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## THE LOVELY STONES

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**HIGHLIGHT:** Among the first to visit **Greece's** new Acropolis Museum, devoted to the Parthenon and other temples, the author reviews the origins of a gloriously "right" structure (part of a fifth-century-B.C. stimulus plan) and the continuing outrage that half its façade is still in London

The great classicist A. W. Lawrence (illegitimate younger brother of the even more famously illegitimate T.E. "of Arabia") once remarked of the Parthenon that it is "the one building in the world which may be assessed as absolutely *right*." I was considering this thought the other day as I stood on top of the temple with Maria Ioannidou, the dedicated director of the Acropolis Restoration Service, and watched the workshop that lay below and around me. Everywhere there were craftsmen and -women, toiling to get the Parthenon and its sister temples ready for viewing by the public this summer. There was the occasional whine of a drill and groan of a crane, but otherwise this was the quietest construction site I have ever seen--or, rather, heard. Putting the rightest, or most right, building to rights means that the workers must use marble from a quarry in the same mountain as the original one, that they must employ old-fashioned chisels to carve, along with traditional brushes and twigs, and that they must study and replicate the ancient Lego-like marble joints with which the master builders of antiquity made it all fit miraculously together.

Don't let me blast on too long about how absolutely heart-stopping the brilliance of these people was. But did you know, for example, that the Parthenon forms, if viewed from the sky, a perfect equilateral triangle with the Temple of Aphaea, on the island of Aegina, and the Temple of Poseidon, at Cape Sounion? Did you appreciate that each column of the Parthenon makes a very slight inward incline, so that if projected upward into space they would eventually steeply themselves together at a symmetrical point in the empyrean? The "rightness" is located somewhere between the beauty of science and the science of beauty.

With me on my tour was Nick Papandreou, son and grandson of prime ministers and younger brother of the Socialist opposition leader, who reminded me that the famously fluted columns are made not of single marble shafts but of individually carved and shaped "drums," many of them still lying around looking to be re-assembled. On his last visit, he found a graffito on the open face of one such. A certain Xanthia, probably from Thrace, had put his name there, not thinking it would ever be seen again once the next drum was joined on. Then it surfaced after nearly 2,500 years, to be briefly glimpsed (by men and women who still speak and write a version of Xanthos's tongue) before being lost to

view once more, this time for good. On the site, a nod of respect went down the years, from one proud Greek worker to another.

The original construction of the Parthenon involved what I call Periclean Keynesianism: the city needed to recover from a long and ill-fought war against Persia and needed also to give full employment (and a morale boost) to the talents of its citizens. Over tremendous conservative opposition, Pericles in or about the year 450 B.C. pushed through the Athenian Assembly a sort of stimulus package which proposed a labor-intensive reconstruction of what had been lost or damaged in the Second Persian War. As Plutarch phrases it in his *Pericles*:

The house-and-home contingent, no whit less than the sailors and sentinels and soldiers, might have a pretext for getting a beneficial share of the public wealth. The materials to be used were stone, bronze, ivory, gold, ebony and cypress-wood; the arts which should elaborate and work up these materials were those of carpenter, molder, bronze-smith, stone-cutter, dyer, veneerer in gold and ivory, painter, embroiderer, embosser, to say nothing of the forwarders and furnishers of the material.& It came to pass that for every age almost, and every capacity, the city's great abundance was distributed and shared by such demands.

When we think of Athens in the fifth century B.C., we think chiefly of the theater of Euripides and Sophocles and of philosophy and politics--specifically democratic politics, of the sort that saw Pericles repeatedly re-elected in spite of complaints that he was overspending. And it's true that *Antigone* was first performed as the Parthenon was rising, and *Medea* not all that long after the temple was finished. From drama to philosophy: Socrates himself was also a stonemason and sculptor, and it seems quite possible that he too took part in raising the edifice. So **Greece** might have something to teach us about the arts of recovery as well. As the author of *The Stones of Athens*, R. E. Wycherley, puts it:

In some sense, the Parthenon must have been the work of a committee.& It was the work of the whole Athenian people, not merely because hundreds of them had a hand in building it, but because the assembly was ultimately responsible, confirmed appointments, and sanctioned and scrutinized the expenditure of every drachma.

I have visited many of the other great monuments of antiquity, from Luxor and Karnak and the pyramids to Babylon and Great Zimbabwe, and their magnificence is always compromised by the realization that slaves did the heavy lifting and they were erected to show who was boss. The Parthenon is unique because, though ancient **Greece** did have slavery to some extent, its masterpiece also represents the willing collective work of free people. And it is open to the light and to the air: "accessible," if you like, rather than dominating. So that to its rightness you could tentatively add the concept of "rights," as Periclean Greeks began dimly to formulate them for the first time.

Not that the beauty and symmetry of the Parthenon have not been abused and perverted and mutilated. Five centuries after the birth of Christianity the Parthenon was closed and desolated. It was then "converted" into a Christian church, before being transformed a thousand years later into a mosque--complete with minaret at the southwest corner--after the Turkish conquest of the Byzantine Empire. Turkish forces also used it for centuries as a garrison and an arsenal, with the tragic result that in 1687, when Christian Venice attacked the Ottoman Turks, a powder magazine was detonated and huge damage inflicted on the structure. Most horrible of all, perhaps, the Acropolis was made to fly a Nazi flag during the German occupation of Athens. I once had the privilege of shaking the hand of Manolis Glezos, the man who climbed up and tore the swastika down, thus giving the signal for a Greek revolt against Hitler.

The damage done by the ages to the building, and by past empires and occupations, cannot all be put right. But there is one desecration and dilapidation that can at least be partially undone. Early in the 19th century, Britain's ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Lord Elgin, sent a wrecking crew to the Turkish-occupied territory of **Greece**, where it sawed off approximately half of the adornment of the Parthenon and carried it away. As with all things Greek, there were three elements to this, the most lavish and beautiful sculptural treasury in human history. Under the direction of the artistic genius Phidias, the temple had two massive pediments decorated with the figures of Pallas Athena, Poseidon, and the gods of the sun and the moon. It then had a series of 92 high-relief panels, or metopes, depicting a succession of mythical and historical battles. The most intricate element was the frieze, carved in bas-relief, which

showed the gods, humans, and animals that made up the annual Pan-Athens procession: there were 192 equestrian warriors and auxiliaries featured, which happens to be the exact number of the city's heroes who fell at the Battle of Marathon. Experts differ on precisely what story is being told here, but the frieze was quite clearly carved as a continuous narrative. Except that half the cast of the tale is still in Bloomsbury, in London, having been sold well below cost by Elgin to the British government in 1816 for \$2.2 million in today's currency to pay off his many debts. (His original scheme had been to use the sculptures to decorate Broomhall, his rain-sodden ancestral home in Scotland, in which case they might never have been seen again.)

Ever since Lord Byron wrote his excoriating attacks on Elgin's colonial looting, first in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) and then in *The Curse of Minerva* (1815), there has been a bitter argument about the legitimacy of the British Museum's deal. I've written a whole book about this controversy and won't oppress you with all the details, but would just make this one point. If the *Mona Lisa* had been sawed in two during the Napoleonic Wars and the separated halves had been acquired by different museums in, say, St. Petersburg and Lisbon, would there not be a general wish to see what they might look like if re-united? If you think my analogy is overdrawn, consider this: the body of the goddess Iris is at present in London, while her head is in Athens. The front part of the torso of Poseidon is in London, and the rear part is in Athens. And so on. This is grotesque.

To that essentially aesthetic objection the British establishment has made three replies. The first is, or was, that return of the marbles might set a "precedent" that would empty the world's museum collections. The second is that more people can see the marbles in London. The third is that the Greeks have nowhere to put or display them. The first is easily disposed of: The Greeks don't want anything else returned to them and indeed hope to have more, rather than less, Greek sculpture displayed in other countries. And there is in existence no court or authority to which appeals on precedent can be made. (Anyway, who exactly would be making such an appeal? The Aztecs? The Babylonians? The Hittites? **Greece's** case is a one-off--quite individual and unique.) As to the second: Melina Mercouri's husband, the late movie director and screenwriter Jules Dassin, told a British parliamentary committee in 2000 that by the standard of mass viewership the sculptures should all be removed from Athens and London and exhibited in Beijing. After these frivolous and boring objections have been dealt with, we are left with the third and serious one, which is what has brought me back to Athens. Where should the treasures be safeguarded and shown?

It is unfortunately true that the city allowed itself to become very dirty and polluted in the 20th century, and as a result the remaining sculptures and statues on the Parthenon were nastily eroded by "acid rain." And it's also true that the museum built on the Acropolis in the 19th century, a trifling place of a mere 1,450 square meters, was pathetically unsuited to the task of housing or displaying the work of Phidias. But gradually and now impressively, the Greeks have been living up to their responsibilities. Beginning in 1992, the endangered marbles were removed from the temple, given careful cleaning with ultraviolet and infra-red lasers, and placed in a climate-controlled interior. Alas, they can never all be repositioned on the Parthenon itself, because, though the atmospheric pollution is now better controlled, Lord Elgin's goons succeeded in smashing many of the entablatures that held the sculptures in place. That leaves us with the next-best thing, which turns out to be rather better than one had hoped.

About a thousand feet southeast of the temple, the astonishing new Acropolis Museum will open on June 20. With 10 times the space of the old repository, it will be able to display all the marvels that go with the temples on top of the hill. Most important, it will be able to show, for the first time in centuries, how the Parthenon sculptures looked to the citizens of old.

**THE PARTHENON IS UNIQUE BECAUSE, THOUGH ANCIENT GREECE DID HAVE SLAVERY, ITS MASTERPIECE ALSO REPRESENTS THE COLLECTIVE WORK OF FREE PEOPLE.**

Arriving excitedly for my preview of the galleries, I was at once able to see what had taken the Greeks so long. As with everywhere else in Athens, if you turn over a spade or unleash a drill you uncover at least one layer of a previous civilization. (Building a metro for the Olympics in 2004 was a protracted if fascinating nightmare for this very reason.) The new museum, built to the design of the French-Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi, has had to be mounted

aboveground on 100 huge reinforced-concrete pillars, which allow you to survey the remnants of villas, drains, bathhouses, and mosaics of the recently unearthed neighborhood below. Much of the ground floor is made of glass so that natural light filters down to these excavations and gives the effect of transparency throughout. But don't look down for too long. Raise your eyes and you will be given an arresting view of the Parthenon, from a building that has been carefully aligned to share its scale and perspective with the mother ship.

I was impatient to be the first author to see the remounted figures and panels and friezes. Professor Dimitrios Pandermalis, the head of the museum, took me to the top-floor gallery and showed me the concentric arrangement whereby the sculpture of the pediment is nearest the windows, the high-relief metopes are arranged above head height (they are supposed to be seen from below), and finally the frieze is running at eye level along the innermost wall. At any time, you can turn your head to look up and across at the architectural context for which the originals were so passionately carved. At last it will be possible to see the building and its main artifacts in one place and on one day.

The British may continue in their constipated fashion to cling to what they have so crudely amputated, but the other museums and galleries of Europe have seen the artistic point of re-unification and restored to Athens what was looted in the years when **Greece** was defenseless. Professor Pandermalis proudly showed me an exquisite marble head, of a youth shouldering a tray, that fits beautifully into panel No. 5 of the north frieze. It comes courtesy of the collection of the Vatican. Then there is the sculpted foot of the goddess Artemis, from the frieze that depicts the assembly of Olympian gods, by courtesy of the Salinas Museum, in Palermo. From Heidelberg comes another foot, this time of a young man playing a lyre, and it fits in nicely with the missing part on panel No. 8. Perhaps these acts of cultural generosity, and tributes to artistic wholeness, could "set a precedent," too?

The Acropolis Museum has hit on the happy idea of exhibiting, for as long as that following of precedent is too much to hope for, its own original sculptures with the London-held pieces represented by beautifully copied casts. This has two effects: It allows the visitor to follow the frieze round the four walls of a core "cella" and see the sculpted tale unfold (there, you suddenly notice, is the "lowng heifer" from Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*). And it creates a natural thirst to see the actual re-assembly completed. So, far from emptying or weakening a museum, this controversy has instead created another one, which is destined to be among Europe's finest galleries. And one day, surely, there will be an agreement to do the right thing by the world's most "right" structure.

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The Parthenon as seen from the new Acropolis Museum, April 2009, with, at right, the west metopes, of the Greeks and Amazons in battle

Picture, **JEWEL ON THE HILL**

Italian president Giorgio Napolitano repatriates a fragment of a frieze depicting Artemis.

Picture, **ACROPOLIS NOW**

the *Luftwaffe* over the Acropolis, 1941

Picture, **ACROPOLIS NOW**

a circa-1795 lithograph of Thomas Bruce, seventh Earl of Elgin, who plundered the treasures of the Parthenon

Picture, **ACROPOLIS NOW**

the Parthenon in 2006

Picture, **ACROPOLIS NOW**

an aerial view of Athens today, with the Acropolis Museum at the bottom.

Picture, **CASTS OF THOUSANDS**

Casts of the Parthenon's west frieze, depicting preparations for the Pan-Athens procession, displayed in the Acropolis Museum.

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