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A BRIEF HISTORY OF CLASSICAL AND CHRISTIAN ATHENS

Athens is known to every schoolchild as the birthplace of Western civilization, and amidst the noise and press of the modern city remain exquisite and graceful landmarks of its classical and Byzantine past – the first as curiosities in archeological sites and museums; the second living in the hearts and churches of its Orthodox Christians.

Six centuries before Christ, the Greek *polai* or city-states, the autonomously ruled towns familiar to us from Greek history, arose as part of the political landscape. Athens and Sparta soon emerged as the most powerful of the *polai*, allying themselves against the Persians, over whom they were victorious at Marathon, Salamis and Platea. Athens followed the triumph with a rich cultural flowering under the patronage of Pericles, the Greek orator and statesman. Within a scant seventy years, the city was presented with the literary masterpieces of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes; the works of Hippocrates, the father of medicine; the Greek historian Thucydides; and the raising of the Parthenon on the heights of the Acropolis.

The bloody and long-drawn-out Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.) between Athens and Sparta signaled Athen's demise as a ruling power. Although the city continued to shine as a cultural focus, political influence shifted to the court of Philip of Macedon and his son, Alexander the Great. In the fourth and fifth centuries before Christ, Athens produced three of the most noted Greek philosophers: Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato, as well as the famous orator, Demosthenes.

In 338 B.C., Alexander the Great formed a powerful confederacy known as the Hellenic League of Corinth, and in a period of thirteen short years

Opposite: Liturgy on the eastern edge of the Acropolis, in the ruins of a Byzantine Church and holy spring dedicated to Sts. Cosmas and Damian and the Life-Giving Spring.

extended Hellenic influence deep into Africa and as far east as India. After his death, a half-century of in-fighting among the members of the league paved the way for Roman incursion. By the second century B.C., Greece was thoroughly established as part of the Roman Empire, and the Romans, in turn, allowed themselves to be reshaped by their new provinces, eagerly embracing Greek philosophy, culture and architecture. Athens continued to prosper commercially and was lavishly patronized by several wealthy Roman emperors in its role as the cultural capital of the West.

Greek religion at this time entailed the worship of a mythical pantheon of gods and goddesses living on the upper reaches of Mount Olympus. In Greek legend, the goddess Athena had won the right to have Athens named after her when she defeated Poseidon in a contest to see who could give the city the most useful gift. Poseidon struck the rock of the Acropolis and salt water gushed forth, but Athena's gift was an olive tree, the mainstay of Greek agriculture for centuries. The post-classical period saw the rise of the mystery religions, most notably the Eleusinian and Orphic cults, both of which enacted secret rituals pertaining to the afterlife as well as supporting prophetic oracles and sibyls, some of whom foretold the eventual triumph of Christianity.

The seed of Christianity was first sown in Athens when St. Paul came from Beroea (Veria) to preach to the Athenians in A.D. 50. Almost three centuries later, Constantine the Great, moving from Rome to his new capital at Constantinople, inaugurated the Byzantine Empire with the Edict of Milan, which allowed Christianity to be openly practiced, and established himself as the first Christian emperor. Athens, along with the rest of the empire, was changed forever when Emperor Theodosius I formally confirmed Christianity as the state church in 380. The edict was reinforced twelve years later when he banned pagan worship entirely, although the city maintained its reputation as a center of classical learning. The fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers, St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory Nazianzen, were among the thousands educated in Athens. Over time, the temples were converted into churches, and Athens, along with Constantinople and Alexandria, became a center of Byzantine Christian worship. In 529, Emperor Justinian banned the teaching of pagan philosophy entirely, and the classical period came to an end. Over the following centuries, the plague took its toll, and the city shrank and changed. Slavic tribesmen from the north moved into the outskirts of the city and, little by little, Athens slept.

In 1204, soldiers from the Fourth Crusade, deflected from their purpose of liberating the Holy Land, attacked and plundered Constantinople. They parceled out Byzantine territory among themselves, and for over a hundred years Athens was governed by the ruling house of Burgundy. As the “Duchy of Athens” it enjoyed moderate prosperity, although its Hellenic foundation probably mixed peculiarly with the medieval feudal culture of tournaments and court singers. In 1311 Athens was seized by the Catalans, who were supplanted eighty years later by the Florentines. The Florentines in turn gave way to the Turks, who annexed Athens in 1458, three years after the fall of Constantinople. They moved the region’s administrative capital to Naplio, purposely neglecting the ‘Queen of Cities,’ which dwindled to little more than a village surrounded by armed encampments. The year 1522 saw the birth of Athen’s most illustrious daughter and its future heavenly patroness, St. Philothei (Benzelos), who was a model of charity and selflessness to the city’s sick and downtrodden during the Turkish occupation. In 1827, Greece was nominally liberated from the Turks after the battle of Navarino. The peace settlements, however, were long and complicated and Athens was fully united to Greece only in 1833, after which it was unanimously proclaimed the capital of the new republic – a sleepy little village of 162 houses that has since burgeoned into a metropolis of four million residents.

An important date in the history of Orthodox Athens was 1922, when the Exchange of Populations between Greece and Turkey wiped out the two thousand-year-old Christian civilization of Asia Minor and landed well over a million Greek refugees onto the shores of a country struggling to get on its feet after ten years of war. Although the Turks did not allow the refugees to take many possessions with them, they did in many cases bring their villages’ holy relics and icons.

After 1922 the outskirts of Athens quickly formed into districts of refugees each from a specific city or locale of Asia Minor (Nea Smyrna, Nea Halkidonia, Nea Filadelfia). Often the first thing the newcomers did was to enshrine their relics and give their community a spiritual center by building a church. Thus, in Athens we also have the relics of the Protomartyr Deacon Stephen, Sts. Eleutherius and Anthia, St. Paraskeve of Rome, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Sts. Theodore Stratilates and Theodore the Tyro, St. Philothei of Athens, New Martyr George of Neapolis, Hieromartyr Patriarch Gregory VI, Papa Nicholas Planas, and St. Nectarios of Aegina all gracing the city with their presence; a rich inheritance bequeathed by the refugees. ✦