

Before The Parthenon: The Early History

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The Parthenon has survived to represent Greece, its history and the splendour of its past. However, this was not its original intention. It was conceived in the Periclean atmosphere of mid 5th century Athens to glorify the Athenian *polis*, and to celebrate its victories, achievements and supremacy. It was named for Athena Parthenos, the patron goddess of Athens, and the deity who embodied the new Athenian spirit and its attitudes, which had developed out of the past four decades. As a symbol who represented the ‘New Athens of crafts and commerce and naval empire’, Athena was also the ‘goddess of arts and sciences, of wisdom, of reason, of intelligence and humanity’, which were ‘qualities and characteristics Pericles claimed for his Athens and its citizens’.¹ Two other powerful impulses contributed to forging this new Athenian ethos: anti-Persian sentiment and the rise of Athenian imperialism. Anti-Persian feeling promoted the awareness of the barbarian and the outsider, which along with the new imperial democracy had a visible influence on the presentation and decoration of the Parthenon.

Early in the 5th Century BCE, the experience of the Persian invasion dramatically altered the way the Athenian thought of the ‘other’. In 490 the Athenians and their allies heroically defended themselves against the Persians at Marathon. However a decade later the Persians returned and assaulted Athens. Having fled their city, the Athenians returned in 479 to find it levelled, sacked and ruined by the Persians; temples were destroyed, houses burnt, treasures looted. The elation of their victories against the Persians at Marathon in 490, Salamis in 480 and Plataia in 479 had waned in the face of the total destruction of their city. ‘A thick layer of ash over the Agora is the clearest archaeological evidence of

¹ Donald Kegan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*, Free Press (New York: 1991). p. 161.

the thoroughness of the destruction'.² The Athenians eventually cleared and buried much of the rubble left from the sack. However not all the debris was interred. Broken statues, smashed pottery and architectural ruins left scattered on the Acropolis would serve as a visual reminder of 'the impious barbarians who had ravaged their sanctuary. The rubble left exposed fed the Athenian grievances and was thus its own kind of war memorial.'³

Now the Athenian psyche had been indelibly impressed with the image of the other, the outsider and the barbarian. The tendency to project non-Hellenic attitudes and customs onto the 'other' became a defence, which entered the Athenian ethos at this time. Their experiences of the barbaric aggressor also helped to shape the determination to protect their city. Edith Hall suggests that it was during this period that the image of the barbarian was impressed upon the Athenian:

It was not until the fifth century that the archaic world's ranks of divine, supernatural, and inhuman antagonists of civilization were to be joined forever by the barbarian.⁴

In 472 BCE Aeschylus produced the *Persians*, which condemned the Athenian enemy on moral, ethical and religious grounds. Aeschylus' voice confirmed that 'the Athenian rationale for the victory over the barbarians had already begun to take shape'.⁵ This 'victory over the barbarian' would later inspire the Parthenon building program.

During this period the Athenian temperament tended to polarise anything non-Athenian into the 'other'. This 5th Century principle of polarity is often described by the extremes of *sophrosyne* versus *hybris*. Moderation and self-restraint (*sophrosyne*), an Athenian attribute, was a polar opposite to the lack of moderation and impiety (*hybris*) of their enemies (i.e. the Persians). In the Athenian atmosphere of the second quarter of the 5th century these polar opposites also included male versus female, civilised versus barbarian, culture versus nature etc. A 'mythology of cultural antithesis and confrontation'⁶ explained the struggle with the barbarian as well as its outcome. The Parthenon inherited this tendency towards expressing the conflict between the Athenian and the barbarian.

The Persian devastation on the Acropolis included the original Parthenon, which had begun construction after the victory at Marathon. Athena's temple had been burnt; 'only the jagged profile of

² Russell Meiggs, "The Political Implications of the Parthenon" from G.T.W. Hooker, *Parthenos and Parthenon*, Oxford University Press (Oxford: 1963). p. 37.

³ Jeffrey M. Hurwit, *The Athenian Acropolis*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1999). p. 142.

⁴ Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, Clarendon Press (Oxford: 1989). p. 53.

⁵ David Castriota, *Myth, Ethos and Actuality*, University of Wisconsin Press (Madison, WI: 1992). p. 23.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 19.

its lower walls marked its place'⁷. Columns intended for the temple were used in the refortification of the Acropolis as another memorial to the destruction. What had remained in tact was the Athenian resolve and determination to prosper. A new foreign policy was quickly adopted spurred by the spirit that 'the best defence was a sound offence'⁸. The city walls were rebuilt and 'the first public building that was undertaken was for defence'⁹. During the same period (478/7), a new alliance amongst Greeks was formed as a defence against further Persian invasions. Athens was the principal partner in this alliance, the Delian League, and responsible for its military leadership and the management of its revenue. While Athens swiftly took action to defend itself none of its temples were refurbished and no new temple building programs were initiated with the possible exception of the City Eleusion, which held the mystery rituals. From the Persian sack in 479 until 447, when the building of the Parthenon began, the Acropolis was left almost as a ruin. Yet in the same period Athens's influence of the Aegean dominated and democratic and cultural growth in Athens prospered.

This lack of reparation or construction of sacred buildings can be explained by the Oath of Plataia, sworn by the Greeks before the battle of 479. This oath suggests that the Athenians vowed not to rebuild any temples but to retain the ruins 'as a memorial of the sacrilege of the barbarians'¹⁰. Why building recommenced in the forties is explained by the Peace of Callias, a peace with Persia, which the Athenians considered 'freed them from their oath'¹¹. While the oath of Plataia and the Peace of Callias were critical agreements, which satisfactorily explain the gap in temple construction, there is considerable scholastic doubt to their authenticity. Whether the oath was genuine was doubted as early as the 4th century. Theopompos, in the 4th century, ridiculed the oath claiming it was a patriotic invention by the Athenians. The Peace of Callias is also questioned since it was not reported by Thucydides, Herodotus or in Plutarch's *Pericles*. However both the oath and the peace treaty are still the most satisfactory explanations for the hiatus in the reparation of temples and Hurwit suggests that 'odds are that both the oath and the peace are authentic'¹². Meiggs reiterates that the 'pattern of events in the forties strongly supports the case for a peace'¹³.

Though there was conflict within and without the *polis*, Athens thrived in this period. Two of Athens dominant figures since the Persian conflict had begun, Themistocles and Cimon, had both been

⁷ John Boardman, *The Parthenon and its Sculptures*, Thames and Hudson (London: 1985). p. 20.

⁸ Jeffrey M. Hurwit, *The Athenian Acropolis*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1999). p. 138.

⁹ Russell Meiggs, "The Political Implications of the Parthenon", p.37.

¹⁰ Diodorus (xi 29.2), quoted in Appendix 10, Russell Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire*, Clarendon Press (Oxford: 1962). p.504.

¹¹ Russell Meiggs, "The Political Implications of the Parthenon", p 39.

¹² Jeffrey M. Hurwit, *The Athenian Acropolis*, p. 157.

¹³ Russell Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire*, p.134.

ostracised. Athenian control of the Delian league had fostered rivalry and conflict with other Greek states. Athens subjugated members who wanted to leave the Delian league thereby keeping firm control on the rim of the Aegean. Intermittent conflict with Sparta erupted lasting nearly fifteen years. Athens also battled and defeated both the Corinthians and Boeotians. Gradually, after the death of Ephialtes in 461, Pericles became a popular statesman. Under his leadership democracy and imperialism combined to promote the growth of Athens.

Five years before the truce with the Persians the treasury of the Delian league was relocated to Athens from the sacred and neutral island of Delos. Pericles was now the prominent statesman who decreed in 450/49 that the Delian League's reserves should be allocated to the reconstruction of Athens's temples, destroyed by the Persians.¹⁴ Pericles quelled opposition to the use of the treasury for funding the Athenian building program. The first year of the Parthenon accounts (447/6) 'implies that the Delian League reserve had been amalgamated with Athens's Treasury before the Parthenon was begun'¹⁵. Athenian imperialism was now funding the Parthenon. Tributes collected from the other states of Greece for Athens's protection of the Aegean were now channelled into Periclean building projects. The most memorable of these was the Parthenon begun in 447.

While the construction of the Parthenon was a collaborative effort it has come to be known as a 'Periclean building'¹⁶; a symbol of the culmination of Athens's triumph over the Persian as well as a monument to the power and success of the Periclean democracy. Conceived in the atmosphere of the mid 5th Century by Pericles and the Assembly of Athens, the Parthenon was informed and shaped by the sweeping changes, which had affected Athens. These influences had begun at Marathon, a battle that galvanised the Athenian spirit. A decade later the Athenians saw first hand the destructive power of the Persian, which ignited a new defensive position and inspired a new ethos. Both contributed to democratic reform and an imperialistic policy, which appeared to enfranchise the Athenian citizen and stimulate cultural, political and creative growth. Finally with the Peace of Callias, the oath the Athenians had sworn at Palatial to not rebuild their temples could be rescinded. Without the threat of the Persians and with the funds from the Delian League's treasury, Pericles was free to commence his building program as a tribute to Victory and a celebration of Athens. Through the mythic images, which were to be sculpted on the metopes, the frieze and the pediments of the Parthenon, Athens's triumphant story could be told and retold.

¹⁴ Russell Meiggs, "The Political Implications of the Parthenon", p 40.

¹⁵ Russell Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire*, p. 133.

¹⁶ Russell Meiggs, "The Political Implications of the Parthenon", p 45.

TIME LINE: The Athenian Empire 5th Century

- 490 First Persian expedition to mainland Greece
Destruction of Eretria (Euboea)
Battle of Marathon
Foundation for original Parthenon began
- 480 Great Persian expedition by land to Greece
Battles of Artemisium, Thermopylae and Salamis
Athens evacuated and sacked by the Persians
- 479 Battle of Plataia; Athenians return home
- 478/7 Foundation of the Delian League
Refortification of Athens (fortification walls)
- 477-67 Naval Campaigns of Cimon
- 467 Battle of Eurymoden (Thrace); destroys Persian threat
- 471 Themistocles ostracised
- 465-3 Revolt and subjugation of Thasos (no longer wanted to be part of Delian League)
- 461 Cimon ostracised
Radical reforms under Ephialtes; Ephialtes murdered
Pericles' supremacy ('first man of Athens')
- 459/8 Battle of Megara; Athenians defeat Corinthians
- 457 Battle of Oenophyta; Athenians defeat Boeotians
- 456 Failure of the expedition to Egypt
- 454 Treasury of the Delian league relocated to Athens; Athens now has blatant control of the league and its treasury
- 451 Five year truce between Sparta and Athens
Cyprus campaign (Cyprus under Persian rule)
Death of Cimon
- 449 Peace of Callias
- 448 No tribute collected
- 447 Commencement of building the Parthenon