

An Obsession with Symmetry: Placing Harriet Boyd Hawes' Unpublished
Treatise on the Riddle of the Erechtheion

Alexandra L. Lesk Blomerus
University of Cincinnati

For the first fifty years of the last century, several prominent archaeologists tried to discern an “original” plan for one of the most controversial buildings of the High Classical period, the Erechtheion. Dörpfeld and Dinsmoor are just two of those experts who published symmetrical solutions for what they believed must have been the original plan of the building. Harriet Boyd Hawes, though more famous for pioneering American excavations on Crete, also wrote a treatise on the riddle of the Erechtheion. Her daughter, Mary Allsebrook, has kindly given me permission to bring her mother’s unpublished manuscript to light. This paper discusses Hawes’ innovative approach and independent solution to what she calls the Erechtheion’s “preposterous plan” and places it in its historiographic context. Hawes researched the problem for over three decades, incorporating the seminal work on the Erechtheion by Paton, Caskey *et al.*, and corresponded with Dörpfeld and Dinsmoor, whose comments on her research are preserved in the margins of the manuscript and in letters. This paper also examines the reception of the Erechtheion in the light of contemporary intellectual and architectural theory, exposing these archaeologists’ obsession with symmetry and their conviction that the ancient Athenians were too rational a civilization to have produced a building as complex and radical as the Erechtheion. Hawes’ contribution to the controversy promises to be a valuable addition to the legacy of this puzzling building’s impact on archaeology and architecture.

Word Count : 250

Time Requested: 15 minutes

Open Session

Bibliography:

- Dinsmoor, W. B. 1950. *The Architecture of Ancient Greece*. London: B. T. Batsford.
Dörpfeld, W. 1904. "Der ursprünglichen Plan des Erechtheion," *AM* 29.
Dörpfeld, W., and H. Schleif. 1942. *Erechtheion* Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn.
Paton, J. M., L. D. Caskey, H. N. Fowler, and G. P. Stevens. 1927. *The Erechtheum*
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.