The Panathenaic Stadium: A Cultural Masterpiece (Script)

If you were in Athens, Greece a few days ago, you would probably be spending the night of June 17th here, in the Panathenaic Stadium or Kallimararo, which translates into “beautiful marble”. At least the famous French fashion house of Christian Dior did, bringing in Athens a fashion show dedicated to the house’s Cruise 2022 collection named “Made in Greece”,¹ inspired from Greek history and celebrating the bicentennial of the Greek Revolution.² But, what if you were here some other time? Well, if you were to visit in the summer of 2018, you would buy a ticket and watch The Scorpions, one of the most successful rock bands of all time perform on this stage,³ while in 2016, for example, you would see thousands of people, including me, finishing the Annual Athens Classic Marathon to support a philanthropic cause. However, Kallimarmaro is not an interesting touristic destination because of the aforementioned events. It is appealing and has hosted numerous such occurrences attracting visitors from around the globe, because of its incredible beauty and magnificent history. It is important to note that a monument is defined by every little thing that has added to its identity over the years, and this one, too, has a story.

Let’s find that one out!

The Panathenaic Stadium goes back to 329 BC, when it was inaugurated and first used for the celebration of the Great Panathenaea, a religious festival performed every four years since 566 BC, honoring goddess Athena, the protectress of the city of Athens.⁴ The celebration itself included

² "Dior fashion show at Panathenaic Stadium celebrates Greece,” ekathimerini-com, June 16, 2021, link.
plainly sacrifices of animals, but the religious event was accompanied by numerous other activities, including musical, poetical, and athletic contests. Of course, the stadium was patently utilized as the place where the latter competitions took place, which are known to be games between nude males and in greek are called “γυμνικοί αγώνες”, and which basically held the form of modern athletics championships.

Now, if we take a closer look at the stadium, we will observe that it has a horseshoe shape, but that wasn’t always the case. When the orator Lycurgus took control of the finances in Athens and undertook the responsibility of creating this structure back around the year 338 BC, he had originally given the stadium a greek parallelogram shape, which changed as a result of the influence of the Roman Empire. In fact, even though Greece lacked political power, during the reign of Emperor Hadrian (AD 117-135), the stadium, which was still hosting sporting events, became the subject of artistic inspiration, and was aesthetically revived by the added Sphendone of the Hippodrome (curved section) and the ornamental pentelic marble covering the stadium from end to end. These transformations were made possible by the donations of sophist Herodes Atticus, the aristocratic Athenian who also supported financially the south slope of the Acropolis.

Nevertheless, the most fascinating aspect of this monument is that there is an extended historical period, when it was almost completely dilapidated. Specifically, owing primarily to Christianity’s triumph, a structure originally built for the praise of a deity who belonged in the Twelve Olympians could not maintain its status and prestige. The barbarity of animal fights that

---

5 “Panathenae,” Encyclopedia Britannica, May 2, 2016, link.
6 “The Panathenaic Stadium: History.”
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Eleftheria Traiou,”The Panathenaic Stadium, Miracle in Marble,” Greece Is, Aug 9, 2016, link.
10 Ibid.
11 “The Panathenaic Stadium: History.”
were established by the Romans and hosted in the Stadium\textsuperscript{12} did not help its preservation either. Therefore, the extravagant embellishments of the second century AD were left at the hands of decay. The marvelous statues which used to cover the space, the ornate thrones utilized by kings in Ancient Greece, the track, the marble slabs defining the starting and finishing lines, the Corinthian propylon in the entrance, the triple-arched bridge in Ilissos, made also of marble, that facilitated uncomplicated access to the Stadium, and generally everything that rendered it superb was falling apart, as Athenians incorporated most marbles to modern for the moment Athenian buildings.\textsuperscript{13} If you are wondering then how is it possible for the monument to stand today, I’ve got the answer for you.

Around the year 1894, covered in soil and deprived of its ancient heritage, the Stadium was decided to be reconstructed to host the first modern Olympic Games of 1896.\textsuperscript{14} To be more exact, this idea flourished owing to a benefactor names Evangelos Zappas who raised the issue of the Stadium’s renovation in 1856.\textsuperscript{15} Two games were hosted in years 1870 and 1875 respectively, as a first attempt to restore the games.\textsuperscript{16} Thanks to Georgios Averoff, the revival project had finally enough funds to be undertaken, and the Panathenaic Stadium was rebuilt on the foundations of the authentic one upon his request.\textsuperscript{17} It is interesting to note, nonetheless, that as the reconstruction of the Stadium began in 1895, it was extremely difficult for it to be ready in less than a year, and despite wholesome efforts to carry materials for the project from 350 mines and the numerous people involved in the process, it was the snowy weather in the Mount Penteli, from where the marble was taken, that made that wish impossible.\textsuperscript{18} Some of the marble which we notice today was

\textsuperscript{12} “The Panathenaic Stadium: History.”
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} "The Panathenaic Olympic Stadium,” \textit{The Athens Key}; link.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Eleftheria Traiou,"The Panathenaic Stadium, Miracle in Marble."
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
during the inaugural international Olympic Games and until the 1900s, limestone for the statues and wood for the seats. On the contrary, these double-sided herms here were never reconstructed, but instead they were found during the 1869-1870 excavations, and so they consist of the original marble used for the Stadium, similarly in a way to the underground passage utilized by the athletes which is said to date back to the 4th century BC. Of course, by the time the later international Olympic Games of years 1906 and 2004 respectively occurred, everything was in place. It was around that time that people began calling the structure “Kallimarmaro”.

In reality, it is not only the monument itself that has seen enormous changes, but the environment around it as well. Ilissos river, where the Panathenaic Stadium is from antiquity standing, is the same Ilissos beside whom Socrates and Phaedrus conversed in Plato’s homonymous dialogue, the same Ilissos passing by the Stadium’s ruins until the year 1856, and the same Ilissos that flows underneath the earth today. However, the human perception of the river changes in accordance to the way humans create history on history, making monuments a huge canvas of abstract art, as each person interacting with one, chooses himself what it means to him. The Panathenaic Stadium is thus a canvas only half painted yet.

Indeed, when visiting this beautiful place, people do not solely honor the past. They built on it as well. It is wonderful that the Panathenaic Stadium is still so alive. It awes people by holding onto its ancient character and modern history, while it synchronously allows them to celebrate life on the very same place through the various cultural events that take place here. Let’s be honest: nothing, not even humans, lasts forever. However, Kallimarmaro has stood the test of time by adopting to new and exciting ideas.

---

19 Eleftheria Traiou,"The Panathenaic Stadium, Miracle in Marble."
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.