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THE PARTHENON FRIEZE: BOY OR GIRL?

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*For Sir John Boardman's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday*  
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When the second volume of Stuart and Revett's *The Antiquities of Athens* finally appeared in 1787, it contained the momentous observation that the Parthenon frieze depicted the Panathenaic procession<sup>1</sup>. It thus established the subject of the frieze for the years to come. Plates 23–24 of Chapter I illustrate William Pars' drawing of the peplos scene on the east frieze. Athena's peplos, presented by the city of Athens to the goddess every four years at the Great Panathenaia, is handled by a man in priestly garb, usually identified with the *archon basileus*, and a child (*pl. 1, 1. 4*). The priestess of Athena Polias stands back to back with the *archon basileus* and receives two young girls carrying objects on their heads (*pl. 1, 1*). The child assisting the *archon basileus* to fold the peplos is described by James Stuart as "a young girl"<sup>2</sup>. Pars drew the child wearing a garment fastened with a button on the left shoulder (*pl. 1, 4*). But the button is not visible on the stone. Pars' mistake was rectified by Adolf Michaelis: without commenting on the button, he simply assumed that the child was a boy<sup>3</sup>. This was developed in further detail by Adolf von Premerstein, who argued that the peplos scene takes place in a weaving workshop in the Agora<sup>4</sup>. He suggested that the peplos is being taken down from the loom by the *archon basileus* with the assistance of a temple boy, who is, in addition, a *pais amphithales* (of living parents). He compared the boy's role to that of Ion in the temple of Apollo at Delphi, as described by Euripides, Ion (even though Ion, far from being a *pais amphithales*, was supposed to be an orphan). The boy's garment he described as a man's chlamys, fas-

tened on one shoulder. Von Premerstein's view has more or less prevailed with little variation to this day with his arguments repeated *ad nauseam*<sup>5</sup>.

The first dissenting voice was heard nearly a century after Michaelis. In his book on the Parthenon frieze, with photographs by Alison Frantz, Martin Robertson argued that the child handling the peplos appears to wear a garment fastened on both shoulders, therefore a peplos<sup>6</sup>. He compared it to the Severe Style grave stele from Paros in New York (*pl. 1, 2*), showing a little girl in an ungirt peplos open on the right, revealing the outline of her bottom<sup>7</sup>. Robertson's case, however, rested mainly on the creases of flesh around the child's neck, which he identified as Venus rings, a well-known feature of female anatomy.

Robertson's arguments were taken up by his Oxford colleague, John Boardman, who identified the girl as an *arrhephoros*<sup>8</sup>. The *arrhephoroi* were two (or four) little girls between 7 and 11 years of age, involved in the ceremony of setting up the loom for weaving Athena's peplos nine months before the Great Panathenaia, at the Chalkeia festival<sup>9</sup>. We do not know what role they played during the actual Panathenaia, but the presence of an *arrhephoros* near the Panathenaic peplos should not come as a surprise. Boardman refined his arguments in a series of articles that appeared from 1977 to

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<sup>1</sup> J. Stuart – N. Revett, *The Antiquities of Athens II* (1787) iii.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart – Revett (note 1) Ch. I, pl. 23 with commentary.

<sup>3</sup> A. Michaelis, *Der Parthenon* (1871) 257.

<sup>4</sup> A. v. Premerstein, *Der Parthenonfries und die Werkstatt des panathenäischen Peplos*, *ÖJh* 15, 1912, 1–35.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., A. Delivorrias, *Η ζωοφόρος του Παρθενώνα* (2004) 41. Scholarly opinion on the child's sex until 1993 is tabulated in E. Berger – M. Gisler-Huwiler, *Der Parthenon in Basel. Dokumentation zum Fries* (1996) 172–174: the dominant view is that the child is a boy. See also M. Steinhart, *AA* 1997, 476.

<sup>6</sup> M. Robertson, *The Parthenon Frieze* (1975), commentary on east 35.

<sup>7</sup> New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 27.45, Fletcher Fund, 1927, illustrated in: J. Boardman, *The Naked Truth*, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 10, 1991, 120 fig. 2; C. A. Picón *et al.*, *Art of the Classical World in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (2007) fig. 132; Robertson *loc.cit.* (note 6).

<sup>8</sup> J. Boardman, *The Parthenon Frieze – Another View*, in: U. Höckmann – A. Krug (eds.), *Festschrift für Frank Brommer* (1977) 41.

<sup>9</sup> L. Deubner, *Attische Feste* (1932) 31; J. M. Mansfield, *The Robe of Athena and the Panathenaic "Peplos"* (Diss. University of California, Berkeley 1985) 270–271; W. Burkert, *Savage Energies. Lessons of Myth and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (2001) 40.

1999<sup>10</sup>. He observed that the two young female companions of the priestess of Athena Polias (*pl. 1, 1*) are too old to be *arrhephoroi*, therefore the child in the peplos scene must be the only *arrhephoros* represented on the frieze<sup>11</sup>. A temple boy, Boardman pointed out, was more likely to have served the cult of a male god<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, a temple boy on the Acropolis is only attested in the fourth century A.D. as feeding Athena's sacred snake<sup>13</sup>. A bronze statue of a boy on horseback dedicated in the ball-court of the *arrhephoroi*, said to be a childhood portrait of Isocrates<sup>14</sup>, need not be associated with the existence of a temple boy on the Acropolis in the fourth century B.C. Besides, we have no evidence of a boy's involvement in Athena's Panathenaic festival<sup>15</sup>.

Boardman's suggestion that the peplos is handled by an *arrhephoros*, not a boy, initiated a scholarly debate that is still current. Several attempts were made to cancel the new identification as a girl. The arguments against will be summarized first and we will then proceed with the counterarguments.

In 1977 Frank Brommer reiterated von Premerstein's identification of the child as a temple boy<sup>16</sup>. He was followed by Erika Simon and eventually by Ian Jenkins<sup>17</sup>. Jenkins adopted von Premerstein's suggestion that the child wears a chlamys. But a chlamys does not have an overfall like our child's garment. In 1984 Werner Gauer pointed out that the child's physique was too athletic for a girl<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Boardman *op.cit.* (note 8) 39–49; *id.*, The Parthenon Frieze, in: E. Berger (ed.), Parthenon-Kongress Basel (1984) 210–215; *id.*, Notes on the Parthenon East Frieze, in: M. Schmidt (ed.), Kanon, Festschrift Ernst Berger. AntK Beih. 15, 1988, 9–14; *id. op.cit.* (note 7) 119–121; *id.*, The Parthenon Frieze, a Closer Look, RA 1999, 313–321.

<sup>11</sup> Boardman 1999 *loc.cit.* (note 10).

<sup>12</sup> Boardman 1984 *op.cit.* (note 10) 214.

<sup>13</sup> F. Brommer, Der Parthenonfries (1977) 269.

<sup>14</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia* 839 C.

<sup>15</sup> As was admitted by two advocates of the boy theory: J. Neils, The Parthenon Frieze (2001) 171; I. Jenkins, Greek Architecture and its Sculpture (2006) 105.

<sup>16</sup> Brommer *op.cit.* (note 13) 269–270.

<sup>17</sup> E. Simon, The Festivals of Attica (1983) 66–67; I. Jenkins, The Parthenon Frieze (1994) 35; *id. op.cit.* (note 15) 105.

<sup>18</sup> W. Gauer, Was geschieht mit dem Peplos?, in: E. Berger (ed.), Parthenon-Kongress Basel (1984) 223.

In 1989 Christoph Clairmont formulated two arguments around which most future discussion would revolve<sup>19</sup>. His objections to the girl theory were, first, that the child's open garment exposes too much flesh, rather unthinkable for an Athenian girl appearing in public; and second, that the creases around the child's neck can be found on male figures too. His idea that the child's drapery is not a garment but the cloth cover of Athena's peplos thrown over its shoulder (like their masters' cloaks thrown over the shoulders of slave boys in the north [*pl. 1, 3*] and west friezes) has not met with approval. But his arguments about nudity and the creases on men's necks were taken up by Burkhardt Wesenberg<sup>20</sup> and Evelyn Harrison<sup>21</sup>. Both formulated the view that the child's dress is not a woman's peplos but a man's himation, exceptionally open on the left. Harrison commented on Pars' mistake in drawing a button over the child's left shoulder (*pl. 1, 4*). Neither Wesenberg nor Harrison was able to cite a single example of a man's himation open on the left. Harrison illustrated instead a lebes gamikos in New York, contemporary with the Parthenon, showing a female figure in a himation open on the left (and worn over a chiton)<sup>22</sup>. The himation idea was developed further by Jenifer Neils, who pointed out that it does not cover the child's ankles, being therefore too short for a female<sup>23</sup>. A himation worn without an undergarment could only belong to a boy. Oddly enough, having established the child's sex to her satisfaction, Neils was hard-pressed to explain his presence in the peplos scene. Her suggestion that the boy was ready to assist the *archon basileus* with the sacrifice to Athena failed to explain why he is handling the peplos.

<sup>19</sup> C. W. Clairmont, Girl or Boy? Parthenon East Frieze 35, AA 1989, 495–496.

<sup>20</sup> B. Wesenberg, Panathenäische Pepsodedikation und Arrhephorie. Zur Thematik des Parthenonfrieses, JdI 110, 1995, 152: the child wears a himation open on the left and must therefore be a boy.

<sup>21</sup> E. B. Harrison, The Web of History: a Conservative Reading of the Parthenon Frieze, in: J. Neils (ed.), Worshipping Athena. Panathenaia and Parthenon. Interdisciplinary Symposia, Dartmouth and Princeton 1992 (1996) 203–205.

<sup>22</sup> Metropolitan Museum of Art 16.73, Rogers Fund, 1916: ARV<sup>2</sup> 1126, 6; Harrison *op.cit.* (note 21) 203 fig. 9.4.

<sup>23</sup> Neils *op.cit.* (note 15) 169–171.

Meanwhile, having established that the child's Venus rings are different from the layers of fat tissue on men's necks which are only visible when they bend their heads forward<sup>24</sup>, Boardman asserted that half nakedness acts in favour of a girl because boys on the frieze are shown stark naked<sup>25</sup>. Good examples of nude boys are provided by Eros, east 42 and three slave boys, north 134 and west 6 and 24 (two of them, 134 and 24, carry the cloaks of their masters over their shoulders). He proceeded to contrast the child's anatomy to that of the naked slave boy north 134 (*pl. 1, 3*)<sup>26</sup>. But the slight differences that he detected did not convince everyone<sup>27</sup>. In fact, Ian Jenkins now believes that the two figures (east 35 and north 134) have more similarities than not<sup>28</sup>. And whatever one may think of Joan Connelly's overall interpretation of the Parthenon frieze<sup>29</sup>, she did make the sensible observation that Greek artists of the Classical period were dependent on male anatomy even for female figures. She went too far, however, when she argued that the girl is semi-nude because she is in the process of removing her clothes in order to put on her funerary dress in anticipation of offering herself for human sacrifice.

It is odd that the girl identification has found few supporters even though it offers the only reasonable explanation of the child's presence in the peplos scene. Only an *arrhephoros* was entitled to be there. In his dissertation on Athena's peplos, John Mansfield said as much but was unable to resolve the question of nudity and oscillated between an *arrhephoros* and a *pais amphithales*<sup>30</sup>.

In his final article on the issue, Boardman observed that the child's garment wraps around the invisible side of its body, being securely fastened on the right shoulder<sup>31</sup>. This crucial observation is the key to the whole argument. It appears that the child *does* wear a himation open on the left which is too short for a woman, yet she is a girl. Her garment is too short and too loose to be a peplos, it is therefore an overgarment. As it happens, it echoes the overgarment of the priestess of Athena Polias on the same slab (*pl. 1, 1*). The priestess is ceremoniously clad in three garments: a chiton, as attested by her ample left sleeve, a peplos, indicated by a long kolpos, and a mantle fastened on her right shoulder, open on her left, and forming an overfall in front. This mantle, known as the *diplax* because it is folded twice to form an overfall, was particularly fashionable in the fifth century B.C. but was adopted by Archaistic figures of later periods as well<sup>32</sup>. It may be pinned on either shoulder and is occasionally girded. It is mainly a feminine dress, often to be seen on Athena and mortal women on special occasions such as weddings. A Severe Style example is Athena on an Attic red-figure calyx krater in New York, wearing a chiton and a *diplax* fastened on the right shoulder<sup>33</sup>. In the high classical period Athena wears a *diplax* over her chiton on an Attic red-figure calyx krater in Schloss Fasanerie<sup>34</sup>. The *diplax* is here fastened on her left shoulder. The Farnese Athena, which may be a copy of Pyrrhos' statue of Athena Hygieia on the Acropolis, wears a *diplax* with a long overfall, fastened on the right shoulder<sup>35</sup>. We can see also a number of bridesmaids wearing a *diplax* over a chiton on an Attic white ground pyxis in

<sup>24</sup> Boardman 1988 *op.cit.* (note 10) 9.

<sup>25</sup> Boardman 1999 *op.cit.* (note 10) 320–321 fig. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Boardman 1988 *op.cit.* (note 10) 9–10.

<sup>27</sup> e.g., Harrison *op.cit.* (note 21) 204: "Precise profiles and anatomical analyses of modern grownups. . . are iconographically irrelevant to the Greek artist's depiction of children. Likewise, the so-called Venus rings have nothing to do with Venus. These are wrinkles in the tender skin of a well-nourished child."

<sup>28</sup> Jenkins *op.cit.* (note 15) 105.

<sup>29</sup> J. B. Connelly, Parthenon and *Parthenoi*: a Mythological Interpretation of the Parthenon Frieze, *AJA* 100, 1996, 53–80.

<sup>30</sup> Mansfield *op.cit.* (note 9) 293–294. 354 note 129.

<sup>31</sup> Boardman 1999 *op.cit.* (note 10) 318–319 figs. 9–10.

<sup>32</sup> On the *diplax*, see O. Palagia, A Classical Variant of the Corinth/Mocenigo Goddess: Demeter/Kore or Athena?, *BSA* 84, 1989, 324–325.

<sup>33</sup> Metropolitan Museum of Art 07.286.6: ARV<sup>2</sup> 617, 2; Palagia *op.cit.* (note 32) pl. 47d.

<sup>34</sup> Hessische Hausstiftung AV 77: ARV<sup>2</sup> 1346, 1; E. D. Reeder (ed.), Pandora. Women in Classical Greece (exhibition cat. Baltimore 1995) 264–266 no. 73.

<sup>35</sup> Naples, Museo Nazionale 6024: Palagia *op.cit.* (note 32) pl. 47e; I. Leventi, Hygieia in Classical Greek Art (2003) 41–45 pl. 5.

London<sup>36</sup>. As it is an overgarment, the *diplax* is not normally worn over naked flesh.

If the child on the east frieze wears a *diplax*, and I think we have established that it does, we should look for a chiton underneath. The only possible explanation is that the chiton was indicated in paint. Incomplete gestures, empty hands and missing attributes on the Parthenon frieze show that, when we lack holes for metal attachments, details must have been picked out in paint<sup>37</sup>. On the east frieze, Dionysos' raised hand must have held a painted thyrsos; the shaft of Ares' spear was completed in colour and so was the tip of Zeus' sceptre<sup>38</sup>. Nike's gesture indicates that she held a ribbon which must have been painted<sup>39</sup>. Ropes around cows' necks on the south frieze were also painted<sup>40</sup>. Knights raising a hand over their heads must be rearranging their wreaths, now lost, that were once shown in colour<sup>41</sup>.

A good parallel to the semi-nude child on the east frieze is provided by a late-fifth-century grave relief from Thebes in the Athens National Museum showing a family group (*pl. 2, 1*)<sup>42</sup>. At the extreme left we see a little girl with raised arms (*pl. 2, 2*). The overfall and short sleeve of her chiton, as well as its rear outline, are modelled in relief but the rest of her figure appears naked. The artist relied on the application of colour for indicating that the girl is in fact clad in a clinging chiton. An extreme example of a nude figure with chiton patterns painted on his bare legs is a Severe Style warrior from the Athenian Acropolis (*pl. 2, 3*). If these patterns had not been

revealed thanks to the special photography of Vincenz Brinkmann, we would still be under the impression that the warrior wore a cuirass directly on his naked flesh<sup>43</sup>.

To conclude: the child handling the peplos on the east frieze (*pl. 1, 1*) wears a *diplax*, modelled in relief over a chiton that must have been picked out in colour. Her overgarment echoes that of the priestess of Athena Polias and she must indeed be an *arrhephoros*, ceremoniously dressed for the grand occasion of the Great Panathenaia. The Parthenon frieze thus provides the sole evidence of the role of *arrhephoroi* in Athena's festival.

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<sup>36</sup> British Museum D 11: ARV<sup>2</sup> 899, 146; J. H. Oakley – R. H. Sinos, *The Wedding in Ancient Athens* (1993) 34 figs. 96 and 98.

<sup>37</sup> O. Palagia, *Classical Athens*, in: O. Palagia (ed.), *Greek Sculpture: Function, Materials, and Techniques in the Archaic and Classical Periods* (2006) 130.

<sup>38</sup> Berger – Gisler-Huwiler *op.cit.* (note 5) pls. 132–133.

<sup>39</sup> Berger – Gisler-Huwiler *op.cit.* (note 5) pl. 133.

<sup>40</sup> Berger – Gisler-Huwiler *op.cit.* (note 5) pls. 114–115.

<sup>41</sup> Berger – Gisler-Huwiler *op.cit.* (note 5) pls. 6, 70, 79.

<sup>42</sup> Inv. no. 1861. W. Schild-Xenidou, *Boiotische Grab- und Weihreliefs archaischer und klassischer Zeit*, Diss. München 1969 (1972) no. 40; N. Kaltsas, *Sculpture in the National Archaeological Museum*, Athens (2002) no. 325.

<sup>43</sup> Athens, Acropolis Museum 599. V. Brinkmann, *Die Polychromie der archaischen und frühklassischen Skulptur* (2003) no. 51; V. Brinkmann – R. Wünsche (eds.), *Bunte Götter. Die Farbigkeit antiker Skulptur* (exhibition cat. Basel 2005) 126–131.

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Ursprünglich wurde das Kind in der Peplosszene des Parthenonfrieses (*Taf. 1, 1*) von Stuart und Revett 1787 für weiblich gehalten. Seitdem es Adolf Michaelis jedoch als männlich beschrieben hatte, schlossen sich ihm alle Forscher ausser Martin Robinson, John Boardman und Joan Connelly an: sie sahen in dem Kind ein Mädchen. Ein Kind, das mit dem Peplos der Athena befasst ist, lässt an eine Arrhephore denken; andererseits hat die Tatsache, dass das Gewand seine linke Körperseite unbedeckt lässt, der Deutung als Knaben wieder Auftrieb gegeben. Hier wird ein neues Argument in die Diskussion eingebracht: das Kind trägt eine *Diplax*, nicht auf der blossen Haut, sondern über einem Chiton, der gemalt wiedergegeben war; es ist also ein Mädchen. Eine gute Parallele dazu liefert ein Grabrelief des späten 5. Jahrhunderts aus Theben (*Taf. 2, 1*): dort trägt das kleine Mädchen einen teils plastisch, teils gemalt wiedergegebenen Chiton.

(Übersetzung Redaktion)

## RÉSUMÉ

Stuart et Revett avaient dès 1787 considéré que l'enfant apparaissant dans la scène du péplos de la frise du Parthénon (*pl. 1, 1*) était une fille. Cependant, en 1871, Adolf Michaelis y vit un garçon. Dès lors, tous les savants suivirent cette vue, à l'exception de Martin Robinson, John Boardman et Joan Connelly qui interprétèrent ce personnage comme une fille. La présence d'un enfant à la cérémonie de remise du péplos d'Athéna laisse supposer qu'il s'agit d'une arrhéphore. Pourtant, le fait que le vêtement ne couvre pas le côté gauche du corps et révèle sa nudité, a milité en faveur de l'identité masculine de l'enfant. L'auteur apporte ici un argument nouveau: comme l'enfant porte une *diplax*, non pas sur sa peau nue, mais par-dessus un chiton, lequel était peint; il s'agit donc d'une fille. En effet, un relief funéraire de Thèbes datant de la fin du V<sup>e</sup> siècle (*pl. 2, 1*) fournit un bon parallèle car on y voit une fillette portant un chiton en partie modelé et en partie peint.

(Traduction Jean-Robert Gisler)



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1 Parthenon east frieze 31–35. London, British Museum  
2 Grave relief from Paros. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art  
3 Parthenon north frieze 133 and 134. London, British Museum  
4 Parthenon east frieze 34 and 35



1



2



3

- 1 Grave relief from Thebes. Athens, National Archaeological Museum  
 2 Detail of grave relief from Thebes  
 3 Painted plaster cast of warrior from Athens. Munich, Glyptothek