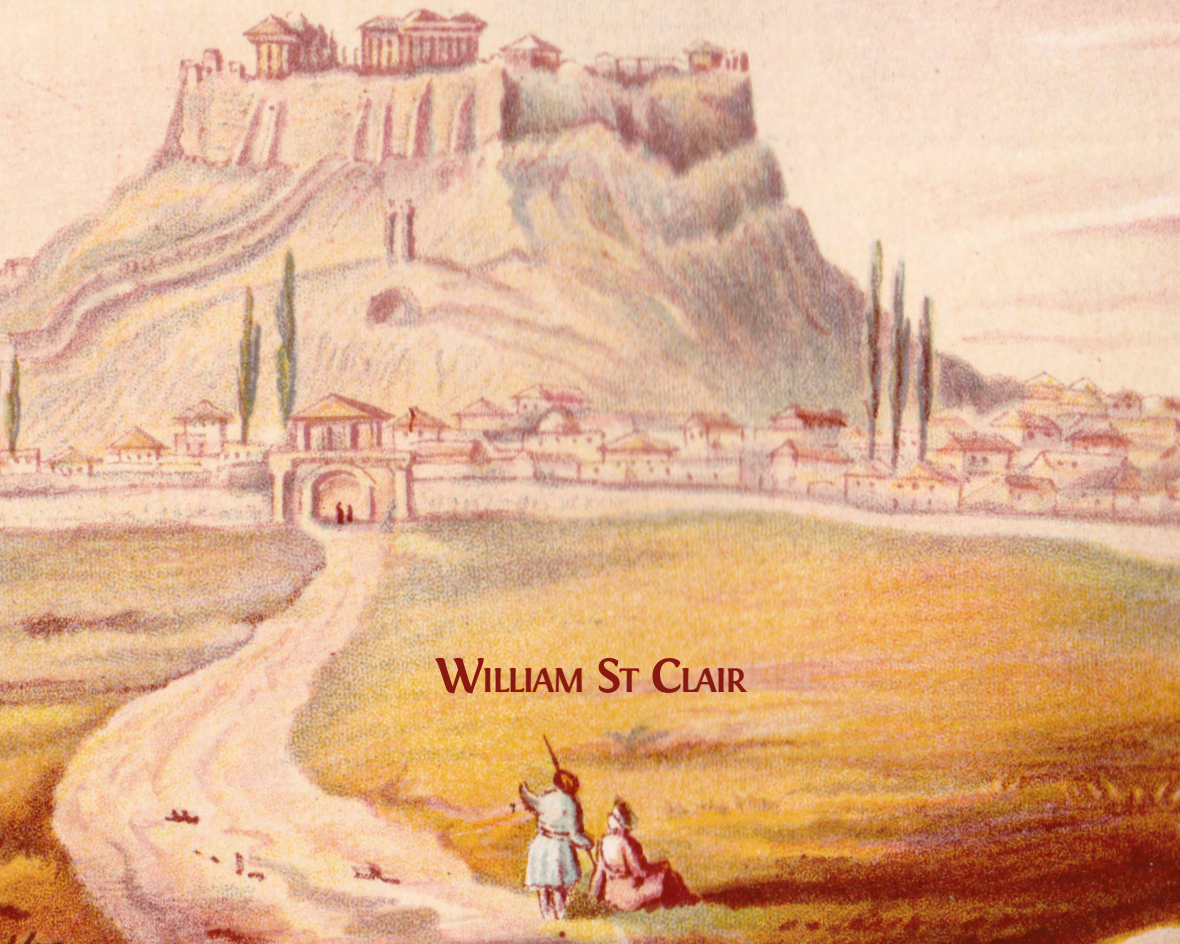


Who Saved the Parthenon?

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



WILLIAM ST CLAIR



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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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20. The Stories

In a much-reported speech made in Oxford in 1986, the late Melina Mercouri, then the Greek Minister of Culture, repeated an old story about an episode in the Greek Revolution. When, in 1821, she said, the Turks were besieged in the Acropolis by the Greeks, they began to dismantle the columns of the Parthenon in order to extract lead to make bullets. The Greeks, according to the story, offered to share their own ammunition with the enemy if they would spare the ancient buildings, an offer that the Turks accepted, the Greeks giving up their lives ‘in defense of their patrimony’. Mercouri, who was then respected not only as an actress and film star but for her opposition to the military rule of the Colonels that lasted from 1967 to 1974, repeated versions of the story on other occasions, often under the auspices of UNESCO, sometimes with additions. For example:

At the time, the Turkish army had taken over the Acropolis and they were under siege by the Greeks led by Odysseus Androutsos. The enemy had run out of ammunition and they started to tear down the pillars of the Parthenon temple gouging out the lead inside them in order to melt it and cast bullets. The Greeks found out and the terrible news spread like wildfire among the troops. One of the few things that the average Greek has always been very sensitive about is the protection of the Parthenon from further harm. Led by this sensitivity, the Greeks delivered to the Turks a load of lead with the famous phrase: “Here are your bullets; don’t touch the pillars.” [...] As Athena had guessed, the Greeks had responded in the only way possible. They had virtually redeemed the pillars from the enemy with their blood seeing that the delivered lead was meant for their own chests.¹

The first mention of that story in the printed record so far found is in 1859, at a time when only a few veterans of the Revolution were still

1 Texts available on the website of the Melina Mercouri Foundation at: <http://melinamercourifoundation.com/en/speeches1/>

alive and even fewer able to remember the days before the Acropolis had been transformed into a national monument.²

If, as is likely, the printed story is derived from earlier oral traditions, the telescoping of time would be explainable. But although the historicity of the story was dismissed by Greek scholars almost immediately, it continued to be repeated, sometimes with variations on 'it is said that' or 'legend has it', a rhetorical device for having things both ways that enables an idea to be planted but relieves the speaker or writer of responsibility for investigating whether it deserves to be recirculated.³ In its earliest version, the story did not disguise its nation-building agenda: 'The Greeks paid with their blood, giving the enemy bullets to kill them, so the precious marbles would remain intact to witness the nation's rebirth after so many centuries of deep sleep.'⁴ The story was given a further twist not long afterwards by Alexandros Rizos Rangabé, an eminent scholar of the history of the Greek language, who praised the Revolutionaries who allegedly shared the bullets by saying that 'those who in the old days fed their starving enemies performed an act of philanthropy, but no nobler action in time of war than this, worthy of the highest civilisation can ever have been undertaken'.⁵

As James Beresford has noted, the story turned what had been a shameful episode, even by the standards of those who had resorted to local genocides, into one of self-sacrifice. It was a collective equivalent of the death-bed absolutions that the Greek Orthodox priests gave to individuals with heavy consciences, but without the need to confess to any guilt.⁶ Although what had actually happened in Athens in 1821 and 1822 had already been recounted in evidence-based histories, the rhetorics of nationalism that require that all events be fitted into an

2 Beresford, James A., 'Alchemy on the Acropolis: Turning Ancient Lead into Restitutionist Gold.' *The Historical Journal*, 2016, Vol. 59.3, pp. 903–26.

3 For example Hitchens, Beard.

4 A. Valaoritis, *Life and Works of Aristotle Valaoritis: Vol. A* (Athens, 1908), pp. 521–23. (Translated from the original Greek). Quoted by Beresford, 8.

5 Quoted with other examples of the same anachronising of the past to meet the ideological aims of a succession of presents, by the late Christopher Hitchens, a British journalist, in *The Parthenon Marbles: The Case for Reunification* (London: Verso: 2008), pp. 59–60. Hitchens introduced his book with 'we know that' and accused those who queried the historicity as repeating 'a common lie about Greek indifference.'

6 The confessions noted by Hartley are described in Chapter 14.

overarching narrative of continuity and celebration treated any challenge as disloyalty.

Meanwhile other well-documented historical episodes were being turned into self-serving stories. At the time of independence, it was widely expected that the

British authorities would return the pieces of the ancient buildings of Athens taken by Lord Elgin's agents, and so help to secure, at the foundation of the new nation state, the goodwill built up by British support during the Revolution.⁷ And when, in 1834, the government of Greece made overtures for the return of some of the pieces of the Nike temple removed by Elgin's agents so that they could be included in the rebuilding, the request was deliberately couched not in terms of neo-Hellenic nationalism, which were explicitly disowned, but as an appeal to contribute to the reassembly of an ancient building, from which everyone who valued the monument would benefit.⁸ No reasons were offered by the British authorities for turning down the request, but they were already beginning to rely on backward-looking arguments about the firman of 1801 under whose dubious, and subsequently countermanded, mandate Elgin's agents had removed pieces of and from the buildings.⁹ Appeals to Ottoman law, which have continued to be repeated through to the present day, were however unlikely to have convinced the mutilated former fighters, the widows, the orphans, and the boys, girls, and women now immured in seraglios far from Greece, who had survived a conflict conducted in accordance with Ottoman laws that the Ottoman Government itself had already disowned.¹⁰

7 Skene, *Sketches*, 621. The discoveries from the earliest excavations were described in a letter from Ludwig Ross to William Martin Leake dated 16/28 October 1835, transcribed in [Finlay] *The journals and letters of George Finlay Edited by J.M. Hussey* (Camberley: Porphyrogenitus, 1995), ii, pp. 492–94. Describing the finding of the blocks of the Nike temple, and plans to re-erect it, he noted, almost as a point that scarcely needed to be said, that 'it will now be time for England to give back the four pieces of the frieze, which the Earl of Elgin carried off.'

8 Documents transcribed in Tsarouchas, Costas [publisher], 'Akropolis von Athens' that consists of facsimiles, with translations, and comments on, a selection of twenty documents from the official papers in a file of the Bavarian Regency Government, 1834 to 1842, (Athens: Alethea, 2012), pp. 19–142.

9 The Firman arranged by French Ambassador Brune in 1806, that saved the west porch from being dismantled is discussed in Appendix A.

10 The most recent example of the 'legally acquired' argument was in March 2021, when it was reported, for example in the *Guardian* of 13 March, that the British Prime Minister had ruled out the return of the pieces of the Parthenon held in the British Museum to Greece, on the grounds that they 'had been legally acquired.'

It was part of Elgin's claim that he had 'saved' the Marbles from the French, and it was reasonable for him, as a counterfactual, to suggest that if Fauvel had had the same opportunities, he would have chosen to do same. But, in the event, as was known at the time when the first claim for return was made, it was French Ambassador Brune who had saved what remained of the Parthenon after the scale of Elgin's removals became known. When he heard that Elgin's agents were planning to remove the west frieze by dismantling the west porch, the last reasonably complete part of the building still standing, and therefore the most valuable, he arranged for a new firman to be sent from the imperial court, ordering them to stop.¹¹

Why then, the question arises, in the case of the survival of the Parthenon during the Greek Revolution and its aftermath, which is as richly documented and evidenced as any historian could wish, has the

It is also puzzling that a former director of the British Museum, who is bound by the standards of conduct applicable to the British public services, and who, as Accounting Officer had a personal responsibility to Parliament for propriety, should claim in an official history published by the organisation, that 'the [Select] Committee [of 1816] vindicated Elgin's actions as totally legal.' Wilson, David M., *The British Museum: A History* (London: British Museum Press, c.2002), 73. Apart from the point that no Accounting Officer should need to be reminded of, that it is not for select committees to determine matters of law, let alone of Ottoman law, and that Wilson presumably knew the sensitivity of the matter and chose his words with care, the Committee made no such claim. Their words were 'The Turkish ministers are ...the only persons in the world, if they are still alive, capable of deciding the doubt' and they went on to say they reached their conclusion, on balance, to recommend the voting of funds 'by conjecture and reasoning, in the absence and deficiency of all positive testimony.' Many have been misled by the Wilson account, treating it as authoritative, including the staff of the Museum who write the labels and brochures, as well as others, as I know from my post. It is puzzling too that those who advised the Prime Minister, have allowed him to repeat the language of 'legally owned by the British Museum's trustees' rather than 'held in trust', a misunderstanding of the responsibilities of British public trustee bodies that is also to be found in statements by the trustees of and members of their staff voting of funds 'by conjecture and reasoning, in the absence and deficiency of all positive testimony.' But even if the reference had been accurately quoted, select committees have no authority to decide on matters of law. In 1962, British representatives in Greece were advised by the Foreign Office to say that 'the collection and removal of the Marbles was done with proper authority and in an expert manner,' the latter part of the sentence straining credibility to breaking point even from what was known at the time, Kew FO 371/163479/1. Opened to the public on 1 January 2013 after 50 years, the last date on which the public records could legally be withheld from public scrutiny, as part of democratic accountability.

11 By the firman obtained in 1805 by the French ambassador Brune, that put a stop to Elgin's removals from the building before he had completed his plans. As shown by the documents recently published noted in Appendix A.

normal course of more evidence leading to a fuller understanding been so intermittent? The notion of ‘saving’ is, of course, a counterfactual not a factual statement, an assessment by someone looking back of what would have happened if there had not been an intervention. And a monument can be saved more than once, and can act as a pivot as often as leaders may choose to make it perform as such. We can see too that, in the case of the Greek Revolution, anyone who resorts to a rhetoric of ‘we will never know’ is, in effect denying the possibility of recovering a knowledge of any past in order to keep open a question that, until some yet more unexpected new evidence comes to light, should be regarded as settled.¹²

Meanwhile another mythic story was being constructed and curated round the pieces from the Parthenon held in London. In 1833, the year in which the Acropolis was surrendered intact by the Ottoman authorities, Sir Henry Ellis, the secretary of the trustees, principal librarian, and, in effect, the director of the British Museum, wrote in a book produced ‘under the superintendence of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge’ for a mass readership: ‘If Lord Elgin had not removed these marbles, there is no doubt that many of them would long since have been totally destroyed; and it was only after great hesitation, and a certain knowledge that they were daily suffering more and more from brutal ignorance and barbarism, that he could prevail on himself to employ the power he had obtained to remove them to England.’¹³ The claim, often including the tell-tale ‘no doubt’ that implies a hesitation, was repeated in official and semi-official publications through much of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Although published in 1833 when the Greek Revolution was

12 ‘If Lord Elgin had not taken them it is likely that the French or Germans would have. Years later, the Acropolis would be battered again in the Greek Wars of Independence, when it was besieged twice. Elgin may, or may not, have rescued the sculptures. We will never know.’ Jenkins, Tiffany, *Keeping Their Marbles: How the Treasures of the Past Ended Up in Museums — And Why They Should Stay There* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 99.

13 [British Museum] [Ellis, Sir Henry] *Elgin and Phigaleian Marbles* (London: Knight, 1833), ii, 215. He was extending a more limited claim about Elgin’s own assessment of the choices he faced made in an earlier publication ‘All these [pieces from the west pediment] were removed from their situations by Lord Elgin, but not before he had ascertained, on incontrovertible evidence, that certain and rapid destruction awaited them, if such means were not taken for their preservation.’ [British Museum] *A Description of the Collection of Ancient Marbles in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, part vi, 1830).

14 For example in [British Museum] Jerrold, W. Blanchard, *How to See the British Museum in Four Visits* (London: 1852), 111.

over, and when the absence of damage was already confirmed, Ellis had mentioned the Revolution in only two paragraphs that may be late interpolations.¹⁵ The wording suggests that Ellis knew about the firman obtained by Stratford Canning as well as the earlier one obtained by Strangford, but chose not to discuss them, let alone admit that his own sentences were now superseded.¹⁶ He could be confident that most of the readership, for example the members of the working classes who belonged to Mechanics Institutes, at whom the series was aimed, would be unlikely to have access to the more expensive books written by the eyewitnesses that gave more truthful accounts.

It had often been assumed by visitors before the Revolution that the damage to the ancient monuments that had occurred hitherto had been caused by the Ottoman Turks out of hatred of 'idolatry'.¹⁷ Blaming 'time and the Turks' had been a cliché of travel writing since the first classically educated visitors from the west arrived in the seventeenth century.¹⁸ That he had personally seen the soldiers of the Acropolis garrison pounding down marble to make lime for mortar for their houses was central to Elgin's justification for his removals. Indeed he claimed that it was the discovery that sculpture that had fallen from the Parthenon had been converted into lime that persuaded him that he had to act to save what remained.¹⁹ That Elgin had exaggerated the risks posed by

15 'In 1821 Athens underwent a siege, but neither then, nor in 1826, when the Seraskier, Redschid Pasha, again besieged the town and bombarded the Acropolis, was serious injury done to the temples. In the former year, at the instigation of Lord Strangford, who was then ambassador to the Porte, orders were issued from the Grand Vizier to the Governor-General of the Morea, for the protection, as far as the Turks could ensure it, of the monuments of antiquity.' [Ellis] *Elgin and Phigaleian Marbles*, i, 68.

16 His main source may have been Gordon's *History* published at the end of 1832 from which the phrase 'as far as the Turks could ensure it' may have been taken.

17 Notably D'Ansse de Villoison, 174, with a specific mention of the sculptures of the Parthenon.

18 For example, 'the barbarousness of Turkes and Time, having defaced all the Monuments of Antiquity.' Lithgow, William, *The Totall Discourse of the Rare Adventures & Painful Peregrinations of long Nineteene Yeares Travayles, from Scotland to the most famous Kingdomes in Europe, Asia and Africa* (Glasgow: Maclehose reprint, 1906), 65, part II, 72 in earlier versions. The first edition of this much reprinted work was in 1609; there were at least twelve during the long eighteenth century, as well as an abridgement and chapbook versions later.

'Rescued from the barbarous hands of the Turkes' Elmes, James, *A General and Bibliographical Dictionary of the Fine Arts* (London: Tegg, 1826) in his article on Elgin Marbles, unnumbered pages.

19 '... the Turk, who had been induced, though most reluctantly, to give up his house to be demolished, then exultingly pointed out the places in the modern fortification,

Turkish lime-makers was noted shortly afterward by the artist Hugh William 'Grecian' Williams who, in 1817, spent some weeks observing and sketching on the Acropolis. In his book published in 1820 on the eve of the Revolution, he devoted a section to 'Reflections regarding the breaking and pounding of Sculptured Marbles by the Turks' in the form of a letter written on the spot in Athens.²⁰ In his comment on 'the story of the Turk and his furnaces', he did not directly accuse Elgin, whom he knew personally, of being deliberately untruthful but of building a general argument on an untypical 'odd and unnatural' episode, that is, employing a rhetorical device much used by makers of myths.²¹ Noting, as others had, that the ancient buildings had not been much altered in recent times, except for piecemeal damage by western tourists that the Ottoman authorities did their best to limit, and that there was plenty of broken marble lying about on the summit if any was needed for making lime, Williams listed the monuments in the town of Athens that still stood. And he suggested his own western romantic aesthetic version of the providentialist 'world has need of them' argument: 'The Temple of Minerva was spared as a beacon to the world, to direct it to the knowledge of purity of taste.'²² By the end of the century Elgin was not only credited with having 'saved' the sculptures, but with having, as a result, helped to win the war of the Greek Revolution.²³

What we see is an example of invented stories being repeated so frequently, and with such apparent authority, that they come to be regarded as true, so deeply internalized that the questions that they give rise to are regarded as settled and closed. We see not a disagreement about the past but a competition between invented myths and how they are rhetorically deployed.

and in his own buildings, where the cement employed had been formed from the very statues which Lord Elgin had hoped to find. It was, in fact, afterwards ascertained, on incontrovertible evidence, that these statues had been reduced to powder, and so used. Then, and then only, did Lord Elgin employ means to rescue what still remained exposed to a similar fate.' Elgin *Memorandum*, 1815 edition, 15.

20 Williams, *Travels*, ii, pp. 316–23.

21 *Ibid.*, ii, 319.

22 *Ibid.*, 323.

23 Elgin 'saved what could be saved. By removing the Parthenon sculptures to England he helped to arouse the interest of Europe and America in little Greece, and thus was instrumental in bringing about the liberation of Greece from the Turkish yoke.' Mach, Edmund von, Ph.D., *Greek Sculpture, Its Spirit and Principles* (Boston: Ginn, 1903), 98.

It became common to attribute the damage done to the Parthenon by Morosini and by Elgin to 'the shot and shell of the Turk' fired during the Greek Revolution.²⁴ An apparently supportive remark was made in the 1842 book by the geologist William J. Hamilton, who picked up stories on his visit to Athens for a few days in October 1835, two and a half years after the Ottoman forces left. 'Chosrew Pacha during the last year of Turkish rule', he wrote, threw down of a corner of a pediment so that they could get at a hive of honey. Confusing Pasha Chosrew with Pasha Reschid, Hamilton went on to claim that the 'wanton act of barbarity' was 'a satisfactory answer to the angry attacks against Lord Elgin for removing to England so many master-pieces of Greek sculpture, now secured from further ravages within the walls of the British Museum'.²⁵

Hamilton's father, William Richard Hamilton, who had been Elgin's private secretary and played a prominent part in obtaining the collection, was now a prominent figure in British public life, permanent secretary of the Foreign Office and a trustee of the British Museum.²⁶ At the time when his son's remark was published, he had recently presided over an inquiry into the state of the surfaces of the pieces of the Parthenon and other ancient Athenian buildings then in London. Following yet more confirmation from examinations of the buildings in Athens and from pieces found in excavations that many parts of the ancient buildings and their sculptural components had been brightly coloured, and the Erechtheion covered with brightly-coloured beads, a search was mounted to see if any colour remained on the pieces in London, during which advice was obtained from Michael Faraday, the most eminent chemist of the time. Much polychromy, it turned out, was still to be seen on the architectural fragments, as it still can be at the time of writing when the architectural fragments are displayed in a basement of the British Museum, but since the sculptured pieces had twice been washed down

24 For example: 'Were I not a Christian and a clergyman, I would this morning, on looking upon these shot-riven columns execrate the vandalism that could level their artillery against these works of art and beauty.' Black, Archibald Pollok, M.A., F.R.S.A.E., *A hundred days in the East: A diary of a journey to Egypt, Palestine, Turkey in Europe, Greece, the isles of the Archipelago, and Italy* (London: Shaw, 1855), 515.

25 Hamilton, William J., *Researches In Asia Minor, Pontus, And Armenia* (London: Murray, 1842), i, 36.

26 W.R. Hamilton's role in a ruse to obtain the part of the Elgin collection detained in Athens is discussed with extracts from a letter he sent on Elgin's behalf in Appendix A.

in acid during the process of making plaster casts for sale, such colour as had remained when they first reached London had gone, with only one possible exception identified at the time.²⁷ Although not comparable in extent with the damage done by agents of Lord Duveen in the 1930s, it was yet another casualty of Winckelmann's western ideas and hierarchies as they had been imputed to the world of classical Athens.

The younger Hamilton was among a long line of apologists who, perhaps out of some sense of national, institutional, or class solidarity, have been drawn into making exaggerations. The fallen corner was put back soon after independence, but the pieces removed by Lord Elgin are still held in a basement of the British Museum, alongside other detached fragments of ancient buildings, occasionally visited, sometimes admired as objects of archaeological study or aesthetic appreciation, but seldom if ever now used as models for copying as was Elgin's stated purpose.

Despite over two hundred years of historical scholarship, a much fuller understanding of speech acts and their rhetorics and of the processes of myth-making, and the fact that all the ancient monuments in Athens still stand in much the same state as they had before the Revolution, the claim continues to be repeated in much the same, vaguely condescending and orientalist, form as Elgin had deployed it in 1816. Like the story that the Turks had damaged the Parthenon in the Revolution, it was presented as immune to falsifiability.²⁸ Like the story of the sharing of the bullets, it has not only remained frozen in much the same form as it was when it was first deployed at the time of the British Parliament's voting for funds to purchase the Elgin collection in 1816, but it has attracted accretions.

And like story of the sharing of the bullets, the accretions can be seen as driven by ideology, not by evidence. By 1962, when the Duveen Gallery was reopened after twenty-three years, British representatives in Greece were advised by the Foreign Office to say that 'the collection

27 [RIBA] 'Report of the Committee appointed to examine the Elgin Marbles, in order to ascertain whether any evidences remain as to the employment of color in the decoration of the architecture or sculpture' In *Transactions of the Royal Institute of British Architects of London, vol. I, part II* (London: Longman, 1842) 102–08.

28 For example: 'Although it is customary to condemn the procedure of Lord Elgin, it is well to remember that he had obtained permission from the de facto owner. It is moreover likely that during the subsequent unsettled and war-like conditions of Greece, these remains of ancient art would have been scattered and lost to civilization.' Zerbe, Prof. A. S., Ph.D., Heidelberg College, Tiffin, Ohio, *Europe through American Eyes* (Dayton, Ohio: Reformed Publishing Company, 1886), 214.

and removal of the Marbles was done with proper authority and in an expert manner'.²⁹ In 2014, under the headline 'Lord Elgin was a hero who saved the marbles for the world', Dominic Selwood—a member of a profession, the law, that claims expertise in evaluating evidence, but also practises the arts of rhetoric—in elaborating on the old stories about the marble being ground down to be sold as lime, went on to say that: 'Furthermore, any art lover who has read up the real story will know that the collection of marbles in the British Museum simply would not exist today without Elgin because they were being systematically destroyed in Athens. If Elgin had not intervened, they would be a mere memory, like the Afghani Buddhas at Bamiyan, dynamited into oblivion by the Taliban in 2001'.³⁰

Since ancient Hellas, and ancient Athens in particular, was one of the few civilizations in recorded history to understand and theorize the difference between myth and history, between rhetoric and truth-seeking, between presentations of the past to serve an ideological present and provisional, evidence-based, inquiry, the repetition of such stories, especially when presented as homage to the ancient Greeks, is especially unfair.³¹

Soon after the purchase of the Elgin collection by the British state, the claim that Elgin had 'saved' the pieces from the Parthenon was joined by a claim that they were now 'safe'. In the words of the Victorian scholar, Walter Copland Perry, who, in the spirit of his times, presented the Marbles as works of art that could be 'pressed into the service of truth and holiness', they were lodged in an 'inviolable asylum'.³² The two main features of the story, rescue and stewardship, were still being officially employed as justificatory rhetorics at the time of writing, despite the fact that they cannot be reconciled with the overwhelming evidence of what actually happened.³³

29 Kew FO 371/163479/1 Opened after 50 years on 1 January 2013.

30 London *Daily Telegraph* on 21 October 2014.

31 To be discussed in *The Classical Parthenon*, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0279>.

32 Perry, Walter Copland, *Greek and Roman Sculpture, A Popular Introduction to the history of Greek and Roman Sculpture, with two hundred and sixty-eight illustrations on wood* (London: Longman, 1882), 249 and 674.

33 Notably Waagen, G.F., *Works of art and artists in England* (London: Murray 1838). A translation of *Kunstwerke und Künstler in England und Paris* (Berlin: 1837 and 1838).