

# A Greek Acropolis and Its Goddess

By SARAH DUBLIN

*Department of Classical Art,  
Boston Museum of Fine Arts*

At the southern tip of the Argolid peninsula a sheltered harbor is joined to the Argolic Gulf by a narrow channel. Just inside the tip of the harbor mouth lies the modern village of Porto Cheli, and opposite it, in the corresponding position on the other side of the channel, is the site of ancient Halieis. It is a large site, with well-constructed city walls and remains of buildings still visible in many places. The hill which served as the ancient acropolis gives an excellent view over the lower Argolid, the island of Spetsai, the entrance to the Argolic Gulf, and the mountains of Laconia across the gulf. The terraced fields running down to the shore are littered with the debris of past habitation: building blocks, rooftiles, and broken pottery. Along the shore can be seen the remains of many buildings which in ancient times must have lined the waterfront but which, because of the subsidence of the land in this area, have been submerged beneath the sea since early in the Christian era. And at various places farther inland and to the east have been found traces of a road, graves, and a sanctuary which lay outside the city walls.

The University of Pennsylvania has been conducting excavations on the site of ancient Halieis since 1962, and since 1967 has been joined in the project by Indiana University. Only the acropolis and a few areas of the lower town have actually been excavated so far, but these excavations along with surface surveying, aerial



photography, and underwater clearing and mapping operations have produced a considerable amount of information about the plan of the ancient city and its history.

Written sources tell us something of the history of Halieis. We are told that exiles from Tiryns settled there during the first half of the 5th century after being driven from their home city by Argos, that the area was subjected to attacks by Athens during the Peloponnesian War, and that in the last quarter of the 5th century the Athenians obtained by treaty the right to garrison troops on the acropolis of the city. During the 4th century Halieis seems to have been allied with Sparta and may, for a time, have fallen under Theban domination.

The excavations have expanded the picture considerably. We now know that the site was occupied in the Late Stone Age and the Early Bronze Age, again from about 900 to shortly after 300 B.C., and then finally in late Roman times. The significant archaeological history of the site begins, however, in the 7th century when the first major acropolis fortifications seem to have been constructed, and from then on until the destruction around 300 B.C. there is a continuous series of walls, each built on or against the last, with many intermediate phases of breaching and repair.

The most interesting contribution of the archaeological evidence from the historical point of view is the fact that the city was not founded for the first time by the Tirynthian exiles, as we had been led to expect. Others before them had obviously recognized the strategic value of the location with its hidden harbor and its view of



*The city wall, a gate,  
and houses in shallow water,  
photographed from a balloon.*



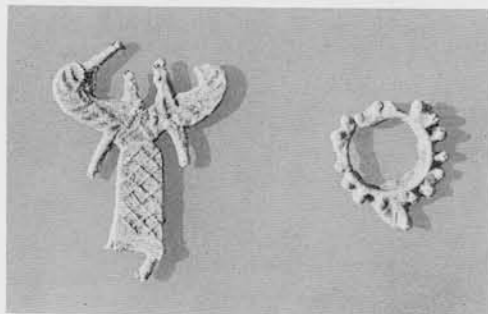
*Sanctuary from NW.  
The statue base is in the foreground,  
the altar in the center,  
and the third base behind.*



*View of acropolis looking  
west from sanctuary area. On  
left, square tower and bar-  
racks; in center, small building  
constructed after abandonment  
of the city; in distance, chan-  
nel from Argolic Gulf into  
Porto Cheli harbor.*



*Terracotta figurine with handmade body and mouldmade head, wrapped in a large cloak.*



*Lead figurine and wreath from the deposit.*



*Several bronze pinheads and earring pendants were found in the deposit.*



*Small bronze shield and mirror. The end of the mirror handle is broken off at the point where it was perforated for suspension.*

the entrance to the Argolic Gulf. It is also noteworthy that, although the historical record indicates several sharp changes in the control of the city in the Classical period, there is little indication of these shifts in the archaeological evidence. In fact, the picture is rather one of a considerable degree of continuity.

This continuity is particularly apparent on the east side of the acropolis in a small complex which was one of the focal points of the excavations from 1962 to 1966 and which is the subject of the exhibit of finds from Halieis. Not only did this complex produce the greatest number of interesting finds during the excavations, but it is also important for what it tells us both of the history of the site and of an aspect of the life of the inhabitants.

In the 4th century, after the Peloponnesian War and the departure of the Athenian garrison, the acropolis was reorganized. The walls were again rebuilt and strengthened, towers were added at a critical point, and several buildings were erected which appear to have been strictly functional rather than decorative (perhaps barracks). In conjunction with all this building activity, the southwest corner of the summit was filled in and levelled to serve as an open court behind the wall at the point where the towers were placed. On the north side of this court, in front of a small rubble wall which probably formed the northern limit of the court, were set three small monuments. They do not seem to have been associated with any building and no objects were found with them to indicate their use. Their shapes and alignment, however, suggest that they constituted a small outdoor shrine complex consisting of a statue base, an altar, and a third monument of which only the socle remains. Furthermore, under the fill of the court was found a layer of ashy earth on bedrock, which contained large quantities of small votive objects dating to the 5th century and earlier. Although this ashy deposit extended over much of the southwest corner of the acropolis it was concentrated primarily under and around the three 4th century monuments. But not a single trace could be found of the sanctuary to which these votives belonged.

Thus we have a votive deposit of the 6th and 5th centuries with no sanctuary and a 4th century sanctuary with no votives. The fact, however, that they shared the same location is good evidence that they represent successive phases of the same cult, and suggests, furthermore, an interesting continuity in spite of the ups and downs and changes of population indicated by the historical record. It is thus possible to draw some conclusions about the use of the

acropolis and the nature of the cult, by combining the evidence of the two phases.

The votive objects from the lower fill show great variety. The most common finds were small terracotta figurines, some of them handmade and others made in a mould, of seated and standing women. One holds a pomegranate, another holds a dove, and one is enveloped in a huge cloak. Figurines of birds and animals were also found, and there were several small models of mounted horsemen as well. The earliest, handmade, examples seem to be of Argive type, with elaborate applied decoration, while many of the later ones are typical Corinthian mouldmade figurines. A few may be Attic and many may actually be of local manufacture in imitation of popular models from the main centers of the terracotta industry.

The most obvious imports in the deposit are a number of small lead figures including wreaths, winged goddesses, and a very interesting representation of Poseidon with his trident. Votive offerings of this type have been found in great numbers near Sparta but they are quite rare outside of Laconia. The series begins in the late 7th century at Sparta and continues into the 5th and 4th centuries, but the late examples are of very poor quality and limited types, and those from Halieis appear to belong rather earlier in the series, probably in the later 6th century.

Bronze votives were also common in the deposit. Jewellery seems to have been a favorite type of dedication, for rings, earrings, and pins occur in great numbers. Most are of standard 5th century types, but a few unusual pieces mark the collection. A silver earring made by a granulation technique (one of the few silver objects found) preserves the loop which went through the ear, and a small but elegant bronze pinhead takes the form of a sphinx seated upon an Aeolic capital. Fibulae also occur, but they were not a common type of dress-fastening in the Argolid in the 6th and 5th centuries, and our best two examples fall correspondingly early and late in the range of dated finds.

A number of small bronze objects puzzled us at first, but looking at them all together we realized that they were, in fact, small replicas of pieces of armor. To be sure, they are all quite schematic—but they are most certainly shields, helmets, and greaves cleverly fashioned from small pieces of thin bronze and meant to be suspended on thread and hung up in a sanctuary. Miniature bronze mirrors were made by a similar technique and were similarly meant to stand in place of the actual objects.

This same concept of dedicating miniature

models instead of real objects is apparent in the pottery. Almost all the vessels found were related to the preparation and drinking of wine, including hundreds of miniature kotylai, miniature kraters, pitchers, and numerous small libation bowls or phialai mesomphaloi, a shape which was usually produced in bronze and which was extremely common in the archaic sanctuary of Hera at Perachora.

It is difficult to identify the divinity on the basis of the votive offerings. Things may be given to the gods for many reasons: because they characterize the god or the votary, because they represent the thing asked for or the thing thanked for, because they are useful, or because they are valuable and/or decorative. Thus it would be unwise, if not impossible, to fit all of these various offerings found in the acropolis deposit into a single cohesive image. But several important features do emerge. First, the preponderance of female figurines, jewellery, and mirrors makes it probable that the divinity was female, as such offerings are both most appropriate and most often associated with cults of goddesses—whether the worshippers are mostly women or not. And second, one of the main concerns either of the worshippers or of the goddess was military. Offerings of miniature armor are not particularly common—and where they are found in any number, as at Halieis, they are likely to be significant to the identity of the cult.

But it is not at all surprising to find a cult with a military aspect on this acropolis. Everything we know of the site suggests continuous concern for the defenses of the city and frequent, if not continuous, occupation of the acropolis by troops. The presence of the offerings of armor is completely in accord with this situation.

Moreover, if we turn once again to the 4th century monuments we see that the courtyard is directly associated with the fortifications of the southwest corner of the acropolis and that the shrine, located on the north side of the court and facing onto it, clearly belongs to this same unit. What could be more appropriate to such a position than a cult of a patron deity of soldiers, a protectress of the adjacent defense walls? The 4th century monuments may, in fact, reflect the formalization of a previously casual association, but it was an association of long standing and great persistence. The goddess was there before the Tiryinthians. She was worshipped throughout the 5th century and in the 4th was provided with a new shrine. And when we arrived in 1962 to begin excavating, the top of her altar was sticking up just a bit above ground level to let us know that she was still there.