

Pandora and the Decorative Program of the Parthenon

The inclusion of the image of Pandora on the base of the statue of Athena Parthenos has puzzled scholars for generations: why this “sinner” in the triumphalistic shrine to Athens’ victory over the Persians? Is she the disobedient “anti-Athena”? A warning to the women of Athens? In fact, considering some possible reasons for the Pandora may shed a more nuanced light on the entire decorative scheme of the Parthenon. In this paper I would like to propose that Pandora – gift of the gods, the first wife, and mother of the human race-- represents civilization, the polis, conceived in the same feminized language as the entire Parthenon schema. It is fitting that the temple of Athena the Virgin expresses a civic and even militaristic message through the language of the female body, since Athena herself expresses the glory of war in the service of the polis in her feminine person.

Pandora must be seen in the context of the entire Parthenon decorative program, which intertwines several themes that may be summarized here:

- **Gift;**
- **Birth;**
- **Civilization or civic spirit**, frequently envisioned in terms of the female body;
- **Victory;**
- **Gift of the peplos** to Athena at the Panathenaia;

With these images in view, one enters the *naos* and confronts the statue of Athena Parthenos, adding the following themes:

- **Virgin;**
- **Victory;**
- **Civilization/civic spirit**, again envisioned in terms of the female body.

Into this visual context is set the Pandora frieze that adorns the base of Athena’s statue. The **virgin** Pandora is a subordinating **gift** on the part of the gods, a condign punishment, in fact, for man’s “attack” on the hegemony of the gods, not so different from that of the giants (Hes. *Works & Days* 47-105). Now, cast back down to mortality, man is in need of perpetuating himself through children, who provide him with a certain hope of a future. The moment depicted on the base is a **birth**, but particularly the addition of the final alluring touch to the virgin named All-Gifts: the gift of Athena herself, a **peplos**. Pandora is the first virgin given to the community/polis for its perpetuation, and she also brings the goddess’ gift of technology (weaving): she is the beginning of civilization. What man could not steal has been given to him, like the impossible victory over the Persians. The semicircular arrangement of gods around the handing over of the Panathenaic peplos on the frieze (reconstruction of J. Neils, 2006) is repeated here around Pandora: it is a symmetrical exchange of gifts. Pandora faces the viewer. This frontal position, used selectively in Greek art, arrests and implicates the viewer, male or female. Pandora is not a figure of female shame but an image of the **newly (re)born** human community, the Athenian polis, expressed in the same feminine body as Athena’s. Just as Pandora brings woe to man, community brings difficulties, it has a price, one which Athens has just paid in the Persian Wars; but it also provides the immortality that no mortal individual can claim, and it provides the benefits of civilization. Athens expresses its hope for an inviolable future in the language of virginity: divine fidelity and human potentiality at the service of the polis.