

Athens, 25 June – 9 September 2012

stories
about light
at the Acropolis
Museum

An activity in parallel with the exhibition
“Light on light: an illuminating story”
being presented at
the Municipality of Athens “Technopolis”







Just as an infant emerges from the darkness of the womb into light so did the ancients believe that the world was born from terrible chaos and wild night into the light of day. Night and day - mother and daughter, were said to live in a cave in the west covered by dense clouds and on the edge of the ocean. However, neither ever met the other. With the light of the sun, day would regulate all human affairs. Night, which succeeded day, would rest weary humans with the draught of sleep, but was also the portent of death.

The ancient gods were also divided into two groups - the gods of bright Olympus and the Giants, sons of *Gaia*, the dark earth. The future of the gods was decided at the *Gigantomachy*, a gargantuan struggle between Giants and Olympians. Undisputed winners of the battle were the gods of light. The goddess Athena played a leading role in the struggle, earning the title of victory, *Nike*. The Athenians viewed their role as similar to that of the Olympian gods, with the benighted barbarians as their rivals. The Gigantomachy was a favourite subject for monuments of the Acropolis: in 6th cent. BC vases, on the pediment of the 'old temple', on the metopes of the Parthenon's east side and on the interior of the shield of the gold and ivory statue of Athena Parthenos. It was even woven onto the famous woollen peplos destined for the ancient wooden statue of Athena Polias located in the interior of the cella in the Erechtheion. In front of the statue which was said to have fallen from the heavens, burned the 'unwaning' light of a golden lamp, a brilliant creation by the celebrated *Callimachus*. Above it hung a huge bronze palm tree that trapped the smoke and removed it with a pipe running through the roof. The olive-wood statue of Athena and the golden lamp that never went out became a symbol of the Athenian state for many centuries.

The Acropolis Museum narrates some of the unique stories of light and is pleased that the *Technopolis* cultural centre is concurrently presenting a story of light from ancient times to the present aided by a rich collection of exhibits.

Dimitrios Pandermalis

President of the Acropolis Museum

Natural light

Sun - Moon

From the time mankind achieved self awareness the effort to understand nature and its phenomena that so affected his life began. And thus commenced the creation of his gods. With surprise, admiration and awe he observed light succeeding darkness and night following day. Seeking to interpret this perpetual cycle he created the god *Helios*, the personification of the light from the sun, and his sisters *Selene* and *Eos*, goddesses of the moon and dawn respectively.

Initially, Helios was ruler of the heavens, who from above “sees all things, and listens to all things” (Homer *Odyssey* XII, 109). It was he who gave life and to a large degree determined the fate of men. When, at the beginning of historical times, the Greek pantheon took its final form – with twelve main gods who resided on Mount Olympus – many of the attributes of Helios and Selene were transferred to other gods: those of Helios to Zeus and Apollo, and those of Selene to Artemis and Hecate. However, the primordial gods of light were not forgotten. They continued to exist in the shadow of the Olympians and enjoyed the respect of people such as the philosopher Socrates who greeted the rising Sun with devotion every morning (Plato, *Symposium*, 220d).



Fig 1:
The sun god Helios



The Greeks of the classical period (5th-4th cent. BC) imagined Helios as a young man dressed in clothes made of light with a bright halo around his head, driving across the sky in a fiery chariot, drawn by four winged horses. Every morning would see him emerge from one side of *Oceanus*, the circular current where earth and sky meet (Homer *Iliad* XIV 201, 246), rising to the center of the celestial sphere and from there sinking down to the other side of Oceanus, surrendering the world to Selene, who would have just commenced her own bright journey.



Fig. 3:
The horses of Helios

The gods of light appear many times on the Parthenon, the most splendid of the temples that the Athenians dedicated to their patron goddess Athena. The birth of the goddess is depicted on the east pediment. Using ancient sources (Pausanias, *Attica* I, 24, 5) and pieces of the fragmented sculptures we can reconstruct the scene to a large degree. Athena has just sprung fully armed from the head of her father Zeus



Fig. 2: Reconstruction of the east pediment. 3rd floor, Parthenon Gallery, atrium

before the astonished eyes of the Olympian gods who are watching the divine birth - standing, sitting or reclining. The chariots of Helios rising from the waters of Oceanus and that of Selene sinking into the other side, complete the two corners of the pediment and help determine the birth date of the goddess: namely dawn of the 28th day of the month *Hekatombaion* (around mid August).



Fig. 4:
The horses of Selene

Helios is again depicted on the east side of the Parthenon this time on metope 14. His quadriga has just risen from the sea, as indicated by the fish leaping among the wheels of the chariot and the water bird below the horses' hooves. This is the image that completes the narrative of the legendary Gigantomachy which unfolds on the eastern metopes of the great temple. The Gigantomachy was the struggle of the gods of Olympus against the Giants, the terrible children of Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Sky), who attempted to seize power and overturn the world order. Helios and his sisters took part in the battle which was won by the Olympian gods, by delaying their daily cycle so that Zeus would be the first to pick the herb that Gaia was seeking in order to render her children invincible (Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1.6.1).

Fig. 5:
Reconstruction drawing
of metope 14

Fig. 6:
East metope 14





The ancient Greeks were always tolerant of, and open to, new religions. The establishment of the great Hellenistic kingdoms in the late 4th cent. BC favoured the coexistence of many peoples, the spread of eastern cults and religious syncretism, which is the amalgamation of various deities to form new ones. Helios merged with Zeus, Dionysus and the eastern deities, *Osiris*, *Serapis* and *Mithra*. From then and until the end of the ancient world he would be worshipped as ruler of the world, father above all and almighty, with whom earthly rulers were wont to identify themselves.

Helios is depicted as ruler of the world on a marble sphere at the Acropolis Museum. The sphere is dated to the 2nd-3rd cent. AD, a time when philosophical inquiry had begun to turn to mysticism and magic. Helios is now depicted as a mature man, seated on a throne under an arch, and as absolute ruler of the universe and lord of the celestial sphere on which he is represented. In one hand he holds a whip, and in the other, three lit torches, the 'triple fire' on which the salvation of the human soul depended. The dogs at his feet symbolize the brightest stars of the Canis constellations: *Sirius* (the 'dog star') with a halo, and *Procyon*. Their presence seems to signal the god's prime period of sovereignty – the hot months of July and August.



Fig. 7:
Magic sphere (EM 2260)
2nd-3rd cent. BC, 1st floor



The marble sphere is considered a magical object associated with the worship of Helios. Apart from the depiction of the god himself, the entire surface is covered with astral, magic, alchemical and geometric symbols, allegorical representations of animals (lion, snake), numbers and incomprehensible inscriptions, probably, appeals to Helios. Only one word inscribed on one of five intersecting circles, can be read: *AIΘHP*, the first of the five natural elements (aether, earth, water, air, fire). The marble sphere was found in 1866 in the Theatre of Dionysus, perhaps buried by its owner in a magical ritual that might ensure him theatrical or athletic victory.

Artificial light

A. oil lamps

So that they could continue their activities when darkness fell, but also to dispel the fears it gave birth to, the ancients found refuge in the power of fire: hearths, oil lamps, torches and candles were all means by which they illuminated the nights.

The most popular means of lighting were oil lamps. Made in different shapes, sizes and materials, they illuminated houses, shops, workshops and public places. They were essential to religious celebrations, night-time rituals and funeral ceremonies and often comprised offerings in the graves of mortals or the sanctuaries of gods.

In their simplest but most common form they were closed clay vessels, with or without handles and with a larger or smaller opening at the top (filling-hole), through which the fuel, usually olive oil, was poured into the interior. A perforated projection (nozzle) was formed at one end with a small hole in it (wick-hole) through which the wick passed. While the wick burned, it absorbed oil and the supply of oxygen from the air maintained the flame. The wick was made from flax, hemp or other plant fibres and burned slowly, ensuring a long duration for the lighting.

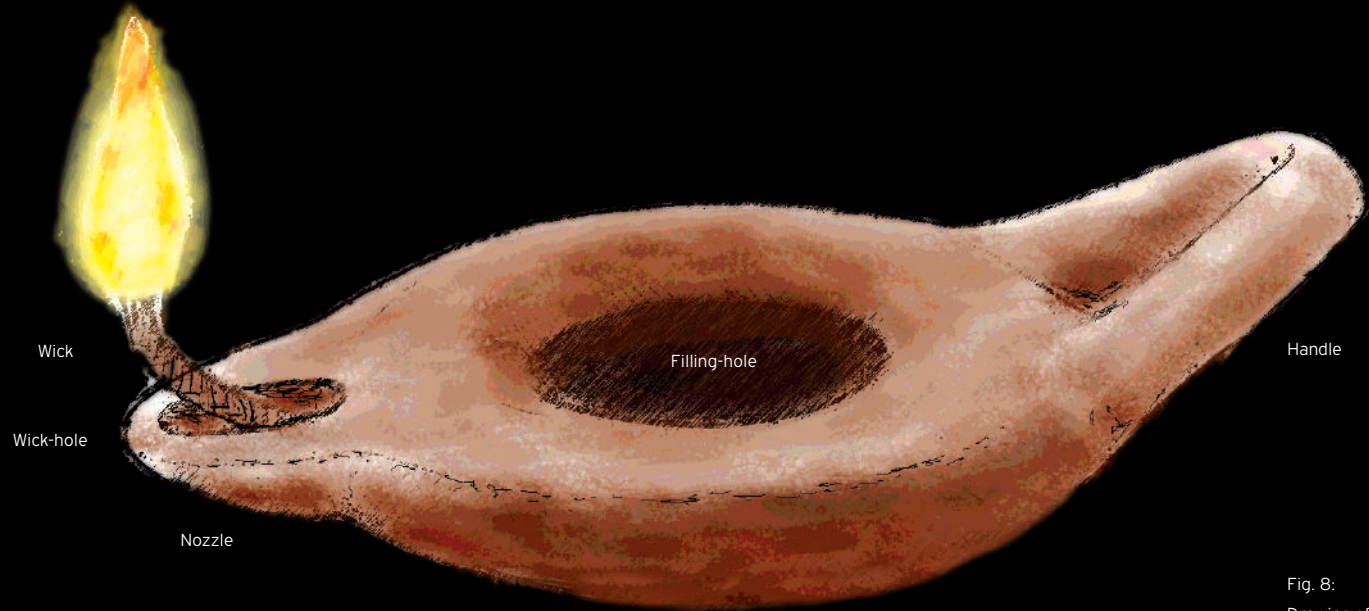


Fig. 8:
Drawing of a lamp

A simple lamp such as this, which could have been found in any home in the 5th cent. BC, was recovered on the Acropolis along with many similar lamps. Made on a potter's wheel, it has a short nozzle, a large filling-hole, and horizontal handle, while the whole surface is covered with lustrous black glaze. Traces of burning around the nozzle indicate that the lamp was lit for some time in a sacred space before being left there permanently. Clay oil lamps, in the form that we know them, appear around the second quarter of the 7th cent. BC. Initially they were made by hand and left unpainted, but by mid-century they began to be formed on the potter's wheel with the interior being sealed with layers of glaze. From the mid-6th cent. BC glaze was applied on the exterior surface and the use of the wheel became widespread and continued for many more centuries.



Fig. 9:
Clay lamp, 480-425 BC
1st floor, showcase 32, no. 9



Fig 10:
Multi-nozzle lamp, 500-460 BC
1st floor, showcase 32, no. 12

In sanctuaries, public buildings and affluent urban homes where lighting needs were greater, oil lamps that fed oil into many wicks simultaneously (multi-nozzle lamps), were used in the same way as multi-light fittings are used today. One such lamp is this one with receptacles for five wicks, found on the Acropolis.

The lamps were used mainly for the lighting of interior spaces. They were placed on tables, shelves, niches and alcoves while some had a perforated central stem, which had multiple uses: it facilitated transportation of the lit oil lamp as the user could hold it by threading a finger through the tubular hole, it allowed for suspension from the ceiling providing diffused lighting, and finally it facilitated the securing of the lamp to a disc on a high base (lamp stand), a precursor of modern floor lamps. For use in exterior spaces, the lamps were placed in lanterns made of clay, wood, metal or hide. Lanterns and torches were the chief means of artificial lighting outdoors.



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Fig. 11:
Multi-nozzle lamp
500-460 BC. 1st floor,
showcase 32, no. 10



12

Fig. 12:
Reproduction drawing of
a lamp on a lamp stand

Fig. 13:
Marble lamp, (Acr. 190)
1st floor, Archaic Gallery

14

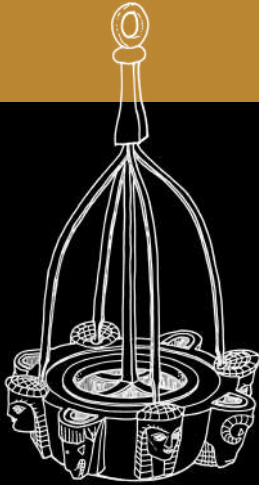


Fig. 14:
Reproduction drawing of
the suspension system

Lamps, especially those made of precious materials, were sometimes particularly ornate vessels – expensive offerings in the sanctuaries of the gods. In this category belongs the lamp displayed in the Acropolis Museum with multiple nozzles and alternating heads of women, rams and goats.

The lamp has four receptacles for wicks, formed at the top of the animal heads. Its curved base, residues of oxidized iron that have stained and corroded the marble, and the small, shallow holes at the top of the women's heads indicate that the lamp would have been hung from above, with the aid of an iron suspension system.

The lamp dates from around 600 BC. One can recognize the oriental characteristics of the so-called '*Daedalic*' style, which flourished in Greece from the second half of the 7th cent. BC in the triangular faces, flat skulls and wavy wig-like hair of the female forms. The style is named after the mythical Daedalus, who according to ancient tradition was a great architect and sculptor, and the founder of monumental sculpture.



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ἘΡΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΑΘΗΝΑΣ

The first reference to an oil lamp is in Homer (Odyssey XIX, 33-4) where the goddess Athena walks holding "a gold lamp that shed a soft and brilliant radiance". The most famous lamp of antiquity, a work by the sculptor Callimachus, was also of gold. It was the 'inextinguishable light' that burned continuously in front of the wooden devotional statue of Athena Polias in her temple on the Acropolis, the Erechtheion. The lamp was replenished with oil only once a year, it had a wick of Karpasian flax fibres (a type of amianthus, that is, asbestos, from Cyprus) that was never consumed, and the smoke was drawn away up through the trunk of a bronze palm tree made by Callimachus.

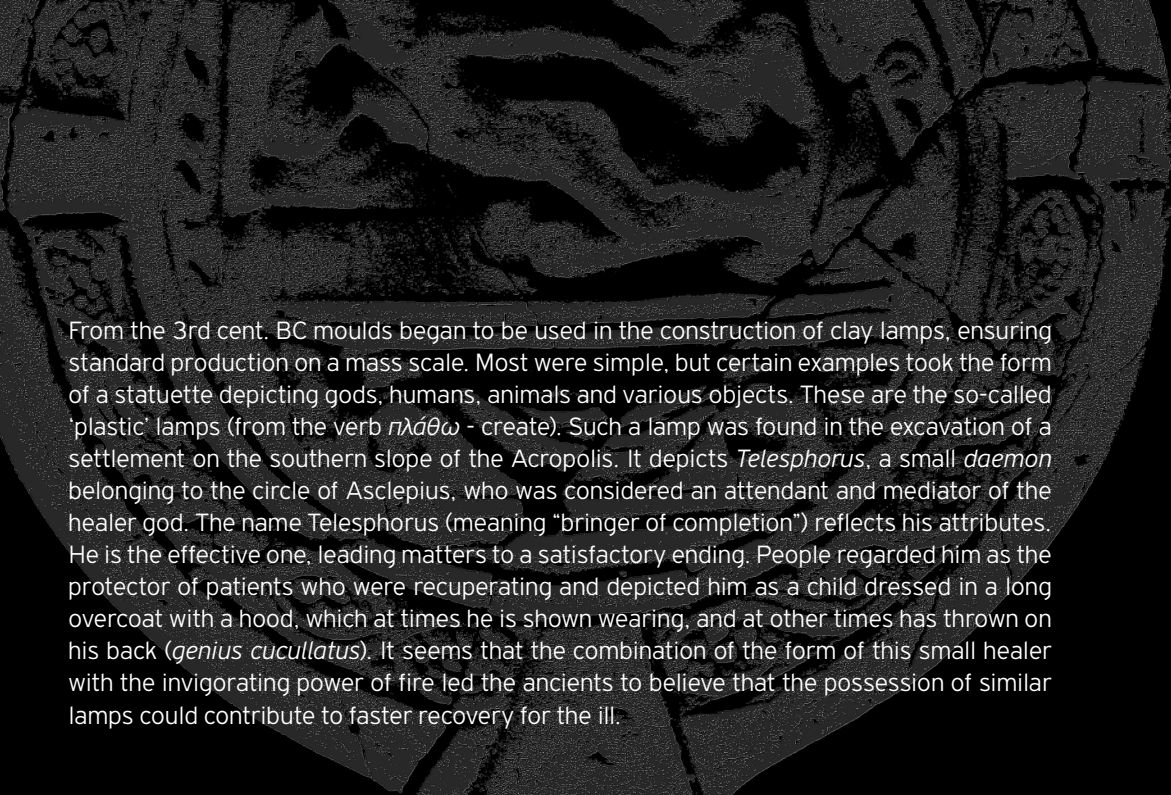
The golden lamp is not preserved. However, another elaborate lamp, made of bronze, was found in the Erechtheion. This lamp has the form of a battleship and bears the inscription ἘΡΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΑΘΗΝΑΣ, indicating that it was a sacred object belonging to the goddess Athena. The lamp is in the likeness of a trireme, the swift ship that defeated the Persians at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BC and guaranteed the Athenian maritime empire for almost two centuries. However, the trireme was also the ship on the mast of which the Athenians carried a new garment (peplos) every four years, to dress the statue of Athena Polias in the Erechtheion, during the Great Panathenaic festival, the city's most important celebration.



Fig. 15:
Lamp from the Erechtheion
(NAM X 7038)
1st floor, case 42



On the bronze lamp from the Erechtheion the receptacle for the wick has been formed on the prow, above the ram. The double rudder in the stern of the ship is secured, while in the interior of the lamp, traces of a casing to secure the mast can be discerned. Finally, the incised circles on the sides represent sockets for the oars. From the style of the letters in the inscription it can be concluded that the lamp was dedicated in the Erechtheion in the late 5th cent. BC, perhaps immediately after the end of the construction (406-5 BC).



From the 3rd cent. BC moulds began to be used in the construction of clay lamps, ensuring standard production on a mass scale. Most were simple, but certain examples took the form of a statuette depicting gods, humans, animals and various objects. These are the so-called 'plastic' lamps (from the verb *πλάθω* - create). Such a lamp was found in the excavation of a settlement on the southern slope of the Acropolis. It depicts *Telesphorus*, a small *daemon* belonging to the circle of Asclepius, who was considered an attendant and mediator of the healer god. The name *Telesphorus* (meaning "bringer of completion") reflects his attributes. He is the effective one, leading matters to a satisfactory ending. People regarded him as the protector of patients who were recuperating and depicted him as a child dressed in a long overcoat with a hood, which at times he is shown wearing, and at other times has thrown on his back (*genius cucullatus*). It seems that the combination of the form of this small healer with the invigorating power of fire led the ancients to believe that the possession of similar lamps could contribute to faster recovery for the ill.





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Fig. 16:
Lamp in the shape of Telesphoros
3rd cent. AD
Ground floor, showcase 2, no. 121

Fig. 17:
Lamp with erotic scene
First half of 3rd cent. AD
Ground floor, showcase 2, no. 47

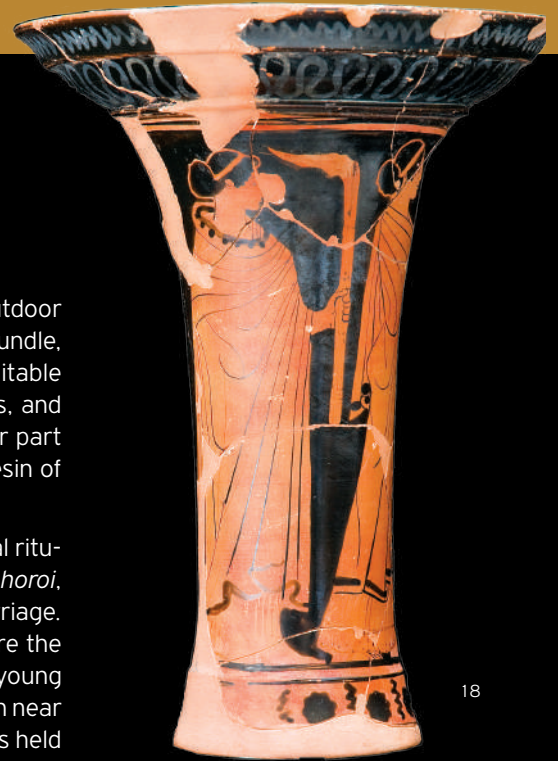
From the 1st cent. AD the tops of lamps were decorated with reliefs of subjects taken from worship, mythology, public and private life, and the plant and animal kingdom. Some scenes were particularly daring, such as the one depicted on a clay lamp in the Acropolis Museum, discovered in excavations of the southern slope of the rock. A couple is shown on the lamp engaging in sexual intercourse

on a bed with a canopy. The luxuriousness of the bed may indicate that the scene takes place in the home of a wealthy courtesan, although the lamp itself may have illuminated a small room in a cheap brothel. The relations of Athenian men with courtesans, concubines and prostitutes were fully accepted by Athenian society where: *τὰς μὲν γὰρ ἑταίρας ἡδονῆς ἔνεκ' ἔχομεν, τὰς δὲ παλλακὰς τῆς καθ' ἡμέραν θεραπείας τοῦ σώματος, τὰς δὲ γυναῖκας τοῦ παιδοποιεῖσθαι γνησίως καὶ τῶν ἔνδον φύλακα πιστὴν ἔχειν* - we have courtesans for pleasure, concubines for daily needs, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households' (Demosthenes, *Against Neaera*, 122).

B. torches

Torches are among the earliest means of lighting, and the most common lighting in outdoor spaces. They were constructed of one, two or more pieces of wood, which formed a bundle, the middle and ends of which were tied with ropes of papyrus or rope. The most suitable wood for their construction was resinous pine, although torches of oak, vines, reeds, and so forth were not lacking. If the wood did not contain resin by nature, then the upper part of the torch was usually covered with a cloth and soaked in tar produced from the resin of coniferous trees.

Torches illuminated the daily activities of ancient people, religious feasts and nocturnal rituals. At the Acropolis Museum we see them at wedding scenes that decorate *loutrophoroi*, the luxury nuptial bath vases found in the sanctuary of Nymphe, protectress of marriage. In ancient Athens, wedding ceremonies lasted three days: they started the day before the wedding (*proaulia*) and finished the day after (*epaulia*). On the eve of the wedding young girls carried water for the nuptial bath in the *loutrophoroi*, from Kallirrhoe, the fountain near the Ilissos river (*loutrophoria*). The water was brought after sunset and thus many girls held lighted torches.



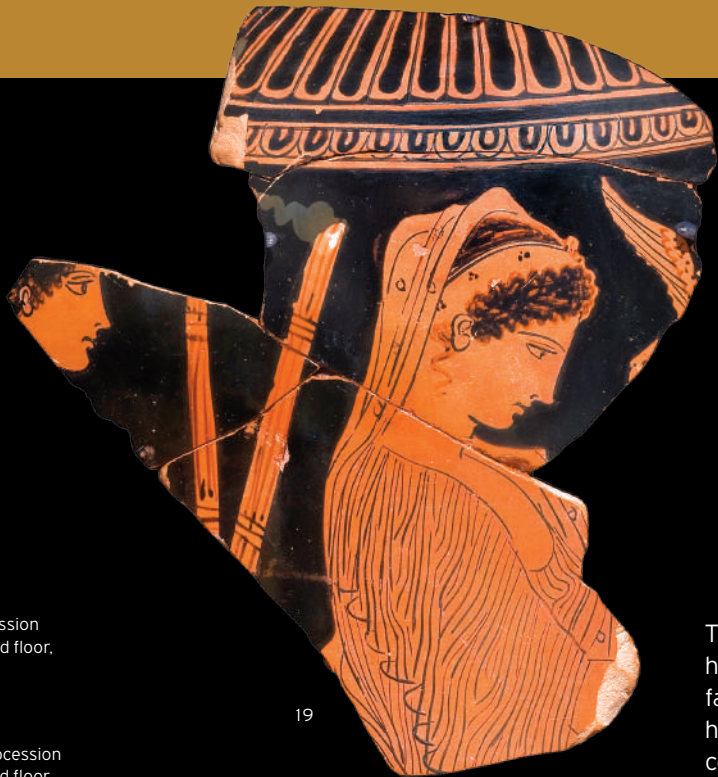


Fig. 18:

Loutrophoros procession
470-450 BC. Ground floor,
show case 5, no. 10

Fig. 19:

Bride in wedding procession
435-420 BC. Ground floor,
showcase 5, no. 22

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The marriage took place the next day at the bride's house. When night fell the groom led the bride to his family home, where she would spend most of the rest of her life. A joyous procession of relatives and friends accompanied the newlyweds with music and songs, while lit torches showed the way.

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Text - editorial: Stamatia Eleftheratou

Translation: Anastasia Caramanis

Illustrations: Manoles Korres (fig. 5)

Alexandros Nikas (fig. 1, 8, 12, 14)

Photographs: Nikos Cosintas (fig. 18, 19)

Socrates Mavromatis (fig. 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 13, 15)

Vaggelis Tsiamis (fig. 9, 10, 11, 16, 17)

Model: According to K.Schwerzek

Printing: Argo printing house

Design: Velissarios Voutsas, Elpida Boubalou





ACROPOLIS MUSEUM

Published by the Acropolis Museum
15 Dionysiou Areopagitou Street, Athens 11742, T: +302109000901
www.theacropolismuseum.gr

ISBN: 978 - 618 - 80078 - 2 - 6