

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

The Inscriptions of Dodona and a New History of Molossia . By Elizabeth A. Meyer. Stuttgart: Steiner, 2013. Pp. 201.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4tf7d9m5>

Journal

Classical Philology, 111(3)

ISSN

0009-837X

Author

Mackil, Emily

Publication Date

2016-07-01

DOI

10.1086/687104

Peer reviewed

BOOK REVIEWS

The Inscriptions of Dodona and a New History of Molossia. By ELIZABETH A. MEYER. Stuttgart: Steiner, 2013. Pp. 201.

The conventional history of Molossia in the fourth and third centuries, as told above all by Peter Franke, N. G. L. Hammond, and Pierre Cabanes, is a history of rapid institutional change marking the development of a highly unusual state—a hybrid of monarchy and federalism.¹ A relatively typical northwestern monarchy, in the hands of the Aeacid dynasty, was transformed circa 400 BCE into a *koinon*, some form of representative government encompassing multiple cities and *ethnē*, following the Molossian seizure of the sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona, which had previously been in the hands of the Thesprotians living to the west of the sanctuary. This state expanded significantly in the mid-fourth century by making territorial acquisitions and granting these new populations representation in the Molossian state. Following the death of the Molossian king Alexander I in 331/0, the state expanded further, now incorporating all of Thesprotia, and renamed itself accordingly: “Apeiros,” or “those of the Epirotes who are allied.” This new Epirote state was governed by a robust constitution that imposed narrow confines around the activities of their kings, including the remarkably active Pyrrhus and his son Alexander II. The state of Apeiros was transformed yet again in 232 BCE by the death of the last member of the Aeacid dynasty. The Epirotes now fully embraced federalism in a form that was relatively standard for third-century Greece and proceeded without a monarch, but their long-standing alliance with the Macedonians eventually led the Epirotes to clash with the Romans, resulting in the defeat at Pydna and the complete desolation of the region at the hands of Aemilius Paullus in 167.

Elizabeth A. Meyer offers us a new history of the Molossian state to 232, arguing that “the Molossians” and the “*koinon* of the Molossians” appearing in official documents before that date represent “a self-identifying community rather than . . . a constitutional entity” (p. 78). This community and the Aeacid kings remained in partnership with one another until the end of the dynasty in 232, but the kings were the sovereign rulers of the state.

This new history is based above all on a critical reappraisal of the dating of the inscriptions from Dodona, which has in the past been done primarily, if not exclusively, on the basis of letter forms. But M. notes that because of the variety of media (stone and bronze) used at Dodona, and the variety of incising techniques even on a single medium (*pointillé* and *repoussé*), “linear dating by letter-form, if rigidly applied . . . and if applied without taking the medium of the inscription into account, leads only to hopeless confusion” (p. 29). Instead, M. compares letter forms in the same medium and incising

1. Peter Robert Franke, *Die antike Münzen von Epirus* (Wiesbaden, 1961); N. G. L. Hammond, *Epirus: The Geography, the Ancient Remains, the History and the Topography of Epirus and Adjacent Areas* (Oxford, 1967); Pierre Cabanes, *L'Épire de la mort de Pyrrhos à la conquête romaine (272–167 av. J. C.)* (Paris, 1976).

For permission to reuse, please contact journalpermissions@press.uchicago.edu.

technique, considers comparable mixes of letter forms, and never relies solely on letter forms to date the texts she studies, relying wherever possible on “strong” criteria (mention of a king, *strategos*, or other official; prosopography) and on broader contextual evidence. This is highly technical work, and M. has done her readers a great service by including an epigraphical appendix of thirty manumissions from the region. Each text is introduced with a lemma and presented with either a photograph or a line drawing, a full *apparatus criticus*, a translation, and brief commentary.

Because the inscriptions tend to cluster around formulaic similarities, the independent redating of even one or two can have important knock-on effects. *SEG* 26.700 (Cabanes 1976 no. 74; Meyer no. 8) is a manumission on stone and *SGDI* 1346 (Cabanes 1976 no. 50; Meyer no. 9) is a manumission inscribed on a bronze tablet. Both are dated by the reign of “king Alexander,” but which one is meant? Cabanes places them both in the reign of Alexander I (344–332/1), but M. argues that they belong to the reign of Alexander II (272–c. 242), taking with them four other (so-called political) inscriptions that share strong formulaic similarities: *SGDI* 1334 and 1337 (grants of *isopoliteia*), 1335 (a grant of *politeia*), and Cabanes 1976 no. 6 (a grant of *ateleia*). There are four reasons for bringing this entire group down to the third century. First, *isopoliteia* does not occur epigraphically in Epirus before the third century, as Philippe Gauthier showed long ago.² Second, *SGDI* 1346 stands apart from the others in letter forms and is much closer to *SGDI* 1347 (Meyer no. 17), which is dated by a *stratagos* of the Epirotes and therefore belongs after 232. They may not be by the same hand but they are close in time, and letter forms suggest that they may both bear the influence of the sanctuary’s oracular *lamellae*. So *SGDI* 1347 brings *SGDI* 1346 down into the second third of the third century (or later). Third, the mix of letter forms in this group belongs better in the third than in the second century. Fourth, *SGDI* 1334, inscribed on a bronze plaque, has a hole at one edge for mounting on a wall, a phenomenon not attested before the early third century at Dodona. M. thus dates the entire group to the first half of the third century, which becomes the foundation for her next move, a reconsideration of three inscriptions traditionally dated to the fourth century and taken as strong evidence for Molossian political institutions in that period.

M.’s new history of the Molossian state is also based on a critique of what she sees as overly politicized readings of the ambiguous evidence for the involvement of the Molossian community in public affairs that remains in the fourth and third centuries after her bracing critique of traditional dates for the inscriptions from Dodona. *SEG* 15.384 (Cabanes 1976 no. 1) records two grants of citizenship to women from Arrhonos (otherwise unidentified), both dated to the reign of Neoptolemos son of Alcetas (who ruled alone only from 370 to 368) and listing a *prostatas* of the Molossians, a *grammateus*, and a group of *damiorgoi*. Whereas this text is traditionally cited as the earliest evidence for a Molossian federal state, with the *damiorgoi* taken as political representatives of newly incorporated territories, M. argues that grants of citizenship to women were made to give them and their descendants full access to Molossian cults and their priesthoods, and interprets the *damiorgoi* as a kind of amphiktyonic council.³ Another grant of citizenship, this time made explicitly by τὸ κοινὸν τ[ῶν Μο]λλοσσῶν (Cabanes

2. Philippe Gauthier, “Sur les institutions de l’Épire hellénistique,” *RPhil*, n.s., 3, 53 (1979): 120–28.

3. This argument is presented more fully in Elizabeth A. Meyer, “Two Grants of *Politeia* and the Molossians at Dodona,” *ZPE* 180 (2012): 205–16.

1976 no. 2 lines 15–16; *SEG* 23.471, 24.446), was placed before 343/2 by both Hammond and Cabanes but is brought down to the third century by M. The top of the stone is broken and M. not only offers alternate restorations for the lacunae in the first two surviving lines, but also restores two lines above those, which she believes were the first two lines of the text, solely on the basis of comparison with the highly fragmentary *SGDI* 1346, now placed in the reign of Alexander II (272–c. 242), rather than Alexander I. Whereas Cabanes read in lines 1–3 [. . .] *traces* [ἐπι προστά][τα] Δ[ρο]άτου Κελαίθ[ου, γραμ]ματέος, M. proposes [Ἀγαθαί τύχαι. βασιλεύοντο][ς Ἀλεξάνδρου ἐπι προστάτα][. . . .] ΤΙΜΟΥ Μολ[οσσῶν . . .][. . .] δράτου Κελαίθ[ου, γραμ]ματέος. The restoration is clever and it may well be right. But the fragility of the argument is worth underscoring: *SGDI* 1346, the comparandum upon which her restoration is based, is itself highly fragmentary and heavily restored: [Ἀγαθαί τύχαι. βασιλεύ][οντος Ἀλε]ξάνδρου, προσ[τατε]ύ[ο]ντος Σαβυρ[τίου][Μολο]σσῶν. In the line drawing of *SGDI* 1346 provided by M. (p. 144), which she herself describes as misleading (p. 145) only in the sense that it exaggerates “the anomalous quality of the lettering,” only the second alpha in Ἀλεξάνδρου is clearly visible. What we have, then, is a major restoration and redating based upon another heavily restored document of uncertain date. In light of these difficulties, M.’s additional argument for down-dating Cabanes 1976 no. 2 on the basis of letter forms is somewhat more persuasive; she notes that the letters are very close to those on a dedication of Pyrrhus around 279 (*SGDI* 1368). A third inscription, recording a grant of proxeny and other privileges by “the Molossians” to one Lagetas from Thessalian Pherai, is pushed down from its traditional date before 330/28 to circa 300, with M.’s reading ἐπὶ βασιλέος Νεοπτολέ[μου] Ἀλεξάνδρου (*SEG* 54.576 = Cabanes 1976 no. 3 lines 14–15). The grant concludes with a (lacunose) list of *hieromnaneuontes*. On M.’s revised chronology, this text belongs between the two grants of *politeia* just discussed.

Here the political significance of her chronological arguments at last becomes clear: in the early fourth century, Molossia was ruled by its kings and by them alone. There is no evidence for a federal state before 232, when Molossia and Epirus became part of the same Epirote state. M. does not eschew all political and institutional development in Molossia in this period, but argues that the institutional changes that appear in the political documents from Dodona reflect the creation of a kind of amphiktyony to govern the sanctuary at Dodona as well as a growing sense of identity and community among the Molossians. Initially called *damiorgoi*, they were renamed *hieromnanes* at the end of the fourth century, and by the second quarter of the third century they have been refashioned as *synarchontes*. Despite the name changes, however, M. argues that throughout this time they were strictly religious officials.

How persuasive is this case? Evidence from other federal states suggests that participation in shared cults contributed in important ways to a sense of community around which regional political institutions could be built and that cooperative investments in common shrines led ineluctably to political considerations. M.’s suggestions that Molossian identity formed around the governance of Dodona, and that this facilitated the indisputable federal developments of the late third century, are therefore a priori plausible. I do not even balk at the claim that the term “*koinon* of the Molossians” (Cabanes 1976 no. 2 lines 15–16; *SEG* 23.471, 24.446) might refer to a community rather than a state. But like many scholarly correctives, M.’s may be an overcorrection. The trouble is that the documents point to an increasing involvement of “the Molossians”

in what are explicitly political matters: the bestowal of citizenship, proxeny, and other privileges such as property ownership, tax freedom, and security. The Delphic amphiktyony, the best attested of all such councils, is not known to have ever granted either proxeny or citizenship. Nor could it, for it represented only a sanctuary that partook of neither institution. On M.'s view, the only explanation for the presence of these religious officials on grants of political privilege is that in the first pair (*SEG* 15.384), decreed circa 370–368, the women who received citizenship sought it in order that they (and/or their descendants) could have full access to the cult of Zeus at Dodona. On this interpretation, there is a certain logic to the listing of a board of religious officials on the decree, although the king may still be the only effective political agent (the passive ἐδόθη is strikingly ambiguous). But at the end of the fourth century it is “the Molossians” who grant citizenship to a Thessalian; the king may be restored in the final lines, as M. argues, but it is hard to escape the conclusion that “the Molossians” now, circa 300 on M.'s chronology, have real political agency. The list of *hieromnamones* on this decree might well reflect a connection between regional governance of the sanctuary and that political power. Some decades later “the Molossians” with political agency call themselves a *koinon*, adopting a name for their polity that was increasingly common in mainland Greece at the time. And they act like a state: it is the *koinon* of the Molossians that grants citizenship to an outsider. The new official title of the magistrates, *synarchontes*, is very much in keeping with this impression of greater political agency for the Molossians themselves. That is, M.'s chronological revisions may be correct (despite the qualms I have already mentioned), but her insistence that political power rested exclusively with the king before 232 is not entirely persuasive. The documents rather suggest to me a gradual formalization of regional political institutions within Molossia that related somehow to the indisputable power of the kings.

M.'s suggestion that the crystallization of a sense of Molossian identity played a role in facilitating what she sees as later federal developments is compelling and fits well with recent work on the development of regional states in the Classical Greek world.⁴ Another thread that runs throughout her book exposes an important dynamic that has received much less attention in these histories, and that is economic integration. The hints that M. drops in this direction raise important questions that deserve further attention. Transhumant pastoralism does not function easily across political boundaries, and the need for mobility across larger areas in regions like Epirus with dominant pastoral economies may have prompted new forms of political cooperation, if not openness. M. attributes to two kings actions that may have been major inflection points in this process: the first was Philip II of Macedon's gift of three cities and some coastline ([Dem.] 7 *Hal.* 32); the second was Pyrrhus' encouragement of “the longer-distance pastoral migrations” (p. 130). The economic integration of the region was pushed further by the creation of the Epirote *koinon* in 232, which integrated not only Molossians but also Thesprotians and Chaonians and enabled longer-distance pastoral migrations from mountains to coast and back (pp. 112, 133). Comparison with other regional sanctuaries suggests that Dodona's place in this transhumant pastoralist economy deserves

4. Jeremy McInerney, *The Folds of Parnassos: Land and Ethnicity in Ancient Phokis* (Austin, 1999); Hans Beck, “New Approaches to Federalism in Ancient Greece: Perceptions and Perspectives,” in *The Idea of European Community in History*, vol. 2, ed. K. Buraselis and K. Zoumboulakis, 177–90 (Athens, 2003); Angela Kühn, *Als Kadmos nach Boiotien kam: Polis und Ethnos im Spiegel thebanischer Gründungsmythen* (Stuttgart, 2006).

consideration. In neighboring Aitolia, the sanctuary at Thermon, sitting at or near the crossroads of two routes of transhumance, played an important part in the integration of the region and served, evidently as Dodona did, as a meeting place and archive for the Aitolian state.⁵ And Jeremy McInerney has recently shown how closely sacred economies were tied to pastoralism.⁶ One wonders whether the *damiorgoi* and *hieromnamones* at Dodona, on M.'s view appointed by the king to "oversee the shrine" (p. 56), were primarily concerned with the sanctuary's economic affairs, as Pierre Sánchez has shown to be true of the Delphic *hieromnēmones*.⁷

It is, however, unlikely that all cattle reared in Molossia were destined for sacrifice at Dodona, and transhumant pastoralism is not generally pursued as a subsistence activity. What about exchange?

A "confusing multiplicity of coinages" (p. 74) was produced in Molossia in this period; small-denomination issues with the legends ΜΟΛΟΣΣΙΩΝ and ΑΠΕΙΡΩΤΑΝ circulated contemporaneously with the more copious and larger-denomination issues of the kings. M. rightly dismisses attempts (especially by Franke) to use these coins as evidence for a Molossian or Epirote *koinon* with the exclusive right to mint in the fourth and early third centuries, and insists that "it is far more likely that kings and *ethnos* could all mint" (p. 76). She swiftly concludes that the small-denomination Molossian and Epirote coinages "found their chief *raison d'être* in the minor needs of the sanctuary of Dodona" (p. 76), but even if that is correct there is no reason to suppose that such coins were not also used in everyday transactions. If Dodona served as a regional economic center, as was demonstrably true at Thermon and Delphi, it is worth exploring the possibility that sanctuary governance, economic integration, and the development of regional political institutions were more closely bound together than has been realized.

These are big questions and it is a mark of the value of M.'s study to have raised them. Her late date for the emergence of a Molossian *koinon* is controversial and will certainly prompt debate among scholars of northwestern Greece and—one hopes—scholars of Greek federal states. But she is to be thanked for providing us with a clear alternative to a long-dominant interpretation of evidence that is in fact deeply ambiguous. Her work on Molossia should be seen as part of a still-emerging new history of regional forms of political cooperation, in which religious and economic interactions between communities and the dynamic, instrumentalist claims of ethnic identity are seen to play a major part in the decision to form regional political institutions.⁸

Emily Mackil
University of California, Berkeley

5. Emily Mackil, *Creating a Common Polity: Religion, Economy, and Politics in the Making of the Greek Koinon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2013); Claudia Antonetti, *Les Éoliens: Image et religion* (Paris, 1990).

6. Jeremy McInerney, *The Cattle of the Sun: Cows and Culture in the World of the Ancient Greeks* (Princeton, N.J., 2010), 146–72.

7. Pierre Sánchez, *L'Amphictionie des Pyles et de Delphes: Recherches sur son rôle historique, des origines au II^e siècle de notre ère* (Stuttgart, 2001), 44–57.

8. Inter alia, Mackil 2013 (above, n. 5) and Hans Beck and Peter Funke, eds., *Federalism in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2015).