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HIST 110 Research Paper

## The Heart of Athenian Imperialism: Architectural Expression and Pericles

*“[The] roots of Athenian Imperialism...are...what we can only call the Athenian Character.”*

(Forde)

Like any great empire, the city of Athens had a unique cultural identity that gave its people just enough egoism to justify imperialism. Athens' victory in the Persian war, most notably at the battle of Marathon, set the precedent for a new, more imperialistic relationship with the city-states of Greece. In 478 B.C., Athens, along with hundreds of other Greek city-states, formed the Delian League, which established Athens as the primary Greek power. A democracy, Athens needed to restructure its priorities in order to maintain this less-than-democratic relationship. Architecture naturally became an expression of power and individuality for the Athenian empire. The lavish reconstruction of the Parthenon under Pericles, the execution of a new major treasury, and creation of an elaborate theatre district contributed to a culture of Athenian nationalism that allowed the empire to strengthen and grow its imperial relationship with the Greek city-states.

The Acropolis reconstruction set in motion by Pericles reaffirmed Athens' ability to govern and transformed the city into a capital fit for an empire. Pericles, inspired by the newfound political power of Athens, commissioned the building project to “keep alive among the people a present consciousness of their greatness and power.” (The North American) The decision to initiate such a financially cumbersome project came from Pericles' personal vision of empire. In order to finance the project, Pericles allocated the tribute collected from the Delian League. The new Acropolis, then, was funded not only by Athens but by *all* of Greece; it was indeed a direct product of the empire and its alliances.

### **The Parthenon**

The reconstructed Parthenon, through its scale, location and meticulous detail, expressed Athenian superiority. The scale of the Parthenon itself was unlike any other temple throughout the Greek city-states. By differentiating themselves from the rest of Greece, Athens created a hierarchical dynamic in which they were superior in every way. Size was an indication of wealth, power and devotion to the Gods. About half the size of a football field and 34-feet high, the Parthenon dwarfed the smaller, older buildings in the Acropolis (Smithsonian). Its scale relative to Athens' older architecture was symbolic of Athens' rise from a once small city to empire. Now, with the means of an empire, Athenians could fortify and beautify the city. The coordination of artists, architects and labor needed to construct something of such scale meant

that the Athenian government was efficient and effective. Because of this, its size alone was enough to command respect from outsiders and prove the worthiness of Athens as a central power. In this way, the size of the Parthenon was a testament to Pericles' administration's ability to control and organize people. Having watched the Parthenon be completed in just 8 years, Athenians were well-aware of their empire's efficiency and power.

Coupled with its location, as if it were touching the sky, the Parthenon was nothing short of awe-inspiring. Its proximity to the sky symbolized Athens' closeness with the Gods and Mount Olympus. Athenians' relationship with religion played a major role in their imperial identity. Similar to how Christianity was a motivating ideal for American expansion, religion was used as a primary justification for hegemony. The Athenians believed their religious values to be superior given that they could offer the Gods military victory and use it to build massive places of worship such as the Parthenon.

Pericles commissioned the architects Ictinus and Callicrates to construct the Parthenon with excruciating detail; every aspect of the temple was intended to reflect the "perfection" and personality of Athens. Even from afar, the details of the Parthenon could impress and influence the naked eye.

The whole building was made of white pentelic marble, boasting Athens' wealth from its imperial endeavors. Pentelic marble in the Classical Era was notoriously hard to sculpt and required months of hand carving to architects' exact measurements. Because of this, specialized labor from every arena was needed to complete the building. The construction of the Parthenon employed hundreds of Athenians - this made the construction a collective effort of the people. They could feel a sense of pride looking at the temple knowing the people of the city built it with their own hands. It brought together the democratic values of the locals with the city's new imperial identity.

The combination of Doric and Ionic columns in the back of the Parthenon represented the mixing of cultures within the empire. Ionic columns were common in Asia Minor while Doric columns were traditionally Greek - in this way, the columns made the Parthenon resonate with not only locals but outsiders and potential "allies." For the perception of perfection, the architects used a lot of curves. For example, they slightly curved the steps leading up to the columns. They also used curved edges on the building itself. Together, these created an optical illusion of a straight line from a distance. It is clear that Pericles and his architects wanted to prioritize the view from afar, perhaps for outsiders or to reaffirm the idealism of Athenian culture. The need to resonate with a wider group of peoples was a direct result of Athens' new identity as an empire.

The Parthenon has several artistic aspects which were brought to life by the sculptor Phidias, who was commissioned by Pericles. In the ionic frieze of the building, the scene can be interpreted either as the Grand Panathenaia<sup>1</sup> or the Athenian victory over the Persians. Either interpretation celebrates, in one way or another, Athenian success and morality. Phidias sculpted the Gods to be charioting and walking among the Athenians, as if equals. Viewers of the frieze can clearly tell that the Athenians and Gods were comfortable around one another. Phidias brought together religion and an Athenian mindset of superiority similar to how John Gast's American Progress (1872) aligned Christianity with a moral obligation for the United States to expand westward and imperialize. Through this imperial propaganda, the Athenians were able to religiously justify their empire. After all, throughout the city, they appeared closer to the Gods than any other Greeks.

The most iconic piece in the Parthenon, however, was the Athena Parthenos, a giant gold and ivory statue of Athena. Covered in gold, the statue undoubtedly put on display the wealth of the Athenian empire. Phidias' sculpture of Athena was unique in that she stands tall, even a bit manly, after winning in combat. On the shield in her left hand, there are scenes of the Athenian victories over the Amazons - like in Phidias' frieze, the shield depicts Athenian triumph. The

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<sup>1</sup> The Grand Panathenaia was the largest festival in Athens meant to worship the goddess Athena.

Athena Parthenos dominated the temple atmosphere so that, to any worshipper, her presence had to be acknowledged and awed at. For Athenians coming to pray in the Parthenon, she was a reminder of their unwavering loyalty to the Gods and proof that their government prioritized the values of its people.

The Parthenon's construction elevated Athens' status in the Mediterranean world and, with it, the Athenians' sense of self. Glistening in the sun atop the city, the Parthenon was truly the epitome of Athenian greatness. In the day-to-day lives of Athenians, they could look up at the Acropolis and be reminded of the benefits of their empire. They had access to the greatest temple in Greece with the most magnificent statue of Athena. To them, the empire meant an even grander way of life elevated from the rest of the world. Pericles' Parthenon transformed Athens into a utopia that felt closer to the Gods and spiritual world than ever before.

### **The Delian League's Central Treasury**

The establishment of a central treasury in the Acropolis was integral to the control of the empire. Regarded as the most important decision in the transition from city to empire by Greek historian Thucydides, the movement of the treasury from Delphi to the Acropolis expedited the process of imperialism (Rawlings). City-states' tribute became easily accessible for the Athenian government to manipulate and use to their advantage.

There was both practical and symbolic significance in Pericles' choice to move the treasury. Plutarch even commented on Pericles' ulterior motives, writing "[Athens] has removed the public moneys of the Hellenes from Delos into its own keeping,...of all excuses which it had to urge against its accusers, to wit, that out of fear of the Barbarians it took the public funds from that sacred isle and was now guarding them in a stronghold." (Plutarch) Pericles wanted to control the Delian League's finances both to prove Athenian control and also to fund his less-than-essential military expeditions.

The treasury itself depicted a clearly Athenian narrative; friezes of scenes celebrating victories at Marathon, a body of pure Parian marble and doric columns. Religious motifs helped convey the "godlike" nature of the Athenian victory over the Persians. Through scenes of Herakles and Theseus, the exterior of the treasury related the Athenian experience in war with that of the Gods. If anything, the exterior frieze of the treasury points to the narcissistic nature of the Athenian culture; they found themselves to be culturally and intellectually superior to the rest of Greece.

As seen in the Parthenon as well, the Athenians made habit out of aligning themselves closely with the Gods. Several metopes of the Amazons were carved into the reliefs of the building to further emphasize the historical supremacy of the Athenians. The Amazons are particularly significant in that they were outsiders and portrayed as such - to viewers of the metopes in the centuries following the Persian wars, the Amazons were the Persians. Several busts of Athena also adorned the treasury as yet another tribute to war and sacrifice. To those living in Athens, Athena was seen as the patron god of the city. It is unique, then, that Pericles and his designers chose to include so many visuals of Athena in a building specifically for all the Greek city states, not just Athens.

The victory over the Persians is Athens' claim of responsibility for the unity and protection of all of Greece; whether that claim is historically accurate or not, the treasury's scenes are proof that Athens made a deliberate effort to write its own version of history.

### **Pericles' Odeon & the Theatre District of Athens**

With his famous Odeon and financing of the Theatre District, Pericles created an eclectic city-center that lent Athens a sense of wealth that fed into its image as an imperial power. Pericles' domestic goal was to appease the Athenian people and ensure complacency for the empire. Amphitheatres and the Odeon brought the Athenian community closer together, enabling essential conversations of politics and pride.

Pericles' Odeon was a far cry from the grandeur of the Parthenon and yet is important when analyzing how nationalism brewed on a more personal scale in Athens. Similar to nearly all of Pericles' building projects, the Odeon's design captured moments of Athenian victory over the Persians. According to Roman writer Pausanias when he visited Athens in 140CE, the Odeon was "a copy of...[the persian emperor] Xerxes' tent." (Trainor) It is doubtful that the Odeon's design was independent of Xerxes' tent given the historical significance of the Persian Wars to the Athenian identity. After all, reminders of the Persian Wars were common throughout the empire. Athenian myth even cites that the wood used for the Odeon was the collected wreckage of the Persian ships after they were destroyed by Athens in the Battle of Salamis. Reminders of victory in such a personal, public place were yet another way Pericles publicized justification for empire. Entirely of wood and covered in columns, the Odeon was not as aesthetically impressive as the Parthenon or Propylaea. However, its role as a community center and place for intellectual stimulation facilitated a unified Athenian cultural identity.

The building was used as a music hall, law court and the annual Proagon, a pre-festival ceremony important to the Athenian public. Pericles' would often finance plays for the theatre district and the Odeon that were open to the public. This brought him support from the poor citizens who'd previously been apprehensive to a Periclean administration. The constant availability of entertainment made nationalism a natural component of the city culture. Athenians were proud that their city could finance such a rich atmosphere of art and intellectual growth. Even to those that financially struggled, the dramas gave them a sense of wealth.

The Odeon and plays put on by Pericles made Athens a mecca for art and the heart of the intellectual world. Pericles needed to show the Athenian people that imperialism actively benefitted them on an individual level. By entertaining them with the arts and providing them facilities to be a community, he demonstrated that his administration respected the city's values. The theatre district became a living, breathing manifestation of how the Athenian people embraced the empire. Once again, Pericles demonstrated that the Athenian empire could simultaneously be a progressive city while also maintaining significant holds onto power.

Athens' execution of imperialism is most clear through its architectural program. The consistent depiction of Athenian victories over the Persians reminded all of Greece who they owed their security to: Athens. Pericles' and the Athenian government saw a clear relationship between nationalism and the stability of an imperial power. Pride was an essential emotion in the success of the empire. The building project initiated and completed by Pericles invoked emotions of pride, superiority and ultimately nationalism without explicitly saying it.

The legacy of Pericles' building project and the Greek Golden Age still is very much alive. Centuries later, imperial powers have adopted the Athenian architectural program to fit their own agendas of nationalism. In the United States, the National Museum is our "acropolis." The memorials of the Korean, Vietnam and Second World War can be equated to the countless representations of the Persian Wars in Pericles' Athens. The Lincoln Memorial is a prime example of the lasting influence of the Parthenon - the scale, elevation and presence of a massive, iconic figure all can be compared to it.

Athens proved to the world that imperialism and domination can be parallel and even beneficial to democracy.

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