

The ancients used the word “frieze” to describe a running band of relief sculpture depicting humans and animals in motion. This constituted an element of Ionic architecture. On the Parthenon, a temple built in the Doric order, such a feature represented a bold stroke of originality.

The frieze depicted the Panathenaic procession. Here we can see gods, priests, nobles, citizens, men and women, young and old, horses and the animals being led to sacrifice. This majestic composition allows us to see and study the ancient Athenians, their religion and their forms of worship, their festivals and everyday life, their horses and chariots, their clothes, weapons, ritual vessels etc.

While the Parthenon frieze is an enormous work of art it is nevertheless characterized by an exceptional sense of unity. Nothing is exaggerated. The gods appear next to the mortals and hardly seem any different from the citizens who participate in the procession. At the same time, the mortals resemble each other. Variety is achieved by different poses and gestures and by dress-drapery while expression is indicated by the motion of the head and not by accentuating particular characteristics. The poses are natural and calm and gestures signify the meaning behind attendance at such an event. Everything helps to express the cohesion of Athenian society during the Golden Age in which the work was commissioned, a cohesion certainly self-evident therein. Thus it has been rightly said that this exceptional work of art is nothing less than the expression of democracy at its best during Antiquity.

Translated by D. Turner

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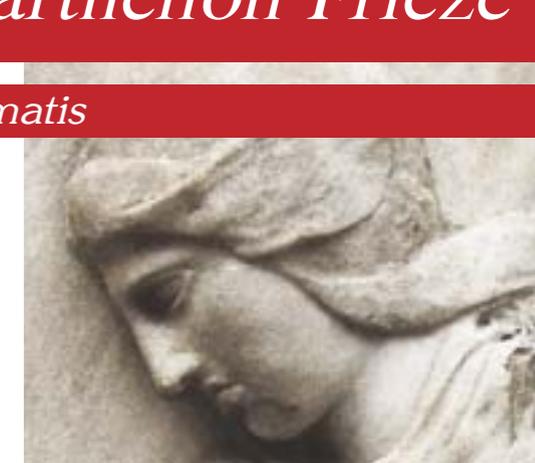
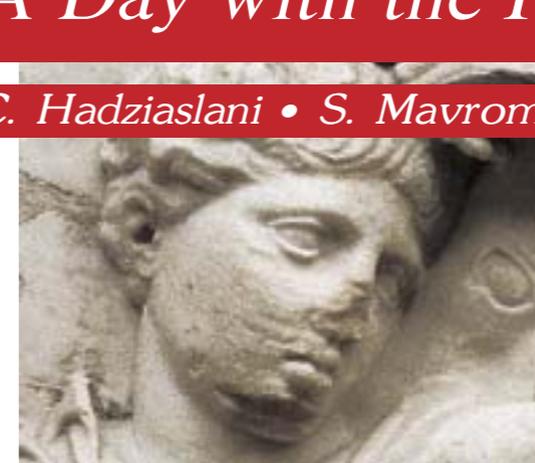
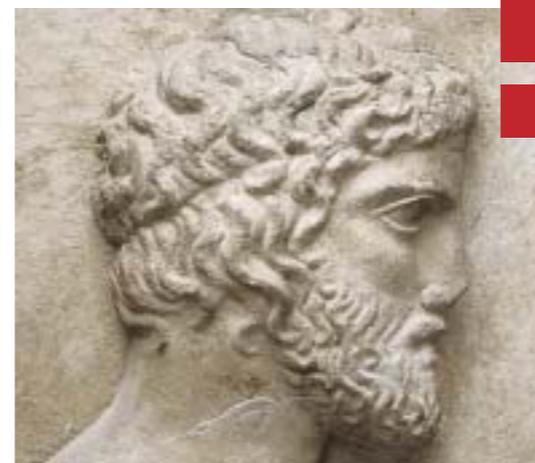
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A Day with the Parthenon Frieze

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The Parthenon and its Sculptural Decoration

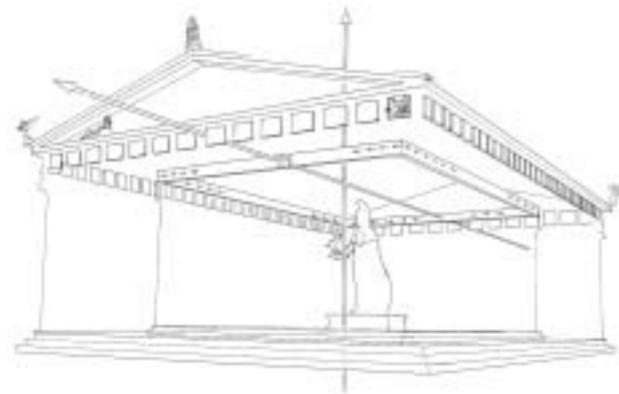


The Parthenon, the great temple that dominates the Acropolis of Athens, was built by the leading statesman Pericles, in honour of the goddess Athena in the middle of the 5th century B.C. and was completed in only nine years. Marble from the quarries of Mt. Penteli in Attica was used throughout in the temple's construction. The temple is famous for its proportions, optical refinements, structural perfection and its sculptural decoration. Today, despite its ruinous state, it still evokes universal wonder and, perhaps more than any other building, manages to unite a host of different values to represent the spirit and achievement of the Classical era of ancient Greek civilization.

What provided the Parthenon with special artistic distinction during antiquity was its sculptural decoration, of a richness and variety not seen till that time. One could see both devotional and narrative scenes in the reliefs on the great temple. Nevertheless, it is clear that these provided the opportunity for magnificent artistic achievement as well as a vehicle for political ideas.

In the temple's interior there rose the great statue of the goddess Athena, 13.5 metres high, made of gold and ivory, the work of Pheidias. Of this nothing survives. Only a much smaller Roman marble copy gives us an idea of what it looked like. The goddess was shown standing upright, wearing a long peplos and a breastplate embossed with a depiction of the head of the Medusa. On her head she wore an ornate helmet decorated with mythological animals. Her right hand held a statue of Victory (Nike) and her left a shield and spear. The outer surface of the shield was decorated with a relief depiction of the battle between Greeks and Amazons, and the inner with an inscribed depiction of the battle between Gods and Giants (Gigantomachy). The soles of her sandals were decorated with relief depictions of the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs (Centauromachy). Finally, the base of the statue was decorated with a relief depiction of the birth of Pandora.

Large-scale compositions, some 3.20 x 25 metres, adorned the two triangular pediments on the east and west façade of the temple. These larger than life-size sculptures were executed in the round and depicted two Athenian myths associated with the goddess: The east pediment, above the entrance to the temple, depicted the birth of Athena in the presence of all the Olympian gods, while the west pediment showed her struggle with Poseidon in the presence of the mythical lords of Athens. Many of these pedimental statues have been preserved.



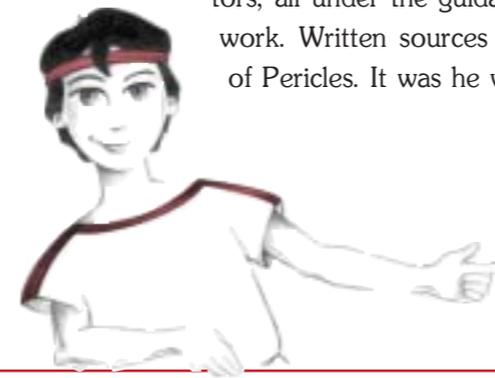
Drawing: M. Korres

The metopes consist of large square plaques which, together with the triglyphs, form the horizontal tier (diazoma) of temples of the Doric order. On the Parthenon, there were 92 metopes, each approx. 1.30 x 1.30 metres, which for the first time were completely covered with relief depictions. These included very ancient myths of the Gigantomachy on the east side, the battle between Greeks and Amazons on the west, the Centauromachy on the south and the Trojan War on the north. Some metopes are preserved in their original location, others are in museums.

The Ionic frieze ran outside the upper part of the cella and along the upper part of the inner colonnades, east to west. This was, once again, an innovation for Doric order temples. Over a length of 160 metres we see the great festival of the Athenians in honour of the goddess Athena, the so-called Panathenaea. This unique composition was, in contrast to the other sculptures, carved on site and in low relief. A significant part of the frieze is preserved today in museums.

The temple's sculptural decoration was completed with acroteria affixed to the three corners of the pediments. These included statues of Nike at the corners and anthemias (foliate motifs) in the middle. Lion-head spouts also existed at the end of the long colonnades, two of which can still be seen in their original location.

Naturally, the construction of all this sculpture was undertaken by many sculptors, all under the guidance of a great artist who co-ordinated the whole work. Written sources indicate that this was Pheidias, a personal friend of Pericles. It was he who formulated the general outline of these large compositions and it was he who executed the most important sculptures with his own hand.



Observe the difference between the three-dimensional statues of the pediments, the high relief of the metopes and the low relief of the frieze.



The Panathenaea, the Great Festival of Athena



The first month of the Athenian year was called Hekatombaeon. According to tradition, the goddess-patron of the city celebrated her birthday on the 28th of that month (somewhere near the 15th of August). It was around that date that the Panathenaea, the great festival of ancient Athens, was celebrated. This festival was of great antiquity but was reorganized in 556 B.C. on the initiative of Peisistratos who introduced its spectacular celebration every four years: the Great Panathenaea. This took place over several days and included various events: artistic and athletic competitions as well as the great Panathenaic procession. The procession culminated in the handing over of the “peplos”, a new robe, the gift of the Athenians to the “Diipetes Xoanon”, the ancient heaven-sent wooden cult statue of Athena that originally stood in the so called Earlier Temple and was then transferred to the Erechtheion.

Artistic competitions included music (avloi and guitar) and rhapsody contests, i.e. where poems were read out.

The athletic contests included: the “Gymnic Games” (track, wrestling, boxing, jumping, disc and javelin throwing), Horse Races, Chariot Races (with two horses, with four horses, and the “Apobasia” contest, described below), Boat Races. Finally, there were the contests which involved local tradition: the “Evandria” which required strength and skill, the “Pyrrhic Dance” which involved armed warriors as dancers; according to tradition this had first been danced by Athena to celebrate the victory of the Olympian gods over the Titans. Another contest was the “Lambadidromia” (Torch Race): It involved forty runners, one after the other running at night with their torches, bringing the flame from the altar of Eros at the Academy to the Acropolis. The victor lit the flame at the altar of Athena and the holy ritual of sacrifice at the Panathenaea began.

The prizes given to the victors were vases of outstanding craftsmanship, the so-called Panathenaic Amphorae, filled with olive-oil (36 kilos



E. V. British Museum

of it). Depicted on one side was Athena as a warrior goddess and on the other the competition for which the amphora was awarded. The first prize averaged at 50-70 amphorae, while the victor of the chariot races won 140 amphorae, namely 5 tons of olive-oil with a value of about 1680 ancient drachmae. Note, that one drachma represented a normal daily wage.

On the 28th of Hekatombaeon, on the goddess’ birthday, there took place the great procession culminating in the offering of the peplos to her. At daybreak, the procession began from a special building known as the “Pompeion” (Procession-Hall) in the Kerameikos, followed the Panathenaic Way, cut through the Agora and wound its way up the Acropolis. The peplos, which had been woven with depictions from the Gigantomachy by the “Ergastines”, girls of noble families chosen specifically for this purpose, was suspended on the mast of a ship which moved on wheels. The ship stopped on level land near the Areopagus and the peplos was carried by the Ergastines from the entrance to the Acropolis up to the temple.

Ten organizers called “Athlothetai” were responsible for all the events during the many days of the Festival.



Why do we think that the frieze of the Parthenon depicts the Panathenaic procession?



E VII, The Louvre Museum

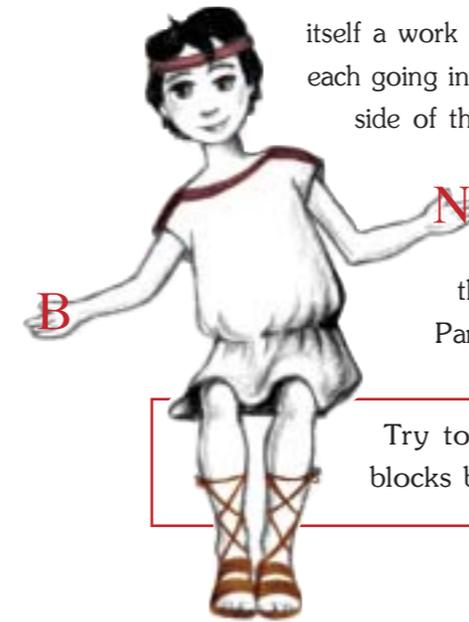
The Composition of the Parthenon Frieze



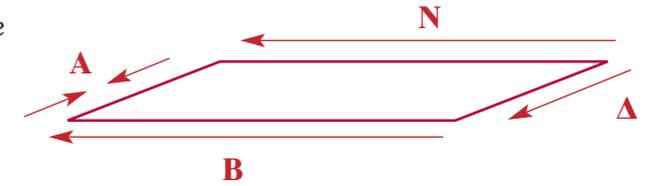
The Parthenon frieze is a continuous relief depiction running along the top part of the outside wall of the main temple, within the outer colonnade. Its total length was 160 metres while its height was approx. one metre. Rich colors and added metal attachments were used to decorate the individual figures that stood out against a deep blue ground.

The composition consisted of 360 divine and human figures and about 250 animals, mostly horses. Competing groups of riders and charioteers take up most of the procession. Then there follows the procession of the sacrifice with animals and groups of female and male figures bringing the holy ritual vessels for the offerings and the sacrifice. Depicted in the middle of the east side, above the entrance to the temple, is the presentation of the peplos. To the left and right are seated the twelve gods. Between them and in the procession we also see 10 figures, the famous heroes of Attica, the mythical forefathers of the Athenians.

Friezeblocks X, XI, British Museum



The manner in which Pheidias planned and placed the procession along the four sides of the temple is in itself a work of genius. From the south-west corner of the temple the procession began in two groups, each going in different directions. One went along the west and north side and the other along the south side of the temple. Both groups included riders, chariots and citizens who had a role to play in the sacrifice. Both parts of the procession met on the east side of the temple above the main entrance to the pronaos. There we find the depiction of the culmination of the festival and of the Panathenaea: the presentation of the peplos.



Try to establish, on the basis of the way the procession is going, which of the frieze blocks below belonged to the north and which to the south side of the frieze.

Friezeblocks XLII, XLIII, British Museum



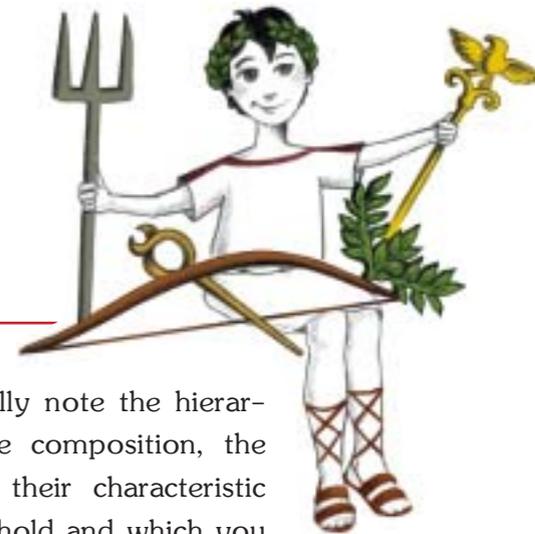
The Presentation of the Peplos to the Goddess Athena and the Gods of Olympus

Depicted to the right and left of the central scene are the seated gods of Olympus executed with exceptional skill. These must have been sculpted by the great and famous sculptors of the day such as Pheidias, Agorakritos and Alkamenes, who all took part in this outstanding project.

How do these figures of the deities stand out amongst the 360 figures in the frieze?

Five figures appear in the central scene. Three females, two carrying the sacred stools (the so-called "diphroi") and a large figure (the priestess?) who leads them. A reverent male figure (perhaps the Archon-King or a priest) and a boy hold the peplos.

Which of the two receive the peplos to present it to the goddess Athena? Justify your answer.



Try to identify the deities and justify your identification. Carefully note the hierarchical position they have in the composition, the relationship between them and their characteristic attributes (or symbols) that they hold and which you recognize from mythology.



Humans, Horses and Chariots in the Procession



In the procession 345 humans are depicted along with about 230 horses. They were carved by various sculptors who had to place horses and riders within a space about one metre high, with the result that the horses are small of stature compared to the humans.

No single figure is singled out for special emphasis in the procession. The austere profile of the faces, which resemble each other, are imbued with ethos, spiritual grace and dignity. A wonderful natural harmony exists between the figures, who are differentiated by their poses and the way they move rather than by appearance. The classical ideal of art, the depiction of beauty, dominates each and every detail of the frieze.

Clothing does not try to differentiate individual figures. Typically, the gods and goddesses are dressed in the same way as the mortals. Variety, however, is established with rich drapery, the ease with which it covers the body and the discretion with which weapons are displayed. A few citizens are armed but nowhere do we see anything that resembles a military uniform. Weapons simply play their part in lending variety to the figures.

All the horses are depicted in profile. They have finely wrought outlines and their individual characteristics are defined by the manner in which heads, nostrils, manes and tails have been executed. At the same time, the axes formed by the heads and the bodies of the horses create the impression of motion in a splendid composition marked by great variety. Some horses appear at rest. Others are shown with their masters



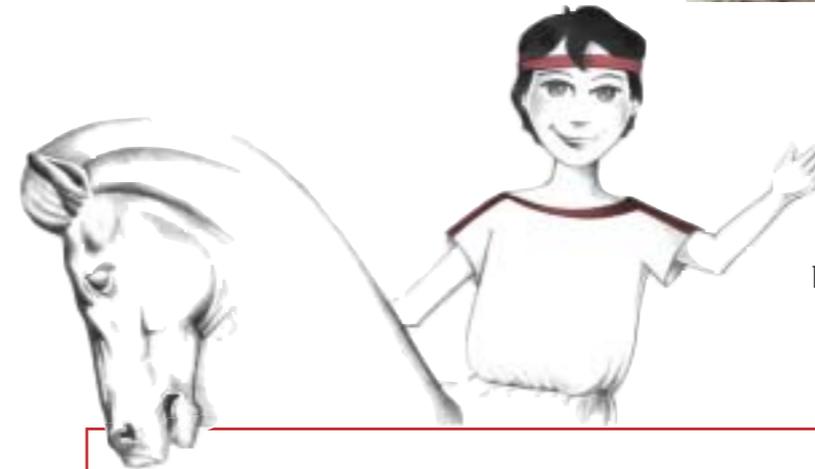
N XXXIV, Acropolis Museum

holding reins, ready to ride. The horses either trot or gallop; some compete with each other while others appear agitated.

Chariot races were amongst the ancient Panathenaic contests. The section depicting chariots in the middle of the long sides is fragmentarily preserved due to the well-known explosion of A.D. 1687. On the north side, where twelve chariots are shown competing, the “apobasia” contest is depicted, a contest involving teams comprising a four-horse chariot, a charioteer and a fully armed warrior. During the race, the warrior leaps down from and up to the chariot while it is moving.



N XXIII, Acropolis Museum



On the south side, where ten chariots are depicted, the poor state of the marbles does not allow us to discern whether the contest involves the apobasia contests or a competition between combat chariots.

Stationary chariots, chariots just about to move, chariots with warriors in the act of leaping, and chariots in motion, all can be found on the north and south side of the frieze. Try to find them.

The Sacrificial Procession to the Goddess



The ancients honoured their gods by offering them sacrifices. They followed special rituals and used sacred vessels. During the sacred rituals, libations of wine were offered to the gods along with the first fruits and animal sacrifices. Those parts of the animal sacrifice not eaten were offered to the gods and burnt on an altar. The remaining meat was distributed to the Athenians at the celebrations following the sacrifices.

On the long sides of the frieze, the sacrificial procession is followed by the animals to be offered to the goddess. On the south side we see ten cattle and on the north four cattle and four rams with their attendants. There are also groups of men carrying trays of offerings, others who hold hydrias (large vases with water), musicians with avloi (pipes) and guitars and handsome aged men holding olive branches painted in the background.

N II Acropolis Museum



The sacrificial procession continues along the east side of the frieze, the holy part of the temple where we see no animals but just gods and mortals. This is the only side where we see women, who also hold ritual vessels for the sacrifice: wine-jars, vases for the libations, censers etc.



Try to identify the groups in the Panathenaic procession in the parts of the frieze now in the Acropolis Museum.

The Fate of the Parthenon Frieze



In antiquity, Pheidias' frieze remained untouched on the walls of the Parthenon. We do not know to what extent it suffered in the great fire of the 3rd century A.D. During the temple's transformation into a Christian church, probably between A.D. 450-500, certain parts of the east side were removed. Even later, perhaps in the 12th century, other blocks of the frieze were removed to allow room for windows for the church.

In 1458, the Parthenon was turned into a mosque. In 1674, the painter J. Carrey drew the sculptures with great accuracy. The most disastrous catastrophe occurred 13 years later in 1687 in the Ottoman-Venetian war, during Morosini's campaign in Attica. The explosion which took place after a Venetian cannonball ignited the gunpowder stored in the Parthenon destroyed a great part of the frieze on the flank walls and irreparable damage was done to blocks, both to those that stayed in place and those that fell to the ground. The road was thus opened to looters.

In the first years of the 19th century, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Lord Elgin, violently removed from the ruined Parthenon all the sculptures he could, including 80 metres of the frieze. These are known as the Elgin Marbles, now in the British Museum. They constitute the largest group of Classical sculpture that has been preserved.



The last part of the frieze to remain in its original position was that on the west side, some 20 metres long. Increasingly rapid erosion of the marbles due to long exposure to the elements necessitated their removal in 1993 to the Acropolis Museum.

Note the damage and wear sustained by the marbles and try to account for the reasons.