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'If you're planning a trip to Athens – or to the British Museum – this is a must-read; but armchair travellers will be equally enthralled' Andrew Crumey, *Scotland on Sunday*

'This hugely engaging account of the greatest icon of the classical world is packed with interest' Christopher Hirst, *Independent*

'Beard's concise and witty examination provides new perspectives on why the classical world remains significant' *Sunday Times*

Classicists suffer from an outdated image ... Mary Beard's brilliant *The Parthenon* should put paid to that. Her engagement with both modern and ancient worlds is impressive, as is her erudition and liveliness' *New Scientist*

'Entertaining, informative and succinct' *Economist*

'Beard's witty narrative dances through the ages straight back to BC times to reveal the temple's various roles ... a brilliant book' *Good Book Guide*

MARY BEARD is a professor of classics at Cambridge and a fellow of Newnham College. Among her books is the bestselling *Pompeii* which won the Wolfson Prize for History. *It's a Don's Life*, a selection of her famous *Times* blog, was published in 2009.

WONDERS OF THE WORLD

THE PARTHENON

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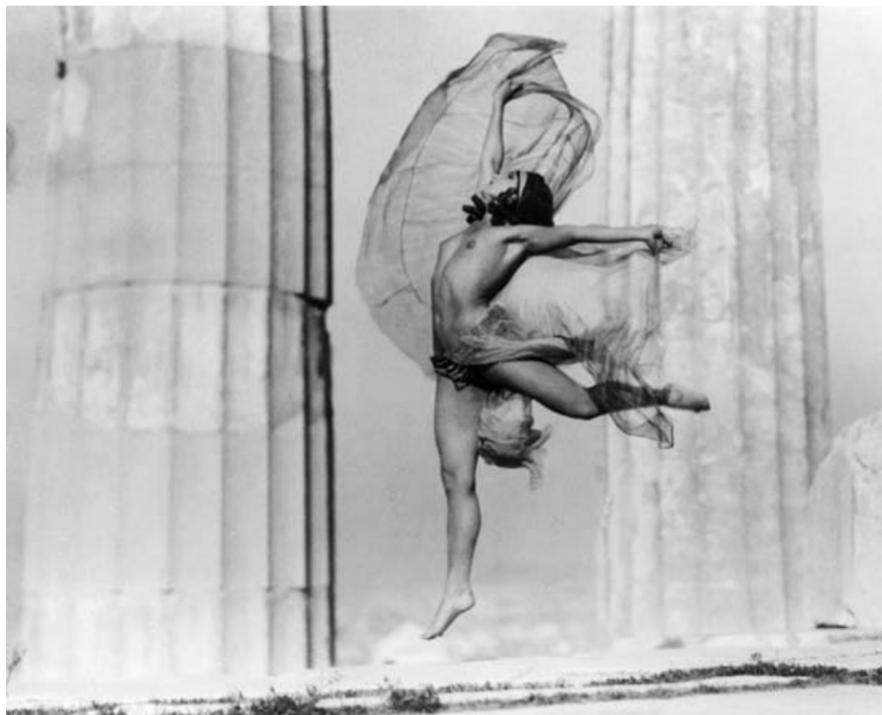
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The most beautiful things in the world are there [Athens] ... The sumptuous temple of Athena stands out and is well worth a look. It is called the Parthenon and is on the hill above the theatre. It makes a tremendous impression on visitors.

Heracleides of Crete (third century BC)

Reporter: 'Did you visit the Parthenon during your trip to Greece?'

Shaquille O'Neal (US basketball star): 'I can't really remember the names of the clubs we went to.'



1. Not everyone goes misty-eyed when confronted with the Parthenon. Here the Hungarian dancer Nikolska poses among its columns in 1929. Isadora Duncan had tried the same trick a few years earlier.

WHY THE PARTHENON MIGHT MAKE YOU CRY

THE REAL THING

When Sigmund Freud first visited the Parthenon in 1904, he was surprised to discover that it really did exist, ‘just as we learnt at school’. It had taken Freud some time to summon the nerve to make a visit, and he wrote vividly of the uncomfortable hours of indecision that he spent in Trieste, trying to resolve whether to catch the steamer to Athens or sail to Corfu as he had originally planned. When he finally arrived and climbed up to the ruins on the Acropolis, delight was mixed with shock. It was as if – or so he later tailored the story – he had been walking beside Loch Ness, had spotted the legendary Monster stranded on the shore and so been driven to admit that it wasn’t just a myth after all. ‘It really *does* exist.’ Not all admirers of the Parthenon have had the courage to follow Freud. One of those not prepared to take the risk of seeing for himself was Werner Jaeger, a renowned classical scholar of the early twentieth century and passionate advocate of the humanising power of ancient Greek culture. Jaeger got as far as Athens at least once, but he drew the line at climbing up to the ruined temple itself – dreading that the ‘real thing’ might not live up to his expectations.



2. A quiet day on the Acropolis. Hundreds of thousands of visitors flock to the site each year. Currently the Parthenon itself is off-limits while many years of restoration work – signalled here by the crane inside the building – is carried out (pp. 114–15).

Jaeger need not have worried. There have been few tourists over the last 200 years or more who have not managed to be impressed by the Parthenon and its dramatic setting on the Athenian Acropolis: intrepid travellers in the late eighteenth century braved wars, bandits and some very nasty bugs to catch their first glimpse of 'real' Greek architecture and sculpture; a whole array of politicians and cultural superstars from Bernard Shaw to Bill Clinton have competed to be photographed, misty-eyed, between the Parthenon's columns (*Illustration 1*); busloads of everyday visitors, in still increasing numbers, make this the centrepiece of their Athenian pilgrimage, eagerly hanging on to the archaeological minutiae regurgitated by their guides. It is true, of course, that tourists are cannily adept at convincing themselves that they are having a good time, and the cultural pressure on us to be impressed, in retrospect at least, by what-we-think-we-should-be-impressed-by may be almost irresistible. All the same, it is often the case that even the most celebrated wonders of world culture are tinged with disappointment when you meet them face to face: the Mona Lisa is irritatingly small; the Pyramids would be much more atmospheric if they were not on the fringes of the Cairo suburbs, and rather too mundanely serviced by an on-site branch of Pizza Hut. Not so the Parthenon. Against all the odds – the inescapable sun, the crowds of people, the surly guards blowing their whistles at any deviants who try to stray from the prescribed route around the site and, for many years now, the barrage of scaffolding – the Parthenon seems to work for almost everyone, almost every time (*Illustration 2*).

At first sight, then, the modern story of this monument is one told in glowing superlatives. An enterprising

businessman-cum-papal diplomat from Ancona set the tone in the fifteenth century, when he visited Athens in 1436: among the huge collections of 'incredible marble buildings ... what pleased me most of all,' he wrote, 'was the great and marvellous temple of Pallas Athena on the topmost citadel of the city, a divine work by Phidias, which has 58 towering columns, each seven feet in diameter, and is splendidly adorned with the noblest images on all sides'. Later writers and critics have piled on the eulogies. Predictably perhaps, the antiquarian visitors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries drooled over the Parthenon's 'exquisite symmetry', its 'glorious fabric' and the 'harmonious analogy of its proportions'. Why beat about the bush? 'It is the most unrivalled triumph of sculpture and architecture that the world ever saw,' was the confident conclusion of Edward Dodwell in 1819, recently returned from three trips to Greece. But a hundred years later Le Corbusier, the most famous prophet of twentieth-century modernism, was still working from very much the same script when he rooted his new vision of architecture in the sheer perfection of the Parthenon. 'There has been nothing like it anywhere or at any period', he wrote in his manifesto, *Towards a New Architecture* (which is illustrated with no fewer than 20 photographs or drawings of the building, some memorably juxtaposed with its modern analogue as a triumph of design, the motor car). And on another occasion he reflected, in more characteristically modernist tones, that 'one clear image will stand in my mind for ever: the Parthenon, stark, stripped, economical, violent, a clamorous outcry against a landscape of grace and terror'.

FAKING IT

Almost inevitably, this enthusiasm has been followed by emulation. Right across the western world you can find clones of the Parthenon in all sizes and materials, adapted to a disconcerting range of different functions: from miniature silver cufflinks, through postmodern toasters (the ultimate in kitchenware 1996, courtesy of sculptor Darren Lago) and models made by Greek political prisoners as part of their re-education, to full-scale, walk-in concrete replicas. The most ostentatious of all is the Walhalla near Regensburg in Germany, brainchild of Ludwig I of Bavaria and intended as a 'Monument of German Unity'. The majority of the designs submitted to Ludwig were based on the Parthenon in one way or another. But the commission eventually went to a vast scheme by the architect Leo von Klenze, set on the top of a wooded 'Acropolis', Bavarian style: the outside an overblown Parthenon, the inside a Teutonic extravaganza, complete with Valkyries and busts of German worthies, from Alaric to Goethe (and now up to, and beyond, Konrad Adenauer). Not all projects came to such lavish fruition. In 1816 the city of Edinburgh, optimistically nicknamed the Athens of the North, was encouraged by none other than Lord Elgin to commemorate the Battle of Waterloo with a lookalike Parthenon on Calton Hill – but got no further than a dozen columns before the money ran out in 1829. These have stood as Edinburgh's pride, or disgrace, ever since, and high-tech plans to finish the job in glass and laser as a gesture to the new millennium were resoundingly rejected by the local residents.

Meanwhile, as the craze for classical style swamped the USA in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Parthenon was resurrected in the shape of a whole series of



3. The full-size replica of the statue of Athena from the Nashville Parthenon, by Alan LeQuire (seen here by the goddess's right leg). This version of Pheidias' creation was unveiled in 1990 and has won many plaudits for its archaeological accuracy. But visitors must use their imaginations to recreate the appearance of gold and ivory. LeQuire had to settle for the more economical gypsum cement and fibreglass.

government buildings, banks and museums. Pride of place here, for accuracy of reconstruction at least (reputedly correct to three millimetres), goes to the Parthenon in Nashville, Tennessee – the Athens of the South, as it sometimes likes to be known. This started life as a wood, plaster and brick pavilion, built for the Tennessee Centennial Exposition in 1897. But the people of Nashville were so taken with it that it remained in place long after the end of the fair and was rebuilt in more durable concrete in the 1920s; its massive 13-metre statue of the goddess Athena, a replica of what we think once stood in the original building in Athens, was eventually unveiled in 1990 (*Illustration 3*). This Parthenon reached a wider international audience through Robert Altman's movie *Nashville*, his epic satire on the tawdriness of the American dream, showbiz and politics. The final scenes of the film are set among its columns draped with the American flag, where a country-and-western benefit concert is being staged for a no-hope fringe candidate in a presidential election; a characteristically American occasion culminating in a characteristically American murder, as the lead singer is gunned down on the Parthenon's portico by an apparently motiveless assassin. Athenian classicism meets the Stars and Stripes.

‘THE BLOODY PARTHENON, I SUPPOSE ...’

There have been, it is true, a few maverick voices raised over the centuries against the general chorus of admiration for the Parthenon. A number of visitors have felt able to confess that the first sight of the building was not quite what they had expected. Winston Churchill, for example, would have liked

to see a few more of the collapsed columns re-erected, and was tempted (for he was First Sea Lord at the time) to volunteer a squadron of the British Navy for the task; while Oscar Wilde's charismatic teacher from Trinity College Dublin, J. P. Mahaffy, theorised that any monument so famous was bound to be a bit disappointing when you first saw it ('no building on earth can sustain the burden of such greatness') – before going on to reassure his readers that, if they persevered to a second glance, the 'glory' of the Parthenon and the brilliance of the 'master minds which produced this splendour' would quickly become apparent. Just occasionally you can find some more consistently barbed attempts to take the monument down a peg or two. The Greek film maker Eva Stefani must have enjoyed the frisson of transgression when she presented the Parthenon as a prostitute in *Akropoli* (2001). So must American novelist Walker Percy when he picked on the Parthenon as a model of modern boredom ('It is a bore. Few people even bother to look – it looked better in the brochure') and fantasised about its total destruction under a massive Soviet attack. At least, he wrote, if you were a NATO colonel 'in a bunker in downtown Athens, binoculars propped on sandbags', watching out for a direct hit on the portico, you wouldn't find the Parthenon *boring*. William Golding was presumably thinking along similar lines when, one March afternoon in the 1960s, after a good Athenian lunch with a classicist friend, he opted to visit 'the bloody Parthenon, I suppose'. It was half-raining, with terrific gusts of wind; the dust blew in their faces, making the usual style of wide-eyed tourism difficult and painful. Golding stopped at the building, looked at it briefly, blew his nose aggressively then – finding a comfortable block of marble – sat down,

back to the monument, and stared away from it at the ‘industrial gloom of the Piraeus’ and the cement works of Eleusis that are just visible from the Athenian Acropolis. ‘Beaming euphorically ... he said at last, “Now *this* is what I call the right way to look at the Parthenon.”’

By and large, however, even the most acerbic cultural critics, the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries’ sharpest tongues, have treated the Parthenon as somehow ‘off-limits’. Oscar Wilde, from whom we might reasonably have expected a well-honed quip at the monument’s expense, seems hardly even to have shared his professor’s doubts about those awkward first impressions. Mahaffy had taken Wilde to Greece in 1877, in the hope that the treasures of pagan antiquity would dissuade his pupil from converting to Catholicism. This campaign against ‘Popery’ was, if anything, rather too successful – to judge from Wilde’s reaction to the Parthenon (as reported, curiously, in a best-selling novel penned by one of his lady friends): ‘He spoke to her of the Parthenon, the one temple – not a building – a temple, as complete, as personal as a statue. And that first sight of the Acropolis, the delicate naked columns rising up in the morning sunshine; “It was like coming upon some white Greek goddess ...”’ A few years later he turned his admiration for the building into such scandalously steamy verses that at least one late-Victorian reader excised them – literally, with her scissors – from the collection in which they appeared. Entitled ‘Charmides’, the offending poem features ‘a Grecian lad’ who manages to get himself locked into a temple at dusk, to undress the statue of the goddess Athena and kiss her till dawn: ‘Never I ween did lover hold such tryst,/ For all night long he murmured honeyed word,/ And saw her sweet unravished limbs, and kissed/ Her pale and argente body

undisturbed'. The temple in which all this takes place, needless to say, bears a striking resemblance to the Parthenon.

Perhaps even more surprising is Virginia Woolf's undiluted enthusiasm for the Parthenon, which she visited in 1906 and again in 1932. Woolf can almost always be relied upon for a caustic comment or two. True to form, in her Greek diaries she is characteristically sharp about the other tourists: the 'hordes of Teutons' and the French, who are notoriously reluctant to take a bath. And she has no more time than most visitors of her generation for the inhabitants of modern Greece. This was long before postcards of smiling, toothless peasants had become a major weapon in the armoury of the Greek tourist industry, selling in vast numbers to sentimental northern Europeans in search of the rustic simplicity of traditional Mediterranean life. For Woolf and her fellows, the peasants were generally dull and stupid, Greeks of all classes 'dirty, ignorant & unstable as water'. But the Parthenon itself, to which she paid daily homage throughout her time in Athens, was an entirely different matter. For once, she claims to have been lost for words: 'our minds had been struck inarticulate by something too great for them to grasp'. And she struggles desperately – and rather ostentatiously, it must be said – to capture on paper the impact of the great monument: its colour is, by turns, bright 'red', 'creamy white', 'rosy', 'tawny', 'ashy pale' (Evelyn Waugh faced the same problem, but likened it more imaginatively to a mild Stilton cheese); 'its columns spring up like fair round limbs, flushed with health'; it 'overcomes you; it is so large, & so strong, & so triumphant'; 'no place seems more lusty & alive than this platform of ancient dead stone'. Or, put more crisply in the novel *Jacob's Room*, where she reworked some of