

CONCERNING THE PARTHENOS

(PLATE 1)

A glance at the plan of the Parthenon (Fig. 1) will show that the base of the Parthenos was located well back in the east cella of the Parthenon, and that both the base and the hole for the "backbone" of the statue were on the axis of the nave.¹ Furthermore, the Parthenos, it will be remembered, had a wooden core covered with bronze plates which in turn were covered with removable sheets of gold.² The extended right hand of the statue held a Nike some 1.80 m. high;³ the Nike, too, was covered with sheets of gold.

An examination of the east cella reveals abundant traces of fire. The marble walls and the marble pavement are everywhere calcined except under the base of the statue where the marble blocks of the base, which was unusually large, protected the pavement. There is evidence, however, that the outside bottom blocks of the base had to be renewed on account of the fire.⁴ If the fire was severe enough to cause the immense amount of damage still visible in the east cella, the fire, without doubt, destroyed the colossal wooden statue. Since all the bottom outside blocks of the base were replaced, evidently a thorough repair of the base was made so that a copy of the statue might be placed upon a base which had no fire defects. As indicated by the later dowels, this took place in Roman times.⁵

The gold sheets for the original colossal Parthenos were of great intrinsic value, for it is known that the sheets were *ca.* $\frac{3}{4}$ mm. thick.⁶ They could be removed for verification, which required a construction which added to the costliness of the statue. If the valuable sheets were lost in a fire, probably more than one ancient writer would have mentioned the fact. No such record has come down to us. We do know that Lachares removed the gold sheets in 296 B.C. to pay his troops, but, again, there is no record that he, or anyone else, put the gold sheets back. Probably the bronze plates were gilded after Lachares removed the sheets of gold⁷ and again in the statue restored after the fire.⁸ The amount of gold needed for gilding is so insignificant that no

¹ *Hesperia*, XXIV, 1955, pp. 244 ff.

² *Ibid.*, XXVI, 1957, pp. 350-361.

³ *Ibid.*, XXIV, 1955, p. 266, fig. 16. Pausanias I, 24, 7 says 4 cubits.

⁴ *Ibid.*, XXIV, 1955, p. 270, fig. 18; Dinsmoor, *A.J.A.*, XXXVIII, 1934, pp. 94 ff.

⁵ Dinsmoor, *op. cit.*, p. 106 dates the rebuilding just before *ca.* 160 B.C.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96 and note 3; *Hesperia*, XXVI, 1957, p. 351 and note 7.

⁷ Dinsmoor, *op. cit.*, p. 97 suggests that gold leaf replaced the sheets of gold against a "wooden (or, more likely, plaster) backing" soon after 295 B.C., but see *Hesperia*, XXVI, 1957, p. 358 for bronze plates over the wood core.

⁸ Although Dinsmoor believes gold sheets were restored, *op. cit.*, pp. 98, 106.

writer would be likely to mention its loss; as noted above, there is no ancient record of such a loss.

As for the second (restored) statue, it is unknown when it disappeared. It stood in the Parthenon until the 5th century after Christ, when it may have been lost in a second fire; another account, however, mentions it in Constantinople in the 10th century⁹ after which there is no further reference to it.

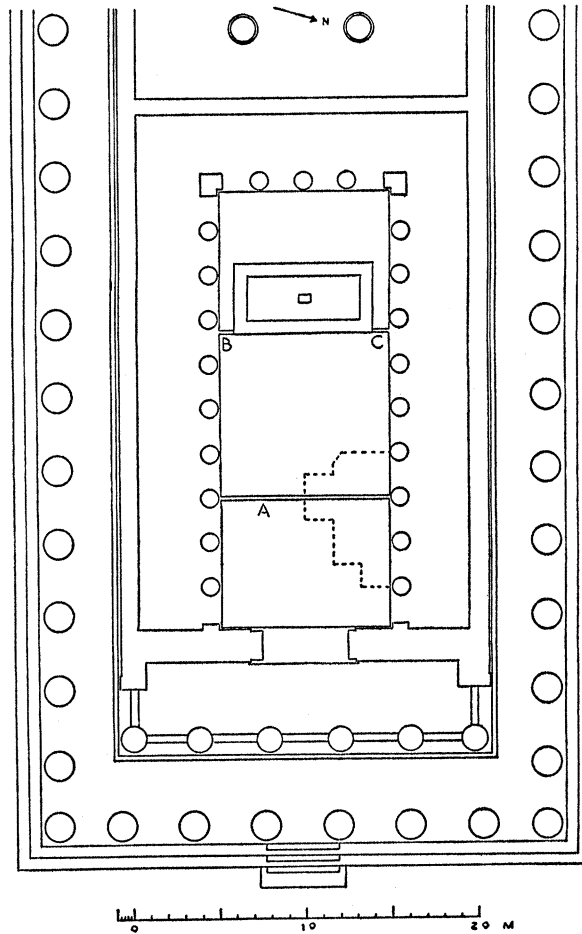


FIG. 1. Plan of the Parthenon.

Although the Parthenos was one of the most famous statues of antiquity and ancient writers refer to almost every part of it, they say nothing, unfortunately, about a support under the right hand which held the Nike. The statue was copied in antiquity more or less accurately, both at large and at small scale, in the round and in relief. It was carved in marble, and it also became a favorite *motif* on coins, terracottas

⁹ G. M. A. Richter, *Sculpture and Sculptors of the Greeks*, p. 220 with ancient references.

and the like. The evidence from these data, however, in so far as the support under the hand is concerned, is often contradictory.

There are two well-known marble statuettes representing the Parthenos, the Lenormant and the Varvakeion, both in the National Museum at Athens (Nos. 128, 129). The Lenormant is only half finished. It has no support under the right hand, but the sculptor may have had one in mind, for the extended arm and its Nike could hardly have been cut in marble without a support.

The Varvakeion statuette has a column for a support under the right hand (Pl. 1, d). This statuette is practically finished, except for the column. The good workmanship and the high polish of the marble indicate that, in all probability, it

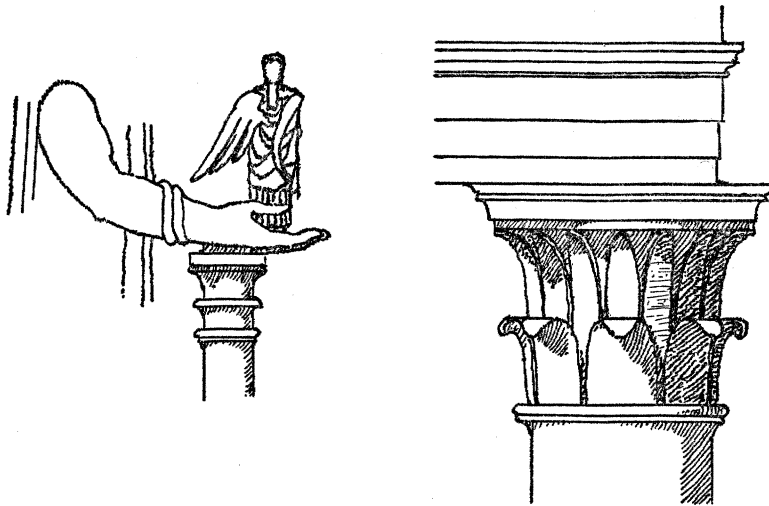


FIG. 2. Capitals of the Column of the Varvakeion Statuette and the Tower of the Winds.

was executed in the time of Hadrian. It probably, therefore, copies the restored statue. Note that the vertical section through the capital of the column shows a somewhat similar set of mouldings to that of the capital of the Tower of the Winds which dates from the first half of the first century B.C. (Fig. 2).¹⁰ Do the similar profiles indicate that one capital was inspired by the other? If so, then, because the Varvakeion capital is unfinished while the Tower of the Winds capital is finished, the Varvakeion capital is likely to have followed the other. We see, then, that Pheidias' original support, if it was a column, could hardly have had a capital like that of the Varvakeion statuette, since there is no evidence for such capitals earlier than the Tower of the Winds, some three hundred years after his time.

That there was some support under the right hand of the Parthenos seems to be

¹⁰ After Stuart and Revett, *Antiquities of Athens*, Vol. I, Chap. III, pl. VII.

confirmed by both structural and esthetic considerations. The original colossal wooden statue could not have been constructed in Pheidias' time without a support, as has been shown elsewhere.¹¹ This is further illustrated in Plate 1, a. The Varvakeion statuette was used by the writer in the drawings of Plate 1, a and b, using a height of 11.544 m. for the statue and its base, as established in *Hesperia*, XXIV, 1955, p. 256. In Plate 1, a, we see that the combined weight of the Nike and of the arm supporting it causes a tendency for the statue to tip to the spectator's left, a tendency which would be likely to prove disastrous in not many years.¹² In Plate 1, b, on the other hand, the combined weight of the Nike and arm is transmitted vertically to the base and there is no tendency to make the statue tip. Looking again at Plate 1, a, where the statue has no support under the right hand, the statue appears to be placed off the axis of the cella, a serious defect for a colossal statue standing practically at the end of the cella of a temple. Further, the base is loaded eccentrically; something is needed beneath the Nike to balance the shield and serpent on the other side of the statue. As soon as a support under the Nike is added, these defects disappear (Pl. 1, b).

In representing a statue on a coin, the ancient die cutter might make a fairly faithful copy of the statue, or then again he might take great liberties with his design provided the persons who were to handle the coin understood which statue was meant. In the case of the coins representing the Parthenos, it mattered little if the Athena was, or was not, shown with a support under the right hand, for the Nike, helmet, aegis, spear, shield and serpent were sufficient to indicate which statue was intended. Nor did the attributes need to be placed on the coin in the same relative positions as they occupied in the statue itself.

A number of coins representing the Parthenos have tree trunks beneath the Nike. One of Aphrodisias is dated *ca.* 375 B.C., and so must reflect the original Parthenos of Pheidias.¹³ Let us suppose, for a moment, that Pheidias designed a support inspired from an olive tree with perhaps an owl perched in the branches to make use of *motifs* appropriate to Athena. The fire would destroy both statue and tree since both were made with wooden cores. Does it not seem possible that the restorer of the statue changed the nature of the support from a tree, which, with its leaves and possibly also owl, would require a sculptor to model, to a simple column which a mason could easily copy, perhaps from the column of the Tower of the Winds? In any case, it is fairly certain that, if Pheidias' support was a column, its capital (as we have said) was not like that of the Varvakeion statuette. Just what, then, was the support like?

A coin of Priene of the Roman Imperial period (Pl. 1, f)¹⁴ shows the large scale

¹¹ *Hesperia*, XXIV, 1955, pp. 264-267.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 264.

¹³ *J.H.S.*, VIII, 1887, pl. LXXIV, Y, 22; *A.J.A.*, XXXVIII, 1934, p. 103, fig. 4.

¹⁴ *Brit. Mus. Cat. Coins, Ionia*, p. 235, nos. 57-58, pl. XXIV, 13. I owe this photograph to the kindness of Mrs. E. B. Mathiopoulou.

copy of the Parthenos made for the temple of Athena at Priene in the mid second century B.C.¹⁵ All Athena's attributes are on the coin, but the serpent is on the other side of the statue from that of the shield, while in the Parthenos the serpent and the shield are on the same side. Of special importance is the tree supporting the right hand, for it shows that the large scale Athena for Priene needed a support under the right hand for structural reasons, and, moreover, that a tree—probably an olive tree—was deemed appropriate for the support. It does not seem beyond the realm of possibility that the inspiration for the support on the Priene coin came direct from Pheidias' Parthenos by way of the colossal Priene Athena,¹⁶ just as the inspiration for the other attributes did; the same may be true for the tree on the Aphrodisias coin mentioned above. In other words, it may be that Pheidias used an olive tree for a support.

On the other hand, at Athens, where the most accurate copies of the Parthenos on coins might be expected to appear, most of the representations of the Parthenos, both on Hellenistic and on Imperial coins,¹⁷ lack the tree or any other support. It is disappointing to find that coin types found in the recent excavations of the Athenian Agora¹⁸ do not change the picture; none show a support of any kind under the right hand.

An Attic relief of the Parthenos of perhaps the fourth century B.C. is illustrated in Plate 1, g.¹⁹ There is a roughly indicated column beneath the right hand of the Parthenos, which seems to have been incised at a late date, perhaps in Roman times. We have already suggested that the Parthenos was restored with a column under the hand in Roman times.

The writer is grateful to Miss Gisela M. A. Richter for calling his attention to a lead tessera recently found by Professor Meliades, Ephor of the Acropolis of Athens, in his excavations south of the Theater of Herodes Atticus (Pl. 1, e).²⁰ The Parthenos holds a Nike in her right hand, and beneath the extended arm is an owl perched on what the editor of the *B.C.H.* considers an altar. Although a number of archaeologists agree with him, there are others who find the "altar" too irregular for an altar

¹⁵ *Brit. Mus. Cat. Greek Sculpture*, II, pp. 146, 152.

¹⁶ If the restoration of the Parthenos occurred in early Roman times, the Priene statue certainly copied the original Pheidian statue, not the restoration. Even if the restoration was carried out in the mid second century, as Dinsmoor proposes, the Priene statue can have copied the Pheidian original, so recently burned. The tree on both the Aphrodisias and Priene coins suggests that the Priene statue goes back to the original.

¹⁷ E.g., *Brit. Mus. Cat. Coins, Attica*, no. 377, pl. XII, 9, nos. 682-693, pl. XVI, 5, 6; J. Svoronos, *Les Monnaies d'Athènes*, pls. 82, 83; *Hesperia*, V, 1936, on p. 326 figs. 30, 3 and 31, 1-2, pls. II, 20, 23, 24, VII, 1, 19, 21, 28, 29, VIII, 1-17, IX, 7, 13, 14, 17, 18, 27-30.

¹⁸ E.g., *Hesperia*, XXVII, 1958, p. 156, pl. 44, b, c.

¹⁹ *Katalog der Sammlung antiker Skulpturen, Berlin Museen, III, Griechische Skulpturen des 5. und 4. Jahrh. v. Chr.*, pl. 83.

²⁰ *B.C.H.*, LXXXI, 1957, p. 498, pl. XI, 36.

and believe it may be the stump of a gnarled olive tree, for the roots seem fairly well defined. Moreover, there is an altar (within a wreath) on the reverse of the tessera. Why should there be two altars on the same tessera?

An olive tree with an owl in it often appears in connection with Athena, especially on coins of Athens.²¹ The same combination also occurs in Renaissance times, derived probably from a classic prototype (Fig. 3).²²

When we attempt a restoration of the Parthenos making use of the olive and

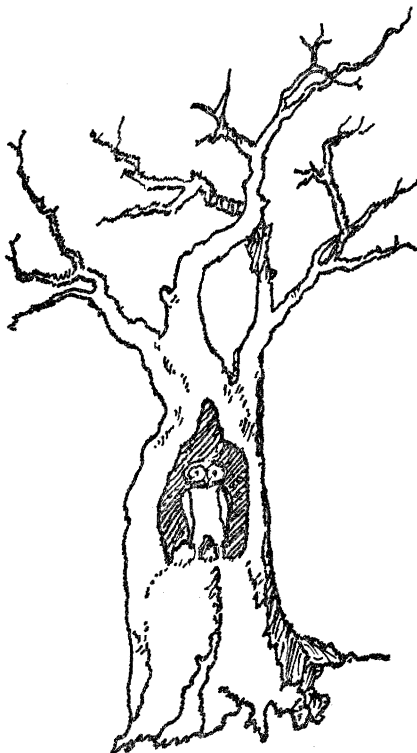


FIG. 3. From a Drawing by Bosch.

the owl, we find that the colossal statue and its various attributes are well balanced both on the pedestal of the statue and on the axis of the cella (Pl. 1, c). Surely an olive tree and owl would give Pheidias subjects far more worthy of his consummate skill in modeling than a column, and would also give more scope for his extraordinary inventive genius.

²¹ *Brit. Mus. Cat. Coins Attica*, no. 695, pl. XVI, 7; Svoronos, *Les Monnaies d'Athènes*, pls. 87, 89; *Hesperia*, V, 1936, on p. 289 fig. 1, 3, on p. 297 fig. 8, 1-11, on p. 302 fig. 12, 5, pls. II, 5, 11, 13, III, 10, 21, 22, IV, 3, 22.

²² From a pen and ink drawing by Bosch (ca. 1450-1516), Kupfer, former Staatmuseen, Berlin.

It is doubtful that Pheidias invented the idea of a support in the form of a tree. There is a great variety of supports throughout all periods of Greek sculpture; they were necessary for the stability of the statues. But if it was Pheidias who first modeled a tree for a support, his invention is noteworthy, for it served many sculptors of later periods for some of their most effective and beautiful compositions.

We have seen that the presence of a column in Roman copies of the Parthenos suggests that in the Parthenos restored after the fire a column was substituted for the tree we have supposed for Pheidias' original. What became of the owl in the tree? It could hardly be left out of the composition completely. Perhaps it was set on the pedestal beside the column. Both the original and the restored owls would presumably have been of the same size in relation to life as the Parthenos herself and so would have been of about the size of the votive marble owl of the first half of the 5th century B.C. found on the Acropolis in association with early votive columns.²³

Unfortunately it is impossible to say with certainty when the original Parthenos was destroyed, when it was restored, and when that copy finally came to an end. The inscription on the lead tessera does not help with these dates. It reads ΓΕΡ[ΟΥ]CΙΑC with the lunate form of *sigma* which appeared as early as the fourth century B.C. on boundary stones and vase inscriptions²⁴ and continued thereafter, more frequently in Roman times. The lunate *sigma* is of hardly any value, however, since its use extended over so long a period. The Roman dowels under the base of the restored statue are also of scarcely any help, for they, too, cannot be assigned to a period limited to a few years. An archaeologist is always hopeful that new facts will turn up to help him solve his difficulties. For the moment, about all that can be asserted concerning the history of the Parthenos is that there was a great fire in the cella, later than the third century B.C., which destroyed the statue and occasioned its restoration; and that, by the time the temple was changed into a church, even the restored copy of Pheidias' masterpiece had disappeared forever, leaving for all time, however, the memory of a marvelously beautiful statue which the Gods had bestowed as a special favor upon the citizens of Athens.²⁵

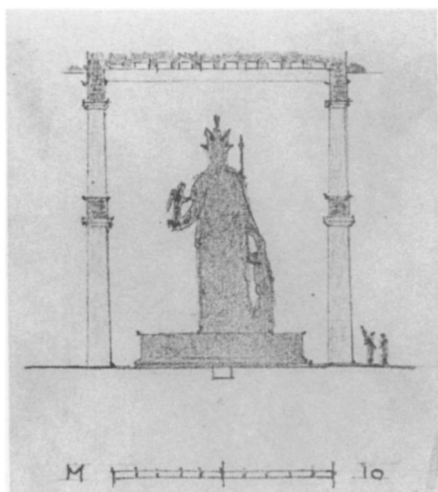
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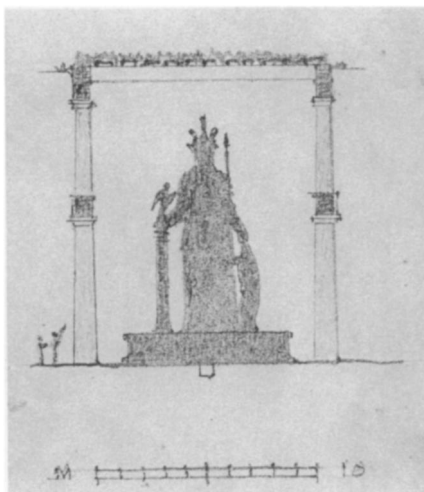
²³ S. Casson, *Catalogue of the Acropolis Museum*, II, No. 1347, pp. 252-253 and figure, G. M. A. Richter, *Animals in Greek Sculpture*, p. 38, pl. LXII, fig. 212.

²⁴ Professor John H. Young has kindly supplied the following references: Roberts and Gardner, *Introduction to Greek Epigraphy*, Part II, *Attica*, p. xvi; W. Larfeld, *Handbuch der attischen Inschriften*, p. 469; Aeschion of the 4th century B.C. (Bergk, *Poetae Lyrici Graeci*, II, p. 516, frag. 1) calls the new moon τὸ καλὸν οὐρανοῦ νέον σίγμα.

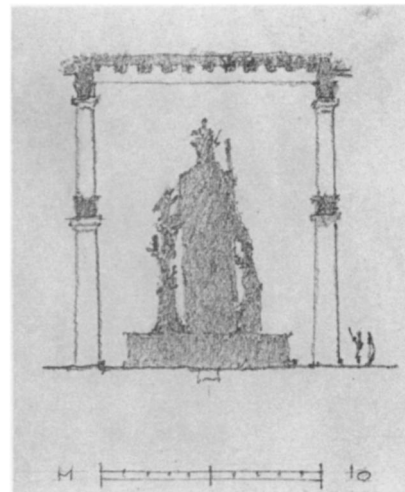
²⁵ Two articles which have appeared since this article was written should be mentioned: G. M. A. Richter, "Was there a Vertical Support under the Nike of the Athena Parthenos?" *Studi in onore di Aristide Calderini e Roberto Paribeni*, III, pp. 147-153; E. Tornaritou-Mathiopoulou, *Ἀρχ. Ἐφ.*, 1953-1954, III (1959), pp. 201-206.



a. No Support under Right Hand.



b. A Column supporting Right Hand, as in Varvakeion statuette.



c. An Olive Tree with Owl in Branches supporting Right Hand.



d. Varvakeion Statuette.

a, b, & c: Restorations of the Parthenos in the Cella of the Parthenon.



e. Lead Tessera (Plaster Cast).



f. Coin of Priene with Copy of Parthenos made for Temple of Athena at Priene.



g. Attic Relief.