



A Heroic Selection
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Why did the Athenians choose to consecrate the Acropolis and the Parthenon to Athena? Athena is not the most beautiful of the deities, the most skilled, or the most powerful. Aphrodite, Poseidon, Apollo, and Hera all outstrip her in some way. And her father, Zeus, the most powerful of the Olympian Gods, is unrivaled in majesty and authority. And yet the Athenians chose Athena.

I cannot consider the question scientifically. I do not know if Athens or Athena came first, if the city derived its name from the goddess or the other way round. So I would like to offer a speculative, imaginative answer, culled from two major sources: the Parthenon itself and the *Odyssey*. It is a procedure doubtful to provide any reliable answer. The Athenians built the Parthenon in the 5th century B.C.E.; Homer wrote the *Odyssey* some 300 years before, in the 8th century. The Parthenon is a work of architecture; the *Odyssey*, a work of literature. The Parthenon is decidedly Athenian; the *Odyssey* was written in a different Greek dialect far from Athens.

Despite these difficulties, I believe that the Homeric epic can provide a fine lens through which to view Greek culture, and in particular the Parthenon. Greek education centered upon the two great epics of the heroic age: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Homer touched on everything from nutrition to virtue to war. As the scholar Charles Freeman notes in his book *The Great Achievement*, “There was virtually no situation, either in the ways humans relate to each other or to the ways gods relate to men and the natural world, that is not covered somewhere in the epics.”¹ Thus Homer became the pre-eminent teacher of Greece. Athenian schoolboys had to learn lists of archaic words in order to understand and memorize the epics, much like we have to read annotated editions of Shakespeare. Plato spent much of his time arguing about and against Homer. Alexander the Great, many years after the heyday of Athens, famously carried a copy of the *Iliad* on his conquests. Greeks understood their lives, at least in part, through Homer. “There was

¹ Charles Freeman, *The Greek Achievement: The Foundation of the Western World* (New York: Viking, 1999), p. 62.

a sense,” according to Freeman, “in which the Greeks never ceased emotionally to live within the age of heroes.”²

The Parthenon, it seems to me, belongs to this same emotional life. The Homeric heroes are constantly in conversations with the gods; human beings and divine beings exist side by side. Later developments suggest that the Greeks moved away from the idea of daily life lived in the presence of the gods. The prohibitions against birth, sex, and dying on the Acropolis, as space preserved for the goddess, seem far removed from the Homeric understanding of divine and human relationships, where gods are constantly involved in war and sex. However, the Parthenon, insofar as it depicts human beings alongside the gods (in the Ionian frieze) reclaims that earlier Homeric tradition of “men that strove with Gods.”³

With these preliminaries out of the way (suggesting that the *Odyssey* can be used to interpret the Parthenon), it is time to repose the question:

Why did the Athenians choose Athena?

One answer lies in the West Pediment which, as we have been told, portrays the contest between Athena and Poseidon to become the patron deity of Athens. Poseidon thrusts his trident into the ground, and up flows a salt-water spring signifying the sea’s blessings. Athena then stabs her spear into the ground engendering an olive tree. The Athenians prefer the olive tree as the better gift, and dedicate their city to Athena. When we were first told this story, I thought the Athenians made a mistake. Who would prefer an olive to the blessings of fish and trade? However, I later learned that the olive was one of three principle crops of ancient Greece (the other two being grapes which had originally been imported into the country, and barley, which was not favored by the Greek aristocracy). The olive tree is native to Greece, can survive drought, and is tough to kill. Although they take years to mature and only produce fruit every other year, olive trees provide many benefits. Freeman writes, “Olives are high in calories, so are a food in themselves, and the extracted oil can be used in lighting and cooking, for treating wool, and even for perfume.”⁴ By selecting the olive tree as a symbol, the Athenians gave it pre-eminent Greek status.

But this was not the only time Athena and Poseidon struggled one against the other. The *Odyssey* tells of Athena’s love for Odysseus and of Poseidon’s hatred for him. Athena desires that Odysseus achieve his homecoming to his wife and son, but Poseidon wishes him dead. Odysseus had “blinded [Poseidon’s] dear son,” the Cyclops Polyphemus, and for this Poseidon hated him. But Polyphemus was a man “with no true knowledge of laws or any good customs (*Odyssey*, ix. 215).” Odysseus recounts that he:

*Reached the country of lawless outrageous
Cyclopes who, putting all their trust in the immortal*

² *Ibid*, p. 62. (Homer is also a powerful poet. The later Greek playwrights built many of their plays on side-plots found in Homer. Vergil, the illustrious Roman poet, remarked that stealing a line from Homer is like stealing his club from Hercules. The French essayist Montaigne wrote, “I am often astonished that he (Homer), who by his authority created and brought into credit in the world many deities, has not himself gained the rank of a god.” He goes on to say, “What glory can be compared with his?” And even into the twentieth century, Homer’s reputation has not diminished. James Joyce, author of *Ulysses*, thought, “The most beautiful, all-embracing theme is that of the *Odyssey*. It is greater, more human than that of Hamlet, Don Quixote, Dante, Faust... The most beautiful, most human traits are contained in the *Odyssey*.”).

³ Alfred, Lord Tennyson. *Ulysses*.

⁴ Freeman, pp. 39-40.

*gods, neither plow with their hands nor plant anything,
but all grows for them without seed planting, without cultivation.*

....

*these people have no institutions, no meetings for counsels;
rather, they make their habitations in caverns hollowed
among the peaks of high mountains, and each one is the law
for his own wives and children, and cares nothing about the others
(ix.106-115).*

Polyphemus can be seen to represent the barbarian, that person who lives outside or without a city to call his own. As barbarians, the Cyclops care nothing for farming, have no government, no laws, and care nothing about other people. They are very anti-social, and the only time other Cyclops come to visit Polyphemus is when he is screaming so loudly (from the stab wound to his eye) that he keeps the others up all night.

Athena loves Odysseus because he shares none of the Cyclops' traits. Athena tells Odysseus that is "fluent, and reason[s] closely, and keep[s his] head always." She also says "[he is] far the best of all mortal men for counsel and for stories, and [she] among all the divinities [is] famous for wit and sharpness." Nestor, the greatest of Greek counselors, remarks that he and Odysseus always agreed on the right course of action. Odysseus reasoned and spoke well. He shared not only the characteristics of a prominent warrior, but those of a statesman, suited for democracy.

Athens honored those who spoke well, reasoned well, and fought well for the sake of the city: Pericles, Aeschylus, and Plato. Odysseus could do all of that. He also understood the importance of law and custom. One can imagine him sliding into Athenian political life with ease. Athens could look on Odysseus as a precursor to their own selves, as a people who prized social life. And yet the goddess Athena commends Odysseus for those very abilities that make him (and the Athenians) suited to political life. By consecrating themselves to Athena, the Athenians dedicate themselves to those things which Athena admires: wit, counsel, close reasoning. These are characteristics which they already possess as reflected in Athenian democracy. By celebrating Athena, the Athenians in turn celebrate themselves.