Demosthenes (435–36) may have been exaggerating when he claimed in 351 B.C. that the Athenians devoted more energy and resources to just two of their festivals, the Great Panathenaia and the City Dionysia, than to all of their military operations. But this rebuke to his opponents and fellow citizens at a time of impending crisis well illustrates the important place occupied by festivals in the culture of classical Athens and the significance of the Panathenaia and the Dionysia in particular.¹

Even by Greek standards, the Athenians were remarkably busy in their religious observations; it is generally reckoned that some form of festival activity took place in Athens on almost one in three days each year. The single most important of these festivals was the Panathenaia, the “[festival] of all the Athenians.” It was the principal occasion for honoring Athena Polias, the patron goddess of the polis, and was held annually, a few weeks after midsummer, toward the end of Hekatombaion, the first month in the Athenian calendar. As the Great Panathenaia, it was celebrated with special extravagance every four years; a smaller ceremony, known as the Lesser Panathenaia, was held in the years between. By the classical period, the grander, penteteric version of the festival appears to have evolved into one of the Greek world’s more impressive mass spectacles.²

I say “appears to” because we lack any definitive eyewitness account of the festival’s contents and cannot even be certain of the precise order of events.
However, long-term study of a wide miscellany of written and material evidence has made it possible to reconstruct a fairly detailed picture of the program of the classical Panathenaia. The result reveals a complex, multifaceted occasion, made up of several distinct, if not entirely unrelated, ingredients. The first of these was the ritual component, the core of the festival. This took place on 28 Hekatombaion. It began with a sacrificial procession (pompe–) along the Panathenaic Way, starting at the Dipylon Gate, at the northwest edge of the city, and proceeding through the Agora, up to the Acropolis. There, large numbers of victims were offered up to Athena at the Great Altar, and in the Arkhaios Neos, her small olive-wood idol, or xoanon, was draped in a new peplos. The sacrificial meat was later distributed by deme, and all Athenians present partook of the feasting that followed. Then there was what we might call the panegyric dimension. Despite all the local significance of the festival’s ritual content, the organizers of the Panathenaia actively sought the participation of outsiders. In particular, they aimed to attract those same luminaries of athletics and music who competed in the stephanitic, or “crown,” games at Olympia, Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea. Though never considered part of the prestigious Panhellenic festival circuit (périodos), it featured a full program of traditional contests in both disciplines. And to encourage leading athletes and musicians from all over Greece to take part in these contests, the organizers of the Panathenaia offered the added inducement of lavish prizes, from large sums of cash to decorated jars of olive oil. Ironically, such efforts to stir comparison with the “crown” games only helped to ensure that the Athenian panegyris was forever somewhat distanced from that company.

But perhaps what distinguished the classical Panathenaia most from its stephanitic counterparts was its overtly political content. The Eleusinian Mysteries aside (see chapter 8), there was probably no event in the Athenian calendar that brought more outsiders to Athens, and it seems that the Athenians saw here an opportunity to make a definitive ceremonial statement of their collective place in the world. The line between worship of the patron goddess and celebration of the collective self was always a fine one; at the Panathenaia, it was all but invisible, as the very name suggests. The “festival of all the Athenians,” with its unusually inclusive procession, was above all an occasion for parading the solidarity of the polis and the shared characteristics on which that solidarity was based. Not the least of these characteristics was military prowess. During the era of the empire, the consequences of this prowess were visible for all to see in the procession itself, where representatives from subject states in the Athenian “alliance” marched alongside individuals from all sec-
tions of the greater polis community, including contingents of the army responsible for their subjection.6

This somewhat chauvinistic militarism was extended even into the athletic arena, where a range of non-Olympic competitions were contested exclusively by citizens of the host state. Spectators bore witness as Athenian “warriors” engaged in individual displays of martial dexterity, like the apobatēs race for chariot dismounters and the contest for javelin throwers on horseback (hippakontizontes), and events for teams drawn from the ten tribes, such as the pyrrhic dance and the boat race. These tribal contests seem to have been specifically designed to promote group loyalties and to demonstrate the kind of cooperative virtues that underpinned collective rule by the demos. At the same time, the events for “warriors” as a whole offered Athenians and non-Athenians alike a forthright, if stylized, statement of the martial aretē that had secured for Athens its position at the forefront of the Greek world.7

A heady cocktail of Athena worship, Olympic-style panegyris, and political showcase, the classical Panathenaia was an unusually rich and complex festival worthy of its status as the premier ceremonial occasion in Athenian public life. But how did it come to acquire this complexity? Were its disparate ingredients all present in some form from the very beginning?

Few participants or spectators in the fifth and fourth centuries would have given much thought to these questions. Despite the festival’s unorthodoxy, it will doubtless have appeared to them to be a timeless and seamless organic whole. While acknowledging that important changes were made to the Panathenaia over time, modern commentators are also inclined to assume that its curious hybrid character was essentially fixed at some early stage, long before the classical period. There are, however, good reasons for thinking that it had experienced more than one significant overhaul by the early fifth century and that its more politically charged elements were only a relatively late addition.

GAMES FOR ATHENA

A state festival as significant as the Panathenaia required distinguished beginnings and a long history. The Athenians themselves believed that it went all the way back to the time of Erichthonius, its putative founder. But there is no solid evidence for the festival before the 560s. An annual sacrifice to Athena Polias had probably been staged since at least the later seventh century, when the first temple was built on the Acropolis. Conceivably, some form of regular offering had been practiced since the Late Geometric period, when the citadel was first established as a major sanctuary. Athena is explicitly linked with the Acropo-
lis in a pair of passages in the Iliad and the Odyssey, one of which refers to annual sacrifices. If the traditional date of the Homeric poems is accepted, we may then have a terminus ante quem for the predecessor or original form of the Panathenaia, in the latter half of the eighth century. That said, it seems safe to infer that the celebration down to the 560s cannot have assumed anything more than very modest proportions, since throughout this early phase, the Acropolis was accessible only by winding paths and narrow entrances. Nor is there any hint in the material record of this period that the fledgling Panathenaia might have involved anything more than a simple sacrificial act.\(^8\)

The picture then changes quite dramatically during the decade 570–560. If a small local festival for Athena Polias existed before this time, it was now transformed into something quite different.

Access to the citadel was significantly improved at this point, making possible a much enlarged sacrificial procession for the festival. As noted in chapters 2 and 4, a vast stone ramp some eighty meters long now superseded the winding paths on the western approaches to the sanctuary, and the west entrance was possibly widened.\(^9\)

Signs of an innovation in the ritual of the Panathenaia are also visible in contemporary vase evidence. One of the events commemorated at the classical festival was the victory of Athena and the gods in the Gigantomachy, and a scene of the armed goddess overpowering a giant was regularly woven into the garment used in the annual peplos ceremony. As it happens, such scenes suddenly became popular on Attic vases right around 560 B.C., and the earliest examples come from the Acropolis itself. It is not self-evident what prompted this new interest, but the introduction of the peplos ceremony at some point in the 560s seems the most likely stimulus. If the ceremony was added at this time, we would be in a good position to explain why the striding, armed Athena image comes to dominate the iconography of the goddess in Athenian art during the middle decades of the sixth century and why, in particular, this image was chosen to adorn the Panathenaic prize amphorae, which also enter the record in ca. 560.\(^10\)

The idea that the Panathenaia underwent some kind of overhaul around this time may also be supported by a small handful of literary and epigraphic sources. But the beginning of the sequence of prize vases is itself the most unambiguous evidence for a fundamental shift in the character of the festival in the 560s. For it surely marks the integration of the first athletic contests into the festival program and, hence, the birth of the Great Panathenaia.\(^11\)

Evidently, the new games and the new amphorae precipitated a surge of demand among the Athenians for scenes of athletic competition on vases. Images
of athletes appear on local ware in the 560s with unprecedented frequency, not only on the prize vases, but also on other types of vessel, including those known as pseudo-Panathenaics, which are of a shape and scheme similar to the prize amphorae. If, as seems likely, the contests depicted on these various vases broadly reflect those that were visible at the Panathenaia, it appears that the new games very quickly came to resemble their counterparts at Olympia, featuring a full range of traditional track-and-field and equestrian events, as well as boxing, wrestling, and the pankration.12

Also added in the 560s or shortly thereafter was a series of musical contests. At least in later years, the awards to victors in these events were cash and gold, so we should perhaps not expect to find scenes of musical competition on contemporary prize vases. But significantly, from the 550s on, we do find images of auletes and aulodes, kitharists and kitharodes, on a range of Athenian amphorae, including pseudo-Panathenaics and vases with Panathenaic motifs. Again, it seems that a series of new contests at the Panathenaia had caught the imagination of local spectators and the artists who catered to them.13 The rhapsodic competitions apparently had a similar effect. These were a distinctive feature of the Great Panathenaia, and were traditionally associated with Hipparchus, the son of Peisistratus, whom posterity remembered as philomousos, “a lover of the arts” (AP 18.1). Whether or not Hipparchus himself actually instituted the contests for rhapsodes, the vase evidence suggests that they too were a fixture at the festival by the end of the 540s.14

In sum, we can be unusually confident that the Great Panathenaia was part of the calendar by around 560 (presumably, it was founded in either 566 or 562) and that within twenty or so years, the ritual and panegyric components of the mature festival were already essentially in place. It must also have been at this point that the distinction arose between the Great and the Lesser Panathenaia. If we can assume that the new penteteric festival had its origins in a preexisting annual sacrifice for Athena Polias, we might infer that the Lesser Panathenaia was little more than a continuation of this earlier rite, supplemented by the peplos ceremony and perhaps a somewhat larger procession.15

But why was a festival like the Great Panathenaia founded at this particular moment, and by whom? Here, our evidence is less helpful. It is true that one late ancient source (schol. Ael. Arist. 13.189.4–5 [3.323 Dindorf]) credits the innovation directly to Peisistratus. But a date in the 560s effectively rules out this possibility. A leader who had to resort to armed force in 561/0 to bolster his bid for power in Athens clearly lacked the political capital necessary to establish a major state festival in 566 or 562. Only after the mid-540s was his
position secure enough to stage an event of this kind. An altogether more likely founder was suggested in chapter 2. This was Lycurgus, who appears to have been the most powerful man in Athens during the 560s, and whose family, the Boutadai, controlled the cult of Athena Polias.¹⁶

And we do not have to look far to find his immediate motivation. The previous fifteen or twenty years had seen the foundation of a series of new Panhellenic games at Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea (in ca. 586, 580, and 573, respectively), and the success of these ventures must have encouraged the Boutadai to mount a rival spectacle at Athens. In their choice of format, they diverged little from the precedents supplied by the circuit. As at the three junior festivals, the program of contests at the Great Panathenaia was built around a core of athletic and equestrian events that, by this point, were fixtures of the games at Olympia, the original athletics panegyris. And like the Pythian festival at Delphi, it was held every four years, in the third year of each Olympiad; its relative infrequency gave it an instant significance, while its timing showed the necessary deference to the senior games.

In its incorporation of musical contests, the Panathenaia also followed the lead of Delphi, where, according to one tradition (Paus. 10.7.3), the competitions for aulodes and auletes were first staged in 586 B.C. (Ol. 48.3). As for the new peplos ceremony, a variety of influences are possible. Given its location and sporting associations, the comparable ceremony held at Olympia during the quadrennial Heraia was probably the most appropriate model. The latter festival, which featured footraces for unmarried females, also had a certain currency, since it, too, seems to have been a product of the sudden vogue for Panhellenic gatherings which arose in the first quarter of the sixth century.¹⁷

But not all was derivative. Aside from the novel rhapsodic contests, which may not have been added until the 540s, the lavish prizes offered to victors set the Panathenaia sharply apart from the other major athletics festivals. Whether this was a bold attempt to rival and perhaps eclipse the three younger “crown” games in prestige or merely a means of compensating for the exclusion of the Panathenaia from the circuit, we know of no certain precedent for the use of valuable awards to lure elite contestants to participate in a public athletics gathering.¹⁸ Nor was there any real precedent for staging a festival of this kind in the middle of a large settlement. The other major games all took place in extra-urban sanctuaries, most of them in distinctly remote locales.

These peculiarities must have given the Great Panathenaia a distinctive tone or flavor. One suspects that it seemed like a brash, urban newcomer in the conservative world of Panhellenic festivals. But otherwise, in its format and in its
essential character, the Panathenaia was still, at this point, a highly orthodox Greek panegyris. In particular, there is no observable trace of the political concerns that so infused and defined the classical festival.

This is not to deny that the sponsors of such an opulent spectacle stood to gain handsome political capital from their endeavors. The Great Panathenaia surely did wonders for the standing of the Boutadai in the eyes of their peers and rivals in Athens and elsewhere. But it did not yet have any overtly political content. While the overall splendor of the pageantry reflected well on the city and its leaders, there was no attempt, at this stage, it seems, to insert items into the program that threw a bright spotlight on the qualities of the Athenian people. We have no evidence for any of those later contests that showcased the collective and individual talents of Athenian “warriors.” In fact, there is no good evidence for much of a military presence at all. And unless the procession now made a point of including representatives from all parts of Attica, which it is not known to have done even in the classical period, it is hard to see in the festival any larger association with the political unification of the region. The name Panathenaïa appears to point in this direction, but the title is not actually attested until the fifth century.  

The original format of the Great Panathenaia must have been firmly in place by around 540. What then of the following three decades? What mark, if any, did the Peisistratids leave on the content and character of the festival? A spectacle of this kind lent itself easily to the Religionspolitik that is often associated with Greek tyrants. One would expect that the family took full advantage of the many opportunities for self-aggrandizement that the festival presented. Presumably, they served as the chief sponsors of the festival during the years of their domination, and their creation of a new public square around a section of the Panathenaic Way in the 530s will have allowed them to put a personal stamp on the procession and on whatever other associated activities were now staged there. But did they make any significant changes to the substance of the Panathenaia in the process?  

There is very little to suggest that they did. Even if Hipparchus was responsible for the introduction of rhapsodic contests, these would not have altered the character of the festival fundamentally. And there is no evidence that they added any other competitions to the program. Otherwise, there remains only the slim possibility that Peisistratus and/or his sons were the first to arrange for armed infantrymen to march in the procession. The evidence comes in a passage of Thucydides (6.56.2–3, 6.58.1–2). Here, he reports that the day of the Panathenaic procession was chosen for the assassination of Hippias precisely because there were armed men taking part in the proceedings. Ac-
According to the historian, these men would have provided some cover and perhaps a source of spontaneous support for the conspirators. In the absence of any compelling evidence for troops in the procession in the early years of the Panathenaia, we might then conclude that the Peisistratids were themselves responsible for their presence in later times.

Skeptics may wonder how Thucydides could possibly have known this information. But a more serious problem for his testimony is presented by another account of the incident, that of AP (18.4), which makes a point of correcting Thucydides on the very detail in question. In support, the author then goes on to explain that the addition of hoplites to the procession was in fact an innovation made later by “the demos.” There is no satisfactory way to reconcile the two accounts; one of them must surely be wrong. Since the author of AP went to the trouble of correcting one of his primary sources on this relatively incidental matter, and since the language of his correction suggests that he knew of a published Assembly decree on the subject, the simplest way out of the impasse is probably to assume that Thucydides’ claim was no more than an inference from later practice. The likelihood is therefore that hoplites did not become a regular part of the Panathenaic procession until after 511/0.20

If so, we can only conclude that the Peisistratids left the Panathenaia much as they had found it: a conventional Greek panegyris that, above all, courted comparison with the four games of the circuit. But changes were again afoot.

GAMES FOR ATHENIANS

Given the momentous innovations seen elsewhere in public life between the years 508 and 490, it would be truly surprising if the state’s premier festival were not also touched in some way by the Athenian experiment. We cannot be sure that “the demos” authorized the addition of hoplites to the procession during this period, even if the creation of a new citizen army gave them a compelling reason to do so. However, with the replacement of the humble seventh-century temple of Athena Polias by the Arkhaios Neos around 500 B.C., we can be sure that the setting for the festival’s climactic ritual moments was grander than ever before. As the home of the ancient xoanon and site of the peplos ceremony, no building was more closely associated with the Panathenaia. And through the innovative Gigantomachy pediment, the designers of the Arkhaios Neos ensured that the temple would be defined by this association from the start. Most likely, the Gigantomachy was placed in the temple’s west gable, henceforth affording all who entered the citadel sanctuary an immediate visual reminder of Athena’s greatest martial feat and her greatest festival.21
More significant for our purposes, it seems that the period 508–490 also saw innovations in the program of the Panathenaia. I refer here to the addition of the first contests for Athenian “warriors.” The range of these contests varied somewhat over time. Some, such as the pyrrhic dance and the rather bizarre *apobatēs* race for chariot dismounters, were among the festival’s signature events. Others, such as the *anthippasia*, a mock cavalry battle between tribal squadrons, are less well attested and may only have been held occasionally. But all excluded non-Athenian competitors, and all appear to have had a pronounced martial flavor that placed them firmly outside the realm of traditional Olympic-style athletics.

Our best single source for these competitions is a partially intact prize list for the Panathenaia from ca. 370 B.C. (*IG II²* 2311). Under the heading “[contests] for warriors” [*polemistērioi*] (58), we find two broad categories of events. Contests for individuals (59–70) included a horse race [*kelēs*], a two-horse chariot race [*hippōn zeugos*], a procession for two-horse chariots [*zeugos pom-pikon*], and a contest in throwing the javelin from horseback [*ap’ hippou akontizōn*]. To these, we should add the *apobatēs* race, the best known of the events for individual “warriors,” which may have featured in a missing portion of the inscription. The list goes on to record prizes for a series of events contested by teams from the ten Cleisthenic tribes (71–80): the pyrrhic dance [*pyrrhike-orkhe-sis*] for boys, youths, and men; an event known as the *euan-dria*, or “[contest in] manly excellence”; a torch race [*lampade-phoria*]; and a “contest of ships” [*neōn hamilla*].

So when were the first contests for Athenian “warriors” added to the Panathenaic program? For the years before the classical period, the most likely source of evidence for these events would be vase painting. As we saw earlier, the foundation of the Great Panathenaia in the 560s apparently inspired a sudden surge of interest in athletic subjects among Attic artists, which carried over into the Peisistratid era. If any of the “warrior” contests had been introduced in the early phase of the festival, we might reasonably have expected at least one or two images of pyrrhic dancing or the like to surface on contemporary vessels. For this reason, the absence of such images before the last decade of the sixth century seems significant.

In any case, one feels instinctively that events that were limited to participants from the host state would have held little appeal for the festival’s organizers in earlier times. It is not impossible to imagine contests for teams from the four Ionian tribes. But it is hard to believe that Athenian leaders in the years 560–510 would have considered them suitable for the Panathenaia. Their overwhelming concern here was to gain the widest possible recognition for them-
selves and their city by mounting an impressive Panhellenic spectacle in the tradition of the Olympics and the other “crown” games. Prestige required the presence of the best competitors available in all of Greece, whether rhapsodes or pankratiasts. Nontraditional events that expressly excluded outsiders, let alone team events, would have done little for the cause.

As it happens, evidence for the tribal team contests begins to appear right around the time of the tribal reform. It comes from vase painting and is assembled and discussed in a recent paper by Jenifer Neils (1994).

Best attested is the pyrrhic dance. Though images of this contest do not appear with any frequency until the early classical period, the pyrrhic makes its debut in Attic art shortly after the end of the tyranny. Two of the earliest scenes occur on the two sides of a black-figure pelike by the Theseus Painter that dates to ca. 500 and is now in San Antonio (fig. 21). Like the majority of later scenes, both depict a single hoplite dancing to the accompaniment of an aulete. Whether we see here a figurative representation of a team performance or merely the practice maneuvers of an individual dancer, the nature of the activity is clear enough. A more conclusive piece of evidence comes in a scene on a fragmentary Attic red-figure skyphos found by French excavators on Thasos. Dating to the last decade of the sixth century, it features a full team of five pyrrhic dancers, or pyrrhikistai, flanked on the right by an aulete and on the left by a multiple herm, leaving us in no doubt that the performance was competitive and that it was staged in Athens, presumably at the Panathenaia.23

The euandria, or “contest in manly excellence,” remains something of an enigma. We have no eyewitness descriptions of the event, and scattered references in sources reveal only that competitors possessed an attractive appearance (see Athen. 13.565) and perhaps unusual size and strength (see Xen. Mem. 3.3.13). The euandria probably was more than a simple beauty contest, though the kinds of challenges it involved are far from self-evident. All manner of suitably “manly” activities have been suggested, from acrobatic displays and shield juggling to choral performance, but a consensus has yet to emerge.24

Tracing the early history of such an elusive event in art is obviously problematic, though Neils (1994, 155–59) may have found a neat solution. Instead of searching for suitable images of euandria competitions in progress, she identifies a series of scenes that might depict the awards ceremony for victors in the contest. Typically in these scenes, the central figure is a nude youth who is festooned with fillets and holding branches. In some, he is being crowned by a draped, bearded official; in others, he wears a distinctive pointed cap or is about to receive one from Nike. Since these scenes are often accompanied by kalos inscriptions and lack the usual attributes that help the viewer to identify
the nature of the victory, one assumes that the youthful victors are being honored for some kind of bodily prowess. And since one of these images occurs on a vase of Panathenaic shape, it is tempting to infer that they represent victories in the euandria. The earliest of these vases are from the late sixth century, and Neils therefore suggests that the contest may have been first staged at the Panathenaia, along with the pyrrhic dance, soon after Cleisthenes’ reforms. She could well be right.25

Neils adopts a similar approach to vase evidence for the boat race, or “contest of ships.” Images of ships on vases are never especially common due to the constraints of the medium, and no known archaic or classical scene of a boat race survives. However, picking up on an observation by Webster (1972, 75–76), Neils proposes that victories in the neo–n hamilla may be alluded to on five vases and two votive shields from the period ca. 480–460. Each one shows a female figure (Nike, Athena, or an unidentified woman) holding an aphlaston, “the curving high stern of the trireme with a standard in front of it” (Neils 1994, 153). Just as musical victories were commemorated by images of Nike holding the pertinent instrument, so, she argues, by a similar metonymy, the aphlaston motif could stand for success in the contest of ships. If Neils’s proposal is correct, it may be that the contest was added to the Panathenaia within a decade or two of Cleisthenes’ reforms. But perhaps the most likely stimulus for the new event was the consolidation of the Athenian navy by Themistocles in the later 480s.26

Torch races (lampadedromiai) were a popular feature of festivals all over the Greek world. By the end of the fifth century, they were an integral part of several in Athens, notably the Hephaisteia and the Prometheia, as well as the Panathenaia. For this reason, it is not always possible to tell which, if any, particular race was intended when a torch race appears on an Attic vase. But for our purposes, the problem is moot. No preclassical scene of the event is extant, and the earliest certain depiction of the Panathenaic torch race occurs on a bell krater that dates to the 420s.27 As a natural team event, the race would not have been out of place among the original tribal contests at the Panathenaia, and it may be the case that the staging of a lampadedromia at Athena’s celebrated panegyris encouraged the adoption of the practice at other appropriate Athenian festivals. But for now, the date of the first torch race at the Panathenaia must remain a matter for speculation.28

The apobatês contest aside, the events for individual Athenian “warriors” are less well known than their tribal counterparts. One suspects that they had about them a rather different ambience. Funding for the team events came from official state liturgies, and the participants competed for the honor of
their phyle and the recognition of their polis, not for private gain. The prizes for the victors were little more than tokens: in ca. 370 B.C., one hundred drachmas and a bull were shared by the winning team in each of the pyrrhic dance contests and the euandria. The individual “warrior” events, however, were an elite preserve. All were equestrian in nature, and competitors were presumably responsible for supplying their own horses and equipment. The rewards, too, were different. Victors in the individual contests, unlike those in the team events, were awarded valuable, prestigious prize vases. Apparently, such men required more substantial, tangible incentives to compete.29

Sadly, all too few prize vases with images of these individual events have survived. In fact, most of the contests have left little impression on the historical record at all, making it extremely difficult to pinpoint the moment of their introduction to the festival.

The contest for mounted javelin throwers, or hippacontists, is something of an exception.30 While the earliest depiction on a prize vase dates only from the late fifth century, images of hippacontists are found on a series of four early classical red-figure stemless cups, all credited to an artist who takes his name from the event. Earlier still is a scene from ca. 500 B.C. of a hippacontist in the company of a long jumper, a discus thrower, and a competitor in the armed footrace. The scene appears on a red-figure cup from Athens painted by an artist in the wider circle of the Nikosthenes Painter. Though one hesitates to place too much weight on a single image, the date of the vase and the interesting conjunction of a mounted javelin thrower with more conventional athletes may suggest that games at Athens around the end of the sixth century, presumably those at the Panathenaia, featured a hippacontist contest.31

We can be less circumspect about the apobates race, the best documented of the individual “warrior” contests. The precise details of this event may still elude us, but the general idea is clear: hoplites driven at speed in four-horse chariots dismounted at a certain point on the course and ran to the finish line. While in later times this curious contest was staged in a range of locations around the Greek world, it was associated above all with Athens and seems to have been invented there expressly for the Panathenaia. Over time, the race came to be emblematic of the festival and was even woven into its mythology. In one tradition, a fully armed warrior arrived at the inaugural Panathenaic gathering in a chariot. His identity is not recorded. But the driver was King Erichthonius, who thereby gave his imprimatur to the new festival, while at the same time inspiring one of its distinctive signature contests.32

For all the rich historical associations that cluster around the event, the apobates race is not securely attested before 500 B.C.33 However, the event comes
to enjoy considerable popularity as a subject among painters of lower-quality black-figure ware in the first quarter of the fifth century. Perhaps the earliest images occur on a pair of black-figure lekythoi by the Diosphos Painter. Soon afterward, the race is adopted as something of a stock motif by the artists of the Haimon Group; almost identical scenes of *apobatai* appear on not less than thirty-five of their surviving vases, all again black-figure lekythoi (fig. 22). True, there are no specific indications that these artists were responding to a new Panathenaic event. But we can be almost sure that they were. The very same group of artists is also responsible for a series of eleven similar scenes on lekythoi that substitute a female figure for the hoplite. In almost every case, the female can be identified without much difficulty as the goddess Athena.\(^{34}\)

Two things are particularly interesting here. First, the artists who produced these lekythoi were certainly not catering to the kind of individuals who might actually have taken part in an *apobates* race. Exports aside, the principal market for these relatively cheap funerary vessels will have been poorer Athenians. Far from being alienated by the frivolous elitism that a contest in chariot dismounting might easily represent, these humbler folk, it seems, were all too keen to identify with the local grandees who took part in the event. One suspects that they saw in the vases a chance to add a touch of heroic glamor to their otherwise modest obsequies. Also interesting is the timing of this sudden demand for images of *apobatai*: production of the lekythoi began to peak in ca. 480. Since tastes at the lower end of the market probably did not change overnight and since artists took time to respond to shifts in demand, the original stimulus for the new images, the first staging of the *apobates* race at the Panathenaia, must have occurred somewhat earlier. A time lag of around ten to twenty years seems reasonable. We can then conclude that the race was invented in the 490s, perhaps even as far back as ca. 500 B.C.\(^{35}\)

**Political Theater**

It is not easy to gauge the impact of Cleisthenes’ new order on the state’s premier festival. We have no documents from the years 508–490 that might shed light on the issue, and must rely instead on the more opaque testimony of a slender and dispersed material record, abetted on occasion by later anecdotes and allusions and by chance epigraphic finds. But we can be sure that there was some impact, and more than likely the changes we can recover were accompanied by others we cannot. Among the most important was the transformation of the Panathenaic cult site itself with the construction of the Arkhaios Neos. More intriguing, though, were changes made to the actual content of the fes-
tival. Probably only a few new contests for Athenian “warriors” were added at this time: the pyrrhic dance, the *apobatès* race, and perhaps the *euandria* and the hippacontist contest. But their significance should not be underestimated.

Previously, the Panathenaia had been scrupulously, resolutely Panhellenic in its orientation, going as far as to offer valuable prizes to encourage the attendance of leading athletes and musicians in the Greek world. The glittering prizes and the Olympic-style open contests would of course remain an integral part of the festival for centuries to come. Only now they were joined by a new category of events that owed nothing to the conventional panegyris model. Indeed, they could be said to represent an altogether different vision of the nature and purpose of public athletics.

The team contests for the ten tribes marked an especially bold departure from the ultra-individualistic ethos of Olympic competition. But in some ways, the larger decision to create new events contested exclusively by participants from the host state was bolder still. Prestige for the polis was still a dominant concern. Yet here the prestige would derive not from the presence of elite outsiders but from the skills and prowess displayed by Athenian citizens. We have no way of knowing how many non-Athenians, whether competitors or spectators, journeyed to Athens for the Great Panathenaia at this time, though perhaps only the Eleusinian Mysteries attracted more. The festival thus provided a golden opportunity for the new order to flaunt its credentials before a captive Panhellenic audience. Together, the new “warrior” contests offered a colorful, if oblique, demonstration of the military strength that the polis, with its new citizen army, now possessed. And the team contests proudly embodied the ultimate source of this strength, namely, the spirit of cooperation and solidarity that now united the political community in Attica.

No less important was the impact of these displays on the Athenians themselves. At least in the early days of the new order, the “warrior” contests must have been directed at least as much toward local spectators as toward outsiders. It is not difficult to see how the team contests might have helped advance the cause of Cleisthenes’ reforms. That the tribes were so soon given a role at the Panathenaia only underscored the critical role they now played in society at large. And the sight of fellow citizens striving collectively for the honor of their phylai must have reinforced the allegiances to tribe and state on which the new order so depended.

Less obvious is the similar role played by the individual “warrior” contests. In daily life, it may have been hard for ordinary Athenians to feel much sense of commonality with the more privileged citizens who took part in these events. But in the sporting arena at the Panathenaia, when, for a few days, the eyes of
the Greek world were trained on Athens, the equestrian exploits of the elite did apparently inspire a certain collegial pride among their poorer fellows, as the popularity of the *apobatēs* motif on cheap lekythoi so amply demonstrates.

Also interesting is the form of the new “warrior” events. However visually appealing, the skills on display in the pyrrhic dance and the *apobatēs* race, the two contests best attested at this time, were of little practical utility for late archaic warfare.

The pyrrhic was an attempt to render in dance the kind of postures and maneuvers one might have seen on the battlefields of the legendary past. It was performed in “heroic garb”—dancers were nude and carried only a round shield and spear—and featured balletic leaps, evasions of imaginary missiles, and the reenactment of specific maneuvers described in the *Iliad*, like the *hupaspedia*, or advance under protection of the shield. Also prominent were choreographed allusions to moments in the “life” of the goddess Athena, notably her birth and her battle with the Giants, the two historic events commemorated at the Panathenaia. The very practice of pyrrhic dancing supposedly derived from the armed dances that the goddess herself had performed on those two occasions, and in one tradition, her name *Pallas* was prompted by the kind of arms brandishing (*pallein, pallesthai*) that was apparently imitated in the dance. Elsewhere, the invention of the practice is credited to Achilles, Neoptolemus/Pyrhus, or the more shadowy Pyrrhikhos, though it was of course Athena who sanctioned the contest at Athens.

As for the *apobatēs* contest, its highly traditional appearance has encouraged modern commentators to see it as a genuine relic from Athenian prehistory. However, the lack of any significant evidence for the race before the early fifth century suggests otherwise. We should probably see it as no more than an artful exercise in antiquarian fancy, a contest inspired by a style of chariot warfare that had only ever existed in the imagination. Nevertheless, the Homeric or heroic “authenticity” of the event helps to explain its rapid assimilation into the mythology of the Panathenaia and its considerable later prestige.

This equation of Homeric resonance with prestige is well expressed in our best literary source for the contest, the fourth-century *Erotikos* traditionally ascribed to Demosthenes. Here, the author (61.24–25) commends the virtues of the *apobatēs* race to one Epikrates.

You have chosen the noblest and finest of contests and one especially suited to your natural gifts. For it is an event that has been made to resemble the realities of warfare [tois en toī polemōi sumbainousin homoiomenon] through acclimatization to weapons and the exertions...
of running and to simulate the might of the gods through the greatness and majesty of its equipment. Moreover, it makes for a most attractive spectacle . . . and has been deemed worthy of the greatest of prizes. For, in addition to those actually offered, merely practicing and preparing for this event will prove to be no small prize in the eyes of those who are even moderately eager for excellence [aretēs]. The best evidence for this may be found in the poetry of Homer, in which he represents the Greeks and barbarians as fighting against one another with this kind of equipment. And still even now [eti de kai nun], it is the custom to use this equipment in games staged in not the humblest but the greatest of Greek cities.

The phrase “still even now” tells us all we need to know about the success of a tradition that was probably not invented much before 500 B.C.

In their efforts to transform the political culture of their home state, Athenian leaders in the years 508–490 might have been tempted to pursue a complete overhaul of the state’s single most significant festival to make it better reflect and reproduce the assumptions and priorities of the new order. Instead, we see yet another example of the cautious, creative use of innovation that seems to be a hallmark of the age. The existing fabric of the Great Panathenaia was left essentially unchanged, with only a fairly minor addition made to the program of events. Even this new category of contests, limited to Athenian citizens, will have blended almost seamlessly into the spectacle of the festival. Much like the army commemorations of ca. 506, the contests figured the citizen soldiers of Athens not as phalanx hoplites but as “warriors” from the age of heroes. Like the new tribes and the new structures on the Acropolis and in the Agora, they played a part in creating an appropriately “historic” cultural milieu for a regime that purported to have roots in the distant past.

No doubt, it soon became impossible to imagine a time when events like the apobate–s race and the pyrrhic dance were not a part of the Panathenaic program. But, appearances aside, these contest were boldly nontraditional and, in their own way, historically significant. For they represent the beginnings of a fundamental shift in the character of the Panathenaia as a whole. No longer the straightforward panegyris of the past, the festival had now became a richer confection. With their highly visible message of military strength and corporate solidarity, the “warrior” contests mark the first conscious attempt to politicize the content of the Panathenaia.

Further steps in this new direction were taken in the decades to come. More “warrior” contests, tribal and individual, were added, and hoplites marched in
the sacrificial procession. In time, they were joined there by representatives
from the subject states of the Athenian empire, bearing symbols of their alle-
giance to the hegemón. By the Periclean era, this unique, composite festival
thus became a sophisticated, if somewhat chauvinistic, form of political the-
ater, as bombastic, in its own way, as the contemporary Acropolis. Originally
shaped by the personal aspirations and Panhellenic outlook of the archaic elite,
it was now animated by the sensibilities of a very different age—more socially
inclusive and corporate-minded, but also more jingoistic and, in some ways,
more self-assured. Over the course of barely a century, a festival whose stature
was once built largely on the talents and energies of non-Athenians had evolved
into the supreme ceremonial expression of Athenian collective identity. Per-
haps inevitably, this process of evolution mirrored the shifting imperatives of
a restless political culture. And in the Panathenaia, as in the political culture at
large, it is during the period 508–490, the years of the Athenian experiment,
that the first intimations of a new, recognizably “classical” mode of practice
seem to appear.

This conclusion prompts one final question: If, in the aftermath of Cleis-
thenes’ reforms, the character of the Panathenaia underwent the kind of reori-
entation I have described, is it also possible that the festival underwent a cor-
responding change of name? The question may seem a little far-fetched. But
ancient accounts do preserve memory of a name change, and our period is as
good a time as any for the change to have taken place.

FROM ATHENAIA TO PANATHENAIA?

There is welcome unanimity among ancient authors about the legendary ori-
gins of the Panathenaia. Allusions to a founding figure occur in nine sources,
the earliest being Hellanicus (FGrH 323a F2). Though one (Plut. Thes. 24.3)
credits the foundation to Theseus, all of the others, less predictably, associate
the first staging of the festival in some way with Erichthonius, son of Hep-
haestus.42 The picture is, however, complicated somewhat by three sources
who maintain that the festival was later refounded. In one (Istros, FGrH 334
F4), the agency behind this initiative is unclear, while the other two (Paus. 8.2.1;
schol. Pl. Parm. 127a) both link it with Theseus. Further interesting details are
noted in passing by various writers. All three authors who suggest that Theseus
was either the founder or refounder relate his actions to the synoecism of At-
tica, and two sources (Marm. Par., FGrH 239 Ar1o; Plut. Thes. 24.3) even link
the establishment of the Panathenaia with the naming of the state and people
of Athens. Last but not least, two of the sources for the refoundation (Istros,
record that the festival was renamed in the process, the earlier Athenaia (τὰ Ἀθηναία), “the [festival] of Athens” or “the [festival] of Athena,” becoming the Panathenaia (τὰ Παναθηναία), “the [festival] of all the Athenians.”

What are we to make of these sundry traditions? With so much ancient agreement on the main details, we can be confident of recovering what apparently became the standard account. Essentially, this claimed that Erichthonius first established the festival, which at the time was known as τα Αθηναία. After effecting the synoecism, Theseus then opened up the festival to the entire population of Attica, restyling it as τα Παναθηναία to reflect the new political reality.43 How might such an account have come about?

The easiest explanation is that the whole tradition of renaming and re-foundation had no correlate in historical reality, that it was simply a fiction invented, presumably by an Atthidographer, to reconcile two rival versions of the foundation of the Panathenaia.44 This compromise would have had the great virtue of conveying the all-important sense of continuity with the very beginnings of Athenian history, while still linking the ultimate form of the festival with the talismanic Theseus and his landmark synoecism of Attica. In other words, there never was an Athenaia, so no genuine memory of it could have survived; the tradition is mere academic musing, an all too obvious attempt to find a suitable name for the “festival of all the Athenians” before “all the Athenians” were politically united.

This explanation has a satisfying economy and may well be correct. It is certainly not impossible to believe that the festival was always known as the Panathenaia, even if it is hard to detect any allusion to the unification of Attica in its program in the 560s or earlier times. Greek pan-festivals, like the Panhonia and the various Panhellenic gatherings, clearly did not always presuppose full political union among members of the cultic community.

That said, our sources do insist on an association between the name of the festival and the synoecism. And one also wonders whether it really was left to pedantic antiquarians to establish how the flagship occasion in the state calendar came into existence. Surely this was a matter of some public interest, especially for a polis community that was more than a little preoccupied with its own past. It is not inherently unlikely that the standard account of the genesis of the Panathenaia arose in a more public context.

We might then be tempted to entertain another, more intriguing explanation for the details of this account, namely, that they are, after all, a reflex of genuine historical events; at some point, agencies responsible for reorganizing τα Αθηναία and redubbing the festival τα Παναθηναία sought an attractive
precedent for their actions. This must have taken place some years before the mid-fifth century, by which time the name *Panathenaia* is firmly attested. The most plausible moments for the invention of the precedent would be either in the 560s or during the age of Cleisthenes, when significant adjustments to the festival are known to have been made. For a number of reasons, the latter time appears the more likely.

Only after 510, when the festival is first used as a vehicle for celebrating the strength and unity of the greater Athenian community, does the name *Panathenaia* seem truly appropriate. Such was the prevailing spirit of imitation in earlier times that we would actually have expected the panegyris founded in the 560s to go by the generic name *ta Athenai*, by analogy with *ta Olympia*, *ta Pythia*, *ta Isthmia*, and *ta Nemeia*. The later date is also favored by mythopoetic considerations. As I tried to show in chapter 5, it is only in the last decade of the sixth century that Theseus came to be seen as a founding father figure who left a deep impression on the Athenian politico-cultural environment. The Dodekapolis/synoecism legend, intimately bound up with the re-foundation tradition, dates only from ca. 508, as perhaps does the Synoikia festival, which, significantly, was held immediately before the Panathenaia, in the month Hekatombaion. In short, if the memory of a name change from *Athenai* to *Panathenaia* does have some basis in historical reality, the new name was almost certainly an innovation of the period 508–490.

Proving the case is another matter. As noted, we have no contemporary evidence for the name of the festival before the fifth century. We do, however, have some evidence for how its identity was conceived and represented in the sixth century. The first items are three Acropolis inscriptions from the middle of the century (Raubitschek 1949, nos. 326–28), where presiding officials [hieropoioi] appear to commemorate their dedication of early Panathenaic gatherings to Athena. All three speak of a *dromos* (racetrack, running?) made for the goddess [τει θεότ], while the first two also refer to an *agon* (games) dedicated to the “grey-eyed maiden” [γλαυκόπιτι κόρει]. Second comes evidence for another offering, the base of a statue dedicated in the mid-sixth century by Alcmeonides, brother of Megacles and uncle of Cleisthenes, to Apollo at the Ptoion sanctuary in Boeotia (*IG* I3 1469). The monument commemorates a recent victory in the chariot race at the Panathenaia and describes the festival simply as “a festive gathering for Pallas at Athens” [ἈΘΕΝΑΙΩΝ ΠΑΝΕΥΓΥΡΙΩΝ]. Finally, we have the official tags on the Panathenaic amphorae, which identify each vase and its contents merely as “[one] of the prizes from Athens” [τὸν ἈΘΕΝΕΟΘΛΟΝ].
The most arresting feature of these items is precisely the absence of the word *Panathênaia* on any of them. This is especially true in the case of the private dedication and the official vases, where the inscriptions were written by Athenians, primarily with non-Athenians in mind. If the panegyris truly was known as the “festival of all the Athenians” in the mid-sixth century, one would have thought that some recognition of its distinctive character was desirable here. Yet we do not even find reference to “the Athenians” whose unity the festival supposedly celebrated. Instead, the spectacle is identified simply by its location and its divine honorand—appropriate if it went by a generic title like *Athênaia*, but strangely vague otherwise.

Clearly, no firm conclusions can be drawn. But the point still seems worth making: there is no concrete evidence for the name *Panathênaia*—and no obvious need for it—before 510 B.C. Was this, then, another innovation of the period 508–490, when the name suddenly begins to make a lot more sense? Was it in these years that the refoundation legend was first invented, a suitably Thesean precedent for a change in the character of the state’s greatest festival? It is not hard to see that it might have arisen in conjunction with the Do-dekapolis/synoecism tradition, which, in structure, it so obviously resembles, and with which, henceforth, it would be so closely associated. If so, perhaps the model here was the Panionia; along with the new Agora cults, the concept of *isonomia*, and the very idea of a Dodekapolis, this could be another example of East Greek influence on the style of the new order in Athens. Whatever the case, it is only after 510 B.C. that the distinctive contours of the classical Panathenaia, a festival quite unlike any other in the Greek world, first come into view.