

Topic Page: [Acropolis \(Athens, Greece\)](#)

Definition: **acropolis** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Hilltop fortress of an ancient Greek city. The earliest known examples were fortified castles built for the Mycenaean kings, and it was only later that they became the symbolic homes of the gods. The most famous acropolis, in Athens, acquired walls by the 13th century bc but the Persians destroyed the complex. The surviving buildings, including the Parthenon, the Erechtheion, the Propylaea, and the Temple of Athena Nike, date from the late 5th century bc.

Summary Article: **Acropolis** from *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*



Image from: [The Athenian acropolis, from a nineteenth-century... in Science in the Ancient World: An Encyclopedia](#)

Of all Greek acropoleis, the Athenian Acropolis (lit., "high city" or "city on the heights") was culturally and historically (if not geologically) the most impressive. Natural springs at its base attracted inhabitants as early as the Neolithic period, and clusters of huts probably dotted its slopes and summit by the fourth millennium bce. But it was not until the Late Bronze (or Mycenaean) Age that the monumental history of the site began. A palace was built on a series of terraces on the north side of the summit: like the megaron-palaces of Mycenae and Tiryns (which it must have resembled), it was defended by a thick, high wall of "Cyclopean masonry" constructed around 1250 bce – a wall that remained the Acropolis' principal defense for almost eight centuries.



Figure 1 General view of the Acropolis from the southwest. Photograph by Jeffrey Hurwit

If self-serving Athenian legend is to be believed, the Acropolis escaped the destructions that befell other Mycenaean citadels in the twelfth century. But what it looked like after that, in the so-called "Dark Age" (1100–760), is uncertain, though the palace was probably left to ruin and a humble village grew up in its place. By ca. 700 a small Temple to Athena Polias (Athena, Guardian of the City, embodied in an olivewood statue that would always remain the holiest image on the Acropolis) probably stood somewhere within the footprint of the earlier palace. This "Geometric Temple" was succeeded by another modest structure in the seventh century. But in the sixth century two monumental temples were constructed as expressions of Athens' rising prosperity and increasing importance. One temple was possibly built on the south side around 560 (its foundations are no longer visible, but building blocks, column capitals, and painted limestone pedimental sculptures testify to its existence). By the end of the sixth century another large limestone temple stood atop extant foundations on the north side of the summit: one pediment was filled with a marble Gigantomachy. The date of this *Archaios Neos* (or "Old Temple of Athena Polias") is controversial, but it may have been the first great building project of the young Athenian democracy, founded in 508/7. Soon after the battle of Marathon in 490, the so-called Older Parthenon was begun on the south side of the Acropolis atop deep and massive foundations, but it never rose very high: like the *Archaios Neos* and hundreds of statues and dedications, it was destroyed by Persian invaders who at Xerxes' command sacked the Acropolis in 480.



Figure 2 The Erechtheion. Photograph by Jeffrey Hurwit



Figure 3 The Theater of Dionysos on the south slope. Photograph by Jeffrey Hurwit

The Early Classical Acropolis (480–450) saw more architectural and votive activity than is often thought: new citadel walls were built (the north pointedly displayed parts of the Archaic temples destroyed by the Persians), innovative statues like the Kritios Boy were dedicated, and a huge Bronze statue of Athena, by Pheidias, was set up near the entrance of the citadel by the 450s. Still, Athena lacked a monumental

temple until 449, when the citizens of an increasingly democratic and increasingly imperial Athens voted to finance Perikles massive building program, intended to make Athens and its Acropolis visibly "the school of Hellas." The centerpiece was the Parthenon, built by Iktinos and Kallikrates between 447 and 432: largely consisting of marble originally cut for the Older Parthenon (on whose podium it also stood), the Periklean building was in a real sense a resurrection of it. Loaded with marble sculptures (akroteria, pediments, metopes, and frieze), the Parthenon displayed within it a huge statue of Athena Parthenos by Pheidias, an echo in Gold and Ivory of the sculptor's earlier Bronze Athena looming over the entrance of the sanctuary. The Periklean building program also included the truncated Propylaia ("Gateways"), built by Mnesikles on rising ground between 437 and 432; the even more asymmetrical and multi-leveled Erechtheion (the Classical Temple of Athena Polias and other deities, 430s–406); and, on a bastion protruding from the west slope, the small but sculpturally loaded Temple of Athena Nike (ca. 425/4).

There were other sacred precincts on the crowded Classical summit, including sanctuaries of Artemis Brauronia and Zeus Polieus, and the south slope boasted the Odeion (Concert Hall) of Perikles, a modest Theater of Dionysos (it took on grandiose proportions only in the fourth century), and a healing sanctuary of Asklepios (founded in 420/19). There were impressive additions to the summit and slopes in the Hellenistic and Roman periods (including the huge Stoa of Eumenes on the south slope, a great Pergamene victory monument set up within the citadel wall southeast of the Parthenon, a small circular Temple to Roma and Augustus set on axis east of the Parthenon, and the Odeion of Herodes Atticus on the southwest slope). But the layout of the Acropolis remained essentially that designed by Perikles and his architects.

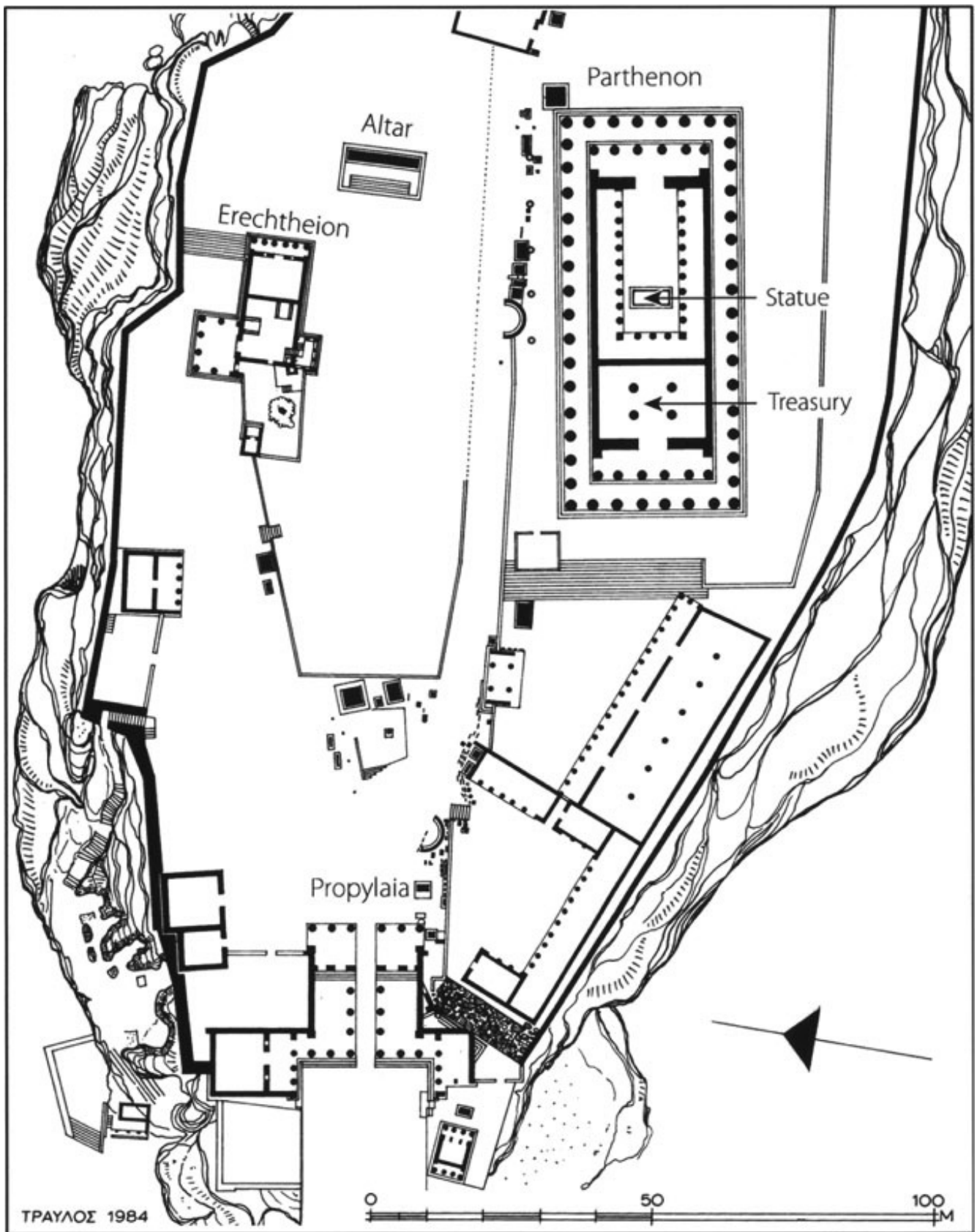


Figure 4 Plan of the Acropolis. From Ogden, D., *Companion to Greek Religion* (2007: 407, fig. 26.5), after J. Travlos.

Late Antiquity was not kind to the Acropolis. In 267 ce, the Parthenon was severely damaged and the statue of Athena Parthenos almost certainly destroyed by invading Herulians. The building was repaired and the Athena replaced, but the Parthenon was not what it once had been. By the early fifth century ce the cult of Athena Polias, still focused in the Erechtheion, began its decline: the sacrosanct olivewood image had probably already deteriorated. By the late fifth century Pheidias' two monumental statues of

Athena were gone: the Bronze Athena was probably shipped to Constantinople, and Christians destroyed the last Athena Parthenos. By ca. 600 the Parthenon had become the Church of the Blessed Virgin, and the Erechtheion the Church of Mary, Mother of God. And they remained churches until the Turks seized the citadel in 1458 and made a mosque of one and a harem of the other. On September 26, 1687, during a siege laid by the Venetian general F. Morosini, a shell lobbed into the Parthenon ignited a huge gunpowder magazine: the explosion blew out the center of the building. But the Acropolis remained Ottoman until 1833, when, at the end of the Greek War of Independence, Bavarian soldiers displaced the last Turkish defenders and bivouacked inside the Parthenon. The new King Otto declared the Acropolis an archaeological site the next year, and the excavation and restoration of the Classical monuments began. A major restoration project continues as this is written.

SEE ALSO:

Athena; Athens; Persia and Greece.

References and Suggested Readings

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Jeffrey M. Hurwit



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