

Rising from the Earth:  
The Theme of Autochthony On the Base of the Athena Parthenos

The chryselephantine statue of the Athena Parthenos, constructed around 447BC and completed in 438BC by Pheidias in Athens, has been the subject of numerous scholarly treatments in the past (Hurwit 1995, Leipen 1971, Stevens 1955), but few have considered the Pandora scene on its base. Hurwit (1995) offers a somewhat negative perspective and argues that it serves as a reminder of the existing evil and catastrophe that could one day destroy the Parthenon, Acropolis, and Athens herself. Following Shapiro's explanation of autochthony in the visual arts of fifth-century Athens, I argue that the theme of autochthony is present not only on the Athena Parthenos statue but also in the Pandora scene on its base. Both Athena and Pandora are born from the earth, both wield a tremendous power over the human race, and both are beings to be feared. Through the use of material and literary evidence, I suggest that Pheidias' monumental statue provided the perfect image of a genderless deity that all Athenian citizens agreed on, approved of, and worshipped wholeheartedly. On the base below, he created Pandora as a representative for humanity and all of its downfalls. The relief illustrated a woman to whom the Athenians could relate: autochthonous, skilled in the domestic arts, and possessing the patronage of the gods, especially Athena. Any Athenian citizen coming to view the Athena Parthenos would be comforted knowing that despite humanity's imperfections, Athena would always stand above the city fully armed and ready to defend her until the very end.

Works Cited

- Hurwit, J. M. 1995. "Beautiful Evil: Pandora and the Athena Parthenos." *AJA* 99: 171-86.
- Leipen, L. 1971. *Athena Parthenos*. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum.
- Stevens, G. P. 1955. "Remarks Upon the Colossal Chryselephantine Statue of Athena in the Parthenon." *Hesperia* 24: 240-76.