

## Prehistoric Terracotta Head of a “Demonic Being” from Dodona (Epirus, Greece)

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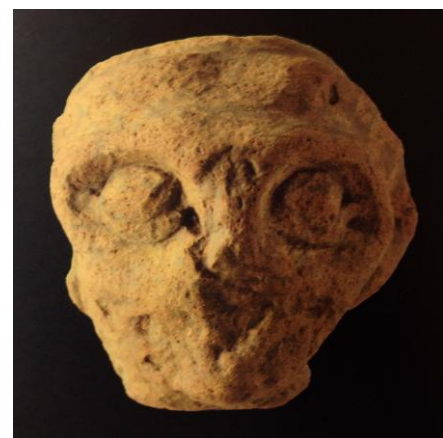
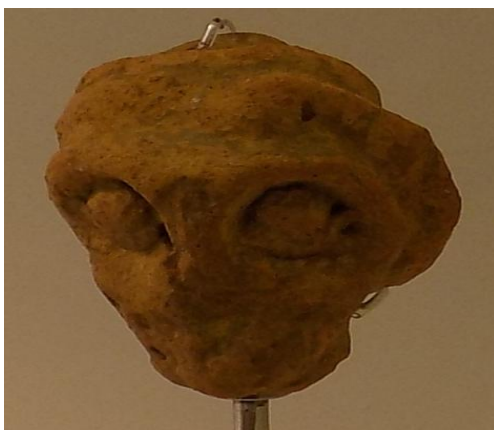
### ABSTRACT

*This paper concerns a clay figurine head dated to the late prehistoric period and found in the sanctuary of Zeus in Dodona. The head is stored in the Archaeological Museum of Ioannina, but was published only in 2016, in the catalogue of the temporary exhibition on Dodona hosted by the Acropolis Museum (Athens, Greece): it has been dated to the 16th -11th centuries B.C. and defined as representation of a demonic being. The article proposes to date this figurine head to the 13th -11th centuries B.C. and argues that it represented a female divine image with Gorgon features. The particular head may have been part of a terracotta figurine, which portrayed a prehistoric goddess of wild nature and fertility in her horrifying hypostasis. In this interpretation, the terracotta head from Dodona provides material evidence for worship of the Minoan-Mycenaean Great Goddess in one of her primitive aspects in Dodona during late prehistoric time.*

**Keywords:** Dodona, sanctuary at Dodona, Mycenaean period in Dodona, Mycenaean pottery from Dodona, prehistoric terracotta figurines, prehistoric goddess of Dodona, Gorgon.

### INTRODUCTION

From June 2016 till March 2017, the Acropolis Museum at Athens hosted a remarkable exhibition on the oracle sanctuary of Zeus in Dodona under the title “Dodona. The oracle of sounds”. The exhibition comprised artifacts permanently stored in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens and the Archaeological Museum of Ioannina. Among the archaeological finds dated to the late prehistoric period and mostly consisting of pottery vessels and bronze weaponry (Eleutheratou, Soueref 2016, 50-57), a small terracotta figurine head was of particular interest (Figs.1-2).



**Fig1-2.** Terracotta figurine head from Dodona, the Archaeological Museum of Ioannina (no.4172) – as it was exposed at the Acropolis Museum Exhibition “Dodona. The oracle of sounds” (Figure 1, photo by the author) and as it is published in the catalogue of the exhibition (Figure 2, source: Eleutheratou, Soueref 2016, 58, no.24).

This head is the only prehistoric figurine fragment found in the Dodona sanctuary, to date; it belongs to the Archaeological Museum of Ioannina (Museum № 4172), but remained unpublished until the organization of the exhibition and its inclusion in the exhibition catalogue (Eleutheratou, Soueref 2016, 58, no.24). This paper attempts to present a detailed description of the Dodonian terracotta head, to

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specify its typological characteristics, to determine the category of prehistoric terracotta figurines, in which it may be put, to clarify its date, and to offer an interpretation of the image represented in it.

### PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

#### Description of the Object

The terracotta head under consideration is miniature and three-dimensional: its height is 6.5cm, its thickness is 4.8cm, and the width of its face is 5.4cm. The head is hand-made and solid, that is, not hollow; the clay is of yellow-orange color. The facial features were made with precision and, despite some superficial damage, are still recognizable: the eyes are large, round, bulgy, and deep-set in huge circular orbits; the eyebrows protrude; the nose is damaged, but it was clearly indicated; there is a likeness of an angular fold at the nose bridge (unless it is the result of damage); the mouth is partially damaged as well, but it is obviously wide open, while something projects downward from it - either the tongue or tusks (or both?), like in the Archaic images of Gorgon. The head was topped with either rich female-styled hair or large headdress of female type (like *polos* or wide diadem?). The uneven lower edge of the head and the visible traces of the neck imply that this head was part of a figurine, which could have been approximately 25-30cm in size, if it was human-like. The publisher of this head, Greek archaeologist Christos Kleitsas, dates it between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. (Eleutheratou, Soueref 2016, 58, no.24), but the fact that Mycenaean pottery found in Dodona was made from similar yellow-orange clay (Eleutheratou, Soueref 2016, 50-55) suggests that the Dodonian head, too, was made during the Mycenaean period and should be dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. The publisher defines the head as the representation of a “demonic being”, which would have had apotropaic character (Eleutheratou, Soueref 2016, 58, no.24), but such an interpretation of the image seems vague.

#### Iconographic Analysis

In terms of style, the head under consideration displays a number of iconographic peculiarities, which all together do not occur in the prehistoric terracotta figurines and larger figures known so far (French 1971; Morris 2017). The upper part of the head, whether it is a hairdo or a headdress, indicates the female gender of the represented. However, the realistic rendering of the facial features distinguishes the Dodonian head not

only from the Mycenaean female terracotta figurines of the traditional types (the so-called *Phi*-type, *Psi*-type, *Tau*-type, and *Kourotrophos*-type) characterized by very schematic representation of the face (French 1971, 112-142), but also from those not numerous Mycenaean terracotta figurines and figurine heads, which belong to the so-called naturalistic group (French 1971, 109-112, 144-150). One of the most distinctive features of the Dodonian head is its big eyes protruding from deep orbits: apparently, the master made holes for the eye sockets first and then filled them with clay balls. This technique, which made the eyes more expressive, recalls the Minoan art traditions: it is traced in Minoan terracotta figurines from the Middle Minoan III / Early Neo-Palatial period, for example, in a terracotta figurine head (Fig.3) from a Cretan peak-sanctuary at Kophinas dated to 1700-1580 B.C., displaying the same stylistic features as the Dodonian head (Rethemiotakis 2001, 55-56, no.60; similar Rethemiotakis 2001, 76-77, no.89-right – terracotta figurine head from Gortys, Crete, dated to the Neo-Palatial – Late Minoan IIIA period; 4-5, no.5 – a Neo-Palatial fragmentary terracotta figurine from Gortys; also Rethemiotakis 2001, 83, no.101; 126-127, nos.136, 138).



**Fig3.** Terracotta figurine head from the sanctuary at Mt. Kophinas, Crete, c. 1700-1580 B.C., the Heraklion Archaeological Museum (no.14166). Source: Rethemiotakis 2001, 56, no.60.

Mycenaean terracotta-makers adopted this technique and applied it in solid hand-made figurines, while in hollow wheel-made clay figurines and larger figures, instead of making holes for the orbits, they created very deep circles around the eyes, which provided the same effect (Rethemiotakis 2001, 25-26, nos.28-29; 32, nos.36-37; 50, no.50, and other examples of Cretan Post-Palatial terracotta figurines made during the Mycenaean Greek presence on the island). Thus, a striking resemblance may be observed between the heads of some of the clay idols found in the Cult Center of Mycenae (Fig.4), dated to c.13<sup>th</sup>

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century B.C. (Taylour 1983, 52-53), and the Dodonian figurine head, even considering the difference in size (the idols' heads are about 10-12cm) and that, unlike the head from Dodona, the clay idols from Mycenae are wheel-made and hollow. It might seem to someone that the small terracotta head found in Dodona was a kind of local provincial miniature imitation of large clay cult figures from the “cultural capital” of the Mycenaean world.



**Fig4.** Head of a clay wheel-made idol from the Cult Center at Mycenae, c. 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the Archaeological Museum of Nafplion (photo by the author).

The Dodonian head's most striking feature, which is unparalleled in the Minoan and Mycenaean terracotta figurines and figures discovered so far, is its wide-open mouth with either a stuck-out tongue or projecting tusk(s). In Greek historic iconography, these were the characteristic traits of Gorgon, whose secure representations in sculpture, relief, and vase painting are known from the early-seventh century B.C. (Krauskopf 1988, 289). However, the origins of the image of Gorgon seems to have been connected with the Minoan religious ideas: for example, a Middle Minoan cornelian prism seal stored in the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford) bears on one side representation of a human-like head with bulging eyes in large deep orbits and wide-open mouth, in which long, hardly human teeth are visible (Fig.5; Hughes-Brock, Boardman 2009, 235, no.101a).



**Fig5.** Representation on a Middle Minoan prism seal, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (no.1938.794). Source: Hughes-Brock, Boardman 2009, 235, no.101a.

Formally, it may be considered a forerunner of the Archaic Gorgon's head type (the so-called Gorgeie kephale or Gorgoneion tentatively identified on a few more seals of the same date and early Late Minoan / Late Helladic clay objects, Σακελλαρίου-Ξενάκη 1958, 80-81). However, until the publication of the Dodonian head there was a gap of almost a thousand years between possible Middle – early Late Minoan / Late Helladic depictions of Gorgon's head and the earliest historic representations of Gorgon. The Mycenaean terracotta figurine head from Dodona seems to fill that gap being a unique late prehistoric sculpted representation of Gorgon.

### Interpretation – Significance of the Mycenaean Terracotta Head Found in Dodona

Studies on Gorgon have demonstrated that this creature originally personified the horrifying hypostasis of the prehistoric Great Goddess of nature, while Gorgon's fearsome appearance was supposed not only to inspire a man's awe, but also to frighten away “evil forces” (Frothingham 1911, 349, 373; Zolotnikova 2016, 359-362). Worship of the Great Goddess in prehistoric Dodona heretofore was assumed and postulated on the basis of later sources dated to historic time. The identification of the late terracotta head discovered in Dodona as representation of a Gorgon-like female deity provides direct material evidence for worship of a Minoan-Mycenaean goddess of nature in one her most primitive aspects in Dodona during late prehistoric time.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the main results of the above-made consideration should be marked out.

The small terracotta head found in Dodona and permanently stored in the Archaeological Museum of Ioannina should be dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. as part of terracotta artifacts of the Mycenaean period discovered in the site.

This head bears the traits, which were characteristic of the image of Gorgon in Archaic Greek iconography, and, thus, at this point in time appears to be a unique representation of Gorgon or Gorgon's head in Mycenaean plastic art. This head confirms the assumption of the connection of a powerful Minoan-Mycenaean goddess of nature with Dodona during late prehistoric time.

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