The Athenian Acropolis in Context

In 490 BCE, Athens was, by Greek standards, a substantial city. It controlled all of Attica, a region that probably had about 200,000 inhabitants. Perhaps a tenth of these lived in Athens itself, packed into the cramped houses and twisting streets below the Acropolis.

Besides being an unusually large Greek city, Athens was also unusually democratic. The ecclesia, the assembly of all adult male citizens, convened forty times a year to debate and vote on important matters. Business was proposed to this assembly by the Boule, or council, whose five hundred members, chosen by lot for one-year terms, oversaw the administration of the city. The chief magistrates also served for a single year, and were chosen by lot from a pool of citizen volunteers.

Across the Aegean, the young democracy faced Persia, the largest and most powerful state to that point in world history. The Persian King of Kings Darius ruled an Empire that extended from northern Greece to Pakistan, and drew taxes from an estimated 25 million subjects. The Athenians had dared, however, to support a rebellion by the Greeks of Ionia against Persian rule.

And so, in 490 BCE, Darius sent an expeditionary force to conquer Athens. The Persians landed at Marathon, about 25 miles from the city, and the Athenians marched out to confront them. In the ensuing battle, 10,000 heavily-armored Greek hoplites decisively defeated 25,000 Persian light infantry: supposedly, 6,400 Persians were killed, but only 192 Athenians. Even if these numbers are suspect, there can be no doubting the reality of the victory, or its powerful impact on Athenian morale.

The Persians, however, were far from done. In 480 BCE, Darius’ son Xerxes invaded Greece at the head of the largest army the world had yet seen – perhaps as many as 200,000 men, supported by a large fleet. At Xerxes’ approach, the states of northern and central Greece promptly defected to the Persians. Athens, however, held firm.

Over the previous few years, under the leadership of Themistocles, the Athenians had constructed a large navy, and concluded alliances with Sparta and other cities. Aided by these allies, they attempted to halt the Persians at the narrow pass of Thermopylae; but a traitor showed the Persians a way around the pass, and the Greeks retreated, covered by the famous rearguard action of King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans.

As the Persian juggernaut rolled toward them, the Athenians took the radical step of evacuating their city and withdrawing to the island of Salamis, just off the Attic coast. The Persians reached Athens shortly afterward, killed the few defenders they found there, and burned the city to the ground. Under Xerxes’ direction, the stone temples of the Acropolis were systematically demolished, and Athena’s sacred olive tree was cut down and burnt.

The fate of Athens and Greece was decided in a naval battle a few days later, where the greater Persian numbers were neutralized by narrow straits of Salamis. The Athenians won a spectacular victory, sinking more than 200 Persian ships, and Xerxes withdrew from Attica.
After the allies defeated the Persian army the following summer, the Athenians created the Delian League, a coalition of cities sworn to resist Persian aggression. Although the Persians’ last attempt at a major offensive was halted in 469, the Athenians, who had developed a taste for imperial power, saw no reason to disband the League. Allies who tried to leave found themselves persuaded to remain by Athenian warships; and by the time the league treasury was moved to Athens in 454, it was clear that the Delian League had become an Athenian empire.

Over the next few decades, the prosperity brought by the empire fueled a remarkable cultural flowering in Athens. In less than a generation, Sophocles and Euripides composed their tragedies, Herodotus wrote the first history, Socrates began to ask his irritating questions, and Myron and Phidias created classical sculpture’s greatest masterpieces.

Through careful tactics and sheer eloquence, the aristocratic politician Pericles became the effective leader of the democracy during this brilliant period, passing a series of populist measures at home, pursuing an aggressive foreign policy abroad, and – most importantly for our purposes – sponsoring the reconstruction of the buildings destroyed by the Persians on the Acropolis.

I. The Temple of Athena Nike

The small building across the ramp from where you’re now standing is the Temple of Athena Nike, begun around 430 BCE and finished a few years later. This shrine was dedicated to Athena in her role as the goddess of victory in battle, and decorated with scenes of Athenian triumph. Before we discuss those details, however, it might be useful to make a few general comments on the design of ancient Greek temples.

Greek temple architecture is carpentry translated to stone. The first temples were simple wooden structures, which often featured a porch supported by tree trunks. The basic features of these early shrines were conserved in their stone descendants. The porch became a colonnaded portico, the rafters and fascia became the stone ridges and panels known as triglyphs and metopes, and the carved trim of the door and walls served as the basis of intricate stone moldings.

Over the course of the sixth century BCE, two regional styles of temple design developed. The older, Doric, was characterized by thick columns with unembellished capitals. The Propylaea at the head of the ramp you’re standing on is a (mostly) Doric building. The Temple of Athena Nike, by contrast, is an Ionic temple, which means that its columns are more slender and crowned by capitals with volutes, or scrolls.

In both Doric and Ionic temples, the entablature - the superstructure above the columns – was often decorated, and the Temple of Athena Nike was no exception. If you look closely, you can see a line of reliefs just below the eaves of the roof. On the side facing you, this frieze showed Athenians fighting other Greek warriors in an unidentified conflict. The Battle of Marathon appeared on the opposite side.

Despite its small size, the Temple of Athena Nike encapsulates the themes of the Periclean building program. It was carefully constructed and finely decorated, with subtle optical
refinements that accentuate its visual impact. Equally importantly, like every other structure on the Acropolis, it was a very conscious reconstruction of a building burned by Xerxes in 480 BCE, and was designed to celebrate Athens’ miraculous victory in the Persian Wars. We’ll talk more about this theme later.

In the meantime, look up at the Propylaea, the monumental gate of the Acropolis.

The Propylaea was begun in 437 BCE. Construction stopped five years later, when the building was not quite finished; if you look closely, you can see that some of the stone blocks of its walls still have their lifting bosses – the grooved knobs used to maneuver them into place during construction. Beyond the colonnaded portico, as you will see shortly, five doorways lead into the Acropolis. The central door, through which you’ll enter, was designed to accommodate the herds of sacrificial cows that passed through it during the Panathenaic procession.

Besides serving as an impressive entrance to Athens’ most important religious and representational space, the Propylaea filled a number of practical functions. The southwest wing, to your right, provided access and a shaded waiting area for visitors to the Temple of Athena Nike. The northwest wing, to your left, contained a dining room that doubled as a picture gallery.

II. The Propylaea

Imagine that it is mid-August, 431 BCE. As always on the day of the Panathenaic procession, the Acropolis is crowded. Hundreds of other spectators are standing and sweating along the processional route – rowers from the fleet with heavily-muscled arms and weathered tunics, women in broad-brimmed sun hats, and a few Scythian policemen with striped trousers and leather whips.

A hot wind whips grit into your face. Wiping your eyes with the sleeve of your tunic, you look toward the Propylaea, which is shrouded with scaffolding. Construction stopped about a year ago, when the assembly decided that more money was needed for the war with Sparta.

Turning your head the other way, toward the Parthenon, you are almost blinded by the polished robes of the bronze statue of Athena in front of the temple, thirty feet tall, and carrying a spear whose gilded tip can be seen for miles around. Beyond the bronze Athena is the Parthenon itself, the pride of Athens. Even from here, you can see the vibrantly-painted sculptures of the west pediment.

The scuffling of sandals on marble draws your attention back to the Propylaea, where the Panathenaic procession is finally emerging. Leading, as always, are the Arrephoroi – four little girls carrying a new robe for the statue of Athena. Athena’s priestesses walk just behind, leading a herd of sacrificial cows through the central gate. Contingent after contingent of citizens follows, each swelling the crowd around the Parthenon and the altar of Athena.

Suddenly, with a clatter of hooves, a group of young horsemen rides through the Propylaea, cloaks billowing in the wind. The crowd applauds, and cheers louder as ten gray-bearded men appear just behind the horsemen, walking at a dignified pace. These are the generals, responsible
for Athens’ defense against Sparta; and the tall, thin man at their head, carrying a polished hoplite’s helmet under his right arm, is Pericles.

In little more than a year, Pericles and about a quarter of the Athenian population will lose their lives to plague. Within a generation, a Spartan garrison will occupy the Acropolis. And within a century, Athens and the rest of the Greek city-states will be absorbed into the world-spanning empire of Alexander the Great. But through this era of decline and defeat, and through all the centuries since, the marble buildings of the Acropolis will endure, carrying the legacy of Pericles and the Athenian Golden Age to the present day.

III. The Erechtheion: North Side

Although the Erechtheion was planned, and perhaps begun, as early as the mid-430s BCE, the bulk of the construction took place between 421 and 406, during and despite the cataclysmic Peloponnesian War.

Before we discuss the gods worshipped here, it might be useful to briefly review how Greek temples worked. Unlike a church or mosque or synagogue, a Greek temple was not designed to hold a congregation. It functioned, instead, as a shelter for the cult statue that embodied the god, and as a repository for valuable offerings. All sacrifices and other rituals took place outside, typically at an altar in front of the temple.

Unusually for a Greek temple, the Erechtheion housed multiple cults. This complex function is reflected in the building’s design. The Erechtheion has three doors, and three porticoes to match. The north portico, which you’re currently facing, shelters a natural rift in the bedrock, which the Athenians believed had been created by Zeus’ thunderbolt shortly after the foundation of their city.

The associated myth is worth telling. During the reign of Kekrops, the first king of Athens, Poseidon and Athena competed over who was to be the city’s patron god. To show his power, Poseidon struck the Acropolis with his trident, opening a deep well filled with sea water. In response, Athena planted the first olive tree beside Poseidon’s well. The two gods were on the verge of fighting when Zeus sent a thunderbolt down to the Acropolis to separate them. A divine council was called to decide the issue, and declared Athena patroness of the young city.

The Erechtheion was constructed on the traditional site of this myth. The scar in the bedrock gouged by Zeus’ thunderbolt was revered, as mentioned, in the floor of portico in front of you; and if you look at portico’s ceiling, you’ll see a square hole just left of the door, which may have been left to mark the path of the thunderbolt. The saltwater well supposedly created by Poseidon’s trident was located just inside that door; according to one ancient writer, the sound of crashing waves could be heard there whenever a south wind blew.
IV. The Erechtheion: East Side

You should be standing in front of the east portico of the Erechtheion. This was the building’s main façade, and the entrance to the chamber that housed its greatest treasure: the ancient wooden statue of Athena Polias.

Athena, the goddess of wisdom, strategy, handicrafts, and heroism, was worshipped throughout Greece under many different local titles. Her most famous incarnation, however, was Athena Polias – that is, Athena of the city, the guardian of Athens.

The wooden cult statue of Athena Polias was already ancient in the classical period. According to legend, it had fallen from the sky; it may have actually been a thousand-year-old relic from the Bronze Age. Although we do not know exactly what the statue looked like, it seems to have been life-size and rather crudely carved. It wore golden jewelry and a robe that was renewed every year at the end of the Panathenaic procession, when the statue was ritually dressed by a group of Athenian women. The rest of the year, it stood alone in the Erechtheion’s main chamber, illuminated by a perpetual lamp with an asbestos wick.

V. The Erechtheion: South Side

Stand with your back to the Parthenon, and look toward the south portico of the Erechtheion. The Caryatids – that is, the female statues that serve as the portico’s columns – are dressed as worshippers, and originally held bowls in their right hands for pouring libations. They were probably intended to represent worshippers at the shrine of the cult housed in this corner of the building, which was dedicated to the mythical Athenian king Erichthonius.

Even in the classical era, Erichthonius was an obscure figure. He was sometimes identified with Erechtheus, an equally shadowy early king of Athens, and seems to have been worshipped alongside Poseidon in the Erechtheion. For our purposes, he is of interest only for the myth describing his conception.

According to that story, Athena came one day to Hephaestus, the smith god, with an order for new armor. Hephaestus, however, had a thing for tall women in bronze, and made advances. Athena wanted nothing to do with him; but Hephaestus began to chase after her. When he had nearly caught up, the smith god – who was apparently rather excitable – ejaculated onto Athena’s leg. Disgusted, the goddess wiped off the semen with a bit of wool. The wool fell to the ground near Athens, impregnating mother Earth; and not long after, Earth brought forth the baby Erichthonius. Athena found the infant, and gave him to king Kekrops of Athens, who raised Erichthonius in his palace on the Acropolis.

This story nicely illustrates the political dimension of Greek myth. Erichthonius was thought to be an ancestor of all Athenians; and since he was descended both from the Earth and from Hephaestus, the Athenians could claim to be at once products of their native soil and children of the gods.
VI. The Parthenon: West Façade

In late September, 480 BCE, Xerxes, King of Kings, inspected the ruins of the Acropolis. He strode deliberately, sunlight gleaming on the lotus blossoms and rampant lions worked into his robe. Two servants fanned him as he walked, and a team of sweepers cleared every cinder from the track of his crimson sandals.

Standing, perhaps, where you are now, he surveyed the heap of tumbled and blackened stone that had been a large, half-finished temple before his soldiers began their work of destruction. Then he moved on, to watch the demolition of the Acropolis walls and plan the final defeat of the Athenians.

Only a few days later, as Xerxes watched from his silver-footed throne, the Athenians and their allies crushed the Persian fleet at Salamis. Within a month, the Persians withdrew to the north, and the Athenians reclaimed their city. For a generation, however, the Acropolis remained much as Xerxes saw it: a wasteland of rubble and ash, left untouched as a memorial to the Persian Wars.

This began to change in 447 BCE, when Pericles undertook the reconstruction of the unfinished temple destroyed by the Persians. On the foundations of that building, the Parthenon began to rise. Construction, financed by the revenues of the empire, was complete within nine years.

The Parthenon is remarkable for several reasons. First, it was unusually grand. Although bigger temples were constructed in Sicily and Asia Minor, the Parthenon was the largest on the Greek mainland at the time of its construction. Its design, moreover, was exceptionally careful. To enhance the visual impact of the building, the columns swell slightly in the center, and the temple platform arches a few inches upward. The Parthenon’s sculptural decoration, likewise, was more abundant, better-carved, and more thematically-unified than that of any other ancient Greek building.

Most remarkable of all, the Parthenon seems to have never functioned as a temple. Animal sacrifice was the central act of Greek religion; but the Parthenon lacked an altar. It did have a cult statue – a colossal gold and ivory Athena sculpted by the great Phidias – but this seems to have been appreciated more as an artistic masterpiece than as an object of worship.

In short, though the Parthenon looked like a temple, it was something quite different: a colossal thanksgiving offering to Athena for Athens’ victories in the Persian Wars. It used the foundations, and many of the marble blocks, of its burned predecessor; and the sculptures of its metopes (as we shall see) celebrated the triumph of civilization (that is, the Greeks) over barbarism (AKA the Persians).

On a more practical note, the Parthenon was designed to serve as the state treasury. Valuable offerings and large stocks of bullion were guarded within the thick inner walls. Even the robes of Athena’s great statue were designed to be removable, so that the 2,500 pounds of gold they contained could be melted down for public use in an emergency.
For Pericles and his contemporaries, finally, the Parthenon was a symbol of Athenian power. Much of the treasure it contained was tribute, and the building itself was constructed with money levied from Athenian subjects. Although the victories it celebrated were over the Persians, the Parthenon embodied the uncomfortable truth that Athenian freedom and democracy were founded on the subjugation of other Greek cities.

VII. The Parthenon: North Side

Most Greek temples consisted of a single enclosed room, or cella, surrounded by a colonnade. The Parthenon, by contrast, had a double cella: two unconnected chambers, each entered from a door in one of the temple’s facades. The larger cella, accessed from the west (where you were standing a moment ago), contained the great statue of Athena.

This masterpiece, created by the sculptor Phidias, stood about 35 feet tall, and cost more than the Parthenon itself. The goddess’ face and arms were molded from gleaming ivory, and her eyes were inlaid with gemstones. Her robe was coated with gold plates, designed (as mentioned earlier) to be removable in case of fiscal emergency. In her right hand, Athena carried a life-sized winged victory; her left hand rested on a shield fifteen feet in diameter, which showed the Amazons’ mythical attack on the Acropolis – an allusion to the Persian invasion. Windows, lamps, and a reflecting pool bathed the statue in a nimbus of golden light.

As you’ve probably noticed, the Parthenon’s interior is less impressive these days. Phidias’ Athena held court in her gilded chamber for more than seven hundred years. In the mid-third century CE, however, the Parthenon was sacked by a band of marauding Goths, and Phidias’ statue burned. Afterward, centuries of service as a church and mosque transformed the Parthenon’s interior, and the Venetian mortar that destroyed most of the building in 1687 completely obliterated the room in which the statue once stood.

VIII. The Parthenon: East Façade

According to Plutarch, Phidias, creator of the great statue of Athena, supervised the Parthenon’s sculptural program. Although he probably didn’t create any of the exterior sculptures himself, he likely established the general themes of the program, and may have even made sketches or clay models to guide the men who carved them.

Particularly in the case of the metopes, the sculptures, which were produced by multiple artists, vary considerably in quality. Some pieces are superb; others are barely competent. All, however, are representative of the high classical style, which combined naturalistic poses with idealized faces and bodies. Gods and mortals are portrayed with the same ageless beauty and effortless grace. Contrary to our notions of classical simplicity, however, the sculptures of the Parthenon were brightly painted.

The Parthenon’s sculptural decoration was concentrated in three parts of the building: the metopes, the pediment, and the frieze. We’ll discuss each of these in turn.

Look up at the façade of the Parthenon.
The reliefs you can see just above the columns, separated from one another by three vertical lines, are the metopes. Metopes evolved from the terracotta panels set between the wooden rafters of early Greek temples. The vertical lines that separate them, called triglyphs, are stylized evocations of the rafter ends that stuck out between those panels. The Parthenon originally had 92 metopes – 14 on both ends, 32 on each of the long sides. The metopes on each face of the building depicted scenes from a single myth. In keeping with the Parthenon’s function as a monument to Athenian victory in the Persian Wars, all of these myths celebrated the triumph of Greeks (or their gods) over barbarism and chaos.

The metopes of the west façade, facing the propylaea, represented the Athenians’ mythical defense of the Acropolis against the Amazons. Those of the north side, where you were just standing, narrated the Trojan War. The south metopes depicted the combat of the Lapiths and centaurs. And the metopes of the east façade, in front of you, showed the Gigantomachy – the gods’ defeat of the giants who sought to claim Olympus.

Although the east metopes were badly damaged in late antiquity, the basic scheme is clear enough. Each metope showed a god either striking down a giant or riding toward combat on a chariot. Zeus and Hera appeared in the center panels. The fourth metope from the left showed Athena, and the fourth from the right depicted Hercules.

The triangular gables, or pediments, of the facades were filled with sculpture. Each pediment contained about 25 over life-size statues, arranged to narrate a myth connected with the goddess Athena. The west pediment, facing the Propylaea, depicted the contest of Athena and Poseidon. The east pediment, facing you, showed the birth of Athena.

Before he married Hera, Zeus took the goddess Metis, wisest of the immortals, as his consort. He soon learned, however, of a disturbing prophecy: any child Metis bore would be wiser than its father. Fearing that he might conceive children who would overthrow him, Zeus did the only reasonable thing and ate Metis. Unbeknownst to Zeus, however, Metis was already pregnant. A few months later, Zeus began to suffer from a splitting headache. To relieve the pressure, he ordered Hephaestus to crack him over the head with an ax. The god of medicine, you see, had not yet been born. Hephaestus complied, and Athena emerged, fully-grown and fully-armored, from Zeus’ skull.

We aren’t sure how this myth was presented on the east pediment. If the composition was anything like that of the west pediment, it would been intensely dynamic. We might imagine Zeus seated in the center, with Athena leaping forth on one side, and Hephaestus, ax in hand, staggering back on the other. Around these central figures were the other gods, presumably posed in various attitudes of surprise and wonder.

A few are still partially preserved. In the left corner of the pediment, you can see the heads of the horses that pulled the chariot of Helios, god of the sun. Since the birth of Athena took place at dawn, Helios is shown in the act of rising into the pediment. The reclining figure to the right of the horses is probably Dionysus, the god of wine; his missing hand likely held up a goblet. The only figures visible in the right corner of the pediment are the heads of three horses. These
belonged to the chariot of Selene, goddess of the moon, who was shown in the act of “setting” through the horizon of the cornice. Unlike the horses of Helios, which seem to explode onto the pediment, the horses of Selene are visibly exhausted, worn out by their night-long ride.

The final component of the Parthenon’s sculptural decoration was the frieze, a band of reliefs carved into the outer wall of the cella. Although art historians disagree about the details of the frieze’s subject and significance, it almost certainly represents the Panathenaic procession. On this side of the Parthenon, the frieze was located on top of the inner row of columns. If you haven’t already, I encourage you to visit the new Acropolis museum to see the excellent reproductions of the frieze there.

IX. The Temple of Rome and Augustus

You are standing in front of the remains of the Temple of Rome and Augustus, a small circular building constructed nearly five centuries after the Parthenon. What happened between can be summarized briefly.

The last years of Pericles’ life coincided with the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, a generation-long conflict with Sparta that ended in Athens’ total defeat. Although the democracy was eventually restored, Athens would never again rule the Aegean. In the mid-fourth century BCE, Phillip II of Macedon reduced Athens and the other Greek cities to the status of client states. His son Alexander, who managed to conquer the entire Persian Empire before his thirtieth birthday, confirmed Athens’ political irrelevance.

Even Alexander, however, recognized the past glories of Athens. If you look above the columns and below the metopes of the Parthenon’s façade, you can see a line of holes, two between each column. These mark where the Athenians hung the Persian shields that Alexander sent them after the Battle of the Granicus, his first great victory.

After Alexander’s death, Athens became a plaything of his generals. Perhaps the most colorful of these was Demetrios the besieger, who actually lived in the rear chamber of the Parthenon for several months, and had the eyebrow-raising habit of holding orgies there. Most Hellenistic kings, however, treated the Acropolis with respect. Eumenes II of Pergamum, for example, constructed a large stoa along the south side of the Acropolis, and was later honored with an impressive bronze portrait in front of the Propylaea. The tall stone pillar at which this tour began was the base of that statue.

The Romans, who effectively controlled Greece from 146 BCE onward, revered Athens as a cultural center, to the point that it became customary for elite Roman adolescents to spend a year or two there pretending to listen to philosophers and teachers of rhetoric. Although the city’s relationship with Rome was strained during the civil wars of the late Republic, in which the Athenians consistently supported the losing side, it was restored under Augustus, the first Roman emperor.

The Temple of Rome and Augustus was a small, pavilion-like structure, remarkable chiefly for its classicizing architecture. The nine Ionic columns that held up its conical roof closely imitated
those of the Erechtheion. Even its dedicatory inscription employed archaic letter forms. It seems to have been unthinkable, for both the Athenians and the Romans, that any new building in the Parthenon’s shadow would not imitate its Classical predecessors. For them, as for us, the Acropolis was inseparable from the Age of Pericles.