

Graffiti on the Erechtheion

by Alexandra L. Lesk

The Erechtheion on the Athenian Akropolis has survived the vicissitudes of time surprisingly well considering the explosions and mortar fire during the Greek War of Independence and its fairly constant occupation. Romans, Byzantines, Franks, Turks, early modern European travellers and German occupiers interacted with the building and left their personal marks. This paper presents the graffiti which has never before been documented or analysed. Crosses are scattered all over the temple, sometimes at great height, from a time when the building served as a Byzantine church. The majority of the graffiti is concentrated inside the roof of the North Porch which was accessible via ladder to a loft space as depicted in several illustrations and descriptions from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Names and dates, poetry and sketches of ships are either etched into the fire-blackened areas of the marble, or written in black charcoal or scratched on the paler sections. The maidens of the south porch of the Erechtheion did not escape defacement either. They have names and symbols carved on their legs, arms and cheeks. Lastly, the “secret passageway” between the North Porch and the west chamber of the Erechtheion, which was only excavated in the early twentieth century, bears the marks of more recent visitors.

Although there are many accounts of early travelers to Athens which tell us a great deal about the Erechtheion and their reactions to its beauty, the graffiti attest to a far wider range of very personal interactions with the building that span millennia.