

The caryatids on the erechtheion of the acropolis essay



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The Erechtheion, a temple dedicated to Athena Polias on the Athenian Acropolis, is a building that is mysterious in numerous ways. Even though the Erechtheion was one of the most significant of Athena's shrines, relatively little is known about it. Especially when compared to the information available regarding the largest structure on the Acropolis, the Parthenon, the Erechtheion is to some extent a mystery. Its unique architectural structure is due to the irregular terrain, which was too sacred to touch, on the northern side of the Acropolis.

The temple was built on three different levels to accommodate the steep change in elevation making there a three-metre difference in height between the eastern and western parts. The Erechtheion Temple is divided into four parts, including the three central shrine rooms and two porches. The west end of the Erechtheion, one with a porch of columns on the north and one with a porch of Caryatids on the south, makes the building unusual, with its two side porches, enclosed front and elevated colonnade (Jeppesen).

Although the Erechtheion is known for both its complexity and for the exquisite perfection to its details, its distinctive porch, supported by caryatid figures, is what makes the building stand out more than any other. The Erechtheion housed shrines to several gods, local deities, and heroes, in addition to the temple of Athena Polias (Robertson). It was also the site of several sacred spots, including the mark of Poseidon's trident spear, and the graves of the legendary Erechtheus and Kekrops (Elderkin).

Each level of the Erechtheion has a specific purpose. To the east, from higher terrain is a six-column Ionic porch that housed the ancient wooden image of

Athena. At the north is another Ionic porch that leads to the chamber of Erechtheus. The sacred olive tree of Athena is located in an open courtyard in the west of the Erechtheion. And finally to the south is the resting place of the legendary King Kekrops (Lahanas). "The Porch of the Caryatids" covers this gravesite.

Supported by six maiden figures used as columns with the crowns on their heads being the capitals, this Porch of Maidens otherwise known as The Porch of the Caryatids, gives the Erechtheion its unique structure making the building stand out besides it being located on an uneven terrain. The Caryatids, or maiden columns, stand on the south side of Erechtheum of the Acropolis. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology, a caryatide is "the sculptured female figure used in place of a column to support an entablature or architrave".

Using female statues as columns was not a new or unused architectural element in Greek architecture, but it was not terribly common either. The caryatides of the Erechtheum were clothed and elaborately detailed, life size (231 centimeters high) figures constructed of marble and designed by the architect Mnesikles (Stokstad). They were carved using tools similar to other sculptures of the same period including; hammer, punch, claw chisel, flat chisel, gouge, rasp and various abrasives. These caryatides were not carved out of a single marble block, but rather out of pieces separately made and joined by tendon and mortise. Richter). Each woman stands in a classical contraposition stance with her weight shifted to the outside leg, while wearing differing peplos (tunics), mantles, and jewelry with elaborate hair dressing, making no two sculptures identical. (Lahanas). Rather than having <https://assignbuster.com/the-caryatids-on-the-erechtheion-of-the-acropolis-essay/>

a stiff, ridged, and identical appearance as did the sculptures during the Archaic period, the Porch of Maidens had a graceful, flowing attire, along with loose, sinuous hair which would place them in the Classical period of Greek sculpture.

During the Classical Period, sculptures and architecture became more popular, and the style of sculpture changed from the idealized, heroic image to a more flowing, natural style, that began showing more muscle tone, bones, fat, veins, and emotion. The bodies of the caryatide women were in a contrapposto pose, which means the weight was on one leg, while the other was bent, and the head was slightly tilted giving them a more natural position and Classical period appearance. The Erechtheion's caryatids reflect one of the last phases of classical sculpture before the fourth century.

The Erechtheion is most definitely not the largest building in the Acropolis, but for what it lacks in size it gains in well thought out planning, decoration, and its unique features. The Caryatid Porch of the Erechtheion at the Acropolis once had all six of these Caryatide female figures, which comprise the signature feature of the temple. After the temple was recognized as a classical treasure, in the early nineteenth century Lord Elgin, of the United Kingdom, took one of the caryatids with out permission.

This caryatide ended up being sent back to the British Museum in London where it still remains today despite the Greek governments wish that it would be returned (Lahanas). In order to help preserve and protect the remaining five caryatids from further damage, in 1979 they were removed to the Acropolis Museum and replaced with replicas which still today stand on

the south side of the Erechtheion of the Acropolis and continue to be one of the unique features of the Erechtheions design.