

## The Past Among the Present: Roman Architecture at Athens, Delphi, and Olympia

The aim of this paper is to discuss and analyze the architecture of Athens, Delphi, and Olympia in the Roman period, in order to understand the physical characteristics of the mix of cultures and the impact these characteristics had upon Roman Greece. Physically, the Romans reused older buildings but with a new purpose, maintained and modernized buildings, and added buildings to these venerable sites. Although these three “themes” seem to be distinct, the Romans used all three to establish their political and cultural authority over Greece. However, it becomes apparent that the Romans did not just replace the culture of Greece with their own. In reality, they referenced Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic traditions by using certain elements in their own architecture. The effect of the mix of periods was that the Romans were appropriating Greek culture, and in turn it gave them cultural authority. Besides cultural authority, they used architecture to show their political power over Greece. The Romans simply employed the ancient architecture of Athens, Delphi, and Olympia to make it relevant to their present.

The first theme is that the Romans repurposed older buildings. For example, at Olympia, the Romans reused the Metroon to hold the imperial cult. By reusing the Metroon in this way, the imperial cult was positioned within one of the most sacred sanctuaries and among some of the most sacred buildings in the Greek world, and therefore gained religious legitimacy and meaning. By placing a Roman idea—worshipping the Roman emperors—into a Greek building, its users more easily made the transition from a Greek religious tradition to a Roman one (Price 1984). It helped the Greeks accept that Rome was the new power, and it helped the Romans establish and maintain their political authority.

An example of the second theme—maintaining and modernizing buildings—is the Heraion in Olympia, which was changed in the Roman period from a temple serving Hera to a

museum that displayed Archaic and Classical sculpture from the sanctuary (Arafat 1995). The change of the Heraion was dictated by who was using the building and the site. The Romans appropriated the architecture of the original site for their purposes, which helped the transition of power. Another example of the Romans maintaining and modernizing buildings is the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Domitian renovated the temple, and included an inscription crediting him with the renovation—in Latin, the language of the West. Instead of the renovation being just about the temple, it was also used as an advertisement for Domitian's power and the power of the Roman Empire.

If the Romans did add new buildings to a site, they were considerate and knowledgeable about the preexisting buildings, and they made the new buildings physically and symbolically fit into the old site. One example of this is the diminutive Temple of Roma and Augustus on the Acropolis—the only architectural addition to the Acropolis in the Roman period (Hurwit 1999). The Ionic column capitals of the Temple of Roma and Augustus were copies of the column capitals of the Erechtheion. By doing this, the Temple of Roma and Augustus looked as if it belonged with the Periklean buildings on the Acropolis. Symbolically, it gained some of the religious authority from the Erechtheion. When taking the whole Acropolis into consideration, the placement of the Temple of Roma and Augustus is also significant. When standing on the east end of the Acropolis and looking west, the Parthenon seems to frame the Temple of Roma and Augustus. Overall, the addition of even so small a temple greatly affected the space and meaning of the Acropolis.

By analyzing the history, form, and surroundings of the buildings and projects which date to the Roman period in Athens, Delphi, and Olympia, themes emerge which support a different view of the Romans and their interactions with Greece. Rome changed the purposes of buildings,

renovated and modernized buildings, and added new buildings. By doing this, the Romans were adding their civilization onto the civilization of the ancient Greeks by referencing the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic periods, which gave them cultural authority. Contrary to traditional views, the Romans were not the cause of the cultural fall of ancient Greece—instead, they were its avid curators. Roman Greece was a place where the past was among the present, and the Romans had to navigate this past in order to maintain their present and future position.

### Bibliography

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