



The Parthenon

First Term, 23 April 1956

During the first quarter of the fifth century Greece was invaded upon several occasions by the Persians, and although sorely pressed, managed to survive. In 490BC the Athenians, single-handed, won a magnificent victory against the Second Persian invasion at Marathon. The victory aroused a new feeling of pride and achievement among the Athenians and stimulated them to a great building effort. In order to celebrate their victory and in thankfulness to their faithful and reliant goddess, Athena, it was decided that a new temple should be raised to her upon the highest point of the Acropolis [??]. In order to do this the old Poros or limestone Hecatompedon erected by Peisistratias was destroyed and broken up to form a high platform or stylobate for the new building. Instead of limestone marble from a new quarry at Mount Pentelicus was used. But, unfortunately, the columns of this new temple had only risen to the height of from two to four drums (that is, from 5 to 10 feet) by the year 480 when the Persians again invaded Greece and occupied Athens. The temple was burnt and destroyed, and for thirty years the Athenians deliberately left the ruin 'as a memorial of the impiety of the barbarians.' But the end of the Persian wars was already at hand. In the very year they sacked Athens the Persians were utterly routed both on land and sea, and with their defeat in 479 we enter upon what is known as the classical period of Greek art.

The second quarter of the century (from 475 to 450 BC) known as the early classical period was, as we might well expect, then a period of readjustment and recovery after the wars. In 477 BC Athens became the head of the Delian League, an alliance of Greek city-states designed to present a common front to the Persians. The representatives of the cities met together at the Temple of Apollo at Delos which also acted as the central treasury for the funds of the League. But the city of Athens soon came to dominate the League and the treasury of the common fund was transferred from Delos to Athens in 454. A great deal of the new wealth that thus poured in Athens was used by Pericles, who was the virtual ruler of the city, not in prosecuting the war against the Persians or in strengthening the defences, but in the construction of great public works for the beautification and the glorification of the city. And the glorification of its goddess. Already in 456 a colossal bronze image of Athena by the sculptor Phidias had been erected upon the Acropolis. It was made from the spoils of the Persians who had landed at Marathon and was so big the Greek traveller, Pausanias, tells us that "the point of the spear and the crest of the helmet of this Athena are visible even to mariners, as they approach around the corner of Cape Sunium".

But Pericles planned a far greater tribute to the goddess, namely, the building which has come to be known as the Parthenon. It was built upon an extension of the foundation of the older temple destroyed by the Persians, and hence stood up the



highest point upon the Acropolis [1]*. The temple was built more for the glorification of Athena than for her worship. For her worship was reserved rather for the Erechtheum which housed the ancient wooden cult image of the goddess, and was built by Pericles opposite the Parthenon upon the site of an older temple. The Parthenon also served as the treasury for the Delian Confederacy and became the culminating point of a great procession to honour the goddess which was held every four years, and of which I shall have more to say later.

Let us turn first to the architecture of the Parthenon. It was planned by two architects, Ictinus and Callicrates, and the sculptor Phidias was in charge of the sculptural decoration. It was constructed like the earlier temple upon the same site; the architects appear to have planned their building to make as much use as possible of this second hand material. The building operations continued over a period of nine years, from 447 to 438 BC, but the sculptors continued to work upon the decoration of the temple down to 432 BC, that is until the eve of the Peloponnesian wars.

The Parthenon* is a peripteral octostyle building in plan. Peripteral because it is encompassed on all sides by free-standing columns, octostyle, by virtue of its eight columns at either end. The longer sides are flanked by two rows, each of seventeen columns. The whole temple stands on a stylobate consisting of three rather high steps. The portion of the temple enclosed by walls, or the cella, was divided into two parts, the naos or Hecatompedon, so named because it was 100 Attic feet in length, and the Parthenon or virgin's chamber, at the Western end. It is from this chamber that the Parthenon derived its name. Inside the Hecatompedon, there was a double colonnade of smaller Doric columns, joined by three more at the western end. These were used to support the roof timbers. Similarly in the virgin's chamber there were four central columns, to support the roof but these were of the Ionic order. Near the eastern end of the Hecatompedon stood the great statue of Athena Parthenon by Phidias. Of which I shall have more to say later.

Professor Trendall has already spoken of the extraordinary subtleties of curvature and inclination which were introduced into Doric architecture for the purposes of correcting optical illusion. Although the purpose of some of these subtleties has been greatly debated, they are certainly not a modern fancy. The Roman architect Vitruvius of whom you will hear more in a later lecture, advised attention to the correction of optical illusion, and he, in turn, probably derived his ideas from Greek architectural practice. Further, we know that one of the architects of the Parthenon, Ictinus, wrote a book about its construction. However, it's unlikely that all the refinements introduced into the construction of the Parthenon were intended to correct optical illusions. The stylobate of the Parthenon, for instance, rises gradually and lightly towards the centre, its surface, as one writer has neatly put it, is like that of a carpet nailed at the four corners only, and raised from the floor by a draught. The reason of the [slope] was probably for drainage.



The columns of the Parthenon show diminution from the base of the shaft to the capital [3]*. The entasis or curve introduced to correct optical illusion was always subordinated to the diminution of the column, so that the column tapers in a gentle convex curve from its greatest diameter at the base. The outer columns all incline inwards slightly towards the cella walls, while the columns [4]* at the angles of the temple possess a double inclination, that is away from both of the fronts which they face. The entablature, however, is tilted forward slightly, a point recommended by Vitruvius. Even the cella walls were tilted back slightly.

The sculpture of the Parthenon is the third great body of original Greek sculpture of the fifth century that we possess. The first being that of the temple of Aphaia at Aegin (490-480?) and the second that of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia (460). The architectural sculpture [5]* of the Parthenon, all of which was carved in Pentelic marble, is divided into three parts: the metopes, the Pediment, and the frieze. The metopes were completed first, but not before 446 BC, the frieze followed being completed about 6 years later, that is about 440, and last of all the pediments, probably between 438 and 432. Although Phidias was the general superintendent of the building operations but the question as to what share he took in the sculptural decorations a difficult one. The metopes vary not only in quality and execution but also in style. In the friezes several hands are observable but they clearly worked from a detailed design. We may assume that Phidias supervised the progress of the architectural sculpture; it is not possible to say whether he himself carved any of it. Both the architecture and the sculpture was coloured, the colour helping to throw the carving into bolder relief, but much of the fine detail of the carving was lost owing to the height it stood above the ground. The frieze in particular was placed in an [entirely?] difficult position because of the sharp and lofty angle of vision involved and the fact that it was only by light reflected from the floor or the surrounding columns.

Before dealing with the sculpture in detail it is well to reflect upon its general function. The temple was Athena's and its adornment was concerned with the glorification of Athena and of her favoured city, Athens, and with its civilizing mission as the 'School of Hellas'.* The shield of the great Athena Parthenos which stood in the heart of the temple was decorated on the inside with a relief showing the gods fighting against the giants, the Greeks fighting against the Amazons, and her sandals are engraved with the Lapiths fighting the Centaurs. All three battles are symbolic of the triumph of the higher over the lower breeds. The metopes too illustrate the battle of the gods and giants, of Greeks and Amazons. In the frieze, we meet all the people of Athens in festal procession to the Acropolis to honour their goddess. In the East Pediment we observe the birth of Athena, in the west, the contest between Athena and Poseidon for the land of Attica. The whole intention of the sculpture is intended to glorify Athena, and in glorifying her, to glorify the people of Athens.



Turning now to a more detailed examination of the sculpture, let us begin with the metopes, since they were the first to be completed. The reason for this is the simple fact that they were panels which had to be keyed into the triglyphs in the course of construction. They could not be added later, as the frieze was. When we have regard for the strong vertical lines of the somewhat protruding triglyph and the strong shadow cast by the overhanging cornice it is clear why the metopes should have been carved in bold relief. The projection of the sculpture from its background is at times as much as thirteen inches. Some pieces have been made separately and attached and there is evidence of alterations, where pieces have not fitted correctly. There were 92 metopes in all. The subjects were varied. On the east front was the battle of gods and giants, on the west, the battle of the Greeks and Amazons, and on the north and south were scenes from the Trojan legend, and from the battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs. The Lapiths lived in the mountainous district of Thessaly, in Northern Greece. Upon the occasion of the wedding of their king Peirithous, they invited their neighbours the centaurs, who were a wild, horsy lot. Unfortunately the wine went to the centaurs' heads and the party became riotous. They attacked the bride and the other women, and the Lapith men only succeeded in quietening them after a violent struggle. The story, to the Greeks typified the struggle between civilisation and barbarism. In one of the finest of the surviving metopes [6]*, we see a Centaur who is wounded and turns to escape. He is pressing a wound in his back with his right hand. But the Lapith holds him by the side of the head and is about to deliver a second thrust. Note the tense and dry delineation of the Lapith's anatomy which recalls in this, as well as the emphasis upon the pelvic girdle and the roll of flesh above the knee, the sculpture of Polyclitus, who was at work at this time. Note also the way in which the drapery has been swung freely from one extended arm to the other, forming an effective foil to the nude figure.

But the quality of the metope sculpture varies considerably [7]*. Here for instance a centaur is attempting to throttle a Lapith, but the treatment of the torso is rather perfunctory, the junction of horse and man in the Centaur is sculpturally unconvincing, and the arm of the Lapith is badly drawn. Indeed, it must be admitted that after the metopes of the temple of Zeus at Olympia, the Pantheon metopes are disappointing.

Let us turn now to the sculpture of the pediments. Because of the heavy cornices which framed it, it is clear that the pedimental sculpture had to be even deeper than that of the metopes. It becomes, in consequence, sculpture in the round which was, nevertheless, only intended to be viewed from one face. The subject of the East Pediment was the Birth of Athena.[8]* Among other things Athena symbolized perpetual virginity and the nature of her birth was appropriate though somewhat unusual. According to an ancient legend she was the daughter of Zeus, and sprang from his head fully armed when Hephaestus, the Olympian blacksmith, split it open with an axe. The fact that Zeus has swallowed his first wife may have had something



to do with this extraordinary biological occurrence. Unfortunately, the central group of the east pediment depicting the birth of Athena [?] * was destroyed many centuries ago, probably about 450AD when the Parthenon was converted into a Christian Church, and an apse was built at its eastern end. From a circular well-head dating from Roman times, however, we have some evidence that the dominating figure of the pediment was a seated Zeus. In front of him stood the newly-born Athena, with a Nike or Victory flying down between the two gods to crown her. To the left of Zeus stood Hephestus stepping aside with his axe.

Tracing the figures from the left to right in a reconstructed version, the actual fragments available are shown above, of the East Pediment we see at the extreme left the head and arms of a man rising from a slab of marble upon which ripples are carved, he is Helios, the sun-god, driving his chariot up out of the sea as the day breaks. In front of him are the heads of the horses of his chariot. Facing Helios is a male figure seated on the skin of a panther and a lion: some say he is Heracles, who performed his great labours with the help of Athena, some say that he personifies Mount Olympus, so we have the place as well as the time of the event. And others say that he represents the god Dionysus, the wine god, who usually carries a panther-skin. We may be reasonably certain of the next two figures: they are Demeter, the goddess of the grain-bearing earth, and her daughter Persophone, the goddess of the growing wheat. The two goddesses sit on chests which are covered with folded rugs: chests and woven cloths were used in the ritual of these goddesses. Demeter stretches out her arm to a young girl running towards her. She may be Hebe, the cup-bearer of Zeus, starting back in alarm at the miraculous event.

If we pass now across the central gap to the first group preserved at the right we find three figures that were once known as the three fates, but their identification is in dispute. The one apart may be Hestia, goddess of hearth and home, the other two may represent the nymphs of the Hesperides, who lived in an island upon the most western confines of the world and were the daughters of night. But there is no doubt, however, about the sculptures in the extreme angle of the pediment, they represent Selene, the goddess of the moon, sinking below the horizon in her four horse chariot. She is already submerged to the waist, and only the heads of her horses are to be seen. This horse is a masterpiece of draughtsmanship and modelling: its tired, drawn expression affords a striking contrast with the spritely expression of the steeds of Helios as they stride forward into the day.

Only fragments of the west pediment survive. It was fairly well preserved until a Venetian general, Morosini in 1687 endeavoured to take down the central figures. As a result we now have only torsos and a large series of fragments remaining. We can gain some idea of the original design, however, from a drawing made by a French artist, Jaques Carrey in 1674. The subject of the pediment was the contest of Athena and Poseidon for the land of Attica. The legend ran that Poseidon in support of his



claim struck the Acropolis rock with his trident and produced a miraculous salt spring. The alleged trident mark can still be seen and the salt-spring survived there until at least the second century AD. Athena in support of her claim caused the first olive tree to appear. And she was adjudged the victor.

The designer of the west pediment shows Poseidon and Athena in the act of performing their miracles. [14]* The olive tree probably filled the centre of the pediment. Both Athena and Poseidon have driven up to the scene of the contest in two horse chariots, being conducted by the two divine messengers, Hermes and Iris. The torso of Hermes has weathered considerably, [15]* but that of Iris is much better preserved. She was winged, and was rushing forwards. Note how well the torso of the running figure, with its thin windswept drapery has been rendered, and the free almost impressionist modelling of the drapery which we might well contrast with formal dignified vertically fluted drapery upon early classical work such as the Bronze charioteer from Delphi or the Hestia Guistiani.

The figure in the left angle of the pediment is usually identified as one of the Greek river gods. The river gods were usually presented in a reclining position. He raises himself by one hand and turns his head in order to look at what is going on in the centre.

The torso to the right of Iris belongs to the driver of Poseidon's chariot., it may be Amphitrite his wife. She is leaning backwards to throw her weight on the reins and check the horses.

It is rather useless for us to compare the pediments of the Parthenon with those say of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, in which, as Mr O'Brien pointed out in an earlier lecture, the basic problems of pedimental composition were solved, since we have only a series of fragmentary remains. It is clear however, that both the Birth of Athena and the contest between Athena and Poseidon were presented in a fashion admirably adapted to pedimental composition.

Let us turn now to the frieze. It was placed as we have noted along the exterior of the cella walls and formed a part of the entablature above the inner columns of the porches at either end of the building. First a word about the subject. [handwriting??] At the beginning of each year the Athenians honoured their goddess Athena in a festival known as the Panathenaic festival. A procession in which many of the citizens took part was a central feature of the festival. But once every four years the festival was celebrated with special splendour and magnificence. This special quadrennial celebration was known as the Great Panathenea, and the procession was likewise of special magnificence.



On the frieze of the Parthenon we have an idealized rendering of the Great Panathenaic festival. The ceremonial purpose of the procession was to form an escort from the lower town up to the Acropolis for a sacred robe, known as the sacred peplos. The peplos was carried in the procession on the mast of a kind of carnival ship. Whoever designed the Parthenon frieze, however, apparently thought that the rendering of the peplos on the top of a pole would not be sufficiently dignified. At any rate he preferred to represent the peplos as having reached its destination.

The diagram indicates how the various parts of the procession are represented upon the frieze. The beginning of the procession is represented as taking place at the south-west corner of the building. The procession consists of two branches which flow around the building to meet again at the eastern end. On the west frieze we see horsemen preparing for the procession. And on the western ends of the south and north frieze we see the horsemen moving along in the procession, ahead of them are chariots, and further ahead are the elders, the musicians, the pitcher-bearers, the tray-bearers, and the animals being brought to sacrifice. But already while horsemen in the lower part of the town are still preparing to depart the other section of the procession has wound up to the Acropolis where we see the Athenian maidens who have woven the sacred peplos, already before the Marshals, Citizens, Magistrates, and Heroes, and the sacred peplos is being folded, a ritual enactment, before the Olympian Gods, who look on quietly in the background.

The west frieze which shows preparations for the procession was probably the first to be carved.* It shows horsemen with their attendants. Some are adjusting harnesses, putting on their riding habit, or fastening their boots.

As we turn to the north west angle of the building the first slab of the north frieze* shows a groom arranging his master's tunic before he mounts, and a horseman* holding the wreath upon his head with one hand, while he holds his prancing horse with the other. From this point the procession moves forward at a trot. Note the way in which the relief indicates horses riding abreast. Sometimes as many as seven horses and riders are thus shown in receding planes, although the actual depth of the relief nowhere exceeds more than 2 ½ inches. The relief sculptors had fully mastered the problem of suggesting recessive planes and movement in depth. And yet with admirable taste and judgment the supremacy of the frontal plane as the significant decorative area is admirably realized. Note for instance the admirable contrapuntal rhythm established by the feet of horses and riders against the strong horizontal movement of the procession along the frieze. The general effect of a troop of prancing horses held in check gracefully and easily by trained riders is admirably established. The frieze was in its original form coloured, and a dark red background both above and below the riders served to throw the procession into a clear silhouette. The reins and bridles were made of bronze. Rivet holes for their attachment may be seen at the



mouths of the horses, behind the ears, and in the riders hands. Further along we come to the chariots. Out next slide shows the horses breaking into a gallop.*

In front of the chariots we come to a group of old men.* These were probably the branch bearers, elderly citizens who carried olive branches. The strong vertical lines of bodies formed a most effective visual period to the vigorous horizontal movement of the chariots and horses behind them. Ahead of the old men were* four lyre-players and four flute players and they in turn were preceded by boys carrying water-pots,* containing water for ritual use. In front of them* were boys leading the sacrificial animals. Note the admirable contrast here afforded by the dignified draped figure at the left with downcast head, and the prancing heifer with its attendant. The carving of the drapery has become free and natural, but it has not yet lost the dignified line and weighty spacious handling that so well expresses the classical ethos.

The south frieze repeats in general the motives that we have studied in the north frieze, although not of course mechanically. The east frieze represents the culmination of the procession. The leading groups are not men but girls, who carry various vessels for use at the sacrifice, incense burners, jugs, shallow bowls for pouring libations.* But the girls at the very head of the procession carry nothing at all: these are doubtless the maidens who have carried the sacred peplos in the procession; and it is possible that they are also the **arrephori**, the maidens who had charge of weaving the peplos. The maidens are being received by men who are evidently officials. To* their left are to be seen a group of four men who stand in relaxed attitudes conversing with one another and watching the procession. It is not certain who they are intended to represent: they may be magistrate representative citizens of Athens, or perhaps the heroic ancestors of the Athenians. The group is balanced by a similar group of elders on the other side of the central slab of the east frieze. The central slab of the frieze which contains the culminating point of the procession, consists of a magnificent block of marble, 14 ½ feet long which was set very close to the columns in front of the main eastern doorway.* We see a priest aided by a young boy, holding the sacred peplos. Behind him a priestess of Athena is beginning to take a low stool from one of her two attendants, Her act is a symbolic invitation to the gods of Olympus to be present on the sacred occasion. On either side of this central group is a group of twelve seated figures, all larger in size than any of the other figures depicted on the frieze. They represent, doubtless, the twelve gods of Olympus, who are thus imagined as invisible spectators of the ceremony. They were intended to form a semi-circle behind the central scene.* Here we see three of them: Poseidon. His trident which he held in his left hand was shown in paint on the background. Resting easily on his right arm and turning to speak to him is Apollo, and to his left his sister Artemis. Here are three gods seated on the right of the central incident. * First, we see a god seated in a restless attitude is Ares, the god of war, who appears to be rather uneasy at this peaceful ceremony. The shaft of his spear passes behind and supports his left heel. In front of Ares sits a goddess heavily draped, chin in hand, which was a gesture of sadness in antiquity. It is



Demeter, the goddess of the grain bearing earth, and she seems to be still worrying about her lost daughter Persephone. In her left hand she carries a long torch which originally continued upwards to the right. A god sits up opposite Demeter, with his knee touching hers, this is Dionysus, the other great god of natural fertility. His left hand once held his wand which was capped with a bunch of ivy. He was a great advocate of soft and pleasant living and in deference to this he has been kindly provided with a cushion, while he leans luxuriously upon the firm back of Hermes, the messenger of the gods, who sits tense and ready to be of at a moment's.

The Parthenon was completed in 432 C. For nine hundred years it continued to be a temple of Athena. It then became a Christian church, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. An apse was built into the eastern end which destroyed much of the sculpture of the Eastern pediment. It continued to be a Christian Church for another thousand years, from about 450 to 1458 AD. But in the latter years Athens was taken by the Turks, and the Cathedral Church was converted into a mosque. So it remained for another two hundred years, not greatly damaged. But in 1687 a Venetian general, Morosini, attacked Athens and besieged a Turkish garrison entrenched upon the Acropolis.* A Venetian shell landed upon the Parthenon which was being used by the Turks as a powder magazine. The interior was destroyed and the long sides blown outwards. Further damage was done by Morosini when he attempted to lower the central figures of the West Pediment. From that time onwards the building was a ruin*. A small mosque and Turkish houses were built within the ruin.

Then between 1802-1812, Lord Elgin, the British ambassador at Constantinople, obtained permission from the Turkish authorities to remove the remaining marbles. Justification for this act lies in the fact that at the time they were perishing from neglect and mutilation. Sculpture which was not removed was drawn and moulded.

The subject of the frieze, taken as a whole, is concerned with the people of Athens engaged not in fighting but upon a highly religious and at the same time highly enjoyable public holiday. The spontaneity and relaxed freedom which is implicit in the composition of the frieze, may be contrasted with the rigid lines of tribute bearers and marching warriors that one meets in the friezes upon Assyrian palaces. The frieze, in short admirably expresses that union of a common purpose and individual freedom so admirably expressed in the funeral speech of Pericles, which was delivered only one year after the frieze itself was completed. A few brief parallels might be quoted:

We have provided for our minds numerous recreations from toil, partly by our customary solemnities of sacrifice and festival throughout the year.

Our social march is free, not merely in regard to public affairs, but also in regard to intolerance of each other's daily pursuits.



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We combine elegance of taste with simplicity of life.

With our easy habits of life we are not less prepared than they (he is referring to the Spartans) to encounter all perils within the measure of our strength.

The Parthenon frieze, in short, may be taken as the visual equivalent of Pericles' funeral oration. After the establishment of the Greek kingdom in 1833 the Parthenon was cleared of obstructions and rubbish, and some restoration of the architecture. The fallen columns of the northern colonnade have been re-erected.



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