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THE CHRISTIAN PARTHENON AND ST. PAUL

by Mother Nectaria McLees

For those of us who studied the Parthenon in school, there was rarely a mention of its Christian centuries, and in fact, the fifty-page guide to the Acropolis available at the foot of the ruins affords them only two lines. But once you know the temple's marvelous history, it draws like a magnet. Early in the morning, before the tourist buses arrive, is a wonderful time to climb the steep path leading from the cobbled streets of old Athens to sit atop the Areopagus, the rocky promontory where St. Paul preached so many centuries ago. The modern city falls away at your feet, and behind, as the sun rises in the liquid reds and orange of a Greek dawn, the Parthenon, resplendent even in ruins, stands like a queen, arrayed in her history as one of the most sublime churches of Christendom.

The Classical Beginning

The Acropolis, the large stone outcropping that overlooks Athens and the Aegean, has been used almost continually since 1300 BC, first as a military fortress and later as a center of worship. In 490 BC the Athenians began construction of the precursor of today's hilltop Parthenon. It was still unfinished a decade later when the invading Persians leveled it to the ground. The temple we see today was begun again in 447 BC under the patronage of the Athenian statesman Pericles, and finally dedicated in 438 BC during the 85th Olympiad.

Remnants of four of the original marble buildings still stand on the Acropolis – the foremost being the Parthenon, or Virgin's Apartment. Originally a Doric-columned temple, the central hall housed the forty-foot wooden statue of the goddess Athena Parthenos carved by the sculptor Pheidias, and covered with gold and ivory plate. Outside, dominating the mount, was a second statue of Athena, "Athena Promachos," built with the



View of the south slope of the Acropolis.

proceeds of the spoils taken after an Athenian victory over the invading Persians. Also by Pheidias, the colossal bronze figure rose thirty feet from the bottom of the pedestal. Sunlight shining off the tip of Athena's spear could be seen by mariners off the Sunium coast, the southern-most point of Attica. Included in the Acropolis complex was the beautiful Propylea, the ancient entrance to the temple site; the smaller temple of Athena Nike, called "the jewel of Greek architecture," supported with ionic columns and housing another statue of Athena; and the Erechtheion, a bi-level structure that contained several shrines and the beautiful statues of the caryatids – marble maidens who upheld the south porch.

The Erechtheion temple sheltered a fourth statue of the goddess that commemorated her mythical victory over Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea, over whom she had won preeminence by planting an olive tree on the Acropolis. The statue was fittingly carved from olivewood. Another room of the Erechtheum was dedicated to Poseidon himself, and a third to the snakebodied hero Erechtheus. The south side of the structure supports the famed Karyatids, six columns in the shape of women. A short distance away was the Pandroseum, or Temenos of Pandrosos, where Athena's sacred olive tree grew.

The Christian Parthenon

One of the most striking things about the glut of literature by eighteenth and nineteenth century European Hellenes chronicling their rediscovery of classical Greece, is their almost complete silence about the Parthenon's Christian millennium.¹ Invariably, they neglect to mention that although the Acropolis' great temple was used for pagan worship for 830 years, it was a Christian church for well over a thousand. Dedicated as a temple to Athena in 438 BC, by AD 392, Byzantine Emperor Theodosius I had outlawed all forms of pagan worship and the fifth century saw the Parthenon consecrated as the Orthodox Cathedral of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom). In 662 it was rededicated in honor of the Mother of God, "Panagia Atheniotissa" (Panagia of Athens), and remained so until 1204-5 when the Latins and the Franks annexed Athens. The Acropolis was then used as a fortress and palace, and the Parthenon as a Catholic Church, ("Santa Maria di Athene," and later "Notre Dame d'Athène"). Under the Byzantines, the Erechtheion was also consecrated as a church dedicated to the Mother of God, the Temple of Hephaestus became the Church of St. George, and the Propylea (probably used as the bishop's palace) had a chapel dedicated to the Holy Trinity. A narthex was added to the west side of the Parthenon, and an apse to the east to hold the altar. The apse was decorated with a mosaic of Panaghia Atheniotissa², and the walls covered with frescoes. To this day the Parthenon has a faded fresco fragment of the Annunciation high up on one of its inside walls.

The Christian Parthenon contained a wealth of church treasures. From records of 1390, we know that the relics of St. Macarius the Great and St. Helen's own copy of the Gospels were enshrined here. Other medieval travelers recorded the presence of an icon of the Mother of God painted by St. Luke the Evangelist, and a miraculous lamp whose oil never ran out. In the

¹ Philip Sherrard, Greek scholar and translator, has made the observation that the European interest in Greek mythology and antiquities came at a time when Protestantism had rigidly suppressed the veneration of saints. Many of the educated northern Europeans transferred their affections to the heroic Greek figures, finding in them prototypes of the Protestant competitive spirit, an absorption that was reflected in literature and art for the next three centuries.

² In 1682, an Englishman, George Wheler, saw the apse mosaic almost whole: "The Roof over the Altar and Quire added to the temple by the Greeks, hath the picture of the Holy Virgin on it, of Mosaic Work, left yet by the Turks; because, as They say, a certain Turk having shot a Musquet at it, his hand presently withered." (George Wheler, *A Journey Into Greece*, London, 1682.)

midfourteenth century, Pedro IV of Aragon described the Parthenon as “the most precious jewel that exists in the world, and such that all the kings in Christendom could in vain imitate.”

Athens was eventually occupied by the Turks, and in 1460 they turned the Parthenon church into a mosque and the Erechtheum into the Turkish commander’s harem. The Acropolis garrison had held out for two years after the defeat of the Florentine duchy and the fall of lower Athens in 1456, and it was only in 1458 that Sultan Mehmed (Mohammed) II was able to make his triumphal entry into the captured city. He fully understood its classical, Byzantine, and Orthodox significance, and wanting to placate the Greeks as allies against the West, put the Parthenon Church – the plum of classical Athens – back into Orthodox hands for the first time in 250 years.

It was quickly reestablished as the seat of the Metropolitan of Athens. Unfortunately, a few years later many of the city’s leading Greeks were implicated in an abortive attempt to restore the duchy, and Ottoman toleration came to an end. The altar was ripped out, mosaics plastered over and the Parthenon became a mosque.

Sadly, during the Venetian siege of Athens in 1687, a shell hit a Turkish supply of gunpowder stored in the Parthenon and it was extensively damaged. Ironically, German Field Marshal Koenigsmarck, the Venetian commander whose troops shelled the Parthenon, had, as a student, written a Latin thesis lamenting the subjection of Athens by the barbarian Ottomans. His philhellenism, however, did not stop him from ordering the mortar barrage that detonated the Turkish powder magazine. “The resulting explosion shattered the twenty-eight columns, blew out the wall of the cella, brought down the massive architraves together with a large section of the frieze and distributed most of them over the surrounding countryside.... The fire raged for two days and the Turkish garrison finally surrendered.”³ By a kind of supreme irony, the minaret added by the Turks remained untouched by the explosion. The Greeks did not regain what was left of the Acropolis until the 1822 War of Independence.

3 Green, Peter, *The Parthenon*, Newsweek Books, New York, 1973.

Beauty and the Longing to Worship

Greek temples often mean little to those of us who have only seen them in history books, but when one actually stands before a physical creation as marvelous as the Parthenon, the natural desire of every age to worship worthily springs to life, immortalized in stone. History aside, nothing can prepare the visitor for his first glimpse of the temple at the top of the Acropolis. Even as a ruin, it is extraordinary. One writer has rightly remarked, "Why can no picture or photograph ever succeed in portraying the Parthenon? It is not an easy question to answer. There is something about the balance of this temple, something purely Greek in its rejection of the unnecessary, which is almost impossible to convey on canvas, because it appeals not so much to the eye as to the mind. The Parthenon has a quality of life which suggests a bird alighting from the air, in that brief moment as it closes its wings and is still poised and balanced."⁴

For the Orthodox pilgrim, the Parthenon has a meaning that goes beyond the earthly admiration that is its obvious due. It is indisputable that there is much to be esteemed in the culture of classical Greece; its outpouring of literature, art, philosophy, and architecture was unparalleled in the history of the West. Too often, however, classical enthusiasts have lauded the art of pagan Greece while ignoring the spiritual longing that gave it birth – not unlike many modern-day tourists who trek to Greece to admire the domed basilicas of early Byzantium but are embarrassed when they bump up against the living Church within its walls. Reverencing these objects of earthly beauty for themselves is indulging in aesthetic sentimentality, for they were not created as an end in themselves. The finest among them were expressions of man's innate desire to worship, his hunger for eternal truth.

If we can judge by the classical literature that remains, and by the exquisite lines of the ruined temples, the pagan Greek search for Truth was generally an honorable one. Their unfulfilled longing to worship the true God roused the Greeks to create an earthly beauty that has rarely been rivaled, and like the Magi's astrology, it led them to something greater. This was because Greek pantheism, although mistaken and idolatrous, was to some degree innocent – God had not yet fully revealed Himself and He allowed their early attempts at worship to be a preparation for the seed of a later

⁴ H.V. Morton, *In the Steps of St. Paul*, Methuen and Co., London, 1937, pp. 268-269.

sowing. In the words of St. John Chrysostom's Paschal sermon, "He honors the intent..." and thus, so can we, for their noblest aspirations – the painful groping towards the light of faith – were vestiges of man before the Fall. That their soil was well-tilled is beyond doubt – the Christian seed took root with such steadfast vigor that after Constantine remade his capital on the Bosphorus, Greek Asia Minor became the eastern guardian of the Church for almost a thousand years.

Neither can we forget that it was the Greeks themselves who turned their pagan temples into churches; the Parthenon of the goddess Athena was transformed into a Christian church consecrated to the Wisdom of God and the Virgin Mary. Within its walls the Holy Liturgy was celebrated daily for over a thousand years, longer even than at Justinian's Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. What else, then, can we call the Acropolis and the Parthenon, if not holy ground? And if Christians themselves do not remember, who will?

In his book, *In the Steps of St. Paul*, H.V. Morton, writing in the 1930's, gives a striking account of his first view of the Parthenon:

As I passed through the Propylaea, I saw before me a great space of rough rock rising upward, and on the summit of this rock the Parthenon stood against the blue sky. I thought that never in my life had I seen anything so beautiful. I was almost afraid to go any nearer in case I was wrong.... Lifted high above Athens, with nothing behind it but the blue sky of summer, far larger than I had ever imagined it to be, yet looking queerly weightless, the Parthenon, even in ruin, looks as if it has just alighted from heaven upon the summit of the Acropolis... .. I realized that my ascent of the Acropolis, and my approach through the Propylaea, was a preparation for this moment: and I remembered the words of Socrates, that a temple should be difficult of access so that men would approach it in purity of heart. You cannot come suddenly on the Parthenon: you must ascend to it.⁵

⁵ Morton, pp. 267-268.



The Caryatid Porch of the Erechtheion, later a Byzantine Church dedicated to the Mother of God

Saint Paul in Athens

When St. Paul came to Athens, the city had fallen from its ancient splendor, a splendor as far distant from his own time as Elizabethan England is from ours. Here, for the first time, he approached the Gentiles on their own ground. When he had reached out to the Gentiles at Antioch it was through the synagogue, but Athens' role as a thriving commercial center had long since disappeared and the Jewish community had flocked to the newer colonies of Patras, Nicopolis and Corinth.

Saint Paul was the first Christian missionary to preach in the celebrated intellectual stronghold of the Greco-Roman world. Indeed, Athens still reigned as the university of the Empire; she lived on her reputation as the city of the philosophers, and her streets were filled with the arguments of Platonists, Stoics, and Epicureans. Other intellectual centers had arisen in Rome, Alexandria, Antioch and Tarsus, but Athens remained indisputably the queen.

Although faded in spirit she was outwardly more brilliant than ever, holding tightly to her antiquities and monuments, sacrifices and festivals. As St.

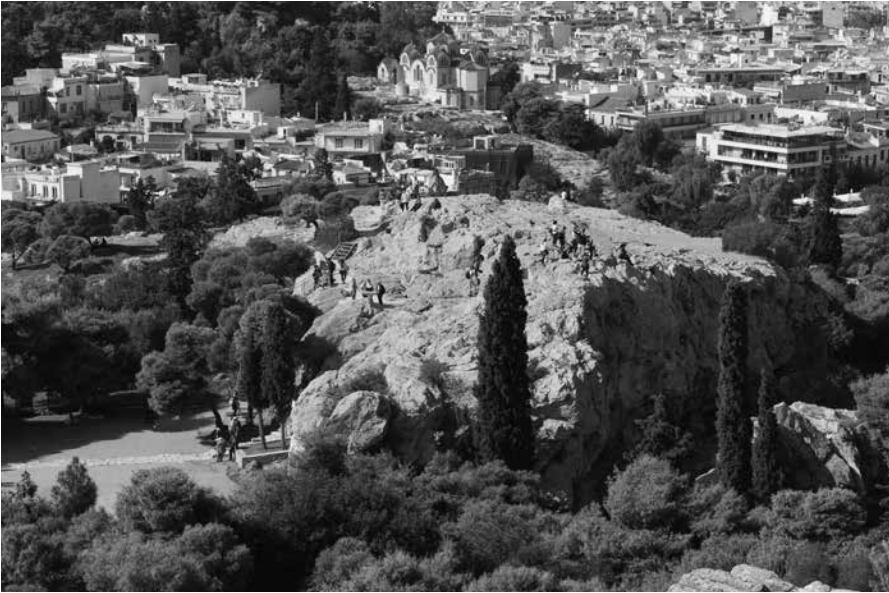
Paul awaited the arrival of Silas and Timothy, he would have seen the temples blazing with gold and color, and the host of statues dedicated to both Greek and foreign gods, erected in temples, courtyards, public buildings and raised high on pedestals in the streets. He begins his famous address to the Athenians with the words, *“Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are very religious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD...”*

Morton remarks that in appealing to their altars of the Unknown God, St. Paul’s teaching, as always, was tailored to his audience. He didn’t quote the Hebrew scriptures, which would have meant little to his listeners, but instead gave them something of their own.

It was an excellent beginning. It had the local touch, the right note of something surprising to follow. To everyone who listened to St. Paul, the altars inscribed TO AN UNKNOWN GOD were, of course, a commonplace. Everyone knew the story of the plague that visited Athens in the sixth century before Christ; and how, after sacrifices had been made to every known god and the plague continued, the services of the Cretan prophet, Epimenides, were requested. He drove a flock of black and white sheep to the Areopagus and allowed them to stray from there as they liked, waiting until they rested of their own free will: and on those spots were the sheep sacrificed “to the fitting god.” The plague ceased, and it became the custom, not in Athens alone, to erect altars to unknown deities.

Saint Paul’s Areopagus

Descending from the temple mount through the ruins of the Propylea – the ancient gate – you can see below to the right (separated from the temple mount by the footpath that winds up the northern side of the Acropolis from the Plaka), a large outcropping of rock overlooking Athens. An ancient hewn staircase of fifteen or sixteen steps leads to the polished and rutted top, where the rock was artificially leveled centuries ago. This is the Ares, or the Areopagus, the ancient meeting place of the famous assembly of Athenians to whom St. Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ.



View of the Areopagus hill from the Parthenon.

Some think it probable that he addressed the assembly in the agora below, but local Orthodox tradition and many historians concur that it was on the Areopagus itself. If so, we know that St. Paul must have ascended these same stone steps, and standing on the rocky precipice with Athens spread out at his feet, declared to his listeners that God “*dwelleth not in temples made with hands,*” – pointing, as he spoke, to the marble temples crowning the Acropolis behind him and the thirty-foot statue of Athena, whose gold spear tip was visible even to mariners off the coast of southern Attica.

For the pilgrim, the best time to sit atop the Areopagus and recall the words of the Apostle is early in the morning or late in the evening, as the sun sets behind the Acropolis with a blaze of color – the brilliant reds and golds so peculiar to Greece – when St. Paul’s words take on a life of their own:

Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was give over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, “What does this

babbler want to say?” “Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,” because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.” For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious: For as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you. God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’”

“Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead”. And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this matter.” So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

(Acts 17:16-23)

For Christians, St. Paul's words ring in the ears like a wake-up call, but on the day he delivered them, it may have seemed a failure, a seed dropped on rocky ground. One Parthenon historian remarks, "Intellectually sophisticated and with a keen eye for social pretensions, politically impotent, but honed to a fine edge by daily exercise in philosophical dialectic and oratorical tropes, the men of Athens whom St. Paul addressed in AD 54 must have been a formidable audience. No city resisted Christianity as long or with such a sense of intellectual superiority."⁶ Out of all those thousands of worshippers, philosophers and orators, the Apostle gathered only a handful of people who believed his words. Of these we know only two by name, St. Dionysius the Areopagite, who, tradition tells us, was a judge on the nine-member council of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris. Little did sophisticated Athens realize that within a few hundred years these vaguely heard and quickly dismissed words would bring her speculative philosophies tumbling to dust – and the golden spear of Athena supplanted by the life-giving Cross. ✚

⁶ Green, *Ibid.*