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Aristophanes in a 'City of Images': Making Fun of Athena*

In order to be funny, a comic poet has to refer to well-known narratives, beliefs, and stereotypes; he has to build on what is normal. Aristophanes surprises his audience with unexpected combinations and inappropriate or absurd comparisons; he indulges in playing with words and in taking metaphors literally¹. As H.-J. Newiger argues, Aristophanes transforms metaphors into action².

When Aristophanes speaks about divinities, he makes his audience think of alive, acting figures. He rarely mentions images of gods³. However, his and his compatriots' imagination of the appearance of the gods is shaped by images. In this paper, I want to trace some of these visual inspirations.

1. *Athena in the guise of Phidias's statue in the Parthenon*

In his plays, Aristophanes presents Athena with thirty-two different epithets⁴. He uses traditional ones (e.g. Παλλάς, Πότνια, πολιοῦχος, μεδέουσα), invents some (e.g. Γοργολόφα, Φοβεσιστράτη) or gives established ones new meanings by con-

* I thank Farouk Grewing for his help with philological issues.

¹ On Old Comedy see: OLSON 2010, 35-69; HENDERSON 2022, 12-25. On Aristophanic humour: SWALLOW, HALL 2020. On metaphors and personifications: NEWIGER 1957; ZIMMERMANN 2024, 59-74. On obscene language: HENDERSON 1991 (my thanks to Ewen Bowie for this reference). – In this paper, plays by Aristophanes are cited without the poet's name. Unless indicated otherwise, the translations are mine; the edition is that by WILSON 2007.

² NEWIGER 1957, 20, 32-3, 46-9, 103, 122-33, 178; see KONSTANTAKOS 2024, 111-9 («enlivened metaphors and scenically materialised figures of speech», 119).

³ *Ach.* 547, 991-2; *Eq.* 31 (SOMMERSTEIN 1981, 146: close to Aesch. *Sept.* 95-6); *Nub.* 306, 1474; *Av.* 435-7; *Lys.* 262-3 (the holy *bretas* of Athena); *Th.* 489; *Ra.* 366; *Ecc.* 779-83.

⁴ ANDERSON 1995 (list at pp. 79-80).



Figure 1: Small-scale model of the statue of Athena Parthenos. Courtesy of ROM (Royal Ontario Museum), Toronto, Canada. ©ROM



Figure 2: Small-scale copy of the statue of Athena Parthenos. Athens, NAM 129. © Hans R. Goette

necting them with recent events (e.g. Πυλαίμαχος)⁵. The epithets refer to capacities and functions of the goddess; they do not point to specific images of Athena. Rather, the visitors in the theatre (just like the producers of images) would have their personal imagination of the goddess in mind. I argue, however, that in some passages Aristophanes intends for his audience to think of the colossal statue of Athena Parthenos, set up in the Parthenon in 438 BCE

⁵ NEWIGER 1957, 45. On μεδέουσα, see ANDERSON 1989, 10-6; ANDERSON 1995, 11-22; TORDOFF 2024, 60. On Γοργολόφα and Φοβεμιστράτη, see ANDERSON 1995, 26-7; on χρυσολόφα (*Lys.* 344: gold-crested) as a pun on χρυσελεφάντινος, see LAPATIN 2001, 64 n. 28; on Πυλαίμαχος, see below with n. 17.

(Figs. 1 and 2)⁶. Yet he never explicitly mentions this image, not even in his play *Peace*, performed in 421 BCE, in which he speaks of Phidias by name and insinuates that the sculptor's entanglement with Perikles actually caused the Peloponnesian War⁷.

In a passage of the *Knights* (performed in 424 BCE)⁸, Paphlagon and the Sausage-Seller compete for Demos's favor (*Eq.* 1166-76):

Πα.	ἰδοῦ, φέρω σοι τήνδε μαζίσκην ἐγὼ ἐκ τῶν ὁλῶν τῶν ἐκ Πύλου μεμαγμένην.
Αλ.	ἐγὼ δὲ μυστίλας μεμυστιλημένας ὑπὸ τῆς θεοῦ τῇ χειρὶ τήλεφαντίνη.
Δη.	ὥς μέγαν ἄρ' εἶχες, ὦ πότνια, τὸν δάκτυλον.
Πα.	ἐγὼ δ' ἔτνος γε πίσινον εὐχρῶν καὶ καλόν· ἐτόρυνε δ' αὐτὴ Παλλὰς ἡ Πυλαιμάχος.
Αλ.	ὦ Δῆμ', ἐναργῶς ἡ θεός σ' ἐπισκοπεῖ, καὶ νῦν ὑπερέχει σου χύτραν ζωμοῦ πλέαν.
Δη.	οἶει γὰρ οἰκεῖσθ' ἂν ἔτι τήνδε τὴν πόλιν, εἰ μὴ φανερώς ἡμῶν ὑπερεῖχε τὴν χύτραν;

PAPHLAGON	Look, I bring you this little barley-cake, kneaded from the grains taken at Pylos.
SAUSAGE-SELLER	And I bring you pieces of bread, scooped out by our Goddess with her ivory hand.
DEMOS	What a big finger you have, Mistress.
PAPHLAGON	I bring you pea soup, a lovely colour and a lovely taste; it was stirred by Pallas the Fighter at ... Pylos.

⁶ Paus. 1.24.5-7. On the statue: DNO II 889-933 no. 10; LEIPEN 1971; LAPATIN 2001, 63-79 figs. 149-72; MEYER 2017, 193-209 figs. 284-96. The denominations 'Parthenon' for the temple and 'Parthenos' for the statue are not attested until much later (by D. 22.13; 22.76; 24.184 and Paus. 5.11.10; 10.34.8, respectively: see MEYER 2017, 17-8, 99 nn. 46 and 724) – unless one takes *Av.* 667-70 (speaking of the nightingale Prokne, wearing a lot of gold, ὥσπερ παρθένος) as a reference to the statue, as LAPATIN 2001, 64 and PLATT 2011, 111 do (for an obscene pun on χρυσός, 'gold', see HENDERSON 1991, 131). For convenience I use the term 'Parthenos' for the statue throughout this paper.

⁷ *Pax* 605-18. On this issue, see MEYER forthcoming (a).

⁸ On the *Knights*: NEWIGER 1957, 11-49 (comic effects); REINDERS 2001, 123-6, 168-203 (on Demos). Most recently: HOLZBERG 2010, 61-75; OSBORNE 2020, 24-44 (he rejects a reading of the play with a focus on politics and stresses the poet's intention to make «different parts of the audience laugh for different reasons», 37); HALL 2024, 74-5; TORDOFF 2024; TSOUNPRA 2024, 107-26; BILES, OLSON 2025.

- SAUSAGE-SELLER Demos, it is manifest that our Goddess is watching over you. Even now she holds over your head ... a pot full of broth.
- DEMOS Of course! Do you think this city would still be inhabited if she didn't manifestly hold her ... pot over us?⁹

Paphlagon (a stand-in for Kleon)¹⁰, offers Demos a cake, kneaded ἐκ τῶν ὀλῶν τῶν ἐκ Πύλου (*Eq.* 1166-7). This is a double joke: When the comedy was performed in the spring of 424 BCE, just a few months after the spectacular Athenian victory at Pylos (in south-western Peloponnese)¹¹, the audience would not expect ὀλῶν (genitive of ὀλαί, 'barley')¹² in combination with Pylos, but ὀπλῶν (genitive of ὀπλα, 'weapons', 'shields'). The shields taken from the captive Spartans on the island of Sphakteria, off Pylos, were put on display in the Stoa Poikile on the Agora and, as has been persuasively suggested, also hung on the *pyrgos* of the Temple of Athena Nike¹³. And the Athenians who,

⁹ Text by BILES, OLSON 2025, 116; trans. A.H. SOMMERSTEIN, adapted. On the passage, see SILK 2000, 127-8, 297, 336; TORDOFF 2024, 103-7; BILES, OLSON 2025, 583-7.

¹⁰ On the identification of Paphlagon with Kleon: NEWIGER 1957, 17; SOMMERSTEIN 1981, 2-3, 144-6; REINDERS 2001, 178-89, 199-203; HOLZBERG 2010, 64; TORDOFF 2024, 7-28; TSOUNPRA 2024, 107-26; BILES, OLSON 2025, 1-35. The identity of the two slaves (with the strategoi Demosthenes and Nikias) is disputed: see TSOUNPRA 2024, 107 n. 1.

¹¹ Demosthenes, strategos-elect for 425/24 BCE, had insisted on fortifying Pylos when the Athenian fleet was on its way to Kerkyra (and Sicily) in 425 BCE. This provoked an attack by the Spartans. The Athenian fleet, called back by Demosthenes, achieved a victory over the Spartan fleet, and the Spartans who had been disembarked on the island of Sphakteria off Pylos got trapped (Thuc. 4.2-4; 4.8.3). After Kleon had accused the strategos Nikias of being too hesitant to conquer Sphakteria and the latter had given up his office, the Assembly appointed Kleon to lead the expedition against Sphakteria. The island was conquered; 292 hoplites (among them 120 Spartans) surrendered. Thuc. 4.2-5; 4.8-23; 4.26-40. KAGAN 1974, 218-51, 260; LAZENBY 2004, 67-79; REES 2016, 144-56 map 12.1-4; BILES, OLSON 2025, 16-26.

¹² On οὐλαί (grain sprinkled over the head of sacrificial animals) see ANDERSON 1995, 23-4 (because of the connection with sacrifices, he sees a reference to *Eq.* 54-7 and the insinuation of Paphlagon's stealing offerings); SILK 2000, 128 n. 64; BILES, OLSON 2025, 584. The variant οὐλαί exists only in Attic texts.

¹³ In the Stoa Poikile: PAUS. 1.15.4. One shield (with the inscription [...] ΕΚ ΠΥΛΟ) was found in the excavations: LIPPMAN, SCAHILL, SCHULTZ 2006, 552-4 figs. 2-3; CAMP 2010, 99-100, fig. 64. Suggested display below the Athena Nike temple: LIPPMAN, SCAHILL, SCHULTZ 2006, 551-63 figs. 4-6; SCHULTZ 2009, 130, 150-4; LEVENTI 2021, 83-4, fig. 2.

in the Assembly, had decided to send a relief force to Pylos knew well that the site had been short of grain (as Thucydides explicitly says) and had been in need of supplies¹⁴.

The victory at Pylos and the subsequent surrender of the Spartans on Sphakteria, the biggest Athenian success in the Archidamian War, were due to the leadership of Demosthenes and Kleon, but the latter (called a *δημαγωγός* by Thucydides)¹⁵ was credited with it and granted extraordinary honours¹⁶. When Paphlagon speaks of Athena as *Πυλαίμαχος* (*Eq.* 1172) the audience would have laughed about his (i.e. Kleon's) insistent bragging about this victory because *πυλαίμαχος* ('fighting at the gate')¹⁷ was an appropriate epitheton for the martial goddess (beyond any connection to Pylos)¹⁸.

Explicit mention of these shields (still with their armbands, *πόρπακες*, i.e., ready to use): *Eq.* 844-59. TORDOFF 2024, 79; BILES, OLSON 2025, 495. When the chorus in *Eq.* 581-94 (BILES, OLSON 2025, 392-5) asks *poliouchos Pallas* to bring Nike, «our *σύνεργος*» ('cooperator') in expeditions and battles (*Eq.* 587-9), who in the audience would not have thought of the demos's recent decision to dedicate two golden *Nikai* (*IG* I³ 468, 426/25 BCE) and a bronze one for the triumph on Sphakteria (Paus. 4.36.6)? TORDOFF 2024, 60 thinks of the Nike on the hand of the Parthenos.

¹⁴ Thuc. 4.8.8 (he uses the common word *σίτος*, not *ὄλαί*). Therefore, the sending of a relief force was essential for the besiegers, see KAGAN 1974, 238-41. The trapped Spartans, however, did not lack supplies: see Thuc. 4.39.2.

¹⁵ Thuc. 4.21.3.

¹⁶ See n. 11. Cf. *Eq.* 54-7: «DEMOSTHENES Yes, and the other day, when I'd kneaded a Laconian barley-cake at Pylos, he quite brazenly ran past me, snatched up the cake, and served it up himself – the one I had kneaded!» (trans. A.H. SOMMERSTEIN); *Eq.* 392 (about Paphlagon: «a man [...] reaping another's harvest»); *Eq.* 742-3: «PAPHLAGON What do I do? I slipped in before the general at Pylos by sailing there and bringing home the Laconians» (trans. A.H. SOMMERSTEIN); references to Pylos (and the privileges earned): *Eq.* 76, 280-1, 355, 702, 766, 1005, 1058-60, 1200-4; *Pax* 219. HOLZBERG 2010, 64; OSBORNE 2020, 38-9; TSOUNMPRA 2024, 110; BILES, OLSON 2025, 17-25, 163-4, 310-1, 450-2.

¹⁷ Cf. Stesich. F 242 (DAVIES 1991, 223); NEWIGER 1957, 45; SOMMERSTEIN 1981, 205; ANDERSON 1995, 22-6; TORDOFF 2024, 105-6; BILES, OLSON 2025, 586.

¹⁸ Another joke on Pylos in *Eq.* 1058-60: Paphlagon quotes an oracle that spoke of *πρὸ Πύλου Πύλον*, and explains: *ἔστι Πύλος πρὸ Πύλοιο*. Demos asks: «What does that mean, *πρὸ Πύλοιο*?», and the Sausage-Seller answers: «He says he will seize the tubs (*τὰς πυέλους*) in the bathhouse». SOMMERSTEIN 1981, 109, 201; OSBORNE 2020, 31-2 (for an allusion to Hom. *Il.* 5.397); TORDOFF 2024, 98-9; BILES, OLSON 2025, 555-6. Demos's lack of understanding of *πρὸ Πύλοιο* might be a slur directed at the Propylaia, built 437-1 BCE (cf. *Eq.* 1326; BILES, OLSON 2025, 641). This, the biggest and most prestigious entrance hall, might have inspired the comparison with a *βαλανεῖον* (bathhouse). In 2024, the remains of a big, almost rectangular bathhouse of the fifth century BCE were

The Sausage-Seller offers Demos pieces of bread, «scooped out»¹⁹ (μεμυστιλημένας) by the ivory hand of the goddess (*Eq.* 1168-9) – apparently to be used for the pea soup that Paphlagon subsequently provides (*Eq.* 1171). Female skin was supposed to be white. In Archaic Athenian vase-painting, the white faces, arms and feet of female figures, including Athena, contrast conspicuously with the dark bodies of male figures. The whiteness of female skin was praised by comparing it to ivory, e.g. in the *Odyssey*, when Athena made Penelope appear more beautiful, and «whiter than new-sawn ivory»²⁰. The audience, hearing about the ivory hand of the goddess, is led to think of a comparison: her hand's being like ivory. Demos, however, turns the audience's mind in a different direction: «What a big finger you have, Mistress!» (*Eq.* 1170). He is not impressed by the whiteness, but by the size of her hand²¹. And all Athenians knew an Athena with enormous ivory fingers – the statue of gold and ivory made by Phidias for the Parthenon and set up there in 438 BCE, almost twelve meters high (fig. 1)²². Aristophanes first insinuates a comparison and immediately tricks his audience: he is speaking of Athena with a hand not *like* ivory, but *of* ivory. The audience, having imagined the goddess meddling with bread, now thinks of the statue in the temple. Aristophanes continues to confuse his audience by speaking about Athena but implying the image in the Parthenon, and he ridicules the common practice of seeing

found near the Holy Gate in the Kerameikos (I thank J. Stroszeck for this information). On a circular βαλανεῖον (of the fifth century BCE) outside the Dipylon gate see LUCORE, TRÜMPER 2013, 281 cat. no. 11; STROSZECK 2023, 93-9, fig. 1 and 8. Cf. *Eq.* 1398-403: Paphlagon will do the Sausage-Seller's job ἐπὶ ταῖς πύλαις, drinking water from the βαλανεῖον. BILES, OLSON 2025, 665-6.

¹⁹ Cf. BILES, OLSON 2025, 584. SOMMERSTEIN 1981, 119 translates «fashioned». On μυστίλαι and a possible sexual connotation, see ANDERSON 1995, 27-9. Mind the phonetic similarity of μυστίλη / μυστιλῶμαι with μιστύλλω, used in Homer «to cut up» (meat). The poet might be alluding to the contrast between being fed meat or soup.

²⁰ Hom. *Od.* 18.195-6; cf. *Av.* 668. HENKE 2020, 294-6, 632.

²¹ On an obscene reading of δάκτυλος, see HENDERSON 1991, 114.

²² On the statue, see above n. 6. On the reference of *Eq.* 1169-70 to it, see LAPATIN 2001, 64; TORDOFF 2024, 105; BILES, OLSON 2025, 584-5.

the gods themselves in their statues²³ by claiming capacities ascribed to the acting goddess for the artifact as well.

The Sausage-Seller continues (*Eq.* 1173): ἐναργῶς ἡ θεός σ' ἐπισκοπεῖ («the goddess is watching over you ἐναργῶς»). The goddess is expected to care for her worshippers, and when she ἐναργῶς ... ἐπισκοπεῖ, she fulfills these expectations with her attention and presence. It was exactly the epiphanic presence of the divinities in their specific visual appearances that Phidias's statues were praised for (but the literary sources are late)²⁴. The Parthenos statue, of enormous height, with her weight distinctly shifted to her right side and the drapery of her golden peplos reacting to the *contrapposto* and underlining her mobility, and her flesh made of ivory (not: like ivory) embodied the goddess more convincingly than previous statues or contemporaneous artifacts made of metal, wood, or even marble would have been able to²⁵. Aristophanes implicitly testifies that the ἐνάργεια²⁶ of the Parthenos is appreciated as a specific quality of the statue from the time of its erection because he makes fun of it. He presents Athena

²³ PLATT 2011, 78-83, 87-9, 110-1; HÖLSCHER 2017, 21, 43-111.

²⁴ D. Chr. 12.25-6 (about Phidias's Zeus in Olympia: Phidias took his inspiration from Homer who represented Zeus ἐναργῶς); 12.44-5 (about an artist like Phidias as an «imitator of divine nature»: μιμητὴν ... τῆς δαίμονίας φύσεως); 12.49-55 (55: about the ὁμοίωσις, 'likeness', of the god); 12.70-1 (rendering of the φύσις and δύναμις of the god); cf. Anth. Plan. 81. Quint. *Inst.* 12.10.9 (about Phidias and his statues of the Parthenos and Zeus in Olympia: *cuius pulchritudo adiecisse aliquid etiam receptae religioni uidetur*); similarly Cic. *Or.* 2.8-9; Sen. *Controv.* 8.2 (Phidias «made» gods and conveyed their *maiestas*); cf. Paus. 5.11.9. See PLATT 2011, 80, 89; BILES, OLSON 2025, 586.

²⁵ See above with n. 20. See PLATT 2011, 77-123 («a mimetic likeness of divine form», 108), on the contrast to the wooden ἀρχαῖον ἄγαλμα; HÖLSCHER 2017, 499-506; HENKE 2020, 274-80, 547 (on Plat. *Hp. Ma.* 298e-290c and the ivory eye of the statue).

²⁶ There is a vivid (*sic!*) discussion on *enargeia*, see BIELFELDT 2014 (especially the contributions of R. Bielfeldt, T. and F. Hölscher, and N.J. Koch); GRETHLEIN, HUITINK 2017, 67-91 (who argue for a new, enactive interpretation: see next n.); HUITINK 2020, 188-209. For *enargeia* in historiography, see WALKER 1993, 353-77, esp. 357-8, 374-5 («realistic representation», 375) and FELDHERR 2021, 62-88 («a "reality effect"», 63), with Thuc. 7.70-1 as «the most famous example» (67). On Thuc. 7.71, see HUITINK 2020, 203-5. KIDD 2025, 73-106 argues that rhetorical *enargeia* meant 'vividness' only from the first century BC on (after it had become confused with the Aristotelian concept of *energeia*, 'activity'); in earlier sources it had meant 'clarity' / 'obviousness'. However, the passages in *Eq.* 1168-9, 1171-3 aim at exactly the persuasive representation of the vivid, active goddess (Kidd does not discuss Aristophanes).

engaged in very mundane activities: she has scooped some bread (*Eq.* 1168-9) and stirred some pea soup (*Eq.* 1171-2). The imagination that the enormous figure, armed to the teeth and holding Nike and her shield, would make hollows into pieces of bread with her ivory hand was, indeed, utterly funny²⁷.

And the Sausage-Seller continues to praise the goddess's ἐνάργεια (*Eq.* 1174: «Even now she holds over your head ... a pot [χύτρα] full of broth»), Demos responds: «Of course! Do you think this city would still be inhabited if she didn't manifestly hold her ... pot over us?» (*Eq.* 1175-6). This passage has been recognized as a parody of the beginning of a poem, ascribed to Solon, that celebrates Athena as the ἐπίσκοπος of Athens:

ἡμετέρη δὲ πόλις κατὰ μὲν Διὸς οὐποτ' ὀλεῖται
αἴσαν καὶ μακάρων θεῶν φρένας ἀθανάτων·
τοίη γὰρ μέγαθυμος ἐπίσκοπος ὀβριμοπάτρη
Παλλὰς Ἀθηναίη χεῖρας ὑπερθεῖν ἔχει.

Our state will never perish through the dispensation of Zeus
or the intentions of the blessed immortal gods;
for such a stout-hearted guardian, Pallas Athena,
born of a mighty father, holds her hands over it²⁸.

In Solon's poem, ἐπίσκοπος and «holding her hand over the polis» are metaphorical expressions of the goddess's function as guardian of the city. Aristophanes takes them literally. Athena as ἐπίσκοπος reminds him of the huge artifact: the Parthenos statue ἐπισκοπεῖ Demos because she is so tall that she looks *over*

²⁷ This evocation of the goddess's activity is a fine example of conveying *enargeia* as seen by GRETHLEIN, HUITINK 2017, 73: «A focus on bodily movements which describes objects only in so far as they pertain to the action engages the reader's imagination far more strongly than a minute description would do». See *ivi*, 73 n. 41 on listening (instead of reading). In this passage from *Knights* I do not see any connection to the wealth displayed by the Athena Parthenos or housed in Athena's treasury, as ANDERSON 1995, 28 suggests.

²⁸ D. 19.254-6 (ed. and trans. GERBER 1999, F 4). ANDERSON 1995, 29-30; TORDOFF 2024, 106-7 with n. 1; BILES, OLSON 2025, 586. On the unverifiable chronology and authenticity of the poems ascribed to Solon, see RÖNNBERG 2021, 40-8.

(ἐπι-) the head of mortals (see fig. 1)²⁹. A few lines later, the Sausage-Seller claims that the goddess ἐπισκοπεῖ γὰρ περιφανῶς τὸ ναυτικόν («she conspicuously looks over the fleet», *Eq.* 1186)³⁰. Again, ἐπισκοπεῖν is meant literally: the Acropolis was in fact a good vantage point to watch over the sea and the fleet.

The metaphor of holding one's hand over something or somebody is turned into the act of holding a pot over Demos. In Greek the joke works better because χεῖρας ('hands') and χύτραν ('pot') sound vaguely similar (would they maybe have been pronounced *chiras* and *chitran*?). In order to leave no doubt that this is a reference to Solon's poem Aristophanes links the pot with the continued existence of the *polis*, just as Solon links the goddess's care with it.

In the passages quoted so far, Aristophanes addresses his audience's visual and aural memory. Without mentioning the statue as such, the poet plays with the Athenians' familiarity with it, and he parodies a probably well-known poem.

Aristophanes's lines are the earliest evidence for the effect that Phidias's statue had on his fellow Athenians. Fourteen years after the Parthenos had been erected, the poet attests that Phidias's creation dominated the imagination of Athena's visual appearance – a phenomenon that can be observed from this time on, long before copies of the statue began to be made. The Parthenos served as a model for countless images of the goddess in various media³¹; its statue type was often chosen for scenes in which the goddess engages with mortals (fig. 3)³². An early

²⁹ See the reconstructions in Toronto (with two human figures: LEIPEN 1971, 58, fig. 60; MEYER 2017, 194, 197, 209, fig. 288) and in Nashville (with the artist: LAPATIN 2001, 66, fig. 154). See also LAPATIN 2001, 78 about the original statue: «she towered over the viewer». Cf. *Eq.* 75 (Demosthenes on Paphlagon): «That man watches over (ἐφορᾷ) everything. He stands with one leg in Pylos and the other in the Assembly». BILES, OLSON 2025, 174. Eup. fr. 316 K.-A. (from the *Golden Race*, dated before 422 BC): ὦ καλλίστη πόλι πασῶν ὅσας Κλέων ἐφορᾷ.

³⁰ Trans. SOMMERSTEIN 1981: «It is manifest how she watches over the fleet». Cf. *Eq.* 1063 for τὸ ναυτικόν. BILES, OLSON 2025, 589.

³¹ NICK 2002, 177-205; GAIFMAN 2006, 258-72 pl. 4.5; MEYER 2017, 196, fig. 297.

³² On votive and document reliefs see e.g. GAIFMAN 2006, 267-8 pl. 4.4; MEYER 2017, 196 figs. 298-9.



Figure 3: Votive relief for Athena (ca. 330 BCE).

Athens, Acropolis Museum 3007.

© Acropolis Museum Photo Archive (photo: Eirini Miari 2020)

example is an Athenian column-krater of ca. 430-20 BCE: The figure of Athena, obviously derived from the Parthenos, visualizes the victory of the figure to whom the small Nike on the goddess's hand turns (see fig. 5)³³.

2. *Athena's benefits*

I do not think that the quoted passages draw only on Phidias's statue and Solon's poem. There might have been, I suggest, additional inspirations, and these inspirations were visual ones. There is more behind the idea of a pot being held by Athena than the substitution of *χείρας* for *χύτραν*.

³³ Berlin V.I. 3199: *BAPD* 214735; GAIFMAN 2006, 258, 264-7 pl. 43; *CVA* Berlin 11, 2009, 24-5 pls. 16-8 (A. SCHÖNE-DENKINGER); KUNZE 2022, 76, 78, 81 pl. 37d; WILLIAMS 2022, 135-8, fig. 77; see below with n. 60.

A χύτρα³⁴ is a cooking pot. It is appropriate for soup but not for a vessel in the hand of Athena. This is funny as such. But there might be a twist to it: on the third day of the spring festival of the Anthesteria, the Chytrai were celebrated. The name refers to the pots with a mixture of boiled seeds prepared by every household and offered to Hermes Chthonios on behalf of the dead³⁵. Aristophanes might be taking the ritual of the Chytrai, substituting the contents of the pot, the agent, the recipient, and the purpose, and ending up with a χύτρα with soup held by Athena for the protection of the *polis*.

The lines that present Athena with a χύτρα follow the lines that provide the Demos with a cake, some bread and pea soup – and thus insinuate that the broth, as another goody for the Demos, is intended to be poured on him³⁶. This insinuation is supported by a passage, preceding this one by less than a hundred lines, that speaks of goodies being actually spilled on Demos. In *Eq.* 1090-5, Paphlagon and the Sausage-Seller talk about their dreams. Paphlagon claims to have seen Athena pouring (the verb is καταχεῖν) πλουθυγία ('wealth-and-health')³⁷ over Demos, with a ladle³⁸. The Sausage-Seller saw Athena bestowing ambrosia «down upon the head» of Demos, using an aryballos (κατασπένδειν κατὰ τῆς κεφαλῆς ἀρυβάλλω / ἀμβροσίαν κατὰ

³⁴ *LSJ s.v.* χύτρα: «earthen pot», e.g. *Ach.* 284, *Av.* 43; cf. *Eq.* 89. ROTROFF 2015, 181-5 figs. 16.1, 3, 5; BILES, OLSON 2025, 452.

³⁵ PARKER 2005, 290-7, 301-2.

³⁶ PARKER 2005, 295 n. 28 points out that by etymology a χύτρα suggests a vessel for pouring liquids (cf. χέω). ANDERSON 1995, 28-31 remarks that ζωμός (a meat-based broth; *Pax* 716; BILES, OLSON 2025, 298-9) is also used metaphorically for the tribute paid by the allies (*Nub.* 386, 389). The word can also refer to vaginal secretion (*Pax* 885); HENDERSON 1991, 145; HOLZBERG 2010, 99 (cf. *Eq.* 357, 360, 1285; SOMMERSTEIN 1981, 211; TORDOFF 2024, 117).

³⁷ On *ploutos* and *hygieia* as the epitome of happiness, cf. *Vesp.* 677; *Av.* 731. ANDERSON 1991, 151; BILES, OLSON 2025, 564.

³⁸ On ἀρύτανα, an instrument for various liquids, see: Sch. *Eq.* 1091a (ed. Koster): a bronze instrument to pour oil into lamps. ANDERSON 1991, 150-1: «a bathman's ladle», with references, e.g. *Thphr. Char.* 9.8; ANDERSON 1995, 36-7 and BILES, OLSON 2025, 564 think that *Eq.* 1090-5 present Athena as a bath-attendant, but κατασπένδειν suggests a context with libations.

σοῦ), and garlic sauce on Paphlagon³⁹. The verb κατασπένδειν evokes σπονδαί («libations»)⁴⁰.

The passage has persuasively been interpreted as a parody of the lines in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter that describe the goddess anointing Demophon with ambrosia⁴¹. Ambrosia is known as the food of the gods, but in the hymn the anointing with ambrosia is one of Demeter's strategies of making Demophon immortal. Aristophanes apparently cannot resist putting Demos in the role of Demophon (mind his name!), and he stresses the anointing by indicating the vessel. The mention of an *aryballos* is curious⁴². ἀρύβαλλος was a Dorian word; the Athenians would have called the vessel a λήκυθος⁴³. This was a common designation for various containers of oil for ritual purposes, and it would go well with σπένδειν. Maybe the unexpected combination of ἀρύβαλλος with κατασπένδειν is another comic effect.

Aristophanes plays with words (χύτρα instead of χεῖρ, Demos instead of Demophon). His parodies, however, evoke images in the audience's mind, and they work because these images were absurd (Athena holding a pot of broth) or funny (ambrosia and garlic sauce poured over Demos and Paphlagon). I suggest that Aristophanes' invention of these strong images that the audience were to imagine was inspired by existing tangible images.

We have a recurrent scheme here, a combination of three components: a (divine) agent (Athena) – holding a χύτρα with soup / pouring πλουθυγία with a ladle / κατασπένδειν ambrosia –

³⁹ Cf. *Eq.* 199; BILES, OLSON 2025, 226. On *Eq.* 1090-5, see ANDERSON 1991, 149-55; ANDERSON 1995, 36-8; BILES, OLSON 2025, 564-6.

⁴⁰ GAIFMAN 2018, 1-3. See the end of the play, *Eq.* 1332 (the Sausage-Seller about Demos): «smelling of *spondai*, anointed with myrrh». BILES, OLSON 2025, 644.

⁴¹ *H. Hom.* 2.236-7. HOMMEL 1978, 18 n. 45; ANDERSON 1991, 152-3.

⁴² BILES, OLSON 2025, 566. Archaeologists use *aryballos* as a conventional term for a container of perfumed oil for men. RICHTER, MILNE 1935, 16 figs. 103-6; SCHEIBLER 1995, 22-4 figs. 16-7.

⁴³ SCHEIBLER 1995, 22. The word *aryballos* derives from βαλλάντιον, a bag made of leather. BEAZLEY 1927-8, 187-8; RICHTER, MILNE 1935, 14-6; HOMMEL 1978, 18-23.

over the head of a (mortal) recipient (Demos). And the action is always thought to be a gift, beneficial for the recipient⁴⁴.

The Athenians would have been familiar with images of Athena pouring something, because scenes of libations made by Olympian gods were a popular subject from around 500 BCE onward⁴⁵. Most of these images do not show the act of pouring the liquid but the preparation for the sacrifice, the filling of the *phiale* by an assisting figure⁴⁶. This task can be performed by another god, e.g. by Athena serving Zeus⁴⁷. She even fills the *phiale* for Herakles on the cup in Munich⁴⁸. The hero had been elevated to the gods after his death and enjoyed divine company. The gods might pour libations or assist their peers in the preparation, but they would not fill a *phiale* in a mortal man's hand nor would they use their jug to pour something onto a mortal. Therefore, images of Athena with a jug in her hand do not work as a model or a reference for the scenes that Aristophanes makes his audience imagine – Athena's holding or pouring something over the head of Demos.

The most likely objects one would see on or above the head of a mortal person were either a hat or cap or a wreath. The participants of festivals or *symposia* adorned themselves with wreaths⁴⁹, and wreaths of specific plants were the prizes for the winners

⁴⁴ Something beneficial being poured on a mortal might recall the *καταχύσματα*, the ritual pouring of dates, nuts, dried fruit, and figs over a newlywed couple, see OAKLEY, SINOS 1993, 26, 34-5, fig. 60.

⁴⁵ The meaning of sacrifices performed by the gods themselves is a disputed issue among archaeologists (see MEYER 2020, 91 n. 71 for references). The gods are shown by themselves, in their own sphere, as a demonstration of the divine nature of the divinities. PATTON 2009; GAIFMAN 2018, 117-49; MEYER 2020, 88-92.

⁴⁶ Often by Hebe, Iris (?), or Nike: SIMON 2004, 250 nos. 26a, c with figs.; PATTON 2009, figs. 2, 30-1, 33, 43-4; THOMSEN 2011, 168-80 figs. 69, 71 (Iris not attested); BAPD 205571. The assistant usually fills the *phiale* held by the main figure but might fill it herself and then hand it over, see SHAPIRO 2021, figs. 3, 5, 6.

⁴⁷ New York, MMA 1988.40 (ca. 490 BCE): BAPD 201960; GAIFMAN 2018, 128-9, fig. 4.5. BAPD 202470; BAPD 213235.

⁴⁸ Munich 2648 (ca. 470 BCE): BAPD 205230.

⁴⁹ SCAFURO 2009, 61. Cf. *Eq.* 221 (crowning before making a sacrifice); *Vesp.* 710 (crowned for feasting). TORDOFF 2024, 68; BILES, OLSON 2025, 232-3.



Figure 4: Athena offers Kadmos a crown.
Hydria Berlin F 2634 (ca. 410 BCE).

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of the Panhellenic games⁵⁰. These wreaths had their place and function in real life.

Therefore, the scene on a late Archaic hydria, with Athena holding a wreath for reclining Herakles, refers to an actual practice, symposiasts wearing wreaths or ribbons⁵¹. When, however,

⁵⁰ On wreaths (and/or ribbons) as prizes for victory in various *agones*: BLECH 1982, 109-53, 162-81, 427-9 no. 5. *Stephanosis* as a visualization of honouring (and images of the scene): BLECH 1982, 153-81, 435-7 no. 20; KEPHALIDOU 1996, 62-6, 248-9 with figs.; OAKLEY 2007, 81-3 figs. 1-4 pl. 9 (Montreal 1944.Cb.2, early fourth century BCE: Nike adorning a Panathenaic victor with a ribbon); KALTSAS 2008, 78-86 (E. KEPHALIDOU), 225, 247, 251 nos. 121, 142, 146. Scenes of victors crowning themselves are attested since Early Classical times: BLECH 1982, 117-21. Votive relief Athens NM 3344 (ca. 460 BCE): KALTSAS 2002, 88-9 no. 152.

⁵¹ London BM B 301 (ca. 520-10 BCE): BAPD 320244; RÜTH 2021, 49-50, fig. 6. Cf. BAPD 305509 (ca. 500-490 BCE; reclining Herakles being crowned); FILSER 2017, 218-9, fig. 85. WOLF 1993, 73-7, 197, sf. 6, sf. 47 figs. 21 and 33 points out that the act of crowning symposiasts is rarely represented (see BLECH 1982, 456 no. 64) and scenes of reclining Herakles being crowned are therefore meant to show him honoured. However, a reference to actual practice cannot be denied. On wreaths for symposiasts: Xenophanes, cited by Ath. 11.462c (πλεκτοὶ στέφανοι – «plaited wreaths» – as part of the prepara-

on vases of the late fifth century BCE Athena holds a wreath for Kadmos who is fighting the dragon in Thebes (fig. 4)⁵², or puts a wreath on Theseus's head when the hero has ceded Ariadne to Dionysos⁵³ or crowns Herakles in a scene without any mythical context⁵⁴, the images do not show an actual act of giving a wreath but mark the heroes as being appreciated and praised by the goddess.

From the early fifth century BCE on, the bestowing of a wreath became the very visualization of honouring, be it in an athletic, military, or civic context⁵⁵. Such an act is called 'crowning' in English. The Greek term is *stephanosis*, *stephanos* meaning 'crown' or 'wreath'. When the *stephanosis* is performed by a divinity or a personification, crowning is a metaphor for conveying appreciation. The metaphorical use of the word *stephanos* is attested by Pindar⁵⁶.

An early example of metaphorical crowning is provided by a hydria of ca. 470-60 BCE⁵⁷. Athena and two assisting Nikai are shown rushing into a potter's workshop and crowning three workmen (their female colleague at the far-right side, however, misses out). Tellingly, the master and the craftsman in front of him do not take any notice of their divine guests. The image celebrates them as being honoured but not actually adorned with wreaths, which would be out of place in this setting.

The heyday of images of honorary *stephanoseis* began at the time when the Parthenos was introduced (in 438 BCE), and the

tion for a symposion); BLECH 1982, 63-74, 115; FILSER 2017, 131, 147, 198, 223-4 pls. IVa and numerous figures on pp. 151-275 (fig. 90: *stephanosis*).

⁵² Berlin F 2634: BAPD 215723; THOMSEN 2011, 206-9, 414 figs. 88-9 A 58.

⁵³ Syracuse 17427: BAPD 215692.

⁵⁴ Palermo 2162: BAPD 215178; WILLIAMS 2022, 146.

⁵⁵ Images of Nike, personified victory, bringing a wreath or a ribbon: THÖNE 1999, 94-6, 148-9 pls. 8.2, 10.1, 3; THOMSEN 2011, 165-84, 193, 199-200, 214-6, 220 figs. 70, 73, 75a-b, 76, 94.

⁵⁶ Pind. O. 1.100-1; O. 13.29-30; P. 8.56-7. BLECH 1982, 152 (who also refers to Sappho and Simonides).

⁵⁷ Vicenza, Banca Intesa Sanpaolo 2: BAPD 206564. SENA CHIESA, SLAVAZZI 2006, 19, fig. 5; 47-51, 62-9 no. 6 with figs. and solid arguments against an interpretation as a metalworker's workshop (C. LAMBRUGO).



Figure 5: Athena's Nike crowns a game player.
Column krater Berlin V.I. 3199 (ca. 430/20 BCE).

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wreaths or ribbons might be given by a small Nike, standing on Athena's hand or flying in the air⁵⁸. Being crowned by Nike might signify a victory, as on a column-krater in Berlin (fig. 5) that revives a composition invented ca. 540-30 BCE: Achilles and Ajax playing a board game. On some of the earlier examples of this frequently depicted scene Athena, standing in the background between the warriors, looks or points to one of them, indicating the winner⁵⁹. On the Berlin krater, produced ca. 430-20 BCE, her decision is expressed by the small Nike on her right hand who brings a ribbon to the left player⁶⁰. The figure of Athena is modelled after the statue in the Parthenon.

⁵⁸ Cf. the small flying Nike (without Athena) crowning a tropaion with a wreath, on a pelike of the late fifth century BCE (Athens, NM 1683; *BAPD* 30667) with the tall standing Nike erecting a tropaion on the pelike of ca. 450-40 BCE (Boston, MFA 20.187; *BAPD* 212473).

⁵⁹ On the composition, most recently: KUNZE 2022, 71-94 pls. 34-8; see also DASEN 2022, 95-101 pls. 39-44. With Athena (since ca. 520 BCE): RÜTH 2021, 46-8 figs. 4-5; DASEN 2022, 95-9 pl. 41a; KUNZE 2022, 75-81 with n. 34 pl. 37.

⁶⁰ Berlin V.I. 3199: s. above n. 33.

This vase is one of the first pieces of visual evidence for the impact of the Parthenos. Interestingly, on vases of the last third of the fifth century BCE, a small flying Nike crowning somebody might also appear in scenes without any connection to victory, e.g. in images of the birth of Erichthonios, honouring the newborn (and, implicitly, the Athenians because Erichthonios was the proto-Athenian), or in assemblies of heroes⁶¹.

The composition of the goddess herself crowning someone was adopted for a new context in the 420s BCE. At that time, an entirely new genre of monuments was introduced, the so-called document reliefs: reliefs carved into stelai with inscriptions that published decrees or accounts of the demos, of its sub-groups (phylai or demes) or of certain institutions (e.g. the treasurers) or associations⁶². In the images, divinities or personifications stand in for the mortal agents when relations between poleis are concerned, often joined in *dexiosis* in order to visualize an agreement⁶³, or they represent the authorities whose affairs are concerned (as on reliefs that top the accounts of treasurers)⁶⁴. Reliefs above honorary decrees, however, show figures of mortals, the honoured person or persons (whose names are recorded in the inscription) being crowned by Athena (fig. 6)⁶⁵.

⁶¹ Palermo 2365: *BAPD* 217525; Adolphseck 77: *BAPD* 217589. On Erichthonios as the proto-Athenian, see MEYER 2017, 362-77. Adolphseck 78: *BAPD* 217590 (Nikai crowning Aigeus and Peirithoos). On Nike in such scenes see MEYER forthcoming (b).

⁶² MEYER 1989; LAWTON 1995; DEENE 2016, 75-87; MACK 2018, 365-98.

⁶³ MEYER 1989, 140-5 pls. 3, 4.1, 5.2, 10.1, 11.2; LAWTON 1995, 8-9, 36-7 pls. 1.2, 3.5, 4.7, 5.9, 7.12; SMITH 2011, 103-4, 107; MACK 2018, 368 («gods as active agents»). On the *dexiosis* motif on document reliefs, see also BLANSHARD 2007, 19-37.

⁶⁴ MEYER 1989, 109-14 pl. 10.2, 11.1; LAWTON 1995, 9-10, 37-8 pls. 5.8, 7.13.

⁶⁵ The goddess might be accompanied or substituted by Demos (and Boulé). On representations of Demos on document reliefs (from the late fifth century BCE on): MEYER 1989, 110, 139-40, 177-87 pls. 28.2, 30.1-2, 34.1, 35.1-2, 39.1, 40.2; LAWTON 1995, 31, 55-8 pls. 20.38, 26.49, 28.54, 61.117, 67.126; 71.133, 78.147, 79.149, 89.172; GLOWACKI 2003, 447-66 figs. 1-11, 13; SMITH 2011, 91-2, 95-102, 105, 107, 127-41 figs. 9.6; 9.9-9.11; – of Boulé (fourth century BCE): MEYER 1989, 139-40, 148, 193-4, 202 pls. 35.2, 39.2, 41.1; LAWTON 1995, 31, 56, 58 pls. 26.49, 75.142; SMITH 2011, 99-106, fig. 9.8; 9.12; 9.13. Earliest attested depiction of Demos: monumental painting by Parrhasios (ca. 425-400 BCE): Plin. *NH* 35.69; GLOWACKI 2003, 450 n. 10; SMITH 2011, 98, 141 MP 2.



Figure 6: Fragment of a document relief.
Three men are being honored (crowned) by Athena (340/39 BCE).
Avignon, Musée Calvet E28. Acquisition Institut Calvet,
from Athens in 1841. © Property of the Institut Calvet.

The bulk of the honorary decrees with reliefs date to the fourth century BCE but there are examples among the first document reliefs. The earliest preserved one features a man of Kolophon in Asia Minor who served the interests of the Athenians after they had intervened in an inter-Kolophonian conflict in 427 BCE (fig. 7)⁶⁶.

Athena, depicted in almost frontal view in a figure type derived from the Parthenos (belted peplos, free left leg, the shield at her left side, the snake at her right) is crowning a man who

⁶⁶ Athens, EM 6615: IG I³ 65; MEYER 1989, 132-4, 265 A 2 pl. 1.2; LAWTON 1995, 31-2, 113-4 no. 65 pl. 34.65; GAIFMAN 2006, 267; DEENE 2016, 80 no. 2. Only fragments of the inscription are preserved; the decision about the *stephanosis* is not. Apollonophanes was responsible for guarding the harbour of Notion (ll. 9-14) where the pro-Athenian Kolophonians had been exiled since 430 BCE; when there was a stasis in Notion, too, the Athenians intervened and established a colony: cf. Thuc. 3.34; KAGAN 1974, 151; GEROLYMATOS 2020, 43-5. On proxeny decrees: MEYER 2013, 467-8.



Figure 7: Fragment of a document relief. Apollonophanes is crowned by Athena (427/26 BCE). Athens, Epigraphic Museum 6615
© Hellenic Ministry of Culture/ Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (H.O.C.RE.D).

is smaller than the goddess and who has turned to her with his right hand raised in a gesture of reverence. The image shows Athena holding an object over the head of a mortal man depicted in smaller size. This is exactly the composition that Aristophanes suggests for the three scenes of *Eq.* 1090-1, 1094-5, and 1174. I think that his repeated scenario of Athena's bestowing the Demos with *πλουθυγία*, ambrosia, or a pot of broth was inspired by the introduction of document reliefs with Athena crowning a mortal figure of minor size⁶⁷.

The joint representation of a historical person with a divinity sets the reliefs for honorary decrees apart from document reliefs for other issues, and the physical contact of mortal and divine

⁶⁷ On Athens, Acr. 2996+ (*IG* I³ 91 add.; 422/21 BCE), Athena holds the crown in her lowered hand. MEYER 1989, 134-5, 266 A 6 pl. 2; LAWTON 1995, 31-2, 115-6 no. 68 pl. 36.68.

figure sets them apart from votive reliefs that also show divine and mortal figures, differentiated by size (see fig. 3)⁶⁸.

In the honorary decrees the merit of the respective person, Athenian or foreigner, was not always specified. The demos's recognition, however, was recorded, and awarding a *stephanos* was part of the honours granted⁶⁹. The honoured person actually received a *stephanos*⁷⁰. The images thus referred to real practice (a *stephanos* being awarded to a historical person named in the inscription and depicted in the relief) but, in the image, the official who would execute the demos's decision was substituted with the goddess herself, thus elevating a ritual of civic life to a benefit granted by Athena herself. This combination of actual and metaphorical crowning sets these honorary reliefs apart from all the images of *stephanosis* mentioned above – that either show scenes of real life (symposiasts or athletes being given wreaths or crowning themselves) or scenes of purely metaphorical crowning (Athena's or Nike's crowning of a mortal, whether a figure of myth or an anonymous person). However, in the document reliefs the honour is bestowed not by an authority of real life but by the goddess.

I think it was exactly this pretentious mismatch of realistic and fictitious elements that instigated the poet's mockery. Aristophanes ridicules the metaphor – Athena's granting of a *stephanos*

⁶⁸ On the experimental stage of Athenian votive reliefs in the earlier fifth century BCE, see MEYER 2017, 174–81 figs. 261–4. After ca. 430 BCE, they were produced in great quantities. COMELLA 2002; VIKELA 2005, 100–41 pls. 15–26.

⁶⁹ Before the 340s BCE, *stephanoi* were granted almost exclusively to foreigners. BURNETT, EDMONDSON 1961, 87–8 n. 40; LAMBERT 2004, 86–8; SCAFURO 2009, 59–86; PILZ 2018, 158–66. Earliest preserved inscription with such a decision: IG I³ 102 (410/9 BCE): MEIGGS, LEWIS 1988, 260–3 no. 85; SCAFURO 2009, 67–8; SHEAR 2011, 141–6. Earliest attested crowning of an Athenian: Chabrias monument (376/75 BCE): BURNETT, EDMONDSON 1961, 74–91 figs. 1–3 pls. 11–2; PILZ 2018, 158–60, fig. 5. Cf. the *stephanoi* for Alcibiades (408 BCE; Plut. *Alc.* 33.2) and those who defeated the Thirty Tyrants in 403/2 BCE (SEG 28:45.73; Aeschin. 3.187, 190). BLECH 1982, 155–8. Because gold crowns were dedicated at least from 434/33 BCE on, SCAFURO 2009, 67 assumes that they were awarded before there is epigraphical evidence for this practice. DEENE 2016, 75–87 argues that reliefs were added exclusively to honorary decrees for non-citizens, with only two exceptions.

⁷⁰ On cases in which the crowning might have been symbolic, see SCAFURO 2009, 66–77.

that was factually granted by the Athenian citizens⁷¹ – by taking the idea of Athena's putting something on a mortal man's head literally, thus making fun of the pretension expressed by the image of Athena herself putting a wreath on a man's head. If she held a wreath over a man's head, why would she not hold a *chytra*? Why would she not pour *πλουθυγία* or ambrosia on a man?

The new iconography of the recently introduced document reliefs with its curious mixture of realistic and metaphorical elements lent itself to be mocked by variations of the suggested benefit granted by the goddess. Aristophanes's jokes unmask the inherent incredibility of the composition. Athena did not show up on the Pnyx in order to crown the city's benefactors. Whether Aristophanes intends to criticize the choice for visualizing state honours or whether he just does not want to miss an opportunity to ridicule a pretentious iconography has to be left open.

It would not be the only case of the poet's dismissive attitude towards a recent innovation in visual representation. In a slightly earlier passage, the protagonists share the dreams in which they saw the goddess (*Eq.* 1092-3). The Sausage-Seller says he saw Athena coming from the Acropolis, and «an owl sat on her» (αὐτῇ ἑπικαθίσθαι). The owl is Athena's frequent companion, and images of Athena with an owl next to her or on her hand abound in the fifth century BCE⁷². However, the owl does not

⁷¹ Aristophanes explicitly refers to crowning as a demonstration of honour and appreciation. In *Eq.* 533-4, he makes fun of his rival Kratinos who, in his old age (always looking for a drink and with his glory long gone), «wanders about [...] wearing a *stephanos* old and sere, and all but dead with thirst» (trans. Sommerstein). TORDOFF 2024, 56-8; BILES, OLSON 2025, 367-9. In *Eq.* 1225-8, Demos claims to have crowned and gifted Paphlagon but now wants to give the *stephanos* to the Sausage-Seller (who ultimately calls it a *niketerion* of Zeus Hellanios, *Eq.* 1253). SOMMERSTEIN 1981, 207-8; TORDOFF 2024, 68, 112; BILES, OLSON 2025, 38-9, 598-9. It apparently marks the victory in the contest of Paphlagon and the Sausage-Seller (HOLZBERG 2010, 70 thinks of the wreaths worn by speakers in the assembly; see NEWIGER 1957, 16 for a reference on speakers in *Eq.* 59-60). Cf. *Eq.* 647 (reward for a message; TORDOFF 2024, 68; BILES, OLSON 2025, 417); *Ach.* 1145 (Dikaiopolis as symposiast with a wreath); *Av.* 1274-8 (a golden crown for wisdom, as a τιμή, 'honour').

⁷² KREUZER 2010, 119-78 figs 1-16, 19, 21-2, 26-9, 36-40; MEYER 2017, 190 figs. 281-3. Since ca. 515 BCE, an owl adorned the reverse side of the Athenian *drachmai* (KREUZER 2010, 131-3; MEYER 2017, 348, fig. 358). By Aristophanes's times, 'owls' had become pro-

sit on her⁷³ or on her helmet. A helmet is not mentioned in the text, but I think it was implied⁷⁴. And there was a statue of Athena on the Acropolis (from where the goddess in the dream is coming) that had various mythical creatures sitting on its helmet; the Athena Parthenos⁷⁵ had an extraordinary helmet with elaborate decoration: three crests⁷⁶, supported by a sphinx and two pegasoi, the cheek pieces showing griffons, the browband deer and pegasoi (Figs. 8 and 9)⁷⁷. This is the most extravagant

verbal for Athenian *drachmai* (*Av.* 301: «Who brought an owl to Athens?»; cf. *Av.* 1106: owls of Laureion).

⁷³ The passage in *Av.* 514-6 (Zeus stands with an eagle on his head, his daughter with an owl, Apollon with a hawk) refers to a different context (the Olympian gods themselves are likened to birds) and does not allude to a location or to images. See, however, *sch. Av.* 515b-c (ed. Holwerda): τῆς δὲ ἀρχηγέτιδος Ἀθηνᾶς τὸ ἀγάλμα γλαῦκα εἶχεν ἐν τῇ χειρὶ. This might refer to the golden owl attested for the *archaion agalma* by inventories of the fourth century BCE. KREUZER 2010, 124-5 nn. 31-2; MEYER 2017, 152-3.

⁷⁴ Cf. the translation by SOMMERSTEIN 1987, 230, with references; KREUZER 2010, 146; BILES, OLSON 2025, 565. ANDERSON 1991, 152 n. 12, thinks that ἐπικαθῆσθαι could also mean 'on' or 'in her hand'. Paus. 6.26.3 mentions a chryselephantine statue of Athena in Elis, with a cock «on the helmet», made by Phidias (according to Plin. *NH* 35.54 by Kolotes who had worked with Phidias), maybe a derivation of the decoration of Athena Parthenos's helmet. DAVISON 2009, 906-7, 1061; *DNO* II 1036-7 = 1425-6.

⁷⁵ Already suggested by LIEGLE 1952, 414-6 n. 5 (who, however, thinks that the owl was part of the statue, attested by the gold medallion of Kul-Oba, see n. 78). LIPPMAN, SCAHILL, SCHULTZ 2006, 557 think of the Athena Promachos, Phidias's colossal bronze statue standing opposite the Propylaia. MEYER 2017, 184-93 fig. 275 (convincing reconstruction by L. Schneider and Ch. Höcker). However, this statue did not have an owl. On the Promachos, see most recently: ZIMMER, LEOPOLD 2021-2, 241-362.

⁷⁶ Cf. the τριλοφία of Epops in *Av.* 94; also: *Ach.* 964-5, 1095, 1109, 1111 (Lamachos's *gorgoneion* and his helmet with three crests).

⁷⁷ Paus. 1.24.5 mentions only the sphinx and «griffins in relief». The most elaborate copy (Athens, NM 129; LEIPEN 1971, 3-4 no. 2 figs. 2-3; DAVISON 2009, 170-1 no. 6 figs. 6.2-5, 86; MEYER 2017, 195 figs. 286-7) has only the sphinx and the pegasoi (see fig. 8). On the helmet: LEIPEN 1971, 32-3; DAVISON 2009, 86-90. Some copies and illustrations of the Parthenos allow the reconstruction of an Attic helmet with turned-up cheek-pieces (adorned with griffons). The central crest was supported by a winged sphinx, the lateral ones by pegasoi worked in very high relief. On the browband of the helmet there were protomai of stags and pegasoi. Some marble copies of the head preserve at least part or traces of the animals: Berlin Sk 76A (lost?): LEIPEN 1971, 7, 32-3 no. 24 figs. 16-7; DAVISON 2009, 86-9, 180 no. 20 fig. 6.17. – Paris and Cologne: LEIPEN 1971, 8, 32-3 nos. 26 and 27 figs. 19-20; DAVISON 2009, 194 no. 40. – Gemstone (jasper) Rome, Mus. Naz. 108684, signed by Aspasios (see fig. 9): LEIPEN 1971, 9-10, 32-3 no. 36 fig. 38; DAVISON 2009, 86-9, 207 no. 67 fig. 6.20; LAPATIN 2015, 135, 246 pl. 92; PAPINI 2023, 199-200 with fig.



Figure 8 (left): Head of the small-scale copy of the statue of Athena Parthenos shown in figure 2. Athens, NAM 129. © Hans R. Goette
 Figure 9 (right): Intaglio (jasper). Head of the statue of Athena Parthenos. Rome, MNR 108684. © Su concessione del Ministero della cultura - Museo Nazionale Romano. Foto L. Mandato.

helmet known⁷⁸. It seems as if Aristophanes wants to say: the goddess coming from the Acropolis should be accompanied by her owl and not by all these exotic creatures with which Phidias had endowed her⁷⁹.

⁷⁸ Among the earliest and most elaborate depictions of the bust of Athena Parthenos are two gold pendants with medallions, one mirroring the other, from a female tomb in Kul-Oba near Kertch (first half of fourth century BCE). They show an owl perched on one of the cheek pieces – an enrichment of the decoration, not evidence for an owl as part of the statue's accoutrement (I agree on that with KREUZER 2010, 142 n. 137). St. Petersburg, Hermitage inv. KO 5; LEIPEN 1971, 10 no. 38 fig. 42; WILLIAMS, OGDEN 1994, 144-5 no. 87; DAVISON 2009, 78, 211 no. 78 fig. 6.1; KALASHNIK 2014, 136-9; LAPATIN 2015, 59, 226-7 pl. 19.

⁷⁹ There are sophisticated interpretations of the presence of these figures, e.g. FEHR 1979, 79-80; FEHR 1981, 72-3; LAPATIN 2001, 66-7; DAVISON 2009, 88-90. What intrigued Aristophanes, I think, was the presence of figures that were not commonly associated with Athena.

The idea that Athena poured πλουθυγεία – wealth-and-health – on Demos might have been inspired by the recent erection of a bronze statue of Athena Hygieia on the Acropolis⁸⁰, set up in front of the southernmost column of the Propylaia⁸¹. In 424 BCE, Aristophanes's combination of *ploutos* and *hygieia* might have been taken as a cynical comment on the actual situation: wealth and health were what the Athenians lacked most at the time⁸².

Interestingly, the idea of *hygieia* being poured on somebody anticipated an iconography that was not introduced until ca. 400 BCE. Some votive reliefs for the healing god Asklepios (whose cult was established in Athens in 420/19 BCE)⁸³ show the god touching his patient during incubation and thus demonstrating the healing process, as if this contact induced health⁸⁴. Physical contact is strictly avoided on votive reliefs for other cult recipients.

3. *The peplos for the city goddess*

Some of Aristophanes's remarks about Athena as the city goddess are very important for our understanding of the cult on the Acropolis. In the *Knights* and in the *Birds*, the poet refers to the peplos fabricated by Athenian women and girls and donated as the collective votive offering of the Athenians to their main goddess at her festival, the Panathenaia⁸⁵.

In the *Knights*, the poet speaks of the peplos twice. When Paphlagon and the Sausage-Seller reveal that the goodies they bring for Demos are gifts from Athena, Demos exclaims (*Eq.*

⁸⁰ The lines *Eq.* 1092-3 (Athena coming from the Acropolis) follow the mention of *plouthygieia* in *Eq.* 1091, suggesting a connection of Athena, the Acropolis, and *hygieia*.

⁸¹ IG I³ 506; MEYER 2017, 27-30 (with n. 158 on the date, ca. 430 BCE) figs. 5, 13-5.

⁸² Cf. *Av.* 603-5 on *hygieia*.

⁸³ Most recently see PILZ 2018, 149-53 fig. 1; MYLONOPOULOS 2023, 23-59 figs. 1-7 (who argues for a slightly earlier date, after the plague had struck in 430 or after the Peace of Nikias in 421 BCE).

⁸⁴ KONSTANTINIDIS 2022, 233-61. The earliest examples: Epidauros 1305 (fig. 2-4), Piraeus 405 (no. 5 fig. 7); Athens, NM 2373+ (no. 10); see also no. 1 fig. 10.

⁸⁵ There are many disputed issues concerning the peplos (irrelevant in this context). MEYER 2017, 210-43; WESENBERG 2020 (with all the sources).

1180): «Nice of her to remember the peplos!». The peplos was the ritual link of the Athenians to their goddess that remained as tangible evidence of their devotion – whereas the prayers and hymns, the procession and the sacrifices were ephemeral rites. The cited passage of the *Knights* explicitly reveals the logic of the dedication: the goddess gives because she has been given.

In an earlier passage of the play (*Eq.* 565-6), the knights praise their fathers for having been worthy of «this land and the peplos». This means, I think, that they had defended their home physically (in land and sea battles, *Eq.* 567-8) and their community psychologically (against disintegration, especially during the evacuation of the city in 480 and 479 BCE)⁸⁶. The veneration of the city goddess united the community and identified them as Athenians⁸⁷, and the peplos was the token of the Athenians' service to their goddess, as the Parthenon frieze demonstrates⁸⁸. In *Eq.* 1334, the chorus praises Demos who, after having been rejuvenated by the Sausage-Seller, seems to be the same as in the good old days (the glorious time of the Persian Wars)⁸⁹: «Your bliss is worthy of the city and of the tropaion in Marathon»⁹⁰.

The central function of the peplos as the mortals' part of the interaction with the divine is, again, explicitly revealed in *Birds* (826-31):

⁸⁶ Cf. *Vesp.* 1076-90 and below n. 89. *Contra*: SOMMERSTEIN 1981, 175: «worthy of <being depicted on> the peplos», that is, «superhuman, heroic». Similarly, BOWIE 1993, 58-9 (ranking the deeds of the fathers alongside the fight of the gods against the giants, depicted on the peplos). OSBORNE 2020, 34-5 sees a joke because of the inappropriateness of the combination of «this land» and the peplos. On the evacuation: Hdt. 8.40-1, 9.3. GARLAND 2017.

⁸⁷ SHEAR 2021.

⁸⁸ The central slab of the East frieze, above the entrance to the cella, features five mortal figures, among them the Archon Basileus holding the peplos. SPANTIDAKI 2016, XXV, fig. 01; MEYER 2017, 230-40, fig. 130, 133, 301.

⁸⁹ Cf. *Eq.* 781-5 (reference to the Battles of Marathon and Salamis); *Eq.* 1325 (the demos as a companion of Aristides and Miltiades); *Ach.* 181, 698-9; *Vesp.* 1076-90. BILES, OLSON 2025, 469-72, 639-40, 644-5. On the treatment of the past in Aristophanes, see OLSON 2010, 46-59, 63-4, 68; CAREY 2013, 123-42 («grandfather past», 124); TORDOFF 2024, 77, 123.

⁹⁰ Trans. SOMMERSTEIN 1981. Cf. *Vesp.* 711 and *Lys.* 285 (*tetrapolis* refers to Marathon), 318.

Επ. τίς δαὶ θεὸς
πολιοῦχος ἔσται; τῷ ξανοῦμεν τὸν πέπλον;
Ευ. τί δ' οὐκ Ἀθηναίαν ἑῶμεν Πολιάδα;
Πε. καὶ πῶς ἂν ἔτι γένοιτ' ἂν εὐτακτος πόλις,
ὅπου θεὸς γυνὴ γεγονυῖα πανοπλίαν
ἔστηκ' ἔχουσα, Κλεισθένης δὲ κερκίδα;⁹¹

When the protagonists proceed to found their Cloudcuckoo-land, the chorus leader asks: «Who will be the tutelary god? For whom should we make the peplos?». The interdependence of protection and dedication could not be expressed more poignantly. And Euelpides answers: «Why don't we let Athena be the Polias?» (*Av.* 826-8).

There might be a joke here. The verb *ξάινειν* (*Av.* 827) refers to the preparation for the weaving of the peplos, the combing of the wool⁹². This was done by female Athenians, as was the entire production process, from washing the wool to weaving the cloth. It is funny to hear the chorus leader pretend that male persons had done that work⁹³. And it is the raw material, the wool, that is combed, not the peplos. I wonder whether Aristophanes, by this odd combination of *ξάινειν* and the peplos, wanted to highlight how ignorant men actually were of the subsequent steps to be taken in order to produce the peplos and thereby emphasize how ridiculous the imagining of men preparing and weaving the peplos for Athena was. My assumption might be supported by the following verses, which aim at gender differences.

Upon Euelpides's suggestion, Peisetairos remarks: «How could a polis become well-ordered, where a god born as a woman stands in panoply, whereas Kleisthenes has the spindle?» (*Av.* 829-31). Kleisthenes was a fellow ridiculed in several of Aristophanes's plays for being effeminate⁹⁴.

⁹¹ Text by WILSON 2007. On this play, most recently: HALL 2024, 77-8; KONSTAN 2024, 183-95.

⁹² SPANTIDAKI 2016, 33. Cf. *Lys.* 536, 579; *Ecc.* 89-90.

⁹³ MEYER 2017, 210-28 (with a discussion of allegedly attested male weavers, 216-7).

⁹⁴ Cf. *Ach.* 117-21; *Eq.* 1373-4; *Th.* 574-654; *Ra.* 48-57 (see SOMMERSTEIN 1981, 218); SOMMERSTEIN 1987, 252; ANDERSON 1995, 74; TRAILL 2001, no. 575540; TSOUNPRA 2024, 118-20; BILES, OLSON 2025, 657.



Figure 10: Aerial photograph of temples for Athena on the Athenian Acropolis: the Erechtheion, the foundations of the temple destroyed by the Persians in 480 BCE, the Parthenon. View from the southwest. © Hans R. Goette

The association of Athena Polias with an Athena in panoply is intriguing. «Polias» is not attested as an epitheton for Athena until the mid-fifth century BCE⁹⁵; Aristophanes uses it only here (*Av.* 828). The traditional image of Athena as the city goddess was the *archaion agalma*, made of olive wood, one of the oldest Greek cult images. For this *agalma* the first temple had been built, replaced in late Archaic times by a peripteral temple that was destroyed by the Persians in 480 BCE, and ultimately this *agalma* was housed under the same roof as other traditional cult objects in the complex structure of the Erechtheion (fig. 10)⁹⁶. Over time, the wooden image had been equipped with various attributes, including *aegis* and *gorgoneion*, but apparently it did not have weapons⁹⁷. One would not think of the *archaion agalma* as Athena in panoply.

When Aristophanes speaks of Athena as 'Polias' and evokes the image of a female figure standing in panoply, he implicitly testifies that the *archaion agalma* had not shaped the Athenians'

⁹⁵ Hdt. 5.82; Soph. *Ph.* 134; IG I³ 363.8 (441/40-440/39 BCE). MEYER 2017, 18-9.

⁹⁶ On the temples for Athena on the Acropolis, see MEYER 2017, 43-146 figs. 21-37.

⁹⁷ On the *archaion agalma*, see MEYER 2017, 147-55.

imagination of the visual appearance of their goddess. In fact, the *archaion agalma* does not appear in the rich imagery of the Athenians at all⁹⁸. Because most images of Athena show her in martial outfit⁹⁹, Peisetairos's remark about a female god in panoply might refer to the goddess's iconography in general. However, as I argue above, Phidias's statue had an enormous impact on subsequent representations of the goddess and, I would claim, on the Athenians' imagination. There is a good chance that the poet, when speaking about the goddess standing in panoply, had the Parthenon in mind. His presentation of Athena suggests that 'Polias' refers to a function, not to a specific cult site or cult image¹⁰⁰, and that the goddess represented by the statue in the Parthenon was the same Athena as the one represented by the *archaion agalma*.

4. Conclusion

There is ample evidence for the conclusion that Aristophanes, although he rarely refers to images, was inspired by visual media, and especially by recent innovations of iconography, be it grand statuary that was to impress for centuries (Phidias's colossal statue in the Parthenon) or modest products of a contemporary enhancement of the epigraphic habit (document reliefs).

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⁹⁸ GAIFMAN 2006, 259.

⁹⁹ In his play *Peace*, Aristophanes presents Eirene as the very opposite of Athena: *Pax* 560-1 (Eirene «took the crests and Gorgons away»).

¹⁰⁰ See the discussion in MEYER 2017, 16-23.

ABSTRACT

When Aristophanes, in his plays, mentions divinities he does not explicitly refer to any visual media. However, his 'imagination' of the gods was (as the English word implies) shaped by images that he – and his audience – saw in Classical Athens. The poet shrewdly plays with the common belief that a statue of a god actually was this god, and he confuses his audience by speaking about the acting goddess Athena but alluding to one particular statue. The *Knights*, performed in 424 BCE, show that the Athenians of the later fifth century imagined their city goddess to look like the colossal chryselephantine statue made by Phidias and erected in the Parthenon in 438 BCE (Athena Parthenos). This statue is probably also alluded to in the *Birds*, when the *Polias* of the new city is said to be fully armed.

However, Aristophanes did not only play with prestigious images. When in the 420s BCE the Athenian Assembly began to top stone inscriptions of their decrees with reliefs and, for honorary decrees, a composition was created that showed Athena (as the representative of the Athenian state) crowning the honoured person, the poet 'jumped' at this innovative visualisation of the goddess's concern for mortals and ridiculed the – traditional – metaphor of Athena holding her hand over somebody (as a guardian) by taking this gesture literally. Aristophanes makes Athena hold a pot of broth over Demos's head and, in another passage, pour *plout-hygieia* and ambrosia onto him (and garlic sauce on Paphlagon; *Knights*).

KEYWORDS

Knights — *Birds* — Athena Parthenos — Demos — Pylos — Solon — Libation — *Episkopos* — *Enargeia* — *Stephanosis* — Document Reliefs

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Abbreviations

BAPD = Beazley Archive Pottery Database, <<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk>>.

CVA = *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*.

DNO = S. KANSTEINER *et al.*, edd., *Der Neue Overbeck*, Berlin 2014.

K.-A. = KASSEL R., AUSTIN C. (edd.), *Poetae Comici Graeci*, 9 voll., Berlin-New York 1983-2022.

ThesCRA = *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum*, 10 voll., Los Angeles 2004-2006.

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