The Golden Age of Athens

Athena was the chief city of the fertile region of Attica, in southern Greece. It grew rich from trade, manufacturing and mining silver. The city of Athens reached the height of its wealth and power in the 5th century BC. By this time, it had built up a large empire which encompassed cities on both the mainland and the islands. Its 250,000 citizens enjoyed a vibrant golden age of art and culture. During this period, the Athenians celebrated a victory against Persian invaders by building a series of magnificent temples on the Acropolis in Athens. The Acropolis was a sacred hill that overlooked the city. Its most important temple was the Parthenon, which was dedicated to the city’s goddess, Athena. Below, at the heart of the city was the market-place (agora). Surrounded by temples and public buildings and crowded with stalls, the agora was the commercial centre of Athens.

Between 431 and 404BC, Athens fought a crippling war against Sparta and the Persians. It lost the war and most of its maritime empire. As a result, Athens gave up its role as commercial and cultural leader in Greece to Sparta.

Crowning Glory

This temple to Hephaestus is a supreme example of the elegant architecture at which the Athenians excelled. It was built between 449 and 444BC at the eastern end of the agora. Hephaestus was the god of fire and armourer of the gods. A bronze statue inside the temple showed Hephaestus at work making armour, wearing a blacksmith’s cap and holding a hammer above an anvil. Excavations have revealed that the bronze sculptors worked on one side of the temple, while sculptors in marble worked on the other side.

Panathenaic Festival

Every year, the people of Athens marched or rode in a great procession up to Athena’s temple on the Acropolis. Even foreign residents joined in. This frieze from the Parthenon shows young men getting ready to join the procession. At the temple, oxen and other animals were sacrificed, and the meat was given to the people to eat. Every fourth year, there was an extra celebration when a new robe (peplon) was presented to the goddess Athena. This event was celebrated with days of sporting and musical competitions, with prizes of money or olive oil.

Birth of a Goddess

According to Greek legend, Zeus swallowed a pregnant lover after a prophecy warned that their child would depose him. Not long after swallowing her, Zeus complained of a painful headache. Hephaestus offered to split open Zeus’s head with an axe to ease the pain. When he did, the goddess Athena jumped out. She was fully grown and wearing the armour of a warrior (as seen here in the centre of the painting).

Banishment

Once a year, Athenians were allowed to banish an unpopular member of the community from the city for 10 years. Voters scratched the names on a fragment of pottery called an ostrakon, which is why the procedure was called ostracism. If at least 6,000 votes were cast in favour of exile, a person, they would have to leave the city within 10 days. Ostraka were also used for messages and shopping lists.

Goddess of Wisdom

The owl, symbolizing wisdom, was the emblem of Athena. This silver coin was issued in Athens in 479BC, after the Greeks won decisive victories against the Persians. Athenian coins were accepted throughout Greece, Italy and Turkey. This proves just how influential the city of Athens. Coins from other city states were not widely accepted.