Weaving the Body Politic:
The Role of Textile Production in Athenian Democracy as Expressed by
the Function of and Imagery on the ἐπίνητρον

After setting the historical and political background this paper presents close
readings of several Athenian ἐπίνητρα that date to around 500-404 BCE (spanning
the Late Archaic and Classical Periods) in order to address how such scenes might
be read by women as reflecting their role in the continued success of Athenian
democracy through their textile contributions to the πόλις (city-state).

Keywords: Ceramics, democracy, textile production, women.

Your own mother will not know you when you get back to the town. But first,
my friends and allies, let us lay these garments down. And all ye fellow-
citizens, hark to me while I tell: What will aid Athens well. Just as is right, for
I have been a sharer in all the lavish splendor [sic] of the proud city. I bore
the holy vessels; at seven, then I pounded barley. At the age of ten, and clad in
yellow robes, soon after this, I was Little Bear to Brauronian Artemis; then
neckletted with figs. Grown tall and pretty, I was a Basket-bearer. And so it’s
obvious I should. Give you advice that I think good. The very best I can.
(Aristophanes, Lysistrata, 636-647)

Introduction

The ἐπίνητρον (pl. ἐπίνητρα) is a ceramic shape used in ancient Greece
to card wool; as such, it is a form created for women. What can the imagery
on these works reveal about gender and identity in ancient Athens during
the period of democratic rule? This presentation examines several Athenian
ἐπίνητρα that date to around 500-404 BCE (spanning the Late Archaic and
Classical Periods). After setting the historical and political background, this
paper offers readings of the subject matter on a number of ἐπίνητρα from
Attica; the exploration reveals messages to women that relate to social
identities; during the Archaic period as members of clans, and during the
Classical as part of the democracy.

A Review of the Literature

Compared to such forms as the ομφόρα (storage jar) or κύλιξ (cup),
there is a dearth of extant ἐπίνητρα and the literature reflects this in that one

arislysistrata.
2John Boardman, “‘Reading’ Greek Vases?” Oxford Journal of Archaeology 22, no. 1
(2003): 109-114; Andrew J. Clark, Maya Elston, and Mary Louise Hart, Understanding
Museum, 2002); Elizabeth Moignard, Greek Vases: An Introduction (London: Bristol
of the main concerns is to catalog the examples. A second major way in which scholars address the vases is within the context of exploring textile production; and the third primary inquiry is into individual examples. There is a consensus that, because there is no functional need for figural imagery, the scenes are a locus of information about cultural, ideological, and political ideals. What is missing in the literature is a complete, in-depth accounting of one region’s or period’s vessels.

Methodology

The methodology used in this essay is the New Art History in which a variety of theoretical stances are employed in equal measure, rather than privileging one over another, to explore meaning in art; among these may be multiculturalism, postcolonial studies, gender studies, literary analysis, new historicism, as well as reception theory. Both of the latter examine various products of a culture to gain insight into cultural mores of the time contemporaneous to the production of a work of art.

Athens and Textile Production: Private and Public

In regard to the topic of this paper – how women’s roles in and contributions to Attic democracy is communicated by the imagery on Attic ἔπινητρα – it is salient to outline the reforms of Cleisthenes at the inception

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of this political framework. Cleisthenes divided Attica as follows: Athens remained the ἀστυ (main city-state of a region); it was also one of three partitions of the land. The other two were the μεσόγειος or μεσόγεαι (inland) and παραλία (coast) sectors. Cleisthenes divided each section into ten groups, each of which is known as a τριττύες; three of these (one from each geographical designation) constitute a φυλή (tribe). Every φυλή could be composed of as many as ten smaller entities, each known as a δήμος (pl. δήμοι). All Athenian citizens belonged to and associated their names with a δήμος. This reorganization effectively limited the power wielded by the aristocratic class and distributed the norms of the Athenian ἀστυ to the whole of Attica.\(^8\)

Textiles were important domestically, within the πόλεις (city-state; pl. πόλεις), in the larger Greek world, and beyond. In the οίκος (home) and αγορά (marketplace), consumers would find a variety of cloaks, robes, tunics, and shirts to adorn both men and women; hairnets and girdles completed women’s wear.\(^9\) As Peter Acton notes, in his book *Poesis: Manufacturing in Classical Athens*, textile work was not limited to clothing; items related to bed and decorative furnishings, as well as bags, were common household materials; all of which women made and all of which contributed significantly to the well-being and status of those in the οίκος.\(^10\) Although many of the islands, such as Cyprus, Miletos, and πόλεις, such as Corinth and Megara, were known for their trade in cloth, Athens does not seem to have been a particularly active textile trader. It appears that the focus of textile production for Athens was for domestic and ritual use.\(^11\)

During religious festivals dedications of textiles and production tools are common from very early periods.\(^12\) Clothing inventories at the Artemis sanctuaries in Brauron and in Athens list textiles.\(^13\) The most important public festival during the Classical Period in which the Attic Greeks made a textile dedication was the Panathenaic Festival in honor of Athena during which participants offer a πέπλος to the goddess.\(^14\) In this manner women

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\(^8\)Ephialtes in 462 BCE and Pericles in 451 BCE completed the reforms in the period of specific concern to this paper. See Pierre Lévêque, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and David Ames Curtis, *Cleisthenes the Athenian* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997); Karl-Willhelm Welwei and Mischa Meier, *Athen von den Anfängen bis zum Beginn des Hellenismus* (Darmstadt: Darmstadt Primus, 2011).


\(^10\)Acton, Ibid.


contributed to the body politic in a very public and far-reaching way.\textsuperscript{15}
Moreover, adolescents from aristocratic families aided the priestesses on the
first date of the Chalkeia Festival in late October; by the following July the
raiment was ready.\textsuperscript{16}

The Objects

This paper limits the examination of ceramics to those that can be
securely placed within manufacture in Attica and that date to the late
Archaic and Classical periods; that is, around the beginning of democracy in
508 BCE, and its functional end around 404 BCE. As objects used in the
production of textiles, which historical evidence both written and material
highlight, has not only private but also public visibility (in the form of
dedications during civic religious festivals), these objects – as Danielle
Smootherman Bennett has aptly observed – are “embedding social cues,
representing familiar social tasks, and depicting anonymous figures with
which women of wide-ranging social statuses could self-identify” and, thus,
can be examined for the pointed messages sent to its consumers.\textsuperscript{17}

Like textiles, ἐπίνητα have been found at sanctuaries, commercial
zones, and in graves; all sites that were important in the civic and/or
religious life of democratic Attica, making them ideal for the study of their
subject matter’s relationship to cultural and political messages and
meanings. The figural scenes are varied: they include martial subjects,
mythological narrative, as well as imagery centered around activities of the
ὁίκος. A chronological examination is revelatory about the iconography, and
concomitant meanings, favored from the early to the late democracy in
Attica.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15}Matthew Dillon, \textit{Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion} (London and NY: Routledge, 2002), 54-60.
\item \textsuperscript{17}Danielle Smootherman Bennett, “Targeted Advertising for Women in Athenian Painting of the Fifth Century BCE,” \textit{Arts} vol. 8, no. 52 (April 2019): 2; see also, Lauren Hackworth Petersen, “Divided Consciousness and Female Companionship: Reconstructing Female Subjectivity on Greek Vases,” \textit{Arethusa} 30, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 35-74; Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway, “Ancient Greek Women and Art: The Material Evidence,” \textit{American Journal of Archaeology} 91, no. 3 (July 1987): 399-409.
\end{itemize}
An early and representative example, now housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, dates to the last quarter of the sixth century BCE (accession number 06.1021.52). Its date places it in the years in which Attica went from dominance by aristocratic clans and, in Athens, from the Peisistratid tyranny to democracy. This black-figure object depicts two four-horse chariots with drivers on each of the long sides and two draped figures on the end cap. The figural scenes on the long sides suggest, to the viewer familiar with Greek vase painting, that this may illustrate funeral games or, more likely the ἐκφορά (procession) to the cemetery that took place three days after death.\(^9\)

This imagery is not unusual for this era of transition from tyrannical to democratic rule as several ἐπίνητρα fragments demonstrate; three from a work that represents an Amazonomachy and come from the Sanctuary at Eleusis (Eleusis Museum 465); two from the Sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron Museum A21 and A22 that depict an Amazonomachy and procession on horseback; one from the Athenian agora (American School of Classical Studies, Athens P 16745) that portrays a woman working wool; and one from the Acropolis of Athens (Athens National Museum 2611) that limns Eos running toward her son, the fallen Memnon who is identified by inscription.

What unites these scenes is the emphasis on the life of the aristocratic clans either directly (scenes of rituals, rites, and social activities) or indirectly (mythological narratives). One must recognize that from early times, the Greeks used myths as metaphors so the scenes of the Amazonomachy or the gods vanquishing mortals who have transgressed normative behavior speak to ideals to emulate or behaviors and attitudes to avoid.\(^20\)

Three late black-figure paintings date to the early years of the democracy and are, hence, paradigmatic of the transition of subject matter from before and after the fall of the Peisistratids and the institution of democracy.\(^21\) The Diosphos Painter’s work, now housed in the Louvre Museum, portrays on side A a scene of women working wool and displays on side B a frieze of Amazons; the end cap possesses a protome of a female head. The vessel by the Golonos Group (1877,0805.6) features figural scenes on both of the long sides in which two figures converse in front of hanging textiles, and a protome of a female head on the end cap.\(^22\)

As the unattributed ἐπίνητρον, British Museum 1814,0704.1205, represents on long side A: a συμπόσιον (banquet) that is repeated to form two sets: Dionysos – recognized by his ivy-wreath reclines on a κλίνη (bed

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\(^21\)Bennett, “Targeted Advertising,” 1-2; 4; and 7.

or, in this instance, dining couch). He is turned to left, conversing with Ariadne, who is seated to right on an ὀκλαδίας (a type of seat commonly found in domestic settings). Side B portrays two women, each of whom sit on an ὀκλαδίας; between them is basket from which one pulls out wool; they are working wool and garments hang behind them on the wall; on the end cap is a protome of a female head.²³ Although it seems strange that a narrative relating to the elite-male banquet appears on one side there are three things to bear in mind: 1) women who ran the household were undoubtedly responsible for organizing the events, including choosing the pots that would be showcased at them; 2) Dionysos was not only the god of wine, but also has some significance to the funerary for which women had primary authority (for example, the preparation of the body included making the funeral shroud and any other textiles needed); and 3) before Ariadne became Dionysos’ consort, she aided Theseus to defeat the Minotaur and escape the labyrinth by giving him thread to use as a guide.²⁴ Furthermore, by echoing the composition of side A on side B, the painter has drawn an implicit parallel between the two.

The trend toward domestic subjects expands and becomes the primary iconography during the art historical shift from the Archaic-Early Classical to the High Classical periods; the titular vase of the Painter of Berlin 2624, now housed in the Antikensammlung of the State Museums of Berlin, is an excellent example of this transformation.²⁵ This red-figure ἔπινητρον possesses on the long sides scenes of a seated woman between two youths; the woman holds out an ἀλάβαστρον and the youth facing her proffers a sack. The end cap presents a painted head of a woman. Other works of the era; notably, Athens National Museum 2180 exhibit subject matter so similar as to justify naming this a trope of the High Classical period. What are the significations that ceramics’ female consumers might glean from this trope? One could argue that, seeing their activities reflected back at them as they carded wool recognized the important role of textile production in the Attic world and would, therefore, send the message to women that their contributions were valuable by equating them with other consumer activities. Furthermore, this scene could speak to not only elite women, but also working women and prostitutes as Mark Stansbury-O’Donnell has argued. He points to the idea of an exchange – prostitute and client negotiating price for services – and the textiles on the walls as indicating a domestic space.²⁶

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²⁵See also, Mercati, Epinetron, XXIII-XXVI and XXVIII.
One could interpret Athens National Museum 2179, which dates to the Late Classical period at c. 425-400 BCE, as reflective of a time when the democracy was under threat due to the Peloponnesian War. This object is a typical example of how the imagery on the ἐπίνητρα of the Late Classical period turns back to myth as well as to scenes of ritual activity. The ceramic depicts a scene of maenads on the long sides; the end cap is decorated with a painting of Perseus defeating the Chimera while riding Bellerophon. What might women make of these narratives? The maenads are ardent followers of Dionysos whose association with women has been noted.

The portrayals on the end caps in general are interesting to reading these ceramics. In all periods, typical end cap imagery was a veiled female head. When the wool worker placed the ἐπίνητρον on her knee, this female physiognomy (portrayed in an idealizing mode of representation) would face out, broadcasting that the woman working was an ideal participant in the body politic by creating the textiles needed for home, city, and region. As described in this essay, the end caps of Metropolitan 06.1021.52 and Athens National Museum 2179 are somewhat of a departure from the standard so the question arises: why and what do these end caps signify?

The former was created in the years leading up to the democracy and depicts two draped figures. This strengthens the argument that the imagery of the long sides relates to funerary ritual because the figures are draped in a manner that suggests they are engaged in public ritual: long dresses, cloaks, and veils. The latter was produced during the Peloponnesian War and represents a mythological scene in which Bellerophon battles the Chimera; this is an obvious allusion to the civil war, the forces of chaos presented by non-democratic peoples. I suggest that women would, perhaps, read their production of textiles as their contribution to the war effort; additionally, they would see the wayward figures: Amazons, fantastical beasts, and even maenads as warnings for them not to step out of their approved roles.

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Mercati, Epinetron, plates XXIX-XXXV and XXXVII-XL.
Conclusions

The examination of paradigms of figural ἐπίνητρα has illuminated how women’s work contributed significantly to the public project of democracy in Attica from the late sixth through the late fifth centuries BCE. It has further highlighted that the implied message to women is that their social identities as contributing members to the democracy come through their textile contributions to the οίκος, πόλις (or in the case of Athens: the ἄστυ), φυλή, δῆμος, and on to the of entirety of Attica combined with cautionary tales of the defeated Amazons, Chimera, and other transgressors of normative mores.

References


