

Personal Experience in Civic Festivals: The Arrhephoroi and Athena's Panathenaic Peplos

Ellie Mackin

We don't know a lot about the lives of very young girls in classical Athens – even the young elite girls who furnished the city's religious festivals with their service. This age – by which I mean prepubescent and pubescent, not very young children and not married – was *the time* for these girls to shine on the public stage, as they acted as conduits between the city and the gods, before retiring into the relative oblivion of being good citizen wives who, as Thucydides's Perikles tells us, are to strive to be the least-talked about woman among men. That will be, as he says, her 'greatest glory'.¹ But for the time being, it seems, the young girl is free to put herself into the middle of grand religious festivals as she likes – or actually as her father can persuade others to include her.

The 'big four' that the young girl could potentially play are those that the chorus of old women in Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* reminisce about,² these were the roles of an *arrhephoros*, which entailed year-long service to Athena for girls aged between seven and eleven; *aletris*, who grind sacred grains, these girls had to be virgins befitting the purity required to prepare food; next she would be an *arktos*, a 'Bear' at the Brauronia in honour of Artemis – though here we possibly play with the age banding slightly, given that girls could have been as young as five when they took on this role. And finally, reaching puberty, she would be a *kanephoros*, carrying a basket in a prominent position of a festival procession, allowing the citizenry to look upon her beauty. The old chorus women frame their reminiscing in an interesting way, too – *Athens*, the city, they say, raised them with all the luxury afforded to a girl of that station. Their lives as young girls described by and mediated through their official participation in civic festivals – festivals designed, in large part, to continually reassert the relationship between the *city* and the gods. This is high-level civic religion – and in larger or smaller part, main roles are being distributed to young girls. The question is... why?

Keep that question in your mind, because that is the crux of this. But first...

The Panathenaia is a festival that needs very little introduction – it was, in many senses, designed to be all about the extravagance of Athenian piety. It's about reaffirming the ongoing, reciprocal bond between all Athenian people and their poliadic deity. This was symbolised in the peplos woven and gifted to Athena each year. But the Panathenaia is so much more than just a religious festival, and this is also tied up in the Athenian's relationship with Athena – their strong, warrior goddess – because this festival is also a way to cement the bonds between the political and social institutions of the city and the religious aspect³ – it is the embodiment of embedded religion in the classical Greek world.

The Panathenaia was thought to stretch back to the founding of Athens itself, perhaps it was founded by the mythic king Erichthonios, when he invented the chariot and drove it at the first festival. After all, as Herodotos tells us, the Athenians we're Athenians, but Kekropidae, before Erichthonios.⁴ Or, perhaps that was the *Athenaia*, and Theseus invented the

¹ Thuc. 2.45.2.

² Aristoph. *Lys.* 636-644/5.

³ (Maurizio 1998, 297-98; Neils 1992, 27)

⁴ Hdt.

Panathenaia when he synoecised Athens, as Pausanias and Istros tell us.⁵ Obviously, the evidence for this is fanciful, or late, or both – but it tells us that the Athenians thought the festival was intricately tied up with the establishment of their city and their civic identity. Sometime in the 560s – the usually accepted date is 566 – Pisistratus instigated the Greater Panathenaia. This is the quadrennial festival that included athletic and music contests and was presumably modelled on the games at Delphi and Olympia.⁶ The Greater Panathenaia was no longer just an *Athenian* festival, it had been transformed into an international festival that celebrated Athens in a uniquely Athenian way, and in doing so ‘forcing’ outsiders to also celebrate Athens. Pindar, for instance, tells us of the ‘olive [oil]’ that came in ‘richly ornamented...jars’. And we have many beautiful examples of Panathenaic prize amphorae, including this one from around 530 BCE. And then, the construction of the Parthenon – which itself was a kind of re-glorification of the Panathenaic festival and, obviously, of Athens itself: using the finalisation of the Persian Threat to reassert Athenian dominance over the allies and show off a bit to the rest of the Greek world.

And now we really get to see how the Panathenaia embodies the intermeshing of civic priorities and religious expression. For example, the term of office for treasurers of Athena ran from Panathenaia to Panathenaia, and the reassessment of the allies’ tributes occurred in the years of the Greater Panathenaia – which was, incidentally when ambassadors from some of the allied states were supposed to come and renew their bond with Athens, bringing with them a ‘cow and a panoply’.

So we can see how the Panathenaia sits at the representational intersection of civic Athenian identity and religious Athenian identity – though this would have been experienced very differently depending on where your place in society at large was, and where your place in the festival happened to be. And this is why women’s roles in the Panathenaia are really interesting, but why *girls* are even more interesting. Their place in society at large is relatively low down, but their place in the festival is rather high up. Many of the first wave of processors were women and girls, both Athenians and metics. Most participation in major religious festivals happens, for women, when they are young girls – as we saw from the chorus of Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata*. And, I want to focus on the first role on that list: the *arrhephoroi*. Seven to eleven-year-old girls who live in service of Athena Polias for a year. Except most girls won’t do this, because only two, or maybe four, girls do this each year.

I have some interesting insight into being a little girl, mainly because I was one – but that, I think, is where we need to end the comparison between a seven-year-old classical Athenian girl and a seven-year-old girl today. It seems a superfluous thing to say, but the lives of children in the ancient world just aren’t the same as they are today. To start with, I say that the *arrhephoroi* were girls between the ages of seven and eleven, but that’s probably not quite true, because the ancient Greeks just didn’t care about keeping precise records of chronological age, so it was more about ‘peer-group context’ than about ‘have you reached the minimum threshold of 84 months of age’ (that’s seven years!).

In that sense, the young girls who are represented to serve as *arrhephoroi* represent all girls their age. It kind of makes sense that they are from the most elite families, because these are

⁵ Paus. 8.21.1, *Istros* FGrHist 344 F4; that Theseus synoecised Athens see Plut. *Thes.* 4.

⁶ (Jenkins 2014, 24) cf. (Parker 1996, 68).

perhaps the families who could afford for their daughters not to contribute to household work. The duties that girls undertook during these religious events relate more or less directly to the duties they'd learn in the household anyway.⁷ Formal education began around the same age as the youngest arrhephoroi, but again, the intensity of this – especially for girls – was directly dependant on the economic situation of the family. Can they afford the tuition? Can they afford for the child to not contribute to the household during the time they are in education?⁸ So girls whose families can afford to not have their daughter around for a year are prime candidates. And, modelled off a later arrhephoros whose name we do know, let's call our classical girl Panarista.

She's only recently been appointed to the role after a vote by the assembly, perhaps followed by selection from the archon basileus. She's from an exceptionally elite family, and we can easily imagine her father speaking up for her inclusion – a role that honours his daughter, and so his whole family, and demonstrates their devotion to the city's religion, and puts him in a good position to negotiate a wealthy elite husband for his daughter when the time comes. The Panathenaia is the first public-facing thing that Panarista will do in her tenure on the Acropolis. In a few months, she'll undertake probably her most important task in setting up the loom and warp at the Chalkeia, a festival dedicated to Athena Ergane and Hephaistos, and from there she'll start the process of weaving the peplos for Athena's gift. We don't really know how involved these young girls were – I'll talk more about this in a moment. I want to be clear, partly following Mansfield and Sourvinou-Inwood,⁹ that there is a new peplos woven every year, and this is not just something 'special' that occurs during the years of the Greater Panathenaia. Perhaps in these years there was a particularly ornate peplos or something of that nature, but there is no evidence at all to suggest this.

Panarista will be familiar with weaving, even if she had not personally done any. Weaving Athena's peplos – the main object of devotion that the Athenian people gave to their poliadic deity – will be her first big task. But, weaving on an upright warp-weighted loom is labour intensive. These two pictures give you an indication of what this kind of loom looks like, and you can see from the action-shot that the loom is very big – certainly the size of an adult woman, not a seven-year-old girl. And you can see here that the size isn't too far off the scale shown on this vase from around 550 BCE. Setting up the warp was even more labour intensive than weaving, and required a detailed knowledge of the mechanics of weaving. It's the physical intensity of the experience that leads me to think that no arrhephoros could have set up the warp, nor could they have achieved a level of technical weaving required to make the peplos, which features intricately woven scenes of the Gigantomachy. There are scenes – like this fourth century votive showing an arrhephoros at a loom that appears to be a more appropriate size for a young girl. The loom is still big, and would still require significant strength that an elite seven-year-old – that is, a girl who might have helped around the home but would have grown up with household slaves to do the heavy lifting, as it were.

The point is rather that the symbolic presence of these young girls is more important than their physical ability to complete any of the intricate weaving. I wouldn't have surprised me to find evidence saying that they passed the first and last woof and that was it.

⁷ (Beaumont 2012, 122)

⁸ (Beaumont 2012, 149)

⁹ (Mansfield 1985; Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 268)

The girls who did most of the weaving are more likely another group of elite girls, which I will come to in a moment. But first. Why? Why are kids so important in religious festivals? One answer that's been put forward is that they are other – close to birth, and untarnished from death, and therefore they were a special conduit between the rest of the mortal world and the gods. But they weren't usually given marginal tasks, and even though the *arrhephoroi* actually *were* given one of the most marginal tasks of children-divine-attendants at the *Arrhrephoroi*, it was the very last thing they did. Their first task as ritual actors would have been directly compromised by their otherness, their outsider-ness isn't conducive to the most important civic-religious offering that Athens gave Athena. Children were well integrated into both civic and family life, and they did have some purity but it wasn't directly related to their sexual immaturity, as is often suggested. But they also weren't morally pure, related to the fact that they couldn't be corrupted or lie or be swayed.¹⁰ Except, anyone who has spent any decent time with a small child knows they are completely corruptible by their parents, and that they are more than adept liars when it suits them. So: why were children such important parts of the religious civic life – well, that is also related to the girls who probably do the waving.

These are the *parthenoi* – in later sources, like Hesychius, these girls are called *ergastini*. And, the weaving party was overseen by the Priestess of Athena Polias. This means that *all* Athenian women and girls were ritually represented in the party that would weave the most important offering of the Athenians. It not only symbolised the greatest work that these women could undertake, but also was an opportunity for them to embody the most feminine aspects of the goddess herself.

Weaving was an immensely important skill for women to have, and an excellent weaver would be prized as a wife, so this would have been an amazing opportunity for the girls involved – both the *arrhephoroi* and the *parthenoi*, whose marriage contracts were probably being discussed around this time, at least one imagines that's what's crossing their father's mind when he's arguing for her inclusion in the party. And the real Panarista – who my imaginary *arrhephoros* is based on – does go back to join the weaving party some years later. Was this normal for past-*arrhephoroi*, or a double-coup for Panarista's marriage prospects?

I need to step back here, because otherwise I will get questions about the peplos scene of the Akropolis. That's where my research started. I've looked at this scene and thought about who these figures are – are they two *arrhephoroi*, the Priestess of Athena Polias. Is this the Priest of Zeus Polieus, or the Priest of Poseidon Erechtheus? But then, I started wondering how many people would have actually looked at the inside frieze in any great detail. After all, it's tucked up in an odd place for viewing – and even when you do view it, it's an incredibly sharp angle and you can never really get a sense of what's going on (which was, admittedly, very nicely explained by Robin Osborne¹¹). But, any argument based on the fact that the *arrhephoroi* might have been able to read the frieze, or seen themselves represented in it, assumed a knowledge of it I just don't think they would have had, especially after they'd only been living on the Akropolis for a month or so.

¹⁰ (Vuolanto 2010, 150)

¹¹ (Osborne 1987)

So, imagine the seven-year-old Panarista in front of the Parthenon in the middle of the Panathenaia. She's processed all the way from the Keramikos, up the Sacred Way, through the Propylaia, and joined the throng of activity on top of the Akropolis. She's tired. It's the start of summer, and it's hot. If our sources are anything close to accurate then it's cacophonous on top of the Akropolis at the moment. The air is filled with the thick, acrid smell of blood and roasting meat and the half-digested sludge being scooped out of the inside of slaughtered animals. The sounds of people. Of animals bellowing out their final breaths. The sun being obscured, and quickly unobscured, by adults surrounding her. Everyone – from Panarista to a seasoned magistrate – must have been affected by this sensory onslaught. It would have shaped the way they experienced the festival. These smells must have then been cognitively associated with religious ritual and, perhaps, specifically with this ritual for Athena. This might have changed the way that Panarista – the real one, or my fictitious one – approached her upcoming year on the Akropolis, and her budding relationship with Athena would be cemented forever. The next major thing Panarista will do is another sensuous thing – weaving is tactile. Even if all Panarista does is to help spin wool, a task which, though tiring is one a seven-year-old can comfortably do. Even wool that has been washed and carded leaves an oily residue on the hands. Even as the summer has cooled way to autumn, being covered in lanolin would make you sticky and sweaty. Research is starting to show – particularly the wonderful chapter by Candice Weedle in the edited collection being launched at this CA – that the smell of blood sacrifice doesn't wash away as easily as we might have originally thought. But for Panarista that smell has probably become an unconscious part of her life.

What I want to point out in this very small snapshot of ongoing research is that even at festivals that we talk about as, and assume are, the height of civic-religion there are personal experiences to be found. There is no way to tease personal and civic religion apart, just as there is no way to tease apart demonstrations of religious piety and political parading. And little Athenian girls are as much a part of that as their fathers.