

THE DORIC COLUMN: A REPRESENTATION OF THE NORM OF VIRTUE

E A Maré

University of South Africa

At the previous conference my purpose was to give a rhetorical interpretation to the sacred geometry of the west façade of the Parthenon, the best-known of all Greek temples, the apogee of Hellenic architecture, built by architects Ictinus and Callicrates for Pericles, the client, from 447-32 BC, on the Acropolis in Athens.¹

In the present paper I will take as my point of departure the analysis of the diagram of the west (or east) façade of the Parthen-

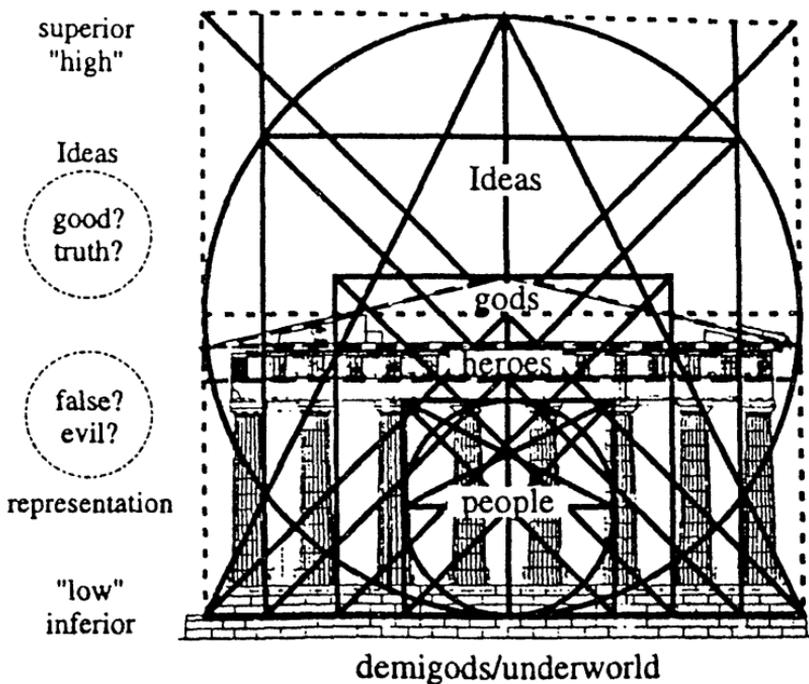


Figure 1

A diagrammatic representation of the east façade of the Parthenon representing the Greek concept of hierarchy of being.

on, which can be interpreted to symbolise the hierarchy or orderly succession of ways of being (figure 1). It is suggested that the society for which classical temples were built understood the zone below the stylobate to designate the underworld, the zone of Doric columns the world of human beings, the architrave that of heroes, the pediment that of the gods, and the superior, invisible zone the immaterial world of Ideas of which all else is, in Platonic terms, but a mimetic approximation.

No work of art is made with only one thing or consists of only one form. I concur with Gaston Bachelard's (1984: 147) statement about phenomena: "There are no simple phenomena; every phenomenon is a fabric of relations." The Greek temple is no exception: it is a unity of constitutive parts, structural functions, and environmental and social references. Therefore, the first thesis that I propose is that even though meaning may be inherent in things as such, it is also inherent in relations - in the contrasts and similarities between parts. This will be argued in the case of the forms which comprise the façade referred to, but any attempt to decode its meaning should be based on an understanding of the overriding importance of context. Therefore, an attempt will be made to decode the meaning of the architectural relationships of the west façade of the Parthenon as a totality of forms representing a hierarchy of being, which was a reality only to the society which related to such a hierarchy, that is the Greek classical society.

In order to evaluate the meaning of the parts of the Parthenon's façade, I propose three ways of understanding both the whole and the parts, all rooted to some extent in classical Greek thought.

The first is a summary of the understanding of "Being" as expounded by Heraclitus (born c 535 BC). WT Stace (1956: 77) explains this philosopher's insight as follows:

"Not only is Being, for Heraclitus, identical with not-being, but everything in the universe has in it its own opposite. Every existent thing is a 'harmony of opposite tensions'. A harmony contains necessarily two opposite principles which, in spite of their opposition reveal an underlying unity."

" ... At the heart of things is conflict. If there were no conflict in a thing, it would cease to exist. This idea is expressed by Heraclitus in a variety of ways: 'Strife', he says, 'is the father of all things'. ... 'Join together whole and unwhole, congruous and incongruous, accordant and discordant, then comes from one all and from all one.' In this

sense, too, he censures Homer for having prayed that strife might cease from among gods and men. If such a prayer were granted, the universe itself would pass away."

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) formulates a similar insight, revealing Heraclitus' influence on his thinking about the one and the many, or unity and parts, both as a life-world phenomenon and in the arts. Heidegger's (1971: 54-5) proposition rests on the thesis that opposition between parts do not result in duality; nor are they identical. In response to Heidegger's idea of strife between world and earth, the opposition between matter and form, and the disclosure of the breach (*Riss*) between concealment and unconcealment. J Sallis (1989: 185) explains that "strife is not a matter simply of opposition but rather is such that the opponents belong to one another in their very opposition The opponents belong together by having a certain common ground and origin" ² This means that parts belonging to a whole are linked together by a solidarity relation, or stated differently: parts or separate forms in bigger wholes presuppose each other.

The previous insights relating to the parts and the whole I wish to link up with a third - the theory of "dialogic architecture", as formulated by Tom Leddy. This architectural critic bases his thesis on an understanding of Socratic dialogue, which he explains, "moves from the word (signifier), to definition (signified), to instantiations (physical referent), to understanding, and finally to reality (essential referent). The relations between these are dynamic; the path is both upwards or downwards" (Leddy 1994: 196). In the same way, relations are important in dialogic architecture. Leddy refers to several levels on which dialogue must occur in order for dialogic architecture to happen, and concludes his theory by stating that:

"there must be a dialogue (metaphorically speaking) between different elements of the semantic situation, i.e. between signifier, signified and referent This implies a commitment to a holistic organicist approach to architecture in which architecture is seen as referring to a physical, ecological, and cultural context. Architecture must not contribute to furthering our alienation from nature and cultural tradition, but rather should recognise the human need for wholeness" (Leddy 1994: 198).

This recalls a structuralist position, with its emphasis on the creation of meaning through relationship, in which no term, form or part is to be understood in isolation, but instead as part of a contrasting system built up from binary oppositions.³ Therefore, Edmund Leach

(1976: 12), a semiotician, is quoted here for his insight into the category of the "Signifier/signified" relationship. He labels as *signa* those signs in which signifier and signified are related as any part is related to the whole. Since semiotics have influenced architectural theory to some extent, it comes as no surprise to find theories concerning paradox in modern and post-modern architectural criticism. For example, August Heckster, an architectural critic (quoted by Robert Venturi [1965: 20], a post-modernist architect) states: "A feeling for paradox allows seemingly dissimilar things to exist side by side, their very incongruity suggesting a kind of truth." Adding to this view one may say that strife implies the fructifying influence of paradox, which does not negate unity.

An analysis of the Parthenon diagram reveals a paradox between visible and invisible. Those beings which have bodies are represented as visible structures; they are the gods, heroes, humans, and the spirits who are captive in the underworld, while the realm of Platonic Ideas is not structured as a visible form.⁴

If the Doric temple is representative of the Greeks' concept of the underworld, the world of humans, heroes, gods and ideas, then the unity of and distinctions made between gods, heroes, humans and spirits in classical times is relevant to the discussion of context, more specifically world view or cosmology. However, only one aspect which both differentiates and unifies them hierarchically can be dealt with in this paper, namely their various types of embodiment, which will be symbolically derived solely from the unity and relationships of the architectural forms of the parthenon's east façade.

The gods of the Greeks were animistic, personified, anthropomorphic beings who lived on Mount Olympus or in the heavens, but gods like Dionysus held associations with the earth, while Pluto occupied the underworld and Hades. In this respect Jean-Pierre Vernant's (1989: 23) research on the "body of the gods" reveals the insight that:

"To pose the problem of the body of the gods is thus not to ask how the Greeks could have outfitted their gods with human bodies. It is rather an investigation of how the symbolic system functions, how the corporeal code permits one to think of the relation between man and god under the double figures of the same and the other, of the near and far, of contact and separation, while marking between the poles of the human and the divine that which associates them through a play of similitudes, mutual advances, overlapping areas, and

dissociates them through the effects of contrasts, opposition, incompatibility and mutual exclusion."

Moving down in the vertical relationships of the hierarchy of being, one encounters heroes. They were held in greater esteem than ordinary humans, because they were of more than human stature, capable of greater feats of endurance and strength, for example Hercules who was half-human, half-divine, his father being Zeus. Heroes are related to human beings, but this relationship is in the form of a binary opposition of sameness and otherness, in the same way that they are related to the gods.

Humanity was conceived by the Greeks primarily in terms of a body/soul dualism. The Platonic idea of independence of the soul (*psyche*) from the body (*soma*), and the urge to get rid of it, results in a hostility toward the body. As Aristotle subsequently argued, the Platonic affirmation of the one-sided superiority of the psyche over the body only exhibited a failure to grasp the relation of the former to the latter. That the two can be logically distinguished need not preclude the truth that the body serves as the instrument through which a soul expresses itself. The Aristotelian emphasis on body-soul organicity, as WKC Guthrie (1975: 143) rightly suggests, indicates "a hint that a satisfactory study of life must be based on a study of the living body". The dualism finds a unity in what mortals affirm about their own existence. This affirmation, according to Heidegger (1949: 274), implies that they belong to the earth. But being on earth means being "Aunter dem Himmel" (Heidegger 1954). Humans share the idea of *eros*, which was derived largely from the philosophy of Plato (*Symposium* 210A-E), for whom it meant a love of humans for the divine, a desire by which they seek a contemplation which will be wholly satisfying. This leads to transcendence of the transient things of the world.

The underworld was the lowest of all possible worlds. Spirits and humans who, after death, dwell everlastingly in the underworld were thought to be like shadows, without real bodily substance.⁵

After this very brief and incomplete investigation into embodiment in classical Greek culture the theoretical propositions set out above need to be applied to the Parthenon's west façade in order to ascertain how it symbolizes embodiment in the relationships of its structural forms.

What should emerge from a dialogic approach to architecture is a holistic view, a view according to which the greatest unity is

achieved by the fusion of divergent relations. This is in agreement with Christian Norberg-Schulz's (1965: 109) statement that "architecture controls or regulates the relations between man and his environment". While it has seldom been acknowledged that architecture is a representative art, one may be more radical than Norberg-Schulz and state that in architecture human beings represent themselves. While in Greek architecture "man" is the dominant subject of representation, his object of representation in Doric temples is the totality of classical cosmology. The relationships of "strife" (Heraclitus and Heidegger), "signifier/signified" (Leach), contradiction (Heckster), and the "dialogic" (Leddy) will be the basis of an understanding of the meaning of the parts composing the temple, which is taken to be a representative image.

The relations of the forms resting on the stylobate are dynamic, but as Leddy had noted, the path is both upward and downward. This is the path of reciprocal interdependence, also in the case of the Parthenon's west façade.

The stylobate is a platform-like structure with steps, which give support to the superstructure and conceals the underworld. On these horizontal steps the Doric columns rise vertically. The proportions of these columns are very specific, and in this regard G Germann (1980: 25) noted that the builders of the Doric temples observed that a man's foot is a sixth the height of his body. They transferred this proportion to architecture and made the Doric column, including its capital, six times as tall as the width of the bottom of the shaft. In this way the Doric column began to represent the power and grace of the male body.

The zone of heroes is symbolized by the strong horizontal entablature which is contrapuntal to both the verticality of the columns and the triangular pediment which is a pointed form, resting on what is below and reaching into infinity.

The Greek cultivated world strongly exhibits a congruence of sensory pattern and abstract idea.⁶ This a world which came into being in the Parthenon as a result of tension and complementarity. It is a world of harmony which was viewed by the Greeks as the soul of the universe. Harmony furthermore involves a hierarchical order. In this hierarchical cosmos man reaches understanding by means of reason which enables him to understand the worlds of Ideas, gods, heroes and the dead. Thus reason presides over the harmonious formation of man, of which the human body was the visible paragon

(Haas 1956: 21). If one accepts the very poetic statement by Martha Graham (1991), the renowned dancer, that "the body never lies", then we can do so only in the sense of the visible human body - not the speculative bodies of gods, heroes and spirits. Therefore, the Doric column can be interpreted rhetorically as exemplifying the truth about a culture in which the male form was *the norm of virtue*. This involved "the sensuous lived world in which usefulness, beauty and living are essential" (Leddy 1994: 189).

In conclusion, a word of criticism. The generic element of the Doric column in temple construction can be related to the intellectual clarity of Greek architecture, but one may argue that it caused an aggravating inflexibility in using its formal systems in complex compositions (Howe 1985: 105-6). This may lead to a reassessment of the Doric column as limited by inflexibility, since inflexibility eliminates strife. However, counterpointed by the Erechtheion (421-05 BC), an Ionic temple on the Acropolis, the female forms of caryatids attached to it is juxtaposed with the male order of the Parthenon.

Notes

1 See Maré (1998).

2 Heidegger's concept of "disclosure", to which "strife" belongs, is elucidated in Maré (1995: 26-7).

3 See Seymour-Smith (1986).

4 For an overview of myths dealing with the Greek gods, heroes, humans, and the spirits who are captive in the underworld see the chapter on Greek mythology in F Guirand (1959).

5 See Homer, *Iliad* 23 and *Odyssey* 11.

6 I derive this idea from Thiel (1961: 46) who wrote: "It is a tragic fact that much of our manmade world no longer exhibits this congruence of sensory pattern and abstract idea."

Bibliography

- Bachelard, G. 1984. *The new scientific spirit*. Translated from the French by A Goldhammer. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Germann, G. 1980. *Einführung in die Geschichte der Architekturtheorie*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Guirand, F (ed). 1959. Greek mythology. Translated from the French by R Aldington & D Ames. *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*. London: Paul Hamlyn.
- Graham, M. 1991. *Blood memory*. New York: Doubleday.
- Guthrie, WKC. 1973. *The Greek philosophers: from Thales to Aristotle*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Haas, WS. *The destiny of the mind: East and West*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Heidegger, M. 1949. Hölderlin and the essence of poetry. *Existence and being*. Indiana: Regenry/Gateway.

- Heidegger, M. 1954. *Bauen Wohnen Denken. Vorträge und Aufsätze.* Pfullingen: Neske.
- Heidegger, M. 1971. *Poetry, language, thought.* Translated by A Hofstadter. New York: Harper & Row.
- Homer. *Iliad.* Any edition.
- Homer. *Odyssey.* Any edition.
- Howe, TN. 1985. *The invention of the Doric order.* PhD thesis, Harvard University. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International.
- Leach, E. 1976. *Culture and communication: the logic by which symbols are connected.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leddy, T. 1994. Dialogical architecture, in MH Mitias (ed), *Philosophy and architecture.* Amsterdam: Atlanta, GA.
- Maré, EA. 1995. Earth and world in two place images: an interpretation of John Clarke's *Stockade I* and *Stockade II.* *Acta Academia* 27(3): 20-36.
- Maré, EA. 1998. A rhetorical interpretation of the sacred geometry of the façade of the Parthenon in terms of Plato's Acreation myth" in the *Timaeus*, in JD Gericke & PJ Maritz (eds), *Plato's philosophy of education and its relevance to contemporary society & Education in the ancient world*, volume 1. Proceedings of the First International Conference of the South African Society of Greek Philosophy and the Humanities 29 April - 6 May 1997. Pretoria: The SA Society for Greek Philosophy and the Humanities: 205-21.
- Norberg-Schulz, C. 1965. *Intentions in architecture.* Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.
- Plato. *Symposium.* Any edition.
- Sallis, J. 1989. Heidegger's poetics: the question of mimesis, in W Biemel & FW von Herrmann (Hrsg), *Kunst und Technik: Gedächtnisschrift zur 100. Geburtstag von Martin Heidegger.* Frankfurt aM: Klostermann.
- Seymour-Smith, C. 1986. Structuralism. *MacMillan Dictionary of Anthropology.* London: MacMillan: 269-70.
- Stace, WT. 1956. *A critical history of Greek philosophy.* London: MacMillan.
- Thiel, P. 1961. A sequence-experience notation for architectural and urban spaces. *Town Planning Review* 32(1, April): 33-52.
- Venturi, R. 1965. Complexity and contradiction in architecture. *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal* (September-October): 18-36.
- Verdant, J-P. 1989. Dim body, dazzling body, in M Feher et al (eds), *Fragments for a history of the human body.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.