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► **To cite this version:**

Pär Ola Sandin. Life and Death on the East Frieze of the Parthenon. *Symbolae Osloenses*, 2023, 96, pp.4-44. 10.1080/00397679.2023.2175502 . hprints-04138541

HAL Id: hprints-04138541

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Submitted on 23 Jun 2023

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Life and Death on the East Frieze of the Parthenon

Symbolae Osloenses 96 (2022), 4–44

Abstract

The gods on the Parthenon frieze are represented as looking out on the real world from the position of their material image on the Acropolis, displaying the contemporary imperial self-awareness of Athens. Poseidon's gaze guards the entrance to the straits of Artemisium. Hermes and Ares look towards Egypt with implicit adversary intent. Aphrodite pointing something out to Eros means that she is indicating a victim of love in an unspecified location. Artemis follows her indication, assuming duty as the goddess of childbirth, the locally worshipped Brauronia. On the East pediment, Aphrodite rests in the bosom of Artemis in a similar fashion as on the frieze. The association of Eros and Aphrodite with Artemis Brauronia, representing the creation of life, and the general divine concord presented on the East frieze, are expressions of the optimistic and imperial hegemonic ideology prominent in Athens in the period between the two major wars (479–431 B.C.). On the other hand, Demeter on the left looks with longing at Hermes and Dionysus, experienced visitors to the land of the dead, where her daughter resides. Including Ares, the group of four gods on the left, in polar contrast to the three gods on the rightmost side, allude to the opposite of life.

Keywords

Aphrodite; Artemis; Athenian empire; Demeter; Parthenon frieze; Twelve gods

I will begin with only a short apology for my addressing a problem, the artistic programme of the Parthenon Frieze, that has already been subject to such an immense amount of scrutiny. The specific matter to be addressed, though, the activities of the gods on the East frieze, has been studied in relatively little detail in comparison with the mystery of the great procession of humans surrounding them and the temple on the South, West, and North sides.¹ The

[p. 39] I would like to thank one of the referees consulted for the publication for particularly learned and helpful suggestions leading to major improvement of the content.

[p. 32 >] ¹ I will address the humans little and only in the cases where they are relevant for the discussion of the gods. See Osada (2019, 1–2) for a bibliography of research surveys and individual interpretations. I take no definite stand on the meaning of the procession but incline to the view that it may be a broader Athenian cultural and political display than merely a depiction of the Panathenaic festival (Wesenberg 1995; Pollitt 1997), and that it may be partly supernatural, involving heroes of ancient legend and recent history (cf. Boardman 1977) mingling with the living in this exceptional context, where times converge and congeal (Harrison 1984, 1996, 208–11; cf. Osborne 1994, 145–46). This latter view is not incompatible with Osada's suggestion that the humans simply represent the Athenian people as dedicators of the monument to the gods, as the people may be represented as a historical continuum in this capacity. Generally, there has been a very strong tendency among scholars to privilege the humans in the frieze, as for instance Korres (1994a, 31): "The most important part of sculpted relief is the procession ([...]) along its longer sides". The gods are not seldom relegated to the function

proposals have been tentative, [4|5] and from early on, many scholars followed a wayward track, the idea that the attitudes and interrelation of the seated gods were related to cults with local relevance.² Local cults and epithets come into play in some cases, in particular Artemis of Brauron and (of course) Demeter of Eleusis, but generally, the depiction of the gods is confidently universalizing.³ I will state a few additional preliminaries to inform the following study, most of them accepted, in theory, by scholarly consensus. One perspective that has been acknowledged, and which has inspired important studies, is that the location of the gods in their original context was not the walls of a museum, nor the pages of a book, nor the screen of an electronic device, but more than eight metres above the heads of the people, who beheld them with some difficulty, above the inner colonnade of a temple that was situated on top of the Acropolis, above Athens, Hellas, and the world. The significance of the position of the Twelve Universal Gods, that is the gods ruling the universe, in such a location, should not be overlooked.⁴ This arrangement expresses the newfound identity of Athens as the Imperial centre of Greece and, just conceivably, her nascent dream of being the cultural, religious, and political centre of the *oikoumenē*, the world. More contentious, the inumbrated position of the frieze, showing it partly obscured by the outer columns to the visitor outside the temple, and to a viewer inside the colonnade from a steep angle, might encourage the presentation of the occasional controversial message, whether related to the religious vision of an artist, the imperial dream of the *polis*, or both. Finally, something which may be admitted in theory but in practice has in my opinion too often been disallowed by scholars of Classical literature and art: *humour*, even relating to intimate aspects of life, may be in place even in the most solemn of contexts in the Archaic and Classical periods of Greek culture. It does not necessarily disparage or belittle. The depicted activities of the gods, watching, pointing, bending forwards and backwards, holding arms, hiding a hand, wrinkling the nose, airing the shoulder, may be depicted with humour, Attic salt, but they are not merely an entertaining

of mere decoration (e.g., Jenkins 1994, 78–80). I believe that the typical viewer in antiquity would have perceived an inverse ratio of importance.

² The excessive focus on local cults has been rightly opposed by for instance Brommer (1977, 261–62), Mark (1984, 292–94), and Neils (2001, 187–88). The keen perceptions of Pemberton (1976) were largely wasted by her insistence to interpret everything she saw in terms of local cult epithets and festivals.

³ Rightly Neils 2001, 188.

⁴ The conceit of a divine government of Twelve may not have been invented in Athens, but it was literally central to the religious and political life of the city. The altar of the Twelve gods set up in the Agora by Peisistratus the younger in 522 B.C. (Thuc. 6.54.6–7) constituted the symbolical centre of Athens. See e.g., Rutherford (2010, 43–44); Furtwängler (1893, 190).

and decorative detail, but significant with relation to the universal function and individual identity of the gods.⁵

Regarding their basic identity, a consensus has been reached that is probably unassailable and leaves few uncertainties. The twelve seated gods, arranged in two separate groups, are by broad agreement identified as, to the left and South, Hermes (E24), Dionysus (E25), Demeter (E26), Ares (E27), Hera (E29), and Zeus (E30); to the right and North, Athena [5|6] (E36), Hephaestus (E37), Poseidon (E38), Apollo (E39), Artemis (E40), and Aphrodite (E41).⁶ Two lesser, winged deities, a girl and a boy, stand in attendance to Hera and Aphrodite, respectively. The latter (E42) is Eros. The former (E28) remains uncertain, with Nike, Iris, and Hebe being the contenders. The question of her identity will not be addressed here, but mostly the activities of the right- and leftmost groups of deities, depicted on the marble slabs conventionally numbered IV and VI.⁷ I attach the sketch of Michaelis for ease of reference (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The Twelve gods, two lesser deities, five humans (image from Michaelis 1870, pl. 14, detail).

Imperial Spaces

In-between the two separate groups of seated gods stand five humans (E31–35) occupied with ritual activity, apparently the preparation of the *peplos* of Athena that was a central recurring feature of the Panathenaic festival.⁸ I agree with the major strand of scholarship on the Parthenon frieze that maintains that the humans on the frieze inhabit a different sphere of fictional space from the gods, in the sense that the latter are unseen by them.⁹ Apart from the

⁵ Ashmole (1962, 231), belittling, perceives “irony” and “mimes” in the gods on the frieze.

⁶ The numbering of characters and marble slabs follows the convention of Michaelis (1870) and Jenkins (1994).

⁷ Although see n. 66 below.

⁸ See e.g., Jenkins (1994, 24–25, 35–42); Osborne (1994, 149); Neils (2001, 166–71, 193–94).

⁹ Gods unseen by humans depicted next to them is a known conceit in ancient Greek art, with examples given by Osada (2015), Murray (1890, 27–29), and Michaelis (1871, 221, cf. 254). Cf. also, e.g., Thiersch (1820, 144); Petersen (1873, 301–2); Brommer (1977, 111, 119); Korres (1994a, 31); Rosenzweig (2004, 93); Nakamura (2016, 52). The term “fictional” is used in this article for mimetic images [32|33] created by human minds and hands, in contrast to the real world of material objects and biological humans. No intrinsic reference to the philosophical nature of fictional creations or their perceived relation to reality is intended by the use of this term. This aspect of the imagery of the gods is discussed briefly below, n. 16.

girl standing next to Zeus (E31), who turns away from her group and may perhaps be represented as sensing his presence, each person standing next to a god is not only oblivious of the god in question, but actually turns his or her back towards it (figs. 1, 4, 17). All humans on the East frieze who *prima facie* seem to be positioned to perceive the gods or the general space in which they are located, completely ignore that sphere of fictional reality. According to a very often stated consensus, though, which I will challenge from a more eccentric position, the gods of the Parthenon frieze attentively watch these humans who ignore them.¹⁰ Aphrodite is destroyed, but the fragments that remain as well as Jacques Carrey's drawings of the frieze from before the temple was blown up (1674) reveal that she is pointing at something. Eros, her son or servant, now preserved in [6/7] plaster casts after the mould made by Fauvel in 1787, watches the object of her indication with interest (figs. 1, 4), as does Artemis (figs. 1, 13). But the focused interest of gods in a mere human religious procession is untypical. In the votive reliefs compared to the frieze, the depicted gods are either oblivious of the humans or, at best, formally and disinterestedly acknowledging them.¹¹ On both sides on the East frieze, several of the gods are watching things with active interest. There has been some concern among scholars about the seeming lack of interest of most gods in the procession as such, though.¹² It has even occasionally been noted that the attention of the gods, even of Aphrodite, cannot really be construed as directed towards the humans in any coherent reading of the imagery. The humans could be understood as coming in from a distance from behind the gods, as the left foot of Hermes indicates (fig. 17), placed in front of the smaller human relative to the viewer, allowing for an interpretation of the different sizes of gods and humans in terms of perspective. If so, the gods are not turning their attention towards the procession at all, several of them instead angling their torsos towards the viewer, accordingly away from the procession in such a realistic understanding of the imagery. The foot of Hermes certainly discourages a reading in which the humans are the objects of the gods' attention or "received" by them.¹³ On the opposite side, Aphrodite sits close to an old man standing with his back turned towards her, the plaster reconstruction even making her foot touch his heel (fig. 4). He does not notice or care. Her pointing is "objectionable", according to Elderkin (1936, 95), if relating to the humans before her, *prima facie* directed at

¹⁰ E.g., Jenkins (1994, 78, 80); Neils (2001, 161); Rosenzweig (2004, 94, 99); Osada (2019, 29).

¹¹ See Osada (2019, 4–8, 13–14).

¹² See e.g., Mark (1984, 332–35) with further references.

¹³ Corbett (1959, 21–22), taking the interest of the gods in the human procession as axiomatic, understood both the position of the foot of Hermes and the fact that the humans turn their backs on the gods as flaws in the composition.

the small of the back of that same old man. Elderkin thus suggested that the gods and the procession should be imagined by the viewer as located in different parts of the local topography, on the Acropolis and the Agora, respectively. While wayward in other respects, his reading goes some way towards explaining what is going on and should be considered in conjunction with that of Philipp Fehl (1961, 1974), who has read the scene most closely in line with what I believe the contemporary audience would have experienced, aided also by cues in the coloration of the frieze.¹⁴ With some modifications, the further hypothetical readings proposed in this article are based on Fehl's understanding of the relation of the gods to their fictional surroundings. [7|8]

When [...] we come to stand before the gods we may—or, perhaps, *should*—wonder about what moved the artist to show the gods to us in two groups that are isolated from each other, each group being flanked by men who are turned away from the gods, while the gods appear not to pay attention to the human beings. [...] One day, as I stood, not so much thinking as musing, in front of the marvellous group of Eros and Aphrodite [...] the left index finger of Aphrodite wriggled a little and I saw suddenly that it was pointing downward and into a far distance. “Don’t you see,” the goddess seemed to smile at me, “that we are seated on Mount Olympus and look down upon the world of men?”¹⁵

The view that the gods look down on the world of humans is right, whereas the idea that the rocks at the feet of the gods represent Mount Olympus is a truth with modification. The rocks may symbolize “The Olympus”, but educated Greeks knew well enough that there were no gods sitting on top of any real Mount Olympus in Greece, whether in Thessaly or elsewhere. In the fifth century, “Mount Olympus” is a quaint but satisfying conceit of old poetry, not a religious dogma. The Olympian gods look down on the world, but the imperialistic message that we are served on the Parthenon frieze is that they sit right where they are, on top of the Acropolis, the Olympus of Hellenic culture, and look at the world *from there*. The sacred

¹⁴ The parasol held by Eros may be a cue with respect to the visual segregation of the world of humans and gods, specifying that the latter are seated in the sun. Might the background to their heads and torsos, that is the area above the chairs, unlike the rest of the frieze have been coloured cerulean? Cf. fig. 12 and Neils (2001, 88).

¹⁵ Fehl (1974, 312); cf. Brommer (1977, 258); Nakamura (2016, 52). I have not been able to inspect artifacts *in situ* but am grateful for the anonymous referee report informing me that “there exists the tip of the left forefinger [of Aphrodite], a tiny relief fragment, which is visible on the [remains of slab VI] of the eastern frieze in the British Museum. It is scarcely noticeable, but every visitor to the museum can see it if they know to look for it. Close inspection will reveal that there exists not only the end of the left forefinger, but, around it, also a part of the parasol and a part of its handle which Eros holds.” I was able to verify this observation from an image currently available on the British Museum website: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1816-0610-21-22 (accessed Jan 20, 2023). The finger is indeed pointing downwards.

images on the frieze constitute a divine presence, projected from far divine reality.¹⁶ From the position of this projected presence, the gods look out on the real world.¹⁷ They do not look at the procession, but the gods on the left side look south by south-east, in the direction of Crete, the Libyan desert, or Egypt; and those on the right to the north by north-west, towards Acharnae, Thessaly, Macedon, and beyond. Their regard should be understood as a manifestation of real intrinsic power, not fictive royal condescension.¹⁸ The geographical extent and activities of the Delian league and the allies or subjects of Athens on the north-eastern side of the Greek mainland are relevant to the gods, a basic frame of reference when ruling the world out of Athens, and a major focus of their immediate interest. The imperialist adventures of Athens in Egypt and North Africa may also be part of the gods' concern and are addressed further in the last section of this article. The interest of Poseidon is relatively close and quite specific, though, while at the same time projecting Panhellenic protective ambition. Poseidon looks at the entrance to the straits of Artemisium, and he does not remove his gaze even as Apollo [8|9] addresses him (figs. 1, 2, 3). His line of sight is aimed exactly between Skiathos and South Pelion, near the coast of the latter, watching the naval inroad to the straits where the fleet of Xerxes sailed to defeat in 480 B.C., so as to force the conspiratorially minded scholar to suspect that the temple was erected in its exact position with this design in mind.¹⁹

¹⁶ On the issue of divine presence in images in antiquity, see Chaniotis (2017, 8–10 [§§ 28–38]) with further references, arguing that this occurs occasionally in the case of epiphanies. The belief in divine immanence is best attested for fully three-dimensional statues, but for discussion and evidence for divine powers attributed to reliefs, see Guggisberg (2013, 78–79, 84); Hölscher (2017, 21–23); and n. 18 below. The enigmatic status of the Parthenon as a temple of worship has been noted by scholars, and the statue of Athena Parthenos inside is considered not to have been a “cult image” (see esp. Preißhofen [1984]; cf. e.g., Burkert [1985, 143]; and see Gladigow [1985–86] generally on cult images in relation to ordinary images of gods). The logical implication of Osada's (2019) reading of the relief might seem to be that the temple was quietly dedicated to all the Twelve gods (cf. Rosenzweig [2004, 95]).

¹⁷ The notion that the attention of the gods may stretch beyond their fictional surroundings has been expressed by Kardara and Osborne, although limiting their view to the local topography and social environment. Kardara (1964, 130) associated the pointing of Aphrodite with the location of a sanctuary of Eros and Aphrodite on the north slope of the Acropolis (cf. Elderkin [1936, 95]; Broneer [1935, 125–48]). Osborne (1994, 149), on whose reading see further below, suggested that the [33|34] gods are interested in “the Athenian people as a whole” and the real procession taking place in the real Athens simultaneously with the fictional one (cf. Osborne [1987]; Nakamura [2016, 54]). But the gods look far away, and their scope is wider than the town and *polis* of Athens. They rule the world.

¹⁸ The eyes of images of gods are invested with special potency (cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 519–23; Eur. *IT* 1167). Two religiously important artifacts, belonging to the cults of Demeter of Eleusis and Amphiaraos respectively, display relief images of eyes unattached to a head or body, presumably conceived as channels for divine power or even individual presence (see Guggisberg [2013, 78–81, 84]).

¹⁹ In important contributions, Korres (1994a, 1994b) has pointed to evidence suggesting changes in the plan for the decoration during the building process of the Parthenon. His conclusion that, “instead of the frieze, simple



Fig. 2. Poseidon²⁰
Photograph in the collection of the Hallwyl museum



Fig. 3. Direction of the gaze of Poseidon

Poseidon might have to look through some hills in Attica and Euboea, as well as past the horizon, but that is no match for a god. The gods are aware of the processions gathering in their honour, the fictional one depicted on the frieze and the real ones repeatedly assembling in the real Athens, but they barely acknowledge them. This is because their concern is the entirety of Athens, Greece, and the world. The relation of these images of the gods to the real world resembles that of colossal statues, Zeus of Olympia, Athena Promachos, or indeed Athena Parthenos inside the temple, and of functional wardens such as the ubiquitous ithyphallic Herms, which are not represented as interrelating to a fictional reality of art, but as

unadorned metopes had been projected above the cella walls” (Korres [1994a, 33]) goes too far, though, if the suggestion is that this included an unadorned inner entablature above the entrance to the pronaos on the east side. I cannot see that the evidence discovered by Korres rules out decoration in this space having been part of the original plans, and I believe that it was, not to have the Parthenon outdone by the smaller Hephaisteion begun a few years before. I believe that the gathering of the twelve gods above the entrance to the pronaos of the Parthenon was central to the original plans, if perhaps originally projected in the form of six low-relief metopes. The major change in the plans may have consisted in the addition of a procession of humans surrounding the gods, necessitating a change of structure from metopes to a continuous Ionic frieze.

²⁰ See Fehl (1961, 41) on the character of the gaze of Poseidon. Unlike some of the other gods, he is not off duty (*pace* Neils [2001, 106]). His left hand is formed and positioned as holding a shaft, without doubt the trident, for which there is a hole left in the stone where it was fastened (Petersen [1873, 265]). His right hand is not at leisure but held ready by his side, also perhaps indicating a disinclination to start an argument or song with Apollo (see the last section below). As was shown on the West pediment, Poseidon lost the contest against Athena for the sovereignty of Attica (see Osborne [1994, 144], cited below, for a reading of the ideological significance), so he now looks away from Athens, but he remains lord of the seas surrounding Hellas and the world. If he is a little put off, his greater dignity is preserved, as is his chosen duty.

looking out at the real world surrounding their image, through walls or mountains if necessary.²¹

[9|10]

A Triad of Life

A compositional principle for the gods seated on the edges of the gathering of the Twelve was recognized by Heiner Knell, who spent only a few [10|11] sentences on it. Knell has had few followers, but I am certain that he is correct, and cite his suggestion in full here (1968, 50–51; cf. 1972, 170, 1990, 114):

So ist es sicher nicht zufällig, daß gerade Hermes und Aphrodite mit Eros die Versammlung auf beiden Seiten einrahmen. Denn sie, denen sich der Festzug hier nähert, sind nach griechischer Göttervorstellung den Menschen am nächsten. Dies in entgegengesetzten Bereichen: Hermes als Psychopompos, der die Verstorbenen in den Hades geleitet, Aphrodite, deren wirkende Kräfte neues Leben entstehen lassen. Die hier anklingenden Bereiche werden einerseits durch Demeter–Kora, die als Persephone im Reich der Toten herrscht, andererseits durch die Hochzeits- und Geburtsgöttin Artemis vertieft.²²

This may need some elaboration to be fully convincing. Crucial for the understanding of such a composition yet overlooked by Knell and almost all scholars commenting on these images, is the significance of Aphrodite pointing something out to Eros. It is not “look, how the humans march for us”.

²¹ On the everyday interaction of the Athenians with the Herms and statues such as Athena Promachos, see Scheer (2015, 166–67).

²² Already Fehl had suggested that Hermes and Aphrodite of the gods “are most immediately concerned with human affairs” (1961, 14). Brommer (1977, 258, 263) and Jenkins (1994, 34) accept the polar symbolism of Aphrodite-Eros and Hermes with respect to life and death, but without acknowledging Knell’s contribution.

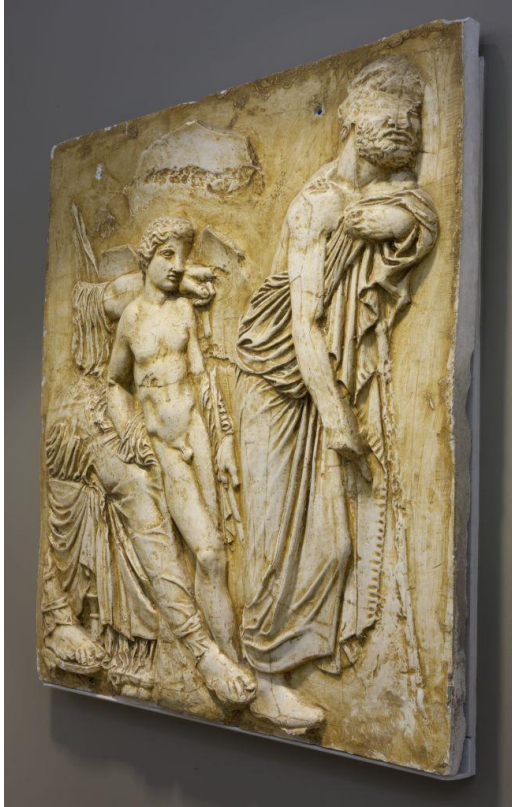


Fig. 4. Reconstructed cast of Aphrodite, Eros, and old man.
Courtesy Cornell Cast Collection, Cornell University library.
Photograph by Danielle Mericle.

The typical viewer in antiquity would have recognized the actual significance of the pointing. The artist who conceived of this image certainly did. FehI also knew and urgently hinted but was too bashful or political to spell it out.²³ But as late as the early modern period in Europe, all educated artists knew. FehI (1961, 14, n. 32, 1974, 318) observed, following von Salis (1947, 199), that the workshop of Raphael has painted a similar motif in the Villa Farnesina in Rome.

²³ He considered the wisest course to be deference to the authority of Professor Ashmole (FehI 1974, 317–18, 1961, 14, cf. 40–41).



Fig. 5. Workshop of Raphael: Venus and Cupid



Fig. 6. Raphael: Study for the Loggia of Psyche

Raphael has illustrated a scene from the legend of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius. An exceptional beauty queen, the mortal Psyche has usurped the role of Venus in the adoration of the people. Enraged, Venus calls on her son to exact revenge:

“I beseech you,” she said, “by the bonds of maternal love, by your arrows’ sweet wounds, by your flame’s honey-sweet scorplings, avenge your mother and avenge her totally [...]. *Let that girl be gripped with a violent, flaming passion for the meanest man.*”²⁴

Venus is raging but in the ceiling in the loggia of Psyche, she looks tranquil, almost smiling (fig. 5). She comes even closer to a smile in Raphael’s red chalk study in preparation for the painting (fig. 6). A closer look at her face in both pictures will reveal that she is displeased. [11|12] Later, though, Domenico Beccafumi and Giovanni Pellegrini have painted unambiguously happy and smiling Venuses directing Cupid in this manner (figs. 7, 8). A probably nineteenth-century Spanish ivory shows a Venus that is keeping her finger active and ready, looking for somebody to point at (fig. 9). [12|13]

[34|35] ²⁴ Apul. *Met.* 4.31, transl. by Hanson (1989, 243, my italics): *per ego te, inquit, maternae caritatis foedera deprecor per tuae sagittae dulcia uulnera per flammae istius mellitas uredines uindictam tuae parenti sed plenam tribue [...]: uirgo ista amore flagrantissimo teneatur hominis extremi [...].*



Fig. 7. Domenico Beccafumi (ca 1530)^{25[29]}



Fig 8. Giovanni Pellegrini (early 1700s)^{26[31]}



Fig. 9. A. Capuz (mid-1800s?)^{27[35]}
Courtesy V&A Collection.

These artists knew, as did Pheidias and his assistants, that this interaction of Aphrodite and Eros is a universal motif, indeed a worn cliché of Greek poetry, where Aphrodite goes by the name of the Cyprian:

Sweet Eros again, *by the will of the Cyprian*,
flows through me and heats my heart.

(Alcman^{28[25]})

^{25[29]} The design of Beccafumi’s mannerist Venus is copied from Leonardo’s “Leda and the Swan”. The upwardly directed indication of the goddess towards a sky full of birds is an acknowledgment of this and a learned allusion, implying that she is pointing at a flying swan outside of view. “Give me an arrow then, mom”, Cupid says. In the background, Mercury oversees Vulcan’s forging of weapons for the war that shall result from the birth of Helen.

^{26[31]} This Venus on a blue bedspread is strongly reminiscent of the Anadyomene fresco from the Casa della Venere in Conchiglia in Pompeii (fig. 12). Note the fold [35][36] covering the right arm of both goddesses, the arrow in the right hand of the Pellegrini Venus answering to the wand held by the goddess of Pompeii, and the position of Cupid relative to the goddess in both pictures. I do not know if the mural was visible to visitors of Pompeii in the early eighteenth century, but it may well have been, as it is situated not inside the house but facing the garden.

^{27 [35, p. 36]} The sculpture is signed “A. Capuz” (Victoria & Albert Museum 2002). A sculptor Antonio Capúz y Gil was active in Valencia in the mid- to late 19th century (Thieme–Becker s.v. Capúz y Romero; Ríos Moyano [2016, 262]).

^{28 [25, p. 35]} Alcman fr. 59a P: Ἔρωσ με δηῦτε Κύπριδος φέκατι | γλυκὺς κατεῖβων καρδίαν ἰαίνει. The translations from Greek are mine unless otherwise stated.

But for me Eros is asleep in no season. Flaming as from the lightning of the Thracian North Wind, *charging from the Cyprian*, murky and fearless, with fundamental dominance he keeps guard of my mind.

(Ibycus^{29[26]})

[13|14]

The Cyprian to the Muses: “You honor Aphrodite, little misses,
Or I’ll arm Eros against you.”

And the Muses to the Cyprian: “That’s mouth for Ares.
That kid won’t fly for us.”

(Plato?^{30[27]})

An educated person contemporary with either Alcman, Ibycus, Pheidias, or Plato, looking at Aphrodite pointing something out to Eros, will know that she is indicating a target.^{31[28]} “See that mortal down below, boy? You strike him now.” There can be no other meaning of that act for a viewer [14|15] who believes in these gods and has heard poetry in his or her own language sung and recited about them since childhood. Eros is the hitman. In the Parthenon frieze, his right hand is hidden under a suspiciously protruding fold at the knee of the goddess (fig. 4). Certainly, just like Raphael’s Cupid, it holds a dart or some other kind of weapon.

Nor a dart of fire nor one of stars is superior to the one the son of Aphrodite releases from his hands, Eros, the child of Zeus.

(Euripides^{32[30]})

²⁹ [26, p. 35] Ibyc. fr. 5 P: ἐμοὶ δ’ ἔρος | οὐδεμίαν κατάκοιτος ὄραν | †τε ὑπὸ στεροπαῖς φλέγων | Θρηίκιος βορέας αἴσσωσιν παρὰ Κύπριδος ἀζαλέαις μανίαισιν ἐρεμνὸς ἀθαμβῆς | ἐγκρατέως πεδόθεν φυλάσσει | ἡμετέρας φρένας.
³⁰ [27, p. 35] *Anth.Pal.* 9.39, attributed to Plato by Diog.Laert. 3.36: Ἄ Κύπρις Μούσαισι· κοράσια, τὰν Ἀφροδίταν | τιμᾶτ’ ἢ τὸν Ἔρων ὕμνιν ἐφοπλίσομαι. | χαὶ Μοῦσαι ποτὶ Κύπριν· Ἄρει τὰ στωμόλα ταῦτα· | ἀμῖν οὐ πέτεται τοῦτο τὸ παιδάριον. The attribution to Plato is rejected by Page (1981, 165–66) on the grounds of the street vocabulary of the word κοράσια, “condemned early in the third century B.C. by Philippides”. Philippides, a poet of New Comedy, hinted that the word was ξενικόν, “non-Attic” (fr. 37 KA), and was taken seriously by Atticist grammarians (Aelius Dionysius s.v. παιδισκάριον; Phrynichus s.v. κόριον). The prudery of New Comedy is irrelevant, though. Plato is no stranger to colloquialism (cf. Pl. *Euthyd.* 283e); Poll. *Onom.* 2.17 accepts κοράσιον as vulgar (εὐτελέες) Attic; and the poem is written in mock *Doric* dialect, Old Comedy style, or rather Sophronic mime, portraying Aphrodite and the Muses as rustic provincial women. As a commentary on the disinterested nature of art or inferior value of love poetry, it does not seem uncharacteristic of Plato, who is also said to have been an admirer of Sophron (Diog.Laert. 3.18).

³¹ [28, p. 35] Cf. also Eur. fr. 324.5–6 K; Ar. *Eccl.* 966–68; Asclepiades in *Anth.Pal.* 5.194, 12.162; Theoc. *Id.* 1.94–97.

³² [30, p. 35] Eur. *Hipp.* 530–34: οὐτε γὰρ πυρὸς οὔτ’ ἄστρον ὑπέρτερον βέλος | οἶον τὸ τᾶς Ἀφροδίτας ἦσιν ἐκ χερῶν | Ἔρωσ ὁ Διὸς παῖς. The idea that Eros was fathered by Zeus may be an innovation of Euripides that lacked traction (Barrett [1964, 260 n. *ad loc.*]). His lineage, like that of Aphrodite, was contested, and poets

The wizened condition of the man standing closest to Aphrodite, and his symbolic ignorance of her presence, cruelly but deliberately designate him [15][16] as a non-player, to make it clear to the viewer that he is not the object of her indication (cf. Fehl [1961, 14; 1974, 317]). This adds to the picture of the humans in the frieze interacting with the gods in no other way than through the ritual acts that they are performing.

The motif of the pointing Aphrodite is not popular in ancient art, which prefers her disarmed and herself the naked object of the viewer's desire. But Eros is chasing someone, and a woman, perhaps Aphrodite, is standing behind and directing him on a skyphos from Emporion that may be contemporary with the Parthenon frieze (fig. 10). A Hellenistic clay mould from Alexandria has Aphrodite guiding the arm of Eros as he aims his bow (fig. 11).^{33[32]} In the Casa della Venere in Conchiglia in Pompeii, a fresco shows Venus reclining in the shell of her birth, vaguely indicating something with her left hand, and Cupid looking at it with apparent dismay (fig. 12).^{34[33]} This last motif may ultimately go back to a famous painting by Apelles.^{35[34]}

speculated freely (cf. below, n. 41). The later well-worn image of him using a bow is also not canonical in the Archaic and early Classical eras. In Homer, Eros *envelops* (being largely impersonal) the mind or mid-riff of his victim (*Il.* 3.442, 14.294); in Sappho, shakes her like a wind (fr. 47 V, cf. also fr. 130 V); in another fragment of Ibycus, uses sorcery to drive his victim into the hunting nets of Aphrodite (fr. 6 P); in Anacreon, Eros boxes (fr. 51 P); casts toxic dice (fr. 53 P); strikes with an axe (fr. 68 P); and throws a soft ball (fr. 13 P).

³³ [32, p. 36] Von Salis (1947, 199, pl. 59a), who purchased the mould for the Zurich collection in 1944, compared it to the fresco of Raphael.

³⁴ [33, p. 36] Cf. fig. 8 and n. 26[31] above; and n. 41 below on the motif.

³⁵ [34, p. 36] Strabo 14.2.19; Ath. 13.59.



Fig. 10. Woman, Eros, and Aphrodite (?) (450–400 B.C.)^{36[37]}
Restored skyphos. Courtesy Museu d'Arqueologia de Catalunya. Cf. Bosch i Gimpera and Serra i Ràfols 1951–1957, 125.



Fig. 11. Aphrodite and Eros
Cast after mould in the collection of the University of Zurich, inv. 3328.
© Archäologische Sammlung der Universität Zürich.
Photograph by Frank Tomio.



Fig. 12. Venus from Casa della Venere in Conchiglia in Pompeii

The Parthenon frieze does not display a wholesome representation of the gods like European royalty benignly watching local subjects with pretend interest, “waiting for the ceremonies to begin” (Jenkins 1994, 78). It depicts them as the rulers of the world, acting out of Athens, Greece. Poseidon is the Lord of the Sea, but Aphrodite is the Queen of [16][17] Love, cruelly but beneficially directing and controlling mortals. It does not matter whom she is pointing at right now, but the authoritative pointing as such defines her universal function. Even so, the two gods that accompany her take a genuine interest in her indication. Eros performs his proper duty, but what is the concern of Artemis? Her left arm is even holding on to Aphrodite’s right one, as a fragment identified as late as 1972 shows.^{37[36]} The intimacy is remarkable, as in literature, these goddesses are depicted as each other’s antipodes, the

³⁶ [37, p. 36] BAPD 9341, <http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/6B6C4EB3-8A73-47D1-976B-DE64087BCAD2> (accessed Jan 20, 2023).

³⁷ [36, p. 36] Despinis (1972); cf. Brommer (1977, 117); Jenkins (1994, 80); Neils (2001, 106).

goddess of chastity [17|19] and the goddess of sex, respectively. The dark and cynical paradigm from high canon is the *Hippolytus* of Euripides. But on the frieze, the goddesses act sisterly. Looking at Artemis though, who is preserved, we can see, when her face is properly lighted, a furrow at her nose (fig. 13). Her mouth is slightly open (Brommer 1977, 119).



Fig. 13. Artemis^{38[40]}
 Photograph in the collection of the Hallwyl museum



Fig. 14. Goddesses in the East pediment
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/legalcode>
 Photograph by Marie-Lan Nguyen (detail)

There is pathos in this depiction of Artemis, unusually in the Greek gods, especially her and Apollo, and generally in Greek sculpture of the fifth century. But the wrinkled nose and open mouth are expressions of disgust, real or feigned. The pathos is additional proof of what is going on. The goddess of chastity is disgusted by watching the game of Aphrodite and Eros. At the same time, astonishingly, she is hot, baring her shoulder, apparently with little comfort. This is because the heat that she feels is erotic. She holds the arm of her older sister or grand-aunt, and even a goddess herself, she cannot help but be affected by the power.^{39[38]} Scholars have seen the significance of the heat and the intimacy, if not the pointing finger. Artemis is depicted in her capacity as the goddess of brides, pregnancy, and childbirth,

³⁸ [40, p. 36] The layers of soot and patina that can be seen remaining on Artemis in this photograph from the late nineteenth century may perhaps have been corrosive, but if harmless, they should not have been removed, adding some of the depth and shade to the white marble that the contemporaries would have experienced through the addition of colour and of soot from torches and lamps that regularly burned near and in the temple.

³⁹ [38, p. 36] Neils (2001, 106) observes that Aphrodite seems to playfully dominate Artemis in the frieze: she “leans slightly into her lap – almost in a sense pinning her to her seat”.

merging with Eileithyia, and worshipped in Attica in this aspect as Brauronia.^{40[39]} A sanctuary to Artemis Brauronia sat on the Acropolis, and everybody walking through the Propylaea up to the Parthenon passed it on their right-hand side. The point is not, as suggested by Mark (1984, 295–302), a symbolic mother-and-child relation of Aphrodite and Eros relating to this role, which is not a necessary reading of the image, where Eros might as well be a sassy boy servant, waiting for instructions from a [19|20] dispassionate mistress (fig. 4).⁴¹ His arm on Aphrodite’s leg may signify a closer bond, but it might also merely be instrumental, the act of hiding his weapon under her clothes. Rather than the academic question of the genealogical relations of the gods, though, the point is that Artemis as the goddess of childbirth is depicted as involved, out of reluctant duty, in Aphrodite’s coupling business. She holds the arm of Aphrodite because their respective domains of power overlap. Artemis, when favourable, will accept the loss of virginity of a woman as a sacrifice to herself, and she will help those who get pregnant from Aphrodite’s game.

On the East pediment, Aphrodite, according to a commonly held opinion, reclines in the lap of another goddess, who is often identified as Dione, although neither identification is unanimous (fig. 14).⁴² If it is in fact Artemis that Aphrodite rests with here, too, the pairing and composition will mirror that on the frieze.⁴³ Aphrodite bares her right shoulder as

⁴⁰ [39, p. 36] Cf. e.g., Eur. *IT* 1463; [Theoc.] *Id.* 27.29–30; Harp. s.v. ἀρκεῦσαι. The epithet refers to the cult at Brauron, where the main temple of this aspect of Artemis was situated. Already Furtwängler perceived this association from the pose and attitude of Artemis, calling her a goddess of “the sexual life of women” (1893, 191 n. 1). It became even more obvious when the fragment of her arm linked with Aphrodite was discovered (Despinis 1972). Cf. Knell (1968, 48, 50); Brommer (1977, 257, 262); Mark (1984, 301, 302 n. 63); Rosenzweig (2004, 99–100, 103–4); and on this aspect of Artemis in general, Farnell (1896, 443–44); Parker (1983, 345–46); Burkert (1985, 151); Larson (2007, 106–8). If there is a significance to Artemis baring her left rather than right shoulder, it is not motherhood (*pace* Harrison [1982, 87 n. 180]), which has no meaningful symbolism, parallel, or relevance for Artemis herself. The left shoulder could perhaps hint at her reluctant attitude towards the matter, affecting her against her will. The Diana of Gabii, though, conjectured to be a copy of the Artemis Brauronia of Praxiteles, which was placed in her sanctuary on the Acropolis (Paus. 1.23.7), bares her left shoulder with a smile on her face, in the process of dressing, or perhaps undressing, as the lifting of the fibula on her right shoulder with one hand without looking might more naturally suggest. On Artemis Brauronia, see further below, n. 44.

⁴¹ Eros may also certainly be understood as the son of Aphrodite in the image, but the question is not central to its significance. Cf. Mark (1984, 297–300) on the dominant literary and iconographical tradition according to which Eros is older than [36|37] Aphrodite and present already at her birth (cf. fig. 12), and e.g., Sapph. fr. 159 V, who refers to him as a *servant*. If Eros is not the son of Aphrodite, he is contemporary with the birth of the universe, as per the Hesiodic genealogy (*Theog.* 120–22), but he becomes a willing subordinate to Aphrodite immediately after her birth (*Theog.* 201–2). In the frame of such a theological programme, Aphrodite may represent a measure of order imposed on the anarchic Eros, brother of Chaos. Cf. n. 43 below.

⁴² For lists of suggested identifications before 1963, see Brommer (1963, 155–56); Cook (1940, 717–18).

⁴³ Arguing against the case of Dione is the fact that she in such a position will present an explicit stance in support of the Homeric rather than Hesiodic lineage of Aphrodite. A non-committal position, like in the case of Eros (see n. 41), is the prudent strategy for a monument conceived to represent the state of Athens for a

Artemis her left on the frieze, but the goddess of [20|21] sexual experience is of course perfectly at ease. Artemis may also be more confident here when the mischievous Eros is out of sight. The conception and birth of Athena, which was the main subject on the East pediment, was achieved without the craft of Eros and Aphrodite, and the latter may be depicted as resting from duty. We can no longer see the faces of these goddesses, though, nor be certain about the identification. Still, judging from the imagery on the frieze, the theological programme of Pheidias fronted an Artemis that like Aphrodite is a goddess of *sex*, even if she wants no part of it for herself. She takes joint responsibility for the process of creating *life*, being the goddess of the giving-up of virginity more than of virginity preserved. If she retains a preference for the [21|22] latter, it may be understood as related to her close second-hand experience of the pain that women feel when giving birth. In the universal order of things, though, Brauronia is the important role of Artemis, virginity a literary affection. As Mark (1984, 301–2) emphasises, the aspect as goddess of childbirth is not limited to her Attic cult, but the Brauronian Artemis of the adjacent sanctuary is relevant, not in a provincial but an imperialist sense. The message is that the Attic Artemis, Artemis of Pregnancy, is the universal goddess.⁴⁴ In the frame of such a theological programme, if the goddess sitting next to Artemis and Aphrodite in the East pediment is indeed Hestia, as is often surmised, they will complete an innovative triad of goddesses relating to οἶκος and family (circumventing the unpopular Argive Hera). Aphrodite, Eros, and Artemis in turn constitute a triad of *life*, depicted on the right, propitious side of the East frieze.⁴⁵

thousand years. People and states are divided in their opinions, and it is better not to take a definite stand if the issue is not crucial to the interests of the *polis*. The goddesses themselves may not remain propitious if the wrong guess is promoted as fact in such a central state monument.

⁴⁴ She is also the democratic or at least demotic goddess, meaning that whereas high poetry emphasises her role as goddess of virginity, popular cult is concerned with her authority over procreation and sometimes the protective strength of her wildness. See e.g., Larson (2007, 101–13) and Simon (1983, 79–88). Farnell observes this discrepancy between literature and popular religion with spontaneous disapproval, arguing that the “maidenly character” of Artemis “is her sole quality of great importance for a higher and more spiritual religion” (1896, 442), but he rightly concludes that “there is no public worship of Artemis the chaste” (444). With this insight in mind, the significance of the “bear dance” performed by the girls celebrating the *arkteia* of Artemis Brauronia (Harp. s.v. ἀρκτηῦσαι; see also Farnell [1896, 435–38]; Simon [1983, 86–88]) should perhaps be interpreted less cautiously and more “popularly”, as foreboding and preparing for marriage and fertility (cf. Rosenzweig 2004, 99), even though the ritual is performed by children. Such a “popular” understanding is implicit in Eur. *Hel.* 375–80 (where the ms. reading ἐπέβας should be preserved).

⁴⁵ For the local relevance of the fertility aspect of Aphrodite, see Rosenzweig (2004, 29–58) on Aphrodite Ἐν κήποις, “In the gardens”, relating this aspect of the goddess to the Attic sanctuaries of Aphrodite on the Ilissos, the north slope of the Acropolis (see n. 17 above), and Daphne, and to the festival of the Arrhēphoria.

Pax Athenaea

Aphrodite's pointing with authority is not only an erotic but properly a martial-tactic, strategic, or imperial gesture, occurring in other contexts in ancient art with predominantly divine subjects ("Das herrische Befehlen", Neumann 1965, 30). A couple of central examples may help to clarify the *political* significance of the lordly management of procreation now hinted at, which remains graciously obscure against the background of love poetry and erotic art. On a skyphos from Nola contemporary with the Parthenon frieze, currently in the Louvre, we find the equivalent case of a goddess, Athena *Ergane*, commanding a supernatural subordinate, here a giant, to help construct the walls of the Acropolis (fig. 15). On the other side of this vase is depicted the miracle of the olive tree of Athena, which sprouted anew after having been burned by the Persian invaders.⁴⁶ The gift of the olive, with which Athena won the contest against Poseidon for sovereignty of Attica, may have featured in the middle of the West pediment of the Parthenon, where this conflict was depicted.⁴⁷

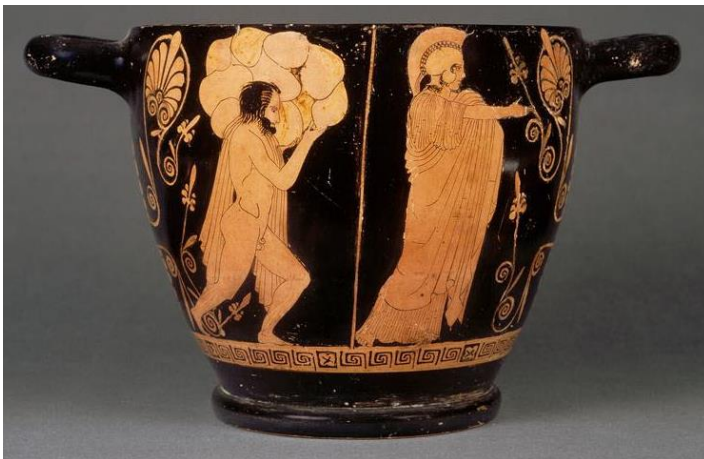


Fig. 15. Athena and a giant (ca 440–30 B.C.)
© 1999 RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre)
Photograph by Hervé Lewandowski.



Fig. 16. Apollon of Olympia (ca 460 B.C.)
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>
Image by Vicenç Valcárcel Pérez.

In sculpture, the paradigmatic example of authoritative pointing is Apollo from the temple of Zeus in Olympia, a few decades earlier than the Athenian counterparts (fig. 16). Like the gods on the East frieze of the Parthenon, he seems to be depicted as invisible to the mortals surrounding him.⁴⁸ His gesture has become somewhat enigmatic with the loss of much of the

⁴⁶ BAPD 216791, <http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/30D4BB89-E021-4B5C-8E76-5FEDB6592AA1> (accessed Jan 20, 2023). See Hdt. 8.55; Neils (2001, 11–12).

⁴⁷ Cf. above, n. 20, and see e.g., Osborne (1994, 144).

⁴⁸ See Neumann (1965, 32) and cf. above n. 9.

context, but I maintain that a significant contrast [22|23] may be observed between these gods. Whereas Athena uses the gesture of command for the purpose of constructive work, having offered life and sustenance to the Athenians through the gift of the olive, Apollon of Olympia orders death and destruction to beastly adversaries against the background of pugnacious chaos, that is the centaumachy that was the subject of the West pediment of the temple of Zeus.⁴⁹ Even more striking is the contrast of Aphrodite to the same Apollo, and as a central part of a project that might suggest conscious emulation of and allusion to the temple of Zeus. The Olympian Apollo dispenses death in battle, but as we have seen, the power of Aphrodite assisted by Artemis commands the peaceful creation of life. Serving this function, Aphrodite, like Athena, constructively shapes the future of Athens and the world.

The theme of love as a constructive force for society is recognizable from literary works of the period. While Greek poetical tradition including Euripides predominantly tends to depict love and desire as dark and destructive powers afflicting the individual (see above), the contrasting notion of love and sex as positive, creative forces, which through their [23|24] generative function build and improve upon society, is an expression of the optimism characterizing the Athenian interbellum period between the Persian and Peloponnesian wars, attested in literature at least in Aeschylus, for instance a famous fragment from the *Danaides* where Aphrodite speaks in defence of her activity.⁵⁰ The contrast between love and [24|25] life on the one hand, and war and death on the other, is on display within the Parthenon frieze itself, as we shall see in greater detail below. But in addition, the progressive and cooperative spirit exemplified here and in other Athenian works of art of this period should be noted for its contrast to the reactionary or status quo messages displayed in the main artistic and spiritual rivals of the Parthenon, apart from the Temple of Zeus also the archaic Siphnian treasury in Delphi. The gods on the Delphic East frieze, which is often compared with its Parthenon counterpart, watch the Trojan war like a game, with conflicting sympathies.⁵¹ Apollon of Olympia suppresses insurrection and restores order in a reactive fashion. In contrast, the message fronted by the examples of Athena and Aphrodite from the height of

⁴⁹ Notably, Olympia had a rival legend of the introduction of the olive to Greece, claiming that it was Heracles who imported it from the Hyperboreans for the purpose of crowning the victors in the Olympic games. See Pind. *Ol.* 3.13–32 with the notes of Sandin (2018, 25).

⁵⁰ Aesch. fr. 44 R, also apparently a case of reference to her aspect ἐν κήποις, “in the gardens” (see above n. 45). The aetiological theme of the Danaid trilogy presented [37|38] Aphrodite and especially Zeus as constructors of the peoples of the future, especially the heroic Danaan people that descended from the Danaid fugitives. See Sandin (2021a, 137–46, 152) on the mentioned fragment and Aesch. *Supp.* 524–37, 571–94.

⁵¹ Cf. Neils (2001, 40–41, 62); Osborne (1998, 121–23).

power of the Athenian empire is that divine authority – notably females – constructively, foresightedly, and unitedly shapes the future of the state and the world in peace. With Aphrodite and Eros on display, the tone is not officious but light and humorous, but the implicit message is clear to the theologically informed viewer. Athena with the help of Hephaestus orders, builds, and provides for Athens; Aphrodite with the help of Eros and Artemis oversees the creation of her people.⁵² This progressive and hegemonic ideology characterizes an empire intent on growth, Athens in its zenith.

Aspects of imperialist ideology have been identified by several scholars studying the artistic programme of the Parthenon, sometimes with respect to details of war and conquest, as showcased on the metopes on the outside of the temple (see below), but the most incisive readings I believe are those that focus on the message of hegemonic peace in the frieze, for instance Root 1985. Whether Root was correct or not in seeing a conscious emulation of the Apadana reliefs of Persepolis in the Parthenon frieze (and accordingly already now a vision of the larger empire later ventured by Macedon), she rightly emphasized that the message is constructive rather than belligerent. The frieze pointedly showcases not the glory of war and conquest, but the state that follows upon victory: peace, prosperity, and positive development. “To the Athenians who planned the Parthenon frieze the sculpture was meant to convey something powerful and energizing: the harmonious ordering of a society guided by positivistic ideas and far-reaching aspirations.” (Root 1985, 120, cf. 113–14.) And while the civic and humanist display of the procession of mortals on the long sides of the temple has impressed modern secular viewers the most in this respect, the messages of peace, [25|26] prosperity, unity, and imperial authority appear in particularly condensed form in the gods on the East frieze. The positive forces for the management of the present and creation of the future gather on the right, propitious side. There are things to say about Hera, Zeus, Athena, and Hephaestus in the middle (slab V), which for lack of space will have to wait for a later occasion. But as already hinted, the last two (E36–37), sitting behind Poseidon, display the same *ēthos* and symbolism as Athena Ergane on the vase discussed above. In the present context, the couple allude to the curious tale of the birth of Erichthonius ([Apollod.] *Bibl.* 3.188), but this is a light-spirited joke, for the era of kings is long gone and does not need excessive emphasis. The fruitful pseudo-union of Athena and Hephaestus resulting in the first Attic king is politically significant, though, because on a deeper level, to use the somewhat

⁵² On the relation of Aphrodite ἐν κήποις (see above n. 46) to Athena Ergane, Hephaestus, and the birth of Erichthonius ([Apollod.] *Bibl.* 3.188) in art, see Rosenzweig (2004, 52–53).

simplifying terminology of divine symbolism, these two gods together symbolize orderly industry and the creation and maintenance of material prosperity, such as characterized the contemporary self-image of Athens (Thuc. 2.38). Poseidon in front of them symbolizes the rule of the sea and a watchful peace. Apollo, who has probably held a lyre (see below), symbolizes the music, art, and culture that characterize prosperous Hellenic society (Thuc. 2.38). And the three gods sitting and standing on the rightmost edge of the gathering symbolize the creation of life. Unlike in chaotic mythical history, the Twelve gods are now in concord, and it may be hinted that this concord is the accomplishment of Athena, the political goddess, whose sacred capital has moved to Athens, the hegemon *polis*.

A Theology of Progress?

To reinforce this last assertion and the notion of a progressive and imperial hegemonic message with the gods in the centre, I would like to pay some further attention to the reading of Osborne (1994), reviewing and expanding on some of its aspects. Osborne's contribution was based on his earlier professed view of an artistic programme conceived as a movement harmonizing and blending with the visitor's progression when walking around the temple towards the entrance (Osborne 1987). He first perceived that the gods on the frieze above the entrance look out on the real world with a *political* view (Osborne 1994, 149).⁵³ As already explained, I think we should extend their scope beyond [26|27] Athens and her immediate surroundings. But Osborne also saw in the progression from the struggle of Athena against Poseidon on the West pediment to the harmonious gathering of deities and humans in the East frieze the theme of development. His exposition is admittedly provisional (cf. 149 n. 1), but a fully articulated suggestion is that while the unruly horses and haughty cavalry in the West pediment and adjacent friezes represent Poseidon, lord of horses, they also embody the aristocratic past and present aspects of Greece, with cavalry in the contemporary Athens being intimately associated with aristocracy (1994, 145–46):⁵⁴

At the same time, we might note in anticipation, that as the viewer moves from west to east the horses become fewer until they are entirely absent from the east façade; the viewer moves from a world in which Poseidon still contests to a world in which Athene reigns unchallenged, from the world of aristocratic combat to the world of democratic ritual.

⁵³ See above, n 17.

⁵⁴ Osborne cites Ar. *Eq.* 551–55 as evidence for this association at a somewhat later time.

Rather than a strong partisan message with respect to a populist or aristocratic ideology in the depiction of the procession, we may be looking at a sophisticated compromise, in which the viewer may choose his or her own preference.⁵⁵ More tentatively, but perhaps promisingly, Osborne also attempted to relate the theme of the metopes on the outside of the temple with that of the pediments and frieze (1994, 144–48; cf. Osborne 2009, 3–4). A commonly held view is that the martial scenes in the now badly damaged metopes, the centauroomachy in the south, Amazonomachy in the west, fall of Troy in the north, and gigantomachy in the east, function as reflections of the recent victories over the Persians, featuring Athenians, Greeks, and gods vanquishing barbarian and monstrous enemies, hence foreshadowing the recent triumph of Athens over invading foreigners. I believe that this is a plausible reading, but as Osborne observes, the imagery on the metopes seems not in every case positively heroic, apparently featuring problematic scenes with women, children, domestic backgrounds, and gods in discord, especially in the Trojan sequence in the north (1994, 146–48). Osborne thus discerned a contrast between the martial and partly immoral chaos of the metopes, and the increasingly peaceful procession culminating in the East frieze in harmony with the evangelic birth of Athena on the pediment and the splendour of her statue inside the temple. “Where is the place of war in the civilised world Athene promises in the pediment?”, he asks (1994, [27|28] 145). I believe that a search for answers in the dark subversion of Euripides and pessimism of Thucydides (1994, 149) might be inconsequential. We are still in the Thirty Years Peace, and as I have tried to argue, this is a period of optimism, I believe a revived Aeschylean optimism.⁵⁶ Indeed, the spectator is “encouraged to view the Greek attack on Troy *teleologically*” (Osborne 1994, 148, my italics). But it is to be known that the good side wins. As Osborne may hint, but did not follow up systematically, the postulation of an existential or political development that follows the visitor’s progression towards the temple entrance could be expanded into a programmatic teleological reading of history and even theology, culminating in the victorious Athenian empire under the rule of Athena, who has accomplished *divine concord* from given diversity. There is no space to develop this theme here in great detail, but surely it may be possible to read the tale of Athena’s birth (East pediment); the historical disagreements of the gods of Love, Wine, War, Matrimony, and Political Order resulting in conflicts (metopes); the transfer of Athena and her sacred

⁵⁵ See Neils (2001, 183–86) for a review of the controversy of whether the human procession on the Parthenon frieze represents democratic or aristocratic ideals.

⁵⁶ Cf. above, n. 50. On the religious and political, in a modern (Nietzschean) sense “untragic” optimism of Aeschylus, see now Seaford (2021); also Nestle (1974); Sandin (2021b, 234–35).

palladium from her former capital in Troy to the new one in Athens (North metopes: see Osborne 1994, 146–47; cf. Scheer 2015, 169–70), won in collegial contest with her uncle (West pediment); and the eventual divine concord shown on this frieze, where Dionysus is tamed, Athena has made friends with Poseidon, Hera with Zeus, and Aphrodite with both her virgin nieces or sisters, as a tale of historical-theological progression towards a final, good end? Unlike in the primeval divine conflicts, centauromachy, Trojan war, and other regrettable if interesting instances in history, there is now divine concord. This concord is reflected in the secular imperial hegemony of Athens, the city of the daughter of Zeus, who as the embodiment of the mind of Zeus creates, maintains, and represents the new world order, secular and divine.

A Quartet of Death

For all this positive thinking, it must be admitted that the Athenians of this period remained aware that there is another side to life and empire. If there is peace on the inside, violence and disorder do yet reign in the world outside the Athenian empire, as reflected in the metopes on the outside of the Parthenon. On the East frieze itself, the slab to the left of centre carries a darker message than its right counterpart, [28|29] and my account will be briefer. The four Olympian gods assembled here sit somewhat removed from their neighbours. Their heads and some of their hands and arms are destroyed but most of their bodies intact (fig. 17).



Fig. 17. Man, Hermes, Dionysus, Demeter, Ares
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/legalcode>. Photograph by Egisto Sani (detail).

Hermes, with boots on his feet and a traveller's cap on his lap, looks south-eastwards in a calm and composed manner. Dionysus leans on his shoulder in a festive mood, turning away from his table companion, Demeter, to address him. Alone of all gods, in proper order

Dionysus sits facing his companion, in the opposite direction from all the other seated deities on the left side, and indeed perversely from all the gods, if the reconstructed half-circle arrangement first proposed by Petersen (1873, 239–45, 301–2) should be accepted as reflecting some kind of divine reality.⁵⁷ Instead of solemnly watching whatever it is that the others are watching, Dionysus looks as if he has been trying to get intimate with Demeter. For whatever reason, he has decided at this moment to turn around, not to look at humans or the world, but to address Hermes. His left arm is raised, sometimes supposed to have held the thyrsus, but he is not in office, and the point of the gesture is lively conversation.⁵⁸ The hand may have held a cup, though (Petersen 1873, 260). Apollo on the opposite side (fig. 1), turning to address Poseidon, lifts his hand in the exact same manner as Dionysus, and while it in turn may have held a laurel or (better) lyre, in both cases the gesture is related to social interaction. The significance of the raised hands is not astonishment, as Petersen diffidently suggested (1873, [29|30] 266), but may be the proposal of a drink and a song, respectively, or simple emphasis on a point of view, as was common in verbal communication in antiquity and still is today in the Mediterranean and other places, while not perhaps in northern Europe in the time of Petersen.

Ares, restless and detached, leans backward but looks at Hermes or in the same general direction as him. Demeter, alone of all gods, leans forward, towards the deities sitting in front of her. She is not the least bit interested in getting intimate with Dionysus, but in something else.⁵⁹ I believe that the key to the understanding of the group, saturated with information and allusion, is the pose of Demeter in relation to the two gods sitting in front of her. Her head is not bent downwards as a sign of grief, although her sorrow may be conventionally indicated by her chin placed in her hand as well as religiously-symbolically by the torch that she carries in her search for her daughter. But she lifts her head as if intently focusing on something, the angle of her neck inclined sharply forward.⁶⁰ Nobody has tried to imply that the interest of Demeter should be the humans and their procession, though. I think that her pose rather

⁵⁷ Cf. Murray (1890, 28–31), pl. 1; Smith (1892, 151, 157); Neils (2001, 62–66); Nakamura (2016).

⁵⁸ As in symposia paintings, for instance a red-figure kylix by the Triptolemos painter, *BAPD* 203844, <http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/9FA99F3A-FB64-4B94-8CF5-62F52FC12434> (accessed Jan 20, 2023).

⁵⁹ On the complicated pose of Demeter in relation to Dionysus, see Tanaka (2016, 125) and Nakamura (2016, 57), who however wrongly in fig. 4 reconstructs her head in three-quarter profile. The remains of her forehead shows that it was depicted in full profile.

⁶⁰ To me, looking at the facsimile of Jacques Carrey's drawing of the head of Demeter (Bowie and Thimme [1971, pl. 26]), it seems to depict an intense, pained gaze directed straight ahead. Mizuta (2016, 157) perceives a dotted eye looking demurely downwards. In either case, Carrey's drawings are cursory and the faces inaccurate in detail, as can be seen from the instances preserved in the original.

suggests that she is trying to hear what Dionysus says to Hermes. The reason is that while holding on to the torch, she knows by now where her daughter is, and Dionysus and Hermes are the two of all Olympian gods, apart from possibly Zeus, who visit that place. Demeter looks at them and wonders if they have seen Persephone in Hades and are talking about her.

The relation of Hermes to the land of the dead is no secret but known already from the *Odyssey*: he leads the souls to the afterlife, taking the epithet *Psychopompos*.⁶¹ In literature and cult, he is often addressed as *Chthonios*, Hermes of the Underworld.⁶² In the feelgood version of the myth of Persephone promoted in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Hermes eventually brings her up to the light again in person, a visit that is to be repeated for the larger part of each coming year (*Hymn.Hom.Cer.* 334–495). This is what Demeter may be looking forward to here, although the tragic depth of the image becomes diminished. The initiated will perhaps know that Persephone is only allowed to send flowers.⁶³ The Chthonian role of Dionysus is esoteric, but not so secret or sinister as to keep Aristophanes from joking about it. In the *Frogs*, Dionysus is famously portrayed as visiting Hades to have a word with the deceased Euripides. There are details concerning his underworld experiences that we know by hints, but which would perhaps be more familiar [30|31] to initiates of the Dionysian and Eleusinian mysteries.⁶⁴ His death and resurrection may be a theme, as well as a mystical relation to Demeter in this context. The precise details of the secret cult tenets are not important here, though, but rather the general character of Hermes and Dionysus as experienced visitors to the land of the dead, and the deep familiar relation of Demeter to that same place, while being herself forbidden to go there.

⁶¹ Hom. *Od.* 24.1–14, 98–100. The epithet *ψυχοπομπός* is not attested for Hermes before the Roman era, but in tragedy he is *πομπὸς φθιμένων* (Aesch. fr. 273a** .8 R), *πομπᾶτος χθόνιος* (Soph. *Aj.* 832), and *πομπός* together with *νεπτέρα θεός*, “the goddess below”, that is Persephone (Soph. *OC* 1548).

⁶² On Hermes Chthonios in cult, see e.g., Larson (2007, 149–50) with further references. For the similarity of Hermes on the frieze with a supposed Hermes Chthonios by Pheidias, see Pemberton (1976, 119); Simon (1985, 310–16).

⁶³ See Clinton (2010, 344–46) on the discrepancies between the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and what is known about the Eleusinian ritual, and Parker (1991) for a more positive view on the relation of the hymn to the cult.

⁶⁴ On the Great Mysteries of Eleusis, see e.g., Clinton (2010) with further references, and Simon (1983, 24–35, addressing the role of Dionysus at 32–33); see also Simon (1983, 93) on the relation of Dionysus to Hermes Chthonios in the context of the [38|39] rites of the Anthesteria. Apart from Attic cults and festivals, the relation of Dionysus to Hades and Persephone is evidenced in many sources, including Heraclit. 22 B 15 DK *ὄντος δὲ Αἰδῆς καὶ Διόνυσος*, “Hades and Dionysus are the same”, and the so-called Orphic gold tablets, where he may be depicted as a gatekeeper (*Orph.* 26a–b, 28, 30 Graf–Johnston). Following this lead, he might perhaps be esoterically interpreted as hindering Demeter from approaching Hermes in the frieze. See further Cole (2010, 338–41); Larson (2007, 141–42); Burkert (2004, 72–98).

In images invested with directed, functional power, Hermes is regularly apotropaic rather than on the offensive, and he is generally a god of commerce, including colonies and trade, so that his look towards the Mediterranean Sea need not in itself be construed as sinister. Ares, though, while not caring about or interacting with the Chthonian and the dead, is unambiguously a god of death.⁶⁵ Combined, the simultaneous look of those two, Ares and Hermes, to the south, Egypt perhaps, and the restless attitude of the former and calm expectancy of the latter, do not amount to a cosy or humorous message. The failed and ignominious Egyptian campaign of 459–454 springs to mind.⁶⁶ “Shall we go again then, Psychopompos”, is the attitude of Ares, who might be looking at Hermes rather than the horizon. Ares alludes to the same watchful peace as Poseidon in the equivalent position on the right side, but in accordance with his nature, his attitude is sinister and threatening rather than defensive, suggesting potentially expansive imperialism. All three gods sitting next to Hermes may focus their attention on him, with disparate interests. The late modern, ageing scholar may perhaps be forgiven for finding the longing of Demeter more moving than the bloodlust of Ares and politics of empire. Looking at the entire row again (fig. 1), we may perceive that while Ares reflects Poseidon, Demeter closely mirrors the physical position and attitude of Artemis on the opposite side. Both are Olympian goddesses admitting to pathos, and both take an ambiguous interest in the gods sitting and standing directly in front of them. As Knell saw (1968, 50–51), Aphrodite-Eros and Hermes Psychopompos are fundamental symbols of life and death; but the symmetry with which the feelings of Artemis and Demeter towards these extremes complement each other envisages the organic cycle of life as perceived by the women empowered to maintain it. Artemis, excited but wrinkling her nose, agonizes about the creation of life, about sex and the giving of birth, the typical worries and nascent interests of a young girl, such as she will ever remain. Demeter, having [31|32] done both things, wonders and is in pain about death, the loss of the life that was given to her as the result of those acts.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ I wonder if the apparently innovative association of Ares with the three major “chthonian-leaning” Olympians to form a group alluding to death might have been worrying or controversial to contemporary religious viewers reflecting upon it. Ares is clearly the odd man out here, though, and he shows no interest in Demeter or Dionysus, only in Hermes.

⁶⁶ See Rhodes (1992, 50–54, 61). The body of Hermes is turned leftwards, and his head may have been sculpted in three-quarter profile (cf. Brommer [1977, 111]; Stuart and Revett [1787, pl. XXV]), looking to the south-east, towards Egypt and the Nile. If E28 is Nike, her stern look at the neck of Ares (her head is missing in the sketch of Michaelis [fig. 1] but has later been found, see e.g., Jenkins (1994, 78) could actually be interpreted as disappointment and censure, an astounding example of Attic *self*-irony in the midst of propagandistic splendour.

⁶⁷ While the male gods on the frieze assume passive attitudes, whether ominous or intimidating (Hermes, Ares, Eros), watchful (Poseidon), carefree (Dionysus and Apollo), making friends (Hephaestus), or intransigent (Zeus)

[39 >]

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– most females take active or dramatic poses. On the relatively large importance of women in the sculptural decoration of the Parthenon, see Osborne (1994, 144–47); on the possible relationship of this feature to the citizenship law of Pericles from 451 B.C. ([Arist.] *Ath.Pol.* 26.3; Davies [1992, 299]), which restricted Athenian citizenship to men born of ἀμφοῖν ἀστοῖν, “both parents being townspeople/citizens”, Harrison (1996, 210).

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