Older Parthenon

The first endeavor to build a sanctuary for Athena Parthenos on the site of the present Parthenon was begun shortly after the Battle of Marathon (c. 490–488 BC) upon a solid limestone foundation that extended and leveled the southern part of the Acropolis summit. This building replaced a hekatompedon (meaning "hundred-footer") and would have stood beside the archaic temple dedicated to Athena Polias ("of the city"). The Older or Pre-Parthenon, as it is frequently referred to, was still under construction when the Persians sacked the city in 480 BC and razed the Acropolis.

The existence of both the proto-Parthenon and its destruction were known from Herodotus, and the drums of its columns were plainly visible built into the curtain wall north of the Erechtheon. Further physical evidence of this structure was revealed with the excavations of Panagiotis Kavvadias of 1885–90. The findings of this dig allowed Wilhelm Dörpfeld, then director of the German Archaeological Institute, to assert that there existed a distinct substructure to the original Parthenon, called Parthenon I by Dörpfeld, not immediately below the present edifice as had been previously assumed. Dörpfeld's observation was that the three steps of the first Parthenon consisted of two steps of Poros limestone, the same as the foundations, and a top step of Karrha limestone that was covered by the lowest step of the Periclean Parthenon. This platform was smaller and slightly to the north of the final Parthenon, indicating that it was built for a wholly different building, now completely covered over. This picture was somewhat complicated by the publication of the final report on the 1885–90 excavations, indicating that the substructure was contemporary with the Kimonian walls, and implying a later date for the first temple.

If the original Parthenon was indeed destroyed in 480, it invites the question of why the site was left a ruin for thirty-three years. One argument involves the oath sworn by the Greek allies before the Battle of Plataea in 479 BC declaring that the sanctuaries destroyed by the Persians would not be rebuilt, an oath from which the Athenians were only absolved with the Peace of Callias in 450. The mundane fact of the cost of reconstructing Athens after the Persian sack is at least as likely a cause. However, the excavations of Bert Hodge Hill led him to propose the existence of a second Parthenon, begun in the period of Kimon after 468 BC. Hill claimed that the Karrha limestone step Dörpfeld thought was the highest of Parthenon I was in fact the lowest of the three steps of Parthenon II, whose stylobate dimensions Hill calculated at 23.51 by 66.888 metres (77.13 ft × 219.45 ft).

One difficulty in dating the proto-Parthenon is that at the time of the 1885 excavation the archaeological method of seriation was not fully developed; the careless digging and refilling of the site led to a loss of much valuable information. An attempt to discuss and make sense of the potsherds found on the Acropolis came with the two-volume study by Graef and Langlotz published in 1925–33.This inspired American archaeologist William Bell Dinsmoor to attempt to supply limiting dates for the temple platform and the five walls hidden under the re-terracing of the Acropolis. Dinsmoor concluded that the latest possible date for Parthenon I was no earlier than 495 BC, contradicting the early date given by Dörpfeld. Further, Dinsmoor denied that there were two proto-Parthenons, and held that the only pre-Periclean temple was what Dörpfeld referred to as Parthenon II. Dinsmoor and Dörpfeld exchanged views in the American Journal of Archaeology in 1935.

Present building

Above, the parthenon today. Below, the parthenon as it probably appeared in ancient times.

In the mid-5th century BC, when the Athenian Acropolis became the seat of the Delian League and Athens was the greatest cultural centre of its time, Pericles initiated an ambitious building project that lasted the entire second half of the century. The most important buildings visible on the Acropolis today — the Parthenon, the Propylaia, the Erechtheion and the temple of Athena Nike — were erected during this period. The Parthenon was built under the general supervision of the artist Phidias, who also had charge of the sculptural decoration. The architects Ictinos and Callicrates began their work in 447 BC, and the building was substantially completed by 432, but work on the decorations continued until at least 431. Some of the financial accounts for the Parthenon survive and show that the largest single expense was transporting the stone from Mount Pentelicus, about 16 kilometres (9.9 mi) from Athens, to the Acropolis. The funds were in part stolen by Pericles from the treasury of the Delian League, which was moved from the Panhellenic sanctuary at Delos to the Acropolis in 454 BC.