

# Lorenzo Mancini, *Edilizia di culto presso gli ethne dell'Epiro. Architettura e paesaggi del sacro alla periferia nord-occidentale della Grecia*, Quasar, Roma 2021 | Book review

Francesca D'Ambola

francesca.dambola@uniroma1.it - Sapienza Università di Roma

Mancini, L., *Edilizia di culto presso gli ethne dell'Epiro. Architettura e paesaggi del sacro alla periferia nord-occidentale della Grecia*, Quasar, Roma, 2021.

Lorenzo Mancini's latest work offers a comprehensive study of the architecture of sacred buildings in the region of ancient Epirus, which corresponds to the area between present-day southern Albania and north-western Greece. As the A. specifies in the introduction (pp. 22-23), the title is indicative of the chronological period examined which coincides with the presence of *ethne* (tribal groups often reunited in federal political structures) and, therefore, spans from the end of the Classical period to Octavian's victory at Actium, fought at the southern borders of Epirus.

Although the focus of the volume is on the architectural and monumental aspects of Epirote sanctuaries and cult sites, with a special attention towards the architectural decoration, the A. demonstrates his deep and wide-ranging knowledge of these topics, discussing a large number of archaeological, epigraphic, literary and iconographic evidence, supported by a solid and extensive bibliography. The familiarity with the material is evident and confirmed by Mancini's academic background, comprising many years of fieldwork with the Archaeological joint Mission at *Phoinike* of the University of Bologna and of the Archaeological Institute of Tirana, directed by S. De Maria and Sh. Gjongecaj and from 2017 by G. Lepore and B. Muka. In fact, this volume is preceded by Mancini's PhD dissertation at University of Bologna, focused on sacred architecture in the "indigenous" sites of Epirus, and by various in-depth articles on some aspects of Epirote sacred landscapes and public architecture (Mancini 2013; Mancini 2017; De Maria, Mancini 2018; Mancini 2019; Mancini 2020).

The book is organised by regional areas, according to the traditional division of Epirus into Molossia, central-southern Epirus (corresponding to Thesprotia, Cassopea and Ambrakia and Corcyra's territories), and Chaonia. Within these three sections, a concise historical background is provided for each region and its related ethnic groups, delving into their institutional development and mythical-religious imagery. Furthermore, a synthesis of the *pantheon* of deities and of some minor sites of worship are given for each tribe, based on various types of evidence which, although sometimes fail to lead to conclusive interpretations, are still discussed in-depth. Subsequently, within the aforementioned regional division, sites with monumental evidence of buildings identified as part of a cult place are dealt with in dedicated chapters. These chapters are structured in the form of catalogue voices, which include a topographical framework, a brief history of previous studies with bibliography, an

analysis of the archaeological evidence and hypotheses regarding chronology, reconstruction and functional interpretation.

In the first section, much space is given to the analysis of the oracular sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona with its *naiskoi* and their debated interpretation (chs. I.3.1-I.3.6). The length of these chapters confirms the overwhelming amount of evidence compared to other sites in Epirus, which has sometimes had the unfortunate result of monopolising the debate about Epirote religion (Piccinini 2012). Through a first-hand re-analysis of the evidence on the field, together with new graphic documentation, the A. successfully proposes reasonable hypotheses regarding the identification of the titular deities of these small temple-like buildings and to question their function, despite the fact that some scholars still refer to the well-established, but outdated, interpretation proposed by D. Evangelidis and S.I. Dakaris (Evangelidis, Dakaris 1959; Dakaris 1971).

Considering the function of these cult buildings, usually identified as *naiskoi*, the A. finds evidence for a wider range of potential uses, discussing them in more detail in chapter IV.3. He examines previous interpretations as temples (Dakaris 1971), temple-*thesauroi* – stressing the hypothetical correlations between architecture and ethnic groups (Quantin 2008, 20-29; Piccinini 2016, 264-265) – or as polyfunctional rooms used for reunions or banquets (Emmerling 2012, 201-210). Even if the data is insufficient to get to determining results, the latter use is investigated in relation to *Naiskos Γ* by the A., who presents some convincing evidence that ritual feasting could have taken place in this building, perhaps by élites representative of tribal organization or an amphictyonic association (pp. 493-494). It would have surely been intriguing to hear the A.'s opinion on the recent volume on Dodona by D. Chapinal-Heras in which is also present a discussion of these buildings and their function as treasuries, archive rooms or dining places and an attractive but insufficiently documented proposal of attribution to the three main *ethne* of Epirus (Chapinal-Heras 2021, 71-72). Unfortunately, the two volumes were published more or less contemporaneously.

In the second section, the discussion of the construction of identity through a shared *pantheon* is particularly noteworthy. In the case of Thesprotia and central-southern Epirus, it translates into the acquisition of underworld imagery and deities (chs. II.1.4-II.1.6). At the centre of the debate is the *Nekyomanteion* sanctuary and especially the structure near the village of Mesopotamos, which has traditionally been identified as the oracular site cited by Homer in the *Odyssey*. Nevertheless, following the intuition of D. Baatz, an increasing number of scholars, including the A., now refute this hypothesis in favour of an interpretation of the building as functional to the process of production and storage of agrarian resources (pp. 252-253). Although there is limited evidence to support the existence of a sanctuary of the dead, the A. does not shy away from a careful analysis of the evidence related to chthonic cults, in particular numismatic and coroplastic finds, emphasising the risks of automatically identifying the recipient of worship based on iconography or architectural models, as female protomes or *oikos* buildings are often correlated to *Kore-Persephone* without substantial data. Nevertheless, underworld nuances are cautiously referred by the A. to some evidence from the Acropolis A of Dymokastro (ch. II.4.1), in particular some thirty fragments of a life-size statue recognised as a Ludovisi-type Hermes (possibly a cult statue); a fragment of an animal which is speculatively viewed as a three-headed Cerberus; the residential-like plan of the *Oikos N* which is a frequently recurring layout in “chthonic” sanctuaries.

In the third part, dedicated to the region of Chaonia, the A. tackles the question of the emergence of the sanctuary of Asklepios at Butrint, which stands out as the only cult place in the region whose material and monumental evidence are sufficiently known for both the Hellenistic and Roman period. In the absence of stratigraphical data, the traditional dating of the first phase of the sanctuary to the late 4th or early 3rd century BCE relied on the chronology of some movable finds (Melfi 2012, 24-25) and on the *terminus ante quem* given by the dedicatory inscription of the theatre (232 – 163 BCE). The A., recalling a recent study by him, N. Aleotti and A. Gamberini (Aleotti, Gamberini, Mancini 2020), confutes this dating in favour of a new chronology of the material to the 2nd century BCE. Together with the careful analysis of the archaeological remains of the sanctuary buildings, supplied with a new plan of the temple of Asklepios and its mosaic pavements (p. 447), the A. proposes to postdate the establishment of the sanctuary during the late 3rd century (p. 420), even in the chronic uncertainty of stratigraphic data. Another issue is represented by the function of the so-called “shrine of Asklepios”, a small quadrangular building divided in two rooms, which Ugolini classified as *pronaos* and *naos*. Although it has been convincingly identified by M. Melfi as a *thesauros* where the sanctuary’s offerings and valuables were stored (Melfi 2007), this interpretation can only apply to the last Roman Imperial phase because the archaeological data is insufficient to reconstruct the Hellenistic aspect of the building, as the A. himself has to begrudgingly admit (p. 442).

Lastly, a substantial section serves as conclusion of the work. It consists of seven chapters where the A. provides a synthesis of the major themes of his work in chronological order, demonstrating how difficult it is to recognise elements in the architecture of sacred structures which are specific to the Epirote building culture. This is mainly due to the scarcity of evidence and its diverse nature which do not allow to reach conclusive explanations, with the risk of frustrating the reader. Nevertheless, the A. successfully meets the challenge of highlighting both the connection between Epirote architecture and the contemporary Mediterranean *koine* and its original and lively aspects developed in a much wider context of self-representation during the Hellenistic period. Some cautious cues are given towards the political and social history of the region which will be hopefully examined in depth in future studies. Moreover, the volume publishes new and detailed graphic documentation, which is the precious result of the A.’s experience on the field, and a rich catalogue of architectural elements for which the A. proposes an indispensable chronological serialization which will be helpful, together with the volumes on civic buildings in Epirus and architectural decoration in Chaonia (Rinaldi 2020; Podini 2014), to anyone dealing with Epirus’ public architecture. In the light of his value of reference work for both scholars and students, an index of places and names at the end could have been an appreciated supplement.

In short, the volume is a significant addition to the scholarship of sacred architecture in Epirus and, generally, of the political, social and identity aspects related to religious evidence. Moreover, the numerous prompts, albeit cautious, towards the political and social history of the region, such as the considerations about a “Ionian-Adriatic *koine*” for architectural decorations or about the influence of Rome in the maintenance and transformation of sacred complexes (pp. 516-518), open the path for further discussion. More in-depth investigation of the many aspects implied by the study of “sacred landscapes” may combine the archaeological analysis with an anthropological view of the landscape and its perception in order to come closer to an exhaustive picture of the Epirote religion and cult places and their relation with

the social, economic and political reality. This could mean to take a further step towards comprehending the reasons behind the preference for some deities, the spatial distribution of sanctuaries, the diffusion and use of some mythical narratives and the cultural interactions between ethnic and political groups. In doing so, Mancini's volume represents an extremely useful reference work and a solid foundation for any scholar interested in approaching these topics in Epirus.

## Bibliography

- Aleotti N., Gamberini A., Mancini L. 2020. 'Sacred places, territorial economy and cultural identity in northern Epirus (Chaonia)', in *Boundaries Archaeology: Economy, Sacred Places, Cultural Influences in the Ionian and Adriatic Areas*, edited by E. Giorgi, G. Lepore, A. Gamberini, 45-63. Heidelberg: Propylaeum.
- Chapinal-Heras D. 2021. *Experiencing Dodona: the development of the Epirote Sanctuary from Archaic to Hellenistic times*. Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter.
- Dakaris S.I. 1971. *Archaeological guide to Dodona*. Ioannina: Cultural Society "The Ancient Dodona".
- De Maria S., Mancini L. 2018. 'Territori e paesaggi sacri nella Caonia ellenistica e romana', in *Politics, Territory and Identity in Ancient Epirus*, edited by A.J. Dominguez, 193-246. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.
- Emmerling T.E. 2012. *Studien zu Datierung, Gestalt und Funktion der ‚Kultbauten‘ im Zeus-Heiligtum von Dodona*. Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač.
- Evangelides D., Dakaris S.I. 1959. 'Το ιερόν της Δωδώνης Α. Ιερά Οικία' in *Αρχαιολογική Εφημερίς*, 1-194.
- Mancini L. 2013. 'Templi, *thesauroi*, "temples-trésors". Note sull'edilizia templare non periptera nei santuari dell'Epìro ellenistico' in *Ocnus* 21, 75-99.
- Mancini L. 2017. 'ΘΕΣΠΡΩΤΙΚΑ ΙΕΡΑ. Il contributo del paesaggio sacro alla conoscenza di un *ethnos* epirota', in *Annuario della Scuola archeologica di Atene e delle missioni italiane in Oriente* 95, 205-225.
- Mancini L. 2019. 'L'architettura templare nei santuari dell'Epìro', in *Dodonaios L'oracolo di Zeus e la Magna Grecia. Catalogo della mostra, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Reggio Calabria, (8 marzo-9 giugno 2019)*, edited by C. Malacrino, K. Soueref, L. Vecchio, 181-188. Reggio Calabria: Kore.
- Mancini L. 2020. 'Il 'rovescio' del Continente. Paesaggi inferi d'Epìro tra fonti letterarie, miti contemporanei e realia', in *Acheruntica. La discesa agli Inferi dall'antichità classica alla cultura contemporanea*, edited by R.M. Danese, A. Santucci, A. Torino, 31-66. Urbino: Argalia Editore.
- Melfi M. 2007. 'The Sanctuary of Asclepius', in *Roman Butrint. An Assessment* edited by I.L. Hansen, R. Hodges, 17-32. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Melfi M. 2012. 'Butrinto: da santuario di Asclepio a centro federale', in *I processi formativi ed evolutivi della città in area adriatica*, edited by G. de Marinis, G.M. Fabrini, G. Paci, R. Perna, M. Silvestrini, 23-30. Oxford: Archaeopress.
- Piccinini J. 2012. 'Rethinking Epirote Religion. A Survey of Recent Scholarship on Epirote Cults and Sanctuaries', in *Annuario della Scuola archeologica di Atene e delle missioni italiane in Oriente* 90, 318-326.
- Piccinini J. 2016. 'Renaissance or decline? The shrine of Dodona in the Hellenistic period', in *Hellenistic sanctuaries. Between Greece and Rome*, edited by M. Melfi, O. Bobou, 152-169. Oxford: Oxford University Press

- Podini M. 2014. *La decorazione architettonica d'età ellenistica e romana nell'Epiro del nord*, Bologna: Bononia University Press.
- Quantin F. 2008. 'Recherches sur l'histoire et l'archéologie du sanctuaire de Dodone. Les oikoi, Zeus Naios et les Naia' in *Kernos* 21, 9-48.
- Rinaldi E. 2020. *Agorai ed edilizia pubblica civile nell'Epiro di età ellenistica*, Bologna: Bononia University Press.