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E.R. Dodds: Two Unpublished Letters on Ancient 'Irrationalism'

The surviving correspondence of Eric Robertson Dodds (1893-1979) includes numerous letters in which he addressed scholarly topics that arose from his research and publications. In this note we present two such communications¹, both from the years after World War II, when Dodds, having in 1945 resumed his position at Oxford as Regius Professor of Greek following wartime service in educational intelligence, prepared and published (in 1951) his most famous and influential work, *The Greeks and the Irrational*².

When Dodds was invited to give the Sather Lectures at the University of California at Berkeley on which that book was based, he saw it as an opportunity to address a subject that «had without any planning on my part gradually come into focus as the dominant centre of my life's interests»: this he defined as «the study of human irrationality in all its manifestations, from ancient Dionysiac cults to the odder by-ways of modern psychical research»³. The reference to «Dionysiac cults» reminds us that in 1944 Dodds's edition of Euripides' *Bacchae* had finally appeared⁴, and it was probably its publication that ensured the invitation to lecture at Berkeley, where Dodds was personally acquainted with a fellow-student of Greek irrationalism, Ivan Linforth⁵.

The first letter reproduced below was written shortly after that edition was published, in response to an inquiry about the significance of Dionysiac cults for

¹ Both letters are reproduced by permission of the executors of the Estate of E.R. Dodds. For this we express our respectful thanks.

² On this period of his life see his *Missing Persons: An Autobiography*, Oxford 1977 (reissued 2000), 168-171. On the evolution of his *Meisterwerk* see R.B. Todd, *A Note on the Genesis of E.R. Dodds's The Greeks and the Irrational*, «EMC/CV» n.s. XVII (1998) 663-676. *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1951, has been frequently reprinted; for its publishing history see Todd, *A Note* 667 n. 19. Further on Dodds see R.B. Todd, *E.R. Dodds: A Bibliography of His Publications*, «QS» XLVIII (1998) 175-194, and Id., *E.R. Dodds: The Dublin Years (1916-1919)*, «Classics Ireland» VI (1999) 80-105 (available electronically at <http://www.ucd.ie/~classics/99/todd.html>), the latter a study that traces the origins of Dodds's interest in 'irrationalism', ancient and modern, to the period 1914-1919.

³ *Missing Persons* 180.

⁴ *Euripides: Bacchae*, Oxford 1944¹; 1960². The first edition had been completed by 1940; see *Missing Persons* 169.

⁵ See Todd, *A Note* 665 with n. 10.

medieval witchcraft. Dodds, as we shall see, could respond authoritatively, not only because of his knowledge of the ancient material but because of his wide reading in anthropological literature. This exposure, along with some theory and practice in psychical research, had informed his analysis of 'irrationality' since his student days before World War I⁶, an era when classical scholars were investigating Greek religion in the context of general anthropology⁷. Our second letter deals with a topic endemic to psychical research, divination. It is a response to an inquiry as to whether scrying, or the discernment for purposes of divination of images in a translucent or shining object, was represented on a vase of the classical period.

By annotating these letters we aim to show from more informal sources than his published works the extent of Dodds's reading⁸, and also to locate his views in the context of later discussions of 'irrationalism' in antiquity, an inherently controversial topic once it is approached from the perspective of modern ideas or later parallels.

1. *E.R. Dodds to E.H. Blakeney, October 1945*

This handwritten letter is in the papers of Edward Henry Blakeney (1869-1955) at the Cambridge University Library, Add. Ms. 7509 (125)⁹. Blakeney, a Classics graduate of Cambridge, pursued a career as a schoolteacher, mainly at Winchester (1918-1930). He had a wide range of interests, and produced a respectable body of minor publications¹⁰. He also corresponded with Housman and

⁶ Dodds traces his interest in anthropology to reading as a schoolboy in 1911 J.G. Frazer's *Psyche's Task*, London 1909¹; 1913² (*Missing Persons* 19); around the same time he also initiated his interest in psychical research (*ibid.* 98).

⁷ *Missing Persons* 39 and 74. At 170 he refers to his classes on Greek religion at Oxford in the years after World War II as reviving a subject neglected since the days of Lewis Farnell (1856-1934), a prominent figure in the study of Greek religion at Oxford when he was a student (1912-1916). The so-called «Cambridge Ritualists» (Jane Harrison, F.M. Cornford, and A.B. Cook) were active at this time, and Dodds's teacher and mentor Gilbert Murray had close links with the group. On Dodds's relation to this group see G. Mangani, *Sul metodo di Eric Dodds e sulla nozione di 'Irrazionale'*, «QS» XI (1980) 173-205.

⁸ Dodds's wide reading can easily be traced in his books. See, for example, *The Greeks and the Irrational* 309f. nn. 116, 118, and 120. The portion of his library that survives intact is unfortunately limited to works of classical scholarship. It is at Lancaster University Library, Lancaster, U.K. (We are grateful to Mr. Michael Hutchinson, now Emeritus Librarian, for supplying us with a list of the items in this special collection).

⁹ In this letter we have added the parenthesis around the reference to Porphyry, since it is clearly an aside.

¹⁰ On Blakeney see *Who was Who 1951-1960* 111, and the references at P.G. Naiditch,

Wilamowitz¹¹. In his letter to Dodds, which has not survived, he must have suggested that medieval witchcraft could have arisen from the ancient cult of Dionysus, since both involved groups of women and the eating of raw flesh, though it would seem that his only evidence for the latter was the sacrifice of a cock, not the actual eating of its flesh.

62 High Street
Oxford¹²
17 October 1945

Dear Mr Blakeney,

Many thanks for your interesting letter about ὠμοφαγία¹³ and witchcraft. There are certainly analogies between the θίασος and the «coven»: I have referred to a possible one in my note on *Bacchae* line 115¹⁴. But I rather think that witchcraft derives more directly from the cult of Hecate-Diana, which flourished in late Graeco-Roman times and was itself influenced both by Dionysiac μυστήρια

Problems in the Life and Writings of A.E. Housman, Beverly Hills 1995, 44 n. 1. His publications included several volumes of verse, and some translations and editions of classical authors.

¹¹ For Housman see the index to H. Maas (ed.), *The Letters of A.E. Housman*, London 1971, and for Wilamowitz see A. Bierl, W.M. Calder III and R.L. Fowler (eds.), *The Prussian and the Poet: The Letters of Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff to Gilbert Murray (1894-1930)*, Hildesheim 1991, *Appendix: Two Letters to E.H. Blakeney* 123-128.

¹² This was Dodds's residence in Oxford from 1936 to 1946, «a maisonette [...] its front rooms were uncomfortably noisy and it possessed only the merest apology for a garden» (*Missing Persons* 126). Thereafter he lived at Cromwell's House, Marston (a village three miles from Oxford) (see *Missing Persons* 179f.), from which the second letter below is addressed.

¹³ For ὠμοφαγία, the eating of raw flesh, see especially Eur. *Bacch.* 138; Dodds, *ad l.* called this the «supreme rite» of the triennial Dionysiac festival, a type of communion in which the god was thought to be eaten. Cf. also his Introduction to this edition (1st ed., XIV-XVIII; 2nd ed., XVI-XX). His interpretation has been subsequently rejected by, for example, R. Seaford, *Euripides: Bacchae*, Warminster 1996, 37, with nn. 46f. for references.

¹⁴ Dodds had suggested that a single male celebrant, identified with Dionysus, led the group of women, first at *Maenadism in the Bacchae*, «HTHR» XXXIII (1940) 155-176 at 170 n. 71, and then in the note on Eur. *Bacch.* 115, where he claimed that the «organization would be like that of a witches' coven, where the single male leader was known to his congregation as 'the devil'». This devil leader is also discussed by Murray, *The Witch-Cult* (see n. 16 below) 186-190. A. Henrichs, in a long and scathing article, *Male Intruders among the Maenads: the So-called Male Celebrant*, in H.D. Evjen (ed.), *MNEMAI*. «Classical Studies in Memory of Karl K. Hulley», Chico 1984, 69-91, has convincingly shown that Dodds's «notion of the 'male celebrant' is an ill-conceived modern construct that must be given up» (72). He also (at 83f.) comments unfavorably upon Dodds's analogy with the witches' coven.

and by Egyptian magic. See Rohde, *Psyche* 323ff. (Eng. trans.)¹⁵, and Miss M.A. Murray's book on witchcraft. But there is room for much fuller investigation¹⁶. (The mediaeval cock sacrifice interests me in another connection, for the possible light it may throw on something that has always puzzled me in Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* c. 10, the séance that was interrupted because one of those present strangled the birds ἃς κατεῖχε φυλακῆς ἔνεκα¹⁷). Did the witches *eat* the cock, an ὀμοφαγία? Lady Alice Kyteler gave it to the demons at the cross-roads after a σπαραγμός (C. Williams, *Witchcraft* p. 96)¹⁸. The constitution of Pope Honorius prescribes its cockfights in conjunctions (*ibid.* p. 242)¹⁹. I should be grateful for any further references you may be able to supply.

Yours sincerely,

E.R. Dodds

If you get any offprints of your notice of my *Bacchae* I should like very much to see one²⁰.

¹⁵ E. Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality Among the Greeks*, London 1925. This was an English translation of the eighth edition of the German work.

¹⁶ Rohde (324 n. 101) mentions medieval traditions of groups of women gathering with Diana as arising from ancient traditions of Hecate and the souls accompanying her. Margaret Alice Murray (1863-1963; *Dict. Nat. Biog.* 1961-1970 770f.), an Egyptologist, had written two works on witchcraft: *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology*, Oxford 1921 (to which Dodds is probably referring, since Murray mentions Diana at 12), and *The God of the Witches*, London 1931. For the prevalence of references to a cult of Diana in connection with witchcraft, during the early Middle Ages, especially in France, see V.I.J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*, Princeton 1991, 122. For the origins of Hecate as a goddess of witches, see S.I. Johnston, *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature*, Atlanta 1990, 144-148.

¹⁷ *Vit. Plot.* 10,26f. Henry-Schwyzler. In an article written two years later Dodds suggested that the presence of birds at the séance was prophylactic, and that their strangling was not a proper part of the ritual. See *Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism*, «JRS» XXXVII (1947) 55-69 at 60f. (= *Greeks and the Irrational* 289-291). For a recent discussion of this text see L. Brisson, *Plotin et la magie: le chapitre 10 de la 'Vie de Plotin' par Porphyre*, in *Porphyre: La Vie de Plotin*, II, Paris 1992, 465-475, at 471f.

¹⁸ C. Williams, *Witchcraft*, London 1941. Dame Alice Kyteler, or Kettle (under the latter name at *Dict. Nat. Biog.* XI 79), was a fourteenth-century Irish noblewoman, accused of witchcraft in 1342. She sacrificed to a spirit at night «in the high waie nine red cocks», to quote Holinshed's *Chronicle* from the *Dictionary* article.

¹⁹ Pope Honorius (d. 1227) was the author of a «Grimoire», or book of magic. An issue that Dodds does not raise in this context is whether sacrifices by witches at «conjunction», i.e. full moon, were intended to assist in their pulling the moon down, as they were reputed to both in antiquity and early modern Europe. On this alleged practice in C. Mugler, *Sur l'origine et le sens de l'expression καθαίρειν τὴν σελήνην*, «REA» LXI (1959) 48-56, D.E. Hill, *The Thessalian Trick*, «RhM» n.s. CXVI (1973) 221-238, and P. Bicknell, *The Dark Side of the Moon*, in *Maistôr*. «Classical, Byzantine and Renaissance Studies for Robert Browning» (= «Byzantina Australiensia» V), Canberra 1984, 67-75.

²⁰ We have not managed to locate this review.

2. *E.R. Dodds to Annie Ure: June 1952*

This typed letter was discovered by Dr. Victoria Sabetai of the Research Centre for Antiquity at the Academy of Athens in an archive at the Ure Museum at the University of Reading²¹. Annie D. Ure (d. 1976) was at the time the widow of Percy Neville Ure (1879-1950), Professor of Classics at Reading 1911-1936²². He had appointed E.R. Dodds as an Assistant Lecturer in Classics in 1919²³, and during Dodds's five years in his department the two men became good friends, as we learn from Dodds's autobiography²⁴. Ure was a graduate of Cambridge, where, as a student of Sir William Ridgeway (1853-1926)²⁵, he had specialised in Archaeology in Part II of that university's Classical Tripos. His major scholarly contribution was the cataloguing of pottery, based on excavations at Rhitsona in Boeotia. As early as 1922 he established a museum in connection with his department, a remarkable initiative in a small institution that was still an affiliate of the University of London. This museum is now «the fourth most important collection of Greek ceramics in Britain, after those of the British, Ashmolean and Fitzwilliam Museums»²⁶. By having Ure as a colleague Dodds would have been exposed to Greek art and archaeology, which had formed no part of his training at Oxford, and this experience must have helped him in using evidence from these areas in later work²⁷.

²¹ We have omitted a sentence at the end of this letter referring to personal matters.

²² On Ure see *Who Was Who 1941-1950* 1176, and *An Address Presented to Percy Neville Ure on his Seventieth Birthday with a Bibliography of his Writings*, Reading 1949. We are grateful to Dr. Sabetai for supplying us with a copy of the latter.

²³ Dodds recounted his interview with Ure, and the offer of a post, to Gilbert Murray in a letter of 14 August 1919, at Murray Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Box 40,8f. This letter confirms Dodds's recollection (*Missing Persons* 74) that his starting salary at Reading was £275.

²⁴ See *Missing Persons* 73f., and 94 (a visit to Thebes and Delphi with both Ures). Ure is also mentioned in one of Dodds's letters from this period to Thomas McGreevy (1893-1967), the Irish poet and literary critic, McGreevy Papers, Trinity College Dublin, Ms. 8112/28: «My own professor, Ure, reads his *Daily Herald* [*sc.* the newspaper of the social-democratic left] religiously. He is a nice man, but with a mind somewhat attenuated by a too exclusive study of Greek vases of the best period: so that he has lost all appreciation of the beefy either in art or life – the sight of a bottle of stout or a picture by Rubens makes him positively ill!» At *Missing Persons* 138 Dodds puts Ure in the «treasured category of non-careerists», along with his friend, Stephen MacKenna, the famous translator of Plotinus.

²⁵ He contributed a paper to Ridgeway's *Festschrift* in 1913: *An Early Black-Figured Vase from Rhitsona in Boeotia*, in «*Essays and Studies Presented to William Ridgeway*», Cambridge 1913, 171-179.

²⁶ This claim is made at the University of Reading's web site: <http://www.rdn.g.ac.uk/Ure/history.html>.

²⁷ In fact, when he was Professor of Greek at Birmingham he appointed a former Reading student of his and Ure's, R.P. Austin, to teach Greek history and archaeology. See *Missing Persons* 73 and 89.

Mrs. Ure, who assisted her husband in his research, was clearly in the process of cataloguing and studying a vase dateable to no later than the first century B.C., on which there was a gesture of someone looking into their hand, which she thought might indicate hydromancy. The letter that she wrote to Dodds asking for advice has not survived. Dr. Sabetai informs us that she has not identified any vase in the Ure Museum that might have led to this inquiry, but, as she notes, Mrs. Ure may have misunderstood the scene and gesture. The letter itself is in uncatalogued boxes of Ure material at the Ure Museum, and we are indebted to Dr. Sabetai for providing us with a photocopy.

Cromwell's House
Old Marston
Oxford
June 29, 1952

Dear Mrs. Ure²⁸,

I'm sorry I have failed to turn up the reference to scrying in a liquid held in the palm of the hand²⁹; but I'm pretty sure you will find it in Lane's book on the manners and customs of the modern Egyptians³⁰. In any case it proves nothing for the ancient Greeks³¹. So far as I know the ancients always did their scrying in a

²⁸ Dodds refers to her less formally as «Nan» at *Missing Persons* 73.

²⁹ Dodds speaks of scrying most fully in *Supernormal Phenomena in Classical Antiquity*, in *The Ancient Concept of Progress and other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief*, Oxford 1973, 156-210 at 185-192. (We shall refer to this reprint of an article originally published in «Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research» LV (1966-1972), pt. 203, 1971, 189-237). Thus at 186 he defines scrying as «the practice of prolonged staring at a translucent or shining object which enables a minority of persons to see a series of hallucinatory moving pictures 'within' the object». For scrying in antiquity, see now M. Nelson, *Narcissus: Myth and Magic*, «CJ» XCV (2000) 363-389, esp. 365-369. In his letter Dodds must mean that he was unable to find any such reference in *ancient Greek* texts.

³⁰ This is a reference to an anecdote recorded by Edward William Lane (1801-1876; *Dict. Nat. Biog.* XI 512-515) in his *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, II, London 1846, 90-99, of a young boy medium who, in Lane's presence, gave a description of, among other people, Lord Horatio Nelson, whom he claimed to see in ink placed in the palm of his right hand. For such scrying practices there were more recent studies by E. Lefébure, *Le miroir d'encre dans la magie arabe*, «Revue Africaine» XLIX (1905) 205-227 and W.H. Worrell, *Ink, Oil and Mirror Gazing Ceremonies in Modern Egypt*, «JOAS» XXXVI (1916) 37-53. For more references to this type of scrying, see Nelson, *Narcissus* 366 n. 12.

³¹ Numerous other forms of scrying that became popular later (e.g., gazing into a crystal ball), were unknown to the Greeks. For Dodds's experiment with crystal-gazing during his undergraduate days in the Oxford Society for Psychical Research, and in the presence of T.S. Eliot, see *Missing Persons* 99.

vessel of water³². Divination by «the cup in which my lord divineth» (*Genesis* 44,5) seems to go back in the East to the time of Hammurabi (Hunger, *Becherwahrnehmung bei den Babyloniern*, diss. Leipzig 1903)³³. But I know of no direct evidence that it was an early Greek practice, though Varro thought Pythagoras had learned it from the Persians (*Aug. Civ. Dei* VII 35)³⁴. The first specific instance referred to by classical writers belongs to the time of the Mithradatic wars (*Apul. Apol.* 42, also from Varro)³⁵, and the practice was considered Persian by Strabo (*XVI* 762) and Pliny (*NH XXXVII* 192)³⁶. So perhaps any interpretation of your vase as a scene of hydromancy ought to be put forward with caution³⁷. Ganszyniec

³² Dodds later knew better. At *Supernormal Phenomena* 185 he speaks of «at least two methods» (he is closely followed by G. Luck, *Arcana Mundi*, Baltimore-London 1985, 54): a) with a mirror (or shiny shield) and b) with a «vessel of water [...] with or without the addition of a film of oil» (186f. and 187f., respectively, with the quotation at 187). His omission in the letter of a) must be an oversight, since Dodds knew of Delatte's work on Greek catoptromancy (see n. 39 below). There is a third possibility, the practice of gazing at the flame of a lamp (lychnomancy), which Dodds had briefly noted at *Greeks and the Irrational* 299. In the same work (at 87 n. 40) he takes Paus. VII 21,13 to mean that scrying could be performed at a spring.

³³ The exact form of divination with the cup alluded to in *Genesis* is unknown, and so are any connections with Babylonian divination; see, most recently, A. Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria*, Leiden 1996, 160-166. Dodds later recognised that the Babylonian form of divination was inductive rather than, as in the case of scrying, intuitive, though he still posited a connection between the two; see *Supernormal Phenomena* 188, and cf. Nelson, *Narcissus* 368f. with n. 19. For a more recent study of this type of Babylonian divination, superseding that of Johannes Hunger mentioned by Dodds, see G. Pettinato, *Die Ölwehrnehmung bei den Babyloniern*, I-II, Rome 1966.

³⁴ At *Greeks and the Irrational* 264 n. 70 Dodds claims that Varro's statement was made «doubtless on the strength of Neopythagorean apocrypha». Varro, in the passage cited, also mentioned Numa as a practitioner of hydromancy. Johannes Tzetzes later claimed (wrongly) that the practice of scrying could be found in Homer; see Nelson, *Narcissus* 367 n. 13.

³⁵ The earliest instance is actually *Ar. Ach.* 1122-1141 and not Varro *ap. Apul. Apol.* 42,6, as Dodds indicated at *Supernormal Phenomena* 186 (after he had read Delatte's work; see n. 39 below). Apart from the two instances cited here by Dodds, Varro is also reported as mentioning hydromancy at *Serv. Aen.* III 359 and *Isid. Etym.* VIII 9,11-14.

³⁶ Strabo (*XVI* 2,39) mentions Persian necromancers, lecanomancers, and hydromancers, while Pliny (*NH XXVIII* 104 and *XXX* 14 [not *XXXVII* 192]) mentions Persian divination through lamps, bowls, water, spheres, air, stars, axes, and the dead. It is uncertain whether either author was referring to scrying rather than some form of inductive divination with the use of water and bowls, etc.; see Nelson, *Narcissus* 367f. However, in a fifteenth-century manuscript, there is a drawing of a Persian (intuitive) lecanomancer named Apollonius; see A. Delatte, *Anecdota Atheniensa*, I, Liège-Paris 1927, 494.

³⁷ This is sound advice, since there had earlier been some questionable identifications of ancient representations of hydromancy. These include (i) G. Perrot, *Mémoires d'archéologie, d'épigraphie et d'histoire*, Paris 1875, 123-137, cited in A. Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire de la divination dans l'Antiquité*, I, Paris 1879, 186 n. 1, with reference to two paintings on the

in P.-W. s.v. Lekanomanteia quotes most of the literary evidence, such as it is³⁸; but the fullest and most recent discussion will probably be in Delatte's book on catoptromancy which I have not read³⁹.

Yours sincerely,
E.R. Dodds

University of British Columbia

MAX NELSON
ROBERT B. TODD

Palatine; (ii) L. A. Milani, *Il R. Museo Archeologico di Firenze: sua storia e guida illustrata*, Firenze 1923, 147, on a fifth century B.C. black-figure pelike in Florence (nr. 72732), which actually depicts a seller of oil or wine with a female customer, as was shown by F.J.M. De Waele, *The Magic Staff or Rod in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, Gent 1927, 161; (iii) P.B. Mudie Cooke, *The Painting of the Villa Irem at Pompeii*, «JRS» III (1913) 157-174 at 169 on an amphora from Ruvo in the British Museum (nr. F 331), in which Eros holds a phiale (and not Aphrodite), which is certainly not to be used as a «divining glass»; and finally, and most famously, (iv) Mudie Cooke (*l. c.*) and A. Delatte, *La catoptromancie grecque* (n. 39 below) 185f. on a kylix from Vulci in Berlin showing Aegeus consulting the Delphic prophetess Themis (Antikenmuseum Staatliche Museen F 2538 = ARV² II 1259,5). Dodds, *Supernormal Phenomena* 186 n. 4 rejected all attempts (such as Delatte's) to interpret the latter scene as one of scrying, since, as he noted, there was no evidence for this practice at Delphi.

³⁸ *RE* XII/2 (1925) 1879-1889. R. Ganschinietz also wrote the articles on catoptromancy at *RE* XI (1921) 27-29, and lychnomancy at *RE* XIII/2 (1927) 2115-2119; the article on hydromancy was by F. Boehm, *RE* IX/1 (1914) 79-86.

³⁹ This is Armand Delatte's study *La catoptromancie grecque et ses dérivés*, Liège-Paris 1932. Dodds had cited this work, though not by page numbers, sixteen years earlier in his essay *Telepathy and Clairvoyance in Classical Antiquity*, in *Greek Poetry and Life*. «Essays Presented to Gilbert Murray on his Seventieth Birthday, January 2, 1936». Oxford 1936, 364-385, at 364 n. 4 and 367 n. 4. In *Supernormal Phenomena* (first published in 1971; see n. 29 above), he characterized Delatte's book as «a work of wide learning to which I am heavily indebted» (186 n. 3). Not long before this letter was written, Armand Delatte's student François Cunen in 1951 had completed a doctoral thesis at the University of Liège entitled *La lécanomancie grecque*. For further literature on scrying in antiquity see Nelson, *Narcissus* 365 n. 8.