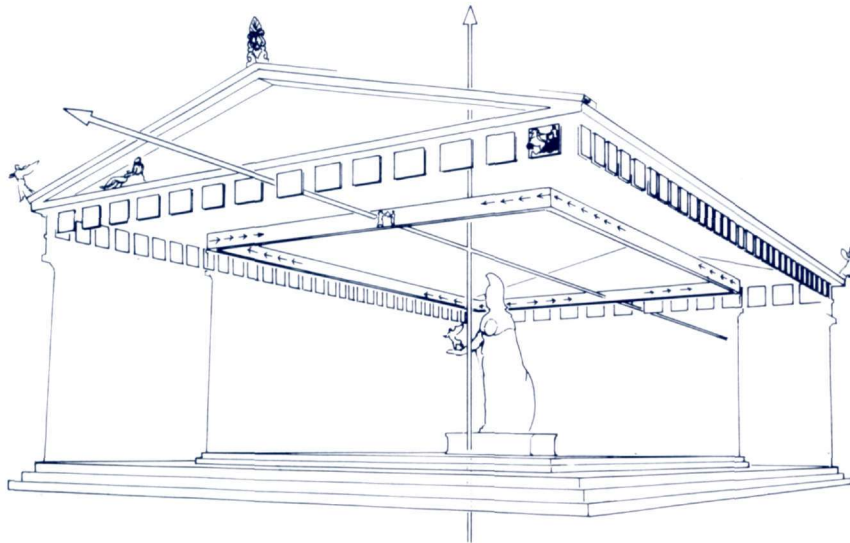


A Day at the Centre for the Acropolis Studies

THE SCULPTURAL ADORNMENT OF THE PARTHENON



The term 'decoration' in its present superficial sense does not convey the ancient essence of the word, especially where sculpture is concerned. This latter art form constituted a most important and exalted art form which ran parallel to the very structural plan of the temple itself. Together, sculpture and structure served common ends in the service of the deity while at the same time expressed cultural values and even alluded to political ideas and concepts. Naturally, however, sculpture's most direct and tangible function was figurative and illustrative. The position of the various sculptural groups in the building present the following notable aspects:

- An Ionic aspect in the continuous frieze at a height along the four sides of the cella.
- Sculptural depictions on all the metopes (92) and not only on a few, as was the case in most of the doric temples.
- A vertically arranged hierarchical succession of three decorative levels.

The first represents mainly earthly life as most of the figures depicted are mortal.

The second represented by the metopes lies in between the other two and depicts mythical scenes.

The third and highest level represents the heavens with figures of predominantly divine beings.

- A horizontal hierarchical arrangement.

The eastern side of the frieze is the most important and formal depicting as it does not only the gods of Olympus but also the eponymous heroes.

Among the metopes only those of the eastern side bear figures of gods (Gigantomachy).

Semi-gods, heroes and divine personifications although depicted on the west pediment are excluded from the east pediment where only gods can be seen and more particularly Zeus himself.

This hierarchy can be compared with that used in Orthodox Christian churches: a Christ Pantokrator presides in the dome, a Virgin Platytera in the apse, and saints in secondary positions further down etc.

The sculptural unities were assembled within the building according to principles springing from a desire to beneficially exploit lines of architectural form. For example, the square surface of the metopes did not allow continuity, the length of the ionic frieze did not favour discontinuity of scenes, and the triangular space left by the pediments imposed particular confines on height and hierarchical positioning of the figures included therein.

Despite the discontinuity of the metopes and their thematic division into four groups (the Gigantomachy on the east, the Iliou Persis on the north, Centaurmachy on the south and Amazonomachy on

the west), a common element unites all four closely, namely the theme of struggle between two rivals regardless of who they may be. It is not fortuitous that the mythopoetic imagination of the Ancients created a personified deity named Agon (Competition).

In the Parthenon metopes the expression of this struggle is unsurpassed and constitutes a symbol of the perpetual contention between opposite and opposing powers in nature, human society and the human soul. In its entirety, 'Struggle' is irresolute and thus is never ending. Thus the very egress of a struggle becomes an unimportant detail when compared to the process of conflict as a whole. The deep meaning of the sculptures here highlights the great spiritual maturity of the society which created it as well as underlining that society's distance from the art of neighbouring peoples who in approaching the same subject gave importance only to the outcome for the victor and the humiliation of the defeated (e.g. victorious Pharaohs, Assyrian kings, etc.).

The frieze standing high along the four sides of the cella depicted the great procession of the Panathenaic Festival in continuous but pulsatory movement starting from the west, going along the north and south sides and ending in the middle of the eastern side where the goddess' Peplos, is solemnly handed over. On either side we see the twelve deities and coming after them the Eponymous heroes, the mythical primogenitors of the Athenians who gave their names to the phylai, namely the administrative groups of the Athenian city-state. Originally four in number, the phylai were reorganised into ten with the establishment of the Democracy in 508 B.C.

The harmonious composition of horses, chariots and

charioteers, musicians and other figures, including animals, corresponds as much to the original number of four phylai as to the new one of ten and echoes the establishment of the Democracy as well as giving preeminence to the institutions of the state. It is remarkable that the frieze although carved in particularly low relief it bears many subsequent picture-levels; The frieze was clearly visible even from the side. Application of colours in paint along with added metal objects (weapons, utensils, etc.) would have made the frieze originally much more clearly visible than the part which today remains in situ on the west side of the temple.

The Parthenon pediments found an ingenious method to fill the reduced heights created towards their corners. The figures included in these corners retain a relatively undiminished size thanks to the particular stance given to individual bodies. The pediments' standard triangular shape was utilised by the temple's designers to emphasize the hierarchical development of the compositions. Subject of the east pediment is the Birth of Athena from the head of Zeus, the chief of all gods. The west pediment depicts the dispute between Athena and Poseidon for the domination of Attica in the presence of other gods, mythical heroes and deities who to a great extent represented personifications of the Attic land especially of aqueous elements so important to life and agriculture.

Poseidon's prominent place exactly adjacent to Athena symbolises the importance the state gave to shipping: in the same way the domination Athena won from Poseidon denotes the sovereignty of the Athenians over their mostly naval allies.

OTHER WORKS OF ART CONNECTED WITH THE TEMPLE AND SHRINE – THE VOTIVE OFFERINGS

In Ancient times, one of the most widespread customs related to temples and worship was the offering, or rather devotion, of objects. These votive offerings were sometimes made as private gestures and at other times on behalf of a civic community or state. In essence, the votive offering constituted a moral obligation.

Two groups of votive offerings can be discerned: one was primarily of a religious character and the other of an honourific nature primarily of a socio-political meaning.

For the artist of Antiquity, votive offerings constituted the finest objects to which they could apply their many talents, and thus inscriptions were often carved thereon indicating the names of the devotee and the artist and the reason why the offering was made to the particular deity.

Votive offerings were many and varied in types and sizes: some were simple statues either of individual

figures or of more ambitious group compositions. There were also relief stelai, precious vessels and furniture, weapons and spoils, architectural elements such as columns and so on. Even symbolic tripods and copies of ships were presented.

According to their type, the votive offerings were made of either marble, bronze, iron, wood or clay. Their surfaces were enriched with coloured paint and were embellished with attachments.

The marble votive offerings are those which have mostly survived to present times, but for the greater part only in fragmentary form and stripped of their original paint and attachments. However, the bronze works, were undoubtedly greater in number, as well as being more important, finer and more lavish. The most important of these was the giant statue of Promachos Athena, the earliest work executed by the famous artist Pheidias.

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