Athena: Protector and Conquerer

I celebrate the powers of Pallas Athena, the protectress of the city:

Dread, as Ares, She busies herself with the works of war;

With the sack of cities, with the battle-cry and with the combats.

It is She also who saves the fighters that go to war and come back alive.

Hail, Goddess, give us good fortune and happiness!

-Homeric Hymn #11 to Athena

As stated in the Homeric Hymn, Athena possesses as part of her character a dual, contradictory role. She is at once the "protectress of the city" and yet, as goddess of war, is involved with "the sack of cities." How, then, would the Greeks deal with this dichotomy when entreating Athena to assist them during times of war? How could she simultaneously destroy and save these cities?

As the goddess of war and strategy, an offensive army would pray for the assistance of the goddess Athena to defeat their enemy and, if such was the case, sack their enemies' city. However, given that Athena is the protector of cities and citadels the defensive army would similarly pray for the preservation of their polis. Would the offensive Greeks recognize that they are asking for Athena’s aid in destroying a city, when she is meant to protect and safeguard them? If the goddess really could intervene on the behalf of the mortals, how could she be expected to fulfill all of her roles? Would she have to choose between one army and the other?

It is not uncommon that the Ancient Greek gods would possess discrepant aspects in their character. Apollo, for instance, was god of both healing and plague. Similar to the issue of Athena destroying and defending cities, how could Apollo both represent plague and healing? Likely it is because he who made the plague must therefore be able to heal it. Or, he who is healer only becomes such by having something to heal. This similar circumstance can then be applied back to Athena’s combating roles. She can only protect cities because she is a mighty warrior goddess, yet she can only be a warrior by defeating these cities. The warring armies could only pray to different aspects of her character.

Given that Athena is the patron goddess of Athens, the presence of the massive Parthenon dedicated to Athena in Athens serves to represent this dual aspect of the goddess’ nature as it applies to the city. The purpose of the Parthenon was to display the Athenian wealth and power, to honor their patron goddess, and celebrate their victory over the Persians. The sculpture successfully honors Athena as a goddess of craft, given the elaborate and costly materials that went into its construction. In celebration of the Athenian triumph over the Persians, the Athena Parthenos would likewise commemorate Athena as the warrior goddess.

Much like the dual aspect to Athena’s warrior nature, the statue of Athena Parthenos and the temple which it held would also function in two ways. First, it would honor Athena as the goddess that assisted them in their wartime victory. This appeals to the destructive Athena: the warrior and sacker of cities. Second, it would draw upon the opposing side of her nature and could serve as a sort of talisman to say that Athens was defended by its eminent Patron goddess who protected both cities and heroes. In this way, the Greeks could simultaneously honor these two opposing characteristics of Athena. Through the Athena Parthenos the Athenians show that, like their patron, they can both defend their city and conquer their enemies in war.