

Contrary to popular belief, the work of an archaeologist by no means ends when a structure has been fully excavated. Given the complexities of modern society, we are increasingly facing major problems of preservation. Nowhere is this type of problem more apparent than on the Athenian acropolis, where acid rainfall, caused by modern industrial pollution, is threatening to destroy some of mankind's most precious monuments.

The greatest threat at present is posed to the Erechtheum, a small temple dedicated to Athena and Poseidon. Built, according to ancient tradition, on the very spot where the two divinities held a contest to see

which would become patron of Athens, the Erechtheum is certainly not a typical Greek temple: it is not only strangely asymmetrical in plan (having four inner rooms and three exterior porches), it is also built on two levels, reflecting a ten foot drop in ground level at this side of the Acropolis. This uniqueness of the Erechtheum is increased by its famous South Porch, often called the Porch of the Maidens, where, instead of traditional columns, six large female figures (Caryatids) support the portico's roof. Opposite this porch is the so-called North Porch with six impressively decorated Ionic columns. The entire structure is made of Pentelic marble, although a frieze of black stone from Eleusis was also once part of the design.

It is, in fact, the very marble nature of this temple that creates serious problems. The Pentelic marble is extremely vulnerable to acid rain, which literally eats its surface. Two years ago, a UNESCO study discovered that acid rain had done more damage to the Erechtheum in the previous four years than had occurred in the previous four hundred years! The report suggested that even a few more years of exposure to such rain would turn the Caryatids of the South Porch to dust. At once the Greek government and UNESCO began to investigate ways to save the statues from such a fate. Various suggestions came from all over the world, including: injecting special preservatives into the marble to counter the acid rain; or covering the entire rock of the Acropolis with a huge glass dome. Both were rejected as unfeasible.

Archaeologists were then left with one solution, and not a very appealing one: remove the statues from the South Porch, place them in a Museum, and erect modern replicas on the site itself. Such activity is basically anathema to archaeologists, who prefer whenever possible to leave remains in situ. In the case of the disintegrating Caryatids, however, no other solutions seemed possible. And so, several weeks ago, workmen began the task of removing the statues from the Porch where they had stood for twenty-four centuries. When this is done, further restoration work awaits: archaeologists now intend to dismantle the entire temple so that decaying iron rods placed within the stone during earlier restorations may be replaced by titanium rods which are resistant to erosion.

The rest of the Acropolis also needs attention: the Parthenon is now quite unstable, and the strengthening of its massive columns is now under way. Indeed, an aerial view of the Acropolis today would show a maze of scaffolding, cranes, and other equipment all around the ancient structures.

The Battle for the Acropolis, as it has been called, is finally underway. Should we become wise enough to stop polluting our planet, perhaps in the future such battles will not have to be fought again.