

The history of Athens is closely associated with the ancient goddess Athena, after whom the city is named. While people no longer believe that she actually exists, the name of Athens serves as a constant reminder of her. In tradition and art, her presence is everywhere apparent, especially on the Acropolis in the centre of the city where her sanctuary shone like a star throughout the ancient world.

Athena was worshipped throughout Attica. The famous ancient traveller Pausanias tells us: “And the rest of Athens, as well as the whole of Attica, is equally devoted to her, for those communities which worship other gods and goddesses give no less worship to her.” (Attica 26, 6.)

The ancient Athenians believed that the goddess protected the city and the state and took care to make both stronger and richer. Thus they offered her a very large number of votive statues, each of which depicted her in a particular way in order to show one of the many sides of her character. They also organised a wonderful festival for her, the so-called Panathenaea.

According to the ancient myths, Athena always protected the great heroes of the ancient Greeks, such as Hercules, Perseus, Achilles, Odysseus –she was always by their side in their struggle. In her person were combined the power of her father, Zeus, and the shrewdness and care of her mother, Metis. For the ancients, she was the protector of whatever had anything to do with culture, wisdom, art in all its forms, philosophy but also the martial arts. In Athens, belief in the goddess’ powerful but dignified presence influenced the public and private life of the citizens throughout the Archaic and Classical period.

Written & edited by Cornelia Hadziaslani

Drawings: M. Korres, I. Benekou, M. Cox, G. P. Stevens • Photo: S. Mavrommatis

Translated by D. Turner

Artistic supervision: AltSys

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A DAY ON THE ACROPOLIS IN SEARCH OF THE GODDESS ATHENA

ATHENA NIKE



The small Ionic style temple of Athena Nike stands on a bastion just in front of the Propylaea, the ceremonial entrance to the Acropolis, to the right. The temple was built around 425 B.C., possibly by the architect Callicrates. Later on, it became known as the temple of Wingless Victory (Apteros Nike) because, according to Pausanias: "... the Athenians ... think that Victory, having no wings, will always remain where she is." (Laconia, 15, 7) In reality, however, this cult statue was not of a Wingless Victory, since Victory always bore wings, but of Athena, the giver of Victory. The goddess' statue no longer exists. It was a xoanon, a cult statue which, according to the traveller Heliodoros (2nd century B.C.), held in its right hand a pomegranate (symbol of peace) and in its left a helmet (symbol of war).

In Antiquity, the word *xoanon* meant a statue of wood. These were of great age and, consequently, were not as well fashioned as later statues made in stone. Nevertheless, they were considered extremely sacred because they were most closely associated with the worship. The *xoana* were painted and were often decorated with inset metal elements and clothed with woven fabrics.

Because the temple on its bastion was somewhat high up, it was surrounded by a marble parapet (or *thorakion*) which was constructed at a later date, around 410 B.C. This parapet was decorated with figures of Victory and Athena carved in relief. We recognise Victory by her wings, and Athena by her symbols, by objects she holds and bears. Part of the parapet, such as that in the drawing, are now in the Acropolis Museum.

Look around the Museum to find parts of the parapet and try to work out which figure is Athena and which Victory.



I. Benekou

Relief No 989, Acropolis Museum, Marble, Ht. 1.055 m.

ATHENA PROMACHOS



On having passed through the Propylaea, the ancient visitor would have beheld the colossal statue of Athena Promachos. Today only the foundations and part of the crown of the statue's pedestal are preserved.

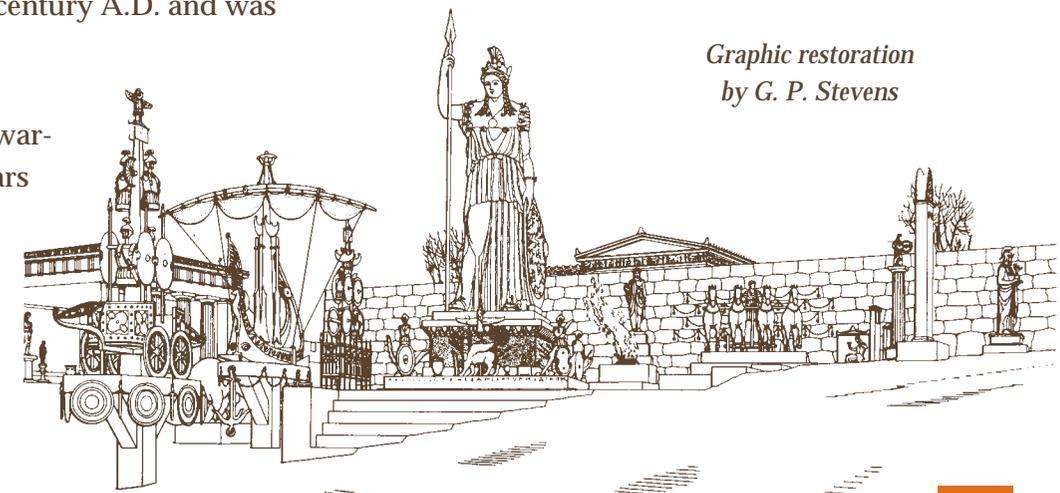
The statue of the Promachos celebrated the victory of the Greeks over the Persians at the battle of Marathon. Here Athena has a warlike character, and appears fully clad in the armour of a Greek warrior. Athena is the only female deity who wears a helmet and carries a spear. The statue was about eleven metres tall all in all, and was made of bronze.

Pausanias wrote the following about this magnificent work of art, made by Pheidias between 460 and 450 B.C.: "...there are two tithes dedicated by the Athenians after wars. There is first a bronze Athena, tithe from the Persians who landed at Marathon. It is the work of Pheidias, ... the reliefs upon the shield, including the fight between Centaurs and Lapithae ... The point of the spear of this Athena and the crest of her helmet are visible to those sailing to Athens, as soon as Sunium is passed." (Attika, 28, 2)

In the drawn reconstruction below we see that the Promachos was surrounded by various spoils of war and smaller votive objects and statues, and thus we can get an idea of what shrines looked like in Antiquity. The Athena Promachos was taken to Constantinople in the 7th century A.D. and was destroyed in A.D. 1204.

The figure of Athena as a warrior goddess always appears on one side of the Panathenaic amphorae.

In Athens today, there are wonderful modern statues of Athena at the Academy and in the *Pedeion tou Areos* (Field of Mars). Note them well and compare them with the now lost statue of the Promachos.



Graphic restoration by G. P. Stevens

ATHENA HYGEIA

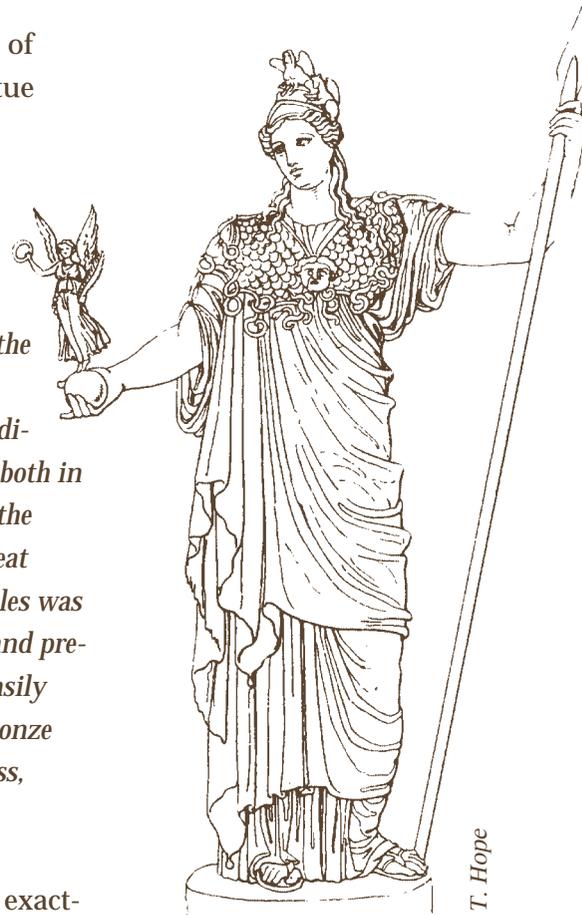


Preserved just in front of the Propylaea, on the inside of the Acropolis, is an altar and the base of a bronze statue which, according to the inscription on it, was that of Athena Hygeia (Health). The goddess was venerated because she provided health, protected the sick and helped to cure them.

Plutarch (1st century A.D.) says of the statue: “*The Propylaea of the Acropolis were brought to completion in the space of five years. A wonderful thing happened in the course of their building, which indicated that the goddess was not holding herself aloof, but was a helper both in the inception and in the completion of the work. One of its artificers, the most active and zealous of them all, lost his footing and fell from a great height, and lay in a sorry plight, despaired of by the physicians. Pericles was much cast down at this, but the goddess appeared to him in a dream and prescribed a course of treatment for him to use, so that he speedily and easily healed the man. It was in commemoration of this that he set up the bronze statue of Athena Hygeia on the Acropolis near the altar of that goddess, which was there before, as they say.*” (Pericles XIII)

The statue was made by the sculptor Pyrrhos. We do not know exactly what it looked like, but some scholars have reconstructed its appearance, and this is what we see in the picture.

Typically, the altar was set up before the statue. The altar was the most important element in cult practice, next to the temple and statue, which were not essential for worship of a deity.



Athena Hope / Farneze,
Roman copy in the Naples Museum,
Marble, Ht. 2.24 m.

Closely observe the ancient statue base. Read the inscription and copy it.

ATHENA LEMNIA



A bronze statue of Athena, known as Athena Lemnia, was one of the wonders of the Acropolis in Antiquity. Its original location is not certain but it most probably stood on a marble base immediately in front of the Propylaea to the left.

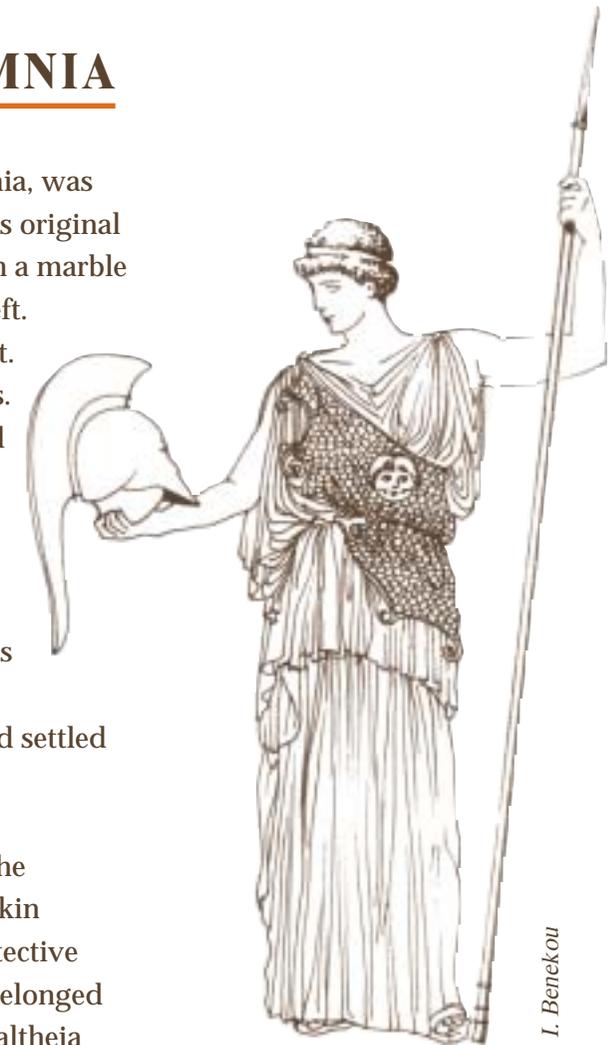
The statue was the work of Pheidias, in fact one of his earliest. It is known to us today, however, only through marble copies. The goddess was depicted standing. In her left hand she held a spear, on which she leaned, while in her right she held her helmet or, according to other scholars, an owl. A number of ancient texts talk about the exceptional beauty of this statue, which they said was the most wonderful of all those created by the sculptor. The statue is known as Lemnia because it was a votive offering made by the clerouchs from the island of Lemnos. These were Athenian citizens who had migrated and settled on the island in the 5th century B.C.

The goddess wore over her “*peplos*” (mantle), the *aegis* with the *Gorgoneion*. The aegis was a kind of shield covered with the skin of a goat (aiga in Greek). According to mythology, it had protective qualities. The ancient myths relate that the aegis originally belonged to Zeus and that it was covered with the skin of the goat Amaltheia who nurtured the baby god. Ancient artists depicted Athena’s aegis surrounded by snakes.

The *gorgoneion* is the head of Gorgon Medusa, whom Perseus killed with the help of Athena. The gorgoneion was said to have apotropaic qualities, namely it could ward off evil and was even said to turn all those who looked at it to stone. It almost always appears on Athena’s aegis, and sometimes on her shield.

Another characteristic attribute of Athena was the owl, symbol of wisdom. The ancient Greek name (*glauk*) comes from the Greek verb “to shine”. Athena and the owl were originally associated together because they were bright-eyed.

Do you know where else in Greece there are shrines and temples to Athena?



The copy of the head is in the Bologna Museum, while the body is in the Dresden Museum. Marble, Ht. 2.0 m.

I. Benekou

ATHENA AND MUSIC

STATUE GROUP OF ATHENA AND MARSYAS



On going towards the Parthenon from the Propylaea, the ancient visitor would have had to the right and the left of him various votive objects and statues, amongst which the group of Athena and Marsyas stood out thanks to their size and the excellence of their workmanship. Today, there is nothing to see apart from a carved area of rock where the base may have stood, and even this is doubtful. Nevertheless, ancient authors have left us lots of information about this important work and we have Roman copies. Both statues together are depicted in relief on a marble krater (a large votive vase) in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.

The myth goes that Athena was the first to make avloi (flutes) to play music, but she threw them to the ground when she realised that blowing them disfigured her face. But the satyr Marsyas, charmed by the sound of the new instruments, went to grab the avloi from the ground. This was exactly the scene depicted by the famous sculptor Myron in the two large bronze statues, made around the middle of the 5th century B.C. Athena wears her helmet and holds a spear. The satyr Marsyas steps back in awe while he looks longingly at the avloi.

The avlos was the most important wind instrument in Ancient Greece, and the myth related above associated Athena with music, a vital ingredient in every intellectual, artistic or social event in ancient Greece.



*The copy of Athena is in the Frankfurt Museum, Marble, Ht. 1.73 m.
The copy of Marsyas is in the Lateran Museum in Rome, Marble, Ht. 1.59 m.*

Avlos and guitar players participated in the Panathenaic Procession. Try to locate depictions of them in the Acropolis Museum.

ATHENA ERGANE



Going a little further on, the ancient visitor would have come across the shrine of Athena Ergane near the north-west corner of the Parthenon. We have no clue today as to what form this shrine took, neither do we know its precise location. In fact, we are ignorant of the statue's type and even of the material it was made of.

The Athenians were the first to place under the protection of Athena each and every art form and every artist and craftsman who worked with his mind and hands. Athena taught humans to spin, to bridle horses; she also helped the Argonauts build their ship, the Argo, and was instrumental in the construction of the Wooden Horse that led the Greeks to victory over Troy.

Athena Ergane, together with Hephaestus, protected all the professional guilds: potters, vase painters, stone workers, wood workers, metal workers and so on.

Athena is also considered the goddess of weaving, and for this reason is often shown holding a spindle, as in the drawing. According to the myth, she taught the art of weaving to humankind. A famous weaver, Arachne (Spider in English) was so proud as to think of herself as better than Athena at weaving, and challenged her to a contest. Athena wove a "peplos" with scenes of her battle with Poseidon on the Acropolis for the rule of Athens, and Arachne a "peplos" with scenes from the life and love affairs of the gods. In a fit of rage, Athena turned Arachne into an insect, and the spider has not stopped weaving ever since.

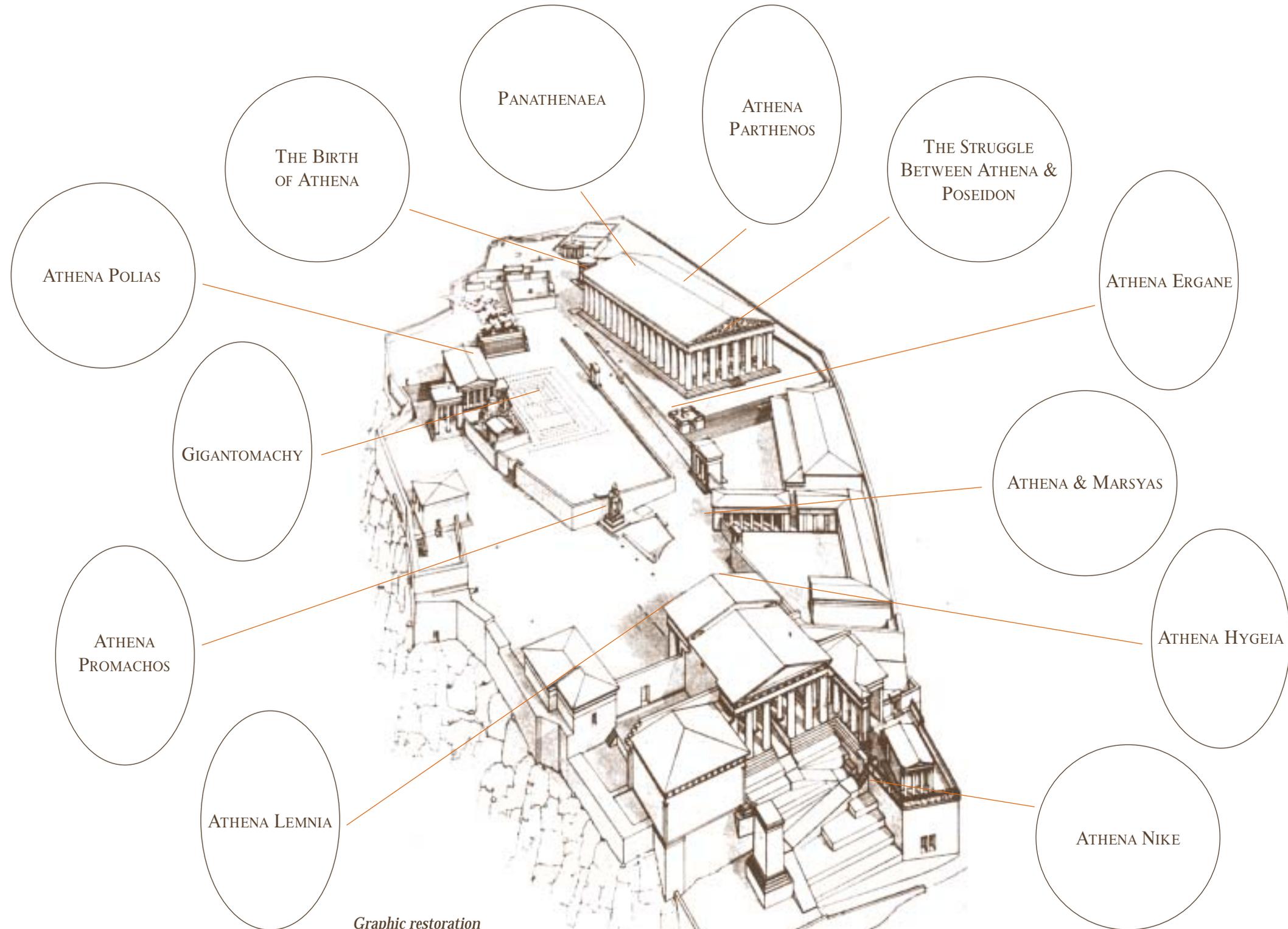
Representation of Athena Ergane on the clay plaque, No 13055, Acropolis Museum, Ht: 0.218 m.

Draw the "peplos" which you would have presented to the goddess with scenes of your own choice. Don't forget that on the Panathenaic "peplos", there were scenes of the Gigantomachy.



A DAY ON THE ACROPOLIS IN SEARCH OF THE GODDESS ATHENA

By yourself, locate the drawings of the statues of the goddess Athena in this book in the place that they would have stood in Antiquity.



*Graphic restoration
by G. P. Stevens*

ATHENA POLIAS



The second most important building on the Acropolis was the Ionic temple of the Erechtheion, built between 421 and 406 B.C. Its main chamber housed the very ancient statue of Athena, the “*Diipetes xoanon*”. On this, Pausanias writes: “*But the most holy symbol, that was so considered by all many years before the unification of the parishes, is the image of Athena which is on what is now called the Acropolis, but in early days the Polis (City). A legend concerning it says that it fell from heaven.*” (Attika, 26, 6)

Before the completion of the Erechtheion, the xoanon stood in the Ancient Temple, where the goddess used to be venerated. Traces of this very ancient structure can be seen slightly to the south of the Erechtheion.

Here Athena was worshipped as “Polias”, namely as the protector of the city. Offered to her in this capacity were the most lavish sacrifices on the “great altar” in front of the temple. The xoanon no longer exists. We do not know what it looked like. We do know, however, that it was clothed and bore ornamental jewellery. Each year, during the Panathenaic festival, the statue was offered a new “peplos” and every four years it was adorned, with great ceremony, with an elaborate “peplos” bearing depictions of the Gigantomachy. During another festival, the so-called “Plynteria”, the statue was taken by women in a secret procession to the sea, where it was cleansed.

The Erechtheion also housed other “sacred spots” which were venerated accordingly. Here we can see two monuments to the original rivalry between Poseidon and Athena for domination over Athens: an olive tree replacing the one that grew on this spot in ancient times, and a well where Poseidon’s trident is said to have struck the rock, at the north porch of the temple. Tradition had ordained that the sacred snake of the goddess reside here.



Clay figurine from the Acropolis perhaps illustrating the xoanon. Today it is in the Berlin Museum.

What do you think the xoanon would originally have looked like? Draw your impression and offer it a “peplos” of your making.

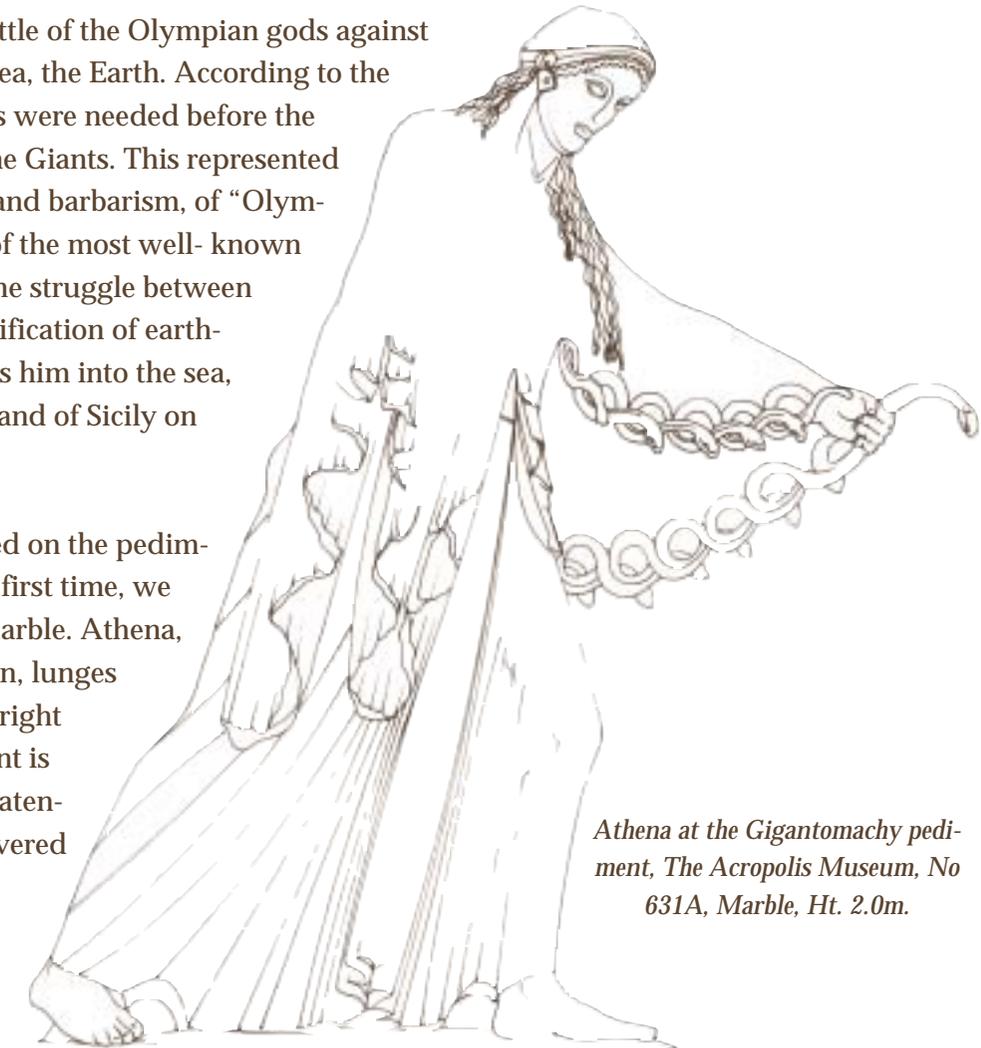
THE GIGANTOMACHY



The Gigantomachy was a favourite subject for artists in Antiquity, especially amongst sculptors. The scene adorned the woven “peplos” which was offered to the cult xoanon during the Great Panathenaic festival. It also appeared on the eastern metopes of the Parthenon, the inner surface of the shield of Athena Parthenos, and on the pediment of the Ancient Temple. Although this temple no longer exists, part of the sculpture group from the pediment can still be seen in the Acropolis Museum.

By Gigantomachy we mean the battle of the Olympian gods against the Giants who were the sons of Gea, the Earth. According to the myth, much time and many battles were needed before the Olympian gods could overcome the Giants. This represented the victory of Reason over nature and barbarism, of “Olympian Order” over the world. One of the most well-known episodes of the Gigantomachy is the struggle between Athena and Engelados, the personification of earthquakes. The goddess finally throws him into the sea, and to keep him still placed the island of Sicily on top of him.

The Gigantomachy was represented on the pediment of the Ancient Temple. For the first time, we see fully carved statues made of marble. Athena, almost at the centre of the depiction, lunges towards Engelados, a spear in her right hand. Only the foot of her opponent is preserved today. The goddess threateningly stretches out her left arm, covered in the snake-lined aegis.



Athena at the Gigantomachy pediment, The Acropolis Museum, No 631A, Marble, Ht. 2.0m.

Look in the Acropolis Museum to find works that depict Athena. You will recognise them by her attributes.

ATHENA PARTHENOS



The most imposing likeness of Athena on the Acropolis was the gold and ivory statue made by Pheidias which stood inside the cella of the Parthenon. While Athena was also depicted here fully armed, she inspires peace rather than war. Here we see the goddess of wisdom, she who stood beside poets and rhetors, philosophers and artists.

Pausanias gives us a good idea of the statue: *“The statue itself is made of ivory and gold. On the middle of her helmet is placed a likeness of the Sphinx... and on either side of the helmet are griffins in relief. The statue of Athena is upright, with a tunic reaching to the feet, and on her breast the head of Medusa is worked in ivory. She holds a statue of Victory about four cubits high, and in the other hand a spear; at her feet lies a shield and near the spear is a serpent. This serpent would be Erichthonius. On the pedestal is the birth of Pandora in relief.”* (Attika, 24, 5&7) From other sources we know that the outer face of the shield was decorated with a relief depiction of the Battle of the Amazons, while the Gigantomachy was painted on the inside. Finally, the sides of her sandals were decorated with relief depictions of the Centauromachy (battle of Centaurs and Lapithae). The gold used for the statue has been calculated at weighing about 1,150 kilos.

This masterpiece of Classical art no longer exists, neither do we know how or when it was destroyed. However, a small marble copy now in the Athens National Archaeological Museum provides us with an idea of what it would have looked like. The quality of the original’s craftsmanship must have been exceptional, and it blended perfectly with the architecture of the great temple. From the ground, it rose to a height of about thirteen and a half metres, and rested on a marble base surrounded by a large number of precious votive offerings.



I. Benekou

The Varvakeion Athena, National Archaeological Museum, Marble, Ht. 1.045 m.

The most prominent aspect of Athena Parthenos is her unique crown. Using your imagination, draw what you think it looked like.

THE PANATHENAEA, THE FESTIVAL OF ATHENA

PARTHENON – FRIEZE

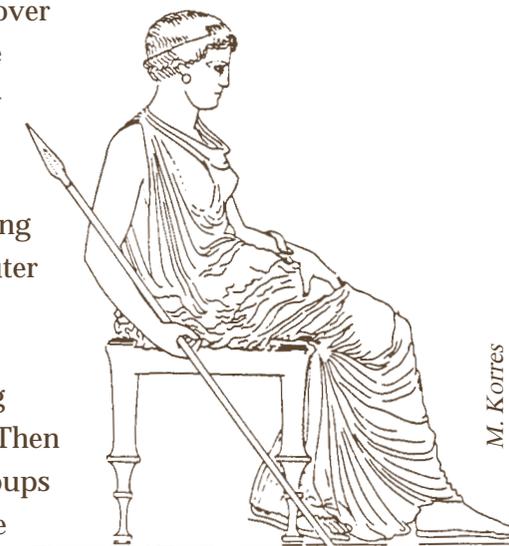


The Panathenaia was the biggest festival of ancient Athens. It was celebrated in honour of goddess Athena every year and more spectacularly every four years. It included various events, artistic and athletic competitions as well as the great Panathenaic procession, which culminated in the handing over of the “peplos” to the cult statue in the Erechtheion. Large votive vases, the “Panathenaic amphorae”, full of olive oil, were awarded as prizes to the winners of the contests.

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. 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. Groups of men carrying trays of offerings, others who hold hydrias (large vases with water), musicians with avloi and guitars and handsome aged men holding olive branches participate in the procession.

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. Athena is seated next to the “peplos” scene. On her knees she holds the aegis and with her right hand her spear.

Today part of the frieze has been destroyed, but most parts of it are in the British Museum, the Acropolis Museum and the Louvre.



M. Korres

Try to identify the Groups in the Panathenaic procession now in the Acropolis Museum.

Graphic restoration of the Gods at the Frieze. Ht. 1.03 m.



M. Korres

THE BIRTH OF ATHENA

PARTHENON – EAST PEDIMENT



Two myths associated with Athena provided the sculptor Pheidias and his colleagues with the opportunity to create two magnificent statue groups to decorate the pediments of the Parthenon, the largest temple on the Acropolis.

The east pediment was much changed by the 6th century A.D. when the veneration of Athena stopped and the temple was converted into a Christian church. We are, therefore, unsure as to the form of the central section of the composition. A very ancient myth states that the goddess Athena was born from the head of Zeus, who had swallowed her mother Metis, the goddess of wisdom. When the time came, Zeus ordered Hephaestus to open his head with an axe, whereupon Athena appeared fully armed in front of the other Olympian gods.

Athena and the enthroned Zeus are flanked by Hephaestus, Hera, Dionysos, Hermes, Poseidon, Apollo and other deities, including Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth. Identifying the statues is not always possible. The birth of Athena took place at daybreak, symbolised in the pediment sculptures by the chariot of Heliος (the Sun) rising to the left, and that of the Selene (the Moon) sinking to the right.

In the Acropolis Museum we can see a small-scale reconstruction of both pediments. There are also a few fragments of the Parthenon sculptures themselves, most of which are now in the British Museum and the Louvre in Paris. Plaster copies of all the surviving sculptures of the Parthenon are today at the Centre for the Acropolis Studies.



I. Benekou

Why should the birth of Athena appear on the most sacred side of the temple, the east, instead of the struggle with Poseidon?

ATHENA AGAINST POSEIDON

PARTHENON – WEST PEDIMENT



The second myth associated with Athena was depicted in ornate marble sculptures on the west pediment of the Parthenon. Here the story takes place on the Acropolis itself, and concerns the struggle between Athena and Poseidon for the supremacy over and protection of Athens. The judges were the local heroes who witnessed the offering of the divine gifts and gave victory to Athena.

The west pediment has been preserved in a far better condition than the east, and thanks to old drawings (Carrey, 1674) we know what the composition looked like. Athena and Poseidon dominated the centre of the scene. They were flanked by two chariots driven by Nike and Amphitrite respectively. Kekrops and his daughter along with other heroes of the Athenians and distinguished figures (whose identification remains problematic) are shown in various poses on the pediment, the edges of which contained the personifications of the two main rivers of Attica, the Kiffisos and Ilissos respectively.

The exceptional quality of the Parthenon pediment statues rank them as outstanding works of Classical sculpture. Even the smallest detail in places that could not be seen by the observer on the ground are perfectly executed.

According to Plutarch, Pheidias was the overall director of the sculptures' execution, which would indicate that although many great sculptors worked on the project, this remarkable ancient artist was responsible for the general composition, and the unity and quality of the whole. The offering made to Athena thus motivated one of the most important creations of art in history.



I. Benekou

Describe what Athens would have looked like if the struggle had been won by Poseidon.