



The Acropolis & the Parthenon

The Acropolis

NARRATOR:

Once the Panathenaic procession left the agora, it started its ascent to the Acropolis.

Today access is via a slowly rising winding path, but in Classical times there would have been a broad ramp leading up to the Acropolis gate, the angle of which can still be made out.

As the procession climbs up the hill it looks straight onto the Propylaea, which is the only entrance to the Acropolis.

From ancient descriptions as well as the remains it's clear that the Propylaea was highly elaborate both in its design and decoration but it probably had little religious function.

One thing it clearly did is add to the experience of entering the Acropolis, with the view of the site's buildings and statues opening out suddenly as you walk through it.

It is a unique building in various ways. The procession would enter through a set of stairs, the outlines of which are still visible, and the design is brilliantly adapted to the difficult, sloping site. The roof of the gate is lower at the sides than the centre, for example, but the proportion of column to steps is kept by having four white marble steps in the centre but only three at the sides.

The columns inside the Propylaea, supporting the ceiling, also needed to be taller than the external columns which were topped by a frieze.

The architect came up with the elegant solution of using thinner Ionic columns on the inside of the building, which are neatly concealed by the wider Doric columns of the facade, when viewed from the front.

For reasons that we can only speculate about, the building seems to have been left unfinished as can be seen most clearly from the so-called lifting bosses: these were used to put the marble blocks into place, but would normally be removed once everything was finished.

To the right of the Propylaea, and also visible during the ascent, is the Temple of Athena Nike or Athena the Victorious. Unfortunately, the entire temple had been taken down for preservation reasons while we were making this film, a reminder of the sheer scale of the ongoing restoration works on the Acropolis. There is little that we see today that hasn't been restored in one way or another.

Once the people in the procession had cleared the Propylaea, they would have the entire Acropolis in their view, looking roughly west to east. Straight ahead was the enormous bronze statue of Athena Promachos, or 'Athena who fights for' the Athenians.

Ancient authors tell us that the statue would have been visible from the sea; but now only parts of its base are left and we rely on later surviving statues to get a sense of what it looked like.

Behind the statue, to the left, was the site of the Temple of Athena Polias. This temple was partly destroyed during the Persian Wars and then later rebuilt and was in use throughout most, if not all, of the fifth century. It housed the most sacred image of Athena: the ancient olivewood statue which, according to legend, had fallen from the sky.

After the Persians had left, the Athenians vowed never to rebuild the destroyed temples. Instead, they used some of the debris for building the north wall, creating a memorial.

Next to the Athena Polias temple, almost perched on the edge of the Acropolis, is the Erechtheion, another unusual building. It is perhaps the most graceful of the Acropolis temples since it is designed in the Ionic style.

Architecturally, the Erechtheion is marked out by its unusual ground plan with its complex layout and external porches. Particularly striking are the statues of young women, known as Caryatids, used as columns.

The name Erechtheion refers to Erechtheus, one of the mythical kings of early Athens and closely associated with the god Poseidon. But the precise function of the building is unclear. Apart from Erechtheus and Poseidon, Athena too, and perhaps even Zeus, may have been worshipped here.

Various religious stories are associated with the Erechtheion. An olive tree on the west side, facing the Propylaea, was thought to be the first ever olive tree, planted by Athena as a gift to her city. And not far from it, there is a salt spring which legend had it was created by Poseidon.

The same legend also explains the hole in the roof and the floor in the south-east porch of the building. This is where Poseidon's trident flew before it struck the ground and created the spring.

On the far side of the Erechtheion was the Great Altar of Athena, where the livestock that formed part of the procession would be sacrificed. Presumably, the altar was at the centre of much activity. Once again, though, we have little more than the site left today.