

The Parthenon

In 447 B.C., Pericles, leader of Athens, envisioned a great building project located high above the city on a large, flat hill called the *acropolis*, meaning "high place" or "high city." The Acropolis was the site of many elaborate and costly buildings, including one of the most famous landmarks of the ancient world—a massive temple called the Parthenon—dedicated to the patron deity of Athens, the goddess Athena.



Athena's temple: The Parthenon

In addition to the Parthenon, a massive gate with large columns, called the Propylaea, was built as an entrance to the Acropolis. Other buildings were added later, including the Erechtheum, a house of shrines.

Pericles faced much criticism over the cost of this public funds project, which, if constructed today, would cost over a billion dollars.

The size of the Parthenon accounted for part of the cost. The temple was 237 feet long, 110 feet wide, and 60 feet high. Several rows of great marble columns supported the flat, stone roof. The outer row of columns stood 34 feet high, with 8 columns at each end and 17 along each side. Builders used over 20,000 tons of marble in constructing the Parthenon, much of it locally quarried.

The temple's inner sanctuary featured a porch at each end supported by six columns. The inner sanctuary, called the *cella*, was divided into two rooms. A large statue of Athena stood in the east room. Made of gold and ivory, it measured over 30 feet in height. Athena was portrayed as a warrior-goddess, giving blessings to the army of Athens. In her outstretched hand she held a six-foot-tall statue of *Nike*, which means "victory" in Greek.

Despite the presence of Athena's statue, the Parthenon was not intended as a place of public worship. A house of divinity and honor, the Parthenon was the exclusive domain of priests and priestesses. Religious ceremonies for the citizens of Athens were held outside.

The outer wall of the *cella* was originally decorated with many marble figures portraying the Athenian people in a festival honoring the birthday of their special goddess. Other statues showed men in battle and mythological creatures. Many of the sculptures were removed from the temple in the early 1800s A.D. (when Athens was under Turkish control) by Lord Elgin, the British ambassador to Turkey. The statues may be found today in the British Museum in London and are known as the *Elgin Marbles*.

Only portions of the Parthenon have survived over the past 2400 years. The roof long ago caved in or was destroyed, but many of the original columns still stand. During the 1600s A.D., a Turkish army used the Parthenon as a place to store gunpowder. An explosion in the temple wrecked the inner portion of this great building, perhaps the greatest monument built during the Golden Age of Athens.

Review and Write

The marble statuary which adorned the walls and upper portions of the Parthenon not only portrayed the gods of the Greeks, but everyday people doing everyday activities. What does this tell you about the people of Athens and their connection to their deities?

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

Although the period between 1100 and 800 B.C. is known as the Dark Age of Greece—a time when writing almost disappeared, it was a time of great storytelling. Part of the oral tradition which comes down to us today may be found in the works of a poet traditionally known only as Homer.

While Homer lived (some historians doubt he ever existed) in the 800s B.C., he created two great epic poems set during the period of Mycenaean rule in the Aegean region around 1200 B.C. Four hundred years after the events, Homer is thought to have recorded the ancient stories which now comprise his classic works, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

The events related in both works are said to have taken place during and after the Trojan War which was fought in the 1200s B.C. during the reign of the Mycenaean king, Agamemnon (see page 2).

Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are part of the heroic element in early Greek literature. The heroes of each work are very different. The hero of the *Iliad*, Achilles, is a man of great military skill and prowess. Odysseus, the hero of the *Odyssey* (in Latin his name is Ulysses), works through a variety of challenges using cleverness and his wits, rather than sheer physical force. Despite their differences, these heroes nevertheless represent the best and most glorious of Greek heroic figures of the day.

The story of the *Iliad* is set during the final year of the Trojan War, which was fought between Greece and the city of Troy. The cause of the war was a woman named Helen, the beautiful wife of the Spartan king, Menelaus. His brother, Agamemnon, leads a heroic Greek army to Troy to recapture Helen, who was kidnapped by the Trojan king's son, Paris.

In Agamemnon's ranks was a soldier named Achilles. The two quarrel and Achilles refuses to fight. Without the skill of Achilles, the Greeks are beaten back by the Trojans, and Achilles' closest friend, Patroclus, is killed during the fighting by Hector, another son of the Trojan king. When Achilles hears of Patroclus's death, he is angered and seeks revenge. Achilles then engages Hector outside the city of Troy and kills him.

Similarly, the *Odyssey* is a story of epic heroism. The hero, Odysseus, has been imprisoned for seven years by a sea nymph. During a council of the Greek gods, Zeus allows Odysseus to gain his freedom and return home to his wife, Penelope. For most of the poem,



The Greek epic poet Homer was, according to legend, blind.

Odysseus is intent on returning to Penelope, who is being pressed to give up hope of her husband ever returning and to marry one of several suitors.

Odysseus's journey brings him great adventure as he faces shipwreck (caused by the god Poseidon), the wrath of a one-eyed giant called Cyclops, sea monsters, a trip to the underworld, visions of ghosts, temptations from the enchantress Circe, and beautiful sea nymphs who lure sailors to their rocky deaths with songs. In time, Odysseus makes his way home, kills those who want Penelope for themselves, and is reunited with his wife.

Review and Write

1. *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are two works which feature great heroes. What other stories have you read which featured a hero or heroine as the main character? Why do you think people like reading about heroes? What kind of persons do you think may be called *heroic*?
2. In just three sentences, explain the basic story line of the *Iliad*.