apart from the legions of archers at his disposal, he himself was a slayer of lions and gryphons (ill. 95). The vast throne upon which he sat was symbolically supported by his subject nations; and once inside the Apadana, Xerxes' great reception hall (ill. 96), visitors were intimidated by a continuous frieze which showed ('again and again') client kingdoms bringing tribute to this very place. Figures move almost invariably in a linear direction; intriguingly, the rare occasions when they are shown turning round to interact with each other are judged to be touches by Greek sculptors at Persepolis.

The cognitive associations created at Persepolis between Oriental despotism, symbols and sculptural style can hardly have been wasted on Athenians who grew up with their own associations of figurative naturalism, democracy and Hellenic identity. It has been argued that the Parthenon frieze attempts in several respects of both style and design to mirror or challenge the reliefs at Persepolis, in particular those of the Apadana. And yet more difference than similitude is apparent. Though the Parthenon frieze is ‘Orientalizing’ in terms of its unrelieved processional solemnity, its designer has tried his utmost to display all the self-defining elements of the Greek Revolution: the Polykleitan nude or semi-nude musculatures, the figures turning to front, side and back with equal facility, the ‘minor incidents’ (restless horses, chatting deities) of the depicted ceremony—all these proclaim to the (imaginary) visitor from Persia, and to the actual visitors from allied Greek cities: this is our world view.

What better focus of commemoration for such a statement than the battle of Marathon?

Myth-history and the Parthenon

The Parthenon was a work of art. That statement is dragged reluctantly from an author who largely denies the production of art for art’s sake in ancient Greece, but it is difficult for anyone to describe the Parthenon purely in terms of its cult functions, and hence tempting to treat its decoration as functionally redundant. Where was the altar of this temple? What festivals were celebrated here? Why did another temple, the Erechtheum, have to be built to house the cult statue of the Akropolis—the small olden image of Athena Polias—and was the luxurious assemblage of the Athena Parthenos no more than a treasury dressed up as a goddess? Can the Parthenon be termed ‘a temple’ at all?

The columns of the Parthenon were specially designed to accommodate a viewer from a certain distance: by a process known as entasis, the columns were carved wider in the centre so that they would not look (according to a natural optical distortion) concave. In fact, the architects of the Parthenon built in a host of ‘refinements’ to make the temple appear beautifully symmetrical. But otherwise the Parthenon was a work of art not specially considerate of those wanting to see it: the frieze particularly so. On the exterior wall of the inner temple chamber, boxed in and almost 12 m (40 ft) above the floor (ill. 97), no one could comfortably secure a proper view of even sections of it, let alone the whole (as is now deceptively easy, given the eye-level, all-round display of the frieze at the British Museum). ‘Artistic hubris’ is how one response to this inaccessibility goes; according to another, we should desist from seeking coherent scholarly accounts of the meaning of the frieze, if its iconography were based on getting no more than lofty glimpses.

Works of art, however, are not necessarily bound to care whether anyone sees them or not: as Paul Veyne has pointed out, the logic of monuments such as Trajan’s Column may be precisely based on their ‘visual non-visibility’. Just as the sculptors of the figures on the Parthenon pediments took care to finish those rear parts of their statues that no ground-based viewer would ever be able to see, so the creators of the frieze worked according to the specifications of the ‘ideal spectator’ who would espouse the same perspective, and comprehend the artistic intentions. No ancient writer has told us what iconographic programme informed the Parthenon’s decoration. With regard to the metopes, the first of the Parthenon sculptures to be executed (in the mid-440s BC), this is not perhaps a great problem. They may be read as plainly invested with a mythical symbolism that exalted Greek or Athenian order over those who would challenge it. They may be read as plainly invested with a mythical symbolism that exalted Greek or Athenian order over those who would challenge it. On the east side there were excerpts from an old favourite, the Gods versus the Giants. The Giants courted their own primordial destruction by a challenge of extreme self-esteem or hubris—
the same sort of hubris that Xerxes would manifest when he launched his invasion via the Hellespont, threatening the very elements of the earth (the story of Xerxes' fury when a storm broke up his bridge, and how he had his minions whip the waves in vain revenge, was archetypal of the Greek characterization of their Oriental enemy). On the west side were scenes from the combat against the Amazons. Here the enemy was again Asiatic, and more specifically anticipated the Persians: fighting on horseback, with bows and arrows, and seeking (as we have noted in the description of the paintings at the Stoa) to seize Attica — and even (as the shield of the Athena Parthenos would show) storm the Akropolis itself.

The south metopes featured a Centauromachy. According to Xenophon's Cyropaedia (IV. 3.17–22), admittedly more a work of imagination than history, the Persians admired the Centaurs, stemming from pride in their own horsemanship, and thought it amusing that the Greeks should regard them as terrifying as Centaurs. It requires little effort to understand how the Centaurs' mythical violation of the wedding of the Lapith prince Pirithoos became a fifth-century BC metaphor for the barbaric intrusion of the Persians upon Greek territory.

The north side metopes are badly preserved, but seem to have shown episodes from the Ilioupersis ('Troy Taken'). Depending on which version of it one consults, that epic contained episodes which cast little credit on the Greek victors: unfortunately, whatever nuances the Parthenon displayed are largely lost to us. It is hardly necessary to elaborate on the possible metaphorical force of the Ilioupersis in the context of an Athenian monument celebrating triumph over an Eastern enemy, but it is worth pointing out that its pairing with the Amazonomachy was already established in the Stoa Poikile; alongside, of course, the battle of Marathon.

Approaching the Parthenon from the Propylaea, the monumental Akropolis gateways also commissioned by Perikles, the most obvious element of sculptural decoration was the temple's west pediment. Perhaps because it was so obvious, no ancient writer ever thought to describe it properly. It appears to show Athena contesting the possession of Attica with Poseidon. From what survives of the pediment, and various echoes of it, it seems likely that what most ancient viewers would chiefly have registered was the central group of this arrangement — Athena versus Poseidon. The mythographers tell us that both deities produced the tokens of their claim to Attica on the Akropolis itself: in Athena's case, an olive tree, and in Poseidon's, a salt spring. Given the choice, it is not difficult to see why Athena won the contest. But our ancient sources cannot agree quite how it was adjudicated, and the west pediment does little to clarify the situation.
As for the opposite, east, pediment, we are no better informed by ancient commentators. The central sculptures evidently showed the Birth of Athena. Hers is a bizarre genesis, not easily represented in stone: she must appear, in all her glory, from the head of Zeus, thanks to an axe-blow of Hephaistos (and Zeus must appear unharmed by all this). Deities witnessing the act should register astonishment and delight, and the cosmic forces acclaim it, too. To the Athenian viewer, the central importance here was the arrival of Athena, the city's protectress. Specific identities of the circumstantial figures, still subject to scholarly debate, were presumably once fixed; but they may have been obscured or forgotten within a couple of decades. As with the west pediment, certain figures here have been more or less plausibly given half a dozen different identities by modern scholars but nearly all are tentative, and again we remain unsure how far the original programme was patent to those gazing up at it in ancient times. One may question, indeed, whether the executive sculptors of this work, and those who paid them for it, knew exactly what programme they were supposed to be following. The building accounts that relate to the frieze of the Erechtheum, quoted at greater length elsewhere in this book (see Chapter 7), are disturbingly anonymous in this respect: figures singled out for piece-by-piece payment are identified by posture, not name (thus 'the man leaning on a staff', or 'the chariot, the youth, and the horses being harnessed'—such phrases could so easily describe figures from the Parthenon frieze too).

Familiarity with 'the Elgin marbles' as works of art, then, is no guarantee of our knowing what they are and it is quite wrong of the British Museum guidebooks to suggest (as they do) that a history of meticulous museum tutelage has ensured a proper understanding of the Parthenon sculptures. It is evident from the manifold variants in the Classical and post-Classical mythography of the Athena versus Poseidon episode that the Parthenon pediments were curiously ineffective at canonizing that story. And yet on a basic level of comprehension, we can see as clearly as any ancient viewer what the Parthenon was about: very simply, the glorification of Athens, Athena and everything Athenian.

The limited success of scholars in clarifying the iconographic components of the pedimental ensembles does not augur well for a detailed explanation of what was the least accessible part of the Parthenon's decoration: the frieze. Again, no ancient writer comes to our aid, though that is not to say that the frieze went ignored in antiquity (its assuredly felt, for example, in the Ara Pacis of Augustus in Rome). As we have noted, some element of rivalry with the Apadana at Persepolis is plausible in both the general concept and the detailed execution of the frieze, perhaps creating a heightened sense among Athenian viewers of their own democratic identity. Where the Apadana reliefs show client states trailing along with tribute for the Great King (ill. 98), the Parthenon frieze shows the unmistakable tokens of religious ritual being performed: here the portage of hydriae (waters) (ill. 99), elsewhere also spondai (libations), skaphai (trays of cakes) and other items of sacrificial paraphernalia. From what basic understanding we have of the Parthenon's programme, this should be a religious ritual with an Atheno-centric (or Athena-centric) focus. What might that focus be?

The first recorded response to the Parthenon frieze comes from the fifteenth-century traveller Cyriac of Ancona, who judged it to represent 'Athenian victories in the time of Perikles'. This suggestion has found few supporters: historically it is difficult to attach much military success to the name of Pericles. If indeed a victory is being celebrated, it must be one from the past. But most scholars (since at least the end of the eighteenth century) have preferred to see here no victory celebration as such, but some representation or evocation of the festival special to Athens, the Panathenaia, celebrated on the date assigned as Athena's birthday. This was honoured annually, but every four years there was a grander version, the 'Great Panathenaia', which involved replacing the peplos dress on the statue of Athena Polias by a new one (ill. 100), it is true to say that, if any interpretation of the frieze can be called 'standard', then the Panatheniacal festival reading is just such.
We know more about the Panathenaia as a festival than most other occasions in the busy Athenian religious calendar, but this knowledge does not invariably assist the full explanation of what we see happening in the frieze. In no sense can it be treated as a 'realistic' depiction of a particular year's festival: the presence of twelve Olympian deities is enough to scotch any notion of a documentary enterprise, and in any case, the decorum of Greek temple decoration generally rules out the direct depiction of contemporary events. Might the frieze then show us an early, paradigmatic celebration of the Panathenaia—possibly the very first festival? Perhaps: some consonance would then be achieved with the pediments, at least. However, as with the pediments, we will then find ourselves blundering about in all the obscurities of Athenian myth and etiology, and possibly no better off in our grasp of artistic intentions than the ancient viewers were.

A much more attractive interpretation—though it takes us into the same area of essential obscurities—has been made by Joan Connelly. She minimizes the Panathenaiac element, and draws attention instead to the story of King Erechtheus as recounted in a play by Euripides, probably performed at Athens in the 420s BC. The play is only partially preserved, but its tragic core is known. Erechtheus, in order to ensure Athenian victory over a Thracian force poised to invade Attica, was bound by the Delphic Oracle to sacrifice one of his daughters. The central scene of the east frieze thereby becomes a rather grisly vignette of sacrificial preparations. For the sake of his city, Erechtheus will cut the throat of his own daughter. His wife Praxithea, and other daughters (there are three or four in the mythology) assist at the scene. As for the cloth here, it is not a peplos at all, but the wrapping in which the sacrificial victim will be conducted to the altar.

It was suggested a century ago (by A. Furtwängler) that the tussle between Athena and Poseidon on the Parthenon's west pediment symbolized two competing myth-historical and cultic claims on the Akropolis, those of Kekrops and his family (for Athena), and those of Erechtheus and his daughters (for Poseidon). A reading of the Parthenon frieze that aligns it within the mythical proto-history of Athens has much to recommend it, especially when one considers that Erechtheus was shortly to have his own temple on the Akropolis. But there remain worries about this interpretation. Athenians in the fifth century BC probably knew as much about Erechtheus as the British know about King Lear. To see his personal vicissitudes unfold on the stage was one thing; to have them carved on a monument designed to commemorate triumph over the Persians was another. True, the extent to which King Erechtheus was prepared to go to save his country from invasion may be regarded as exemplary. But human sacrifice was not a feature of Greek religion. On the contrary, the Greeks regarded it as barbarian (hence the myth of Herakles exploding against the Egyptian pharaoh Busiris who was preparing to sacrifice him), and no Greek temple either before or after the Parthenon shows anything like this. And what of the rest of the frieze? Obviously, sacrificial attendants can be accounted for, and the Olympians too; Connelly is prepared to see the frieze as an explanation of the myth-heroic origins of the Panathenaia. But in quantitative terms, the most striking feature of the Parthenon frieze is its display of young men with horses, and to explain them as the celebratory mustering of King Erechtheus' forces after their success in battle with the Thracians at Eleusis is not quite convincing. Where, for a start, are their weapons? If they are celebrating victory in a sanctuary, why has the virgin sacrifice to ensure victory not yet taken place?

Objections against and points in favour of various individual readings of the Parthenon frieze can be exchanged endlessly. We return to the original theme of this chapter with those young horsemen (ill. 101). Cantering along in a state of semi-nudity may have been an actual privilege of the Athenian cavalry, but hardly in the associated context of a religious ritual. Why is the frieze so dominated by them—as it undoubtedly is, and was? From what we know of the Panathenaia, the cavalry did not take part in the procession involved in the ritual to replace Athena's peplos. Foot-soldiers did, and fully armed too—but not cavalry. So the horsemen hardly square with a conventional Panathenaia. They exhibit some differentiation of dress, perhaps sufficient (as some have suggested) to indicate their membership of the ten Athenian tribes. But what they exhibit more than anything else is an ethos of heroization. To glimpse just one of these figures (ill. 102) is to be left in little doubt how to read it as a piece of fifth-century BC sculpture: Polykleitan torso, flying cloak and features of athletic, self-
conscious seriousness. These may be ideal epheloi, the best examples of young Athenian manhood, dedicating themselves to both Athena and her polis. But temple decorum requires that they should not be portraits of the living. Instead, they must evoke a generation that is to come — or a generation that has already been.

It must be stressed again: no interpretation of the Parthenon frieze which attempts to be specific is free from problems. Conversely, each specific interpretation has something in its favour. And the one so far only anticipated, but not discussed, is as follows: that if you count the number of heroized figures on the frieze, their total comes out at a very significant number — 192.

This is, of course, the number enshrined in Herodotus as those who fell at Marathon. As a tally of ‘heroized’ figures (subject to some dispute, admittedly) it was first noticed by W.-H. Schuchhardt in 1930. John Boardman then incorporated it into his argument that the frieze ‘shows the fighters of Marathon celebrating the prime festival of their goddess, on the temple dedicated to her as a thanksgiving for her aid at Marathon and afterwards, and in a manner which indicates the heroic status of those who fell there’. This is not the place to rehearse the substance and detail of Boardman’s interpretation, which readers may explore for themselves (see Further Reading). But with regard to what has already been said about the burial of the Marathonian dead — in a consciously archaizing, even Homeric style — we cannot be surprised to find them presented here with horses and chariots. Yes, those who fought at Marathon fought on foot. But those who died in that battle were conceived as joining the same nether-world as Ajax, Achilles and Agamemnon. Just as large grave-marking vases from eighth-century BC Attic cemeteries show the heroized dead with ‘Mycenaean’ shields and fleets of chariots, so the Parthenon frieze shows the glory-clad Marathonians as riders and chariot-owners. Everything we know about the Greek historical consciousness of the fifth century BC points to a blurring of boundaries between myth and history. There is also discernible a tendency for the ‘factoids’ of history to become the stuff of both myth and religion, and the communion (koinonia) of living and dead maintained by the imaginative ‘visibility’ of heroic ancestors.

We must admit that the circumstantial pressure upon the Parthenon-designers to make some allusion to the heroes of Marathon was extremely strong. Of course, once in place, the frieze offered no chance to viewers, especially not the dim-sighted old Marathonomachai, to count out the glorious 192. But the conception of an ultimate Marathon memorial may once have been there (see ill. 105) for the perfect viewer. In fact, given the lineage of Marathon commemorations already established, we should rather be amazed by its absence.

Coda: the Erechtheum Caryatids and the Temple of Athena Nike

‘Architects should inform themselves about history.’ So writes Vitruvius, in the opening pages of his De Architectura (1. 5). If they do, then inquisitive members of the public may be quickly satisfied. Suppose, continues Vitruvius, that someone asks why an architect has replaced columns with ‘marble statues of long-robed women, which are called caryatids’. It is the cue for a display of historical erudition. Caryatids, according to Vitruvius, are thus called because during the Persian wars, the Laconian city of Caryae was one of those Greek states which sided with the Persians. After defeating the Persians, the Greek allies turned on Caryae. The menfolk they killed; the women were put into slavery, however ‘high-born’ they were. And the architects of the time symbolized their shame with ‘Caryatids’: stone figures of the heavy-laden women, whose punishment would thus be broadcast to posterity.
The notion that serving as a column represents a form of punishment is not controversial. Figures of Giants or Atlantes, when they serve to hold up a building, may readily be explained as Giants defeated by the gods in the primal Gigantomachy. Yet this explanation of the Caryatids has encountered general scepticism. Scholars suspicious of the Vitruvian idea of history will point out that the Erechtheum (ill. 103) is not in fact the first building to use female figures as columns: the late sixth-century BC building at Delphi which we know as the Siphnian Treasury also has them, and as anthropomorphic basin-stands (perirrhanteria) ‘Caryatids’ have a long Archaic tradition. But this does not exclude the possibility that they acquired a fresh significance of humiliation in the fifth century. And why should Vitruvius be making up his explanation? He goes on to say that the Spartans, when they laid out their ‘Persian Stoa’, similarly set up supports in Persian garb (statuas Persicas sustinentes) as architectural emblems of victory. If he is right, and the construction of the Erechtheum begins in 421 BC, then we are bound to extend our survey of post-Persian wars commemoration thus far. At the time that the Erechtheum was being built, Athens had agreed a truce, or even peace, with Sparta: and to dwell on old successes had become a form of refuge from the present, which offered precious little to celebrate.

The same may be said for the little Ionic temple perched on a bastion of the Akropolis, which we know as the Temple of Athena Nike. Again, it is reckoned to have been built and decorated in the late 420s BC: and again, despite the lapse of time, one is impelled to explain its decoration in terms of retrospective commemoration. Being Ionic, the temple carried a frieze above the architrave on all four sides. Though it has survived poorly, this is the tentative consensus on what the frieze represents: on the east side, a gathering of gods, with Athena probably central; on the south side, Greeks fighting Orientals – some (e.g. Evelyn Harrison) go so far as to call this the battle of Marathon; and on the west and north sides, battles which appear to show Greeks against Greeks – according to one suggestion, scenes from the battle of Megara in 458 BC, when the Athenians indecisively took on Corinth, or perhaps more contemporaneously, evocations of the Peloponnesian War itself (ill. 104).

The structurally unusual feature of the Nike temple is its decorated parapet or balustrade. The reliefs from this part of the building seem equally unusual: Athena, in the company of assorted Nikai, or female victory figures, is vigorously conducting bovine sacrifice, and arranging piles of armour as trophies. Though there appears some inclination on the part of the sculptors to dwell on the femininity of Athena and her companions (the erotic possibilities of deep-cut and wayward drapery are fully explored, as one figure, for instance, stoops to adjust her sandal), there is in fact no ladylike delicacy at this sacrifice. The bulls are wrestled to the ground: at least one is shown having its throat slit. But there is no sign of any altar. So where is this supposed to be happening? Quite possibly on the battlefield itself. The presence of the bulls has favoured suggestions that some connection with Theseus may be implied here, but he is nowhere to be seen. A more cogent solution is that the victory being celebrated here is (or rather was) a cosmically-ordained triumph. Athena herself may be imagined on the battlefield, helping to set up trophies, plunging herself into the protocols of post-battle thanksgiving.

Which battlefield might qualify for such honours? At the time of this temple’s construction, there is really only one candidate. Over half a century on, there is still no forgetting. Its exhortatory power will have been felt by all those who gazed on the Nike bastion (and it was hard to miss). The source of that power was Marathon.