

Rosie Wyles

THEATRE PROPS AND
CIVIC IDENTITY IN ATHENS,
458–405 BC

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ideology, yet the key objects explored in this study (voting urns and pebbles, swords, and masks) each
carried profound connections to Athenian civic identity while also playing important roles as props on
the fifth-century stage. Playwrights exploited the powerful dynamic generated from the intersection
between the 'social lives' (off-stage existence in society) and 'stage lives' (handling in theatre) of these
objects to enhance the dramatic effect of their plays as well as the impact of these performances on
society. The exploration of the 'stage lives' of these objects across comedy, tragedy, and satyr drama
reveals much about generic interdependence and distinction. Meanwhile the consideration of
iconography representing the objects' lives outside the theatre sheds light on drama's powerful interplay
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Abbreviations

- FHG* C. Müller, *Fragmenta historicum graecorum*, Vol. 2. Paris, 1848.
- GHI*² M.N. Tod, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions*. Oxford, 1946.
- IG* *Inscriptiones Graecae*.
- LIMC* *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*. Zürich, 1981–97.
- LSJ* H.S. Jones and R. MacKenzie, *A Greek–English Lexicon*. Oxford, 1940.
- OCD* S. Hornblower, A. Spawforth, E. Eidinow (eds) *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Fourth edition. Oxford, 2012.
- PCG* R. Kassel and C. Austin (eds) *Poetae Comici Graeci*. Berlin and New York, 1983–.
- PMG* D.L. Page, *Poetae Melici Graeci*. Oxford, 1962.
- TrGF* B. Snell, R. Kannicht, and S.L. Radt (eds) *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*. Göttingen, 1971–2009.

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Introduction

Propping up Athens

Athenian civic identity was ‘propped up’ by objects invested with symbolic meaning. These objects could be, literally and conceptually, transported into the theatrical frame. As props in performance they functioned as intersections between civic life and the stage. The object’s ‘civic’ symbolism could be exploited to dramatic effect, while its treatment on stage impacted upon its meaning in society. Theatre’s handling of these props therefore contributed to the discourse of civic ideology that shaped citizen identity.¹ The negotiation, and renegotiation, of the object’s meanings on stage, across different dramatic genres, reflects the complexity of that discourse and of theatre’s contribution to it.² The examination of a selection of such objects that traverse the citizen experience sheds fresh light on the dialectic between theatre and civic ideology. The study simultaneously underlines the importance of taking intergeneric dynamics and iconography into account in the exploration of this dialectic.

I Objects and civic identity

The past forty years have witnessed significant developments in the study of fifth-century Athenian civic identity.³ Chief amongst these has been the shift away from ‘constitutional’ and ‘institutional’ approaches to defining citizenship.⁴ A wider lens on the citizen experience, an appreciation of citizenship’s ‘intangible qualities’ (informing values and behaviour), the recognition of citizenship as a concept and ideological construct, and the awareness of the range of ways in which civic status might be ‘performed’ have now emerged.⁵ The interrogation of the complex interrelation between political and social spheres in Athens and the recognition that categories might become blurred on the ground have further nuanced analyses.⁶ The study of Athenian citizenship has profited from engagement with performance studies, sociology, structuralist theory, anthropology and political science.⁷ Further gains can be made from the work outside the field of Classics that

has established material culture's role in constructing, contesting and reaffirming identity at an individual and collective level.⁸ By considering the role of objects/props, this discussion takes its lead from that work and intends to highlight the fresh contribution that its consideration can make to the understanding of civic identity in Athenian society.⁹

Textual evidence confirms material culture's role in asserting identity in Athens. Solon's sixth-century reforms already demonstrate an understanding of material culture's ability to display status and assert elite identity. The limitation of the number of *himatia* (cloaks/blankets) at burials exposes an awareness of their power as symbols.¹⁰ The ongoing exploitation of objects to this end, despite Solon's measures, is evidenced by the iconic golden cicada hair clasps used by rich elderly Athenian males.¹¹ Beyond the differentiation between social strata, material culture claimed a place in framing collective civic identity in Athenian society. The symbolic status of the olive tree in Erechtheus' shrine on the Acropolis demonstrates this.¹² According to Herodotus, the Athenians claimed that Athena had set the tree there in her bid to become patron of the city.¹³ His narrative couples this detail with the Athenian report that a fresh shoot had grown from the tree's trunk on the day after the Persians had burnt the shrine. These details reveal the prominent symbolic role played by this object in the construction of fifth-century Athenian identity and the importance of reaffirming that symbolism at a point of civic crisis.¹⁴ Moreover, the emphasis on the Athenian propagation of these stories highlights the city's active participation in self-definition through material culture.

The same principle can be identified in operation in the construction and shaping of Athenian citizens' identity. Objects within the city's material culture that were invested with ideological significance could impact upon the citizen's sense of his civic identity.¹⁵ The celebrated Athenian statue group of the tyrannicides, Harmodius and Aristogiton, is recognized to have functioned in this way.¹⁶ This monument, discussed in Chapter 3, contributed to the ideologization of the pair's deed, trained the citizen in reading the democracy's visual codes and offered a concise means of expressing commitment to its values.¹⁷ Yet it was not only landmarks that shaped citizen identity.¹⁸ Objects that could be encountered close up and handled by the citizen also carried the potential to hold this symbolic sway. Euripides' exploration of civic identity through the recognition tokens in *Ion* exploits precisely this aspect of objects' operation within Athenian society.¹⁹ Such objects, unlike a monument, can be easily overlooked in scholarship. In appearance, they can be unobtrusive and might seem, viewed in a museum display, quite ordinary (a water jar, a sword), yet under the citizen's gaze they were

transformed by their symbolic associations. The acknowledgement that such objects had a part to play in the construction and affirmation of citizen identity forms the basis of this study.

An object-oriented approach builds further on the current understanding of citizenship as a dynamic construct, existing beyond strict legal or institutional parameters and including 'intangible qualities'.²⁰ A case could be made for a number of objects that meet with the criteria of being symbolically associated with citizenship. However, the objects considered in this study have been selected to offer insight into a range of identity's dimensions, bolstered by different values and experienced through diverse civic settings.²¹ Voting urns and pebbles symbolically represented the citizen's right to act as a juror (and the value democracy placed on each citizen's view), swords embodied the citizen's obligation to protect the democracy, and masks symbolized the citizen's right to perform in a chorus (and the ideal of civic participation).²² Each object gained symbolic traction through its association with the exercise of a citizen right. The encounter of them within 'institutional' settings (taken in a broad sense) invited reflection on citizen identity, while simultaneously reinforcing it.²³ The law court, battlefield, and theatre were locales within which citizenship could be performed.²⁴ The ideological importance of each activity to Athenian identity is confirmed in Thucydides' account of Pericles' Funeral Oration.²⁵ The collective and habitual nature of the activities with which the objects were symbolically associated (jury service, fighting, and performing theatre) heightened their potential to impact upon the citizen's sense of identity.²⁶ The communal gaze upon these objects in public settings with ideological significance contributed further to this effect.²⁷

The consideration of a range of activities expressing civic ideology allows for a more nuanced account of the construction of citizen identity, and the role of objects in this, to emerge.²⁸ The selection of objects is valuable for the spectrum it represents in the complexity of the symbolism's construction. Voting urns and pebbles gained their symbolism primarily through association with their use in the law court. However, the sword gains meaning from its commemorated use by the tyrannicides, its display (in the panoply) at the Panathenaea and Dionysia, and its role in the battlefield *sphagia* ritual. This demonstrates that the objects functioned as repositories for values and concepts expressed across the breadth of civic experience and highlights the valuable access this approach grants to the 'intangible qualities' of citizenship.²⁹ Two further characteristics to the symbolism constructed for these objects reinforced their effectiveness as a means of expressing identity. The objects' symbolism could be embedded in cultural memory (through iconography and narrative) lending authority to the Athenian

values that the objects represented through implying their longevity.³⁰ Meanwhile, the openness of the symbolism to reinterpretation created a dynamic force to the objects' role in identity's construct.³¹ This allowed discourse on the object's meanings to become a means of reshaping as well as reaffirming citizen identity.

The objects themselves played a part in securing the efficacy of their role in shaping citizen identity. As physical presences in Athens, they could be encountered and handled by individuals in the city.³² The haptic dimension to the experience of these objects endowed them with distinctive influence in forging identities – the physical act of dropping a ballot into a voting urn making for a more profound individual encounter with the symbols of Athenian ideology than looking up at the Parthenon's iconography.³³ The recognition that encountering objects may have enhanced the individual's sense of embodiment is significant for the construction of identity, as is the acknowledgement of the agency of objects.³⁴ The personal impact of objects plays into the dynamic between the individual and collective at the centre of civic identity.³⁵ While this study's approach is primarily semiotic rather than phenomenological, the materiality of the objects discussed is acknowledged to have reinforced the impact of their symbolism on the citizen's sense of identity.³⁶

II The 'social' and 'theatrical' life of objects

The theatre's role in shaping Athenian citizens' sense of identity was made possible, in part, through the 'double' lives of its props.³⁷ The objects seen on stage were understood to have a 'social life', an existence (conceptual and concrete) outside the performance, alongside their 'theatrical' life.³⁸ While the concepts of the prop's 'social' and 'dramatic' life depend on modern critical writings, the ideas can already be found within ancient Greek drama.³⁹ In Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, performed in 425 BC, the audience is encouraged to think about the life of costumes and props outside the theatre as well as their 'dramatic' life.⁴⁰ Aristophanes' references to the manufacture of props, and stage mechanics, further expose the life of the objects outside the fictive world of the play.⁴¹ Tragedy too, though less explicit in its mode, engages with the idea of its theatre objects' existence outside the action of the play. The dramatic effect of the Erinyes' new cloaks at the end of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, for example, depends on awareness of the clothing's 'social life' and its use in a contemporary civic festival.⁴² Athenian playwrights acknowledged and exploited the intersection between the 'social life' and 'dramatic life' of the objects populating their productions. This has

ramifications for the question of drama's engagement with life outside the theatre in fifth-century Athens. Props have been almost entirely overlooked in assessments of this relationship, yet they function as intersections between the two spaces.⁴³ Moreover, the treatment of certain props on stage implicates their symbolism in civic life and vice versa. The identification of ideologically loaded language is a familiar tactic in discussions of Athenian drama's interaction with society.⁴⁴ Stage *objects* embedded with heightened civic significance merit the same consideration since they were equally capable of making demands on the audience to reflect on the relationship between the dramatic action and civic life.⁴⁵

Athenian society asserts itself on the comic and tragic stage through a wide array of objects making up the fictive worlds presented there. Despite its near-default setting in the mythological past, the tragic stage is filled with objects familiar from the present: altars, garlands, torches, sticks, and writing tablets to name but a few.⁴⁶ Amongst these some carried specific symbolic meaning for Athenians, the dark red (or purple) costuming for the Erinyes chorus at the end of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, for example, evoked the clothing worn by *metics* at the Panathenaea festival.⁴⁷ The interest of this study is in objects that resonated with Athenian audience members because of their symbolic association with civic identity and that as props boasted a significant 'dramatic' life. The requirement for the object to have become the dramatic focus of more than one stage production is generated from the concern to investigate props that become sites of contested meaning.⁴⁸ The negotiation of their symbolism across more than one production reveals their status in both theatrical and social discourse. The analysis of props that are significant as objects in civic life and have a notable stage past allows for the appreciation of the intersection between these two lives. The objects' civic symbolism informs their meaning, and dramatic effect, within the theatrical frame and their manipulation on stage impacts on the citizen's sense of identity. Voting urns and pebbles, swords, and masks meet the criteria of being symbolically significant to civic identity and the focus of dramatic attention across multiple plays and for more than one playwright.⁴⁹

The 'dramatic life' of these selected objects determined the choice of plays discussed.⁵⁰ One of the advantages of this approach is that it challenges assumptions about which plays merit consideration. The prominent concern of Euripides' *Ion* with Athenian identity would ordinarily guarantee its inclusion in a study of the topic.⁵¹ Yet the objects that become a focus of *Ion*'s stage action cannot claim to have the same extensive dramatic life as the voting urns or swords.⁵² In other words, they are not a sustained subject in theatre's discourse on civic identity. Extant and fragmentary, tragic, satyric and comic, dating from

certainly as early as 458 BC to c. 405 BC, the plays discussed are: Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and *Theoroi*; Sophocles' *Inachus* and *Ajax*; Euripides' *Electra*, *Phoenician Women* and *Bacchae*; Cratinus' *Seriphioi*; Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Wasps*, *Birds*, *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae*; and Phrynichus' *Muses*.⁵³ The selection highlights the well-established principle that plays need not be set in Athens in order to resonate with Athenian identity.⁵⁴ The inclusion of tragedy, comedy and satyr drama in the list is a hallmark of this study's approach. Traditionally the theatre–society interface has been investigated for each dramatic genre separately.⁵⁵ That the distinctive parameters set by the generic frames of tragedy, comedy, and satyr drama result in each defining, negotiating and expressing their relationship to society in different ways is accepted. Yet the handling of objects that carried symbolic associations for Athenian audience members unites these genres.⁵⁶ The meaning(s) of these objects is contested across the dramatic genres so that a proper understanding of the theatrical and social discourse emerging from this can only be achieved through taking an intergeneric approach.⁵⁷ A study that considered the tragic treatment of the sword in isolation, and ignored the comic contestation of its meaning, would offer only a partial perspective of the theatrical impact on the object's civic status. It would also overlook the profound significance of that symbolic negotiation between genres. The interpretation and reinterpretation of props' meaning highlights the elastic capacity of the symbols that construct identity.⁵⁸ This mirrors the nature of the knowledge upon which the democracy depended, it too was 'flexible' and negotiated through discussion.⁵⁹ The intergeneric perspective demonstrates that at the same time as symbolizing aspects of the civic experience, these objects could invite reflection on democracy's operation.

III Shaping the study

The argument follows a case-study approach, focusing on voting equipment, swords and masks in turn.⁶⁰ The object's symbolic significance to civic identity is established in each case, before the consideration of its manipulation on stage. The order of the case studies is intended to allow a progressive narrative to emerge from the analysis. The opening case study allows for the principle to be established through objects connected to the most conventional setting for the expression of identity (the law courts). The claim of the symbolic association between voting urns and pebbles and Athenian values is not new. However, the case study is valuable in foregrounding the critical issues in the expression of those values

(Chapter 1) and role of theatre in negotiating them (Chapter 2). The weight given to iconographic evidence in Chapter 1 (discussing in detail the series of cups depicting a vote at the contest over Achilles' arms and the Stieglitz 'voting' cup (Dijon, CA 1301)) is programmatic.⁶¹ Chapter 2 offers a model for analysis by assessing the complexities of the objects' function and effect in *Eumenides* and the subsequent interplay between comedy and tragedy expressed through their handling (setting the foundation for the discussion of intergeneric dynamics in Chapter 5). The book's major case study unfolds across three chapters allowing for the detailed exploration of its central concerns. The sword's richly faceted civic life and equally intense stage life make it a profound site of negotiation between theatre and society and between plays. The examination of this object's symbolic importance in Athens (Chapter 3), the manipulation of its civic resonance in tragedy (Chapter 4), and the reconfiguring of its significance on the comic and late fifth-century tragic stage (Chapter 5) establish the full potential of this approach. The final case study (Chapter 6) tests the limits of the study's premise by exploring a 'theatrical' object, the mask. In performance, this prop points to Athens (especially in tragedy in which it is an 'anachronistic' object).⁶² Yet, its Athenian association and civic symbolism is entwined with the experience of theatre as an institution. This makes for a compact and complex case study that deliberately stretches the concept of the citizen's 'institutional' experience (it stands at the other end of the spectrum from the law court). It makes a critical contribution, also, at the study's close to the understanding of the intergeneric dynamics of such object's handling and the interplay with the iconographic representation of them (confirming principles touched upon in the earlier case studies).

The field of Classics has been slow to turn to object-oriented studies and yet the advantage of such an approach to the exploration of the interface between theatre and society should have become apparent.⁶³ While the study is much indebted to existing work in Classics, it also seeks to push beyond it through adopting this innovative approach.⁶⁴ The object's capacity to become a symbolic repository for Athenian values and a memory bank of past dramatic productions made it a powerful entity. It stood as an intersection between theatre and society, and between the production and the theatrical past. It is in the analysis of the dynamic tension in performance between meanings generated from society and those emerging from interplay with past productions that the prop's value to the understanding of theatre and its role in society becomes clear.

Casting Votes in Athens

Theatre's engagement in civic discourse through the handling of voting urns and ballots (explored in Chapter 2) depended on the symbolic meaning created for these objects in their social lives, specifically in the role that they played in reinforcing Athenian values when citizens voted. This opening case study delineates the objects' civic symbolism (through a focalized reassessment of the textual and iconographic evidence) to enable a thoroughgoing analysis of its dramatic exploitation (in Chapter 2) and to offer a framework of considerations, through these first two chapters, for the subsequent case studies.

Law courts, and their judicial process, formed a core aspect of Athenian identity in the fifth century BC.¹ The brilliantly absurd response of the comic character, Strepsiades, when presented with a map of the world by a pupil of Socrates (*Clouds* 206–8), plays on precisely this sense of the centrality of jurors to the city's identity:²

ΜΑΘΗΤΗΣ	αὕτη δέ σοι γῆς περίοδος πάσης. ὁρᾷς; αἶδε μὲν Ἀθῆναι.
ΣΤΡΕΨΙΑΔΗΣ	τί σὺ λέγεις; οὐ πείθομαι, ἐπεὶ δικαστὰς οὐχ ὁρῶ καθημένους.

Pupil: And look, this is a map of the entire world. See?
That's Athens right here.

Strepsiades: What do you mean? I don't believe it;
I don't see any juries in session.

This joke about Athenian litigiousness becomes a 'standby' of Aristophanes.³ In 421 BC, he returned to it in his *Peace* and extends the observational comedy to the divine plane as Hermes explains to the Athenians why peace eludes them (503–5):⁴

ΕΡΜΗΣ	καὶ τοῖς Ἀθηναίοισι παύσασθαι λέγω ἐντεῦθεν ἐχομένοις ὅθεν νῦν ἔλκετε·
-------	---

οὐδὲν γὰρ ἄλλο δρᾶτε πλὴν δικάζετε.

Hermes And to the Athenians I say: stop hanging on to where you're now pulling from; you're accomplishing nothing but litigation.⁵

It emerges again in *Birds* in 414 BC, when Tereus fears that since Peisetaerus and Euelpides are from Athens, they must be jurors (108–11):

ΤΗΡΕΥΣ ποδαπῶ τὸ γένος;
 ΠΕΙΣΕΤΑΙΡΟΣ ὅθεν αἱ τριήρεις αἱ καλαί.
 ΤΗΡΕΥΣ μὼν ἡλιαστά;
 ΕΥΕΛΠΙΔΗΣ μάλλὰ θάτέρου τρόπου, ἀπηλιαστά.
 ΤΗΡΕΥΣ σπεύρεται γὰρ τοῦτ' ἐκεῖ τὸ σπέρμ';
 ΕΥΕΛΠΙΔΗΣ ὀλίγον ζητῶν ἂν ἐξ ἀγροῦ λάβοις.

Tereus What nationality?

Peisetaerus Where the fine triremes come from.

Tereus Not a couple of jurors, I hope!

Euelpides Oh no, the other kind: a couple of jurophobes.

Tereus Does that seed sprout there?

Euelpides You'll find a little in the country, if you look hard.⁶

Even while the pair of Athenians protest that they are a couple of jurophobes, Tereus' incredulity that such a category of person exists in Athens forces them to admit that they are in a minority.⁷ *Birds* demonstrates the ongoing sense of the importance of this activity to Athenian identity (even if criticisms of that very practice appear later in the play).⁸ In fact, Aristophanes had already alluded to the Athenian delight in law courts in *Knights* (1317), produced in 424 BC, demonstrating that this trait provided a running joke for at least ten years and suggesting that the Athenian characteristic remained of sufficient cultural prominence to support this sustained comic exploitation.⁹

While these jokes rely on references to jurors, the objects at the centre of the judicial process, the voting urns and pebbles or shells (the 'ballots'), were equally capable of acting as synecdochic representatives of law courts and the trials held in them.¹⁰ In this capacity these objects were symbols of civic identity.¹¹ Voting in law courts in the fifth century took place as follows: each juror had a pebble or shell (his ballot) and dropped it into one of two urns (either the 'guilty' urn or the 'not guilty' urn).¹² The voting urns were *hydriai*, vessels that functioned primarily as water jars. Aspects of their design that made them suitable for carrying and pouring out water, however, proved equally valuable in the object's repurposed use.¹³ Surviving evidence shows that *hydriai* could be made of terracotta or bronze,

the latter creating an object of value that could serve as a prize at games. A representative example of such a bronze *hydria*, dating to c. 460 B.C., offers insight to the design of such vessels in the period of the *Oresteia*'s production (Fig. 1).¹⁴

This *hydria* was most likely a prize and is more elaborate (in its decoration) than the voting urns shown on the Stieglitz cup (Fig. 5).¹⁵ Nevertheless, its shape corresponds to those urns and it offers a helpful indication of the potential proportions of such vessels (it stands at 47 cm high). While the *hydriai* used for voting in the fourth century were bronze, this cannot be claimed with certainty for the fifth century.¹⁶ The ballots (pebbles or shells, designated by the term ψῆφος) were objects supplied by nature rather than manufactured. Any surviving ballots remain anonymous (in contrast to fourth-century bronze ballots that are readily identifiable from their distinctive shape and official inscription).¹⁷ The urns and pebbles, everyday objects from our perspective, acquired their significance from the framing context of their use and the symbolic meaning which Athenian society attached to them in that setting.¹⁸

The presentation of judicial participation as stereotypically Athenian implies the significance of this activity to civic identity.¹⁹ Moreover, the existence of other Greek communities that also displayed commitment to justice and used voting urns and ballots to carry it out, highlights that the 'Athenianess' of this trait was a construct.²⁰ The deliberateness of its civic symbolism in Athens raises the stakes of reflecting upon the meaning that an Athenian citizen may have attached to the process of voting.²¹ The act of casting a vote was delineated as a citizen activity in the first instance through the restriction of jury participation to male citizens over the age of thirty.²² The significance of the action was more profoundly inscribed, however, through the idea that the pool of jurors (numbering 6,000 ordinary citizens, selected by lot annually) represented and acted on behalf of the entire citizen body.²³ The act of voting in the law court, already self-conscious as a performance of a citizen right (to serve in a jury), expressed the ordinary citizen's acceptance of the idea that his judgment was of equal merit to any of his fellow citizens (and could stand for them); in other words, it represented democratic ideology in action.

The form of the vote reinforced this since the procedure of assessing the judgment through ballots ensured that every vote counted.²⁴ This displayed the city's confidence in every citizen's capacity to judge and conferred a sense of individual responsibility on the voter.²⁵ This was in contrast to the alternative mode of expressing opinion used in Athenian democracy (in the Assembly and Boule), the show of hands (χειροτονία), that through its estimation of numbers minimized the sense of individual impact on the outcome.²⁶ The



Fig. 1 Bronze Greek *hydria*, dating to c. 460 BC, J. Paul Getty Museum 73.AC.12. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

responsibility incumbent on the juror was impressed upon him through the heliastic oath in which he swore to vote in accordance with the laws and decrees of the Athenian people and Council of the five hundred and, in matters with no laws, in accordance with his best judgment.²⁷ The abundance of legal proceedings in Athens suggests that those serving as jurors would engage repeatedly in the act of voting across the year.²⁸ This enabled the symbolic value attached to this action to become inculcated in the citizen, shaping his civic identity.²⁹

The significance placed on this procedure of voting was reinforced through the circumstances of its use in the Assembly and Boule.³⁰ The use of voting urns and pebbles in these institutional bodies was the exception and not the rule (*χειροτονία* being the default procedure), heightening the self-consciousness of its deployment.³¹ The nature of the cases employing this form of voting further suggests circumstances that prompted the citizen to reflect on democracy as he cast his vote on issues pertaining to: *ἄδεια* (immunity to discuss a forbidden topic), conferral of citizen rights and *εἰσαγγελία* (maladministration or treason).³² Democracy, and its citizen body, was at stake in these cases. The carrying out of this procedure in the Assembly was ‘cumbersome’ given the numbers involved.³³ From the voter’s perspective, however, the lengthy process gave far more time for reflection (both on his decision and the symbolic meaning of the action) than the usual raising of a hand; and this would have invited ‘effortful’ deliberation.³⁴ The numbers involved magnified the impact of the spectacle that also displayed the democratic principle in action through the participation of a broad demographic of citizens.³⁵ The awareness of the communal focus on the voting urns, as destined locus for the civic gesture, heightens the objects’ ability to construct the citizen’s sense of identity. He looks upon these objects that represent a civic ideal, he watches fellow citizens as they enact that ideal through voting, and, through his awareness of the gaze of others, he measures himself against this symbol’s ideal.³⁶

The experience allowed the citizen to see his place within the collective body of the *demos*. He could also recognize the individual role that his participation, embodied in the ballot he held and then cast, played within the functioning of that body.³⁷ His responsibility was symbolized in the pebble that would impact not only on the individual under judgment but also the community (i.e. the democracy). The use of this form of procedure, more familiar from the law court experience, in the democracy’s governing institutions and the framing of jury service as acting on behalf of the *demos*, allowed for the collapse of the symbolic distinction between the use of the objects in the two contexts.³⁸ In the law court

and the Assembly (and the Boule), the voting urns and pebbles represented democracy in action and the responsibility conferred on the citizen. In this respect these objects could embody the citizen's sense of who he was and the civic values he enacted as an Athenian.

The perception of the extraordinary power wielded by these objects is captured in the oath introduced in 410/9 BC on the proposal of Demophantus after the restoration of democracy (discussed further in Chapter 3). The striking turn of phrase at the opening of this oath elevates the ballot's status to that of a lethal weapon, as each Athenian citizen pledges to slay 'by word and by deed, by my vote and by my hand' anyone seeking to suppress the democracy.³⁹ The politically charged environment in which these words were spoken adds further to their weight and highlights the symbolic comfort sought in this small but mighty object within the democratic machinery. Its ideological standing allowed it to take this central place in the oath and its intended effect; the reassertion of this object's power at a time of crisis confirms its status as a symbol closely bound up with civic identity.⁴⁰ The latent power of these objects and their symbolic status is further demonstrated in a section of Xenophon's account of the controversial trial of the Athenian generals after the battle of Arginusae (406 BC).⁴¹

έντεϋθεν ἐκκλησίαν ἐποιοῦν, εἰς ἣν ἡ βουλὴ εἰσήνεγκε τὴν ἑαυτῆς γνώμην Καλλιξείνου εἰπόντος τήνδε· Ἐπειδὴ τῶν τε κατηγορούντων κατὰ τῶν στρατηγῶν καὶ ἐκείνων ἀπολογουμένων ἐν τῇ προτέρᾳ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἀκηκόασι, **διαψηφίσασθαι** Ἀθηναίους ἅπαντας κατὰ φυλάς· θεῖναι δὲ εἰς τὴν φυλὴν ἐκάστην **δύο ὕδρίας**· ἐφ' ἐκάστη δὲ τῇ φυλῇ κήρυκα κηρύττειν, ὅτῳ δοκοῦσιν ἀδικεῖν οἱ στρατηγοὶ οὐκ ἀνελόμενοι τοὺς νικήσαντας ἐν τῇ ναυμαχίᾳ, **εἰς τὴν προτέραν ψηφίσασθαι**, ὅτῳ δὲ μή, **εἰς τὴν ὑστέραν**· ἂν δὲ δόξωσιν ἀδικεῖν, θανάτῳ ζημιῶσαι καὶ τοῖς ἔνδεκα παραδοῦναι καὶ τὰ χρήματα δημεῦσαι, τὸ δ' ἐπιδέκατον τῆς θεοῦ εἶναι.

Then they called an Assembly, at which the Council brought in its proposal, which Callixeinus had drafted in the following terms: 'Resolved, that since the Athenians have heard in the previous meeting of the Assembly both the accusers who brought charges against the generals and the generals speaking in their own defence, they do now one and all **cast their votes** by tribes; and that **two urns** be set at the voting-place of each tribe; and that in each tribe a herald proclaim that whoever adjudges the generals guilty, for not picking up the men who won the victory in the naval battle, **shall cast his vote in the first urn**, and whoever adjudges them not guilty, shall **cast his vote in the second**; and if they be adjudged guilty, that they be punished with death and handed over to the Eleven, and that their property be confiscated and the tenth thereof belong to the goddess.'⁴²

Callixeinus' proposal, with its embedded instructions about the vote, includes a striking repetition of terms for urns and the casting of votes (in bold). This emphasis may have formed part of a rhetorical strategy by Callixeinus to try to invest the proposal with legitimacy through normalizing references to familiar procedural elements.⁴³ At the same time, Xenophon's choice to record the proposal *verbatim* elevates the significance of these objects in his narrative and makes them the focal point of his account of this real-life episode in late fifth-century Athens.⁴⁴ More particularly, Callixeinus' proposal (and the report of it) invites both his and Xenophon's audience to consider the procedural actions relating to these objects: the setting up of the urns, each individual holding the pebble, the decision making over the choice of urns (guilty or not guilty), and finally casting the pebble into an urn. This highlights the communal focus on the objects, offering an implicit acknowledgement of the importance of this to their symbolic status for citizen identity. When it came to enacting these envisaged actions, it was a matter of life and death, as the pebbles cast in 406 BC graphically illustrate – the action resulted in the execution of the six generals who were present.⁴⁵ The 'emotional charge' of the objects, created through the purpose they serve and their ideological status, is exploited by Xenophon and reinforced by his narrative.⁴⁶ At the same time, their status as objects closely implicated in civic identity could be used to imply the rightness of taking action in this way (reflecting the ideals constructed through the Demophantus oath – a good citizen uses his ballot to assert democratic concern).

Iconographic evidence allows the significance of the voting process to Athenian civic identity and the pebble's status as a *synechdochic* object standing for the procedure's symbolism to be dated back to almost a hundred years before the Arginusae trial.⁴⁷ A series of Athenian vase paintings dated from between c. 500–480 BC depict the contentious judgment over the award of the armour of Achilles being decided by a vote.⁴⁸ The iconographic scheme of the scenes is broadly consistent across the eight cups (*kylikes*): Athena stands over a stone platform as the heroes approach from either side to place their voting pebbles on one of the two piles at either end of the platform.⁴⁹ A representative example of this iconography is offered by the Attic red-figured *kylix* attributed to Brygos painter in the British Museum (Fig. 2).

Though the cups' subject belongs to the mythological past, the iconography has been argued to be closely implicated in the expression of Athenian ideology. The format of the vote, with pebbles being brought forward as ballots to mark the decision of each voter, mirrors the newly introduced Athenian political procedure and legitimizes it through its mythologization.⁵⁰ The pebbles offer the link between the mythological past and present, they are the conduit for this



Fig. 2 Attic red-figured *kylix* attributed to Brygos painter, c. 490–480 BC, British Museum 1843,1103.11. Reproduced with kind permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.

glorification and, through it, they gain heightened symbolic status as objects used in the Athenian procedure. The contrast between the calm of those handling the pebble as they vote and the conflict shown on the other side of the cup highlights the benefits of this process and symbolically elevates this object further (implying a sense of agency through the pebble's apparent power to bring calm).⁵¹ The impact of this celebration of the ballot would have been intensified if, as has been suggested, the images shown on the cups appeared as a pair of monumental wall paintings.⁵² Even a reading of the iconography that lays greater emphasis on its ambivalence, must acknowledge the focal place given to the pebbles in the composition.⁵³ This is made especially clear in one of the cups from the series that focuses on the procedure of voting in its tondo too, directing the viewer to interpret this as the key subject.⁵⁴ The tondo image shows the male voter bending down to place his ballot at Athena's feet while she extends her right arm over his back, implying both divine support and supervision; the image thus expresses the voter's sense of responsibility discussed above. This series of images reflects, and reinforces, the status of the pebble as an ideological symbol in Athens.

The symbolic status of the voting urns and pebbles in Athenian society immediately before their manipulation on stage in the *Oresteia* can be gauged from the fifth-century Athenian red-figured cup, attributed to the Stieglitz painter by Beazley and dated to 470–460 BC.⁵⁵ Despite the centrality of voting to Athenian civic identity, this cup is remarkably the only surviving fifth-century vase painting to offer a direct representation of the activity.⁵⁶ The comparison between this cup and the earlier mythological series demonstrates the ways in which the Stieglitz painter draws on the existing iconographic tradition but also highlights the boldness of his arrestingly contemporary composition and the directness of its concerns. This important piece of evidence has gained only limited attention, perhaps due to its state of preservation which may also account for the absence of an accurate and detailed description of the cup's images in current scholarship.⁵⁷ The following discussion addresses this gap and highlights the overlooked significance of the tondo image, laying the ground for the consideration of what the composition reveals about the symbolic status of voting urns and ballots in this period.

The exterior images of the cup both depict male figures approaching voting urns along with seated male figures watching them (Fig. 3). The exterior image on Side A includes seven figures (four seated and three standing) in a composition set around two voting urns (Fig. 4). The standing figures approach the voting urns; at the composition's centre, a bearded man approaches the left-hand urn, while another bearded man (and a third damaged figure to the far right of the image) approach the voting urn on the right (Fig. 5). The damaged figure holds



Fig. 3 Underside of Stieglitz cup showing both exterior images (Side A and Side B). Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, CA 1301. All photographs of this cup are © Perry Holmes and reproduced with his kind permission.