CHAPTER TEN

APHRODITE ON THE AKROPOLIS: EVIDENCE FROM ATTIC POTTERY

Elisabetta Pala

Introduction

The goddess Aphrodite enjoyed a wealth of cults in and around Athens, not least on the Akropolis. I have chosen the Athenian fortress as the focus of this chapter because, in addition to being the real political and religious heart of Athens, it also represents a model of reference for the rest of the Attic sanctuaries. Contrary to the common trend considering Athena, the patroness of the city, as the primary recipient of votive dedications on the Akropolis, many other deities are involved in the specific cult practices that enjoy their privileged scenery on the rocky terrace. This chapter seeks an understanding of aspects of different shrines dedicated to Aphrodite on the top of the hill and on its slopes, to show how the goddess was involved in the city life. Although Athena was the main goddess of the summit of the rock, we can still affirm that the preeminent goddess of its slopes was Aphrodite. This is evidenced by the literary and epigraphic sources and especially the Athenian vases found on the Akropolis. First, I will investigate literary accounts of Aphrodite and compare them with the iconography of the goddess on Athenian pottery. Although we cannot read text and images at face value, and often records from literary sources disagree with archaeological material, this comparison will be useful to elucidate some clues about the cults of the goddess and to draw a picture of the role of Aphrodite in the social, political, and religious life of Athens. Second, I will consider the

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links between figured representations of the goddess and the context of her shrines on the top of the Akropolis or on its slopes. Finally, I will discuss some important Athenian festivals that involved Aphrodite on the Akropolis.

**Aphrodite and the Aigeus Saga**

Three of the cult sites where Aphrodite was worshipped share a familial link. From Pausanias’ account we learn that Aigeus, Theseus’ father, founded the cult of Aphrodite *Ourania* in Athens because of his then-childless condition.\(^1\) He believed that Aphrodite’s wrath, which had befallen his sisters, Prokne and Philomela, was passed on to him and that he would remain childless until he had assuaged the anger of the goddess.\(^2\) He decided to appease her, by establishing the cult of Aphrodite *Ourania* in the Athenian Agora.\(^3\)

\[\text{πλησίων δὲ ἱερὸν ἐστιν Ἀφροδίτης Οὐράνιας. ... Ἀθηναίοις δὲ κατεστήματο Αἴγεας, αὐτῷ τε οὐκ εἶναι παῖδας νομίζον—οὐ γὰρ πω τότε ἦσαν—καὶ ταῖς ἀδελφαῖς γενέσθαι τὴν συμφορὰν ἐκ μηνύματος τῆς Οὐράνιας, τὸ δὲ ἐφ᾽ ὠμόν ἐπὶ ἄγαλμα λίθου Παρίου καὶ ἔργον Φειδίου.}\]

Hard by is a sanctuary of Aphrodite Ourania [Heavenly]. ... Among the Athenians the cult was established by Aigeus, who thought that he was childless (he had, in fact, no children at the time) and that his sisters had suffered their misfortune because of the wrath of Heavenly Aphrodite. The statue still extant is of Parian marble and is the work of Pheidias.\(^4\)

Similarly, Theseus established the cult of Aphrodite *Pandemos*, to honor the goddess’ role in the *synoikismos* or unification of the Attic demes, according to Pausanius. We also know that in this shrine Aphrodite was worshipped with Peitho (‘Persuasion’), the personification of a quality essential for the well-being of a democratic state.

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\(^1\) Paus. 1.14.7.

\(^2\) The story about the misfortune of these heroines was told in a Sophokles’ lost play *Tereus* (ca. 430 BC), of which only fragments remain but which was retold by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*.
