

Elena Korka, "The Parthenon Marbles: Time of Removal."

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It is well known that Lord Elgin had sent a group of artists to Athens in 1800, but that their entrance to the Acropolis was difficult and was interrupted by the Turks at various times and for various reasons. It is also well understood that Lord Elgin's plans, when he set out in 1799 as British ambassador to Constantinople, never included any thoughts of removing antiquities from the Athenian Acropolis. Casts, measurements, sketches and drawings were all he could have conceived of. Actually, even when the chaplain of his embassy, the reverend Philip Hunt visited Athens in the spring of 1801 and upon coming back to Constantinople composed a detail request for the various works Lord Elgin's team wished to carry out on the Acropolis (this request was eventually used in the text of the famous "*firman*", *petitioned and obtained by Lord Elgin as a friendly gesture from the Kaimacam, a high-rank Turkish official in Constantinople*) no possibility of removing antiquities from the building itself or others on the Acropolis had crept into Elgin's mind. This is clearly shown by the letters Elgin sent to Athens later on, when he first learned about Hunt's success in obtaining the first metopes from the Parthenon. Surprise, excitement, eagerness and contentment are evident throughout the texts. Whether such a notion had crossed Hunt's inner mind beforehand cannot be known.

In any case, Hunt returned to Athens in the summer of 1801, with the letter (the so-called "*firman*") of the Kaimacam in hand, when he understood that the conditions of the time presented a unique change for him to enrich Lord Elgin's Athenian enterprise with original antiquities from the Parthenon itself. This was a very daring move, which, however, was finally accepted nonetheless by the Athenian Turks, through bribes, presents and blackmail. Hunt initially asked for the removal of one of the best-preserved metopes from the building, which in fact took place on the 31st July 1801 with the help of a ship carpenter and five members of the crew of a British ship. They were far not the most sensitive people toward classical antiquities one could find. Hunt asked then for the second and so forth. This potential made Elgin's team cross the borderline and from that moment on until 1804 when Lusieri's actions on the Acropolis were stopped; an enormous, amazing and unique collection was accumulated for the Scottish Lord. From the Parthenon he acquired: 56 blocks from the frieze, 19 pedimental statues and 15 metopes, along with certain architectural members, from the monument.

It is possible, according to their letters, that both Lusieri and Hunt originally thought they had been preceded in removing sculptures from the temple by S. Fauvel, the representative in Athens of the French Ambassador, the Count Choiseul-Gouffier, who was in Constantinople until the time Elgin arrived. There had been rumors that he had tried to remove one metope from the Parthenon, but that in the task the slab fell to the ground and broke into pieces. This proved to be untrue and finally only F. Morosini, two centuries earlier, had preceded Lusieri in trying unsuccessfully to remove the chariot horses from the west pediment. It seems that the rumors about Fauvel were used in retrospect, as justification for the removals carried out by Elgin's team. There was an antagonistic feeling in the air in Athens between the English and the French which was exploited by

Elgin's men as excuse for "salvaging" Greek antiquities from wanton plunder and destruction.

With great effort and at any cost Elgin's workmen removed the best preserved Parthenon Sculptures. They left what they incorrectly thought to be Roman, or whatever was unobtainable for technical reasons or simply what they did not have the time to remove. Elgin had planned to return to Greece, after he left office in the begging of 1803, probably to continue acquiring antiquities, but fate had in store for him many unpleasant surprises, such as his imprisonment by the French as he was returning home, his divorce and bankruptcy, so he never managed to go back again.

Lord Elgin was heavily criticized even from the time of the actual removal of the Parthenon sculptures for the crude way the monument was treated and for the irreparable damage it suffered. This negative position toward the stripping of a unique monumental building mostly came from British dilettanti travelling from so far to view the ruins of ancient Greece. The most passionate among them was the famous poet Lord Byron.

Had Elgin's men simply reserved their efforts to the sculptures lying on the ground and hidden in the debris piled up around the monument from the explosion of 1687, it is doubtful whether Elgin would have faced such severe criticism. An anonymous writer in Rome in 1803 expresses this opinion "... not only have all the removable works been carried away but many things which had been hitherto considered as immovable..." This statement was very advanced for its time, touching upon major questions of today concerning international cultural law and relevant conventions pertaining to what is considered to be movable or immovable heritage.

The Parthenon, after its losses during the Christian era, the period of the Venetian bombardment, the Ottoman conquest and the first visits of foreign travelers, was finally transformed into a molested ruin by Elgin. He probably never understood and never cared about what the effect of his undertaking amounted to.

He visited Athens in 1802, for a few months, approximately a year after the first metope had been removed, and never really saw the impact of his actions and the transformation of the monument's image.

Many remnants of marble originating from the frieze blocks (after their separation from the sculpted outer surface) may today be seen lying on the ground next to the Parthenon with the saw marks remaining on the surface to tell their story. We must refer here to the text of Edward Dodwell, who visited Athens in 1801 and 1805:

During my first tour to Greece I had the inexpressible mortification of being present when the Parthenon was despoiled...when some of its architectural members were thrown to the ground. I saw several metopae at the south extremity of the temple taken down. They were fixed in between the triglyphs as in a groove; and in order to lift them up, it was necessary to throw to the ground the magnificent cornice by which they were covered. The southeast angle of the pediment shared the same fate; and instead of the picturesque beauty and high preservation in which I first saw it, it is now comparatively reduced to a state of shattered desolation.

Whether the sculptures were historically salvaged or not after their removal is a very debatable issue, but it is beyond doubt that the Parthenon suffered excessively from Elgin's abuses to its architectural structure. These are some of the consequences suffered: The cornice was roughly chiseled and thrown to the ground and split into millions of pieces, in order for certain metopes to be removed. The whole southeastern corner of the temple was broken to pieces. This destruction is irrevocable. The triglyphs between the removed metopes were damaged in the procedure, as well. The crowing blocks above the frieze shared the same fate and the back of each lithos (block) was sawn off, with long strong saws. The block had first to be lowered to the ground, in order for the sculptures which were carved on the exterior surface to be removed. This action transformed the monument's lithoi into slabs. The means that were used were primitive: pulleys, ropes, saws, hammers and chisels. Elgin's team was not prepared for such activity and everything had to be improvised when Lusieri's brushes and pencils suddenly gave way to crude working tools of dilapidation.

In short, a large amount of the material needed today for the restoration of the entablature of the monument is extant. Furthermore important architectural members such as parts of the frieze-crowning block, a column drum and a column capital were among the pieces, which were sent to England as part of the collection. The capital had to be sawn in two in order for it to fit through the Propylaea on its way out of the Acropolis ([Fig. 6](#)).

Fortunately what was undone in the 19th c. can be partly remedied today. During the extensive restoration program of the north colonnade of Parthenon, it would have been essential to engulf the missing members. It is undoubtedly understood that the addition of original material would have been essential. This is even more so, since on the Parthenon each member is unique, its dimensions and axis are specific and it can hold only one position in the monument's structure.

The Venice charter provides international standards for the reconstructions of historical buildings, placing emphasis on the use of original materials. Furthermore, as far as the capital kept today in the British Museum is concerned, if it were to be placed in its proper setting, the column it forms part of would then be the only column of the north colonnade fully reconstructed with original parts. It was originally believed that the capital belonged to the 10th column, according to K. Zambas' study. However, recent evidence, positions it on the 9th column, according to L. Lambrinou.

Carrey's drawings (before the 1687 explosion) survive only in part. Due to the lack of other information concerning the sequence of the sculptures on the monument and the loss of surfaces, as a result of Lusieri's crude interventions, scholars are still uncertain today about the position of certain members.

An aftermath which also resulted after the breaking off of certain pieces of the entablature by Elgin, is that some parts of the monument, which until then had been somewhat more protected, were eventually left open to weather and atmospheric conditions. Another effect, which fortunately did not have time to surface, but which one may have anticipated, is that some of the remaining members, such as the triglyphs, would have loosened in time and crumbled to the ground. Two blocks of the frieze fell to the ground in

the few weeks between Byron's two visits to Athens. It is fortunate that Greek independence followed soon after Elgin's time and that the Greek state immediately occupied itself foremost with the Acropolis monuments. The amazing decision the Greek besiegers of the Acropolis took during the Greek war of independence, whereupon the Greeks sent the Turks lead for their bullets, so that the Turks would stop dismantling the columns in order to remove the metal clamps from the interior, speaks for itself. The restoration work on the Acropolis started right after the proclamation of the new independent Greek state ([Fig. 8](#)).

The Elgin acquisitions opened the way and the appetite for foreign travelers to obtain a souvenir from the Acropolis during their trips and take it back home. Due to this fact, some sculptures from the Parthenon disappeared in the short period between Elgin's removals and the independence of the Greek state. In this chain effect the travelers used one another as a pretext for their actions.

In any case, it was fortunate that Lusieri was not allowed to continue removing sculptures from the Parthenon after the beginning of 1804, because, due to his diligence, not much would have been left on the building and its damage would have been even greater. Following their removal from the Parthenon, the Marbles were transferred to the house of the British consul in a cart, which had been confiscated by Lusieri from the French. There they were packed in wooden crates and then transported to the port of Piraeus to await their shipment to England.

Since Elgin had to rely on the British navy for their transportation, he had to accommodate the shipments of his collection to the itinerary of each vessel. It is for this reason that the Marbles suffered quite an "odyssey" until they reached the ports of England. From the 33 missions carried out for the transportation of the whole collection, 17 were needed for the antiquities from the Acropolis. There is no way one can tell the effect of this whole enterprise on the surface of these sculptures, but it can hardly have been without mishaps. Especially, if one considers that even today when archaeological exhibitions travel abroad, minor injuries may occur even though the special companies, which undertake the packing, insurance and transportation, use the best possible equipment and materials. There is reference that the crates Elgin used had to be repaired after damages suffered from their voyages, when they arrived in Malta, the British naval station in the Mediterranean, in order for them to continue to England. Who can know the impact of all this on the delicate surface of the Parthenon Marbles?

An unfortunate event, which took place during the transport, is the well-documented wreck of Elgin's ship the "Mentor" off the shore of Kythera. The sculptures, with which it was loaded, sank to the seabed and it took the Greek divers approximately two years to salvage them. Until they were all collected, the sculptures, which were slowly rescued, had to remain on the beach covered with sand, seaweed and stones. Then they were shipped to Malta. Salt and dampness are not the best friends of marble, so the sculptures must have suffered severely at the time. New documents concerning the shipwreck and the salvage operation have recently been published.

The miscarriage of the splitting of the central slab of the east frieze in two, while Lusieri's men were removing it, finally proved to be the salvation of both of its pieces. They sank with

the “Mentor”, but the Kalymnean sponge-divers were able to lift them from the bottom of the sea, piece by piece whereas otherwise, due to the slab’s total weight this would have been impossible. Luckily the shipload was salvaged. It was most fortunate as well, that the captain of the “Mentor” did not succumb to Elgin’s pressure and did not load the heavy pedimental statues on board the ship, because they would have remained in the depths of the sea due their immense weight.

The rest of the Marbles went through their own ordeal, as well, however. They had to wait at various ports in England under damp conditions, until Lord Elgin was released after 3 years of imprisonment in France. Other pieces lay at the port of Piraeus, since Lusieri had trouble getting them out of Athens for six years (during the period 1804-1810). When Elgin arrived in England, he faced serious economic difficulties in England and had to move the Marbles four times in London to various estates, until he finally desperately accepted the proposal of the British government for their purchase.

We cannot know whether the rust marks on the surface of the central slab of the east frieze, where Zeus and Hera are depicted, happened during the wreckage of the Mentor or previously, when the slab was incorporated in the Acropolis wall . A possibility to be considered is whether the trickling on the marble surface occurred because of the mails, which rusted with which the wooden crates would have been closed.

There is another consideration, in reference to certain frieze slabs, which show rust marks at their sides at the exact same place . These perhaps may have happened during the exhibitions Elgin privately mounted for the public in London. The first one took place in a shed and the second in a coalhouse, in the gardens of different mansions. The rust marks may be due to metal clamps used at the sides of these slabs for their attachment to the walls of the sheds. There may of course be other possibilities, as well.

W. St. Clair reports in his book “Lord Elgin and the Marbles” that a rare fungus was found by the Linnaen Society at that time growing in the sawdust of one of the cases which held the sculptures. Perhaps this indicates that due to time and dampness certain organisms developed in the interior of the cases. Undoubtedly conditions in the makeshift Elgin exhibitions were hardly of museological standards. The Marbles, which stacked inside, were cluttered one on top of the other. Visitors crowded into the first shed, and even boxing matches were arranged there. There is mention that a piece of marble overturned and fell on someone’s foot at some point. This is what Haydon wrote, when he visited the Marbles in 1807: “we... entered a damp, dirty penthouse where lay the marbles ranged within sight and reach”. And in 1815 he goes even further: “I came home from the Elgin Marbles melancholy. I almost wish the French had them; we do not deserve such productions. There they lie, covered with dust and dripping with damp...”

In some drawings of the period even grass is seen growing around them. By 1815-1816 the Marbles were truly damp and dripping. When building operations started at Burlington House, the last resting place of the sculptures, it was necessary to move them from place to place within the courtyard. It was, moreover, discovered during this time that one or two marbles had been stolen. There is an interesting reference by W. Gell from his trip to Athens, while the dismantling of the Parthenon by Elgin was still under way. He mentions that he saw some pedimental sculptures being dug up from around the Parthenon by Elgin’s

men. He states : “On one were the traces of a girdle of metal”. Today these traces do not exist. Precious elements like these, so useful to scholars, may have been lost through the transportation of the Marbles to England.

The largest part of the Parthenon sculptures remains since 1816 still in the British Museum. We have set foot in the 21st century; almost 200 years have gone by and the world has evolved. Standards and principles have improved. The whole world has become sensitized on the issue. Almost twenty committees exist all over the planet campaigning for the return of the Parthenon Marbles to their natural and historical environment.

What is essential is that the Parthenon Marbles are readable only next to the Parthenon, and mutually, the Parthenon, only so, next its sculptures, whether this be aesthetically, historically or conceptually. The dismemberment of pieces of the same sculpture, which today are exhibited separately between Athens and London, benefits no visitor (scholar or not).

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