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Material engagements:

studies in honour of Colin Renfrew

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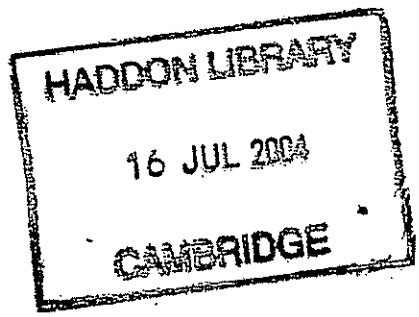

The Parthenon Marbles as an archaeological issue

Anthony Snodgrass

Walking along Silver Street in Cambridge one day early in 1984, I fell in with Colin Renfrew, who was going in the same direction (by a rare chance, neither of us happened to be riding his bicycle). I took the opportunity to raise a then topical issue: the announcement by the then Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition, Neil Kinnock, that a future Labour Government would return the Parthenon Marbles to Greece. Colin's response was instantaneous: 'It's an absurd pledge: the very first one that they'll repudiate when they take office'. At the time, I engaged with the first part of what he had said. But with hindsight, it is the precise accuracy of the political prophecy in the second part which one must now salute. For when, after thirteen years, two further unsuccessful election campaigns and two changes of leadership, a Labour administration did indeed take office, it was a matter not of days but of hours before the responsible minister, pressed by journalists, proclaimed the new government's reversal of the earlier undertaking.

But this is a piece dedicated to Colin the archaeologist, not Colin the politician. Although I have had occasional discussions of the Marbles with him over the intervening years — I hope I am not being indiscreet in saying that these talks have become less and less confrontational — I am here concerned to step back from an apparently unending debate over public policy, and to try to initiate a new, archaeological analysis. But before doing so, I wish to draw attention to an obvious feature of that public debate: the acceleration in its tempo. This used to be an issue which was raised, in a parliamentary question, a newspaper article or a book, once or twice in a generation at most. Today, by contrast, we have seen, within a mere two and a half years at the time of writing, the issue contextualized by the Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on *Cultural Property: Return and Illicit Trade*, in November 2000; re-formulated by the Greek Minister of Culture's initiative, announced in August 2001, to replace the old argument about ownership with a proposal for a long-term loan; politicized in a parliamentary sense through the launch at Westminster in January 2002, by the Liberal Democrat MP and Cambridge 'Arch. and Anth.' graduate Richard Allan, of the Parthenon 2004 project; re-ignited by the beginning of building work on the New Acropolis

Museum in Athens, intended to house (among many other exhibits) the Marbles, the following October; galvanized by the dramatic gesture of the President of Italy, in November 2002, in announcing the return to Greece of the small fragment of the East Frieze of the Parthenon which had been held since 1816 in the Museum at Palermo. With external events moving at this pace, there is all the more justification for taking the kind of longer, cooler look at the issue which archaeology is better equipped to offer.

The longer time-frame is not the only advantage at the disposal of the archaeologist. There is also the contribution of specialist knowledge, which has been only fitfully used by either side in the public debate. Other disciplines too, notably Modern History, can have an important contributory or corrective role. It is the historian who can show the strict falsity of such arguments as the one regularly aired in letters to the press, that Lord Elgin 'bought' the Marbles: he did no such thing, for purchase is a transaction brought about by one agent, the buyer, making a successful offer to another agent who is the lawful owner — in this case, the Ottoman Sultan through his government in Constantinople. The fact that Elgin almost bankrupted himself with the cost of inducements paid to local officials who were not the owners, with the wages paid to his own agents, and more especially through the expenses of transport (St Clair 1998, 94–5, 106–7, 136–7, 142–4, 255–6), is an entirely separate matter. In any case, that issue probably no longer has any legal bearing, after a lapse of 188 years, on the later action of the British parliament in purchasing the Marbles from Elgin.

This last point leads naturally on to another passionate interest of Colin's: the looting of antiquities. Perhaps the question has been put to him and his colleagues at the Illicit Antiquities Research Centre, 'Aren't the Parthenon Marbles the greatest illicit antiquity of all time?'. It is, I think, no longer entirely realistic to answer 'Yes' to such a question. Whatever the strength of the charges of spoliation against Elgin, any full account of the Debate in the House of Commons on 7th June 1816 (St Clair 1998, 254–5) makes it clear that Parliament's hotly-contested decision to purchase the Marbles from Elgin was a conscientious and ultimately constitutional one, taken only with great circumspection and carried by almost the smallest majority possible. The danger attached to receiving stolen goods, though only narrowly discounted, had at least been thoroughly explored. Democracy, though in a much narrower form, had operated with the same validity as in Classical Athens. The actual ownership of the Marbles, as the Act of Parliament passed later in that year determined, passed to the nation. Since then, the factor which the lawyers call prescription — the establishment of ownership through long use — may also have come into play, although its validity normally holds only for uncontested use. It is hard to imagine an International Court now ruling against the original acquisition; even if it were to do so, it is not entirely clear that action would follow.

But none of this involves specifically *archaeological* knowledge. This is

something which can and should be separable from the issues of history, nationalism, legality and, as we shall see, museology, at least up to a certain stage in the argument. I am not thinking of its use for an essentially art-historical debate about the artistic merits of the Marbles. Long ago, in 1928, my own sometime teacher Bernard Ashmole was one of the three Classical archaeologists called in to submit a report on the display of the Marbles for the Trustees of the British Museum. This Committee started out from the assumption that the Marbles were 'primarily works of art', and insisted on the separation (in most, not all cases) of the originals in London from the plaster-casts of pieces in Athens or elsewhere, and indeed from Elgin's own original architectural samples and fragments from the Parthenon, with which they had hitherto been exhibited together. Its report was, in Mary Beard's words, 'a victory for the transcendent quality of original masterpieces over completeness, context and history; it was a victory for the Parthenon as sculpture over the Parthenon as building' (Beard 2002, 167). It is in part that victory' which I wish to contest here.

Ashmole himself was afterwards to take a long stride away from his earlier position. Over forty years later, he published his *Architect and Sculptor in Classical Greece* (Ashmole 1972), a title (and a word-order) which already betokens a change of heart. Chapter 5 begins with the words 'An ancient Greek stranger coming for the first time to the Acropolis at Athens and looking up at the sculptural decoration of the Parthenon might well have been excused for thinking that its architect had taken leave of his senses' (Ashmole 1972, 116). Ashmole was talking primarily about the excess of the sculptural additions, and secondly about their near-invisibility from the ground, fifty feet below. He presently hinted at an alternative (and perhaps better-founded) explanation, in the feeling that the strictly professional decisions of the architect had been overruled by a kind of 'artistic *hubris*', an externally-imposed desire 'to load every available space with decoration, and to show what unlimited money could do'. Inconclusive and subjective these deliberations may be, but they start from the reasonable assumption that an architect should have the overall decision over the design of a building — *his* building. It was arguably the misguided application of, or deliberate interference with, this principle that was to differentiate the Parthenon from every other building of its size and epoch. Perhaps partly as a result, the primacy of the architect and his building is also usually forgotten in modern, non-professional discussion of the Parthenon sculptures. One of the rôles of the archaeologist is to redirect attention to this contextual aspect.

Whatever our aesthetic judgment of the artistic decisions that were taken, there are certain architectural facts that must be borne in mind. The Parthenon sculptures were an integral part of the Parthenon. The two most extensive elements were the 92 square, sculpted metopes that featured in the alternating design above the outer colonnade of the temple; and the continuous sculpted frieze, nearly 525 feet long, that ran all the way round the inner building,

inside the colonnade. Each of these was, in every sense, built in to the temple: that is, they were sculpted on substantial, load-bearing blocks of stone which played a part in keeping the building up. On top of them were presently to be laid the uppermost elements of the architecture — cornice, gutter, rafters and roof in the case of the metopes, further building-blocks, ceiling-coffers and cross-beams in the case of the frieze blocks. From this it follows, among other things, that later detachment of the sculptures could only be achieved where these upper works had been lost, or — though following this path would lead us right back into the arena of the public and political debate — by the deliberate destruction or removal of the upper elements. But to return to the building in its own context: it also follows that the metopes and frieze, at least, cannot and should never have been described as independent works of art, still less as 'statues'. They were, and are, architectural reliefs. Only the giant figures which stood in the gables at either end of the building, the pedimental sculptures, could ever be removed from the temple without obstruction, or could even in the loosest sense be called 'statues'. Although these were (as Ashmole again points out: 1972, 109, 116) 'two-thirds totally invisible' to the ancient spectator at ground level, they are impressively three-dimensional, and even the closest scrutiny reveals nothing that was not worked to a perfection of finish, on all sides. This again was unusual: pediment sculptures were often free-standing in the literal sense, that they could stand up without support, but seldom if ever in the more important sense that they could bear examination from every angle, as a statue can.

In short, the Parthenon was unique in both the profusion and the quality of finish of its sculptural decoration. Yet if its builders had left it completely bare of sculpture, it would still have remained *the* outstanding monument of Classical architecture. This is primarily because its architects took unparalleled pains to introduce into its structure a series of very subtle refinements. The study of these refinements, and of the possible motivation behind them, is a forbiddingly specialized field of study, into which it would be tedious to enter here. They can be summed up by saying that there is hardly a straight line in the whole building: the apparent 'verticals' are not strictly vertical, nor the 'horizontals' horizontal. This in turn means that almost every component of the building is minutely different from its apparent counterparts: the 46 outer columns offer the most obvious exemplification of this.

With a building of such complexity, it is hardly surprising to find that new discoveries about it are still possible today. It was at the 5th International Meeting for the Restoration of the Acropolis Monuments, held in Athens in October 2002, that the world first learned of one such finding: in a paper on the blocks of the south wall of the Parthenon cella — that is, the inner building which carried the frieze — Dr C. Paraschi announced the remarkable finding that the 'standard', rectangular blocks of this wall were themselves individually unique, and had each only one position in a correct restoration of

the building (Paraschi & Toganidis 2004). The implications of this discovery may be intimidating for the present-day restorers, but even more profound is the respect that it inculcates for the ancient builders. This was a building on whose design no expenditure of effort was spared. During the same conference, when the participants were invited to tour the restoration works on the Acropolis and climb to roof-level on the Parthenon, one of the engineers made another observation, this time an unofficial and unrecorded one, that is also relevant. He estimated that, even after all the damage and spoliation of the last two millennia, some 80 per cent of the structure of the Parthenon is still to be found 'on site', that is somewhere on the surface of the Acropolis rock.

All of this is central to an issue that is of prime concern to any archaeologist discussing the Parthenon Marbles: their *context*. We have seen that the Marbles were an integral part of a building; a building that is an architectural marvel in its own right, and one on whose quality of design, even today, new discoveries can still throw fresh light. Even though universally classed as a 'ruin', the Parthenon is at present in immeasurably better shape than most buildings of its age and, as we have again seen, has the capacity of being returned, by careful restoration, to a condition even closer to its original appearance. Yet all this has limited relevance, when the one thing on which all parties are now agreed is that the Marbles cannot be replaced on the building to which they belong. Some of the grounds for this unanimity are obvious, such as the pollution to which they would then be exposed; others are less well-known, such as the irreparable damage done to the settings of the metopes and frieze when Elgin's agents removed these. But it is clear that a physical recovery of the context, in its fullest sense, of the Marbles is now beyond reach.

This fact does not prevent us from focusing our attention on what, in my view, is the heart of the issue of the Marbles today. It is the conflict between the archaeological understanding of 'context' and other understandings of that term. For the other side, we may turn to what can be called 'the argument of the Happy Accident'. In a recent interview in the national press (*Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 10 January 2003, 22; repeated with modified wording, *Sunday Telegraph*, 23 February 2003, 7), Dr Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, was quoted as saying 'The marbles are divided, with roughly half in the museum at Athens and half here. I would argue that this is a happy accident of history'. As he went on to explain, 'They can be seen both in their Athens context and here, where they can be seen against the sweep of the whole of human history . . . Each is valuable'. To quote from him even more recently (*Financial Times Magazine*, 14 June 2003, 30), 'I would argue that the life of these objects as part of the story of the Parthenon is over . . . They are now part of another story'. In part, this is a return to the view of the Committee of 1928 (above, p. 117), but what sticks out even more is the incompatibility of the cultural historian's and the archaeologist's uses of

'context'. This is indeed Dr MacGregor's own view, as well as mine. In the same *Financial Times* interview, he says: 'All the people working in Greek museums are essentially archaeologists and you would expect any archaeologist to privilege original site and original context, and the location of the object at the particular moment of its making'.

Just so. What he is privileging is the context of viewing today, whereas archaeologists who use the same word are almost always talking about the original context of deposition of an object. True, the two senses come closer together, once the argument is extended to cover the case of the Marbles that are still in Athens: the context of viewing is then that of other monuments and museum exhibits from Classical Greece, just as the context of the archaeologist would be a particular Classical Greek building there. But there remains a visible gap between the two mentalities; and when any suggestion of reunification enters the discussion, it suddenly becomes a gaping chasm.

It is tempting, but probably wrong, to read Dr MacGregor's view as embodying simply the professional art historian's standpoint (he is on record elsewhere as having drawn the analogy with Italian altar-pieces, whose components are often separately exhibited in different museums, even different countries, and can thus directly reach a far wider public). But we all know that an archaeologist holding the same post would espouse the same view. The mind-set is, at a more fundamental level, a property of museum curatorship. A while ago (p. 117), I talked of differentiating the approaches of archaeology and museology, but now we find them in apparent collision.

There is another phrase in the quotation of 10 January (above) which serves to bring out this difference even further: '. . . the sweep of the whole of human history'. These words, 'human history', turn out to have a prearranged meaning, and visitors to the British Museum will know what to expect next: references to the great empires of the past, Egypt, Assyria, Persia, Rome. Aside from the fact that Classical Greece, with its mosaic of tiny and relatively impoverished polities, sits rather awkwardly in a list of 'great empires', there is a bigger objection which will spring to any archaeologist's mind: the list is a bit too short. There are a good few empires, and hundreds of lesser cultures of the past, which find neither a mention in the list, nor an extensive place in the British Museum's exhibitions. The thinking is, in the words of Tom Flynn (*Museums Journal*, February 2003) 'a product of a western Enlightenment tradition that has no relevance to non-western, non-capitalist social systems'. As such, it is yet again in head-on conflict with recent archaeological thought.

At this point, the distinctively archaeological interpretation of context may seem to lead us back in the general direction of a topic earlier dismissed as irrelevant, that of illicit antiquities. What is specifically objectionable to the archaeologist about the looting, smuggling and re-sale of antiquities is the loss, most often irretrievable, of their original circumstances of deposition and discovery. The object thus becomes homeless, even lifeless, and the museum curator who acquires it can at least claim to have saved it from oblivion. In

those cases where the original act of clandestine looting can be proved in law, some of those circumstances may after all prove retrievable. At the least, a single object may no longer be isolated from those found with it: in some cases, they may be physically reunited. What distinguishes the case of the Marbles from all such instances is of course the fact that the context of deposition was never lost: it is still visible, in the building on which we have dwelt at some length. Further, the action of Lord Elgin and his agents, whatever else may be said for or against it, was very far from complete.

Here we come to a central fact about the Parthenon Marbles that is nevertheless rather little known. In this country and beyond, there is a widespread belief that the 'Elgin Marbles' constitute the overwhelming bulk of the sculptural decoration of the Parthenon. One can read statements to that effect even in academic works, at least if they are written by art-historians: such as Bodkin (1945, 39), who refers to 'those few sculptures which Lord Elgin did not remove . . .'. He went on to add that they 'have in the intervening 142 years been allowed to deteriorate into utter wreckage'. One may judge the weight of Bodkin's opinions here by the fact that, earlier on the same page, he had managed to compress three historical howlers into one subordinate clause: 'Since Lord Elgin was allowed by the Sultan of Turkey to purchase in 1801 what was left of the sculptures of the Parthenon . . .' (Elgin's permit was signed and sealed by the Grand Vizier's deputy — not by the Sultan, as a true *firman* or official letter of permission from the Ottoman government should have been — and made no mention either of purchase or of the Parthenon).

Informed members of the public today may know that Elgin left in place nearly all of the West Frieze (on one of the short sides of the inner building), contenting himself with making casts of it; and that there is thus at least one major element still in Athens. What is less appreciated is the transformation of this whole issue through some 170 years of intermittent excavation on the Acropolis rock, by successive generations of the Greek Archaeological Service. Almost from the start, the finds from these excavations proved to include missing pieces of the sculptures of the Parthenon. As early as 1835, this fact became known in the British Museum, which offered to exchange casts of the Elgin collection, in return for casts of the new finds and of the West Frieze (St Clair 1998, 265, 333); such exchanges did ultimately take place, though to the accompaniment of demands from the Greek side for the return of the originals. But the final outcome of all this activity is a surprise to most people. If one calculates purely quantitatively, ignoring the state of preservation of the different elements and including every surviving piece, however damaged or weathered (including those which long remained on the walls of the building), then the result is that almost exactly equal proportions of the surviving sculptures — some 49 per cent in each case — are to be found today in London and in Athens. The residual 2 per cent is scattered among more than half a dozen other museums, with the Louvre holding the most substantial share.

This gives food for thought. The symmetry of the division can hardly be matched by any Italian altar-piece. But for the archaeologist, it has several other implications. Many an ancient culture can offer examples of divided, yet fairly readily portable works of art — two well-known instances of Archaic Greek statues involve museums in Greece and in France (Payne & Mackworth-Young 1936, 6–9 & 14–15): here, the solution of exchanging casts was adopted. Pieces detached from a building, besides being rarer, are in a different category altogether; pieces of a building that is substantially still in being are rarer still. Here there can hardly be argument about which museum is the major or 'parent' holder of the work. This, more than any other factor, vitiates the proposal put, at least half-seriously, by a member of the British Museum's Keeper staff in evidence to the Parliamentary Standing Committee of 2000, that the Parthenon Marbles should indeed be reunited — but in London!

But there is a more serious dimension to the archaeological insistence on the recovery of context: it arises from the needs of scholarly research. When a single work is divided between two museums that are 1500 miles apart, the task of detailed study encounters a series of obstacles. Humfry Payne's brilliant discoveries (both of which, interestingly, involved overruling contemporary stylistic judgments) that pieces of two original Archaic statues on the Athenian Acropolis, and respectively in Paris and in Lyon, actually joined, were achieved by visual gifts which are probably beyond most of us. But there is a great deal more to the study of sculpture than identifying joins. Anyone investigating the internal changes of style within a huge ensemble like the Parthenon frieze; or the technique and tools used in its execution; or the post-depositional history of the individual pieces, has their work (to say nothing of their expenses) enormously increased by such physical separation. It is doubtful whether any technique of 'virtual' reconstitution, now or in the future, will ever provide a substitute for what can be learned from actual encounter with the surface texture, or from study of the surface of broken edges. When the monument is in two equal halves, the frequency of these obstacles is likely to be at its statistical peak; when, as was predictable from the history of discovery sketched above (p. 121), even single and relatively small components turn out to be divided between different museums, these obstacles become almost insurmountable. Jenifer Neils (2001, 239–48) has well summarized these arguments based on scholarly need. 'Post-depositional history', too, may include different treatment by different museum curators: here, William St Clair (1998, 312) gives a striking example of how academic study may have suffered from unannounced curatorial intervention.

For many archaeologists, arguments of this kind lead to incontrovertible conclusions. If such a separation can be undone, it should be. If reunification of the individual parts, on some principle of exchange in favour of whichever museum previously held the larger share of that part, would result in even greater dislocation for the work as a whole, then the interests of the work as a

whole should prevail. If the original context of deposition survives as a building, then this determines the site at which reunification should take place. If physical reunification with the original context is ruled out, then at least the closest possible approximation to it should be achieved — in this case, the reunification of the sculptures within sight of that context. The collision of interest with curatorial practice (and perhaps with a less acknowledged factor, curatorial pride) is regrettable, but it cannot be avoided.

We have said little or nothing about the interests of the general public, in Britain, in Greece and world-wide. Quite a lot of evidence has been collected, both about opinions and about numbers of visitors, through recent opinion polls, but these lead us back into those political issues which I have avoided directly raising here. One objective point, however, can still be made. The general public, more than anyone, would benefit from an effort to exhibit the Parthenon Marbles — leaving aside for the moment their original context — in an arrangement that in some way approximates to their original *setting*. This involved their placement, facing outwards, high up on the walls of a rectangular building and on the colonnade surrounding it: as we saw in the testimony of Bernard Ashmole (above, p. 118), this made for very poor visibility in the original arrangement. There is every justification for improving the visual access by bringing the exhibits down to eye-level. But their arrangement in the Duveen Gallery of the British Museum runs directly counter to the main requirement: they face inwards, on the walls of an interior room (a room, incidentally, for which Ashmole himself had a hearty dislike; this helps to explain why the reopening of this Gallery after World War II never took place during his tenure of the Keepership (1939–56), and was postponed until 1961). The display also embodies all manner of devices intended 'to present the Elgin Marbles as if they were a complete set' and 'to disguise the fact that large sections of the frieze are in Athens' (Beard 2002, 167, 185); extending even to the insertion of a false wooden door to mask the absence of a particularly fine section of Slab VI of the East Frieze (St Clair 1998, 304). But these minor deceptions are much less important than the inside-out arrangement itself.

It would be an impossible task to restore the original configuration of the London Marbles within the Duveen Gallery: even that huge floor-space is too small. Perhaps the greatest asset of Bernard Tschumi's design for the New Acropolis Museum now under construction is that, in addition to its natural lighting and its inter-visibility with the Parthenon, it embodies a recreation, as exact as possible, of the true scale and sequence of that configuration. After 2004, this will form an unsurpassed setting for the Marbles already in Athens and perhaps — who knows? — for those presently in London as well.

It is just possible that Colin Renfrew retains some memory of the British Rock-and-Roll singer of the 1950s, Tommy Steele. Shortly after the exposure of the Piltdown fraud, Steele added an extra verse to his song 'Rock-a-Caveman' which, as far I remember, went as follows:

Piltdown pappy sings this song,
'Dem archaeologists done me wrong,
British Museum's got my head,
Most unfortunate 'cos I ain't dead'

I suggest that these lines, the last one especially, have a certain application to the case of the Parthenon Marbles too.

Acknowledgements

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