



The Acropolis & the Parthenon

The Parthenon

NARRATOR:

The Parthenon is by far the largest building on the Acropolis now, just as it was when it was built in the fifth century.

Its shape is more typical of Greek temples than that of the Erechtheion. Its ground plan is oblong, with columns running all the way around.

The inner walls have mostly been destroyed and the roof is missing, making it look less substantial today than it would have been in the fifth century. Even so, what is left gives a good impression of its design.

In contrast to the Ionic Erechtheion, the Parthenon was built in the Doric order.

The entrance was on the east, the far side if you approach from the Propylaea. This means that the procession would have walked alongside the building before getting to its entrance.

The Parthenon was decorated with various kinds of statuary. Most easily visible from afar would have been the pediments: these appeared both over the main entrance on the east, and on the other side of the temple over the west. Each pediment consisted of a set of statues.

Below the pediments, and all the way around the building, are the carved square panels called metopes.

And finally, less easily visible because inside the outer row of columns was the frieze, which ran all the way around the building.

Inside the inner chamber, and only visible from the outside when the temple doors were open, was another statue of Athena, in this case made of gold and ivory. This portrayed Athena Parthenos, or Athena 'the maiden', who gives her name to the building as a whole. It was sculpted by Pheidias and was famous well beyond Athens.

Like Athena Promachos, this statue is lost today, but this modern reconstruction at the Royal Ontario Museum gives us an idea of what it looked like.

Most of these elements – pediments, metopes, frieze, cult statue – can be found in one way or another in other temples, though rarely on this scale and in this combination.

Nonetheless, it is important to remind ourselves that the Parthenon is an unusual temple. For much of the fifth century Athena's most important temple, and the finishing point of the procession, was the temple of Athena Polias, next to which the Erechtheion was later built.

For all its grandeur, then, the Parthenon was not the Acropolis' most important temple in terms of cult. However, the Parthenon had further, non-religious functions. In particular it served as the treasury for the monies Athens collected from its allies and subject-states. Certainly the Parthenon was a temple, but it was a lot else besides.