

## **The meaning of the Karyatids on the South portico of the Erechtheion: What did they represent for the ancient Athenian viewer?**

The Erechtheion is one of the most important yet enigmatic temples on the Acropolis, constructed between 430 and 406 BCE as part of the Periklean building program. Its role, as widely accepted by modern scholars<sup>1</sup>, was to serve as a Temple of Athena Polias and to house the goddess's sacred olivewood statue, which endowed the building with the highest religious importance on the Acropolis. Notably, the architectural sculpture on the Erechtheion is quite limited, consisting only of Ionic friezes and Karyatid columns supporting the roof of the South porch (Smoke 2010, 52), thus placing even greater significance on the sculptor's choice of decoration due to its prominence. While this is not the first use of female Karyatid statuary in mainland Greece<sup>2</sup>, it is an unusual decorative element for the already eclectic temple. The scant number of references to the Karyatid porch in ancient sources, and the exiguity of proposed interpretations in modern ones<sup>3</sup>, offer little explanation of the meaning of its iconography from the perspective of the ancient Greek viewer. This paper attempts to answer why the architect chose this unconventional alternative to the traditional Ionic treatment of the columns, by examining the meaning of the Karyatids in the context of their architectural milieu, as well as the political, cultural, and military events taking place during the construction of the Erechtheion in the late half of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE.

A Roman interpretation claims that the Karyatids represent the suffering women of Karyai, taken as slaves after the Greeks defeated the Peloponnesian city as punishment for its betrayal during the Persian wars (Vitruvius, *de Arch.* I.5), and serve as a reminder of the tremendous military power of Athens. Contrary to this interpretation, this paper argues that the female figures represent Athenian *parthenoi*, which were intended as positive models of chastity,

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<sup>1</sup> Dörpfeld's hypothesis, recently resurrected by Ferrari (2002), claiming that the Old Temple of Athena Polias was not completely destroyed during the Persian sack of 480 BCE and continued to house the sacred ancient statue of Athena, is founded upon an interpretation of the Chandler stele (IG I<sup>3</sup> 474) which argues that the inscription describes fragments of the Old Temple in addition to the Erechtheion; this has been refuted based on archaeological evidence which shows that all fragments described in the construction work inventory refer to blocks used in the present-day Erechtheion (Pakkanen 2006), supporting the view that the Erechtheion was built as a replacement of the Old Temple. Consequently, the terms "Erechtheion" and "temple of Athena Polias" are used interchangeably in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Karyatids were used as columns on the front porch of the Siphnian treasury at Delphi, c. 525 BCE (Osborne 1998, 121), as well as on a smaller scale as handle decoration for hand-held mirrors popular in the 6<sup>th</sup> to mid-5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE (Stewart 2008, 184).

<sup>3</sup> A catalogue search for ("Karyatid\*" OR "Caryatid\*") in article title AND "Acropolis" in article content) was performed on the JSTOR and Scopus databases, and yielded two results in JSTOR and zero in Scopus.

dutiful obedience and religious observance – qualities regarded as female virtues by fifth-century male Athenians. The Karyatids' purpose of inspiring contemporary Athenian girls to follow a model of deference and devotion was chosen by the male architect, in a time when military turmoil and societal changes were threatening the city's patriarchal paradigm.

As the Erechtheion was part of the Periklean plan for the reconstruction of the Acropolis, the symbolism of its sculpture has to be analyzed in the context of other buildings on the citadel, especially since the buildings present a unified theme – one orator emphasizes this holistic character by stating that the “whole Acropolis was like a dedication, or rather like a statue” (Aelius Aristides, *Panathenaic Oration* 191). Of interest is the abundance of female central figures in the myths and themes depicted in the metopes, pediments, friezes, and free-standing sculpture. Since the decorations were conceived and produced by male craftsmen, they indicate the attitudes of male Athenians towards women at the time. On one hand, they imagined the ideal woman as being beautiful, intelligent, humble, virtuous, dutiful and submissive (Reeder 1995), as demonstrated in the depiction of Athena's clever victory over Poseidon for patronage over the city in the Parthenon's west pediment (Barringer 2008); the Lapith women's modesty and struggle against the offending Centaurs in an attempt to preserve their virtue, shown in the Parthenon's southern metopes (Barringer 2008); and engagement in religious rituals as depicted by the maidens carrying offerings in the centre of the east frieze of the Parthenon (Barringer 2008). On the other hand, women were regarded as a *καλόν κακόν*, “beautiful evil”, because they were thought to fall victim to overpowering irrationality, curiosity, sexuality and emotions, giving rise to misfortune and destruction (Barringer 2008, 92). This view is represented by references to the evil brought on by Pandora's consuming curiosity depicted on the base of the chryselephantine statue of Athena Parthenos (Barringer 2008), and the depiction of suffering and death during the Ilioupersis – a war which arose from a dispute over female beauty – shown on the Parthenon metopes from the north wall (Barringer 2008). As an integral part of the Acropolis complex, the Erechtheion and its sculpture of female figures must fit within the themes introduced elsewhere on the citadel. As a temple of Athena Polias which also contains altars to many other gods and heroes (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.26.5), the Erechtheion's primary motifs include the portrayal of the glory of Athens by virtue of the strength and wisdom of its patron goddess, and the autochthonous connection of the people to the land through their mythical ancestors. Since the virgin goddess is a paragon for female strength and infallibility to

weakness, the view of the Karyatids as chaste maidens who mirror the purity of the goddess in the mortal realm suggests itself. In order to demonstrate that this interpretation is more plausible than the Roman view of the Karyatids as enslaved foreign women attesting to the glory of Athenian military power, it is necessary to examine the mythological context staged by the Erechtheion and surrounding sculpture.

In Greek mythology, the temple of Athena Polias is traditionally linked to King Erechtheus: Homer describes Athena's role in bringing Erechtheus to the Acropolis, when she "settled the king in Athens, in her own rich shrine, where sons of Athens worship him with bulls and goats" (Homer, *Iliad* II.550-552), suggesting that the Archaic Temple may have contained an altar to Erechtheus, much like the Erechtheion itself. For the ancient viewer, the temple of Athena Polias, which was located over the mythical tomb of King Kekrops (Stewart 2008, 210-212; Barringer 2008, 98), would evoke thoughts of the birth of Erichthonios<sup>4</sup>. After being born out of Hephaistos' seeds planted in the earth, Athena placed baby Erichthonios in a basket and handed it to King Kekrops' daughters – Aglauros, Herse and Pandrosos, instructing them to refrain from opening it. Driven by curiosity, the Kekropidai open the basket and suffer the curse of Athena, leading them to commit suicide by jumping off the Acropolis rock in madness (Reeder 1995, 39). The handing of a secret basket to a group of maidens is reminiscent of a ritual performed the night before the Panathenaic procession, during which the priestess of Athena hands baskets with sacred offerings to several *arrhephoroi*, who must carry them on their heads as they descent into the city, without succumbing to curiosity and peeking inside (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.27.3). The iconography of the Karyatids, dressed in the dignified *peplos*, with baskets supported by their heads, is consistent with the image of virtuous maidens who partook in the *arrhephoria*. Furthermore, they closely mirror the maidens carrying ritual offerings on their heads as part of the Panathenaic procession, depicted in the centre of the Parthenon's east frieze, which was completed by 432 BCE, prior to the construction of the Erechtheion. As there is strong visual similarity between the maidens from the Parthenon frieze and the Karyatids, it is possible that the former may have inspired the design of the Erechtheion porch, further suggesting a religious context for the interpretation of the female figures. Even

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<sup>4</sup> There is some debate over whether the two names refer to the same individual, or whether Erichthonios is the grandfather of Erechtheus. Most modern scholars agree that the two nomenclatures are interchangeable (Gantz 1993; Reeder 1995), so in this paper "Erichthonios" and "Erechtheus" are taken to refer to the same individual, particularly to the child and the man, respectively (Reeder 1995, 39).

more tellingly, a nearby free-standing statue of Prokne, the daughter of King Pandion, who heroically killed her son Itys in order to protect her family's honour after her Thracian husband Tereus ravished her sister, Philomela (Homer, *Odyssey* XIX.518-523; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI.412-677), shows a striking stylistic resemblance to the Karyatids (Barringer 2008, 95-98). Prokne's strength in avenging her foreign husband, and ability to put the needs of her family above her son's life, would have served as a potent model of dutiful behaviour for Athenian women, who often had to place the state's interests above their own by conceding their sons to battle. The likeness of the appearance of Prokne to that of the Karyatids suggests a parallel similarity in the statues' symbolism – representing woman's devotion and duty to the state. Finally, evidence from the Ionic friezes and decoration of the Erechtheion itself adds another dimension to the interpretation. The southern wall of the temple was the one facing the path of the Panathenaic procession, and was therefore most prominent to participants in the festival (Smoke 2010, 86). A recent analysis of the extant fragments of the south frieze of the cella concludes that they most likely depicted a scene of the Panathenaia (Smoke 2010, 86-87), which reinforces the related interpretation of the Karyatids as *parthenoi* carrying offerings and demonstrating religious observance. Additionally, the temple's mouldings are of the egg-and-dart pattern, which is traditionally associated with votive offerings (Stewart 2008, 210-212), and the Karyatids carried libation *phialai* (Barringer 2008, 98). Coupled with the portico's location above the grave of Athens' first mythical king, Kekrops (Barringer 2008, 98; Stewart 2008, 212), the maidens' stance can represent an act of dutiful worship of the city's glorious ancestors.

The evidence from the architectural and mythological context, presented above, strongly supports the thesis that the Karyatids represent Athenian maidens serving as a paragon of virtue to be emulated by Athenian *parthenoi*. They symbolize chastity and purity, mirroring that of Athena Polias herself; obedience and participation in religious festivals, echoing the theme of the *arrhephoroi* from the Parthenon's east frieze; unwavering duty to the polis in the face of foreign adversaries reminiscent to Prokne's own admirable retaliation in answer to the Thracian king's savageness; and respect and worship of Athens' glorious forbears suggested by the votive details on the Erechtheion. Having thus presented a plausible interpretation for the meaning of the Karyatids, it is interesting to discuss why the male architect chose this iconography for the temple's most prominent sculpture. It is notable that the construction of the Erechtheion took place in the midst of the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta (431-404 BCE). The

large number of male citizens who participated in the war conflict, combined with the devastating plague of Athens in 430 BCE, led to substantial demographic changes in the polis; by the late fifth century, the larger proportion of the population in the city was female. Further, there was an influx of foreign *metic* women who brought new paradigms of gender roles, threatening to disturb the previously established male dominance (Stewart 2008, 587-590). The increase in depictions of Greek victory over Amazonian female warriors in Attic pottery in the mid-5th c. BCE (Stewart 1995), is indicative of the growing presence of foreign women in the city, and the offensive stance taken by Athenian men against their influence. Another indication of this is the restrictive citizenship law passed in 451 BCE by Perikles, prescribing that Athenian citizenship be granted only to those whose parents are *both* Athenian citizens, thus aiming to curb the number of marriages with foreigners (Stewart 2008, 587-590). As a result of these changes, Athenian females began to enjoy greater freedoms – while previously they were only allowed to go outside when participating in religious festivals, worship of gods and ancestors, or to fetch water, they now enjoyed greater mobility within the city (Barringer 2008, 30). The shift away from male dominance is documented in the types of scenes depicted on Attic pottery in the latter half of the century, when vases increasingly begin to portray the domestic female realm, whereas references to lewd scenes preferred by men partaking in symposia are limited (Barringer 2008, 30). The growing power of women is vividly interpreted by the dramatic arts as well; Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* revolves around a group of women who take over the Acropolis and stage a sex-strike in order to put an end to the Peloponnesian war, while public sculpture increasingly portrays sexually suggestive female figures clothed in translucent fabrics. This mounting evidence for the emancipation of women in the second half of the century, as a result of demographic changes and foreign influence, presented a concern for Athenian males.

As Athenian democracy was based upon the assumption of male superiority over women, slaves and foreigners (Reeder 2008), the preservation of patriarchy in the face of external influence and societal changes was critical and warranted the use of prominent architectural sculpture on the Acropolis' main religious temple as a means of instilling patriarchal values in female viewers. The Karyatids were a potent representation of prescribed female qualities, aimed at Athenian *parthenoi* who visited the citadel during religious festivals and worship, in order to sway them towards traditional virtues, such as chastity, religious devotion, and obedience, and away from social independence and sexual emancipation.

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## Appendix



Figure 1: Comparison of Karyatid from the Erechtheion porch (left)<sup>5</sup> and Prokne with Itys (right)<sup>6</sup>



Figure 2: Fragment with two maidens carrying objects over their heads from the east Parthenon frieze.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Caryatid From the South Porch of the Erechtheion; overview*, c. 421-405 BCE, accessed 29 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.artstor.org>>

<sup>6</sup> *Alkamenes, Prokne and Itys*, c. 430 BCE, accessed 29 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.theacropolismuseum.gr>>

<sup>7</sup> *Two Maidens and a Woman, and a Man a Child Handling a Piece of Folded Cloth*, c. 438-432 BCE, pentelic marble, accessed 29 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.artstor.org>>