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# The acropolis in the age of Pericles: The citizen's home and the Empire's capital

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**Abstract:** The Athens Acropolis is the public space for Athens democracy and the center of Athenian Empire. Her main buildings were built in the age of Pericles. Built as a gods' living place, acropolis also bore the strong sense of history and humanism, which expressed the Athens' citizens' joy and empire's inclusiveness. The acropolis was built by the citizens, while the building fund came from empire's alliance. The acropolis took the multiple public functions: sacrifice, keeping the archives, treasury and public moralization.

**Keywords:** Pericles, Acropolis, Democracy, Empire

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## 1. Introduction

Pericles (495-429BC.) was a great leader in democratic politics in Athenian polis. When he took the power from 443BC. to 429BC., Athens' democracy was prosperous.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the Athenian Empire<sup>2</sup> came into being, which covered Greece, Aegean Sea and some part of Minor Asia.

Based on the achievement in politics, Pericles took in charge of the rebuilding of acropolis<sup>3</sup>. The grand and exquisite acropolis offered the stage for Athens' democracy and Athenian Empire. She expressed the prosperity of democratic politics and revealed the empire's great power and inclusiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> Athens democracy was gradually developed from Solon to Cleisthenes. Council and citizens' court (Heliaca) were the main organs. Pericles, as a leader of democratic section, defeated the Cimon and Thucydides, the leaders of aristocratic section, and mastered the Athens politics.

<sup>2</sup> "The Athenian Empire" follows Meiggs' saying.(R. Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire*, Oxford, 1972). To make it clear, inside the Athenian empire the members have the sovereign in internal affairs in most of time. This empire is different from the eastern empire such as Qing Dynasty, which was highly centralized and provincial officials were ordained by the emperor.

<sup>3</sup> The most buildings of existing relics of acropolis were built in the age of Pericles, including Parthenon(447-438BC.), Propylea(437-432BC.), Temple of Nike(about 30s-424/423BC.), Erechtheon(about 435-406/405BC.), Sanctuary of Artemis Brauronia (in the 30s). The Odeion of Pericle was built in the south lobe of acropolis, also in 30s. Jeffrey M. Hurwit: *The Acropolis in the Age of Pericles*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.253-254.

## 2. The Temple's Historical Meaning and Humanism Meaning

The acropolis was built on the top of hill, which was a clearing about 280 meters length and 130 meters width. There was only one way in the east slope leading to the top. She was first built in Mycenaean period. In 480BC, she was sacked and destroyed by Persian war.

As a complex building, acropolis was mainly made up by temples. In the age of Pericles, these temples included the Athena's Parthenon, Temple of Nike, Sanctuary of Artemis Brauronia (the virgin goddess of the hunt and the moon). On the south lobe lied the Theater of Dionysos (the god of wine and opera) Being as gods' community, Acropolis was the land of divinity. So the acropolis located on the top of hill attracted visitor's eyesight upward, just like the sharp peak of Gothic church in Medieval Ages. What's more, Propylea was designed to have different leveled bedrock and roof, "to emphasize the physical nature of the passage onto the Acropolis and, coincidentally, to create a monument uniquely appropriate to the celebration of spiritual transition".<sup>4</sup>

Besides its' divinity, acropolis held many humanism factors. Firstly, in the south and north metopes of Parthenon the heroic

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<sup>4</sup> Robin Francis Rhodes: *Architecture and Meaning on the Athenian Acropolis*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p.54.

battle of Greek versus the Amazons, the Centaurs, Trojans were described. All these scenes celebrated Athens' valor and wisdom. Compared with the heroism in acropolis, the sculpture in the earlier stone temples in Greece reflected terror and mystery. Monsters such as viper-haired Gorgons, colossal leopard and lions ripping ox limb from limb were the theme. "Their purpose is the direct confrontation of any pilgrims who dare to approach, to confront them abruptly with that same unwavering, awesome, dreadful gaze that originally inspired the creation of the temple".<sup>5</sup> Quite different with this darkness atmosphere, confidence and brightness emanated from acropolis.

Secondly, in the Ionic frieze of Parthenon a procession was described. The exact purpose of this procession is debatable, Grand Panathenaia or the procession celebrating Athenian victory over the Persians.<sup>6</sup> It does not matter. What is more important is that the procession is made up of many common Athenians, such as youth riding on the horse, seniors, bands, maid with offerings. The gods are waiting for the offerings, just a part of procession. So Athenians are very close to the gods. The atmosphere is relaxed and joyful.

Thirdly, the Doric order- local style in Greek mainland and Ionic order-originally from Minor Asia was combined. In the age of Pericles, the two styles were distinct with their own regional feature, though they were similar roughly. The Doric order was sturdy, simple and manlike, while the Ionic order was slimmer, elaborate and feminine. The Parthenon was the outstanding master of Doric order, but it was not pure Doric. There were four Ionic pillars in its back part. The temple of Nike and Propylea followed the combination of the two orders. The later Erechtheon was the classics of Ionic order. The integration of the two orders implied the Pericles' vision that Athens was the cosmopolis. This inclusiveness presumed that Athens was the cultural conglomeration in the Empire, so her leadership was of necessity. On the other hand, the foreign visitors, especially from Minor Asia, who were forbidden to enter the acropolis and could only watch at the foot of the hill, could found that the Ionic were familiar and would felt that they were attached to be a part of the common empire.

In view of the great architect Vitruvius, the two orders was the invention of columns from two sets of criteria: one manly, without ornament, and plain in appearance, the other of womanly slenderness, ornament and proportion.<sup>7</sup> The combination of the two orders is the reflection of whole society, man and woman. This view is nothing but humanist.

The acropolis was also a historical site, which memorized the victory over Persia. Its monumental character came from the following fact: the ashes and stones of the older Parthenon were used to build the new one. The purpose of this action was not thrift but to stamp that Greeks, Athens acting as the leader, defended themselves and triumphed over the Persia. It was for

memorizing the victory that the Temple of Nike was built. As a part of entrance, Nike is small, only 8.16 meters in length and 5.39 meters in width, clearly standing out and conspicuous. On its wall hung the booties from the battle. These booties were Athens' glory and invoked their pride when they stepped into the acropolis.

To sum up, acropolis was gods' temples, also bearing strong sense of history and humanism. These multiple features were designed in architects' mind already before launching out. So "The acropolis is more like their own spirit garden, than the palace built for the gods. All the courage and affection of Athenians are lodged in the gods' space. That is the place where Athens' spirit and soul were attached to....."<sup>8</sup> It should be mentioned that the humanist courage, confidence, joy and inclusiveness, and the pride of triumph over Persia in acropolis were the token of Periclean age. These delightful emotions were the psychological and cultural reflection of that prosperous era.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The Building of Acropolis: The Tribute from Empire's Alliance and the Labor of Athens' Citizens

(1) The tribute offered by the alliance members "fed" the acropolis

The building of acropolis was a huge project, which needed funds in huge number. It was of vital importance that where the funds come from.<sup>10</sup>

In order to resist the Persia, Athens and other polis established the Delian League. The exchequer was located in the Apollo Temple in the island of Delo. As the leader of Delian League, Athens was in charge of ordaining the treasurer. The number of the tribute of every member was calculated and ratified every 4 years. In 454BC., the treasure was transferred to acropolis.<sup>11</sup> The tribute did not stop after the Persian War. It was recorded that tribute worth some 600 talents a year came to the city from the allies.<sup>12</sup>

Was the tribute misused in the building of acropolis? Yes

8 Guojun yin: *7 Kinds of Drawings of the Western Architecture*, Southwest Normal University Press, 2008, p.54.

9 Robin Francis Rhodes believes that Parthenon and the art of the Periclean Age can be viewed as a break in the continuous fabric of Greek art and religion, because from the Peloponnesian War and later, the traditional artistic preoccupation returns. The traditional artistic preoccupation tends to understand the life through ever-increasing detail rather than through generalization or idealization and humankind are conceived in all their irregularities, distortions, chaos, and pain. Robin Francis Rhodes: *Architecture and Meaning on the Athenian Acropolis*, pp.174-175. We can infer that the idealization and optimism was the special connotation of Periclean Age.

10 Leiliu's *On the Issue of Athenian Empire Finance* talks about this question. He believes that from 449BC. to 431BC., there were 9 huge projects in building in historical record. ....Athens' productive income and savings of temples could not afford them. So the only way is to defalcate tribute from empire's alliance. Leiliu's *On the Issue of Athenian Empire Finance* talks about this question, Southwest University, Dissertation for Master Degree, 2011, p.34.

11 This transferring was regarded as the beginning of Athens' Empire.

12 Thucydides: *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, edited and translated by Jeremy Mynot, Cambridge University Press, 2013, II.13.3..p.98.

5 Robin Francis Rhodes: *Architecture and Meaning on the Athenian Acropolis*, p.21.

6 Robin Francis Rhodes: *Architecture and Meaning on the Athenian Acropolis*, p.199, note 1.

7 Vitruvius: *Ten Books on Architecture*, Roland(English edition), Cambridge University Press, 1999, Book Four, paragraph 6.

The historical inscription, which was a decree ordained by Pericles in 449BC, ever described 'The Ten General Committee assigned the exchequer [funded by the other polis] in the Temple of Athena to draw 5000 talents out, [to use them in the building of acropolis]... '13

What's more, the following dialogue between Pericles and his opposition revealed that Athens regarded the tribute as their own wealth, not use them in military exclusively. The opposition said that the Greece must consider it as the highest insult and an act of open tyranny that the money she had been obliged to contribute towards the war lavished by the Athenians in gilding the city. Pericles answered that the allies had not furnished either horses, ships, or men, but only contribute money, which was no longer the property of the giver, but of the receiver, if he performed the conditions on which it is received. That as the state was provided with all the necessities of war, its superfluous wealth should be laid out on such works, which would be eternal monuments of its glory. 14

It is by the tribute offered by the alliance members that the acropolis could be built. So the acropolis can be viewed as the 'product' of Athens Empire. 15

### (2) Public building and democratic politics

Pericles was the propellant of the giant project. He had the direction of everything and all the artists received his orders. 16 It took a huge number of money in the rebuilding. The opposition asserted that Pericles wasted the public treasure. In his defense Pericles asked the people in fully assembly, "Whether they thought he had expended too much?" they said, "Then be it". Pericles continued "charged to my account, not yours; only let the new edifices be inscribed with my name, not that of the people of Athens". They cried out "that he might spend as much as he pleased of the public treasure without sparing it in the least". 17 It can be deduced that

13 R. Meiggs & D. Lewis, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions to the End of the Fifth Century B. C.*, Oxford, 1980, 2<sup>nd</sup>, II, 61. III, 89, 281. From Leiliu *On the Issue of Athenian Empire Finance*, p.24.

14 Plutarch: *Plutarch's lives of Greek heroes*, London : Blackie & Son, Ltd., 1---?, p.88.

15 In 449BC., Pericles officially invited all the Greeks to meet at Athens to discuss the rebuilding of the temples that the Persians had cast down, the sacrifices that they owed the gods, and ways of keeping the peace and guaranteeing freedom of the seas. The Spartans prevented the congress from taking place. The Peace of Kallias around 450BC. or 449BC. gave Pericles the opportunity to seek a panhellenic annulment of the Oath of Plataia, which promised not to rebuild the temples destroyed by the Persians before the war with the Persians officially came to an end. Jeffrey M. Hurwit, *The Athenian Acropolis: History, Mythology and Archeology from the Neolithic Era to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.157. So the plan of rebuilding was known by the Greeks. The Greeks did not attend the congress to prove or reject the rebuilding. We can deduce that the Greeks proved the rebuilding by silence.

16 During the building, one of the best and most active of the workmen, missing his step, fell from the top to the bottom, and severely wounded almost died. Pericles was greatly concerned at this accident; in his midst of his affliction, the goddess appeared him in a dream and informed him of a remedy. He applied it and the patient was recovered soon. In memory of this cure, he placed in the citadel a brazen statue of the *Minerva of health*. Also the golden statue of the same goddess was the workmanship of Phidias, and his name is inscribed upon the pedestal. Plutarch: *Plutarch's lives of Greek heroes*, p.90.

17 Plutarch: *Plutarch's lives of Greek heroes*, p.90.

Pericles as a democratic leader is smart and the Athenians believe that the acropolis is not belonged to any single person but public.

During the building lots of free craftsmen were the main force. The number of the slave was not more than 25% of the number of free craftsmen. It is believed that the free craftsmen, as Athens' citizens, are more willing and skillful and the finer products can be made.

Besides the view of quality, Pericles planned that the huge project could work as the 'engine' of democratic politics, which meant that this public building could motivate civic passion. As he said "so many kinds of labour and such a variety of instrument and materials were requisite to these undertakings, every art would be exerted, every hand employed, almost the whole city would be in pay, and be at the same time both adorned and supported by itself". 18

In modern political theory, the rebuilding of acropolis mobilized the whole polis. In this mobilization, the Athens' citizens strengthen their identification with democracy, and fortified their love toward the democratic leader.

### (3) The dissymmetrical free style

As an architecture community, the acropolis included the grand Parthenon and exquisite Nike. They stood irregularly. When the visitors walk along the slope in the west up, they can enjoy different views when they changed the steps. This changing view increases the aestheticism of acropolis, which defines the acropolis as a real masterpiece with top art taste.

In contrast with the agility and variety of acropolis, in Egypt, as late under the Romes, and indeed, the universal tendency in all centralized or totalitarian states, axiality and bilateral symmetry form the basis of planning. The underlying concern is to limit sharply the freedom of the human participant in architecture, to control movement and perceptions in much the way life and thought in general are controlled by the state. Acropolis does not abandon symmetry. Strict bilateral symmetry was limited to individual buildings themselves, never used in planning a site or a group of structures. Acropolis aims to answer this question how better to sap the individuality of buildings in a group than to align them in some precise manner. It seeks the balance between the parts of individual buildings, between the various buildings, and between the buildings and the entire landscape. 19

Zhihua Chen thinks that this dissymmetrical free style mainly comes from the architectural tradition of natural holy land. These lands are located in the democratic polis in Minor Asia and the islands of the Aegean Sea. In contrast, in the polis in Italy and Sicily, the holy land origins from aristocratic palace and its architecture style is rigidly parallel. The architecture style of acropolis follows the Ionical tradition. 20

It is recorded that after the battle with Persia, the political leader Themistocles (around 525BC.-460BC.) planned to rebuild the acropolis in the south of the broken one. The

18 Plutarch: *Plutarch's lives of Greek heroes*, p.88.

19 Marvin Trachtenberg, Isabelle Hyman: *Architecture, from prehistory to postmodernity*, New York : H.N. Abrams, 2002, pp.104-105.

20 Zhihua Chen: *The Twenty Lectures on Ancient Foreign Architecture*, SanLian Book Store Press, 2009, p.10.

aristocratic refused the plan and insisted that the new one must be located exactly on the old base. They believed that the change would evoke god's curse and brought disaster. Pericles put their worry aside and built the new acropolis as planned. 21 This fact illustrates that in the confrontation with the aristocratic dogmatism, the democratic free style is the winner. In this sense, the acropolis is the symbol of democracy.

#### 4. Acropolis' Public Functions and Political Significance

##### (1) The multiple public functions of Parthenon

As the grandest building in acropolis, Parthenon was build for worshipping the Athena, who was the patron of Athens, as well as the whole Greeks. So the Panatheneaea was the festival for all Greeks. It was held annually and every four years there would be a bigger celebration. Besides the physical competition such as foot race, run, wrestle, Jaculation, etc., there would be art performance and show such as singing, dancing, painting, intonation, etc.. The representatives from the other polis could attend the activities and procession. But only Athens could enter into the acropolis.

Besides the activities above, sacrifice was the most important activity. Only Athens could participate it. But the sacrifice articles were offered not only by Athens. From around 453BC., the Eliteli was responsible for offering the grains in Panatheneaea. From 447BC., Athens ordered that every member of the empire should offer one cow and one armour. 22

Parthenon was open only for Athens but it received the sacrifices from all the Greeks and enjoyed the gladness and jollification brought by the whole Greeks. So Parthenon belonged to the Greeks as a whole and acropolis was the common holy land for the empire.

Besides the religious function, Parthenon took the other two tasks. First, the treasures, including Treasure of Athena, Treasures of other gods, and the treasure of Athenian Empire, which was transferred from the island of Delo, were located in the west room inside the Parthenon. 23 Second, there were archives in Parthenon and other temples. The inscriptions were written in stone and bronze, which recorded the daily life in all the ways, such as management of festivals, rites in the sanctuary, financial decrees regulating state expenditures and alliance and treaties in military and colony. There were dozens of so called proxeny ('public guest-friendship') decrees honoring citizens of other states who rendered important

21 Zhihua Chen: *The Twenty Lectures on Ancient Foreign Architecture*, SanLian Book Store Press, 2009, p.11.

22 R. Meiggs& D.M. Lewis, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions to the End of the Fifth Century B.C.*, Oxford,1980, 40.2-4,46.41-43, 69.55-58. From Songyan Xu: 'On the Athenian Empire', *The Journal of Southwest Normal University*, Jan., 1999.

23 In fifth century, the security of the Acropolis was a major concern because of its treasures. The doors, grills, seals, and keys were used to lock the treasures. But the managers were instructed to open the treasuries at least three times a month for public viewing. *The Athenian Acropolis: History, Mythology and Archeology from the Neolithic Era to the Present*, pp.55-56.

services to Athens or assisted Athenians abroad. There were a list of Plataians who were granted Athenian citizenship for their loyalty and courage in the Persian Wars. 24

Sacrifice, treasures and archives are the three public functions of Parthenon. So Parthenon was a public sphere.

##### (2) The votive religious activity

As a public sphere, acropolis was open to the ordinary Athenians except some parts, such as treasures. Most Athenians in most of time would probably not walk up the hill unless they had a specific purpose---dedication.

Dedication was the Athens' main religious activity individually. Compared with the Christianity in Medieval Ages, Athenians' religion was filled with strong sense of secularism. At that time, the purpose of Athenians in believing a god was not for expiation, or heading for the heaven, but for the concrete rewarding. So generally the dedication was made after the prayer got the rewarding. This action looks like a trade between god and man.

Not only the rich and aristocratic, but also the poor and ordinary could dedicate. The quality and quantity of the dedication were different with different dedicants. Jeffrey M. Hurwit comments as following 'despite the infrequent appearance of the poor in its ennobling, elevating, and perhaps wish-fulfilling imagery, the Acropolis belonged to all Athenians, no matter what their class, status, or gender (indeed, in the inventories of the treasures stored in the Erechtheion and Asklepieion women dedicants outnumber men)'. Athena and the other gods who were worshipped on the summit and slopes gratefully receive dedications no matter who gave them, no matter what they were, no matter what the cost.' 25

There was no special group as clergy in Athenian religion, nor classic text, nor church. This simple and civil religion was correlated with the plebeianizing of democratic politics, because both of them believed that men were the master of their own life and fate. In this way, Chinese ancient society is similar to Athens. Both of them are polytheistic and reward-oriented. But ancient Chinese seems more tame and docile. Why? Because Chinese ancient was imperial and Confucianism was accepted inside out. Confucianism constructed a hierarchical pyramid, so everyone had his own place. It is standing on the place that everyone thinks and acts in his own sphere. In sharp contrast with this obedient pattern, Pericles encouraged every Athenians to achieve great honor.

##### (3) The political moralization in the Theater of Dionysos

Theater of Dionysos was built about 500BC., which could hold around 17000 persons. As a traditional festival, the Dionysos was a holiday for the competition and performing of drama besides sacrifice and public dinner. In age of Pericles citizens could get the subsidy for watching the drama. So going to the theater and watching the drama were parts of political activities. The judges of the drama competition were chosen by lot among common citizens.

There were two important items. First the man who was

24 *The Athenian Acropolis: History, Mythology and Archeology from the Neolithic Era to the Present*, pp.51-52.

25 Jeffrey M. Hurwit, *The Athenian Acropolis: History, Mythology and Archeology from the Neolithic Era to the Present*, p.62.

more than 18 years old and whose father had sacrificed for Athens could go upon the stage and received the weapons and armors offered by the polis. Second the representatives of Delian members offered their tributes on the stage.

In view of political-psychology, these two items are artful political moralization. It is by relieving and stimulating the son of the dead that all the citizens know that to sacrificing for the polis is noble and the privilege can cover the offspring. It is by offering tributes on the stage that Athens' great power is revealed thoroughly and citizens' self-confidence is evoked drastically. The more important is that the two actions are taken on the quite grand stage, which makes them clear and vivid.

In summary, the acropolis was both citizens' building and empire's capital. These two features are the two faces of Periclean age, that are internal democracy and outer hegemony. These two faces reinforce each other by the designs of the architecture and the activities in acropolis. The Athenians strengthen their identification with democratic polity and increase their self-confidence by popular festivals, offering of empire members and their 'privilege'---only Athenians can enter into the acropolis. The visitors from other polis, as outsiders, could enjoy the acropolis under the hill. This distance in space tends to increase the majesty and mystery of acropolis. But as the participators of festivals, the outsiders can view and taste the enormous energy and zest of democratic politics, which make them admire and awe.

The acropolis in the age of Pericles recorded the golden age of Athens democratic empire. It confirms the modern political theorists that democracy and empire can be the two faces of one body and also invokes the thinking how the body remains itself and keeps long.

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