

Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena

Author(s): Robert Luyster

Source: *History of Religions*, Summer, 1965, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Summer, 1965), pp. 133-163

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1061807>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *History of Religions*

JSTOR

*Robert Luyster*

SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS  
IN THE  
CULT OF ATHENA

INTRODUCTION

Broadly speaking, the representations of Athena in Greek art may be divided into two classes: the first comprises those which depict Athena as standing erect with shield and spear, that is, in a warlike pose; the second is composed of those which portray her sitting tranquilly and without weapons. But which of these two types formed the standard cult image of the goddess and how the one type may be related to the other is a matter that has puzzled students since Furtwängler, who was among the first to comment upon the apparent contradiction (*Gegensatzlichkeit*) between the two.<sup>1</sup> The same difficulty is mirrored in discussions of the character of the goddess herself. It has long been seen that a tension exists between the royal, civic, and martial aspects of Athena, on the one hand, and her more pacific, natural, and agricultural connotations on the other. Because no evident connection could be sensed between these two halves of her being, it has become customary to select one as primary and then to explain the other as a later and artificial development. Among those who have seized upon her warlike attributes as the basis of her character are L. R. Farnell, M. P. Nilsson, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, and H. J.

<sup>1</sup> A. Furtwängler, in W. H. Roscher (ed.), *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1897–1909), I, 687.

## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

Rose;<sup>2</sup> among those who have insisted that her associations with the fertility of nature are the prior and more fundamental part of her being, we may note especially Jane Harrison, Otto Gruppe, A. B. Cook, Eugen Fehrle, and Ernst Kalinka.<sup>3</sup> The same dualistic approach is employed in the most recent study of Athena by C. J. Herington, *Athena Parthenos and Athena Polias*, in which he suggests that the Erechtheion and the Parthenon upon the Acropolis of Athens were originally meant to serve two distinct goddesses, an agricultural and a warrior goddess.<sup>4</sup> In this study we propose, chiefly by an examination of the symbolic significance of the images and artifacts of the cult of Athena, to inquire somewhat more exactly into the nature of this dichotomy among her attributes and its implications for a general understanding of the genuine character of the goddess.

### I. ATHENA AS "METER"

#### A. THE CULT IMAGE OF ATHENA

The ancient xoanon of Athena in the Erechtheion at Athens was generally known in the fifth century as simply "the ancient image," and it was supposed to have been carved from olive wood.<sup>5</sup> It is the same statue that Pausanias later notes in his trip through the Erechtheion,<sup>6</sup> though by his time it was called directly after Athena Polias.<sup>7</sup> At first the consensus was that this ancient image of the city's protectress pictured the goddess in the standing and weaponed pose described in the introduction. Lately, however, it has become increasingly certain that this image was, in fact, of the sitting variety. It is agreed, furthermore, that portrayals of Athena in the sitting posture go quite as far back in time as the

<sup>2</sup> L. R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1896), I, 290-303; M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* (2d ed. rev.; Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1955), I, 440-44; Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Der Glaube der Hellenen* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1932), I, 203; H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1959), pp. 110-11.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), pp. 300-307; Otto Gruppe, *Griechische Mythologie und Religionsgeschichte* (München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1906), II, 1218; A. B. Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914-40), III, Part I, 189; Eugen Fehrle, *Die kultische Keuschheit im Altertum* (Giessen: Alfred Toepelmann, 1910), pp. 170-201; Ernst Kalinka, "Die Herkunft der griechischen Götter," *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum*, XLV (1920), 412-13.

<sup>4</sup> Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1955, pp. 43-47 *et passim*.

<sup>5</sup> Athenagoras *Leg.* 17.

<sup>6</sup> Pausanias i. 26. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Schol. Demosthenes *Androtion* 597.

standing type and that they were of almost equal popularity,<sup>8</sup> being known at Erythrae, Chios, Phokaea, Massalia, and other places.<sup>9</sup>

The antiquity of these representations of Athena as the city-guarding divinity is vouched for, among other proofs, by the fact that Athena, the city-goddess of Troy in the *Iliad*, is described there as possessing a cult image that was evidently sitting.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, this is about all that we can infer from the description, but it is possible to enlarge our picture of this representation of Athena by an examination of later sitting images. It has been demonstrated by Blinkenberg, for instance, that the cult image of Athena Lindia, the city goddess of Lindos, was seated on a throne, wearing a crown.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Pausanias informs us that the Athena Polias of Erythrae was seated on a throne, wearing a crown and holding a spindle in each hand.<sup>12</sup> The spindle motif apparently was widespread, for it infiltrated even into warlike images of the goddess as, for instance, at New Ilium, where the goddess held a spear in one hand and a spindle in the other.<sup>13</sup>

We know little about the seated image of Athena Polias at Athens, but here, too, Frickenhaus has shown from the evidence of inscriptions that the goddess was seated on a throne, wore a crown, and held in this case a *phiale*,<sup>14</sup> a flat bowl often used for libations but also employed as a funeral urn. The underworld associations of the latter were evidently intentional, for more than a few terra cotta copies of this sitting Athena have been found in Attic tombs.<sup>15</sup> A very similar cult image, moreover, was employed in the closely related cult of Athena Nike, later housed in the nearby temple of Athena Nike on the Acropolis.

The cult of Athena Nike was an extremely ancient one and was closely related to that of Athena Polias. Sophocles has his Odysseus run both epithets together in his short salute to Athena ("Nike Athena Polias"),<sup>16</sup> while in the sacrificial ritual of the Panathenaea,

<sup>8</sup> Hans Georg Niemeyer, *Promachos: Untersuchungen zur Darstellung der bewaffneten Athena in archaischer Zeit* (Waldsassen/Bayern: Stiftland-Verlag KG., 1960), pp. 18–24.

<sup>9</sup> Pausanias vii. 5. 9; Strabo xiii. 601.

<sup>10</sup> Homer *Iliad* vi. 86–98, 269–80, 286–311.

<sup>11</sup> Chr. Blinkenberg, "La Déesse de Lindos," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, XXXIII (1930), 154 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Pausanias vii. 5. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Apollodoros iii. 12. 3.

<sup>14</sup> A. Frickenhaus, "Das Athenabild des alten Tempels in Athen," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung*, XXXIII (1908), 17–32.

<sup>15</sup> Farnell minimizes their significance, *op. cit.*, pp. 332–33.

<sup>16</sup> Sophocles *Philoctetes* 134.

## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

after the dedication of a hecatomb of cattle to Athena Polias, it remained only to sacrifice the most splendid one, saved until last, for Athena Nike.<sup>17</sup> The same intimacy obtains in their cult types, for Athena Nike was also portrayed in the sitting position, although this time she is holding a pomegranate, yet another symbol of the underworld, in the right hand and a helmet in the left.<sup>18</sup> Before discussing these seated figures of Athena Nike, however, let us temporarily return to those associated exclusively with Athena Polias.

The throne and crown suggest, of course, that Athena is a queen, an implication that is more than once confirmed by the testimony of Greek drama, where she is often referred to variously as *despoina*, *medousa*, and *potnia*.<sup>19</sup> Her epithet of *potnia* ("queen") can be traced as far back as Homer, where, indeed, it is applied to the same sitting cult image that we have already noted.<sup>20</sup> This would surely seem to recommend the view that the statue was of the same crown-and-throne sort that we have already examined. Our problem, however, is whether we are entitled to search for a deeper meaning in these attributes of the sitting Athena Polias. Certainly, there are indications that we are.

"Lady," "Mistress," and "Queen" are very frequently employed as the names of those fertility goddesses known as "mother goddesses."<sup>21</sup> For this reason, among many others, it has often been claimed that Athena is such a fertility goddess. Her title and depiction as queen, that is, refers not only or even primarily to her patronage of the domestic community but rather to her lordship over the surrounding forces of nature. The connection between the two concepts, furthermore, receives some support in the invocation to Athena in Euripides' *Children of Heracles*. It begins as the chorus exclaims (770-72):

But, O Queen, for yours is the  
Soil and yours the city, of which you are  
Mother, Mistress, and Guardian. . . .

Here the terms "queen" (*potnia*) and "mistress" (*despoina*) seem to lead naturally in Euripides' mind to that of Athena as Mother

<sup>17</sup> *IG*, II<sup>2</sup>, 334.

<sup>18</sup> Heliodoros *apud* Harpokration *s.v.* Nike Athena.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Aristophanes *Knights* 763, *Peace* 271, *Ecclēsiāzūsaē* 476; *potnia* was evidently the popular form; cf. *IG*, I<sup>2</sup>, 566, 643, etc. On dedications to "Queen Athena" see Antony E. Raubitschek, *Dedications from the Athenian Acropolis* (Cambridge, Mass: Archaeological Institute of America, 1949), p. 428.

<sup>20</sup> *Iliad*, vi. 305.

<sup>21</sup> See G. van der Leeuw, "The Form of the Mother," *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), I, 91-101.

(*mater*).<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in Elis, the northwest of the Peloponnese, where ancient cults had a way of resisting transformation, the goddess was formally worshiped as Athena Meter (“mother”), and it was said that she was responsible for the great fertility of the women there.<sup>23</sup> Nor did she lack relation to childbearing even in civilized Athens, for when a maiden was about to become a bride, her parents led her up to the Acropolis, where a sacrifice was offered to Athena for the fruitfulness of the marriage.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, when a couple had just recently been married, the priestess of Athena Polias would bear the aegis of the goddess to their home,<sup>25</sup> a custom evidently designed to promote the birth of offspring.<sup>26</sup> Yet Farnell, who wishes to defend the classical notion of the goddess’ virginity, insists that Athena Meter denotes, not that Athena aids in the birth of children, but rather, because of her interest in the state, that she aids in their protection.<sup>27</sup> Even to Nilsson, however, who is motivated by the same purpose, this explanation seems “kaum befriedigend.” Nilsson goes on:

Eher würde ich glauben, dass die Frauen, die sich in ihren Angelegenheiten, und zwar besonders in ihrem Verlangen nach Kindern, an eine lange Reihe von Göttinnen wandten, nur weil diese Frauen waren und sie sich mit ihnen durch das Band des Geschlechts vereint fühlten, sich auch einmal an die Göttin Athena wandten. Nur so kann erklärt werden, dass Athena zur Beschützerin der weiblichen Kunstfertigkeit geworden ist. Das Auffallende der Nachricht darf aber nicht wegeklärt werden; sie ist um so auffallender, als das Epitheton *Meter*, abgesehen von Demeter, sonst keiner anderen Göttin als Ge beigelegt wird.<sup>28</sup>

But surely the intimate connection with Ge and Demeter is more significant than the rather desperate explanation. The same association with Demeter is evidenced elsewhere by an early votive relief found on the Acropolis in which a family is seen bringing a sow to sacrifice to Athena. The pig was the characteristic sacrificial animal of Demeter, and as the woman in the relief is pregnant, K. Lehmann-Hartleben has concluded that, like Demeter, Athena is here being regarded as a fertility or birth

<sup>22</sup> Dieterich and Wilamowitz are alone in suggesting that the verses are not addressed to Athena; Dieterich interprets them as applying to Ge, Wilamowitz to the Great Mother. See Albrecht Dieterich, *Mutter Erde* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1913), p. 43; Wilamowitz, *loc. cit.*, n. 2. But cf. Karl Kerényi, *Die Jungfrau und Mutter der griechischen Religion* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1952), p. 65, n. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Pausanias v. 3. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Photius *s.v. genos*; Suidas *s.v. protelaia*.

<sup>25</sup> Suidas *s.v. argis*.

<sup>26</sup> On the priestess of Athena Polias: Robert Schlaifer, “Notes on Athenian Public Cults,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, LI (1940), 257–60; Douglas Feaver, “Historical Development in the Priesthoods of Athens,” *Yale Classical Studies*, XV (1957), 132–37.

<sup>27</sup> Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

<sup>28</sup> Nilsson, *op. cit.*, p. 444.

## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

goddess.<sup>29</sup> We may mention also that there is record of a woman offering her plait of hair to Athena upon the birth to her of a desired male child,<sup>30</sup> while the *amphidromia*, held some five or seven days after the birth of a child, was often in honor of Athena Kourotrophos.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, it is known that the priestess of Athena Polias was herself obliged to be married.<sup>32</sup>

Athena was represented as holding a *phiale*. But Athens knew another goddess who was represented in her cult image as seated and holding a *phiale*; this was the Great Mother (Ge). The latter had a temple in the Peiraeus, and the Metroon, the repository of the state archives of Athens, was her shrine.<sup>33</sup> Much the same duality was displayed by the temple containing the strikingly similar cult image of Athena, the Erechtheion, for it too exercised the same guardianship. Tablets recording the important decrees of the state were erected around her temple for the benefit of her surveillance.<sup>34</sup> Again, just as the council chamber of the state met on ground sacred to the Great Mother for their deliberations, so the public resolutions of exceptional importance that might be passed there, such as the conclusion of an alliance or a declaration of war, were often sanctified by a prayer to Athena,<sup>35</sup> while in the case of an alliance the inscription was often headed by a representation of Athena holding in friendship the hand of the civic god of the allied city.<sup>36</sup> The *phiale* that each bears was most often used in pouring libations and was a round, shallow vessel, deeper than an ordinary saucer and without stem or handles. In earlier times it had been used as a sort of kettle and was placed on a fire,<sup>37</sup> hence its employment as a funeral urn for ashes.

The other object borne by the sitting Athena was the spindle. We have already seen Nilsson explain this on the basis, evidently, that being the same sex as her petitioners she acquired their characteristics. Farnell, on the other hand, derives it from her role as Athena Polias; it signifies, that is, her protective care over the peaceful arts of the city.<sup>38</sup> Let us, however, examine the significance of the spindle elsewhere in Greek art and myth, and then we shall return to its significance in the cult of Athena.

<sup>29</sup> K. Lehmann-Hartleben, "Athena als Geburtsgöttin," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, XXIV (1926), 19–28 and Fig. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Palatine Anthology* vi. 59.

<sup>31</sup> Eudocia 54.

<sup>32</sup> Plutarch *Numa* 9.

<sup>33</sup> See Jane E. Harrison, *Mythology and Monuments of Ancient Athens* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1890), pp. 43–49 and Figs. 9–10.

<sup>34</sup> *CIA*, II, 332.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 57b.

<sup>36</sup> See Nos. 61 and 96 in Marcus N. Tod (ed.), *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).

<sup>37</sup> *Iliad* xxiii. 270.

<sup>38</sup> Farnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 313–14.

There was a certain group of Greek goddesses who were virtually defined by their relationship with the spindle, and this was the Moirai, who were for that matter also known simply as the “Spinners” (*Klōthes*).<sup>39</sup> They were constantly represented as holding spindles, and their names were in fact “Spinner” (*Klōtho*), “Measurer” (*Lachesis*), and “Unbendable” (*Atropos*). The threads that they spun were the fate of each individual—the longer the thread, the longer one’s life. They would seem in some sense to have been related to the moon, for their mother was the goddess Night (*Nyx*),<sup>40</sup> and some claimed that they were in reality the three phases of the moon.<sup>41</sup> At any rate, the significance of the spindle motif may be briefly illustrated by the remark of Hector’s mother when her son has been slain by the hero Achilles. She says, “Even when I did bear him, so did strong Moira spin with her thread at his birth.”<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere in Homer we are told that Odysseus “will have to endure whatever fate the dread Spinners spun with their thread for him at his birth.”<sup>43</sup> And, indeed, so closely is the idea of the determination of fate bound up with the idea of spinning that even the gods are said to “spin” it.<sup>44</sup> Nor, except in Homer, are fate and its representatives viewed exclusively as the apportioners of death. Hesiod observes that “they bestow both good and evil” upon men and that they are in fact the governesses, for good or ill, of the three crucial moments of human existence—birth, marriage, and death.<sup>45</sup> As birth-goddesses they are sometimes associated with Eileithyia, while as the overseers of marriage they escort Themis to Zeus to be his wife,<sup>46</sup> marry Hera to Zeus,<sup>47</sup> and sing at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis.<sup>48</sup>

We may now attempt to show by indicating “spinning” elements in the cult of Athena that the spindles held by her offer a sufficient basis for her comparison with the Moirai. As early as the time of Homer she was recognized as the pre-eminent goddess of spinning and weaving. She was said, for instance, to have woven her robe (*peplos*) with her own hands,<sup>49</sup> and she was also the goddess responsible for weaving the robe that Hera donned in order to seduce Zeus.<sup>50</sup> Achilles would not marry Agamemnon’s daughter even if she challenged Aphrodite for loveliness and Athena in

<sup>39</sup> *Odyssey* vii. 197.

<sup>41</sup> *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 33 (ed. Kern).

<sup>42</sup> *Iliad* xxiv. 209–210.

<sup>43</sup> *Odyssey* vii. 195.

<sup>44</sup> *Iliad* xxiv. 525; *Odyssey* i. 7, iii. 208, iv. 207, viii. 579, xi. 139, xvi. 64, xx. 196.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. V. Weizsäcker in Roscher, *op. cit.* II, 3089 ff.

<sup>46</sup> Pindar frag. 30.

<sup>47</sup> Aristophanes *Birds* 1731.

<sup>48</sup> Catullus 64.

<sup>49</sup> *Iliad* v. 735.

<sup>40</sup> Hesiod *Theogony* 217.



## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

handiwork.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, when Athena appears to Odysseus, she is like a “woman handsome and tall, and skilled in glorious handiwork.”<sup>52</sup> She is even able to communicate to maidens her skill at spinning and weaving.<sup>53</sup> Most of all, to Odysseus’ wife, Penelope, has

. . . Athena given above all else  
Knowledge of fine handiwork, and a deep understanding,  
And wiles, such as we have not heard that even those of old had.<sup>54</sup>

Nor do we lack the votive dedications to Athena of some of these grateful maids—spinners, weavers, seamstresses, and so on.<sup>55</sup>

We have already mentioned that Athena wove her own *peplos* and that of Hera; we know also that, when each of the gods honored Heracles with some special and characteristic gift, her gift was the *peplos*.<sup>56</sup> In fact, the *peplos* was especially associated with Athena, as we can see by the passage in Homer in which she is petitioned as “Queen” in the person of her seated civic image. Hector has withdrawn from the fray and, entering Priam’s palace, is greeted by his mother, Hecuba. He advises her to collect together the aged women of Troy, go up to the temple of Athena on the acropolis, and there, as a gift to Athena, place a lovely *peplos* upon her knees, beseeching her to save the city of Troy from the Achaeans.<sup>57</sup> From this it would appear that the *peplos* was (1) especially associated with women and (2) only given irregularly.<sup>58</sup> Both of these suppositions receive further support from our current knowledge about the offering of the *peplos* in the Panathenaea. It was woven by two young girls of between seven and eleven years of age under the direction of the priestess of Athena Polias and with the expert help of some older women. This was originally done once every four years,<sup>59</sup> although in later republican Athens the event was made annual.<sup>60</sup> As the regular presentation of the *peplos* was probably the creation of the sixth century, so too was the institution of its young weavers; these were consequently assimilated to the already existing Arrhephori and given the same name.<sup>61</sup> By the fifth century and afterward, of course, the offering of the *peplos* was one of the principal events of the festival.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, ix. 390.

<sup>52</sup> *Odyssey* xiii. 289.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, xx. 72.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 116–18.

<sup>55</sup> *Palatine Anthology* vi. 39, 160, 247.

<sup>57</sup> *Iliad* 297–311.

<sup>56</sup> Diodorus i. 14.

<sup>58</sup> On the gift of a *peplos* see W. H. D. Rouse, *Greek Votive Offerings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), pp. 274–77.

<sup>59</sup> Pausanias v. 16. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Schol. Aristophanes *Knights* 566.

<sup>61</sup> Ludwig Deubner, *Attische Feste* (Berlin: Verlag Heinrich Keller, 1932), pp. 9–17; cf. also J. A. Davison, “Notes on the Panathenaea,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, LXXVIII (1958), 23 ff.

Athena, then, excelled all other goddesses at spinning and weaving, and the material token of her pre-eminence was her special association with the archaic dress of Greek women, the *peplos*. If spinning and the spindle are to bear the same significance in her cult that they do with respect to the Moirai—and there would appear to be no reason why they should not—then we should have to see in them, contrary to the explanations of Nilsson and Farnell, the symbols of her domination of fate. And, certainly, it is precisely this symbolic significance that spinning and weaving bear in countless other ancient cultures: “the Great Mother, adorned with the moon and the starry cloak of night, is the goddess of destiny, weaving life as she weaves fate. . . . Thus the Great Goddesses are weavers.”<sup>62</sup> Mircea Eliade, furthermore, not only re-emphasizes the lunar background of the spinning and weaving motif, but also provides us with a valuable clue as to a puzzling myth of Athena:

By its mode of being, the moon “binds” together a whole mass of realities and destinies. . . . That is why the moon is seen in so many traditions personified by a divinity, or acting through a lunar animal, “weaving” the cosmic veil, or the destinies of men. . . . Not for nothing is she envisaged in myth as an immense spider—an image you will find used by a great many peoples.<sup>63</sup>

We have already seen that the Greek Moirai or “Spinners” of destiny are, in fact, associated in certain ways with the moon. The same holds true of Athena, as we shall see below. At the moment it is appropriate only to point out that the sky was occasionally called a *peplos*,<sup>64</sup> and it is not difficult to guess why, for just as the moon “spun” forth the fabric of earthly circumstance, so did Athena spin forth the fabric of the heavens. We may say in a deeper sense, then, that the *peplos* Athena wove was in fact the net of destiny, and it is properly this which explains its enormous ritual significance. The fact that the *peplos* is Athena’s is the true sign of her sovereignty, and as late as the time of Aristophanes, instead of asking, “Who shall be the tutelary guardian of the city?” the comic playwright asks, “For whom shall we weave the *peplos*?”<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the same idea would appear to stand behind

<sup>62</sup> Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), pp. 226–27. On spinning and weaving as images for determining fate, see pp. 226–34.

<sup>63</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958), pp. 180–81. On the moon, fate, and weaving, see pp. 180–82.

<sup>64</sup> A treatise on cosmogony by an obscure Orphic writer was called *Peplos*; see Suidas, *s.v. Orpheus*.

<sup>65</sup> Aristophanes *Birds* 826–27.

## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

his phrase that one must be "worthy of the *peplos*."<sup>66</sup> The expression, in any event, serves to bring us back to the puzzling myth that I mentioned.

We are told that Arachne, a mortal princess of Lydia, was so skilled in the art of weaving that she challenged Athena to a contest. Athena took the guise of an old woman and appeared to her, warning her of the consequences, but as Arachne remained firm, Athena accepted the challenge. Athena wove into her fabric various illustrations of the dire fate of those who meddle with the gods, while Arachne wove pictures of the many erotic affairs of the gods. Furious, Athena ripped up her fabric and began to beat Arachne. When the terrified girl hanged herself, Athena took pity upon her and at last turned her into a spider and the rope into a cobweb, which Arachne climbed to safety.<sup>67</sup>

Eliade has already noted the connections between the art of weaving and the spider as weaver par excellence. Let us return to him now briefly on its connection with young woman's initiations, and then come back once again to Arachne. He notes:

. . . the ritual importance of certain feminine crafts which the neophytes are taught during the period of seclusion; in the first place, spinning and weaving, which play essential parts in the symbolism of numerous cosmologies. . . . It is during the initiatory seclusion that the old women teach, besides the art of spinning, the feminine ritual songs and dances, most of them erotic or even obscene. Their seclusion at an end, the young women continue to meet in the house of an old woman at spinning parties. We must underline the ritual character of this feminine occupation; spinning is very dangerous, and that is why it can only be done in special houses and only during certain periods and before certain hours. In some parts of the world they have given up spinning, and they have even forgotten it altogether, because of its magical danger. . . . In short there is a secret link between the feminine initiations, spinning and sexuality.<sup>68</sup>

Spinning is very dangerous, Arachne finds out, for she must pay with her life for the extraordinary skill that she has acquired. And as with the young female initiands, Arachne, too, is temporarily indebted to the benevolent agency of an old woman who seeks to help her. Again, as with the female initiands, weaving is explicitly associated in the tale of Arachne with sexual elements, for these are what she weaves into her fabric. Finally, as with initiands the world over, her death is followed by a new birth—this time as a

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, *Knights* 566.

<sup>67</sup> Ovid *Metamorphoses* vi. 1–145; Virgil *Georgics* iv. 246.

<sup>68</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960), pp. 211–12. For a more extended treatment, see his discussion of the same subject in *Birth and Rebirth* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958).

spider. But we have already seen that the spider is, quite naturally, simply another metaphor for the spinning and weaving, that is, fate-determining goddess. We may say, then, that like other initiands, Arachne has been symbolically reborn in the guise of the goddess whom she served. In other words, it would appear as though we have in the myth of Arachne and Athena the archetypal model of certain female initiation rites performed in the name of Athena, and particularly in her capacity as the goddess who held the spindle of fate. Arachne, young and mortal, is the primordial reflection of the many young girls who will later spin and weave in the service of Athena, suffer a ritual death for their pains, and be reborn as the spiritual reincarnation of their goddess. (The death by hanging, we may note, is still another variation of the spinning motif: the rope and noose are something "spun," as we see at the end where they are compared to a cobweb.) The old woman is the formal representative of the goddess, whether as townswoman or priestess. We see the final vestiges of this basic situation in the later institution of the Arrhephori, in which the weaving of Athena's *peplos* is the sacred duty of her young worshippers, working under the supervision of the priestess of Athena Polias.

Athena's mastery of the spindle identifies her as a powerful "spinner" of fate, and this in turn implies her mastery of, and special association with, both birth and death. The implication is in fact confirmed by our other evidence on the matter. In the time of Hippias, for instance, it was required that a small fee be paid to the priestess of Athena Polias upon the birth and death of each citizen.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, we have just examined Athena's sponsorship of the ritual death and rebirth of her young female devotees, if our analysis of the Arachne tale be correct. In discussing her throne and crown, we have already examined the proofs of her responsibility for birth, in particular, and the relationship of these with motherhood and the cult of Athena Meter. But her responsibility for death we have not discussed, and this leads us back once again to the matter of the *phiale*.<sup>70</sup> As we have said, small images of the sitting Athena bearing a *phiale* have been found in Attic tombs, while the *phiale* was itself formerly in use as an urn for ashes, at least in Homeric times. Both facts seem to point to the conclusion that the *phiale* was a token of the underworld.

<sup>69</sup> [Aristotle] *Oeconomica* ii. 2. 4.

<sup>70</sup> We may note that among the sacred apparatus of some unknown hierophant near Amyclae were both spindle and *phiale*; see Rouse, *op. cit.*, p. 277. These were dedicated to the deity upon the termination of the priestly office.

## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

The pomegranate was the characteristic ornament of Athena Nike, whose cult, as we have pointed out, was intimately allied with that of Athena Polias. Since, as Furtwängler has observed, "in der altertümlichen Kunst ist die Granate das Lieblingsattribut für alle friedlichen, Fruchtbarkeit und Gedeihen befördernden Göttinnen,"<sup>71</sup> even the most conservative critics have been driven to admit that Athena is in at least some sense presented here as a goddess of fertility.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, however, the pomegranate—for its red color if no other reason—was considered a "bloody" fruit and, therefore, a meal suited especially for the dead (who were thought to crave life, that is, blood) and as an appropriate sign of the underworld in which they lived. Thus pomegranates sprang from the blood of the slain Dionysos,<sup>73</sup> from the bloody member of the slain Agdistis,<sup>74</sup> from the body of the dead hero Menoikeus,<sup>75</sup> and from the bodies of Eteokles and Polyneikes.<sup>76</sup> They were also commonly represented on funeral monuments, but their underworld associations stand forth most clearly in the myth of Persephone. We are told that Persephone was forced to return periodically to her husband, Hades, the king of the underworld, because he had managed to have her eat the seed of a pomegranate that grew in his garden.<sup>77</sup> The pomegranate, then, was a symbol of both birth and death, fertility and bloodshed. The pomegranate that sprang from the severed member of Agdistis was placed by the virgin Nana in her bosom, and the result was that she soon gave birth to the god Attis.<sup>78</sup> It figured most prominently in the cult of Persephone, the queen of the underworld, who was at the same time the agent of regeneration for both man and nature. It is accordingly, in Cook's words, "reasonable to conclude that a pomegranate in the hand of a deity implied perpetual regeneration,"<sup>79</sup> which is to say that it was, at least in this respect, approximately similar in import to the holding of a spindle, for both implied the power of the bearer to give or withdraw life as he or she chose.

What the pomegranate adds to this quality is its relationship to

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Fehrle, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>72</sup> For the pomegranate as fertility symbol in Greece, see Deubner, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>73</sup> Clem. Alex. *Protrept.* ii. 19.

<sup>74</sup> Arnobius *Adversus nationes* 5 ff.

<sup>75</sup> Pausanias ix. 25. 1.

<sup>76</sup> Philostratus *Eikones* ii. 29.

<sup>77</sup> *Hymn to Demeter* 372, 412; Apollodorus i. 5. 3.

<sup>78</sup> Arnobius *Adversus nationes* 5 ff; Pausanias vii. 17. 10.

<sup>79</sup> Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 816. Kerenyi suggests that "der Kernenreichtum des Granatapfels ist ein kleines Abbild des Seelenreichtums der Unterwelt, auch im Sinne der Fruchtbarkeit, wenn etwa geglaubt wurde, die Seelen der Lebewesen kämen von dort her oder von dort her wieder" (*op. cit.*, p. 34). Cf. also Herodotus iv. 143.

the fertility of earth on the one hand and to the realm of the dead on the other. Persephone was the goddess of both. Athena's possession of the pomegranate implies that she also is the goddess of both, and this is only to confirm what has already been suggested, for we have pointed out that she bears the (earth-goddess) attributes of queen and mother (*Meter*) on the one hand and (underworld goddess) token of the *phiale* on the other. With respect to the latter capacity we may pause to observe that Athena was also, like Persephone, paired with Hades. She shared with him her temple on the acropolis at Koronea in Boeotia, where she was honored under the title of Athena Itonia.<sup>80</sup>

#### B. THE SACRED EMBLEMS OF ATHENA POLIAS

*The snake.*—It is said by the Athenians that a great snake living in their temple guards the Acropolis, and in accordance with this belief every month they put out a honey-cake as an offering to it. Now in the past the honey-cake was always consumed, but on this occasion it was left untouched. When the priestess made this known, the Athenians were that much more eager to abandon the city, thinking that even their goddess had deserted the Acropolis.<sup>81</sup>

The temple- and Acropolis-guarding snake of Athena, who is here presented by Herodotus as having fled before the invasion of the Persians, was a well-known feature of the Acropolis. One of the women presented on the Acropolis in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (759) claims that she cannot sleep for fear of seeing the holy snake, which was generally considered to dwell in the temple of Athena Polias, the Erechtheion.<sup>82</sup> In graphic representations of the goddess the snake is often shown coiled immediately beside her, and their association was an intimate one, as we may gather from the tale of Herodotus. There were, however, other important ophidian elements in the cult of Athena on the Acropolis.

The first king of Athens, Cecrops, the legendary father of Aglauros, Herse, and Pandrosos, and the introducer of the olive and its cultivation, had a serpent's tail. He is so presented on many vase-paintings and reliefs, and our explicit testimony confirms the fact.<sup>83</sup> He was thought to be buried in the Cecropeion at

<sup>80</sup> Strabo ix. 411. Preller remarks that *Iton* (Itonia) has been derived from *sitos* ("grain") (L. Preller, *Griechische Mythologie*, ed. Carl Robert [4th ed. rev.; Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1894], I, 215, n. 1). We would have again, accordingly, the same coincidence of funeral and agricultural elements.

<sup>81</sup> Herodotus viii. 41.

<sup>82</sup> Hesychius s.v. *ophis*.

<sup>83</sup> Euripides *Ion* 1163–64; Aristophanes *Wasps* 438; Apollodorus iii. 177; Diodorus Siculus i. 28. 7. Karl Kerényi writes that his name must be a pun on *Kerkops*, "the tailed one" (*The Gods of the Greeks* [New York: Grove Press, 1960], p. 124).

## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

the southwest corner of the Erechtheion. Here a hereditary priesthood served in his name.<sup>84</sup> His three daughters, furthermore, became the nurses of an even more prominent snake-man, Erichthonios. Sophocles applies to them the term *drakaulos* ("housemate of the serpent"),<sup>85</sup> and indeed they are later even identified with the Moirai.<sup>86</sup> Born of the earth, like Cecrops,<sup>87</sup> Erichthonios was placed by his foster mother Athena in a chest and given to the three daughters of Cecrops to guard. Two of the three, however, could not restrain their desire to peer inside of the chest, and what they saw drove them mad, causing them to leap from the Acropolis.<sup>88</sup> What they saw, however, is disputed. It is claimed on the one hand that it was a child guarded by a serpent,<sup>89</sup> on the other that it was a child with a serpent's tail for legs.<sup>90</sup> At any rate, some said later that Athena had had a snake for a child,<sup>91</sup> although the canonical story was, of course, that she only raised him. When Erichthonios died, he was buried on the Acropolis,<sup>92</sup> and most people agreed that he was in reality the temple-guarding snake.<sup>93</sup> One of the three altars inside the temple was in his name (and that of Poseidon), the others being dedicated to Hephaistos and Butes.<sup>94</sup> His name, finally, would appear to mean something like "Very Chthonian," or "He of the Very Underworld."

We have seen that Erichthonios, Athena's foster son, was often thought of as half-child, half-snake. Such a conception was by no means unusual in antiquity, for snakes were in fact regarded as the children of the Earth Mother. Herodotus and others often refer to them as the children of Earth,<sup>95</sup> while snakelike necklaces were often hung about children as apotropaic devices. Where they are personified, they are almost invariably represented as young male children.<sup>96</sup> Ploutos, Agathos Daimon, the Dioscuri, Sosipolis—all

<sup>84</sup> Johannes Toepffer, *Attische Genealogie* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1889), pp. 134, 223, 233.

<sup>85</sup> Sophocles frag. 643.

<sup>86</sup> Hesychius *s.v. moirai*.

<sup>87</sup> Apollodorus iii. 14. 1.

<sup>88</sup> Pausanias i. 18. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Euripides *Ion* 23, 268, 1427; Apollodorus iii. 14. 1.

<sup>90</sup> Hyginus *Astronomica* ii. 13; *Fabulae* 166.

<sup>91</sup> Philostratus *Vita Apollonii* vii. 24.

<sup>92</sup> Apollodorus iii. 14. 7.

<sup>93</sup> See Pausanias i. 24. 7, and the comments of James Frazer on Erichthonios in the Loeb edition of *Apollodorus*, trans. and ed. James Frazer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1921), II, 90–93.

<sup>94</sup> Pausanias i. 26. 5, assuming, as is usually done, that Erichthonios and Erechtheus are variants.

<sup>95</sup> Herodotus i. 78; Artemidorus *Onirocritica* ii. 13; Pliny *Naturalis historia* viii. 229.

<sup>96</sup> Jane Harrison, *Themis* (London: Merlin Press, 1963), pp. 277–89. Observe that Aristophanes speaks of Athena's snake in the male gender (*Lysistrata* 759).

are young boys who are at the same time snakes. It is curious to realize, therefore, that the snake was at the same time the most prominent symbol for the Greeks of the dead and the underworld.

It was constantly displayed upon funeral vases and monuments, on which the dead could as well be pictured in serpentine form as in human form.<sup>97</sup> In explanation Plutarch points out that the backbone of a dead man seems like a snake,<sup>98</sup> but it is also true that the snake is a mysterious, nocturnal animal, inexplicably appearing and disappearing in holes deep in the earth, periodically shedding its skin to be born again, and so on. In any event, it was associated with many underworld figures as their characteristic attribute, such as Persephone, Hecate, the Erinyes, Gorgons, etc. These somewhat contradictory qualities of the snake may seem at first glance difficult to reconcile, but as Jane Harrison has observed, the snake is in fact to be regarded as the dead man or ancestor reborn, reincarnated in a new form and, so, anxious to rejoin his family and eager to help them.

This in turn leads to still another quality of the snake, for the snake was not only a sign of life through perpetual regeneration, but also a sign of fertility: his favor was earnestly sought since, if obtained, the success of one's crops was assured.<sup>99</sup> The snake, who participated ceaselessly in both birth and decay, life and death, had the power to award them as he saw fit. Such, for instance, seems to be the approximate significance of the story that at his birth Athena bestowed upon Erichthonios two drops of blood from the Gorgon's snakes; one had the property of curing disease and increasing life, the other of killing.<sup>100</sup> Elsewhere we are told that if the sacred snake of a temple eats the food offered to it, it promises a fruitful and prosperous year.<sup>101</sup>

Finally, as implied by this story and that of Herodotus about Athena's snake, it was a prophetic animal—the embodiment of wisdom, knowing all secrets, possessed of magical powers. Athena made a prophet of Teiresias by cleansing his ears with the tongue of her serpent Erichthonios so that he could understand the language of birds.<sup>102</sup> Anyone who ate a snake, furthermore, became wise, for he would thus be able to understand the cries of the birds.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>97</sup> E. Küster, *Die Schlange in der griechischen Kunst und Religion* (Giessen: Alfred Topelmann, 1913), p. 81.

<sup>98</sup> Plutarch *Vita Cleomenes* 39.

<sup>99</sup> Küster, *op. cit.*, pp. 1 ff.

<sup>100</sup> Euripides *Ion* 999–1015.

<sup>101</sup> Aelian *De natura animalium* xi. 2, 16.

<sup>102</sup> Hyginus *Fabula* 75; Ovid *Metamorphoses* iii. 320; Pindar *Nemean Odes* i. 91; Tzetzes *On Lycophron* 682.

<sup>103</sup> Philostratus *Vita Apollonii* i. 20.



## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

Athena, then, was intimately associated with the serpent; she was even at certain places referred to as *Drakaina*, the "She-snake,"<sup>104</sup> and *Pareia*, the "Adder,"<sup>105</sup> though generally the snake was merely her constant companion, son, or foster son. We have seen, at any rate, that the snake possesses the same combination of tellurian and subterranean values that we have already examined in the pomegranate, and its effect is accordingly to confirm what was suggested there about the earth-goddess and underworld-goddess character of Athena.

In addition, the prophetic power of the snake indicated the possibility of a similar oracular function by its possessor, and we shall show that there are in fact the traces of such a capacity on the part of Athena. She was, for instance, worshiped as Athena Phemia ("The Oracular") at Erythrae,<sup>106</sup> and she also issued oracles at Argos and Tegea.<sup>107</sup> Divination by means of casting pebbles was practiced in her name at various places,<sup>108</sup> and the same significance must attach to the tales of dice-playing in her temple at Skiros.<sup>109</sup> Men who sought the assistance of the oracle at Delphi were commanded first to sacrifice to Athena Pronaia, who was said to be the guardian of Apollo's oracles.<sup>110</sup> Elsewhere, furthermore, Athena was worshiped under the title *Pronoia*, "The Prescient," and this may even have been her original title at Delphi.<sup>111</sup> In both Athens and Sparta, moreover, the council chamber (*bouleuterion*) prayed to Athena Boulaia for guidance in their decisions.<sup>112</sup> Let us recall, finally, that although Zeus gave birth to Athena, her mother was in fact Metis, "The Wise" or "The Cunning."<sup>113</sup> Like her companion snake, therefore, Athena was the soul of wisdom—every secret and hidden form of knowledge was available to her. Behind the vast reputation of Athena in classical times for the art of reason and its application, there would thus appear to stand a semi-magical background of prophecy and arcane knowledge.

*The olive.*—Immediately beside the temple of Athena Polias grew the ancient and sacred olive tree of Athena.<sup>114</sup>

Now it happened that the olive tree was burnt along with the temple by the Persian invaders; but on the day after its burning, when the Athenians bidden by the king to sacrifice went up to the temple, they

<sup>104</sup> Orpheus *h.* 32. 11.

<sup>106</sup> Dittenberger *Sylloge* 370. 27.

<sup>108</sup> Zenobius v. 75.

<sup>110</sup> Aristides i. p. 23 (ed. Dindorf).

<sup>111</sup> Pausanias x. 8. 4; Photius *s.v.* Pronoia; Diodorus Siculus xi.

<sup>112</sup> Pausanias iii. 13. 6; *CIA*, III, 272.

<sup>113</sup> Hesiod *Theogony* 886 ff.

<sup>105</sup> Pausanias iii. 20. 8.

<sup>107</sup> Schwyzer *Dialectorum* 97, 661.

<sup>109</sup> Pollux 27a. 7.

<sup>114</sup> Philocoros frag. 146.

saw a shoot of about a cubit's length sprung from the trunk, and these things they reported.<sup>115</sup>

The olive tree was said to have been the same one planted there by Athena in order to show that the Acropolis belonged to her and not to Poseidon.<sup>116</sup> Some, indeed, even called it the "Athens-tree" (*Athenais*).<sup>117</sup> Normally, however, it was referred to as the "Citizen Olive" (*aste elaiia*);<sup>118</sup> the olive was, in other words, one of the citizens themselves; they were *astoi* and it was *aste*. Tradition had it that the dozen olive trees that grew in the garden of Academos had been propagated from the sacred olive on the Acropolis.<sup>119</sup> These trees also seemed intimately related to the city itself, for their name, the *moriai*, is derived from *moros* or *moira*, "fate."<sup>120</sup> The olive was the life-tree of Athens, in short, and upon its fate that of the city depended. Another sacred olive, for instance, grew at Megara, and there the oracle explicitly declared that if the tree fell so would the city.<sup>121</sup> Determined to prevent such an occurrence in Athens, the Areopagus carefully inspected the welfare of the *moriai* with monthly visitations; anybody who felled one of them was subject to death.<sup>122</sup> In addition, the trees were under the formal protection of Zeus Morios and Athena Moria, "The Fateful."<sup>123</sup>

We may note also that the olive tree was subject to a more individual use, for it would appear that it was customary to plant one upon the birth of each citizen.<sup>124</sup> Such a practice, it seems, would explain the fact that the life of Meleager was dependent upon the welfare of a piece of olive wood.<sup>125</sup> Let us make mention, too, of the olive tree in Troizen upon which, so the natives claimed, Hippolytus had hanged himself accidentally in the reins of his horses<sup>126</sup>—meeting his fate, we may say, upon the tree of fate (and, let us observe, in the same "fateful" way as Arachne).

Finally, as the very embodiment of life, the olive also played an important role as the dispenser of blessings and prosperity to men. Its most striking appearance in this capacity was as the *Eiresione*, an olive branch hung with wool, figs, fruits, and so on. Such a

<sup>115</sup> Herodotus viii. 55.

<sup>116</sup> Apollodorus iii. 14. 1.

<sup>117</sup> Hesychius *s.v.* *Athenais*.

<sup>118</sup> Pollux ix. 7.

<sup>119</sup> Aristophanes *Clouds* 1005; Istros frag. 27.

<sup>120</sup> Suidas *s.v.* *moriai*; Hesychius *s.v.* Cf. Gruppe, *op. cit.*, pp. 879–80, 1197, n. 5 ("Die Olive ist der lebens- und Schicksalsbaum . . .").

<sup>121</sup> Theophrastus *Historia plantarum* v. 2. 4; Pliny *Naturalis historia* xvi. 199.

<sup>122</sup> Aristotle *Const. of Athens* lx. 2; Suidas *s.v.* *moriai*.

<sup>123</sup> Studemund *Anecd.* i. 269.

<sup>124</sup> Euripides *Ion* 1436 ff.; Hesychius *s.v.* *stephanon*.

<sup>125</sup> Apollodorus i. 8. 2.

<sup>126</sup> Pausanias ii. 32. 10.

## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

branch was hung annually on the door of every Athenian and left there for the duration of the year, but it also figured in the more formal processions of festivals such as the Pyanepsia and Thargelia,<sup>127</sup> where the children who carried it sang of it as a person: "Eiresione brings figs and fat loaves, honey in a jar and oil to scrape herself off, a cup of strong wine to drink herself to sleep on."<sup>128</sup> (And in the process, of course, she also brings these things to the Athenians.)

The same significance of the olive as a token of good fortune may be seen in its use as a prize in various athletic contests. In the Olympic games, for instance, the victors were crowned with branches of wild olive, and tradition had it that they originally slept on them.<sup>129</sup> The Delphic oracle, it was said, had instituted the custom by advising that the winners be crowned with branches from that wild olive in the temenos which was at the moment wreathed in the web of the spider<sup>130</sup>—whose "fortune," in other words, was the most marked. While olive crowns were also awarded in the Panathenaea, its distinctive gift was, of course, an amphora of the olive oil pressed from Athena's *morai* in the Academy, a gift doubtlessly of the same general significance.<sup>131</sup>

Just as in our analysis of Athena's snake, therefore, we have found that her olive possesses significant value as a bestower of blessings, of life itself. Unlike the snake, however, this characteristic is not accompanied by underworld features. Instead, as with the spindle, elements pertaining to fate re-enter the picture: the olive is the sign or instrument of fate. The *moros* or fate of an individual or city becomes dependent upon the life of the *morai* and particularly its parent, the "Citizen Olive." We have, indeed, occasionally remarked the explicit association of spinning motifs with the olive (Hippolytus, the Delphic oracle). This is by no means to deny that spinning and underworld symbolisms are linked; we have already seen, in connection with the Moirai, that they are, for the Moirai are virtually defined by their mixture. We have also seen, in Athena's pomegranate, a plant that dispenses life and fertility but that is linked quite clearly with the underworld. Thus, in the olive tree as an attribute of Athena, we have no new quality adverted to, but only a new combination and confirmation of old ones.

<sup>127</sup> Plutarch *Vita Theseus* xviii; Schol. Aristophanes *Plutus* 1054.

<sup>128</sup> Eustathius *ad Iliad* xxii. 496.

<sup>129</sup> Pausanias v. 7. 6.

<sup>130</sup> FHG, III, 604.

<sup>131</sup> Photius *s.v.* Panathenaea.

*The owl.*—Many of the standard coins of Athens picture the head of Athena on one side and her emblematic owl on the other.<sup>132</sup> When, before the final encounter with the Persians, the Athenian troops saw a small owl fly over their heads, they immediately regarded it as the visible sign of her protection and support.<sup>133</sup> This is understandable enough, for in the mind of the people the owl sat constantly on her shoulder.<sup>134</sup> The particular owl of Athena was called the *glaux*, a small, strictly nocturnal animal. The epithet *glaukopis* is often applied to Athena in Homer, and it is most natural to suppose that its meaning is “owl-eyed,” or more literally “*glaux*-eyed,” although—as we shall see—there is reason also for rendering it as “bright-eyed.” As is true in modern times, the owl was proverbial in ancient Greece for its wisdom,<sup>135</sup> and this would accordingly be one rather obvious reason for its association with Athena.

One must note also, however, that the owl was a bird that signified death and destruction as well. It was used frequently on gravestones and vases as an insignia of death,<sup>136</sup> and its cry was a favorite literary device for suggesting impending doom,<sup>137</sup> especially the cry of the *glaux*.<sup>138</sup> A small model of the *glaux* perched atop a pillar on the Acropolis supposedly served the area as an apotropaic device, for we are informed that it lured birds of all sorts and destroyed them by its stare.<sup>139</sup> The last point reminds us especially of “*glaux*-eyed” Athena, and we may briefly inquire into the basis for such a belief. The name of the *glaux* is almost certainly derived from a verb meaning “to burn” or “to shine,” and the bird is thus the one that burns or shines, particularly by means of its eyes, which have thereby a fatal effect. In addition, the owl was in general a rather uncanny animal, mysterious, a dweller on the heights, seen only by night, a bird of prey. In other eastern Mediterranean countries, moreover, the owl was considered to be the reincarnation of a dead man,<sup>140</sup> and while information on the point is lacking in Greece, its clear association with the dead seems to point in this direction.

Athena was prominently associated with still another bird in

<sup>132</sup> See Wilhelm Lermann, *Athenatypen auf griechischen Münzen* (Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1900), pp. 2 ff.

<sup>133</sup> Aristophanes *Wasps* 1086 ff.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, *Knights* 1092-3.

<sup>135</sup> Dioscurides iv. 139.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. Gruppe, *op. cit.*, p. 794, n. 3.

<sup>137</sup> Ovid *Metamorphoses* v. 550, vi. 431, x. 452; Statius *Thebaid* iii. 511.

<sup>138</sup> Aelian *De natura animalium* x. 37.

<sup>139</sup> Ausonius *Mosella* 308 ff.

<sup>140</sup> Gruppe, *loc. cit.*

## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

Greece, the *korone*, carrion crow or raven. She was represented as holding one in her hand at Korone ("Crow Town") in Messenia,<sup>141</sup> and it was occasionally pictured alongside her in a heraldic sense on vases.<sup>142</sup> The crow goddess named Koronis ("Crow Girl") was supposed to have been given her shape by Athena,<sup>143</sup> and they were worshiped together in a temple near Sicyon.<sup>144</sup>

Koronis, also the mother of a famous snake-man, Asklepios,<sup>145</sup> bears other striking resemblances to Athena. The home of her worship seems to have been in Thessaly, and it was there that she was carried away and raped by both Theseus and Butes,<sup>146</sup> both of whom bear the most intimate relation to Athena. Theseus was probably Athena's most famous protégé, while Butes' clan, the Eteobutadae of Athens, supplied the priests and priestesses of Poseidon-Erechtheus and Athena Polias.<sup>147</sup>

Koronis was occasionally equated with Persephone and, knowing of another "Crow Town" in nearby Boeotia where Hades shared his temple with a goddess, we should certainly expect it to be Koronis,<sup>148</sup> but as we have seen, Kononea honored Hades and Athena. We may mention, finally, that Aigle, "The Bright," was another name for Koronis,<sup>149</sup> and that she was said to have been wedded also to Helios, the Sun.<sup>150</sup>

As for the crow, three qualities in particular that it possessed, or was thought to possess, struck the Greek fancy. It was, first of all, legendary for its age: it outlived men and other animals.<sup>151</sup> Second, it was an oracular bird, of particular use to lost travelers if it were willing to aid them.<sup>152</sup> It was, at last, a harbinger of rain, and was occasionally propitiated to bring it.<sup>153</sup>

Although Athena is incarnate in a number of birds in Homer, most notably the vulture,<sup>154</sup> her cult later recognized only the owl, the crow, and one other bird we have not yet mentioned, the sea-

<sup>141</sup> Pausanias iv. 34. 6.

<sup>142</sup> See Harrison, *Themis*, p. 113.

<sup>143</sup> Ovid *Metamorphoses* ii. 536-632.

<sup>144</sup> Pausanias ii. 11-12.

<sup>145</sup> Pindar *Pythian Odes* iii. 8 ff; Hyginus *Fabula* 202; Pausanias ii. 26. 5.

<sup>146</sup> Butes: Diodorus Siculus v. 50. 1; Theseus: Plutarch *Vita Theseus* viii. Cf. Karl Kerényi, *The Heroes of the Greeks* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), pp. 234-5.

<sup>147</sup> Ernst Curtius, *Die Stadtgeschichte von Athen* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1891), pp. xx-xxi.

<sup>148</sup> Cicero *De natura deorum* iii. 22. 56; Ampelius 9. 5.

<sup>149</sup> *IG*, IV<sup>2</sup>, 1. 128. 43.

<sup>150</sup> Pausanias ix. 35. 5. We have seen Athena-Koronis evidently as the spouse of Hades; it is interesting to note that Jane Harrison sees Helios and Hades as doubles (*Themis*, p. 369, n. 4).

<sup>151</sup> Hesiod frag. 138; Lucretius v. 1083; Horace *Odes* iv. 13, 25. Cf. Preller, *op. cit.*, p. 515, n. 3.

<sup>152</sup> Pausanias ix. 38. 3; Aristophanes *Clouds* 133; Callimachus *Hymns* ii. 66.

<sup>153</sup> Artemidorus *Onirocritica* ii. 20; Horace *Carmen* iii. 17. 12.

<sup>154</sup> *Odyssey* iii. 371-72.

crow (*enalios korone*) or seagull (*aithuia*). Athena Aithyia enjoyed a cult on a high cliff of the coast near Megara,<sup>155</sup> at the same spot where the hero Pandion was said to be buried.<sup>156</sup> The last may be of some significance, for in ancient as in modern times in Greece the gull was looked upon as an embodiment of the soul of the dead, particularly those dead who had drowned at sea. It was acquainted with the secrets of the sea, accordingly, and was also a weather-bird, revealing the approach of rain or a storm.<sup>157</sup> The name Aithyia appears to mean "The Burning" or "The Bright."

To summarize the results of our survey, then, Athena's incarnation in (or, at the least, accompaniment by) the birds we have described—owl, crow, gull—displays once again her character as Mistress of the Dead, for all three are death birds and birds of prey. The gull, and probably the owl, is a dead man come back to life; the owl particularly portends death and doom; the crow-goddess is associated with Persephone. With respect to the last, too, we may point out that in the Germanic north the crow (as well as the vulture) was the bird of the dead and was called literally the "Corpse-Chooser," being also the official representative of the Valkyries, the Germanic demons of war and death, especially in battle.<sup>158</sup> We may pause to observe, incidentally, that the Valkyries were also well known as spinners; the web they weave is known as the web of victory, and it is made of human bodies.<sup>159</sup>

There are, then, some interesting correlations between the Valkyries and Athena: they are both represented by carrion birds, particularly the crow; they are both associated especially with war and its outcome; they are both goddesses of the dead; and they are both spinners of fate. Like the Valkyries, Athena is occasionally pictured on vases as bearing away the dead body of a warrior,<sup>160</sup> and she was also pictured as a war goddess at that temple in Koronea where she was honored with Hades. Alcaeus, for instance, addresses himself to

Queen Athena, upholder of war,  
Who watches over Koronea  
From before her stream-flanked temple  
On the banks of the river Koalius. . . .<sup>161</sup>

Yet despite her warlike character, Athena functions rather like Persephone here, for her husband is Hades and she appears as the

<sup>155</sup> Pausanias i. 5. 3.

<sup>157</sup> Pliny *Naturalis historia* xviii. 363.

<sup>158</sup> Cf. Neumann, *op. cit.* pp. 164–65.

<sup>160</sup> See Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 809 and Fig. 618.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 41. 6.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>161</sup> Frag. 6.

## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

double of Koronis, a goddess equated with Persephone. It appears, then, that Athena's role as Mistress of the Dead bears a twofold significance, both military and agricultural, but that these two elements are inextricably blended. We may remember that Athena Nike—primarily a goddess of war, she who brings victory—holds in one hand a helmet and in the other a pomegranate, a fertility symbol.

Athena's ornithic relationships also confirm what we have already suggested about her originally oracular quality, for all three birds were rumored to be prophetic. We have seen that the crow and the gull were both harbingers of rain in particular. Finally, images of light and heat were seen to characterize all three birds: the *glaux* and *aithuia* are both literally "The Bright," as is also Aigle, Koronis' double. As we have mentioned, Aigle was Helios' wife and reputed also to be the mother of the Horai.<sup>162</sup> Surely a goddess whose name is "The Bright," who is the wife of the Sun and the mother of the Seasons, can only be the Moon.<sup>163</sup> Helios' other wife, Selene ("The Shining"), is certainly the moon, as are his daughters Lampetia, "The Illuminating," and Phaethousa, "The Shining."<sup>164</sup> Birds bearing names and associations like this, therefore, would seem to indicate the presence of lunar elements in the cult of Athena, and this possibility appears to be confirmed by reference to other aspects of that cult.

Athena was worshiped under the epithet of Alea ("Bright Warmth") at Tegea, where she shared her temple with the son of Koronis, Asklepios; here she was served in ancient times, according to legend, by Auge ("Light.")<sup>165</sup> Auge was raped by another protégé of Athena, Heracles, and she eventually had her child in Athena's temple. As a result, her angry father sent her over the sea in a boat, although an image of her kneeling in the act of giving birth remained in the temple, and she was worshiped as a goddess of childbirth.<sup>166</sup>

Elsewhere we hear of the cult of Athena Hellotis ("Bright Warmth") at Corinth, and in the background of a maiden named Hellotis, who did not have a child in Athena's temple, but was instead burned to death there.<sup>167</sup> This serves to remind us again of Koronis, for on still another occasion of Koronis' unfaithfulness, the raven brought word of the fact to her true husband, Apollo,

<sup>162</sup> Pausanias ix. 35. 5.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. Kerényi, *The Gods of the Greeks*, p. 193.

<sup>164</sup> *Odyssey* xii. 127, 261.

<sup>165</sup> Apollodorus iii. 9. 1.

<sup>166</sup> Pausanias viii. 48. 7; Apollodorus 2. 7. 4.

<sup>167</sup> Schol. Pindar *Olympian Odes* xiii. 56.

who was responsible for having her burnt upon a pyre, although her child, Asklepios, was rescued from the corpse.<sup>168</sup> Here, in other words, the two motifs are connected. Our own theory is that we have in reality here the mythological transcription of what was originally a ritual marriage with the sun, but it would serve no purpose here to attempt to substantiate it. We wish to stress only the coherence of these stories and the fact that their background is evidently lunar. Even in Athens we have word of a procession in which the eiresione was carried in honor of Helios and the Horai, the husband and children of Aigle-Koronis, but unfortunately—although we should expect Athena—no goddess is mentioned along with them.<sup>169</sup>

As for evidence, finally, of an immediate connection between Athena and the moon, we may cite the reverse of certain Athenian coins upon which is pictured the owl of Athena, an olive sprig, and—in between these—a crescent moon. Athena herself was occasionally shown as bearing for a blazon on her shield the crescent moon.<sup>170</sup> And the epithet *glaukopis* is one that is also applied by the playwrights to the moon.<sup>171</sup> For what it is worth, moreover, Aristotle himself claimed that Athena was but a personalized form of the moon.<sup>172</sup> The word *koronis*, finally, means “crook-beaked.” Knowing that the curved horns of the cow are occasionally identified symbolically with the moon, is it too much to suppose that the curved beak of the carrion crow, along with its other characteristics, might have given rise to the same identification? We make mention, too, of a Minoan gem picturing a sanctuary in which grows an olive tree, immediately beneath which is a large crescent moon.<sup>173</sup> The combination of these circumstances, therefore, along the affiliations we have already suggested between Athena and certain lunar animals and divine priestesses, prompts us to assert that there are certain undeniably lunar aspects to Athena’s epiphany. These by no means define or exhaust her character, but they would certainly appear to be one dimension of it. As Kerenyi has put it, “Athene sei der Mond; obwohl sie viel mehr als nur der Mond ist.”<sup>174</sup>

The lunar attributes of Athena and the birds associated with her would serve to explain the last item emerging from our discussion, that they were looked upon as the bringers of life-giving

<sup>168</sup> Pindar *Pythian Odes* iii. 5.

<sup>170</sup> See Harrison, *Themis*, p. 191, Fig. 46.

<sup>172</sup> Arnobius *Adversus nationes* iii. 31.

<sup>173</sup> See Harrison, *Themis*, p. 190, Fig. 45.

<sup>174</sup> Kerenyi, *Die Jungfrau*, p. 56.

<sup>169</sup> Porphyry *De abstinentia* ii. 7.

<sup>171</sup> Euripides frag. 997.



## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

moisture—for the moon was so regarded. The moon was considered the source of moisture, especially of the nightly dews that revived vegetation.<sup>175</sup> It is significant, therefore, that an important dew-gathering ceremony was associated with Athena, for this would conform with the lunar character that we have ascribed to her. The Hersephoria (“Dew Carrying”) was performed by young girls imitating the daughters of Cecrops, who were named Aglauros (“The Brilliant”), Pandrosos (“The All-dewy”), and Herse (“The Dew”). It is generally agreed that Herse was originally distinct from her two sisters, and she is also called the daughter of Selene, the Moon.<sup>176</sup> Jane Harrison is of the opinion that Aglauros and Pandrosos were originally a mother-maid combination,<sup>177</sup> and judging from their names, we would be inclined to agree. Their names would seem to indicate that they are merely a duplication of the Selene (moon, mother) and Pandrosos (dew, daughter) relationship. The dew, which was considered a form of rain, was evidently gathered on the occasion of the last full moon of the Attic year and was considered a fertility agent.<sup>178</sup>

### II. ATHENA AS PROMACHOS

#### A. ATHENA PROMACHOS

The second standard representation of Athena in Greek art presented her in a standing and warlike pose. She was pictured as wearing a helmet, carrying a spear with her lifted right arm and a shield with her lowered left. This type in turn may be divided into two subtypes. The first one of these was historically first<sup>179</sup> and, in it, Athena stands rather quietly and with feet together. This is known as the Palladium type, and it was supposed in classical times to have been derived from an original single Palladium in the citadel at Troy, on which it was thought that the prosperity and fortune of that city had depended. Since Troy could not be defeated as long as it possessed this image, Diomedes carried it away with the help of Odysseus and brought it back to Argos in Greece. Thereafter several cities in Greece claimed to have obtained it by one means or another.

<sup>175</sup> Alcman frag. 43; Sappho frag. 98. 12. Cf. Franz Cumont, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans* (New York: Dover Publications, 1912), p. 70.

<sup>176</sup> Alcman frag. 48.

<sup>177</sup> Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 287.

<sup>178</sup> Cf. Gruppe, *op. cit.*, I, 34.

<sup>179</sup> Furtwängler in Roscher, *op. cit.*, p. 691. Cf. the discussion by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, “Athena,” *Sitzungsberichte Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, XXXII (1921), 958 ff.

The other variety of the standing position of Athena was the Promachos type, in which the feet are apart and striding forward. This appears to be a development from the first, and it apparently was the creation of Attic artists, who displayed it especially upon the Panathenaic amphoras. Whereas it was at first supposed that both standing types were post-Homeric and showed the powerful influence of the poet, it is now recognized that the former can be traced at least as far back as the Bronze Age.<sup>180</sup>

We have, thus, a strong witness to the age and popularity of the warlike epiphany of the goddess, and this witness is still further confirmed by the evidence of Athena's cults, many of which celebrated her in especially that capacity. Athena Itonia, whom we have already mentioned in discussing her cult at Koronea, was the chief divinity of war in Thessaly and Boeotia, and coins from both areas display her in the Promachos pose.<sup>181</sup> Shields won from the Gauls were hung in her temple between Pharae and Larissa.<sup>182</sup> Athena Alalkomene ("Helper in Battle") was worshiped in Alalcomenae in Boeotia, and although the city was small, the possession of the cult was supposed to have preserved it from external domination.<sup>183</sup> A temple of Athena Promachorma ("Who Fights before the Ranks") was known on Mount Bouporthmos near Troezen,<sup>184</sup> and a temple at Plataea and an altar at Athens were dedicated to Athena Areia, whose name was also used in the signing of formal oaths beside that of Ares.<sup>185</sup> She was reputed to have taught infantry tactics to the Athenians,<sup>186</sup> and under her titles of Nike and Nikephoros she awarded victory in battle.<sup>187</sup> Indeed, a cult title of Athena's can be shown to correspond to almost every phase of military combat, from the awakening of the desire for battle to the proper distribution of its spoils.<sup>188</sup>

#### B. ATHENA GORGOPIS

Athena's warlike image generally presented her as wearing the sacred aegis, on which was pictured the Gorgon's head. Both of

<sup>180</sup> Niemeyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 25 ff.

<sup>181</sup> Preller, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

<sup>182</sup> Bacchylides frag. 23; Pausanias i. 13. 3.

<sup>183</sup> Pausanias ix. 33. 4; Steph. Byz. *s.v.* Alalkomenion; Aelian *Varia historia* xii. 57.

<sup>184</sup> Pausanias ii. 34. 8.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 28, 5, ix. 4. 1; *CIA*, II, 333.

<sup>186</sup> Aristides, I, 18 (ed. Dindorf).

<sup>187</sup> Pausanias i. 22. 4; Aristophanes *Knights* 581 ff.

<sup>188</sup> Cf. F. Dümmler, "Athena," *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der Klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. Georg Wissowa (Stuttgart, 1896), II, part ii, cols. 1999 ff.

## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

these were also employed separately as charms for their prophylactic effect. The aegis was highly regarded as a battle charm,<sup>189</sup> while the Gorgoneion was usually set over the ovens of bakers, potters, and smiths.<sup>190</sup> Alongside the Gorgoneion on these ovens, the owl of Athena was also modeled, and in one Hymn she is herself petitioned to repel the demons that the owl and Gorgon also fended off.<sup>191</sup>

But workmen's ovens and the emblem on her aegis were not the only connecting links between Athena and the Gorgon, for many stories also associated the two. We have already mentioned that she gave two drops of the Gorgon's blood—one of life, the other of death—to Erichthonios,<sup>192</sup> and it was also said that she presented a lock of the Gorgon's hair to the first king of Tegea, a gift whereby that ancient city of Arcadia was rendered immune to the attacks of its enemies.<sup>193</sup> Athena was also supposed to have invented the flute to imitate the sound of the cries of the surviving Gorgons upon the death of their sister, Medusa.<sup>194</sup> Athena's temple, furthermore, was claimed to have been the site where Poseidon ravished Medusa.<sup>195</sup> Elsewhere, the legend was related that when Iodama, a priestess of Athena Itonia, entered her temple by night, Athena appeared to her wearing a tunic on which was pictured the head of Medusa, the Gorgon. When Iodama saw it, she was turned to stone, and for that reason a woman every day thereafter put fire on the altar of Iodama and repeated three times that Iodama lives and asks for fire.<sup>196</sup> We may pause to note that the last circumstance is a strange one, for it was only the actual Gorgon's head that was thought capable of such an effect and not any copy of it, of which there were many to no one's detriment. What, then, if the Gorgon's head were in fact Athena's, and it was actually the sight of Athena which produced the disastrous effect?

Athena is indeed called Medusa ("Queen") at various points in the Greek drama,<sup>197</sup> but then so are certain other female deities.<sup>198</sup> Of more significance is the fact that Athena is herself, it would appear, named as "Gorgon" by Euripides,<sup>199</sup> while Sophocles refers to her as *Gorgopis*, literally, "Gorgon-eyed."<sup>200</sup> Indeed, the word "Gorgon" evidently had such a close relation to the goddess

<sup>189</sup> Suidas *s.v.* *aigis*.

<sup>190</sup> See Harrison, *Prolegomena*, pp. 188–91, Figs. 27–31.

<sup>191</sup> Hom. *Epigr.* XIV.

<sup>193</sup> Pausanias viii. 47. 5.

<sup>195</sup> Ovid *Metamorphoses* iv. 798 ff.

<sup>197</sup> See, e.g., Aristophanes *Knights* 585, 763; cf. also Plutarch *Themist.* x.

<sup>198</sup> Notably Artemis (Euripides *Hippolytus* 167) and Aphrodite (Lysias 833).

<sup>199</sup> Euripides *Helen* 1315.

<sup>192</sup> Euripides *Ion* 1003.

<sup>194</sup> Pindar *Pythian Odes* xii. 6 ff.

<sup>196</sup> Pausanias ix. 34. 1.

<sup>197</sup> See, e.g., Aristophanes *Knights* 585, 763; cf. also Plutarch *Themist.* x.

<sup>198</sup> Notably Artemis (Euripides *Hippolytus* 167) and Aphrodite (Lysias 833).

<sup>200</sup> Sophocles *Ajax* 450, frag. 760.

that she was formally addressed as *Pallas Athene Parthenos Gorgo Epekoos* ("Pallas Athena, Virgin, Gorgon-like, Listening-to-prayer").<sup>201</sup> Besides being called Gorgon and Medusa, Athena was also associated by name with the second of the Gorgons, Stheino ("The Mighty"), for at Troezen she was worshiped as Sthenias.<sup>202</sup>

As in Athens, she was closely associated in her worship there with Poseidon, who is also the mate of Medusa. The union of Poseidon and Medusa produced the winged horse Pegasus,<sup>203</sup> and this is not altogether unnatural since Poseidon was especially the horse-god and Medusa is represented as a horse on archaic vases.<sup>204</sup> But, like Medusa, Athena also reveals equine characteristics in her association with Poseidon: at Colonos in Attica, Poseidon Hippios and Athena Hippiia shared an altar—one of several places in which she bore the title.<sup>205</sup>

It was claimed of both Athena and the Gorgon, furthermore, that their original home was on the shores of Lake Tritonis in Libya and tales were told of their activity there.<sup>206</sup> Among them is the interesting story in which, like Athena, Medusa appears as a maidenly war-goddess. She was said to have led the Libyans into battle against the armies of Perseus from the Peloponnese. Perseus, however, assassinated her by night and brought her head back to the Greek camp.<sup>207</sup>

Finally, the most prominent characteristic of the Gorgon, that its eyes turned men to stone, is a trait also associated with Athena. We have already pointed out that she was called "Gorgon-eyed" and that the *glaux*, which was formerly a mode of Athena's epiphany and whose eyes in particular resembled those of *glaux*-eyed Athena, was supposed by its stare to turn animals to stone. Let us add the incident related about Lucius Metellus, who attempted to save the Palladium image of Athena from a burning temple, but was blinded for his efforts when he happened to look it in the face.<sup>208</sup> According to the belief of the citizens of Pellene, furthermore, no one could endure the gaze of their image of Athena.<sup>209</sup>

Various epithets of Athena indicate that the citizens were not alone in their fear of Athena's gaze. In Elis there was a temple of Athena Narkaia, "She Who Petrifies."<sup>210</sup> Elsewhere we also find

<sup>201</sup> See Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 588.

<sup>202</sup> Pausanias ii. 30. 6.

<sup>203</sup> Hesiod *Theogony* 280.

<sup>204</sup> See Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 179, Fig. 21.

<sup>205</sup> Pausanias i. 30, 4; cf. Farnell, *op. cit.*, 272.

<sup>206</sup> See Gruppe, *op. cit.*, II, 1201.

<sup>207</sup> Pausanias ii. 21. 5.

<sup>208</sup> Schol. Juvenal iii. 138.

<sup>209</sup> Plutarch *Vita Aratus* xxxii.

<sup>210</sup> Pausanias v. 16. 7.

## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

evidences of Athena Oxyderkes (“Sharp Eyes”), Athena Optiletis (“Sightful”), Athena Eriopis (“Strong Eyes”), and Athena Ophthalmitis (“Ophthalmia,” the name of the eye disease which discharged foul humours, the last also being the method by which the Gorgon paralyzed its victims).<sup>211</sup>

Jane Harrison has rightly seen that originally the Gorgon “is in fact the ugly bogey-, Erinyes-side of the Great Mother; she is a potent goddess, not as in later days a monster to be slain by heroes.”<sup>212</sup> This terrifying and demonic side of the Great Mother is one that any high goddess is capable of presenting, but our own view is that in Greece it was especially associated with Athena, as her close attachment to the Gorgon demonstrates. We would suggest that originally the Gorgon was only the terrible aspect of Athena but that as the goddess was subjected to the idealizing and rationalistic tendencies of the Homeric period, she was forced to repudiate this part of her being or, in mythological terms, to “kill” the Gorgon (for she was occasionally credited with having done so herself).<sup>213</sup> With this tale may be coupled the story that soon after inventing the flute, Athena decided after all to throw it away, because she saw herself playing in the reflection of the water and disliked the appearance of her puffed and swollen cheeks.<sup>214</sup> Such cheeks, however, are a distinguishing characteristic of early Gorgon faces, and Medusa is herself called *euparaos*, “large-cheeked.”<sup>215</sup>

A clear recognition of the terrible and deathly aspect of Athena enables us more easily to understand the apotropaic character ascribed to nearly all of her cult insignias. It was believed, for instance, that the olive branches which Athenians hung upon their doors acted to repel any evil spirits in the vicinity.<sup>216</sup> The warlike Pyrrhic dance, supposedly her invention, and the attendant clashing of arms were supposed similarly to keep away evil spirits. Models of her owl were explicitly said to serve as prophylactic devices on the Acropolis, and we have mentioned their use on ovens, etc.

Doubtless the most important use of such devices, however, was

<sup>211</sup> See Gruppe, *op. cit.*, p. 1198–99.

<sup>212</sup> Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 194.

<sup>213</sup> Euripides *Ion* 987.

<sup>214</sup> Apollodorus i. 4. 2; Ovid *Fasti* vi. 697 ff.; Hyginus *Fabula* 165.

<sup>215</sup> Pollux ii. 87, ix. 162. Normally translated “fair-cheeked,” but not, it seems to me, necessarily so. The prefix *eu-* can and does refer to quantity as well as quality. *Eukomos*, for instance, means not “fair-haired” but “thick-haired”; *euechetos* means either “well-sounding” or “loud-sounding”; and so on.

<sup>216</sup> Plutarch *Vita Theseus* xviii.

in the protection of the city as a whole. A lock of the Gorgon's hair rendered Tegea impregnable, and there was apparently also a legend that the head of the Gorgon, buried on the Athenian Acropolis, performed the same function for that city.<sup>217</sup> The owl and the Gorgoneion served as the two official coats of arms of Athens,<sup>218</sup> and we should interpret these as merely alternate ways of referring to the awful aspect of the goddess to which they alluded—Athena. The safety of a city could also be assured by the possession of a Palladion, which was again, however, but an image of Athena in her terrible aspect, for the Palladion was an image of Pallas Athena, a fierce and warlike side of the goddess. Replicas of the aegis which the goddess wore in this military posture were sometimes hung over the walls of besieged cities, no doubt with the same end in view.<sup>219</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the goddess was herself called Apotropaia and Alexikakos, "Averter of Evil."<sup>220</sup> The goddess was, in a manner of speaking, the ultimate weapon of her time: her protection was the most fearsome one could obtain, and the signs of that protection were invested with the same fearsome qualities as their source.

### III. ATHENA "GORGO EPEKOOS"

Athena's ritual epithet *Gorgo Epekoos* ("Gorgon-like, Listening-to-prayer") well defines the two poles of her being: she is death-dealing and awful, yet at the same time sympathetic and charitable to those whom her aegis shelters. In the last capacity Athena is the goddess of birth and life. Domestic rites that we have examined in Athens and elsewhere seem to indicate that she was originally responsible for the birth of the community's progeny, and her festivals, predominantly agrarian in nature, indicate a like responsibility for its corn crops.

Nor did she neglect to nourish and protect her creations. The dispatch of life-giving moisture seems to have been one of her functions, judging by the Hersephoria in her name, the aquatic associations of the birds that represented her, the well beneath her temple at Athens (her cult was commonly connected with a nearby stream or body of water), and her common and ancient epithet of Tritogeneia, which probably means "Water-born." Athena's beneficent activity is summed up in the assignment of

<sup>217</sup> Euripides *Erechtheus* frag. 362.

<sup>218</sup> C. T. Seltman, *Athens: Its History and Coinage before the Persian Invasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), pp. 50–52.

<sup>219</sup> Suidas *s.v. aegis*.

<sup>220</sup> Dittenberger *Sylloge* 370; Aristides i. 26 (ed. Dindorf).

## *Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena*

the olive tree to her surveillance and care, the embodiment of life, both corporate and individual, as well as its dispenser.

Athena's role as underworld goddess of death and disaster, on the other hand, is implied by her virtual monopoly upon apotropaic devices, her holding of the *phiale*, and her fearful incarnations. In the mildest of these she is the goddess who delights not just in war, but—like the carrion-eating crow and vulture—in its carnage and bloodshed as well. In her more terrible aspect she becomes the Gorgon, from whose eyes there oozes immediate death.

Nor do these two parts of Athena's being exclude or impede each other. Indeed, as we have seen, most symbols of the goddess participate in both realms—life and death, the earth and the underworld. Both snake and pomegranate, for instance, are inextricably related to the world of the dead, and yet both are bearers and emblems of fertility. The moon, too, suffers death and rebirth, and her character as moon goddess shows Athena once again to be the mistress of the two realms. The same significance is attached to her possession of the spindle and designation as the foremost spinner among the Olympian goddesses, for the spindle spins both life and death, as we saw in connection with the Moirai. Spinning the thread of fate as she desires, Athena is easily able to control and foresee the future, and her reputation for wisdom rests, accordingly, on a sound basis.

We conclude, then, that the two apparently "opposed" parts of Athena's theophanic structure in reality presuppose and demand each other. Each half of the dichotomy is not only dependent upon the other but inextricably implicated in it. The supposedly quiet and motherly Athena holds spindle, *phiale*, and pomegranate—each of which connotes death quite as much as life and fertility. Athena as the striding war-maiden employs her destructiveness in an ultimately maternal way, whether in the preservation of cities or in the role of Persephone at Koronea. Nor, as may be supposed, is the combination of traits that Athena possesses by any means so unnatural and unusual as to require that they have been artificially fused for what are usually described as political reasons. For it is by no means rare in the history of religions that a maternal goddess who issued life and fertility to her followers, should be at the same time a destructive and deathly goddess, whether as mighty maiden or fearful hag. We could perhaps have made our point in a different way by citing the many parallels to Athena, among them such well-known deities as Germanic Freya, Canaanite Anat, Babylonian Ishtar, and Indian Kali. It is, at any rate,

unnecessary to suppose that this combination of features can only have come about as the result of an artificial and late synthesis. They are, rather, involved in each other by the very processes of nature; just as life and death are indissolubly joined, so the goddess who dispenses them is one and single.