

Activity 3: The Parthenon as a Political Monument

In this activity we will explore the Parthenon as a political monument.

Athens in the Persian War

Throughout the early fifth century, Athens along with other parts of Greece had been at war against the might of the Persian Empire. The Persians had invaded the city of Athens in 480 B.C., during which time they sacked the Acropolis and destroyed an older temple to Athena. While the Persians ruled with tyranny and hoped to subjugate the Greeks with their might in war, the Athenians belonged to a world of democracy and free speech. At the end of the Persian War, the commissioning of the Parthenon by the Greek statesman Pericles represented a victory for the Athenian people: the Parthenon was dedicated as a victory monument, and it reflected the freedom and prosperity of the Greeks.

The Oath of Plataea

Before the battle of Plataea in 479 B.C., the alliance of Greek city states swore together an oath known as the 'Oath of Plataea'. The allies swore that they would leave in ruins any temples destroyed by the Persians until their enemies had been once and for all defeated in battle, in order to remind them of the atrocities committed by their enemies. As a consequence, the Athenian Acropolis lay in almost complete ruins between 480–447 B.C., and the Parthenon temple we know today could only be built once the Persian War was over.



Figure 1 Photograph showing the Lapiths vs Centaurs

Finding the Persian War on the Parthenon

The architects of the Parthenon did not sculpt images of the Persian War, but they certainly made reference to themes of conflict and oppression. Four types of scenes are depicted on the Parthenon metopes: the battle of the Amazons; the fall of Troy; the war between the gods and the giants; and the fight between the Centaurs and the Lapiths. In each case, we see here a more peace-loving and 'civilised' underdog fighting against an oppressive and bellicose enemy — did the Athenians see themselves as these characters from myth?

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Tasks

1. Research the Persian War, and make a timeline of events that took place leading up to the building of the Parthenon in 447 B.C.
2. Read through the Oath of Plataea [as reported by the speechwriter Lycurgus](#), and then read through the account of the Battle of Plataea, [according to the historian Herodotus](#) (9.1-89).
3. Look through the [catalogue of Parthenon sculptures from the British Museum](#). Identify the metopes, and see what scenes you can recognize.

Explore More...

http://www.britishmuseum.org/visiting/galleries/ancient_greece_and_rome/room_18_greece_parthenon.aspx

[Building the Ancient City: Athens': Andrew Wallace-Hadrill](#)