

## Activity 2: The Parthenon as a Religious Monument

In this activity we will explore the Parthenon as a religious monument.

### ***Athena Parthenos***

Inside the 'naos' of the Parthenon, there was in antiquity a giant chryselephantine statue of the goddess Athena Parthenos: a statue made out of gold and ivory. The body of the statue was in fact made out of wood, and it was only a thin layer of panelling for the statue which was made out of gold and ivory. Made by the artist Pheidias, the statue does not survive to the present day, but we know what it looked like because it was described by the Greek traveller Pausanias in the first century A.D. Furthermore, small marble reconstructions of the statue were made by the Romans at a later date.



Figure 1. Statue of Athena made from gold and ivory

### ***The Great Panathenaia Festival***

Every four years, the Athenians celebrated the Great Panathenaia festival in honour of the goddess Athena. This involved a procession from the centre of the town up to the Acropolis hill, in order to carry a ceremonial garb called a peplos to a wooden statue of the goddess. Following this religious event, there would be a series of athletic games held —again, in honour of the goddess. It is believed that the procession scene on the Parthenon frieze depicts the civic procession of the Great Panathenaia: men and women of all ages, and also children and animals walk towards the centre of the scene, carrying various objects as offerings for the gods who wait for them.

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### *Athens and her 'Creation' Myths*

Athena had a special role in Athens as the tutelary —or 'protector'— goddess of the city. We can see from the various artworks of the Parthenon just how important she was to the people of the city. Both the east and the west pediments depict scenes from the myth of her life. The east pediment shows the birth of the goddess, when she sprang fully grown from the head of her father Zeus. A scene from later in her life is shown on the west pediment. In this scene, Athena fights with the god Poseidon to see who would become the patron deity of Athens. It is fair to say that Athena won this competition!

### Tasks

1. Look in detail at the scenes from the [Parthenon frieze](#). What sorts of activities can you identify going on here? How useful is the frieze as a source of historical information?
  
2. Read these three accounts of the contest between Athena and Poseidon, from three different ancient authors. How do these stories compare to the depiction of the myth in the art of the pediment?

- [Apollodorus 3.14](#)
- [Herodotus 8.55](#)
- [Plutarch, \*Themistocles\* 19](#)

### Explore More...

- In 1897, a reconstruction of the Parthenon was built in Nashville, Tennessee, and in 1990 this 'temple' got its own chryselephantine statue. Learn more about this remarkable building [here](#).
- <http://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en>
- <http://www.parthenonfrieze.gr/home>