





Temples and statues crown the acropolis, the hill above the city of Athens.

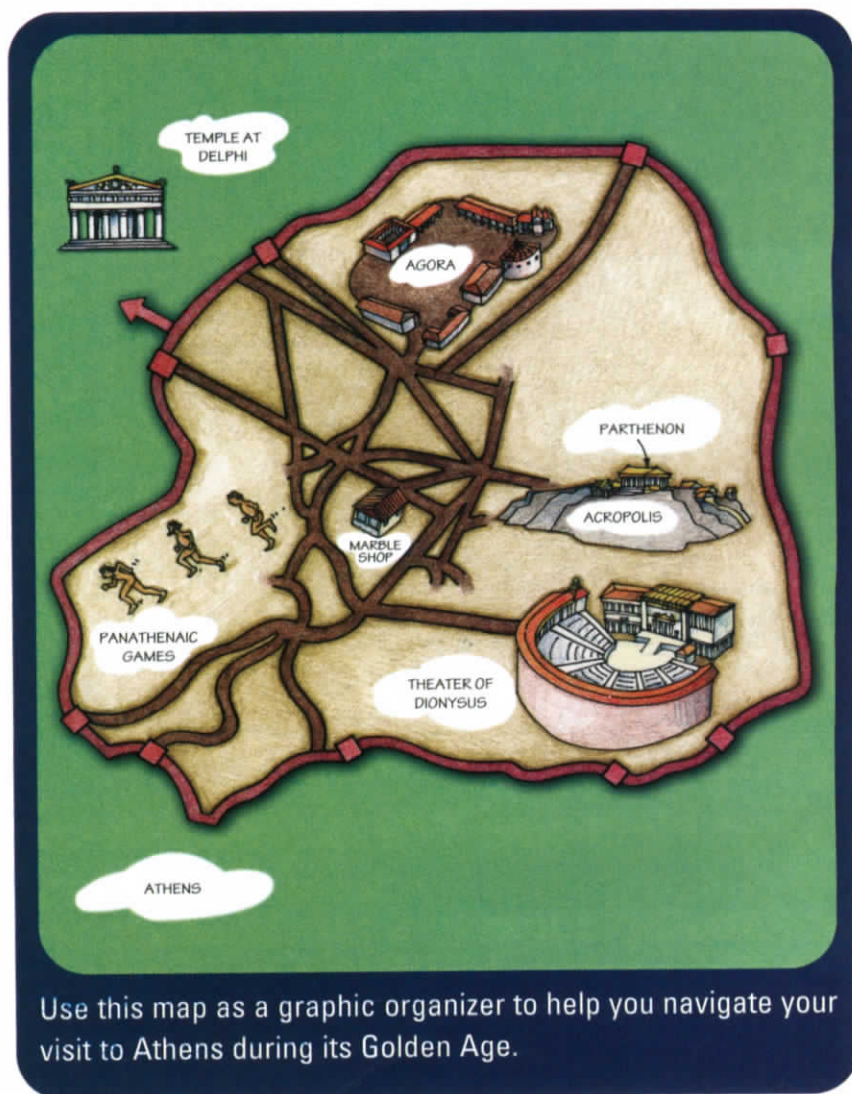
# The Golden Age of Athens

## 29.1 Introduction

In Chapter 28, you read about how Athens and Sparta came together to defeat the Persian Empire. At the end of the Persian wars, Athens was in ruins. The Athenians were inspired to rebuild by a great leader named Pericles. Under his leadership, Athens entered a **golden age**, a period of great peace and wealth. Between 479 and 431 B.C.E., Athens was the artistic and cultural center of Greece.

Imagine that you could visit Athens during its Golden Age. Passing through the city's gates, you wind your way through narrow streets to the agora, the public meeting place in the center of the city. The agora is a great square. On two sides there are large, stately public buildings. The other two sides have covered walkways where people meet and talk with friends. In the center are market stalls with things to buy from all over Greece and beyond. A high, craggy hill known as the *acropolis* rises above the city, crowned with great temples.

In this chapter, you will explore several sites in ancient Athens. At each stop, you'll learn more about **Greek culture**. You'll find out about Greek religion, architecture, sculpture, drama, philosophy, and sports.



**acropolis** the hill above a Greek city on which temples were built

**Parthenon** the temple honoring the goddess Athena, built on the acropolis above Athens

## 29.2 A City of Contrasts

Ancient Athens was a city of great contrasts, or differences. People lived in small, uncomfortable houses that lined narrow streets. Yet the city's public spaces and buildings were large and stately.

Most homes in Athens were one story high and made of mud bricks. The homes of poor families were very simple. Wealthier people had larger houses with rooms built around a central courtyard. But even the homes of the rich were plain and often uncomfortable. Athenian houses had few windows, and they were lit by oil lamps. They were smoky and cold in the winter, and smoky and hot in the summer. The streets between the houses were narrow, crooked, and dirty. People threw their garbage into the streets, so neighborhoods often smelled bad.

It was the public spaces and buildings that were the pride of Athens. The Athenians built large government buildings around the agora. These buildings were made of stone. On the **acropolis**, the hill above the city, the Athenians built magnificent temples as earthly homes for their gods and goddesses.

The most famous temple standing on the acropolis was the **Parthenon**. It was built to honor the goddess Athena. As you remember from the last chapter, Athens was burned to the ground during the Persian wars. According to legend, when the Athenians returned to their city, even the sacred olive tree, a gift from Athena, had been burned and seemed to be dead. Then someone noticed a tiny leaf growing from the burnt trunk. The Athenians took this as a sign that Athena had not abandoned the city, and they decided to rebuild.

Athenians were proud of their city's public buildings and spaces.





## 29.3 Religion: The Temple at Delphi

The temples of Athens show how important religion was to the Greeks. The Greeks worshiped many gods and goddesses who, they believed, looked and often acted like humans but did not grow old or die.

Each god or goddess had power over a particular area of life. Sometimes the Greeks asked them for advice. For example, a famous temple in the town of Delphi was dedicated to the god Apollo. People could ask Apollo questions through a priestess who was called the oracle of Delphi. To answer a question, the priestess went into a trance. The words she spoke were thought to come from Apollo himself.

The Greeks told colorful stories about the gods, called **myths**. According to these stories, the home of the gods was Mount Olympus, a real mountain in Greece. Twelve of the gods and goddesses were particularly important. They are often called the Olympian gods.

The Olympian gods were part of the everyday life of the ancient Greeks. People asked the gods for help when setting out on journeys by land or sea. They dedicated festivals and sporting events to them. They decorated their temples with images of the gods.



The oracle of Delphi sat on a three-legged stool as she listened for the voice of the god Apollo.

### The Olympian Gods and Goddesses

- Zeus** Ruler of the gods
- Hera** Wife of Zeus; goddess of marriage
- Poseidon** Brother of Zeus; god of the sea
- Hestia** Sister of Zeus; goddess of the hearth (the family fire)
- Demeter** Sister of Zeus; goddess of agriculture
- Ares** Son of Zeus; god of war
- Athena** Daughter of Zeus; goddess of wisdom and war
- Apollo** Son of Zeus; god of the sun, poetry, and music
- Artemis** Daughter of Zeus; goddess of the moon and the hunt
- Hephaestus** Son of Zeus; god of fire and metalworkers
- Aphrodite** Daughter of Zeus; goddess of love and beauty
- Hermes** Son of Zeus; messenger of the gods and god of travel

**myth** a traditional story that helps to explain a culture's beliefs

In this painting of the Parthenon, you can see the triangle-shaped pediment and the sculpted figures in the frieze.



**architecture** the art of designing buildings

Greek buildings use three different styles of columns. Doric columns, the oldest style, have no base. Ionic columns are more graceful than Doric columns. Corinthian columns are the most decorative.

## 29.4 Architecture: The Acropolis

Temples are good examples of the Greeks' talent for **architecture**. The Greeks built their temples as beautiful dwelling places for the gods and goddesses rather than as places to worship. Religious ceremonies were conducted outside.

The temples show the importance of balance and order in the Greeks' idea of beauty. Temples were built with rows of tall columns. The Greeks used three kinds of columns. The Doric column was the simplest. It had no base and got slimmer toward the top. The Ionic column was thinner. It sat on a base and had spirals carved into the top. The Corinthian column was the most complex, with carvings that looked like leaves at the top.

Athenians built three temples on the acropolis to honor Athena. One of these was the Parthenon. One of the most beautiful temples in Greece, the Parthenon was built on a long rectangular platform. There were 8 columns across both the front and back and 17 along each side. The roof slanted, creating triangles called *pediments* at the front and back of the building. At the top of the temple was a band of sculptures called a *frieze*. The sculptures themselves are called *metopes*.

Greek temples were many different sizes, but their basic shape was similar. Most had a main room with a statue of the temple's god or goddess. The Parthenon had a magnificent statue of Athena that stood 30 feet high. Made of wood, the statue was covered with ivory to look like flesh. Then it was dressed in clothes and decorated with gold. Like the temple itself, the statue expressed both the Greeks' love of beauty and their awe of the gods.



Doric



Ionic



Corinthian



## 29.5 Sculpture: A Marble Workshop

The statue of Athena in the Parthenon was a wonderful example of another important Greek art: **sculpture**. Sculptors in Athens often set up a workshop near the site where the finished statue would go. Sculptor apprentices first made a life-size clay model supported by wooden or metal frames. The general outline of the statue was then roughed out in marble. A master sculptor added details and finishing touches.

Greek statues were colorful. Metalworkers attached any bronze pieces that went with the statue, like spears and shields. Painters applied wax and bright colors to the statue's hair, lips, clothes, and headdress.

Creating lifelike statues was one of the great achievements of Greek sculptors. The earliest Greek statues had been influenced by Egyptian styles. Like the Egyptians, the Greeks created larger-than-life figures that faced front, with their arms held stiffly at their sides. Later Greek sculptors created much more realistic statues in natural poses with more detailed muscles, hair, and clothing.

One of the most famous sculptors in Athens was a man named Phidias. He designed the figures that line the top of the Parthenon. He also sculpted the statue of Athena that stood inside the temple. The statue carried a shield of gold, with carvings of two faces—those of the great Athenian leader Pericles and of Phidias himself.

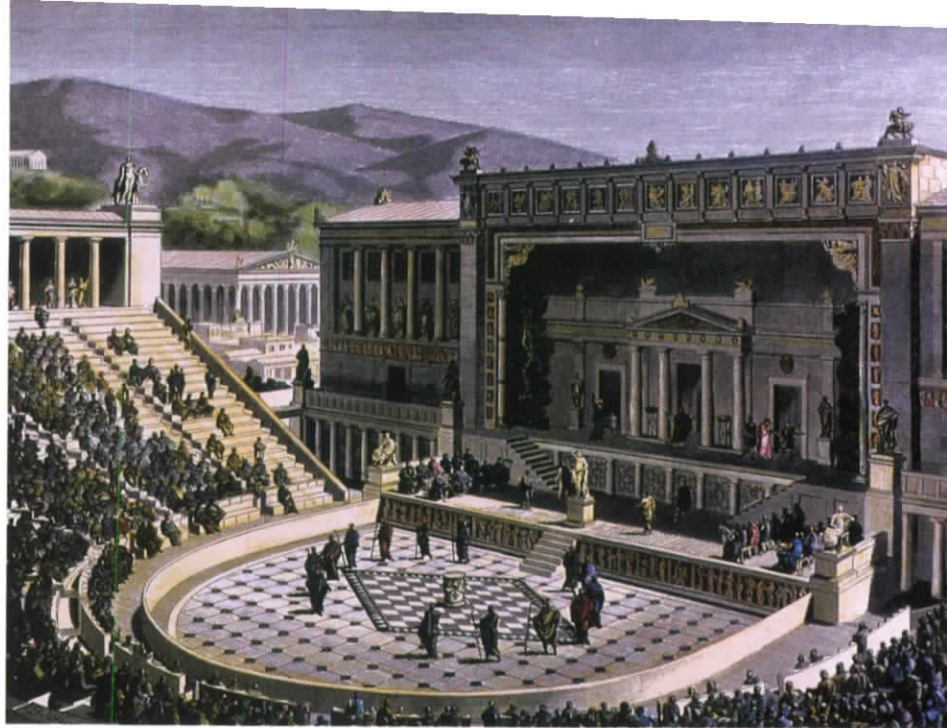
Some people thought Phidias had gone too far by carving his own likeness on Athena's shield. Still, the Greeks greatly admired his marvelous statues. They said that Phidias was the one person who had seen the true image of the gods and revealed it to humans.

**sculpture** the art of creating three-dimensional figures from such materials as wood, stone, and clay

The sculptor Phidias created the huge statue of Athena that stood inside the Parthenon.



A Greek theater was shaped like a bowl, with seats that rose in a semicircle around the stage.



**drama** the art of writing, acting in, and producing plays

## 29.6 Drama: The Theater of Dionysus

In addition to architecture and sculpture, the ancient Greeks excelled in **drama**, the art of the theater. Going to the theater was a regular part of Athenian life. The Theater of Dionysus in the city could hold thousands of people.

Dionysus was the god of theater and wine. Greek plays grew out of the songs and dances that the Greeks performed at harvest time to honor him. As Greek playwrights developed their art, they began to write plays that told stories. The plays included a few main characters and a chorus. The chorus was a group of men who recited lines that commented on the actions of the characters. The words spoken by the chorus helped to explain and expand on the story.

There were no women actors in ancient Greece. Men played all the characters, both male and female. That was one reason actors wore masks. The masks also showed the audience whether a character was happy or sad.

Plays were staged in open-air theaters. The Greeks would build a theater into the side of a hill. The theater was shaped like a bowl so that everyone could hear what was said. The seats rose in a semicircle around a stage at the bottom of the bowl. Scenery was painted on canvas and hung behind the actors.

Plays were often part of competitions that could last for days. Judges chose winners in four categories: tragic playwrights, comic playwrights, leading tragic actor, and leading comic actor. The winning writers and actors were crowned with olive leaves and given prizes such as figs and wine.



## 29.7 Philosophy: The Agora

Like other Greeks, Athenians loved to talk and argue. In the sheltered spaces on the side of the agora, men gathered to discuss the world around them. They talked about nature, trading ideas about what the natural world was made of and how it worked. They also talked about things they couldn't see, such as the meaning of life, justice, truth, and beauty. They called this kind of thinking **philosophy**, which means “the love of wisdom.”

One of the greatest philosophers in Athens was a man named Socrates. Socrates was always encouraging people to question the things they thought they knew. He taught others by asking them questions that forced them to think about their beliefs. He asked such questions as, What is the good life for a man? What is truth? How do you know?

Even in Athens, where people loved new ideas, this constant questioning got Socrates into trouble. His enemies accused him of not honoring the gods and of leading young people into error and disloyalty. In 399 B.C.E., Socrates was brought to trial. In defending himself, Socrates said he was the wisest man in Greece because he knew that he did not know anything!

The jury found Socrates guilty and sentenced him to death. Friends encouraged him to escape from Athens, but Socrates said he would honor the law. He died by drinking hemlock, the juice of a poisonous plant.

The example of Socrates inspired many other Greek thinkers, especially his student Plato. In turn, Plato taught another great philosopher, Aristotle. You will meet Aristotle in the next chapter.

**philosophy** the search for wisdom or knowledge



Socrates calmly drank poison after being sentenced to death by the Athenian jury.



A piece of pottery like this may have been awarded to the winner of a footrace at the Panathenaic Games.



## 29.8 Sports: The Panathenaic Games

The Greeks' interest in philosophy shows how much they valued the mind. Their love of sports shows that they also prized a healthy body.

The Greeks often held athletic events to honor gods and goddesses. In Athens, games were held as part of the Panathenaea, a festival that honored the goddess Athena. The high point of the festival was the procession, or solemn parade. The Athenians attached a new robe for the statue of Athena to the mast of a ship and pulled it through the city to the temple.

The Panathenaic Games included many events. There were horse and chariot races, including one event in which men jumped on and off a moving chariot. Men also competed in footraces. In one race, men ran in their armor. The race was fun to watch because the heavy armor led the men to swerve and crash into each other.

The games also included combat sports, like boxing and wrestling. In an event called the *pancratium*, men were allowed to punch, kick, and even choke each other. The event ended when one fighter surrendered, lost consciousness, or died.

The winning athletes in these games were crowned with wreaths of laurel leaves and given pots filled with olive oil.

Another set of games was played every four years at Olympia to honor the god Zeus. Called the Olympics, these games were so important that the Greeks would call a truce from all wars so that athletes could travel safely to the games.

## 29.9 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you explored Greek culture by visiting Athens during the 400s B.C.E. The temple at Delphi illustrated the role of religion in Greek life. Within Athens, the temples on the acropolis showed the Greek talent for architecture. The life-like statues made in marble workshops displayed the art of sculpture. The Theater of Dionysus introduced Greek drama, while Socrates provided an example of Greek philosophy. Finally, you learned about Greek sports through the Panathenaic Games.

At this time, Athens was at the height of its power and glory. Its power soon faded, but Greek culture lived on. In the next chapter, you will learn how Alexander the Great helped to spread Greek ideas far beyond the country's borders.

This plaster model shows what the acropolis looked like in ancient times.

