Where Did Athenian Generals Take Their Oath of Office?

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...ἐπιωρκκηὼς ὃν ὤμοσεν ὅρκον μεταξὺ τοῦ ἕδους καὶ τῆς τραπέζης...

...as he broke the oath that he had taken between the statue and the table ...\(^1\)

This brief passage from Deinarchus’ speech Against Philocles (2.3) gives us an unusual glimpse of the performance of oath-taking. Unfortunately, very few points about the event mentioned here are really certain. We know that in 323 BC Philocles stood trial for accepting bribes as an acting general and that this alleged offence was depicted by the speaker as an act of breaking the oath mentioned in the line quoted above.\(^2\) As scholarly consensus has it, it is reasonable to suppose that Deinarchus refers here to the general’s oath of office.\(^3\) There are no sources that tell us where it was normally taken,\(^4\) but it seems reasonable to parallel it with the oath of the nine archons, who swore while touching a stone (lithos) with (cuts of) sacrificial victims on it in front of the Stoa Basileos in the agora, subsequently repeating the oath somewhere on the Acropolis.\(^5\) Seeing that the brief description of the setting in the passage

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1 All translations, unless stated otherwise, are my own.
2 For the general background of the speech and historical events referring to it see Worthington 1992.
4 Its existence is well confirmed especially by authors who claim that the general’s oath of office was broken, e.g. Lys. 9.15. Cf. Plu. Per. 30.
5 Arist. Ath. 55-5.
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quoted above does not fit the former location, it seems more likely that the author refers to an oath taken in the latter one.6

What is crucial in the present context is the mention of a table. Torrance, in her otherwise brilliant chapter “Ways to give oaths extra sanctity” in the recent volume edited by Sommerstein and Torrance states: “It is unclear precisely what is meant by trapeza ... Commonly meaning ‘table’, the term also designated the money changers’ counters in the agora, which may be significant here since Philocles has been accused of taking bribes.”7 This lucid explanation suggests that Deinarchos makes a witty, but not very transparent allusion to the financial sphere. It should be noted, however, that _table_ fits the ritual context even better as a piece of furniture on which non-burnt offerings for gods and heroes were deposited.8 _Trapezai_ were often situated inside temple cellae directly in front of the cult statues,9 which apparently was meant to strengthen the impression that the deities themselves were present at a meal set for them by worshippers. An example of such a duo is known from the Athenian Acropolis Propylaia, where a table was found right next to the base of the Athena Hygieia statue.10

Even more relevant seems to be what is known of the cult table set for Athena Polias. Although no traces of the artefact itself have been preserved, several lexicographic sources mention a special officiant, named τραπεζοφόρος or τραπεζών,11 whose sacred service was somehow linked to the table of the goddess.12 The existence of such an honourable function13 suggests a special importance of the _trapeza_ of Athena Polias. This does not come as a surprise, considering the central role of this goddess in the Athenian civic religious

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6 Thus Bayliss in Sommerstein and Bayliss 2013, 39-40. See also Sommerstein and Torrance 2014, 137. Accordingly, all translators assume that ἕδος must be one of Athena’s statues, e.g. Burtt 1954: ‘He has broken the oath which he swore between the statue of Athena and the table’. Cf. Nouhaud and Dors-Méary 1990.
7 Sommerstein and Torrance 2014, 137 n. 17.
8 The only monograph on the phenomenon is Gill 1991, which is an expanded version of the article Gill 1974. More recently it was discussed at some length by Ekroth 2008, 2011, Patera 2012, 113-127.
11 On that latter form see Jacoby 1954, 511.
13 IG II² 776 mentions special honours granted to a priestess of Athena Polias for, among others things, setting properly the table for the goddess.