NO PREP

The Parthenon

Monument, Ruin, and Controversy

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

The Parthenon: Monument, Ruin, and Controversy

Building the Perfect Temple

In 447 BCE, the Athenian statesman Pericles launched the most ambitious building program in the ancient Greek world. On the Acropolis — the sacred rock at the heart of Athens — workers began constructing a temple to Athena Parthenos (Athena the Virgin), the patron goddess of the city. What they built was the Parthenon: 46 outer columns of gleaming white Pentelic marble, 70 meters long and 30 meters wide, designed by the architects Iktinos and Kallikrates under the artistic supervision of the sculptor Phidias. The building was completed in 432 BCE, just fifteen years after it began — astonishing speed for a project of this scale and perfection. The Parthenon is not as simple as it looks. Every horizontal surface is actually curved upward

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Phidias and the Sculptures

The Parthenon was covered in sculpture. The triangular pediments at each end were filled with large marble figures depicting scenes from Athena's mythology. The frieze running around the outside of the inner chamber showed the Panathenaic Procession, a festival in which Athens's citizens marched together to present a new robe to the goddess. Inside the temple stood the most famous sculpture of the ancient world: a forty-foot-tall statue of Athena Parthenos by Phidias, made of ivory

and gold over a wooden frame. The statue no longer exists (it was removed in antiquity and eventually destroyed), but descriptions and small copies give us a sense of its staggering scale and wealth. Phidias himself did not survive his connection to the Parthenon. According to ancient sources, he was accused of embezzling gold intended for the statue and was imprisoned. He died in jail, possibly executed. Whether the charges were genuine or politically motivated (Pericles had enemies who saw attacking Phidias as a way of attacking him) is unknown. The story illustrates how dangerous artistic genius could be in ancient Athens, where art, politics, and religion were inseparable.

Two Thousand Years of Use and Abuse

The Parthenon's history after the Classical period is a story of survival through constant reinvention and occasional catastrophe. In the third century CE, the cult statue of Athena was removed. In the sixth century CE, the Parthenon was converted into a Christian church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, an interesting parallel to Athena Parthenos. The Christians walled up the outer colonnade, altered the interior, and added an apse at one end. When the Ottoman Turks conquered Athens in 1458 CE, the church became a mosque. In 1687, the greatest catastrophe struck: the Venetians were besieging Athens, and the Ottomans were using the Parthenon to store gunpowder. A Venetian artillery shell hit the building. The resulting explosion blew off the roof, destroyed the interior walls, and sent columns flying. The Parthenon went from a remarkably well-preserved ancient building to a ruin in a single afternoon.

The Elgin Marbles: Theft or Salvation?

Between 1801 and 1812, Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin and British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, removed approximately half of the surviving sculptures from the Parthenon. He had obtained a permit from the Ottoman authorities — Greece was then under Ottoman rule — and shipped the sculptures to Britain, where he eventually sold them to the British government. They have been on display at the British Museum in London ever since, where they are called the Elgin Marbles. The debate over whether the sculptures should be returned to Greece is one of the most contentious issues in the museum world. The British Museum argues that Elgin rescued the sculptures from a dangerous situation — more sculptures were damaged and destroyed after he left — and that the museum makes them accessible to

millions of visitors annually. The Greek government argues that the sculptures were illegally removed from an occupied country without meaningful consent, that they belong with the rest of the Parthenon sculptures in Athens, and that the Acropolis Museum, purpose-built in 2009, is perfectly capable of housing and protecting them. The debate touches on fundamental questions about cultural property, colonial acquisition, and who has the right to own and display the heritage of the ancient world.

Key Information: The Parthenon

Detail	Information
Construction Dates	447–432 BCE, under Pericles
Architects	Iktinos and Kallikrates; sculpture by Phidias
Dimensions	Approximately 70m long, 30m wide, 46 outer columns
Optical Refinements	Curved floors and slightly leaning columns to correct visual illusions
Major Conversions	Greek temple → Christian church (6th century CE) → Ottoman mosque (1458 CE)
1687 Explosion	Venetian artillery shell ignited Ottoman gunpowder stored inside, causing catastrophic damage
Elgin Marbles	Sculptures removed 1801–1812 by Lord Elgin; now in the British Museum, London
Current Controversy	Greece demands return of the sculptures; Britain has refused but negotiations continue

Case Study: Dr. Alexiou at the British Museum

Dr. Maria Alexiou had studied the Parthenon frieze for twenty-two years. She knew every surviving fragment intimately — the angle of a horse's neck, the fold of a robe, the gesture of a hand offering something sacred to the goddess. She had published three books and dozens of articles. She was considered one of the world's leading authorities on Phidias and the Panathenaic sculptures. Today, for the first time, she was standing in Room 18 of the British Museum in London, looking at the pieces she had studied only in photographs. They were extraordinary. She could not deny that. The museum had set them in a long room designed specifically for them, with lighting that emphasized every carved detail. Millions of people had stood where she was standing. Many of them had never heard of Athens before walking through that door. But across the room, she could see clearly where the frieze was broken — the jagged edge where one section ended and, somewhere in Athens, another began. The composition was meant to be read continuously, like a sentence. Here in London it was cut off mid-word. 'Magnificent,' said the British Museum curator beside her, and she agreed. 'But incomplete,' she said, and he did not respond.

1. Dr. Alexiou says the frieze is 'cut off mid-word.' What does this metaphor mean, and how does it reflect the Greek argument for returning the Elgin Marbles to Athens?

2. Both Britain and Greece make arguments about where the Parthenon sculptures belong. Based on the reading and the case study, which argument do you find more convincing and why? Be specific about the evidence you are using.

Multiple Choice

1. What were the 'optical refinements' in the Parthenon's design?

    a) Gold and ivory decorations added to make the temple more visually impressive

    b) Subtle curves and column angles designed to make the building appear straight when viewed from a distance

    c) Bronze mirrors placed around the columns to reflect bright and intense sunlight onto the frieze sculptures

    d) Window openings carved into the walls to allow light to illuminate the interior statue

2. What caused the greatest physical damage to the Parthenon in 1687?

    a) A Venetian artillery shell that ignited gunpowder stored inside by the Ottomans

    b) An earthquake that toppled several of the outer columns

    c) Flooding from heavy rains that severely undermined the foundation of the building

    d) Systematic removal of sculptures by the Venetians over several decades

3. What is the main argument the British Museum makes for keeping the Elgin Marbles in London?

    a) The sculptures were legally purchased from Phidias's descendants in 1801

    b) The sculptures were rescued from a dangerous situation and are now accessible to millions of annual visitors

    c) British conservation techniques are superior to anything available in Greece

    d) The Greek government agreed to permanently donate the sculptures to Britain in exchange for much foreign aid

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Parthenon	A) The Athenian statesman who initiated the Acropolis building program in the fifth century BCE
2. ___ Pericles	B) A sculptural band that runs around a building depicting a continuous narrative scene
3. ___ Phidias	C) The marble temple built on the Athenian Acropolis between 447 and 432 BCE, dedicated to Athena
4. ___ Elgin Marbles	D) The sculptor who supervised the Parthenon's decoration and created its famous forty-foot ivory and gold statue
5. ___ frieze	E) The Parthenon sculptures removed by a British diplomat and now held at the British Museum in London

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Parthenon's architects used subtle _____ in the floor and column angles to counteract optical illusions that would otherwise make the building appear to sag or lean.

2. In 1687, a _____ artillery shell hit the Parthenon, which the Ottomans were using to store gunpowder, causing catastrophic damage that turned the building from a well-preserved structure into a ruin.

3. The _____ Museum, purpose-built in Athens in 2009, is central to Greece's argument that it is fully capable of housing and protecting the Elgin Marbles if they are returned.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. The Parthenon served as a Greek temple, a Christian church, and an Ottoman mosque. What does this history tell us about how powerful structures are reused across cultures and time periods?

2. The Elgin Marbles debate raises questions about cultural property and colonial acquisition. Summarize both sides of the argument and explain what the core disagreement is about.

3. Phidias died in jail accused of embezzling gold from the Athena statue. The reading says these charges might have been politically motivated. What does this story reveal about the relationship between art, politics, and power in ancient Athens?