

Hephaistos' Winged Shoes and the Birth of Athena  
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Four early black-figure 'Birth of Athena' scenes (570-540 B.C.) depict Hephaistos as the axe wielding 'midwife' for Zeus, but — unusually — wearing winged shoes. In addition, several literary sources state that Hermes actually delivered Athena by striking Zeus' head. In order to explain both Hephaistos' unusual footwear and the confusion with Hermes as Athena's deliverer, this paper suggests that traditional depictions of Perseus wearing *pteroenta pedila* are responsible for the images of Hephaistos on these vases. Secondly, claims that Hermes fulfilled Hephaistos' role probably arose when later viewers mistook Hephaistos for Hermes, due to Hephaistos wearing winged shoes that later became Hermes' consistent attribute.

The earliest and most numerous scenes that include winged shoes in the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> century Greek art were those of Perseus and the Gorgons (Gialouris 1953). Winged shoes on Hermes first appear in black-figure around 600, just before the Birth of Athena scenes commence. Furthermore, neither Homer nor Hesiod mentions winged shoes -- for any divinity. The earliest literary reference to winged shoes in fact, is to Perseus' *πετροέντα πέδιλα* (Ps.-Hesiod, *Scutum* 216-217), coinciding chronologically with the earliest pictorial representations of Perseus in this footwear.

Since depictions of Perseus in winged shoes pre-date the similar shoes for Hermes, it is likely that at least a generation of artists was accustomed to portraying the slayer of the gorgon in his traditional footwear, and that when there was an impetus for portraying a similar myth, they adapted the pattern they had used to that time.

The Perseus myth and that of the Birth of Athena are structurally similar. I suggest that the following structural parallels between the stories influenced the artists to give "Perseus' shoes" to Hephaistos in the four vases cited above. We note that both Perseus and Hephaistos, armed with sharp weapons (sword, axe) are compelled to approach characters of great power (Medusa, Zeus), each of which displays images of their destructive capability (snake hair, thunderbolt). Each approaching character must strike the head of this dangerous figure, and the result of the blow is the birth of a new and unusual character (Pegasos, Athena) from the head. The weapon wielder then flees. I propose that when artists were called upon to depict the myth of Athens's birth in the second quarter of the sixth-century, they added wings to Hephaistos' shoes because they were used to depicting Perseus in a similar role.

Several literary variants of the myth (Philodemos 59, Gomperz, e.g.) claim that Hermes wielded the axe at Athena's birth, but no artistic representations show Hermes in this role. I suggest that post-archaic observers might have confused depictions of a wing-shoed Hephaistos with Hermes in such scenes because winged footgear came to be a central attribute of Hermes from the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Later viewers, accustomed to identifying Hermes by his winged shoes, could easily have mistaken Hephaistos so shod for Hermes. Furthermore, because Hermes in his winged shoes is sometimes present in artistic representations of the Birth of Athena, the mistake could be reinforced. Finally, confusion could have arisen due to the fact that Hermes sometimes appears in the same pose as the fleeing Hephaistos: departing, looking back, holding a long shaft in one hand and raising his other arm.