

The History of an Archaeological Utopia: The Parthenon in Athens as an Imaginary Place

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For centuries, in the Western tradition, the Parthenon has been celebrated as one of the most impressive and important buildings in the world. Poets, architects, scholars have visited it, studied it, written about it, carved their names on it (as Lord Byron did, for instance), cried on its ruins. Sigmund Freud first visited the Parthenon in 1904 and was surprised and shocked to see that it was not a myth after all, and that it really did exist (Beard 2002: 7 ss.). The whole history of this temple, however, is a sort of mystery and illustrates the fragility of our comprehension of the Greek and Roman world. For, in spite of its fame, we know very little about it.

The problem does not consist in the fact that only a small part of it has survived: this happens, as a matter of fact, with most ancient buildings. It is true that we have to make a special effort to imagine the Parthenon with all its columns in their places, with all the carved marbles still *in situ*, with the original colours on the pedimental statues as well as on the metope panels and on the frieze, with the surrounding buildings standing magnificently on the top of the Acropolis. There were also some sculptures around, at least until the first decade of the 5th century, which contributed to give the impression of a crowd all around the temples: they were the *ex voto* statues of the so-called *kouroi* and *korai*, youths and maidens, dedicated to the gods of the hill (Fuchs 1980). They remained there, standing among the temples, surrounded by the real youths and maidens coming up from the villages nearby, until the great renovation promoted by Pericles towards the middle of the century, when, since

they had already been partially destroyed by the Persian invaders, they were thrown down the hill, where they remained undiscovered for centuries.

Our difficulties in understanding the Parthenon are not only due to the fact that it has been partially transformed during its long history. It became a Christian church in the 5th century AD, and was so deeply transformed that its orientation had to be reversed: the entrance (which was originally supposed to be on the short side facing east) was turned westwards, an apse was built to wall up the east doorway, a narthex was added; and some further changes were made in the interior. Sculptures were removed whenever possible (but some of them had already been seriously damaged during a fire in the 3rd century AD); when it was too difficult to take them down, as in the case of the metope panels, they were systematically defaced. These were only the first steps towards further changes that the Parthenon was going to undergo in the following years, as the cathedral of Our Lady of Athens: the apse was enlarged later on, and a tower was erected in the right-hand corner of the entrance porch soon after the arrival of the Crusaders. It was partly constructed using blocks coming from the nearby funerary monument of Philopappus, at about half a kilometre from the Acropolis.

The transformation of the temple of the goddess Athena into the cathedral of Athens was the first, but surely not the last change of destination of the monument. The new Turkish rulers converted the Parthenon into a mosque in the early 1460: the life of the Parthenon as a Christian church had been as long as its life as a pagan temple had been. According to two visitors in 1675, Jacob Spon of Lyon and George Wheler, an English gentleman, the Parthenon had been converted into "the finest Mosque in the world": a minaret was adapted from the bell-tower in the right-hand corner of the porch, the holy relics and the Christian furnishing were removed, and a coat of whitewash covered the Christian decoration on the walls. As a mosque, the Parthenon was chosen for a very important destination in 1687: when Athens was under attack from the forces of a Holy League formed by Venice against the Ottoman Empire, the Turks decided to put their ammunition inside the sacred building, together with their wives and children. Perhaps they were exceedingly confident in the strength of the ancient walls, perhaps they thought that the Christian army

would respect the building which had been a celebrated cathedral. Either way, they were badly mistaken. The Venetian army shelled the building and a vast explosion (which killed about 300 people) blew out its centre (Sacconi 1991). The Parthenon was neither a church, nor a mosque nor a temple anymore: only a part of it, including the Western pediment, survived in ruins. Some of those ruins, and specifically those referring to the carved decorations, were to be found later by Lord Elgin's agents, and taken to the safe rooms of the British Museum: this has permitted visitors and scholars to see some magnificent masterpieces of ancient sculpture; but to appreciate the Parthenon as a Greek monument, or to imagine what it looked like in the 5th century BC, has become an impossible task.

The events and the difficulties listed above represent only one side of the problem of understanding the Parthenon. Our doubts regarding it begin much earlier. They start with a surprising lack of information concerning the monument as a whole. It is described so seldom in ancient texts that we do not even know whether it was really meant to be a temple. The word "temple" does not appear clearly in connection with it but once. This happens in the short description given by Pausanias, where it is referred to as "the temple they call the Parthenon". Pausanias' text, however, focuses more on the carved decorations than on the architectural aspects of the building, and the author gives a complete description only of its huge statue of Athena in ivory and gold.

Contemporary archaeologists have added some more doubts to Pausanias' dubitative sentence. In fact, we have no elements at all to assure us that the Parthenon was indeed a temple. Temples were, in ancient Greece, the houses of the gods: they hosted the statue of the god (in this case, the ivory and gold sculpture of Athena), and in front of these temples, usually outside the main door facing east, was an altar where the rites were celebrated. Sacrifices took place outside the temple; temples existed because a place was needed, where the sculptures of the gods could sit and look at the rites being celebrated outside in their honour. Without an altar, a temple could not be used. Without an altar, a temple is simply not a temple at all.

In the case of the Parthenon, no trace of an altar has been found so far. The many events that took place in the area cannot be held responsible for this situation: even the most fragile remains of previous temples on the same site have been detected beyond any doubt. Traces of the holes produced by wooden poles, for instance, could be easily recognised. A stone or a marble altar, on the contrary, was never identified, besides never being mentioned in the texts. In some cases, altars (like in Olympia) were not made of marble, stone or wood, but simply resulted from the superimposition of layers and layers of ashes produced during the sacrifices; when the heap of ashes was too high, it was simply levelled to the ground and the process started again on the same spot. Traces of a repeatedly burnt area, however, should have been easily detected on the ground during archaeological investigations; but nothing of the kind has ever been found.

Can we say, then, that the Parthenon is a temple? Is the evidence of the word – clearly mentioned in relation to it only once by a late writer – enough to imagine around it the usual ceremonies that took place in Greek temples? Could it not have been a big *thesauros* instead, a treasury, one of those buildings often shaped like temples, although usually smaller in size, where the most precious offerings were kept in safe hands? The idea that we are actually dealing with a treasury seems to be confirmed both by the description of Pausanias, who lists many offerings stored under its porch and inside the building, and by the fragments of inventories of the Parthenon's contents, originally drawn up by the Treasurers of Athena, inscribed on stone and put on public display. They list, for instance, 113 silver bowls, three golden bowls, a golden female statue, a silver basin, more than 70 shields, an ivory inlaid table, lyres, silver-gilt masks, thrones and so on. The Parthenon seems to have been a strong-box more than a temple.

Our doubts become even more serious if we consider the name of the building. *Parthenon* means "of the virgins". This is not the title of the goddess who was worshipped in it (at least not in this form, since her title was *Parthenos*). Parthenon, "of the virgins", probably has something to do with the ceremonies in honour of Athena, which took place during the Panathenaic Festivals, where a small group of selected virgins offered the goddess a *peplum*

they had woven for her. The back end of the cell, with its four ionic columns, probably had something to do with these virgins and their work (Cosmopoulos 2004). The Parthenon could therefore be the place where a selected group of worshippers of the goddess were housed; its function should be completely reconsidered, and it would not be surprising to conclude that it was not a temple after all. In any case, if we assume that it was really a temple, we should reconsider what we expect from these types of buildings in Greek times: temples were not exactly what we thought they were.

If the Western world has considered the Parthenon the main temple of antiquity, one of the greatest masterpieces of Greek architecture, and a supreme achievement of the classical spirit, this is probably due to the *Life of Pericles* written by Plutarch around the turn of the first and second century AD. The buildings on the Acropolis are presented in his text as the brilliant result of the association between Pericles and an elite circle of artists and architects: Iktinos and Kallikrates, the designers of the Parthenon; Mnesikles, who was in charge of the Propylaia; and, above all, Phidias, who was responsible for the gold and ivory statue of Athena as well as the general overseer (*episkopos*) of the whole scheme of the Acropolis and specifically of the Parthenon (Schweitzer 1940; Carpenter 1970). The Periclean building programme had been intensely controversial from the very beginning; some of the criticisms were referred to Pericles and Phidias in particular, with charges of sex and speculation (Stranier 1953; Burford 1965); but half a millennium after Pericles' death, when Plutarch writes his story, 5th century BC Athens had long since become an almost mythical place: it was already "classical", whatever this word may have meant at that time (Schweitzer 1931). The transformation of the Parthenon into a utopian building is a part of a wider process, in which the whole period is seen as a model and becomes perfect and unchangeable as every model should be.

The idealization of the Parthenon dates from that time and from that moment on we have started imagining it as we would have liked it to be, rather than as it really was. Its later transformation into a Christian church first, and into a mosque afterwards, never completely concealed its glorious past, which

continued to extend its shadow for centuries, in spite of its ruins (Tournikiotis 1996).

The Parthenon we see now is a recreation of the early 20th century: the explosion caused by Morosini had left behind only scattered debris. Even after reconstruction, however, the Parthenon is a *ou topos*, a place that exists in no site at all – or that does not exist any more. A place whose name we do not understand; a place whose true use we can only try to guess; a place we can hardly detect among ruins and fragments; a place very rarely mentioned by contemporary writers. If all this were not enough, we can add the fact that the surroundings of the classical Parthenon have changed so deeply throughout the centuries that the relationship between the other buildings on the Acropolis and the temple itself can hardly be imagined; and – last but not least – we have to take into account the dramatic difference between the black-and-white ruins we are accustomed to and the original, brilliant colours that used to cover almost every part of the building and the sculptures. The present surface of the Elgin marbles, for instance, is the product of more than two millennia of weathering, cleaning and decay, not to mention the washing and scrubbing they were submitted to by Elgin's men. It is now almost impossible to imagine what the marbles looked like in the 5th century BC.

In spite of all this, the Parthenon has remained the ideal temple of classical Greece (Neils 2005). The Parthenon we have in mind when we pronounce its name probably never did exist; but it has become the *idea* of the perfect Greek temple, and the arena where scholars of all age put themselves to the test to show how the Greek genius worked, and what its achievements were.

The Parthenon, in this sense, is a utopian building, because we cannot find it anywhere, neither in space nor in time, and because it is idealized to perfection, as only utopias can be. At the same time, however, such a utopian building helps us understand what the meaning of the “classical” world was in every single moment of our past and how the ideal of “classical” has changed in the course of Western history.

Many contemporary studies on ancient Greece aim at reducing the mythical “aura” that surrounds the classical past. The “miracle” of Greek

philosophy and thought, for instance, has been transformed into a matter of changes and relationships between Greece and the ancient civilizations of the Near East; the origins of Greek literature have been investigated in Mesopotamia and elsewhere in the same area; the first attempts at a Greek sculpture have been related to earlier examples of Egyptian statues, which have more than one detail in common with the *kouroi* and the *korai* of archaic Greece; Greece, more than the birth-place of Western thought, seems to be considered a sort of passageway connecting East and West. As far as architecture is concerned, however, temples seem to maintain a genuine Greek origin; hence the constant popularity of the Parthenon.

Today's Parthenon, this incarnation of an archaeological utopia, seems to be the last surviving fragment of the Greek miracle which can still bring back the genuine spirit of classical times. Our illusion, when we try to free it from its superimposed interpretations, is to reach its original spirit and to understand the past better than our ancestors did. But perhaps this is utopia, too, and studies on the Parthenon will always tell us more and more about ourselves, and less and less about its builders, designers, and worshippers. To find a way out of this impasse is a challenge for all archaeologists and art historians of the 3rd millennium.

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