

# ATHLETES AND ATHLETICS IN THE ORACULAR TABLETS OF DODONA<sup>1</sup>

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**Summary:** The corpus of published oracular tablets from Dodona, dated to ca. 550-167 BCE, contains a number of questions related to the world of Greek athletics. Most of the oracular inquiries submitted by athletes focus on their prospects of victory in specific events or contests. An analysis of the inquiries in question suggests that athletes aiming at victory in modest, local-appeal games as well as top-tier athletes aiming at success in the Olympic games, occasionally resorted to divination as they navigated challenges and coped with the uncertainty of strategic decisions connected to training, travel, and competition.

Athletics was a flagship cultural practice for ancient Greeks. A mainstay of most Greek festivals, it was widely practiced and even more widely followed by Greeks of all social backgrounds. Athletes competing in Greek *agones* could range from occasional contestants in obscure local contests to full-time athletes roaming the Greek-speaking world and competing at the highest level. For those athletes for whom competitive sport was more than an ephemeral gig (as it was, for instance, for many participants of *ephebeia* programs who competed in games only as part of their ephebic training), planning and prudent use of resources was of the essence. It is no wonder, therefore, that full-time athletes often sought counsel about the best strategies of competition, as well as reassurance in the face of uncertainties and the very real possibility of adversities, in oracles. Oracular consultation and other divinatory practices were popular methods of predicting the future as well as advantage-seeking tactics employed by Greeks, not merely athletes, who found themselves embroiled in a dispute or other type of conflict, or who regularly engaged in antagonistic or otherwise competitive activities.

1 My thanks are due to the anonymous referee of the journal. All remaining errors are my own.

In the ensuing discussion I explore the engagement of Greek athletes with divination through the recently published cache of oracular questions and answers from the sanctuary of Zeus in Dodona. Despite some problems of decipherment and interpretation, oracular tablets from Dodona pertinent to the world of sport attest the anxieties, hopes, and objectives of Greek athletes in a formative and still imperfectly understood era of Greek athletics, namely the late Archaic to middle Hellenistic periods. Athletes resorted to divination as they navigated specific challenges and coped with the uncertainty of strategic decisions in a manner that was illustrative of the conditions of competitive sport of their era. Sport-related inquiries in the Dodona tablets seem to suggest that athletes of all calibers, ranging from Olympic hopefuls to habitués of local-appeal games, integrated the oracle of Dodona in their training and competition strategies. Thematically, many of the inquiries that athletes addressed to the Dodona oracle pertain to issues of victory or defeat, and a number of them revolve around the expediency of participation in specific contests.

### The Oracular Tablets of Dodona

For the ancient Greeks divination, including the practice of seeking information, confirmation, or forewarning through oracles, was one of the most common methods of negotiating the uncertainty, anxiety, and risk involved in any present or future endeavor.<sup>2</sup> The recently published corpus of oracular tablets from the sanctuary of Zeus in Dodona provides unique and valuable insights into the operation of divination on the personal level in the context of an interstate sanctuary.<sup>3</sup> As numerous commentators have underscored there are still a number of outstanding issues concerning the reading, transcription, and dating of the published

2 For Greek divination see recently Trampedach 2015; Driediger-Murphy & Eidinow 2019.

3 Dakaris, Votokopoulou & Christidis 2013, hereafter abbreviated *DVC*. All Dodona tablets published before *DVC* are conveniently collected and discussed in Lhôte 2006. Unless otherwise noted, all Greek texts of the Dodona tablets are from *DVC*.

tablets, not to mention the almost complete lack of information regarding the sizeable lot of the still unpublished ones.<sup>4</sup> These concerns largely lie behind an ongoing endeavor, undertaken by a team of international specialists, to reread, revise, redate, and ultimately republish the Dodona tablets that are accessible to the scholarly community, especially those included in the *DVC* edition.<sup>5</sup> Given all the above, for the present any discussion of this material must be, to a certain extent, provisional. Despite these caveats the sheer amount of new material contained in the *DVC* edition must be subjected to a process of a rolling assessment, parts of which could be supplemented or even revised in the future as up-to-date editions and entirely novel material come to light.

Enquirers in Greek oracles often sought answers on the prospects of victory or defeat in war, litigation, and athletics.<sup>6</sup> Among the thousands of tablets with questions addressed to the oracle in Dodona, some directly link with the world of Greek athletics.<sup>7</sup> The Dodona tablets date to c. 550-167 BCE, hence they have the potential to elucidate aspects of athletic practices in some relatively less well-documented stages of the history of Greek athletics.<sup>8</sup> Unmediated or even partially (as in the oracular tablets of Dodona) unmediated discourses reflecting the life conditions and practices of Greek athletes are hard to come by. Commemorative and

4 Parker 2016: 70-71; Chaniotis 2017: 51; Laes 2020: 2-4; Martín González 2021: 204-7.

5 Online edition Choix d'inscriptions oraculaires de Dodone (hereafter *CIOD*), (<https://dodonaonline.com/ciod/>). The *CIOD* website and all the weblinks of specific tablets referenced in subsequent footnotes were last accessed on February 24, 2024.

6 Plut. *Mor.* 386c for inquiries related to the prospect of victory (not exclusively athletic) at Delphi. For discussion of additional testimonia see Parke 1967: 185-87; Eidinow 2007: 265 n. 3.

7 There are over 4,200 published oracular texts (including questions, answers, and labels) from the sanctuary of Zeus in Dodona, and only a handful can be convincingly connected to the world of athletics. There is certainly the possibility that unidentified links to athletics might exist in many other, in addition to the ones discussed here, oracular texts of Dodona that bear no explicit reference to sport. There are also thousands of still unpublished oracular texts from the same sanctuary, so it is a reasonable expectation that more sport-related texts will emerge in the future.

8 For the dates of the Dodona tablets see Lhôte 2017: 41. For the possibility that some Dodona oracular tablets might date after the destruction of the site in 167 BCE see Parker 2016: 71, n. 6. For indications of limited use of the sanctuary and oracle until the Augustan period see Piccinini 2013.

laudatory texts, including epinician poetry and honorific inscriptions in publicly displayed monuments, that contextualized an athlete's achievements were reflective of the public narrative that an athlete and his family wished to propagate. But such texts were also heavily scripted and largely formulaic, in accordance with the expectations of their genre. As for the inquiries in the Dodona tablets, they were formulated in a way that complied with the operational parameters of the sanctuary, but due to the nature of Greek divinatory practices they more or less directly echoed some of the priorities and concerns of athletes. In fact, considering the many linguistic idiosyncrasies of the tablets, it is not very far-fetched to envisage many of the oracular questions related to athletics being written, that is scratched on the actual lead tablets, by the athletes themselves or by other individuals very close to them, e.g. their guardians (in the case of minors) or trainers.

If pursued at the highest level, competitive sport in ancient Greece could be a physically strenuous and potentially stressful enterprise filled with moments of extreme emotional outbursts, but for many athletes also replete with anxieties and insecurities. Athletes and their entourage coped with these daily realities of practice and competition in diverse ways, including divination. The eighth Olympian ode of Pindar, celebrating the victory in the wrestling for boys of Alkimedon of Aegina, probably in c. 460 BCE, begins with an image of Olympic athletes asking the oracle in the sanctuary of Zeus in Olympia about their prospects of achieving an Olympic victory.<sup>9</sup> One would expect that such attempts, through on-site consultation of an oracle, to ferret out divine thoughts and intentions, as the enquiring athletes believed, regarding their prospects of Olympic victory would have been more in line with younger or in general less tried-and-true athletes. But even established and celebrated athletes, with several victories in top games under their belt, would occasionally need the reassurance of a divine forecast, especially regarding the most competitive of all contests in the Olympic games. Lucilius, the epigrammatist active in the reign of Nero, presents the use of divination, most likely in Olympia, by athletes of all stripes as a routine

9 Pind. *Ol.* 8.1-8. Hdt. 9.33.1-2 implies the occurrence of oracular inquiries about sport in Delphi during the late Archaic period.

activity in the early Imperial period.<sup>10</sup> Lucillius is in general a reliable witness for practices and technicalities of Greek sport at his time, and despite the scopic nature of his epigrams there is no good reason to doubt that divination involving athletes was practiced in Olympia during the early Imperial period.<sup>11</sup>

The material from Dodona suggests that in some cases enquirers would deposit multiple questions about the same issue, seeking to gather as much information and support as possible.<sup>12</sup> Enquirers could seek to clarify the past or the future: questions revolving around athletics, as far as one can tell, deal with a future event, and aim at managing uncertainty and making decisions.<sup>13</sup> Questions addressed to the oracle of Zeus in Dodona were usually succinct and often, but not always, articulated in a way that permitted a yes or no answer through cleromancy.<sup>14</sup> Many of the tablets contain questions, but a small number can be identified as answers delivered by the oracle while others have been interpreted as ‘labels’ that briefly identify the enquirer or the subject of the inquiry. Sometimes the tablets were inscribed with a label on one side and the question on the other, but that is not always the case. Labels and answers, due to their brevity, are the most tantalizing.

10 *Anth. Pal.* 11.161 and 163. For Olympia as the most likely setting see Parke 1967: 189; Robert 1968: 244; Eidinow 2007: 283, n. 37.

11 For Lucillius and Greek sport see Robert 1968, and his discussion of the epigrams dealing with divination in Olympia in 222–23 (*Anth. Pal.* 11.161) and 242–45 (*Anth. Pal.* 11.163).

12 Parker 2016; Chaniotis 2017; Eidinow 2019.

13 As Parker 2016: 74 puts it “one normally consulted an oracle when faced with an important decision, not as a way of peeling back the veil from the future”. Cf. Parker 2016: 86 for athletes.

14 For cleromancy in Dodona see primarily Parker 2015 and Chaniotis 2017; for the practice of cleromancy in ancient divination, focusing on Italian oracles, see Buchholz 2013; for lot drawing in Greek sport see Mann 2017; for Greek lot drawing in other aspects of political, social, and religious life see Malkin 2022 and 2023.

## Games and Victory: Athletes' Anxieties, Hopes, and Aspirations

In this context, some of the tablets that have been identified by the editors of the corpus from Dodona as related to agonistic matters provide little or no headway, and in certain cases it is doubtful whether certain tablets that are allegedly sport-related pertain to athletics at all.<sup>15</sup> Yet others afford valuable insights on athletes' frame of mind, anxieties, aspirations as well as some of their strategies of competition. The most common question submitted by athletes at the oracle of Dodona concerned the prospects of victory. In a tablet (DVC 1993A) dated on the grounds of letter forms to the late sixth century BCE, the enquirer sought

15 Some tablets identified by the editors as agonistic might refer to judicial matters, e.g. DVC 225A (4th century BCE) contains a single word in the nominative (ἀντίπαλος) and it is possibly a label for DVC 224. See the *editio minor* in CIOD ([https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2022/04/ciod\\_dvc\\_224a225a.pdf](https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2022/04/ciod_dvc_224a225a.pdf)). Additionally, other tablets that are identified in the *editio princeps* or the *editio minor* as related to athletics are too brief or too ambiguous to yield any substantive conclusions, e.g. DVC 447A; 491A; 635A; 849A; 1011A; 1207B; 1396A (and the *editio minor* in CIOD [https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/ciod\\_dvc\\_1396a.pdf](https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/ciod_dvc_1396a.pdf)); 2216B; 3797. In the *editio minor* ([https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2022/11/ciod\\_dvc\\_3103a.pdf](https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2022/11/ciod_dvc_3103a.pdf)) the editors interpret DVC 3103A, which they date to c. 375-350 BCE, as an inquiry about the prospect of arranging a joint victory in an athletic or thymelic contest. This is possible but not very likely, mostly because joint (in which a draw was declared and the prize was shared by the top two contestants) and sacred (in which a draw was declared and the prize was dedicated to a deity) victories are not documented for institutionalized contests before the late Hellenistic period at the earliest (but they are for one-off games, like funeral games; see Hom. *Il.* 23.700-739 for a draw in wrestling with sharing of prizes in the funeral games of Patroclus). For joint and sacred victories see Crowther 2000 and Papakonstantinou 2016. DVC 3103A might refer to litigation or other forms of dispute settlement in which a division of resources was envisaged as a possible outcome. See also Lhôte 2006: no. 113 (not included in the DVC corpus) which has been tentatively interpreted in the past (Lhôte, *op.cit.*; Parke 1967: 272, no. 28) as germane to horse racing, but see now Méndez Dosuna 2007 and the CIOD *editio minor* ([https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/lod\\_113.pdf](https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/lod_113.pdf)). In the ensuing discussion I examine only the Dodona tablets that I consider as indisputably or very likely connected to the world of athletics.

to discover the deities he needed to worship in order to prevail over certain adversaries that are referred to by name.<sup>16</sup> It is likely, as the editors also assert, that the enquirer was an athlete, as were his named adversaries. Athletes active in the network of institutionalized and one-off (mainly funeral) games of the late Archaic period would be cognizant of the prominent adversaries in their event of specialization, and hence pointing to specific contestants should not surprise us. The practice of targeting other contestants by name is attested, this time with a malicious intent which is largely absent from the oracular tablets, on curse tablets against athletes that also named adversaries by name and asked deities to thwart their athletic performances and annihilate their chances of victory.<sup>17</sup>

To return to the oracular tablets from Dodona, some athletes inquired in a straightforward manner about their chances of victory, sometimes by specifying the event they were planning to register for, without providing any further context. That was the case of the question comprised in *DVC* 825A, dated to the fourth century BCE.<sup>18</sup> In this case the enquirer wished to know whether he will be victorious at the *hippios dromos*.<sup>19</sup> There is no indication as to the festival concerned, the back-

16 ἥς κα νικῶμες Δαμό[δοκος --] | Φιλόφοινοσ, Καρίῶν ὄκα [ --]. For the interpretation adopted here see Parker 2016: 86, n. 70, who also interprets in a similar fashion *DVC* 2036B (for a different interpretation of the latter see the *editio minor* ([https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/ciod\\_dvc\\_2036b2034a2035a.pdf](https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/ciod_dvc_2036b2034a2035a.pdf))). According to the *editio princeps* *DVC* 1996B, which contains an abbreviated inscription that mentions games (ἄλλα), is a label for *DVC* 1993A.

17 Oracular inquiries sought to elucidate the potential for victory in specific contests and/or events to the advantage of the enquirer, while curse tablets sought to undermine the potential for success of notable opponents to the advantage of the agent of the curse, namely the athlete who had commissioned it. For curse tablets against athletes see Tremel 2004, with numerous additional examples published since then (e.g. Jordan 2022). For a recent overview see Hollmann 2021.

18 The editors date it to the fourth century BCE, while Méndez Dosuna 2016: 125-26 dates it to the fifth century BCE and provides a brief linguistic commentary, but misunderstands the tablet as referring to horse racing.

19 ἔ κα φέρ]ε ἵππι]ον; Oracular questions that mention merely the event that the enquirer was competing at (*DVC* 825A; *DVC* 1389A) without reference to the festival, might allude to a local contest held in the vicinity of the sanctuary in Dodona. The

ground (other than the obvious fact that he was a runner) of the enquirer, or any other details that might throw some light on his request. Ostensibly the enquirer thought it unnecessary to supply additional information, either because he was confident that the priests of Dodona would be able to identify him or because he believed that the all-knowing deities would be cognizant of the context of his inquiry, or both.<sup>20</sup> The *hippios* (at times also called *ephippios*) *dromos* was a footrace of four lengths of a Greek stadium, so it was longer than the *diaulos* race but shorter than the *dolichos*, the latter being the long distance race *par excellence*. The *hippios* was not contested in the Olympic or Pythian games but it is widely attested in various stages of the history of other top, mid-range, and local-caliber contests, including the Isthmian and Nemean games, the Great Panathenaia in Athens, the Hekatombaia (later renamed Heraia) in Argos, the Asklepieia in Epidaurus, and many others. So, the only conclusion one can reach with certainty regarding this oracular tablet is that the request did not concern the Olympic or Pythian games. Beyond that, it is anyone's guess. A similarly broad inference must be reached for DVC 1389A as well, dated by the editors to the late fifth or early fourth century BCE, in which the enquirer simply wonders whether he will be victorious in the *stadion* race.<sup>21</sup> In this case, the other side of the tablet (DVC 1390B) contains a simple Σ which, as the editors correctly surmised, stands as an abbreviation of στάδιον, a label for the question inscribed on the reverse.

Equally revealing are inquiries regarding victories in games of local or regional caliber. An instance of this seems to be DVC 296A, a tablet that the editors dated to the second half of the fifth century BCE. The question is written in a dialect suggesting that the enquirer was from Boeotia or Thessaly. Presumably an athlete, he wanted to know whether the gods

conventional wisdom is that the Naia, the agonistic festival of Dodona, was established in the early Hellenistic period (early third century BCE; see Cabanes 1988). Could these sport-related oracular questions of the Classical period from Dodona that do not point to a specific festival concern competitions in an earlier, modest, and otherwise unattested version of the Naia?

20 On the brevity and the lack of identification of the enquirer in most Dodona oracular tablets see Parker 2016: 73-74.

21 ἦ νικῶμι κα στάδιο[ν];

would favor his victory in Oropos “at the ninth hour”.<sup>22</sup> Several aspects of this oracular tablet are uncertain or subject to question. As the editors correctly remarked, the reference to Oropos must indicate the games held in the context of the Amphiareia festival. These games are better documented starting in 332/1 BCE, but little is known about their history in the earlier stages of the Classical period.<sup>23</sup> The tablet from Dodona could very well be the earliest attestation of these games. The editors believed that the reference to “the ninth hour” refers to the periodicity of the Amphiareia in the fifth century BCE, and concluded that at that time the games were held every nine years. There is, however, no evidence that the Amphiareia were held in the fifth century BCE, or at any other point, in a nine-year cycle which, counting inclusively as Greeks usually did with festivals, would result in a festival held every eight years.<sup>24</sup> It is more likely that, if the reading is correct, the ninth hour refers to the schedule of the contest and the approximate timing of the event in which the enquirer was planning to take part.<sup>25</sup>

DVC 2089A, dated by the editors to the second half of the fourth century BCE, is also germane to local-caliber games. In this instance the enquirer wishes to know whether he would be victorious in some unnamed

22 θ[ε]ὸς τύχαν ἀ[γαθάν] | Μυρδιό(ν)δαο : ὄπῳς νι[κ]ῆν ὄντ' <έξ> κῆσε | ἐν ἐνάτας ἡόρας : δόξ[ν] αἰ λῶντες [αἰ δὲ μῆ] | Ὀροπόνδε μεδὲν ἴτῳ;

23 Petrakos 1968: 194 believes that two reliefs, dated to the late fifth or early fourth century BCE and depicting the *apobates* race were dedications by victors at the Amphiareia. See also Petrakos 1997: no. 335.

24 In the Greek world festivals were usually held in a five-year cycle (were hence quadrennial) or less, although there are some rarely attested festivals that were held in a longer cycle, e.g. a sexennial festival in Delos in the late Classical period ([Ar.] *Ath. Pol.* 54.7) and possibly the Hippokathesia (octennial) in late Hellenistic Rhodes (Iversen 2018-2019: 102).

25 In Greek athletic contests the order of athletic events was known and publicized well in advance. Primarily due to the rules governing some of the events, especially the lack of any sort of time limits in the combat events, normally it would have been impossible to determine in advance the exact start of most events, especially as a day of competition progressed. But organizers and athletes would know approximately when to expect a specific event to commence. Exact timing and/or sequence of activities was employed for the operation of various activities in *gymnasia* and baths, e.g. *IG V.1* 1390, 108-109, Andania, late Hellenistic or early Imperial, (bath); *SEG* 65.420, 36-69, Amphiolis, 24/23 BCE (*gymnasion*).

games in Ambrakia.<sup>26</sup> Similar to the oracular question concerning the Amphiareia, this is the earliest attestation of games in Ambrakia.<sup>27</sup> Top-caliber athletes from Ambrakia are documented for the Classical period, namely Sophron, the *stadion* Olympic champion of 432 BCE as well as Leon, the runner-up in the highly disputed Olympic final in the *stadion* race in 396 BCE.<sup>28</sup> This suggests a fairly developed athletic culture in Ambrakia, complete with all the training and competition facilities as well as local games, comparable to what is attested for other Greek communities of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.

The lack of testimonia, besides the tablet from Dodona, on the games of Ambrakia and the scarcity of documentation for the earlier phases (fifth and most of the fourth century BCE) of the Amphiareia point to agonistic festivals of mainly local or at best regional cachet. The Amphiareia games become more visible epigraphically, primarily through a series of victor lists, following their relaunch in 332/1 BCE.<sup>29</sup> In the case of the tablet concerning victory in the Amphiareia (DVC 296A) and considering that, as mentioned earlier, the likely origin of the enquiring athlete was from Boeotia or Thessaly, it would appear that he travelled a considerable distance to Dodona to seek guidance on his chances of victory in a festival that was, in the context of the fifth century BCE, of such low profile. This points to the methodical planning and strategies of competition employed by athletes, and reveals the time and resources they

26 ἡ νικάσω [ - - - ] | ἐν Ἀμπρα[κίαι - - -].

27 Nielsen's (2018) thorough overview of testimonia on games in Archaic and Classical Greece contains no entry for Ambrakia.

28 Sophron, Moretti 1957: no. 321; Leon, Paus. 6.3.7 and a discussion of the testimonia in Crowther 1997.

29 See Petrakos 1997: no. 297. Following the relaunch, and as documented in the victor list of 329/8 BCE (Petrakos 1997: no. 520) the Amphiareia attracted some athletes from other parts of the of the Greek-speaking world (including a small number from Asia Minor and Cyrene), but the preponderance of the victors were Athenian, see Petrakos 1997: 414; Nielsen 2018: 61. In the late Hellenistic period the Amphiareia were celebrated jointly with the Romaia for a number of iterations (Petrakos 1997: nos. 521-534) and emerged as a true interstate contest that attracted a stream of contestants from every corner of the Greek-speaking world. For the strong possibility that the Amphiareia Romaia were celebrated since the middle Hellenistic period see Kalliontzis 2016, with objections in *BE* (2017), 265. For the catchment area of the Amphiareia see van Nijf & Williamson 2016: 53-57.

were willing to expend to implement them. The same conclusion stands for the athlete inquiring about victory in Ambrakia (*DVC* 2089A), and indeed for any other athlete who might have asked the oracle about victory in a specific contest, even though in most cases one cannot determine the city of origin of athletes that consulted the oracle of Dodona. Moreover, in both cases (*DVC* 296A and 2089A), and since available testimonia suggest that during the time these tablets were deposited the Amphiareia and the games in Ambrakia were relatively humble contests of mainly local appeal, one can tentatively assume that the enquirers were not among the top athletic performers of their time.<sup>30</sup> To take the tablet concerning the Amphiareia as an example, a star athlete of the fifth century (e.g. Theogenes of Thasos, or Kallias of Athens) with victories at the Olympic and other major games would hardly deign to consider as a high-stakes target the prospect of victory in a contest like the fifth-century Amphiareia, and proceed to anxiously inquire about it at an oracle. A similar principle was in operation regarding top athletes of the fourth-century BCE vis-à-vis the games in Ambrakia, unattested except for the tablet from Dodona. If this interpretation is correct, then these specific tablets from Dodona do not only allow insights into the competition strategies, but also point to the concerns, and sometimes the angst experienced by athletes who operated in the shadow of the great champions of their day and who prioritized their chances of victory at a lower tier of games.

One wonders how a positive or negative response to such questions would affect athletes' plans to compete. In case of a negative response an athlete not confident of his chances of victory might forgo a particular contest, thus saving himself effort and resources, and focus on another contest instead. A positive response, on the other hand, might provide a psychological boost. However, even with a positive response from the oracle of Dodona, an athlete who would not normally consider himself as part of the top tier of star athletic performers would still need to train as

30 There is no indication that monetary payment was required to submit a question to the Dodona oracle, but the combined expense of travelling to the sanctuary and quite likely dedicating a gift (in many cases perhaps a small figurine, at other times something more valuable) could be considerable for some athletes.

hard as ever in preparation for local-caliber games such as the fifth-century Amphiareia or the fourth-century games in Ambrakia.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are some tablets submitted by athletes who inquired about their chances of victory at the Olympic games. Throughout Greco-Roman antiquity, the Olympic games remained the most prestigious of all Greek-style contests, and a victory there was the ultimate prize for every athlete. *DVC* 1878A,<sup>31</sup> a tablet of the fourth century BCE and *DVC* 3509A,<sup>32</sup> a tablet of the first half of the fourth century BCE, ostensibly refer to Olympia. It is likely that they are related somehow to the games, but they are both too fragmentary to yield any reasonable insights. *DVC* 4079A,<sup>33</sup> a tablet deposited at the end of the fifth century BCE, also concerns an urgent trip to Olympia for an unspecified purpose. The oracle's response (or an alternative question, submitted by the same enquirer) is recorded on the reverse (*DVC* 4080A) of the same tablet, advising the enquirer to hold off his journey (response) or asking whether he should scrap his plans to travel to Olympia (alternative question).<sup>34</sup> Is this an inquiry by an ambitious but uncertain athlete who, shortly before (hence the need to travel urgently if the oracle's response was positive) the registration of prospective contestants for the Olympic games was about to begin, decided to ask the gods about his chances at the most competitive contest in Greece? That is a possible reconstruction, if indeed the context is athletic.

Even though some doubt must remain concerning these tablets referring to Olympia, the pertinence to athletics appears indisputable for *DVC* 2986A. In this tablet, dated to 425-400 BCE in the *editio minor*, an athlete is inquiring whether he will win *akoniti* at the Olympic games.<sup>35</sup> An *akoniti* (literally dust-free) victory was a walkover victory. Such victories were most often associated with combat sport events but are also attested for

31 ἐν Ὀλυμπία[ι ---].

32 ἢ ἐν Ὀλυμπία[ι ---];

33 [---] ἂν ἔλθῃον | [καὶ ἄμεινον Ὀλυμπίανδε | [ἔρποντι] καὶ ἐπέγον[τι αὐτῷ] ἔσσει[ται];

34 Ὀλυ(ν)πίανδε [περ]μένεν. Martín González 2021: 218 interprets *DVC* 4079A and 4080A as two questions (the latter presented in an abbreviated format), submitted by the same enquirer, with two possible courses of action. The *editio princeps* and Chaniotis 2017: 58, n. 32, consider 4080A as the answer to 4079A.

35 ἔ οὐ νικάσ[ο] | ἄκωνιτι ἔν [Ὀλ]υμπία; text from *editio minor* [https://donaonline.files.wordpress.com/2022/04/ciod\\_dvc\\_2986a.pdf](https://donaonline.files.wordpress.com/2022/04/ciod_dvc_2986a.pdf).

footraces and the pentathlon. An *akoniti* victory does not necessarily imply a complete lack of competition, although that was a distinct possibility. In principle *akoniti* or otherwise denominated walkover victories occurred when all contestants except one had voluntarily withdrawn from competition.<sup>36</sup> That was the way such victories were overwhelmingly interpreted in the literary and epigraphical record since at least the late Hellenistic period.<sup>37</sup>

In the post-Classical period, the terminology of uncontested victories expanded alongside the expansion of other surplus-value neologisms employed by athletes to represent the most notable aspects of their careers.<sup>38</sup> Victories that did not involve any competition at all, and hence were *akoniti* in the literal sense of the word, were glamorous and prestigious. But so were the kinds of victories in which the eventual victor faced some opposition only for a round or two, as well as victories in which some adversaries retired at a late stage of the competition because of injuries and physical exhaustion. Athletes who pulled off such victories would eagerly elaborate the circumstances in honorific inscriptions and other media, even if they did not always employ the technical term *akoniti*.<sup>39</sup> In whatever fashion it manifested itself, a walkover victory was perceived as an acknowledgement of the superiority and invincibility of

36 For uncontested victories see Klingenberg 1989: 222-28; Brunet 1998: 128-35; Crowther 2001; and Nielsen 2023. See also Nicholson n. d. who believes, based partly on the story of Theogenes' pulling out of the Olympic pankration final in 480 BCE (Paus. 6.6.5-6; 6.11.4) and thereby granting an *akoniti* victory to Dromeus of Mantinea, that injuries should account for most withdrawals that resulted in *akoniti* victories. While injury and physical exhaustion must account for some *akoniti* victories, the *akoniti* victory of Dromeus was due to, according to Pausanias, the physical exhaustion (προκατεργασθεις) of Theogenes and not because of any debilitating injury suffered by the Thasian athlete.

37 E.g. Diod. 4.14.2; Philo, *Quod deterius potiori insidiari soleat*, 28-29. Philo of Alexandria, an author active in the early Imperial period, was well-acquainted with practices and general principles of Greek-style sport. See Robert 1960; Papakonstantinou forthcoming.

38 Pleket 1975: 79; Papakonstantinou 2019: 93.

39 E.g. IG XIV 1102 = IAG no. 79 = Strasser 2021: no. 107 commemorating the career of M. Aurelius Asklepiades, an athlete who achieved his most notable victories in the 180s BCE.

an athlete based on his reputation, past record of victories, show of bodily strength, and/or his performance in the festival in which the victory took place. Such victories were quite exceptional: in the entire record of ancient Greek athletics, spanning over a millennium of contests, there are fewer than twenty athletes who are attested as having won an uncontested victory of any denomination.<sup>40</sup> Uncontested victories must have been perceived as a long shot by athletes of the late Archaic and Classical periods especially given the limited number, compared to later eras, of games held around the Greek-speaking world.<sup>41</sup> In theory the enlarged network of available games of interstate, regional, and local caliber in the post-Classical world presented athletes with more opportunities for such uncontested victories and other extraordinary achievements. But the epigraphic record suggests that even at the heights of what has been dubbed the Greek agonistic explosion of the Imperial period, *akoniti* or otherwise denominated uncontested victories were a rarity.

The preceding discussion can help us better appreciate the Dodona oracular tablet inquiring about an *akoniti* victory in the Olympic games. In referencing some other known *akoniti* victories in Greek sport, attested in publicly displayed honorific inscriptions for victorious athletes, the editors of the *editio minor* of DVC 2986A find it curious that athletes who achieved such victories boasted that they had won without competition. In fact, Greek audiences found nothing strange about such boasts and athletes, as already underscored in the preceding discussion, considered a walkover victory a great badge of honor. If the reading of the text in the tablet is correct, then the enquirer of DVC 2986A was in pursuit of an exceptional achievement, the rarity of which far exceeded even a simple Olympic victory. We are in the presence, therefore, of an athlete of the highest order who appears confident enough of his forthcoming

40 The literary record, especially Pausanias, overwhelmingly focuses on the *akoniti* victories of star athletes in the Olympic games, a fact that Crowther 2001 believes reflects a higher frequency of these victories in the Olympic games due to the compulsory training month in Elis before the games.

41 For Greek athletic contests in the Archaic and Classical periods see Nielsen 2018, part 1.

Olympic victory to seek clarification of his prospects of an *akoniti* distinction. If our interpretation is correct, such an athlete would surely proceed to compete at the Olympic games even if the oracle's response was negative regarding his *akoniti* victory. At the same time, he was clearly seeking to forge an outstanding victory record enhanced by prestigious value-added titles and, eventually, bequeath a lasting reputational legacy of his athletic career.

### Conclusion

Similar to other divinatory and preemptive measures, primarily oneirocriticism and binding magic, aimed at presaging, forestalling, or altering the course of future events, oracular consultation, as documented by the tablets from Dodona, attracted inquiries from athletes running the entire gamut of the Greek athletic class. Extant sport-related oracular questions from Dodona were most likely written down and submitted by the athletes themselves or their intimate associates. A preliminary examination of these tablets suggests that inquiries focused on issues of competition strategies, including the prospect of success in specific contests, and the optimal allocation of resources. The extant specimens provide insights on top-tier athletes who aspired to distinction at the highest level, as well as on athletes who aimed at success at the modest level of agonistic festivals of local or regional appeal. Finally, it is perhaps slightly surprising that there are no explicitly identified oracular tablets bearing on issues of athletic injury or other forms of bodily incapacitation that, as the record suggests, were major sources of disquietude, especially for athletes in combat sport. Hopefully publication of additional tablets and further research will shed more light on divinatory practices and oracular inquiries of athletes at the sanctuary of Zeus in Dodona.

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