

ATHENS

On the second missionary journey, after facing opposition from unbelieving Jews at Thessalonica and Berea, Paul was escorted by fellow Christians to Athens via the sea (Acts 17:14, 15). Most likely, they sailed past Cape Sounion, the southern tip of the Attica peninsula, which is about 45 miles southeast of Athens. They probably saw the imposing Temple of Poseidon, perched some 200 feet above the Aegean Sea. The Greeks venerated Poseidon as the god of the sea who protected sailors on their voyages. A previous temple from the Archaic period had been destroyed by the Persians at Sounion about 480 B.C. The statue of a *kouros* (youth) discovered there was a votive offering made to that early temple and dates to about 600 B.C.; it is on display at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. The temple seen today was completed about 440 B.C., during the Golden Age of Pericles. It originally had 38 Doric columns, but only 16 of them are still standing. Many tourists visit Cape Sounion to view the Temple of Poseidon and to witness the beautiful sunsets over the Aegean Sea.



Sounion Kouros



Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion



The Aegean Sea at Cape Sounion (Island of Patroclus in the Center)

Luke did not name the port that Paul’s ship had sailed from or the port where it landed. Pydna is one possibility for the former, whereas Piraeus is typically favored for the latter. Piraeus, which had three natural harbors (Kantharos, Zea, Munichia), was located only five miles from Athens. It served as the most important commercial and naval port for the city. The larger Kantharos harbor was used for commercial activity, whereas the smaller Zea and Munichia harbors were reserved for the Athenian fleet of warships. The project to connect Piraeus to Athens with parallel protective walls (465-446 B.C.) was begun by Themistocles and finished after his death (see Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.93). These “Long Walls” allowed food supplies and other necessities to be safely transported to Athens during a siege.

A Brief History of Athens

Regardless of the exact route, Paul made it to Athens, a city with a long and complex history. Its beginnings may extend back to the late fourth or early third millennium B.C., when the defensible area of the Acropolis (“high city”) was first occupied. The general area of Athens in Attica was likely chosen for settlement because of its defensibility, being protected by a ring of mountains: Mount Egaleo (west), Mount Parnitha (north), Mount Pentelicon (northeast), and Mount Hymettus (east). Other considerations include the location’s proximity to the Saronic Gulf (for trade and war) and its mild climate (for comfortable living).

Athens, likely named after its patron goddess Athena, became a prominent city in Greece in the first millennium B.C. According to legend, the city was ruled by kings. The most famous of these was Theseus, around whom many Greek myths were developed. He reportedly abducted the sister of the queen of the Amazons and made her his wife, which resulted in a great battle between the Greeks and the Amazons. Theseus' heroic deeds (ending tyranny and the payment of tribute) were viewed by the ancient Athenians as the means by which democracy was eventually born in their city-state.

While Athens was not the only city-state in Greece to develop democracy, it has the most documentation. Solon (630-560 B.C.) was an Athenian statesman remembered for his efforts to reform Athens morally, economically, and politically. He is credited for laying the foundations of Athenian democracy, having overturned the harsh laws of Draco (which stand behind our term "draconian"). The nascent democracy of Athens was overthrown by the tyrant Peisistratus; but it was reinstated after the expulsion of his son Hippias in 510 B.C. Cleisthenes (570-508 B.C.) reformed democracy about 509 B.C. by founding the popular assembly (*ekklesiā*), the council (*boulē*), and the popular court of law (*heliāia*). In addition, there was also the ancient tribunal, the Areopagus. When the Athenians gathered for their popular assembly, they would congregate on the Pnyx, located southwest of the Acropolis. The Greek word *pnux* means "tightly packed together"; this is fitting since the hill would accommodate between 6,000 and 13,000 people (some say as many as 20,000). All male citizens had the right to participate in government.

The Persian Wars (499-449 B.C.) were a series of battles between the Persian Empire and the Greek city-states. Previously, in 547 B.C., Cyrus had conquered Ionia, which was comprised of Greek settlements in western Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). Many decades later, Darius wanted to punish Athens and Eretria for assisting the Ionians in their revolt against Persia (499-493 B.C.). However, the Athenians defeated Darius and the Persians in the Battle of Marathon (490 B.C.). Later Persian battles against the Greeks were under the leadership of Xerxes I, the son and successor of Darius. The Persians won the Battle of Thermopylae (480 B.C.), and they torched an evacuated Athens. However, they were defeated in the battles of Salamis (480 B.C.) and Plataea (479 B.C.). The Athenians (in the Delian League) continued to fight to remove the Persian occupation of the Aegean Sea and beyond. These events were recorded by the Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484-425 B.C.) in *The Persian Wars*.

Themistocles (c. 524-459 B.C.) had been instrumental in leading Athens to fortify their city with a strong wall and to develop their navy in order to repel the Persians. Despite those fortifications, the city of Athens suffered great destruction at the hands of the Persians, which necessitated a period of reconstruction. Athens celebrated its Golden Years from 443 to 429 B.C. under the rule of Pericles. He was an effective speaker and leader as well as an elected man. Under his leadership, Athens enjoyed the construction of temples and public buildings as well as the development of drama, poetry, and philosophy. The structures seen on the Acropolis today were built about this time.

The powerful navy (with triremes, ships with three tiers of oars manned by 170 men, designed to ram other ships) and fortifications developed under Pericles were useful in repelling the Spartans in the Second Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.). However, the ships returned from foreign ports with disease, which killed the Athenians. The Greeks were shut up in Athens, Pericles died, and the Spartans defeated the city in 404 B.C. The government was left for a brief time in the hands of the so-called “Thirty Tyrants” until democracy was restored (404-403 B.C.). These events were retold by the historian Thucydides (c. 460-400 B.C.) in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

The fifth and fourth centuries were a period of philosophical development. Socrates (c. 469-399 B.C.), considered the founder of Western philosophy, became an influential figure. The “Socratic Method” is named after him; it is a dialogue in which the teacher asks his students probing questions in order to explore the beliefs which underlie their views. The philosopher was ultimately sentenced to the death penalty for corrupting youth, denying the gods of Athens, and introducing foreign gods. Although he did not write any texts, his impact was made through his students. One of them was Plato (c. 427-347 B.C.), who founded the Academy in Athens, the first institution of higher learning in Greece. He was a prolific writer, who in turn taught Aristotle (384-322 B.C.). Aristotle also wrote on a broad spectrum of topics; and he taught Alexander the Great beginning in 343 B.C.

Alexander the Great is one of the most prominent leaders in all of world history. His father, Philip II of Macedon, had defeated Athens and other city-states, forcing them into a Greek confederation. Following Philip’s assassination in 336 B.C., Alexander took over his father’s kingdom at the age of twenty. He set his sights on conquering the Persian Empire, which had interfered with Macedonian rule in Greece (Arrian *Anabasis of Alexander* 2.14). Crossing over the Hellespont into Asia in 334 B.C., he overtook Anatolia, Syro-Phoenicia, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia, making it all the way to the Indus River. There his troops refused to go farther due to extreme conditions, so Alexander eventually turned back. He died at Babylon in 323 B.C. at the age of thirty-two.

The Greek Empire was divided up among Alexander’s generals and friends, the *Diadochoi* (“Successors”). This period of instability led to an unsuccessful attempt by Athens to rebel against Macedonia in the Lamian War. While Athens remained an influential city during the Hellenistic period, its power waned. During this time, the philosophers Zeno and Epicurus began their schools in Athens (310 B.C. and 307 B.C., respectively). Athens came under Roman control after Corinth was defeated in 146 B.C. Some Greek cities, including Athens, revolted against Rome in 88 B.C., but they were soundly defeated by the Roman general Sulla. The Romans still exercised authority over Athens when Paul visited the city about A.D. 50.

The Acropolis and Its Environs

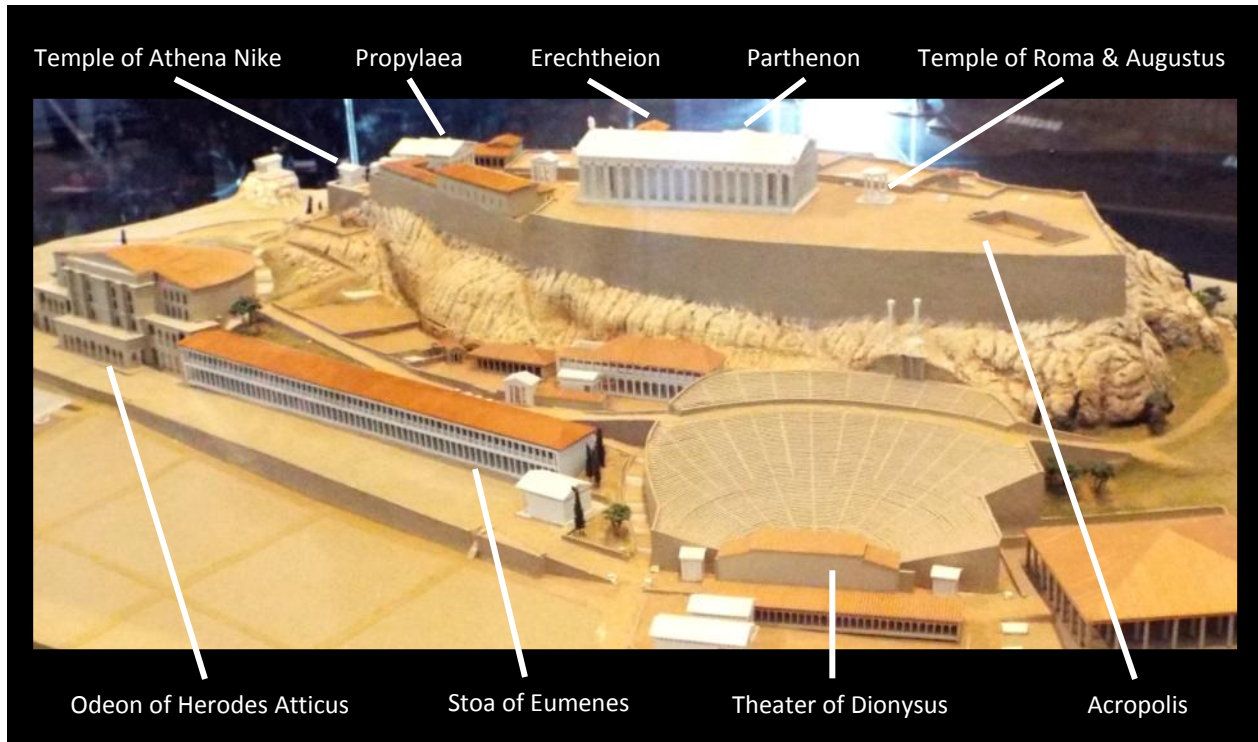
The term “Acropolis” refers to the highest part of the city. The Athenian Acropolis is 512 feet above sea level and has been regarded as a sacred spot for thousands of years.



The Acropolis (Viewed from the Northwest)



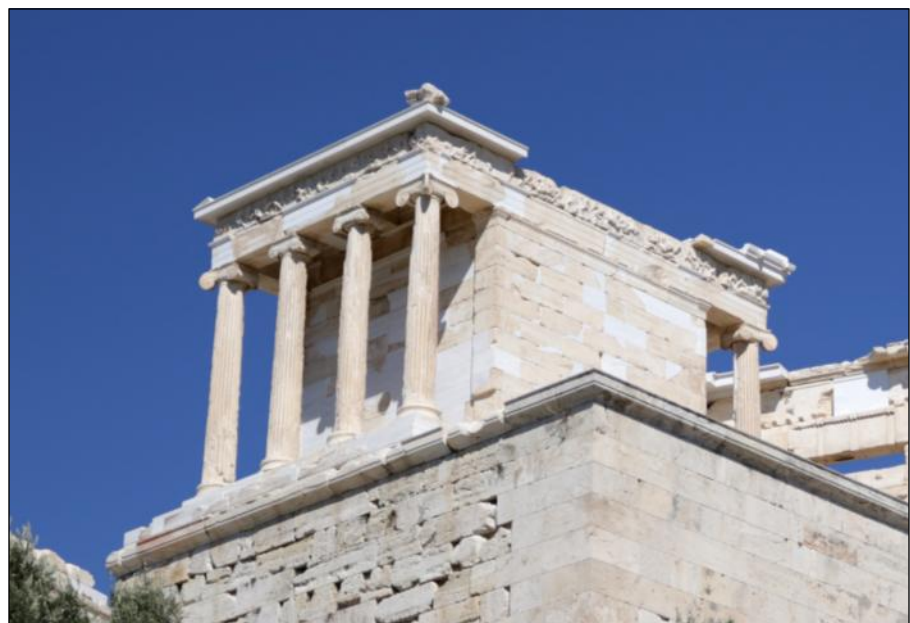
The Acropolis (Viewed from the South)



The ruins of four major structures remain on the Acropolis from the Golden Age: (1) the Temple of Athena Nike, (2) the Propylaea, (3) the Erechtheion, and (4) the Parthenon.

The small Temple of Athena Nike was built between 427 and 424 B.C. to honor the goddess for her help in the battle of Plataea in 479 B.C. Athena was worshipped as Nike, the giver of victory. Because the cult statue of Athena was lacking wings, the temple's second name is Wingless Victory. The crafty Athenians were believed to have clipped the wings of Athena to prevent victory from flying away.

Temple of Athena Nike



The Panathenaic Way that came through the agora led up to the Propylaea of the Acropolis with its grand temples. The Propylaea, built from 437 to 432 B.C., was a monumental gateway that separated the secular from the sacred.



The Propylaea



The Erechtheion was built on the northern side of the Acropolis (421-405 B.C.) to hold the wooden statue of Athena that reportedly fell from heaven. The asymmetrical Erechtheion has three parts: the main temple, the north extension, and the Porch of Maidens. The main temple was divided to accommodate both the goddess Athena and the god Poseidon. The building is named after Erechtheus, a semi-divine hero reputed to be first king of Athens. Over the centuries, the temple was converted into a Byzantine church building, a Frankish palace, and a dwelling for a Turkish harem.



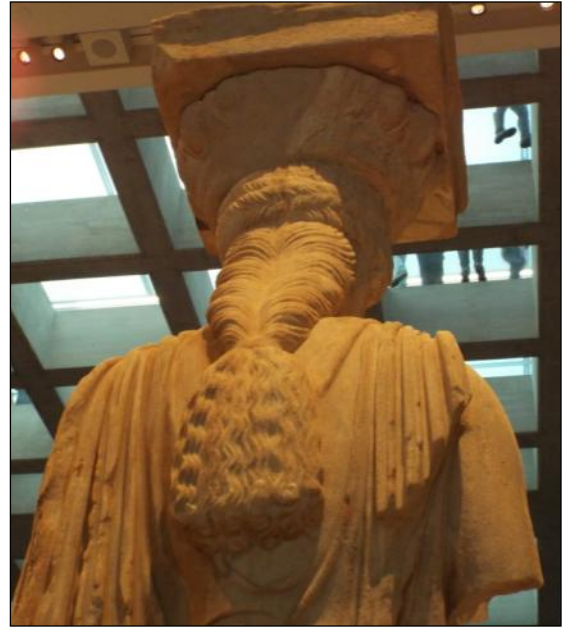
The Erechtheion



Porch of the Maidens,
Featuring Six Beautiful Maidens
(Called Karyatides or Caryatids)



Two Caryatids
(New Acropolis Museum, Athens)



The Caryatids are the six marble figures (columns) that supported the Erechtheion's "Porch of the Maidens." Even though these female statues appear similar in size and dress, none of them are identical. Their thick braids of hair add necessary support to the otherwise weak area of the statue's neck. Five of the Caryatids are on display at the New Acropolis Museum in Athens, and the sixth resides in the British Museum. Replicas stand in place of the originals onsite at the Erechtheion.

The practice of using a human form for a pillar in a building apparently serves as the background to the language of Galatians 2:9 (where James the half-brother of Jesus, Cephas, and John are called "pillars" in the church) and Revelation 3:12 (where Jesus promises to make the overcomer "a pillar in the temple of my God").

The Parthenon is the largest Doric temple ever completed in Greece, being constructed from an estimated 20,000 tons of marble. This rock was quarried from Mount Pentelicon, located about 10 miles northeast of Athens. The main structure of the Parthenon was built during the reign of Pericles over approximately a 10-year period (447-438 B.C.), whereas it took a few more years to complete the architectural sculptures (until 432 B.C.).

The Greek name Parthenon means “virgin.” This temple was dedicated to the virgin goddess Athena, who was the patron deity of Athens. The *naos* of the temple housed the enormous statue of Athena Parthenos, which was designed by Pheidias. The impressive image was probably built of a wooden core plated with ivory and gold.

The Parthenon has 46 outer columns—8 columns on each shorter side and 17 columns on each longer side (recounting the corners). The columns swell and taper, leaning slightly inward. They are 34 feet high and 6 feet in diameter. The general design of the Parthenon has had a wide influence, being imitated in banks, courts, and government buildings in the Western world.

In later history, the Parthenon was used as a Christian church building under Theodosius II (fifth to fifteenth century A.D.) and as a Muslim mosque under the Ottoman Turks (fifteenth to nineteenth century A.D.). War and weather have taken their toll on the ancient Parthenon; therefore, modern attempts at preservation and restoration are ongoing.



Restoration on the West Side of the Parthenon



The Parthenon (Viewed from the Southeast)

The pediments which adorned the Parthenon's exterior are kept in the New Acropolis Museum in Athens. The photos below are of smaller replicas, which are also on display.

The western pediment shows the competition between Athena and Poseidon for patronage of the city of Athens.

The eastern pediment depicts the birth of Athena from the split skull of Zeus.





Varvakeion Athena Parthenos
(National Archaeological Museum, Athens)

This Roman-era statuette is considered to be the most accurate representation of the original statue made by Pheidias and his assistants, which was housed in the Parthenon but no longer exists. Measuring 3 feet 5 inches tall, this reproduction is only 1/12 the size of the colossal statue of Athena Parthenos, which was about 42 feet tall.

Athena is wearing an Attic helmet with the cheek guards turned upward. Its three crests include a sphinx in the center flanked by a Pegasus on either side. She has on a *peplos* (a full-length garment common to ancient Greek women) held in place by a belt with two snake heads. Over this is an *aigis* (a protective breastplate), which is also decorated with snakes and a *gorgoneion* (a protective amulet). In her right hand, she holds a winged figure of Nike (missing her head); the weight is supported by a column. Her left hand rests on a shield, which also bears the *gorgoneion*. Next to the shield is a sacred snake (*oikouros ophis*). The statue rests on a rectangular base.

A full-scale replica of the Parthenon with a 42-foot statue of Athena exists in Nashville, Tennessee, which has been dubbed “the Athens of the South” because of its dedication to higher education. The Parthenon was originally built in Centennial Park for Tennessee’s Centennial Exposition in 1897 using wood, brick, and stucco. Later, between 1920 and 1931, the structure was rebuilt from more permanent materials. The statue of Athena was not completed until 1990.



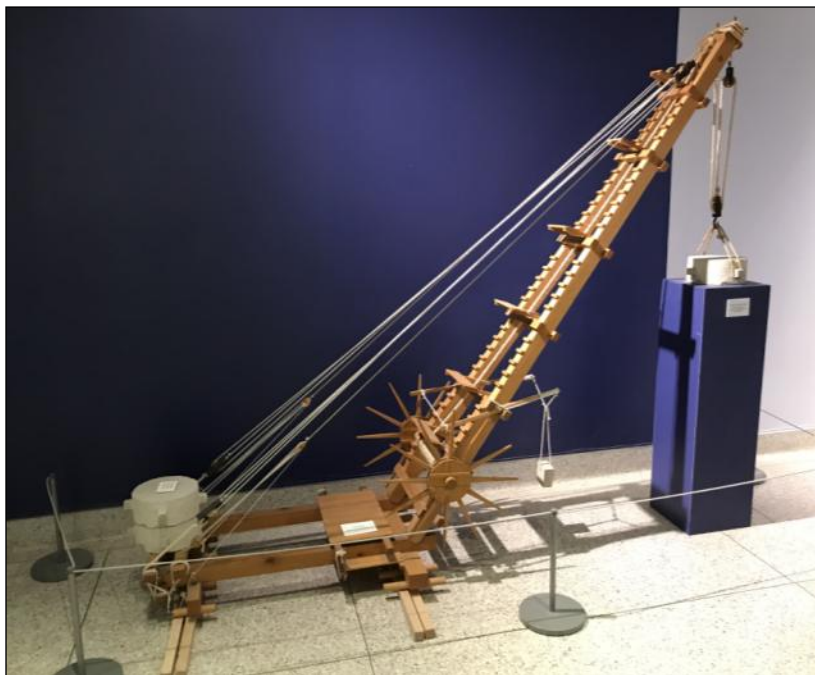
The Parthenon Replica Viewed from the Northeast (Nashville)



The Parthenon’s Eastern Pediment



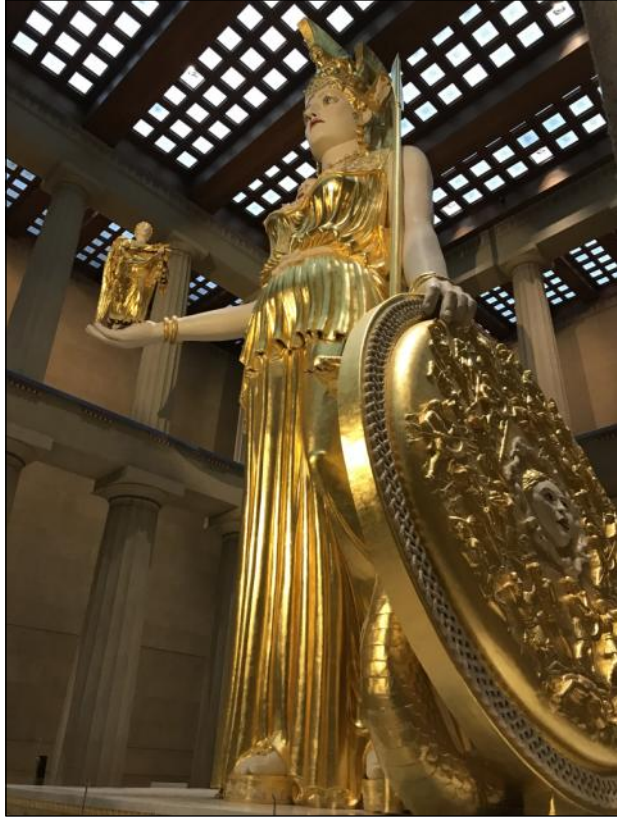
The Parthenon's Western End (with Pediment)



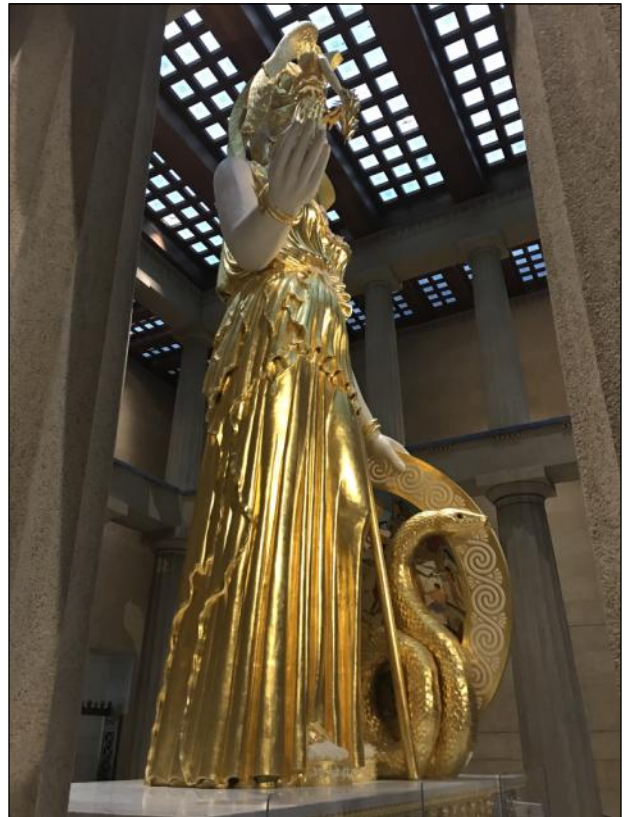
Model of an Ancient Crane Used for Moving Marble



Replica of Colossal Statue of Athena Parthenos (Nashville)



Replica of Colossal Statue of Athena Parthenos



Athena was worshiped as the patron goddess of Athens; it was believed that she protected the city from harm. In Greek mythology, Athena was born from the head of Zeus, the ruler of the gods. Therefore, she inherited much of her wisdom and power from her father. She was worshiped as Athena Parthenos, the virgin goddess.



Athena's Helmet. Her helmet has three crests supported by mythological creatures. The one in the center is a sphinx, which is half woman and half lion. On either side is a Pegasus, a winged horse.

Athena's Breastplate. The breastplate worn by Athena over her shoulders, given to her by Zeus, was considered to have magical powers. It supposedly made her impervious to the weapons of her enemies. The center of her breastplate features Medusa's head, given to her by Perseus for Athena's help in killing Medusa.



Nike. Athena holds in her hand Nike, the goddess of victory, who measures 6 feet 4 inches. Apparently, Nike holds a laurel wreath in her hands in preparation to crown Athena, giving her honor for her victory over the Persians (480-479 B.C.).

Athena's Shield. Her shield protects the serpent, symbolizing her protection of the people of Athens.

The Serpent. Some think that the serpent represents Erechthonios, a legendary deified king of early Athens. Others consider the snake as symbolic of the people of Athens, who arose from the soil of Attica.



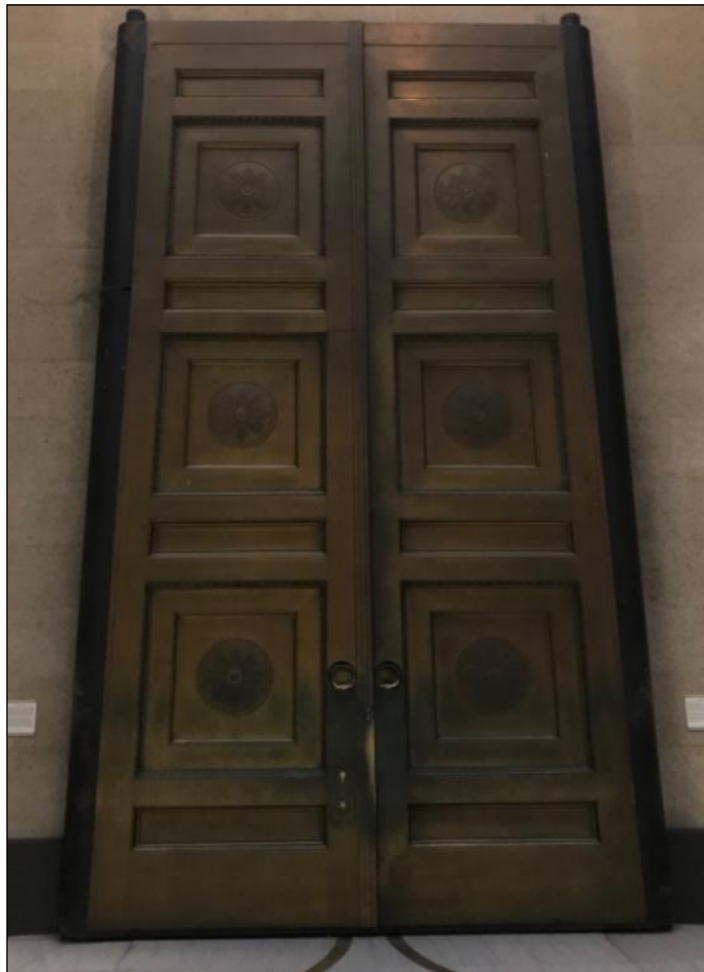


Athena was worshiped by the Greeks as the goddess of wisdom and warfare. This replica of Athena was made by Alan LeQuire between 1982 and 1990. The statue is constructed of a steel frame covered with gypsum cement reinforced with fiberglass. It is gilded with 8 pounds of 23.75 karat gold. From the floor to the top of Athena's helmet measures nearly 42 feet.

Upper Left: The exterior of Athena's shield (fifteen feet in diameter) has the head of Medusa in the center. It is surrounded by battle scenes between the Greeks and the Amazons (women).

Upper Right: The interior of Athena's shield depicts the battle for supremacy between the Olympians and the Titans.

Lower Right: These bronze doors to the *naos* are 24 feet tall, 6.5 feet wide, and 1 foot thick. They each weigh 7.5 tons.





Athena's Sandals. The decorations of her sandals depict the slaying of Centaurs (which have the upper body of a human and the lower body and legs of a horse). Similar images appear on the metopes of the Parthenon.



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

The Frieze. The marble base on which the statue of Athena stands depicts the birth of Pandora, whose name means “all gifts.” The figures are (1) Helios (the sun god), (2) Hermes, (3) Hera, (4) Zeus, (5) Nike, (6) Dionysius, (7, 8, 9) the three Horai (“hours”/“seasons”), (10) Pandora, (11) Hephaestus, (12) Athena, (13) Poseidon, (14) Artemis, (15) Apollo, (16) Ares, (17) Demeter, (18) Hestia, (19) Eros, (20) Aphrodite, and (21) Selene (the moon goddess).



12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21



The Griffin. The griffin, according to Greek imagination, had the body and tail of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. According to legend, griffins were the hounds of Zeus that protected a stream of gold in northern Greece or gold deposits elsewhere (Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound* 802-8; Pausanias *Description of Greece* 1.24.6; Aelian *On Animals* 4.27; Herodotus *Histories* 4.13.1). This made the griffin an appropriate guardian for the four corners of the Parthenon, which can be seen on the Nashville replica. After all, the treasury room of the temple stored valuable votive offerings that needed protection. However, some scholars dispute the idea that the ornament on each of the four corners of the original Parthenon was a griffin; they suggest Nike instead.



While the orchestra area was first constructed in the sixth century B.C., the Theater of Dionysus was built about the fourth century B.C. southeast of the Acropolis. It has been estimated that the theater accommodated 17,000 spectators. The front row has high-back, marble chairs with inscriptions—an ancient form of VIP seating.





The Stoa of Eumenes was built at the southern base of the Acropolis in Athens. It was donated by Eumenes II, the king of Pergamum (197-159 B.C.).



The Odeon of Herodes Atticus was built around A.D. 161 on the southwest slope of the Acropolis. (Herodes Atticus was an Athenian orator and a Roman senator.) The seating of the Roman theater, which holds about 5,000, was renovated in the 1950s for modern concerts.

Paul in the Synagogue and the Agora (Acts 17:16-18)

By the time Paul visited Athens, the glory had departed from the city; yet, the people basked in the memories of the past. Athens still boasted of being the center of philosophy, architecture, and art. Today, tourists are captivated by the magnificent architecture and artistic beauty of Athens. Despite such aesthetics, Paul was repulsed by the gross idolatry of the city (Acts 17:16; see Rom. 1:18-23). He had been exposed to paganism in the Greco-Roman world since his youth in Tarsus; but it was extreme in Athens. Even so, he was more concerned with removing the worship of idols from the hearts of men than removing idols from the city.

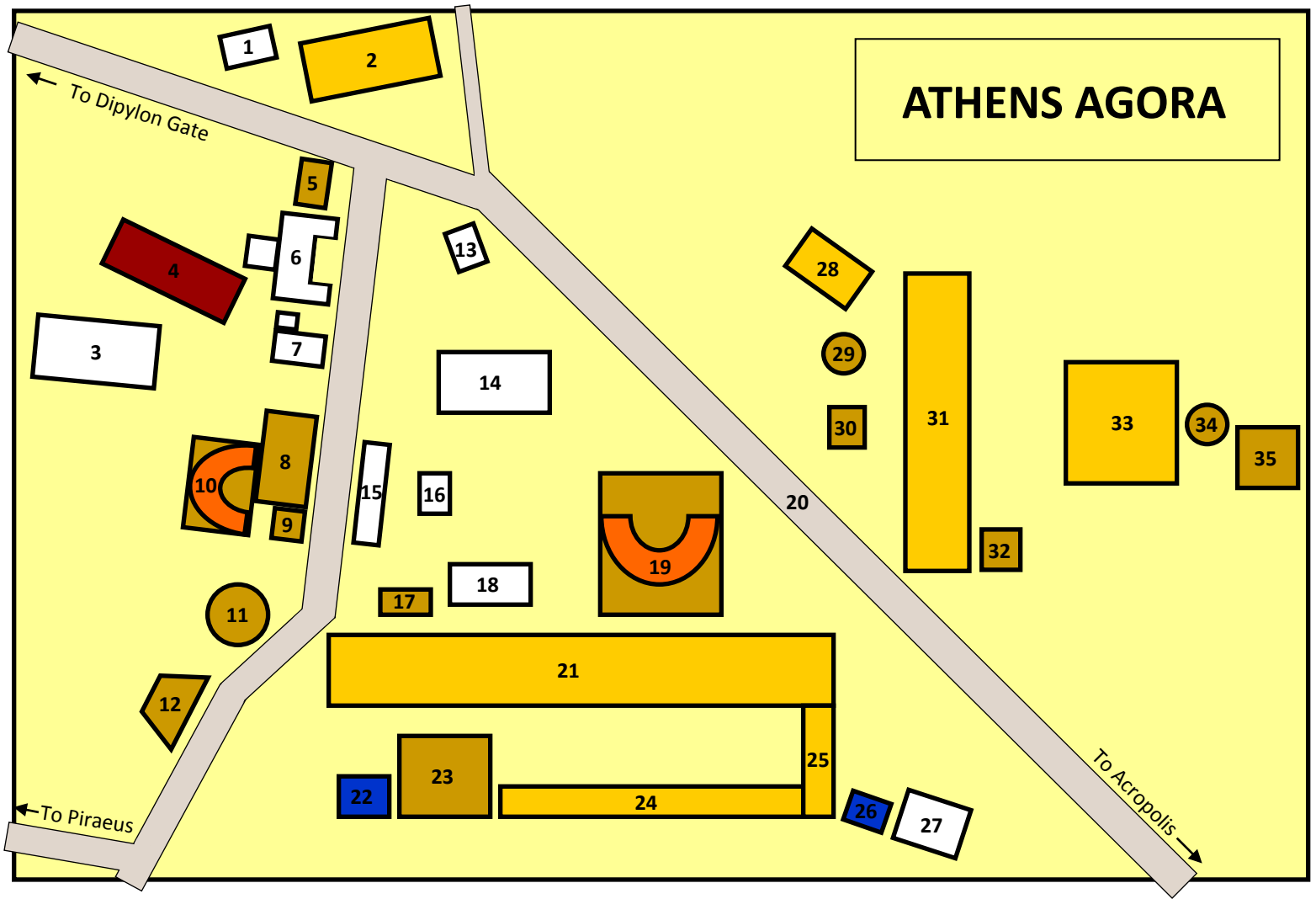
Paul first went to “the synagogue,” as was his custom, where he spoke to Jews and God-fearing Greeks on the Sabbath. The text does not indicate any type of response from those hearers. On other days of the week, he went to “the marketplace” (*agora*) where he reasoned with the philosophers who happened to be there (Acts 17:17). The ancient Greek agora was on the east, whereas the newer Roman agora was on the west. At the agora, Paul encountered two types of philosophers, the Epicureans and the Stoics (Acts 17:18).

The Epicureans followed after the Greek philosopher Epicurus (c. 340-270 B.C.). Their goal was to avoid pain and suffering while enjoying the pleasures of life. In the third century A.D., Diogenes Laertius clarified that the Epicurean understanding of pleasure did not consist of sensuality, lust, and drunkenness, for such overindulgence leads to the very suffering that should be avoided (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 10.129-32).

The Stoics derived their name from the Stoa Poikile (Painted Portico) in the agora; they were the followers of Zeno (c. 335-265 B.C.), who had taught there (Diogenes Laertius *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.1.5). It was under such shaded areas that philosophers expounded their ideas and shopkeepers sold their wares. The Stoics believed in predestination and the inability to change the future. They resigned themselves to accepting whatever happened to them (fate), being indifferent to life’s pain or pleasure. They were dedicated to living with virtue despite the circumstances of life.

Neither of these philosophical schools believed in the need for a personal God or life after death. Certainly, they were uncomfortable with Paul’s statements about the true and living God, Jesus Christ, and the resurrection to come. When they heard Paul’s teaching, they derisively called him a “babbling” (*spermologos*). The Greek word originally applied to birds picking up seeds; but it metaphorically came to represent a huckster who picked up scraps of information and passed them on secondhand, creating a hodgepodge philosophy.

At least some of the philosophers misunderstood Paul’s message, thinking that he was “advocating foreign gods.” They misinterpreted Paul’s gospel concerning “Jesus and the resurrection” as a reference to *two* deities—“Jesus” (*Iēsous*) and “Resurrection” (*Anastasis*). This should not be surprising since (1) many Greek deities represented some abstract quality (like truth or justice) and (2) many male deities had female counterparts (*Iēsous* is masculine; *Anastasis* is feminine). Some Greeks balked at the idea of resurrection. Aeschylus wrote, “Once a man is dead and the ground drinks up his blood, there is no resurrection” (*Eumenides* 647).



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|----|--------------------------------|----|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | Sanctuary of Aphrodite Ourania | 19 | Odeon of Agrippa |
| 2 | Poikile (Painted) Stoa | 20 | Panathenaic Way |
| 3 | Temple of Hephaestus | 21 | Middle Stoa |
| 4 | Arsenal | 22 | Southwest Fountain |
| 5 | Royal Stoa | 23 | Heliaia (Court House) |
| 6 | Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios | 24 | South Stoa II |
| 7 | Temple of Apollo Patroos | 25 | East Stoa |
| 8 | Metreon (Old Bouleterion) | 26 | Southeast Fountain |
| 9 | Propylon to Bouleterion | 27 | Southeast Temple (Built over a Mint) |
| 10 | New Bouleterion | 28 | Northeast Stoa |
| 11 | Tholos | 29 | Monopteros |
| 12 | Strategeion | 30 | Bema |
| 13 | Altar to Twelve Gods | 31 | Stoa of Attalus |
| 14 | Temple of Ares | 32 | Latrine |
| 15 | Monument of Eponymous Heroes | 33 | Roman Market |
| 16 | Altar of Zeus | 34 | Tower of the Winds |
| 17 | Civic Offices | 35 | Agoranomion |
| 18 | Southwest Temple | | |



Temple of Hephaestus (God of Craftsmen) on West Side of the Greek Agora





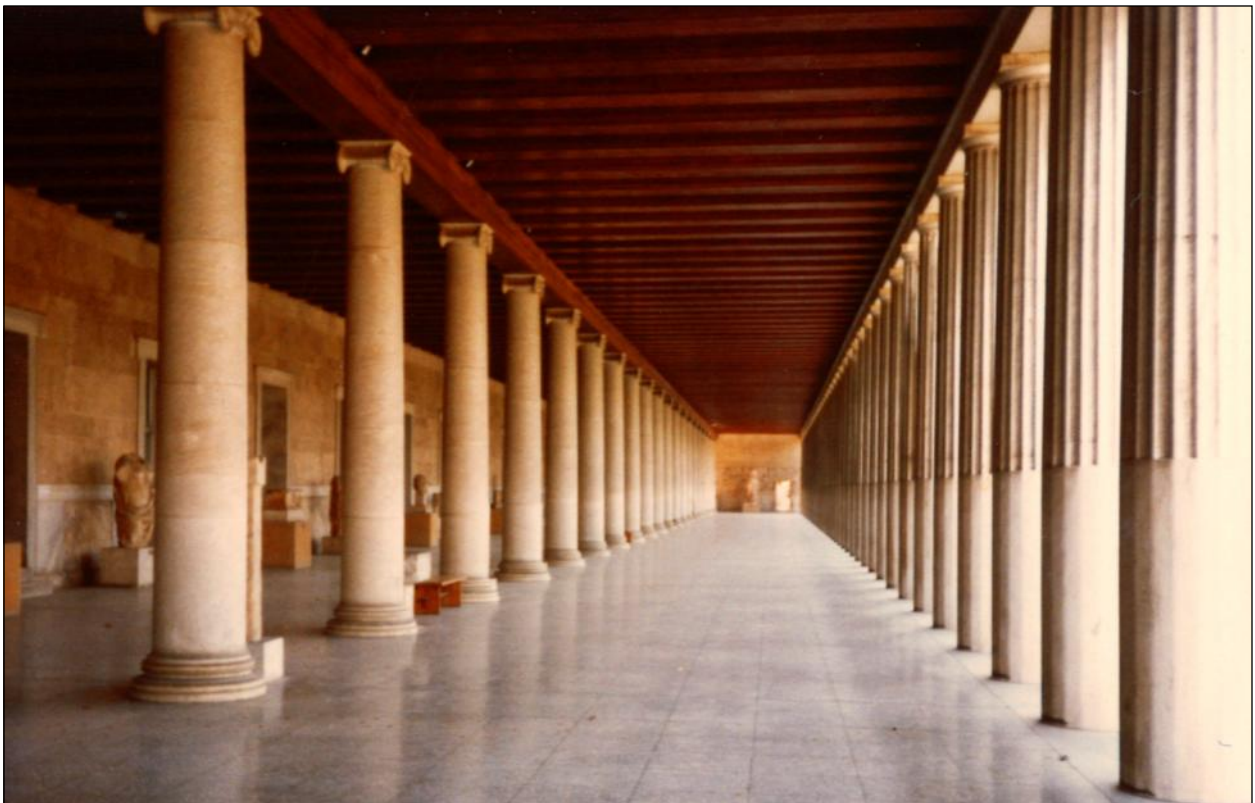
The Greek Agora and the Stoa of Attalus (Looking East)

At the base of the Acropolis was the Greek agora or marketplace. It was the focal point of religious, political, commercial, and social life for the Athenians. It was a large open space enclosed by civic buildings, temples, colonnades, and fountains.

The Stoa of Attalus was a covered walkway, open on one side and closed on the other (having two rows of columns and a wall). It provided shelter from the sun and the rain. This portico provided a place for public lectures and discussions for many philosophers, who discussed such topics as economics, politics, morality, and religion. It was a gift from Attalus, king of Pergamum, in the second century B.C. The Stoa of Attalus was reconstructed in the 1950s by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, and it houses the Museum of the Ancient Agora which features the artifacts found in the agora.



The Stoa of Attalus (Outside)



The Stoa of Attalus (Inside)



The Roman Agora and Tower of the Winds



Tower of the Winds

A Roman agora was built by Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar. It was located to the east of the Greek agora, beyond the Stoa of Attalus. This is where the Tower of the Winds and Agoranomion were located. Hadrian's Library was added in the second century A.D.

The Tower of the Winds was a 40-foot octagonal marble tower with sculpted images at the top of its eight sides, representing eight winds. It served as a water clock, a sun dial, and a weather vane. Vitruvius stated that a revolving bronze Triton on top holding a rod in his hand pointed out which of the eight sculpted images corresponded to the prevailing wind (*On Architecture* 1.6.4). The tower was built by Andronicus of Cyrrhus in the first century B.C. Its central location provided access for the citizens of Athens. Other names for it are the Clock of Andronicus and the Horologion.



Hadrian's Library (2nd Century A.D.)

Paul Before the Areopagus (Acts 17:19-34)

Paul was taken before “the Areopagus” to speak (Acts 17:19), since the acceptance of foreign deities into Athens fell under their jurisdiction (*TynBul* [May 1996]: 78). The compound term “Areopagus” (*Areios Pagos*) literally means “hill of Ares.” According to Greek myth, Ares (Mars in Latin), the god of war, was judged there for slaying Poseidon’s son. The word “Areopagus” referred both to the traditional meeting place (Mars’ Hill) and to the council comprised of important citizens. The use of the expression in Acts 17 seems to refer to the council (see the repetition of *mesos* [“midst”; ESV] in 17:22, 33). While it is possible the council met somewhere else on this occasion (like the Royal Stoa), the location has been traditionally identified as “Mars’ hill” (17:22; KJV) (see McRay, 309; *NTS* [Apr 1974]: 341-50). Today, that site is commemorated by a plaque with the Greek text of Paul’s sermon. In the midst of the Athenian council, Paul preached one of the best sermons of all time, spanning from creation to Christ in a matter of minutes.



Bronze Plaque at the Base of Mars’ Hill with Paul’s Sermon to the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31)



Mars' Hill Viewed from the Acropolis



David and Debbie Stewart on Mars' Hill (1994)

Luke remarked about the Athenians' curiosity and delight in novelty by saying, "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (Acts 17:20, 21). Demosthenes (384-322 B.C.) said that when the Athenians should have been busy working, they went around asking, "Is there any news today?" (*First Philippic* 10). Thucydides (c. 460-400 B.C.) reproved the Athenians by saying, "No men are better dupes, sooner deceived by novel notions, or slower to follow approved advice. You despise what is familiar, while you are worshipers of every new extravagance" (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 3.38.5).

Paul's sermon in Acts 17 can be outlined with a chiasmic pattern, which emphasizes the proper relationship between humanity and God (Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008], 245):

- A: Introduction: Evidence of the ignorance of pagan worship (17:22, 23)
- B: The object of true worship is the one Creator God (17:24, 25)
- C: The proper relationship between humanity and God (17:26-28)
- B': The objects of false worship are the idols of gold, silver, or stone (17:29)
- A': Conclusion: The time of ignorance is now over (17:30, 31).

Paul began his sermon to the Areopagus by observing how "religious" they were (Acts 17:22). While the term *deisidaimōn* can mean "superstitious" in certain literary contexts, the translators of the KJV were mistaken to render it that way here. It was customary for an orator to compliment his audience at the beginning of his speech (the *exordium*). The apostle's aim was to build rapport with his hearers, not to insult them. As he spoke to them, their view (if they were on Mars' Hill) included the majestic Parthenon and other temples on top of the nearby Acropolis as well as those of the agora. In addition to the temples, the streets were lined with statues of gods and goddesses. Indeed, the Athenians were very religious people.

Paul established common ground with the Athenians by referring to an altar that he had seen in their city with the inscription "TO AN UNKNOWN [*agnōstos*] GOD" (17:23). Using that reference as a launch pad, he proceeded to tell them about the true and living God of whom they were ignorant. While the Athenians paid homage to a lifeless stone, Paul wanted them to know the living and personal God. By appealing to their own altar to an "unknown god," Paul may have also been trying to avoid the charge of introducing a *foreign* cult. The charges that led to the death sentence of Socrates (c. 469-399 B.C.) included the accusations that he had rejected the gods of Athens and introduced his own gods (Plato *Apology* 24B).

Literary and archaeological evidence confirms that such altars did exist in the ancient world. Several ancient writers referred to "unknown god(s)." In the second century A.D., Pausanias claimed to have seen an altar to unknown gods between the port of Phalerum and Athens: "The Temple of Athena Skiras is also here, and one of Zeus farther off, and altars of the 'unknown gods'" (*Descriptions of Greece* 1.1.4). He also noted that, at Olympia, the altar of

Zeus was near “an altar of the unknown gods” (5.14.8). Philostratus (c. A.D. 170-245) stated that at Athens “altars are set up in honor even of unknown gods” (*Life of Apollonius* 6.3). Pseudo-Lucian spoke of the “unknown god in Athens” (*The Patriot* 9). An altar was discovered at Pergamum in 1909 at the sanctuary of Demeter whose inscription has been restored to read “to unknown gods, Capito, torch-bearer” (Adolf Deissmann, *St. Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History* [New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912], 261-66).

A general explanation for such altars is this: The Athenians were afraid of what might happen to them if they failed to honor a particular local deity of whom they were ignorant. By setting up altars to unknown gods, they protected themselves from retribution. In contrast, by honoring such deities, they believed that they would be blessed.

The actions of Epimenides, a Cretan poet and prophet from the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., may serve as the background for the concept of an “unknown god.” Reportedly, the Athenians had suffered under a plague for their misdeeds. According to the Pythian priestess, they needed to purify their city of its treachery. Thus, they sent for the wise Epimenides to accomplish this purpose. He released black and white sheep from the Areopagus, instructing men to follow them and to offer sacrifices to the local deities at the places where they lay down. Sometimes the men were ignorant of the name of the local deity, so they may have referred to him as the “unknown god.” Following these sacrifices, the plague ceased within a week. Diogenes Laertius (third century A.D.) wrote, “Hence even to this day altars may be found in different parts of Attica with no name inscribed upon them, which are memorials of this atonement” (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 1.110).

While Paul strove to establish common ground with his audience, he was compelled to address their religious differences. Paul contrasted the true and living God with the many gods of the Greeks. The greatest temples in Greece, including the Parthenon, were not large enough to contain God (Acts 17:24; see Is. 66:1, 2). Neither does God need anything from his creation for his existence. This same point was made by ancient Jewish and Greek writers (Josephus *Antiquities* 8.4.3 [111]; Euripides *Madness of Hercules* 1345-46). In reality, God is the one who sustains life and provides everything necessary for his creatures (Acts 17:25). When Paul said that God “does not live in temples built by hands,” he probably could have pointed to the Parthenon and Erechtheion on the Acropolis as well as the other temples surrounding the agora.

Although not naming “Adam” or quoting Genesis, Paul told the Areopagus that God had made all nations of the earth from “one man” (see Gen. 2:7; 3:20) as well as determining their “times” (or “seasons”) and “the exact places where they should live” (Acts 17:26, 27). This sovereign God had created them; but they had not made him—even though they had fashioned numerous idols to represent their gods. Almighty God had provided them with places to live; yet they were unable to provide the Lord of heaven and earth with a home—even though they had made elaborate temples for their gods (see 1 Kings 8:27; Acts 7:48-50). Some among the Stoics may have been inclined to agree with Paul. Plutarch wrote, “It is a

doctrine of Zeno's not to build temples of the gods" (*Moralia* 1034B). The Lord God created mankind and provided for their needs with the intention that they might seek him and find him (see Deut. 4:29; Ps. 70:4; Is. 51:1; 55:6; Amos 5:4, 6; Mt. 7:7, 8; Jn. 4:24; Heb. 11:6). God is "not far" from anyone.

Although Paul cited the Old Testament when addressing Jews and God-fearers, here he quoted Greek poets when speaking to the Areopagus. Knowing the value of a point of contact with his hearers, he borrowed statements originally made about their chief god Zeus and applied them to the true and living God (Acts 17:28). First, Paul quoted from Epimenides: "For in him we live and move and have our being." (This author is also quoted in Titus 1:12.) The apostle's use of this poetic triad—"live," "move," and "have our being"—underscores mankind's absolute dependency on the Lord God. Second, Paul used the words of multiple Greek poets when he said, "We are his offspring" (Aratus *Phenomena* 5; Cleanthes *Hymn to Zeus* 4). He emphasized that mankind originated from the Lord God.

Paul reasoned that God's offspring should realize that a manmade idol, regardless of size or material, was unable to represent the true and living God (Acts 17:29). God is a spiritual being who cannot be portrayed by physical matter; such an attempt is a great insult. The Creator must not be confused with his creation (Rom. 1:20-23). He alone is worthy of our worship!

After Paul preached to the Athenians, they were without excuse. Their previous "ignorance" (*agnoia*) in 17:30 echoes the word for "unknown" (*agnōstos*) describing God in 17:23. The Athenians now knew about the God who had created everything. The apostle called his audience to repent and follow the resurrected Christ, who will one day judge the world (Acts 17:30, 31). While the Greeks were familiar with converting to philosophy, the concept of repentance toward a holy God may have been difficult for them to comprehend. In Greek mythology, their deities were often as immoral as they were—or even worse. Also, they viewed time as continuous, whereas the apostle pointed out that there will be a climax to world history—the judgment. Paul was brought before the Areopagus for preaching "Jesus and the resurrection" (17:18, 19); and that is where he ended his sermon, talking to them about "the man" (Jesus) and his resurrection from the dead (17:31).

Paul's sermon evoked three responses: mocking, procrastination, and belief (Acts 17:32-34). Today, we often measure evangelistic success based on the number of conversions. It would be easy to think that Paul was a failure in Athens: (1) Few converts are mentioned; (2) no traveling companions from Athens are named in Paul's letters; (3) no greetings in Paul's letters name Christians from Athens; and (4) none of Paul's preserved letters are addressed to the church in Athens. However, Paul was not a failure, for he faithfully preached God's message. Any failure was on the part of Paul's audience, who predominantly rejected his message.

Paul left Athens and went to Corinth (Acts 18:1). Later he wrote to the Corinthians, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:22-24).

Hadrianopolis

“Hadrianopolis” or “New Athens” refers to the new part of the city built by Hadrian for the wealthy in the second century A.D. Located in the general area of Syntagma Square, it included gymnasiums, parks, baths, and villas. About A.D. 131, the Athenian people built an arch in honor of the Roman emperor. Hadrian’s Arch separated Athens into two parts (Greek Athens and Roman Athens) and a different inscription was engraved on each side. The western side read, “This is Athens, the ancient city of Theseus”; the eastern side (facing the Temple of Olympian Zeus) said, “This is the city of Hadrian and not of Theseus.” The arch is nearly 60 feet tall, 45 feet wide, and 8 feet thick.



Hadrian’s Arch

The Temple of Olympian Zeus (considered to be the father of the gods) was begun by Peisistratus in 515 B.C. However, due to the downfall of his tyranny, the project was not completed. Progress was made on the temple under the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 174 B.C., but it was not finished until the emperor Hadrian in A.D. 124-125. The temple was the largest built in Greece. Only 15 of the original 104 columns are still standing.



The Temple of Olympian Zeus





Panathenaic Stadium

Lycurgus built a stadium for the Panathenaic Games between the hills of Ardittos and Agra in 330-329 B.C. It was renovated by Herodes Atticus in A.D. 140-144 and had a seating capacity of 50,000 spectators. This updated structure was the one excavated in 1870. The modern reconstruction of the stadium began in 1895 in anticipation of the first modern Olympic Games in 1896. Known as the Kallimarmaro Stadium (meaning “made of beautiful marble”), it was used again for the 2004 Summer Olympics.