

# Ancient Greece: The Parthenon



Figure of a river-god from the Parthenon  
Greece, 438-432 BC

Visit resource for teachers  
Key Stage 2

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# Before your visit

## Background information

### What was the Parthenon?

A temple to Athena. The Parthenon was built in the Doric style of architecture, but included features from the Ionic style. It was also larger and more richly decorated than any other Doric temple and had a number of refined architectural features that made it special such as gently curving columns and base.

### Where was it built?

On the Acropolis, the hill rising at the centre of Athens. The Acropolis was originally the citadel and site of the palaces of the early kings of Athens, though no trace of these now survives. It became the focus of worship of the city's patron goddess Athena. The most important temple was the Erechtheion (not the Parthenon) as it contained the ancient wooden statue of Athena to which the new peplos (robe/dress) was presented annually on her birthday in mid-summer.

### When was it built?

It was built 447-432 BC. The older shrines and temples were destroyed by the Persians when they sacked Athens in 480BC. When the Athenians returned to their city, it was agreed that these would not be re-built as a reminder of the sacrilege of the Persians. Later, the general and politician Pericles persuaded the Athenian people to build the Parthenon.

### What was in and on the Parthenon building?

A huge statue of Athena made of gold and ivory standing 12 metres tall was inside and painted sculptures outside. The west pediment (triangular space below the roof on the short side) showed Athena and Poseidon's contest for patronship of Athens; the east showed Athena's birth from the head of Zeus. The squarish metopes - all round the outside - were carved in high relief. The ones in the museum (from the south side) show a battle between Greeks and centaurs (half man, half horse). The others showed Greeks versus Amazons, Greeks versus Trojans and the battle of the gods and the giants. The frieze - encircling the outside of the temple's inner chamber - shows an idealised version of the

great procession during the Panathenaic Festival which brought the peplos to Athena's ancient statue and incorporates other events that happened during the festival. One of the temple rooms was used as the treasury for tribute exacted from the cities in Athens' empire.

### **What happened to it later?**

It was used as a church, mosque and ammunition store. It suffered a great deal of damage in 1687 when it was hit by Venetian artillery during a battle between the Venetians and the Ottoman Turks who ruled Greece at the time.

### **How did the sculptures get here?**

Between 1801 and 1805 Lord Elgin, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, removed about half of the remaining sculptures from the fallen ruins and from the building itself, and brought them back to Britain. These sculptures were acquired from Lord Elgin by the British Museum in 1816.

### **Should the sculptures stay here?**

Many teachers include in their schemes of work the question of whether the sculptures from the Parthenon in the British Museum should be sent to Greece. The question provides students with a valuable opportunity to consider, among other matters, the significance of past events for the present, the value of museums and how national identities are represented. It also gives them a chance to argue a case and justify their views. You will find useful background information on this issue in a special section of the Museum's website, which also directs you to sources of alternative views and arguments. Follow the links at the foot of the page from: [www.britishmuseum.org/parthenon](http://www.britishmuseum.org/parthenon)

## Resources

### British Museum websites

#### Explore

Explore is an online database of over 5000 objects selected from the Museum's collection. To access Greek objects on Explore use the Explore function on the home page of the British Museum website at [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)

#### Ancient Greece website [www.ancientgreece.co.uk](http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk)

This is an interactive learning and information website with text, images and maps relating to a range of key themes. It includes a wide variety of online activities for pupils and an area for teachers providing guidance and ideas for the classroom.

### Books

#### For adults

Cook, B.F., *The Elgin Marbles*, British Museum Press, 1997

Jenkins, I., *The Parthenon Frieze*, British Museum Press, 2002

Jenkins, I., *Greek Architecture and its Sculpture*, British Museum Press, 2006

#### For children

McAllister, E., *Pocket Timeline: Ancient Greece*, British Museum Press, 2006

Sheehan, S., *The British Museum Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Ancient Greece*, British Museum Press, 2002

## Gallery information

Room 18 contains sculptures from the pediments, frieze and metopes. The north end (right hand part as you enter the main room) houses the east pediment which showed Athena's birth and contains metopes showing the battle between the Greeks and the centaurs.

The south end of the room houses the west pediment which showed the contest between Athena and Poseidon and contains further metopes of the battle between the Greeks and the Centaurs. The pediment is very fragmentary.

The centre of the room displays the frieze celebrating the Panathenaia. This frieze is at an accessible eye level height. The side galleries contain pieces of architecture and sculpture from the Parthenon and a full-size cast of the west frieze and reconstruction of a corner of the building above a column. These side galleries also set the Parthenon sculptures in their context on the building and on the Acropolis. The southern side gallery (on your left as you go through the glass doors) contains a very useful video showing how the three types of sculpture were placed on the building, how the frieze is composed and a reconstruction of a metope.

## What is it like to visit this gallery ?

Room 18 is long rectangular room. It is popular and can get crowded but is so big that this does not often become a problem, though the size of tourist groups can be intimidating. There is only one exit from the room so students cannot accidentally wander into another room. The south end is quieter than the north end. The side rooms are not suitable for a whole class at a time, but are better for small groups.

## Case Numbers

Please note that any case numbers are usually small, white and high up on the glass.

## Preliminary activities

You may find some of the following activities useful in helping to prepare the pupils for their visit to the ancient Greek galleries.

## General introductory activities

- Locate the area covered by the ancient Greek world in an atlas and look at the modern countries which currently exist in this region of the world.
- Explore life in ancient Greece and focus on the city-state of Athens.
- Look at objects from ancient Greece using the Explore function from the homepage of the British Museum website.

## Activities to support gallery activities

- Look at other examples of ancient Greek architecture. Explain the basic styles and architectural features. Use the *Challenge* activity in the *Acropolis* section of the Ancient Greece website to enable students to design their own Greek temple, [www.ancientgreece.co.uk/acropolis/challenge](http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk/acropolis/challenge)
- Explain where the Parthenon temple was and who it was for. Explain its religious functions and architectural features.
- Talk about the goddess Athena, her role in Athenian life and the Panathenaic procession.

## **During your visit**

## Gallery activity: introduction for teachers

The gallery activities are a set of activity sheets which can be used by students working in Room 18. The sheets can be used as stand-alone activities or you may wish to develop work around particular sheets as suggested in the before and after sections of this resource.

- Where case numbers are indicated on a sheet, these are usually to be found marked in white numbers high up on the glass of that particular case.
- You are welcome to select the activities which are most appropriate for the focus of your visit and adapt sheets to meet the needs of your students.
- Each activity is designed to support the students in looking at, and thinking about, objects on display in the gallery.
- Individual activity sheets may be undertaken by single students, in pairs or as a small group.
- Where space is provided for recording this may be undertaken by the student or an adult helper as is most appropriate for the students involved.
- Familiarise the students and accompanying adults with the chosen activity sheets at school before the day of the visit. Make sure students and adults know what they are to do and are familiar with the vocabulary used on the sheets or which they may encounter in the gallery.

## Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers

### Gallery activity: Athena's birthday

- The frieze portrays the Panathenaic procession and festival which took place every year to celebrate Athena's birthday. The robe being folded is her birthday present. It is located in the central part of the frieze which faces the entrance to the gallery, slightly to the right.
- This activity encourages observational skills.

### Gallery activity: Carving

- The metopes are the almost-square carved panels depicting centaurs and men fighting. The pedimental carvings are located at either end of the room. The frieze runs around the room at eye-level.
- This activity asks students to use written descriptions to link to visual observation.

### Gallery activity: Figures on the temple

- The Parthenon temple follows a traditional Greek design. There are two sets of pedimental figures in the room, one at either end. They are carved to enable them to fit into the triangular shape of a pediment. The frieze is the long scene cut in low relief which runs around the central part of the room. The metopes are located at both ends of the room and are squarish in shape showing scenes of centaurs fighting men.
- This activity encourages students to use visual observation to reproduce images.

### Gallery activity: Watching the procession

- The frieze portrays the Panathenaic procession which was held every year to celebrate Athena's birthday.
- This activity requires students to combine visual observation with imagination.

## Athena's birthday

The Parthenon frieze shows a procession that happened every year in ancient Athens to celebrate Athena's birthday.

- Try to find the following people or animals on the frieze and tick the box next to each one when you see them. (Some are shown many times on the frieze, so as soon as you see one you can tick the box!)

a man riding a horse

a god (sitting on a chair)

a cow

a man walking

two figures folding a robe

- The robe that is being folded is Athena's birthday present. Draw a picture in the box below showing the two figures and the folded robe.



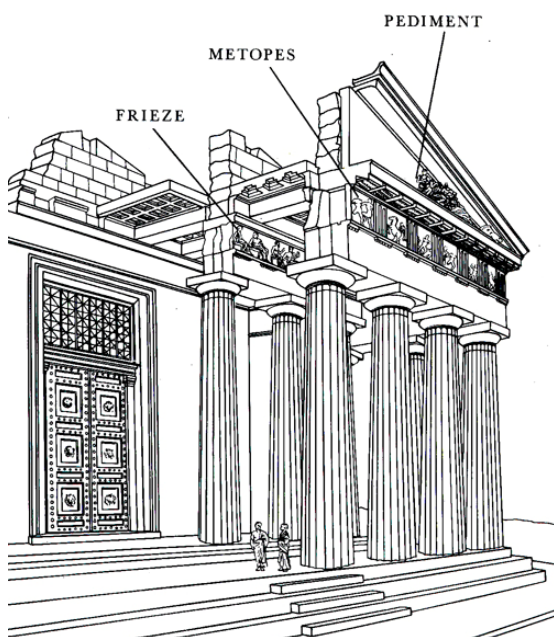
- Discuss in your group what you know about the goddess Athena. Do you know what she is the goddess of, and what her symbol is?

## Carving

Greek sculptors carved the decorations of temples in **three** different ways:

- 1: in the round – sculptures are carved all the way around, front and back.
- 2: in high relief – the figures stick out a lot from the stone background.
- 3: in low relief – sculptures stick out a little from the stone background.

- Three parts of the Parthenon were decorated with sculptures. Look at the picture below and read the descriptions next to it.



metopes are square carved panels

pediments are triangular shapes at each end of the temple

a frieze is a long scene that ran around the temple

- Find an example of each of the three different parts of the temple. Draw a line to match them to the different sorts of carving.

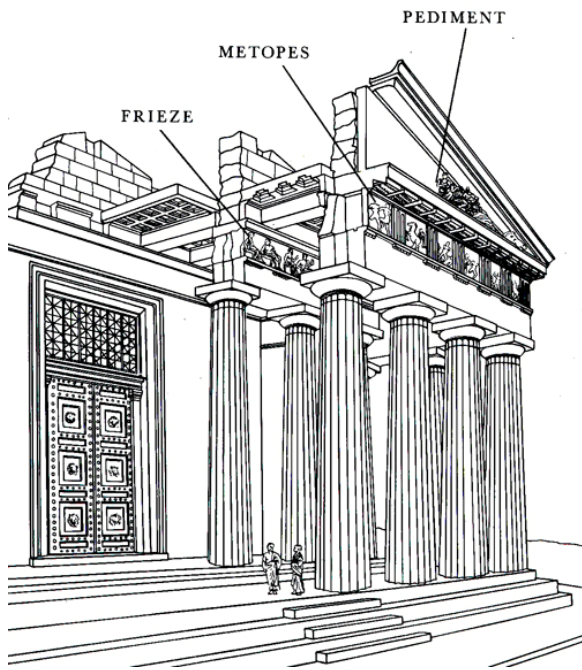
metope
pediment
frieze

in the round
in high relief
in low relief

- Discuss with your group the three types of carving and which you prefer.

## Figures on the temple

The sculptures displayed in this room were all high up near the top of the temple. Three parts of the temple were carved: frieze, metopes and pediments.



- Look in Room 18 and find an example of each part

- Each part shows images of people. Find a person in each part and draw them in the boxes below

person from a pediment	person from a metope	person from the frieze

- Imagine what each person is doing.

## Watching the procession

The Parthenon frieze shows a procession that happened every year in ancient Athens to celebrate Athena's birthday.

- Stand in front of part of the frieze and stretch your arms out sideways. That is your part of the procession.
- Look at your part of the procession. Circle below any things that you can see.

people chatting

a person walking

a man riding a horse

a person leading an animal

an animal

a person carrying something

- Imagine you are an ancient Athenian watching this part of the procession in real life. Describe what you can see, what people are doing, what they are wearing. If there is an animal write down what type of animal it is, if there are objects explain what they look like and what they might be. Describe what you might be able to hear.

Notes on my part of the procession:

- Imagine how you would have felt as the whole procession went past you.

## **After your visit**

## Follow up activities: introduction

These activities aim to encourage pupils to reflect on the work undertaken in the Ancient Greek galleries during their Museum visit.

- Some of the activities draw directly on the information gathered at the Museum while others encourage the pupils to draw on personal experience or undertake additional research in the classroom.
- Each activity includes a suggestion for classroom work and also an outcome which may be in the form of a written piece, drama presentation or artwork.
- You may also wish to look at some of the activities available on the ancient Greece learning website ([www.ancientgreece.co.uk](http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk)) which relate to your visit.

## Follow up activity: Athena's birthday

Curriculum links: history, literacy, art & design

Skills: presentation, group work

- Use pictures from the website and elsewhere to review the Parthenon frieze as seen during the visit.
- Discuss the procession as part of a greater Panathenaic Festival. Ask students to research the Festival and to find out about the athletic events that took place during the festival.
- Use the interactive Ancient Greece website to find out more about the Festival [www.ancientgreece.co.uk/acropolis/story](http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk/acropolis/story)

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## Follow up activity: Carving

Curriculum links: history, literacy, citizenship

Skills: observation, group work, investigation

- Discuss the three types carving used to decorate the Parthenon. Which did students think created the most impact?
- Discuss and explore the design of ancient Greek temples. Write short descriptions as a class explaining terms such as metope, column, frieze.
- Look at modern buildings that use ancient Greek architectural elements - local buildings if examples exist, or examples such as the British Museum. Ask students to recall examples of modern sculptures and buildings in their area. Use photographs, pictures, drawings and notes to make individual research books.

## Follow up activity: Figures on the temple

Curriculum links: history, literacy, drama

Skills: group work, role-play

- Redistribute the worksheets done in the Museum and discuss the carved figures the students saw and drew during the visit.
- Research the stories shown on the Parthenon: the birth of Athena, the contest between Athena and Poseidon and the battle of the Greeks and centaurs. Ask students to each write a short descriptive piece about one or all of the figures they drew. The story should explain how their figure/s fit into the larger story.
- In groups, students can use their stories and figures to write and perform a dramatic piece.

## Follow up activity: Watching the procession

Curriculum links: history, literacy

Skills: group work, listening

- Discuss the students' impression of the Panathenaic Procession.
- In pairs or small groups students can collect ideas of what they imagined was seen and heard whilst watching the procession. Report back to the class on their impressions.
- Draw parallels with modern processions that the students have experience of or knowledge of, for example carnivals or New Year's Day parades. Discuss similarities and differences, what are these and why? Involve the class in a group discussion.

**THE  
BRITISH  
MUSEUM**

Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG

📍 Tottenham Court Road, Holborn, Russell Square

Telephone +44 (0)20 7323 8510

[learning@britishmuseum.org](mailto:learning@britishmuseum.org)

[www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)