

Who Saved the Parthenon?

A New History of the Acropolis
Before, During and After the
Greek Revolution



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Cover image: Figure 2.7. 'View of the Acropolis from the banks of the Illysus, Sep^r 1824.' Chromolithograph from a contemporary amateur picture. From: William Black, L.R.C.S.E., Surgeon, H.M.S. Chanticleer, *Narrative of Cruises in the Mediterranean in H.M.S. "Euryalus" and "Chanticleer" during the Greek War of Independence (1822–1826)* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1900), frontispiece. The chromolithograph was made by McLagan and Cumming of Edinburgh c.1900. Public domain.

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8. Towards a Practical Theory of History

Among the classically-educated visitors who arrived in Athens from western Europe during the long eighteenth century, the commonest way of looking at the Parthenon was through the eyes of a philosopher of history. Those who attempted to theorize the past and its relationships with the present and the future into a unifying narrative coexisted in time both with the topographers already discussed and with those who claimed to appreciate the 'aesthetic' qualities of ancient objects, to be discussed in the next chapter.¹ Whatever other interests the visitors might pursue, and most were antiquity collectors if opportunity offered, they were all, with scarcely an exception, whether explicitly or implicitly, in search of models that would link the experience of the ancient Greeks as evidenced by the monuments of ancient Athens with their own world. As the young Nicholas Biddle wrote in 1806 in a personal letter to his family in the United States that picked up the common thought: 'we are instructed by the melancholy but pleasing philosophy of ruins.'² Or in the phrase of John Galt, not yet famous, who was in Athens soon after, the Acropolis and its monuments were 'venerable monitors' that, if heeded, might save their own and future generations from suffering the fate of the ancient world.³ The aim of the philosophers was to find 'laws' of collective experience, that would not only explain the past and predict the future, but enable offsetting action to be taken in the present,

1 The rhetorics of romanticism and the damage they have caused, and continue to cause, to the building up of an evidence-based understanding of the actual historical classical Athenians and their ways of thinking are discussed in Chapter 9.

2 *Nicholas Biddle in Greece, the Journals and Letters of 1806*, edited by Richard A. McNeal (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 1993), 219.

3 Galt, John, *Letters from the Levant* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1813), 138.

when events seemed to be proceeding in a dangerous direction as many then thought they were.

As most visitors realised as soon as they arrived, the Acropolis of Athens had always been more important than any individual building, including the Parthenon.⁴ And it was the fact that it constituted a human as well as a geographical text, that even the most casual observer could see was the result of additions and subtractions across centuries, that made it such a promising candidate for revealing, and perhaps explaining, the forces that governed human affairs over the long term. The Acropolis was not only a rich and potentially exploitable store of historical experiences, including pasts and hoped-for futures caught and presented in material form, but a laboratory where provisional hypotheses could be examined and, to an extent, used for mental experiments by the observer.⁵ This offered an opportunity to widen the study of the ancient Greek world away from its reliance on the texts of ancient authors, which had been the dominant tradition since the fifteenth-century humanists and from which Spon and his successors had broken. But it also appeared to provide a needed corrective to the arranging of the past as a linear narrative of selected events arranged along a chronological axis, with or without commentary by the author, a tradition that itself owed much to the historiographical practices of the ancient Greeks.⁶

Looking at the monuments through the eyes of a philosopher was therefore more than critiquing what was recorded in the ancient authors against modern criteria, 'second-guessing', or comparing the moral and political life of one great man against another; such 'exemplary history' had been practised in the ancient world, notably by Plutarch. It had higher ambitions than the many modern micro-studies of what is misleadingly called 'reception' that take two or more slices of recorded

4 The Acropolis as a landscape text that sets its own frame was discussed in Chapter 1.

5 For the aspiration of Adam Smith and David Hume, the most innovative of the anglophone philosophers, to devise a 'science of man', see Phillipson, Nicholas, *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 2, 64, 70. They were participating in a movement led mainly by men and women living in France that included others across Europe, including some writing in the Greek language such as Adamantios Koraes.

6 The works of many of the stay-at-home narrative historians who wrote during the eighteenth century are summarized by Moore, James, Morris, Ian Macgregor, and Bayliss, Andrew J., *Reinventing History, the Enlightenment Origins of Ancient History* (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2008).

experiences (e.g. 'events') or of cultural productions (e.g. literary, visual, or performative texts) produced during different epochs, and compares and contrasts them against present day norms selected by the author.⁷

Some philosophers, notably Montesquieu, who did not visit Greece, as well as many who did, knew that the generations of classical Athenians who had commissioned, built, and then used the Parthenon in their civic lives, notably Plato and Aristotle, had attempted to provide theoretical answers to the same questions in the circumstances of their own day and with the same aim in mind.⁸ It was less well known, indeed scarcely noticed then or even now, that the main theory of history available in classical Athens, what I will call the 'emergence from brutishness' narrative, was so deeply internalized and entrenched that we can be confident that it underlay many decisions, including the decision to build the classical Parthenon. Since most European histories of ancient Greece written during the long eighteenth century drew heavily on the work of Thucydides, which, although primarily a narrative of events, also summarized that ancient 'philosophy of history' model, it was almost as if the philosophers and historians of classical Athens were themselves being invited into the discussion to consider whether their theories stood up or needed to be modified, as a kind of Enlightenment sociability across the intervening centuries. Partly because the implicit ideologies and rhetorical practices of Thucydides and other authors had not yet been recognized for what they were, the philosophers as much as the historians of the long eighteenth century tended to present the past from the top-down point of view of those who governed rather than of those who were governed.⁹

By examining the material remains of antiquity as they had come down to their own time, the philosophers of history hoped to critique, and if necessary, to overturn, the accounts and prescriptions of library-bound historiographers. Many disdained the practice of the stay-at-homes of reshuffling the narratives of the ancient historians with little

7 Its limitations as a way of understanding the past, and my suggestions for how they and other limitations can be avoided are discussed in *The Classical Parthenon*, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0279>, with my experiment in recovering how it might have been applied along with other features of the discursive environment.

8 Discussed in *The Classical Parthenon*, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0279>.

9 Discussed by Ceserani, Giovanna, 'Modern histories of ancient Greece: genealogies, contexts and eighteenth-century narrative historiography', *Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics* Paper No. 020805, 2008, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1427422>

added except comments that pleased their patrons. C.S. Sonnini, for example, who made an extensive officially-sponsored tour of the eastern Mediterranean lands, was contemptuous of the work of Cornelius de Pauw, author of *Philosophical Reflections on the Greeks*, who 'buried in his closet, pretends to observe better what he does not see', and who, in a betrayal of the professional ethics of a modern scientist or philosopher, squeezed the facts to fit his theories and his policy prescriptions.¹⁰ As those who took part in the exchanges may have known and consciously repeated, the post-classical ancient historian Polybius, a man of action, had criticized Timaeus of Tauromenium for spending all his time in libraries.¹¹ But the stay-at-homes may also have known that both Timaeus and Ephorus of Cyme, described by a modern commentator as 'one of the least notable for any active participation in the events from which history is made' had each enjoyed great success in their time.¹²

The Role of Topography and Climate in History

In some respects the philosophical viewers were anticipating the approach of the twentieth century French 'Annales' school of historians,

10 'It would be extraordinary if such an opposition of sentiment should not be met with between the observer who reports what he has seen, and the man of science, who, buried in his closet, pretends to observe better what he does not see. Guided by a rage, by no means *philosophical*, of rejecting facts that would be in contradiction -with the system which he has formed for himself, M. de Pauw admits those only by which he can support it, at the same time accompanying them with argument.' Sonnini, 6. He was referring to *Philosophical dissertations on the Greeks / translated from the French of Mr. De Pauw* (London: Faulder, 1793) first published in French in Berlin in 1788. Sonnini was mentioned in Chapter 6 in the discussion of imperial travelling firmans. In German-speaking countries, where numerous authors wrote on ancient Greece, and how its literature and art might be made relevant to their modern times, few had direct experience of the Greece of their time, and although most of the French- and English-language travel accounts were translated into German, few authors showed any interest. The printed writings are summarized, in accordance with the parliament of texts model that largely ignores questions of production, access, readerships, and influence, by Valdez, Damian, *German Philhellenism, The Pathos of the Historical Imagination from Winckelmann to Goethe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2014).

11 Polybius, *History*, 12, 25, referred to by Stephen Usher, in his edition of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Critical Essays* (London: Harvard UP, 1974), i, ix. Summarized from Sonnini, *Travels in Greece and Turkey, undertaken by order of Louis XVI, and with the authority of the Ottoman court by C.S. Sonnini; illustrated by engravings and a map of those countries; translated from the French* (London: Longman, 1801).

12 *Ibid.*, ix.

founded by Ferdinand Braudel, who suggested that the human past can best be understood as the changing result of the constant interactions among 'structures', 'conjunctures', and 'events', while accepting that individual agency was never absent and had sometimes been decisive as turning points within wider contexts.¹³ Among the first results of the encounter in the 1670s by Spon, for example, had been a realisation that the land, the sea, and the climate of Greece, including the microclimate of Athens, had scarcely changed since the descriptions given in ancient times and that these natural phenomena, in Braudel's term, 'structures', were still available to be directly experienced. The mountains and the seas, the sun, the moon, and the stars, the islands, the winds, the treacherous currents of the Archipelago, the climate and the local microclimates, the rivers and the fresh water springs, were, the philosophers appreciated, not an inert backdrop to human decisions, but active factors in the unfolding of events, and they constituted a form of recoverable knowledge that could be factored into any emerging explanations. Indeed, some 'structures' had continued to be limitations through to their own long-eighteenth-century times, notably the shortage of fresh water in Athens, as the events of the Greek Revolution were soon to prove.¹⁴ However, although from what was knowable in the long eighteenth century, the philosophers were probably right in thinking that there had indeed been a long period of climatic stability, we can now see that they were mistaken in regarding 'Nature' as constant. There had been changes in land use, notably in the type of crops planted, and a consequent disruption of political structures, which were changes acknowledged in the ancient model. The societies of the ancient world had brought about changes in the environment through deforestation, overgrazing, intensive agriculture, and extraction of water for irrigation, as well as by deliberate destruction in wars, conquests, and enforced movements of populations.¹⁵ And there had been further changes since:

13 Notably in Braudel, Ferdinand, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the age of Philip II* translated from the French by Sian Reynolds (London: Collins 1972 and 1973). First published in 1949 as *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Epoque de Philippe II*.

14 The role of the microclimate in the ancient Athens of the classical period is discussed more fully in *The Classical Parthenon*, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0279>, with my suggestions for how we ought to treat it as an element in what is now called 'distributed cognition' and its rhetorics.

15 Discussed by Hughes, J. Donald, *Environmental Problems of the Greeks and Romans: Ecology in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,

abandoned towns, some of which may have been struck by earthquakes, were the most obvious evidence of this, as well as towns that had shrunk in size, such Athens itself.¹⁶

The philosopher of history hoped, however, to do more than extend the boundaries and explanatory frameworks within which the ancient past could be understood and presented in a linear narrative historiography of a succession of events. If by the middle of eighteenth century, as most of the educated western world had accepted, Isaac Newton had discovered universal laws of 'Nature', by which he meant mainly physics and optics as applicable to the 'natural' external world, which appeared to apply without exception across time and place and were repeatedly shown to do so until the twentieth century, the next big prize was to discover the laws of 'Man', a category seen as an opposite of 'Nature' in a strong binary.¹⁷ Inheritors of a long tradition that accorded 'man' a unique place in the universe, only a few of the philosophers, notably Chateaubriand, seem to have understood that their view had not been shared by the most influential ancient thinkers, Plato and Aristotle, both of whom noted that a sharp divide between 'Man' and 'Nature' was a linguistic convention, imbued with a selfish, anthropocentric pride. Both ancient philosophers had gone on to argue that some living creatures, for example storks and cranes, had developed complex, regular, and successful political and moral customs and organizations, 'laws', in accordance with their 'natural' disposition, that humans would do well to imitate.¹⁸

Although the word 'law' as used by Newton was applied more loosely by the philosophers of history, the general research approach was the same. Some, who already had a wider model in mind, inserted the recorded experience of ancient Greece into the conjectural historical narratives that were common among historians of the Enlightenment in Scotland such as David Hume, Adam Smith, William Robertson, and

second edition, 2014).

16 The classical Athenian attempts to understand and use the time-scape as it was recoverable at that time is discussed in *The Classical Parthenon*, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0279>

17 In most European languages, the word 'man' is gendered to exclude the roles of women and children.

18 This topic, together with the documentary evidence and its implications for understanding the minds of those who built the temple is discussed in *The Classical Parthenon*, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0279>

Adam Ferguson, who postulated a 'stadial' progression from hunting, through pasturage and agriculture, to modern commerce. And others went further. The churchman William Rutherford, for example, from reports arriving of local societies in lands now being explored by Europeans for the first time, particularly in North America, postulated that the ancient Greeks had practiced cannibalism as the Caribs had done. As he wrote: 'The aborigines of Greece, like the first inhabitants of every country, were composed of savage tribes, who wandered in the woods without government or laws, and had little intercourse or communication with one another. They cloathed themselves with the skins of wild beasts; retreated for shelter to rocks and caverns; lived on acorns, wild fruits, and raw flesh; and devoured the enemies whom they slew in battle.'¹⁹

The philosophical viewers did not necessarily set themselves up in opposition to the topographers, who were now becoming more widely defined to include the whole post-Spon scientific tradition. Indeed they depended upon them, and many made their own contributions. But they had an advantage that no amount of assiduous library or topographical work could match. Instead of having to study the past linearly and chronologically as it had been turned into words and tidily arranged within its own conventions, they could attempt to comprehend the systemic complexity of a long past and what it implied for the future by direct visual observation from the viewing station of the present, both synoptically and simultaneously. By deliberately putting themselves into a physical and bodily position where the mute stones would appear to tell their own stories, the philosophers could allow their minds to dart from thought to thought, temporarily liberated both from linearity and from any particular theory. They could use their imaginations to converse with what the stones suggested, following up the ideas that such acts of contemplation suggested as explanations that they could later write up for the benefit of others. And nowhere in the world that they knew was so much experience concentrated in so manageable a microcosm as in Athens. As was noted by Johann Gottfried von Herder, one of the stay-at-homes who followed the publications of the on-the-spot discoveries

19 Rutherford, Rev. William, D.D., Master of Uxbridge Academy, *A View of Antient History; including the progress of Literature and the Fine Arts, in two volumes, third edition corrected* (London: Longman, 1809), i, 325.

and scholarly debates from the security of his library, Athens seemed to offer a completed story of human development of growth, maturity and decline.²⁰ Or, as the author of *Ruins of Sacred and Historic Lands* wrote, it offered 'world history written in the uncorrupted marble'.²¹

Telling Histories, Constructing Narratives

After nearly two hundred years of research on the physical Acropolis, we now understand that the philosophers in the long eighteenth century were historically incorrect in attributing to the Acropolis the power to explain their world view. These philosophers were aware that time had shaped the survival of the ancient stones, in response to historical processes that were replete with contingencies which were not obvious to the eye, but which might be open to investigation. They could see too that indifference, as well as hostility and admiration, on the part of the leaderships who had controlled the geographical site, had shaped the Acropolis of the stones, and to that extent there was a broad correspondence with what was usually presented by the historiographers as a decline into moral decadence. The philosophers did not, for the most part, actively look for gaps, explicitly consider counterfactuals, or, as is among the aims of the present study, systematically search for the succession of presented perceptions of past presents, of past pasts, and of past futures.

Our generation can, however, see that, in practice, the on-the-spot western viewer, however imaginative he or she attempted to be, was never entirely free from his or her own intellectual times and usually operated within many of the same assumptions and explanatory paradigms as the stay-at-homes. One assumption, shared even by the many philosophers who rejected or doubted the claims of Christianity, was that the world

20 Noted by Güthenke, Constanze, *Placing Modern Greece: the Dynamics of Romantic Hellenism, 1770–1840* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 29.

21 Jackson, William Fulton, *Ruins of Sacred and Historic Lands* (London and Edinburgh: Nelson 1850), 10. The author, in dismissing other forms of inquiry in the first sentence of his book, ('cumbered by the tedious minutiae of the professed antiquary, and the extravagances of the unbridled theorist'), picks up a remark by John Ruskin in his 'Lamp of Memory' essay in *The Lamps of Architecture*, 'How cold is all history, how lifeless all imagery, compared to what the living nation writes and the uncorrupted marble bears!' Comments on the Ruskinian view and on attempts to put it into practice are offered in *The Classical Parthenon*, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0279>.

had been 'created' by a unique 'God' at a specific moment in the past, a date that some thought had already been calculated by a scrutiny of the chronologies of ancient writers.²² But if, as many had discovered, the date of creation was difficult to establish, if indeed it had occurred as a single event, then a methodologically acceptable substitute for the purpose of establishing a starting point for the modern philosopher's trajectories might be the Great Flood, one of the first events recorded, apparently independently, by the surviving texts of several ancient societies. There were evidently some common features between the myth of Noah's flood as recorded in the ancient Jewish texts, and the ancient Greek myth of Deucalion, whose son Hellen was constructed as the eponymous founder of the Hellenes. Indeed, according to the local ancient Athenian myth it was at the site of the huge temple to Olympian Zeus, the largest of the ruinous ancient buildings of which a large fragment still survives in Athens, where the first new human beings had come into existence after the waters receded.

Isaac Newton himself had struggled with the problem of how to reconcile the reports of what he called the 'first memory of things in Europe', an indispensable preliminary step in establishing the calendar chronologies within which modern models might be fitted. In a posthumously published book he revealed his exasperation at the myths of ancient Athens: 'And so they have made two Pandions, and two Erechtheus's, giving the name of Erechthonius to the first; Homer calls the first Erechtheus: and by such corruptions they have exceedingly perplexed Ancient History.'²³ Newton, from the information available to him, was not to know that, in the world of the tragic drama, the authorities of classic Athens had encouraged the retelling of old myths in new variants as a means of enabling moral and public questions to be presented dialogically without direct allusion to current politics, an innovation as extraordinary as the invention of the tragic drama itself.²⁴

J.B.S. Bartholdy, for example, had no answer to the puzzle of why the monuments of Athens had survived through to his own time except

22 For an example among many, Williams, William, of St. John's College, Cambridge, *Primitive History, from the Creation to Cadmus* (Chichester: Seagrave, 1789).

23 Newton, Isaac, *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (London: Tonson, Osborn, and Longman, 1728), 5.

24 As noted, with the historical evidence, in *The Classical Parthenon*, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0279>.

to credit 'mysterious providence', but to others the same stones could be studied as the results of human agency over the long run, without resort either to theism or determinism.²⁵ And, if some philosophers remained traditional Christian providentialists, others pushed providentialism back in time as a means of coping with the problem of the 'good pagans', who, under most statements of Christian core beliefs, having lived before the time of Jesus of Nazareth and therefore never having the opportunity to become Christians, were destined never to be eligible for membership of the imagined community of 'the saved'.²⁶ For example, the opening words of William Robertson's much-reprinted *History of Ancient Greece*, first published in 1778, assert not only that a Christian providentialism had been at work before Christianity but that its main features had been fixed in writing. As he wrote: 'Ancient Greece seems to have been peculiarly chosen by Heaven as the scene on which mankind were destined to display, in the utmost perfection, all the superior faculties that distinguish them so highly above the other animals on this earth.'²⁷ Robertson was giving a Christianizing twist to persistent narratives of the human development from brutishness that some ancient authors deployed from their own traditions and observations, and that were part of the discursive environment in which the decision to build the Parthenon had been taken.²⁸ Some may have noticed that classical Athenian authors, notably Plato, had developed their own models ('paradeigmata') of historical processes that were drawn from the physical plans used in the building industry. Nor is this surprising. The discussions leading to the decision to build the classical-era Parthenon and other buildings on the Acropolis in the form that they took, as well as the actual construction work and the bringing of

25 Bartholdy's comment was noted in Chapter 6.

26 'The problem of the 'good pagans', such as Socrates, is discussed in Chapter 22.

27 That Robertson's invocation of 'Heaven' was not just a literary device by a minister in the official Scottish church is proved by his formal defence of Christian providentialism in his sermon, *The situation of the world at the time of Christ's appearance, and its connexion with the success of his religion*, delivered and published in 1775. And as has recently been shown by Ceserani, *Narrative*, Robertson took much of his material from the work of the providentialist universal historian Rollin. The problem of the 'good pagans', especially Socrates, also puzzled the western Christians who established their own cultural practices on the Areopagus hill in the nineteenth century as will be discussed in Chapter 22.

28 Robertson, William, *The history of ancient Greece, from the earliest times till it became a Roman province* (Alletz: Pons Augustin, 1793). Discussed in *The Classical Parthenon*, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0279>.

the building into use, had forced themselves on to the experience of local people over the generations that in retrospect are identified as the classical period.²⁹

To some of the long eighteenth century, the survival of the ancient buildings on the Acropolis seemed enough to offer a confirmation of the truth of providentialism. As Valentine Mott, an American anatomist, wrote about his visit in the early 1840s, shortly after the Greek Revolution: 'It is the partial regeneration and commencing civilization of this oppressed and unfortunate people, who, during that long epoch, with the proudest monuments of human genius constantly before their eyes, to remind them of their degradation, have, from the inscrutable designs of Providence, been visited, as it were, with a moral and political death, and left to wander through a long and gloomy night of deplorable barbarism.'³⁰

Earlier, John Bigland, a library philosopher, who was unusual for his time in extending his purview of the ancient past beyond what could be gleaned from the texts of the ancient Jewish, Greek, and Roman writers, noted that 'when Athens was the seat of science and literature, abounding in seminaries of learning, and crowded with philosophers, orators, legislators, and heroes, London and Paris, at this time the two central points of all that is great and elegant, were nothing but woody swamps.'³¹ However, while appreciating the roles of contingency and historical processes in having taken him to his station as observer, in drawing his conclusion, he too was unable to escape from the power of the ancient theory. 'The philosopher', he wrote, 'who takes a retrospective view of the history of mankind, and contemplates, with a spirit of observation and reflection, the complicated and interesting drama of human existence, throughout all its successive and variegated scenes, from the earliest period of historical record to the present day, will, perhaps, find no difficulty

29 Both are discussed in *The Classical Parthenon*, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0279>, with my suggestion of how such theories played a part in the decision to build the Parthenon.

30 Mott, Valentine, *Travels in Europe and the East* (New York: Harper, 1842), 179. Mott's contemplation of the dead of the Revolution on the Acropolis and the lessons he drew about race and nationality is discussed in Chapter 15.

31 Bigland, John, *Letters on the study and use of ancient and modern history: containing observations and reflections on the causes and consequences of those events which have produced important changes in the aspect of the world, and the general state of human affairs* (London: Longman, 1806).

in perceiving that imperious circumstances fix the destiny of nations and of individuals; that various combinations of physical and moral causes, incalculably numerous, and extremely complex, determine the political, religious, intellectual, and social condition of mankind; that all things concur to the accomplishment of one vast and mysterious plan; and that the history of human affairs, and the history of Divine Providence, are essentially the same.'

He scolds the ancient historians for celebrating the great conquerors, 'destroyers of mankind' instead of reflecting philosophically on the 'tears of the widows and orphans'; on imagining 'the groans of the wounded and dying'; and on drawing the right general lessons. Were the peoples who practised human sacrifice that were being discovered by explorers in many places round the world, Bigland asked, worse than the 'blood-smeared idol' [Napoleon] who had already 'laid his thousands and his tens of thousands in the dust' and who in 1806, when Bigland wrote, was just getting into his stride.³² And, picking up on an idea he had read about in ancient authors, he went on to advise his readers to think of themselves as performing in a play, when it is 'of little consequence to the actors which of them appears in the character of the prince, or which in that of the peasant, since all are equal as soon as the play is ended; so it is an affair of trifling importance what part we are destined to perform in the drama of human life; the great point of consequence for us is how our respective parts are acted.'³³

It was commonly assumed too, by the visitors as much as by the stay-at-homes, that 'Nature' was designed, unchanging, and benevolent, that its complexity and apparent beauty, the latter perceived as a primary and intrinsic characteristic, not as an observer-conferred value, was itself evidence of a 'natural theology', that is, of the existence of a creating god. For philosophically-minded visitors from the west, many of their acts of viewing the Acropolis of Athens were, as a result, attempts to use their imaginations to fill the gap between the laws of

32 Bigland, 37. He refers to the passage in the Judaeo-Christian Bible at 1 Samuel 18:7 in which the women who are celebrating the conquest of the Philistines cry out 'Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands'. The phrase is inscribed on the British war memorial to the machine-gun corps of the First World War to be seen at Hyde Park Corner, London.

33 Bigland, 610.

'Nature', which they perceived as fixed, and the works of 'Man' which were always in flux.³⁴

The Stories and the Place: Athens and its Relationship to the History-Makers

Looking at the Acropolis through the eyes of a philosopher was different from the romantic aesthetic approach of those who wanted to see and to possess what they called ancient art, although many who thought of themselves as philosophers were also grave robbers, exporters, collectors, and traders in antiquities. As a precondition, for example, philosophical viewing required a long apprenticeship. Long before the philosopher set out for Athens, he had to have been educated as a boy and as a young man in the ancient Greek and Roman classics in the original languages, the writings of the ancient biblical Jewish writers, usually in translation, and in a wide spectrum of modern knowledge collected in printed books. He was also expected to have already reflected deeply. These were not skills that could be learned or applied on the spot. As Chateaubriand, who spent some weeks in Athens in 1806, noted: 'A moment is sufficient for a landscape painter to sketch a tree, to take a view, to draw a ruin, but whole years are too short for the study of men and manners, and for the profound investigation of the arts and sciences.'³⁵ The philosophical way of viewing was only possible for a small number of people drawn from the ranks of the educated elites of western Europe.

With only a handful of exceptions until shortly before the Greek Revolution, it was a way of seeing that was not available to many of the local peoples of Athens, or to those living in the wider Ottoman or formerly Byzantine territories of which Athens formed a part, even if they had wanted to attempt it. Senior local Orthodox churchmen, even if they could read biblical and patristic Greek, as many could, did not have the sustained access to the printed texts of the pre-Christian ancient Hellenic authors, nor to the works of the scholarly tradition that had begun in western Europe at the time of the Renaissance. They

34 A point made explicitly by Chateaubriand: 'Cette mobilité des choses humaines est d'autant plus frappante, qu'elle contraste avec l'immobilité du reste de la nature'. Malakis edition, i, 289. Discussed by Güthenke.

35 Chateaubriand, Preface to the first edition.

inhabited a cultural world that not only knew little of ancient Hellas, but whose leaderships had for over a thousand years regarded it as their ecclesiastical duty to condemn it.³⁶

To the philosophers of history, their visit to the Acropolis was therefore not the start but the culmination of the research process, the field-work stage before the systematic thinking and the subsequent writing up of results. And from the many autobiographical accounts we have of philosophical viewing of the Acropolis in practice, we can reconstruct the main common features of how the philosophers set about their task. Some viewers, such as Thomas Jolliffe, who was in Athens in 1810, tried to imagine themselves transported back to classical times. Figure 8.1 reproduces an image of how he presented himself in his book, as an ancient Athenian holding an ancient scroll, with the Acropolis in the background, looking at the reader of the book who is invited to join him on the quest.



Figure 8.1. 'T.R.J. 1817'. Hand-coloured lithograph, the frontispiece to Jolliffe's book.³⁷

36 Discussed, with consideration of the key texts, in *The Classical Parthenon*.

37 Jolliffe, T.R., *Narrative of an Excursion from Corfu to Smyrna* (London: Black, Young, and Black, 1827). 'Drawn on stone by M. Gauci P[ublishe]d. by Engelmann G.C. & Cy'.

As befitted a process that required years of study, the philosophical viewer was keen to maximise the benefits of his period of field-work. He typically spent weeks contemplating the ruins in the town, the views of the Acropolis from many angles, looking at it from far away as well as from nearby. He topographised. And he turned to Pausanias, and occasionally to Meursius, to reset his mental calendar from contemporary to ancient times. From time to time, often as a culmination, the philosopher found a place to sit on the Acropolis, preferably alone and in as much silence as the birds and animals allowed, and induce himself into a semi-conscious state in which he imagined himself walking and talking among the great men of the classical period, only to be woken back into his present day by the call of the muezzin or the music of the black slaves.³⁸

As was noted by Alessandro Bisani, who spent a day on the Acropolis in July 1788: 'these ideas present to the imagination a succession of scenes ever new and ever pleasing; my heart is penetrated with them; it palpitates; a soft melancholy succeeds these ecstasies; I yield to the pleasing illusion, and indulge in reveries till at length they vanish like "the baseless fabric of vision"'.³⁹ Some philosophical viewers, such as Chateaubriand, used the words 'réflexions' and 'rêveries' interchangeably.⁴⁰ Others talked of 'meditations'. By composing the thoughts in verse, as even those with little talent often attempted, the re-awakened philosopher led his or her readers into a mental zone between consciousness and fancy.⁴¹

Just as in silent reading the meanings of printed words seemed to enter the reader's mind straight from the ink on the paper, so in silent viewing, or in semi-conscious reverie, the meanings appeared to come direct from the mute stones. In turning their swirling mental states into comprehensible ordered words so that they could be read by others, the awakening philosopher sometimes claimed to be relating what 'Athena'

38 For example Forbin, 4.

39 Bisani, 60.

40 For example Malakis, 71.

41 The master was Byron, who provided a model for others and whose reflections were often quoted by later writers. Less successful practitioners of verse philosophizing include Byron's predecessor William Haygarth, *Greece, A Poem in Three Parts; with Notes, Classical Illustrations, and Sketches of the Scenery* (London: Printed by W. Bulwer ... sold by Nicol, 1814); Alexander Baillie Cochrane, *The Morea: with some Remarks on the Present State of Greece* (London: Sauders and Ottley, 1840); Matilda Plumley, *Days and Nights in the East* (London: Newby, 1845); and Nicholas Morrell, *Ruins of Many Lands, A Descriptive Poem, with Illustrations* (London: Tegg, 1849).

had revealed to him.⁴² As Byron wrote of the ideas and reflexions that arose in his mind: 'They came like truth — and disappear'd like dreams.'⁴³ Byron thought he was able to retrieve enough of them later, and he wrote them down for others to share, as many did, but he maintained a critical scepticism about the truth-value of meditating. As he wrote: 'for waking Reason deems/Such overweening fantasies unsound,/ And other voices speak, and other sights surround.' As Byron and others seem to have appreciated, not only was he choosing what thoughts to include as he fixed a tumble of inner experiences into words and narrative, such accounts were seldom more than an appropriation of a revived classicizing literary trope whose conventions, and content, were already known to the reader.

Charles Eastlake, an artist who had visited Athens shortly before the Revolution later produced a famous picture called 'Byron's Dream' in which he is presented as foreseeing the Revolution and its success. Figure 8.2 reproduces a small watercolour painted by Frederick Mercer:



Figure 8.2. Frederick Mercer, *Byron Dreaming that Greece Might Still Be Free* (1832). Watercolour, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Frederick_Mercer_-_Byron%E2%80%99s_Dream_-_Mercer-98399.jpg

42 A device employed by, for example, the non-Christians Byron, and Ernest Renan as discussed in Chapter 22.

43 *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto 4, stanza vii, referring to his experiences contemplating the ruins of Rome.

In contrast to what had gone before in the Christian centuries, no philosophical dreamer on the Acropolis seems ever to have seriously thought that his or her thoughts came from outside the body. They arose from the mixing of present experience with past reading, the collecting of ideas, and the organising and putting them into a communicable order, a distributed cognition, not the passive receiving of information or advice from some external agent.⁴⁴ In this practice, the philosophical viewer of the Enlightenment distanced himself from the Christian predecessors whose reports of visions of saints appearing to them in dreams seem to have been thought of as actual visitations from some metaphysical entity. He or she also distanced himself or herself from the many western Christians who looked at the Acropolis in the years after Greek independence.⁴⁵

Philosophical viewers had usually pre-dreamed Athens at home long before they re-dreamed it on the spot. Eliot Warburton, for example, realised that the Acropolis was already present in his unconscious mind. As he wrote of his first sight from the sea: 'Now the Acropolis of Athens greets us like some-well remembered vision'.⁴⁶ Or, as the American Christian preacher Thomas de Witt Talmage wrote: 'I had read so much about it and dreamed so much about it, that I needed no magician's wand to restore it'.⁴⁷ Visiting the Acropolis was, for many, an actualisation of an experience that had already been pre-figured and internalized by pre-reading, by pre-viewing of pictures, and by pre-visioning.

The book that most helped to spread and entrench the philosophical way of seeing was *The Ruins* by Count Volney, his meditations on the ruins of empires, first published in French in 1788 on the eve of the French Revolution and, with its omnipresent engraving, soon to be well known over Europe and particularly valued by those on the liberal end of the political spectrum. As Volney wrote of his investigative method:

44 The notion of 'distributed cognition' and its basis in neuro-science is discussed briefly in Chapter 1.

45 Discussed in Chapter 22.

46 Warburton, Eliot, Esq., *The Crescent and the Cross, or Romance and Realities of Eastern Travel* (London: Colburn, 8th edition, 1851), 396, on his first sight from the sea.

47 Talmage, T. de Witt, *From the Pyramids to the Acropolis, Sacred Places seen through Biblical Spectacles* (Philadelphia: Historical Publishing Company, 1892), 272.

'I will dwell in solitude amidst the ruins of cities: I will inquire of the monuments of antiquity what was the wisdom of former ages.'⁴⁸

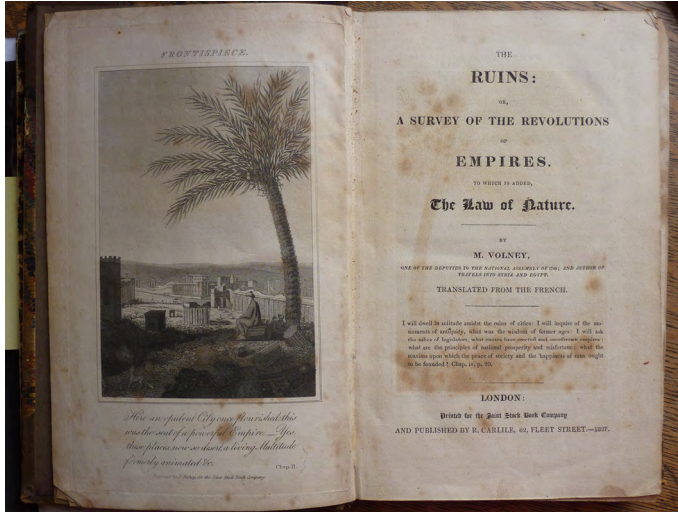


Figure 8.3. Title page and frontispiece of an English translation that followed the French closely, with the same image. Copper engraving.

Disowning what he called the 'mathematical', by which he meant the Newtonian notion of laws, Volney adopted what he called the moral, in modern terms anthropological, approach to understanding the fluctuations of human historical experience.⁴⁹ Soon after he first wrote, his model appeared to have been vindicated as a practical predictor and not just a theory. And he was ready to draw on the experience of the moderns as well as the ancients. When, for example, in the year before the fall of the Bastille and the rapid success of the French Revolution, which came to many as a surprise, he wrote of the Ottoman leaderships, that when 'they shut themselves up in their seraglios, benumbed by

48 *Les Ruines, ou Méditation sur les Révolutions des Empires* (London: Carlile, 5th edition, 1827) and quoted on title page of most editions and translations from chapter iv. The ideas were also set out and developed, drawing on the experience of the French Revolution in Volney, C.F., *Leçons d'histoire, prononcées à l'Ecole normale, en l'an III de la République française* (Paris: J. A. Brosson, 1799) and later editions. An English language edition, *Lectures on History* (London: printed at the Oriental Press, 1800). Volney, C.F., *New Researches in Ancient History ... Translated in Paris under the superintendence of the author by Colonel Corbet* (London: Lewis, 1819).

49 Volney, *Considerations on the War with the Turks. Translated from the French of M. de Volney* (London: Debrett, 1788), 5.

indolence, satiated even to apathy, and depraved by a the flattery of a slavish court, their minds contracted with their enjoyments, their inclinations were vilified by their habits and their government grew as vicious as themselves', the parallel with the Versailles of *ancien régime* France was not hard to discern.⁵⁰ And his claim to have predicted the Revolution while contemplating the ruins of Palmyra did not seem like the wisdom of hindsight, especially as he had himself anticipated and pre-empted that sneer.⁵¹

As with the other ways of seeing, philosophizing from ruins owed much to practices already well established in western countries. The ruins of Rome had long been regarded as providing a moral and philosophical education, a practice caught by the image shown as Figure 8.4, which a young English lady preserved in her commonplace book.



Figure 8.4. 'Wisdom receiving instruction from the history of States and Empires'.
Copper engraving, c.1800, unidentified.⁵²

50 *Ibid.*, 21.

51 *Ibid.*, 86, where he compared himself to Columbus who was ridiculed by contemporaries who later pooh-poohed his achievement on the grounds that 'All this was simple enough; indeed everybody guessed it long since'.

52 'Pasted into the commonplace book of Miss H. Pearson'. Private collection.

Nor were the lessons or explanatory models that emerged from a philosophical study thought only to be useful as a guide to public policy—albeit many of the visitors, as aristocrats, would be expected to contribute to the development of such policy. The Acropolis, if observed and studied correctly, was potentially what the Germans called a *bildung* and the ancient Greeks a *paideia*, an education not as a process of accumulating useful knowledge, but of developing morally according to civic values. Studying the remains of ancient Greece would, according to this view, help to emancipate modern men and women from the provincialism of mind into which nations and pre-national polities had commonly fallen. By introducing themselves to difference and facing its implications, the philosophical viewers liberated themselves from the assumption that their own customs and beliefs were necessarily superior. Philosophizing among the monuments would stimulate their imaginations and clarify their powers of reason.⁵³

‘Living Inscriptions’: Custom as a Form of Ancient Knowledge

Until the later eighteenth century, the western quest was almost exclusively concentrated on the materiality that ancient Hellas had left behind; first the manuscripts in which works of ancient authors had been carried across time, and the physical remains above and below ground, topography and archaeology. Although the scope was sometimes widened by applying emergent theories drawn from experience elsewhere, this was an object-centred study of things—not of how they were used in the lives of the peoples of the ancient past. But was it possible, some eighteenth-century visitors began to wonder, that there was another source that could help to improve modern understanding of ancient Hellas? As the early topographers had discovered, the stories that were told by the people of Athens about the monuments turned out to be of little value as information about ancient times. But could the living people whom they encountered

⁵³ A typical statement of this common claim is to be found in, for example, the translator’s Preface to *Voyage dans la Grèce Asiatique, à la Péninsule de Cyzique, à Brusse et à Nicée ... Traduit de l’italien de l’Abbé Domenico Sestini* [by J. C. Pingeron] (London and Paris: Leroy, 1789).

themselves be carriers of knowledge from ancient times? Did remnants of ancient Hellenism remain inscribed in the customs of the people? Were they 'living inscriptions', a phrase that had been used by the early-eighteenth-century French botanist Tournefort to describe his hope that the local people he met might have retained reliable information about the medicinal qualities of plants described by the ancient botanical authors Theophrastus and Dioscorides, which were still discoverable and identifiable growing on the ground of Greece.⁵⁴ And if the people had retained traces of the ancient past, was there still time, even in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, to find such remnants before they were irreversibly subsumed by the rapidly expanding advance of European modernity? If so, how could they be collected, studied, and deciphered? Was it possible to disassemble and rearrange the layers of oral traditions? Was it possible, we might say in modern terms, to reverse-engineer the 'experiential history' that had been passed from generation to generation in myths and stories into evidence-based knowledge? As only a few understood, the ancient Hellenes had themselves attempted to fit old narratives, such as those that clustered round the Trojan war, into calendar time, and had, in their tragic theatre and public civic art, such as temple architecture, with its stories in stone displayed on sacred buildings such as the Parthenon, maintained a sharp boundary between evidence-based histories and those stories that were largely dependent on oral traditions.⁵⁵

As the early post-encounter travellers to Athens discovered, the ancient gods had not entirely gone away but had been overlaid by later stories or renamed. Since Athens had had a classically educated foreign colony of western settlers and visitors since the 1670s, it was not the most promising site in which to dig for buried mentalities. But perhaps in the remoter regions least affected by contact with the west, traces might still be found? And where better to look than on Mount Olympus, in whose unvisited, snow-capped peak, the twelve gods of the Olympian pantheon had, according to Hellenic religion, made their principal abode? In 1838 David Urquhart, who was perhaps the first human being to climb to the summit of Mount Olympus with that idea

⁵⁴ Quoted by Lack and Mabberley in Sibthorp, 11.

⁵⁵ This is discussed further in *The Classical Parthenon*, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0279>

in mind, found no traces of the Olympian gods.⁵⁶ When he was told that 'heaven and earth had once met upon its summit, but that since men had grown wicked, God had gone higher up', he thought he might have discovered a pre-Hellenic myth that was even more ancient.⁵⁷

Or could knowledge of the ancient world be recovered by a study of what they called 'folklore'? When in 1809 John Galt heard that the young women of Athens who were in search of a husband put out an offering of honey, salt and bread on the night of the new moon at a place where Pausanias had seen a statue to Aphrodite, he assumed that it was a custom handed down from antiquity.⁵⁸

If Jacob Spon is the father of looking at the ancient monuments of Athens scientifically as the material records of the ancient past, and Meursius is the grandfather who collected and collated the written documentary record, the first to carry the approach from archaeology to anthropology, from things to people, from dead stones to living customs, was a French trader living in Constantinople, Pierre-Augustin Guys, whose influential book first appeared in 1771. If most of the philosophers tried to understand the ancient past by contemplating the material ruins, Guys looked at the people as a linear narrative of continuity.⁵⁹ Like an antiquary who finds an old coin, he declared, he would remove the encrustations to reveal the bright metal underneath.⁶⁰

During the nineteenth century, when many of the people living in Greece were not yet much affected by European modernity, a huge effort was made to collect songs, stories, and customs surviving in the rural areas and the islands where traditions from ancient times might have survived, albeit with an overlay of Christianity that a modern anthropologist might be able to peel away. As Walter Woodburn Hyde noted in 1923: 'We are fortunate in having many many collections of such songs and tales, which have been made from the time of Leo Allatius, the Chiote theologian and folklorist of the early seventeenth century, down to our own day.'⁶¹ The list of such collections comprises

56 Urquhart's secret mission to the Ottoman commander, Reschid, will be discussed in Chapter 18.

57 Urquhart, *Spirit of East*, i, 417.

58 Galt, *Letters*, 109. His informant was Padre Paulo, with whom he lodged in the Capuchin convent.

59 A point made explicitly by Constantine, *Early Greek Travellers*, 150.

60 Guys, 1771 edition, i, 338–39.

61 Hyde, Walter Woodburn, *Greek Religion and its Survivals* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1923), 60. He names a long list of local as well as foreign researchers and theorists,

many distinguished names of French, German, English, and Greek scholars—Fauriel and Legrand, Passow, Schmidt, and von Hahn, Abbott and Garnett, Polites, Zampelios, and a host of local Greek historians.⁶²

Unlike the other imported ways of seeing that initially were practiced almost entirely by foreigners, this enterprise was local and international. However it was all too tempting in the nineteenth century, when books by the historical novelist Walter Scott had by far the widest European circulation, to discern long traditions.⁶³ As Lucy Garnett, who had studied Greek lore for many years, wrote: ‘The caves in which the crystal drops of water appear to be distilled from the living rock were no less delighted in by the nymphs of antiquity than were the perennial spring; but all such natural temples are now appropriated by the Virgin Queen of Heaven, and a Panaghía Spelaiótissa, or “Virgin of the Grotto,” now receives from the Greek peasant women honours similar to those paid in classical times to the nymphs of whose temples she has usurped possession.’⁶⁴

including Fauriel and Legrand, Passow, Schmidt, and von Hahn, Abbott and Garnett, Polites, Zampelios,

62 Hyde *Greek Religion and its Survivals*, 60.

63 See St Clair, William, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 240.

64 Garnett, *Greece of the Hellenes*, 173.

