

# Performing Piety: A Phenomenological Approach to Athenian Processions

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Imagine for a moment that you are a basket-bearer in the Panathenaic procession. In the lead walk the priests and priestesses, setting a steady pace. The basket on your head is beginning to feel heavy, and the handles are slippery in your hands. Your gold jewellery hangs heavy on your neck, jangling with each careful step, and the white paint on your face itches in the summer heat. Ahead of you stretches the wide street, lined with wooden stands which are filled with people, chattering and murmuring as you pass by. You are acutely conscious of all the eyes on you, and the stands channel all the sound down to you. In the distance, you can see the Acropolis, the great rock of Athena. Behind you, you can faintly hear the musicians with their flutes and *kitharai*, matching their solemn tunes to the pace of the procession. Once in a while, the wind carries a whiff of incense to you from the incense-bearers, or the smell of the cattle and sheep who are plodding along behind you to the altar. In your mind's eye, you imagine the procession winding behind you, and you feel giddy and proud. You imagine the altar waiting atop the Acropolis in front of Athena's temple, the goddess watching from her pedestal, the fire lit and waiting for the sacrifice. You can almost taste your share of the roasted meat.

Scholarship on ancient festivals and festival processions tends to be rather clinical, focused on *aitia* and myth, or the mechanics of the ritual. This approach fails to capture the rich sensory experience of these rituals, and especially processions, which

combined movement through a landscape with a variety of sights, sounds, and smells, perceived by both the spectators and the participants of the procession.<sup>1</sup> Much of this sensory experience was deeply personal, and it would be impossible to reconstruct any individual's experience. The difficulty does not, however, invalidate the usefulness of attempting to consider this sensory experience, the possible perceptions or meanings of this sensory experience, and the potential ways that these symbols influenced collective memory and identity.

Some scholars studying ancient Greek sacrificial processions have attempted to classify those processions as a way of understanding them. For example, Martin Nilsson organized processions into categories such as processions to the deity, processions with the

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1 Angelos Chaniotis has produced welcome and fascinating work (2006, 2011) which injects emotion back into our analysis of festivals and processions and analyzes the ways that these rituals help create "emotional communities", but his work does not focus on the sensory experience of processions. Connelly 2011 focuses mainly on the routes and space of processions, particularly spaces used for dance – an ephemeral but vitally important element of ancient ritual sensory experience. Raja & Rüpke 2015 contains many important articles on experience in ancient religion and the ways we can access that experience through material culture (see especially Huet 2015). However, Stavrianopoulou's chapter on processions focuses on processions as performances and movements through a landscape, and gives little discussion of processional symbols aside from their significance as displays of wealth.



Fig. 1. Wooden plaque from Pitsa with a painted scene of a religious procession. 540-530 BCE. L. 31 cm, max. H. 14.5 cm. A 16464, National Archaeological Museum, Athens (photographer: G. Patrikianos).

deity, and “magical” processions which were originally focused not on a god, but on a specific ritual goal (e.g. processions that carried around a symbol like the phallus or *eiresione*).<sup>2</sup> Fritz Graf, seeking a classification focused on landscape and movement, divided processions into two categories, centripetal (moving toward the city centre) and centrifugal (moving away from the centre).<sup>3</sup> Such classification systems imply that the processions in each category share significant characteristics with each other that they do not share with the processions in other categories, but this is not necessarily true – nor do processions always fit neatly into such categories.<sup>4</sup> What to do, for example, with processions that circumambulate the city, such as the Athenian Thargelia? The

processions of each Greek city-state formed a ritual system, in dialogue with and related to each other, sharing symbols, participants, and topography.

Perhaps part of the problem is that processions are complex and difficult to define. What differentiates a procession from a group of people walking down the street? Participants may move in a particular way, as a unified group, perhaps in lines or formations; they may be holding signs or other symbols; they may be escorting a float, a statue, or a distinguished person; they might be shouting slogans or singing hymns; and they might be dressed distinctively, in costumes or priestly vestments.<sup>5</sup> It is by these types of sensory cues that we distinguish a procession from other types of movement. Athina Kavoulaki has proposed a very useful “basic structure” for processions, including human participants, symbols or offerings, musical accompaniment, and

2 Nilsson 1916, 309-23.

3 Graf 1996, 55-65.

4 Kavoulaki 2000, 145 rightly emphasizes the variation in “tone, rhythm and colour” present in processions. Stavrianopoulou 2015, 351-2 criticizes Graf for excluding the element of performance and communication between participants and spectators, as well as the dynamic character of processions.

5 Luginbühl 2015, 47 defines processions as “a number of people moving forward in an orderly fashion as part of a ceremony or other ritual activity, generally of a religious nature”.

an established route with a defined start and end point.<sup>6</sup> Additional elements could be added to this basic structure to alter the sensory experience and meaning of the ritual.

The ritual processions of ancient Athens also included these types of sensory cues, so that even a small private sacrificial procession like the one that Dikaiopolis organized with his family in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* would have been immediately recognizable (Fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> Participants in Greek processions were associated with a particular kind of movement that distinguished them from normal walking.<sup>8</sup> Sacrificial animals and other bloodless offerings were escorted or carried, along with other symbols. Auloi were the most common instruments played during processions, although *kitharai*, syrinxes, and drums are also attested.<sup>9</sup> Hymns or songs were also ubiquitous, and certain distinctive types were associated with particular processions.<sup>10</sup> Distinctive dress was also part of ancient Greek ritual processions. Xenophon mentions garments reserved for festivals, something like one's "festival best."<sup>11</sup> Priests and *kanephoroi* dressed in particular clothes, and *kanephoroi* may also have worn makeup to whiten their faces.<sup>12</sup> Demosthenes ordered gold crowns for himself and his chorus and a gold-embroidered robe for himself to wear in the City Dionysia procession.<sup>13</sup>

Literary evocations of processions further emphasise their sensory appeal and draw on their audience's sense-memory. Although a *theoria* was a different form of sacred travel than a ritual procession, it is still noteworthy that in Aristophanes'

*Peace* Trygaios remarks on *Theoria's* wonderful smell, which evokes for him among other things "sweet fruits, festivals, the Dionysia, the harmony of flutes, the tragic poets."<sup>14</sup> In Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Dionysos and Xanthos first become aware of a procession of initiates in the underworld when they hear the faint sound of pipes and smell torches.<sup>15</sup> Several authors use a phrase vividly translated as "fill the streets with the smell of burnt sacrifice."<sup>16</sup> Incense-burners, or *thymiateria*, and incense were carried in processions.<sup>17</sup> Both incense, which was imported from afar, and incense-burners, frequently made of precious metals, were symbols of wealth in service of and for the glory of the deity.<sup>18</sup>

Within the procession, participants and spectators alike experienced a rich collection of symbols – items perceived by the senses which possessed meaning for the people who perceived them. These symbols included items worn or objects and offerings carried in procession; the animals led to the sacrifice; hymns, chants, or music that accompanied the procession or marked specific places along the way; dances or movement specific to the processional context; and the monuments, buildings, or art visible along the processional route. Participants and spectators perceived these symbols in different ways, however. Participants walked along the procession's route, seeing all the monuments, buildings, art, and the natural landscape and observing or participating in the minor performances which took place along the route. Spectators were stationary, watching the procession from the side of the road, or perhaps

6 Kavoulaki 2000, 145.

7 *Ar. Ach.* 241-62.

8 Polyaeus, *Strat.* 5.5; Kavoulaki 2000, 154.

9 Haldane 1966, 98-107.

10 The *oschophorikon* at the Oschophoria, see Rutherford & Irvine 1988, 43-51; Kavoulaki 2000, 153. On the "melody of the wild fig." at the Thargelia, see Bremmer 1983, 313-4.

11 *Xen. Oec.* 9.6.

12 Parker 2005, 93-5, 225 n. 35; Roccas 1995, 641-66.

13 *Dem. Meid.* 16, 22.

14 *Ar. Pax.* 530-2 (trans. O'Neill).

15 *Ar. Ran.* 312-5.

16 *Eur. Alc.* 1156; *Ar. Av.* 1233, *Eq.* 1320; *Dem.* 43.66.

17 *Andoc.* 4.29; Parthenon frieze East VIII fig. 56 carries a *thymiaterion*; *Xen. Ephes.* 1.2.4 describes incense carried in procession (but no *thymiateria*).

18 *Thymiateria* made of precious metals as part of the state's processional vessels: *Andoc.* 4.29; *Thuc.* 6.46; *Diod. Sic.* 13.3. Used by private citizens as a mark of luxury: *Dem. Against Androtion.* 22.75; *Pl. Resp.* 373a.



sitting in stands or carts for a better vantage point. They saw the entire procession with all its participants and symbols, but did not experience the landscape in the same manner as the participants. This is not to say that the spectators simply passively absorbed the procession's symbolic spectacle. Eftychia Stavrianopoulou rightly emphasises the central importance of the interplay between participants and spectators, sensory symbols, and landscape elements which can "evoke the creation or collapse of communities".<sup>19</sup> The presence of spectators who were actively watching was an important part of the ritual, since they could bear witness that the procession (and sacrifice) had been properly carried out.<sup>20</sup> The majority of Athenians played the role of spectator most of the time, but this does not diminish the experience of the participant; presumably, if and when an Athenian had the chance to participate in a procession, those memories and impressions influenced his or her later experiences as a spectator.

The meanings of these processional symbols varied from person to person, highly conditioned by personal experience. At least some of these layers of meaning, however, were shared within the community through the links between the symbols and shared myths, history, or knowledge of other rituals. Through their common sensory experience of these rituals and familiarity with the meanings and interpretations of a shared set of symbols, processions brought Athenians together to create, shape, and maintain their communal identity.

Processions were repeated once every year, two years, or four years. Thus, Athenians had the chance to experience the procession and its symbols repeatedly throughout their lives. Such repeated retrieval of memories and cultural knowledge about a procession's symbolism could certainly have reinforced that knowledge in the Athenians'

minds.<sup>21</sup> It also allows for the possibility of change in an individual's understanding of religious symbols, as he or she grew older, experienced new rituals, and gained new experiences or insights, and as society itself changed.

These memories of processions and their symbols were also collective, in the sense that they were held by many individual members of a group. While individual emotional experiences during a festival or deeply personal responses to particular symbols were not necessarily shared, the spectators of a procession saw, heard, or smelled roughly the same sensory symbols.<sup>22</sup> As Anthony P. Cohen has observed, just as communities contain a group of individuals with different experiences and views, so symbols accumulate a range of individual meanings.<sup>23</sup> Because the members of a community share the symbols, they overlook the variations in meaning and perceive themselves to be more similar to each other than to the members of other communities, in part based on this shared symbolic language. All who came to see the Panathenaic procession would have seen the peplos with its woven tale of Athena's triumph, or the *kanephoros* walking past in her festival garments bearing her ceremonial basket, or the *thallophoroi* carrying their olive branches. Moreover, since the procession was repeated, two people who had attended the procession in different years would still have shared collective memories about the ritual, since they would have seen much the same set of symbols.

This is not to suggest that processions were static, unchanging rituals. Some things would alter from year to year, for example the identity of the various participants, or perhaps the specific wording of prayers or the tunes played by the musicians. Other

21 Roediger *et al.* 2009, 138-70.

22 Except performances at particular places along the processional route, which only those nearby would have observed.

23 Cohen 1985, 11-21.

19 Stavrianopoulou 2015, 350.

20 Graf 1996, 57-8.

elements of the procession changed to reflect social or political changes in the community, for example the addition of Athenian allies and colonists in the processions of the Panathenaia and City Dionysia during the late 5th century BC. Some symbols, however, were consistently present in these processions, and it is especially with respect to these symbols that we may consider the effects of collective memory.

The concept of collective memory was pioneered by Maurice Halbwachs, who pointed out that the formation and recall of memories was socially structured and conditioned.<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt points out that in fact, groups require a collective memory for three reasons: to ensure the satisfactory performance of their own activities, to maintain and communicate their corporate identity, and to maintain and advance their position with respect to other groups or broader institutional structures.<sup>25</sup> The memories collectively held by the group are not necessarily static bodies of information, waiting to be passed on to the newest member as a lump sum of knowledge; rather, the group is itself a place of exchange and interaction, processes which form and maintain the group memory.<sup>26</sup> By participating in the formation and retrieval of these memories, an individual demonstrates and creates a sense of “belonging” to the group. In Athens, these groups existed at many levels, for example the family, the deme, the phratry, the tribe, elite drinking groups, and many more. The group most visible to us, however, is the collective of Athenian citizens. By attending a polis-level festival procession as either a participant or a spectator, an Athenian reaffirmed his or her identity and membership in this group.

Of course, processions could also be attended by non-Athenians, including resident metics and

foreign visitors. Non-Athenians lacked access to the shared memories of those who had been raised on Athenian myth and ritual. Some metics who had lived in Athens for longer periods could have become familiar with collective Athenian memory, depending on how enthusiastically they embraced their new home. But they also possessed another set of collective memories tied to their original polis, which differentiated them from Athenians. Also, they would probably not have had the same emotional attachment to Athenian collective memory – for example, they could not say that their ancestors were buried in Athenian cemeteries, or that their ancestors were born from the land itself.

Other scholars have emphasised that memory is also culturally structured and conditioned, embedded in and transmitted through cultural institutions and recurring rituals.<sup>27</sup> As one example, Paul Connerton discusses commemorative rituals – rituals that celebrate their continuity with past observations of the same ritual, and frequently also with a mythical or historical figure or group.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, cult myths are not always preserved for the Athenian festivals, and sometimes their associations with mythic figures may be secondary.<sup>29</sup> Connerton suggests that this “rhetoric of re-enactment” is enacted through the recurrence of the ritual at the same time every year, as well as verbal or gestural repetition within the ritual.<sup>30</sup> Athenian festivals did follow a cyclical calendar, but it is harder to find verbal or gestural repetition within the procession itself (the sacrifice is another matter), aside from broader cultural norms of gesture and speech. Hymns and music for the procession could be rewritten, and new ones composed; and we have little evidence for specific gestures during the procession, aside from a sort of

24 Halbwachs 1992 [1925], 37-9. On social memory in 5th-century Athens, see Steinbock 2012, 1-47.

25 Cubitt 2007, 134-5.

26 Cubitt 2007, 166.

27 Connerton 1989, 36-40; Assmann 2011.

28 Connerton 1989, 41-71.

29 For example, Theseus' connections to the Oschophoria, first attested in the 4th century BC. Plut. *Thes.* 23.2; Philoch. F183; Istros *FGrH* 334 F8; Harding 2008, 61-3.

30 Connerton 1989, 65-70.

“processional walk”.<sup>31</sup> The important repetition in these rituals was not the content of the hymns or the form of the dances, but the fact of their performance in the right place at the right time, as well as the repetition of meaningful sensory symbols. Each year was another opportunity to delight the deity with a splendid procession, fine offerings, elegant choral dances, and beautiful hymns.<sup>32</sup>

Jan Assmann focused less on the concept of repetition and more on the question of storage. In his view, cultural memory is “disembodied” and “stored away in symbolic forms”; it has to be constantly “circulated and re-embodied”.<sup>33</sup> Cultural memory involves the mythical or historical past, communicated through formalized ceremonies and rituals using icons, dances, performances, and archaic language. Participation is hierarchically structured so that only a select few have access to the full range of cultural memory.<sup>34</sup> The symbols in Classical Athenian processions did frequently draw their meaning from the distant mythical or historical past, but they could also commemorate or reference events within living memory (such as prominent military victories, or the relatively recent establishment of democracy). They do not fit comfortably into Jan Assmann’s dichotomy between communicative and cultural memory. Nor was the full understanding or appreciation of these symbols (dances, hymns, objects carried, etc.) confined to “specialized carriers of memory”.<sup>35</sup>

These concepts of social and cultural memory are not new to the study of Athens. Other scholars have devoted much ink to considering how the Athenians’ sense of community and identity was reinforced by myths, monuments, speeches, and

political institutions.<sup>36</sup> As yet, no one has thoroughly considered the institution of the *pompe* – how these large, public processions, which reached so many people and were so frequently repeated, contributed to the Athenian memory community and Athenian identity.

The concept of cultural memory is helpful, though not quite as either Paul Connerton or Jan Assmann defines it. Assmann’s idea that cultural information is stored in symbols – in the sense that a member of the community perceiving the symbol then remembers the cultural information – fits the emphasis on display and sensory perception present in Greek processions. Connerton’s focus on the repetition of commemorative rituals is also an important component of how cultural memory functions, how it is preserved, and how its re-enactment serves to reinforce identity. Sacrifices are somewhat similar in these ways (and in some ways Connerton’s description of commemorative rituals better fits Greek sacrifices), but processions remain unique because of their movement, which allows more interaction with the landscape and offers greater opportunity for display and for a larger number of people to see and remember the significance of the symbols involved. In the following sections, I will analyze a few of these symbols, examining who conveyed and observed them, some of the associations that these symbols may have possessed, and other places or rituals where the symbols also appeared – in other words, what shared cultural memories these symbols might have evoked in the minds of Athenians.

36 This is not a comprehensive list. Shear 2011 focuses on the revolutions at the end of the 5th century; Wolpert 2002 examines the period just after the Thirty, as does Loraux 2002; Loraux 1986 focuses on funeral orations; Loraux 2000, 1993 on myths of autochthony and its implications for gender and citizenship; Bridges *et al.* 2007 looks at the Persian Wars; Castriota 1992 examines the depiction of myths on public monuments following the Persian Wars; Arrington 2014 focuses on the methods and spaces of commemoration for the war dead in 5th-century Athens.

31 See n. 8 above.

32 Furley 2007, 119.

33 Assmann 2011, 17.

34 Assmann 2011, 18–22.

35 Assmann 2011, 20–1.





Fig. 2. Block V, the central scene of the east side of the Parthenon Frieze, showing the *peplos* at the head of the Panathenaic procession. 438-432 BCE. H. 1.02 m. British Museum 1816,0610.19 (courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).

## The Peplos of Athena

Once every four years, a peplos woven with the tale of Athena's victory over the Giants was presented to the goddess at her penteteric festival, the Great Panathenaia (Fig. 2).<sup>37</sup> The peplos was a powerful symbol for the Athenians; in Aristophanes' *Knights*, the chorus describes their fathers as "worthy of the peplos".<sup>38</sup> The Gigantomachy myth connected to the Panathenaia told of Athena's victory, an appropriate myth for a procession where military victory was a prominent theme.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere in the procession, Athenian hoplites, men in chariots (*apobatai*), and cavalry added to the martial theme.<sup>40</sup> The Gigantomachy myth also expressed the triumph and reaf-

firmation of Zeus' reign, and thus cosmic order and stability.<sup>41</sup>

The image of Athena conquering a Giant first appeared in Attic vase-painting in the mid-6th century BC, about the same time that the Great Panathenaia was first organised as a penteteric, internationally oriented athletic festival (Fig. 3).<sup>42</sup> Luca Giuliani suggests that the peplos design showing the Gigantomachy was established at this time, perhaps linked to a new poetic version of the Gigantomachy myth, and it was the peplos which inspired the vase-painters.<sup>43</sup> It is most likely that the vase-painters saw the peplos in procession, where it was displayed for maximum

37 Mansfield 1985; Barber 1992, 103-17; Shear 2001, 97-102, 173-85.

38 Ar. *Eq.* 565-8; Shear 2001, 174.

39 Shear 2001, especially chapters 1, 2, and 4.

40 Shear 2001, 155-6; Neils 1996, 181-2 on the 6th-century vase evidence for hoplites and cavalry in the procession; the *apobatai* are attested on the Parthenon frieze and perhaps in Ar. *Nub.* 69-70, see Shear 2001, 161.

41 Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 270-80.

42 Shapiro 1989, 38; Vian 1952, 246; Giuliani 2000, 266-72; Shear 2001, 35-6.

43 Giuliani 2000, 264-72; Vian 1952, 95-106, 251-3.