Athena’s Peplos: Weaving as a Core Female Activity in Ancient and Modern Greece

Evy Johanne Håland

A peplos (dress) was presented to Athena Polias (i.e. “of the city”) at the Panathenaia (i.e. “the Festival of all the Athenians”), which was held in the summer, by the middle of August, and was the most important festival of the Athenian ritual year. This age-old annual festival, as well as the quadrennial eight-day long festival of an historical date dedicated to Athena,1 was the appropriate occasion for the peplos to be presented to her. During the ancient festivals, the gods and goddesses were dressed in their most beautiful garments, or they were offered new clothing, on a calendrical basis. The annual gift of Athena’s peplos formed the focus of the Panathenaic festival, and marked the beginning of the new Athenian year. Such a presentation also required a suitable procession, which would bring the dress to the goddess, and the most important festival day, representing the original version of the festival, was called “the presentation of the peplos” (Parke 1986: 33).

Presenting a textile was appropriate, for Athena was, among other things, the goddess of weaving. In her “home” on the Athenian Acropolis, terracotta dedications showing women weaving were dedicated to her, probably by women. Athena also had loomweights dedicated to her and on one of these loomweights Athena herself appears in the form of an owl, her sacred bird, spinning wool from a wool-basket in front of her (Barber 1992: 106f.). Athena was also given cloths on other occasions, as when Homer describes Hecuba (Il. 6.269-311) going to the temple to lay the most gorgeous robe in her possession on the knees of Athena’s statue in supplication during dark days at Troy.

The arts of weaving belonged primarily to women and were the principal vehicle for demonstrating their various roles as mother, provider, worker, entrepreneur and artist, and so the production and ritual dedication of the peplos demonstrate the importance of women’s responsibilities.

Cosmos 20 (2004), 155-82
THE PRODUCTION OF THE PEPLOS

Since the peplos was the dress for the goddess, it was a very special object whose production was surrounded by ritual. The material used was wool, the traditional stuff of early Greek clothing. The accounts of the making of Athena’s peplos tell us that the combing, spinning, and weaving of the wool involved young girls, older girls, and married women (cf. Fig. 1).

The warp was set on the loom on the last day of the month Pyanepsion (i.e. October-November), around the time of the sowing of grain and the gathering of the olive crop, on the festival of the Chalkeia, which honoured Athena as goddess of handicrafts (Fig. 2). This was approximately nine months before the Panathenaia. The work of setting up the loom was done by the priestess of Athena together with the Arrēphoroi. These were two or four little girls between the ages of seven and ten or twelve, selected on the basis of good birth, who were specially dedicated each year to the worship of Athena. The young Arrēphoroi, while weaving Athena’s peplos, are preparing themselves in general terms for their future female tasks. They also serve to guarantee the purity of Athena’s robe, the garment which, in turn, possesses the cultic value of renewing the power of the goddess at her Panathenaic festival. The peplos was woven by a team of maidens, the Ergastinai (i.e. Workers), who were chosen from the aristocratic families of Athens.

The design of the peplos of Athena was executed in bright colours: yellow and hyacinth (blue) are mentioned, in addition to murex purple, the most expensive and sought-after dye. But the dominant colour, the colour of the ground-weave, was saffron-yellow. The “saffron peplos” of Athena (Eur. Hec. 465-74) is of a colour, which was part of a very old Aegean tradition intimately connected with women and their special goddess. Early sources like Homer (Od. 15.250) and Hesiod (Th. 381, cf. also HHA 226) regularly use epithets like “saffron-robed” for female deities and heroines, from obvious ones like Eos (Dawn) to miscellaneous giantesses, nymphs, and muses. Aristophanes in his comedies invariably bedecks in saffron clothing the men he portrays as effeminate and those who are masquerading as women. Parts of the text of Thesmophoriazousai, “the women celebrating the Thesmophoria festival”, are full of yellow gowns (Thesm. 939-46). We also meet the colour in the
Figure 1. a) The weavers on the warp-weighted loom in the painting, had to walk to and fro as they passed their bobbins through the threads of the warp.

b) Shaking blankets, and folding them was then, as now, a vigorous task. The painting also shows women spinning and preparing yarn. Paintings (copied from an *lekythos*, oil flask, c. 560 BC) in the Museum Mesogeia Attica History and Civilisation, November 2005. (All photographs are by the author)
tragedies: when Iphigeneia was offered as a sacrifice in Aulis, she was wrapped in saffron-coloured robes (Aesch. Ag. 238 f.).

The time-consuming decoration of the weaving with story material was important. According to E. J. W. Barber (1991: 365-72, cf. 1992), the motifs of the Geometric vases (cf. Fig. 3) may indicate how Greek women used weaving to tell stories long before the Geometric period. She argues that many motifs in early Greek art can be shown to have come down from the Bronze Age, when textiles were at the heart of the Aegean economy, and shows that the tradition of making story-cloths such as the peplos of Athena must have come down from that era too. The scenes on the peplos were shown in a traditional European weaving technique of supplementary weft-float, developed in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. Barber asserts that any designs put into Athena’s peplos will not have been true tapestry (1992: 109) since tapestry and pile knotting require an immobile warp
under extremely high tension and cannot be done on the warp-weighted loom traditional to Europe (Barber 1991: 91-113).

Figure 3. a) Dipylon funeral vase; b) detail of painted scene. National Museum of Athens; winter 1992.

The traditional subject mentioned repeatedly in ancient authors was Athena’s exploit in overcoming Enkelados in the battle of the Gods and Giants. The Giants were the mythological monsters that attached the Olympian gods, trying to dethrone them (Apollod. 1.6.1-2), and the victory over the Giants was one of the motivations for the Panathenaic Festival (cf. Arist. Fr. 637). Giants and the Titans, although generally distinct, are often mentioned indiscriminately as equivalent by the ancient sources. Some allusions to gigantomachy weavings in the tragedies of Euripides suggest that the peplos of Athena is meant: In the *Hecuba*, the Trojan women lament that, as captives:

Perhaps I shall come to live in Athena’s city,  
And there on the saffron peplos of Pallas (i.e. Athena),  
Weaving bright threads in a flowery pattern,  
Yoke the horses to her glorious chariot;  
Or depict (weave) the race of raging Titans  
Quelled by Zeus, son of Kronos,  
With the flame of his lightning. (*Hec.* 465-74, tr. Vellacott)

In Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris* (222-4), Iphigeneia, longing for her distant home, laments that she will never weave Athena and the Titans like the other women. These descriptions by the lamenting heroines indicate that Athenian women wove figured dresses for the great goddess Pallas Athena. The Battle of the Gods and the Giants
had been represented on the pediment of the temple destroyed by the Persians and was a popular subject on Attic vases particularly after the Persian wars had ended victoriously for Athens, but the written sources indicate that the subject was also popular on perishable woven materials, associated with women.

Displayed in their threads was Athena’s part in the Battle of the Gods and Giants. Thus, the story woven into the dress was a renewed thank-offering to the patroness of Athens for saving the city from destruction. When the Ergastinai had finished their task, Athena was offered her new peplos during the Panathenaia.

THE RITUAL DEDICATION OF THE PEPLOS

The holiest of all the images of Athena was Athena Polias’ wooden statue on the Akropolis, according to Pausanias (1.26,6), who also tells that rumour says it fell from heaven. This highly revered statue of olive wood formed the centre of devotion on the citadel. The tradition of its heavenly origin may suggest that no maker for the image was known, and it certainly added to the cult’s venerability. The wooden image looked so obviously ancient that tradition supported its remote past by associating it with mythological figures, like Kekrops, a legendary king of Athens; its vesture ceremony and the washing of its clothing were connected with Aglauros, one of Kekrops’ daughters, since it was said to have started when she was made priestess of Athena. The peplos was borne to the Akropolis and presented to the goddess by the Praxiergidai, an Athenian clan whose ancestral privileges included the washing of the cult statue and its garments.

The procession-day, on the 28th of Hekatombaion (July-August), Athena’s birthday, was the climax of the festival. Ancient sources (Schol. Pl. Resp. 327a) tell that on this day, the Panathenaia was celebrated with a procession to the Akropolis that carried a peplos through the city up to Athena. The procession of the peplos took place on the Street of the Panathenaia, which served as the sacred way of Athens. The procession began at sunrise, and it was dedicated to Athena Polias in the Erechtheum (cf. Fig. 4).9

The procession is shown on the Parthenon frieze. The Ergastinai lead it. Since their work is finished, they are empty-handed. Now, that their work is completed, they are given the place of honour at the
head of the procession when the peplos is presented to Athena. When the procession came up to the Akropolis, it culminated by presenting the peplos (Figs 5a, b), i.e. the rectangular cloth, which is illustrated on the frieze\textsuperscript{10}, to the life-sized cult statue. The goddess was dressed in her new peplos.

Figure 4. “The Olive Tree Pediment”, c. 550 BC: Athena Polias (i.e. “of the city”) in her temple. Acropolis Museum, Athens, 52; August 2005.

The aim of the procession was to dedicate the sacred peplos to the virgin goddess, and to confirm the pact between Athens and Athena Polias that could be argued had the form of a marriage settlement since the peplos was a common wedding present. The procession was led by the female weavers, and the dedication was the climax of the festival (Fig. 5b). In other words, we meet the importance of a female-dominated activity, through the weaving of the peplos, and a female divinity that has dedicated to her the completed cloth, which is
Figures 5a, b. Copies of the “peplos ceremony” from the Parthenon frieze (the originals, c. 480 BC are in the British Museum, London), central group showing the receiving of the peplos. New Acropolis Museum, Athens; August 2005.
also a wedding dress. Through the symbolism in connection with the little Arrēphoroi and the central ritual when the peplos is dedicated, we meet the importance of marriage in the festival.

The wedding goddess, Hera, also had cloths dedicated to her, and the gifts were always woven by women, as in the epigram, praying:

Hera revered, who oft descending from heaven lookest thy Lacinian shrine fragrant with frankincense, accept the linen garment which Theophilis, daughter of Cleocha, wove for thee with her noble daughter Nossis. (AP. 6.265).

At the sanctuary of Hera at Elis, in Olympia, the same arrangement prevailed as in Athens, since a college of Sixteen Women was charged with the weaving of a robe offered to Hera (Paus. 5.16,2).

THE YEAR CYCLE AND THE LIFE CYCLE

Athena had several festivals dedicated to her throughout the year, which were important in connection with the olive crop that came under her protection, and several rituals during her festivals were also important in connection with the rite of passage undergone by girls at puberty to prepare them for marriage (Håland 2004: chs 5 and 6). The ritual of making the Panathenaic peplos has strong connections with women’s rites of passages, as is generally the case during the festivals of Athena. Accordingly, it is not accidental that it takes nine months to weave the peplos for the virgin goddess, and that young girls play a role. The time frame also matches the period of gestation before the birth of the goddess (cf. Scheid and Svenbro 1996: 178 n. 43; Nagy 2002: 88).

The period from the Chalkeia, the day on which the priestesses together with the Arrēphoroi warp the peplos, around the time of sowing and the gathering of the olive crop, until the completed robe is cut in the middle of the summer, is a parallel to the yearly calendar of the Kabyles in Algeria (North Africa). Here, the “calendar” of the women’s work complements the farming “calendar”, since the assembly of the loom, is followed by the start of weaving at
ploughing and sowing time, and the woven cloth is unfastened, cut and removed around the time of the grain harvest (Bourdieu 1980: 410, figs 2 and 5). Weaving is the winter activity, which ends with the wet season in May. According to the male presentation of Pierre Bourdieu, this women’s work is completed when the mistress of the house unfastens the woven cloth at the time of harvest, an activity which has to be completed around summer solstice, at the highest point of the “male period”. When the cloth has been removed, the loom is dismantled and put away for the duration of “the death of the field”, i.e. the period lasting from the completion of the grain harvest until the start of ploughing and sowing (cf. Håland 2005; Bourdieu 1980: figs 2 and 4, 408 ff.). But, the work, or the production is done in the wet and “female” part of the agricultural year – the gestation period. Contrary to the representation of Brinkley Messick (1987), Bourdieu (1980: 364) argues that the weaving activity is a “veil”, behind which the women can isolate themselves, at the same time as they have the excuse of an activity, which is always available. He gives an account according to which the result of the production is reaped in the “male period”. However, the work of production, which is necessary to complete the woven cloth as well as ensuring the crop, is mainly carried out in the period which is connected with the “female”, “productive part” of the agricultural cycle. From another perspective, we get another interpretation, emphasising this fertile period. In short, like Mother Earth who performs the eight months’ labour necessary to produce Demeter’s grain, women carry the long burden of human generation. Women civilise Demeter’s wheat, turning it first into flour, then into bread; it is women who nurture and train children. They also weave their cloths.

The discourse of women’s domestic weaving in North Africa embodies a distinctively female world-view. The rituals these women perform in connection with the aztta, or the loom, parallel those of birth, child rearing and death, and men are required to leave the room. Women straddle the prepared loom as if giving birth, beat the stretched warps as they do their male children to give the loom “fear”, and mimic Muslim death rites by daubing water across the warps while uttering a testimony of faith before cutting off the finished cloth. The life-cycle is represented in the rituals surrounding the loom, and the relation with hieros gamos or the sexual act is implied by an analogy, since the warp symbolizes the penis, while the weft is a feminine word for “food”. Ancient Greek parallels are illustrated in
the holy phallus as well as the woman’s comb, symbolising the female sex organ, which were worshipped at the Mysteries at Eleusis (Clem. Al. Protr. 2.18P f.; Tert. Adv. Valent. 1.3, cf. symplokē, designating both the union of the masculine warp and the feminine woof in weaving, Pl. Plt. 281a and the sexual union of man and woman Symp. 191c).

Such a conscious structuring of what Messick (1987) calls a “world-frame constituted by women” within an ostensibly male-dominated society offers a suggestive parallel for how ancient Greek women may have viewed their own position in society, since most of them did not know the “male” art of writing. The process of weaving represents in miniature and symbolic form women’s relations to the life-cycle and particularly to men, as infants, boys, adults, and finally deceased. Women, in a sense, enclose men’s lives: They bring them into being and through their performing of the death-rituals, they ultimately send them into the next world, and have, because of their double consciousness about their own existence and about men’s representations of it, a more comprehensive understanding of men than men have of women.

It is also important to recognise that there is a female world-view and language, which differs from men’s. In African and Mediterranean societies, as well as in modern and ancient Greece, we meet an official male cosmology, which differs from an unofficial female cosmology, where fertility is connected with female powers of the earth (cf. Jacobson-Widding and van Beek 1990: 26; Messick 1987: 210-25).

Sources written by men express a certain uneasiness towards weaving women.11 This is particularly illustrated through the three spinning goddesses the Moirai or Fates, who weave their net and spin the thread of life, as illustrated by Aeschylus (Eum. 334 ff.). The very weapons Clytairnnestra uses to overthrow her husband Agamemnon are female: the carpet and the net (cf. Aesch. Ag. 1125-9). She weaves her intricate threads into the path that leads him from the outside world of men and light to the dark, inner chamber (cf. below for thalamos) of the palace (Aesch. Ag. 906-13, 956-72, 1343, cf. above for Bourdieu 1980: figs 2 and 5) where women ply the art of weaving that belongs to them as it does to the Fates and the goddess Athena (see also Alexiou 1974: 116). In vengeance for her murder of Agamemnon, she is murdered by her son Orestes (Aesch. Cho. 930 ff.). Afterwards, the dancing Fates are weaving or spinning their
Evy Johanne Håland

laments for their double, the dead Clytaimnestra. The connection between women, laments and weaving is important in Greek society Today, moirologi (i.e. moirolog[i], dirge, lament[ation], bewailing, funeral song) is the general word for the laments for the dead, and the song to Fate is assumed to be the origin of the modern moirologi (Alexiou 1974: 110). The Ancient Greek word moira signifies Fate or destiny, and logos signifies speech or word. In other words, to lament is to sing or weave a person’s fate. Moirologi is particularly sung at death, and avoided on other occasions as ill-omened. This is due to many of the oldest and most fundamental associations of moira. Three years after death, the bones are still exhumed (cf. Fig. 6). At the churchyard, the assembled women examine the unusual “seams” (γαρφές) on the forehead of the skull. While doing this, they murmur to each other: “Look, this is where the Moira wrote his fate!” (Alexiou 1974: 116, cf. Danforth 1982: pls 27-31). According to Margaret Alexiou (1974: 116) “this fusion of writing and weaving is used of the Moirai as early as the Greco-Roman period”, as in the inscription found in Peek (1955: 1029.3-4) telling about: “The Fates, having written … wove.” (i.e. Μοῖραι … ἐκλῶσαντο … γραφάμεναι). According to LSJ s.v. ὅφαινω means to “weave” and ἀλωάω (cf. Klotho, one of the Moirai), means “twist by spinning, spin”. Accordingly, it is probably better to say that we meet a fusion of writing, spinning and weaving, or wool-working. Alexiou (1974: 229 n. 46) further adds that “the concept can be traced back to Homer”, while giving several references (Il. 20.128, 24.210, Od. 7.198). Il. 24.210, however, tells about the destiny the Moira worked (ἐπένηκε) for him “with her thread”. Further, Achilles, after his fight and slaying of Hector, “will suffer whatever Fate worked for him with her thread at his birth,” according to the prophesying goddess, Hera (Il. 20.128), while the third reference tells about the thread of destiny spun (LSJ s.v. νῆξω, spin) by the Spinner (i.e. klothothes in Od. 7.198), On the other hand, an anonymous fragment (AF 1018) invokes, the three Moirai who “… weave (ὑφαίνεις) on adamantine shuttles ….”

The archaic lawgivers (Plut. Sol. 12 and 21) attempted to curb women’s rituals where their connection with birth and death or the mysteries of life was prominent, but it seems that Athenian male attempts to curb women’s festivals and laments which posed a threat to official society were only partly successful since the same process was repeated in the Byzantine and modern periods when new
attempts to curb women’s laments became important. The picture from the Christian era is not very different from its forerunners: women were still lamenting, and the female laments have continued up to our own days, since women’s laments and other rituals remained essential parts of the death-rituals of rural Greece.

Contemporary Greek laments have survived by oral transmission from Homeric times (Alexiou 1974; Danforth 1984; Holst-Warhaft 1992; Håland 2004. Cf. Hansen 1990). Lamentation is essentially a female art form, that gives women a means to express not only pain, but frustration and anger. So the art of lamentation gives women considerable power over the rituals of death, and women’s laments became “Dangerous Voices” in ancient Greece (Holst-Warhaft 1992). Traditionally, ritual lamentation has been women’s way of articulating themselves in public. Women’s prominence in the death rituals and their use of the public forum of the funeral to express anger and grief have presented a powerful challenge to established social order both in ancient and modern Greece, and women’s mourning ritual have been characterised as a weaving conflict, i.e. women’s cultural resistance as they weave together diverse social practices through their mourning ceremony (klama), for example in opposition to Men’s Council (gerondiki) in modern Mani in the southern Peloponnese (Seremetakis 1991: ch. 7), where I have experienced ritual lamentation during my own fieldwork. The moirologhistra, the great singer of laments in the modern Greek village, is rightly regarded by men with a certain fear. She has an authority that is recognized by all around her to communicate with the dead. She is poet and priestess, spellbinder and exorciser of spells. It is females who have traditionally, by the authority of the Fates, controlled the great mysteries of birth and death.
CLOTH-PRODUCTION AS WOMEN’S WORK

In Greek tradition there is a close social connection between women, cloth and clothing. The deep connection between women and weaving is illustrated with the divine representative of the principle of weaving, Athena. In the story of Pandora, Athena is the goddess who teaches her womanly skills: “needlework and the weaving of the varied web” (Hes. Op. 60-4). Athena also provides the first woman in the world, Pandora, with suitable clothing: “And the goddess bright-eyed Athena girdled and clothed her with silvery raiment, and down from her head she spread with her hands a broderied veil, a wonder to see”. (Hes. Th. 573-5). Ovid (Met. 6.1-145) tells the story of Athena’s contest with Arachne, who transformed the unfortunate girl into the first spider, doomed to spin and weave forever.

Spinning was so gender-stereotyped that, even in burials if the Dark Ages (c. 1200-800 BC), spindle whorls served to identify corpses as female (cf. Fig. 7). Later, Plutarch (Mor. 241d9) tells about “a woman from Ionia who showed vast pride in a bit of her own weaving, which was very valuable.” Accordingly, it is important to give priority to skills that were passed down from mother to daughter, and the typical female works, such as weaving, also an important “language” (cf. Bergren 1983) within the female sphere. Women are first and foremost to be found in the female sphere, which is not necessarily inside the houses, and women are among women. Traditionally women have used weaving to tell
stories, such as Sappho, the “weaver of tales” (*Fr. 28*). The Classical

Greeks had inherited a 7000-year tradition of weaving (Barber 1992: 103), and weaving is a metaphor for birth and the rebirth of the world. Through women’s laments, festivals and daily life we find a “female universe”, where female activities exclude men, where the frame of reference is not their male relatives’, but rules and criteria established within this female universe. Weaving is a sort of “female speech” associated with girdles and hairnets, typical female symbols (Sappho *Fr. 83, 133*; Plut. *Mor.154a-b*). A woman may give another evaluation of the process of weaving than men (Sappho *Fr. 135*). It represents an essential part of women’s female knowledge. The act of weaving, thus represents an important means of manifesting “a poetics of womanhood”, according to which the essential thing is to “be good at being a woman” in Greece (Dubisch 1995 on modern Greek material; Håland 2001, 2003, 2004 for modern and ancient
material), for example when performing fertility-rituals in agricultural or procreation contexts, using magic such as in healing contexts, nursing children, performing death-rituals. In ancient Greece, women had important ritual roles in village and family life, and one of the female responsibilities and central ways of manifesting womanhood were demonstrated through spinning and weaving cloths, such as the weaving of cloths for their own family-members and the weaving of robes for female divinities.

In ancient Greek tradition, mostly sources written by men, the sign of the female, first and foremost, is weaving, since women do not speak, they weave. According to Plato (Leg. 806a), girls are not only working wool, they are also “weaving” their life. In reality, male authors, such as Plutarch generally does not seem to understand women. This is discerned in his presentation of the maiden, Eumetis. Despite of all her learning and wisdom (Mor. 148c-e), it seems that Eumetis should not be taken seriously, when “weaving her riddles” (154a-b). It is interesting to note that Eumetis’ wisdom is most often expressed by way of riddles and compared to weaving (154b). The female speech of weaving is connected with both a female way of handling things and female cunning (cf. Plut. Thes. 19.1).

Lysistrata applies terms used in wool-working when describing her plan of how she will unite Greece in peace (Ar. Lys. 567 ff.). Homer (Il. 3.125-8) describes Helen weaving battle scenes and Andromakhe weaving talismans, or “flowers of varied hue” (Il. 22.440 f., for Il. 3.126, 22.441 cf. LSJ s.v. ἔμπάσσω, sprinkle in or on, i.e. weave rich patterns in a web of cloth), and show Penelope, holding her suitors at bay for more than three years while she wove a figured funerary cloth, unravelling it every night (Od. 2.94-110, 19.139-151, 24.139 f.). Penelope at her loom (cf. also Od. 1.356-8) is further illustrated on a vase-painting (ARV 1300,2). By weaving pictures in a robe (Apollod. 3.14, 8; cf. also Ov. Met. 6.412-674 [571-586]) and sending it to her sister, Philomela uses her “female speech” to tell Procne about her rape by Tereus. The myth exposes the magical power of a silent web to speak, and women’s weaving implies a “writing”, or graphic art, a silent material representation of audible, immaterial speech.

Thus, the poems of Ancient Greece preserve an old tradition for both the weaving of story-cloths and the habit of women offering
textiles to the goddess, who had successive temples on the Akropolis from the Mycenaean period. The entire ritual of presenting the pre-Hellenic deity Athena, with an ornate new dress, was a local relic of the Bronze Age (Barber 1991, 1992).

CONTINUITIES FROM THE PAST

Today, rural women like those in the villages of Olympos and Diaphani on the island of Karpathos engage in wool-working in ways very similar to those of the past (cf. Fig. 8). They take their spinning with them as they carry on the numerous tasks of farm life, for example tending their goats, since it takes many times as long to spin a pound of fibre as to weave it. Barber (1994, Figure 1.1.) presents a seventeenth century woodcut of women in the Balkans spinning while travelling. We meet a parallel in Herodotus’ (5.12) tale about the woman on her way “to draw water, bearing a vessel on her head and leading a horse by the bridle on her arm and spinning flax the while.” A walking spinning woman is also illustrated on a vase-painting (ARV 403, 38). The similarities between women’s work in Homer and in the rest of the Mediterranean world, even today, need to be emphasised.

In the ancient world, several caves were dedicated to nymphs and, according to popular religious belief, the nymphs were sitting in their caves working at their looms: In the Odyssey we learn about the “shadowy cave sacred to the nymphs that are called Naiads”. “Therein are . . . ever-flowing springs”, and other important elements associated with maidens, such as bees and honey. “And in the cave are long looms of stone, at which the nymphs weave webs of purple dye, a wonder to behold” (Od. 13.103-109). Kirke also dwells in her cave, “singing with her sweet voice as she went to and fro before the loom, weaving with a golden shuttle” (Od. 5.57-62, cf. Fig 1). Today, many caves are transformed to chapels dedicated to the Panagia (the Virgin Mary).

According to popular religious belief on the island of Mytilini/Lesbos, the Panagia is sitting at the loom weaving golden textiles (Makistou 1970: 111 f.) in the thalamos (chamber), the modern equivalent to the ancient “women’s apartment or bridal chamber”. On Mytilini, the thalamos is the cave deep under the
The peplos ritually presented to Athena, is paralleled by the woven offerings (Fig. 9) dedicated to Panagia today at the festival celebrating the Dormition of the Panagia on 15 August on the Aegean island of Tinos. In addition, the motif of the island’s miraculous holy icon (image) said to have been made by St Luke is the Annunciation, which announces conception. According to Foskolos 1996 (i.e. the pamphlet distributed by the Church of the Annunciation of Tinos), the icon portrays the Panagia wearing a golden-yellow-green dress. Today, the icon is covered with offerings of gold and precious stones (cf. Fig. 9), and it is not possible to see what it portrays. Like her mother Agia (i.e. Saint) Anna, and other female saints, Panagia gets textiles, particularly shawls (Fig. 10), headscarves, tablecloths and handkerchiefs. In Euripides’ Ion (1141-65), Ion, a temple servant,
fetches a large number of story-cloths from the temple storerooms in order to set up a huge outdoor pavilion for a feast. As on modern Tinos (Fig. 11), the cloths had been left as dedications (cf. also Ar. Plut. 844 f.).

Figure 9. The carpet under the miraculous icon representing the Annunciation is one of the many woven offerings dedicated by women to the Panagia today on the Aegean island of Tinos. The monastery of Kekhrovouno; July 2005.

Figure 10. Panagia receives dedications of cloth, particularly shawls, as in the village of Olympos on the island of Karpathos; April 1992.
Women in Ancient Greece devoted most of their time to preparing textiles and food. Accordingly their main gifts to the divinities were food and clothing, and these gifts were also given on other occasions. Greek funerals evidently made use of ornate cloths. As already mentioned, Penelope at her loom (Od. 2.94-110) was for instance weaving a funerary cloth for her father-in-law, Laertes. The practice of laying a story-cloth over the body during the funeral and eventually the coffin (cf. Fig. 12) is attested.\(^{13}\) The painted scenes on sarcophagi and on the Dipylon funeral vases (Figs 4 f.) seem to be another way to accomplish the same ritual ends. Nevertheless, legislators tried to restrict women’s gift-giving to the dead, as well as their laments which were characterised as excessive. According to a funeral law from the late 5th century BC, which is a copy of an earlier Athenian law:
The dead shall be buried as follows: in three or fewer white cloths – i.e. a spread, a shroud and a coverlet – the three worth not over a hundred drachmas. They shall carry him out on a simply-wrought bed and shall not cover the bier with cloths. . . . They shall carry home from the tomb the bed and the spreads. (*SIG*³1218).

These and other restrictions (Plut. *Sol*. 21.4 f., cf. 12.5) against women’s traditional rituals for the dead, were repeatedly stated in the ancient world, a fact that illustrates that women were still carrying out their rituals. They were (often in a competitive way, cf. Håland 2001) offering cloths to their dead, thus paralleling their offerings dedicated to their weaving goddess on the Acropolis of Athens.

*Bergen, Norway*

*evyhaa@online.no*

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the Traditional Cosmology Society for giving me a grant from the Deidre Green Fund, thus providing me with financial support in connection with my participation in the conference on Weaving and Cosmology in Edinburgh on 23-25 June 2005. I would also like to thank the editor for useful recommendations on conveying my thoughts and helping to clarify my English. I would also like to thank the anonymous reader of the article for useful comments and suggestions for further reading. Any remaining errors are of course my own.

**Notes**
The sources distinguish between the “yearly” and the “great” festival. The quadrennial “great” Panathenaia, modelled on the Olympic games founded by 776 BC, was celebrated with special pomp from its foundation c. 566 BC until AD 410. See Håland 2004: ch. 5, also for further discussion of the festival.

Cf. Paus. 1.24,3 for Athena Ergane, i.e. Athena “the Worker”. Cf. Ridgway 1992: fig. 92. See also Il. 5.733-735 where Athena herself had wrought and her hands had fashioned her soft robe, richly broidered.

Cf. Paus. 1.27,3, see also Ar. Lys. 641-8, discussed in Håland 2004: ch. 5. See also Plut. Mor. 839c. Arrēphoreō, i.e. serve as arrēphoros, Ar. Lys. 642; the Arrēphoros at Athens, i.e. maiden who carried the symbols of Athena Polias in procession, Paus. 1.27,3. For Arrēphoroi and Ergastinai, see below; see also Deubner 1932: 9-36.

The profusion of spinning and weaving implements found at the sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron (including a child-sized one), point to some not inappropriate training in womanly skills during the period the little Athenian girls “tended the shrine”, as Bears (Ar. Lys. 645). The Lysistrata (641-648) tells how the Athenian girls moved up from behind-the-scenes preparation for the Panathenaic festival to actual participation in the procession: “When I was seven, I was Arrēphoros. At ten I was Aletris (i.e. grinned grain for the sacred cakes for Athena); then I wore the saffron to be a bear for Artemis of Brauron. Next, as a fair young girl, I was Kanephoros (i.e. bearer of basket) . . . .”

In the Aegean Islands saffron is still considered a medicine against menstrual ills.


Or: “Figuring it (i.e. the peplos) with intricate flower-dyed wefts.” Eur. Hec. 465-474. While comparing his poem to the peplos, Verg. Ciris, 20-23 (cf. 35 ff.), tells about a story woven on the peplos: “but I should weave a story into an ample robe, (…), such as is borne in Erechthean Athens, (…) to chaste Minerva, (…).” See also 29-34, for its design and colour, cf. Håland 2004: ch. 5. Cf. Euripides (IT. 222-224, Ion. 1417-1424) showing his heroines discussing the myths they wove into their cloths as young maidens. Iphigeneia tells about Athena and the Titans, while Creusa (in her dialogue with Ion) tells about “a Gorgon in the mid-threads (…) fringed with serpents-with the Aegis-fringe.”
8 See for example ABFV 206 = ABV 363,45; ARV 417,1, 589,1, 602,24, 1344,1.

9 There are several interpretations of “The Olive Tree Pediment” (c. 550 BC) from the Acropolis museum of Athens, see Hurwit 1999: 113-15: Perhaps it is a generalised image of the Panathenaic procession nearing its conclusion at the temple of the goddess. The female figure may, in that case, perhaps be one of the Arrēphoroi, perhaps even bearing the sacred peplos itself on her head. Since the Arrēphoroi were little girls, and this seems to be a woman, I would rather suggest that it may be an earlier representation of one of the Ergastinai than the one given at the Parthenon frieze from c. 432 BC (see infra), or for example the priestess of Athena Polias, the most prestigious religious function an Athenian aristocratic woman could obtain. One may also suggest that this is the goddess in her temple waiting for the procession.

10 See for example Parke 1986: pl. 12, see also pls 13-19 for the frieze (pl. 13 showing the maidens at the head of the procession). See also Barber 1991: 361 fig. 16.1, 1992: fig. 72 for the peplos ceremony. The controversy of the frieze and the Panathenaic peplos or peploi is discussed in Håland 2004, ch. 5, see also Neils 1992a: 26; Barber 1992: 113-14 (“first and second form of peplos-offering”).

11 Cf. the image of Zeus as weaver and the male-oriented discussion in Scheid and Svenbro 1996.

12 In ancient Greek ἱλαμος signifies an inner room or chamber, surrounded by other buildings particularly in Homer (Od. 23.183-204, chiefly 192). Generally, thalamos signifies women’s apartment, inner part of the house (Il. 3.142); a special chamber in this part of the house, bedroom especially of the lady of the house (Il. 3.423). It also signifies bed (cf. the important “sign” in Od. 23.183-204), store-room (especially for valuables, Od. 21.8). The modern and ancient thalamos is discussed at length in Håland 2004: ch. 6, see also for example Detienne 1989: 216 (la chambre nuptiale), cf. supra, cf. also Loraux 1985: 51-3 (dans le thalamos: mort et mariage) for the ancient material.

References


ABV = Beazley, J. D. (1956). *Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.


Weaving as a Core Female Activity in Ancient and Modern Greece


Hes. *Op., Th., Sc./HHA.* (=nb. 5=The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite)/*HHD* (=nb. 1=The Homeric Hymn to Demeter)=*Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns*
Evy Johanne Håland


---- (forthcoming 2006). The ritual year as a woman’s life: The festivals of the agricultural cycle, life-cycle passages of Mother Goddesses and fertility-cult. In Proceedings from The First International Conference of the SIEF working group on The Ritual Year, in Association with the Department of Maltese University of Malta, Junior College, Msida, Malta, 2005, approx. 17 pages.


