

Gender and sexuality in the parthenon frieze essay sample



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Younger addresses the problem of the Parthenon Frieze through a different perspective than the long argued narrative debate. He instead looks at what the scene says about gender relations and sexuality during the time, based on changes in composition and the relationship between different blocks of the frieze. By comparing the differences in how male relationships, female relationships, and the relationships between the deities are represented, Younger makes conclusions about what Athenian society meant to portray as the sexual norm through the Parthenon frieze.

Younger first identifies the gender of each figure. The two central figures are an adult man and woman, to either side of them are two children, and to the left of the woman is a young adult female. Younger begins by establishing the sex of the child to the right. He first describes the child's clothing as a himiton, worn by both boys and girls. However, girls were usually depicted as wearing a chiton beneath, whereas boys and this figure in particular were left bare. Next Younger decides that the possible presence of Venus Rings does not exclude the figure from being male, as many of the male figures on the Parthenon frieze have them. Next Younger compares the child to other children on the West and East friezes.

They closely resemble one another, and appear to all be made from the same design: that of a boy. Then Younger studies the difference in composition between each block of the frieze. Each compositional change signifies a change in narrative. The West III block depicts a man turning abruptly toward a nude boy, and when compared with vase designs from earlier periods, features a homoerotic theme. Since the East block is a repetition of the West III and North XLII and XII composition, Younger states <https://assignbuster.com/gender-and-sexuality-in-the-parthenon-frieze-essay-sample/>

that their themes must also be the similar. In all three blocks, the focus is on the adult male's sexual desires between the ephebe and the young boy.

In the East block however, the adults focus is fully on the boy, who appears younger than in the other blocks. Next Younger outlines the significance of homoerotic love in classical Greece, stating that in Athenian Greece, the relationship was a means of education for the young boy. When seen in this light, the wider the age difference, the more educationally stimulating the relationship, therefore the East frieze highlights the extreme youth of the boy and the full attention of the adult in a positive way. The theme also brings attention to the socio-political differences between the youth and adult.

There is a clear divide between the male and female figures in the composition. Younger states that the physical separation between the male and female belies a thematic separation. The women are much closer in age, both around the age of marriage, when huge life transitions would be occurring. The adult woman takes on the role of instructor to the younger girl, educating her on issues of puberty, marriage, and women's position in the socio-political sphere. Younger makes the case that the role of the experienced older female is underscored by her placement within the repeating composition.

The woman is in the place of the horse, due to the connection between women's unbridled desire and horses. Younger states that the relationship between the two females is more equal than that of the adult male and young boy due to their closeness in age, and mutual inferiority socially and

politically. Next he states that there may have been a lesbian element to the relationship, but within the pair there is no evidence. Other females within the frieze are shown as depersonalized and repetitive figures, grouped in pairs, whose relationship he calls “romantic friendships”.

Next Younger discusses the Gods and Goddesses within the frieze, and what it reveals about their sexual relationships to one another. He begins by outlining the position of the last series of Gods and Goddesses. He states that similarly to the repetitious blocks featuring the adult male and young boy, an adult Poseidon faces a youthful Apollo. He then goes on to state that the figure next to Apollo is his sister Artemis, and that her relationship to the other female deity, Aphrodite, is surprising.

The two would not generally be depicted together, but seem to be depicted as close friends, with Artemis reaching out towards Aphrodite, and the two sharing features. He states that Aphrodite wears a veil of respectability, while Artemis takes on sexual features that do not correspond to her identity as a chaste deity, and that it is as if their two identities have become blended to fit within the role already prescribed for the adult Athenian female and the younger Athenian girl. Aphrodite takes on the role of sexual, yet respectable teacher, and the girl takes on the role of chaste young girl, who is still sexually desirable.

Younger then states that Athena takes on boyish qualities, and therefore is situated appropriately in the place of the young Athenian boy, with Hephaistos depicted as the older bearded man leaning in to speak with her. Younger summarizes all this by saying that the three Goddesses depict the

three sexual desires of Athenian males: The desexualized wife, the young and ignorant female, and the homoerotic youth.

Next Younger explains the relationship between the youthful, homoerotic Eros and Aphrodite, as well as his function within the entire sexual and gender scenario. Eros stands at the arm of the adult Aphrodite, who represents an Athenian woman, holding a parasol. Younger explains that the parasol was traditionally a symbol that served to distinguish the metic women, or wives of Athenian aliens, from the superior Athenian women. Younger states that this shows that women depicted their socio-political differences by stressing the differences between mistress and servant, rather than sexually like the males.

Next he states that Eros' homoerotic depiction fits within the Athenian male's conception of the metic woman. Rather than the metic woman being depicted on the frieze as the sexualized water carrier, they are replaced by metic male youths. According to Younger, this underscores the connection between the erotic nature of metic women and homoerotic youths. Younger begins to conclude that the relationship between adult Athenian male and the youth, whether citizen or metic was idealized. However, pairs of adults and metic youths are not depicted on the Parthenon frieze, indicating that this relationship was a strained one.

The metic woman is not even depicted, rather replaced by homoerotic youths. The fact that these relationships were not depicted shows the degree to which they were taboo. Within Athenian culture, women were not able to represent themselves as erotic beings, so within depictions, they were

replaced as sexual objects by these youths. However, as a representation of Athenian values, the relationship between the metic youth or woman could not be represented, as their participation in the Panathenaic festival did not signify their citizenship or equality. Younger ends his argument by calling attention to the figure of a girl who is separate from the rest of the figures.

She is completely desexualized, and therefore not idealized, or included in the action of the scene. She is merely an add-on. This last comment served to solidify Younger's position that the Parthenon frieze reveals the complexity of gender and sexual relations of the time, and the importance that they played on Athenian society. Younger's analysis of the Parthenon frieze is very systematic in its approach, which helps to maintain its clarity. However, the problem I see with Younger's approach to the issue of gender roles and sexuality is that he compiles a pretty thin list of evidence in defense of his first point, that the child is in fact a boy. Once he establishes this point, he then runs with it, and it is completely the basis of his entire analysis.

Without it, the whole thing would be completely incorrect. His argument would be much stronger if he could solidify his evidence that the youth is in fact a boy. Also, he brushes over the female figures rather quickly. I think he may have been looking to cast new light onto the male-male relationship, but really had no desire to disprove any previous assumptions about female relationships. He explains it as a lack of textual evidence, and then moves on to the weightier issue of male homoerotic relations. I think Younger definitely could have provided more insight and more research into the issue of female-female relationships.

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