L'astuzia del polpo. Simboli monetali e identità nella Eretria arcaica.

The Octopus's Cunning. Monetary Symbols and Identity in Archaic Eretria.*

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Abstract

By focusing both on the symbolic value of the octopus within the cultural context of ancient Greece and on the history of Eretria in the 7th and 6th centuries B.C., the present paper is aimed at understanding why did the Eretrians adopt the image of that animal for their first coinage. Athena, the goddess of metis, proves to be a key element in this connection.

The symbol of the octopus, present on the reverse of the earliest coin issues of the city of Eretria (figs. 1, 2)[1], chronologically datable between the last decade of the sixth century B.C.[2] and

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[1]On the obverse is present the type of cow being scratched, sometimes accompanied by a bird on its back. The octopus is placed inside the incuse square. It is important to reaffirm, based on what was opportunely observed many years ago by Seyrig 1950 and, in more recent times, by Berend 1989, p. 23 ff., and Kraelse 1995, pp. 19, 34 ff., that it is properly an octopus and not a cuttlefish or squid, as has been suggested on not a few occasions and erroneously resulted even in well-known repertories (for the cuttlefish see, for example, Kraay 1976, p. 91, and Plant 1979, p. 101, nr. 1759; for the squid, Flacelière 1948 and Head 1963, p. 362), erroneous interpretations that generally result connected to the reading of a well-known Plutarchean passage from the *Vita di Temistocle*, on which I will have occasion to dwell further (see below, n. 47). The three animals, to tell the truth, can hardly be confused. The cephalopod depicted on the Eretrian coins has eight long tentacles and a globular body that unequivocally represents an octopus. The cuttlefish, and even more the squid, have an elongated form and are provided with ten tentacles, eight of which result rather short and only two, instead, very long and provided with suction cups at the extremities. The difference between the three is described, in the terms indicated and with abundance of particulars, by Aristotle (Arist., *H.A.* IV 1; see Thompson 1947, s.vv. Πολύπος and Τευθίς).

[2]I make reference to the punctual and documented analysis of Kraelse 1995, p. 46 ff., whose conclusions, which are based on the comprehensive reexamination of the Eretrian numismatic documentation, propose the solution in my opinion most balanced on the argument. Kraay 1976, p. 91, has proposed, instead, 525 B.C. circa. The attribution to Eretria, proposed by Babelon 1907, pp. 674-686, and taken up by Head 1963, p. 360 ff., of recent series, on the obverse, the head of Gorgon or that of a bull and, on the reverse, the incuse square or else the head of Gorgon on the obverse and that of a bull inserted in the incuse square on the reverse, dating back to 600 B.C. circa, no longer appears practicable. Babelon and Head, who saw in such emissions the testimony and consequence of a close relationship between Athens and Eretria (Babelon spoke of 'monnaies d'alliance'), dated the beginning of the emission with the cow and the octopus to 510 B.C., in correspondence with and as a consequence of the fall of the Pisistratids (Babelon 1907, 586; Head 1963, p. 361).



490 B.C.[3], is now an established fact: it constituted the *παράσημον* of the city,[4] and was therefore one of the most important representative elements of the Eretrian community of that time and of its identity.



Figure 1: Eretrian tetradrachm, end of the 6th century BC. On the right the cow scratching itself, on the reverse the octopus (from Seltman 1933, pl. XI, no. 1).

But in what sense? Different explanations have been advanced. It has been thought both of a reference to the 'proverbial riches of the island and of the waters that surround it"[5] either to a reference to fishing activities, insofar as they would represent 'one of the principal resources of Eretria'.[6] Within the scope of this latter solution have been highlighted those elements of tradition that attest how Euboea was surrounded by a sea that in some of its stretches was known for fishing, and how both the principal centers of the island, Chalcis and Eretria (and not only these), were connected, in different ways, to fishing and to fish processing activities. Athenaeus, in fact, our principal source on the argument, praises the oysters of Euboea,[7] in the cuisine of which Chalcis represented excellence.[8] Of such a city the author also recalls the nets, inferior to those present in other places of Greece for quality of meat but still always appreciable as delicacy. Eretria, instead, is connected to the fishing of the sarage,[9] of the *phagros*[10] and of a fish similar to the tuna, the πόμπιλον,[11] which were much appreciated, in antiquity, on the gastronomic level. Eretria and Stira,

[3]It is not yet possible to establish with certainty whether, due to the destruction of the city by the Persians in 490 B.C., there was the definitive end (as suggested in Kraay 1976, p. 91) or else the temporary suspension (according to Kraelse 1995, p. 47) of the aforementioned emissions.

[4]Thus, for example, Head 1963, p. 362 and Kraay 1976, p. 92.

[5]Mani Hurter 2006, p. 68; 2007, p. 47. According to the scholar, the cow that scratches its head, which appears on the obverse of the Eretrian tetradrachms in question, would represent 'the proverbial agricultural richness of the island'. But more probably it could have connections with (Kraelse 1995, pp. 52-54) or with Hera (Valenza Mele 1977, p. 494) and be, therefore, representative of Euboea, which in tradition appears closely connected to both figures (ivi, pp. 493-494).

[6]Flacelière 1948, p. 215 n. 4.

[7]Ath., *Deipn.* IV 135e.

[8]In Ath., *Deipn.* IV 132e, Egesander of Delphi affirms the superiority of Chalcidian cuisine over Athenian, asserting that a single appetizer of sea fruits cooked in Chalcis is superior in goodness to an entire dinner in Athens.

[9]Ath., *Deipn.* VII 298c.

[10]Archestr., F 26 Brandt.

[11]Ath., *Deipn.* VII 283b.

then, result strongly interested in the collection and processing of murex,[12] present also in Euripo.[13] Carystus, moreover, was known for the fishing of its sea and for the unsurpassable quality of two of its fish, the tuna and the ἵππουρος, in which we identify the coryphaena or lampuga.[14] Elianus, finally, records the characteristic Euboean technique of fishing with the lantern.[15]



Figure 2: Eretrian didrachm, end of the 6th - beginning of the 5th century BC. On the right the cow scratching itself, on the reverse the octopus (from Jenkins 1972, figs. 78, 79).

Alongside these ideas, which configure for the Eretrian octopus simple and immediate symbolic values and references, insofar as directly connected to the environment in which the animal lives, appear two more sophisticated interpretative solutions based on the suggestions offered by a well-known study by M. Detienne and J-P. Vernant dedicated to the symbolic relationship between *metis* and the animal world in antiquity, with particular reference to the octopus and the fox. The first is owed to J. Kraelse, according to whom the type of the octopus could have been used to symbolically evoke the virtues and warrior abilities. This hypothesis is founded on two observations: the octopus, as a cunning predator and fighter, possessed the same qualities of the 'good warrior'; the Eretrians could boast an excellent reputation in the military field 'déjà du temps de la Guerre Lélantine'.[16] For Kraelse it is possible to think that the symbolism of the octopus made reference both to the marine context and to the military one, with the aim of summarizing the most noted and important abilities of the Eretrians.[17]

The second solution comes from a brief but accurate analysis, which is owed to M. Puglisi,

[12] Schmid 1999 has shown how an attentive reading of the sources, in the first place those archaeological, indicates with sufficient clarity that the working of purple, in Eretria as in Chalcis, was an activity of quarrying in the Roman age, with particular reference to the I-III centuries of our era. The exploitation of mollusks is also known at Oropo, probable Eretrian foundation of the VIII century B.C., already in the geometric age (Theodoropoulou 2007). For Stira one can make reference only to the testimony of Ath., *Deipn.* IV 132c.

[13] Arist., *H.A.* 5, 15; Ath., *Deipn.* III 88f.

[14] Ath., *Deipn.* VII 302a e, risp., 304b.

[15] Ael., *N.A.* 88.

[16] For Kraelse 1995, p. 57, who by way of example calls upon Plutarch (*De Herod. malign.* 24, 861a-c; 27, 862c), Herodotus (VI 101) and Plato (*Men.* 240a-c), tradition would on numerous occasions bear witness to such reputation.

[17] Kraelse 1995, p. 57.

of the diffusion of the image of the octopus within Greek coinage, both as principal type and as secondary symbol, in which one reaches the conclusion that 'the interpretation of the octopus in a naturalistic sense, almost metonymic of the sea, does not seem to be the only possible one, nor the most pregnant' and that the positive value that the animal possessed in antiquity, with reference in particular to the virtues proper to the sphere of *metis*, can explain the elevated frequency with which it appears in numismatic documentation and, more generally, the fortune it enjoyed in the realm of figurative arts.[18] The scholar suggests, specifically, that the appearances of the octopus within the coinage of Poseidonia, Taranto, Turi and of Etruria, in association respectively with *Poseidon*, *Taras*, Scylla and the *Gorgoneion*, could be functional to the evocation, on the symbolic plane, of the idea of voyage, of passage, of the transformations that recur in human existence. On Eretria, however, attention stops only for the purpose of recalling the possible relation between Eretrian coinage and the already cited text of Plutarch.[19]

It is my intention to try on one hand to sound out the validity of different interpretative suggestions summarized above, on the other to formulate a further proposal for reading the Eretrian symbolism of the octopus. I will proceed in such direction beginning by evoking, in essential outlines, the relationship between the octopus and *metis*.

1 The octopus and *metis*

A beautiful study from 1967 by M. Detienne and J-P. Vernant, to which I have already alluded, and an equally valid and more recent work by P. Thiercy have accurately explored the values that the octopus, and with it other cephalopods like the cuttlefish and the squid, have had in the Greek symbolic universe.

The animal world was in antiquity (and is still, for that matter) an ample reservoir of elements strongly connoted on the symbolic plane and the octopus, like all animals endowed with polymorphism and/or refined strategies of dissimulation, was connected, particularly in the Greek cultural context, to the concept of *metis*, which Detienne and Vernant translate with the expression 'cunning intelligence'.[20] The octopus, in fact, possesses an extraordinary body that can change form and color confounding the gaze of an observer; notable is also its capacity to produce ink, with the use of which the animal can escape from its adversaries.[21] The octopus is also a dissimulator and refined deceiver, which associates it with the astute and deceptive hero par excellence, the πολύμητις,[22] he who in cunning finds his distinctive trait and his most effective weapon: Odysseus.[23] That of the octopus as astute and intelligent animal is a motif that we find in two authors distant both on the temporal plane and on that properly literary like Homer and Oppian and which, therefore, has represented a true and proper paradigm, across the centuries, in the Greek perception of the animal world.[24]

[18] Puglisi 2004, p. 163 s.

[19] Ivi, p. 163.

[20] Détienne & Vernant 1969, p. 291. The argument was then deepened by the two scholars in a very notable monographic work (Détienne & Vernant 1984).

[21] Détienne & Vernant 1969, p. 305 ss; Thiercy 2008, pp. 96-98.

[22] In the *Odyssey* Odysseus is thus defined no fewer than sixty-seven times (for example, *Od.* II 173), in the *Iliad* seventeen times (for example, *Il.* I 311).

[23] On this point see the acute suggestion of P. Thiercy (Thiercy 2008, pp. 98-99) apropos of Hom., *Od.* V 432-435, episode in which the hero is compared to an octopus. Detienne and Vernant opportunely speak of 'incarnation humaine de la métis' (Détienne & Vernant 1969, p. 316).

[24] Détienne & Vernant 1969, pp. 311-312. The entire vocabulary pertaining to *metis* maintains virtually unal-



Detienne and Vernant have highlighted, in their ample discourse, the relationship that *metis* has with the dimension of agonistic confrontation and combat, both that between human beings and that between human beings and animals, which finds its most genuine expression in hunting and fishing. *Metis*, in fact, is that quality capable of subverting the relationships of force between two contenders and of allowing whoever is less powerful to triumph over whoever, instead, appears clearly advantaged on the plane of brute force, to whoever starts penalized by a disadvantage of some kind to be able to compete effectively and win over whoever seemed to have a clear advantage. In matters of agonistic confrontation one of the most noted and ancient cases is found in the famous episode of Antilochus, narrated in canto XXIII of the *Iliad*,[25] in which the young son of Nestor, well instructed by his father who is expert in *metis*, succeeds in beating Menelaus in the chariot race, despite the latter possessing horses clearly faster, thanks to an astute and well-studied maneuver.[26]

Strength, agility, speed of movement, cunning, patience, constant attention, mimetic capacities, adaptability to situations are, on the other hand, the indispensable qualities for being a skilled hunter or fisherman. In the world of hunting and fishing victory is obtained only by means of *metis*. For animals as for men, hunters and fishermen, a firm rule applies: one succeeds in triumphing over a *polymetis* only if one demonstrates having more *metis* than him.[27] The centrality of *metis* in hunting as in fishing is a constant of the Greek imagination, present with force already in Homer and Hesiod.[28] The octopus and, more generally, the cephalopods, with particular reference to the cuttlefish (also capable of secreting ink, which constitutes one of the most effective instruments of dissimulation) are also very skillful hunters.[29] In definitive terms, the concept of *metis* is the most effective interpretative key for the symbolism connected to the image of the octopus.

2 The Eretrians and the symbolism of the octopus: weak points of the interpretative hypotheses formulated

Each of the interpretations of Eretrian octopus symbolism advanced so far encounters difficulties. The hypothesis that it serves to evoke the sea is undoubtedly plausible, since Eretria is a maritime city, but also substantially undemonstrable, not having at disposal any other documentary element that can restore clear indications in such direction.

The interpretative solution of the reference to fishing can be considered both in a 'naturalistic' and direct sense, the octopus is the prey, and in a less immediate and traceable sense, according to what was illustrated previously, to *metis*. In such case the symbolic reference would not be direct to the prey but to the proper endowments of the fisherman, which the octopus with its abilities perfectly represents. The first option encounters a relevant difficulty, posed by the fact that among the various animals to which the testimonies make reference, illustrated previously, that allow defining the connection between Euboea, some of its individual centers and the sea (as

tered its composition and its semantic characteristics during the entire temporal arc that separates the two authors, Homer and Oppian, who are considered by Detienne and Vernant as fundamental witnesses in the reconstruction of the concept of *metis*.

[25]Hom., *Il.* XXIII 301-527.

[26]The episode has been masterfully analyzed by Détienne & Vernant 1967. See also id. 1984, pp. 3-15, and Nicolai 1987.

[27]Détienne & Vernant 1984, p. 19-23

[28]Id. 1967, p. 314. See, for example, Hom., *Il.* VII 324; Hes., *Sc.* 28.

[29]As effectively testified by Oppian (*Hal.* III 156-164) and Plutarch (*Sol.* 978d-f).



source of sustenance and delicacies) the octopus is precisely missing. Both in the first and in the second option, moreover, is implicit the idea that for the Eretrian community of the third quarter of the VI century B.C., which minted the staters in question, fishing was so important as to be able to be evoked, through the octopus symbolism, as a central element of collective identity. This, however, does not accord with the knowledge we have about Eretria in the period that interests us.

The ensemble of testimonies constituted by the so-called laws of Eretria (from which is suggested the possibility that the city had control of navigation in the marine space included between Euboea and southern Attica, being able to impose a toll on those who passed beyond the *Petaliai* islands),[30] from literary and epigraphic references to the *Leionautai* (who most likely would constitute a mercantile corporation),[31] from the presence of Eretria in the list of thalassocracies of Eusebius of Caesarea (which recognizes to the Euboean center a period of fifteen years of 'dominion over the sea' in the years between the end of the VI and the beginning of the V century B.C.),[32] from the Herodotean passage that records the participation of five Eretrian ships in the Athenian expedition in aid of Aristagoras and the Milesians during the Ionian revolt,[33] finally from the discussed fragment of Lysanias of Mallo (which attests the participation of the Eretrians alone, on the occasion of the fire of Sardis, in 'une expédition navale destinée à repousser la flotte perse, par quoi ils avaient contribué à la victoire des forces ioniennes sur les Chypriotes au large de la Pamphylie'),[34] allows indeed to define a marked 'orientation vers les choses de la mer' of Eretria in the period that extends roughly from the third quarter of the VI century B.C. up to at least the end of the V century B.C.,[35] within which are naval warfare and transport activities of men and things – across the arm of sea that separates the eastern coasts of Boeotia and Attica from those of central-southern Euboea – to play the role of greatest weight.[36]

More than in fishing activities, which would be marginal, it is in the use of ships for warlike and commercial purposes, therefore, that can be identified a very likely sphere of reference for the collective imagination and identity of the Eretrians. The matter is clearly shadowed in the well-known passage of the *Vita Apollonii* of Philostratus,[37] in which it is recounted that on the tombs of the Eretrians deported by the Persians to Ardericca in 490 B.C., and there then dead

[30]IG XII, 9 1273/4. See Constantakopoulou 2007, pp. 218-219. Cf. Jeffery 1961, p. 84; Vanderpool & Wallace 1964, p. 391; Cairns 1984; 1991; Musiti 1984, p. 153; van Effenterre & Ruzé 1994, pp. 331-333; Walker 2004, pp. 186-194.

[31]See the discussion in Walker 2004, pp. 123-124.

[32]From 505 to 490 B.C., according to Myres 1906, p. 96 s. On the list the most recent comment is in Constantakopoulou 2007, p. 91.

[33]Hdt., V 99.

[34]Lysan., FGrHist 426 F 1 (= Plut., *De Herod. malign.* 24, 861a-d. Knoepfler 2008, p. 604. The fact, which finds confirmation in some important monetary findings (ivi, p. 604 s.) would have been, according to Plutarch, deliberately omitted by Herodotus so as not to obscure the Athenian role. The presumed reticence of Herodotus is one of the elements that have contributed to the formation of the disputable hypothesis, by K.G.Walker, of a preponderant role of the Eretrians, and not of the Athenians, during the development of the revolt (Walker 2004, pp. 274-277; cf. Boffa 2009).

[35]Knoepfler 2008, p. 604.

[36]Ivi, p. 596. For D. Knoepfler one could qualify Eretria as 'porthmeutike' [...], like other trading cities – thus Corinth or Chalcis – which are 'isthmiques', mistresses of a natural or artificial isthmus. The importance of the *porthmeutike* in the sea-oriented activities of the principal Euboean centers has been recently highlighted by C. Constantakopoulou (Constantakopoulou 2007, p. 224 s.). The role of the scale of Oropo, founded by the Eretrians in the VIII century B.C. (*Oropos and Euboea* 2007), was of capital importance insofar as it was situated at the terminus of an important terrestrial connection route to and from Athens (Knoepfler 2008, pp. 595-596; cf. Tritle 1992). The routes of crossing of the Euboean sea have been reconstructed by Gehrke 1992.

[37]Philostr., *V. A.* I 23 s.



and buried, were incised ships ὡς ἕκαστος ἐν Εὐβοίᾳ ἔζη [πορθμεύων ἢ προφυρεύων] ἢ θαλάττιον ἤ καὶ ἀλουργὸν πράττων. καί τι καὶ ἐλεγεῖον ἀναγνῶναι γεγραμμένον ἐπὶ ναυτῶν τε καὶ ναυκλήρων σήματι.[38]

The possibility of a connection between the octopus and the virtues of the good warrior, by virtue of the common bond with *metis*, proposed by Kraelse, is undoubtedly interesting. The hypothesis of the scholar reveals itself, however, weak at the moment in which it affirms the existence, in tradition, of a clear, widespread and lasting reputation of the Eretrians as warriors and, as such, as possessors of *metis*. In such sense the sources proposed by way of example restore, in fact, rather tenuous indications.[39] The Herodotean text (VI 100 s.) documents the attempt at defense of their own city on the part of the Eretrians against the Persian assault without giving prominence, it seems to me, to the fighting force of the Greek side and without proposing episodes of particular heroism or cunning but rather highlighting the existing divisions among the citizens (some were inclined to flight to the heights, others to the surrender of the city to draw from it a personal advantage) in view of the Persian threat and the decision not to fight in open field but to entrench themselves in the city; the passage of Plato (*Men.* 240a-c) makes reference to the Eretrians as οἱ τῶν τότε Ἑλλήνων ἐν τοῖς εὐδοκιμώτατοι ἦσαν τὰ πρὸς τὸν πόλεμον καὶ οὐκ ὀλίγοι, but also says that they were defeated by the Persians in three days and easily captured with a raking.[40]

There is, then, the passage, already cited, with which Plutarch (*De Herod. malign.* 24, 861a-c), in open and bitter polemic with the Herodotean account, aims to reevaluate the scope and importance of the intervention of the Eretrians in the Ionian revolt by recording, on the basis of Lysanias of Mallo and other sources whose names are not given, a naval victory over the Cypriots and attributing to them the merit of the capture of Sardis (above, n. 409). The consistent and still unresolved doubts that regard the effective validity both of the Plutarchean discourse and of the testimony of Lysanias[41] counsel extreme caution in their use. The other passage of the Plutarchean work called upon (862c-d) seems to be little more useful. The author, in fact, considers unjust the definition of ἀνδράποδα attributed by Herodotus to the Eretrians captured by the Persians, asserting that the Euboeans showed an audacity and patriotism not inferior to those of the other Greeks and that they suffered an undeserved treatment with respect to their value. Even in this case it does not seem to me that an exceptional bond between the Eretrians and military virtue is highlighted. None of the testimonies examined, it should be noted, contains references, explicit or implicit, to *metis*.[42] To this is added what is reported by the already cited passage of the *Vita di*

[38] According to Knoepfler 2008, pp. 607-608, the Philostratean excursus could be based on the work and, what is even more important, on the ocular testimony of Ctesias of Cnidus who most likely visited the small center of Cissia in 402 B.C. On the Eretrians of Ardericca see Grosso 1958; Knoepfler 2008, pp. 603-608.

[39] See above, n. 16.

[40] Herodotus (VI 101) speaks, instead, of six days for the fall of the Eretrian walls. The σαγήνεια, explicitly recorded by Strabo (X 1, 10) in the case of Eretria, was a habitual operation of the Persians (Hdt. VI 31; cf. III 149).

[41] Brown 1981, p. 392; Murray 1988, pp. 467-468. To this are added also the perplexities that still exist on the effective scope of the presence both Athenian and Eretrian in the events in question (Tozzi 1978, pp. 60-61; Briant 2002, p. 906).

[42] The only attestation of cunning behavior by the Eretrians, therefore most likely connectable to *metis*, is, in my opinion, given by the passage of Thucydides in which the aid provided by them to Agesandrides and the Peloponnesians against the Athenian troops is recorded on the orders of the strategos Timocare (Th., VIII 95). The Eretrians acted so that the Athenian provisions were forced to seek supplies not in the center of Eretria, where they avoided putting the goods on sale, but in the periphery. In such way they found themselves unprepared to respond in rapid times to the attack carried by the enemy ships, which sailed from Oropo following a signal given by the Euboeans.



Temistocle of Plutarch, in which the Eretrians are depicted as cowards and unfit for battle.[43]

Therefore, the sole Homeric record of the Euboean Abantes 'who breathe fury' and who are 'eager with long ash spears to break the breastplate around the chest of enemies',[44] in the number of which the Eretrians are included, seems to be testimony of an accentuated warrior virtue of these latter, in relation, moreover, to a moment quite distant from the period that interests us and in connection with *lyssa*, the warrior fury, the virtue that represents the opposite of *metis*.[45]

To these testimonies, which are expression of an external point of view to Eretrian reality, it is possible to place alongside one that, on the contrary, contains elements traceable to an internal point of view to the society of Eretria. I refer to the well-known passage of Strabo that attests the existence, in the sanctuary of Artemis Amarynthia, of a stele on which was present an inscription that recorded the participation in the procession of the goddess of three thousand hoplites, six hundred horsemen and sixty chariots.[46] This fact has been justly read, together with other indications, as a sign of Eretrian will, traceable in particular to the equestrian aristocracy of the *Hippeis*, to preserve cultural elements of 'heroic' type, recognizable in the presence of war chariots within the procession[47] and, more generally, in the breeding of horses.[48] Strabo attributes to the stele the value of proof of the ancient power possessed by Eretria adding, as proof, that the Eretrians had also governed over Andros, Tenos, Ceos and other islands. The discussion on the temporal horizon of reference of the testimony relative to the stele has not yet reached a shared solution and the proposals range from the VIII to the VI century B.C.[49] The reference to dominion over the nearby islands, instead, can with a certain degree of conviction be referred to the VIII century B.C. since, in the period that goes from the end of the IX to the beginning of the VII century B.C., archaeology places with sufficient precision an Eretrian residential presence at Zagora of Andros.[50] The element that interests me to highlight is that the exhibition of terrestrial military force at Eretria results, on the basis of Strabonian testimony, contextual to the cult of Artemis.[51]

[43]Plut., *Them.* XI 4-6. In the passage Themistocles replies to doubts advanced by a man of Eretria about the opportunity to engage a naval battle with the Persians, asserting that the Eretrians, similarly to cuttlefish, possessed the sword (with obvious reference to the bone of the animal) but not the heart and, therefore, had no right to say anything περὶ πολέμου. The Themistoclean expression, which as I have said was used erroneously to support that on Eretrian coins a cuttlefish or squid and not an octopus was depicted, plays in an evident manner on Eretrian monetary symbolism, making irony and giving to the cuttlefish whoever was represented with the octopus.

[44]Hom., *Il.* II 536-544. Tr. by R. Calzecchi Onesti (*Omero, Iliade*, Torino, 1990).

[45]Brizzi 2002.

[46]Str. X 1, 10.

[47]Snodgrass 1991, p. 56.

[48]On this aspect, which associates Eretria with Chalcis (where were the *Hippobotai*), is still fundamental Mele 1975.

[49]See the discussion in Walker 2004, pp. 119-120; 286-287. On the sanctuary of Artemis at *Amarynthos*, on its relationship with Eretria and on the most recent acquisitions of archaeology see Knoepfler 1988; 2008; Blandin 2011.

[50]See Descoeudres 1973; Cambitoglou et Alii 1988.

[51]Cf. Novaro 1996, p. 85. Strabo (X 1, 12) also records another stele placed in the sanctuary of Artemis, on which was incised a treaty between Eretria and Chalcis that prohibited, contextually to the conflict for the Lelantine plain, the use of long-range weapons. On this point still obscure in the history of the two major Euboean centers see Parker 1997, pp. 59-93. Cf. Walker 2004, pp.152-165; Knoepfler 2008, p. 600 s.



3 Eretria, the cult of Athena, *metis* and the octopus

In the search for an explanation of the connection between the Eretrians and octopus symbolism the mythico-religious context has been neglected until now, which seems to offer very interesting points for reflection. The most ancient and prestigious divinities of the Eretrian pantheon, Apollo and the aforementioned Artemis, do not result particularly connected to the possession of *metis* either within the more general Greek religious panorama,[52] except for sporadic situations,[53] nor in the specific case of the city, where they were venerated with the respective epicleses of *Daphnephoros* and *Amarynthia*.[54] Recent discoveries, however, offer the possibility of looking at what is, as already underlined, the divinity that more than all others in the Greek world is connoted by 'metic virtues': Athena.[55] To the goddess, in fact, was dedicated the sacred area placed on the acropolis. The archaeological testimonies brought to light so far have allowed to trace back her presence, already attested for the Hellenistic age by two testimonies of epigraphic character,[56] to the end of the VII century B.C. or, at the latest, to the beginning of the successive century.[57] Such chronology places Athena outside the Eretrian cultural framework of the origins, pertaining to the VIII century B.C., within which we can safely frame only Apollo and Artemis.[58] We know, arriving thus at a key point of my discourse, that the octopus is in the number of animals representative of Athena and closely connected to her; the cephalopod, in fact, appears, in the context of iconographic documentation, on the shield embraced by the divinity. Two examples are known to me, both relative to Athenian vascular production with black figures from the VI century B.C., coming one from Vulci (fig. 3) and the other from Athens (figg. 4a-b). I believe that there can be few doubts, by virtue of what was said previously, that the connection between the octopus and the goddess was based on the possession by both of *metis*.

[52] Detienne & Vernant 1969, p. 261.

[53] Piccirilli 1987, p. 18 s., who highlights the connection, based on *metis*, between Themistocles and the cult of Artemis.

[54] On the most ancient Eretrian pantheon see Novaro 1996. For an analysis of the characteristics of Artemis Amarynthia cf. also Breglia Pulci Doria 1975.

[55] The goddess was daughter of Zeus and Metis (Hes., *Th.* 886-891) and was invoked as πολύμητις (H. *min.* 2). See in this regard Roscher, II 2, s.v. *Metis*; RE, XIV 2, s.v. *Metis*; Decharme 1929, p. 86; Jeanmaire 1956.

[56] The most ancient of these (IG XII 9, 265), dating to the III century B.C., is a dedication to Athena Alcymonea, placed on a *horos* found in the eastern part of the city; the other, rather mutilated, relative to a block of stone and dated between the II and I century B.C. (IG XII 9, 264), makes reference to a priestess of Athena.

[57] The merit of the discovery belongs to the Swiss School of Archaeology in Greece. Decisive, for the identification of the divinity venerated in the area, was the finding of a votive inscription, consisting of the name of Athena in the genitive, placed on a small limestone idol in the form of a lion, of oriental production, chronologically placeable, according to S. Huber, 'à la fin de l'époque archaïque' (Huber 2007, p. 127).

[58] As evidenced by D. Novaro (see note 54).

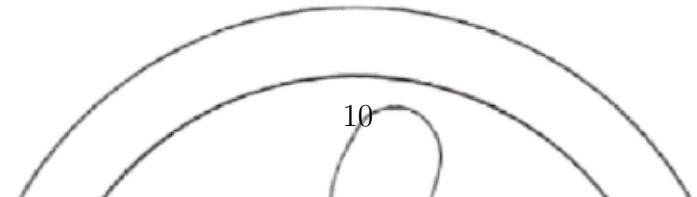




Figure 3: Taranto, 575-25 BC. Panathenaic amphora with black figures depicting, on one side, a group of athletes running and, on the opposite side, Athena. The goddess embraces a shield with the octopus emblem (from *Atleti e guerrieri*, p. 201, fig. 34.1).



Figure 4a: Athens, 550-500 BC. Amphora with black figures depicting the *Ilioupersis*. Athena is recognized armed with spear and shield with the octopus emblem (from Siedentopf 1982, pl. 35, fig. 1).



On the basis of what has been observed up to now it is possible to think, in my opinion, that the symbol of the octopus on Eretrian coins served to evoke the civic cult of Athena. To support in the most appropriate way this hypothesis it is necessary, however, to reason about some crucial questions that it raises: why does the *parasemon* make reference to Athena and not to one of those divinities, Apollo and Artemis, whose presence dates back to the very origins of the city? And what could be the meaning of such reference? What fundamental and identifying aspect of Eretrian society and of its life did the goddess protect with her action? To respond one must look both to the spheres in which the divinity deployed her own action and the force of her *metis* and to the political and social situation of Eretria in the period in which the coins with the octopus make their appearance.

The field of action of Athena is quite articulated and contemplates numerous spheres.[59] Among them that relative to the military sphere cannot be taken into consideration from the moment that, as has been noted previously, at Eretria such sector seems connected to Artemis. That, instead, from which it is possible to make emerge a convincing solution pertains to the sphere of navigation. Athena, as masterfully illustrated by Detienne, 'se manifeste dans le monde marin par l'exercice d'une intelligence navigatrice qui sait tracer sa route droit sur la mer en rusant avec les souffles et la mouvance des flots'.[60] The goddess on numerous occasions in the context of tradition comes to the aid of the ship's pilot, of him, that is, who only thanks to the possession of *metis* is capable of conducting navigation to a good end; she, moreover, is connected to naval carpentry and to the construction of vessels.[61] To a divinity so connoted could very likely look the Eretria that minted its first coins, finding in her a valid ideal and identifying reference. The last decade of the VI is a key moment in the history of the Euboean city, which sees radical and highly significant changes of social, political and economic order. Between 510 and 508 B.C., in fact, is placed the fall of the oligarchy of the *Hippeis* by the work of Diagora,[62] an event that gives beginning to a rapid transition, completed probably before the end of the century, toward democracy.[63] In the same arc of time the city consolidates, as I have previously underlined, its own vocation to naval activities[64] arriving to hold in the context of the Greek world an importance that tradition clearly perceives in terms of thalassocracy and it is possible that such naval force was based on the fitting out of a public fleet.[65] In such context it seems to me entirely possible that the Eretrian

[59]See Roscher, I 1, s.v. *Athene*; RE II 2, s.v. *Athena*.

[60]Detienne 1970, p. 176.

[61]Ivi, pp. 153, 157.

[62]On the figure of Diagora and on his work, which constitute points still little clear of Eretrian history, see Geyer 1903, p. 67; Cairns 1991; Walker 2004, pp. 207-235; Knoepfler 2008, p. 602. According to Cairns the advent of Diagora is placed in a period that goes from shortly after the fall of Hippia to Athens (holding, I believe reasonably, that the Athenian tyrant would hardly have accepted the end of the power of the *Hippeis*, who were, so to speak, friends of the family, without intervening) to shortly after the Cleisthenic reform (since, reasoning in an inverse manner, 'the Eretrian ἱππεῖς are unlikely to have survived for long the fall of Hippias at Athens, particularly once «democracy» has triumphed'). For Knoepfler the honors attributed to him post mortem suggest seeing in Diagora a 'good tyrant', on the Pisistratean model, or a sort of 'Eretrian Solon', whose work was directed to maintain 'l'équilibre entre les prérogatives des anciens oligarques et les nouvelles aspirations populaires'.

[63]Cairns 1991, p. 309. The most ancient and secure documentary proof of the existence of Eretrian democracy is constituted by a proxeny decree dating to the beginning of the V century B.C. (IG XII suppl., 549. See Wallace 1936, pp. 273-284).

[64]It is shared opinion that Eretria had, from the origins, a particular vocation to activities on the sea. On this theme see Kontoleon 1963; Lévêque 1989; Parker 1997, pp. 31, 42-43; Huber 1998.

[65]Most recently see van Wees 2010. Cf. Cairns 1991, p. 311; Van Effenterre & Ruzé 1994, p. 332. The hypothesis is based in particular on the presence of the term μισθός within the fourth text of the cited laws of Eretria, whose dating would go back to the last decade of the VI century B.C.



community, in making the choice of an identifying symbolic reference for the *parasemon*, could have looked, drawing from the religious framework, not to Apollo or Artemis but to Athena, evoking her aforementioned marine connotations and selecting the eloquent image of the octopus for her representation. In definitive terms, I believe it is possible to see in the emblem of the octopus the coherent and effective symbolic representation of the renewed Eretria of the end of the VI century B.C.

However, further and important questions arise, responding to which it is possible to amplify and better define the framework. How and why is born, as said between the end of the VII and the beginning of the VI century B.C., the relationship between the goddess and the Euboean city? What connotations did Athena have during the oligarchic phase of Eretria? What role did the goddess have, in such period, within the civic pantheon? Finding a punctual response is not simple because the documentary elements on which to reflect are really few and the VII century B.C. is, consequently, among the lesser known periods of Eretrian history.[66] It seems logical to me to hold that the advent of the cult of Athena marked a key moment in the progressive increase of the importance of the acropolis area within the civic space. Such area at the moment of the foundation of the city, at the beginning of the VIII century B.C.,[67] had a completely marginal role[68] in the κατὰ κώμας[69] articulation of the settlement. In the current state it is not possible to say whether such development is to be connected to macroscopic changes regarding Eretrian society.

It also seems plausible to me to maintain that the presence of Athena in the Eretrian context could be in some manner connected to Athens, that is to say to the city that more than any other was bound to the goddess and that exercised a marked and quite prolonged cultural and political influence on Euboea and, in particular, on its two most important centers, Chalcis and Eretria, in different modes and spheres. Of such influence we have indications and testimonies that precede and follow the most ancient traces of the Eretrian cult of the goddess. On the plane of material culture, for example, a connection between Athens and Eretria is grasped, for the VIII century B.C., in the Attic influences on Eretrian ceramic productions.[70] Some traditions focused on mythical elements should be considered, then, the most noted of which is the Strabonian notice of the foundation of Eretria and Chalcis by, respectively, *Aiklos* and *Kothos*, coming from Athens.[71] Always Strabo records how also other Euboean centers, Histiaea,[72] Carystus, Stira,[73] would have been founded by Athenians coming from homonymous demes. One can usefully call upon, moreover, a scholion to the *Iliad*[74] in which the dynasty of Chalcon, which numbered Abantes, Chalcodontes and Elephenor, subjects who, as is known, belong to the mythico-heroic horizon of Chalcis,[75] re-

[66]For a general framework see Walker 2004, in particular pp. 109-124.

[67]On this point and on the controversial evaluation of the few traces of occupation of the site datable to the end of the IX century B.C. see Blandin 2007, pp. 159-162, and Simon 2007, p. 164.

[68]As underlined in Altherr-Charon & Bérard, p. 236.

[69]Fundamental on this point is the reflection of Crielaard 2007.

[70]See Kenzelmann-Pfyffer 2011.

[71]Str. X 1, 8. Cf. Plut., *Quaest. Gr.* 22, 296d-e.

[72]Str. X 1, 3: ἔνιοι δ᾽ ὑπ᾽ Ἀθηναίων ἀποικισθῆναι φασὶ τὴν Ἱστίαιαν ἀπὸ τοῦ δήμου τοῦ Ἱστιαιέων, ὡς καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἐρετριέων τὴν Ἐρέτριαν. The text clearly anticipates the affirmation in X 1, 10.

[73]The territories of Carystus and Stira would have been colonized by Athenians coming from the Tetrapolis of Marathon and from the Attic deme of Stira (Str. X 1, 6).

[74]*Schol. in Hom Il.* II 536-541: οἱ δ᾽ Εὔβοιαν ἔχον — ἄ ρ χ ο ς Ἀ β ά ν τ ω ν· ἐπὶ μὲν τῶν ἄλλων „Βοιωτῶν μέν" (B 494), „αὐτὰρ Φωκήων" (B 517). ὧδε δέ, ἐπεὶ διαφόρως ὡς πρὸς τὴν πόλιν ὀνομάζονται, διαφορὰν αὐτοῖς προσῆψεν· ἢ τὸ ὁμοειδὲς ἐκκλίνων τῆς φράσεως. γίνεται δὲ ἀπὸ μὲν Ἐρεχθέως Κέκροψ, οὗ Μητίων, ἀφ᾽ οὗ οἱ Μητιονίδαι, οὗ Χάλκων, οὗ Ἄβας. ὃς Ἄβαντας αὐτοὺς ἐκάλεσεν, οὗ Χαλκώδων, οὗ Ἐλεφήνωρ.

[75]On the argument are still fundamental Mele 1975 and 1981.





Figure 5: Vulci, 550-500 BC. Black-figure amphora of Athenian production, attributed to the Leagros group, depicting the departure of a group of warriors. A hoplite armed with spear and shield with the octopus emblem can be distinguished (from KUNZE-GÖTTE 1973, pl. 417, fig. 3).

sults inserted in that of Erectheus drawing origin from Metion.[76] The testimony is interesting because the connection between Athens and Chalcis, evidently unbalanced in favor of the first, from the moment that it is the Athenian dynasty that welcomes the Chalcidian one, is centered on a character who would seem connected, one intuits from the name, to *metis*.[77] To be recalled, in relation always to Chalcis, is also the Plutarchean account of the sending, by Theseus, of his own sons to Elephenor.[78] The origin of these traditions has been traced back, perhaps not wrongly, to the activity of the Athenian tyranny,[79] whose advent inaugurates a period of marked Athenian

[76] A. Mele has highlighted the existence of two diverse Attic genealogies that encompass 'the series of Euboean kings Abas-Chalkodon-Elephenor': the first, that witnessed by the cited scholion, leads to Metion and Chalcon, the other to Pandoro, brother of Metion and Alcone, a character who in tradition often results to be a 'double' of Chalcon (MELE 1981, pp. 25-30).

[77] Specifically the key of the connection would reside, according to what suggested by H. Jeanmaire, in the being both the Metionids and the Chalcodontiads connected to the art of metalworking, an activity strongly connected to *metis* and to Athena, beyond Hephaestus (JEANMAIRE 1956, pp. 29-31; MELE 1981, pp. 30-31).

[78] Plut., *Thes.* 35, 5-7.

[79] For the notices on *Aiklos* and *Kothos* see, in such direction, the recent observations in ABETE 2008, p. 62. Differently J. Bury (BURY 1886, p. 636) pronounces himself, who sees in such tradition a reflection of the intercurrent relationships 'in early times' between Attica and Euboea (cf. BUCK 1979, pp. 79-81, who also reasons about the connections that such characters have with Boeotia, and THOMAS & CONANT 1999, who think of a framing in the so-called Dark Age). For the notices on the sons of Theseus and the foundation by the Athenians of the cited Euboean centers see FOURGOUS 1987, pp. 10-11. For the scholar also the fact that the Athenians, in the context of the *Catalogo delle navi*, appear immediately after the Abantes should be read as an expedient of Pisistratean

protection toward Euboea that sees important political and military developments, affecting the two principal island centers in quite diverse manner. The relationships with Chalcis, of which in reality we know little or nothing, evidently precipitated in 506 B.C. At such moment, in fact, the Euboean city, which had attacked Attica taking part in the initiative of Cleomenes of Sparta, suffered, together with the Boeotians who had come to their aid, a very harsh defeat by Athens, which contextually installed four thousand cleruchs in the lands of the *Hippobotai*.[80] On the contrary, the VI century B.C. is the period in which the relationships between the Attic metropolis and Eretria appear entirely optimal. Well known, in fact, is the solid relationship between Pisistratus and the *Hippeis*, who in 556 B.C. gave asylum and support to the Athenian exile for the second time and favored, then, his return.[81] Less evident but equally significant are also the connections between the Eretrian equestrian aristocracy and two Athenian families of elevated prestige such as the Alcmeonids, in the first place, and the Gephyraei.[82] Diagora also had important connections with the Athenian environment.[83] It is plausible, in definitive terms, that the good relationships between Eretria and Athens, which were sanctioned by the collaboration between the two cities in the expedition connected to the Ionian revolt,[84] had very ancient roots and were maintained as such until the outbreak of the revolt of the Euboean centers in 446 B.C., harshly repressed by Pericles, in which Eretria had an active part.[85] In light of such elements, I consider it possible to imagine, with a certain verisimilitude, both the arrival of the cult of Athena at Eretria from Athens, as a consequence of profound relationships between the two centers and active already in the context of the VII century B.C., and an Athenian influence in the Eretrian choice of the octopus type. Relevant seems to me, in such regard, the fact that precisely from the city of Attica come the two iconographic testimonies that I have called upon and that, more generally, precisely in the context of Athenian vascular iconography with black figures and red figures the symbol of the octopus finds the widest nucleus of attestations.[86] Suggestive results, I would say, the similitude between the two environments, Eretrian and Athenian, in the graphic rendering of the octopus, in my opinion particularly perceptible in relation to the image of the shield of Athena reported in fig. 3.

As regards the possible values of Athena during the oligarchic period, I believe it is quite obvious to hold that they were in harmony with the ethical and ideal horizon of the *Hippeis*, therefore that they were differently oriented with respect to what hypothesized for the end of the VI century B.C. A connection between the goddess and the Eretrian equestrian aristocracy would seem, moreover, to be able to be intuited from the characteristics of some fictile reliefs, still unpublished, dating perhaps to the second half of the VI century B.C., which could have been part of the decoration of one of the first buildings of the sanctuary of Athena and which depict horsemen.[87] The already

propaganda.

[80] Hdt., V 74-77. Useful, on the general plane, is the discussion in Walker 2004, p. 52 s.

[81] On the relationship between the Athenian tyrant, his sons and Eretria see Walker 2004, pp. 178-221.

[82] Summarized ivi, p. 254 s.

[83] Ivi, pp. 201-221.

[84] The importance of such collaboration is grasped, in Eretrian context, in the decoration of the western frieze of the temple of Apollo, which numbers a scene of Amazonomachy, a subject ideologically connected to the Persian wars: Touloupa 1983; Culasso Gastaldi 1977.

[85] See Walker 2004, p. 277. On the motivations at the base of the revolt is useful Ostwald 2002.

[86] For example, the octopus constitutes, on numerous occasions, the emblem on the shield of hoplites (see figures 5 and 6). What significance this presence has is not easy to say. However, it seems possible to me, in light of what illustrated apropos of the symbolic value of the octopus, that a reference to *metis* should be considered without doubt among the interpretative possibilities, constituting, in my opinion, the best among them (for a different solution, Lissarrague 1987, p. 111 n. 13).

[87] The notice of their discovery was given by Huber 2007, p. 128 n. 21.



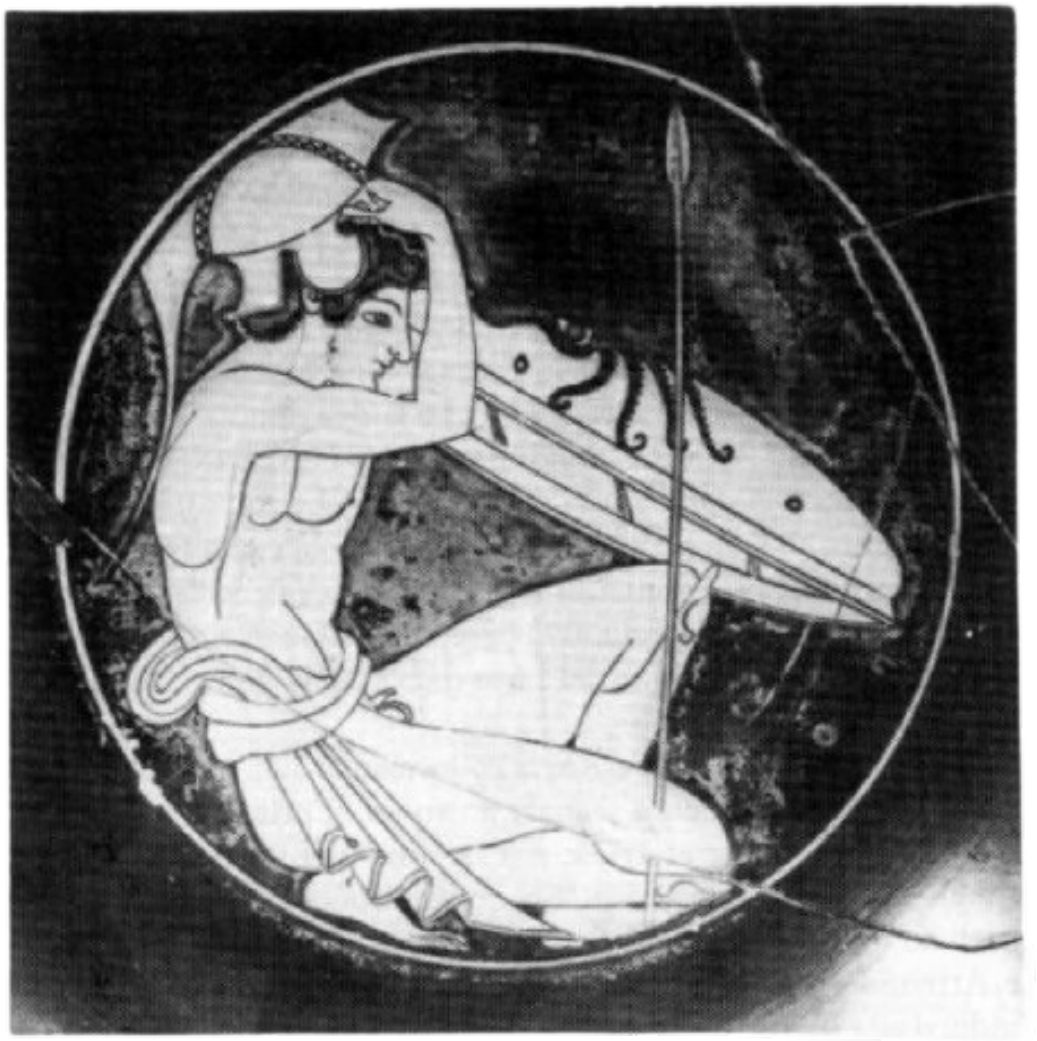


Figure 6: Tanagra, 550-500 BC. Red-figure cup of Athenian production signed by Finzia and depicting a warrior in the act of putting on his helmet, armed with spear and shield with the octopus emblem (from Ferrari Pinney 1981, pl. 55, fig. 22).

cited and meritorious study of Detienne offers the possibility of reasoning about a hypothesis that seems to me truly fascinating: a connection between Athena, the *Hippeis* and the use of horses and the chariot. In a manner absolutely akin to what seen for the guidance of the ship, Athena clearly results, in the Greek imagination, mistress in the conducting of the horse, whether directly mounted or harnessed to the chariot, thanks to the force of her *metis* and to some capacities traceable to it: keen eye, rapidity of reaction, attention to the unpredictable movements of the animal and to obstacles.[88] Athena is connected to the χαλινός, the bit, which permits controlling the horse and which the goddess gave to Bellerophon for the guidance of Pegasus;[89] furthermore she is expert also in the fabrication of the chariot and of the individual pieces that constitute it.[90] A divinity that possessed such characteristics is undoubtedly adequate to represent an ideal

[88] Detienne 1970, pp. 154-155.

[89] Pind., *Ol.* XIII 68 ss. Pausania (II 4, 1) records the sanctuary of Athena Χαλινῖτις at Corinth.

[90] Detienne 1970, p. 158. The scholar illustrates very effectively the numerous similarities between the ship and

and religious point of reference for an aristocracy like the Eretrian one which, as said, finds in *hippotrophy* and in the use of the war chariot two of its characteristic traits.

Regarding the third question, the placement on the acropolis of her sanctuary evidently signals a role of primary importance for Athena in the Eretrian environment and one would be led to think of a poliad function of the goddess. On this last point, however, the absolute silence of tradition, which instead well remembers Apollo and Artemis, is a significant element that generates perplexity and leads to maximum caution.

To conclude, I believe one can reasonably hold that Athena was a fundamental point of religious and identifying reference for Eretria both in the oligarchic phase and in the democratic one, by virtue of her accentuated 'metic characteristics' and of the correspondence of such values to those aspects and those activities highly connoted in the life and imagination of the city, now in one now in the other phase. Both the establishing of the cult of the goddess and the choice of the octopus as *parasemon* are connectable to the cultural and political influence exercised by Athens. Only new documentary elements, however, will be able to provide material for an advancement of the discussion and for the search for a better definition of the framework that I have tried to reconstruct, should it be confirmed.

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the horse, constantly present in Greek mentality, and the connection that both things show with Athena and her *metis*.

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