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Priestesshoods as Expressions of Civic Identity

Isabella Kershner
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Priestesshoods as Expressions of Civic Identity in Classical Athens

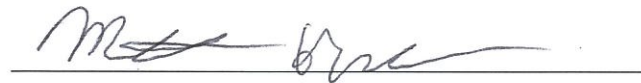
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in
Classical Studies from William & Mary

by
Isabella Kershner

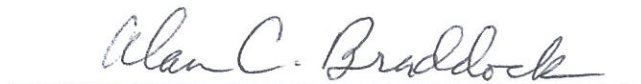
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Honors Thesis

The College of William and Mary

Advisor: Professor Jessica Stephens

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Introduction

This thesis presents a detailed examination of the intersection between religious roles and the development of female civic identity in classical Athens, articulated through a comprehensive narrative that bridges the gap between ancient religious practices and the political evolution of the city-state. First the thesis traces the trajectory of Athenian women within the religious sphere, mapping out the hierarchy of priestesses from childhood rituals to the esteemed position of the High Priestess of Athena Polias. This exploration reveals the ways in which these sacred roles served as both a spiritual passage and a civic curriculum for girls, priming them for their eventual integration into the *polis*. A focal point of this study is the comparative analysis of the High Priestess of Athena Polias with that of Athena Nike, investigating the establishment of the latter and its connection to the democratic reforms of Pericles. This comparison underscores the balance—and tension—between hereditary privilege and democratic lot selection, unmasking a veneer of egalitarianism that belied a more complex hierarchy. The thesis then delineates the fundamentals of Athenian citizenship, a status deeply rooted in the city's democratic ethos, and explores the significant transformation it underwent following Pericles' citizenship law in 451/450 BCE, which redefined Athenian identity and societal structure. This research underscores the overarching significance of these findings, challenging the preconceived notion of Athenian women's confinement to the domestic sphere and instead highlighting their public and influential religious roles that were inextricably linked to their civic identities.

This exploration presents a challenge to the traditional discourse on female religious roles in ancient Athens. It seeks to dissect and understand the intricate relationships between gender, purity, power, and religious authority. The discovery that the High Priestess's power did not stem

from abstinence but rather was accompanied by a fully-realized female identity is a revelation that not only piques academic interest but also demands a reevaluation of our understanding of ancient Athenian society and the female civic identity that came with the Citizenship Law of 451 BCE.

The heart of this thesis lies in the exploration of a transformation—the metamorphosis of Athenian females from their childhood to their eventual standing as citizens. Departing from the traditional view that Athenian women were merely silent figures existing in the shadow of male-dominated public life, this study delves into the religious sphere, a domain where women not only had a voice but also played a pivotal role. It is through the lens of religious roles that we can trace the subtle yet significant formation of female civic identity.

The Athenian woman's life, often veiled in obscurity, was in reality a tapestry of responsibilities and rites that contributed to the social fabric of the city-state. As children, girls participated in religious festivals and rituals that served as both pedagogical tools and rites of passage, laying the foundation for their eventual emergence as recognized members of the *polis*. These ritualistic involvements were not mere formalities but were instrumental in the socialization of young girls, teaching them civic virtues and integrating them into the larger community.

The role of the priestess emerges as a particularly illuminating element in this discourse. Far from being ornamental, priestesshoods offered women a unique avenue for participation in the civic life of Athens. Priestesses were not only visible; they were indispensable to the religious and, by extension, civic health of the city. Through the administration of sacred rites and the stewardship of temples, they wielded a form of authority and garnered a level of respect that challenges modern preconceptions of female invisibility in ancient civic matters.

This thesis, therefore, tracks the multifaceted experiences of these women, piecing together the evidence from archaeological findings, literary sources, and epigraphic records to construct a more nuanced portrait of their role in society. In doing so, it presents a dynamic view of how religious ritual was a crucible for the formation of female civic identity in Classical Athens.

Why does this matter? The significance of this study is twofold. First, it contributes to the broader understanding of Athenian democracy by shedding light on the often-overlooked female half of the population. The traditional narrative, heavily influenced by Pericles' Funeral Oration, posits that the ideal Athenian woman was one who lived a life of quiet subservience, her greatest accomplishment being obscurity. This thesis challenges that narrative by demonstrating that women's roles, particularly through religious ritual, required visibility and active participation in the public sphere, and were as vitally important to the health and functions of the polis as the assembly and *Boule*.

Secondly, this thesis engages with and contributes to the ongoing conversation about the nature of citizenship itself. By examining the lived experiences of Athenian women, we are compelled to reconsider the dimensions of civic identity. Athenian citizenship for women was not a static legal status but a dynamic role shaped by cultural practices and social expectations. The religious realm, often dismissed as a separate sphere, was in fact a stage upon which the drama of Athenian civic life unfolded for women. As priestesses, they were far from being the muted figures of Pericles' ideal; they were, in many respects, the bearers of civic virtue and identity.

The implications of this study are manifold. It not only enriches our historical understanding of ancient Athens but also prompts a reevaluation of the ways in which we

conceptualize the relationship between gender, religion, and civic identity. Furthermore, by highlighting the complexity of women's experiences and their contributions to public life, this research invites a reexamination of the narratives we construct about the past and the assumptions that underpin our interpretation of history.

The first chapter delves into the realm of girlhood priestesses, examining their pivotal function in acquainting young Athenian females with the duties and expectations of citizenship. The second chapter shifts focus to the esteemed roles of maiden priestesses, dissecting their revered status and the public aspects of their positions. In the third chapter, we dissect the two highest positions open to Athenian women: the High Priestess of Athena Nike and High Priestess of Athena Polias. In the final chapter, we explore the idea of Athenian citizenship and its development after the Periclean Citizenship Law.

This thesis stands as an invitation to look beyond the conventional narratives and to recognize the intricate patterns of influence and identity that shaped the lives of Athenian women. By tracking their journey from childhood to adulthood through the medium of religious ritual, we uncover a more vibrant and nuanced picture of their role in the civic life of Classical Athens. In doing so, we not only pay homage to the legacy of these ancient women but also pave the way for a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the past, with reverberations that echo into our present understanding of civic identity and participation.

Chapter One: Girlhood Rituals

The religious landscape of ancient Athens was profoundly shaped by the participation of young girls in various priestly roles and rituals, which facilitated their transition from childhood to womanhood. This chapter examines the priestesses of the *Arrephoroi* and the *Aletrides*, and the festival of the *Arkteia*, elucidating their significance within Athenian society. The religious experiences of these young priestesses and their contributions to the civic and religious identity of Athens are reconstructed through an analysis of literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence. The *Arrephoroi*, as the youngest priestesses on the Athenian Acropolis, were integral to the *Arrephoria* festival, an annual event marked by the secretive exchange of sacred items. This ritual, described by Pausanias, symbolized the end of an *Arrephoros'* term and was deeply rooted in the mythological narrative of Erichthonios, reflecting a communal act of redemption. The *Arrephoroi's* service, beginning at the age of seven, was a prestigious role that set the stage for future religious duties, as indicated by the character Lysistrata in Aristophanes' play. The *Aletrides*, another class of young priestesses, were tasked with grinding grain for sacrificial cakes, a duty performed around the ages of nine to twelve. This role, while less documented, was nonetheless an honored position within the religious framework of Athens. The *Arkteia* festival, dedicated to Artemis, was a rite of passage for Athenian girls, democratizing religious participation across social classes. The festival's rituals, including athletic and dance performances, are depicted in artistic representations found at various sites, such as the sanctuary to Artemis at Mounichia and the Athenian Agora. These artifacts, alongside literary sources, suggest a cult of Artemis that evolved alongside Athenian democracy. The roles of the *Arrephoroi* and *Aletrides*, along with the *Arkteia* festival, were pivotal in the religious and social development of Athenian girls. The competitive nature of these positions, reserved for

noble-born girls, and the democratization of religious rites through the *Arkteia*, highlight the complexity of Athenian religious practices.

Arrephoroi

As the *Lysistrata* proposes,¹ the first role an Athenian girl would take in the public sphere was the *Arrephoros*. The *Arrephoroi* were the youngest priestesses on the Athenian Acropolis, marking the beginning of a long path of authority that could end with the Priestess to Athena Polias.² *Lysistrata* herself describes her past priestesseships over the course of her youth, starting with the *arrephoros*, “From the age of seven, I was an / *arrephoros*; at ten, I milled grain.”³ This simple statement introduces a vital part of this priestesshood: the age. Aristophanes, through the character of *Lysistrata*, specifies the age for this priestesshood as seven, unlike the typically broad and indeterminate age range associated with many others. Although this might not have been the only age of the *Arrephoroi*, this provides a solid understanding that the girls in this position were pre-pubescent and perhaps even under the age of ten, as it is then stated that at the age of ten, *Lysistrata* began milling grain and was no longer functioning as an *Arrephoros*.⁴ The inclusion of *Lysistrata* having previously been an *Arrephoros* among her list of achievements implies the importance of the position itself, as it must have been a recognizable role for Aristophanes to have mentioned it as an accomplishment in a play written for the masses to enjoy.

The Arrephoria

The second-century author Pausanias mentioned the *Arrephoroi* in his description of Greece. His account gives modern historians insight into the importance of this priestesshood by

¹ Ar. Lys. 641-47

² I do not mean to suggest that the four functions represent a rigid system of four age grades of an Attic system of initiation, as Brelich (1969) 229-311 rashly argued. Rather that, an Athenian girl could, provided she fulfilled all possible requirements, serve as *arrephoros*, *aletris*, *arktos*, and *kanephoros*.

³ Ar. Lys. 641-42, trans. by Alan Sommerstein.

⁴ Ar. Lys. 642, trans. by Alan Sommerstein.

describing the priestesses' ritual duties in the context of the *Arrephoria*,⁵ an annual festival characterized by the exchange of sacred goods:

“Two maidens dwell not far from the temple of Athena Polias, called by the Athenians Bearers of the Sacred Offerings. For a time, they live with the goddess, but when the festival comes around, they perform at night the following rites. Having placed on their heads what the priestess of Athena gives them to carry—neither she who gives nor they who carry have any knowledge of what it is—the maidens descend by the natural underground passage that goes across the adjacent precincts within the city, of Aphrodite in the Gardens. They leave down below what they carry and receive something else which they bring back covered up. These maidens they henceforth let go free and take up to the Acropolis others in their place.”⁶

Here, Pausanias describes the *Arrephoria*, illustrating the key components of the festival and, therefore, revealing the tenure of the *Arrephoroi*. According to this account, the *Arrephoria* marked the beginning and end of each *Arrephoros*' term.⁷ As the festival was annual, it follows that the positions themselves would also be merely a year-long, during which the girls would live on or near the Acropolis, as Pausanias calls it, “living with the goddess.”⁸

The *Arrephoria* had deep mythological ties related to the foundation of Athens, specifically to the myth of Erichthonios.⁹ As the myth goes, Erichthonios was a child born from the earth of Attica from the seed of Hephaestus. Athena took the child and placed him in a basket, gifting it to the three unmarried daughters of Kekrops, the first king of Athens. She ordered the girls – Aglauros, Herse, and Pandrosos – not to look inside. However, two of them

⁵ For an incredible and intensive exploration of the *Arrephoria*, see Robertson, Noel. *The Riddle of the Arrhephoria at Athens*. “Harvard Studies in Classical Philology” 87 (1983): 241–88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/311260>.

⁶ Paus. 1.27.3, trans. W.H.S. Jones, Litt. D., and H.A. Ormerod, M.A

⁷ The festival occurred during the month of *Skirophorion*, a month around the Gregorian July or August.

⁸ Paus. 1.27.3. Living with the goddess is an interesting term, and one that scholars do not explore, instead, taking it at face value and interpreting it as living on the Acropolis (as I have done). However, I believe it warrants further thought. Although we have no other sources regarding where priestesses lived, especially where they lived on the Acropolis, if they lived on the Acropolis, it is a fascinating topic to explore. If they did live on the Acropolis, there would be a mix of the sacred and profane in ways that we have denied existed in Athenian sanctuaries. Daily household tasks would have to be carried out in the *temenos*. If they

⁹ See Shapiro, H A. *The Cult of Heroines: Kekrops' Daughters*. Essay. In Pandora: Women in Classical Greece, edited by Ellen D Reeder, Baltimore: Walters Art Gallery, 1995: 39–48.

did, causing them to leap off the Acropolis to their deaths in a fit of madness.¹⁰ The *Arrephoria* represents a chance for Athens to redeem themselves of Aglauros and Herse's disobedience. Two unwed virgins are chosen to replace the girls symbolically as they complete the task Athena asked of the condemned girls in their stead.

The festival most likely had ties to the harvest and fertile land as well, for it was a joint celebration of Athena Polias and Aphrodite of the Gardens, at least by the time of Pausanias in the 2nd century AD. By descending into the tunnels connecting the city to the sanctuary of Aphrodite, the *Arrephoroi* participated in a ritual with both mythological and social importance. The symbolic idea of descending into a tunnel, beginning in the sacred space of Athena, a virgin goddess, then encountering a space of Aphrodite and rejecting its allure is a potent metaphor.¹¹ They re-emerge from the earth back in Athena's city, remaining pure and untempted by the desire to peer into the baskets. Scholars have debated over the contents of these baskets. Some propose they contained various phallus-shaped objects, a literal representation of sexual temptation.¹² Others have theorized there was some kind of agricultural equipment in the baskets, meant to represent the Athenian connection to the earth.¹³ However, as neither the High Priestess of Athena nor the *arrephoroi* knew what was inside the baskets and thus left no record, there is no way to know for sure.

¹⁰ Alwang, Camryn. "Marriage and Abduction Myths of the Ancient Greeks: A Means of Reinforcing the Patriarchy." 2021: 9. <https://soar.suny.edu/handle/20.500.12648/1873>.

¹¹ It must be noted that this is a highly convoluted paragraph from Pausanias. The translation is highly subjective. As of March 2024, there has been no tunnel found on the banks of the Ilissos River and the precise location of the sanctuary of Aphrodite in the Gardens eludes scholars.

¹² W. Burkert, *Griechische Religion der Archaischen und Klassischen Epoche* (Stuttgart etc. 1977) = *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical Periods*, tr. J. Raffan (Oxford 1985) (Section numbers are identical in German and English editions): 229

¹³ Anita, Hart. "Year-End Festivals of the Athenian Acropolis." *Chrestomathy* 8 (2009): 61 <https://chrestomathy.cofc.edu/documents/vol8/hart.pdf>.

Other Ritual Duties

The *Arrephoria* was not the extent of the *Arrephoi*'s duties, however. Another ancient source, the Lexicon of Harpocration, mentions additional responsibilities of the *Arrephoroi*. Harpocration specifies that there were four *Arrephoroi* on the Acropolis and places them in two pairs:

“Four *Arrephoroi* used to be elected, according to good birth, and two were selected who began weaving the *peplos* and the other things concerning it. And they used to wear white clothing. And if they put on gold things, these became sacred.”¹⁴

Harpocration references four *arrephoroi* in total, but Pausanias only mentions two. This discrepancy can be reconciled by understanding that the two Pausanias refers to are specifically the pair selected from the group of four to carry baskets in the *Arrephoria*. The other two, as detailed by Harpocration, are responsible for setting the warp for the weaving of the *peplos* for Athena Polias on the Acropolis each year, along with additional duties not specified by Pausanias. These duties would have been most important during the *Chalkeia* festival, which occurred three months after every *Panathenaia*. As Matthew Dillon explains,

“On the last day of the autumn month *Pyanepsion*, the Athenians celebrated the *Chalkeia* festival in honor of Hephaestus and Athena as patron deities of crafts. The warp for the *peplos* of Athena was ritually set up on the loom by the priestesses of Athena and the *arrephoroi* on that day.”¹⁵

This would have been an important task, serving the double purpose of teaching the *Arrephoroi* the art of weaving, a sacred task for women and wives in Athens, and also of clothing the goddess' statue. Thus, while the *Arrephoria* involved a ceremonial procession, the *Chalkeia*

¹⁴ Valerius Harpocration. *Harpocration Lexicon in Decem Oratores Atticos*. Oxoniis: Typographeo Acad, 1853: a240

¹⁵ Nikos E Kaltsas et al., *Worshipping Women : Ritual and Reality in Classical Athens* (New York, N.Y.: Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation (Usa) In Collaboration With The National Archaeological Museum, Athens, 2008): 34

festival bestowed upon the *Arrephoroi* a pivotal role in the religious and social tapestry of Athens. By participating in the creation of Athena's peplos, these young women not only engaged in a rite of passage but also contributed to the veneration of the goddess, intertwining their civic duties with the cultivation of skills esteemed in Athenian society.

Arrephoroi in Archaeology

Harpocration provides more detail concerning the specifics of the priestesshood, addressing how the girls acquired their priestesseships. He chronicles that each year, “four *arrephoroi* used to be elected, according to good birth.” This confirms the position of *Arrephoroi* was one only a noble-blooded girl could win, but perhaps more importantly, Harpocration reveals that the position was up for election. This opportunity was most likely very competitive amongst the Eupatrid Athenian girls. Positions such as these were highly coveted as they advertised not only the nobility of their blood but also their virtue and piety. It was an important enough indication of nobility for Athenian girls that from at least 220 BC, their families would often dedicate statues on the Acropolis to their daughters who served as *Arrephoros*. This indicates a huge shift in societal norms from a period when women were traditionally expected to remain anonymous to an era where the contributions and roles of young girls were openly acknowledged and honored. These have preserved the names of twenty-one girls who served as *arrephoroi* from the late third century B.C. to the second century A.D. Seventeen girls are known from inscribed bases that held their statues, set up on the Acropolis by their families, or by the Boule and Demos.

One such example is currently in the Athenian Epigraphical Museum (see Figure 3). The inscription references the name of the *Arrephoros*, Penteris, as well as the names of her kin,

including her mother, father, and their ancestors.¹⁶ The inscription's meticulous documentation of Penteris' lineage underscores the immense pride and social prestige associated with her role as an *Arrephoros*. The decision to commission such an inscription, despite the considerable expense, speaks volumes about the value placed on this priestly office. It was a public declaration of honor, reflecting the societal status and wealth of the family who could afford to celebrate their six-year-old daughter's selection as a priestess through a lasting and costly tribute. This act of commemoration was not merely a family affair but a statement to the broader community, enshrining the name of their daughter and her esteemed position in the annals of religious and civic history.

However, it was not only families of the *Arrephoroi* who erected monuments in their honor. Depictions of the *Arrephoroi*, though rare, are seen in surviving votive reliefs and provide useful evidence to the perception of an *Arrephoroi* by the *polis*. Although none depict the *Arrephoria*, perhaps due to the secrecy surrounding the procession, the reliefs illustrate *Arrephoroi* at a loom, perhaps referencing the festival of the *Chalkeia*.¹⁷ This can be seen in Figure 1, where an *Arrephoros* weaves on a large loom to the left as a Grace stands nearby, holding an apple, a traditional symbol of the Graces. Although the fragment is broken, it can be assumed that the Grace is repeated two more times to the right of the existing one as there are three Graces. Here, the *arrephoros* is modeled after the traditional image of the Athenian woman. Her hair is in a plaits and she wears a traditional garment that could be a *chiton* or a *peplos* that

¹⁶ Marble statue base of the *arrephoros* Anthemia from the Athenian Acropolis, 2nd century B.C. marble, Athens, Epigraphical Museum, 10863

¹⁷ The *Chalkeia* festival was a significant annual event in ancient Athens, honoring the deities Athena and Hephaestus, whose realms encompassed wisdom and craftsmanship, respectively. Celebrated on the last day of Pyanepsion, roughly corresponding to our late October or early November, the festival featured sacrifices, processions, and the presentation of a new *peplos* to Athena. Clements, Jacquelyn H. "Weaving the Chalkeia: Reconstruction and Ritual of an Athenian Festival." In *Textiles and Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean*, edited by Cecilie Brøns and Marie-Louise Nosch, 31:36–48. Oxbow Books, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh1dszk.8>.

covers her feet. She stands, reaching up towards the loom, presumably in the act of setting the warp.

There is a pattern of depicting the *Arrephoroi* with the Graces in art celebrating the *Arrephoroi* and their duties. Another votive relief fragment shows a similar scene (see Figure 2). In this relief, the *Arrephoros* reaches up towards the loom as she weaves. She is hanging loom weights with the cloth beam, which she grips in both of her hands. Again, her hair is in a bun, and she wears a traditional *peplos*. In this fragment, the *Arrephoros* is depicted with full breasts in her side profile, a stylistic choice from the sculptor, as most children were depicted as smaller adults. However, the Grace to her right seems to be the same height as the *Arrephoros*, although she could be sitting, as seen in Figure 1. She stands in a typical archaic pose, her right arm reaching out stiffly. Presumably, her left arm would be echoing this movement. Her hair hangs in thick, curled strands, framing her deeply cut *peplos*.

The Arrephoros and Civic Identity

Building upon the understanding of the *Arrephoroi's* role in Athenian society, it is evident that their duties were not only a form of religious service but also a preparation for their future as Athenian citizen women. The public nature of their election, based on noble birth, and the visibility of their duties, such as weaving the *peplos* for Athena, served as a public affirmation of their virtue and readiness for the responsibilities of Athenian womanhood. The competitive aspect of being chosen for these roles underscores the societal importance placed on these young girls, who were expected to embody the city's ideals of nobility and piety.

The epigraphic stele erected in honor of the *Arrephoroi*, such as the one dedicated to Anthemia, provides concrete evidence of the high regard in which these roles were held. These

inscriptions, dating from the late third century B.C. to the second century A.D, indicate that the prestige associated with the *Arrephoroi* has increased. They also suggest that a girl's civic identity has become more important than the expectations of reputation espoused by Pericles in his Funeral Oration.¹⁸ The stele not only commemorated the girls' service but also served as a lasting testament to their families' status and the girls' suitability for their eventual roles within the Athenian *polis*. The *Arrephoroi's* duties, therefore, were a critical aspect of their development as citizen women, providing them with the skills and public recognition necessary for their future participation in the civic and religious life of Athens.

Aletrides

Having established the significance of the *Arrephoroi* and their sacred duties within the annual *Arrephoria* festival, we now turn our attention to another esteemed role that young Athenian girls could aspire to: that of the *Aletris*. This position, while distinct from the *Arrephoroi*, continued the thread of religious service by noble-born girls, focusing on the vital task of preparing sacrificial offerings through the grinding of grain and the crafting of sacred meals for the gods.

Lysistrata refers to this position only as a “grain-grinder,” for which the Ancient Greek word is *Aletris*. Thus, scholars have taken up that name for this class of priestesses, who presumably grind grain and prepare food for their god or goddess' sacred image. Lysistrata again gives the exact age she was when she performed the duties of an *Aletris*, ten years of age. This age, in addition to the position's placement in Lysistrata's list, might imply that being an *Arrephoros* was a prerequisite to becoming an *aletris*.

¹⁸ Thuc. 2.45.2

As the name *Aletris* indicates, the duty of the *Aletrides* was to grind grain and prepare meals for the cult statues of their temple's patron god or goddess. Dillon paraphrases the primary source, Hesychius of Alexandria, who provided a definition of the *Aletrides* in his fifth-century lexicon:

“Hesychius explains the duty as being an honor, commenting that the *aletrides* ground the corn for the cakes used at sacrifices; the scholiast explains that the *aletrides* were 'well-born,' grinding the grain used in sacrificial cakes and that they had sacred molones ('mills' or 'querns') for this purpose.”¹⁹

As he explains, it was the *Aletrides*' duty to grind the grain for sacrifices to the god or goddess, using *molones*,²⁰ or special mills, to do so. Due to the generality of the position, it seems to be a priestesshood that existed throughout the Ancient Greek world, not limited to Athens.²¹ Thus, it can be assumed that the position was not purely tied to a single god or goddess.

As is referenced in the *Lysistrata*, at the age of ten Lysistrata ground grain 'for our patroness,'²² which is commonly interpreted as Athena. Despite this prevailing view, there is an ongoing scholarly debate about the identity of this 'patroness.' While Athena remains the predominant theory, alternatives such as Artemis, Despoina, or Demeter have been proposed.²³

Dillon, who supports the notion that Artemis is the patroness in question, expounds on his theory:

¹⁹ Dillon (2008): 472. Although regrettably, I did not have access to a transcript of the original Lexicon, Dillon's summary provides insight into the source's contents.

²⁰ For more on ancient grain-grinding and bread-making in daily life and ritual, see Villing, Alexandra. “The Daily Grind of Ancient Greece: Mortars and Mortaria between Symbol and Reality.” *Formes Et Usages Des Vases Grecs (VIIe – IVe Siècles Av. J.-C.)*, 2009.

²¹ There is evidence as far as Etruria of women grinding grain in religious ceremonies and festivals. See the *Bowl (dinos) with scenes of dancers and banquet preparation* at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. 13.205. “Bowl (Dinos) with Scenes of Dancers and Banquet Preparation,” [collections.mfa.org](https://collections.mfa.org/objects/154429/bowl-dinos-with-scenes-of-dancers-and-banquet-preparation?ctx=46761914-2a09-4eb9-a731-60f9e7e27148&idx=1), accessed April 1, 2024, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/154429/bowl-dinos-with-scenes-of-dancers-and-banquet-preparation?ctx=46761914-2a09-4eb9-a731-60f9e7e27148&idx=1>, and the attached object description. See also Villing 2009.

²² Ar. Lys. 641-47, trans. by Alan Sommerstein

²³ The theories regarding Despoina and Demeter are seemingly due to the Skira festival and the associated ceremonies. As the festival

“If the epithet *archegetis* belongs to this duty [referring to being an *Aletris*, and not to the *arktoi* that are next in the list of four duties], then the candidates of the scholiast are Despoina, Artemis, or Demeter, with modern scholars generally preferring Artemis.”²⁴

Dillon argues that the epithet *archegetis*, which he leaves untranslated, presumably means either saffron-robed or of *Brauronia*. Either epithet would imply Artemis as the patron goddess, especially when taken in the context of Lysistrata’s list, which describes positions she took serving both Athena and Artemis *Brauronia*. Nonetheless, Athena emerges as the most plausible choice and the focus of this thesis, given that Lysistrata addresses the deity as 'our patroness' in her address to Athenians, signifying that she speaks of the city's guardian, Athena.

The role of *Aletris* may have encompassed more than the grinding of grain; it likely included the preparation of sacred offerings. An integral part of these offerings were the honey cakes, known as "*pelanoi*," which were left for the sacred snake of Athena.²⁵ This snake was considered the guardian of the Acropolis and a physical representation of the goddess herself. The ritual of offering honey cakes would have been a vital duty, symbolizing the sustenance provided to the divine protector of the city. By grinding the grain for these offerings, the *Aletrides* would have directly contributed to the worship and appeasement of Athena, ensuring her favor and protection continued to shield Athens. This task, while seemingly mundane, was imbued with religious significance and highlights the intersection of everyday activities with sacred rituals in ancient Athenian life. It further reinforces the importance of the *Aletrides'* role within the religious framework of the city, elevating the status of those young women selected for the task.

²⁴ Dillon (2008): 472

²⁵ The mythological origins of the *pelanoi* seem to originate with Kekrops, the first king of Athens. It was said that he abolished bloody sacrifices which had until then been offered to Zeus, and substituted honey cakes (*pelanoi*) in their stead. The gods were pleased with this gift, and thus would eat the cakes when they were pleased with the city. Herodotus (8.41) details a story in which the High Priestess used this mythology to sway the Athenian public to evacuate the Acropolis, warning the citizens that the sacred snake of Athena had not eaten the cakes, signaling Athena’s abandonment of the city.

Aletrides in Archaeology

There is little surviving art that depicts the *letrides*; however, there are many images of girls carrying temple offerings. It seems reasonable to assume these mirror how portrayals of the *Aletrides* must have looked. One such example is in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (see Figure 4). The girl carries a tray filled with fruit and cakes in the fold of her Doric-style *chiton*. The young girl depicted in this statue was likely an *Aletris*, although there is no way to know which goddess she served. Little can be said about the monument. The monument was reported to be found in Corinth, although its provenance has remained unconfirmed. If so, it could be proposed that she was an *Aletris* for Aphrodite, their patron goddess, or Athena, another one of the city's main deities. Regardless, this statue remains a staple piece of evidence for the existence of young priestesses with duties surrounding the preparation and presentation of food.

The Aletris and Civic Identity

In the context of Athenian religious and civic life, the role of the *Aletris* was a formative one for young noble-born girls, preparing them for their future as Athenian citizen women. The public nature of their selection²⁶ and the duties they performed—grinding grain and preparing meals for the gods—were not only acts of devotion but also a demonstration of their families' status and the girls' readiness for adult responsibilities. The statue of a girl with an offering tray, housed in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and dating to around 450 B.C., serves as a visual testament to the role of the *Aletris*. This artifact, while not definitively linked to a specific deity due to its uncertain provenance, nonetheless embodies the public aspect of the *Aletrides'* duties.

²⁶ The position of *aletris* remains an elusive one, with very little accessible evidence to explain the position beyond its basics. Still, it must have been equally as well-known as the *arrephoroi*, as it was included in Lysistrata's list of accomplishments. As it, too, was open to only girls born of noble blood, it was likely as competitive a position as the *arrephoroi* and the others on her list. However, nothing is known about the means of attaining the priestesshood. The *arrephoroi* were elected. However, that does not necessarily mean the *aletrides* were as well, although the chances of the two positions having similar mechanics are high.

The girl's depiction, carrying a tray filled with fruit and cakes, aligns with the known responsibilities of the *Aletrides* and suggests the ceremonial nature of their service. This public display of service and the competitive nature of attaining such a position underscore the societal expectation for these young girls to be visible exemplars of piety and virtue, thus preparing them for their eventual roles within the Athenian *polis* as citizen women.

The Arktoi and the Arkteia

Having explored the role of the *Aletrides*, who ground grain and prepared sacred meals for the gods, we now shift our focus to another significant ritual in the lives of young Athenian girls: the *Arkteia*. This festival, dedicated to Artemis at Brauron, a sanctuary east of Athens, marked a critical stage in their journey towards adulthood, encompassing a broader age range and allowing for a more inclusive participation across the social spectrum. There is evidence that during the 5th century the festival at Brauron was celebrated every 4 years; earlier on it may have been an annual event.

The Brauronia²⁷ festival was deeply rooted in mythic origins that shed light on its importance in a young Athenian girl's life. Connelly explores the founding myths of the sanctuary, explaining that²⁸

“At Brauron, initiates took the name “bear,” in commemoration of a local myth in which a bear was killed after injuring a young girl near Artemis's sanctuary. The goddess was angered by the bear's death and sent a plague that, according to the Delphic oracle, could be stopped only if the Athenians sent their daughters to “play the bear” in local rituals called the *Arkteia*.”²⁸

These games were a ritual part of the transition from Athenian girlhood to adulthood. The ritual's association with bears—a creature known for its strength and untamed nature—could be seen as

²⁷ *Brauronia* is an interchangeable name to *Arkteia*. All uses of either name reference the same annual festival.

²⁸ Connelly (2007): 73

symbolically resonant with the untapped potential and raw energy of the young girls. By mimicking bears, the girls engaged in a form of sympathetic magic, a process thought to endow them with the bear's qualities of strength and independence while also taming those very qualities to fit within the societal expectations of modesty and restraint. Furthermore, the *Arkteia* provided a communal space for girls to collectively experience this stage of life, creating a shared social memory and a bond among participants. The energy of the group, when harnessed through ritual, could reinforce social cohesion and smooth the transition from childhood to maidenhood. Perhaps this is why it is mentioned in the same lines as the *Arrephoroi* and *Aletrides* in Lysistrata's list. In comparison, the role of *Arktos* at Brauron was a far less competitive position, as any Athenian girl could participate, including those of the lowest classes. This democratization of religion allowed all young girls to have rites required of them before they could transition into womanhood.

Again, Lysistrata's list reveals the approximate age of the participants in the festival, here indicating she was around ten years old. This matches with the thousands of kraters and amphoras found at Brauron and Athens painted with scenes of the *Brauronia*, depicting girls as young as five and as old as twelve years of age "playing the bear." As this was a coming-of-age ritual, the age range seems to have been much larger, although it was only for pre-pubescent girls.

As for the ritual aspect, Walbank interprets artistic evidence of the *Brauronia*:

"Ghali Kahil publishes several *krateriskoi*, found mostly at Brauron but also at other Attic sites connected with Artemis; young girls are shown running or dancing, sometimes holding torches or wreaths, in a sanctuary identified as that of Artemis by the presence of palm tree. In the Brauron fragments, at least, these girls are sometimes shown naked, sometimes clothed in a short *chiton*... That these vases depict the ritual of the *arkteia*, I have no doubt."²⁹

²⁹ Walbank, Michael B. "Artemis Bear-Leader." *The Classical Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (1981): 279. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/638532>

These two fragments, found at Piraeus and the Athenian Agora (figures 5 and 6), show young girls either running or dancing with other girls of similar ages and are thought to depict some ritual dance or race that occurred at the *Arkteia*. The fragment in Figure 5 is mended from four shards found at the sanctuary to Artemis at Mounichia, where the *Arkteia* was also performed. There is chipping along the rim of the fragment, seen in the recesses lacking the original black paint. It clearly depicts a girl in an athletic position. She is wearing a short, long-sleeved *chiton* that reveals her lower legs as she runs. She turns her head back, showing her hair is pulled back with a red ribbon. The fabric of her pleated *chiton* is decorated in purple and white dots. Presumably, the figures to her left and right echo her positioning, creating a repeating pattern of the running girls around the *krateriskos*. This is evidence of these athletic rituals said to have occurred at the sanctuaries of Artemis around Athens. Similarly, Figure 6 depicts two young girls holding hands while running or dancing. The representation in this fragment shows a ritual dance said to be performed after the sacrifice of a she-goat in honor of Artemis.³⁰ After the sacrifice, it was said the *arktoi* danced in circles around the altar, imitating bear cubs. The pattern of the dancing girls seems to not repeat perfectly around the *krateriskos*, however, as there appears to be a plant on the left of the little girl in the middle. The fragment cuts off the main body of the plant, but the two visible fronds suggest a palm tree, a common motif on Brauron pottery shards. The origin of the palm tree design is debated. However, the most popular theory suggests that the palm tree is linked to Artemis being the daughter of Leto, who had given birth to Artemis and Apollo underneath a palm tree on the island of Delos.³¹

Other rituals attested to the *Arkteia* involved the young girls who made the pilgrimage, leaving their toys at the altar of Artemis as a sign of leaving their childhood behind. This theory

³⁰ Kaltsas & Shapiro (2008): 105

³¹ See in Homeric hymn to Delian Apollo; in a similar vein, the palm tree was a symbol of the Delian League.

is backed up by the hundreds of children's toys found at Brauron, as well as epigraphic evidence.³² In a dedicatory epigram left at a temple precinct, the anonymous author testifies that Timareta, a maiden about to be married, has left her childly possessions to Artemis:

Timareta, the daughter of Timaretus, before her wedding, has dedicated to you, Artemis of the lake, her tambourine and her pretty ball, and the caul that kept up her hair, and her dolls,³³ too, and their dresses; a virgin's gift, as is fit, to virgin Artemis. But, daughter of Leto, hold your hand over the girl and purely keep her in her purity.³⁴

This practice of leaving toys, particularly dolls,³⁵ at Brauron as a transitional ritual dates back to the beginnings of the sanctuary.³⁶ Although we don't have a votive relief from Brauron depicting this dedicatory act, there is evidence from other sites of comparable ritual. One marble votive relief that comes from Echinus, Greece, depicts young girls lining up to Artemis with their offerings (see Figure 7). The relief demonstrates that girls and women made this type of offering at Artemis' sanctuaries, which logically suggests that such practices also occurred at Brauron.

Here, four female figures line up in front of Artemis and her altar, all with different offerings. The closest figure to the altar is the smallest, and therefore youngest, girl. Her form is less detailed; however, she is clearly holding out something for Artemis. This would have been a toy of some kind, perhaps a doll or animal figurine. She wears a short *chiton* and has her hair tied back, similar to the girls seen dancing in Figures 5 and 6. The girl next to her is significantly taller and, therefore, older, although she still appears very young. She holds out a doll for Artemis, suggesting she is about to marry and is giving her childhood symbolically to Artemis.

³² See Bevan, Elinor. "The Goddess Artemis, and the Dedication of Bears in Sanctuaries." *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 82 (1987): 17–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30103072>.

³³ In Greek the same word is used for "girl" and "doll"

³⁴ Paton, W R. 1980. *The Greek Anthology*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press ; London.

³⁵ For further reading on dolls in antiquity, see "Doll | British Museum." Accessed April 1, 2024. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1865-0720-34, for an example of an Athenian doll, and Elderkin, Kate McK. "Jointed Dolls in Antiquity." *American Journal of Archaeology* 34, no. 4 (1930): 455–79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/498710>.

³⁶ Perlman, Paula. "Acting the She-Bear for Artemis." *Arethusa* 22, no. 2 (1989): 124 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26308518>.

Her *chiton* is long and short-sleeved, and her hair is tied back in a bun on the nape of her neck. Behind her is a girl carved into the relief, rather out of it. Due to this, she is probably a temple attendant, a fact which is evidenced by her carrying a large tray filled with food on her head, presumably to give to the goddess. She seems to be outside of the main procession, existing in a perspective state behind the main four figures. The final figure is the oldest and largest of the girls and seems to represent a married woman, as she looks to be veiled, although her head has taken damage. She holds out a small cake as an offering, perhaps representing her growth into a mother. This relief depicts the stages of worshiping Artemis throughout the life of a woman. She grows with Artemis, the goddess of childhood, maidenhood, and finally childbirth.

The finding of such fragments as Figure 6 in the Athenian Agora and others at the Athenian Acropolis “reinforces the hypothesis that a sanctuary dedicated to Artemis existed on the Sacred Rock as early as the late sixth century B.C., predating the Brauron of the Classical times.”³⁷ This indicates a cult that existed before the Peisistratid appropriation of the Brauron sanctuary, and perhaps suggests that the rise in popularity of the *Arkteia* after the Peisistratids’ fall was a form of reclamation. In addition, the dating and location of the relief in Figure 7 suggest either preexisting *Arkteia*-like rituals in non-Athenian cities or the widespread influence of the Athenian *Arkteia* throughout the 4th century B.C.

The Arkteia and Civic Identity

Broadly speaking, the lives of males and women were distinctly separated in ancient Greece. This separation was generally mirrored in both civic and religious contexts. While there were some ceremonies that allowed the participation of both men and women, most were limited to one gender. Among these restricted rituals were those associated with childhood and adolescence. These ceremonies symbolized the developmental progression of adolescent boys

³⁷ Kaltsas & Shapiro (2008): 105

and girls, reinforcing gender-based roles. There is considerable controversy regarding the specific purpose of these rituals. Still, it is evident that the rituals for boys and young men were significantly distinct from those for girls and young women. In this section, I will focus on two of these ceremonies: the *Arkteia* for the girls, and the *Koureion* for the boys. Both traditions were centered on the perpetuation of the traditional Athenian family unit, encompassing rites that delineated distinct phases in the developmental progression of the participants. The *Koureion* represented a shift in biological status for males, similar to the *Arkteia* for females. Traditionally, scholars have concluded that the similarities between the two ceremonies end there, as they argue the *Koureion* had a distinct political and public purpose that was not shared by the *Arkteia* due to the political responsibilities and advantages associated with the adult male position in Athens. However, I believe this to be misinformed. In this section, I will argue that although the male position in Athens is undoubtedly privileged, the *Koureion* and the *Arkteia* both were equally politically motivated.

For the young Athenian male, the *Koureion* was a pivotal moment. It involved cutting and offering hair to Apollo, signifying the shedding of boyhood and the acceptance of upcoming civic responsibilities. This ritual was more than a personal milestone; it was a public declaration of readiness to serve the *polis* in both civic and military capacities. The *Koureion* was a step into the visible realm of Athenian democracy, where the male youth would soon exercise his voice in the assembly and his strength on the battlefield.

Conversely, the *Arkteia* was a festival dedicated to Artemis, the chaste goddess of the hunt, wilderness, and childbirth, among other domains. The ritual was intimately associated with the sanctuary at Brauron, 32.7 kilometers on foot outside of the city of Athens.³⁸ It was there

³⁸ According to Google Maps, this walk would take 7 hours and 43 minutes. This is without stopping and by yourself. Imagine the trip with a thousand (give or take) 9-13 year old girls. I do not envy the priestesses in charge of keeping order and enforcing the rituals at the *Arkteia*.

where young girls, known as "bear maidens" or *Arktoi*, engaged in ceremonies to the goddess that included bear dances, races, and sacrifices—symbolic acts that were meant to guide the girls into casting off their youth in favor of marriage and female citizenship. The *Arkteia* marked the passage of girls into maidenhood, preparing them for their eventual roles as wives and mothers. It represented a transition into a life of domesticity and community support, reflecting women's vital yet circumscribed roles within the Athenian democracy. The ceremony simultaneously reinforced the expectation of nurturing the *oikos* through sacrifices and allowed for a pivotal cathartic release of “girlish” energy through the frenzied dances and races.

The *Koureion* and *Arkteia* were not isolated spiritual events but were critical components of the Athenian democratic fabric. Through these ceremonies, Athens displayed a complex relationship between the civic and the sacred, showcasing a society where religion served the state and its democratic ideals. The young were inducted into this system, with their respective rites signifying both personal growth and their evolving relationship with the Athenian *polis*. The *Koureion* and *Arkteia* were foundational experiences for Athenian youth, emblematic of the roles they would assume and the expectations placed upon them by their society. Just as the *Koureion* channeled young boys’ energy toward the *polis* through exercises meant to echo military and political service, so did the *Arkteia* for girls, channeling their energy toward the religious sphere. In this way, both ceremonies functioned to “create” genders, taking equally energetic groups of children and training them to adopt their duties as citizens. In this way, both ceremonies had equal importance in the development of their Athenian identity, regardless of the societal favoritism toward boys.

The *Koureion* and *Arkteia* played significant roles in shaping the identities and roles of Athenian youth within the democratic society. These rites symbolized the transition from

childhood to adulthood, preparing boys for civic and military service while guiding girls towards domestic and religious responsibilities. By intertwining the sacred and the civic, these ceremonies exemplified the interconnectedness of religion, politics, and societal expectations in ancient Athens. Ultimately, the *Koureion* and *Arkteia* were foundational experiences that underscored the importance of gender roles and the cultivation of Athenian citizenship.

The exploration of girlhood rituals in ancient Athens reveals a complex tapestry of religious and social practices that were integral to the city's cultural identity. The *Arrephoroi*, *Aletrides*, and participants in the *Arkteia* each played a crucial role in the religious life of Athens, from the weaving of Athena's *peplos* to the symbolic "playing the bear" in honor of Artemis. These rituals, deeply rooted in mythology and tradition, not only prepared young girls for their future roles in society but also reinforced the values and beliefs of the Athenian *polis*. The evidence, ranging from literary accounts like Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* to archaeological finds such as votive reliefs and toys at Brauron, paints a vivid picture of these rites of passage. The competitive nature of attaining these priestesses, reserved for noble-born girls, and the democratization of religious practices through the *Arkteia*, highlight the complex interplay between status, piety, and community in Athenian life. The girlhood rituals, therefore, were not mere formalities but were foundational to the perpetuation of Athenian identity and the cultivation of its future matrons and leaders.

Chapter Two: Maiden Priestesshoods

Having explored the girlhood rituals of Athens, we will now explore the intricate and competitive world of maiden priestesshoods, specifically focusing on the priestesses of the *Plynteria* and the *Kanephoroi*. These priestesshoods were both admirable and competitive, serving as status-affirming roles that had a significant impact on the social standing and marriage prospects of Athenian women. We will delve into the rituals, duties, and significance of these roles, shedding light on the religious and social dynamics of these positions in ancient Athenian society.

The roles of the *Praxiergidai* and the *Kanephoroi* in ancient Athenian festivals were not only religious in nature but also served as public demonstrations of citizenship and social status within the *polis*. The *Praxiergidai*, a clan of priestesses, were integral to the *Plynteria* festival, where they performed the sacred duties of caring for the xoanon of Athena Polias. This festival, marked by a period of mourning and the absence of sacrifices, was a public event that underscored the priestesses' religious and civic roles. The *Praxiergidai's* tasks, such as undressing, bathing, and redressing the statue, were performed in a highly ritualized manner that, while keeping the intimate tasks themselves hidden from public view, still allowed the girls to be prominently seen by the community. Similarly, the *kanephoroi*, young women from aristocratic families, carried baskets of sacrificial instruments during the Panathenaia, the most significant religious festival for Athenians. Their selection was a public affirmation of their chastity, beauty, and purity, which were essential qualities for the ideal Athenian maiden. By participating in the procession and being associated with the sacred rites, the *kanephoroi* visibly embodied the virtues of the *polis*, reinforcing their identities as citizens and their eligibility for high-status

marriages. These roles allowed the young women to publicly affirm their citizenship and virtue, enhancing their visibility and prestige within the *polis*.

The Praxiergidai and the Plynteria

Once an Athenian woman had undergone the transition ritual at Brauron, she had a few different paths she could follow in the religious sphere with the permission of her father. As seen in the *Lysistrata*,³⁹ these ritual priestesses were both admirable and competitive, as well as status-affirming. An elite Athenian girl who followed the ritual procession of authority across the Acropolis elevated her status as a bride and, therefore, could secure a more politically advantageous marriage. In the verses detailing the priestesshood progression, the chorus jumps from their position as a ‘little bear’ to their tenure as a *Kanephoros*, or basket bearer. However, plenty of minor positions were left unmentioned. These positions were typically festival-based, meaning the majority of their tasks were related to a single festival. However, this does not mean that the same woman could not be a festival-specific priestess in addition to occupying a separate priestess position at other points in the year. The most documented group of festival-specific priestesses are those that served the *Plynteria* festival, celebrated seven months after the Panathenaia on the 25th day of the Attic month *Thargelion*.⁴⁰

This group of priestesses, referred to as the *Praxiergidai*, were charged with performing the major tasks and rituals associated with the *Plynteria*. Scholars disagree about the exact job of the *Praxiergidai* and, indeed, whether or not they even existed. The term has been referred interchangeably to a prominent family of Athens, a priestesshood, and a group of priestesses. For example, in Sourvinou-Inwood’s summary, the *Praxiergidai* are given the key to the temple

³⁹ Ar. Lys. 641-47, trans. by Alan Sommerstein

⁴⁰ Kaltsas & Shapiro (2008): 36

and the *chiton* to wash.⁴¹ The reference to priestesses in the plural implies the *Praxierygdai* comprised a collective, with the dedication of the temple key to one among them hinting at the presence of a designated leader. She is obviously a senior priestess among the others, even implying this priestesshood can be held over multiple years, as she has gained respect among not only the other priestesses but also among men.

On the other hand, Smith refers to the *Praxierygdai* as an ethnic/familial group.⁴² It seems that the *Praxierygdai* were both- suggesting that all of these priestesses of the *Plynteria*, as it were, were all members of this clan.⁴³ This is not without precedent, for, as explained later in this chapter, the High Priestess of Athena Polias was one such position also restricted to one family/ethnic group.⁴⁴ There is no evidence of how the *Praxierygdai* received their posts, at the same time. It is possible that the leader of the *Praxierygdai* priestesses was elected, but the lack of evidence limits our understanding of how this office was designated in reality of how this office was designated in reality. However, the equivalence of the family name with the priestesshood is interesting, perhaps suggesting a religious dynasty in which female participation in the *Plynteria* was paramount.

⁴¹ The conferral of the key to the Erechtheion upon the *Praxierygdai* was a gesture of immense significance, granting these women an extraordinary measure of control over a sacred space at the heart of Athenian religious life. As the Erechtheion was not only dedicated to Athena but also to other deities, the possession of the key by the *Praxierygdai* meant that they had the exclusive authority to regulate access to this hallowed area. This privilege allowed them to potentially deny entry to male priests and officials who would otherwise perform their religious duties within the precinct. Such power was remarkable in a society where women's public roles were generally circumscribed. The *Praxierygdai*'s control over the key thus symbolized a profound trust and respect afforded to them by the polis, acknowledging their pivotal role in the religious and civic spheres of Athens. It underscored the unique intersection of gender, religion, and power, where these women could exert influence by controlling access to a space that was central to the worship of multiple gods and the execution of various religious rites.

⁴² Smith writes: "the *Plyntrides*, two girls who were undoubtedly members of the *Praxierygdai*." Smith, sub. voce

⁴³ Noel Robertson confirms the *Praxierygdai* as a family group in his 2004 study of inscription IG I3 7. He cites family records and epigraphic evidence that the *Praxierygdai* were an ancient family of Athens. Robertson, Noel. 2004. *Review of The Praxierygidae Decree (IG I3 7) and the Dressing of Athena's Statue with the Peplos*. *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 44 (2): 111–61. <https://grbs.library.duke.edu/index.php/grbs/article/view/91>.

⁴⁴ See in Chapter Three

This theory is the most accurate explanation of an inscription, dating from 460-420 BC, which provides conclusive evidence that the exclusive right to clothe and unclothe the statue of Athena was legally reserved for the *Praxiergidai* clan. This law suggests that the handling of the statue was a privilege strictly limited to this family, implying that any contact with the effigy necessitated membership within the *Praxiergidai*. The text of the inscription reads as follows:

“The Council and People decided. [- was the prytany]. - was secretary. [- was chairman. -proposed]: concerning the request [of the Praxiergidai to write up the oracle] of the god and the [decrees] formerly [made about them] on a stone stele [and set it down on the acropolis] behind the old temple; ; and the money of the goddess according to ancestral tradition . . .the payment officers shall give them the money. Apollo issued the following oracle: it is better [for the Praxiergidai] to put the peplos on [the goddess and make preliminary sacrifice] to the Fates, to Zeus Leader of the Fates, to Earth . . . these are the ancestral traditions of the Praxiergidai provide (?). . . [for the Praxiergi?]dai. . . the fleece. . . according to [tradition] . . . provide . . . Thargelion. . . the archon shall give (?) . . .in accordance with ancestral tradition. The Praxiergidai shall put on [the peplos]. The Praxiergidai shall pay for (?) a medimnos of barley.”⁴⁵

The inscription in question, dating from the mid-5th century BC, is a critical piece of evidence that underscores the exclusive rights of the *Praxiergidai* clan in the religious ceremonies of Athena Polias. It decrees that only members of this clan are permitted to clothe and unclothe the statue of Athena, suggesting a hereditary privilege that extends to the handling of the sacred effigy. The inscription, as recorded, reflects a decision by the Athenian Council and People, indicating a formal civic endorsement of the *Praxiergidai's* ancestral traditions. It mandates that the *Praxiergidai* are responsible for dressing the goddess with the *peplos* and making preliminary sacrifices to the Fates, Zeus Leader of the Fates, and Earth, with financial provisions made for these services.

The festival was an annual celebration during which the *xoanon*, or the sacred effigy of Athena Polias, was cared for. During this ceremony, the ancient olivewood statue of Athena

⁴⁵ *Decree about Genos Praxiergidai*. n.d. www.atticinscriptions.com.
<https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IGI3/7>.

Polias was undressed, bathed, and wrapped in a funeral shroud in commemoration of Aglauros, a daughter of Kekrops who jumped to her death from the Acropolis after failing her sacred duties.⁴⁶ This festival period was one of mourning; therefore, the sanctuaries were closed, and no sacrifices were held.⁴⁷ Once washed, the olivewood statue was then redressed. At some point in the ritual, baskets of sweetmeats made with figs were carried throughout the city, presumably by the *kanephoroi* or other basket-bearers.⁴⁸ In 2011, Sourvinou-Inwood reconstructed the festival itinerary. Although the rituals themselves occurred on 25 *Thargelion*, Sourvinou-Inwood argues the preparations began on the first of the month. She explains:

At the beginning of *Thargelion*, the archon sealed the temple and gave the key to the *Praxiergidai*, and the priestess⁴⁹ removed the *peplos* from the statue and handed it over to the *Praxiergidai*. When the *Praxiergidai* took over the statue they dressed it with a *chiton* costing two *mnai*, which they provided. On 25 *Thargelion*, the sanctuary was roped off—a stronger version of the sealing on the temple... This was an ill-omened day. On that day... the *Praxiergidai* first offered the preliminary sacrifice... they then removed from the statue the *kosmos*, its jewelry, and its temporary dress, the *chiton*, and then covered the statue up in an appropriate piece of cloth.⁵⁰ They also performed ‘secret rites.’ It is likely that it was on that day that the *peplos*... was washed... by the *Plyntrides*, two girls who were undoubtedly members of the *Praxiergidai*.⁵¹

This summary helps us understand the timeline of the festival, as the original sources provide conflicting information regarding the exact events of 25 *Thargelion*. Smith describes the more specific divisions of labor in his discussion of the *Plynteria*:

⁴⁶ Reeder, Ellen D. *Pandora: Women in Classical Greece*. Princeton University Press, 1995: 247

⁴⁷ This extended to the political sphere as well. As the festival was a day of ill-omen, much evidence of the festival comes from historical accounts where the authors describe political figures who did not respect the day of rest religiously required of Athenian citizens. Traditionally, 25 *Thargelion* was a day on which all political action was ill-advised, as anything that happened on the day was considered a bad omen. This public distrust of the day can be seen in Xenophon’s description of Alcibiades’ return to Athens. In it, he explains that Alcibiades returned on the day of the *Plynteria*, causing the citizens of Athens to immediately distrust his intentions:

“[He returned] on the day when the city was celebrating the *Plynteria* and the statue of Athena was veiled from sight,—a circumstance which some people imagined was of ill omen, both for him and for the state; for on that day no Athenian would venture to engage in any serious business... Others said that Alcibiades alone was responsible for their past troubles, and as for the ills which threatened to befall the state, he alone would probably prove to be the prime cause of them.” (Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.12)

⁴⁸ Reeder (1995): 247

⁴⁹ Presumably the High Priestess of Athena Polias.

⁵⁰ This is the mourning shroud mentioned in the above paragraph.

⁵¹ Sourvinou-Inwood, Christiane, and Robert Parker. *Athenian Myths and Festivals : Aglauros, Erechtheus, Plynteria, Panathenaia, Dionysia*.w Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012: 151

“When the sacred image of Athena Polias was stripped, the *Praxiergidai* took off the helmet and spear⁵², and the two female attendants called *Loutrides* [λουτριίδες] or *plyntrides* [πλυντριίδες] removed the *peplos*, which it was their duty to wash and covered over the statue in the meantime⁵³. The image itself was bathed. The pedestal of the image was washed by a *Kataniptis* [κατανήπτης].”⁵⁴

Here, Smith gathers separate positions described in various texts and divides them into three categories of priestesses. Connelly introduces a fourth in the form of the *kosmeteriai*, a title she bestows onto the priestesses who care for the *kosmos*, or jewelry, of the statue.⁵⁵ Thus, there are four distinct positions in the *Plynteria*, as modern scholars see it: the *Plyntrides*, who stripped the statue of its helmet and spear; the *Loutrides*, who removed the *chiton* and washed it; the *Kataniptis*, a singular priestess who washed the pedestal of the statue, and the *Kosmetariai*, who removed and washed the jewelry of the statue.

Perhaps the most precise way to understand the priestesses of the *Plynteria* is as follows.⁵⁶ Among the clan of the *Praxiergidai*, a group of women were appointed to different roles during the *Plynteria* festival. One was in a senior position and directed all of the *Praxiergiai* priestesses. She held the key to the Erechtheum during the month of *Thargelion* and led the rituals associated with dressing and undressing the statue and its washing. She oversaw

⁵² Hesych. sub voce

⁵³ Again, this is referring to the funeral shroud.

⁵⁴ Smith, William, and Charles Anthon. *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, 1843: sub. voce

⁵⁵ Connelly (2007): 35, “Loutrides washed the statue while kosmeteriai decorated it. The author Harpokraton, quoting the fourth-century orator Lykourgos, records that the priestess of Athena Polias at Athens was attended by two helpers called Kosmo and Trapezophoros. These words may reflect the roles of the “decorator” and the “table carrier” in performing specific duties within Athena’s rites.”

⁵⁶ This is a warning: the names of the many different priestesshoods folded into the *Plynteria* are manifold and confusing. It seems every scholar refers to them all differently. In all my reading, I found that Connelly (2007) gave the best explanation of the various names and duties, so that is the model I have largely followed. Overall, because the festival is called the *Plynteria*, many scholars refer to all the priestesses who serve during this festival “the *Plyntrides*.” They use that as the broad name (interchangeably with *Praxiergidai*, to make it even more awful). Some scholars simply leave it at that, referring to the festival’s priestesses as a monolith, but when I researched further to decipher the different roles the festival-priestesses inhabited, I found a chaotic mess of name overlapping and overall no scholarly consensus, thus the deferral to Connelly and her analysis. Connelly explains four separate roles folded into the *Plynteria* festival- the *Plyntrides* (not referring to the group as a monolith, but as a specific role here), the *Loutrides* (who some scholars do not acknowledge at all, but whose existence is corroborated in Harpokraton (sub. voce)), the *Kosmeteriai*, and the *Kataniptis* (whose existence is only discussed in Connelly- every other scholar does not reference her. But, as stated above, this lack of acknowledgement does not mean much, as Connelly is by far the authority on these neglected priestesshoods).

two *Plyntrides* who stripped the statue of her helmet and spear and assisted in the washing of the statue; the *Loutrides*, an unknown number of women who washed both the sacred *peplos* and temporary *chiton* of the statue; the *Kosmeteriai*, an unknown number of women charged with the care of the statue's jewelry as well as her decoration once washed; and finally, the *Kataniptis*, a woman who washed the statue's pedestal.⁵⁷

The Plynteria and Civic Identity

Through the roles and rituals of the priestesses, the *Plynteria* festival not only honored the goddess Athena but also reinforced the social status and political influence of the *Praxiergidai* clan. The timing of the inscription regarding the *genos Praxiergidai* is noteworthy as it coincides with the period of Pericles' citizenship law, which was enacted in 451/450 BC. This law stipulated that citizenship could only be claimed by individuals born to two Athenian parents, thereby reinforcing the importance of lineage. The inscription's emphasis on the *Praxiergidai's* hereditary role in the *Plynteria* festival could be interpreted in two ways: it either reaffirms an existing tradition, ensuring that these priestesses remain within the *Praxiergidai* clan, or it establishes a hereditary barrier around these roles at a time when Athenian society was increasingly concerned with defining and protecting the privileges of citizenship. In either case, the inscription serves to solidify the status of the *Praxiergidai* clan as true citizens of Athens, with exclusive rights to a religious office that was integral to the city's identity and the veneration of its patron deity, Athena.

These women's duties were not only acts of religious significance but also served as a public affirmation of their readiness to fulfill the domestic and civic responsibilities expected of

⁵⁷ Although the Greek form is masculine, I believe this to be a case of the use of a masculine noun applied to a female job. There is no evidence that a man would have been allowed to view the sacred statue of Athena naked, as the statue was treated as the goddess herself, and could not have her virginity sullied.

Athenian citizen women. The roles of the *Praxiergidai* involved relatively small tasks that could have been performed by a few priestesses. However, there were a large number of women involved in these tasks, indicating a deliberate effort to have as many women as possible participate. This suggests that the *Praxiergidai* aimed to showcase their citizenship to the *polis* by involving a significant number of women in the religious rituals and ceremonies.

The *Praxiergidai's* tasks were a reflection of the domestic sphere, with the *Plyntrides* handling the armor, the *Loutrides* washing the garments, the *Kosmeteriai* caring for the jewelry, and the *Kataniptis* washing the pedestal, all of which mirrored the management and maintenance of an Athenian household. During their duties, the *Praxiergidai* effectively turn the Erechtheion into a home, continuing the steady increase in responsibility branching from the *Arrephoroi*. As an *Arrephoros*, girls would carry secret items, a task suited to a young girl. Then, as the girls age, they would learn to grind grain for the sacred cakes as an *Aletris*, another domestic task. As a member of the *Praxiergidai*, these maidens would treat the *xoanon* of Athena as an extension of themselves, ritually bathing, dressing, and decorating it as they would their own bodies in preparation for marriage. In this way, we can see the religious civic identity for women matching completely with their *oikos* civic identity, both serving to completely mold these women into the perfect wife-citizen.

The public nature of these duties during the *Plynteria* festival was a testament to the larger societal expectation for daughters of noble Athenian families to be visible and exemplary, thus enhancing their prospects for advantageous marriages. The *Praxiergidai's* roles were a demonstration of their capability and purity, qualities that were highly valued and necessary for their future roles as wives and mothers within the *polis*.

Kanephoroi

The highest ritual role an Athenian woman could inhabit was that of the *kanephoros*. This priestesshood was perhaps one of the most competitive of Ancient Athens, or at least the most publicly competitive. The duties of the *Kanephoroi* were high profile in nature, seeing how they participated as basket-carriers, central figures in the many religious processions of Athens. These baskets held the instruments which would be used to slaughter the sacrifices. As such ritual instruments were necessary for any procession, *Kanephoroi* were required for every religious festival, providing many chances for noble-blooded maidens to advertise themselves. As Connelly explains:

There were many opportunities for maidens to serve as *kanephoroi*, since nearly every festival required a basket of sacrificial paraphernalia. For Attica alone, we have basket bearers at the Anthesteria, Apollonia, Brauronia, Delia, Diogesoteiria, rural Dionysia, state Dionysia, and Eleusinia and at the festival of Herakles at the Mesogea.⁵⁸

The most important, and revered *kanephoroi* positions, however, were serving during the Panathenaia, the most important religious festival for Athenians.⁵⁹ Handling sacrificial instruments of any kind was a holy task requiring purity, however, for the Panathenaia, this requirement was amplified with the importance of the festival. The *kanephoros* for the Panathenaia was held to a higher expectation of beauty and purity, and was considered to be the perfect *kore*, or maiden. She could be regarded, in a way, as a symbolic figure representing the Athenian *polis*. She demonstrated the higher beauty and purity of Athenian maidens, as she must be noble and an Athenian citizen.

⁵⁸ Connelly (2007): 76

⁵⁹ Harpokration, s.v. *trapezophoros*

The Panathenaia

Although nearly every aspect of the Panathenaia has been debated *ad nauseam*, there are certain elements that almost all scholars accept.⁶⁰ The Panathenaic Festival was held in Athens in honor of the goddess Athena and epitomized the religious and civic unity of the city-state. With mythic origins stretching back to King Erechtheus, this festival was a multifaceted celebration combining athletic and cultural competitions with profound religious significance.⁶¹ Every four years the festival was larger in scale and longer in duration, marking the difference between the Greater and Lesser Panathenaea. The festival served as a manifestation of Athenian democracy, by showcasing the civic participation of the *polis* and the tributes from allied states, thus indicating Athens' political and military dominance. While all city residents could observe, only citizens were permitted to enter the Acropolis. The Panathenaic Festival's grand procession was a centerpiece that demonstrated not only the religious devotion of the Athenians to Athena but also their civic pride and solidarity. Honored in the procession were the *kanephoroi*, who bore the baskets of sacrificial instruments. The procession ascended the Acropolis, culminating in a grand act of worship where the intricately woven *peplos*—crafted by the *arrephoroi*—was presented to the ancient cult statue of Athena Polias. At the end of the festival the *kanephoroi* were rewarded a portion of the sacred meats- a huge honor, considering the same privilege was given the the archons of the city as well as the High Priestess of Athena Polias herself.⁶²

⁶⁰ For a comprehensive, if not exhaustive, view of the Panathenaic festival, procession, and origins, see Waldstein, Charles. "The Panathenaic Festival and the Central Slab of the Parthenon Frieze". *The American Journal of Archaeology and of the History of the Fine Arts*. no. 1, (1885): 10–17. doi:10.2307/495977; Neils, Jennifer. *Goddess and Polis: The Panathenian Festival In Ancient Athens*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (1992); Jon D. Mikalson. "Erechtheus and the Panathenaia." *The American Journal of Philology* 97, no. 2 (1976): 141–53. <https://doi.org/10.2307/294404>; Connelly (2007); Sourvinou-Inwood (2012); Kaltsas & Shapiro (2008)

I am not exaggerating when I say this subject has been debated to the point of nausea. Everybody and their mother has a new theory on the Panathenaia and what might have happened during it, if the Parthenon frieze is in reference to it, and a million other tiny details. However, I am also just bitter that I had to read all of it.

⁶¹ Mikalson (1976)

⁶² Connelly (2007): 75

The Ideal of the Kanephoroi

The young women were chosen from a family of high status in Athens, whose youthfulness and purity were essential to a successful sacrifice. As it was essential that these priestesses were virgins, the Athenian maidens who were chosen as *Kanephoroi* were publicly declared chaste and, therefore, worthy of a high-status marriage. The *kanephoroi* were universally seen as the ideal Greek maiden, often described in ancient literature as blushing brides-to-be who could overwhelm men with their beauty. Theocritus describes the beauty of a *kanephoros* in his Idylls, written in the early third century, where he tells a tale of a young man smitten with a *kanephoros*, named Thestylis, at first glance.⁶³ In a similar sentiment, Diodorus Siculus recounts a tale of Peisistratus' daughter, whose beauty, while serving as *kanephoros* in the grand Panathenaic procession, so captivated a young man that he was compelled to embrace and kiss her, overwhelmed by love.⁶⁴ These references to the Great Procession and love at first sight indicate that there was a strong connection between the position of *kanephoros* and the ideal bride in the ancient mind. This idea of the *kanephoros* as the ideal *kore* was perhaps more important than her actual ritual function.

While it was a great honor to be chosen as a *kanephoros*, likewise, it was a great dishonor to be refused the position, as the underlying assumption was an issue of purity. This was a

⁶³ Idylls 2.66-82 “One day came Anaxo daughter of Eubulus our way, came a-basket-bearing in procession to the temple of Artemis, with a ring of man beasts about her, a lioness one. Now Theumaridas’ Thracian nurse that dwelt next door, gone ere this to her rest, had begged and prayed me to gout and see the pageant, and so – ill was my luck – I followed her, in a long gown of fine silk, with Clearista’s cloak over it. I was halfway o’ the road, beside Lycon’s, when lo! I espied walking together Delphis and Eudamippus, the hair o’ their chins as golden as cassidony and the breasts of them, for they were on their way from their pretty labour at the school, shone full as fair as thou, great Moon. And O the pity of it! in a moment I looked and was lost, lost and smit i’ the heart; the colour went from my cheek; of that brave pageant I bethought me no more. How I got me home I know not; but this I know, a parching fever laid me waste and I was ten days and ten nights abed.”

⁶⁴ Did. Sic. 9.37.1 “Once when the daughter of Peisistratus was carrying the sacred basket in procession and she was thought to excel all others in beauty, a young man stepped up and with a superior air kissed the maiden. The girl’s brothers, on learning what had been done, were incensed at the youth’s insolence, and leading him to their father they demanded that he be punished. But Peisistratus laughingly said, “What shall we do then to those who hate us, if we heap punishments on those who loveus?”

dishonor of the highest kind for any woman, but especially for a maiden on the verge of marriage. As the position of the *kanephoros* was one of the major ritual positions for a young aristocratic woman preparing to be a wife, failure to assume the role could be detrimental to the social standing of both her and her family. The main evidence for this is in Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War, written in the late fifth century. Hidden in his description of the tyrants Hippias and Hipparchus and their eventual assassinations by Harmodius, an Athenian aristocrat, Thucydides described an event involving Harmodius' sister, a potential *kanephoros*. He explained that Hipparchus revoked the sister's position of *kanephoros* in 514BC.⁶⁵ The slight was perceived to be so great by Harmodius that it initiated the assassination plot.

“So, to resume, when Harmodius rejected his advances, Hipparchus carried out his intention of humiliating him. Harmodius had a young sister who was a virgin. Hipparchus and his people invited her to present herself as one of the basket-bearers in a religious procession, but then sent her away, claiming that she had never been invited in the first place because she did not meet the qualification. Harmodius was furious at this, and Aristogeiton yet more incensed on his behalf.”⁶⁶

The rejection of Harmodius' sister from the role of *kanephoros* was not merely a personal affront but a public statement questioning her purity and, by extension, her family's honor. Such an act had the potential to tarnish her prospects for marriage and undermine her family's social position. The incident illustrates the profound impact that the denial of religious honors could have on an individual's reputation and the lengths to which one might go to restore or defend that honor. In this case, the perceived dishonor directly contributed to a chain of events that culminated in a significant political upheaval, demonstrating the intricate ties between religious roles, personal dignity, and the political landscape of Athens.

⁶⁵ Dillon argues it was on account of her rejection of Hipparchus' advances, but this seems to be a confused understanding of Aristotle and Thucydides. See Aristot. Const. Ath. 18 and Thuc. 6.56.

⁶⁶ Thuc. 6.56, trans. Martin Hammond

The Kanephoroi and Civic Identity

This priestesshood was used more for political reasons than any other. Due to the public and impermanent nature of the position, the role became a pedestal on which to put any eligible young maiden, assuming they were *Eupatrid*. The *Kanephoros* remained the highest-ranking priestesshood any noblewoman could have hoped to achieve.⁶⁷ The role functioned ritually as a basket-bearer of sacrificial products but socially as a route to an advantageous marriage. This combination of ritual and social function made the role of *Kanephoros* an important and powerful one and a symbol of female achievement. It provided many opportunities for young noblewomen to prove their worth and gain recognition in society not just as maidens, but as citizens. As Connelly reveals,

“Inscriptions list fifty named kanephoroi dating from the fourth century B.C. to the second century A.D. Most of these participated in the three major festivals between 138 and 95 B.C. The maidens who held office came from families of high status, most from the clan of the Kerykes, followed by the Eteoboutadai, Eumolpidai, Apheidantidai, Eupatridai, and Erysichthonidai.”⁶⁸

This further indicates the prestige of these positions. Although fifty names might seem small in relation to the population over Athens over six centuries, they represent an appreciation for these maidens who otherwise would have been unnamed. Before the citizenship law of 451, the only portrayal of the *Kanephoroi* are buried within stories and poetry, where their roles are limited to the fictionalized. In these inscriptions, we can see an esteem for these real maidens. Their names, and those of their families, were important enough to etch into stone.

The roles of the *Praxiergidai* and the *Kanephoroi* in ancient Athens were deeply intertwined with the religious and social fabric of the city, serving as a nexus where civic identity, ritual practice, and social status converged. The *Praxiergidai*, a clan of priestesses, were

⁶⁷ Dillon (2008): 473

⁶⁸ Connelly (2007): 76, Turner (1983) 327–42.

entrusted with the sacred duties of the *Plynteria*, a festival of mourning and purification for the statue of Athena Polias. Their responsibilities, which included the undressing, washing, and redressing of the statue, were not only acts of religious devotion but also public affirmations of their familial and social standing. The *kanephoroi*, chosen from the ranks of aristocratic maidens, were the embodiment of Athenian ideals of youthfulness, purity, and beauty. Their role as basket-carriers during the Panathenaia was a public spectacle that highlighted their chastity and suitability for high-status marriage, making the position highly competitive and politically significant.

The public nature of these priestesseships allowed young Athenian women to demonstrate their citizenship and virtue to the entire *polis*, reinforcing their eligibility for advantageous marriages and elevating their families' prestige. The refusal of such roles could lead to social dishonor, as evidenced by historical accounts involving figures like Harmodius' sister and Peisistratus' daughter. These roles were not merely ceremonial; they were strategic positions within the societal hierarchy, offering a platform for political maneuvering and the assertion of noble lineage. The priestesseships of the *Plynteria* and the Panathenaia thus reveal the complex interplay between gender, religion, and politics in ancient Athens, where the sacred and the social were inextricably linked.

Chapter Three: Athena Nike and Athena Polias

Thus far this thesis has examined girlhood rituals and maiden priestesses of Athenian citizen women, exploring how these roles aided in the continuous public reaffirmation of women's citizenship. This identity culminates in the highest priestesses of the Acropolis: the High Priestess of Athena Nike and the High Priestess of Athena Polias. In this chapter, we will dissect these positions and their role in Athenian society, as well as examine the tensions between the two positions.

The priestesses of Athena Nike and Athena Polias in ancient Athens were emblematic of the complexities and nuances of female citizenship in the city-state. The Priestess of Athena Nike, selected by lot, ostensibly offered a semblance of egalitarianism as the position was legally open to all Athenian women. This inclusivity suggested that any woman, regardless of her social standing, could ascend to a role of great religious and social power, potentially surpassing the influence of her husband and most nobility. However, the reality was that the selection process was biased towards women from the upper classes, who had the necessary influence and recognition to validate their status. This bias was a reflection of the socio-economic structures of Athenian society, where the outward appearance of democratic equality was undermined by a de facto class distinction.

In contrast, the High Priestess of Athena Polias represented a hereditary position within the *Eteoboutad* clan, a role that was deeply intertwined with Athenian values surrounding family and societal status. The High Priestess was expected to embody the ideal Athenian woman—aristocratic, educated in religious duties, and responsible for birthing and rearing female heirs to continue the priestly lineage. Her role was a unique amalgamation of religious reverence and civic honor, granting her unparalleled socio-political standing among women in

Classical Athens. The High Priestess's influence extended beyond the religious sphere, as she could sway political appointments, shape public policy, and her blessings were sought for the success of political and military endeavors.

Both priestesses, despite their differences, underscored the pivotal role women played in the perpetuation of Athenian religious and social order. They were central figures in the intersection of religion, culture, and politics, serving as symbols of stability and continuity in times of peace and conflict. The priestesses' positions, particularly that of the High Priestess of Athena Polias, served as a testament to the unique status women could hold in ancient Greek society, transcending typical gender boundaries and highlighting the potential for female agency within the religious domain.

Priestess of Athena Nike

The deity Athena Nike was a counterpart to Athena Polias, or Athena of the City. She was a divine embodiment of the Athenian people's preeminence as a *polis*, embodying the union of Athena and Nike, the goddess of triumph. A sacrificial altar to Athena Nike had been active on the Acropolis for at least a century before the establishment of any democratically appointed priestess.⁶⁹ A newer altar has been found with an inscription dating to c. 550 BC, during the Peisistratid period. The inscription read, "Altar of Athena Nike. Patrokleides made it."⁷⁰ Although Athena Nike had been worshiped in Athens since the middle Archaic period, it wasn't until the 5th century that the cult was formally recognized by the democratic government.⁷¹

⁶⁹ While it may appear peculiar that the cult did not have a designated priestess in its early years in the sixth century, scholars believe that the responsibilities associated with Athena Nike were assumed by members of the *Eteoboutadai*, whose genos wielded a special influence over the Acropolis. See Blok, Josine. "The Priestess of Athena Nike." *Kernos*, no. 27 (November 1, 2014): 99–126. <https://doi.org/10.4000/kernos.2274>.

⁷⁰ "IG I³ 596 Altar of Athena Nike," www.atticinscriptions.com, accessed April 2, 2024, <https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IGI3/596>.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Before the decisive Battle of Plataea in 479 BC, which marked the end of the Persian Wars, an oath was purportedly sworn by the Greek allies to never rebuild the temples destroyed by the Persians, signifying their commitment to remember the sacrilege and the cost of war.⁷²

The main evidence for this oath is seen in Lycurgus' speech *Against Leocrates*, from c.330 BC:

I will not hold life dearer than freedom nor will I abandon my leaders whether they are alive or dead. I will bury all allies killed in the battle. If I conquer the barbarians in war, I will not destroy any of the cities which have fought for Greece, but I will consecrate a tenth from all those who sided with the barbarians. I will not rebuild a single one of the temples which the barbarians have burnt and razed, but will allow them to remain for future generations as a memorial of the barbarians' impiety.⁷³

Following the Battle of Plataea, the Acropolis of Athens underwent a significant transformation, symbolizing the resolve and rejuvenation of the city-state in the wake of the Persian Wars.

Despite the oath's stipulation not to rebuild the temples destroyed by the Persians as a memorial to their sacrilege and the Greek victory, the Athenians later interpreted this vow as a mandate to construct grander edifices to replace those that had been lost.⁷⁴ This led to a monumental rebuilding program in the mid-5th century BC, which saw the construction of the Parthenon, the Erechtheion, the Propylaea, and the Temple to Athena Nike. The building program lasted for almost 50 years was accompanied by a series of epigraphic stele recording the declarations of the assembly establishing these new monuments and priestesses to care for them. One of these

⁷² The authenticity of the Oath of Plataea, supposedly sworn by the Greek allies before the Battle of Plataea, remains uncertain. No direct contemporary evidence confirms its existence, leading to debates among historians about its actuality. However, its mention in Lycurgus' speech—crafted long after the supposed event—indicates that the Greeks of the later periods believed or at least entertained the notion that such an oath was indeed a part of their collective past.

⁷³ Lyc.1.81, trans. by J.O. Burt

⁷⁴ John Camp explains: "At some time in the middle years of the fifth century, perhaps as early as 463 or as late as 449, a peace of some sort was made with Persia, known as the Peace of Kallias, after the Athenian ambassador. With this peace, the professed reason for the Delian League ceased to exist. The Athenians, however, had become used to their allies' contributions, and they were strong enough to enforce their continuation. Perikles therefore proposed that the oath of Plataea be nullified and the allies' money be used to rebuild all the temples burned by the Persians, most of which happened to be in Athens or Attica. During the third quarter of the fifth century, magnificent marble temples were built on the Acropolis, in the lower city of Athens, and throughout Attica, ostensibly replacing Archaic structures left in ruins by the Persians in 480/79."

Camp, J.M. 2004. *The Archaeology of Athens*. New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press: 72-73

stele, inscribed in 448 BC,⁷⁵ instituted the position of Priestess to Athena Nike as an official title.⁷⁶ It similarly charges Kallikrates with the construction of a formal temple to Athena Nike on the acropolis.

As was typical of high priestesses, the new priestess would have domain over the many sacrifices offered to Athena Nike. This is verified in IG' I³ 35, where the authors specify that the priestess would be provided a share of the sacrificial meats as payment.⁷⁷ Overall, her main role was as the intermediary between Athena Nike and the people of Athens. She would have been in a senior position above the various *arrephoroi* and minor priestesses, as well as acolytes. The

⁷⁵ It was either 438 BC or c. 448 BC, although most scholars posit that it was around 448. The 448 theory postulates that the decree happened as a result of the end of regular fighting between Athens and Persia and was a response to the Periclean Citizenship law. Then, the temple they refer to is the small shrine that was built around this time in the place where the eventual temple would stand. The 437 theory argues that the temple they refer to is the marble temple to Athena Nike built with the Propylaea, with the specific timing being about two months before construction began. Most scholars believe that the stele is from 448/449 and that the temple construction was, for unknown reasons, delayed for 20 or so years. For the purposes of my thesis, I will be using the earlier date, as I believe it is more probable that the priestesshood has direct ties to the Periclean citizenship law.

David Gill provides a list of the scholarly consensus in his discussion of IG' I³ 35: "e.g., J. Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* (New York 1971), 148: "The decision to erect a new marble temple and altar was made in 448 BC... actual construction did not begin until 427 BC"; Wycheley 128: "In 449 BC, a decree was passed authorizing the erection of a temple for Athena Nike... When the temple of Athena Nike was finally built is not altogether clear; it was probably in the middle 420s"; Shear, "Kallikrates" 376, 388: "The construction of the temple was first proposed in ca. 448 BC", "the construction of the temple was delayed for some twenty years"; A.W. Lawrence (rev. R.A. Tomlin son), *Greek Architecture* (Harmondsworth 1983) 192: "Callicrates, who is named in an inscription, probably to be dated to the middle of the fifth century", 210: "The construction of the temple of Nike does not seem to have been undertaken till at least five or six years after 432, when the work on the Propylaea ceased; the design may have been that of Callicrates executed in accordance with the decree of some twenty-five years earlier"; J.G. Pedley, *Greek Art and Archaeology* (London 1992) 254-56: "A decree of 449 BC authorized the construction, but the temple was not built until the middle to later years of the 420s"; E.B. Harrison, "The Glories of the Athenians: Observations on the Program of the Frieze of the Temple of Athena Nike", in D. Buitron-Oliver (ed.), *The Interpretation of Architectural Sculpture in Greece and Rome* (Studies in the History of Art 49; Hanover 1997) 109: "It is now agreed that the foundations of the Nike Temple must have been already laid by the time work was stopped on the Propylaea in 432."

David W. J. Gill, "The Decision to Build the Temple of Athena Nike ('IG' I³ 35)." *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 50, no. 3 (2001): 257-78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4436618>.

⁷⁶ The stele reads: "[The Council and People decided.?] . . . -kos proposed: [to install] a priestess for Athena Nike to be [allotted?] from all Athenian [women], and that the sanctuary be provided with gates in whatever way Kallikrates may specify; and the official sellers are to place the contract within the prytany of Leontis; the priestess is to receive fifty drachmas and to receive the back legs and skins of the public sacrifices; and that a temple be built in whatever way Kallikrates may specify and a stone altar." inscription and translation sourced from <https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IGI3/35>

⁷⁷ Specified in IG I³ 35, line 9-10: "the priestess is to receive fifty drachmas and to receive the backlegs and skins of the public sacrifices" translation from Attic Inscriptions Online (<https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IGI3/35>)

first Priestess of Athena Nike, Myrrhine, had a funeral monument that provides a small understanding of perhaps what else was expected of the priestess, saying “she was first to tend the statue [of Athena Nike].”⁷⁸ Tending the *xoanon* of a deity was an archetypal duty for priestesses, however, very little is known about the statue referred to by the funeral monument. According to Heliodoros and Pausanias, there was a cult statue of Athena Nike. Both call the statue a *xoanon* and note that it is *apteros*, or “wingless,” unlike normal images of Nike.^{79,80} According to Heliodoros, the statue held a pomegranate in the right hand and a helmet in the left.⁸¹ As it has not survived, this is the only information known about the statue. Like other priestesses, it is likely the Priestess of Athena Nike had her own minor priestesses or temple slaves to aid in the statue’s care.⁸² However, this is purely theoretical as there is no mention of any *Plyntrides* aiding her in the washing of garments or the statue itself in any surviving literature.

Although it is likely that the Priestess of Athena Nike had a role in many or all of the major religious festivals, the only procession with her confirmed presence is the Panathenaia. As one of the three major religious leaders on the Acropolis, it follows that after the position’s establishment in the mid-5th century, she would have stood with the High Priestess of Athena Polias and the High Priest of Poseidon-Erechtheus. Julia Shear explores this possibility, as well as the socio-political implications of the priestesses’ participation in the procession, through her

⁷⁸ The funeral monument reads “Far-shining memorial of Kallimachos’ daughter, who first tended the temple of Nike. She had a name companion to her good repute, as by divine fortune Myrrhine she was called in truth; she was first to tend the statue (?) of Athena Nike, (chosen) by lot from all, Myrrhine by good fortune.” translation courtesy of <https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IG13/1330>

⁷⁹ Mark, Ira S and American School Of Classical Studies At Athens. *The Sanctuary of Athena Nike in Athens : Architectural Stages and Chronology*. Princeton, N.J.: American School Of Classical Studies At Athens, 1993: 94

⁸⁰ Paus. 1.22.4

⁸¹ Mark proposes this is an ancient statue re-found, and thus needed sufficient covering once she was restored to her place on the acropolis. See Mark (1993): 143.

⁸² The High Priestess of Athena Polias had a retinue of minor priestesses and temple slaves to assist in care of the temple, as we will see below.

interpretation of a Black-figure band cup found in Athens and dating to ca. 550 BC (see Figure 8):

On the band cup, the priestess of Athena is shown shaking hands with the man leading the procession, and so she welcomes the procession to the goddess' sanctuary and her altar, which stands between her and the man (Fig. 4.5).⁸³ This depiction brings out the priestess' role as an independent actor, and it suggests that such actions would not have been foreign to viewers of the cup. If it was normal for the priestess of the goddess to receive the procession, then all participants would have witnessed her independent actions and her central role, which, in turn, stressed her membership both in the city and especially in the community of 'all the Athenians.' In the middle of the fifth century BC, the priestess of Athena Polias was presumably joined by the newly instituted priestess of Athena Nike.⁸⁴

The prominent placement of the priestess on the Parthenon frieze (see Figure 9), which parallels the depiction on the band cup, further emphasizes the high honor and reverence afforded to her position in Athenian society. Just as the band cup shows the priestess of Athena as an independent and central figure in ritual proceedings, her representation at the forefront of procession depicted in the Parthenon frieze embodies a similar veneration, symbolizing her crucial role in Athenian religious and civic life.⁸⁵ This visual prominence signifies the exceptional honor inherent in leading the procession, especially for the priestess of Athena Nike, a relatively new priestesshood for the Acropolis. These depictions across different media reinforce the narrative that the priestess' participation and leadership in sacred ceremonies were not only esteemed but also integral to the communal identity and religious expression of the Athenians in the 5th century.

⁸³ Here Shear references, Black-figure band cup, c. 550 BC: sacrificial procession to Athena (Stavros S. Niarchos Collection, A 031). See Figure 8.

⁸⁴ Shear, Julia L.. *Serving Athena: The Festival of the Panathenaia and the Construction of Athenian Identities*, Cambridge University Press, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central: 255
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cwm/detail.action?docID=6499806>.

⁸⁵ Although the scholarly debate surrounding this procession and its nature is extensive, for this thesis' purposes, the specificity of the procession is insignificant. No matter the festival, what is important is that the priestess' are leading the parade, and are therefore in a place of extreme prestige.

If it is true that Athena Nike stood at the head of the procession with Poseidon Erechtheus and Athena Polias, then it would cement her position as a major religious figure in the *polis*. However, despite the importance of the position, there were no listed prerequisites for being the Priestess of Athena Nike. According to fragment *IG I³ 34* lines 1-4: “[The Council and People decided.?]. . . -kos proposed: [to install] a priestess for Athena Nike to be [allotted?] from all Athenian [women].”⁸⁶ This inscription suggests that a woman was chosen completely by lot, out of all citizen women, not just the *Eupatrids*. Therefore, it was far less likely for a woman to be of noble origin and married to a high-status man than not. Consequently, one should not presume that a newly appointed priestess possessed prior knowledge of the rituals or the religious duties her role entailed. This uncertainty adds complexity to the position.

The Priestess of Athena Nike was chosen by lot in a ceremony, and therefore would have been thrust out of her daily life into one of the most significant and powerful positions available to women in Athens. To be spontaneously chosen as the priestess to Athena Nike, a life-long position of great power, would have resulted in having more power than one’s husband, given a job outside of the home, as well as placing the selected woman in a position above most nobility. This would be a potentially traumatic, yet honorable shift in the woman’s life and marriage. As a result, she would have had to navigate the complexities of her new role while also managing the expectations and dynamics within her relationship. In the extreme patriarchy of Classical Athens, women had very limited rights and were expected to be submissive to their husbands in all aspects of life. To be randomly chosen to be a religious figure could have completely reversed the power dynamics in any lower class marriage. However interesting these dynamics are to imagine, there is no evidence for how couples in lower class marriages would react to such a

⁸⁶ *IG I³ 34* 1-4, <https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IGI3/35>

reversal of power. In fact, in the only literary evidence that gave voice to the Priestess of Athena Nike, Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, the priestess is married to a highly ranked Athenian statesman, a reality that may well have been indicative of the reality behind the supposed egalitarian nature of the priestesshood.

The role of the priestess of Athena Nike was a position of significant religious and social importance, but one whose eligibility, despite theoretical openness, was also practically limited by socio-economic constraints.⁸⁷ The necessity for a woman to be present at the assembly for selection inherently presupposed a level of affluence; only those from families wealthy enough to own slaves and servants could afford to delegate their domestic responsibilities and be absent from home. This requirement probably acted as an informal gatekeeper, ensuring that only women of a certain class could realistically accept the position.⁸⁸ Furthermore, the patriarchal structure of Athenian society required women to obtain permission from their male guardians—be it a father or a husband—to engage in public duties, which further reinforced the class barrier. Since female citizenship was established through male testimony rather than an official registry, as was the case for men, the process was biased towards those within the upper echelons of society where male citizens would have the necessary influence and recognition to validate a woman's status. Consequently, the selection of the priestess of Athena Nike was not just a matter of religious protocol but also one of reinforcing social hierarchies, effectively ensuring that this sacred office was largely reserved for women from the upper classes.

⁸⁷ There is also the problem of how much power Athena Nike realistically wielded. As discussed above, the selection of Athena Nike by lot could have theoretically resulted in the appointment of a woman who had little to no previous training. This, in conjunction with the public knowledge of her non-*Eupatrid* status could both potentially cause her to lose the respect of Athenians.

⁸⁸ Taylor, C. "From the Whole Citizen Body? The Sociology of Election and Lot in the Athenian Democracy." *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 76, no. 2 (2007): 323–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25068022>.

Despite the socio-economic barriers that implicitly restricted the priestesshood of Athena Nike to the upper classes, the position was legally open to any Athenian woman, which presented the semblance of egalitarianism. This legal inclusivity paralleled the structure of the Athenian assembly, which, in theory, welcomed all male citizens regardless of wealth or social standing. However, just as the realities of economic and social demands prevented many lower-class women from realistically serving as priestess, the male assembly was similarly skewed towards those of means. Theoretically, all male citizens had the right to participate in the assembly, yet it was predominantly those with the financial stability to take time away from their trades or farms who could afford to engage in civic duties.⁸⁹ The poorer citizens, whose daily sustenance depended on constant labor, found it challenging to exercise this civic privilege, effectively creating a system where the wealthier, leisured classes were far more likely to participate in governance. Thus, while the institutions of both the priestesshood and the assembly maintained an outward appearance of democratic equality, the underlying economic structures of Athenian society meant that, in practice, these roles were most accessible to those from the more affluent segments of the population, reinforcing a de facto class distinction within the ostensibly egalitarian framework of the city-state.

There is only one named High Priestess of Athena Nike in the surviving epigraphic and historical records: Myrrhine. She was the first High Priestess of Athena Nike, serving for approximately 30 years, and she is believed to have been respected and admired by the citizens of Athens.⁹⁰ Her father erected a monument to her, the inscription reading:

⁸⁹ Kamen, D. "Full Citizens: Male." In *Status in Classical Athens*, 97–108. Princeton University Press, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2855c8.15>.

The assembly also had a limited number of participants as dictated by space available on the *prytaneion*. Camp (2004):46-47

⁹⁰ Lougovaya-Ast, Julia. "Myrrhine, the First Priestess of Athena Nike." *Phoenix* 60, no. 3/4 (2006): 211–25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20304610>.

Far-shining memorial / of Kallimachos' / daughter, who first / tended the temple / of Nike. / She had a name / companion to her good repute, / as by divine fortune Myrrhine / she was called / in truth; / she was first / to tend the statue (?) / of Athena Nike, / (chosen) by lot from all, / Myrrhine by good fortune.⁹¹

This epigram, etched with pride, not only immortalizes her name but also her esteemed position in Athenian society. The mention of her 'good repute' and the 'divine fortune'⁹² of her name suggests that Myrrhine was more than a religious functionary; she embodied the grace and favor of the gods in her service.

In the *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes portrays Myrrhine, the Priestess of Athena Nike, as a teenage wife who, though initially hesitant to follow Lysistrata's strike, eventually joins the other women in their protest against the war. Myrrhine's decision to join the protest reveals her willingness to challenge societal norms and fight for peace, and it is her refusal to submit to her husband's sexual desires that wins the strike for the women. This portrayal of Myrrhine in the *Lysistrata* suggests that Athena Nike may have been seen as both relatable and strong, despite her lack of experience. As for what this suggests about the amount of power she holds, Aristophanes clearly places her beneath Lysistrata and the position of High Priestess of Athena Polias.

However, I do believe it is significant that Myrrhine was well-known enough to be referenced by name in the *Lysistrata*, keeping her own name and position, although she is aged down from

⁹¹ IGI3 1330 Gravestone of Myrrhine, First Priestess of Athena Nike. n.d. www.atticinscriptions.com. <https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IGI3/1330>.

⁹² Attic Inscriptions comments on the name Myrrhine in the translation notes for this inscription, saying: "Myrrhine" is Greek for "Myrtle", a sacred plant from which, among other things, crowns were made, associated with cult of Demeter (e.g. IG II3 1, 1164), but also more generally with symposia and sacrifices, and worn by officials and priests. By the operation of divine will, this verse suggests, exercised in the use of the lot (Plato, *Laws* 6. 759b-c), a candidate with an appropriate priestly name had been selected for this priesthood. Greek names commonly had religious connotations, and this was felt to be especially appropriate in the case of priests, who in some sense represented the divine. Here the propitious name, uttered when the priestess was spoken of in "eulogy", is envisaged as in harmony with the good things people had to say of her (l. 7). An appropriate name, however, was easier to engineer when appointment was from a *genos* than from the population at large and there may be a subtle implication that Myrrhine was as good as a *genos* priest (note too the emphasis on her father, whose name begins the verse, confirming that this priestess was properly qualified by descent)."

IGI3 1330 Gravestone of Myrrhine, First Priestess of Athena Nike. n.d. www.atticinscriptions.com. <https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IGI3/1330>.

what her age would have been in 411 BC (that being about 40). This represents a significant amount of social capital, even if it doesn't necessarily translate to political power. Therefore, it is not rash to argue that no matter the amount of political power wielded by Athena Nike, this position automatically placed her above most people in Athens, including her husband (provided he was not a magistrate or archon) and all women except the High priestess of Athena Polias herself. This elevated status granted Athena Nike a level of influence and authority in Athenian society that was unparalleled for a woman chosen by lot.

The role of the Priestess of Athena Nike was a position of significant religious and social importance in classical Athens. The priestess's role as an intermediary between Athena Nike and the people of Athens was crucial, and her position was central in major religious festivals and processions. The portrayal of the Priestess of Athena Nike in literary evidence, such as in the *Lysistrata*, suggests that she was seen as both relatable and strong, despite potential lack of experience. Overall, the Priestess of Athena Nike played a pivotal role in the religious and social fabric of ancient Athens.

High Priestess of Athena Polias

The High Priestess of Athena Polias held an office of unparalleled religious significance in the spiritual life of Ancient Athens.⁹³ Her role was multifaceted, encompassing the maintenance of ritual purity, the performance of sacred rites, and the safeguarding of religious traditions. As the earthly representative of Athena Polias, the goddess who presided as the *polis*'s protector, the High Priestess was integral to the city's identity and its relationship with the divine.

⁹³ Dillon (2008): 84-89

One of her primary responsibilities was to preside over the major religious festivals honoring Athena. The *Chalkeia*, a festival celebrating the goddess's patronage of artisans and the art of metallurgy, saw the High Priestess setting the warp for the weaving of Athena's new *peplos*.⁹⁴ This garment was not a mere piece of clothing but a symbol of the city's devotion and the goddess's favor. The meticulous ritual underscored the belief that the welfare of the city was intrinsically linked to the deity's veneration, and the High Priestess was at this nexus, guiding the populace in their worship.

During the *Arrephoria*, the High Priestess's role was shrouded in mystery, handling sacred objects whose nature remains unknown.⁹⁵ The "secret things" that she entrusted to the *arrephoroi* were carried in a solemn procession and deposited at an undisclosed location, retrieved the following day.⁹⁶ Her duties extended to the *Plynteria* as well, a festival where the ancient wooden statue of Athena was stripped of its ornate clothing and jewelry and ceremoniously washed. The High Priestess supervised this intimate ritual, which was thought to renew the divine presence within the statue.⁹⁷ Similarly, she oversaw the adornment and redressing of the statue, restoring Athena's grandeur within the Parthenon.⁹⁸ These rituals, though focused on the physical image of Athena, were imbued with profound spiritual meaning, symbolizing the renewal of the city's fortunes and the purification of the community.

Beyond these public duties, the High Priestess also played a crucial role in the smaller, often daily rituals that sustained the bond between Athena and Athens. She offered regular prayers and sacrifices, mediated disputes concerning religious law, and managed the temple precinct, which was not only a religious center but also a treasure house and refuge. Her

⁹⁴ Connelly (2007): 120

⁹⁵ For more on the *Arrephoria* see Chapter 1

⁹⁶ Connelly (2007): 120

⁹⁷ Ibid

⁹⁸ Ibid

authority to manage the financial assets and properties of the temple further underscores the economic and administrative dimensions of her role. The High Priestess's religious duties were, therefore, not confined to mere ceremonial display; they were woven into the very fabric of Athenian social and political life. She held a position that transcended the boundaries of the sacred and the secular, embodying the civic ideology of ancient Athens.

Hereditary Succession and the Eteoboutad Clan

The office of the High Priestess of Athena Polias itself was deeply rooted in the principle of hereditary succession, specifically within the *Eteoboutad* clan, an aristocratic family that traced its lineage to the mythic Erechtheus, a foundational king of Athens. This hereditary and even autochthonous aspect underpins the enduring relationship between the divine patronage of Athena and the lineage that served her, signifying the interlacing of the sacred with the aristocratic order of the city. The High Priestess could trace her ancestors back to the very foundation of the city, in some accounts to the mythic-king himself, said to be a child of Athena.⁹⁹ In this way, she is completely Athenian in the true sense of the word. Her ancestors sprung from the ground of Attica itself, therefore, she is the perfect figurehead of Athena in Athens.

The *Eteoboutad* clan's claim to the priesthood was so entrenched in Athenian tradition that it became synonymous with the religious identity of the city.¹⁰⁰ The priestess, chosen from the daughters of the *Eteoboutadai*, was not only a spiritual leader but also a living symbol of the historical continuity of Athens. Serving for life, her role was not one to be taken lightly, for it demanded a lifelong dedication to the goddess and her worshippers.

⁹⁹ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Erechtheus." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 15, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Erechtheus-Greek-mythology>.

¹⁰⁰ Connelly (2007): 117

Epigraphic trails allow for a glimpse into the lives and legacies of these priestesses, enabling historians to piece together the matrilineal tapestry that held the *Eteoboutadai* in high social regard. This hereditary transmission is particularly evidenced by the epigraphic record of the family line of Drakontides of Bate,¹⁰¹ which shows that the first six known priestesses of Athena Polias were closely related. A compelling case can also be made that the first ten named priestesses, as recorded in the inscriptions, belonged to the same familial line, underscoring the clan's enduring hold on the priestess's role.¹⁰² Such epigraphic evidence not only illuminates the line of succession but also the importance of female lineage in the maintenance of religious traditions, suggesting that women played a pivotal, though often understated, role in the perpetuation of Athenian religious and social order.

The process of succession, as posited by scholars, typically observed the passing of the priesthood from the eldest male of the *Eteoboutad* clan to his eldest daughter.¹⁰³ This method ensured that the sacred office remained within the clan, preserving the purity of the line and, by extension, the sanctity of the rituals performed. In scenarios lacking a direct male successor, the office would be passed matrilineally, a testament to the flexible yet rigidly structured nature of Athenian priestly succession.¹⁰⁴

The hereditary nature of the High Priestess's office is not merely a function of religious necessity but also a reflection of the Athenian values surrounding family and societal status. The priestesses were responsible not only for the care of the priestesshood, but also for birthing female heirs. This placed the High Priestesses in the unique position of being both a representative of a virgin goddess, and yet was allowed—required, even—to be married, be a

¹⁰¹ See S.B. Aleshire 1994. "The Demos and the Priests: The Selection of Sacred Officials at Athens from Cleisthenes to Augustus." In *Ritual, Finance, Politics*, edited by R. Osborne and S. Hornblower, Oxford: 332

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Connelly (2007): 523

¹⁰⁴ As suggested by Turner, *Judy Ann*. "Hierai: Acquisition of Feminine Priesthoods in Ancient Greece." 1983: 249. See also Aleshire (1994) 332.

mother, and rear children. This ensures the candidate for the position be the ideal Athenian woman: truly Athenian, as she was from a blood-line sprung from the earth of Attica, well-educated in her duties, as she progressed through all the religious roles required of any *eupatrid* girl, and virtuous, as she was married and faithfully providing heirs to her family.

Moreover, the hereditary aspect of the priesthood served as a political tool, ensuring that the *Eteoboutad* clan maintained a significant influence in Athenian affairs. The priestess's recommendations and opinions would often carry weight in political decisions, indicating the subtle yet profound ways religion and governance intertwined in the city-state.

In sum, the hereditary succession of the High Priestess of Athena Polias within the *Eteoboutad* clan was not simply a matter of familial tradition but a complex interplay of religion, politics, and social structure. The continuity of this role through the generations not only preserved the sacred rituals and traditions of Athenian worship but also reinforced the socio-political framework that sustained the city's prosperity and identity across the centuries.

The Socio-Political Elevation of the Priestess

The socio-political standing of the High Priestess of Athena Polias in Classical Athens was unparalleled among female positions, reflecting a unique amalgamation of religious reverence and civic honor. This elevation is illustrated by the case of Lysimache, who served as a priestess for an extraordinary sixty-four years in the 5th century, a tenure that spanned significant historical periods, including the Peloponnesian War and the rise of Macedonian power. Lysimache's character and dedication likely inspired the portrayal of Aristophanes' titular

character Lysistrata.¹⁰⁵ Through this depiction, her image served as a model for subsequent generations, shaping cultural expectations and norms surrounding the office of the priesthood.

There are also a plethora of stories associated with the role of High Priestess, even if they are not named. One such story attests to the power of the Priestess extending beyond just the borders and citizens of Athens. Herodotus gives a detailed account of a priestess of Athena Polias who refused Spartan king Kleomenes entry to the Acropolis in 508 BC.¹⁰⁶ Connelly's discussion of the relevant passages of Herodotus illustrate this point:

“before the king even got a foot in the door of Athena's temple, the priestess leapt up from her throne and ordered him out. Addressing him as “stranger from Lakedaimon,” she cautioned Kleomenes that it was unlawful for a Dorian to enter the holy place. Despite the fact that this account is probably fictitious, a core truth reflects the authority of the priestess in enforcing sanctuary law.”¹⁰⁷

Clearly, the political power of the priestess's role was also significant. Her ability to influence civic offices by recommendation and maintain associations with the city's elite allowed her to operate within the political framework of Athens. Although direct political power was typically denied to women in ancient Greece, the priestess navigated these constraints through soft power, utilizing her religious authority and social connections to influence decisions subtly but effectively. This soft power was not insignificant. The priestess's recommendations could sway political appointments, her opinions could shape public policy, and her religious authority could legitimize political actions. In a city where the favor of the gods was sought for the success of political and military endeavors, the priestess's blessing was a coveted endorsement.

The most famous story of this “soft power” resides again in Herodotus in his description of how Athens was vacated before the Battle of Salamis in 480 B.C.¹⁰⁸ As the Persians advanced,

¹⁰⁵ For the convincing argument, see Lewis, David M. “Notes on Attic Inscriptions (II): XXIII. Who Was Lysistrata?” *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 50 (1955): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0068245400018542>.

¹⁰⁶ Herodotus 5.72

¹⁰⁷ Connelly (2007): 120-121

¹⁰⁸ Herodotus (7.142–44)

the Athenians sought guidance from the oracle at Delphi. The oracle's advice was enigmatic, suggesting the Athenians find safety behind "wooden walls." This led to a split in interpretation among the people; some believed the "walls" referred to the Acropolis fortifications, while others thought it meant the Athenian naval fleet. Themistocles, an Athenian general, was among those advocating for the latter interpretation and urged the Athenians to board their ships. However, it was the priestess's declaration that sealed the decision. Herodotus credits her for publicly announcing that the sacred snake had not consumed its offering of a honey cake, which was seen as a signal that the goddess Athena had abandoned the city.¹⁰⁹ This interpretation facilitated the willing evacuation of the populace. The priestess's ability to sway the people to follow Themistocles' plan demonstrates the intertwined nature of politics and religion in Athens, as well as the significant role the priestess played in mobilizing the community.¹¹⁰

The socio-political elevation of the High Priestess of Athena Polias was thus a reflection of her central role in the intersection of religion, culture, and politics. She was a figure of continuity in the landscape of Athenian society, a symbol of stability in times of peace and conflict, and a conduit of influence in the civic realm. Her position served as a testament to the unique status women could hold in ancient Greek society, particularly within the religious domain, where their roles could transcend the typical gender boundaries of the time.

The High Priestess of Athena Polias embodied the paragon of Athenian female citizenship, intertwining the threads of religious piety and civic virtue. Her life and work represented an ideal convergence of the city's expectations for its women within a realm where the religious realm granted a unique bridge to the civic. By performing her religious duties with unwavering dedication, she upheld the spiritual sanctity of the *polis*, reinforcing the feminine

¹⁰⁹ Herodotus (8.41)

¹¹⁰ Connelly (2007): 121

sphere of civic duty. Simultaneously, through her engagement in the socio-political fabric of Athens—advising, guiding, and influencing matters of state and religious law—she demonstrated a level of agency and involvement in the public sphere that far surpassed the ordinary confines placed on her female contemporaries. Her role as a mediator, a protector of tradition, and an adviser placed her at the heart of Athenian society, where she represented the potential of women to contribute to the greatness of the city, setting a profound example of female citizenship under the *aegis* of Athena.

Conclusion

Thus, the priestesses of Athena Nike and Athena Polias in ancient Athens were not merely religious appointments but were deeply embedded in the socio-political fabric of the city. The Priestess of Athena Nike, selected by lot, was a role that theoretically democratized religious service, yet in practice, it was constrained by socio-economic factors that favored the elite. This position, while significant, was often held by women already connected to high-status individuals, reflecting the complexities of Athenian society where egalitarian ideals coexisted with entrenched class distinctions.

The High Priestess of Athena Polias, on the other hand, was a hereditary role that exemplified the intertwining of religious duty with aristocratic lineage, serving as a living symbol of the city's historical continuity. Her influence extended beyond the temple, as she played a crucial role in guiding the populace in worship, advising on state matters, and upholding religious law, thereby setting a profound example of female citizenship.

Both roles underscore the importance of women in the maintenance of religious and social order in Athens. The priestesses represented a unique space where women could

exercise a degree of power and agency, challenging the typical gender boundaries of the time.

Through their service, these priestesses not only honored the gods but also shaped the identity and governance of their city, leaving an indelible mark on the cultural and political landscape of ancient Athens.

Chapter Four: Citizenship

The role of priestesses in Athenian society presents an intriguing paradox when juxtaposed with prevailing scholarly views on the traditional expectations of Athenian women, particularly those influenced by Pericles' Funeral Oration. In his speech, Pericles articulates a vision of female virtue that celebrates their invisibility in public discourse, encapsulated in the maxim that “To a woman not to show more weakness than is natural to her sex is a great glory, and not to be talked about for good or for evil among men.”¹¹¹ This perception, while not entirely inaccurate, has often overshadowed the complex realities of women's lives in ancient Athens, especially when considering their public religious roles. In contrast to this ideal of female seclusion, the public nature of priestesses offered women a platform for civic presence and participation, raising questions about the compatibility of such roles with Pericles' ideals. The conundrum deepens when examining the practicalities of citizenship laws introduced under Pericles, which required public affirmation of a woman's status—a direct challenge to the notion of female invisibility. Without any formal registry for women's citizenship and the necessity of public testimony from a male guardian or witnesses to affirm a woman's citizen status, the expectation of women's confinement away from the public eye seems at odds with the realities of the time.

The concept of Athenian female identity was invented through the 451 Citizenship Law, commonly referred to as Pericles' Citizenship Law. Although scholars commonly refer to this law as providing women citizenship, it is important to note that the main purpose of the citizenship law was to restrict citizenship, not expand it.¹¹² In this way, the female right to

¹¹¹ Thuc. 2.45.2

¹¹² For a brief overview of the Citizenship Law of 451 see T.R. Martin, *An Overview of Classical Greek History from Mycenae to Alexander, Athenian Empire in the Golden Age, the Policies of Pericles, the Citizenship Law of Pericles*. n.d. www.perseus.tufts.edu.

citizenship was a mere side effect of this law rather than its intention.¹¹³ The law specifically stipulated that only those born of two Athenian citizen parents could claim Athenian citizenship. This legislative change placed a further emphasis on the role of Athenian women in the production of legitimate citizen offspring, thereby restricting their freedom through the elevation of their status within the *polis*.

The citizenship law also indirectly affected women's legal rights, particularly in the realm of property ownership. While citizen women could inherit property and receive dowries, their ability to manage or dispose of this property was constrained. A law cited in Isaeus prevented women from entering into contracts for the disposal of property valued above a medimnos of barley without the involvement of a *kurios*.¹¹⁴ Although this law limited women's legal autonomy, it is argued that in practice, women could exercise control over property through various means, despite the legal restrictions.¹¹⁵

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0009%3Achapter%3D9%3Asection%3D3%3Asubsection%3D1>. For the mention of the law in the constitution, see Aristot. Const. Ath. 26.3

¹¹³ As the specific language of the law has been lost, our evidence for the existence of it comes through two sources, Aristotle and Plutarch. Aristotle provides the broad strokes of the proclamation: “an enactment was passed on the proposal of Pericles confining citizenship to persons of citizen birth on both sides,” (Aristot. Const. Ath. 26.3), while Plutarch reveals that Pericles asked for an exception to his own law due to the death of his sons, saying: “When the people had apologized for their thankless treatment of him, and he had undertaken again the conduct of the state, and been elected general, he asked for a suspension of the law concerning children born out of wedlock,—a law which he himself had formerly introduced,—in order that the name and lineage of his house might not altogether expire through lack of succession.” (Plut. Per. 37.2, trans. by Bernadotte Perrin).

¹¹⁴ Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves : Women in Classical Antiquity*. London: Pimlico, 1994: 59, 64

¹¹⁵ This is an argument that can be expanded to all studies of Athenian law, and all of ancient law for that matter. Unfortunately much of our analysis of ancient Athenian culture comes from surviving law codes, which can be helpful in determining the ideals of the *polis*. However, we do not know how much of the law code was strictly enforced versus what was just an ideal that only existed in theory. Although I do not delve into this discussion of law and reality in this thesis, I recommend the following articles for further reading on women's studies in classics: P. Culham, *Ten Years after Pomeroy: Studies of the Image and Reality of Women in Antiquity*, *Helios* n.s. 13 (1986), 9-30; M. Skinner, *Classical Studies vs. Women's Studies: Duo moi ta noemmata*, *Helios* 12 (1986), 3-16; L. Foxhall, *Gender and the Study of Classical Antiquity*, in *Studying Gender in Classical Antiquity*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (2013): 1-23; and M. Katz, *Ideology and "The Status of Women" in Ancient Greece*, *History and Theory* 31, no. 4 (1992): 70–97.

However, proving female citizenship became slightly more complex because women were not enrolled in the lists of *phratries* and *demes* like men. Thus, their citizenship was often proven through witness testimony regarding their birth to citizen parents, their lawful betrothal (*enguē*) arranged by a *kurios*, and their marriage feast as part of a lawful union. This method of proving citizenship was less reliable than inscribed records, which were the standard for men, and could be challenged in court.¹¹⁶ In the judicial sphere, women's participation was constrained but not entirely absent. They could not testify in court, but their testimony could be invoked indirectly, such as through evidentiary oaths sworn outside of court or cited within a speech's narrative. Women could serve as plaintiffs or defendants in legal proceedings,¹¹⁷ often represented by their *kurios*, and in some cases, they could be involved in trials with severe penalties, such as death.¹¹⁸ In her analysis of Athenian citizenship, Deborah Kamen adds that women might have influenced legal outcomes indirectly, for instance, by affecting their husbands' votes in court and in the assembly.¹¹⁹

Prior to this law, the maternal lineage of a child was not as rigorously scrutinized for the purposes of citizenship. The new decree, however, intensified the importance of Athenian women's reproductive role, as they became gatekeepers of the citizenry. Women's ability to confer citizenship upon their children meant that their own status as citizens needed to be beyond reproach. With no official system of registration for female citizens, how would one affirm a woman's citizenship in a society? This thesis argues that the priestesshoods that girls and women progressed through functioned as persistent public affirmations of citizenship, established and reinforced through communal consensus. By acting in these official religious positions, the girls

¹¹⁶ The most famous example of this type of lawsuit is in Apollodorus' *Against Neaera*. See Dem. 59.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Kamen, Deborah. *Full Citizens: Female*. In *Status in Classical Athens*, 87–96. Princeton University Press, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2855c8.14>.

and women repeatedly proved their Athenian birthright to the entire city. Making a woman's citizenship well-known throughout the *polis* by means of priestesses accomplished more than just the traditional dual purpose: to bring honor to their family through piety, and to display their citizen daughter as eligible for marriage.

As the Citizenship Law required both parents to be citizens in order for their offspring to be citizens, it was more important than ever that *Eupatrid* daughters were seen in society, where their citizenship could be observed and attested to. This introduced a new perspective to priestesses, one that displayed the mantle as a civic responsibility as well as a somewhat decorative position. For example, in this way the Panathenaia served not only as a debutante ball, but also to reaffirm the position of the *kanephoroi* as Athenian citizen women in an audience that included slaves and metics as well as citizens. This is the same for the *Arrephoria*, the *Plynteria*, the *Kallekteia*, and the many other ceremonies in Athens. These festivals were all celebrated publicly, meaning that it was important to the Athenians that the women performing these duties were seen.

Similarly, as this thesis has explored, monuments erected to honor women who had served in the public sphere as priestesses increased in popularity during the 5th century as female citizenship became more important to prove. This practice accomplished the exact opposite of Pericles' ideal— it preserved the names of these women for eternity, as wives, mothers, and most importantly, citizens. Joan Connelly explores another example of women's names being widely known, and even used for historical records:

“At Argos, the priestess of Hera enjoyed an even more broadly reaching civic eponymy. The tenure of her service was used to date not only matters of cult but also historical events of the day. In this, the priestess's position was comparable to that of the male archons whose tenures provided dates for historical chronologies at Athens and other cities. Thucydides (2.2.1) used the forty-eighth year of Chrysis's service as priestess at

Argos, along with the tenures of the ephorate at Sparta and the archonship at Athens, to date the beginning of the Peloponnesian war. The names of priestesses were thus among the most widely shared elements of common knowledge across the Greek world. This is striking, in view of the widely held belief that the names of well-born women could not even be spoken aloud in classical Athens. In this, we see a contradiction between what we are told in literature and what we learn from epigraphic sources.”¹²⁰

Thucydides himself, who had also transcribed the Funeral Oration, used a woman’s name to mark significant events in his History of the Peloponnesian War.¹²¹ As this was contemporary to Pericles, it follows that Pericles would have been familiar with the oral tradition of using a (female) priestess’ name to mark significant events.¹²² This statement brings to the forefront a central dilemma encountered in the study of ancient times: the tension between rhetoric and reality.

Citizenship and Participation in Priestesshoods

Although most of the priestesshoods were available to a select few families classified as “*eupatrid*” enough for the honor, there were some ceremonies and positions open to all Athenian girls or women. Chief among these was the Panathenaia, the city-wide procession meant to honor Athena.¹²³ The *Arkteia* was another festival open to girls of any social class and allowed them to present their citizenship to the *polis* through a series of girlhood rituals at Brauron. Due to these “open” festivals, in theory, every Athenian woman could have participated in the religious sphere

¹²⁰ Connelly, Joan Breton. *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece*. Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition: 114

¹²¹ Thuc. 2.2.1, and Harvey, D. “Women in Thucydides.” *Arethusa* 18, no. 1 (1985): 68
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44578356>.

¹²² It could be argued that Pericles disapproved of this practice, and was perhaps referencing it when he declared that a good woman should not have her name spread around. Chyrseis was a priestess of Hera at Argos, and therefore was not Athenian. Pericles could have been drawing a line between a respectable, silent, reclusive Athenian woman and the overpowered Argive woman. However, the point still stands. Whether or not Pericles approved of this method of date-keeping, it was still practiced enough that Thucydides used it as a standard of time he assumed his readers would understand. This means that the power of the priestess was widespread, and, as I will explore more in Chapter 4, the High Priestess of Athena Polias on the Acropolis would have been just as known, considering she held a priestesshood comparable in power to the Priestess of Hera at Argos.

¹²³ For more on the Panathenaia and its significance see Chapter 3

at some point in her life, thereby confirming her citizenship.¹²⁴ This theoretically universal participation contrasts sharply with the more exclusive priestesses, creating a broader context in which to consider the role of Athenian women in the religious and civic domains.

Inadvertently, the citizenship law of 451 BCE reinforced the distinct nature of female citizenship in Athens. Although its goal was to underscore the reproductive and domestic roles of women while maintaining their exclusion from direct political participation, the law essentially required women to be public figures. Women's citizenship was characterized by a combination of privileges and limitations, with their primary contribution to the *polis* being the production of legitimate citizen offspring and participation in civic religion. This distinct status category for female citizens was essential for the maintenance of the Athenian identity and the perpetuation of its citizen body.

¹²⁴ Transitioning to a more quantitative analysis of this participation, we can reference historical demographic data. Using Gomme's foundational estimate for the Athenian population circa 431 BC at around 30,000 individuals, there were about 15,000 female citizens at the time. Accounting for age and ability to attend, I estimate that about 10,000 women would participate in some form of public religious ceremony in their lifetime. Gomme, A.W. *The Population of Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.* Westport: Greenwood Pr, 1986: 29. This is a very broad estimate made using the general 50/50 population split between genders. I acknowledge there might be a large margin of error as I did not account for exposures of female newborns. For general reading about the regularity of exposures see Patterson, Cynthia. "'Not Worth the Rearing': *The Causes of Infant Exposure in Ancient Greece.*" *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-) 115 (1985): 103–23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/284192>.

Conclusion: The Implications of Public Performance of Citizenship

In the preceding chapters, I have traversed the storied landscape of Ancient Athens through the lens of historical analysis and secondary scholarship. I have explored the intricate tapestry of various priestesses and the religious, social, and cultural practices that defined them. Yet, despite the extensive research, there remains an elusive element to the historical narrative: the visceral, human experience. Although this element is difficult to capture, what follows is an attempt to do so. Through a narrative story, following the life of an elite Athenian citizen girl, I hope to convey the humanity that existed in the gaps left in between votive reliefs, ancient historians, and modern scholarship. It is easy to forget that these priestesses were people—people who had families and hopes and fears. Similarly, many of the priestesses were focused in childhood, with the chosen girls being as young as six when they left their mothers to live on the Acropolis.¹²⁵

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The air is hot and dry, the sun beating down on her slowly browning skin. Her feet hurt, her toes keep slipping out of the front of her sandals, rubbing against the ground painfully as her six-year-old legs struggle to keep up with the procession of adults. *You've never walked this much before*, she thinks, *not gone up there*. The acropolis looms above her—never getting closer. It's the holy city. Her new home for the next year. Her calves burn as the ground beneath her sharpens upward yet again. The hill is neverending.

¹²⁵ I hope to provide an element of realness in my image of girlhood, not just because I am a woman, and thus have been a girl, but also because I spend my days around children as a nanny. Most of the girls I care for are around the age of seven or eight, and so I'd like to think I know their behavior and psyche, especially while they are in the height of their emotions. The girl I wrote is very different from the girls I nanny, obviously, as the girls I nanny are not second-class citizens (I hope) in a world where they carry the weight of nobility and family on their shoulders. However, I see a lot of them (the girls I nanny: Violet and Isabel) in her (the girl I wrote). They (both the girls I nanny and the girl I wrote) are imaginative and tired, and complain a lot, but mostly in their heads (although Violet and Isabel complain a lot out loud too). Most importantly, they all are children. They love toys and playing outside, and they hate chores and too much school. I can't live out the experience of a little Athenian citizen-girl, but I have tried to imagine it. I hope you enjoy.

It's the month of Skirophorion, and the Arrephoria has just ended- or will end, when she reaches the temple and is initiated. She had been chosen. When her name was announced, her father had almost leaped with joy— her selection meant he was noble enough, good enough. Her mother had released a sigh of relief. She didn't quite understand what was happening, why her name was called, or why it mattered. But before she knew to ask those questions, her nursemaid was whispering tearful goodbyes in her ear as she plaited her hair, her mother was hugging her and telling her to listen to the High Priestess, and her father was lecturing at her about duty and priestesshoods and future husbands and what it means to be an Athenian. And now she is here, finally nearing the temple, looking behind her and realizing just how far up she is— how far away from her brothers and father and mother and nursemaid.

There are three other girls standing next to her at the initiation. It's just her and them and the High Priestess, an older woman who seems untouchable. She knows one of the other three— the one at the other end of the line— is the priestess' daughter, and that the girl will be in her mother's shoes one day. The girl also seems nervous, playing with her chiton edges quietly. The High Priestess notices and shoots her daughter a glare. The girl stops immediately, head cast down.

The girls are all initiated, and she follows. Temple acolytes scrub her body and anoint her in oils, she is dressed in temple robes, and the next day she begins her lessons. Over the next year she learns to weave, coming to understand the delicate way to handle the weft, kanon, and shuttle. In between chores and lessons she and the other girls find corners of the temple to explore. At night, they braid each other's hair and giggle under the covers so the acolytes can't hear. She finds wildflowers growing in the sparse patches of grass on the mountain and weaves them into crowns. She thinks about her mother all the time, her nursemaid even more.

She finds out that she has been selected to be one of the basket carriers for the *Arrephoria*, along with the High Priestess' daughter. She thinks she remembers this as a good thing— her father had wanted this. She is told by the acolytes to be pleased. “*The entire polis will bear witness to your obedience,*” they say, “*they will know you have been blessed by Athena.*”

The basket was a test. In her lessons she had been told the story of Pandrosos, the obedient daughter, servant to Athena. It was now her turn to walk in the ancient girl's shoes with the same task- do NOT look in the basket. Not when she receives it, not as she carries it through the city, and not when she deposits them in the sanctuary to Aphrodite of the Gardens. At night the other two girls— the ones chosen to set the warp— whisper stories of what they heard resides in the baskets. Live snakes with a bite reserved for any *Arrephoroi* who dares to look inside, knives wielded by Athena herself, back in the Age of Heroes. They haunt her dreams. What will she carry through the city tomorrow? Something horrible? Something wonderful?

It haunts her still as she carries the heavy basket on her head. She has turned seven during the past year, and she feels grown up. It shouldn't be this hard, still, to walk such a long distance. she thought it would have gotten easier since the last time she made this journey, exactly a year ago. She and the priestess' daughter descend by the natural underground road that goes across the city, a cool and earthy passageway to the sanctuary of Aphrodite. She sets down what she had carried at the feet of the High Priestess, who looks terrifying in the damp darkness of the night, and she gives her another basket, filled with more mystery, somehow even heavier. She returned to the Acropolis, calves burning, feet blistered, and set down the basket. The new *arrephoroi* have been chosen, and she is no longer one. She can make out the shape of her mother and father waiting to bring her back home. However, as she approaches, ready to leave the sacred city,

ready to see her brothers and nursemaid, her father speaks with pride in his eyes. She has been chosen to be an *aletris*. She will continue living on the Acropolis.

Although she wanted to go home, and her feet hurt, and she had been dreaming of seeing her bedroom and toys, she sees her mother shake her head subtly and give her an encouraging smile. Her mother had done this, she remembered. "*Her mother had done this when she was a child, and if she could, then I could,*" she thinks. She remembered the *aletrides*, they were nice, as far as she knew. She could do this.

The High Priestess' daughter had also been chosen, so she wasn't alone. The acropolis had been her home now for over a year, and it wasn't nearly as frightening anymore. As she learned to grind grain in the *molones*, she watched the new *arrephoroi* from afar. They seemed so small, so scared. There were other priestesses, older than she but younger than the High Priestesses, who shuffled around the Acropolis. Many lived off the mountain, with their husbands, returning to the sanctuary for festivals. "*They get to see the xoanon unclothed,*" The High priestess' daughter had whispered. When she asked if she would ever be able to, the High priestess' daughter laughed. "*No silly, they're the Praxiergidai. You're noble but not **that** kind of noble. They're **my** kind of noble. And I'm descended from Athena herself.*" "*Are they?*" she asked, "*descended from Athena, I mean?*" A perplexed look came upon the other girl's face. "*I don't know,*" she breathed, "*but I know you're not.*"

The *Skira* came and went and came and went again, and she grew tired of the routine. There is less time for sneaking around as an *aletris*, she has so much grain to grind, so many honey cakes to bake, so many offerings to leave. Unlike the *arrephoroi*, she doesn't have an end date. Some of the *aletrides* serve for three years, others one. She has been one for almost two years. She is nine now. The High Priestess' daughter is still with her, and is her best friend. The

Praxiergidai and their mysteries had become a secret game between the two of them. They would lay awake at night whispering theories of what they do during the 25th day of Thargelion, when the Erechtheion is walled off. Everything is quiet and familiar, until one day, when an acolyte tells her that her father has requested the end of her service as an *aletris*, and the High Priestess has complied. For the first time since she was six, she is going home.

Home is different than she remembered. Her brothers are no longer available to play, they are being trained— for what, she isn't sure— and when they return to their rooms, they have no patience for her childish games. It's strange, being invisible again. On the Acropolis she was so visible, noticed all the time, every action nitpicked. Here, she was expected to be small and obedient, to play quietly. She misses her friend, she misses waking up to priestesses moving around her, performing their duties.

A year passes, and when the city begins buzzing for a religious festival- the Brauronia, she is told she will participate. Her father explains that this is important. All little girls do this to become women. She will be an *arktos*, a little bear, for Artemis. She is fitted in saffron-colored robes and proceeds with the mass of people to the sanctuary. It is a long walk, but the air is bright and the crowd is happy. There are more little girls in the procession than she has ever seen together in her life- all in yellow dresses, all quivering in anticipation.

The ceremonies were nothing like the ones on the Acropolis, completed with solemn expressions and bowed heads. The Arkteia was a frenzy. She was expected to do things that she had been scolded for her entire life. She was meant to scream, and run, and fall over, scraping her knees. It didn't matter if she tore her dress or danced. There were races, like the ones her brother ran, and she ran faster than she ever thought possible, her bare feet slamming painfully against the forest floor. She came in third, and even though there wasn't a third place prize, she

was proud. In the frenzy of the dances that night, she saw the High Priestess' daughter, her too being wild- wilder than she had ever thought she capable of.

But as soon as it started, it ended. The walk back to the city is sadder, exhaustion from the nightly activities combined in disappointment that they are over. Her mother pats her head and talks of urges and girlhood and gladness that it's out of her system. "*You are ready,*" her mother says. She knows what she means.

From this moment on, she is no longer left alone to play with her toys and the slave children, instead her mother brings her to her weaving room, and she sits for hours with her, impressing the women with the skills she learned on the Acropolis years before. When her mother isn't weaving, she takes her around the house, lecturing her on the *oikos*, on responsibility, on the management of the household. "*You will be expected to take care of all of this,*" She asks. "*Do you understand?*" she nodded. She begins to understand that it was important that she learned to grind grain and weave. "*This is what we do,*" her mother explains. "*This is your duty.*"

Years pass, and she is thirteen. It has been years since she was a priestess in the public eye, and her father is getting anxious. Marriage, and a good match, has been placed on her mind for years by her mother, father, brothers, and whispering servants. She has been trained by her mother in the art of housekeeping, and she is ready to be given away. But her father is a politician, and is ambitious. She is of a noble family, but not noble enough to make politics easy. She is a key to his success, a vessel for an alliance. But no one will consider her unless she is a *kanephoros*. One of the perfect maidens chosen to represent the city in the Panathenaia. Tomorrow is selection day, and she can't sleep. Nerves encompass her body as she thinks of what more she could have done to ensure her selection. She thinks of her brothers, both counting

on her to secure them a wealthy, powerful brother-in-law, her father, waiting to use her as a stepping stone to an archonship, her mother, waiting for assurance that she did well raising a perfect Athenian citizen daughter.

The next day, she stands in the slight breeze as the announcer prepares to read out the names of the chosen. Her mother grips her hand tightly. Everyone was expecting her to be chosen, a blessing and a curse. If she weren't, she shudders to think what might happen. Her virtue, her citizenship all open to questioning. The crowd quiets in anticipation and she breathes a sigh of relief when she hears her name. She can barely pay attention as the other names are called, too relieved to register her parents' praises to Athena. She walks, once again, to the Acropolis, and listens silently to the High Priestess as she greets her with the other *kanephoroi*. The High Priestess' daughter has also been selected, and they stand near each other. She is instructed in the procession, the importance of the baskets, the mythos behind every movement. She is told that she will be paraded throughout the city, to be triumphant, beautiful, and graceful. Her future husband will be in the crowd, watching her for signs of her virtue. "*You are Athenian,*" the High priestess says, "*be proud of your citizenship, and humble of your gender.*"

The day of the Procession is a blur. As she begins the walk, led by the High Priestesses and the High Priest, she holds her back straight and walks daintily, remembering her mother's words. Everyone is watching, from all throughout Attica. Every eligible man is staring at her and the other *kanephoroi*, choosing which one he likes best. Any slip, and they might be too embarrassed to marry you, someone who faltered in front of the entire *polis*. She hadn't been near many men in her life other than her father and brothers, and the occasional male slave. Some are handsome, she notices, remembering her mother's advice. "*Keep your eye out,*" she had said, "*be coy, enchant them.*" So she does. She smiles and glides through the city, ignoring

the pain in her calves that is still there, no matter how many years she has walked this route. She is certain that she is the picture of beauty and grace, she silently prays to Athena to bring her a wise and handsome husband.

The nights after the festival, her family feasts on the finest cuts of meat— her rewards for service. Her father is proud and her mother is relieved, as there have been many offers for her hand. She has succeeded. A flurry of men want her as their wife, as the mother for their future citizen babies. Her father will choose the one with the best brideprice, and soon she will be moved into her husband's house, and will raise her daughters to follow in her footsteps. She will wait in anticipation for their name to be read as an *arrephoroi*, and will send away her six-year-old to live in strangers' hands on the Acropolis for years. When she returns she will be another person, no longer a child, no longer allowed to be one.

During the week before her wedding day, she travels with her mother and brothers to Brauron again, this time with her childhood toys. She lays them at the feet of the statue of Artemis, whispering a prayer for her marriage, fertility, and childbirth. As she walks away, she can feel something break— her connection to her family, to herself. She is no longer a child, she is a wife. She has made the transition from girl to woman.

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In this fictionalized exploration of an Athenian girl's passage through her participation in various priestesses, we have delved into the elements of her life often overlooked in scholarship, from the formation of friendships to daily chores. All of these things unfold against the backdrop of the Athenian *polis*. While our protagonist's ascent to the esteemed position of a *kanephoroi*, and her friend's to that of High Priestess, showcases the public influence afforded to some women within the religious hierarchy, it also casts a stark light on the broader societal

context where women, despite their sacred roles, remained second-class citizens. Nevertheless, it is clear that these women, enshrined in their duties and cloaked in the sanctity of their office, were citizens nonetheless.

Appendix of Images



Figure 1. Marble votive relief of the Graces with *arrephoros* at the loom, from the Athenian Acropolis, 4th century B.C. marble, Athens, Acropolis Museum, 2554



Figure 2. Marble statue base of an *arrephoros* with the Graces from the Athenian Acropolis, 4th century B.C. marble, Athens, Acropolis Museum, 3306



Figure 3. Marble statue base of the *arrephoros* Anthemia from the Athenian Acropolis, 2nd century B.C. marble, Athens, Epigraphical Museum, 10863

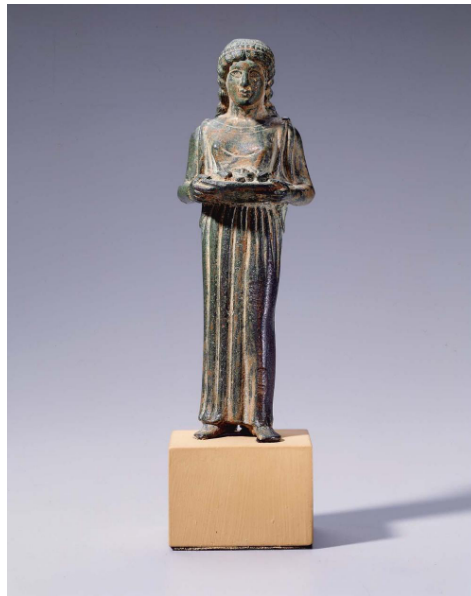


Figure 4. Statuette of a girl with an offering tray from Greece (said to have been found at Corinth), c.450 B.C. bronze, Boston, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 98.668



Figure 5. Fragment of Black Figure Krateriskos from the sanctuary to Artemis Mounichia at Piraeus, c.500-450 B.C. Piraeus, Piraeus Archaeological Museum, ΜΠ 5424



Figure 6. Krateriskos Fragment from the Athenian Agora, c.500-450 B.C. Athens, Agora Museum, P 27342



Figure 7. Marble votive relief to Artemis from Echinus in Phthiotis, end of 4th/ beginning of 3rd. Century B.C. Lamia, Archaeological Museum, 1041



Figure 8. Black-figure band cup, Athens, c. 550 BC: sacrificial procession to Athena (Stavros S. Niarchos Collection, A 031).



Figure 9. Parthenon East Frieze, Block 5 (V). Fragment. Pheidias' workshop, 442-438 B.C.; marble, 0.22 x 0.27 m. Athens, Acropolis Museum, Акр. 855

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