

Curiouser and curiouser

THE MOST famous of all sites in Greece, the Athenian Acropolis, is a veritable reservoir of grandeur and beauty, worth not just one but many visits, yet few of us have climbed up to the city's ancient citadel as often as we should.

And located near the northern edge of the limestone plateau, stands the Erechtheion, arguably more sacred than the Parthenon. Moreover, the rightly famous building has had its details copied from antiquity to the present. Still, it is a rather odd structure.

Sir Francis Bacon's famous observation comes to mind: "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in proportion."

If we try to free ourselves from the familiarity that the Erechtheion holds for most of us, be it from visits, photographs or drawings, we can begin to see how strange it is.

Unlike typical Greek temples, which tend to follow canonical patterns, it has no clear front, back or sides. In fact all four sides can be seen as focal points, nearly as if we were looking at four buildings, not one.

Indeed odd

In contrast to the even foundations of most Classical buildings, the Erechtheion is built on two levels, its northern and western facades 3m lower than the south and east. Most unusually in mainland Greece, all its columns are in the Ionic order, except the even more unusual Caryatids to the south. Also, part of the roof, over the north porch, was left out on purpose.

Why so much oddness?

As you consider the question, pay close attention to how finely and elegantly the structure's details are finished. Note regular blocks of Pentelic marble in the walls and the course of blue marble above, designed as the backdrop to a frieze of white figures, now lost.

There's also the finely carved, tall and slender columns, and the extraordinary rich detail on their bases and capitals, the ornately framed doorway leading to the interior from the north porch and, of course, the Caryatids holding up their porch.

The figures there now are copies: sev-

en of the originals have been moved to the Acropolis Museum, to protect them from the elements. The eighth was long ago taken to London by Lord Elgin.

Lasting impact

The Erechtheion formed the final stage of the great Classical reorganisation of the Acropolis. In 456BC, a generation after the destruction of Athens and its sanctuaries by the Persians in 490 BC, when the city was at the height of its power, its leader, Perikles, embarked on a momentous - and to this day - still effective effort.

He decided to redesign the sacred rock and its monuments along a coherent plan, using part of the resources of the city and its allies. This large-scale project, virtually defining what we now call Classical, marked a new departure in

as the architect in charge at completion, the original plans may go back to Mnesikles, a contemporary of Perikles. In any case, those responsible faced a triple challenge.

First, the Erechtheion was to house the cult of at least two major deities, of Athena as patron of the city, and Poseidon, god of the sea, probably as well as various smaller cults.

Secondly, its location contained several of the most sacred spots in Athenian myth and legend, such as the grave of the mythical kings Erechtheos and Kekrops, the place where Poseidon and Athena had fought each other for the patronage of Athens, the long-established seat of the cult of Athena, and also the sacred olive tree planted by the goddess.

And thirdly, this highly important sanctuary had to be given a form that would offer a valid, dignified and im-

pressive counterpart to its enormous neighbour, the Parthenon, the biggest Doric temple in mainland Greece.

The complexity and irregularity of the Erechtheion is the result of those challenges. Its multiple facades probably represent various functions, and the difference in height preserves part of the sacred terrain. In fact, the opening in the roof over the north porch coincides with a gap in its floor, under which there is a deep natural crevice in the rock. This was probably held to be the mark left by Poseidon's trident when he struck the ground in anger.

Usually, it is assumed that the cult of Athena Polias, the protector of the city, with its very ancient wooden statue, was behind the east porch, that of Poseidon behind the northern one and that the Caryatid porch marks the tomb of Kekrops. But numerous alternative theories exist.

The Erechtheion's distinctive elegance and fine detail are the ingenious solution to the third challenge. Rather than competing with the Parthenon in terms of size, or aping its imposing Doric order, the Erechtheion offers an alternative, a complement instead of a contradiction.

The use of Ionic columns and Caryatids - also a subtle reference to the Ionic connections of the Athenians and the eastward extent of their league - and the arresting unusual shape of the building underline this aspect.

Beyond these rational explanations, another factor must be credited with this astonishing structure: inspiration.

The Erechtheion is on the northern side of the Acropolis. The site is open from 8am to 6pm, admission is 12 euros (6 euro concessions) for a combined ticket to the Acropolis and 10 other sites in the city centre

· *A closer look*

Sacred stones

(National Museum, Room 36)

Temples and shrines played a major role in Greek cults, usually housing the cult statue, the representation of a deity, and were not accessible to the public. But the actual rituals of worship were a public affair, involving activities such as processions and sacrifice. These usually focused on an outdoor altar, such as this one. Made of marble, it stood in the Agora and was dedicated by the Athenian Council to Aphrodite and the Graces, in 194/193BC.

CAPTIONS:

1. The Erechtheion from the southeast - the olive is meant to replace the tree once planted by Athena herself.
2. Sacred stone
3. The Caryatid porch, one of the most unusual features of the Acropolis



Greece, since Athens and other cities had so far grown piecemeal and organically, not permitting such grand urban visions.

Perikles' plan incorporated four principal structures (each replacing earlier predecessors): the Parthenon, the Great Propylaia, the Temple of Athena Nike and the Erechtheion.

Although part of the original plan, the Erechtheion was probably only begun around 420 BC and completed after an interruption around 406BC. We know this based on some of the calculations for its construction cost which survive as inscriptions. The west facade was altered after a fire in the 1st century BC.

Although each of the four main monuments was part of a greater plan, with complex interrelations in terms of proportions and detail, each also served specific functions and possessed individual features.

Designed by...

It is in this context that we can understand the strangeness of the Erechtheion. It is not clear who designed it. Although Philokles is named

Un Fortunately, scholars do not fully a-

Disagreement

Un Fortunately, scholars do not fully a-