The Mounted Torch-Race at the Athenian Bendideia

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The first reference to the cult of Bendis in Greek literary sources comes in a fragment of the Ephesian lyric poet Hipponax, who wrote around 510 BC.¹ The cult of Bendis is first mentioned in Attic literature in fragments of the Θρατταί written by the comic poet Kratinos, which dates to circa 430 BC. In one of these fragments the goddess is mentioned as carrying two spears for hunting.² This feature, along with her Thracian dress, has enabled Bendis to be identified on Attic Red-Figure vases painted at about the same time.³ The goddess is also mentioned, though on the island of Lemnos, in the Λήμνιαι of Aristophanes, perhaps of a slightly later date.⁴

The Bendideia at Athens

At first the cult may have been introduced into Athens by Thracian immigrants and slaves.⁵ The goddess may have been worshipped in Athens from some time before becoming officially recognized as a state cult. The cult of Bendis became recognized officially at Athens after consultation with the oracle at Dodona.⁶

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³ LIMC sv. Bendis 1–2. No. 1 in the list is ARV² 1023, 147 painted by the Phiale Painter. No. 2 was at first thought to be non-Attic, possibly Boeotian (C. Watzinger, Griechische Vasen in Tübingen (Reutlingen: Gryphius-Verlag, 1924) 59, taf. 41; cf. E. Simon, Opfernde Götter (Berlin: Mann, 1953) 25.
⁶ IG ii² 1283, 6.
This original consultation, with the oracle is mentioned in an inscription recording a decree of the Athenian assembly, \( IG \) ii² 1283, moved in archonship of Polyastratos, which fell between the years circa 269–262 BC. The first mention of the cult of the goddess Bendis as a state cult in Athens comes in a second Athenian inscription, the accounts of the treasures of the Other Gods for 429/8 BC. Therefore establishment of the cult came before, but presumably not much before, that date.

Nilsson and Ferguson both proposed that the cult was probably established in 431 BC, at the start of the Peloponnesian War, when Athens was in alliance with the Thracian king Sitalkes. Parke thought that it was motivated by Athenian interests in the Thraceward regions, which had been further stimulated by the Peloponnesian war, and an alliance with King Sitalkes. Parker attributes the establishment of the state cult of Bendis to the general fascination Athenians had for Thrace at that period.

Indeed, the comic authors in the early years of the conflict provide evidence for the hope of Thracian help. In the first year of the war (431 BC) Thucydides (2.29.5) records that Sitalkes promised to send Athens cavalry and peltasts. A fragment of the comic poet Hermippos, preserved in Athenaeus (1. 27e–28a), composed during the early stages of the Peloponnesian War in the 420s, lists a whole host of goods pouring into Athens in a mock-epic catalogue. Alongside hoplite mercenaries from Arcadia he lists peltasts sent by the Thracian king Sitalkes ‘an itch to plague the Lakedaimonians’. Aristophanes, in the Acharnians (160) first performed in 425 BC, wishes for an army of Odomanti, who for two drachmas a day will ‘petast down’ (katapeltazien) all of Boeotia. According to Gomme this passage ‘expresses some of the Athenian feeling of weakness before a peltast attack’ following the battle of Spartolos in 429 BC. Be that as it may...