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EXPLORATION OF A MYTH OF ATHENA AS FOUND IN THE HISTORICAL SOURCES

ABSTRACT

The Myth of Athena is one of the most interesting myths in the Greek mythology. It has great influence over the Greek arts. This paper investigates some of the literary and historical sources in order to analyze the Myth of Athena. The investigation shed light the way Homer and Hesiod stated the myth of Athena and how it was reinterpreted in the visual arts. The paper suggests that on the basis of these literary, historical and visual arts examples one can reconstruct the Myth of Athena, and can see how Greek people thought about their gods. How myths are the reflection of believes and imagination of Greeks and how it has influenced the art of the subsequent generations.

Keywords: *Myth, Athena, Literary, Visual, Believes, Imagination, Art.*

DISCUSSION

Our understanding of the Greek myth of Athena is not only the understanding of a particular myth but an understanding of the Greek people, their beliefs and imagination which comes to us through the expression of writing and visual arts. The object of this paper is to observe the reconstruction of the myth of Athena as found in the historical sources and to introduce some of the continuations as seen in literature and the visual arts. Although there are number of myths related to Athena such as, the birth of Athena, judgment of Paris and the birth of Erichonios (fig. 1,2,3) however, this paper will be focusing only on the birth of Athena. For this purpose three examples are selected, two from literature and one from visual arts, which are as follows:

1. Homeric Hymn to Athena
2. Excerpts from Hesiod's *Theogony*
3. The east pediments of the Parthenon

The origin of Greek mythology belongs to much earlier period. However with the passage of time myth developed and changed its form to some extent. Since the mythological research and development through the ages is beyond the scope of this paper, investigation will focus only on the way Homer and Hesiod created such significant mythology for the Greeks and for the subsequent generations. It is generally believed that by the time Homer and Hesiod were creating a new- fashioned mythology, myth had already gone through a constant re-handling. In regard to Homer and Hesiod, the myths were reconstructed using the existing material. However it is generally believed that the old material adopted by Homer and Hesiod must have been based on fragments. Before going into the discussion on the birth of Athena, it seems appropriate to know what mythology is and how it is related to the humanities. Generally, mythology can be viewed from two perspectives religious and mythical¹. Actually these two perspectives are inseparable. Nilsson suggests “mythology in the traditional sense is a complete whole into which both religious and mythical conceptions enter”². Moreover, Thomas Mann maintains:

Myth is the foundation; it is the timeless pattern, the religious formula to which life shapes itself, inasmuch as its characteristics are the reproduction of the Unconscious. There is no doubt about it the moment when the story-teller acquires the mythical way of looking at things, the gifts of seeing the typical features of characteristics and events³.

It suggests that the myth is a way of describing characteristics, specific features and events. A myth encompasses a number of tales. In a sense images of mythology resemble the themes and variations in music. Looking from this perspective, the story told by the narrator is not only the actual subject but also its variations. The reconstruction of the myth of Athena is quite similar to this, where each layer is pregnant with a new and exciting tale. One can see by constructing these tales that what we hear in poetry and see in paintings and sculptures is not only the subjective creations of the poet and artist but it has various layers connected by a thousand interwoven threads.

Example 1 (Homeric hymn to Athena):

“And before Zeus the aegis-holder she sprang swiftly from his immortal head, brandishing a sharp-pointed spear. Great Olyntpos quaked dreadfully under the might

of the gray-eyed goddess, as the earth
all about resounded awesomely, and the sea moved and
heaved with purple waves. The briny sea calmed down’
when the splendid son of Hyperion stopped his fleet-
footed horses long enough for maidenly Pallas Athena to
take from her immortal shoulders The divine weapons.
And Zeus counselor exulted⁴.

Example 2 (Excerpt from Hesiod’s *Theogony*):

Now king of gods, Zeus made Metis his first wife,
Wiser than any other god, or any mortal man But when
she was about to deliver the owl-eyed goddess Athena,
Zeus tricked her, gulled her with crafty words And
stuffed her in his stomach, taking the advice Of earth
and starry Heaven. They told him to do this So that no
one but Zeus would hold the title of the king Among the
eternal gods, for it was predestined That very wise
children would be born from Metis,
First the grey-eyed girl, Tritogeneia,
Equal to her father in strength of wisdom,
But then a son with an arrogant heart Who would one
day be king of gods and men But Zeus stuffed the
goddess into his stomach first So she would device with
him good and evil both⁵.

In these two examples we have a tale of the birth of Athena told by two narrators from their own points of view. They are sharing the same subject and same medium (words) but in different ways. Each individual approach of seeing things is part of the cultural background and their own way of creation, which tells us about their beliefs in gods. We can also have some idea of the expectations of the audience that tells us about the Greek culture, religion and their society. According to Kerenyi, “mythology is everything that presents such figures as would be defined, in a history of religion, as gods and demons. They are historical data of bygone cultures⁶.”

We have seen Athena in a number of myths as mentioned. We can also see her on Attic vases as a companion of heroes. In the *Iliad* we have usually found her supporting Achilles, Diomedes and Odysseus and with some of her other favorites. At this point let us discuss further the manner in which Homer and Hesiod reconstructed the myth of Athena. Homer and Hesiod are perhaps the only sources that tell about Athena

and her various mythical stories with such detail that we can reconstruct these legends from numerous points of view.

In the *Iliad* she is called “Pallas Athena,” the “glorious goddess” and “gray-eyed.” In Greek mythology Pallas Athena was the father’s daughter because she was born of a father and not a mother. From a religious point of view she supposed to hold second position after her father Zeus. In the visual arts she is presented with armor as a warrior goddess. In some of the older legends she is not depicted as warrior but a lively and energetic goddess.

Her title “Pallas⁷ Athena” is frequently used in the *Iliad* and also in Homer’s hymn to Athena. It is a good starting point to think about her fearless heroic nature in relation to some of her attribute, which made her one of the favorite goddesses of Greeks. It is suggested that word “pallas,” refers to both masculine and feminine meanings. In a masculine sense, it definitely refers to a strong man and in a feminine sense, to a strong virgin⁸.

Another factor that might be responsible for her brave and fearless nature might be her unusual birth and genealogy. The tale that was told by Hesiod tells us that Zeus swallowed Athena’s mother because she was predestined to bear two children. One of them would be a gray-eyed girl who would be equal to Zeus in power and wisdom, and the other, a boy who would be the king of gods. Therefore Zeus decided to swallow Metis who was pregnant with Pallas Athena. And finally Zeus gave birth to Athena on the shore of the river Triton. Athena bears her title Tritogeneia⁹ after the name of river Triton. There is another hypothesis about the surname of Tritogeneia, which suggests that Athena did not bear this title because she was born at the bank of the river Triton but because she was born of water. As Kerenyi proposes, “the name Triton seems to be associated with water generally¹⁰.” And from this reference she was also known as gray-eyed, green-eyed Athena.

Athena is also famous for her poetic epithet “owl-eyed” Athena. The owl (*glaux*) was supposed to be the bird of Athena. Walter F. Otto proposes:

The old notion of [the owl] may be, by its use of an expression which had long ago become a stereotype, the epic emphasizes that aspect of the owl which is most striking—its bright-eyes¹¹.

Otto further suggests that in old language *Glaukos* is an attribute of the sea and was also the name of the old sea gods. It also refers to the

moon, stars and dawn. All these connotations imply something bright, luminous and glowing. Otto mentions that the word [*glaukos* or *glaukōpis*] must have denoted a bright glow, and this is confirmed by the usage that applies the same epithet to the olive tree to denote its shine¹².” Some of the scholars point out that Athena is a goddess and she must have awesome, frightening and lofty qualities as well, therefore instead of “*Glaukōpis*” the word “*Gorgōpis*, ” was used that enhances the beauty of Athena’s eyes. The best example however, is Homer’s *Iliad* where the beauty of her eyes is usually praised. In visual arts her eyes were executed with special consideration and observance. In these examples one can feel the brightness of her eyes and intelligent expression of her face. The owl is considered the wisest of the birds therefore “owl-eyed Athena” is an expression of wisdom. Our analysis of cause and effects of the epithets attributed to Athena helps us to imagine the brightness and attentiveness of her spirit and nature. Figure 5 is the representation of the beautiful and bright eyes of the Athena. It is the obverse and reverse side of an Athenian coin. The image of Athena with owl and olive branch was regularly represented on the fifth century’s coins.

One of her most distinctive attributes is *aegis* that was the gift of Zeus to Athena. Its nature in literature is different than the visual arts (Fig 5), in visual arts it is more like a periphery or borderline like snakes. However for Homer it is more like goatskin fringed with golden puff or tassels.

Holding the deer treasured aegis, ageless, immortal,
from whose edges float a hundred all-golden tassels,
each one carefully woven, and each worth a hundred oxen¹³.

In some of the paintings and sculptures, the gorgon’s head was placed in the center (fig 6). The Gorgon head on the shield (fig 7) of Athena and on her aegis is another important attribute that gives a peculiar character to the goddess Athena.

According to Kerenyi’s research, “Gorgo meant only for something ugly and terrible¹⁴.” In a tale Perseus is able to slay the Gorgon because Athena advised him not to look at the face of the Gorgon when he advanced towards her: instead he was instructed to look at her reflection in his shield. The purpose of this proposal was that Perseus should not face the Gorgon directly so that the horrible face of the Gorgon would not terrify him (fig 7). In this way Perseus succeeded over the Gorgon. There is another tale, which says that the Gorgon was the real owner of the goatskin that is attributed to Athena. The Gorgon

was child of Gaia whom Athena must have disparaged¹⁵. It is suggested that the aegis with the gorgon was a symbol of terror for the enemy that denotes a peculiar quality to Athena. Otto describes Athena's authority over her opponents in the following words, “when the time comes for the final struggle, the goddess raises her aegis high and the terrified suitors stray through the hall until the last has fulfilled his fate¹⁶.”

Athena is also distinguished from other goddesses due to her helmet. Thomas H. Carpenter suggests that her raised helmet is actually a Corinthian helmet. The sources of this assimilation are the coins from Corinth made between last quarter of sixth century until today¹⁷. The spear of Athena is another attribute that confers upon her a warlike appearance as if she is ready to fight.

In the following discussion some examples from visual arts will be studied to understand the reconstruction better. For this purpose the well-known tale of her birth will be discussed. In a number of drawings and paintings in which the moment of her birth is captured, she is presented fully armed springing out of the head of Zeus. In most of the illustrations Zeus's head was opened with a double edge axe by Hephaistos. Pallas Athena appeared with a great cry in armor of glowing gold. It was a moment of great terror for mortals and immortals.

The fabulous moment of the birth of Athena was the popular subject for the Attic vase painter (fig 1) in the sixth century BC., in this vase painting a miniature figure of Athena is emerging from the head of Zeus. She is illustrated with her popular attributes of spear and shield. Zeus is shown seated not on a throne but on a stool, while Apollo is playing the lyre. At the left, Hermes and on the right, a woman and Ares (god of war) are standing almost in front of Zeus. In another vase painting almost from the same period Zeus is shown seated in the center with his thunderbolt and scepter. Here instead of a stool he is enthroned on an elegant throne, held with two horses. Here again Athena is shown emerging from his head.

The most spectacular representation of the birth of Athena was executed on the east pediments of the Parthenon. It is noteworthy that the sculpture program representing the birth of Athena was executed on such a grand level for the first time. According to Palagia, in the early Christian period, the temple of Athena (Parthenon) was converted into a church; in order to add an apse on the eastern side, the east pediment was demolished¹⁸. In this case the main subject of the birth of Athena became the question for scholars. Although very few fragments are left to make a

reliable statement to tell how the birth of Athena was captured on the east pediment, scholars are continuously trying to reconstruct the story of the birth of Athena in the light of new archeological discoveries. Frank Brommer argues that Carrey's drawings should be considered the most reliable source for the purpose of investigation. Carrey made the drawings of the Parthenon sculptures in 1674, almost thirteen years before the destruction¹⁹. Lord Elgin is another important source mentioned frequently by Brommer, Palagia, Boardman and other scholars.

The culminating point in the composition was the central part of the pediment where the whole picture of the birth of Athena was carved. The investigation of the composition and its actual representation would help one to comprehend some of the important issues.

Most of the scholars agree that the Athena and Zeus occupied the central part of the east pediment; however, there is a great dispute often the way these figures were actually arranged. For instance Jacques Carrey's drawings represent the right and left parts of the east pediment (Figs 8-9). These drawings do not show any arrangement of the central part. However, it leads to an understanding of some of the important aspects of the imagery. According to Brommer's research, the birth of Athena was enclosed between the two figures of sun (*Helios*) and moon (*sleen*) on the other side (fig 10)²⁰. Iconography of the east pediments has also been questioned greatly in order to allocate due status to the figure of Athena and Zeus. One of the marble reliefs, perhaps a copy of the east pediments, was executed in the fourth century by the Romans (fig 11)²¹. In this post-Parthenon example Zeus is composed out of the center and Hera seems to hold the same position as Zeus. However, Athena is given the most dominant place and is almost in the center.

Elgin's draftsman, Feodor Ivanovitsch (fig 12) made a drawing showing the birth of Athena that might be the earliest representation of the subject on the east pediments. Zeus and Hera are occupying the central position. Athena and Poesidon are standing at their right and left. In another restored drawing by Charles Robert Cockerell (fig 13), Zeus is again seated in the center along with Hera. Hephaistos stands in between Zeus and Athena. The portrayal of Athena in this drawing is remarkable. She is represented with almost all of her attributes, discussed earlier in this paper. All of her hidden qualities and forces operating in her body and mind are made visible to the audience. The diversity and fragmentation experienced in the Homeric hymn has been coordinated as

a whole in this marvelous portrayal of Athena by Pheidias. Now armed Athena is not a terrible goddess for Athenians but a symbol of peace, intelligence and wisdom. She is powerful and divine too, but not really in a sense of physical strength. Laszlo Versenyi describes excellence as follows:

Excellence and power seem to imply a field of action in which one excels, yet it is not by difference of function that the gods and man are kept apart in Homer, but merely by a difference in degree of excellence²².

Therefore, the title “armed-Athena” should be taken not as significant of a physical power and strength but as signifying her excellent attributes that brought Athena next to her father Zeus. Otto suggests:

In Hesiod’s *Theogony* she is described as equal to her father in strength and wise understanding. This excellence of “intelligence” or “council” (metis) constitutes an essential trait in the Homeric picture of Athena²³.

The west pediment of the Parthenon represents Athena’s context with Poseidon for the land of Attica (Fig 14). However scholars believe that although her armor and weapons acknowledge her as a warrior goddess, she succeeded Poseidon “through her gifts of peace - crafts and the olive tree . . . this was the first occasion on which the citizens of Athens had found salvation in their goddess²⁴.”

It was due to her distinctive qualities that the Athenian people gathered at the Parthenon for thanksgiving each year on the birthday of Athena. Every fourth year the special festival was arranged to thank Athena for her favors and to secure more favors from her. At this grand occasion a new *peplos* robe was wrapped around her sacred image, and prayers, hymns, and sacrifice of cattle were offered to goddess Athena²⁵. The Parthenon and the celebrations held in honor of Athena can be considered a hallmark of the Greek’s religion and their love for their gods.

The above discussion demonstrates that the visual images mentioned, in vase paintings and sculpture serve as visual representations of Homer and Hesiod’s idea of Athena. It is actually the product of the unconscious and the divine. As was quoted earlier “they [the myths] are historical data of bygone culture” [of the Greeks].

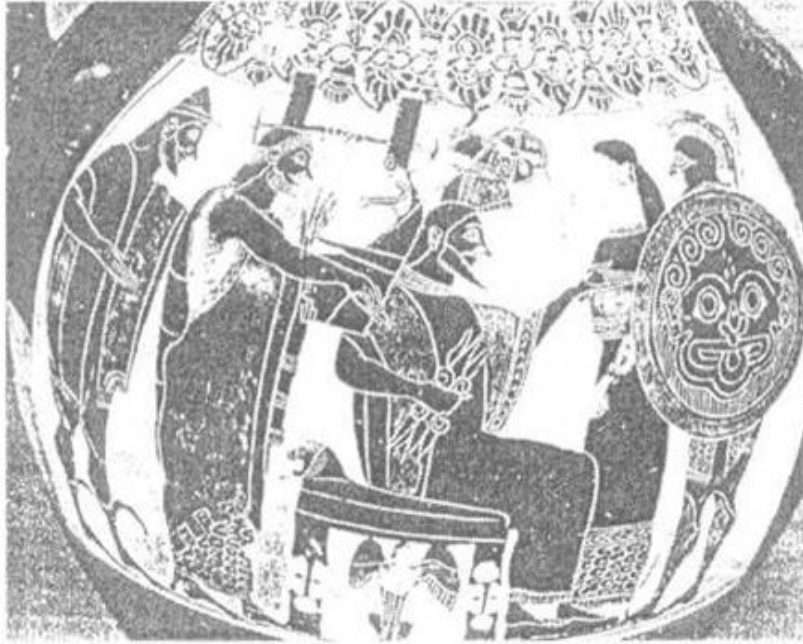
1. Birth of Athens



1. (a) Birth of Athena:

UK! Attic black-figure amphora from Group V. Birth of Athena. Zeus with his thunderbolt and sceptre, sits in frontal pose on an elegant throne with horse protome arms as Athena emerges from his head. Note her aegis Eileithyia and another goddess assist while Hermes and Ares observe. Note the tripod device on Ares' shield, i. S40 4/s cm

shield, i. S40 4/s cm



(a) Birth of Athena:

Birth of Athena. Attic black-figured amphora, sixth century .C. 00.330)

2. Judgment of Paris

290 (below) Attic black-figure hydria from Vulci. judgment of Paris. A bearded Paris holding a sceptre moves sway from Hermes and the goddesses who greet him. Hera and Aphrodite are not differentiated. Athena wears her snaky aegis and holds her helmet. The deer beside her would more appropriately accompany Artemis, c. 540





291 Ivory relief, comb from Sparta. Judgments of Paris. A bearded Paris sits on a throne as the three goddesses approach him.

The first, with a bird on her arm, could be Hera with her cuckoo, the second is Athena who may be wearing a helmet and the third, followed by a bird could be Aphrodite with her goose. ». 600.

L. 8 cm

4. Head of Athena, Owl: Coins of Athens, Fifth century BC.



Coin of Athens, Fifth Century B.C. Head of Athena; owl (00.264)



5. Representation of aegis of Athena: Attic red figure

2-n Attic red-figure cup hy Dos irk from Ccervetn. jason and the dragon, The bearded dragon disgorges Jason while Athena holding in owl and leaning on her spear watches. Note the gorgoneion on her aegis and the sphinx on her hehnrr. The golden fierce hangs on, tree behind the dragon. J70.

6. Gorgon Head on the shield



Marble shield. 'Strangford Shield' from Athens. Roman copy of the shield held by Pheidippides at the Parthenon. In the centre a gorgoneion, and around it warriors fighting.

3. Birth of Erichthonios



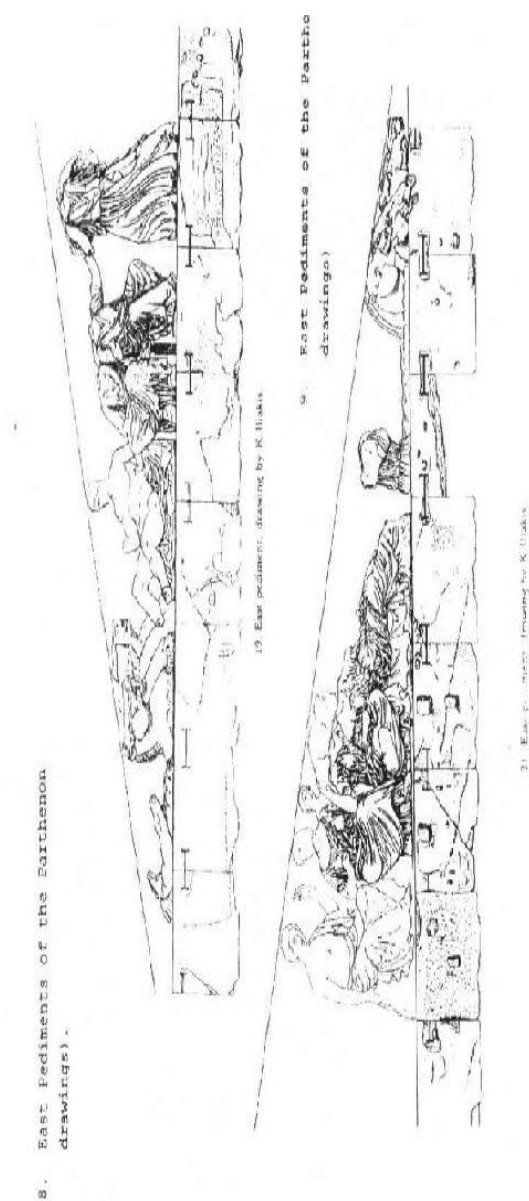
in Attic red-figure calyx-krater. Birth of Erichthonios. Athena receives the infant Erichthonios from Gaia (Barth) while Hephaistos and Hermes look on from the left; Nike, Aphrodite and Zeus, from the right. An owl with a laurel wreath hovers above Athena c. 400. 37.7 cm

7. Perrsus beheads Medusa



54 Limestone metope from Selinus. Perseus beheads Medusa who already holds the winged horse Pegasos. Athena, without attributes, stands beside him. r. 530. 1.47 n

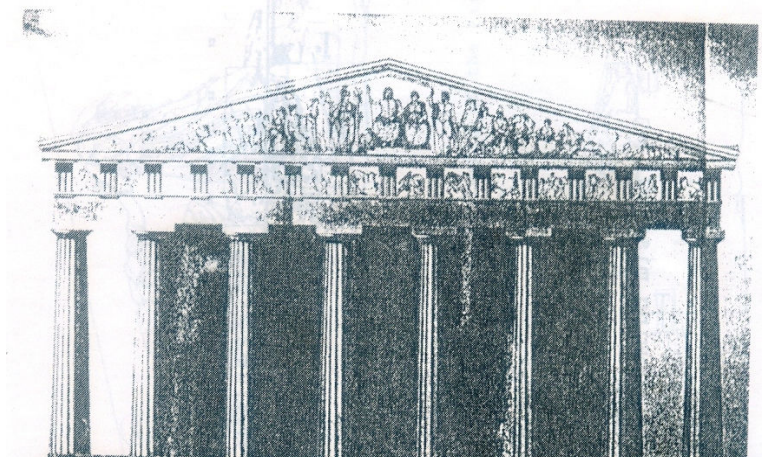
8. East pediments of the Parthenon drawings.



9. East pediments of the Parthenon drawings.

12. birth of Athena, (Feodor Ivanovitsch

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8. Feodor Jvanovitsch, E.,st Pediment of the. Parthenon, restored, 1802. drawing British Museum. London

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9. Charles Robert Cockerell, *Past Pediment of the Parthenon, restored, rR-jo From Rohm Schneider. Pie Obr der Athens (Vienna, pj)*

11. Birth of Athena (Roman copy)

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Sketch of the Birth of Athena from a marble puteal second century a.d. Museo Nacional Arqueológico nacional 2691 Madrid

13. West pediment of the parthenon

13. West pediment of the parthenon.



22 West pediment, drawing by M. Coe.

Endnotes

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¹ It is hard to say that religious mythology can be separated from mythical because they both adjoined with each other. See Nilsson, P. Martin. *A History of Greek religion*, pp. 45

² Nilsson, p. 47

³ Kerényi, C. p. 1-2

⁴ Homeric Hymn to Athena 1,7, 16. Source: Palagia p. 18

Also see Homeric Hymn 28. It is suggested that about twenty-eight Hymns were written by Homer in order to draw a magnificent picture of Athena, her nature and her first arrival among gods. For further research see Walter F. Otto *Homeric Gods* p.44

⁵ *Hesiod Works and Days & Theogony*, pp.85-86 (Translated Stanley Lombardo)

⁶ Kerényi, p. 11

⁷ Some of the Giants were also known as Pallas. See C. Kerényi p. 120

⁸ Kerényi, p. 119

⁹ Kerényi, p. 119-120

¹⁰ Kerényi, p. 128

¹¹ Otto, F. Walter, p. 58

¹² Otto, P.58

¹³ Iliad, 11.477-479

¹⁴ Kerényi, p. 49

¹⁵ Kerenyi, p. 50

¹⁶ Otto, p. 45

¹⁷ Carpenter, H. Thomas, p. 46

¹⁸ Buitron-Oliver, Diana, p. 29

¹⁹ Brommer, Frank, p. 15

²⁰ Brommer, p. 52-58

²¹ Buitron-Oliver, p. 31

²² Versenyi, p. 20

²³ Otto, p.50

²⁴ Boardman, John. p. 12

²⁵ Boardman, p. 12