

INTRODUCTION

FOR THE OPENING ceremony of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, thousands of volunteers painted their faces and costumed their bodies into embodiments of iconic ancient Greek art objects, capturing their vivid colors and patterns (Figures 1 and 2).¹ Staged by director Dimitris Papaioannou, Hourglass (*Klepsydra*) performed a story of ancient Greek art in vividly polychrome living pictures (*tableaux vivants*).² Unlike the bright colors of those portraying objects from earlier and later epochs, however, volunteers portraying the idealized nude male statues and richly clothed female counterparts produced as dedications in the sixth to fifth centuries BCE as well as those playing the figures on the reliefs of the Parthenon wore thick white face and body paint, white muscle suits, or white dresses (Figures 3 and 4).³ The construction of these monochrome white sculptural bodies required significant preparation and stood out dramatically on stage in contrast with the colors of earlier and later art

¹ Papaioannou's choice to invite living people to perform ancient sculptures staged a narrative of unbroken autochthony, or earthbornness, between ancient and modern Greece at the opening of the twenty-fifth modern Olympiad in Athens, an event which affirmed the Greek origin of the games in antiquity and their modern revival in Athens in 1896.

² The performance had two parts, *Allegory* and *Klepsydra* and is alternatively identified as *Birthplace*. See Dimitris Papaioannou, *Birthplace*, filmed in 2004, in Athens, Greece, www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/gr/recent/birthplace-2004. For an analysis situating this performance within the geopolitics of the modern Greek nation-state, see Johanna Hanink, *The Classical Debt: Greek Antiquity in an Era of Austerity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 191–193.

³ These costumes literalize Larissa Bonfante's argument for "nudity as a costume," in ancient Greek art, on which see Larissa Bonfante, "Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 93, no. 4 (1989): 543–570.

2 ∩ SEEING COLOR IN CLASSICAL ART



Figure 1 Performance of Minoan fresco paintings for *Klepsydra* at the Opening Ceremony of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. Designed by Dimitris Papaioannou. Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYvnr8Cpzo

bodies.⁴ This costume of monochrome whiteness thus visually bracketed the living statues portraying the art of the late sixth, fifth century, and early fourth centuries BCE from the actors portraying the rest of ancient Greek art.

Yet, as Johanna Hanink argues, Papaioannou's performance ran counter to centuries of research on the lost colors of these ancient statues as well as the extant pigments still visible on them, many of which are on view in the Acropolis Museum, Athens (Figures 5 and 6).⁵ More recently, a series of exhibitions and articles have emphasized the stark contrast between seemingly monochrome marble and bronze sculptures from which pigments, alloys, and inlays have been stripped or lost and those on which extant pigments and materials remain or have been reconstituted.⁶ Sculpture has

essays and books on the subject of polychromy include: the landmark exhibition *Bunte Götter* that opened in 2004 in the same summer as *Klepsydra*, as well as its ongoing iterations across the globe, Vinzenz Brinkmann and Raimond Wünsche, eds., *Bunte Götter: die Farbigeit antiker Skulptur* (Munich: Biering und Brinkmann, 2004): additional venues, some with associated catalogues, include Athens, Berlin, Cambridge, MA, Copenhagen, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Istanbul, Los Angeles, Madrid, Mexico City, Munich, New York, San Francisco, Stockholm, Vienna, Vatican City, <http://www.stiftung-archaeologie.de/publicationen.html>; A selection of recent publications include: David Wharton, ed. *A Cultural History of Color in Antiquity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); Felix Henke, *Die Farbigeit Der Antiken Skulptur: Die Griechischen und Lateinischen Schriftquellen zur Polychromie*, (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2020); Amalie Skovmøller, *Facing the Colours of Roman Portraiture: Exploring the Materiality of Ancient Polychrome Forms* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2020); Samantha Bee, "White at the Museum," clip from *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, April 3, 2019, www.Tbs.Com/Shows/Full-Frontal-With-Samantha-Bee/Clips/White-At-The-Museum; Philippe Jockey, ed., *Les Arts de la couleur en Grèce ancienne . . . et ailleurs: approches interdisciplinaires*, BCH supplement 56 (Athens: École française d'Athènes, 2018); Margaret Talbot "The Myth of Whiteness on Classical Sculpture," *New Yorker*, October 22, 2018; Jan Stubbe Østergaard, "Colour Shifts: On Methodologies in Research on the Polychromy of Greek and Roman Sculpture," *Proceeding of the Danish Institute at Athens*, vol. VIII (2017): 149–176; Sarah E. Bond, "Why We Need to Start Seeing the Classical World in Color," *Hyperallergic*, June 7, 2017; Bente Külerich, "Towards a 'Polychrome History' of

4 On the elaborate costuming of these bodies, see the film about staging the performance *Birthplace/Memory*, <https://vimeo.com/72146418>.

5 Hanink, *Classical Debt*, 191.

6 Curatorial practice and conservation science have played a significant role in shaping a resurgence of engagement with color in ancient Mediterranean antiquity. Documents of recent international exhibitions and conferences and related



Figure 2 Performance of painted terracotta Tanagra figurines for *Klepsydra* at the Opening Ceremony of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. Designed by Dimitris Papaioannou. Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYvnr8Cpzo

Greek and Roman Sculpture,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 15 (2016): 1–18. Cynthia Haven, “Stanford’s Painted Ladies: Cantor Exhibition Shows How the Ancient World Used Color – and How Science Reveals the Faded Past,” *Stanford Report*, March 17, 2011; Vinzenz Brinkmann, Oliver Primavesi, and Max Hollein, eds. *Circumlitio: The Polychromy of Antique and Mediaeval Sculpture* (Munich: Himer Verlag, 2010); Mark Bradley, *Colour and Meaning in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Roberta Panzanelli, ed., *The Color of Life* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008); Agnès Rouveret, Sandrine Dubel, and Valérie Naas, eds., *Couleurs et matières dans l’antiquité: textes, techniques et pratiques* (Paris: Editions Rue d’Ulm, 2006); Liza Cleland and Karen Stears, eds., *Colour in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Oxford: Hedges, 2004); Michalēs Tiverios and D. S.

Tsiaphakē, eds., *Color in Ancient Greece: The Role of Color in Ancient Greek Art and Architecture (700–31 B.C.): Proceedings of the Conference Held in Thessaloniki, 12th–16th April 2000, Organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum and Aristotle University of Thessaloniki* (Thessaloniki: Aristotelio Panepistēmio Thessalonikēs, Hidryma Meletōn Lamprakē, 2002); Simone Beta and Maria Michela Sassi, eds., *I colori nel mondo antico: esperienze linguistiche e quadri simbolici: atti della giornata di studio, Siena, 28 marzo 2001* (Fiesole: Cadmo, 2003); Annie Caubet, ed., *Cornaline et pierres précieuses: la Méditerranée, de l’Antiquité à l’Islam: actes du colloque organisé au musée du Louvre par le Service culturel les 24 et 25 novembre 1995* (Paris: La Documentation française, 1999).

4 ~ SEEING COLOR IN CLASSICAL ART



Figure 3 Performance of naked statues of young men (*kouroi*) for *Klepsydra* at the Opening Ceremony of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. Designed by Dimitris Papaioannou. Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYvnvr8Cpzo



Figure 4 Performance of blocks of the frieze of the Parthenon and grave stelai, with the Parthenon floating above for *Klepsydra* at the Opening Ceremony of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. Designed by Dimitris Papaioannou. Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYvnvr8Cpzo

long been the priority medium in the reception of the art of the ancient Mediterranean and it has remained so in the work to reconstitute colors. Even so, although the evidence for colors from every period and across different media of ancient Mediterranean art continues to accumulate,

scholars have often excluded sculpture produced during the fifth through fourth centuries BCE from polychrome reconstruction.⁷ Even among

⁷ The first iteration of *Bunte Götter*, in 2004, primarily focused on additive pigments on archaic sculptures,



Figure 5 Statue of a woman (*korē*, detail of profile), marble from Paros with pigments, ca. 490–480 BCE, H: 1.19 m, Acropolis Museum, Athens, Acr. 684. © Acropolis Museum. Photo Yiannis Koulelis

6 ~ SEEING COLOR IN CLASSICAL ART



Figure 6 Statue of a woman (*korē*, frontal detail), marble from Paros with pigments, ca. 490–480 BCE, H: 1.19 m, Acropolis Museum, Athens, Acr. 684. © Acropolis Museum. Photo Yiannis Koulelis

although this focus has expanded with subsequent iterations. Notably, the iteration of the exhibition that traveled to the Harvard Art Museums (*Gods in Color: Painted Sculpture of Classical Antiquity*, September 22, 2007–January 8, 2008) included the additional reconstruction of a relief from Persepolis executed by Susanne Ebbinghaus and Judith Lerner as well as objects from the ancient Near East and Egypt in museum’s collection. These additions were not included in the English-language version of the exhibition catalogue, although subsequent venues have modified the catalogue to include each museum’s additional contributions. See also, Vinzenz Brinkmann and Oliver Primavesi, *Die Polychromie der archaischen und frühklassischen Skulptur* (Studien zur antiken Malerei und Farbgebung 5), (Munich: Biering & Brinkmann, (2003). The exhibition *Archaic Colors* at the Acropolis Museum,

Athens had a similar emphasis, see Dimitrios Pandermalis, ed., *Archaic Colors* (Athens: Acropolis Museum, 2012). Researchers in Athens, at the British Museum, London, and ongoing work by the Stiftung Archäologie team have continued to recover traces of pigments on the Parthenon marbles and other objects that date to the fifth to fourth centuries BCE, undermining earlier commitments to a radical break in color practices, and affirming the observations of antiquarians. On architectural images of the Parthenon recording or recovering colors, see Brinkmann, Dreyfus, and Koch-Brinkmann, *Gods in Color*, 14–19; 82–83; 110–114; Ian Jenkins, and A. P. Middleton, “Paint on the Parthenon Sculptures,” *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 83 (1988): 183–207; Amerimni Galanos and Yanna Doganis, “The Remnants of the Epidermis on the Parthenon: A Valuable Analytical Tool for Assessing

researchers of polychromy, the idea that there were colors in and on art produced during the rise and height of the Athenian democracy and Periklean building project on the Acropolis in Athens has often generated the most resistance. Analyzing different positions taken by antiquarians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the extent of paint on ancient Greek marble sculpture – full coverage, limited coverage, or none – Andreas Prater writes “especially long-lived is a group clinging to the old explanation, that painting of sculpture was characteristic of Archaic times or of the later decline of Greek art. . . .”⁸ This position sought to maintain the monochrome white purity of sculpture associated with the classical period, preceded by colorful primitivism of earlier Archaic art and followed by polychrome decadence of the Hellenistic period. Ongoing study, however, has continued to demonstrate what locals and antiquarian travelers observed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – that colors were an integral part of ancient Greek artistic production, including on the Parthenon and its artistic program.⁹

Condition,” *Studies in Conservation* 48, no. 1 (2003): 3–16; “A Parthenon Metope: History and Reconstruction,” virtual reconstruction, British Museum, June 23, 2014, <https://youtu.be/EW5DMs1gOE>; “Egyptian Blue on the Parthenon Sculptures,” *British Museum and Kahn Academy*, www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/greek-art/classical/v/egyptian-blueparthenon; E. Aggelakopoulou, Sophia Sotiropoulou, and Giorgios Karagiannis A. Bakolas, “Architectural Polychromy on the Athenian Acropolis: An In Situ Non-Invasive Analytical Investigation of the Colour Remains” *Heritage* 5 (2022): 756–787.

- 8 A. Prater, “The Rediscovery of Colour in Greek Architecture and Sculpture,” in Tiverios and Tsiaphakē, *Color in Ancient Greece*, 31.
- 9 Francis Cranmer Penrose, *An Investigation of the Principles of Athenian Architecture, or The Results of a Recent Survey Conducted Chiefly with Reference to the Optical Refinements Exhibited in The Construction of The Ancient Buildings at Athens* (London: The Society of Dilettanti, 1851). Kasia Wegłowska, “Paint and the Parthenon: Conservation of Ancient Greek Sculpture,” <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/paint-and-the-parthenon-conservation-of-ancient-greek-sculpture/2018>; Natalie Haynes, “When the Parthenon Had

A centerpiece of *Klepsydra* was the actress portraying the famous statue of Athena Parthenos, which was housed within the Parthenon on the Acropolis (Figure 7). She wore the appropriate iconographic identifiers: a helmet adorned with a sphinx and griffins and a protective aegis with Medusa’s decapitated head strapped across her chest. She also held a statue of Nike, the goddess of victory, in her open palm. Costumed in white paint and cloth, however, she played the role of a colossal statue famed in antiquity for its vivid, material polychromy. While the ancient colossal statue has long since disappeared, the main fact that we know about the original is that it was built up from vibrant materials and brilliant colors.¹⁰ Accounts carved

Dazzling Colors,” *BBC*, January 22, 2018; Trevor Timpson, “Fear and Fury among the Marbles” *BBC* (September 12, 2007): http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6986756.stm; Joan Breton Connelly, *The Parthenon Enigma* (New York: Knopf, 2013), 296–302; C. Vlassopoulou, “New Investigations into the Polychromy of the Parthenon,” in *Circumlitio: The Polychromy of Antique and Mediaeval Sculpture*, ed. Vinzenz Brinkmann, Oliver Primavesi, and Max Hollein (Munich: Himer Verlag, 2010), 218–223. Ian Jenkins and A. Middleton, “Paint on the Parthenon Sculptures,” *The Annual of the British School of Archaeology at Athens* 83 (1988): 183–207; Amerimni Galanos and Yanna Doganis, “The Remnants of the Epidermis on the Parthenon,” *Studies in Conservation* 48, no. 1 (2003): 3–13.

- 10 Thucydides (II, 13), Diodorus (XII, 40), Plutarch (*Life of Pericles* 12–13; 31), and Pausanias (*Description of Greece* 1.24.5–7); Aristophanes *Birds* 670 likens the gold feathers of a bird to the gold of the Parthenos. For a current summary of the evidence to produce reconstructions, see Olga Palagia, “The Gold and Ivory Cult Statues of Pheidias in Athens and Olympia,” *Handbook of Greek Sculpture* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 328–346; on the timber set into the Parthenon floor, *ibid.*, 331. On the inlaid eyes of the Parthenos, see Olga Palagia, “Classical Athens,” in *Greek Sculpture: Function, Materials and Techniques*, Olga Palagia, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 123; Kenneth Lapatin, *Chryselephantine Statuary in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 69. On inlaid eyes in chryselephantine cult statues, see Andrew Stewart, *Greek Sculpture: An Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 40. On the possibility of cypress wood for the statue’s core, see Lapatin, *Chryselephantine Statuary*, 70–71. On the shaped gold plates, see *ibid.*, 74. On stories about the removability of the plates as comedic slander, see *ibid.*, 66n55 and 89. See also Neda



Figure 7 Performance of the Athena Parthenos for *Klepsydra* at the Opening Ceremony of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. Designed by Dimitris Papaioannou. Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYvnr8Cpzo

into marble stelai documented annual expenditures for the gold and ivory materials and labor necessary to produce both the statue and the building that housed it (Figure 8).¹¹ Working in the mid-fifth century BCE, artists in the workshop of the lead artist and designer Pheidias fitted plates of gold and ivory onto a core of wood

(possibly cypress), laid in precious stones such as chalcedony, lapis lazuli, and obsidian, and layered on bright pigments, in order to form the colossal statue of Athena in her guise as Parthenos, or young virgin. The two-meter statue of Nike that the colossal Athena held in her outstretched palm was also crafted from gold. By creating the statue from many different materials, these artists forged a vibrant, polychrome wonder.

From the statue's public dedication on the Acropolis in 438 BCE, the Athena Parthenos presided over the interior of the Parthenon.¹²

Leipen, *Athena Parthenos: A Reconstruction* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1971).

¹¹ Separate managers (*epistatai*) oversaw the building of the Parthenon, its doors, and the statue. See *IG* 3.449, *IG* 3.458; *IG* 3.459 (unfinished), *IG* 3.460. Lack of weathering suggests that these accounts might have been set up inside the Parthenon itself or otherwise covered, on which see Stephen Lambert and Robin Osborne, translators, *Attic Inscriptions Online*: <https://atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IGI3/458>, footnote 1. The account includes quantities in the far-left column, with a list of expenditures, including for both gold and ivory, in the body of the inscription. See Konstantinos Arvanitakis, "Athena Parthenos: Inscriptions": <https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/athena-parthenos-inscriptions>.

¹² On the Parthenon as a temple-like structure named after the statue housed within it, see Jeffrey Hurwit, *The Acropolis in the Age of Pericles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). On the reworking of the materials of the older Parthenon into the newer building, see Rachel Kousser, *The Afterlives of Greek Sculpture: Interaction, Transformation, and Destruction*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 113. The Parthenon stood adjacent

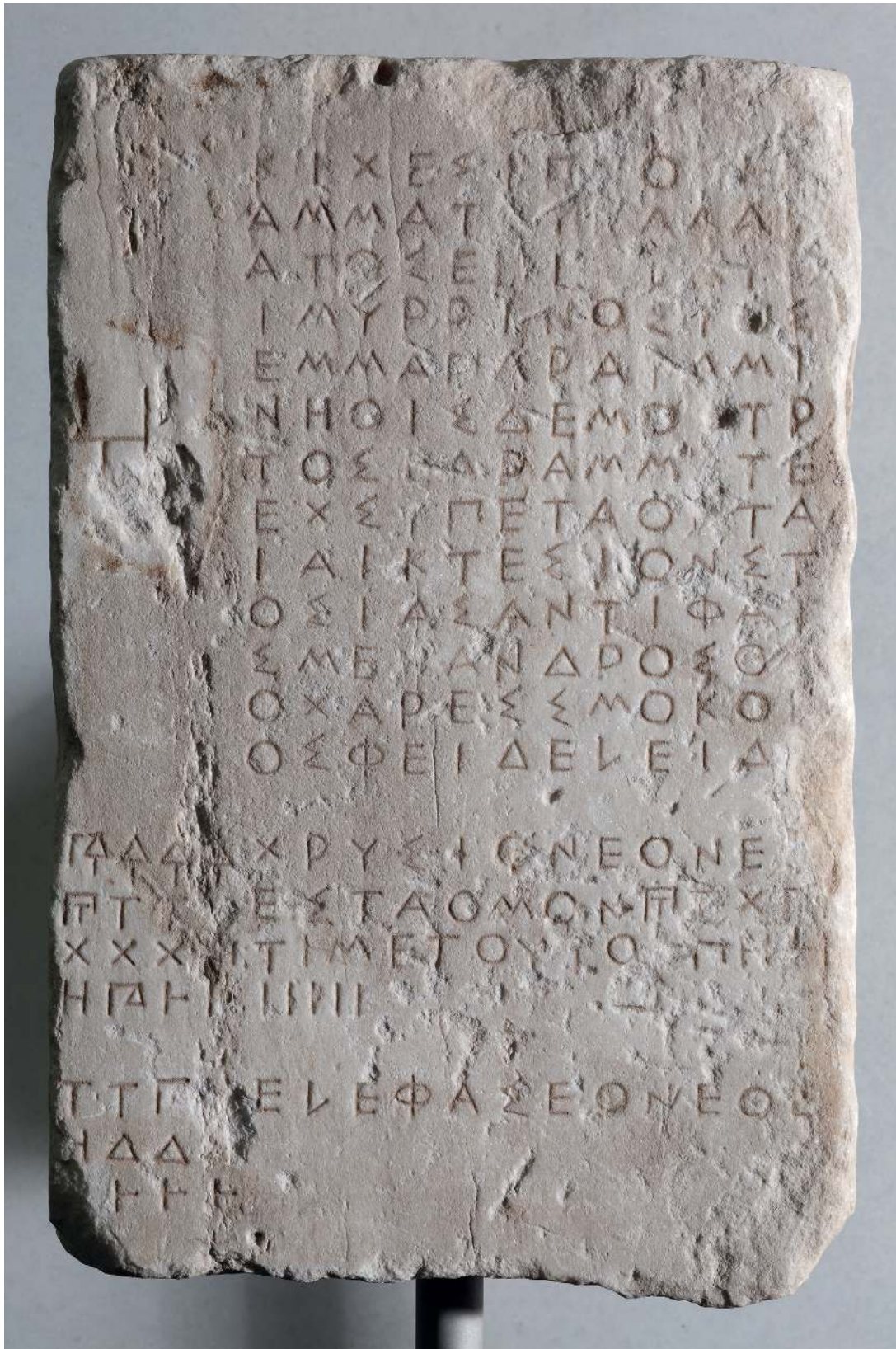


Figure 8 Financial accounts for the construction of the gold and ivory statue, 440/439 BCE, marble from Penteli; H. 0.44 m L. 0.29 m, W. 0.105 m; Acropolis Museum, Athens EM6738. @ Acropolis Museum, Athens. Photo: Nikos Daniilidis

Installed in the heart of the Acropolis and produced in the wake of victory over the Persians at a moment of celebrated democratic and imperial power for Athens, “the gold statue” was already famous in antiquity and remains central to accounts of ancient Mediterranean art.¹³ The Parthenos, however, did not conform to the sort of monolithic, monochrome, white form that later beholders have come to seek from the classical past. Instead, the statue showcased and was valued for its pieced-together polychrome material splendor.

Such splendor was never static, but mutable and protean like color itself. Over the centuries, the goddess’s presence-as-polychrome statue kept changing, demanding maintenance and repair. Officials might even have lent her expensive gold plates to fund the economic demands of the Athenian state.¹⁴ Finally, historical texts suggest that a fire on the Acropolis in the third century CE likely consumed what

to the much-older temple to Athena Polias, subsequently rebuilt as the Erechtheion, and the venerated *xoanon* (wooden cult image) of the goddess in her guise as patroness of the city of Athens.

- 13 On the epithets of Pheidias’s statue, see Palagia, “Gold and Ivory,” 330. The gold of the statue resonated not only with myths about the golden age of the Olympian gods, but also with the transition from an economy of gift exchange practiced during the centuries of the Athenian oligarchy to the circulation of coinage, on which, see Leslie Kurke, *Coins, Bodies, Games and Gold: The Politics of Meaning in Archaic Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 16–23. Athenian coins, such as the iconic tetradrachms, were predominantly struck in silver that had been mined from the Athenian-controlled Laurion mines by the grueling work of enslaved laborers. Deborah Kamen, *Status in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 8–11, 15. The iconicity of the statue of the Parthenos grew to the extent that in the second century BCE an image of the form of the statue marked the New Athenian Tetradrachms struck from Laurion silver.
- 14 Plutarch (*Life of Pericles* 12.5.12.1), writing centuries after its construction, suggested that Pericles commissioned the Parthenon and the statue of Athena Parthenos in part to generate work for non-military Athenians in the wake of the Persian wars, in something like the American New Deal era Works Projects Administration (1935–1943) for the fifth century BCE.

remained.¹⁵ Physically absent and described in texts, the Athena Parthenos statue circulated in countless reproductions in different materials, media, and scales.¹⁶ For instance, the scaled-down statue of Athena Parthenos set up at Pergamon about 170 BCE does not retain any added pigments and substitutes white marble for the earlier statue’s fitted-together material colors.¹⁷ The second-century CE “Varvakeion” statuette of the Athena Parthenos preserves small traces of yellow and red pigments layered onto pentelic marble, indicating that some ancient iterations included additive colors. And yet because these colors only remain as small traces, the statuette presents as a miniature white marble copy, as does the “Lenormant” statuette produced in Pentelic marble in the first century CE.¹⁸ A marble Roman statuette of the Athena Parthenos now in the collection of the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain (E000047), has empty sockets where its eyes would once have been inlaid with colorful materials. Other images of the Athena Parthenos on coins and plaques

- 15 William Bell Dinsmoor, “The Repair of the Athena Parthenos: A Story of Five Dowels,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 38, no. 1 (1934): 93–106. The removability of the gold plates pieced together on the Athena Parthenos purportedly allowed for repeated checks against embezzlement, but also for the city’s possible use of the stored wealth. The fact of their removability was publicly emphasized, although Lapatin, *Chryselephantine Statuary*, 89, argues that these are comedy not historical fact. Both Pausanias (1.25.7) and Plutarch (*De Iside et Osiride* 71) recount the potentially slanderous claim that in 265 BCE, under Lachares the Athenians stripped the gold plates from the statue to draw upon its credit, leaving the wooden core momentarily exposed and the goddess naked.
- 16 On replications of the Athena Parthenos, see Milete Gaifman, “Statue, Cult and Reproduction,” *Art History* 29, no. 2 (2006): 258–279.
- 17 Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, L.2016.33. Recently on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Per Dr. Sarah Lepinski at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, close visual inspection of the statue does not reveal any pigment traces, but XRF analysis has not been carried out.
- 18 The statuette was discovered in 1880 on the site of the Varvakeio public school, from which its name derives.