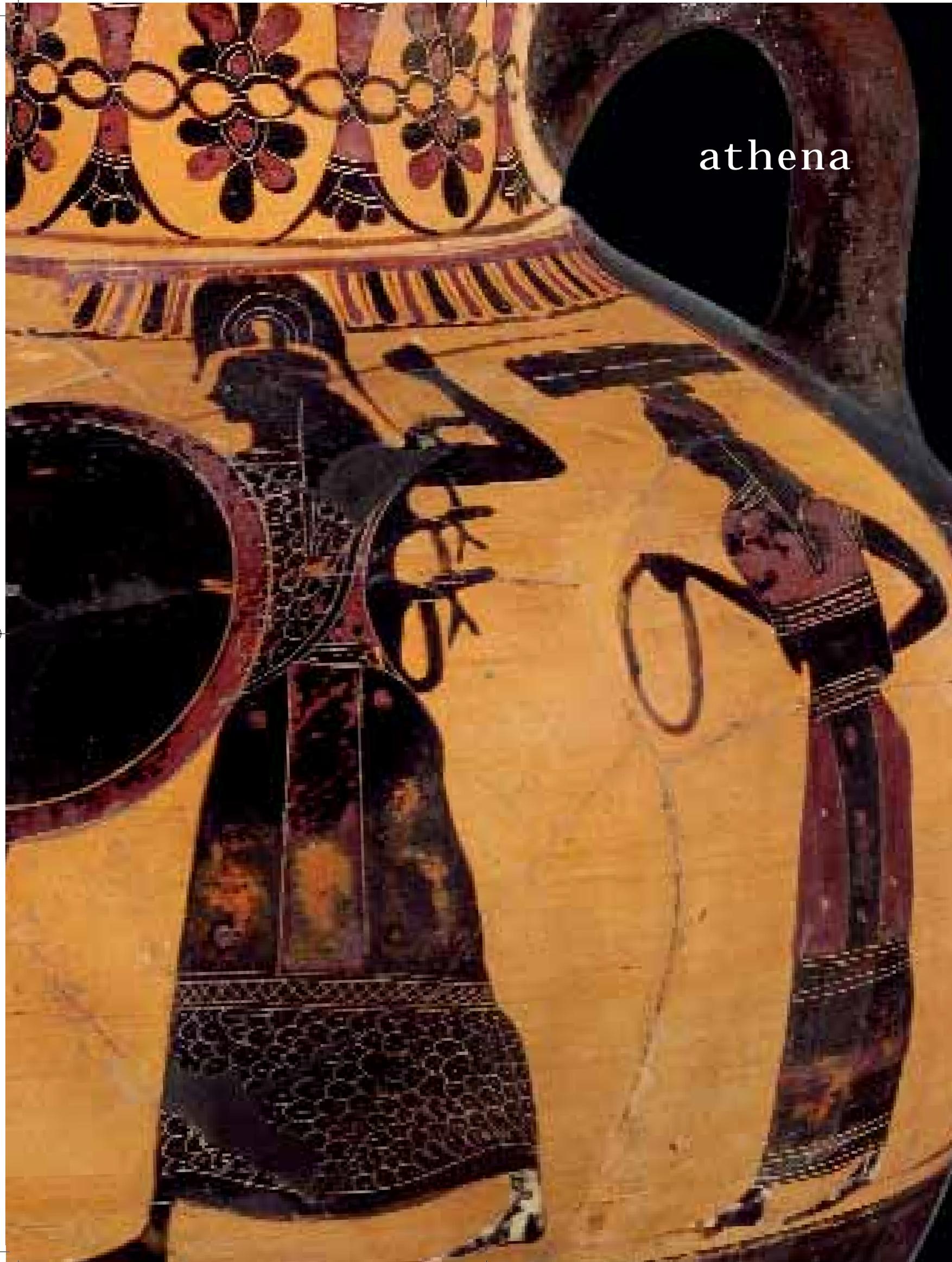
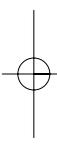
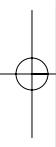


goddesses and heroines





athena



women in the cult of athena

Olga Palagia

What kind of women served the cults of Athena in Athens? The evidence at our disposal concerns only the cult of Athena Polias on the Athenian Akropolis (fig. 1). In addition to the priestly personnel and one or two mature women, Athena was primarily served by an assortment of young girls who were recruited from the aristocratic families of the city to perform certain religious duties for a fixed period of time. Even though these girls had to be of premarital age, their functions were related to women's duties: weaving, washing, and performing fertility rituals. They had to help weave Athena's garment on the loom or wash it, or carry the implements of animal sacrifice for the goddess, or participate in secret fertility rites. Our information comes from literary

sources, inscriptions, and works of art, which can be difficult to interpret, especially as the visual is sometimes at odds with the written record. An additional difficulty is the fact that these records are spread across the centuries, beginning in the sixth century b.c. and continuing to Byzantine compilations and lexica.

If we wish to chart the cultic duties of little girls according to the Attic festival calendar, we must begin with the Panathenaia. This was Athena's greatest festival and was held on the first month of the Attic year, Hekatombaion, which fell in mid-summer. It was celebrated with games and competitions, a grand procession to Athena's altar on the Akropolis, and a sacrifice on a colossal scale. Every four years,



Fig. 1. View of the Parthenon (Photo: S. Mavromatis).

at the Great Panathenaia, the city presented its patroness with a peplos that was woven ceremoniously, probably on the Akropolis. It was presented to the venerable *xoanon* of Athena Polias, which was housed in the Old Temple of Athena in archaic times and was eventually moved to the Erechtheion in the closing years of the fifth century b.c. (fig.2).

Religious processions were usually headed by one or more *kanephoroi* (basket-bearers: see cat. nos. 94–96). These were girls of marriageable age (around fifteen years old), chosen from among the high born (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 646). They carried baskets (*kana*) full of sacrificial implements (e.g., knives and fillets, incense and barley). The baskets, which could be shallow trays or deep basins with handles, came in a variety of shapes and were made of wicker work or metal. To serve as a *kanephoros* at the Panathenaic procession was so prestigious that rejection amounted to a mortal insult. For instance, Harmodios and his lover, Aristogeiton, assassinated the tyrant Hipparchos in 514 b.c. because he prevented Harmodios' sister from being a *kanephoros* (Thucydides 6.56–57). Athenian girls who died unmarried could be commemorated on their grave monuments dressed as *kanephoroi*, as on an example in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Roccos 1995, fig. 23). *Kanephoroi* at the Panathenaia had their faces powdered with flour to keep off the sun, and

they were accompanied by the daughters of metics carrying parasols and stools (*skiaphoroi* and *diphrophoroi*) for their comfort (Aristophanes, *Birds* 1550; *Ekklesiazousai* 732–34). We do not know how many basket-bearers marched at the Panathenaia, but there must have been several: the Athenian politician Lykourgos, who managed the affairs of Athens in the third quarter of the fourth century b.c., provided gold ornaments for one hundred *kanephoroi* (Plutarch, *Moralia* 852b). One assumes that those ornaments were not all used at the same time.

Kanephoroi are illustrated in Greek art from the sixth century b.c. They can be shown leading processions to the altar of Athena, carrying baskets on their heads and sometimes also carrying lustral branches. A *kanephoros* by the altar or near the god's statue is sometimes shown alongside an incense burner (*thymiaterion*) placed on the ground or on a pedestal (see cat. no. 96). Since their baskets were stocked with incense, the presence of *thymiateria* is not surprising.

A great deal of debate attaches to the presence of *kanephoroi* in the Panathenaic procession depicted on the Parthenon frieze. The two girls with empty hands, slab VII 50–51 (fig. 3), facing a marshal who holds a shallow object now mostly broken off, are often interpreted as *kanephoroi*, despite the fact that they are not carrying objects on their



Fig. 2. View of the Erechtheion (temple of Athena Polias) from the southeast.



Fig. 3. Parthenon frieze, slab VII: The Ergastinai, about 440 b.c. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Ma 738 (Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY).

heads nor are they leading the procession. One should look to the head of the procession, as shown on slab V (see cat. no. 113) with the peplos scene. Two girls (31 and 32) approach the priestess of Athena Polias, carrying objects on their heads. They are, in fact, leading the procession. Their identification has been a knotty problem since the eighteenth century. In 1787 Stuart and Revett described the objects on the girls' heads as baskets, the object held in the left hand of girl 31 as a tablet, and the rodlike object held by girl 32 as a torch, and they identified the pair as either *kanephoroi* or *arrhephoroi*. This interpretation continued for about a century, until in 1871 Adolf Michaelis argued that the girls carry stools on their heads and that the so-called torch is in fact a stool leg. In 1932 Deubner identified these girls as *arrhephoroi*, an interpretation that has remained current ever since. The three missing stool legs were accounted for by assuming that one was painted into the background while the other two were attached into the holes cut in the background between the girls and in the right arm of girl 31. Girl 31 was thought to carry a footstool in her left hand. This object, however, is far too small for a footstool, and it cannot be a receptacle, because it is held at an angle. As an animal paw seems to project beyond the girl's arm, she may well hold a small animal, judging from the small lamb held by Kekrops in a scene reminiscent of one of the rituals on the Akropolis on an Attic red-figure calyx-krater in Schloss Fasanerie (see Shapiro, fig. 2, p. 165).

In 1995 Wesenberg questioned the missing stool legs and reverted to the eighteenth-century identification of the objects on the girls' heads as baskets, at the same time interpreting the rodlike object held by girl 32 as a lamp with a tall handle. A light held in that high a position, however, would have torched the basket on top of the girl's head. The knob finial of this object can be compared to the incense burner carried by another girl on the Parthenon frieze, slab IX 57, and to the *thymiateria* shown in the presence of *kanephoroi* on a handful of Attic red-figure vases (see cat. no. 96). Yet another *thymiaterion*, missing its top, is carried by another pair of girls on the Parthenon frieze, slab III 12, 13. The "stool leg" or "lamp" or "torch" of girl 32 is best understood as an incense burner. Instead of assuming the presence of more stool legs, the missing objects that were once attached to the holes in the background of the peplos scene may well be lustral branches, for we see them carried by *kanephoroi* and others in sacrificial scenes on Attic vases.

In sum, girls 31 and 32 are basket-bearers leading the Panathenaic procession. They also hold between them an incense burner, lustral branches, and a small animal. The priestess of Athena Polias (33) helps them discharge their burden near the altar (which is not represented).

Three months after the Panathenaia and nine months before the next Panathenaia, on the last day of the autumn month Pyanopsion, the Athenians celebrated the Chalkeia festival in honor of Hephaistos and Athena as patron deities



Fig. 4. Marble statue base of the *arrhephoros* Anthemia from the Athenian Akropolis, second century b.c. Athens, Epigraphical Museum, 10863.

of crafts. The warp for the peplos of Athena was ritually set up on the loom by the priestesses of Athena and the *arrhephoroi* on that day. It is not clear which priestesses were involved. The *arrhephoroi* were little girls of the Athenian aristocracy, ages seven (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 641) to eleven. They were appointed in Skirophorion, the last month of the Attic calendar, to reside on the Akropolis for a year and perform certain rituals in honor of Athena Polias. Four girls were said to be elected by the people, out of whom the Archon Basileus selected two (Deinarchos *apud* Harpokration, s.v. *arrhephorein*). The upkeep of the *arrhephoroi* formed the subject of a liturgy, that is, it elicited private sponsorship (Lysias 21.5). The honor of being chosen to serve as an *arrhephoros* was occasionally commemorated

with dedications to Athena on the Akropolis by parents and relatives. There is a great concentration of honorific portrait statues of *arrhephoroi* from 220/19 b.c. to the second century a.d. About nineteen inscribed statue bases of *arrhephoroi* were found on the Akropolis and are now in the Epigraphical Museum in Athens. The only complete base that once carried a life-size statue of the *arrhephoros*, Anthemia of Aphidna dates from the second century b.c. (fig. 4). It is made of Pentelic marble and is 68 centimeters high, large enough to support the statue of a child. It was found between the Parthenon and the Propylaea and is signed by the sculptors Kaikosthenes and Dies, sons of Apollonides. Kaikosthenes also signed another *arrhephoros* statue, dedicated to both Athena and Pandrosos (IG II² 3472).

The participation of the *arrhephoroi* in the setting up of the loom for the peplos may be illustrated in two fragmentary marble reliefs of the fourth century b.c. from the Athenian Akropolis. A votive relief to the Three Graces (fig. 5) includes a girl setting up the warp for weaving Athena's peplos on the loom in what is clearly part of a larger scene. The fragment of a sculptured statue base (fig. 6), also associated with the cult of the Graces on the Akropolis, shows a girl holding up a peg with warp hanging from it. Another figure is just visible on the left, so this too was part of a larger scene. On both reliefs the Graces are shown as archaistic half-figures, and there are more reliefs from the Akropolis with the Graces and Athena, sometimes accompanied by Nike. The cult of the Graces on the Akropolis was situated opposite the temple of Athena Nike and was celebrated with secret rites (Pausanias 9.35.3). The importance of their shrine is highlighted by the fragment of a document relief of 374/3 b.c. showing one of the Graces: it presumably crowned a decree issued in connection to the sanctuary (Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 157; Svoronos 1937, 677, pl. 249.1). More important still, the association of the Graces with the *arrhephoroi* and the weaving of the peplos on the Akropolis reliefs indicates that the loom was probably set up on the Akropolis and that the Graces were involved with the ritual of the Chalkeia. The Graces were not new to weaving as they were supposed to have woven the peplos of Aphrodite (Homer, *Iliad* 5.338). It has been argued that the peplos was woven in the Athenian Agora because it was carried to the Akropolis during the Panathenaic procession. However, the involvement of the priestess of Athena Polias and the *arrhephoroi*, who had no business in the lower city, indicates that the loom was more likely located somewhere on the rock.

After the ritual setting up of the loom, the peplos was woven by the *parthenoi*, virgin girls of marriageable age, presumably also selected from the Athenian elite. These girls are called *ergastinai* in a late source (Hesychios, s.v.). The *parthenoi* are only attested by a number of inscriptions of



Fig. 5. Marble votive relief of the Graces with arrhephoros at the loom from the Athenian Akropolis, fourth century b.c. Athens, Akropolis Museum, 2554.



Fig. 6. Marble statue base of arrhephoros with the Graces from the Athenian Akropolis, fourth century b.c. Athens, Akropolis Museum, 3306.

the late second and first centuries b.c., but these may well reflect Classical practice (e.g., *IG II²* 1060 and *IG II²* 1036). The combined evidence of the inscriptions suggests that eight to twelve *parthenoi* were selected from each tribe, about one hundred and twenty in all, that they marched in the Panathenaic procession, and that they dedicated a silver phiale to Athena after the discharge of their duties. Some of their names recur in further lists, for they served Athena as *arrhephoroi* and *kanephoroi* on other occasions. The *parthenoi* who wove the peplos may be recognized in the group of marching maidens holding phialai and oinochoai on the Parthenon frieze, slabs II, III, VII (fig. 3), VIII, and IX.

Seven months later, in the Attic month Thargelion, during the Plynteria festival, the garments of the venerable *xoanon* of Athena Polias were removed for ritual washing; the *xoanon* was wrapped up and the precinct roped off. The day was considered unlucky. The goddesses' garments were washed by two unmarried girls called *plyntrides* or *loutrides*. Only women of the Praxiergidai clan were allowed to clothe the statue again; it is therefore assumed that the *plyntrides*

were also members of this clan. Since the Plynteria involved a secret ritual and an ill-omened day, it is not surprising that there are no depictions in art.

The same applies to the secret ceremony of the Arrhephoria, which was performed in Skirophorion, the last month of the Athenian calendar. It was an annual nocturnal fertility rite commemorating the myth of the bringing up of Erichthonios, Hephaistos' son, by the daughters of Kekrops, king of Athens. Unnamed objects were carried in covered baskets by the *arrhephoroi* from the Akropolis to a cave on the banks of the Ilissos River and back. The mystery objects may have been snake- and phallus-shaped cakes, as well as pine cones. This was the last duty performed by the *arrhephoroi* before their term was up. A new pair was appointed in time for the celebration of the Panathenaia the following month.

As we have no representations of the Arrhephoria, we depend for information on the account of Pausanias (1.27.3), dating from the second century a.d. It is related to his visit to the temple of Athena Polias on the Akropolis (fig. 2) and the nearby shrine of Pandrosos, Kekrops' daughter. The passage



Fig. 7. Detail of marble grave relief from Boeotia, late fifth century b.c. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 1861.

is notoriously convoluted and interpretation depends on how it is translated from the Greek:

Adjacent to the temple of Athena is a temple of Pandrosos. . . . There is something amazing in connection to all this, which is not generally known, I will therefore describe it. Two girls, called *arrhephoroi* by the Athenians, live not far from the temple of Athena Polias. After residing near the goddess for a while, when the time for the ceremony comes round, they perform the following nocturnal rite. They carry on their heads what the priestess of Athena gives them, even though neither the girls nor the priestess know what it is. They take it down into the city, to a sacred precinct near the sanctuary of Aphrodite in the Gardens, where there is a natural underground passage. The girls deposit their burden in the cave and receive something else, covered up, which they carry back to the Akropolis. They are afterwards dismissed, and others take their place.

The route of the *arrhephoroi*, their destination in the city, and the significance of their ritual have been much discussed. It is remarkable that even their destination is shrouded in mystery. No underground passage on the banks of the Ilissos River has been found so far, and the precise location of the sanctuary of Aphrodite in the Gardens eludes us (see Delivorrias).

Since Pausanias says that the *arrhephoroi* changed guard in Skirophorion, we may assume that they spent an entire year on the Akropolis. Their services would therefore have been available during the Panathenaia, despite the silence of the written sources. Since the *arrhephoroi* played such a crucial part in the production of the peplos, we should look for them in the peplos scene on the Parthenon frieze (see cat. no. 113). The only seven-year old depicted there is assisting the Archon Basileus with handling the peplos of Athena. This child has long been thought to be a boy on account of its partial nudity. No Athenian girls would appear half-naked in public, whereas boys did not face such a restriction. The child in the peplos scene was initially identified as a girl by Stuart and Revett in 1787. This verdict was reversed by Michaelis in 1871, and the identification of the child as a boy has remained current, despite the lack of evidence of any temple boys in the service of Athena. The child's garment has been interpreted as a man's chlamys, exposing its left side. But the garment wraps around the invisible side of its body, is fastened on the right shoulder, and has an overfold, which disqualifies it from being a chlamys. It is more likely a ceremonial overgarment known as a *diplax*, similar to that worn by the priestess of Athena Polias in the same scene. The fact that the child's left side is exposed must be because the dress

under the *diplax* was indicated in paint, not modeled in relief. The best parallel is offered by a little girl on a Boeotian grave relief of the late fifth century (fig. 7), where the upper part of the dress is in relief, while the skirt was painted over the girl's naked legs. The appearance of an *arrhephoros* in the peplos scene of the Parthenon frieze is not surprising, although one wonders what happened to her companion. One assumes that the frieze depicts only a symbolic number of the officials involved in the celebration of the Panathenaia.

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