Athena in The Mediterranean: A Comparative Analysis of the Evidence for Cult Worship of Athena in Athens and the South Italian City-States of Magna Graecia

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As a Summer Research Project for the Classics Division of the Humanities Department, I studied the worship of the Greek goddess, Athena. As the Greeks spread to inhabit large portions of modern-day Italy, bringing to these lands their religion. Of course, the physical separation from their ancestral land led to variations in lifestyle. Different religious needs and altered priorities led the Greeks to change their habits of devotion. In this paper, I explore how these cultural differences impacted the worship of Athena in Magna Graecia, as compared to that in her home-city, Athens.

When one thinks about a Greek goddess, there is a high probability that an image from a movie or even a cartoon will come to mind. With series on television that turn ancient deities into characters, it is hard to separate these modern versions from the true beings that were so widely worshipped in the classical world. Whether you are looking at a movie from the early 1980s, or an after school cartoon, you are being presented with falsified editions of the god. This is, among others, a key reason to continue the search for the true identities of the ancients. Through a combination of research from previous scholars’ works and archaeological study, it is possible to gain a more accurate understanding of a goddess, such as Athena, than that which popular culture presents.

One of the keys to understanding Athena’s role in and around the Hellenistic era is to know her origins. She was not always a goddess of wisdom and war-craft, as she is in the minds of those who know her today. She was a guardian- she took on the role, not of attacker, but of defender. The Cretan goddess from whom Athena developed was a snake goddess who protected her followers, kept their homes running in good order. At Gournia, a site dating to Minoan Crete, among other cultic remnants, there was a vast quantity of a “bell shaped goddess.” This figure has a snake encircling it and was the most plentifully represented deity in the Minoan pantheon, as far as archaeology has shown us thus far. The snake, though a creature of evil and mischief in modern post-biblical culture, was a creature of safety in the past.

The serpent had two functions in the ancient world; that of representing the souls of the dead and that of guarding the household and bringing luck. Based on the great presence of the snake in Minoan religion, and its presence in the house, it is obvious that whichever deity it was associated with was very significant. Due to the fact that alters within the domestic cults had snakes, it is less likely that it was being worshipped as the soul of the dead. Domestic cult worship of Persephone, or
her Minoan predecessor, is far less likely
due to its morbidity than that of a
goddess, such as Athena’s antecedent,
who brought safety and luck.¹

Later on, her protective
capabilities were extended to include
offensive warfare as well as marriage. A
wedding, though a festive occasion,
involves a great change in lifestyle for a
member of an oikia, or family unit. The
bride has to be protected through her
transition to adulthood. There is, in fact,
an architectural terracotta frieze from
Temple C in Metaponto, depicting a
marriage procession.² (see Figure A) This
does not, however, mean that her
protective nature was in any way lessened.
Athena’s palladium, according to myth,
was sometimes kept deep inside of the
citadel of a king. As hers was the
domestic cult that protected a prince, it
was centered in the core of the palace,
where it was protected, and from which it
could protect the ruler.³

Her guardianship continued to
include the heroes of the classical world,
as evidenced in her actions during and
after the Trojan War, when she, for
example, took such pains to guard
Odysseus on his way home. The
Hellenistic image of Athena, however,
cannot be seen simply as an extension of
the Minoan snake goddess. Other facts
play into the identity of this venerated
deity, shaping her to suit the needs of a
different culture. The story of her birth,
for instance, is indicative of the Greek
need to have their gods be a part of their
world, even though the latter lived on
Mount Olympus. Having the right to
claim that yours was the land on which a
goddess such as Athena was born is a
source of pride that was argued over for
an age.

Among Athena’s typical attributes
is one belonging not to the goddess
herself, but to her father. Among
Athena’s typical attributes is one
belonging not to the goddess herself, but
to her father. The aegis is one of her
more puzzling possessions, as its nature is
not perfectly known. Its origins are, at
best, speculation, as different myths place
it in different circumstances. Some say
Metis made the aegis when while she was
trapped in Zeus’ belly and that Athena,
therefore, was born already in possession
of the garment. A thoroughly
contradictory myth tells of the aegis being
the skin of an opponent, whether a giant,
monster, or simply an invulnerable
warrior is undecided, who was flayed in
battle. Though the aegis’ name comes
from the Greek word for “goat,” the item
itself was only made of the skin of that
animal in one version of the myth; that
which identifies it as the hide of the goat
that suckled Zeus on the island of Crete.⁴
The question that one brings from all of
this is what this skin, what—and wherever
it came from, has to do with a goddess
who, in modern times, is seen to be one
primarily of wisdom and war craft. The
answer is weather. Zeus, a god of the sky,
shakes the aegis to bring thunder. It is
possible that when Athena wears the
aegis, she is using it to bring wind or
rain.⁵ This would explain the description

¹ Nilsson, Martin P. A History of Greek Religion.
trans. F.J. Fielden (Oxford: Oxford
² DeSiena, Antonio. Metaponto: Archeologia di
una Colonia Greca. (Taranto: Scorpione
Editrice, 2001), 49.
⁴ Deacy, Susan and Alexandra Villing. Athena in
the Classical World. (Boston: Brill
⁵ Deacy and Villing, 30.
that Homer and other late epic poets give of the two deities using the skin to bring storms.

Of course, the construction of this theory is anything but perfect. While the texts do show her to use the aegis to this end, that does not support her characterization as a weather goddess. This idea is based more on the idea of rain being a symbol and bringer of fertility. When a woman was recently married, according to Athenian custom, the priestess would bring the aegis from the Acropolis and go on rounds of begging. While this is evidence leaves the question of weather rather unclear, it does make a case for Athena’s worship as a matrimonial goddess. Her role as a goddess of marriage is one that is far less ambiguous. Votive offerings, dedicated to the goddess, depict such scenes as a bride and some of her entourage, in and around a chariot.

Linked to this belief in her power over rain, was the myth that she invented the plough and so her influence on farming became more concrete. In these cults, she was the aid and protector of agriculture. In a similar role, her ability to keep the air clean meant that she could ward off disease and sickness as well as care for the growing children of those who worshipped her. With these aspects of her character in mind, it follows that each year, for example, the people celebrated the Panathenaia, a festival in honor of the birth of their patron that finds its origins, according to some, as a celebration of the harvest.

Every four years, the celebrations would be even more splendorous.

The Panathenaia was not always the same, but it began with the ritual procession to the Acropolis along the Panathenaic Way. It would have started at the Ceramicus and gone to Eleusis, then returning along a route that has yet to be fully plotted, until the procession reached the Acropolis. The procession would have been lead by a wheeled ship model with a peplos, or woolen robe with embroidery, fastened to it. The peplos was most likely tied to resemble a sail, possibly acting as an homage to Athenian naval supremacy in the fifth century. The people who took part in the procession ran the full selection of people who made up the free population of Athens. Even non-Greeks participated in the festival, though their place was probably at the end of the procession. When they reached the Acropolis, the old peplos of the goddess’ statue would be removed and replaced with that from the model ship. There would then be great sacrifices and feasting and the Panathenaic games. There, both individual and team competitions were held to honor the deity. Not all of the events were physical, however, as the works of Homer would be recited. This event, as well as musical competition, was added during the time of Pericles. Those who won were presented with amphorae decorated with Athena’s image.

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6 Ibid. 45.
10 Garland, 60.
11 Farnell, 294-295.
and that of the event that they had won. These were filled with olive oil.\footnote{12} While some believe this festival to have been based on the harvest, this is uncertain. Along with the recitations and musical events was probably instituted a sort of thanksgiving, as it fell at the end of the Attic year, after the crops had been collected.\footnote{13} The nature of the festival was malleable, and its ascension as the principal festival in Athens is due to the efforts of a sixth century tyrant names Peisistratos. He wanted the Panathenaia to rival such Pan-Hellenic celebrations as those at Olympus and Nemea. At one point, during the fifth century BC, a law required that every ally of Athens would have to supply to the festival a cow and a suit of armor. This acted as a method of “imperial propaganda.”\footnote{14}

The festivities themselves, however, were more mythic in origin than political. Among those activities said to have a history of that sort is the pyrrhic dance. Supposedly, Athena invented this style of frivolity. Erechthonios was said to have instituted the contest of the apobatae, or armed hoplites, who would jump from chariots. The lamphadoria was in celebration of Athena’s crafts making use of fire, and involved chains of runners racing in a form of relay, passing a torch between them.\footnote{15}

Of course, the Panathenaea was not the only large celebration to the goddess who reigned over one of the greatest cities of all time. One of the most important festivals incorporated into the cultic worship of Athena was the Plynteria- the cleansing of the Palladium. But, in order to understand the importance of this event, it is imperative to first comprehend the significance of the effigy itself. This wooden icon of the deity was incredibly sacred to the Athenians, and the festival was held annually to cleanse it of the miasma brought by human proximity. The Palladium itself is of mythic origin, having possibly been dropped from Olympus by Athena after her accidental murder of her friend, Pallas. Its tale, however, has little else to do with the river being. Whether it is in a story of its own creation or one of the heroes of the Trojan War, this statue plays an important role in both the spiritual and the mundane lives of those whose paths it crosses. The most popular legend of the Palladium ties into the story of Diomedes and Odysseus at Troy. The tale states that the statue was stolen from Troy and fought for between the two men. Upon their return from battle, the Argives land at Phalerum and rest the figure there, only to be attacked by the Athenians, who did not see the true identities of the men on their shore.

When the Athenians realized whom they had attacked in order to obtain Troy’s Palladium, a trial was held with a jury consisting of fifty men from each side (representative of the number of fighters involved).\footnote{16} The trial was held for two reasons; Demiphon, the leader of the attacking Athenians, was tried for both the deaths of the Argives and the accidental trampling of and Athenian by his horse. For this reason, the court established for trials of involuntary bloodshed was under the dominion of Athena. One of the more famous

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[12]{Garland, 60.}
\footnotetext[13]{Farnell, 294-295.}
\footnotetext[14]{Garland, 60.}
\footnotetext[15]{Farnell, 298.}
\footnotetext[16]{Deacy and Villing, 83.}
\end{footnotes}
examples of her influence on this court system can be seen in the Orestaia, when she opens the case on the matter of obligatory vengeance that is brought up by Orestes’ actions against his mother. From this comes the practice that, when the votes are cast evenly, the case is acquitted, giving the advantage to the defender.\(^{17}\) In this way, Athena is showing the influence of her mother, who was the oceanid associated with reason, wisdom and sense.

The Palladium itself serves as a protector of sorts. The complication for the Athenians because of this is that, when the figure is not in the temple, they are left without that line of defense. At a point in the fall, the procession of the statue down to Phalerum was a celebrated and simultaneously dreaded event. Once the old peplos was removed, the Palladium was brought to the shore for the ritualistic cleansing.\(^{18}\) This was necessary in order to purge the sacred wood of the miasma that homicide would coat it with. This could make the ceremony a form of fetish ritual. The potential fetish-object is cleansed and oiled, its clothing draped as though it were a living person, and so on. It would be almost certain to take on a moral significance, as Artemidorus said, all rites of this sort are essential because of the sin that humans cannot help but commit, polluting temples and icons.\(^{19}\) A festival combat was held, and when it was an anthippasia, it took place in the Hippodrome. The Palladium was most likely housed in the sanctuary dedicated to Athena Sciras until the time came for the second procession, which brought it back into the city.\(^{20}\) This second journey would be held by a group of armed youths, walking by torchlight, to commemorate the ill fate of the Argives.\(^{21}\) During its absence, however, the shrine at the gate of the city was considered to be exposed. So, between the months of Boedromion (September) and Maemacterion (November), when sacrifices made at Phalerum’s shrine to Sciras indicate that the Palladium was present,\(^{22}\) homicide cases were postponed, lest something go wrong in the proceedings.\(^{23}\) Legend states that when the Pelasgians assaulted the Athenian girls, the crime was committed during this period of vulnerability. In images depicting this scene, such as that on the frieze of the temple, there is a girl holding on to the vacant base upon which the Palladium would normally stand as a man reaches down to her kneeling form. In images of Ajax’s rape of Cassandra, however, the statue is there, implying that the goddess has seen the offense.\(^{24}\)

Those involved in the actual ritual of all of these ceremonies were considered highly important figures. The Parthenoi, a group of virgins dedicated to the sanctity of Athena, were key to the maintenance of her temple. The arrhêphoroi were a sub group of either two or four virgins of noble birth who lives on the Acropolis itself and wove the peplos for the olivewood statue on which the cult was centered. They tended the sacred olive tree and also were the bearers of unknown objects, held in baskets, to

\(^{17}\) Farnell 304.
\(^{18}\) Deacy and Villing, 48.
\(^{19}\) Farnell, 258-262.
\(^{20}\) Deacy and Villing, 48.
\(^{21}\) Farnell, 258.
\(^{22}\) Deacy and Villing, 50.
\(^{23}\) Ibid. 51.
\(^{24}\) Deacy and Villing, 49.
the shrine of Aphrodite. Two other noble girls were names the loutrides or plyntrides. They were responsible for the cleaning of the Palladium and its garments.

Not all of the activities of the priestesses were so benign, however. Until the middle of the fourth century, there was an annual custom for which a group of maidens was sent from Locris to the shore of Troy to participate in a set of rites. These girls wore no more than a simple garment, walking barefoot and with cut hair, to join the ranks of the priestesses of Athena. While this part is, in no way, gruesome, the first group among these girls was slain and their bones were ceremonially burnt. Their ashes were thrown into the sea from the mountainside. This custom may be related to the myth of Cecrops’ daughters. According to legend, when Hephaestus wished to rape her and Athena resisted him, his seed spilt on the ground and Erichthonius was born. Though not of her blood, Athena took care of him, unbeknownst to the other gods. She placed him in a chest and bestowed it on a mortal woman. When the sisters of the woman in who’s care she entrusted the care of this chest defied her will and opened the case, they saw a snake coiled around the infant. In some versions of this myth, Erichthonius was not merely within the coils of a serpent, but was half, or even wholly, one himself.

Artifacts are, of course, one of the main sources of information that we have with which to piece together these customs. In order to understand the worship of a goddess, it is important to look at the material culture that surrounded her followers. To do this, I went to southern Italy to study the findings of the archaeologists who have devoted their time to the study of Magna Graecia. Rebecca M. Ammerman’s work on a catalogue of terracotta fragments found in the Metaponto area was a fantastic opportunity to understand just how we know so much about the rich religious lives of the ancient Greeks. Instead of reading about how these objects are studied, I was given the opportunity to be a part of the process.

After an excavation, pieces are identified by class of object. Often, there are many duplicates, such as of votive offerings. These come in many forms, including but by no means limited to figurines and plaques. These are the two forms that we studied as we worked on Professor Ammerman’s study. The pieces that we catalogued were primarily plaques made from pressing the clay into a frontal mold and imbedding it into the cast with a finger or a few fingers. The incredible number of these votives implies that there was a significantly sized following of the deity to whom they were dedicated. For example, there was a substantial cult dedicated to the worship of Pan. The sheer number of plaques depicting a satyr and a young woman who, most likely, was a maenad implies that there was a

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25 Garland, 33.
27 Farnell. 258-262.
following. This, of course, makes sense in the countryside of the land, as Pan was a shepherd god, and the locals were very much part of a farming community.

These pieces, in their multitude, had to be systematically analyzed and categorized. Their dimensions, color and fabric (the composition and condition) of the clay from which they were made all have to be recorded, in order to see how they were made and, if possible, where. Experts examine these attributes of the pieces and work to see if they can draw any parallels between them. In working on this project, not only did I gain a greater appreciation for the work that archaeologists do, I learned how to systematically dissect, as it were, the outside of a terracotta figure in order to learn about a religion. Also, working with the pieces themselves allowed me to see how the matching of votives is done. For example, some depictions might show a special attribute of the god, while others do not. This sort of variation is what allows analysts to identify the terracottas that are lacking those images. Since they have a basic template, matching it up with others of its kind can identify even a fragment. The missing design can act as a dating method or a locator for the workshop in which it was produced. Every workshop would have its own trait, meaning that the differences would be telling of the maker.

While it may not seem all that important who made a piece, it really is. Knowing this means that trade can be analyzed. If there is a market for these goods, that means that worship in the area is more widespread, instead of being an isolated pocket. Also, it shows the economic side of religious practice. While votive offerings were not always made by artisans, the vast majority of what we are left with to study today are the longer lasting, workshop produced samples.

The material evidence that we are left from the cultic practices in honor of Athena on the Acropolis in Athens is primarily from plaques and plates. Plaques were far more plentiful than plates, but both forms are amply represented in findings are various sites of worship. The plaques found were flat and rectangular with the variation of rounded edges. These offerings had holes in them, which allowed for their suspension along the walls of the temples, as well as storage. These plaques are found only as religious items and in such locations as sanctuaries and graves. There is no other use indicated by their making. Plates, on the other hand, could be used for multiple purposes. Wooden plates would be used for everyday use, but white-ground plates were unglazed in certain areas, which implies that they were not intended for contact with food. The greater proportion of plates was actually used for funerary purposes and for export to other poleis.30

Plates in Athens were made on a potter’s wheel and were only decorated on one side, but in other locations, double-sided decoration suggests that these votives were meant to be seen from both sides. They have holes, just as plaques, for the purpose of suspension. These two observations combined suggest that it was intended that they be poised away from a wall. The size of the plates was usually related to the size of the vessels made in the workshop in which they were produced. For example, a workshop that produced such vessels as

30 Deacy and Villing. 95-96.
amphorae and hydriai would be more likely to produce larger plates than one devoted to cup production. So, it is not only the design of the plate but the size that helps it be traced to its origins, allowing researchers to find out which of the many leading artists had been a part of that work’s production. The artists would also, sometimes, dedicate an offering to the goddess for himself. On the Acropolis, two plates were found that suggest that they were dedicated in gratitude for her aid in their craft as potters; one was signed by a painter and potter named Epiktetos, and the other by the artist who has come to be known as the Berlin Painter. Both of these plates were decorated with the goddess’ image.

This shows that another key to understanding the votive offerings that were left for the goddess is to simply look at what is depicted on them. Since so many different shapes of pottery are found on the Acropolis, which is not really helpful as a distinguishing factor, but the iconography of the pieces most certainly is. A key problem here is the uncertainty as to whether the iconography is related to the item’s use as a dedication. It would make sense that it was connected, as so many plaques and plates depict Athena, but that is not sure proof. The most popular image of her on the Acropolis in Athens is of Athena Promachos, armed with a shield and spear, in the act of moving forward. This sort of posture is a common one to depict on vessels that are suited to having a central figure as the main part of the image (i.e. plaques, plates, the tondos of cups, etc.). It became a particularly dominant style in the middle and late sixth century, which is the time during which the Panathenaic amphorae were introduced. This particular type of vessel was established as the prize in the newly reorganized Panathenaea.32

Of course, other images are found on the artifacts from the Acropolis. Myths are prominent in the count, depicting Athena’s birth are one of the two most numerous. The most well known and widely accepted version of Athena’s birth is that, after Zeus swallowed Metis, he had either Hephaestus or Prometheus cleave his head open at the river Triton in order to release the mature and fully armored goddess.33 This version is accepted so thoroughly, in part, because of its prominence on the pottery found on the site. In fact, the oldest known depiction of her birth was found on a plaque from the Acropolis. The other scene found in the most abundance is that of the Gigantomachy, during which the Olympian gods faced the giants in a battle for supremacy. These are actually the only known images of Athena in battle that include her enemies.34

The presence of Athena’s image on these containers is not constant. She is a more dominant figure on plaques than on plates and, on the Acropolis, as the number of plates rose, that of plaques fell. Also, the later plaques had a greater diversity of subject matter. It is possible that this rise in plate production was an economic surge that had an impact on worship, instead of the other way around. The strange thing is that the two shapes

31 Deacy and Villing, 97.

32 Deacy and Villing, 99.


34 Deacy and Villing, 100.
are actually relatively rare in Attic pottery. Over half of the Attic plaques and around one third of the plates are from the sanctuary on the Acropolis, and date to sixth to the early fifth centuries BC.\textsuperscript{35} These artifacts were, of course, not simply sitting around on a hill, waiting to be found. They were found inside and among the remains of the great sanctuaries. On the Acropolis in Athens stood Athena’s most famous monument, the Parthenon, as well as to small temples in her honor. In the early fifth century, architects attempted to erect a temple to Athena on the southern side of the Acropolis. It was meant to compliment the northern temple, which was older. Unfortunately, the Persians invaded at all production had to stop. There is still evidence today of the foundations and areas of the superstructure.\textsuperscript{36}

The Hephaestion, built between 449 and 444 BC on the Kolonos Aoraios, a hill to the west of the Acropolis, was considered a part of the agora of Athens, though it wasn’t technically in it. It was a joint temple, dedicated to the two gods of craft, Athena and Hephaestus. Later, it’s name was changed, unofficially, to the “Thesion,” probably because of the images of the hero, Theseus, that decorate it’s sculpture.\textsuperscript{37} The construction of the temple to Athena Nike (Athena of Victory) was approved in 449 as well, giving the architect Kallitarates the ability to make his vision a reality. However, production was put on hold until the mid 420s. This latter date is assumed based on the dedication of the temple’s icon in either 425 or 424 BC.\textsuperscript{38} The temple to Athena Nike, with its frieze of Nike engaged in multiple activities related to sacrifice and other rituals, had Athena shown on three sides of the structure.\textsuperscript{39} Athena Hygieia, a goddess of health, had a temple near to the Parthenon, and had an active cult as early as the fifth and maybe even the sixth century.\textsuperscript{40}

So, there were multiple other temples to Athena, in her various roles, sprawling across Athens, but, of course, there was only one Parthenon. Near to its completion, according to records, the treasuries dedicated to Athena were very active. The temple of Hephaestus at Laurion, the Hellenotania, the treasuries of the Delian League and the same of surplus gold all combined to purchase ivory and stone. The stone was cut on Pentelikon, a local mountain, and brought to be carved for the temple. There are also records of payment for labor in woodworking, gold working and silver working. From these treasury records, we can glean the magnitude of the scale of production on a structure of this size.\textsuperscript{41}

The frieze of the Parthenon actually depicts the Panathenaic procession, which is intriguing, as most friezes would depict something from the lives of the gods themselves, as opposed to something so human-based. This is not to say that the gods are not present on the image. While the west end depicts un-mounted horsemen, the east shows the gods watching the rites. This

\textsuperscript{35} Deacy and Villing, 102-103.  
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. 68-69.  
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. 127-128.  
\textsuperscript{39} Wycherley, 150.  
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid. 132.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. 114.
leaves a mystery of its own, though. While the rites are presented to us, there are elements missing. The ship-cart that bore the peplos is noticeably missing. It cannot be that the artists ran out of space, as they carved more than two hundred human figures into the scene. There is a large image of the cavalry, the elite among Athenian male youths. There are chariot groups, musicians, men bearing offerings, marshals, priests holding what is most likely the old peplos, priestesses and victims waiting to be sacrificed, some of whom are calm, while others are agitated. 42

The center of the whole procession and festival was the cultic icon housed on the hill. Athena Parthenos, though taken to Constantinople and lost in late antiquity, is by no means unknown to us today. It is known from records that Pheidias was the artist who constructed this magnificent statue out of ivory and gold. The chryselephantine Athena was wooden in the center and plated in the splendors that Athens had commissioned. Around his workshop were found fragments of ivory, tools and clay molds that were used to create the texture of the gold. 43 We know what the statue looked like from Pausanias and its representation on coins. With a triple-crested helmet and a peplos, she is unmistakable on the currency. She also has her companion, the snake, coiled to her left, between her body and her shield, which she supports with her left hand. Also in her left hand, she holds a vertical spear. Her right hand is held flat horizontally, holding a smaller figure of a winged Nike.

The artistry on this work is detailed and sophisticated, having gone so far as to decorate both the outer and inner surfaces of the shield. In relief on the convex side is a representation of a battle between the Greeks and the Amazons, a rival race of warriors who were all women. The concave surface shows the gigantomachy. Based on Pausanias' descriptions, it has been deduced that this was most likely a painted image. Even the great statue's sandals are decorated with figures of Lapiths and centaurs, while the base of the icon was embellished with the story of Pandora's creation. 44

While this was a display of mastery and artistic talent, it was not necessarily the most admired statue of Athena on the Acropolis. The Lemian was a bronze work, and was said by Pausanias to have been the "most worth seeing of all the works of Pheidias." This simpler icon of the goddess was described by Lucian to have been beautiful. She was deemed to have a seductive beauty, one that captured the eyes and minds of those who saw her. Having two such different images of the goddess on one hill surely shows how the Athenians viewed her as a multifaceted and important deity. 45

Another sign of how important the Athenians found their patroness is that they had, not only multiple temples in her honor, but a prelude to the main temple. Before the Parthenon, the Propylaia looms over the worshipper. The Propylaia was designed by the architect Mnesikles as a structure to lead up to the larger temple. It was a Doric structure with aspects of Ionic style, in

42 Wycherley. 117-118.
43 Ibid. 123.
44 Wycherley. 124.
keeping with the Parthenon, itself. Built from 437 to 432, it was the first structure of its kind on the Acropolis. It was never completed according to its original design. The southwestern wing was shortened to make room for a small shrine to Athena Nike and the southeastern room had to be altered so that it didn’t jut into the sanctuary to Artemis Brauronia.46 However, even with the alterations, its purpose was served, and it introduces the Parthenon to those moving towards the larger structure.

Aside from these statues, smaller dedications were made in Athena’s honor. According to Plutarch, when the Propylaia was still under construction, a worker fell a great distance and lay dying. Perikles was said to have been visited by Athena Hygieia, who told him what to do to save the man. When the ruler awoke, the remedy was effective and a bronze statue was placed beside the alter with the inscription “The Athenians to Athena Hygieia, Pyrrhos of Athens made it.” This implies that the whole demos of Athens dedicated the icon, in gratitude to her work. If the legend is inaccurate, there is a possibility that the image was placed within the temple in thanks for the end of the plague from the beginning of the Peloponnesian War.47

In Metaponto, the evidence for Athena’s worship is nowhere near as plentiful. While there is an identified temple to Athena raised in honor of her work as the goddess of arts.48 The truth of the matter is that, until recently, there was very little known about her presence in Metaponto. Temple C, also known to archaeologists as Sacellum C, built, at earliest, in 600, has been debated for years. Some say that it was dedicated to Apollo,49 others, to Athena. The same is true of the “Temple of Ceres” in Paestum. The latter, however, has been more concretely deemed in honor of the goddess of wisdom, in recent years. “Ceres” is a structure of some great magnitude, unlike Temple C, which is smaller than many modern rooms. (see Figure-cluster B) Temple C is located in what became a Roman area in later years. It was built more than once, as evidenced by the multiple outer limits of the structure, as well as by the age of the alter. Surrounded by numerous other temples, Temple C is certainly the oldest in the urban sanctuary. Simple and built out of roughly hewn stones, it is a work of older style. Also, the famous terracotta frieze of two women in a chariot and a procession of younger girls is one of a motif that strongly suggests that this temple was, in fact, dedicated to Athena, as other structures with this sort of image were. Also, a significant selection of vessels depicting Athena or dedicated to her, including that of the marriage ceremony, were found in the area, which would be rather illogical if there were no local worship of the goddess.

In Paestum, the evidence is even greater, with images of the goddess from both Greek and Roman times in the area. Unmistakable icons of the goddess, with her helmet, shield, gorgon’s head and often spear fill cases of the museum in Paestum, displaying various styles and eras of her image. From the Roman era, a slab of stone with the name Minervae was found, showing that the Romans

46 Ibid. 127-128.
47 Wycherley. 132-133.
48 Farnell, 277.
found the temple to be suitable to use for their own “version” of Athena. (see Figure C) Athena’s worship was far-reaching and diverse. A goddess of war and healing, craft and destruction— with so many facets to her personality, it is no wonder that she holds our attention, even to this day. With careful analysis, it is possible to create a window into her history and that of her followers. With so many different epithets and roles, it would be hard not to find one to suit your needs. While her secrets may never be fully solved, dedicated work in the field and in the libraries of the world with, no doubt, reveal more to us that we ever knew was out there to begin with about this enthralling goddess’ impact on the lives of those who worshipped her, whether they were in Athens or in Magna Graecia, aristocrats or farmer.
Works Cited


Figure A

Figure-Cluster B
Figure C