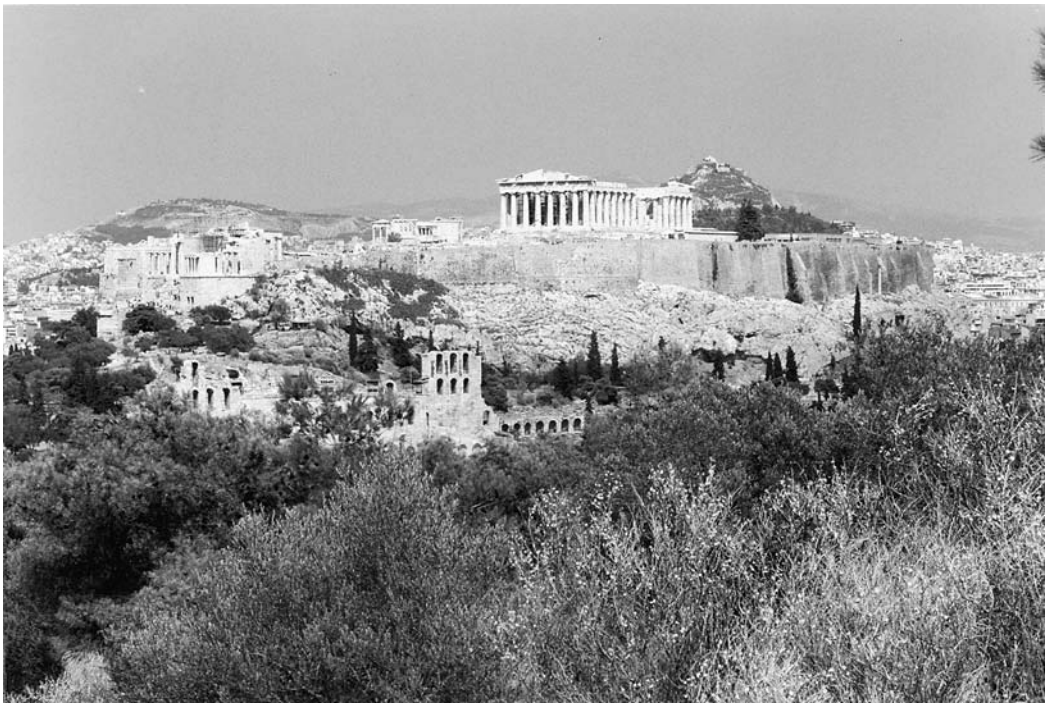
CHAPTER ONE

THE ROCK AND THE GODDESS

The Rock

The Acropolis (Fig. 1; CD 001–003) is not the tallest hill in Athens – Mt. Lykabettos, not quite 2 kilometers to the northeast, is nearly twice as high – but it had the right combination of accessibility, usable summit, natural defenses, and water to make it the obvious choice for ancient Athens's "high city" or "city on the hill" (for that is what *akropolis* means).[1] Almost every Greek city–state (or *polis*) had one, but no other acropolis was as successful as the Athenian: a massive urban focus that was always within view and that at various times throughout its virtually uninterrupted 6,000-year-long cultural history served as dwelling place, fortress, sanctuary, and symbol – often all at once.

The Acropolis is about 270 meters (885 feet) long at its longest and about 156 meters (512 feet) wide at its widest, but it is rugged and irregularly shaped, and the builders of its later, faceted walls merely regularized its essentially polygonal form (Fig. 2). They also created its flat-topped appearance: the rock actually slopes markedly from a ridge at its center down to the south (Fig. 3b), and only a long and complex series of retaining walls and artificial terraces on that side, together with a huge stone platform originally built to support a Parthenon planned decades before Pericles's great building (Fig. 4), extended the natural summit in that direction. Originally, then, the Acropolis was most sheer on the north and the east, and these sides especially are marked by virtually perpendicular cliffs about 30 meters (100 feet) high: the fortification walls built by men

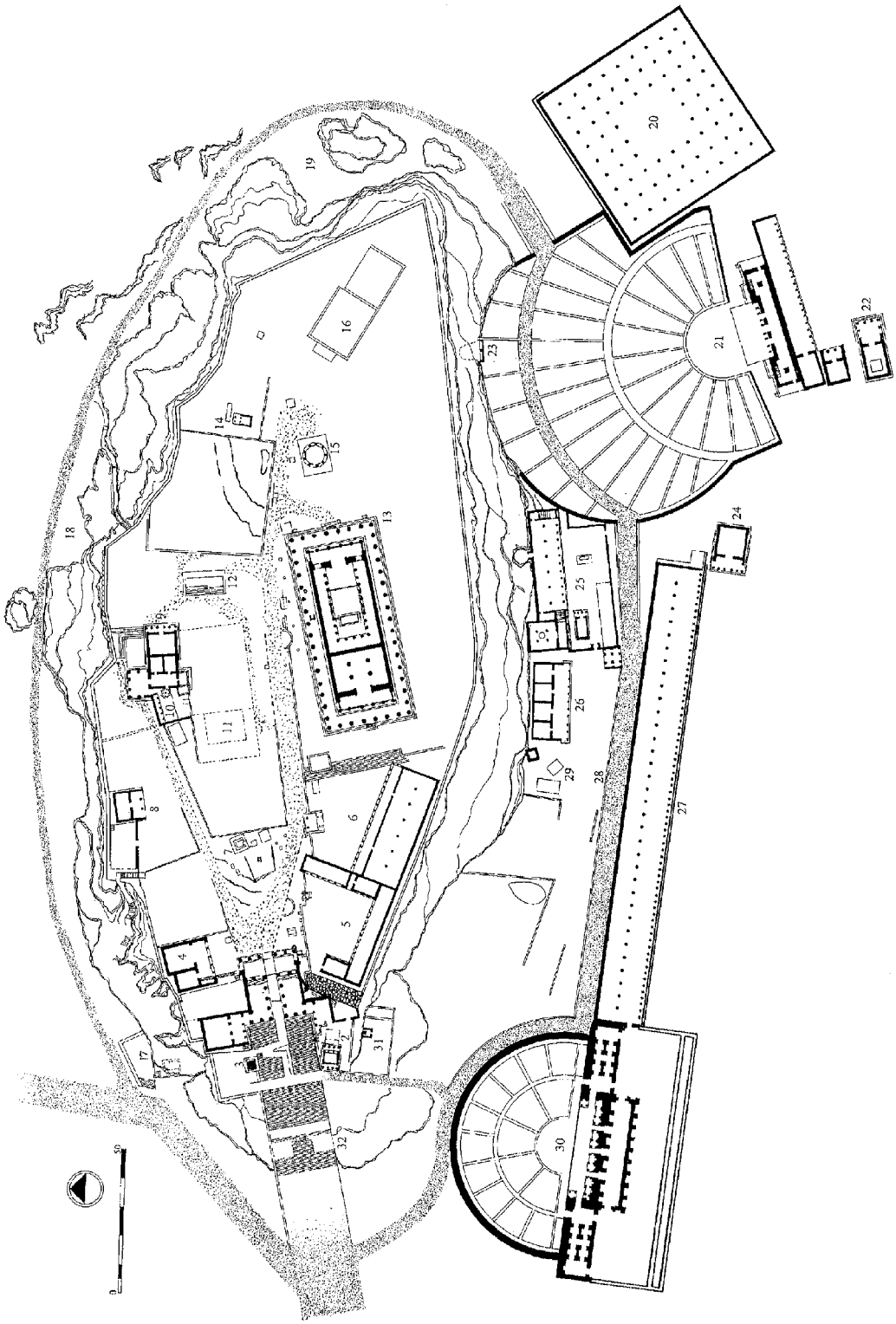


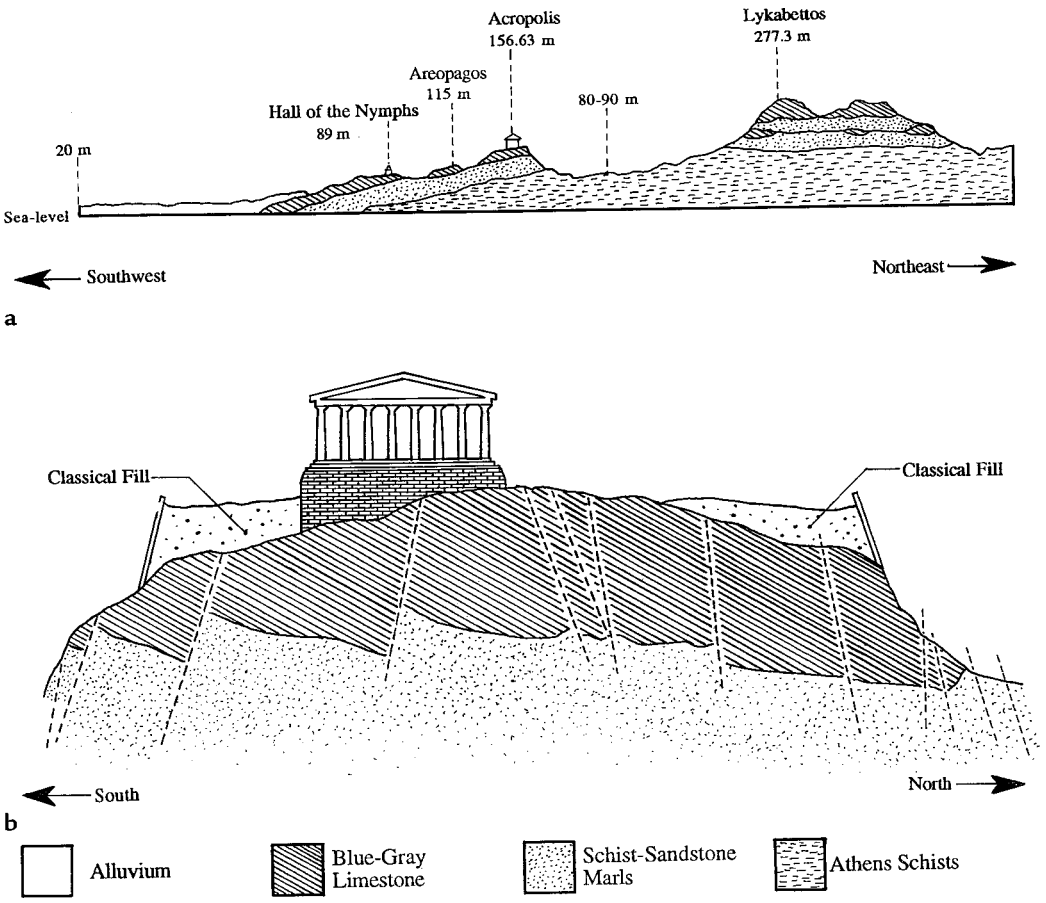
1. View of Acropolis from southwest; Mt. Lykabettos is seen in the distance, to the right of the Parthenon. Photo: author.

almost seem to emerge from them, as if the natural form had somehow transformed itself into architecture. But even the south side of the rock is marked by great rocky bulges and escarpments (Fig. 1; CD 001–002), and the only easy ascent was (and is) on the west side (Fig. 5), where the

2. (facing page). Plan of the Acropolis by I. Gelbrich (after Travlos 1971, Fig. 91, and Korres 1994b, 43), with revisions by author.

1 Propylaia
2 Sanctuary of Athena Nike
3 Monument of Eumenes II (later, of Agrippa)
4 Northwest Building
5 Sanctuary of Artemis Brauronia
6 Chalkotheke
7 Bronze Athena
8 Building III (House of the Arrhephoroi)
9 Erechtheion
10 Pandroseion
11 Opisthodomos?
12 Altar of Athena
13 Parthenon
14 Sanctuary of Zeus Polieus
15 Temple of Roma and Augustus
16 Building IV (Heroon of Pandion?)
17 Klepsydra Fountain
18 Shrine of Aphrodite and Eros
19 Cave of Aglauros
20 Odeion of Pericles
21 Theater of Dionysos
22 Temple of Dionysos
23 Monument of Thrasyllos
24 Monument of Nikias
25 Asklepieion
26 Ionic Stoa
27 Stoa of Eumenes II
28 Boundary of the Spring
29 Temples of Isis and Themis
30 Odeion of Herodes Atticus
31 Santuary of Aphrodite Pandemos
32 Beulé Gate



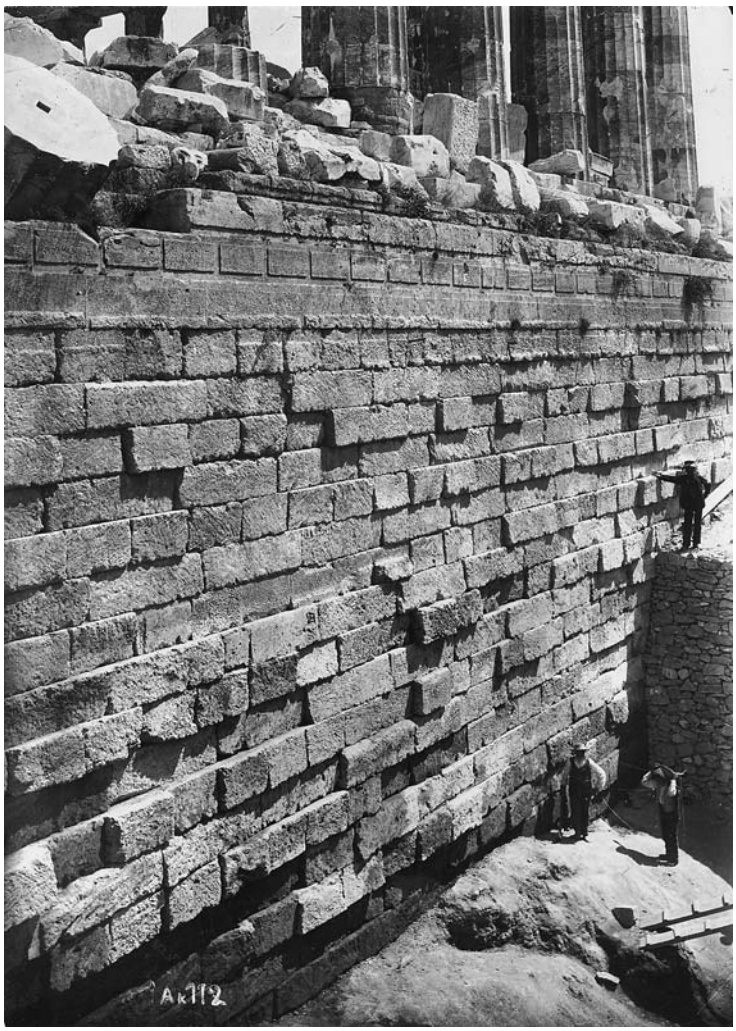


3. **a.** Section through the hills of Athens (after Judeich 1931, Fig. 7). **b.** Section through Acropolis (after Higgins and Higgins 1996, Fig. 3.4). Drawings by I. Gelbrich.

Acropolis is joined by saddles to lower, smaller hills nearby (above all, the Areopagos and the Pnyx, Fig. 6; CD 014) that would themselves play significant roles in the political history and civic life of Athens.

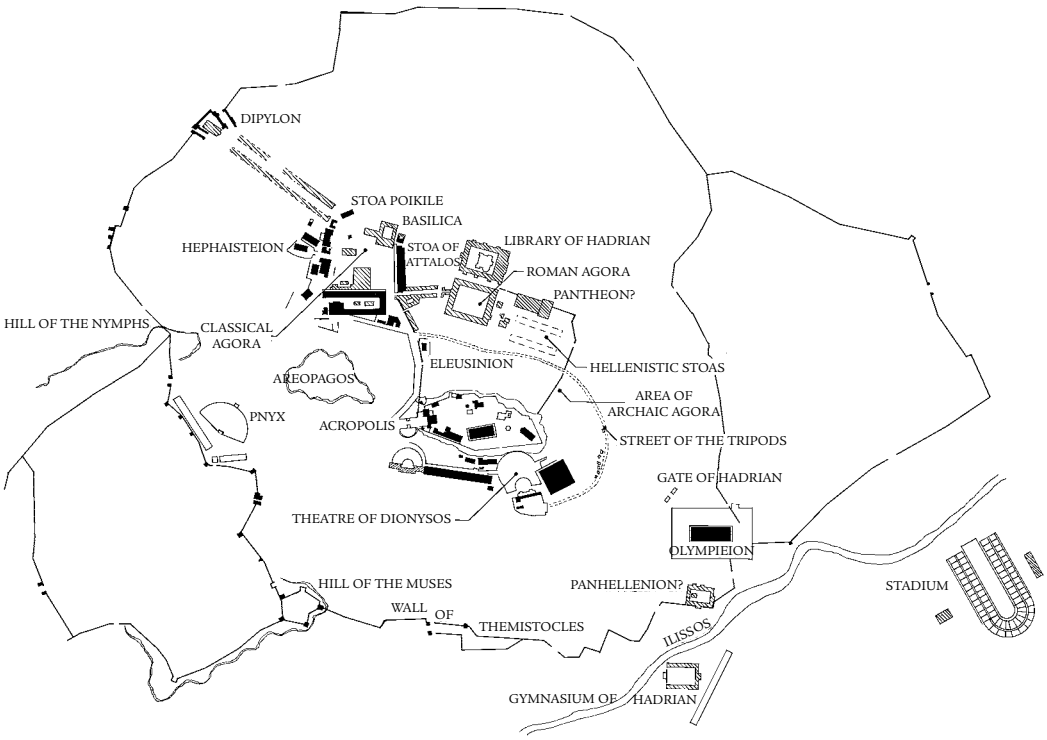
The Acropolis itself is a complex, soft mass of schist, sandstone, marl, and conglomerate capped by a thick layer of hard, highly fractured limestone formed in the late Cretaceous period, around the time the dinosaurs died off (Fig. 7; CD 010–011). The stone is fundamentally bluish to light gray in color, but it is also frequently tinged pink, and irregular streaks of almost blood-red marl or calcite course through it (CD 012–013). The brecciated, veined character of the stone is especially clear in those exposed portions of the rock that, over the centuries, have been heavily polished by feet. In places, the stone is nearly crystalline and its character thus approaches that of marble (because marble is simply limestone that has undergone a lot of high pressure and heated

metamorphosis, the line between them is sometimes hard to draw). At all events, this same "Acropolis limestone" caps the other outcrops and hills of Athens (Fig. 3a; CD 014). Eons ago, they were all part of the same continuous physical feature, bumps on a long mountain ridge that was eventually broken down by such forces as earthquake and erosion. In other words, the Acropolis is basically an ancient mountaintop, a remnant of a once much greater limestone formation that, like the other hills of Athens, came to be partly buried by the levelling sediments that created the Athenian plain.



4. Foundations of Periclean Parthenon, originally built for Older Parthenon, 489–480. Courtesy DAI–Athens (Neg. Akr. 112).

5. View of Acropolis from west. Photo: author.



6. Map of Athens, by I. Gelbrich.

7. View of Acropolis limestone, south slope. Photo: author.

The rock is characterized on all sides by hollows and projections, by deep folds and fissures, and by caves large and small. A series of caves (once sacred to Pan, Zeus, and Apollo) marks its northwest shoulder (Fig. 8; CD 004). A high, deep cave gouges the middle of the north side (CD 005). A huge, rounded grotto – the Cave of Aglauros, as it is known – is the principal feature of the east (Fig. 9; CD 008–009). On the south, ancient architects, having shaved smooth the bulging face of the limestone, collaborated with the caves nature provided to create such structures as the Monument of Thrasyllos, built to commemorate the victor of a choral competition in the year 320/19 (Fig. 10). The effects of natural erosion are everywhere palpable, and the action of earthquakes, taken together with the seepage of water channeled through widening fractures in the limestone – in places the Acropolis has split or has been in danger of

8. Northwest slope of Acropolis. The caves marking the slope were sacred to Apollo Pythios/Hypoakraios (Under the Long Rocks), Zeus Olympios, and Pan. Photo: author.

9. Grotto on east slope (Cave of Aglauros). Photo: author.

10. Monument of Thrasyllos (320/19), above Theater of Dionysos. Photo: author.

splitting apart – have at various times sent great pieces of the rock to the ground below. An inscription marking the extent of the *peripatos*, the ancient roadway that encircles the Acropolis (Fig. 2), is carved on such a fallen boulder, for example (Fig. 11), and in the first century AD another large chunk smashed into the center of the paved court of one of Classical Athens' s most splendid fountainhouses, the Klepsydra, on the northwest slope (Fig. 2; no. 17). The interior mass of the Acropolis now appears to be stable, and the citadel seems in no danger of splitting deep at its core.

The limestone that caps the Acropolis, though hard, is porous and water-soluble; the schist–sandstone foundation of the rock, though soft, is neither. Thus, water percolates down through the limestone only to be stopped by the impermeable layer below. It collects atop the seam and,

11. View of *peripatos* (north slope). The *peripatos* inscription is inscribed on the bottom of the upright block of Acropolis limestone at left. Photo: author.

as a result, it could be tapped at relatively shallow depths on the periphery of the Acropolis, where the limestone meets the schist–sandstone layer, where the forces of erosion have hollowed out caves or rock shelters, and where the water naturally emerges again in springs.[2] In essence, then, the lower slopes of the Acropolis were full of natural reservoirs, and it was this ready supply of water that early on made it an attractive site for human occupation. At the northwest corner of the rock, shallow artesian wells tapped the supply as early as habitation can be documented at Athens, in the Neolithic period, and this is the area that became the location of the Klepsydra. Midway along the north side of the rock, Late Bronze Age (or Mycenaean) Athenians dug a well at the bottom of a deep, hidden fissure and built a remarkable stairway of wood and stone to reach it.[3] On the south side, natural springs were thought sacred and played important roles in Classical cult (for example, in the Sanctuary of Asklepios [Figs. 12, 13; CD 153, 156]).[4]

This, then, was the easily defensible, relatively water-rich rock that would dominate the political, military, religious, and cultural history of