

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



Image from: [The Parthenon in DK Eyewitness Books: Ancient Greece](#)

Summary Article: **Parthenon**
from *The Classical Tradition*

Over the past two and a half millennia the Parthenon has been temple, church, mosque, ruin, reconstruction, and icon. Built as a temple to the goddess Athena between 447 and 432 bce, it was converted into a Christian church probably sometime in the 5th century ce and into a mosque, under the Ottoman rulers of Greece, in the mid-15th century. The essential form of the ancient building survived these conversions, as did most of the architectural sculpture. In fact, despite some intentional defacement by Christians and possibly Muslims, the reuse of the building was a crucial factor in its preservation.

The main changes in the Parthenon's conversions were in its orientation (the principal entrance was moved to the west from the east) and its internal decoration. Numerous fragments of medieval marble fittings and inscriptions survive, Christian frescoes could still be made out in the 19th century, and tesserae from a Christian mosaic of the Virgin Mary could still be picked up on the Acropolis in the 20th century. Contemporary descriptions of both church and mosque praise its beauty and venerable history (not always accurately: the Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi, who visited Athens in the 1630s and 1640s, believed that the building had originally been the Academy of Plato and that its doors had been the gates of the city of Troy). For the Englishman George Wheler, writing in 1682, it was simply "the finest mosque in the world."

In 1687, during the wars between Venice and the Ottoman Empire, the Parthenon was catastrophically damaged. Put to use by the Ottoman garrison as a gunpowder store and then hit by Venetian cannonballs, it exploded, causing some 300 fatalities—and was left beyond repair. Although a small mosque was rebuilt within its shell, for the next century and a half the Parthenon was left as a ruin within a military base. It was looted for building material and for what remained of any value. Most notoriously, in the early years of the 19th century much of the Parthenon's surviving sculpture was removed by the diplomat Lord Elgin and taken to Britain. The controversy around his actions remains intense. Was Elgin a destructive, self-interested vandal, or did he save masterpieces that would almost certainly have been destroyed? There have been prominent partisans on either side—from Lord Byron on—and their loudly discordant voices have certainly contributed to the Parthenon's present fame.

Following the Greek War of Independence (1821-1832), Athens became the capital of Greece under a Bavarian monarchy. The Acropolis was converted into an archaeological site: excavation work removed almost all traces of later structures, leaving the ruins of the Parthenon isolated on bare rock, along with the other buildings erected in the 5th century bce. Major restoration work in the 1920s (directed by N. Balanos) reerected many of the dispersed columns and gave the ruin its now familiar silhouette. But the iron clamps used in the reconstruction gradually expanded, causing such damage to the marble that a further complete restoration was begun in 1986 and is ongoing.

Since the late 18th century the Parthenon has been a model for architects and designers, from Neoclassicists to such prophets of Modernism as Le Corbusier. New Parthenons have been built across the Western world, from Bavaria (where Leo von Klenze's Valhalla is a more-or-less exact copy) to Nashville (where the full-size replica erected for the Tennessee Exposition of 1897 still stands)—not

to mention the thousands of miniatures sold as ouzo bottles, key rings, even toasters. The Parthenon has also become an icon of classical culture. Its image is the official symbol of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and it is often taken to stand for all we owe to ancient Greek civilization. Though most have admired it, for some its mythic status has proved oppressive. Sigmund Freud was famously reluctant to visit. When he finally did, he claimed that the experience was rather like discovering that the Loch Ness monster really did exist after all.

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