

WONDERS OF THE WORLD

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# THE PARTHENON

MARY BEARD



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## WHY THE PARTHENON MIGHT MAKE YOU CRY

### THE REAL THING

When Sigmund Freud first visited the Parthenon in 1904, he was surprised to discover that it really did exist, ‘just as we learnt at school’. It had taken Freud some time to summon the nerve to make a visit, and he wrote vividly of the uncomfortable hours of indecision that he spent in Trieste, trying to resolve whether to catch the steamer to Athens or sail to Corfu as he had originally planned. When he finally arrived and climbed up to the ruins on the Acropolis, delight was mixed with shock. It was as if – or so he later tailored the story – he had been walking beside Loch Ness, had spotted the legendary Monster stranded on the shore and so been driven to admit that it wasn’t just a myth after all. ‘It really *does* exist.’ Not all admirers of the Parthenon have had the courage to follow Freud. One of those not prepared to take the risk of seeing for himself was Werner Jaeger, a renowned classical scholar of the early twentieth century and passionate advocate of the humanising power of ancient Greek culture. Jaeger got as far as Athens at least once, but he drew the line at climbing up to the ruined temple itself – dreading that the ‘real thing’ might not live up to his expectations.



2. A quiet day on the Acropolis. Hundreds of thousands of visitors flock to the site each year. Currently the Parthenon itself is off-limits while more than twenty years of restoration work – signalled here by the crane inside the building – is carried out (pp. 114–15).

Jaeger need not have worried. There have been few tourists over the last 200 years or more who have not managed to be impressed by the Parthenon and its dramatic setting on the Athenian Acropolis: intrepid travellers in the late eighteenth century braved wars, bandits and some very nasty bugs to catch their first glimpse of ‘real’ Greek architecture and sculpture; a whole array of politicians and cultural superstars from Bernard Shaw to Bill Clinton have competed to be photographed, misty-eyed, between the Parthenon’s columns (*Illustration 1*); busloads of everyday visitors, in still increasing numbers, make this the centrepiece of their Athenian pilgrimage, eagerly hanging on to the archaeological minutiae regurgitated by their guides. It is true, of course, that tourists are cannily adept at convincing themselves that they are having a good time, and the cultural pressure on us to be impressed, in retrospect at least, by what-we-think-we-should-be-impressed-by may be almost irresistible. All the same, it is often the case that even the most celebrated wonders of world culture are tinged with disappointment when you meet them face to face: the Mona Lisa is irritatingly small; the Pyramids would be much more atmospheric if they were not on the fringes of the Cairo suburbs, and rather too mundanely serviced by an on-site branch of Pizza Hut. Not so the Parthenon. Against all the odds – the inescapable sun, the crowds of people, the surly guards blowing their whistles at any deviants who try to stray from the prescribed route around the site and, for more than a decade now, the barrage of scaffolding – the Parthenon seems to work for almost everyone, almost every time (*Illustration 2*).

At first sight, then, the modern story of this monument is one told in glowing superlatives. An enterprising

businessman-cum-papal diplomat from Ancona set the tone in the fifteenth century, when he visited Athens in 1436: among the huge collections of ‘incredible marble buildings ... what pleased me most of all,’ he wrote, ‘was the great and marvellous temple of Pallas Athena on the topmost citadel of the city, a divine work by Phidias, which has 58 towering columns, each seven feet in diameter, and is splendidly adorned with the noblest images on all sides’. Later writers and critics have piled on the eulogies. Predictably perhaps, the antiquarian visitors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries drooled over the Parthenon’s ‘exquisite symmetry’, its ‘glorious fabric’ and the ‘harmonious analogy of its proportions’. Why beat about the bush? ‘It is the most unrivalled triumph of sculpture and architecture that the world ever saw,’ was the confident conclusion of Edward Dodwell in 1819, recently returned from three trips to Greece. But a hundred years later Le Corbusier, the most famous prophet of twentieth-century modernism, was still working from very much the same script when he rooted his new vision of architecture in the sheer perfection of the Parthenon. ‘There has been nothing like it anywhere or at any period’, he wrote in his manifesto, *Towards a New Architecture* (which is illustrated with no fewer than 20 photographs or drawings of the building, some memorably juxtaposed with its modern analogue as a triumph of design, the motor car). And on another occasion he reflected, in more characteristically modernist tones, that ‘one clear image will stand in my mind for ever: the Parthenon, stark, stripped, economical, violent, a clamorous outcry against a landscape of grace and terror’.

## FAKING IT

Almost inevitably, this enthusiasm has been followed by emulation. Right across the western world you can find clones of the Parthenon in all sizes and materials, adapted to a disconcerting range of different functions: from miniature silver cufflinks, through postmodern toasters (the ultimate in kitchenware 1996, courtesy of sculptor Darren Lago), to full-scale, walk-in concrete replicas. The most ostentatious of all is the Walhalla near Regensburg in Germany, brainchild of Ludwig I of Bavaria and intended as a 'Monument of German Unity'. The majority of the designs submitted to Ludwig were based on the Parthenon in one way or another. But the commission eventually went to a vast scheme by the architect Leo von Klenze, set on the top of a wooded 'Acropolis', Bavarian style: the outside an overblown Parthenon, the inside a Teutonic extravaganza, complete with Valkyries and busts of German worthies, from Alaric to Goethe (and now up to, and beyond, Konrad Adenauer). Not all projects came to such lavish fruition. In 1816 the city of Edinburgh, optimistically nicknamed the Athens of the North, was encouraged by none other than Lord Elgin to commemorate the Battle of Waterloo with a lookalike Parthenon on Calton Hill – but got no further than a dozen columns before the money ran out in 1829. These have stood as Edinburgh's pride, or disgrace, ever since, and high-tech plans to finish the job in glass and laser as a gesture to the new millennium were resoundingly rejected by the local residents.

Meanwhile, as the craze for classical style swamped the USA in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Parthenon was resurrected in the shape of a whole series of





3. The full-size replica of the statue of Athena from the Nashville Parthenon, by Alan LeQuire (seen here by the goddess's right leg). This version of Pheidias' creation was unveiled in 1990 and has won many plaudits for its archaeological accuracy. But visitors must use their imaginations to recreate the appearance of gold and ivory. LeQuire had to settle for the more economical gypsum cement and fibreglass.

government buildings, banks and museums. Pride of place here, for accuracy of reconstruction at least (reputedly correct to three millimetres), goes to the Parthenon in Nashville, Tennessee – the Athens of the South, as it sometimes likes to be known. This started life as a wood, plaster and brick pavilion, built for the Tennessee Centennial Exposition in 1897. But the people of Nashville were so taken with it that it remained in place long after the end of the fair and was rebuilt in more durable concrete in the 1920s; its massive 13-metre statue of the goddess Athena, a replica of what we think once stood in the original building in Athens, was eventually unveiled in 1990 (*Illustration 3*). This Parthenon reached a wider international audience through Robert Altman’s movie *Nashville*, his epic satire on the tawdriness of the American dream, showbiz and politics. The final scenes of the film are set among its columns draped with the American flag, where a country-and-western benefit concert is being staged for a no-hope fringe candidate in a presidential election; a characteristically American occasion culminating in a characteristically American murder, as the lead singer is gunned down on the Parthenon’s portico by an apparently motiveless assassin. Athenian classicism meets the Stars and Stripes.

‘THE BLOODY PARTHENON, I SUPPOSE ...’

There have been, it is true, a few maverick voices raised over the centuries against the general chorus of admiration for the Parthenon. A number of visitors have felt able to confess that the first sight of the building was not quite what they had expected. Winston Churchill, for example, would have liked

to see a few more of the collapsed columns re-erected, and was tempted (for he was First Sea Lord at the time) to volunteer a squadron of the British Navy for the task; while Oscar Wilde's charismatic teacher from Trinity College Dublin, J. P. Mahaffy, theorised that any monument so famous was bound to be a bit disappointing when you first saw it ('no building on earth can sustain the burden of such greatness') – before going on to reassure his readers that, if they persevered to a second glance, the 'glory' of the Parthenon and the brilliance of the 'master minds which produced this splendour' would quickly become apparent. Just occasionally you can find some more consistently barbed attempts to take the monument down a peg or two. American novelist Walker Percy must have enjoyed the frisson of transgression when he picked on the Parthenon as a model of modern boredom ('It is a bore. Few people even bother to look – it looked better in the brochure') and fantasised about its total destruction under a massive Soviet attack. At least, he wrote, if you were a NATO colonel 'in a bunker in downtown Athens, binoculars propped on sandbags', watching out for a direct hit on the portico, you wouldn't find the Parthenon *boring*. William Golding was presumably thinking along similar lines when, one March afternoon in the 1960s, after a good Athenian lunch with a classicist friend, he opted to visit 'the bloody Parthenon, I suppose'. It was half-raining, with terrific gusts of wind; the dust blew in their faces, making the usual style of wide-eyed tourism difficult and painful. Golding stopped at the building, looked at it briefly, blew his nose aggressively then – finding a comfortable block of marble – sat down, back to the monument, and stared away from it at the 'industrial gloom

of the Piraeus' and the cement works of Eleusis that are just visible from the Athenian Acropolis. 'Beaming euphorically ... he said at last, "Now *this* is what I call the right way to look at the Parthenon."

By and large, however, even the most acerbic cultural critics, the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries' sharpest tongues, have treated the Parthenon as somehow 'off-limits'. Oscar Wilde, from whom we might reasonably have expected a well-honed quip at the monument's expense, seems hardly even to have shared his professor's doubts about those awkward first impressions. Mahaffy had taken Wilde to Greece in 1877, in the hope that the treasures of pagan antiquity would dissuade his pupil from converting to Catholicism. This campaign against 'Popery' was, if anything, rather too successful – to judge from Wilde's reaction to the Parthenon (as reported, curiously, in a best-selling novel penned by one of his lady friends): 'He spoke to her of the Parthenon, the one temple – not a building – a temple, as complete, as personal as a statue. And that first sight of the Acropolis, the delicate naked columns rising up in the morning sunshine; "It was like coming upon some white Greek goddess ..."' A few years later he turned his admiration for the building into such scandalously steamy verses that at least one late-Victorian reader excised them – literally, with her scissors – from the collection in which they appeared. Entitled 'Charmides', the offending poem features 'a Grecian lad' who manages to get himself locked into a temple at dusk, to undress the statue of the goddess Athena and kiss her till dawn: 'Never I ween did lover hold such tryst,/ For all night long he murmured honeyed word,/ And saw her sweet unravished limbs, and kissed/ Her pale and argent body

undisturbed'. The temple in which all this takes place, needless to say, bears a striking resemblance to the Parthenon.

Perhaps even more surprising is Virginia Woolf's undiluted enthusiasm for the Parthenon, which she visited in 1906 and again in 1932. Woolf can almost always be relied upon for a caustic comment or two. True to form, in her Greek diaries she is characteristically sharp about the other tourists: the 'hordes of Teutons' and the French, who are notoriously reluctant to take a bath. And she has no more time than most visitors of her generation for the inhabitants of modern Greece. This was long before postcards of smiling, toothless peasants had become a major weapon in the armoury of the Greek tourist industry, selling in vast numbers to sentimental northern Europeans in search of the rustic simplicity of traditional Mediterranean life. For Woolf and her fellows, the peasants were generally dull and stupid, Greeks of all classes 'dirty, ignorant & unstable as water'. But the Parthenon itself, to which she paid daily homage throughout her time in Athens, was an entirely different matter. For once, she claims to have been lost for words: 'our minds had been struck inarticulate by something too great for them to grasp'. And she struggles desperately – and rather ostentatiously, it must be said – to capture on paper the impact of the great monument: its colour is, by turns, bright 'red', 'creamy white', 'rosy', 'tawny', 'ashy pale' (Evelyn Waugh faced the same problem, but likened it more imaginatively to a mild Stilton cheese); 'its columns spring up like fair round limbs, flushed with health'; it 'overcomes you; it is so large, & so strong, & so triumphant'; 'no place seems more lusty & alive than this platform of ancient dead stone'. Or, put more crisply in the novel *Jacob's Room*, where she reworked some of

her Athenian experiences, it 'appears likely to outlast the entire world'. Face to face with the Parthenon even Mrs Woolf seems to have gone weak at the knees.

#### THE CRYING GAME

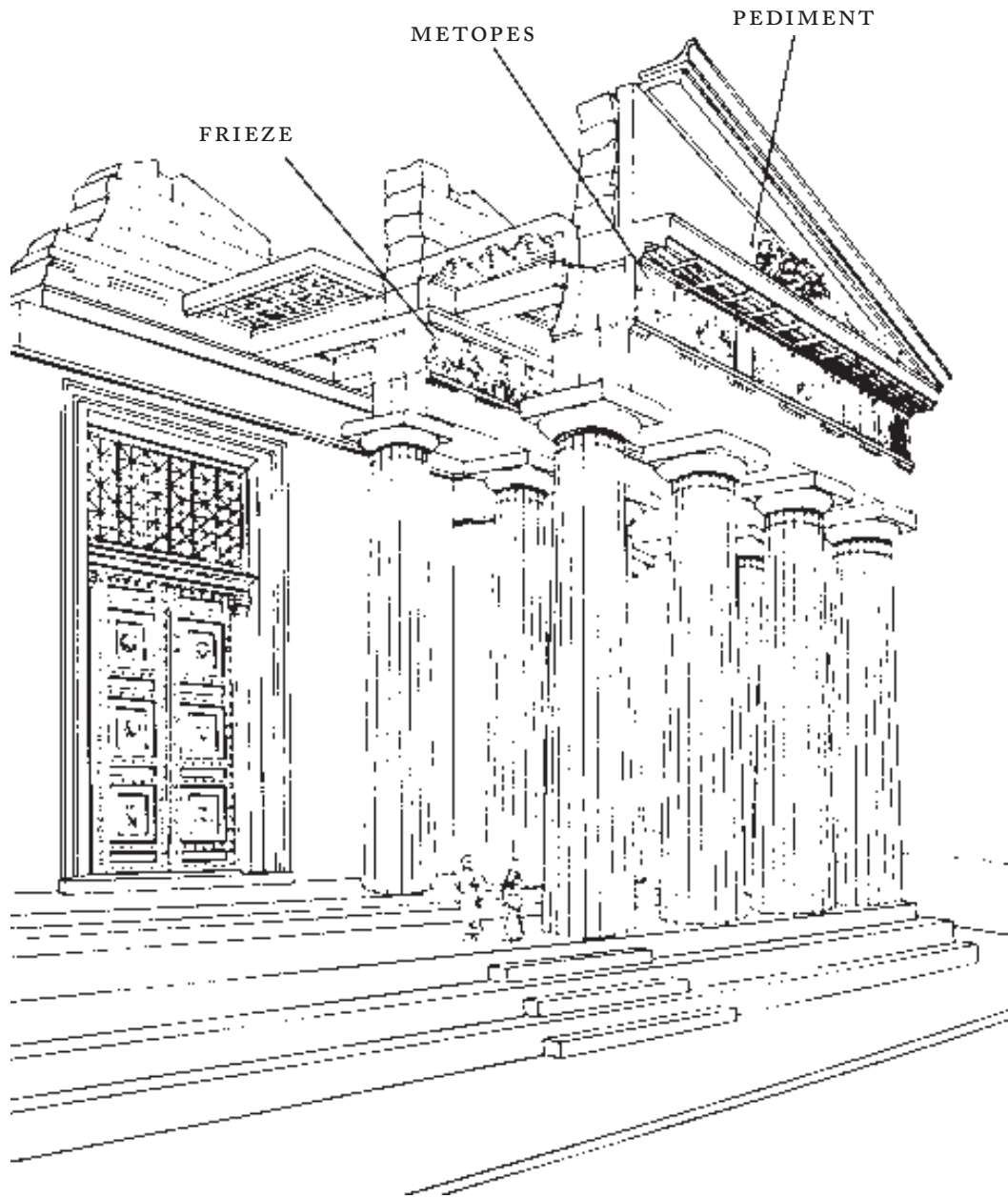
At least she did not cry – unlike many of the world's most famous critics and connoisseurs, who have found that the Parthenon can reduce them to tears, stiff upper-lip or not. 'The Parthenon is so shattering that it made me weep, which I don't usually do under these circumstances', wrote Cyril Connolly, archly, after a visit in the 1920s. Thousands of others have made a similar confession (or boast), before and since. It is, in fact, a fair guess that more people have wept on the Athenian Acropolis than at any other monument anywhere in the world, with the possible exception of the Taj Mahal. But it is not only aesthetic overload, the shock of anticipation fulfilled or (as a cynic might suspect) showmanship that bring tears to the eyes. Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet, composer of the Indian national anthem and compulsive world traveller, is said to have cried at the sheer 'barbarian ugliness' of the ruins he saw on the Acropolis – a useful reminder, if such were needed, that the Parthenon might not look so rosy from a multi-cultural perspective. And there is, of course, a whole tradition, flamboyantly launched by Lord Byron, that makes tears obligatory on the Acropolis, not for the overwhelming beauty of the Parthenon, but for its tragic ruin and for what he saw as its horrible dismemberment.

For the Parthenon is no longer to be found only in Athens. Replicas aside, a good proportion of the sculpture



that decorated the original fifth-century BC monument (not to mention a few column capitals and other stray architectural fragments) is now scattered through the museums of Europe. Roughly half the sculpture is housed in Athens, not – as in Byron’s day – on the Parthenon itself, but safely away from the notorious Athenian pollution in nearby museums and storerooms. Most of the rest is in the British Museum, London, courtesy of Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, who sold it to the British government in 1816 – including over 75 metres of the famous sculpted ‘frieze’ that once ran round the whole building, as well as 15 of the 92 sculpted panels (or ‘metopes’) that were originally displayed high up above the columns and 17 life-size figures that once stood in the temple gables (or ‘pediments’) (*Figures 1 and 2*). But there is also a notable clutch of material in Paris, including a metope and a slab of frieze, acquired in Athens by a fanatical aristocratic collector in the 1780s, sequestered by the French revolutionaries and now on display in the Louvre, plus various odd, smaller pieces in Copenhagen, Wurzburg, Palermo, Rome, Heidelberg, Vienna, Munich and Strasbourg, mostly pocketed (literally) by early visitors to the Acropolis.

Byron’s particular target was Lord Elgin, British ambassador to Constantinople between 1799 and 1803, who had his boatloads of Parthenon sculpture removed from the site through the first decade of the nineteenth century. Some of this had already fallen from its original position and was picked up from the ground near by. But a considerable quantity was removed from the building itself, which involved a whole series of awkward operations, prising the sculpture out or occasionally dismantling small sections of the building to release it. Much of it then turned out to be colossally heavy



*Figure 1.* Position of the sculpture on the Parthenon.



and almost impossible to transport safely, so to lighten the load (and without, so far as we can tell, attacking the sculpted surfaces themselves) Elgin's agents proceeded to saw off the backs of the thickest slabs, removing as much excess weight as they could. All of this was immediately controversial. What Elgin's motives were, and whether he had the legal authority to do what he did, remain, as we shall see in later chapters, matters of intense and irresolvable dispute. The conclusions you reach – whether now or 200 years ago – depend less on facts or logic than on the prejudices from which you start. Predictably, over the centuries, Elgin has been characterised with equal fervour as a parody 'milord' prepared to desecrate the acme of world architecture in search of some nice sculpture to prettify his ancestral seat, and as a selfless hero who practically bankrupted himself in preserving for posterity masterpieces that would otherwise have been ground up for cement by ignorant locals, caught in the crossfire of some internecine war or, in due course, destroyed by acid rain. Neither version has much to recommend it.

Byron never met Elgin and was not present while the sculptures were being removed from the Parthenon. In fact, he would have been hardly more than 13 years old when Elgin's men started their work. He did not set foot in Athens until Christmas Day 1809, when he stayed for 10 weeks, lodging with the famous Widow Macri, whose renowned hospitality extended to taking in a few well-heeled paying guests. He apparently divided his time between deploring the state of modern Athens, touring the sights (you can still just see where he scratched his name on one of the columns of the little temple of Poseidon at Sounion, outside Athens) and

scribbling poetry. This included vitriolic attacks on Elgin as well as the ghastly doggerel entitled 'Maid of Athens' in honour of Macri's 12-year-old daughter – 'Maid of Athens, ere we part,/ Give, oh, give me back my heart!/ Or, since that has left my breast,/ Keep it now, and take the rest!'

It is far from clear what exactly lay behind the sheer nastiness of his campaign against Elgin and the export of the sculpture (no insults were spared, not even sideswipes at Elgin's retarded son or carefully placed hints about syphilis and Lady Elgin's adultery). Byron had not yet decided to parade himself as the champion of Greece and Greek freedom – a cause for which he would eventually die, from fever rather than cannon fire, at Missolonghi. Besides, he had all manner of intimate connections with Elgin's men in Athens. On his return visit to Greece, just a few weeks after the first, he had a whirlwind affair with the young brother-in-law of the man who had actually supervised the removal of Elgin's marbles from the Parthenon. And when he finally left for home he was happy enough to travel as far as Malta on the very same boat as the last consignment of marbles, which were also on their way to England after years of delay. But whatever drove Byron's hostility, there can be no doubt that his verses were hugely influential on the reactions to the Parthenon, especially the reactions of the British. 'Cold is the heart, fair Greece! that looks on thee,/ Nor feels as lovers o'er the dust they lov'd;/ Dull is the eye that will not weep to see/ Thy walls defac'd, thy mouldering shrines remov'd/ By British hands ...' *Dull is the eye that will not weep*. It was hardly less than an order to greet the Parthenon with tears.

### ‘ON SEEING THE ELGIN MARBLES’

The diaspora of the marbles, and in particular the Elgin collection now in the British Museum, gives another significant spin to the modern story of the Parthenon. From the very moment that the first shipment went on display to the favoured few in 1807 (in a shed behind Elgin’s house at the corner of Park Lane in London), the Elgin Marbles have attracted as much attention as the Parthenon itself, if not more. Some reactions to this sculpture chime in closely with the kind of enthusiasm for the building that we have already traced. Mrs Siddons, the celebrity actress of the moment, predictably (and histrionically) shed a tear when she first caught sight of the figures from the temple gables in the Park Lane shed. John Keats swooned on paper, in the shape of a sonnet titled ‘On Seeing the Elgin Marbles’, when he visited the sculptures in 1817, just after they had been moved to the British Museum, and he is supposed to have incorporated various vignettes taken directly from the frieze in his even more famous ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. (*Illustration 4*). Goethe meanwhile celebrated the British government’s decision to buy the collection from Elgin as ‘the beginning of a new age for Great Art’. One of the most quoted reactions of all came from the sculptor, Antonio Canova who turned down Elgin’s offer of the plum job of restoring the marbles on the grounds that ‘it would be a sacrilege in him or any man to presume to touch them with a chisel’. It is not often pointed out, though, that he contrived this elegant and flattering refusal to his no doubt pressing client some years before he had actually seen the collection with his own eyes.

These sculptures were replicated all over Europe and beyond. You can find a copy of the Parthenon frieze adding



4. This particular scene from the Parthenon frieze is often thought to lie behind John Keats's famous lines in his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': 'Who are these coming to the sacrifice? To what green altar, O mysterious priest,/  
Leadest thou that heifer lowing at the skies ... ?'

classical lustre to the monumental screen at London's Hyde Park Corner, designed by Decimus Burton in the 1820s – who went on, appropriately enough, to emblazon the façade of his building for the brand new Athenaeum Club with another version of this masterpiece from ancient Athens. Exact replicas in the form of plaster casts also flooded out from the British Museum to other museums, schools, art colleges and foreign governments. The Treasury obviously decided that the marbles were a useful tool in diplomatic relations and promptly sent a free gift of a full replica set to the royal courts of Tuscany, Rome, Naples and Prussia (with a smaller selection being packed off, also as a present, to Venice). The Prince Regent gave copies of the whole collection to both Plymouth and Liverpool. Others had to pay for the privilege: in St Petersburg, Bavaria and Wurtemberg royalty dug deep into their pockets for 'parts of the Elgin Marbles'; the Dresden Museum, more economically, swapped a surplus-to-requirements original classical statue for a set of Parthenon casts. It is reckoned that by the mid-nineteenth 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. Private customers, of course, might prefer something on a smaller scale. Almost as soon as the collection arrived in England, the sculptor John Henning cornered, and flooded, the market with miniature boxed sets of plaster replicas of the frieze – still on sale through the British Museum shop even today ('superb as a paperweight or as a miniature focal point for a wall', as the catalogue helpfully suggests).

But, for all this admiration, there is – and always has been – a much stronger dissident tradition on the Elgin Marbles



than on the ruins of the Parthenon itself. To start with, it was to do with 'the shock of the new'. Fashionable art theorists in the early 1800s held that art had reached a state of absolute perfection in classical Greece of the fifth century BC. Or so, at least, they judged from what Greek and Roman writers had to say and from later, Roman copies of earlier masterpieces. For, so long as travel to Greece itself remained an exotic and dangerous activity, almost none of those in northern Europe who pontificated about the history of art had actually seen an original work of fifth-century Greek sculpture. The Elgin Marbles were the first examples of sculpture from what was believed to be the Golden Age of Art that most people in Britain had ever clapped eyes on. If some critics enthused, others did not much like what they saw. Many of the pieces, they thought, were disappointingly battered; a few (especially among the metope panels) seemed frankly second rate and hardly any reached that level of 'sublimity' they had expected. One notoriously damning judgement, trumpeted by a rival collector, Richard Payne Knight, was that Elgin's marbles were not fifth-century BC Greek at all, but Roman additions to the Parthenon from the second century AD. Like Canova, though, Payne Knight spoke before he had seen; he first uttered this put-down, at dinner with Lord Elgin, before the sculptures had even been removed from their crates.

Even after the Roman theory had been decisively scotched, there continued to be voices raised against the star billing of the Elgin Marbles. The sculpture came to stand for all that was worst, as well as best, about classical art: just a little too perfect, slightly sterile, spoiled by the very homogeneity of the figures and the lack of real-life expression on

the faces. Thomas Carlyle, for example, was thinking of the characters depicted on the great frieze when he teased the painter G. F. Watts (who kept some casts of the marbles in his studio): ‘There’s not a clever man amongst them all, and I would away with them – into space.’ And just this kind of dissatisfaction is captured, decades later, in the opening to one of the most influential books on the ancient world to be published in the twentieth century, E. R. Dodds’s *The Greeks and the Irrational* (a brilliant exploration of the murkier, ‘primitive’ aspects of Greek culture). Dodds begins his first chapter with the story of a chance encounter in front of the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum: ‘... a young man came up to me and said with a worried air, “I know it’s an awful thing to confess, but this Greek stuff doesn’t move me one bit ... it’s all so terribly rational.”’ It was in response to this complaint, so his story goes, that *The Greeks and the Irrational* was conceived.

#### DID BYRON GET IT RIGHT?

Other visitors have felt that the sculptures were simply ‘wrong’ in the British Museum. This was partly a sense that works of art created for the bright Athenian sunshine were inevitably deadened by their display in the sombre atmosphere of Bloomsbury – the English weather outside, the hushed tones adopted by troops of dutiful visitors inside. Virginia Woolf, for one, preferred the ‘hairy, tawny bodies’ of Greek tragedy to those delicately ‘posed on granite plinths in the pale corridors of the British Museum’, while ‘being brought to the gloom/ Of this dark room’ was the main gripe of the marbles themselves, as ventriloquised by Thomas

Hardy in his poem 'Christmas in the Elgin Room'. But these questions of display have, more often than not, been subsumed into what has become the longest-running cultural controversy in the world: should Elgin ever have removed the marbles from their original location? Should they ever have been shipped to Britain? Does justice demand that they be sent back 'home'? In short, did Byron get it right?

These debates have now been running for 200 years. Insults have been traded and a lot more tears have been shed – notably by the formidable Greek Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri, who wept memorably to camera when she visited the marbles in the British Museum in 1983. There have been bad arguments on both sides. Britain has been parodied as an unreconstructed colonial power, desperate to hang on to its cultural booty in place of its lost empire; Greece as a jumped-up Balkan republic, a peasant state hardly to be trusted with the stewardship of an international treasure. Politicians have leapt on and off the bandwagon. Successive Greek governments have found the loss of the Parthenon sculptures a convenient symbol of national unity, and demands for their restitution a low-cost and relatively risk-free campaign. With equal expediency, successive Labour governments in Britain have forgotten the rash promises they made in opposition to return the marbles to Athens just as soon as they reached power. Meanwhile, in the cross-fire, all kinds of crucial questions of cultural heritage have been raised: to whom does the Parthenon, and other such world-class monuments, belong? Should cultural treasures be repatriated, or should museums be proud of their international holdings? Is the Parthenon a special case – and why?



Whatever the rights and wrongs of this dispute (and they are much trickier to judge than campaigners would have us believe), the unquenchable controversy has had one very clear effect. It has helped to keep the Parthenon at the very top of our cultural agenda. Not single-handedly, of course. The Parthenon belongs, as we have already seen, to that elite band of monuments whose historical significance is overlaid by the fame of *being famous*. When we visit it in Athens or in the British Museum, we are not only searching out a masterpiece of classical Greece; there are, after all, a good number of classical temples bigger or better preserved than this that never attract such attention. We are also following in the footsteps of all those who have visited before (that's why we want *our* photographs taken there too ...); and we are paying tribute to a symbol that has been written into our own cultural history, from Keats, through Freud to Nashville. But, in the case of the Parthenon, there is yet another dimension. We are visiting a monument that has been fought over for generations, that enflames passions and prompts government intervention. It has the added distinction, in other words, of being *worth arguing about*. The uncomfortable conclusion is hard to resist: that, if it had not been dismembered, the Parthenon would never have been half so famous.

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‘THE TEMPLE THEY CALL THE  
PARTHENON’

A GUIDE IN HAND

Only one brief description of the Parthenon survives from the ancient world itself. It runs to a single paragraph in a *Guidebook to Greece* written by an enthusiastic traveller in the mid-second century AD, almost 600 years after the monument was built. In striking contrast to the flood of modern eulogies, Greek and Roman writers remained remarkably reticent on the Parthenon. True, they were probably not so reticent as they now appear. An enormous amount of classical literature has been lost over the centuries; in fact, almost anything that medieval scribes or their patrons did not choose to copy has not survived – it is as simple, and chancy, as that. Victims of this neglect certainly include a technical treatise by one of the building’s architects, Iktinos, and at least two multi-volume gazetteers to the Athenian Acropolis which must have featured the temple prominently. As it is, for the ancient view of the Parthenon we now rely on the description of a writer called Pausanias, a Greek speaker from the western seaboard of what is now Turkey, writing more or less the ancient equivalent of a *Blue Guide*. He toured Greece when the country had long since become a comfortable, demilitarised province of

the Roman empire – even if there were still bitter memories of the brutal conquest by the Romans in the second century BC. By his day Athens was a slightly self-satisfied university town and a notable highspot in the ancient ‘heritage trail’; its monuments were tourist attractions almost as much as they are today.

Unlike Freud, Pausanias made a beeline for the Athenian Acropolis. The first of his 10 volumes opens with the account of his arrival on the coast near Athens, sailing past the sanctuary at Sounion where Byron was later to carve his name. Once through the city gates, there were any number of attractions to engage and detain him: statues by the most illustrious Greek artists; celebrity tombs; historic government buildings; ancient sanctuaries; paintings of notable Athenian victories from their glory days before the Romans (or, for that matter, before Philip of Macedon effectively stamped out Athenian independence in the fourth century BC). But by the middle of the book he was all set to take his readers up the single road, ‘precipitous throughout’, leading to the Acropolis (*Figure 3*).

This was not the bare rock that it is now, with just a few isolated monuments dramatically silhouetted against a clear sky. It was the most important sacred space in the whole of Athens, as well as the prime site of civic memory and display. As such, it was crammed with statues, shrines and curiosities, many of which Pausanias stops to describe, explaining their origin and elaborating their history with a whole range of more or less curious myths and stories. One minute it is the legend of Theseus’ father who plunged to his death just where the little temple of the goddess Victory later stood. The next minute he is pointing to a group of Graces and

explaining how ‘everyone says’ that it was sculpted by Socrates, the greatest guru-philosopher of the fifth century BC (a nice idea ... but we now think that it was much more likely the work of a second-division sculptor from Thebes, also called Socrates). One minute he is floored by the sheer quantity of works of art to describe, and warns us that he will not even be mentioning some of the less distinguished pieces. The next he is fussing over a small stone where, once upon a time, Silenus, one of the rowdy friends of the god Dionysus, was said to have stopped for a rest. And so the sights and stories flood out.

When he finally reaches ‘the temple they call the Parthenon’, the account is almost uncomfortably low-key. There is no gush of admiration, not a single superlative. He starts with a brief glance at the scenes depicted in the two temple gables: ‘as you go in, all the sculpture in the so-called “pediment” is about the birth of Athena; the subject of the pediment at the back of the building is the contest between Poseidon and Athena for the territory of Athens’. He finishes with a note of the only two portrait statues he claims to remember seeing there. The first is of Hadrian, Roman emperor and fanatical admirer of Greek culture, who poured money into a magnificent facelift for Athens in the early second century AD (including, if you were to believe Payne Knight, the Parthenon sculptures themselves). The other, ‘by the door’, is a statue of Iphicrates, a fourth-century BC general-cum-mercenary who, as Pausanias rather vaguely writes, ‘did many amazing things’. His memory sometimes served him better. Elsewhere in his *Guidebook* he brings up a painting in the Parthenon which featured the fifth-century BC general (later defector and exile) Themistocles, as well as

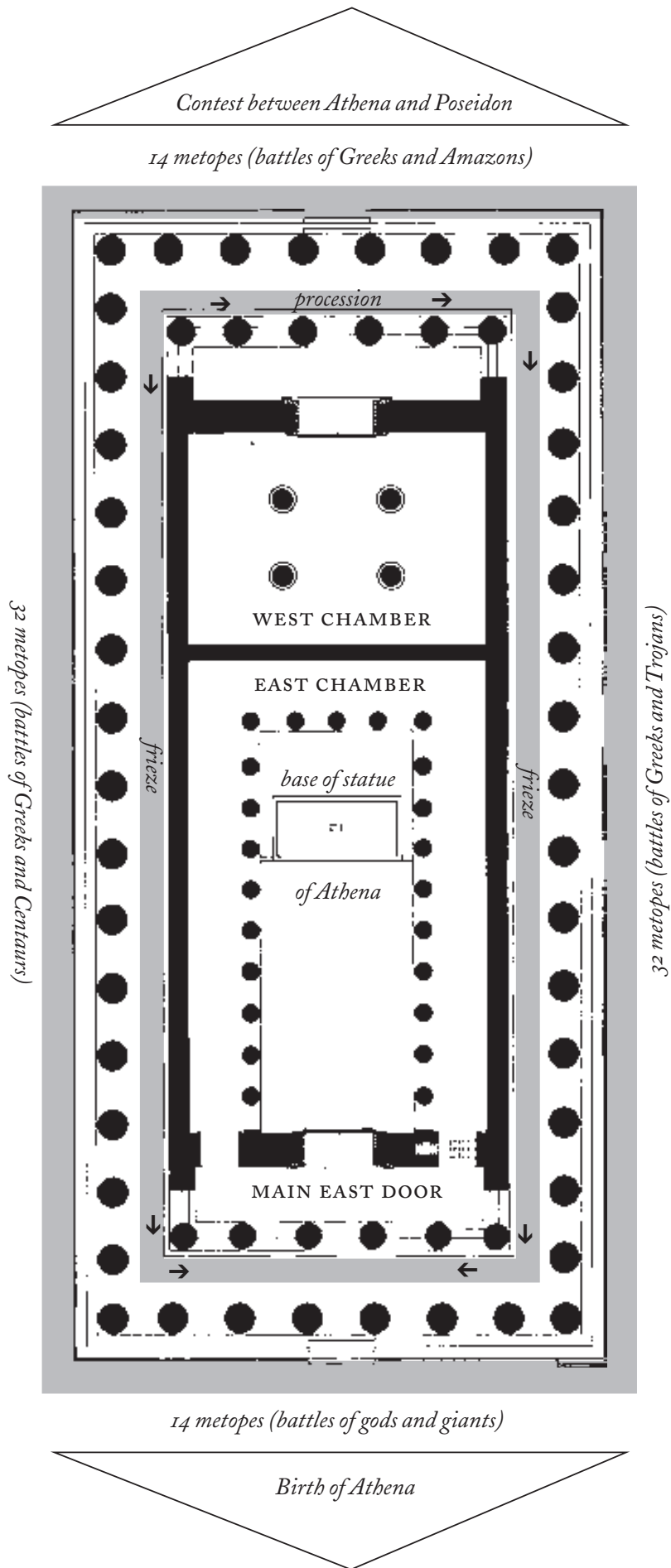


Figure 2. The Parthenon and its sculpture (scale 1:400).

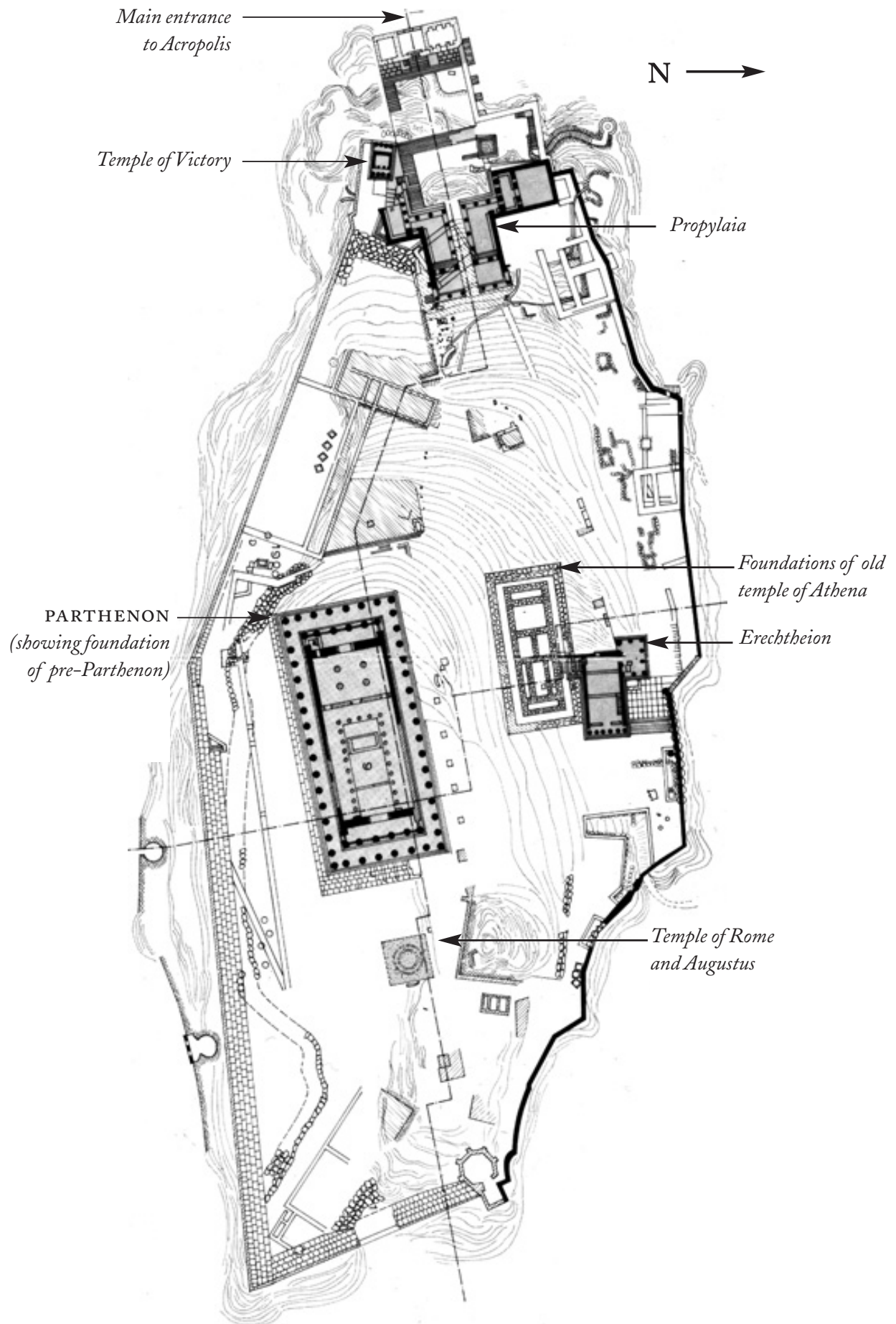


Figure 3. Plan of the ancient Acropolis.



a portrait of someone called Heliodorus, whose tomb he passed on the way to Eleusis. But his mind is not on those here.

For, in the rest of his account, some 20 lines or so in all, Pausanias has eyes for one object only: the virtuoso statue, now lost without trace, of the goddess Athena which took pride of place inside the building. She was made of ivory and gold, he explains, and stood up straight, dressed in a tunic that stretched to her feet. On her head she wore an elaborate helmet, with a sphinx in the centre and griffins on either side; while her breastplate carried as its emblem the face and snaky locks (here worked in ivory) of one of her celebrated victims. This was the gorgon Medusa who, so the story went, had turned to stone anyone unlucky enough to catch sight of her – until the goddess helped a plucky young hero to do the necessary and decapitate the monster. The whole statue was set on a pedestal which was itself decorated with sculpture showing the creation of the first mortal woman, Pandora. Pausanias lingers here: ‘before Pandora came into being’, he insists, ‘there was as yet no race of women’. It was indeed a turning point in the history of mankind, for Pandora was a treacherous gift made by the gods as a punishment for men’s disobedience and, not unlike Eve, the origin of all human trouble.

Athena was also equipped with a number of her characteristic props. In one hand she grasped a spear. In the other she held a statue of the goddess Victory; this alone, Pausanias says, was ‘four cubits’ tall. Finally, at her side lay a shield and a serpent, ‘presumably Erichthonios’. He expects his readers to know that ‘Erichthonios’ was the son of the virgin goddess, by a miraculous conception that lay at the heart of

local legend. Athena had gone one day, they said, to the god Hephaistos, the divine blacksmith, to kit herself out with a new set of weapons. But he had other things on his mind, namely sex. The predictable tussle ensued. Athena sternly fended him off and Hephaistos only got close enough to ejaculate over her leg. Divine seed, though, was powerful stuff. When Athena cleaned herself up and brushed it to the ground, up popped Erichthonios – either, as some versions of the myth held, in the shape of a serpent, or as a more recognisably human baby – who would grow up to be one of the founding fathers of the city of Athens.

Brief as it is, Pausanias' account is absolutely crucial in helping us to picture the ancient Parthenon. Without it, we would have very little clue what any of the battered pieces of sculpture that survive from the pediments could possibly have been meant to be. It still remains a puzzle, as we shall see, how exactly the group over the main entrance captured in marble the birth of Athena, who, in another divine twist of the normal mechanisms of human reproduction, was supposed to have emerged fully formed and fully armed from the head of her father Zeus. There are some doubts too, at the other end of the building, about how the sculptors managed to depict what Pausanias calls the 'contest between Poseidon and Athena': the legendary auction, in which the two deities offered rival bids for control of the city of Athens, Athena's olive tree winning out against Poseidon's offer of the sea. And, of course, he may not have understood these scenes in exactly the same way as other visitors did, let alone as their artists had envisaged them. (Indeed, on a few notable occasions elsewhere in his *Guidebook*, modern commentators have decided that his descriptions must be, in detail, quite wrong.)



Nevertheless, Pausanias offers a first-hand, eye-witness interpretation to get us going. He is the starting point too when we try to imagine the phenomenal statue of Athena. This was made of gold and ivory – not, of course, solid but a precious covering over a wooden frame (in fact, classical writers joked about the mice that lived in the hollow interiors of statues such as this). Frankly, to modern ears, Pausanias' account makes it sound an appallingly vulgar confection, an uncomfortable mixture of materials, overblown and overloaded, about as far from 'the classical ideal' as you could get; and this impression is horribly confirmed by every modern attempt to reconstruct the object (*Illustration 3*). But, like it or not, Athena must have been the star attraction of the temple.

Paradoxically, though, what Pausanias leaves out of his account of the Parthenon has attracted almost as much attention as what he includes. He may go to town on the statue of Athena, but he spares not a word for the architecture that has been so eulogised by more recent visitors; nor does he stop to mention the names of the architects or sculptors involved. Even more disconcerting for most modern students of classical art, he says nothing at all about the metope panels or the sculpted frieze that ran round the whole building. The frieze, in particular, has become for us the touchstone of classical art, its 'calm and understated beauty' (as one recent book has it) standing for all we love – or hate – about Greek art in the fifth century BC. So why does Pausanias say nothing? Did he just fail to notice it? If so, was it because he was generally unobservant or simply tired and losing concentration by the time he reached the Parthenon? Or was it that the frieze was actually very difficult to see? High up on the

wall, behind an outer colonnade, maybe it was effectively hidden from even the most conscientious ancient tourist. Or is it because it came low on his list of priorities, so far below the statue of Athena that it did not rate even a word? Any of these alternatives is possible. But whichever we choose (and, for my money, the last seems the most likely – and would explain his silence about the very visible metope panels as well), it should remind us just how difficult it is to reconstruct the way in which any ancient viewer saw the Parthenon, or what they made of what they saw.

#### DRESSING UP ATHENS LIKE A WHORE

A few of the gaps left by Pausanias can be filled by another account, written some decades earlier, also by a Greek living under the Roman empire – the hugely learned and prolific Plutarch. Writing around the turn of the first and second centuries AD, Plutarch was responsible for a whole library of essays, ranging from technical treatises on whether water animals are more intelligent than land animals to more practical advice on what makes a marriage work. But since the sixteenth century (when, via a best-selling English translation, he provided Shakespeare with most of the historical colour for his *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*), he has been best known for his biographies, more than 40 surviving life-stories of distinguished Greeks and Romans. These include the *Life of Pericles*, the Athenian aristocrat, democratic ideologue, general and ultimately war-monger, who was the prime mover in getting the Parthenon project off the ground in the 440s BC.

Pericles is a puzzling figure. He was, without doubt, a

brilliant vote-catching politician. Repeatedly elected 'general' by the Athenian people in the mid-fifth century BC (technically a military post, but with much wider influence), he dominated the political process, some would argue, in a way that sat uneasily next to his democratic credentials. He was also given a magnificent and hugely influential write-up by Thucydides, the fifth-century historian who charted the Great War between Athens and Sparta in the final decades of the century. Early in his *History* Thucydides puts into Pericles' mouth a tear-jerking speech (supposedly delivered at the state funeral for the brave warriors who had died in the first year of the war) which has often been read as a powerful manifesto for Athenian democratic culture. 'We are called a democracy because Athens is run with the interests of the majority in mind ... we are lovers of beauty yet without extravagance and lovers of wisdom without being soft ... our city as a whole is an education for Greece.' It is heady stuff, which has been conscripted in support of all kinds of 'civilised values' ever since (and was, in fact, plastered over London buses during the First World War).

But this is only one side of Pericles. Some of the others are, for us, considerably less palatable. Like many superpowers since, Athens saw no contradiction between democratic freedom at home and aggressive imperialism overseas. Pericles' hawkish influence almost certainly lay behind the increasingly ruthless treatment meted out to Athens' overseas 'allies' in the course of the century. One particularly lurid anecdote tells of Pericles ordering the crucifixion of the leaders of the breakaway island of Samos; when the unfortunate rebels were still alive 10 days later, he had their heads clubbed in and their bodies thrown out without burial. Or so,

at least, one Samian patriot was to claim a century and a half later. Pericles was also one of the prime movers in provoking the city of Sparta to war – a war that Athens would so disastrously lose, ending up in 404 BC with a catastrophic casualty list, democracy suspended and a murderous (if short-lived) Spartan-backed junta in control.

Plutarch saw things rather differently; indeed he made a point of denying the truth of the grisly story about the crucifixions. Writing more than half a millennium after Pericles' death, when fifth-century BC Athens had long since become an almost mythical time of past glory, he had no doubts about his hero's wisdom, probity and military expertise. He enthused in particular over what was to be Pericles' most enduring achievement – namely, the vast schemes for new building that he initiated in and around Athens. As Plutarch ruefully reflects, this was about the only clear evidence that remained in his day to prove that Greece really had once been rich and powerful.

The 'Periclean building programme', as modern historians tend to call it, involved much more than the construction of the Parthenon, significant as that may have been. For it was only part of a radical makeover for the Acropolis as a whole. This included the grand Propylaia, or monumental gateway, which was singled out by Thucydides as the flagship building of the site and was on any estimate not much less expensive than the Parthenon itself, as well as a brand new Odeion, or 'Music Hall', on the hill-slopes (it was here that Athenian dramatists gave previews of their plays, and comic writers joked that its shape was very like that of Pericles' own head). Also in the scheme for the Acropolis was a new sanctuary of the goddess Artemis between the Parthenon and the

Propylaia; plus two smaller temples, one to Athena (the so-called Erechtheion, with its famous line-up of female columns or caryatids), the other to Victory (Athena Nike), both of which were completed after Pericles' death in 429 BC. Further afield, Pericles was also behind a revamped Hall of the Mysteries for the ancient sanctuary of Demeter at Eleusis, as well as a variety of rather more mundane projects for well-houses, defensive walls and gymnasia.

More systematically than Pausanias, Plutarch names names, conjuring up an elite circle of artists and architects hard at work to realise Pericles' vision for Athens: the designers of the Parthenon, Iktinos and Kallicrates; Mnesikles, who was in charge of the Propylaia; Koroibos, who died too soon to see his Hall of the Mysteries completed; but, above all, the sculptor Pheidias, who was responsible for the gold and ivory creation inside the Parthenon, as well as acting as designer, site-manager and general overseer of the whole programme. If we were to follow Plutarch, we would see the partnership of Pericles and Pheidias as one of those brilliant combinations of politician-patron and artistic genius: Pheidias playing Michelangelo to Pericles' Pope Julius II (or, let's face it, Speer to Pericles' Hitler).

Plutarch painted a vivid picture of the impact of the building works on Athens and its citizens: whole armies of specialist craftsmen – carpenters, sculptors, engravers, bronzesmiths, painters, gilders – were enlisted; so too were vast numbers of tradesmen, suppliers, miners and hauliers who came up with the raw materials and delivered them to the different sites. Almost everyone in the city had some part to play: ropemakers and roadbuilders were needed as never before. Meanwhile, the master artists pulled out all the stops

to produce their very best, but never once missed the contract's deadline. Plutarch must have been as familiar as we are with projects not finished on time and it was the amazing promptness of the programme that impressed him more than anything else. 'The most wondrous thing of all', he wrote, 'was the speed of their work,' and he pondered quizzically on the paradox that monuments which were to last for all time were constructed in almost no time at all. They appeared old and venerable from the moment they were built, he went on, yet they seemed fresh and new, 'untouched by time', even 500 years later.

All the same, Pericles' plans were not universally popular. Plutarch counted it to his hero's credit that he had managed to overcome carping critics of the wonderful building programme. But clearly a strong tradition existed in Plutarch's day (and some of it at least will have gone back to the fifth century BC) that the Parthenon and the other monuments sponsored by Pericles had been intensely controversial from the very beginning. Some of the criticisms, as reported, sound like the usual stories of sex and speculation that often cluster around great architectural schemes. Pheidias, for example, was accused of fiddling the books by skimping on the gold used on the great statue of Athena in the Parthenon; according to Plutarch it was all carefully removed and weighed, and Pheidias was (of course) completely exonerated. Others suggested that Pericles was using his site-meetings with Pheidias as a cover for secret assignations with attractive female art-lovers, conveniently procured by the great sculptor himself. There was also a nasty scandal about some of the images that decorated the outside of Athena's shield. The overall design was part of the standard repertoire



of classical temple art and, in itself, entirely uncontroversial: scenes of valiant Greeks battling against the mythical warrior-race of women, the Amazons. But among the legendary Greek fighters, people claimed to recognise two real-life portraits: 'a figure something like Pheidias himself as a bald old man lifting up a rock in both hands and a very beautiful image of Pericles fighting an Amazon'. Sacrilege, or merely a case of ill-judged self-promotion? Whatever the exact charge, Plutarch claimed that Pheidias was hauled off to prison – where, mastermind of the Parthenon or not, he languished and soon died. Other evidence, however, suggests a happier outcome. Certainly, if we were to believe Plutarch, we would find it hard to explain how we hear of the same Pheidias a few years later, putting his stamp on another vast gold and ivory creation – this time the statue of Zeus in the sanctuary at Olympia.

But Plutarch also suggests that in the mid-fifth century BC there were more strident, political, objections to the whole Parthenon project. Pericles' rivals attacked the building works as a colossal waste of money and (even more to the point) as an insult to the Athenians' 'allies', whose contributions to a common defence budget were being squandered on titivating the city of Athens. Plutarch puts some tough talking into the mouth of this opposition. 'Greece must obviously think she is being terribly insulted and tyrannised, when she sees the tribute we have taken from her by force for the war used to gild and prettify our city like some vain woman, bedecking itself with expensive stones and statues and temples worth millions.' Almost certainly these exact words are an invention of Plutarch himself, wheeled out specifically to be trounced by some even tougher talking on

the part of Pericles. None the less, the charge of ‘dressing up Athens like a whore’ (as an alternative translation puts it), out of the dubious profits of empire, is one that still hovers over the whole Parthenon scheme.

The roots of this accusation go back decades before any of the building plans had even begun to take shape. In fact, they go back to the early fifth century BC and to the single most significant event in the forging of classical Greek identity: the war between the Greeks and the vast Persian empire, a conflict which ended in 479 BC with a glorious, if costly, Greek victory. This war had an enormous influence over the history of the next 100 years or more, and over almost every aspect of the Parthenon, including (as we shall see later) its decorative scheme. As with all the most memorable victories, the Greek success was against the odds. On the Persian side it was a revenge match. There had been an earlier dent to Persian pride in 490, when they raided Greece with (for them) a relatively modest force and the Athenians, as they never ceased to boast, pulled off a tremendous massacre at the battle of Marathon. In 480, the invaders came back again with their full battalions, numbering – according to the ludicrously patriotic exaggeration of the Greek historian Herodotus – more than 5 million troops; but certainly enough to outnumber the Greek forces heavily, even at the more sober modern guesses of some 650,000.

The unexpected Greek victory can be put down to the simple fact that, for once, most of the wilfully separatist cities of Greece (or ‘fiercely independent’, to use the usual euphemism) pulled together; the threat from Persia, temporarily at least, called a halt to their usual hostilities. Significant too was the Greek readiness to sustain terrible losses in the cause



of ultimate success. Three hundred heroic – or brainwashed – Spartans effectively committed suicide trying to block the Persian advance through the pass at Thermopylae (William Golding, in mellower mood than in front of the Parthenon, saw the Spartan commander here as a martyr in the cause of freedom against oriental despotism, Persian-style: ‘A little of Leonidas lies in the fact that I can go where I like and write what I like. He contributed to set us free ...’). Meanwhile, Athens itself was evacuated and the Persians, albeit on their way to defeat, had the satisfaction of destroying the town, looting and burning the temples and other monuments that then stood on the Acropolis.

But how long would the victory last? When the Persians scuttled back home in 479, most Greeks must have assumed that sooner or later they would be back. To keep their defences ready, a group of Greek cities, large and small, clubbed together in a loose military alliance; more than 200 of them were involved in the middle of the century, but at the beginning they probably numbered fewer than 100. Athens was at the head and provided the organisation and strategic command; each of the member states made a contribution, either in cash or in war ships plus crew; the fighting fund and financial reserves were kept on the island of Delos (hence the alliance’s modern title, the Delian League). Over the next 25 years or so, there was a series of sporadic encounters with Persian forces, including a thundering Greek victory over the Persian fleet on the river Eurymedon (in modern Turkey), and an equally thundering Greek defeat in Egypt. But, even so, there was nothing on the scale that the allies most likely predicted.

In fact, before long some League members began to feel

more anxious about Athenian ambitions than about any menace from Persia. For the hawks at Athens were busy turning an alliance of independent cities into a ruthlessly controlled empire. A decisive turning point came in 454 when the Treasury was transferred from Delos to Athens – the financial reserves ending up, appropriately enough, inside the Parthenon when it was completed. From this point too, any joint meetings of the League ceased and all decisions were in the hands of the Athenians. But some member cities clearly resented Athens' grip much earlier: from the 470s on, although new cities were still coming into the League, others were attempting to jump ship and to stop payment of what was now, in effect, imperial tribute. Mostly with disastrous consequences. Defectors were brought back by force and made to see the error of their ways. Garrisons and governors, the destruction of a city's defences and the insistence that capital crimes were tried in Athens itself under Athenian law (a neat way of protecting Athens' friends in allied cities from judicial execution), were just a few of the weapons in the armoury of Athenian control.

The building and the funding of the Parthenon are inseparable from the Athenian empire, its profits, its debates and discontents. Plutarch's general picture of Athens in the 440s may be misleading in all kinds of ways. The impression he gives, for example, of a highly planned, centrally directed programme of public works, with major artists at the beck and call of the powers that be, probably owes more to his experience of the vast urban redevelopments sponsored by Roman emperors than to any knowledge of what actually went on in the fifth century BC. And his emphasis on full employment for the masses fails to acknowledge the simple

fact that much of the labour (and certainly all the roughest work) would have been carried out by slaves. None the less, his account is an important reminder of the controversies that must have surrounded the Parthenon from the moment it was first mooted. A glorious celebration of Athens, maybe. But, for at least a minority of Athenians, it could equally well have stood for the misuse of the profits of their empire. As for the ‘allies’, even if some of them were proud at the way their money had been spent (all empires, we should remember, are popular with some of their subjects), others could only have seen the Parthenon as a powerful symbol of their humiliation.

#### THE BARE ESSENTIALS

We know just the barest essentials about the Parthenon as the Greeks and Romans saw it. Apart from the remains themselves (tricky as we shall find them to interpret), and what we learn from Pausanias and Plutarch, the evidence is tantalisingly elusive. There is a clutch of brief references and passing allusions in other classical writers: Plutarch’s biography of Demetrios Poliorketes, for example, describes how this fourth-century BC warlord took up residence there (with permission) – ‘and Athena was said to entertain him and act as his host, even though he was a dreadfully disorderly guest and did not treat his lodging with the *politesse* due to a virgin’. Predictably perhaps, the vast statue of the goddess claims most of what attention there is. The omnivorous Roman polymath Pliny spares it several lines in his roster of famous sculpture, noting its total height, 26 cubits, and how it was crammed with decoration on the shield and even the sandals

(which were themselves, according to a second-century AD Greek lexicographer, ‘of Etruscan type’). While in his satiric comedy *The Knights*, first staged in the middle of the Great War between Athens and Sparta (when Pheidias’ creation was little more than a decade old), Aristophanes bandies a joke about cakes made by the enormous ‘ivory hand’ of Athena herself.

From all the evidence combined, we know enough about this lost statue to be able to identify a whole variety of smaller scale versions found all over the ancient world in marble, bronze and terracotta, as well as on coins and gems. The latest count gives a total of more than 200, not including the coins: they range from what must be reasonably careful ‘copies’ of Pheidias’ original to imaginative echoes of the famous masterpiece; from works at roughly half the original size to miniatures no more than a centimetre tall; from gold pendants laid to rest with a rich lady in the Crimea in the early fourth century BC, featuring the statue’s head (in an almost exact match of Pausanias’ description), to a chunky, marble, three-and-a-half metre adaptation commissioned for the reading room of the royal library at Pergamon, in modern Turkey, in the second century BC. Whatever impetus lies behind these versions – piety, love of art, the souvenir trade or (in the case of the brash new dynasty at Pergamon) a desire to cash in on the cultural capital of Athens – taken together they attest the impact, right across the ancient world, of the Parthenon’s centrepiece, far beyond what we would ever guess from surviving ancient literature.

From Athens itself another small cache of material gives us a glimpse of the ancient Parthenon, from an unexpected angle. One of the obsessions of the classical Athenian

democracy was public accountability. In pursuit of openness and transparency in government, they put on public display the records of all kinds of official decisions and financial transactions, laboriously inscribed on stone, 'for anyone who wanted to see' (how many of the intended audience in fifth-century Athens could actually read, even supposing they were interested in this arid bureaucratese, is quite another matter). Among the many thousands of such inscribed documents that survive, there are a few that refer to the Parthenon. We shall look in Chapter 5 at the inscribed inventories of its contents: for the Athenians, these were a weapon in the fight against embezzlement and theft; for us, they are a rare hint of the precious bric-à-brac that once cluttered the inside of the temple, from Persian daggers and broken stools to gold cups and ivory lyres.

Just as revealing is a small group of fragments from the inscribed accounts for the building work itself and for the production of the statue of Athena. What remains amounts to less than 10 per cent of the original text, and there is still a good deal of dispute about how, or where, some of the smaller pieces should be fitted into the whole picture. The ingenuity with which scholars have reconstructed what was written on the missing sections is often hard to distinguish from sheer fantasy. All the same, enough survives to allow us to fix the exact dates of the construction on site – starting in 447/6 BC (the Athenian year ran from summer solstice to summer solstice) and completed in 433/2. And in some places we can deduce the order in which the work was carried out. The first year, for example, includes payment for quarrying and transporting marble (presumably the start of the enormous task of extracting the marble from the quarries on

Mount Pentelicon and carting it the 18 kilometres to Athens). The payment for wood in 444/3 has been thought to indicate scaffolding. The selling off of spare gold in 438/7 is a strong hint that the gold and ivory statue was by then finished.

There is much more, however, that we simply do not know about the ancient Parthenon. This is not only a question of bad luck – the unfortunate disappearance of just those ancient texts that might have answered our most burning questions, or the random destruction of those parts of the building we would so much like to have survived. Of course, it is in part that. We would almost certainly be in a much better position to understand the Parthenon if the Ottoman Turks had not used it as an ammunition store and so made it an irresistible target for their Venetian enemies to attack in 1687 – causing, as we shall see in the next chapter, enormous damage to the structure and sculpture. But other things are at issue too, much more fundamental to our understanding of the classical past as a whole. For to study the Parthenon is to be brought face to face with the very fragility of our grip on the Greek and Roman world, and with the challenges (or frustrations, depending on your mood) that are involved in even the simplest attempts to describe it, let alone explain or make sense of it. The Parthenon, in other words, offers an object lesson in those tantalising processes of investigation, deduction, empathy, reconstruction and sheer guesswork that must be the hallmarks of any study of classics and the classical past.

Our dilemmas start with the name of the building. The Greeks gave it various titles. The most usual was probably the *hekatompodon* or ‘100-footer’, perhaps after the exact



dimensions of some part of the building, or perhaps just indicating 'big'. But we, like Pausanias and his informants, 'call it the Parthenon'. But why? One common guess is that it was originally the name of one of the inner rooms, and only later applied to the building as a whole; but we cannot be sure. The Greek word *parthenos* means 'virgin', and Parthenos was indeed one of the titles given to the virgin goddess Athena. But modern scholars have found it hard to decide whether it was the goddess who gave the title to the temple, or the temple to the goddess. To complicate things further, the word Parthenon in its Greek form (the last syllable is spelled with a long o, or omega – Parthen-*ob*-n) does not mean 'virgin'; but more precisely 'of the virgins', in the plural. This has prompted a whole range of desperate speculations about the use of part of the temple for housing a group of pre-pubescent girls employed in weaving the sacred textiles used in the worship of Athena (making it literally a 'house – or room – of the virgins').

Many other basic questions also remain the subject of lively debate. No one can agree, for example, how the sculptural decoration was painted. It is one thing to accept (as most people now do) that some kind of colour was applied to the marble, that it was not the pure brilliant white that, since the Renaissance, we have come to expect of classical statuary. But are we dealing with a discreet background wash to reduce the glare of the marble, plus the careful highlighting of certain crucial details? Or was it a garish confection of bright reds, yellows and blues, about as distant as it is possible to imagine from that 'calm and understated beauty' that is supposed to characterise classical art? Not even the resources of modern scientific analysis directed to the surviving traces

of 'paint' on the marble provide a clear answer. And there is even more controversy about what much of the sculpture (garish or not) was meant to represent. The famous frieze is well preserved, and has been minutely studied for 200 years. Yet there is little consensus about what it is trying to show, beyond a solemn procession of some sort. Does it, for example, feature the men and women of fifth-century BC Athens engaged in some real-life Athenian ritual? Or is it, as one influential recent theory holds, a preparation for human sacrifice, drawn from the repertoire of local Athenian myth? We have no ancient text to help us out. How on earth are we supposed to decide between all the different 'solutions'?

Even more to the point, perhaps, what was the building as a whole *for*? The obvious answer that it was a 'temple' (and so essentially 'religious') is not quite so obvious as it might seem. There were no priests or priestesses attached to the Parthenon, no ancient religious festival or ritual is known to have taken place there, and it did not even have that most basic piece of Greek temple equipment: an altar directly outside its front entrance. Faced with these difficulties, some scholars have tried to argue that, despite all appearances, it was not actually a 'temple' at all. Instead, they suggest, we should think of the Parthenon as a particularly grand treasury (for it certainly housed most of Athens' accumulated reserves), or as a spectacular thank-offering to the goddess for her help in defeating the Persians. Others have resisted. After all, 'temple' is exactly what Pausanias calls it. Maybe it would be better, they argue, to think more carefully about what we expect of an ancient temple, and how we would decide what counted as one and what did not.

There are all kinds of wider historical issues at stake too.

Why, for example, was the building work started when it was? The Persians had destroyed the earlier monuments on the Acropolis in 480 BC. So why wait more than 30 years before embarking on a restoration programme? Some ancient writers, presumably with this same question in mind, referred to a solemn oath sworn by the Greeks in 479 just before their final victory, forbidding any such thing: 'I will rebuild none of the temples that have been burned and cast down, but I will leave them as a monument to men hereafter, a memorial of the impiety of the barbarians'. But, if this prohibition really was in force (and already by the fourth century BC, cynics could dismiss the idea of such an oath as a piece of self-serving fiction), why was rebuilding suddenly allowed in the 440s? Certainly the sharpest memories of the Persians will have dulled somewhat by then – and the ruins on the Acropolis might well have come to seem more of a nuisance than a poignant memorial. But was the oath just conveniently forgotten? Or was it made irrelevant, as later Greek tradition had it, by a formal peace treaty between Greeks and Persia – which would also have removed the original *raison d'être* of the Delian League?

And who paid? The final price-tag on the Parthenon is utterly elusive. Most modern estimates reckon that the building itself cost less than the gold and ivory statue. But the exact figures produced – based on the fragments of surviving accounts, on what we know of the price of raw materials, transport and labour in the ancient world, plus inevitably a good deal of guesswork – vary by a factor of more than four. On the most modest, the whole building seems a bargain, not even reaching the total given by Thucydides for Athens' annual income from the empire just before the start

of the Great War. On the largest, it becomes an enormous drain on resources, and the whole Periclean building programme looks like a ghastly financial folly. But whichever figure you choose (or wherever on the spectrum in between), there is still the question of how far Plutarch's objectors had a point. Did the allied budget really foot the bulk of the bill for 'dressing up Athens like a whore'? Not surprisingly, modern opinion is divided here too. The majority view is that the fragmentary inscriptions of the building accounts do indeed confirm that huge transfers were made from the fighting fund to the building programme. But recently others have concluded, on the basis of exactly the same evidence, of course, that relatively little of the allies' money was used; no more, in fact, than the tiny percentage of their contributions which was given as a regular offering each year to Athena herself (and could, you might argue, perfectly legitimately be used in building her a brand-new temple). But, in this case, maybe the difference does not matter so very much. However the bookkeeping was done, and however much the various pockets of finance were kept (formally) separate, the wealth of Athens in the mid-fifth century BC was both a direct and indirect consequence of its empire – and it was that empire that paid for the Parthenon.

In the chapters that follow I shall be scratching the surface of a number of these controversies, and thinking harder about how we can make sense of the ancient Parthenon and the culture in which it was created. But at the same time I shall constantly be keeping an eye on its later history, after antiquity and up to the present day. The Parthenon is, after all, as much a modern icon as an ancient ruin. If we wish to

understand its significance in the ancient world, we need also to understand what has happened to it over the last two millennia, and how we have come to invest in it so much of our own cultural energy. It is for this reason that Chapter 3 starts in the Middle Ages.