

THE ACROPOLIS IN THE AGE OF PERICLES

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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

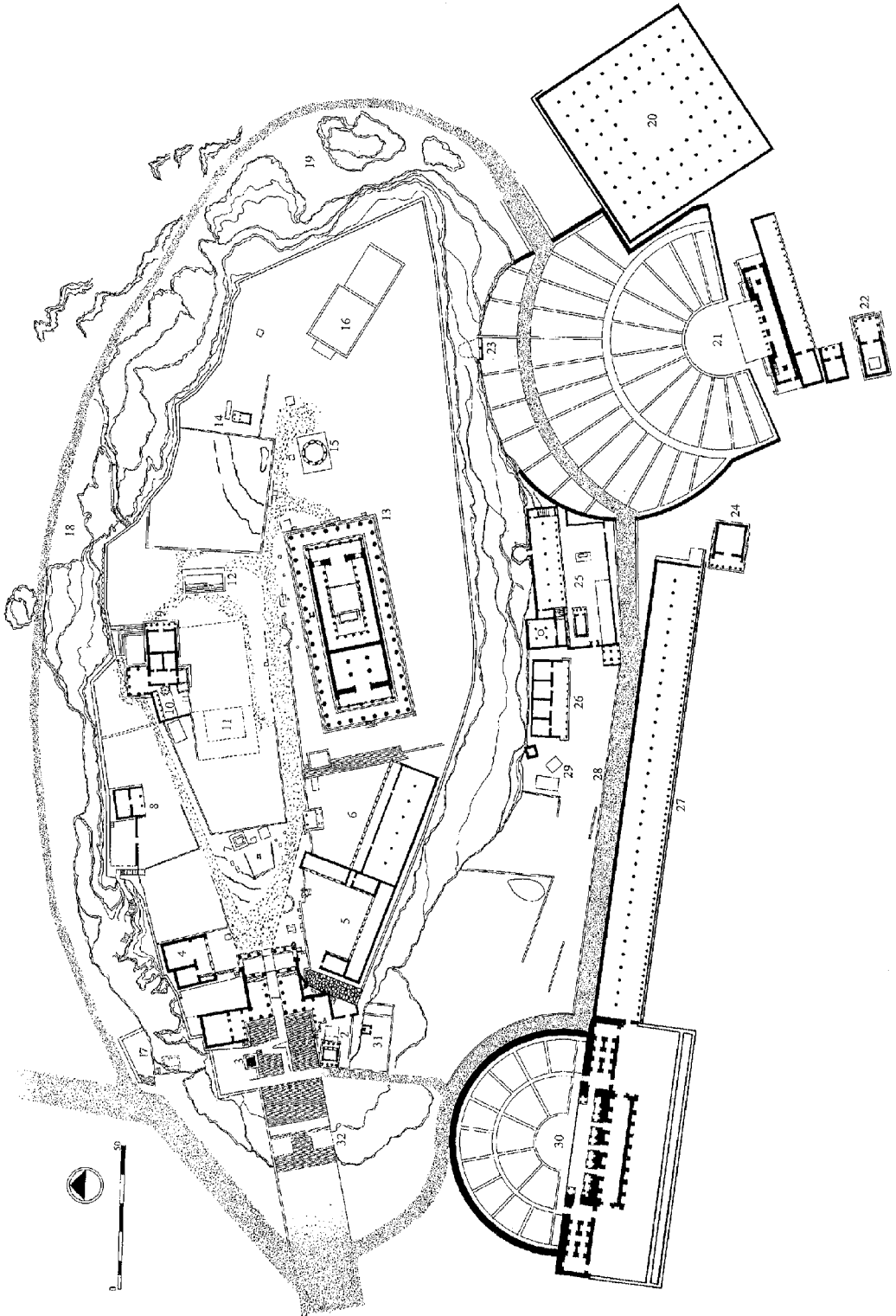


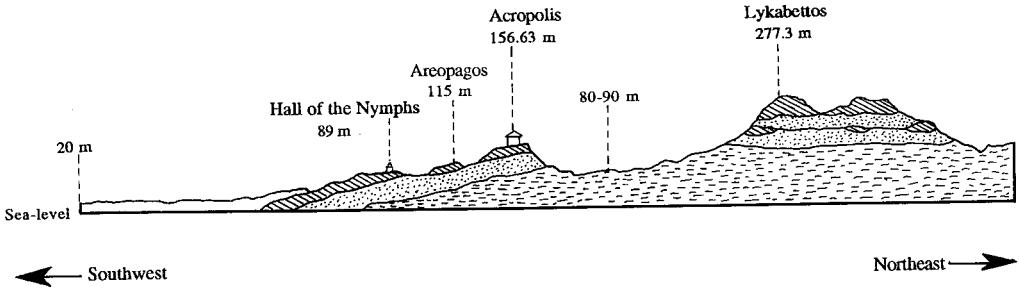
1. View of Acropolis from southwest; Mt. Lykabettos is seen in the distance, to the right of the Parthenon. Photo: author.

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

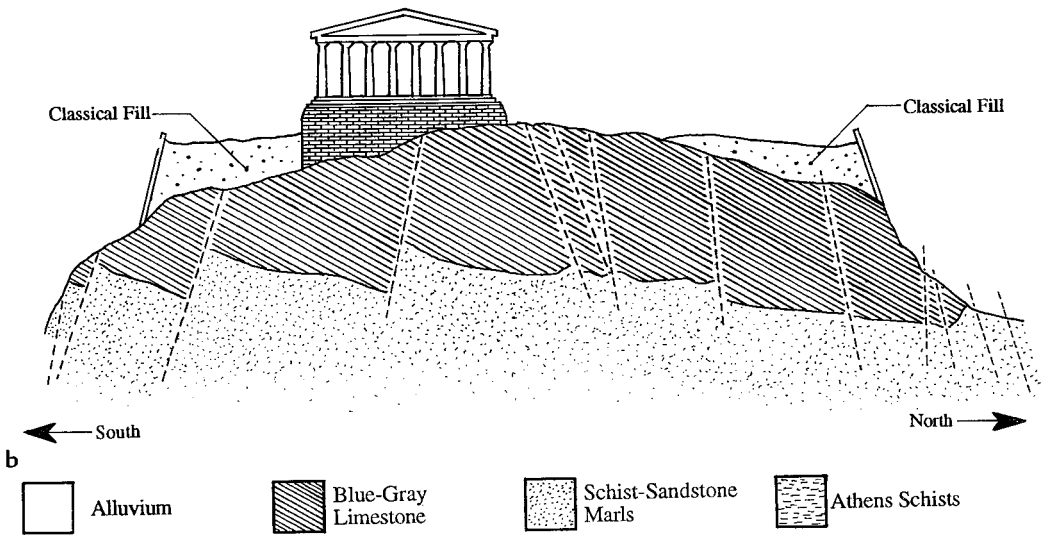
2. (facing page). Plan of the Acropolis by I. Gelbrich (after Travlos 1971, Fig. 91, and Korres 1994b, 43), with revisions by author.

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





a



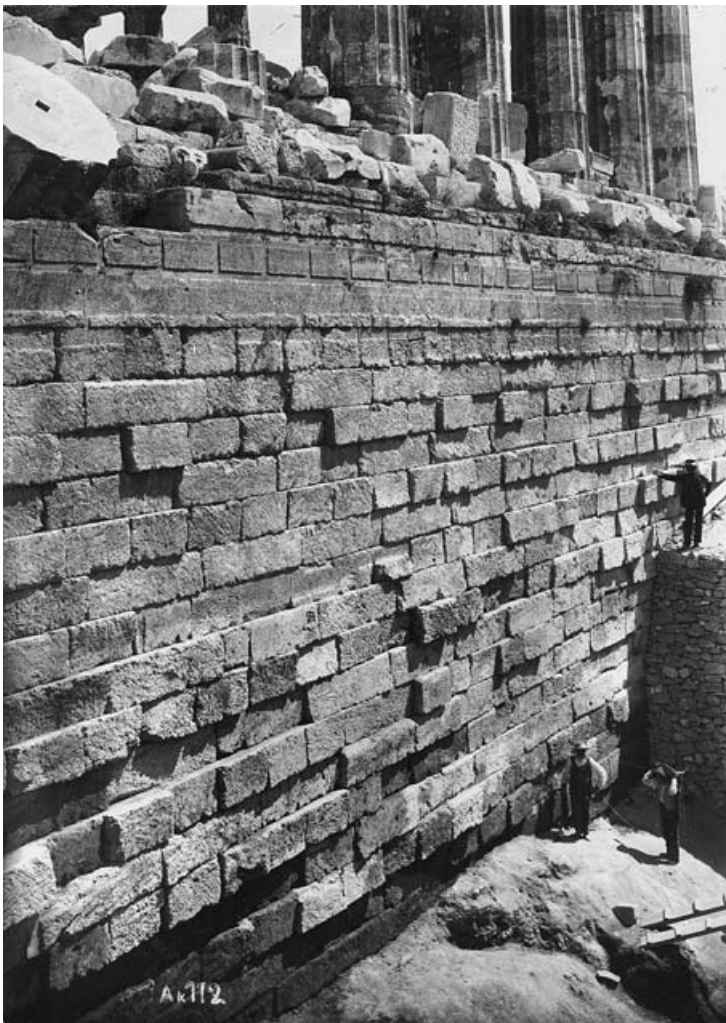
b

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

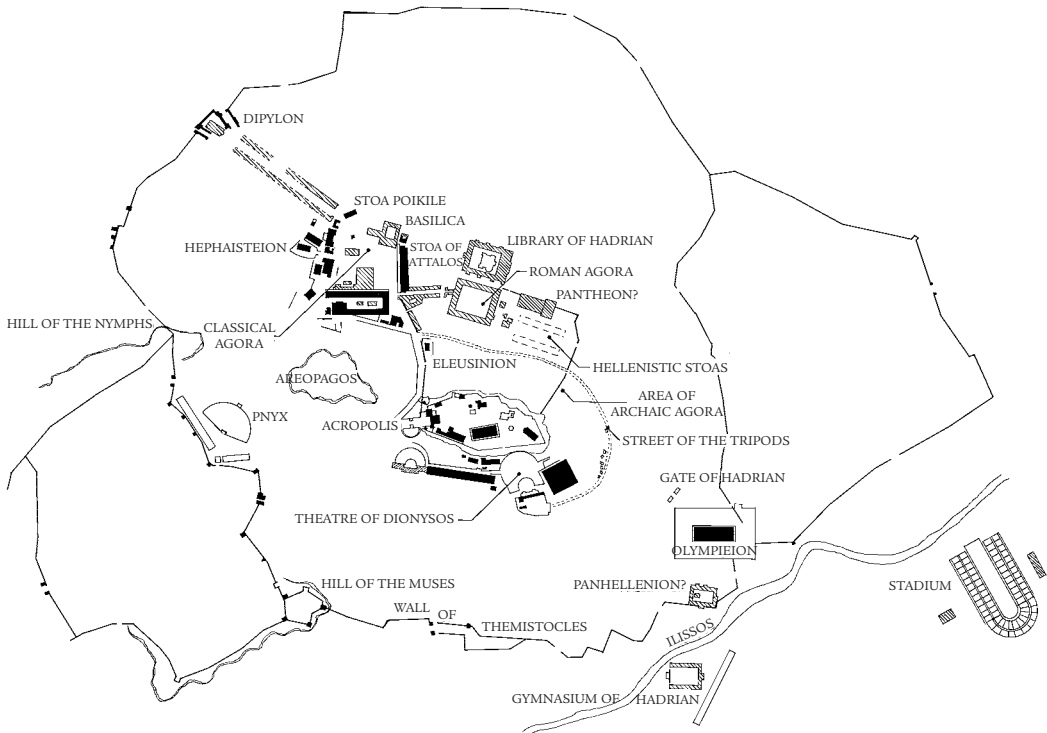
metamorphosis, the line between them is sometimes hard to draw). At all events, this same “Acropolis limestone” caps the other outcrops and hills of Athens (Fig. 3a; CD 014). Eons ago, they were all part of the same continuous physical feature, bumps on a long mountain ridge that was eventually broken 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 Thrasyllus, 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 Thrasylos (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.

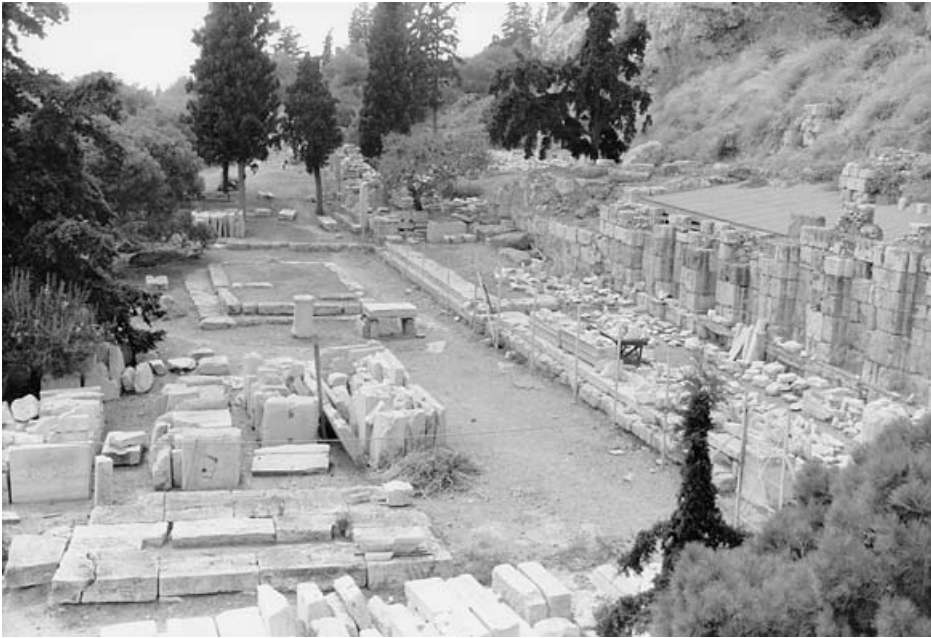
The limestone that caps the Acropolis, though hard, is porous and water-soluble; the schist-sandstone foundation of the rock, though soft, is neither. Thus, water percolates down through the limestone only to be stopped by the impermeable layer below. It collects atop the seam and,



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.

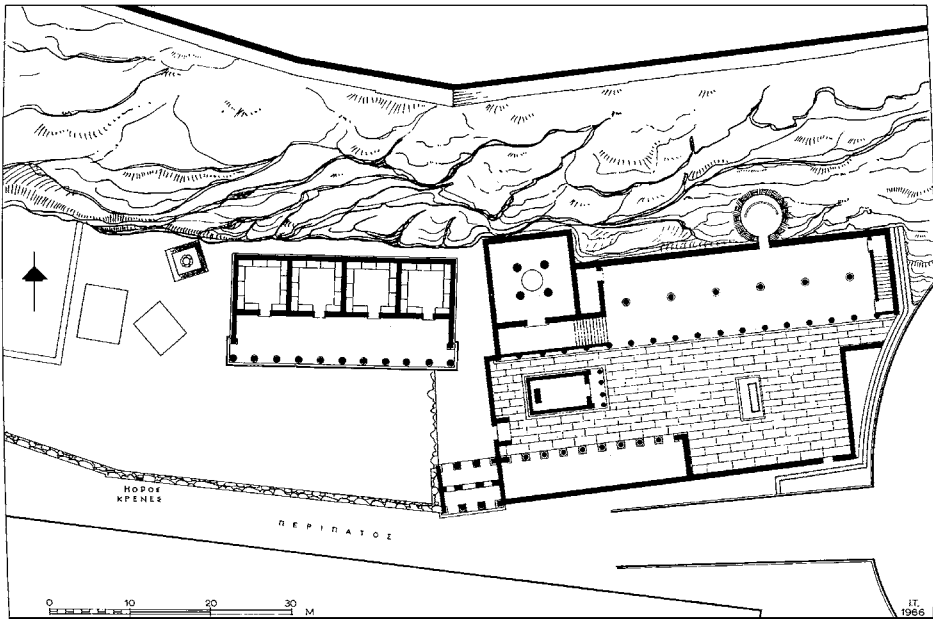
as a result, it could be tapped at relatively shallow depths on the periphery of the Acropolis, where the limestone meets the schist-sandstone layer, where the forces of erosion have hollowed out caves or rock shelters, and where the water naturally emerges again in springs.² In essence, then, the lower 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



12. View of Asklepieion from east. Photo: author.

Athens – the hub of what the oracle of Delphi knew as “the wheel-shaped city.”⁵ Historical Athenians called it the “Acropolis” or even just “polis.”⁶ What the prehistoric inhabitants of Athens called it (and what divinities they first worshipped upon it), we do not know. There was a Classical memory of a distant time when the Athenians themselves were known as the Kekropidai or Kranaoi, after their prehistoric kings Kekrops and Kranaos, though there is no memory of what they called the Acropolis then.⁷ However, it is entirely plausible that they called it (and the small clusters of houses they eventually planted atop it and its slopes) *Athene* or, in the plural, *Athenai*, words that seem, etymologically, pre-Greek. If that is so, the rock lent its name to the patron deity who would be so particularly and strongly associated with it, the city goddess who was, in effect, imminent in the rock and whose principal sacred emblems or symbols – the owl, the snake, and the olive tree – dwelled or grew upon it. Some small trace of that primeval identity may, in fact, be preserved in Homer’s *Odyssey*⁸ when *Athene* (an epic form of Athena) is said to travel to *Athene* (the city, in the singular): the words are the same and so, linguistically, the goddess visits herself. In short, it seems that Athena was in the beginning named after the rock. No matter what later myths, mythographers, and tragedians suggest, the city was not named after her.

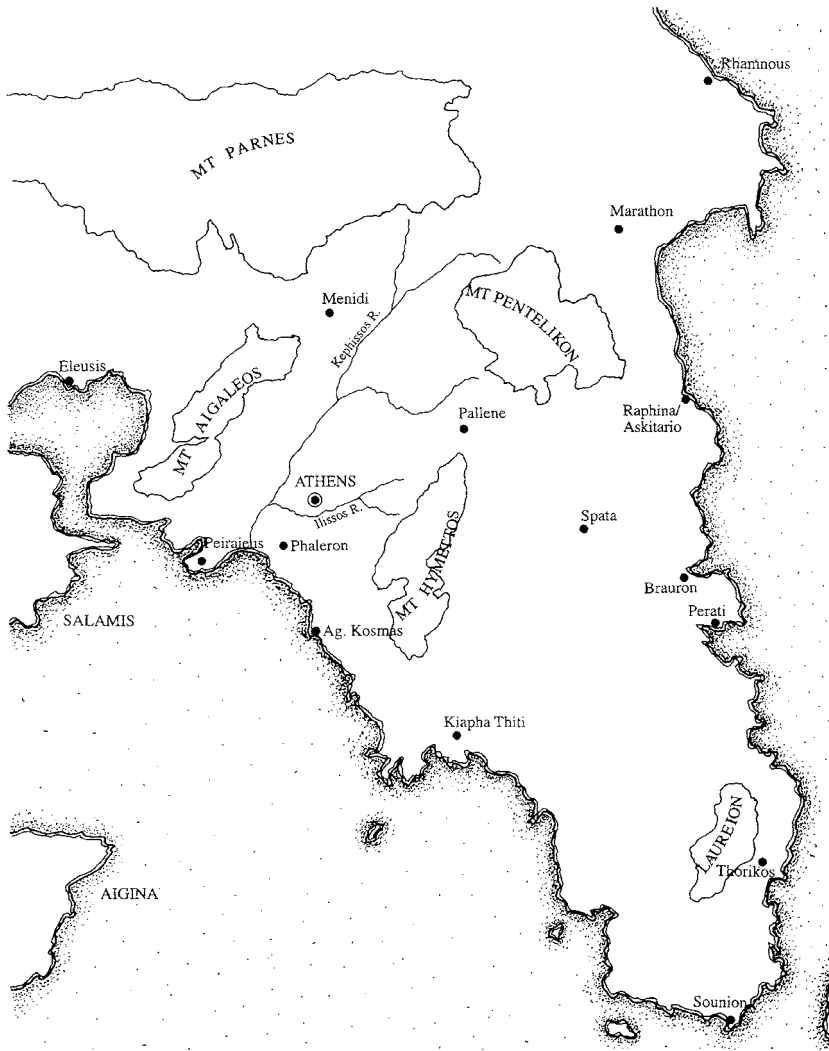


13. Plan of the Asklepieion. After Travlos 1971, Fig. 171. Reproduced by permission of DAI-Zentrale, Berlin.

And yet, in the end, who was named for what did not matter much. What mattered was the special relationship the city forged with the goddess and how completely Athena came to be regarded as Athens itself. The Athenians virtually spoke her name (*Athena* or *Athenaia*) every time they named their city (*Athenai*) and themselves (*Athenaioi*).⁹ In fact, because the Athenian *polis* eventually encompassed all of Attica (Fig. 14) and not just the city itself, the Athenians might more accurately have called themselves *Attikoi* (inhabitants of Attika). That they did not do so suggests the strength of their special bond to their goddess. For although Athena was a goddess for all Greeks, the Athenians claimed her as their own, identifying themselves with her, and claimed for themselves many of the very qualities Athena herself embodied: military valor, boldness, love of the beautiful, love of reason and moderation, and knowledge. Athena was their guide and their security. She was the Athenian ideal and in the Athenian mind, where religious belief and secular patriotism dwelled so easily, so inextricably together, the goddess and the city were one.¹⁰

The Goddess

We do not know where the Greek gods came from, but the conventional view is that most of them came from somewhere else. It is widely believed,



14. Map of Attika, by I. Gelbrich.

for example, that when the Indo-European people who would in time become the Greeks arrived on the mainland early in the Bronze Age, they superimposed their own system of “sky gods” (mostly male) upon a stratum of chthonic, or earthly, powers worshipped by the peoples they found in place – above all, fertility and earth-mother goddesses (such as Gaia, or Earth, herself) of Neolithic and even Palaeolithic origin, the very embodiments of fecundity. It was indeed typical of most ancient peoples to respect and absorb, or else co-opt, the gods of others rather than reject them. (Why take chances, and why fight holy wars?) And so, the Greek pantheon has often been considered the result of a Bronze Age blend



of more or less indigenous nature divinities (broadly responsible for the welfare and fertility of human beings, plants, and animals) and newly arrived Olympians, with their own more specific functions and limited spheres of action – “special department gods,” as they have been called.¹¹

Things are not likely to have been that simple. Although the distinction between “earth gods” and “sky gods” was taken for granted even in antiquity,¹² the notion that one set of divinities (the chthonic ones) was “native” and the other set (the Olympians) consisted of “Indo-European invaders” is hard to prove. It is remarkable, for example, that only one of the canonical twelve Olympian gods can confidently be said to have an impeccable Indo-European pedigree, and that is Zeus, god of the shining sky and thunderbolt. Yet, some gods outside the canon (the sun god Helios, for example) are almost certainly Indo-European, too. On the other hand, Demeter, the principal goddess of the cultivated earth, is also an Olympian, whereas the canonical Aphrodite is probably a post-Bronze Age eastern immigrant to Olympus from Cyprus. (She is not nicknamed “the Cyprian” for nothing.) As for Athena, who is firmly entrenched as one of the Olympian twelve, her name at least seems to predate the arrival of the people who would worship her.

The formation of Greek religion was clearly a long and complex process, and the origins of individual divinities often cannot be precisely tracked. In fact, Greek religion had already undergone many centuries of combination, assimilation, and transformation by the time Athena (or her prototype) first enters the archaeological record. Interestingly, she first appears not in Athens or on its Acropolis but on the acropolis of Mycenae, the heavily fortified citadel that was the leading cultural and political center of Late Bronze Age Greece. She also appears in a cluster of images – a gold ring, a painted tablet, a fragment of fresco (Fig. 15) – that present her very much as later Greeks knew her: as an armed, helmeted, warrior goddess.¹³ It is no surprise to find that the Mycenaeans – best known for their fortified citadels, weapons, and armor – worshipped a female deity charged (apparently) with the defense of the citadel and royal house. Warrior goddesses were commonplace elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean and Near East. (The Mesopotamians, for example, had Ishtar or Astarte, the Egyptians had Neith.) There is no reason why such a goddess should not have figured in the pantheon of Bronze Age Greece.



a



b

15. **a.** “Shield Goddess” on painted tablet from Cult Center, Mycenae (Athens NM 2666). Late thirteenth century. Drawing after Rehak 1984, 537. **b.** Helmeted Goddess holding griffin. Drawing of fresco from Cult Center, Mycenae (Athens NM 11652). Late thirteenth century.



Whether Mycenaean Greeks actually called their warrior goddess “Athena,” we do not know. She may be mentioned – once – in the Bronze Age linguistic record, but the record is controversial, and it comes from neither Mycenae nor Athens but from Knossos on Crete. On a narrow clay tablet baked hard in the fire that destroyed the Palace of Minos (possibly around 1375, possibly later), two inscribed lines of Linear B (a syllabic script that is the earliest known form of written Greek) seem to record gifts issued to four deities.¹⁴ The top line reads *a-ta-na-po-ti-ni-ja*, and that, as soon as the text was deciphered, rang a loud bell. The almost identical phrases *potnia Athenaia* and *potni’ Athana* (both meaning “Lady Athena”) are found many centuries later in Homer and, later still, on inscriptions from the Acropolis.¹⁵ The trouble is that the title *potnia* (“lady” or “mistress” in the sense of “she who masters”) is apparently applied to more than one deity in Linear B (including one goddess who seems a *Potnia* par excellence),¹⁶ and that when names are linked to it they are normally toponyms, or place names. So, *a-ta-na-po-ti-ni-ja* means not “Lady Atana” (that is, Athena) but “Lady of Atana,” and we have no idea whether the Atana referred to is “our” Athens or another one on Crete, or whether the lady of the place is Athena herself or some other goddess closely associated with it.

All in all, though, it is likely that the Greeks of the Mycenaean Age worshipped a goddess like Athena – a goddess of cities or citadels, at the very least – and it is a very good bet that Athena is what they called her after all. Although the goddess will not appear again in the archaeological record for some 500 years, that record was still Greek, and some degree of religious and linguistic continuity across the centuries is assured. It certainly seems more than coincidence that when an Archaic temple was built directly atop the ruins of the Bronze Age palace of Mycenae in the seventh century, it was (it seems) dedicated to Athena.

In a sense, the Greeks did not worship one Athena; they worshipped many. Like any Greek god or goddess, Athena was a force of multiple powers, with many roles and manifestations, with the capacity to intervene in human life in a variety of ways. The wide range of her associations with special spheres of human activity is reflected in the dozens of epithets or titles by which Athena was known. Athena loomed large in the lives of Greeks other than the Athenians, of course. At Sparta, for example, she was worshipped as *Chalkioikos*, Athena of the Bronze House, and she is

The Statue of Athena Polias

The cult image of Athena Polias was so old that the Athenians themselves were not sure where it had come from, and so simple that one later Christian author (a hostile witness, to be sure, writing when the statue had probably deteriorated) called it “a rough stake and a shapeless piece of wood.”¹⁹ According to one tradition, it had miraculously fallen down from heaven. According to others, either the legendary Kekrops or Erichthonios had it made when he was king of the city. However it got there, it was surely among the oldest cult-statues to be seen anywhere in Greece. Although there is the possibility that the statue was a Bronze Age or Mycenaean relic – a prehistoric fetish that somehow survived the centuries – and whereas we can be confident that throughout its long history, it always inhabited a series of shrines built on the north side of the Acropolis, culminating in the late fifth-century building we call the Erechtheion but whose official title was “the temple on the Acropolis in which the ancient image is” (Figs. 16–17), we know, strangely, very little about it. We think it was life-size or less because we can infer from a variety of evidence that it was evacuated from the Acropolis in 480 just before the Persians came, and that women could dress it, undress it, and possibly even carry it around like a mannequin as part of various festival rituals. Several inscriptions inventory an impressive array of ornaments somehow attached to the statue – “a diadem [or crown] which the goddess wears, the earrings which the goddess wears, a band which the goddess wears on her neck, five necklaces, a gold owl, a gold *aigis*, a gold gorgoneion, and a gold *phiale* [a shallow libation bowl] which she holds in her hand.”²⁰ But, we are not sure when or over how long a period she acquired the

items, and she may also have worn a bronze helmet that (because of its relatively poorer material) did not make it into the inventories. We do not even know for sure whether the statue was seated or standing. There are a number of small painted terracotta seated goddesses from the Acropolis that might crudely imitate the Athena Polias (cf. Fig. 18), but there are standing terracottas that might imitate her, too, and it is likely that the ancient statue stood postlike, rigidly upright, with a gold *phiale* in one hand and an owl in the other.²¹ Indeed, it is just possible that it – or something like it – was represented in south metope 21 of the Parthenon (Fig. 19).²²

It is certain, however, that the statue wore cloth as well as gold. Every year, the statue was dressed in a new saffron-colored woolen robe or *peplos* (measuring perhaps 5 by 6 feet) woven by select Athenian girls and women and principally decorated (in contrasting purple) with inwoven scenes from the battle between the gods and giants, the savage sons of Earth (Gaia) who tried to overthrow the Olympians. (There are a few hints that other subjects, such as chariots and Athenian soldiers, appeared as well.) No detailed representation of the *peplos* survives (though the cloth depicted in the center of the Parthenon’s east frieze is probably it; Fig. 20; CD 092), but it must have been an especially grand version of the sort of richly figured garments worn by women in many vase-paintings, by Athena herself in a late statue in Dresden, and (their paint now mostly faded) by Archaic Acropolis *korai* (cf. Fig. 45).²³ At all events, the presentation of a new *peplos* to Athena Polias was the highlight of the grand midsummer civic festival known as the Panathenaia.

The fate of the statue is unknown, but it is likely to have finally crumbled or been destroyed by the early fifth century AD, after serving as the focus of the most important cult on the Acropolis for a thousand years or more.