



## The Acropolis & the Parthenon

### *The Parthenon frieze*

#### **NARRATOR:**

Like pediment and metope statues, the frieze has also been removed to museums. In this case the British Museum holds almost half of the frieze's original 160 metre length.

Since the frieze once ran around the outside of the inner Parthenon walls, it is awkward to display on the inside of a room as in the British Museum. Outside corners, for instance, need to be created artificially.

The great advantage of looking at the frieze in a museum, though, is the ease of access. At the British Museum we can look at it at eye level from close up.

Even small details such as the fittings with which the frieze was fastened to the building are clearly visible – as are the holes where metal details such as diadems and bridles would once have been attached.

This is an enormously different experience from looking at it steeply from below in half shade below the temple's roof.

The narrative of the frieze began at the south-west corner of the Parthenon. Here the two processions start. One runs to the right alongside the north facade, with the longer branch of the procession running to the left along the west and south of the temple: the two sides which would have been visible from the Propylaea.

Both branches meet up on the east side. In the centre of the east side is the much debated cloth scene, which possibly portrays the donation of the sacred peplos to Athena at the climax of the Panathenaic procession.

To the right and left of this we see the larger seated figures, generally thought to be gods, looking at the two parts of the procession as they arrive.

We can make out different groups of people in this long procession. Particularly impressive perhaps are the long sequences of horses and riders, which the procession would walk alongside, in a way tracing their steps.

As with the metopes, the artists have tried to create as three-dimensional an effect as possible.

Many of the horses overlap, giving the impression of a wide band of riders moving parallel to each other.

Apart from the horsemen, there are several charioteers, who are generally less well preserved.

There are also both men and women walking; carrying various objects; playing instruments; and bringing animals to be sacrificed.

Much of the work is supreme, and has often been admired for good reason. Close to, the quality of the carving can really be appreciated, such as the horses' heads and the skilful relief work.

With groups of two or three horsemen overlapping it is easy to forget that the carving is never more than six centimetres deep.

Other panels have clearly been worked up less carefully, or are the creation of less competent sculptors.

In looking at the frieze, and the Parthenon sculpture more generally, it's important to remember that much of it would have been coloured, creating a rather different effect. Years of exposure to the elements have removed almost all the colour, and traces survive only in a few places, for instance on a piece of cornice.

With the buildings of the Acropolis ruined, removed and reconstructed and with its sculptures scattered throughout different museums and displayed in ways they never were in fifth-century Athens, it takes real effort to imagine how the buildings looked when they were first built.

Perhaps a greater challenge, though, is to understand their significance to the men and women of the day who took part in the Panathenaic procession or who looked on the Acropolis from afar as they went about their lives in Athens.