The Parthenon Frieze

Many scholars have tried to unravel just exactly what the frieze on the Parthenon really depicts. Theories about what this masterpiece of architectural sculpture depicts range from a more general view of the Panathenaic Festival to an extremely specific look at this same theme, to the representation of foundation myths and more. I argue that a non-specific interpretation is most appropriate in comparison to other abounding theories. However, I also believe that scholars have been mislead in believing that trying to decipher what the original meaning prescribed to the frieze will yield the only important interpretation of it.

The reason I disagree with arguments describing the frieze as strictly the Panathenaic Procession is founded on the fact that when examining the frieze closely for specific elements of the Panathenaic Procession, as described in ancient texts, one cannot identify many key parts that are mentioned. Pollitt argues against the frieze as specifically depicting the Procession by pointing out exactly what is absent in the narrative. In the Panathenaic Procession men known as the thallophoroi carried branches, but the figures identified as such in the frieze have no such prop. Additionally, there are men carrying water jugs in the sculpture when, from what we know, it should be women. Holloway also mentions several essential characters from the Procession are missing, including the Panathenaic ship, the Athenian hoplites, and the kanephoroi, the girls to whom the great honor of carrying the sacred baskets was bestowed.

In my opinion, if the highly skilled Athenian craftsmen were trying to depict exact scenes from the Panathenaic Procession on the frieze of the Parthenon, they would have been able to do so. These sculptors were able to carve four inches of marble to into eight horses abreast. Not only that, but on close examination, the proportion of the size of the riders to their horses is off, with the people larger than they should be. However, this effect successfully makes the scene

look completely natural, simply causing the viewer to get the impression that the horsemen, with their heads slightly bowed, are in total control of their surroundings. With the extraordinary skill of these workers in mind, I do not think it is too much to imagine that had the intent been to show a precise idea, in this case the Panathenaic Procession, these Greeks would have.

I find Neil's analysis of the central portion of the east frieze unconvincing for similar reasons of the expertise of the sculptors. He states that in the center is, unquestionably, the folding of the new peplos for Athena, the core celebration around which the Panathenaic Procession was created. He attempts to solve the problem of the gods facing away from this essential event by describing them actually sitting in a semi-circle that the artists were not able to depict perfectly on the frieze. While I find it difficult to believe that the center depicts anything but the folding of the peplos, this interpretation is still more awkward than others; it seems much more plausible that the sculptors would not attempt to show a seating arrangement that would be almost impossible to decipher. It easier to believe that the gods facing away from the peplos holds a different meaning. The artists could have meant this positioning to represent the gods invisibility to the figures in the center, an idea Neils discredits with little explanation beyond calling it awkward.

Though perhaps not very likely, I've wondered myself if the gods are simply just discussing the events surrounding the peplos. If it is such an important occurrence, it may be worthy of this sort of divine conversation. This scene would have been the culminating event of the Panathenaic Procession, a festival dedicated to the gods. With so much action going on in the other parts of the frieze, whether or not exactly relating to the Pathanenaic Procession, why should the gods be statically sitting by and passively watching? The gods may very well be abuzz with the excitement of the festival as well.

Perhaps looking at each of the figures and decoding exactly who they is not how scholars should be studying the Parthenon frieze in the first place. It could be that the sculptors' goal was simply to allude to the festival life of Athens during the 5th century and, in a general way, do so by using images associated with the Panathenaic Procession, a celebration every Athenian was familiar with. I find Pollitt most convincing when he tries to persuade his readers of this notion. He systematically examines the different sides of the frieze and explains that each element most likely belongs to a wider festival culture of Athens, rather than the Panathenaic Procession. For example, Pollitt discredits scholars who assume that because the cavalry scene is so prominent on the frieze, and because the most widely held modern interpretation of it is as the Panathenaic Procession, that this scene must have been part of that festival. He reasons that the only two literary sources that mention a cavalry in association with processions, two passages of speeches by Demosthenes, make no mention of a specific procession, but only refer to them in a general way. Pollitt also points out that, according to ancient sources, cavalry processions often took place in Athens. Since having a cavalry was a new and probably quite an exciting occurrence for the city of Athens, it would make sense that a procession by this powerful military force would be quite exhilarating for those watching, and even those taking part in it. I can absolutely see why frequent showings of this part of society would take place. Additionally, those in charge of creating the sculptural program of the Parthenon would want to include this new aspect of Athenian identity in the repertoire of the temple. Perikles himself says in a speech that one of the three greatest institutions Athens possesses, along with competition and sacrificial rites, is the system of military training that made the city stronger than its enemies. If the cavalry was such a huge part of the Athens of the 5th century, it makes perfect sense that it is part of the frieze, whether it was part of the Panathenaic procession or not.

While decoding the exact, original meaning of the frieze as prescribed to it by its chief sculptural designer, most probably Phidias, would undoubtedly shed valuable insight into that period of Greek civilization in Athens, it is also crucial to remember that the monument may have taken on different meanings as time passed. One illuminating example of what I am getting at, an icon that every citizen of the United States of America should be familiar with, is the Statue of Liberty. It was given to the United States by France in 1886 as a symbol of peace and friendship between the two countries and to commemorate the centennial anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. This statue stands on Liberty Island in New York Harbor and has been the first symbol of America that immigrants to this country have seen since it was placed there. As anyone familiar with US history knows, countless groups of people escaped oppressive and poor conditions overseas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and sought refuge in the land of freedom, hope, and prosperity that America was known for. Over time, the Statue of Liberty took on these ideals that the United States offered to the world, and today it embodies those ideals more so than what it was originally intended to signify – good relations with France. This secondary significance has, in the end, become the most important one to the people of this country and those seeking refuge within it. While knowing the history behind the conception and beginning of the Statue of Independence is a valuable part of history, the sheer power it holds as a symbol with meanings prescribed to it later speaks volumes about a later period.

With this example in mind, one must remember that no historical source explicitly describing what the frieze of the Parthenon. The only texts available to scholars by ancient authors only allude to the general theme of the frieze. The idea that it depicts the Panathenaic Procession, in particular, was an idea put forth with in the last few hundred years. Perhaps the precise meaning the artists meant the sculptures to have was lost after some time and even the

Athenians themselves either lost the original meaning, or it became secondary to the one they created for themselves, much like the Statue of Liberty. What might help scholars determine this is the study of any possible texts existing from the later city of Athens that mention the Parthenon and its frieze. This could supply clues into any shifting in the significance of the frieze to the people of Athens. One thing for sure, the Parthenon and its sculptures certainly hold a significant place in the hearts and minds of Athenians today. They are a symbol of their Greek heritage that has survived through the ages. Especially after the veritable pillaging of many of the Parthenon and sculptures and other parts of the temple by Lord Elgin, the statues of the frieze are a passionate subject for many.

The frieze of the Parthenon has been a popular subject for scholarly study and interpretation for a long time, partially because the lack of any ancient texts that describe it. For this reason it is an intriguing mystery open to many interpretations. For me, it seems most likely that it represents a general celebration of the festival life of Athens, much like Pollitt describes. Intricate decoding of the sculptures tend to run into problems that require complex reasoning. While attempting to discover the original meaning of the frieze is important, I also feel that spending time on its cultural context of later generations of Athenians would also be interesting.