

Cape of Sounion, with its famous temple dedicated to the god Poseidon, is one of the most beautiful natural areas of Attica and one of the most impressive archaeological sites in Greece. In ancient times it was called Sounias Akra (edge) and was connected with the legends of Athens and the Aegean. Cape Sounion is the spot where Aegeus, king of Athens, allegedly jumped off the cliff, thus giving his name to the Aegean Sea. It is also referred to as a sacred place in the Homeric epics. The site was chosen for its direct relationship with the sea, since this was the last piece of land seen by ships departing from Athens and the first on returning from their voyage.



Temple of Poseidon, built around 444 - 440 BC, Cape Sounion

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The site of Sounion was inhabited since prehistoric times. From the 8th century BC however, the cult of Poseidon and Athena started to develop but the sanctuaries were destroyed in 480 BC by Persian troops during Xerxes I's invasion of Greece. In the mid-5th century BC, by order of Pericles, the Temple of Poseidon was rebuilt, the ruins of which now dominate the cape's summit with its 16 standing columns partly restored.



Temple of Poseidon, part of the south colonnade with foundations of the earlier poros temple dating from the Archaic Period, Cape Sounion
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In a maritime country like Greece, the god of the sea was bound to occupy a high position in the

divine hierarchy. His implacable wrath, manifested in the form of storms, was greatly feared by all mariners. In an age without mechanical power, storms very frequently resulted in shipwrecks and drownings. The sanctuary of Poseidon, therefore, was a venue where mariners, and also entire cities or states, could propitiate Poseidon, by making animal sacrifice, or leaving gifts.



Temple of Poseidon, part of the south colonnade with foundations of the earlier poros temple dating from the Archaic Period, Cape Sounion

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The sacred precinct (*temenos*) of Poseidon was entered through a monumental gateway of poros and marble, to the north of the temple, the *propylaea*. Beyond, along the north side of the *temenos*, runs a stoa, some 40 m. long by 9 m. wide, divided into two aisles by an internal colonnade of six columns. A second smaller stoa occupied the west side of the precinct. The stoas served as accommodation for visitors to the sanctuary.



The propylaea, a monumental construction of poros and marble, to the north of the temple, through which the sacred precinct of Poseidon was entered, Cape Sounion

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The north stoa, 40 m. long by 9 m. wide, divided into two aisles by an internal colonnade of six smooth columns, Cape Sounion

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The temple of Poseidon is a Doric peripteral temple with six columns on the narrow sides and thirteen on the long ones, made of locally quarried white marble. At the centre of the temple colonnade would have been the hall of worship (*naos*), a windowless rectangular room, similar to the partly intact hall at the Temple of Hephaistos in Athens (which is considered to be the work by the same architect). It would have housed a colossal bronze statue of Poseidon.



The temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion, north side colonnade, Cape Sounion

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The temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion from the northeast, Cape Sounion
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A sculptured frieze originally lined the four sides of the area in front of the *pronaos*. It depicted the Battle of the Centaurs, the Battle of the Gods and Giants, and the deeds of Theseus. However, like on the temple of Hephaistos in Athens, there was no frieze decoration on the metopes. The relief friezes have suffered considerably from climatic conditions and exposure to the elements. The best preserved are exhibited in the [Archaeological Museum of Laurion](#).



The temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion from the north, Cape Sounion
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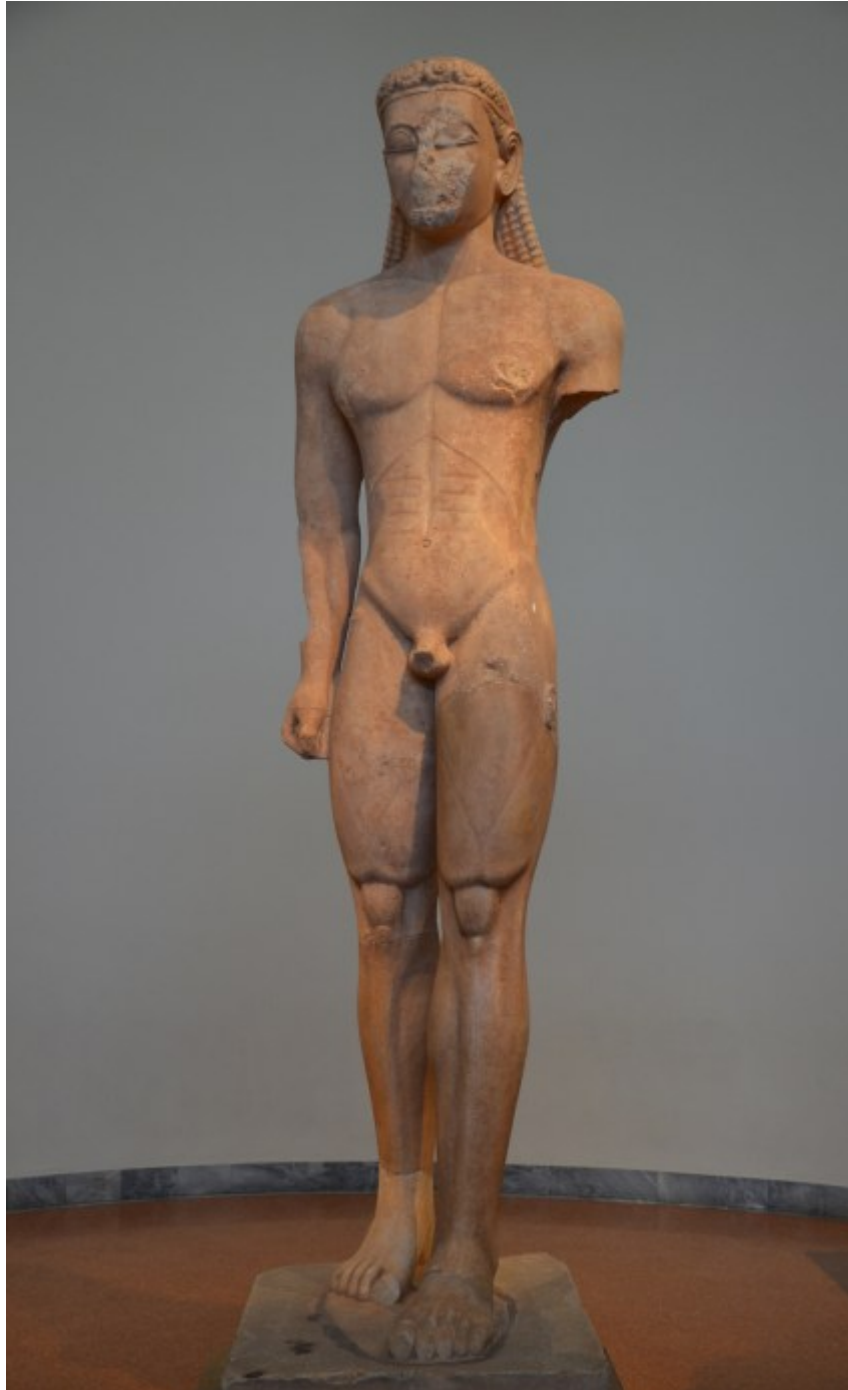
The decline of Sounion began at the end of the Hellenistic period. By Roman times the two temples had already been deserted. Pausanias describes the monuments in the 2nd century AD, confusing the temple of Poseidon with the temple of Athena which may indicate the abandonment of the area.



The temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion from the north, Cape Sounion

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Archaeological excavation of the site in 1906 uncovered numerous artefacts and inscriptions. Fragments of 17 early archaic kouroi were found in a deep pit east of the Temple of Poseidon. The statues were probably damaged by the Persians at the time they destroyed the earlier temple. Since they were sacred dedications, they could not be entirely discarded, and thus they were deposited in the pit to make way for newer, undamaged dedications. The best preserved of these statues is a 7th century BC marble kouros statue known as the [Sounion Kouros](#) now on exhibit in the Athens National Archaeological Museum.



*Statue of a Kouros, from the Sanctuary of Poseidon at
Sounion, ca. 600 BC*

National Archaeological Museum of Athens

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In the 19th century, Sounion was a popular destination for tourists, many of whom have engraved their names on the ruins of the temple of Poseidon. The most famous signature is that of the Romantic poet George Lord Byron.



Temple of Poseidon, 19th century Graffiti on the left pillar, Cape Sounion, Greece

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“Place me on Sunium’s marbled steep,
Where nothing, save the waves and I,
May hear our mutual murmurs sweep;
There, swanlike, let me sing and die:
A land of slaves shall ne’er be mine—

Dash down yon cup of Samian wine!”

The Isles of Greece by Lord Byron (1788-1824)



Temple of Poseidon, built around 444 – 440 BC, Cape Sounion

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Sources: [The Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites](#) - [Wikipedia](#)

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