

1 Acropolis

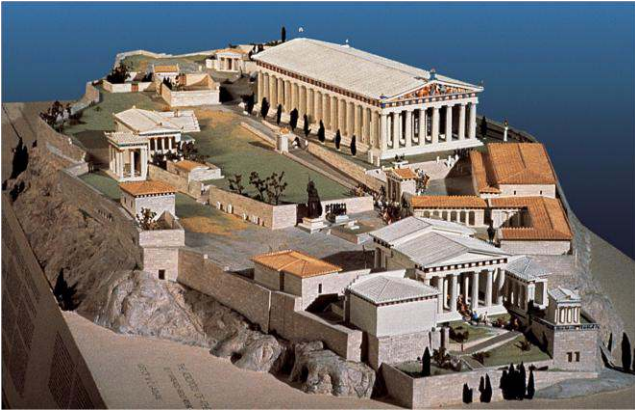
Names (also known as)

Greek: Acropolis

It was also known as Cecropia, after the first Athenian king.

Etymology

ἄκρον (*akron*, high-est, extremity) and πόλις (*polis*, city)



Location/Description

The Acropolis is located on a rocky promontory 156m above the valley of Ilissos; it covers a surface area of less than 3ha.

The first inhabitants of the Acropolis of Athens were Mycenaean Kings who fortified the rock with massive eight-metre high walls, and built their palaces there.

The Acropolis had its own underground water supply in the form of a deep well, dug at the north end of the rock, which could be used by the defenders during a siege.

Besides being a fort and the royal residence, the Acropolis functioned as a place of worship for the pantheon of Greek gods, but primarily Athena, the Protector of the city of Athens. The Parthenon was built for her worship. There are also temples or altars for Zeus, Dionysus and Artemis along with several demi-gods and heroes.

In subsequent years, the Athenians rejected the monarchy and were ruled by a council of Aristocrats (the *pentakosio-medimnoi*). These were rich landowners whose land yielded more than 500 bushels of produce. Administrative functions moved away from the Acropolis towards the Agora.

The Acropolis became exclusively a place of worship and never hosted another ruler, partly because the new realities of city administration made it inconvenient, and partly because the

Athenians in their democratic zeal wanted to eliminate all references to a monarchy.

Scriptural references

We have our own high and holy city that should tower over and superintend our daily lives ...

Old Testament

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of Yahweh's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the house of the Elohim of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem. (Isa. 2:2-3)

Thus saith Yahweh; I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and Jerusalem shall be called a city of truth; and the mountain of Yahweh of armies the holy mountain. (Zech. 8:1-8)

New Testament

Our high city is the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev. 3:13; 21:2)

Famous characters

Darius
Xerxes
Paul
Pericles

Brief history

From the 2nd millennium BC it was a fortress protecting places of worship and royal palaces.

The plateau was protected by a wall, the *Pelasgicon*, which existed prior to the invasions of the Dorians who threatened Athens beginning in 1200 BC. A Delphic oracle declared the *Pelasgicon* cursed and it was destroyed. The upper town, deprived of its ramparts, was severely weakened.

In 480 BC, the Persians under Xerxes invaded Greece (after Darius' plan failed at Marathon). The Athenians fled the city. The Persians sacked the city and Acropolis, looting and burning everything.

Paradoxically, the carrying away of the booty by the Persians actually resulted in its conservation in comparison with the artefacts left behind. The Athenians declared everything the Persians touched as desecrated. They tore down and rebuilt everything on the plateau. The so-called Persian debris is a rich archaeological store.

The time of Pericles in the 5th century BC marks the apogee of Athenian democracy. The period of rebuilding 447-406 BC, saw the construction of:

1. the main temple dedicated to Athena, the Parthenon;
2. the Propylaea, the monumental entrance which replaced the Gate of Peisistratus, built on the very site of one of the entrances to the citadel of the ancient kings;
3. the temple of Athena Nike; and
4. the Erechtheion.

These are recognised as the four masterpieces of classical Greek art.

After the disastrous Peloponnesian War that resulted in the capitulation of Athens in April 404 BC the Acropolis continued to be beautified and restored by the powerful personalities of the day, including the sovereigns of Pergamum, Cappadocia, and Egypt, Roman Emperors such as Claudius and Hadrian, and wealthy private citizens like Herod Atticus, the private tutor of Marcus Aurelius.

The first incidence of damage to the monumental heritage of the Acropolis came at the time of the Herulian raid in AD 267. Since then the site has been damaged many times.

The Byzantines converted the temples into

orthodox churches and removed their art treasures to Constantinople. After the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1204, Athens was put into the hands of Frankish lords who had little respect for its ruins.

When the Turks took over the city in 1456, it became a mosque, and the Erechtheion was used from time to time as the harem of the Turkish governor.

In 1687 during the siege of the Acropolis by the Venetian armies of Morosini, the Turks used the Parthenon as a powder magazine and it was severely damaged by an explosion.

In the 19th century, with official authorization from the Sultan, Lord Elgin, ambassador of the King of England, completed the pillaging by acquiring marble sections (the Elgin marbles) which since 1815 have been the pride of the British Museum.

After a century of excavations and improvements of the site, the Acropolis is now a testing ground for the most innovative open-air conservation techniques aimed at safeguarding the marble sections, which have been affected by heavy atmospheric pollution.

(Compiler – John Tierney)

