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**“The Parthenon Part II, 432 BCE - 2017 CE:
An Icon and a Ruin”**



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Assembly Room, A. K. Smiley Public Library

The Parthenon II: From Then to Now

“We dropped anchor within half a mile of the village. Away off, across the undulating Plain of Attica, could be seen a little square-topped hill with a something on it, which our glasses soon discovered to be the ruined edifices of the citadel of the Athenians, and most prominent among them loomed the venerable Parthenon.... [Then] the commandant of the Piraeus came in his boat, and said we must either depart or else get outside the harbor and remain imprisoned in our ship, under rigid quarantine, for eleven days!... To lie a whole day in sight of the Acropolis, and yet be obliged to go away without visiting Athens! Disappointment was hardly a strong enough word to describe the circumstances.”

Mark Twain. *Innocents Abroad*

“It’s a bore. Few people even bother to look—it looked better in the brochure.”
Walker Percy

“I think the feeling which at present reigns for the restoration of ruins, the classification of fragments... should be cried down by the untied protest of all real lovers of the picturesque. Why, I know not, but certain I am that the Parthenon as it now stands, a ruin in every sense of the term, its walls destroyed, its columns shivered, its friezes scattered, its capitals half-buried by their own weight — but clear of all else, is, if not a grander, assuredly a more impressive object than when, in the palmiest days of Athenian glory, its marble... first met the rays of the morning sun.”

Architect Henry Cook (1851)

“Before Isadora Duncan had been a nymph from a temple. Now she was the Parthenon itself.”

Carl Van Vechten

Tourists who climb the hill to view the Parthenon have, since the 1950s, tread, without noticing, on hundreds of antique paving stones shifted from their original sites to this zig-zag crazy path; they walk on one ruin to view another.

Paraphrase of Mary Beard, *TLS*, 5/20/16, 12.

Prologue: A capsule review of Part I of this paper, accompanied by a few images from the first talk that hopefully will awaken your memories:

The Acropolis of Athens, [1 – 16, every few seconds] occupied for millennia, had been primarily the site of fortifications, mythic narratives, and temples honoring their gods. But after the Persians sacked and burned its buildings and votive statues in 480 BCE the Athenians decided to entirely redesign and rebuild the desecrated ground. In addition to restoring the more sacred northern side of the rock they devoted nearly two decades under Phidias and the architect Iktinos, from initial planning to the last statue, in erecting a temple on the south side, first to celebrate their patron goddess Athena but also to proclaim their civic pride, and imperial power, to the world. The first paper recounted the mythology, engineering, politics, religion, expense and aesthetics of erecting the Parthenon. It also took up the men of the 18th and 19th centuries, especially self-taught classicist and art historian Johann Winckelmann, who invented for us an ideal of barebones classical purity in his oft-quoted phrase (“noble simplicity and quiet grandeur”). He and those who followed him shaped how ancient Greece’s monuments and statuary have been received throughout the world ever since. This pristine vision contrasted almost violently with the painted and even garish decorations of the original building: brightly-colored metopes and frieze, and the 40 foot tall chryelephantine statue of the goddess with its 2500 pounds of removable gold.

Today we’ll take a speed train through the centuries of the Parthenon’s checkered history after it was dedicated, and end with some thoughts—quite a few thoughts, in fact— about “ruins” as cultural markers and expressions of an age, including ours.

Not a great deal has come down to us about the earliest history of the Parthenon after its completion in 432 BCE.¹ The 5th century Athenians had little reason to write about such a self-evident public triumph. Then Athens lost much of its empire after the disastrous Peloponnesian War that finally ended in 404 BCE. But even as the city descended into a welter of oligarchies, tyrants, and a few temporary recoveries of democracy—given its reputation, there was remarkably little democracy in Athens over its long history—and its final submission to Philip of Macedon in 332, it retained its position as the major center of Western culture, learning and the arts. Like the World Trade Centers, it immediately became symbolic. Foreign potentates who thought little of Athens as a military or political ally made sure to send their sons to the city for their education in rhetoric, philosophy and the other arts of living well—and successfully—in the new urban societies of the Mediterranean. And the economies of scale in the ancient world made serious occupation of conquered lands very hard, even

¹ Disclaimer: this claim reflects the level of analysis and research I've undertaken here. There may be fragments of city accounting records, untranslated ancient speeches with news of the building, arguments over stored treasure or maintenance gaffs, that have survived and are known to serious specialists, but that's a level I can't rise—or descend—to.

for the Romans: much easier to let the locals manage things as long as they didn't revolt. It was, ironically, more peace-producing to be conquered.

Writing some 80 years after the Parthenon's dedication Plato [17] does not mention the temple per se, but he does comment on Phidias's statue. Committed to a didactic realism, he condemned any illusion in art—*skiagraphia*— as corruptive (*Republic* 602d), and critiqued the chryselephantine Athena as all out of proportion: “the upper parts appear smaller than they should be, and the lower ones larger, due to the wider or shorter distance to our eyes.... saying farewell to truth.” (*Sophist* 235e-236a). Plato doesn't mention the fact that the Parthenon itself is an illusory structure designed to trick the eye by giving the viewer straight lines via curves, but he well could have; it wasn't an architect's secret that such illusions were built into the temple and the superstructure (not the stylobate) of the Parthenon and its elaborate entry gate, the Propylaia. It's a question I would have loved to ask him.

As we move into the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, we start encountering enticing tidbits, snapshots, of our building. In 334 BCE Alexander the Great, after winning the first of his several battles against the Persians, at the Granikos river near Troy, sent 300 Persian suits of armor and fourteen shields to Athens as a tribute to Athena (Beard, 150). [18] The shields were

mounted on the Parthenon's east architrave; the hooks and slotting securing them left traces that can still be seen. He added an inscription, denigrating the Spartans for refusing to join his war effort, the first writing carved into the stones of the building itself. Alexander's followed by a small-minded successor in Athens, one Lakhares, who is said to have taken down the shields—and stripped the gold off the Athena statue—to pay his soldiers (Waterfield, 242). A succession of other small conquerors and self-advertisers followed Lakhares's lead with new shields, or placed metal wreaths along the north and south sides of the Parthenon—the Greeks liked to display the spoils of war on the temples of their gods—but none was more notorious, even farcical, than the demagogue with the Best Name of All: Demetrius *Poliorketes*: Demetrius the Besieger (337–283 BCE). Do read Plutarch's life of him when you have an extra half hour. [19]

He earned his name from the huge machines he devised when, as a young man, he laid siege to Rhodes; these included a battering ram 180 feet long that needed a thousand soldiers to propel it, and a wheeled siege tower called "Hel-**ep**-olis" ("Taker of Cities") which was 125 feet tall, 60 feet wide, and weighed in at eighteen thousand tons. And he failed to take the city! The Rhodians commemorated their victory by erecting their famous Colossus statue of Helios, their protector-god, at the entrance to

their harbor. [20] At ninety-nine feet—comp the 151 foot Statue of Liberty—it was explicitly meant to ridicule Demetrius and his monster machines.

The Besieger went on to invade Attica and Athens three times. [21] At first he was declared a god called “Soter (“preserver” or “savior”) by the Athenians after ridding them of their current tyrant (you can feel the influence of Alexander’s cult). A shrine was built at the spot near modern Piraeus where he landed, of which traces remain. But before long he himself was driven out as a debauched tyrant. He bought and sold lovers, male and female, then lost standing when he assaulted a young boy named Democles the Handsome. The youth kept on refusing his attentions but one day found himself cornered at the baths. Having no way out and being unable physically to resist his suitor, he pulled the lid off a cauldron of boiling water and threw himself in. You’d think that would be enough to shatter Demetrius’s honor permanently, but not so: on his next triumphal return to the city he received his greatest honor (I’m quoting Plutarch): “They gave orders that he should lodge in the back part of the Parthenon [i.e., the small, cramped treasury] which accordingly he did, and Athena was said to have received him as her guest, a guest not very fit to come under her roof, or suitable to her virgin purity.” Spiritually, that must be the Parthenon’s lowest point. He ended up drinking himself to death in prison in Egypt: a fitting end. And Rhodes’ Colossus didn’t last much

longer either, [22] thanks to an earthquake in 226 BCE, snapping off at the knees and falling onto the land as though it too were drunk.

In the 2nd century BCE the ruling dynasty in Pergamum, the Attalids, hoping to elevate their cultural standing, built the famous Stoa in the Athenian agora, [23] a reconstructed version of which impresses tourists today and houses the finds of the American excavations in the city. The Attalids also built a garish monument right on the NE corner of the Parthenon, tall enough to obscure the view, and topped it with a bronze chariot. A couple of centuries later, when the young Emperor Augustus was in command across the Mediterranean, the long-vanished Attalids' extravaganza was quietly renamed in his honor. And that wasn't enough: the city then built a lovely temple—only foundations and column fragments remain [24]— seventy five feet directly east of the Parthenon, and on its same axis: the Temple of Rome and of Augustus: smart Athenians.

There were a number of other royal attempts to re-brand the Parthenon: here's just one. On the same eastern architrave that for a time held Alexander's shields, Mr. Eugene Andrews, [25] who had just graduated from Cornell in the class of 1896, noticed several large dowel cuttings under the metopes as well as a number of small, closely grouped cuttings under many of the triglyphs. [26] He jerry-rigged a rope ladder to

reach them, and a bos'n's chair from which to work, and at great personal risk gradually unpacked the puzzle. The dowels had supported another set of shields, while the cuttings proved to be faint traces of Greek bronze letters which, with enviable effort and ingenuity, could be deciphered. Seated precariously in his chair he painstakingly worked out their meaning: [27]

The Council of the Areopagus and the Council of the 600 and the Athenian People to the Great Emperor Nero Caesar Claudius Augustus Germanicus, son of god, when Tiberius Claudius Novius son of Philinos is acting as general over the hoplites for the eighth time [and while he is epimeletes and nomothetes] and while Paullina daughter of Capito is priestess of Athena. [28]

Mounted in 61-62 CE, it sounds at first like a Neronian take-over of the Parthenon, but the grammar (and the Greek, rather than Nero's Latin) indicate that it was an honor accorded the emperor by city officials. Their motive, indeed their freedom, to do so, however, we know little about. No later inscription was placed on the Parthenon in antiquity, at least not one that left a trace, and this one didn't last long: it was taken down immediately after Nero died, and the drill-holes and markings remained a mystery until Anderson risked his neck to decipher them. But their presence affirms that the Parthenon, nearly 500 years after its completion,

still carried the cultural—arguably transcendental—authority that had marked its beginning. Generally, tyrants tried to magnify their own importance by “improving” or repairing the building rather than sacking it; that was key to its preservation in the ancient world. Who’d want to be known as the tyrant who knocked over, say, Mount Vernon?

Other emperors left their marks: Hadrian, for example, had his statue placed inside the cella, alongside Athena. And Hadrian’s protégé, the wealthy sophist Herodes Atticus (101-177 CE), who claimed descent from Theseus, even changed his name to reflect his devotion. He restored a number of classical structures throughout Greece, and built the famous Odeon on the SW corner of the Acropolis that still bears his name. [29]

In the next century the intrepid Greek traveler Pausanias—a boring writer but invaluable to archeologists—described the Parthenon in detail, including the Phidias statue. The Athenians must at some point have replaced the looted gold on their Athena, since Pausanias reports its presence, but my money’s on gold plate for that restoration. The building was still in relatively good condition, with its main features intact. Pausanias dutifully catalogued many of the hundreds of votive and show-offy statues that stood on the Acropolis, and then gave us the authoritative descriptions of the pedimental sculptures and the Phidias Athena that I quoted in my first talk. But, curiously he says nothing about the metopes

or the frieze, or even more curiously, about the building itself: not a word beyond the fact that he walked inside it. And shortly after his visit some efforts to restore the cella colonnade were undertaken, using blocks that had originally served as statue pedestals: on my first visit in 1971, when one could still enter the Parthenon, I could see—and touch, invaluable for our experience of ruins—the lettering naming the statues on those transferred blocks.

The next century, the 3rd CE, was the first really disastrous one for our building. In 267 CE the Heruli, Germanic tribesmen from roughly what is now Denmark came south and joined the Goths in sacking both Byzantium and Athens. They set fire to many monuments, including the Erechtheum and the Parthenon. The fire—probably supplemented by a Visigoth sack two centuries later—gutted most of the cella, including whatever version of Phidias's Athena that still stood inside it, cracked marble walls, destroyed the eastern colonnade and the great entry doors and, maybe worst of all, the roof; the entire building has never been covered since. You can still see a few burn marks from their invasion [30], and you can still see the shallow drain channels carved in the *pteroia*, the peristyle base, to move accumulating rain water. Some repairs were undertaken, including columns taken willy-nilly from other buildings, and a copy of the original statue was put in place, but it can have resembled

Phidias's masterpiece only in outline. It was another century and change before another Roman emperor, that last, anachronistic defender of pagan religion, Julian the Apostate, is credited with ordering a wooden roof placed over the cella, protecting that imitation of an imitation, but leaving the peristyle exposed as it is today. And a few successors continued to patch up the building with dressed stones, many of them pedestals for sculptures, scavenged from other sites and buildings. So a number of the marble bases and statues Pausanias described on the Acropolis ended up as part of the building itself, yielding some irregular columns thicker at the top than the bottom. That dramatizes the city's decline into poverty, speeding up the rate of loss; marble was now something to loot, not preserve. The peristyle drums were too big to use elsewhere, but blocks from the cella were stolen. More irony: replacement door jambs for the treasury room at the rear of the cella were made from 4th century BCE inventory blocks of all the imperial treasure the building had once held. Darkest of all, a visitor in 395 CE, Synenius of Cyrene, compared the city to the charred remains of a sacrificial animal (Neils, 296).

997 years after the Parthenon's completion, in 435 CE, the Roman emperor Theodosius decreed that all pagan temples in his lands be closed. The stubborn Athenians had held out; the last Panathenaia we know of took place in 391 or perhaps 395 CE. Whatever remained of Phidias's cult

statue was hauled off to Constantinople, where it stood until 1204, when the soldiers of the 4th Crusade sacked the city and proudly destroyed it. And a century and change after Theodosius the Byzantine emperor Justinian (ruled 527-565 CE), ignoring the toleration encouraged by his predecessor Constantine, completed the takeover, closing Plato's Academy, and launching the conversion of the Parthenon and Erechtheum into Christian churches. [31] Though this was far from their intent—early Christian remodelers pulled down a number of the metope sculptures—it meant that the two buildings were spared from further destruction. Greece is filled with leveled temple sites that never became churches or mosques. The church was dedicated to Our Lady ("*Despina*") of Athens, the Virgin Mary: a remarkable conflation of childless Athena Parthenos with the Virgin ("*parthene*" in Byzantine inscriptions) Mother. It was re-oriented to the west, the treasury becoming the narthex, with the original cella entrance (*pronaos*) becoming the apse (many details in Neils, 303ff), a wooden first floor gallery built around the cella's interior walls, and a curved apse soon bulged out of the original east entrance. In succeeding centuries, mostly in the 8th CE, the securely mounted metope sculptures were randomly defaced and the central pedimental sculptures pulled down. Some were left, scholars speculate, because with a little ingenuity Christian narratives could be applied to them: Hebe and Hera [32] from the

frieze were plausibly renamed an annunciation scene, while their immediate neighbors were trashed. And some, notably the metopes on the south side, were pretty much left alone, probably because few people had occasion to visit that side of the building and a lot of effort would have been required to take them down. The cella frieze had lost nearly all its paint, making it much harder to see, and therefore less likely to give offense. Some writers viewed the pagan sculptures suspiciously as possessing secret powers, and instructed viewers to leave them alone (Neils, 307). And over the next thousand years no fewer than 230 Christian inscriptions were carved into the stones of the Parthenon.

By around 690 CE—written sources are very scarce— the Parthenon was the cathedral church of Athens, complete with a pulpit and bishop’s throne, and maintaining a “miraculous” oil lamp that never needed refueling. (More wonderful irony: the bishop’s Seat was a marble chair was brought up from the Theatre below, where it had been the seat of the priest of Dionysus!) It was the goal of several famous pilgrimages.²

² One scholar, Anthony Kaldellis, argues that the Parthenon became a major site of Christian *pilgrimage* after its conversion into a church. Paradoxically, it was more important as a church than it had been as a temple: the Byzantine period was its true age of glory. He examines the idiosyncratic fusion of pagan and Christian culture that took place in Athens, where an attempt was made to replicate the classical past in Christian terms, affecting rhetoric, monuments, and miracles. He also re-evaluates the reception of ancient ruins in Byzantine Greece and presents for the first time a form of pilgrimage that was directed not toward icons, Holy Lands, or holy men but toward a monument embodying a permanent cultural tension and religious dialectic. (Amazon blurb)

Ironically, only monotheistic services were ever conducted *within* the Parthenon, never ancient Greek ones, who conducted all sacrifices and ceremonies in the open air. Our knowledge of a set of 12th century Christian century frescoes comes mainly from a series of 19th century watercolors, made before the cella was “purified” of their remains: just a few smudges of color remain today. A mosaic ceiling and a so-called “Frankish Tower” [33] on the SW corner of the cella were added around 1250 CE.³ It served probably as a bell tower and had a spiral staircase whole lower section was still *in situ* in the 20th century. Vaulted tombs were built beneath the Parthenon’s floor (Hurwit, 295). And always keep in your mind’s eye that Athens was for centuries and centuries a smallish town of a few thousand, clustered around and mainly on the Acropolis; for most of the past 2500 years the Rock was heavily inhabited. The Parthenon, appearances to the contrary, rarely stood alone on sacred ground, and undoubtedly many hundreds of people lived around and in it. By the early medieval period it had been renamed the Temple of Theotokos (mother of God) Atheniotissa; soon after it became, for a time, a Latin church when a Burgundian prince took the city⁴; frescoes of the Last

³ It was built, we have just recently learned, from blocks stolen from the tomb the Roman Philaopappus which dominates the Hill of the Muses a half mile SW of the Acropolis.

⁴ An Italian named Niccolò da Martoni spent a few days in Athens in the late winter of 1395 and recorded in his journal the first careful description of the Parthenon since

Judgment were added to the outer narthex; traces remained as late as 1970. The Metropolitan of Athens, one Michael Choniates,⁵ wrote in 1185 that he would leave the “poor and mean” village below and climb the Acropolis to write and reflect in the Parthenon, “bestriding the very peak of heaven.” But this was not to last: successions of Christian occupiers—Burgundians, Catalans, Franks⁶, culminating in the Florentines and their Santa Maria de Atene Parthenon church—were driven out of multicultural Athens by the Ottoman Turks under Mehmet the Conquerer in 1458.⁷ The tolerant conquerors left the Parthenon a cathedral for a few years as Mehmet, a well-read man with a historical eye, himself tried to reconstruct what the Parthenon had been. But eventually the Acropolis became a military fortress and the Parthenon a mosque, [34] with the SW corner tower extended into a minaret. Still, it’s true that the Parthenon was dedicated to the Virgin Mary for nearly as long as it was dedicated to the Virgin Athena.

The 375 year Ottoman occupation had many twists and turns, including the use of the Erechtheum as a harem [35]—its famous caryatids were now advertisements—and the Parthenon for weddings and wakes.

Pausanias. Though he’s most moved by the Christian fixtures and relics, the size of the Parthenon overawes him as he counts columns and notes metopes.

⁵ Neils, 294.

⁶ The Catalan King Pedro IV of Aragon called the Parthenon “the most precious jewel that exists in the world, and such that all the kings of Christendom could in vain imitate...” (Beard, 63)

⁷ The Italian banker, Neri Acciaiuoli, whose powerful family led the Florentines’ in Athens, was actually buried under the Parthenon in 1394.

And many Turks deeply admired the building: to quote a 17th century traveler, “We have seen all the mosques of the world, but we have never seen the likes of this.”⁸ But let’s hasten ahead to the days when it was a garrison and ammunition dump.

In 1645 gunpowder stored in the Propyleia was struck by lightning, doing considerable damage and killing the garrison commander quartered there, but no lesson was learned. Ensuing decades of intermittent warfare between the occupying Ottomans and the invading Venetians and their allies—control of the Eastern Mediterranean seaways was always at stake—led up to September 26th, 1687. It was their sixth separate war. The Ottomans had stored their considerable supply of ammo and powder in the Parthenon mosque, not to mention many of their wives and children. Perhaps they reasoned that the Venetians would not shell a building that had been a famous church for centuries. The attacking forces were under a Swedish commander, and commenced cannon fire from a position on the Hill of the Muses. More than 700 shell impacts [36] have been detected on the west front alone, and several fragments of ordinance—one sitting on top of a remaining Parthenon wall—were found in the 20th century. [37] One or more mortar shells pierced the mosque’s roof and struck the magazine. The huge explosion killed some 300 people—a tragedy usually

⁸ Diarist Eyliya Çelebi, quoted by classicist Daniel Mendelsohn, 34.

ignored—and in effect blew the Parthenon into two pieces, [38] destroying the cella-mosque's interior columns and lateral walls, the roof, the ancient pronaos and 28 columns of the peristyle colonnade on the north, east and south, together with the metopes and east pedimental sculpture that they supported. More than half of the frieze was knocked down, and many panels shattered. The ensuing fire burned into the next day. It was, easily, the most destructive day in the long history of the Parthenon, and one from which it could not recover.

It was once conventional in the West to blame the stupid Muslim Turks for this disaster, but there's plenty to go around. The Venetian commander, Francesco Morosini, arrived after the shelling, but had ordered it done.⁹ The Venetians occupied the Acropolis temporarily, and Morosini promptly had his soldiers set about looting the west pedimental sculptures— Athena and Poseidon contesting the naming rights of the city—that had somehow survived. But the machinery his men concocted broke, dropping the Poseidon and the horses of Athena's chariot and destroying them. A few fragments were carted off, and the rest left lying where they fell. Then General Morosini conceived the even brighter idea of blowing up the rest of the Parthenon so the Turks could never use it again: again, sound familiar? Fortunately—I'll even say miraculously—these

⁹ Compare the shelling of Monte Cassini in Italy in 1944.

plans were never carried out. So both Turks and Venetians are responsible for the desecration, and neither could hold the site permanently. And a final note about Not Learning From History: the British mounted gun emplacements on the Acropolis in late 1944.

The explosion could well have left us with hardly any solid evidence for what the Parthenon looked like before 1687. But thanks to several adventurous travelers with sketch pads, we do know, and they deserve a rapid tribute. Among these the central figures are two Englishmen, commissioned by the Society of Dilettantes in London in 1674. Jacques Carrey (1649-1726) was commissioned by his patron, the French ambassador to the Ottoman court, to make sketches of the Parthenon during the ambassador's regal visit to Athens. [39] His fifty-five remarkable drawings—accurate and beautiful—gave us our only record of what had survived before the explosion. He drew from the ground, and rightly prided himself on his precision, adding nothing but what he saw. Other intrepid Englishmen, architects Nicholas Revett (1720-1804) and James Stuart (1713-1788), sponsored by the Dilettante Society, spent three years in Greece drawing ancient monuments, including the Parthenon, some accurate to within a hundredth of an inch. Their 1762 book, *The Antiquities of Athens and Other Monuments of Greece* became the bible of the

architects who created the Greek revival across Europe and America. Here's a representative drawing of the Erechtheum. [40] And these two had a French rival—big surprise—Julian-David LeRoy (1724-1803)—whose magnificent drawings were enabled by France's highly cordial relations with the Ottoman authorities. [39] This gave him access to sites and points of view denied the Englishmen, and he had a whole staff of engravers and architects—it amounted to a national effort—to help him produce his work. [41] (Books on the side table) And many other architects and scholars made the trek—we began with Winckelmann—to Italy and Greece in the late 18th century: architect Robert Adam was the greatest of the British students. And there was Pierre l'Enfant, to whom George Washington turned to design the new capital city of a fledgling country.

"The sea-ruling Britannia snatched the last spoils of Greece, that was in the throes of death."
Lord Byron

Now we've arrived at the story of the Parthenon's long history best known to most of us: that of Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin (1766-1841), a Scot not an Englishman, by the way, and British ambassador to the Ottoman court from 1799-1803. [42] Elgin lies northeast of Inverness in

Scotland's far north. Nothing about his story is straightforward, including the facts; everything's disputed, and it would take a whole paper to sort through all the variants. So with that important caveat, here's a plausible version of events and their aftermath.

Elgin and his agents—he paid for everything himself but was only occasionally on this site—visited the Acropolis a number of times between 1801 and 1811. The Parthenon that they entered in 1801 was little like what we see today; it was, despite everything, still a ramshackle mosque and part of a military base. [43] It was surrounded by shabby huts, and had already endured scores of European despoilers who had bribed Ottoman officials to carry off what pleased them. At first Elgin's men only made sketches (at exorbitant fees charged by the Turkish commander on site), and were not allowed to take anything or even build scaffolding for a better look. So they returned to Constantinople, where Elgin procured from the Sultan a *firman*, or official order, authorizing.... well, that's the issue, what exactly was authorized? Armed with this document, the crew returned to what remained of the shattered Parthenon, armed with scaffolding, ladders, and chisels. [44] They took away about half of the surviving figures and panels: seventeen pedimental sculptures, fifteen metopes, and 247 feet of the frieze. A number of these they found lying in large fragments on the ground or in use as wall filler. One metope was a

doorstop in a nearby house. But his crew ruthlessly removed many others still *in situ*, chiseling off metopes to reduce their weight, maiming some, dropping and smashing others, knocking down the magnificent cornices that blocked their way, and removing—again, with considerable loss like the Venetians before them—the pedimental sculptures many of us have admired in the British Museum. In doing all this they were certainly following the spirit of Elgin's original orders to his lead lieutenant: On December 26, 1801, he wrote to his employee, the Italian architectural painter Giovanni Lusieri: "From the Acropolis I want to have samples of each cornice, each frieze, each column capital, of the roof decorations of the grooved pillars, of the various architectural orders of the metopes and in general, of anything, as much as possible." His men undoubtedly would have taken more, but many pieces now in the New Acropolis Museum were still buried under the rubble of the 1687 explosion. [45]

Now for the contradictions: Yes, Elgin wanted to preserve at-risk classical art, *and* yes, he wanted to make money. Yes, he had loved Greek culture since boyhood, *and* yes he thought it rightly belonged to Englishmen, not the Turks who had been there since 1460, let alone the Greeks they ruled over. Yes, he wrote of educating his countrymen about their deep past through these figures, *and* yes, he imagined outdoing the French, even Napoleon, in classical treasure-hoarding: art and patriotism

rarely make good companions. Yes, the nexus between classical sculpture and British aristocracy had been in force since the decorating of Hampton Court, and British writers as early as 1634 had urged their countrymen on Grand Tour to rescue artifacts from the Turks.¹⁰ Yes, he had written permission from Constantinople to remove artifacts from the site, *but* that *firman* survives only in a highly suspect Italian translation made for Elgin, who couldn't read the original order; so did his agents exceed their brief or not? The document we have (it's in the British Museum today) says nothing one way or the other about *in situ* sculpture. (Think of all the great thefts in history that have been perfectly legal by the standards in place at the time.) Yes, he carved his initials, and those of his wife Mary, high up on one of the Parthenon's columns, and yes he would have taken all the Erechtheum caryatids if there'd been room on the ship he had bought for the purpose. Yes, he pillaged and stole, carrying pedimental sculptures the four miles to Piraeus on uncushioned gun carriages, but what if he hadn't; wouldn't the French have done much the same thing?—almost certainly they would. Yes, he may have rescued items that would have been lost to the indifference of the Turks, even burned for their lime as one observer reported, but other observers reported that the Turkish guards on the

¹⁰ Ruth Guilding, *Owning the Past: Why the English Collected Antique Sculpture 1640-1840*.

Acropolis did their best to stop the English from ruining the *in situ* sculptures. Yes, one of his treasure-boats sunk off Kythera, but he paid the cost of the two years' labor required to rescue the pieces. Yes, he used some of the artifacts to decorate his stately home in Scotland. And when, years later, heavily in debt, he went to sell his treasure to the British government to recover the approximately £70,000 he had spent on the removals, more irregularities appeared; an English copy of the *firman*, the permission order, presented to the Parliament committee in charge, added things not even in the dubious Italian version. Ultimately he got half of what he asked for— £35,000—and the British Museum removed all the sculptures from their latest home in a coal shed in the yard of the Duke of Devonshire's Burlington House where they had been carelessly stored, and put them on display. John Keats was among the earliest visitors, a visit that yielded two sonnets and the "Grecian Urn" ode. And on and on: at every stage there's controversy. His contemporaries disputed the issues, if anything with even more vitriol than we express today; Lord Byron excoriated him in poem and prose, while many other lords and artists defended his "noble actions." Some thought it just that Thomas Bruce died of syphilis.

And the British government quickly made political and economic use of the marbles, sending free plaster casts to several cities to grease

diplomatic negotiations, charging several others for the replicas, and even horse-trading for authentic classical remains (Dresden) with their prized copies. Both Plymouth and Liverpool received complete sets from the Prince Regent. "It is reckoned that by the mid 19th century there was hardly a sizeable town in Europe or North America that did not somewhere possess the cast of at least one of Elgin's marbles."¹¹ And from the beginning they sold, and still sell, miniatures of figures from the frieze. And the British Museum has hardly been a reliable host in other ways: famous chemist and student of electromagnetism Michael Faraday, thinking with Winckelmann that all the marbles originally were pure white, used first alkalis, then dilute nitric acid to clean them, with shall we say poor results. In 1858 another misguided attempt to clean the marbles with oil and lard then restore them with wax and resins discolored a number before the process was stopped. In 1938 Lord Duveen, who funded the gallery where the artifacts are still on display, approved of using copper scrapers and chisels to remove what he took to be dirt and discoloration (it was the marble's natural patina); they took considerable detail with them as well before the process was halted.

And then there's the question dominating our artistic politics today: should the surviving stones be returned to Greece? [46] (Here's the new

¹¹ Beard, 18.

Acropolis Museum, one of the world's greatest.) Two contrary thoughts. One: Nationalism and national rights, if upheld for all artworks, would strip out the world's museums—the Greek museums, for example, would have to return thousands of objects to Italy and the Levant—and, worse, deprive people around the world of seeing the greatest art. These are world, cosmopolitan treasures, not state-owned commodities. Did the “country” that's demanding return even exist when the objects were made? Indeed, the Greek Government agrees with the first claim: they believe it's good to have Greek art distributed all over the world for people to see because it does everything from enriching education to drumming up tourist business. So it's pretty much accepted that if everything goes back to Greece, many fewer people would know of classical achievement. Two: The question should be resolved morally and aesthetically, not legally; the law is hopelessly tangled and ambiguous, and the Parthenon-size display room for the marbles in the New Acropolis Museum surpasses anything the British Museum has mounted. My conclusion: should they be returned? Yes. Rescue does not entail ownership: think of surviving Holocaust artworks. Do I think they will be? Eventually. After all, their accurate name is not “the Elgin” but the Parthenon marbles. [47]

During the Greek War of Independence (1821-1832) archeologists estimate that Turkish soldiers removed more than blocks of marble from

the Parthenon to create makeshift defenses, or broke some columns apart to make bullets from the lead that coated the iron clamps holding them together. After the Greeks won their independence, waves of trained and semi-trained archeologists came to Athens to study—and “rescue”—the Parthenon’s well-picked-over remains. In 1831 it was officially designated an archeological site, not a military fortress— the first site so categorized in Greece—though the garrison of Greece’s new king, Otto the Bavarian, remained on the Acropolis until 1834: the Parthenon as military barracks! Otto himself had his throne placed *in* the Parthenon for state occasions: Hadrian revisited. All medieval Muslim traces were systematically removed from the Parthenon, as were all non-classical buildings and even the topsoil, leaving the unlived-on bare rock that most modern visitors take for its natural state. One apologist called the remaining mosque “a dirty cork in a beautiful bottle,” setting a tone we’re all too familiar with. So it was archeologists with a purist, Winckelmann-inflected vision of the Real Parthenon that set about erasing all traces of history from the Rock. The Frankish tower came down in 1875, its removers citing “dark relics of the passing waves of barbarity,” neglecting to mention that it had been built by their Christian forbearers. Who paid for much of this?— the famous/notorious unearther of Troy and Mycenae, Heinrich Schliemann. Fellow archeologist Sir Arthur Evans, excavator of Knossos on Crete, wrote

that “It is but a narrow view of the Acropolis in Athens to look on it simply as the place where the great works of the age of Pericles may be seen as models for a museum... At all events, let not men calling themselves scholars lend themselves to such deeds of wanton destruction.” (Quoted in Beard, 109). Only the staircase remains in the medieval tower in the cella have survived. But most of us love the denuded version: Oscar Wilde gushed for many when he reportedly said that the Parthenon in the morning sun was “like coming upon some white Greek goddess...”¹² Still, one scholar remarked recently that a tour of the Acropolis today is like being taken to a Westminster Abbey from which everything’s been removed but the artifacts of Edward the Confessor.

And then come the sad stories of restoration attempts to put the Parthenon back together again, not unlike Humpty Dumpty, using the thousands of marble fragments scattered in and around its base. I’ll confine myself to the most ambitious and the most damaging, that of engineer Nikolaus Balanos, from 1921-33. With no oversight committee or administrator, he did what he thought best, and some of his ideas were good: replacing some of the looted pedimental sculpture with plaster casts, for example. But his main project was to re-erect the 28 columns of the exterior peristyle that had fallen in the explosion of 1687 so that the

¹² Beard, 9.

building would be whole again. His method was to manufacture iron H-clamps to replace the lead-coated ones used by Iktinos to hold the remounted column drums together. So when he finished the building was indeed closer in appearance to its original form, though Balonos simply joined drums that fit together easily, not realizing (or caring?) that each of them was subtly unique. So up went the “restored” columns with their parts jumbled together. Over a few decades those iron lynchpins corroded and expanded because the fits between drums weren’t nearly as tight or lead-coated as those of the original, and cracked the marble drums they were supposed to preserve. Only the 1687 explosion did more damage to the Parthenon over its 2500 year history.

The current restoration underway now since 1975—compare the thirteen years it took to build the original—is the most meticulous and thoughtful ever undertaken, I’d hazard, of any historical structure in the world. [48] In essence, the entire building down to the stylobate has been taken down and is now being reassembled. Under the direction of Manolis Korres—you may have seen the NOVA programs on his work; I heartily recommend them—the more than 70,000 pieces of marble on the Acropolis, and any available around the world, have been laser-measured using more than fifty criteria and catalogued. Those lost forever will be reconstructed by master masons from marble cut from the same Pentelic

quarries that Iktinos relied on, and carefully noted as such. Titanium H-clamps replace the iron, and original tolerances are restored. [49] Further, international conferences have been held to discuss each step of the work. Air pollution, the new formidable enemy, led to another wise decision: all the surviving original sculpture is now housed in the filtered air of the New Acropolis Museum, and, eventually, plaster casts of what remains will be put *in situ*. [50] At the same time there's no wish to recreate the so-called original by composing sculptures to fill the gaps, or to paint anything. We know that parts of the Parthenon were originally painted, but our Parthenon is not, cannot be, except in our imaginations. History's marks will not be erased; the Venetian cannonball holes will remain, the medieval graffiti protected, whatever traces of the churches and mosques that survived to 1975 will be preserved. We should even preserve Cecil Rhodes' claim that the Parthenon is now a monument to a new Empire, the British, or, even more disturbing, keep the photographs of Nazi big-wigs standing before the columns, celebrating what they termed the triumph of Aryan civilization. We have what we have, and the Parthenon of 2017—or 2217—will be precisely that, not Periclean or even perfectly pre-1687. It will be a building that is not, never was, frozen in time, but a truly historical building rather than an “eternal” icon of an age that was itself immersed in change. [51]

I'll end with a few thoughts on Ruins: The ruins of any site—a cathedral, a monastery, a stadium, a temple—pulls us in contrary directions at the same time: is what we behold a further proof of human vanity, a *memento mori* of our hopeless wish for permanence, *or* is it a noble monument to past greatness that endures and inspires? Both, of course, though one or the other may dominate for a time, and the personality and world-view of the viewer clearly enters in as well. Ruins are inherently unstable, both physically and culturally. They are a shadow, an echo, even a critique of the past, and what's no longer there, like Athena's statue, may be almost as important as what remains.¹³ It's true for most—it's certainly true of the Parthenon—that what does remain behind is largely a matter of chance, and of what wasn't useful to earlier generations. We've learned by now that there is no definitive "Parthenon" that restorers can recapture, but rather a two-millennia-long history of use and misuse that doesn't lend itself to either idealization or despair. We've learned that the so-called primitive technology of the original builders can barely, if at all, be matched by the best of contemporary experts. We, or at least I, regret the cutting back to the bare rock and the bare columns, confusing such denuding with recovery and perfection. It's rather like cutting away all the plants from this, or any, ancient site. Think of Rome's Coliseum or a

¹³ Rosemary Hill, 20; Carolyn Korsmeyer, 439.

famous English abbey or a country church: [52] should they be stripped of the ivy that has grown up about them, producing a feeling of soft ruination uncapturable by naked stone? Unlike an old damaged building, you *can* ruin a ruin by restoring it. My guess is that we're fine with climbing ivy on English ruins, since it accords with our half-conscious picturesque pastoralism regarding them. And I've tried to show that we bring similar subliminal expectations to classical sites: that word alone has come to represent a way of seeing that Phidias and Iktinos would barely recognize. After all, there are no "natural" readings. Claiming so leads to the arrogance of naturalizing your own experience. Here's Roland Barthes: the seemingly most "natural sign" is in fact the most ideological, because it tries to pass off culture as nature.

Indeed some eras—the European Romantics in particular—are more susceptible to ruins' charm and reality than others; the 19th century architect Sir John Soane, who submitted plans for The Old Lady of Threadneedle Street, the venerable Bank of England, not only created specs for the building yet to happen, but also images of what it would look like when it was a quasi-Roman ruin. Or a more hard-bitten recent example, echoing the decision to save the marks of Venetian artillery on the Parthenon: Castro's guerillas failed in their first attempt to capture the main bank of Havana, and they were imprisoned. When they eventually

were victorious, they returned to the site where their bullet holes had been plastered over and fired away at the walls until something like the original pockmarks were “reconstructed.”

What, after all, is being saved: the past? the present? our imaginative images? All of these. [53] Even a barebones history of the Parthenon such as we have undertaken lets us see the palimpsest of the most iconic building of the West, the layers of accretions and losses, of Alexander, Demetrius the Besieger, Nero, Hadrian, the Byzantine cathedral, the several mosques, the French and English sketchers, the tragic arsenal, the looting, the centuries of earthquake and weather. [54] Like returning to one’s childhood home or school, it’s poignant and mysterious, inducing many images, reflections, melancholy, a sense of loss yet a lively memory. Don’t you sense the past in the silence around a ruin? [55]

So, a long journey, 2500 years long, that leaves us both with the past unreachable—yet recaptured—and the present enriched by this unmatched temple to a long-faded goddess.

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“The Parthenon Part II: An Icon and a Ruin.”
Bill McDonald
SUMMARY.

Since its completion in 432 BCE the Parthenon has led a life unlike any other ancient Greek structure. The great temple and statue celebrating Athens' goddess and the city's imperial power has been, variously, a billboard for foreign tyrants, quarters for both famous emperors and small-time despots, a Roman brothel, both a Byzantine and a cathedral church, several mosques, a fortress, a homeless shelter, a quarry for other buildings, an ammunition dump, a magnet for the educated, and a symbol of everything from long-lost greatness to classical purity and the invention of democracy. It has (barely) survived not just wind and weather and earthquake and now smog since its roof disappeared some 2,000 years ago, but also indifference, multiple lootings from Roman pirates to Lord Elgin, explosions, and perhaps worst of all, bungled attempts to restore it to some imagined ideal of the past. The classical purity of stone and light that we envision in its colonnades airbrushes the fact that much of the original was brightly painted. Even its current scientific restoration, an ongoing international effort that began in 1975, can only recapture a small part of that history.

The paper ended with some thoughts on “ruins.” The ruins of any site pull us in contrary directions: is what we behold a further proof of human vanity, a *memento mori* of our hopeless wish for permanence, *or* is it a noble monument to past greatness that endures and inspires? Both, of course: ruins are inherently unstable, both physically and culturally. Each is a shadow, an echo, even a critique, of what's no longer there. What remains behind is largely a matter of chance, and of what wasn't useful to earlier generations. There is no definitive “Parthenon” that restorers can recapture, but rather a 2500 year history of use and misuse that doesn't lend itself to either idealization or despair. The Parthenon remains powerful, poignant and mysterious, inducing countless reflections, a precious icon of human blundering and human greatness.

Bill McDonald grew up in Glendale, near the other end of our remarkable mountains, the longest east-west chain in America. Both his parents and most of his relatives were teachers, and he was not a rebellious child. He earned his B.A. at Colgate in philosophy and religion, then returned to Claremont for doctoral work in religion and the arts. After a four year stint in a Midwest English department, he, Dolores and their three boys returned to California in 1969 to join the U of R's new, innovative Johnston College. He's now fully retired from UofR's English department and the Hunsaker Chair in Distinguished Teaching, and sort of retired from Johnston. Retirement's a military trope: he's stepped away from the front lines but is still soldiering on with alumni and development work, and teaching two courses a year. It's rare in higher education to have the chance to build a new college, and the Johnston program remains at the center of his active work. He's co-authored one book on the College's history and co-edited another, and also published books of criticism on two winners of the Nobel prize in literature: Thomas Mann and J. M. Coetzee. He's given 6 Fortnightly papers to date: on Literary Disclaimers; on the History of Reading; on Sappho and Homer; on Freud; on Minoan civilization; and "The Parthenon, Part I: from its Beginnings to 432 BCE." His other interests include the history and theory of the novel, Anglo-Irish and European modernism (James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and that whole crowd), roses, wine, the history of love, classical music and opera—and of course the Dodgers (since 1948), the Rams (since 1949) and the Lakers (since 1960).

His paper today: "The Parthenon Part II: An Icon and a Ruin"