

## Activity 1: The Parthenon as a Work of Art

In this activity we will explore the Parthenon in Athens.

### *The Parthenon, the Acropolis, and Athens*

The Parthenon was built between 447–438 B.C. on the Acropolis hill in Athens. The word 'Acropolis' comes from two Ancient Greek words, and means 'top of the city'. Appropriately, the Acropolis hill was the highest point in fifth century Athens, and so the Parthenon temple would have been visible from anywhere in the ancient city. Splendid white marble was used to sculpt the temple which came from Mount Pentelicus, 15km to the north-east of the Acropolis hill.

### *Greek Temple Design*

The Parthenon is a peripteral temple which stands in an east-west orientation. It is 30m long, 20m wide, almost 14m high, and it has fluted columns all the way around the outside of the temple: 17 along the long side and eight along the short edge. Inside the temple the space is divided into two separate rooms. To the east side is a 'naos' or 'cella', a large room which would have contained a giant statue of the goddess Athena (see activity 2); to the west, there was a treasury room.



Figure 1. A photograph showing the remains of the Parthenon Temple

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## ***Architectural Sculpture***

Like many other Greek temples, the Parthenon was decorated with elaborate images: figures sculpted out of marble. Underneath the roof, 92 stone rectangular stone slabs called metopes depicted various scenes of conflict between the Greeks and their enemies; at the top of the inner wall, a long and continuous strip of marble called a frieze showed the Athenians celebrating a festival alongside their gods; and the triangular spaces at each end of the temple roof are called pediments. Both the east and west pediments were filled with statues which told the story of the myth of Athena.

## **Tasks**

1. Watch this short clip from BBC's '[Joanna Lumley's Greek Odyssey](#)', which introduces the Parthenon and its modern restoration. (02:17–09:10)
2. Find out about [three other temples](#) from the 'Classical Period' (fifth/fourth century B.C.) Compare their ground plans with that of the Parthenon. What are the similarities and differences?
3. Explore the website of the [Athens Acropolis museum](#). What else would an Athenian of the fifth century have seen apart from the Parthenon, if they had visited the Acropolis hill?
4. The Parthenon sculptures are now in the British Museum, and were brought to Britain by Lord Elgin in the early nineteenth century. [Read about this part of the monument's history](#), and the discussion surrounding whether or not the sculptures should be returned to Greece. Where do you stand on this argument?

## **Explore More...**

Beard, M. 2002. *The Parthenon*. London.

Osborne, R. 1998. *Archaic and Classical Greek Art. Oxford History of Art*. Oxford. 53-67.

Woodford, S. 1988. *An Introduction to Greek Art*. Cornell.