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The Panathenaic Festival

By Alison Hughes

Despite the fact the *amphorai* were small in size compared to the large structures on top of the Akropolis, they still served as one of the most important parts of the Panathenaic festival. By analyzing Jeffrey Hurwit's article, The Athenian Akropolis, and Jenifer Neils' articles, The Panathenaic Festival in Ancient Athens and "Panathenaic Amphoras: Their Meaning, Makers, and Markets," one can conclude the prized vases and other offerings helped to fulfill the social and religious goals of the festival. Such groups as the *tamiai*, the priestesses, and the *hieropoioi* helped to control actions taking place on the grounds. They also further aided in the making and rewarding of the *amphorai*. These groups occupy this sacred space, but at the same time added a social dimension. The amount and assortment of offerings was extraordinary and the wide variety of dedicators was amazing, which helps to make the Akropolis a religious and social institution. While religious festivals and games were taking place at the Akropolis, it was obvious in the readings that there was a social and political approach behind them. As Hurwit focuses on who was at the Akropolis daily, the audience realizes there were many more activities than the Panathenaic festival. Further, Neils reveals many facts about the *amphorai* that

helped to explain how they related to the Akropolis and the festival. Through her analysis, she intensifies one's current understanding of *tekhne*. As the audience of these two authors, one can understand the religious and social space in terms of the vases that were given to the winners and objects that were placed within this area.

The Akropolis, which held one of the most important athletic competitions, was a very sacred space. Held every four years, the Panathenaic Games served as a way for Athens to honor their patron deity, the goddess Athena. Not only was it a time to pay tribute to Athena, but also a way for citizens to acknowledge other deities venerated on the Akropolis. These are only some of the religious goals of the festival. The dedicatory objects and the *amphorai* also helped to accomplish the religious purposes of the festival. At the Olympic Games at Olympia, olive leaf wreaths were rewarded to the winners, whereas *amphorai* were given in the same way at the Panathenaic Games. The olive leaf wreaths were offered back to Zeus after given to the victors. The *amphorai* usually "accompanied its owner to the grave" (Hurwit 29). They were seen as a religious symbol, depicting an image of Athena. Because the deity they were honoring is the goddess of handicraft, the winners received a symbol of her epithet. This religious portrayal and image of Athena is embedded in the minds of those who left the Akropolis, for after the winners claimed their prize, they were forced to remember

they competed for their faithful goddess. If they were to open the *amphora*, it contained olive oil from the sacred olive trees that Athena gave to Athens after her victory over Poseidon. This further shows the religious part of the festival because the goddess they respect and cherish “gives” to them a symbol of purity for which she is well known.

Along with the *amphorai*, dedicatory offerings also revealed the religious goals of the Panathenaic festival. Hurwit explains that many people were attracted to the Akropolis during the festival. As they entered the festivities, which began with the procession, they saw the offerings everywhere they glanced. Everything from a small cup to a large bronze statue was presented in Athena’s honor. Regarding the dedicators, Hurwit claims, “the Akropolis belonged to all Athenians, no matter what their class, status, or gender” (62). This wide range of people who visited illustrates the amount of religious offerings placed on the Akropolis. One of the goals was to display these religious offerings in a way that everyone who arrived was enthused by the amount of dedications. They were carefully placed in areas that were easy to access and to view in order to accommodate the large crowds of people. Offerings and vases added to the religious function of the festival. Neils states, “[t]o the ancient Greeks, organized religion focused neither on a sacred text like the Bible or Qur’an, nor on abstract dogmas and creeds, but rather was comprised principally of actions: rituals,

festivals, processions, athletic contests, oracles, gift-giving, and animal sacrifice” (13). Her interpretation is a perfect summary of the way these objects related to ancient Greek religion.

Not only was the Panathenaic festival a religious event, but also a social one. It brought many varieties of citizens together to honor their sacred Athena. The making and distributing of the *amphorai* were done by specific groups of people who were socially linked as citizens of Athens. The *Boule* and *athlothetai* arranged for the making of the *amphorai* and presented the winning olive oil. One can only imagine the amount of interaction between people during the award ceremony. It was a time for the victors to be socially recognized and the *amphorai* were emblems of that acceptance.

The *tamiai* recorded the dedicatory offerings that were given to Athena. This group of elite Athenians also inscribed *stelai* with legal guidelines for the visitors to view. The *hieropoioi* were a group of elite Athenians who were in charge of the sacrifices that took place and also were the heads of the Panathenaic Games. These examples give light to the fact that there were many citizens who came together to take part in the festival and other ceremonies. When visitors arrived on the Akropolis, they were bombarded with not only dedicatory offerings, but also large crowds of people. There was noisy interaction going on, music being played, and objects being sold. It was an atmosphere much like the streets of Athens; a “bazaar.”

The Panathenaic *amphorai*, “even in Roman times...lived on as a symbol of the games at Athens” (51). Even today, these prizes still represent the social events that took place on top of the Akropolis. The manufacture and meaning of the *amphorai* and votive offerings helped to make the Akropolis a social institution.

All of the discussion regarding the *amphorai* relates to a main point Neils makes in her article. “In ancient Greek culture there was a long-standing tradition of awarding prizes in recognition of physical prowess as demonstrated in contests with peers” (29). This tradition is seen even today in the Olympic Games, and in other athletic competitions. Winners are given awards, whether it is medals, trophies, or money. Even on a smaller scale, local competition winners receive small trophies with an image of their sport on the top. The same idea took place with the *amphorai*. The winners acquired a prize with not only their deity on one side, but also an image of their sport on the other. The tradition of awarding extraordinary athletes, in all levels of competition is a practice that has been tradition since the ancient Greek times.

In “Panathenaic Amphoras: Their Meaning, Makers, and Markets,” Jenifer Neils analytically discusses the winning vases at the Panathenaic Games and relates them to *tekhne*. In ancient Greece, all spaces, objects, and buildings existed for a purpose. Usually, this purpose was to facilitate religious, political, and social behavior. The

amphorai were specifically made for the winners and were not to be displayed in a local museum. The Greeks prized technical excellence because it was a tradition. Greeks also used color, scale, elevation, and every part of the composition relate together to make it so visible. The artist tried to help the viewer reckon with the piece by creating interrelationships between the figures. The important physical ways Greek artists accomplished this idea of *tekhne* was through centrality, the way the bodies were facing, and naturalism.

Knowing these facts about Greek *tekhne*, Neils expanded my understanding of the term. Looking at creations such as metopes and large statues, the basic facts of *tekhne* is revealed. But by reading Neils’ article, I learned even more about the way Greeks have slightly changed the images shown on the *amphorai* to create perfection. This is not a sculpture or figure, rather a form of painting in which the Greeks also applied *tekhne*. Using the black-figure technique, the obverse decoration always consisted of an image of Athena. Because of importance and relevance, the obverse decoration remained relatively unchanged over the centuries. Greeks tended to keep the most significant images and decorations untouched. This reveals how Greeks reckoned with the viewer. The artist illustrates the importance of an image if it is left unchanged. Before 540 BC, the vases did not exhibit the columns Athena stood between in the most recent *amphorai*. Not

only do the decorations on the vase change through time, but also “the pose and proportions of Athena change[d] as well” (30). As time passes, she became taller and high waisted. Neils focuses on the direction Athena is faced and states her body is “moving to the left, but with her head turned back to the right” (31). This further explains how Greek artists of the *amphorai* focused on the image and position of Athena on the obverse decoration. By noticing this, her audience is taken further than just focusing on statues and figures. She deepens their horizons and explains that *tekhne* can be applied to smaller, painted objects, not just large statues and buildings.

One of the most important themes of Greek *tekhne* was further explained in Neils’ insightful article. Judging from the information provided and topics discussed, Greeks found the usage of artwork to be very crucial. These *amphorai* were carried, buried, and respected. In other words, they were not displayed in a case like they are today; rather they were used in a physical manner. Moreover, Neils states that used Panathenaic *amphorai* were later auctioned off in the late fifth century for a large sum of money. This is clear evidence why the Greek artists prided themselves in perfection in order to raise the value. Neils takes this idea of *tekhne* a step further and applies it to the rewarded vases at the Panathenaic Games.

The *amphorai* and dedicatory objects that were seen on top one of the largest sanctuaries tell us a great deal of information

regarding the Panathenaic Games. This was a time in the Akropolis’ history that every citizen could join and honor their loyal goddess Athena. The artwork shown on the vases shows us not only the types of competition that was performed during the festival, but also information about Athena. The objects placed around the grounds helped fulfill both the religious and social intentions of the festival. This was a grand festival, which honored their god who was also displayed on every *amphorai*. The Panathenaic Games was a religious, political and social event. The visual images, employees and visitors on the Akropolis helped to attest to this fact. In addition, Neils’ discussion about the *amphorai*, helped add another element to known facts about ancient Greek *tekhne*. Her audience further realizes what Greek artists valued most while completing a work of art. Hurwit and Neils critically analyze the Akropolis and Panathenaic festival to reveal many hidden facts about these great parts of Greece and its history.