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# THE CLASSICAL PARTHENON

Recovering the Strangeness of the  
Ancient World



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## 6. Heritage<sup>1</sup>

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Can the long history of the ways that the Parthenon has been put to use over thousands of years improve our understanding of built heritage as such? Can we discern patterns that are common to different epochs, including our own, that might serve as explanatory models or frameworks? And, if so, could they help to improve our understanding not only of eras and episodes in the past and their long aftermaths, but to help to inform current choices facing policy-makers and to equip those who are the consumers of the rhetoric of heritage with the tools needed to critique it?

In recent times, many monuments previously regarded as sites of collective memory have become objects of contestation, with demands, for example, in some countries to remove statues of colonial-era soldiers and governors, slave owners, and political and religious leaders whose recorded opinions on such matters as gender, race, sexual mores, and human rights, are out of line with those of vocal modern constituencies. For me the most depressing feature of these episodes has been to see those who have most responsibility for maintaining values in the public arena lining up to kick the ball into their own goal. 'You cannot rewrite history', has been the cry. What the speakers meant is that you cannot change the past, a very different idea. Of course, when we re-examine what the past has left us, we can, and we should rewrite history and, I would say, we should also make it available to be read.

We also see proposals to build new memorials to those who were previously marginalized or victimized and who are mostly absent from the built social memory. Old buildings are renamed and museum labels rewritten in an untidy process of changing the stories that the mute stones are deemed to be telling. Memorials to individuals are condemned

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<sup>1</sup> See Editor's Note on the inclusion of this chapter.

even if what they are found to have said or done was praiseworthy, unremarkable, or incidental to their contribution in their own times. We see the raising of new memorials to those previously omitted, forgotten, marginalized, or victimized. Conservation and cleansing increasingly appear to be opposite ends of a long spectrum in an ongoing political debate about the public display of memory and therefore of identity.

In the case of the Parthenon, even with the extraordinary advantages of being set in a geographical cognitive frame, and the fact that all substantial changes have been the result of the explicit intentions on the part of those who were in political control of the site, there is no unifying grand narrative.<sup>2</sup> The history can be arranged in accordance with the official uses to which the building has been put (ancient Athenian temple, Christian church, first Byzantine Orthodox and then Roman Catholic, Suni Muslim mosque, Greek national heritage site, and so on) on the analogy of a biography of an individual person. Nor do broad calendar chronologies of production (Mycenaean, archaic, classical Hellenic, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, Modern Greece) adequately cope with fact that the things that were actually seen, even in ancient eras, were the productions of different times. Furthermore, all tidy, object-centred chronological narratives risk underestimating the contribution made by consumers to the cognitive transaction, whether in the past or now. No monument, I suggest, and perhaps especially the classical Parthenon, can be understood without giving due weight not only to the pull of then officially-imagined pasts and aspired-to futures, but also to how the aims of the producers for their consumers can only be understood within the then-prevailing theories of cognition and explanatory paradigms, some of which, including the many varieties of providentialism, few modern persons are able to accept.

The long history cautions against the circularities of romanticism, and of the notion that 'art' can reveal the minds of the societies that brought objects into being (so-called 'emanationism'), rather than of those individuals and institutions that were able to commission, finance, and cause the objects to be built and their rhetoric to be commended.<sup>3</sup> The

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2 The extraordinary advantages of the site, including the historical particularity that the potential effects on the viewer were never absent, were discussed in St Clair, *WStP*, Chapter 1, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0136.01>.

3 Joan Breton Connelly has, for example, described the Parthenon frieze as 'the largest and most detailed revelation of Athenian consciousness we have.' Connelly,

succession of physical Parthenons, including the classical-era building and its predecessors and successors, have all been part of the political economy of their time in which various considerations were brought together. The discursive environment, too, within which meanings were recommended and perhaps accepted and acted upon, has always itself been part of a political economy which, even in an age of social media, gives disproportionate advantages to some voices compared with others. We also see that in the long past there never seems to have been a time when the officially presented meaning was not contested, and that for a modern writer to imply that there were such times, not only risks being unfair but surrenders to the fallacy that actual reactions of live human beings to a cultural object can be deduced from a study of the rhetorical tendency of the object itself.

Regime changes too are now often marked by removing memorials, as when in the case of the late Saddam Hussein of Iraq, the staged performance of the act of knocking down a statue of the former leader was pictured on the news, a symbolic destruction of the past presented as a prelude to a new and better future. Revolutionary insurgencies frequently target buildings for their symbolic rather than their direct military value, as for example in the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and individuals and transient political groups try to harm their perceived opponents by desecrating their valued buildings and the graves of their dead, actions seen as surrogates for, and sometimes threatening preliminaries to, the cleansing of people. An urge to destroy can show the symbolic power of a monument as much as an urge to save and preserve it.

History warns us of the risks and circularities of emanationism, a practice that attempts to deduce the mentalities prevalent in societies by a study of their most valued, often sacralized artefacts, without giving sufficient consideration to the governing political and economic structures, including theocratic monopoly, and the power to award contracts and supply finance, without which monuments could not have come into existence in the form that they did. Those who practice emanationism may think that they are recovering the mentalities of a

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Joan Breton, *The Parthenon Enigma, A New Understanding of the World's Most Iconic Building and the People Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), xix.

society, but are often, even for a democratic society such as classical Athens, mainly recovering a production history of the methods employed by leaderships to influence the minds of the people over whom they exercised power. Emanationism too therefore is always at risk of giving the producers what they wanted, namely to influence the minds and actions of contemporaries and of later generations in ways that suit their own rhetorical and political agenda.

So, what remedies can be suggested? Some modern governments of nation states, a category that often presents itself as ‘natural’ ‘permanent’ and ‘ancient’, frequently practice monument cleansing, as the newly independent Greek state did in the nineteenth century, even if not so blatantly, attempting to change perceptions of the future by changing the visual landscape and the continuities with various pasts that this had previously implied, a form of memory cleansing. We also see many examples of the invention of an imaginary past or civic imaginary, however unhistorical, being promoted as a good thing in itself, for example by UNESCO, as a contribution to nation-building, which is still often regarded as a desirable activity despite the geographical and observable fact that there is scarcely a city, town, or village, from Ireland to the Urals that does not boast a war memorial, and that many in Europe have several from the twentieth century alone—let alone in the rest of the world, where memories were less often turned into materiality, even rhetorical materiality, and were allowed to fade into oblivion. Just as the champions of the active conservation of monuments sometimes deploy discourses that claim timeless value and universal applicability (‘common heritage of mankind’), so too those who destroy usually call on other allegedly timeless, universal, and often theistic, discourses (‘carrying out God’s will’) to justify their actions. It is now almost routine to describe the destruction of ancient monuments as a ‘war crime’, equating the destruction of things with the killing of people; by contrast, others argue that by leaving certain monuments intact one is in effect collaborating with those who had the power to build them in the first place, enabling them to prolong their rhetoric into our own time.<sup>4</sup> Today, when the visual is at least as influential as words

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4 A recent example is Mesckell, Lynn, *A Future in Ruins, UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace* (New York: OUP, 2018), xviii, ‘war crimes against cultural property’.

in constituting and changing mentalities, such trends can be expected to continue and to intensify. Rather than regarding the built heritage as a sideshow in conflicts, perhaps the time has now come when it should be re-categorized as among the causes and the weapons?

The Parthenon, by providing a well-documented historical example of monument cleansing as well as of monument conservation, in the service of many of the most common forms of imagined community and of their universalizing and normalizing justificatory discourses, has a strong claim to be regarded as heritage in a more general sense: namely, as a store of retrievable experience that, by its very variety and its strangeness from modern assumptions, can help to inform understanding and choice today. The fact that so many people took an interest in the building and recorded their experiences is, I would say, itself a heritage. However, what is also striking is the extent to which traditional historiography has found it difficult to cope with the complexities without ignoring or severely downplaying what, in my view, constitutes the central question, namely, how to integrate the material world of the Parthenon stones with the contested immaterial worlds of ideas, memories, ideologies, imagined pasts and aspired-to futures that brought about the changes. Even in the last few centuries, a fraction of the thousands of years during which the Acropolis was a heritage as well as active site, we encounter examples of contestation across the whole spectrum from admiration, through indifference, to hatred. And we also see huge changes, both physical and in the attribution of value.

Although there is probably a developing unanimity about the nature of the problem, none of the main intellectual approaches for addressing it seem to me to be adequate. The history of the Parthenon can be told as a parade of the changing physicality, or as a set of parades of imputed meanings that then took on lives of their own with an astonishing capacity for adaptation, survival and revival that resulted in patterns and trajectories that cannot easily be fitted into the linearity of traditional historiography. But it can also be told as a story of the coining and re-use of sets of rhetorical tropes that became available to be deployed and that took on lives of their own. If, as I suggest, we regard the Parthenon as a uniquely full and well-documented store of experience, it is also a treasure-house of the rhetoric within whose

conventions actual experiences of looking at the building, whether to admire, despise, or treat with indifference have been turned into words and deployed. As this generation increasingly understands that there is no determinist plan or pattern, and the future lies in the hands of successive generations looking forward as well as backwards with as much honesty and sincerity as can be mustered within the knowledge available at the time, the opportunity that the Parthenon offers to engage critically with its unrivalled collection of rhetorics, as a means of engaging with rhetoric itself, may turn out to be a heritage as precious, or as the classical Athenians might have said, as useful as the marble.