

Year-End Festivals of the Athenian Acropolis

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The mythology of the Athenian Acropolis begins with the quarrel between Athene and Poseidon. The rest of Athenian mythological history, it seems, is dedicated to patching up this little squabble. The cult of Poseidon is housed within the very same building as Athene's own cult on the Acropolis. Important festivals involve, even require, the cooperation of both gods and their priests for the good of the city. But why should the mortal inhabitants of Athens have held such a vested interest in the ancient and decisively-settled contest of two gods? Why worry so much about honoring Poseidon, the loser of the contest? Given Athens' importance as a seaport, I propose that the Greeks were intent upon facilitating a business partnership between the two divinities, despite their personal animosity, in order that the city's maritime industry might flourish. Citizens of Athens played out their efforts to promote reconciliation between Athena and Poseidon through year-end festivals on the Acropolis.

Athens had four important year-end festivals which took place on the Acropolis. In this paper I shall discuss the *Arrephoria*, *Plynteria*, and *Skiraphoria* festivals. The first, the *Arrephoria*, was a night-time ritual of carrying objects to a sacred cave. The *Plynteria* was a purification ritual in which the cult statue of Athene was taken down to the ocean to be washed. The *Skiraphoria* was a more complex and secretive ritual, in which the priestess of Athene and the priest of Poseidon Erechtheus proceeded out of the Erechtheion to Skiron, between Athens and Eleusis. As a counterpoint to these, I shall look at the *Dipolieia*, a festival to Zeus, which takes place two days after the *Skiraphoria*. The *Dipolieia*, as a ritual killing, symbolizes an attack on

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the Acropolis, and possibly on the king of Attica himself, and shows the dangers of what can happen when the city's protectress is absent.

I shall begin with the mythological "history" of Athens as told by ancient authors, describing the relationship of Athene and Poseidon, and outline the reasons why the Classical Athenians felt it necessary to include Poseidon in their year-end rituals. From there, I shall move to the rituals themselves as revealed through literary sources and archaeology, looking at both their actions and locations to see where reconciliation seems to be promoted. An effort to decode the meaning of these ancient festivals to the people who enacted them faces some difficult obstacles. Problems which arise include the possibility of other divinities being honored in association with these festivals, which might deflect the focus of rituals from reconciliation to other matters; the lack of first-person sources (especially in the case of the festivals), giving us no insider's account; and the method itself of working from myth to ritual. As mythology is often added by later generations to explain preexisting rituals, working backwards is risky at best. To overcome these obstacles, I will rely on textual and physical evidence. By the Classical period, the Athenian Acropolis had been rebuilt, shaped, and sculpted in a way that provides us with clues about what the Athenians of this period thought of the meaning of their festivals. The meaning and placement of symbolic facades, statues, and numerous buildings help to determine connections between certain areas of the Acropolis and the myths that structured the culture of the period.

Poseidon and Athene were important gods in ancient Greece, and in Athens in particular. The one controlled the seas and tides, caused earthquakes, and gave men the horse; the other protected the city, resided in its citadel, and stimulated its economy. As an important seaport and commercial center, Athens found both divinities indispensable. In the second century A.D., Pausanias "stated that the Athenians are far more devoted to religion than other men" (Pausanias 1.24.31).¹ Statuary, shrines, and monuments littered the roads. Many cults besides those of Athene or Poseidon were housed even on the very Acropolis of Athens. In the context of this inclusive polytheism, in a spot where so many gods are welcomed without a hitch, the feud between Athene and Poseidon represents an interesting problem. But

the mythology on the subject is clear: these two deities irritated the ever-living daylights out of each other.

In the complex, snaky coil that is Athenian mythology, five main story arcs stand out: the birth of Athene, the contest for Attica, the reign and line of Cecrops, the war with Eleusis, and the life and reign of Theseus. Because these stories outline the origins both of Athens itself and of the feud between Athene and Poseidon, from their own direct confrontations to the wars of their descendents, they offer crucial background information for the argument I develop below. They often interlink, and there is no hard chronological order to most of them. For the sake of clarity I will treat them as a linear narrative that flows from the least to most complex arc.

The story of Athene's birth, naturally, predates the direct confrontation between her and Poseidon. It does, however, seem to have connections to the *Dipolieae*, a festival that responds to their feud. After the Titanomachy, Zeus consorted with the Titaness Metis, daughter of Ocean, and wisest of all beings (Hesiod 885). After a while, however, Zeus began to worry about the offspring two such powerful entities—the strongest and wisest beings in the cosmos—would produce. Patricide, after all, ran in the family (Hesiod 170-180, 685-730).² Rather than waiting and swallowing the child as his own father had, he did Chronos one better and swallowed his pregnant wife. Apollodoros gives the full account:

Zeus had intercourse with Metis, who turned into many shapes to avoid his embraces. When she was with child, Zeus, taking time by the forelock, swallowed her, because Earth said that, after giving birth to the maiden who was then in her womb, Metis would bear a son who should be the lord of heaven. From fear of that, Zeus swallowed her. (Apollodoros 1.3.6)

Still, wife and child continued to grow and live inside Zeus. Some time passed after the swallowing of Metis until Athene burst out of her father's head. Two versions of this event exist. The first, according to Hesiod, indicates that Zeus had no help in bringing forth his daughter (Hesiod 929). The second version, as told by Apollodoros, says that "when the time came for the birth to take place, Prometheus, or, as

others say, Hephaestus, smote the head of Zeus with an axe, and Athene, fully armed, leaped up from the top of his head at the river Triton,” (Apollodoros 1.3.6). Although Apollodoros is the later of the two authors, and Hesiod would usually be considered the more reliable, artistic representation affirms the story of the axe-blow.³ In addition, Apollodoros’ version is more helpful in interpreting the year-end festivals of the Classical Athenians. This story will be discussed in greater detail along with the *Dipolieia* festival.

The next myth, the contest for Attica, introduces characters important in later myths, and first touches on the hostilities between Athene and Poseidon. In the time when King Cecrops was ruling Attica, the gods began dividing up the world; each began to “stake out” his or her own territories, as it were, claiming the cities in which he or she would be worshipped. Attica, destined to become both a major seaport and a center of civilization, attracted both Athene and Poseidon. Poseidon produced a salt spring on the Acropolis as a gift to the people. After him, Athene arrived at the same spot with the king of the region and there before him produced the olive tree. When the two gods fought over the region, Zeus intervened, and put the matter to a vote of the other gods. Athene was awarded Attica, and its capital was named for her (Apollodoros 3.14.1).

Their descendents continued the tradition of warring over territory. The mortal lines of Poseidon and Athene both sprung, indirectly, from Cecrops himself. The infighting of his descendents added to the animosity of the two gods. Cecrops was the first king of “Athens” proper. His son, Erysichthon, died before his father and never became king (Kastor qtd. in Harding 14). It was his adopted grandson, and Athene’s adopted son, who later became king of Athens (Pausanias 1.2.6). The story goes that Athene went to Hephaestus’ forge to commission a new suit of armor. For Hephaestus, being married to the beautiful yet faithless Aphrodite, ‘twas lust at first sight. He attempted to rape Athene, who resisted him successfully, but not before he left evidence of his excitement on her thigh. Disgusted, she wiped herself off with a piece of wool, and threw it down to earth. From this wool emerged Erichthonius, Cecrops’ adopted grandson and Athene’s adopted son (Apollodoros 3.14.6).

Back on earth, although his son died, Cecrops was also father to

three daughters, Herse, Aglaurus, and Pandrosus (Amelesagoras F1 qtd. in 28). When Athene adopted Erichthonius, she wished to hide him from the other gods and make him immortal. She gave the basket containing him to the three sisters with instructions not to look inside. Pandrosus obeyed, but her sisters opened the basket, where they found Erichthonius, either wrapped within the coils of a snake guardian, or a half-snake creature himself (Apollodoros 3.14.6; Amelesagoras F1, qtd. in Harding 28; Pausanias 1.18.2). Aglaurus and Herse, in a fit of madness, threw themselves off of the Acropolis (Pausanias 1.18.2; Euripides 267-74). Once Erichthonius became king, Athene secured the loyalty of the royal line and the people of Attica.

It was not to stay that way, however. Athene raised Erichthonius inside her precinct (Amelesagoras F1, qtd. in Harding 28). His grandson Erechtheus received the kingship in his turn. (Kastor, qtd. in Harding 42). The reign of Erechtheus marks the point at which the royal line split in two. Erechtheus' granddaughter had a son by Poseidon named Eumolpus. Once he was grown, this Eumolpus lived in Eleusis. When the Eleusinians and the Athenians fought, Erechtheus and Eumolpus met in battle, the former killing the latter (Philokhoros F13, qtd. in Harding 44). Pausanias, however, holds that Erechtheus did not kill Eumolpus but rather his son Immadarus (Pausanias 1.38.3). Either way, the fighting between these branches of the family intensified the fight between the two gods. According to Euripides, Poseidon goes so far as to kill Athene's adopted great-grandson in vengeance for Eumolpus (Euripides 281).

Athene and Poseidon's feud actually begins before the contest for Athens and extends well beyond it. Athene outdoes her uncle at every turn, creating a ship for his sea, a rein for his horse (Apollonius Rhodius 1.18; Pausanias 2.4.1). In his passage on the contest for Attica, Apollodoros goes so far as to say Zeus found it necessary to "*dialusas*"—literally, to part or sunder—them to keep them from quarreling (Apollodoros 3.14.1). As gods, the two were not allowed to battle one another due to the collateral damage and political chaos a fight between two such powerful entities would cause. There was nothing, however, to prevent one of the two from taking his or her frustrations out in a more roundabout way. Poseidon's first act as official runner-up in the contest for Attica was to flood the Thriasian plain

(Apollodoros 3.14.1). Thus, while probably not running around in fear of imminent tsunami, the Athenians still had a very real reason to promote harmony. What better way for Poseidon to get revenge than by flooding Athene's favorite city?

Athenians sought to overcome this feud by their rituals. In particular the year-end festivals on the Acropolis sought to reconcile the two gods. Yet before the people of Athens could begin trying to promote harmony between two gods, they first had to make sure that they themselves were in harmony with their goddess. This solidifying of bonds between Athene and her city was the focus of the first of the festivals, the *Arrephoria*. While the exact time of the ritual is unknown,⁴ it seems to fit in well with the other year-end rites, and the actions of its participants play out pieces of myth otherwise missing from the mythic cycle (Robertson 250; Simon 39).

Pausanias is our main source for information about the festival. He describes the *Arrephoria* thus:

Two maidens dwell not far from the temple of Athena Polias, called by the Athenians Bearers of the Sacred Offerings (*arrephoroi*). For a time they live with the goddess, but when the festival comes round they perform at night the following rites. Having placed on their heads what the priestess of Athena gives them to carry—neither she who gives nor they who carry have any knowledge what it is—the maidens descend by the natural underground passage that goes across the adjacent precincts, within the city, of Aphrodite in the Gardens. They leave down below what they carry and receive something else which they bring back covered up. These maidens they henceforth let go free, and take up to the Acropolis others in their place. (Pausanias 1.27.3)

This one paragraph is the lengthiest account we have of the festival, but from its few lines have sprung numerous interpretations. The *Arrephoria* has been read as an agricultural fertility rite, a coming-of-age ceremony, a symbolic self-sacrifice, and even a feeding of divine snakes (Simon 46; Larson 39; Burkert 1985: 229; Burkert 1983: 150-154; Larson 40-41; Robertston 243-44; Lefkowitz 82-83). What we

know of the *Arrephoria* is thus: two noble girls, aged seven to eleven, were chosen, possibly by the archon basileus (Simon 39, 41-42; Aristophanes 641-2). These girls would live on the Acropolis for about a year, playing and lending their presence to the weaving of the Panathenaic peplos (Simon 39).⁵ At the end of this time, the girls would go one night, having been given a secret package by the priestess of Athene, down the side of the Acropolis to a sanctuary, where they would receive other secret packages and return to the Acropolis. After this, the girls would be discharged of duty, and others would take their places.

Many scholars connect this ritual to the myth of the daughters of Cecrops, the mythical king of Athens. The two *arrephoroi* represent his daughters, and the receiving of the wrapped objects mimics the “gift” of Erichthonius hidden in his basket. Beyond this, theories vary. Burkert’s interpretation of the festival as a coming-of-age rite was held as the standard for a while. Taking Pausanias’ mention of the garden of Aphrodite to mean that this, a sacred area of the goddess of love, is the ultimate destination of the two girls, Burkert says the ritual “hint[s] at a drama of sexuality and incest in which the king’s daughters become the victims” (1983: 150).

Burkert’s interpretation, however, is problematic. The ritual itself does not follow the pattern of a coming of age rite. Only two girls are chosen at a time, at the age of seven, not an age of majority even in the ancient world. In fact, the only reason for interpreting the *Arrephoria* as a fertility rite is in connection to Aphrodite, a connection which probably does not even exist. In his own analysis of Pausanias, Simms translates the line, “There is a precinct in the city of the Aphrodite called ‘In the Gardens’ not far off, and through this is a natural underground descent the maidens go down.” According to this understanding of the Greek, the precinct of Aphrodite, therefore, is not the girls’ destination; they merely pass by her sanctuary referred to as “In the Gardens.”

Further light was shed on the subject when, in 1980, in a cave on the east side of the Acropolis, an inscribed stele was found, nearly *in situ*, identifying the cave as the sanctuary of Aglauros. This refuted earlier scholarship, which claimed that the sanctuary was located on the north slope of the Acropolis, despite the fact that no ancient source

ever indicated this (Donatas 57-8). The main reason for this assumption is the presence of a sanctuary to Aphrodite in this location. Following the path the girls would have taken down the Acropolis, the two girls would be required to make something of a u-turn in order to get to this sanctuary of Aphrodite. To reach the cave sanctuary, however, the path simply follows the curve of the mountain base. Being that the girls are acting under the guidance of the priestess of Athene, it would be very strange if they were to incorporate Aphrodite into their rites in such a way. It seems more likely that they would go to the sanctuary of one of the girls whose myth they are enacting.

If we accept the interpretation that two young girls carry items from the Acropolis to the sanctuary of Aglauros and back, we can pursue a line of inquiry. Much has been made both of the end of the *arrephoroi*'s term of service after their nocturnal sojourn, as well as the possible contents of their baskets. The expulsion of the girls has been used as support for the idea of a coming-of-age ceremony, yet this reading only works with the interpretation as a fertility ritual, which has already been refuted (Simon 41-42). I tend to agree with Erika Simon, who parallels the end of the girls' service to the ending of the present year, after which there would be a new archon basileus and new *arrephoroi* (Simon 41). Understanding the *Arrephoria* in this way works well in context with the other end of the year festivals.

The contents of the basket are more controversial. The secret items the girls carry have been said to be anything from oil and wool, to live snakes, or phallus-shaped cakes (Burkert 1985: 229; Robertson 241). The contents have been used to justify fertility rites, the dedication of childhood toys, or the feeding of sacred snakes (Burkert 1985: 229; Burkert 1983: 151-52; Simon 42; Robertson 257). If the story of the daughters of Cecrops is the origin of this ritual, then, I say that the important part of the ritual is not what is carried, but the fact that the participants themselves do not know what it is. If the ignorance of the girls is the crucial factor, as it seems to be according to Pausanias, the content of the packages then becomes inconsequential; and if the priestess who gave the basket to the girls did not even know herself, I hold no hope for modern scholars to know definitively. On a practical note, how much weight is reasonable for two small girls, possibly unaccompanied, to carry down a steep

descent? Even empty baskets, or baskets weighted with a few stones, could suffice.

In the myth, two of the three girls, Herse and Aglauros, opened the basket containing Erichthonius, thereby disobeying the goddess. As punishment, they died by falling or flinging themselves off of the steepest part of the Acropolis—which accurately describes the eastern side, where the cave of Aglauros is situated. Descending into the earth in ritual is symbolic of death, and the placement of the cave sanctuary is particularly relevant if the girls threw themselves to their deaths on the eastern side. The third sister remained obedient and lived. It is worth noting that only two girls are involved in the ceremony. The reconciliation in the *Arrephoria*, therefore, is not between Athene and Poseidon, but between Athene and the disobedient girls, and as an extension the city-state as a whole. The *arrephoroi* receive the secret objects and do not look at their contents, following the goddess' orders. They still must make the journey to the bottom of the mountain, to the cave of their predecessor, reenacting the death of the girls by their journey under the earth, but returning once more to the Acropolis, signifying a rebirth, and a happier ending than the myth. The symbolic death and rebirth is important in year-end festivals, which celebrate the end of one year and the beginning of another. Having straightened out old discrepancies between the goddess and her people, and allowing for a more suitable outcome to the myth, both are now ready to move into the year-end reconciliations with other gods.

The first of these divinely reconciling festivals, the *Plynteria*, was held on the twenty-fifth of the month of *Thargelion*, and was the day on which the goddess herself received her bath (Parke 152). According to Parke, this festival probably began in earlier times when the cult statue would have been a relatively light wooden construction, human-sized or smaller. Even after the building of the huge chryselephantine statue of Athene by Pheidias, the ritual was continued with the smaller image (Parke 152-53; Nagy 276). Within the temple, the women of the Praxiergidai family would undress the statue and wrap it for its journey in procession to the sea for a purification bath (Plutarch 34.1; Hesychios; Parke 152-53). At first glance, the *Plynteria* appears to be a simple interaction between the goddess and her attendants for a little congenial hygiene. The very intimate act of bathing and the

mundane act of laundry are taken up together by the goddess and the people. One can even envision a quaint day at the seaside, with the procession to the ocean led by a woman carrying the goddess' very own basket of fig candies (Parke 152-53; Hesychios). It might not even appear that Poseidon is present. Looking slightly deeper, however, actions begin to take meaning. Soap and water baths were unknown to the Greeks. Running water, and most of all salt water, was regarded as a purifier in ancient Greek thought (Parke 153). The greatest source of saltwater was the sea. The sea was the domain, if not the very embodiment, of Poseidon. By including the god in this ceremony, the Athenians attempted to physically unite the two in a purification rite. The bringing of the statue, the avatar of the goddess and a "piece of the Acropolis," down to the sea functions as a mirror image of the pool of saltwater, the "piece of the sea," which Poseidon had supposedly placed on the Acropolis. If the statue was in fact made of olive wood—Athene's gift—the metaphorical exchange would be strengthened.

Not everything about the *Plynteria* was celebratory, however. During her procession to the sea Athene was absent, her city unprotected, and the day was considered unlucky. Sanctuaries closed, businesses were put on hold, and even the entrances to the city were roped off (Parke 154). That day of the *Plynteria* was considered inauspicious is evident in story involving the general Alcibiades, who dared to enter the city from his exile on the day of the *Plynteria* (Xenophon 1.4.12). According to Xenophon, who probably witnessed this act of hubris, within just a few months Alcibiades lost his good fortune and position. They did not return to him (Xenophon 1.4.12). This is a rather overblown example, but it illustrates the extent to which Athens depended on its patron goddess. Thus on the day of her absence, everything had to cease, lest it not have her blessing and oversight (Pausanias 1.26.6).

This absence left the city open and vulnerable. Should Poseidon decide to ignore the Athenians' reconciliation efforts, there was nothing in the citadel to keep him from attacking the city. Just in case any member of the procession might forget this, the Acropolis itself reminded them. Participants passed by the northern side of the Parthenon, the metopes of which depicted the Fall of Troy. The most

notable of these carvings appears to show the theft of the Palladion. In mythology, the Palladion was a wooden statue, alternately described as a likeness of the original Pallas or of Athene herself (Nagy 295). Pausanias called it “the most holy symbol, that was so considered by all many years before the unification of the parishes...A legend concerning it says that it fell from heaven” (Pausanias 1.26.1). Apollodoros provides the account:

The story told about the Palladi[on] is as follows: They say that when Athena was born she was brought up by Triton, who had a daughter Pallas; and that both girls practiced the arts of war, but that once on a time they fell out; and when Pallas was about to strike a blow, Zeus in fear interposed the aegis, and Pallas, being startled, looked up, and so fell wounded by Athena. And being exceedingly grieved for her, Athena made a wooden image in her likeness, and wrapped the aegis, which she had feared, about the breast of it, and set it up beside Zeus and honored it. But afterwards Electra, at the time of her violation, took refuge at the image, and Zeus threw the Palladi[on] along with Ate into the Ilian country; and Ilus built a temple for it, and honored it. Such is the legend of the Palladi[on]. (Apollodoros 3.12.3)

The Greeks, having learned that Ilium could not fall while the Palladion remained in the city, sent in Odysseus and Diomedes to steal it. With the help of Helen, Odysseus smuggled it out of the city, removing the safety charm and rendering the city vulnerable to attack (Apollodoros 5.10-13). Later the Palladion wound up in Attica (Pausanias 1.28.8-9). There is some argument that the Palladion remained in the law court, and that it had its own washing ceremony procession to Phaeleron, but the commonly held thought is that this “procession to Phaeleron” is the same festival as the *Plynteria* and involves the statue from the Acropolis itself, making that statue the same Palladion whose theft allowed Troy to be razed (Nagy 289).

In a metope on the north side of the Parthenon, two long-robed figures stand, the rightmost reaching towards a small, rigid figure on a pedestal. The metopes along the north side depict the *Iliopersis*, the

fall of Troy, and this carving in particular may represent Odysseus or Diomedes reaching for the Palladion, the statue-like figure, with another figure watching. A small winged figure appears over the shoulder of the second figure. Given Pausanias' account, it might be that this carving represents Odysseus, reaching out for the statue, with Helen at his back, a winged Nike or, as she did like to take bird forms, Athene herself. Due to the ravaging of the image, however, and the lack of written expression, all of this is left to speculation. The warning from mythology, however, is ominously clear. Without the Palladion, Ilium fell. Likewise the *Phynteria* celebrants are taking their own Palladion out of the city and in attempting reconciliation, they are leaving the city open and vulnerable. Should Poseidon not take a liking to the reconciliation process, disaster could be at hand. Thus the *Phynteria* causes a great deal of tension for the city and its inhabitants. Yet, as in the *Arrephoria*, the ritual has a positive ending. The statue is returned within the day; Athens survives its absence, remains safe, and the tension is diffused.

The next festival of the year's end, the *Skiraphoria* or *Skira*, was more complex than the simple, procession-oriented *Phynteria*, and in analysis contains both a greater element of cooperation between the antagonistic deities and a greater problem of interpretation. No exhaustive description of the *Skira* exists. Indeed, later Greek authors appear as much at a loss (if less willing to admit it) than current scholars. On the twelfth day of the month of *Skiraphorion*, a priestess of Athene and a priest of Poseidon-Erechtheus proceed under a sunshade together with a priest of Helios out from the Erechthion, down the Acropolis, heading in the direction of Eleusis. They do not quite make it. They stop at Skiron, halfway in between Athens and Eleusis. Here our knowledge of the ritual fades. At the site of Skiron, the priestess of Athene, the priest of Poseidon, the priest of Helios, and any other participants there may have been held some kind of ceremony, the details of which are unknown (Harding 44-45).

The profusion of gods implicated in the ceremony has made it difficult to understand both for ancient and modern academics. In addition to Athene and Poseidon, Demeter seems to be present as well, a fact which suggests that perhaps the *Skira* was a fertility festival. There is certainly evidence for the strong presence of Demeter cult in

the *Skira* festival. She was the patron goddess of Eleusis, the “apparent final destination” of the procession. She and her daughter Kore had their own sacred space very near Skira; indeed in the region around Skira was a collective temple to Demeter, Kore, Athene, and Poseidon (Simon 23-24, Pausanias 1.37.2). Parke hypothesizes that it might be a women’s festival, owing to the practice of women to eat garlic and not wear perfume during the period of holy chastity to keep their husbands at bay (Parke 160). In fact, the question has existed since ancient times as to whether the *Skiraphoria* is really a festival devoted principally to Athene or Demeter (Parke 156).

The connection to Demeter, the goddess of fertility, might suggest that the festival is primarily a fertility rite. Indeed, Plutarch writes of a “sacred ploughing” which took place at Skira (qtd. in Parke 158). And, as Parke notes, the festival took place around harvest time, which may offer an explanation for the connection to Athene.

If there was a ploughing, presumably there was a sowing and the procession of the Skira will either have been to bless the ripening crops or to be present at the formal act of harvesting this sacred grain. When we look at it in this way the reason why the festivals of Athene and Demeter coincided on this date becomes more apparent. Both of them served the same general purpose of furthering fertility. (Plutarch, qtd. in Parke 158)

Athene and Demeter both have mythological connections to the plowing of fields and domestication of agriculture. Italian scholar Servius tells the myth of how “Athene had seen Demeter invent wheat, and she wanted to show the inhabitants of Attica how to obtain the wheat from the earth more rapidly. Athene therefore invented the swing plow” (qtd. in Detienne and Verth 163). Hesiod in his *Works and Days* gives complete instructions to “Athena’s handmen” for the construction of the plow (Hesiod 420-0). In this myth, Athene performs the same function as in the myths of the rein and ship, supplementing the natural gift of another god with technology (Detienne and Verth 163).

The problem with reading the *Skira* purely as a fertility rite is that

this interpretation cannot account for the apparent presence of Poseidon.⁶ Poseidon, as salt water, is useless for growing crops. Therefore, I propose that the *Skira*, while it probably did involve some aspects of fertility, also functioned to enact a reconciliation, perhaps between numerous gods, but distinctly between Athene and Poseidon. Beginning from the citadel of Athens, the priests representing Athene and Poseidon acting in capacity of Erechtheus⁷ sally forth in pantomimed march toward Eleusis. They are stopped halfway, apparently met by the patron deity of the enemy city. It appears, from this procession, that the festival is a re-enactment of the war with Eleusis. If the participants are not reenacting the mythical assault, what purpose does the procession serve if they are merely going to meet Demeter cultists?

Could the parties not meet somewhere else? What purpose does the presence of Demeter cult serve if the Athenians simply want to host a festival at Skiron? Is it just a coincidence of dates for two different festivals? Most of all, what other reason could the Greeks have had for pairing Poseidon and Erechtheus without reference to the Eleusinian war? Perhaps the issue is indeed two-fold. Perhaps the procession is an allusion to the war between the Athenians and Eleusinians, and the meeting of the gods represents either a war or peace council. Yet perhaps, the rite is not only one of reconciliation between Athene and Poseidon, Athene and Demeter, but also of Demeter and Poseidon.

Pausanias tells us that even in the city of Athens there stood a temple to Demeter containing an impressive statue of Poseidon (Pausanias 1.2.4). While strife between Demeter and Poseidon never reached the intensity of his rivalry with Athene, Apollodoros reminds us that in his anger over losing *Athens*, Poseidon flooded *Eleusis* (Apollodoros 3.14.1). Pausanias writes of streams still running through the plain near the boundary of Athenian and Eleusinian lands which are sacred to Demeter and her daughter Persephone, and none but their priests are allowed to fish in them (Pausanias 1.3.1-3). Poseidon also has strong cult presence in Eleusis, as Poseidon Father and as the ancestor of the preminent Eumolpidae clan, of whom we shall hear more below (Pausanias 1.8.6; Simon 24). Also of course in the war between Athens and Eleusis his descendents fought on the

side of the Eleusinians. So, there does seem to be some evidence to suggest a basis for the enactment of a symbolic reconciliation between Poseidon and Demeter at the site of Eleusis. Perhaps they are both coming together to commiserate about having to put up with their bull-headed niece.

Despite all of the rivalries between gods and cities presented, the *Skira*, like the *Phynteria*, diffuses the tension which it creates. Athene and Poseidon go together from Athens to meet with Demeter, patron of Eleusis. While lack of evidence prevents scholars from knowing precisely what rites occurred at Skiron, it seems that they emphasized fertility over fighting and prosperity over warfare.

Two days after the *Skiraphoria*, on the fourteenth of Skirophorion, a festival of Zeus called the *Dipolieia* was held. The *Dipolieia*, a festival to Zeus on the Acropolis at which a bull was sacrificed, completes the year-end cycle of festivals. It follows the pattern of exit and return found in the other three, yet in reverse. Like the other two festivals, the *Dipolieia* was led by a hereditary group. According to Parke, this indicates that the festival probably predated democratic times, in which such offices would have been appointed (Parke 162). To this I add that this appears to indicate some significance in the choice of clan to lead the ceremony, especially so upon further inspection of the two festivals. The *Skira* participants were drawn from and escorted by members of the Eteobutadai clan, down even to the superfluous-seeming priest of Helios (Simon 23). The Eteobutadai were the leading Athenian family at the time, drawing their line down from Erechtheus himself. The *Dipolieia* was led in turn by the Kerykes, the leading Eleusinian family, the first of many ways in which the *Dipolieia* reverses elements of the *Skira*. Two days after the Eteobutadai have led their charge down the Acropolis, the Kerykes process with their own group back up the same path, leading bulls for sacrifice. Passing by all other temples, they proceed to the sanctuary of Zeus Polieus. They are met on the way up by their fair share of psychological warfare, images and symbols of the enemy city, its goddess, and its heroes. Coming up through the Propylaea, which is itself filled with Athene iconography, the participants pass by the temple of Athene Nike, with its parapets showing Nikes leading bulls to Athene, just as the humans are now leading bulls, although not to the goddess.

Once through the gates, the sight that greets the Kerykes is the great statue of Athene Polias (“Of the City”)—not Ergane (“Worker”), with peaceful distaff and spindle, but a bronze-armored colossus with spear and shield, protecting the citadel. Over her shoulder is the Parthenon. The artwork immediately visible to the processors would show the contest between Athene and Poseidon. The depiction of the contest of Athene and Poseidon reminds viewers of the struggles between the two gods which led to the conflicts of Erechtheus, Eumolpus, and the two cities. It is only after working their way past all of this, the Parthenon, the Erectheion, the foundations of the old temple to Athene, and all of the statuary, that they come at last to the sanctuary of Zeus at the very rear of the Acropolis. Pausanias provides a description of the ritual:

Upon the altar of Zeus Polieus they place barley mixed with wheat and leave it unguarded. The ox, which they keep already prepared for sacrifice, goes to the altar and partakes of the grain. One of the priests they call the ox-slayer, who kills the ox and then, casting aside the axe here according to the ritual runs away. The others bring the axe to trial, as though they know not the man who did the deed. (Pausanias 1.24.4; Androtion F16, qtd. in Harding 178)

This is the *Bouphonia*, the sacrifice made at the *Dipolieia*. It is the last of the year-end festivals on the Athenian Acropolis, and though it does not directly deal with either Athene or Poseidon, it nonetheless fits into the theme of reconciliation between the two. According to Apollodoros, it was Zeus who prevented Athene and Poseidon from coming to blows with each other. Thus, it is only sensible that he should receive tribute for establishing (an admittedly tense) peace between the two. Parke mentions that Athene appealed to Zeus to cast his vote for her in the contest for Attica, promising that the first bull would be offered on his altar (Parke 163; Pausanias 1.28.10). This does not mesh well with Apollodoros’ account of how the contest was judged, however. Even if Athene had bribed Zeus, he could not have played tie-breaker in an even number of judges. If the Olympians served as judges, there would be ten on the panel: Zeus, Hera, Apollon,

Artemis, Hephaestus, Hermes, Ares, Aphrodite, Demeter, and either Dionysus or Hestia. If Zeus were the last to vote, he could only *cause* a tie, not break one. Not to be too quick to disregard this explanation, it should be pointed out that myth is an organic thing, prone to revisions and addition, and this story does provide a link between Zeus and the reconciliation of the other two. In doing so, it provides the best explanation for categorizing the *Dipolieia* with the other year-end festivals. With myth typically coming after pre-existing ritual, it is possible that this was the popular explanation in Athens for the *Bouphonia* by the Classical Age.

A second interpretation does not contain Athene-Poseidon reconciliation. It cites the *bouphonia* as the first blood sacrifice—and the end of the golden age—perpetrated by Erechtheus (Parke 163). According to mythology, up until this time there had been no blood sacrifices made to any gods (Philokhoros F98, qtd. in Harding 22; Plato 782c). Understanding the *bouphonia* in this way, the ritual becomes the re-enactment of the first animal sacrifice. The bull must first commit the crime of eating the sacred grain so that its killing will be justified. Next, the killer flees, and the weapon is brought to trial (Parke 165). Parke also mentions a singular version of the ritual given by Porphyry, who claims that after the sacrifice and the feasting, the hide of the bull was stitched up and stuffed with straw (Parke 166). Although this presents the problem of a differing account of the ritual activities, the re-stuffing of the bull could also be taken as a sign of symbolic guilt over the shedding of blood.

A third interpretation, again supported by surrounding artwork, suggests that the *Dipolieae* is both a sacrifice to Zeus as peacemaker and a reenactment of the birth of Athene, providing a bridge to the *Panathenaea* at the beginning of the year. The sanctuary of Zeus Polieus is located at the very eastern end of the Acropolis far from the Propylaea. Today only carvings in the natural rock of the ground remain in the sanctuary. In Classical times, however, it would have been surrounded by carefully placed, meaningful artwork. Coming into the Acropolis from the Propylaea and moving farther in, the observer would have encountered various monuments related to the mythological history of Athens: the contest for Athens on the western pediment of the Parthenon, the fall of Troy on its northern side, the Erechthion

and the old temple to Athene, culminating with the birth of Athene and the Gigantomachy, situated on the eastern façade overlooking the altar of Zeus Polieus. The further the participants progressed into the Acropolis, the further “back in time” they traveled via the monuments and sculptures. Of particular import is the depiction of the birth of Athene. The pediments of the Parthenon, like most of the Acropolis, are now hacked and defaced and modern scholars can only speculate about what they looked like. However, other artistic renditions of this scene still exist, in the form of vase paintings, and the common version in the sixth century portrayed Zeus, Athene, and Hephaestus to the side with his axe. Some renditions of this myth include Hephaestus, having split the skull of Zeus, dropping his weapon and fleeing as fast as his lame legs will carry him. This is a different and unrelated interpretation of the ritual as the birth of Athene or the “slaying of Zeus.” The word *bouphonia* means “ox-slaying,” but *phonos* is, strictly speaking, the word for “murder” or “homicide;” the slaying of a man rather than an animal. The story of Athene’s birth might enact a symbolic patricide, yet it cannot literally do so, since Zeus cannot die. Hephaestus, as much of a *faux-pas* as he may have committed, cannot be brought on charges of murder for killing Zeus any more than the Bull-slayer can be prosecuted for killing an ox. (The resealing scar on Zeus’ head might also be suggested by Porphyry’ tale of re-stitching the bull so it “comes back to life.”)

Located in time only two days after the *Skira*, and mirroring it so closely in inversions of roles and places, the *Dipolieia* likely extends in some way the reconciliation efforts of the preceding year-end festivals on the Acropolis (Burkert 1983: 143). It connects the reconciliation efforts which sought to include both Athene and Poseidon by honoring Zeus Polieus, who settled the original debate for Attica. It brings the tension inherent in all of the festivals to a head, with a sacrifice ending in a murder trial. By portraying Athene’s birth, it looks forward to the celebration of Athene’s birthday in the *Panathenaea*, literally the “all-Athene” festival, in which the tension of the *Arrephoria*, *Phynteria*, *Skira*, and *Dipolieia* is diffused.

Ancient authors such as Apollodoros give us myths about Athene and Poseidon’s ire with one another. Ancient and modern scholars emphasize the ancient Athenians’ dependence on both the olive and

the sea. Finally, ancient historians like Pausanias tell of the ancient Greek's view of their own dependence on each of these quarreling gods. Of course, none of these sources is infallible. Myths change with the region and the telling, and many artifacts have deteriorated. Pausanias, and others like him, did not have access to all aspects of religious rites and often wrote from a foreigner's view. Taboo or cult subjects were often purposefully not recorded. In addition to practical problems with the physical and textual sources, I have also worked to rationalize ritual via myth. This is a dangerous enterprise, especially with two gods who represent archetypal deities worshipped long before the Classical Greeks. Myths themselves often represent efforts to explain existing rituals by later practitioners, and may be completely unrelated to ritual itself. Despite the lack of entirely reliable evidence, it seems likely that the end-of-year festivals provide us with a glimpse of how Athenians used ritual to counteract or control potential disaster. In these rituals Athenians attempted to bring together the two great forces on which their city depended.

Notes

¹ In keeping with the conventions of classical scholarship, I will cite book and line numbers of original sources.

² Hesiod tells the stories of Kronos' rebellion against Ouranos and of Zeus' rebellion against Kronos. Zeus naturally feared such an uprising from his own son.

³ Louvre CA616, Attic Black Figure Tripod ca 570 - 565 BC; Zeus sits on a throne as Athene leaps from his fractured skull. Hephaestus stands to the left with double-bladed axe.

⁴ Although it seems it may have been performed during the month of Skirophorion, along with the Plynteria and Skiraphoria festivals. Robertson mentions that the festival is "elsewhere [i.e., not in Pausanias] assigned to the month Schirophorion."

⁵ Simon states that "Because of their youth they did not really weave, but it was believed that the beginning of the work was blessed by their presence. When both of their parents were alive young boys and girls were . . . thought to be dear to the gods, and therefore they ministered in many cults" (2002: 39).

⁶The representation of Helios is negligible. The Classical Athenians were not sun worshipers, and most likely he is a later Hellenistic addition.

⁷It is worth note that Poseidon takes the epithet “Erechtheus,” the name of Athene’s adopted descendant whom he killed, and who killed Poseidon’s own descendant in the war with Eleusis. This joining together of enemies is a reconciliation in itself.

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