

The Byzantine historian George Syncellus reports that “The Anaxagoreans interpret the gods of myth so as to make Zeus [represent] mind (*nous*) and Athena skill (*technê*)” (DK 61 A 6). This reference to “Anaxagoreans” has long been thought to refer in particular to Metrodorus of Lampsacus, known for his allegorical interpretations of Homer. Philodemus (*On Poems* 2) tells us that Metrodorus interpreted the gods as parts or humors of the body (Demeter as liver, Dionysus as spleen, Apollo as bile), and Tatian confirms, though without providing details, that he also interpreted Hera, Athena, and Zeus along these lines (A 3-4; see now Califf (2003)).

The focus of this paper is Metrodorus’ interpretation of Zeus and Athena, who are treated as a pair by Syncellus and likely also by Metrodorus himself. Richardson (1975) is almost certainly correct to suggest that Metrodorus had identified Zeus as the head, the locus of *nous*, and Athena as the hands, the instruments of *technê*. But I think we can go further and see these two interpretations as part of a larger organic whole, held together by a common myth, the birth of Athena, which Metrodorus would have understood as an allegorical representation of the emergence of *technê* (Athena, patron of handicrafts) from *nous* (the head of Zeus).

This reconstruction of Metrodorus is supported by other evidence, which shows that the birth of Athena was being interpreted during the classical period as a manifestation of the operation of mind or thought in the universe, possibly even a specifically Anaxagorean *nous*. Plato, in the *Cratylus* (407b), tells us that some Homer interpreters identified Athena herself as *nous*, and some went so far as to explain Athena’s name as deriving from *hâ theonoa*, which is equivalent to *hâ theou noêsis*, or “the mind of god” (cf. Baxter 1992). This suggests a link with Zeus and more specifically the story of her birth: her emergence from the head of Zeus marks the advent of *nous* in the universe. Somewhat earlier, Democritus had written an ethical treatise entitled *Tritogeneia*, which described the three parts of *phronêsis* (DK 68 B 2). Democritus’ title, too, seems to allude not only to Athena herself, but to the myth of her birth: the birth of Athena from the head of Zeus marks the appearance of *phronêsis* in all its forms.

If a (Metrodoran) allegorical interpretation of the birth of Athena is merely implied in Democritus and Plato, it is explicit in the Stoic Chrysippus (SVF II.908-910). Chrysippus does not disagree with those who understand the birth of Athena as an account of the birth of *phronêsis* or *technê* from the mind. What he objects to is the claim of some interpreters that the myth “proves that the ruling part of the soul is in the head.” Chrysippus, who is committed to the view that the ruling part of the soul resides in the breast, quotes lines from two different Hesiodic poems (the *Theogony* and probably the *Melampodia*) to show that Athena in fact was conceived and came to term in Zeus’ belly, and he argues that the reason that she emerges from his head is that the mouth is the outlet for speech, not because the head is the locus of cognition. I make two related arguments about this passage from Chrysippus. First, the object of Chrysippus’ polemic here is not earlier Stoics (who do not seem to have disagreed with him about the locus of the mind or soul), but Metrodorus of Lampsacus, who not only identified Zeus as the head and Athena as the hands (instruments of *technê*), but probably based this interpretation on the story of the birth of Athena from the head of her father. Second, Chrysippus’ discussion of these passages from Hesiod does not suggest an interest on Chrysippus’ part in allegory for its own sake (see already Long (1992); cf. Steinmetz (1986)), but is motivated solely by a desire to refute those who held that the soul resided in the head.

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