

# Blazing fire

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## Source of arts

Sparkling stories  
about fire

at the **Acropolis  
Museum**



ACROPOLIS MUSEUM

κόσμον τόνδε, τὸν αὐτὸν ἀπάντων, οὔτε τις θεῶν οὔτε ἀνθρώπων ἐποίησεν,  
ἀλλ' ἦν ἀεὶ καὶ ἔστιν καὶ ἔσται πῦρ ἀείζωνον ἀπτόμενον μέτρα καὶ ἀποσβεννύμενον μέτρα

*This world, which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made; but it was ever, is now and ever shall be an ever-living fire, with measures kindling and measures going out.* (Heraclitus, Fragment 30)

**A**ncient Greek philosophical thought sought the beginning of the world in the four elements of nature: earth, water, fire and air. For Thales the primary element of cosmogony was water, for Anaximenes air, and for Heraclitus, Aristotle and Theophrastus it was fire. Nonetheless, for the history of culture, the use, keeping and production of fire was truly a cosmogonic event. By taming this random and uncontrollable power man acquired the tool that would forever change the course of his development.

The four elements are masterfully brought together in the form of the “three-bodied daemon”. Water, fire and air are represented allegorically with the waves, lightning bolt and bird that he holds in his hands. The fourth element, earth, is symbolized by the snakelike body of this strange being that decorated the pediment of the Hekatompedon.



*The “three-bodied daemon”.*  
1st floor, Archaic Gallery.

Ancient man observed the fires that broke out freely in nature, with awe, wonder and fear. In a bolt of lightning he would see a sign of Zeus, and in the eruption of a volcano, the chthonic power of Hephaestus. Myth would have it that Prometheus stole this divine knowledge and offered it as a gift of life to mankind.



*Lightning bolt in the hand of Zeus.*  
Reconstruction of the east pediment.  
3rd floor, Parthenon Gallery, atrium

The purifying power of fire became a means of communication with the divine. It burned on altars and the fragrant smoke from the portions of sacrificed animal, fruit, wine and aromatic kindling sent a message of man's piety to the gods, as it ascended to the heavens.



*Sacrifice to Athena on an altar with branches.*  
1st floor, showcase 29 no. 3.

On the frieze of the Parthenon animals are led to the altar of Athena Polias for the great sacrifice of the Panathenaic festival. Young girls carry vessels for libations and incense burners for the burning of myrrh and incense. The sacred fire to light the altar would have been carried at dawn in a torch race from the altar of Prometheus in the Academy.



*Block VIII of the east frieze.  
3rd floor, Parthenon Gallery.*



The capacity of fire to create and destroy and to generate and be regenerated connected it with religion and worship, but also dark magic. Hecate, goddess of roads, the moon and night magic, crosses the borders of the world of the dead tearing the darkness with the flame of her lighted torches.

*Hecate on a votive relief from the sanctuary of Asclepius.  
Ground floor, no. NAM 1377*

Fire was the core of human socialisation. Its light and warmth would gather the group around it, promoting thought and communication. Food was cooked in its flame and the place where it was lit, the hestia (hearth), became synonymous with home and family, protected by the goddess of the same name, Hestia.



*Brazier and cooking pot,  
Ground Floor, showcase 3 nos. 70-71.*



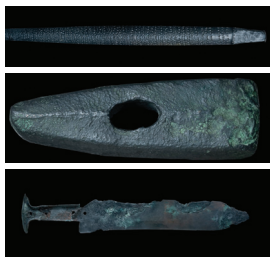
*Case with surgical instruments and cupping cups.  
Ground floor, Sanctuary of Asclepius, no. NAM 1378.*

Fire contributed to hygiene, therapy and healing. It warmed bathwater, disinfected surgical instruments, and cauterised wounds. When ignited it created a vacuum within a cupping cup which allowed it to attach to the skin and to free the body of pathogens.

Fire was a generative factor in all the material achievements of mankind. Firing the potter's kiln or the metalworker's furnace became an agent of progress and a catalyst in the development of arts and crafts.



*Representation of ceramic and metalwork workshops.  
1st floor, showcase 29 no. 2.*



Metal melted by the same fire could become a means of living or a weapon of death. The products from the workshop of a coppersmith who lived on the Acropolis in the 12th century BC throw this into relief. Swords of war and extermination were produced alongside the chisels, ploughshares and hammers of peaceful labour.

*Chisel, hammer and sword from the so-called "treasure of the coppersmith".*  
1st floor, showcase 4, nos. 17, 18, 5.

Athens owed its economic growth in the 6th century BC in large part to the fire that transformed humble clay into utilitarian objects and beautiful works of art. Attic vases flooded the markets of the Mediterranean bringing large profits to the potters, who showed their gratitude to the great goddess of the Acropolis by dedicating costly gifts to her.



*The potter's relief.*  
1st floor, Acr. 1332

Fire can be transformed from a creative power to a cause of total destruction. Such a catastrophe took place in the most violent manner in Athens in 480 BC, when the Persians burned the Acropolis, reducing temples and statues to rubble.



*Sculptures and coins showing traces of the Persians' fire.*  
1st floor, showcase 8.



Fire can obliterate its own creation but can also give it life again. Only this head remains from a bronze statue of a warrior. The body was handed back to the fire and the molten metal was transformed into something new, affirming the eternal cycle of life and death.

*Head of a hoplite.*  
1st floor, showcase 40