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THE CULT OF ERECHTHEUS AND ATHENA ON THE ACROPOLIS OF ATHENS

The common cult of Erechtheus and Athena on the Acropolis was recognized by the ancients as the oldest and most venerable of all Athenian cults. A clear reference to this cult is made by Plutarch (*Sympos. Probl.*, 9, 6) : Poseidon-Erechtheus was a partner of the same temple (κοινωνός τοῦ αὐτοῦ ναοῦ) with Athena (Fig. 1). Erechtheus and Athena were pre-Olympian deities of Attica.

1. Chthonic Poseidon and kindred local gods

Erechtheus was an ἐρέχθων god¹ who rends or breaks the earth, an earth-shaker god (ἐνοσίχθων or ἐνοσίγαιος). The corresponding Thessalian god (also pre-Olympic) was called Πετραῖος (god of the rock), because he rent an enormous rock at Tempe and created the famous channel of the river Peneios. The broad-known name of this god in Greece was Ποσειδῶν (from oldest times perhaps in Arcadia), to whom the Thessalians identified their own Πετραῖος (since called Ποσειδῶν Πετραῖος). So did Athenians with their Erechtheus (since known as Ποσειδῶν Ἐρεχθεύς and in inscriptions Ποσειδῶν Ἐρεχθεύς γαίηοχος). Later no one doubted that Erechtheus was a local name for Poseidon (cf. HESYCH. : Ἐρεχθεύς · ὁ Ποσειδῶν ἐν Ἀθήναις)².

2. The goddess Athena

Athena, the associate of Erechtheus in worship, was not his wife, as one would expect; in myths very early she appeared as a young virgin goddess, and it was impossible to become the wife of an aged god. Otherwise, the idea that she could be a daughter of Poseidon-Erechtheus can not find any support in the Athenian myths³.

¹ The verb ἐρέχθω, very common in Homer, means to rend, to disturb, to shake violently.

² In this early age it is obvious that Poseidon was a chthonic god, like Erechtheus, without any direct relation to the sea. (Athenians had for the sea a local daemon Αἰγεύς, from a root αἰγ-, meaning the water, as in κατ-αἰγ-ίς or Αἰγ-αῖον πέλαγος).

³ According to a Libyan myth mentioned by Herodotus (4, 180), Athena's real father was Poseidon and mother the nymph of the lake Tritonis. After a conflict with Poseidon, Athena abandoned him and recognized Zeus as her father. It is self-evident

The fact of co-existence in the same sanctuary of a god and a goddess, who had no relationship by marriage and did not have also any other nearness of kin, could perhaps find a plausible explanation by assuming that they were two separate favoured deities of two different groups of inhabitants resided near the Acropolis. If the two groups had agreed to live in peace, they should have decided at the same time to establish a common sanctuary of their deities on the Acropolis.

Herodotus often mentions sections or troops of Pelasgians settled round Acropolis not only during remote prehistoric years, but also later, in the dawn of the historic period (1, 57). Pelasgians were numerous in Attica. The people of Kranaoi, after whom Athens was called Ἀθῆναι Κρανναῖ (PIND., *Ol.*, 7, 82) were Pelasgians, according to Herodotus (8, 44). Ionians also, expelled by Achaeans from Peloponnesos, were established in Attica and Boeotia, before their migration to Asia Minor. The large group of Cecropidae, after which Attica was called Cecropia for a while, had also settled in the vicinity of Acropolis. Each group was constantly engaged in struggles with neighbours to protect its land and its goods, but also to impose its favourite god or goddess to its rivals. Mythmaking poets later spoke about the strife of the gods for the «possession of the land». The most important strife was the famous contest between Poseidon and Athena, which took place during the highest opposition of the old chthonic and the new Olympian gods (i.e. during the so-called dark ages, from 1150 to 900 B.C.). Chthonic Poseidon was then defeated, because his rival was already one of the prominent Olympians. The young Athena was among the first chthonic deities who abandoned the chthonic Pantheon and entered the Olympian one. Her chthonic substance survived only in popular cults (as was her cult in Erechtheum too).

3. Goddess Athena as *Poliás* and as *Parthenos* or *Promachos*

With Athena as Olympian or celestial goddess (always of bellicose type) a new era of religious life began in Athens.

Already in the second half of the sixth century B.C. the Olympian Athena started to throw her shade on *Poliás*, the old and venerable protectress of the city. She took possession of Acropolis with the surnames *Parthenos* and *Promachos*, while the goddess of the forefathers maintained her old epithet *Poliás* and a humble mystic worship with Erechtheus.

In the fifth century, Athena *Poliás* and Athena *Parthenos* became two separate goddesses with different features, although the Athenians wished to

that her opposition to Poseidon was due to the fact that she changed herself into an Olympian goddess very early, while Poseidon continued to be a chthonic god.

see their familiar Athena in both of them. *Parthenos* Athena became the brilliant official goddess of the state, with the Parthenon as her temple and the pompous Great Panathenaea as her main feast. Distinguished citizens entrusted their ambition for supremacy over Greece to her. Her statue in the Parthenon, the famous «*chryselephantine* Athena», wrought by Pheidias, was 12 meters in height and had garments and weapons of gold of a net weight of 40 talents, i.e. more than one ton. Her second statue on the Acropolis, the so-called *Athena Promachos*, made of bronze, was 9 meters tall : it was raised in the open air, immediately after entering the Propylaea and it gave the impression that this was the goddess who commanded the Acropolis. Nevertheless piety is fostered neither by the greatness in size nor by the richness in gold : so it is evident that both statues addressed rather to the artistic feeling than to piety. Fine arts, from classic period on, started an autonomous development, often harmful to the religion. The cult of Athena *Parthenos* was showy, not pious.

On the contrary, Athena *Poliias* with her familiar chthonic peculiarities, survived as a humble vegetation goddess with fertility rites. Poseidon-Erechtheus, with whom she shared the worship, was a kindred deity, especially with the epithet φυτόλαμιος (producing or nourishing the plants)⁴.

Poliias Athena had no impressive images. Her famous statue was made of olive wood and stood in her «old temple» (later in the Erechtheum); some said that it had fallen from heaven (διπτετὲς ξόανον), others, that it was a gift to the goddess by Cecrops, the forefather of the Athenians. it was a small *xoanon*, light to bear, and represented the goddess seated on a throne, at least the older one, which existed in the «old temple», before the destruction of the Acropolis in 480 B.C.⁵.

This image was the holiest in Athens; it was an εἰκὼν ἔνθεος, although ἀτοπωτέρα ἐς τὴν ὄψιν (according to PAUSANIAS, II, 4, 5). Athenians believed the city was under its protection, day and night. In the feast of *Plynteria*, when the statue was carried to the sea, and the temple was left without its image, no one in Athens was willing to commence any serious work : οὐδεὶς Ἀθηναίων, Xenophon says, κατακεκαλυμμένου ὄντος τοῦ ἔδους τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς, τολμήσαι ἄν ἄψασθαι σπουδαίου τινὸς ἔργου (*Hell.*, 1, 4, 12).

⁴ Poseidon, the ruler or master of the sea, was another god : he had already become a shining personality of mythology, without any warm cult (many sea-deities existed besides him).

⁵ Homer does not know any other image of Athena, except the seated one (*Il.*, VI, 303). Seated was represented especially the queen of the nether world. The same image was the appropriate one for the primitive *xoanon* of the chthonic Athena. After 480 B.C. perhaps the older statue was replaced by another image, again wooden, for which we do not know whether it represented the goddess seated or upright.

An olive-oil lamp was constantly burning in front of this statue, day and night, all year long (ἄσβεστος λύχνος). With this eternal lighting the Athenians paid their continuous respect to Athena *Polias*.

4. The cults in the Erechtheum

Prehistoric cult places occupied especially the north section of the hill surface, i.e. the area of the classic Erechtheum, between this building and the north leg of the pelagic wall. Excavations uncovered traces of open-air sanctuaries, of enclosures with altars, as well as small chapels (μέγαρα or ἄδυτα) for chthonic rites (Fig. 2).

Herodotus, who visited Acropolis about the middle of the fifth century B.C. and before the erection of the periclean monumental temples, saw at the north part of the hill a small room of chthonic cult (μέγαρον πρὸς ἐσπέρην τετραμμένον 5, 78); in this *adyton* or in another of the same kind some Athenians took refuge in 480 B.C. and within the *adyton* they were killed by the Persians (8, 53). Then the barbarians ἐσύλησαν καὶ ἐνέπρησαν πᾶσαν τὴν Ἀκρόπολιν (same passage). Among the burnt sanctuaries was also the most important one of the north district of the hill, which was called by the Athenians of the early fifth century νηὸς Ἐρεχθέος τοῦ γηγενέος, i.e. temple of the earth-born Erechtheus (Herodotus). It is certain that this νηὸς Ἐρεχθέος occupied the place of the afterwards Erechtheum, because included, as Herodotus adds, the famous tokens of the contest of Athena with Poseidon, i.e. the trident mark, the well of salt sea (called Ἐρεχθηϊς θάλασσα) and the sacred olive-tree of Athena (8, 55).

The herodotean νηὸς Ἐρεχθέος is called in *Odysseia*, VII, 81, Ἐρεχθῆος πυκινὸς δόμος and in *Ilias*, II, 549, Ἀθήνης πίων νηός. Both verses belong to the archaic period⁶. It was the period during which the common cult of Erechtheus and Athena flourished on the Acropolis and Athena was praised by poets as the winner of the divine contest. At that prosperous time she became the maiden protectress of the city with the epithet *Polias*, which inspired a pious awe to every old Athenian. In the next century, when the majestic *Parthenos* Athena was already regarded as the new protectress of the recently established Athenian empire, many honorable citizens continued to express the previous devotion to *Polias* Athena, the «Goddess of the ancestors». Plato's devotion is included in the warm words he uses for *Polias* Athena : «our Maid and Mistress, who dwells among us» (ἡ παρ' ἡμῖν Κόρη καὶ Δέσποινα, *Nom.*, 796). The Periclean programme for restoration of the

⁶ DIOG. LAËRTIUS, I, 57, knew that the passage of *Ilias*, II, 546-556, was composed in the sixth century B.C. and was interpolated into the *Ilias* by the tyrants.

Acropolis after the Persian catastrophe contained a second temple, equivalent to the Parthenon in majesty, for the traditional cults of Athens, especially of Athena Polias and Poseidon-Erechtheus. This second temple was the Erechtheum, which, in spite of financial difficulties and war failures, was almost ready at the end of the fifth century.

Athenians honoured their traditional *Polias* Athena (besides *Parthenos*) in many opportunities : a thanksgiving sacrifice (Προχαριστήρια) of the chief magistrates at the end of the winter (when the new vegetation made its first appearance) was addressed not to Demeter but, according to a local custom (older than the union of Eleusis with Athens), to the chthonic Athena (i.e. to the local vegetation goddess). For the same goddess there was a temple in Phaleron, where Athena was called *Skiras* (PAUS., I, 1, 4). A sanctuary of the same Athena *Skiras* is mentioned by Herodotus in Salamis also (8, 94).

Fertility rites connected with *Polias* Athena and Erechtheus were practised in the prehistoric years, until the dawn of the historic age and before the 7th century B.C., when Eleusis was united with Athens. After the annexation of Eleusis the cults of Athenian vegetation deities started to decline or were extinguished : the Athenians regarded the Eleusinian deities as their own and took care for the reorganization of the Eleusinian mysteries and for the expansion of the cult. In Eleusis the Athenians replaced a small *telesterion* of oblong plan with the new rectangular construction, which in the next century became a huge square hall, each side more than 50 meters in length, with 42 inner columns to support the roof. Eight rows of seats at each side were enough for three thousand people. In the second half of 4th century the building was enlarged by a monumental stoa with twelve columns in front of the entrance.

5. Survival of some Athenian rites older than the conquest of Eleusis

Among the old (the pre-Eleusinian) rites were three ritual ploughings (ἱεροὶ ἄροτοι), which were performed before the regular period of ploughing and sowing, in order to reinforce and bless them. One of the ritual ploughings took place in the Eleusinion, on the north foot of the Acropolis. In this sanctuary Pausanias saw a statue of the old Athenian priest Epimenides (not the famous Cretan Epimenides, as Pausanias thought [I, 14, 4]); in connection to this statue was a bronze image of a bull, which Pausanias saw very close to Epimenides. According to an old Athenian tradition, Epimenides was the founder of the sacerdotal Athenian family of Βουζύγαι, and the first who put to yoke a pair of oxen to draw the plough. The tale was an Athenian one, without any relation to Eleusis. The sanctuary later was

dedicated to the Eleusinian goddesses and received the name Eleusinion (Ἐλευσίνιον τὸ ἐν ἄστει).

A second ritual ploughing⁷ was connected with the place Skiron in the plain of the Athenian Kephisos. In older years, Athena *Polias* and Erechtheus were the central deities of the feast of Skira. As a survival must be considered a procession with the priest of Poseidon-Erechtheus and the priestess of Athena *Polias* which started from the Erechtheum and the Pandroseion in Acropolis, crossed the Agora and arrived at Skiron for the sacrifice. Later the sanctuary of Skiron was ascribed to Demeter and Kore; even in this later period Athena *Polias* was honoured with the sacrifice.

Another sanctuary, beyond Skiron, on the same road, belonged to the Eleusinian goddesses; in this sanctuary also honors were provided for the two kindred Athenian deities, Athena and Poseidon (PAUS., I, 37, 2).

On the Acropolis, the priestess of Athena *Polias* was responsible for the rites performed in the Pandroseion. The most important among the mystic performances of the Pandroseion were the *Arrephoria*, which lost their significance after the emergency of the Athenian *Thesmophoria* and the *Eleusinian Mysteries*. Pausanias found *Arrephoria* in decadence (I, 27, 3), because they had remained a simple rustic rite, in opposition to the *Eleusinian Mysteries*, which promoted an eschatologic teaching reconciling the mystae with death and inspiring ἡδίους ἐλπίδας περὶ τοῦ μέλλοντος αἰῶνος (ISOCR., *Panyg.*, 28).

Arrephoria required an absolute secrecy to become successful. Mystic objects and acts had to be hidden to a higher grade than in *Thesmophoria* and other fertility rites. The ceremony of *Arrephoria* took its name from the transportation of the ἄρρητα ἱερά from the Pandroseion to another sanctuary belonging to Aphrodite (which was situated on the north foot of Acropolis). Ἄρρητα ἱερά were secret objects used as magical charms helping the growth of crops. In the ritual of *Arrephoria* :

1) the transportation had to be entrusted to persons who had not passed the «age of innocence» (perhaps the age of ignorance too, inasmuch as for the job two young girls were chosen, 7-11 years old).

2) The chosen young girls had to live for a while in the sanctuary of the goddess, far away from any human being.

3) The transportation of the sacred items had to be done during the night, in order to be protected by the darkness.

⁷ According to PLUTARCH (*Praec. Conj.*, 42) this ploughing was an ὑπόμνημα τοῦ παλαιοτάτου τῶν σπόρων, consequently a pre-Eleusinian one.

4) The girls, each carrying a basket, had to descend the Acropolis through the rocks, following a secret narrow path, in order to avoid curious eyes (Fig.1).

5) The baskets with the sacred objects were carefully covered, and the girls did not know what exactly they were carrying.

The *Hersephoria* (which we know from vague information that it took place in the Pandroseion) was another fertility rite, as J.E. Harrison indicated, with the intent to obtain (through a magical process) rain or dew for the plants and vegetables (*Themis*, 173).

6. The Erechtheum as a temple

The Erechtheum was an unusual cult-place. It was destined to embrace, besides the cult of the two older deities of Acropolis, the sacred enclosure of *Pandrosos*, the venerable grave of Cecrops and the tokens of the contest between Poseidon and Athena. Pre-existent chthonic cults of this kind hindered any free plan of the building and excluded even the attempt of levelling the ground before the construction (for this reason the east and the south walls of the Erechtheum were founded about 3 meters higher than the north and the west ones).

The two impressive entrances of the building (one from the east, with an ionic *prostasis* of six columns, another from the north, with a higher *prostasis* of the same number of ionic columns) correspond perhaps to the cult of the two main deities of the «temple», but it is impossible to determine the part belonging to each of them. The east room, which usually is considered as a temple of *Polias* Athena, was dedicated rather to the cult of Poseidon-Erechtheus, because Pausanias, coming from the east, first visited this room, within which he saw an altar of Poseidon-Erechtheus, a second one of Hephaestos and a third of Boutes. He did not see any cult-image in the room, and for this reason he calls it οἶκημα (house or establishment), not ναός (temple). On the walls of this οἶκημα he saw paintings of the sacerdotal family of Eteoboutadae (I, 26, 5). For the paintings abundant light was necessary, and perhaps for this reason two windows (very rare in Greek temples) were left open one on each side of the entrance (exactly as in the *pinakothek* of the Propylaea, for the paintings there). Three priests were assigned for the cult in this east room. Excavations uncovered two of the inscribed bases of the chairs destined for the two of them (for the priests of Hephaestos and Boutes).

After the tokens of the divine contest, Pausanias mentions the xoanon of Athena *Polias* and the ἄσβεστος λύχνος with the vague information that they were ἐν τῇ Ἀκροπόλει (I, 26, 6). This extremely vague expression about the situation of the statue and of the lamp allowed the supposition that they could

be located within the east room, together with the altars, but the text of Pausanias clearly calls the temple of *Pandrosos* (with its enclosure) *συνεχῆ* to the temple of *Polias* Athena (I, 27, 2) : Πανδρόσου ναὸς συνεχῆς ἐστὶ τῷ ναῷ τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς). So, for Pausanias, the place of Athena's image must have been in the west room of the Erechtheum, which is called by him «temple», because of the presence of the cult-statue.

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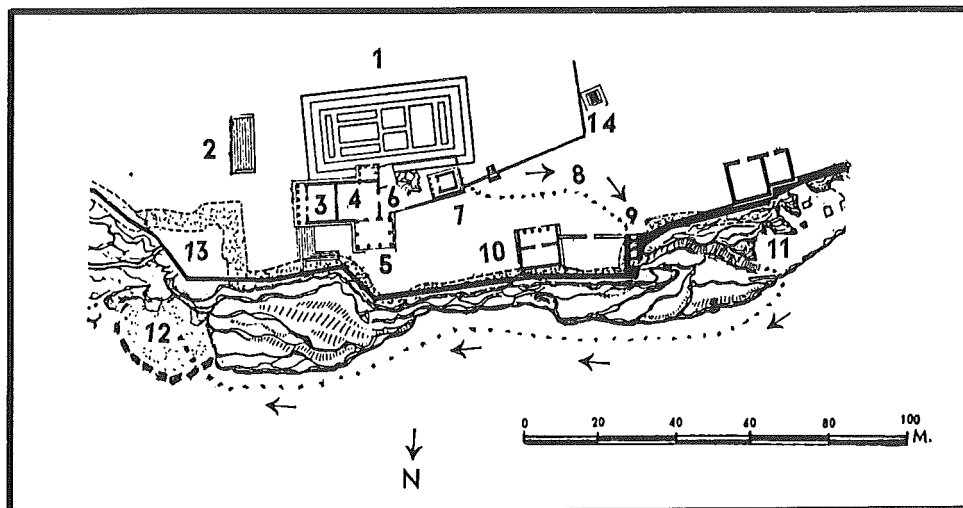
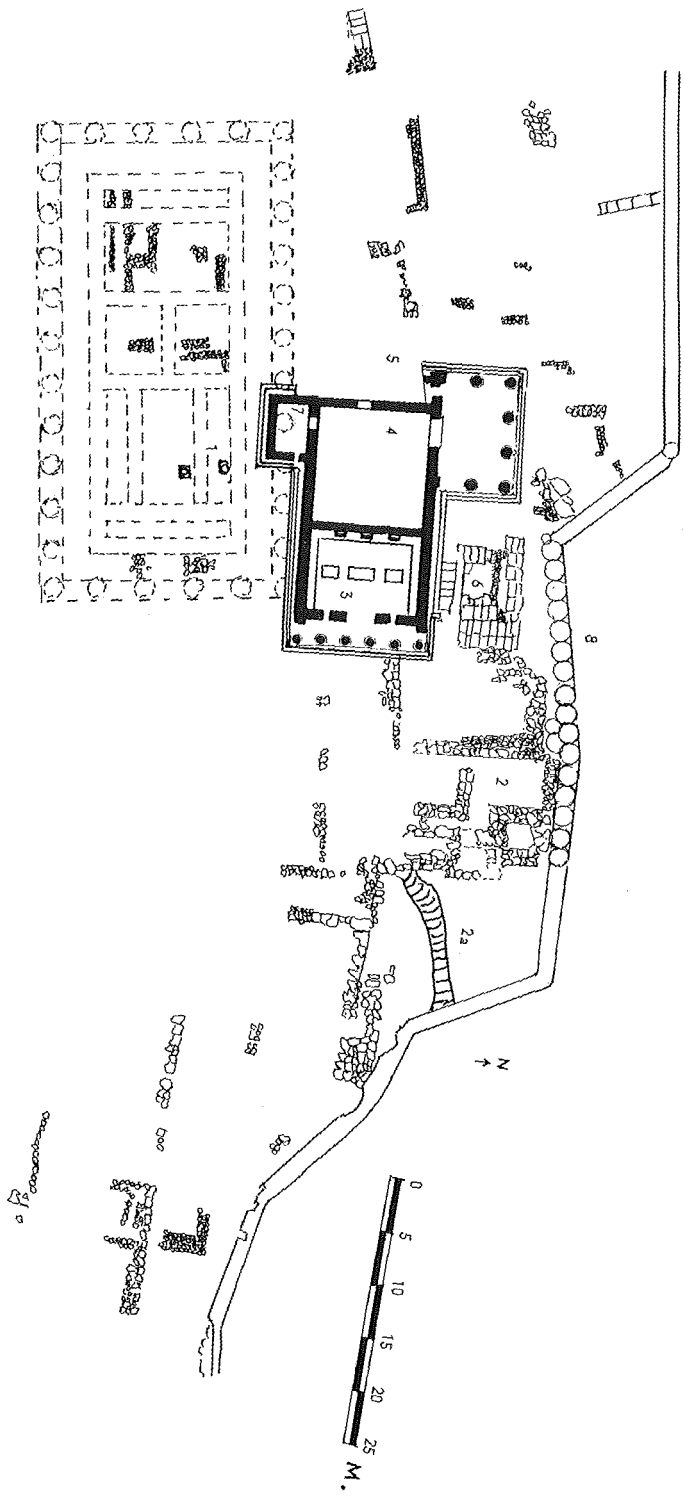


Fig. 1 : The area of the common cult of Poseidon-Erechtheus and Athena *Polias*.

1. Monumental archaic temple of Athena *Polias*.
2. The great altar to the same temple.
3. East room of the Erechtheum (less than 7,5 m. in length).
4. The larger west room (more than 10 m. in length).
5. The north porch, from where the west room was accessible.
6. The sanctuary of Pandrosos with her small temple, from where the *arrephoroi* started descending the Acropolis.
- 7, 8, 9, 11, 12. Mystic path followed by the *arrephoroi* (8-11 secret passage through the rocks).
12. The open-air sanctuary of Aphrodite reached by the *arrephoroi* during the night.
10. Two rooms used as abode of the *arrephoroi* (the west one a simple enclosure).
13. Remains of the prehistoric wall («*pelasgicon*») of the Acropolis.
14. The place of the great bronze statue of Athena.



(See opposite page)

Fig. 2: Prehistoric remains of cult-places and dwellings beneath the archaic temple of Athena and around the classic Erechtheum (drawing based to the plate 7 of *AJA*, 28 [1924]).

1. Few remains of walls below the foundation of the temple of Athena. The two stone bases of columns (where the number 1) recently are considered not as mycenaean, but as belonging to a temple of the early historic age (*Opusc. Atheniensi*, 4 [1962], p. 31 ff), at least 130 years older than the archaic temple of Athena.
2. Excavations uncovered more prehistoric walls north-east of the Erechtheum, near the narrow descent (with some steps cut on the rock, Nr. 2a), which ended perhaps to a small door of the Acropolis precinct.
3. The east room or chamber of the Erechtheum was dedicated to the cult of Poseidon-Erechtheus, at least when Pausanias visited and described the building (I, 26, 5). There were within this room : three altars (the main one for Poseidon-Erechtheus, another for Hephaistos and a third for the hero Boutes), three chairs for the three priests and a stone bench in length of the north, west and east sides (for people participating in mystic performances).
4. The larger west room should be dedicated to the cult of Athena *Poli*as.
5. The sanctuary of Pandrosos (the Pandroseion) followed to the west. According to Pausanias (I, 27, 2) it was «joined together» to the temple of Athena *Poli*as. The small temple of the goddess Pandrosos left no traces.
6. Old cult-place (paved with stones) for an open-air mystic rite.
7. Porch of the maidens, enclosing a part of the venerable grave of Cecrops.
8. North edge of the hill with the wall of the classic period; parts of column-shafts walled in (from temples destroyed by Persians).