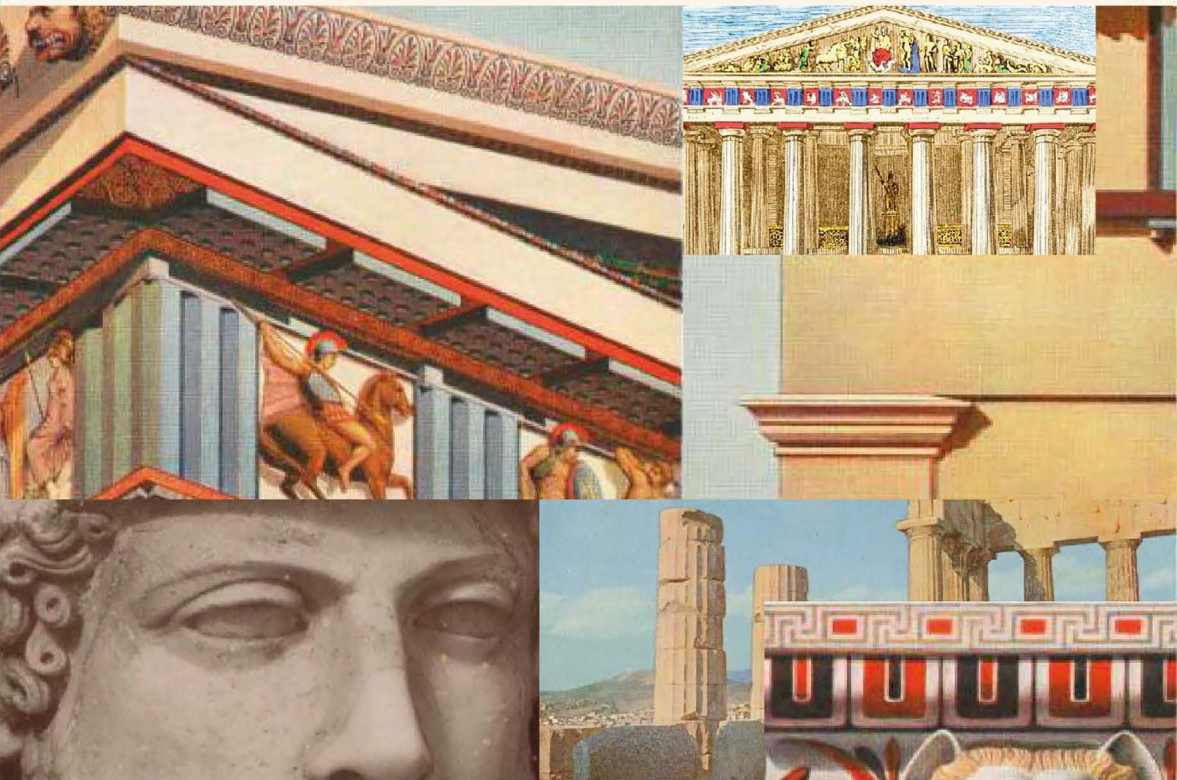


HUBRIS

PERICLES, THE PARTHENON, AND THE INVENTION OF ATHENS



DAVID STUTTARD

HUBRIS

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at the height of its powers, reinterpreting
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AND THE INVENTION OF ATHENS
DAVID STUTTARD

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*Let us go now to Athena's glistening land
to see the soil of Cecrops, so beloved, the home to such good men,
where they respect the sacred rites that must remain unspoken,
where the building that reveals the holy mysteries
welcomes initiates,
where offerings are consecrated to the gods of heaven,
where there are temples with high roofs and statues
and the most revered processions for the blessed gods,
and there are sacrifices crowned with garlands for the gods,
and feasts and banquets in their proper season.*

—ARISTOPHANES, *CLOUDS*

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Map 1 The Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea.



Map 2 Greece and Asia Minor.



On the Term *Hubris*

In classical Greek, *hubris* originally meant a deliberate and dishonouring transgression of status boundaries, often involving physical violence, with specific reference to the boundaries that were believed to separate humanity from the divine. In English, the definition has been broadened to include overconfidence or pride. In this book, readers should especially bear the former definition in mind.

INTRODUCTION

THE GIRLS AND THE ROCK

Athens, June/July 430 B.C.

If they were terrified, the two girls could not show it. For the past year, they had lived on the Acropolis as servants of the goddess, cloistered, with the hawk-eyed priestess of Athena Polias (Athena Who Protects the City-State) watching their every move, supervising their performance of each ritual, teaching them the skills they needed to fulfil their sacred duty. A great loom dominated the small building where they lived, and many of their waking hours were spent there, watching women work long skeins of blue and saffron-yellow wool that gradually transformed into a rectangle of cloth showing scenes of gods and giants locked close in combat for possession of the cosmos, with Athena in prime, central position, helmeted, her snake-fringed aegis slung about her shoulders, her right arm raised, about to spear her fallen enemy, Enceladus, who writhed, defiant, at her feet.¹

Time had passed slowly, a blur of repetition in a circling of seasons as suns rose and set behind the high walls of their little compound, the one-roomed house and courtyard where the priestess granted them occasional permission to go out, play ball, and let off steam—they were, after all, just eleven years of age. But they were more than conscious of their status. Only the elite of the elite, the

crème de la crème, could be considered for the most prestigious post a girl could hope to hold, as representative of all her people, a link with an ancient past, an expiation of a legendary guilt.

It was how they were to expiate that guilt that terrified them most. Time and again the priestess had gone over it, what they must do, and more importantly what they must not on any account dream of doing. Almost the first thing they had been shown when they moved in a year before had been the entrance to the chasm in the rock, the vulva-shaped cleft, from which a passage tunnelled down into the darkness. They could recall the earthy smell, the heat, the haunting quality of the stale air, as if left over from another age. And they could visualize the wooden treads that had been fixed into the crevice's grey walls, a staircase leading down into the very womb of the Acropolis.²

The priestess had done her best to reassure them. It would be dark, but they could take it slowly. They could not afford to fall. The main danger came halfway: a hairpin turn. But keep on going, and the air would change again. The light would become stronger, albeit the faint light of moon and stars, but still enough to help them see where they were going. Soon, they would hear familiar sounds, the nighttime city, stray dogs barking, distant revellers, perhaps even the low murmuring of women as they hurried to the fountain house to fill heavy amphoras of water, desperate to be back home before the dawn.

At least those women knew what they were carrying. Before they set out on their journey, the priestess would present the girls with *kistai*, circular lidded baskets, which they must carry on their heads down through the rock until they reached the cavern on the slopes of the Acropolis, at the lower end of the great gash. From there it was a brief brisk walk around the Peripatos, the road round the Acropolis, to the Gardens of Aphrodite, blossoming with a rich harvest of sculpted genitalia, where they would exchange their baskets for two others, in all respects identical, which they must bring back through the fissure in the rock, up the steep muscle-stretching steps, and, as the moonlight bathed the sky and glinted off the statue of Athena rising up beyond the compound wall, entrust it to the waiting priestess of Athena.³

And then their duties would be over. They would have lived up to the name by which they had been known for the past year: Arrhe-



I.1 The entrance from the Acropolis to the fissure in the rock known as the Passage of the Arrhephoroi.



1.2 The Gardens of Aphrodite beneath the north face of the Acropolis.

phoroi, “those who carry something that must not be spoken of.” Undoubtedly, they had both speculated about what that “thing” might be. They knew the story of the princesses, their predecessors, who, like them, were entrusted with a box, although it was Athena, not her priestess who had given it to them, with orders not to open it or look inside. But curiosity had overcome them. They disobeyed. And what they saw drove them insane: a newborn baby with, instead of legs, a scaly serpent’s tail, conceived from semen wiped from Athena’s thigh with wool and thrown down on the rock, a monstrous baby born from the Acropolis itself.⁴

Dropping the box, those princesses had panicked, running, stumbling in terror off the high cliffs to their death. Only their sister, the sublime Pandrosus, had obeyed the goddess, and it was to mark her sense of duty and do penance for her siblings’ lack of it, that the Arrhephoroi performed their rituals every year, tending Athena’s sacred olive tree nearby, watching the weaving of a robe from wool, the fabric soaked (in myth) with semen from which the monstrous child was born, living in a house above the entrance to the crevice, returning sacred objects through the rock to Aphrodite, goddess of generation, conveying sacred objects

back through the vulvar tract of the Acropolis as if to a new birth—and overcoming their desire to raise the lid and look inside the basket.

As they dressed on that midsummer evening after sunset (for Greeks the start of a new day), shrugging on their special vestments, long robes that fell in pure white folds down to their ankles, the girls were justified in feeling fear. It was not just fear of what might be lurking in their caskets, though that was fearsome enough; or of the monsters they might encounter on their journey, creatures like the massive serpent which they knew lived near their compound or others which appeared to them in nightmares. It was the fear of what they would discover later that same day once they had discharged their obligation to the goddess, and their year as the Arrhephoroi was ended. For they had heard the news out of the lower city. Of war. Of plague. Of how the gods were abandoning Athens.⁵

Yet, the girls had done their best to keep those gods on side, not least by sacrificing a whole year of their young lives, marooned, imprisoned almost, on the rock—albeit in a gilded prison amid such awe-inspiring buildings and such vibrant statuary. They vividly remembered how at the start of their sequestered service they were taken to admire the frieze which had been carved high on the outer walls of the new temple, completed just a year before, and looking up excitedly saw set in pride of place above the stunning gold-and-ivory doors two sculpted figures—two young girls clothed in vestments that fell in pure white folds down to their ankles, sculpted Arrhephoroi presenting objects to a sculpted priestess, a mirror of themselves and of the duties that they must perform.⁶

If the role of the Arrhephoroi was so important—if they themselves were so important that men celebrated them in sculptures on Athena's temple—then they would overcome their terror and perform their duty without flinching. They would allow themselves to be absorbed into the rock, engulfed by darkness; and, after they had done what they must do, they would rise again onto the sacred rock of the Acropolis, transformed.

It was the sort of thing that made Athenians Athenian, as they had learned from myth and history and from the sculptures and the

buildings that surrounded them. As Pericles, their “first man,” had said just months before, Athens was the educator of all Greece. But cracks had been appearing in the city’s confidence. Old certainties were being questioned. Already there were some who spoke of ancient curses being fulfilled or muttered about hubris being met by divine punishment. In the year the girls had spent on the Acropolis, war had come to Athens, and plague had broken out. People had been dying in streets and temples. The stench of burning corpses from incessant pyres was draped like a damp rag across the city, and there was no end in sight. And pious men were asking why the gods were angry. As the girls left the safe haven of their house on the Acropolis for the last time later that same day, they would discover that the educator of all Greece was facing a harsh lesson of its own.⁷

~ ~ ~

Today, images of the Acropolis are everywhere. The Parthenon is known across the world, a shorthand symbol, an icon for modern Greece, and in recent decades great care has been lavished on its curation. As columns have been cleaned and repaired, it has bristled with scaffolding as experts consider the extent of future restorations; an impressive museum has been opened to the south of the Acropolis exhibiting artworks from the temple with intelligence, ingenuity, and sensitivity; and all the while a great debate has gathered pace, as the Greek government demands the return of sculptures scattered far and wide across the globe (especially in London).

Such is the interest in the Parthenon and ancient Greece that in the twenty-first century A.D. not only do more people set foot on the Acropolis each year than visited in all of antiquity, but it is probable that more words are written about it in a day—perhaps even an hour—than have survived from the entirety of what we call the classical world. The paucity of our written sources is remarkable. Important documents have not survived—works such as a treatise written by the Parthenon’s architect, Ictinus, or works by other practitioners referenced by later Roman specialists such as Vitruvius, which explored specific architectural refinements. And while we have fragments of the financial accounts—a marble slab recording construc-

tion costs for the temple and its towering gold-and-ivory statue—and while two generations later the orator Demosthenes praised “the beauty of the Parthenon,” no contemporary literature explicitly explores the intention behind the building or its impact on Athenians and other Greeks. Only the late fifth-century-B.C. historian Thucydides comes close, observing that if Athens were to be abandoned but her temples left intact, “her appearance would suggest that she was twice as strong as she actually is.”⁸

It is only in Plutarch’s *Life of Pericles*, a work written half a millennium after the Parthenon was built, that we find an attempt to explain the motives for its construction, but we must handle this with care. Straddling two cultures, Plutarch was a Greek living in a Roman world, a product of his age, familiar with the Parthenon and its statue as it stood in his time but deeply influenced by the ethos of imperial Roman building programmes. So, although many inferences in his *Life of Pericles* may be correct, he tends to view the Parthenon project from a second-century-A.D. rather than a fifth-century-B.C. perspective, using anachronistic vocabulary and perhaps even imputing anachronistic motivations. As for his observations about its impact on those who first saw it, there is no evidence to suggest that they are anything but romantic speculation: “At the time all the buildings immediately seemed age-old in their beauty, while now, thanks to their energy they seem modern and newly made, so much does their constant freshness blossom, making them appear untouched by time, as if the ever-vibrant breath of an unageing spirit permeated every work.”⁹

If Plutarch is gushing, our other major source, the roughly contemporary traveller, Pausanias, is frustratingly sparse and prosaic. In his *Travels Around Greece* he devotes a few brief sentences to the Parthenon and its statue, more interested in expounding his knowledge of griffins than in recording what he saw on the Acropolis; and, while his brief description of the temple’s pedimental sculptures has proved invaluable to modern scholars, his reliance on an apparently ambiguous or ill-informed tour guide has led to misunderstandings of the statue’s plinth which still persist today. At least Pausanias provides some detail, which is more than can be said for other writers of his era. Yes, Pliny the Elder tells us that the statue was made from gold

and ivory, but other than that? Nothing. As for the third-century-A.D. biographer, Diogenes Laertius, all he contributes to the sum of our knowledge is that “the Parthenon at any rate is beautiful.”¹⁰

Of course, we do have other valuable evidence: much of the Parthenon survives along with many of its sculptures, and although they are fragmented and disfigured their subject can be recognized. From Pausanias we learn that those on the east pediment showed Athena’s birth, and the west her contest with Poseidon for the land of Attica. From autopsy we know that the four sets of *metopēs* (self-contained high-relief sculptural slabs set on the architrave above the columns on the outside of the temple) showed scenes of mythological battles, and that the continuous low-relief (Ionic) frieze that ran behind this outer architrave around the outside of the *sekos* (the temple’s basic boxlike structure) roughly forty feet above ground level showed a procession—horsemen, charioteers, and worshippers—which culminated in a scene of five human participants surrounded by the twelve Olympian gods.

However, between recognizing subject matter and understanding its significance lies a world of difference. It is partly because of this that so much continues to be written about the Parthenon, its related buildings and their sculptures. For, while there are ongoing advances in our appreciation of the archaeology of ancient Athens and the architectural complexity of the Parthenon, and while it is generally recognized that the carefully curated subject matter of the temple’s sculptures (many of them repeated, we are told, in details of the goddess’s cult statue) was intended to project a message to both Athens and the rest of Greece, there is still no generally agreed consensus as to what that message was.

Yet, if we are to try fully to comprehend fifth-century-B.C. Athens, we cannot shirk from trying to comprehend the thinking behind the Parthenon’s sculptures, since they encapsulate an image of the city which was being honed by its intellectual elite partly to project Athenian power, and justify imperialism, but partly, too, to find new ways to glorify its citizens. Carved in marble, they are both a record and a commentary as significant as Thucydides’ history or Euripides’ dramas.

The sculptures' structure, form and consequence can be appreciated at first glance, but, like their literary counterparts, a deeper understanding requires awareness of their own inner complexity and the external factors which helped shape their creation: the events, values, and beliefs of sixth- and fifth-century-B.C. Greece in general and Athens in particular.

For, the Parthenon was not created in a vacuum. Conceived in 449 B.C. and begun in 447, it was the centrepiece of an ambitious public programme whereby not just in Athens but throughout Attica temples and sanctuaries left ruined since being burnt some thirty-three years earlier by invading Persians were rebuilt to the highest specifications, many using the best, most costly materials. The timing of the project was significant. A year or so earlier, Athens had made peace with Persia, an event of huge significance, setting the city on a par with a great empire stretching all the way to India and positioning Athens as the leading power in Greece, something for which Athenians had striven over many years, a cause of celebration as they looked back on a remarkable six decades—most recently the acquisition of an empire, following their city's rebirth after Persian destruction, in turn following the overthrow of tyranny and the foundation of their boldly new experimental democratic constitution. The sense of can-do optimism, that anything was possible, which these events engendered, inspired and permeated the new building programme.

So, alongside ambitions for the future was a profound awareness of the past. The temples which the Persians burned had been constructed in the first two decades of the new democracy at a time when Athens had seen off not just an oppressive ruling family but concerted attacks from rival city-states. If the symbolism of the temples then had been profound, the symbolism of their postwar ruins had been profounder still, since during Persia's invasions, when many of those rival city-states had coalesced grudgingly into an uneasy alliance, Athenians had made the greatest sacrifice and borne the brunt of the destruction. At the same time, (they could argue, and they did) they had made the greatest contribution to Greek victory—on land at the Battle of Marathon; at sea at the Battle of Salamis. Thanks to their steadfastness,

Greece was free. Thanks to their resolution, their ruined city had been reborn from its ashes.

Many Athenians attributed their city's success to two main factors. One was its democratic constitution, in which every citizen of every class could participate at almost every level, attending every meeting of the Assembly, voting on every motion, and being eligible to hold most offices of state. The other was the favour of the gods. It was only thanks to their support and intervention and that of local demigods or heroes that they believed that Athens had prevailed against apparently insuperable odds; and the reasons for those gods', heroes', and demigods' support were their age-old love of Attica (evinced in myth and legend) and Athenians' unique character and piety. No other Greek city-state celebrated so many religious festivals, and the cityscape and landscape were alive with not just sanctuaries and shrines, but offerings paid for and consecrated by the state and private citizens, often in thanks for victory in battle. For most Athenians, the Parthenon was one such offering made to the city's patron goddess, Athena.

But not for all. The sixth and fifth centuries B.C. were a time of bold scientific discovery and intellectual growth. Through observation natural philosophers began to overturn old certainties, suggesting, for example, that heavenly bodies were not divine, but balls of fire or lumps of earth, and questioning the nature of the gods, their power and even their existence. Among those embracing such new ideas was Pericles, Athens' leading statesmen, the man (so we are told) behind the construction project of which the Parthenon was part. As a religious sceptic, his motivation for building temples to the gods must clearly have been different from that of pious believers. For him politics and the possibility for propaganda played a more important role than veneration, and surviving versions of his speeches lend credence to the idea that sculptors and artists working on the Parthenon channelled his carefully honed vision of a democratic Athens, where living citizens, through sacrifice and effort, attained a godlike status equal to that of the dead heroes of mythology. Designed to boost the city's self-esteem and standing in the eyes of others, this vision was not entirely new. While literature is silent on the matter, since the late sixth

century B.C., the architecture of state buildings had consciously (and perhaps controversially) drawn on religious models in a manner that suggested that the *demos* (the civic body) and democracy were viewed as somehow godlike.

For so long as Athens prospered, the private sceptical beliefs of Pericles and his coterie, even if they were known publicly, did not really seem to matter. But just a year after the Parthenon was finished, Pericles' policies plunged Athens and her empire into war with Sparta and her allies; a plague killed a third of all Athenians, including Pericles himself; Athens' finances haemorrhaged; she suffered military defeats; and earthquakes rocked the city, cracking columns of the Parthenon, dislodging sculptures. To those opposed to Pericles, his politics, and policies, these misfortunes were proof of his misguided leadership and wrongheaded religious beliefs. Because of them, they argued, gods who once favoured Athens were angered: Apollo, god of plague, who killed thousands of Athenians; Poseidon, god of earthquakes, who razed large parts of the city; and Athena, who rejected her new Parthenon, suffering its damage as a sign of her discontent.

Following the plague and earthquakes, more new temples were quickly built—for Athena and Poseidon on the Athenian Acropolis; for Apollo on his sacred island, Delos. But for post-Periclean Athens it was too late. War with Sparta ended in defeat and the temporary suspension of democracy, and as Athenians took stock and questioned how such calamity had come to pass, many saw its seeds in the kind of thinking which Pericles had once famously embraced and Socrates still sought to promulgate. They could get rid of Socrates with little bother, but the sheer cost of Pericles' most famous monument meant that it must endure. So, the Parthenon remained on the Acropolis, a curious anomaly, a temple with no altar and no priestess of its own, more state treasury than religious building, which was why a century on from Athens' defeat a triumphant general could convert it into plush accommodation for himself and his pool of mistresses.¹¹

For its original meaning and importance to be appreciated, then, the Parthenon must be seen within its wider context—the context of the Periclean building project and the building project in the early years

of the Athenian democracy; the context of temple building throughout the Greek world, where religious structures and associated sculptures were used both to project power and to attract the approbation and protection of the gods; the context of shifting attitudes towards religion, of Athens' politics, her constitution, the two Persian invasions and her rise as an imperial power; and the context of the tensions which gave the city its identity but at the same time threatened to destroy it, tensions rising out of rivalries between diverse cultures, powerful families, classes, generations, and those whose vision of the world and mankind's place in it proved incompatible.

These themes weave through this book, as other themes weave through the subject matter of the sculptures we shall be discussing, themes such as mythology and cult, death and rebirth, civilization and hegemony, humanity, each one a constant background presence occasionally coming to the fore like a line of music in a fugue. But even the most complex fugue must be lucid to its listener, driving on with clear momentum until it reaches its conclusion, as accessible to the nonspecialist as to the expert. In a book with many strands of thought this can be difficult to achieve, but I hope that, by mixing historical narrative with architectural and artistic analysis, I might come close to doing so. For, despite the volume of words being written every day—perhaps each hour—about the Parthenon, I believe this book has something fresh to say, bringing a slightly different focus to and shedding a slightly different light upon not just the building and its sculptures but Athens in the course of the fifth century B.C. And because for the most part this is a book about not just a building programme or what happens when new certainties too quickly seek to topple old, but a city and the people who once lived there, we shall begin by visiting its democratic heart and meeting some of its key citizens as they gathered on a hill just west of the Acropolis some nineteen years before the two Ar-rhephoroi we have already met were dressing in their pure white robes to start their journey through the fissure in the rock. We shall begin one early morning in 449 B.C. as Athenians are pouring up onto the Pnyx for a much-anticipated meeting of their democratic Assembly.

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