

ATHENS

5TH CENTURY BC

POSEIDON

*"He commands, and the swell
and the wind rise up."*
God of the sea, brother of Zeus.
Poseidon is in antiquity a god
venerated by the Greeks,
a seafaring people.
He plants his trident
and the earth trembles,
as on the Acropolis
where he makes a spring
of salt water gush forth.



THE LEGENDARY DISPUTE

Like two children quarrelling, Athena and Poseidon both want to be the patron of Athens. Gathered on the Acropolis, the citizens are called upon to decide between them, under the eye of Zeus, the supreme god. Athena raises a sturdy olive tree from the ground; Poseidon makes an impression with a magnificent horse. The most elderly and wise of the citizens, on behalf of the other inhabitants, say how precious these gifts are: the olive tree, symbol of prudence and peace; the horse, representing power and war...

THE ACROPOLIS

To both those arriving by sea and those coming from the surrounding lowlands, the Acropolis imposes its unique skyline. By building a marble citadel on the city's highest hill, Pericles wanted to show the world the rediscovered grandeur of his people. The Parthenon, dedicated to the goddess Athena, is the most beautiful of the temples, constructed in less than ten years (447-438 BC). It is an example of ideal architecture, the perfection to which the Greeks of that era aspired.



War and peace: The history of Athens is forged on this alternate pattern. In 480 BC, the Athenians win the war that once again pits them against their age old enemies – the Persians – but the city is destroyed. Buoyed by this victory, the city is rebuilt with fervour. Under the leadership of Pericles, their policy maker or strategos, the capital of Attica in less than a century becomes the beating heart of Greek antiquity. Arts, philosophy, literature and politics profoundly transform society.

ATHENA

Despite being the goddess
of military strategy, she
does everything to ensure
that peace prevails.
She does not lose any
battle because she thinks
before she acts.
It is she who supervises
the good governance
of Athens.



... But if war can bring great wealth and new territories through conquest, peace is more sustainable.

So, the olive tree wins!

Poseidon, furious, unleashes the waters and submerges the city that resists.

To soothe his rage, a temple is dedicated to him. But in the end it is the wise Athena who names the city after her and is now celebrated as the city's patron deity.

WAR AND CONQUEST

War is as much a part of the life of an ancient Greek citizen as the exercise of democracy, religion or trade: anyone could be called upon to defend his city after training as an ephebe from the age of 18 to 20. On land or at sea, the Greeks had developed new techniques to defeat their enemies and conquer new territories. Athens had gained a formidable reputation with its fleet of 300 triremes sailing the Mediterranean Sea.

IN LIFE, IN DEATH AND WITH DIVINE HELP

There is no mercy for enemies: the city that is conquered is subjugated, its crops are burnt, its trees are cut down and its population is slaughtered or enslaved. But you don't go into battle out of anger: for the Greeks, war is sacred, and the gods have their say. They would be consulted about everything, everywhere, even on the battlefield. Greek soldiers would listen to the advice of soothsayers, who were wise men capable of reading the signs sent by the gods. And, of course, the war plunder taken from the enemies is dedicated to the gods.



A Greek soldier never leaves his fellow soldier killed on the battlefield without giving him a burial. All the dead are honoured on a stele where their names are engraved.

BECOMING A HOPLITE

When young boys become citizens at the age of 18, they start preparing to become hoplites in a two-year military service. These future footsoldiers are the backbone of the Greek armies. The young men – or ephebes – learn to handle weapons, especially the spear. They learn manoeuvres and practice their skills hard in the stadiums or gymnasiums.

At the end of the first year of ephebia, a ceremony takes place to hand over the shields in front of all the citizens in the Ecclesia.

Also present are the strategoi, the leaders of the Athenian army. At the age of 20, the ephebes are ready to fight and can be called up to the age of 60 to go to war.

In front of the priest and all the Athenian citizens, the ephebes climb to the peak, placing a cup of wine on the altar to honour them.

"I will not abandon the company I have in battle. I will fight to the death, for the sake of my country, my friends, my family and my honour."



"Like a winged dove, swiftest of victory, heeds our best wishes by the nation who takes the oath."

