

*Deepening Understanding*  
*UKS2 Information Text*  
*The Parthenon by Laura Curtis*



Thousands of years ago there was an Empire. An Empire that stretched from the shores of the Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea. This was the Ancient Greek Empire - one that is so significant in our cultural history that it is known as 'the birthplace of Western civilisation'. This greatest of civilisations may have eventually fallen to the Romans, but its legacy can still be found today in our words and arts, our laws and government and our science and technology. Aside from ideas and language, the Ancient Greeks left many tangible legacies: they left beautiful works of art and craftsmanship, many of which can be found in museums or in archeological sites. Amongst these ancient relics, one magnificent building stands above them all - literally: the Parthenon. This most elegant of monuments stands proudly, perched atop a hill, overlooking the complex maze of the city of Athens below.

Dominating the horizon from miles around, the Parthenon is Ancient Greece's enduring emblem. Rising 150m above sea level, this ancient temple sits upon a flat-topped rock called 'The Acropolis' (from the Greek words *Akron* 'edge' and *polis* 'city'). It is also known as the 'Sacred Rock'. The



Parthenon itself is comprised of an impressive colonnade of marble columns (50 in total) which together support a roof structure consisting of a plain band of stone; a frieze of vertically grooved blocks and more blocks adorned with sculptures and friezes.

### Why was the Parthenon Built?

The Ancient Greeks were tremendously powerful people and proud of their Empire - one which had immense influence and control over its neighbouring countries. They were also devout followers of the Gods; the Ancient Greeks believed the mighty Gods and Goddesses controlled their lives and as a consequence, went to vast lengths to make them happy. Naturally then, the foremost reason why the Parthenon was built was a religious one. Upon its completion, the beautiful building was dedicated to the Goddess Athena.

### Who were the Grand Designers?

Directed by the Athenian statesman Pericles, the Parthenon was built by the architects Ictinus and Callicrates, under the direct supervision of Pheidias, who was himself a master sculptor. For the next eleven years, a team of skilled artists and stone masons crafted the temple's lavish exterior and the ornate decoration of the interior. Made of white marble and stone, it was completed in 438BC; the final flourish of artistic brilliance was the positioning of the colossal statue Athena herself, set free from the stone by Pheidias himself. Weighing a grand total of 44 'talents' (which nowadays equates to 1,140kg) her face and arms were adorned with ivory and the rest with gold plating.

Not only was - and still is - the Parthenon visually stunning to look at, its construction is something to be admired: over 13,400 blocks of marble were transported from the quarries at Mount Penteli. Measuring from the top step of the base, the Parthenon still stands at an impressive 30.89m wide and 69.54 m long (the same as its original length).

### A Sight (Site!) for Sore Eyes

The Parthenon may have been built as a monument for the faithful however, given its (intentionally crafted) decorative carvings, its religious



purpose was somewhat later overshadowed by the visual messages that the carvings portrayed: that the all-powerful Ancient Greeks had no rival. The Ancient Greeks had won many battles both at home and abroad (including the Battle of Troy) and they wanted to remind the Athenians - and all who visited - of their legendary greatness. Surely, any Athenian or visitor then or now would have been both humbled and mesmerised by the contorted faces of the enemy or the victorious Greeks depicted within the stonework.

### A Colourful History

Considering it has been standing for thousands of years, it is not surprising that the Parthenon has had somewhat of a chequered history. The Parthenon remained largely intact as a temple for 800 years until the Ancient Greek Empire was absorbed into Roman then Christian control when it was transformed into a church. In 1458, the Turks (under the Ottoman Empire) seized the building and changed its use to a mosque. A few years later (1801-1803) a British nobleman called Lord Elgin, who had permission of the Turkish rulers, claimed several of the classical sculptures (also known as the Elgin Marbles) and sold them to the British Museum in London; they remain there to this day. After gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1832, the Greek government began projects to restore its monuments and expressed its disapproval that the priceless Marbles had been removed. In recent years, there has been some attempt to restore the Elgin Marbles to their rightful resting place but this has yet to come to fruition.

Although the Parthenon has suffered damage over the centuries, its breathtaking structure remains; it is a cultural masterpiece and a lasting legacy to the craftsmanship and technical brilliance of the Ancient Greek architects and sculptors. Hundreds of thousands of tourists still climb the many steps leading up to the rocky outcrop, surfacing with wonder at the site before their eyes. Striking in its architectural beauty, even nearly 2500 years later, the Parthenon holds a charm over all who visit to gaze at the images carved by the hands of the Ancient Greeks all that time ago.

