

The Parthenon: A Symbol of Civic Pride

Will Karp



Prologue (a personal note)

When I was visiting the British Museum just one year ago (for the first and only time) and standing a couple of feet from the statues of the Parthenon Pediment and the Caryatid from the Erechtheion, never in my imagination would I think that I would be writing a paper about the Parthenon! I had to make sure to read the title cards repeatedly to be sure I was seeing what I thought I was seeing. Admittedly my main sense of being overwhelmed was in the technical aspects of the sculptures. The way the sculptors achieved the astounding effect of the flowing robes clinging to the body as if you could see right through them. Totally mesmerizing. The sheer size and the wonderment of what tools and techniques were used, and who carved these, and how did they get way up to the pediment, and...How did these all get to England, and Why in England? – all these filled my head. Being ignorant of ancient history and art history, the Meaning of these sculptures, and the Culture that brought them about, were really not of prime importance to me at the time. Now that I've gone back to my photos that I took of these statues, and gone back to the British Museum website, I see that the whole room was a "re-creation" of the entire Pantheon, full of metopes and friezes extending all along the walls - which at the time, I looked at briefly and couldn't have cared less about – I didn't know what they were all about, and they did not have the emotional effect on me that the huge pediment statues had, or the Colossal bust of Ramases II or the Easter Island gigantic stone statue. So in retrospect, I guess it was "size matters" at the time that got my attention. Anyway, now, after being exposed to the nature of this artwork, I am looking at all this with a whole new perspective and respect. (And sort of kicking myself that it took so long for me to come to an initial understanding of these works of art on a historical level.)



By the way, that gnawing question I had about Why England has these – I did a bit of googling on that, and found a nice history and explanation (from the Museum’s standpoint) at: http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/statements/parthenon_sculptures/facts_and_figures.aspx

The Acropolis is the highest point in Athens, and the Greeks were a people devoted to their stories, legends, heroes, and gods. What better place than the top of a high plateau to build structures to hold the images and votive offerings for their gods. While earlier temples were built on the Acropolis, it was Pericles, general of the Athenians, who initiated the reconstruction and enlargement of the complex from 447 to 438 BCE. (Additional work on sculptures continued to 432 BCE.) Greece had soundly defeated the Persians in 480 BCE after the Persians had destroyed the Acropolis. The Persians were barbarians in as their methods would include killing all captive males, and selling females and children into slavery. Pericles in the meantime, built up a coalition of surrounding city states and organized the Delian League which would work together to protect the mutual interests of its members. Pericles conveniently manipulated the funds of the league to produce the capital required to build the Parthenon.

To address the significance of the Parthenon in terms of “the triumph of civilization over barbarism” I’ll consider three aspects of “Civilization.”

Celebrating civilization through visual harmony, unity and order over chaos

Pericles’ vision was to produce a design for the Parthenon that would be harmonious and impressive in all aspects. Just as the Egyptians and Greeks had their canon of proportions for the human body, so did the Greeks develop standards for design of their temples. From my own interest in the technical aspects of design, the most memorable “highlights” about the Parthenon are the architectural design elements. The mathematical “perfect” proportions, the ideal length, width and height ratios of the building, the calculation of the number of columns being $x=2y+1$, the diameter and height ratios of the columns, the narrowing of the corner columns (due to being in more light) to give the illusion of all columns actually being the same diameter, the slight raising of the stylobates in the center to give the illusion of really being level, changing the depth of reliefs depending on how high the sculptures were located on the friezes or metopes, are some of the principles that only a civilized and organized society could come up with, or care about. What a way to impress a potential enemy. And make its own society proud.

Celebrating civilization by memorializing its victory over enemies

Being Doric design on the outside, there are 92 metopes. These all depict in high relief, battle scenes of one sort or another - the sack of Troy, battles with gigantomachy, amazonomachy, and centauromachy. The depictions on the centauromachy metopes refer to the defeat over the Persians. The fact that these battle scenes are visible on the outside would make them clearly visible to outsiders as a reminder of Athen’s power over its barbarian enemies, and to citizens as a reminder of their success. Since marble was in high supply, the building and its reliefs and statues are all in white marble, painted at the time.

Celebrating civilization of society through the devotion to the goddess Athena Parthenos

The interior of the building is devoted to the goddess of wisdom and warfare, the virgin Athena. Inside is the cella, an area surrounded by a smaller set of columns (Ionic design) with the same ratio and same Algebra I formula as the outside. In its center is a 38 foot gold and ivory statue of Athena. Phidias, the designer of the Parthenon is credited with personally sculpting the gigantic sculpture. The enormity of the scale is a triumph in itself, only of what a civilized and organized society could pull off. Carved into the friezes encompassing the entire interior are high relief scenes of the Panathenic Procession, a huge festival held every four years to celebrate the Athena Parthenos as well as Athens itself. On the exterior of the building (facing east-west) in one of the pediments, is located the story of the birth of Athena, having been born from the head of Zeus. Phidias figured out how to use the triangular shape of the pediment to a new degree of reality, by showing a chariot driver’s arms and the top of its horse’s head

popping up and emerging from the bottom of the left side of the pediment. The right end of the pediment shows the three goddesses present at the time of Athena's birth nicely positioned to fit into the tapering off of the triangular shape. As a fascinating point of interest, some additional research and computer modeling indicates that the goddess on the left, would have heard the commotion of the birth (in the center of the pediment) and the position of her torso indicates her missing head would have been turned toward the center, and her right foot already can be seen moving back in getting ready to stand up. The other two would also have had their heads starting to turn to the center as well. That kind of detail, and the details in the folds of the robes show what level of excellence the artists of Athens had reached, another indication of a triumph of civilization.