As Greek As It Gets: British Attempts to Recreate the Parthenon

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The arrival of the Elgin Marbles in Britain and several ambitious attempts to reconstruct the Parthenon in London, Cambridge and elsewhere fostered its general reputation as ‘a building from which derived all that is good’. While it is well known that the high esteem held for the Parthenon after the defeat of Bonaparte was predicated by a change in taste and by associating this monument with the defeat of the Persians by the Greeks in 479 BC, another crucial issue has as yet been overlooked: the self-interest of those attempting to recreate the Parthenon. By linking their own present with an alien, even fictitious, past, they wished to associate themselves with an aura of greatness that would suggest their own heroic power. Putting themselves on the same level as Pericles, Pheidias, Iktinos and Kallikrates, they could argue for their own cultural superiority while hoping for kleos aphthiton—fame and glory that outlast death. No other monument from the ancient world could, at the time, have offered a more suitable basis for such approbation. The article focuses on the British reception of the Parthenon in the early nineteenth century. It introduces new evidence as to how and why, after the Napoleonic Wars, the British epitomized the Periclean monument as the pinnacle of human accomplishment. It argues that the monument was reintegrated into the Western art canon by replicating its sculpture through plaster casts and by substituting historic facts for fiction. As the unique quality of the Parthenon’s architecture was not known and published prior to 1838 and not introduced to a British audience before 1851, the Parthenon could only have gained its importance and fame because of the physical presence of the Elgin Marbles. Hence, I will make clear that the sculpture was a pivotal element in rendering the Parthenon a canonical monument.
It has long been established that classical antiquity played a pivotal role in British culture with two strains—Greece and Rome—jostling for ascendancy. Since the Renaissance, these two strains existed side by side and served as models for refashioning governance, legislation and taste. Greece and Rome provided Britons with exemplars of literary, philosophical and artistic perfection, as well as models for a specific self-perception, in which the ancients came to epitomize the progenitors and heralds of British superiority (Jenkyns 1980, pp. 30–37; Turner 1989). The dissemination of images, material evidence and travel accounts from ancient Greece and Rome helps to explain why the classical past was incorporated into collective memory. This sense of a shared past was fashioned out of recollections, traditions and imagination that provided analogies between a distant past and the present. Also fictional as an arbiter of political and economical objectives, the sense of a shared past was simultaneously shaped and manipulated because of these political and economic aspirations. As Maurice Halbwachs (1950) pointed out in his definition of collective memory, one of the consequences of this explicit self-fashioning was the stereotyping and simplification of an imagined past. A further consequence was a selective view of contemporary reality that ignored whatever did not fit into the existing preconception (Assmann 1999; Halbwachs 1950). While this selective view served as a justification for imperialistic behavior, the sense of a shared past promised the undisturbed continuity of ancient civilizations once they had become the masters of the world.

This article focuses on British perceptions of fifth-century-B.C Greece and its leading power—Athens—during and shortly after the Napoleonic wars, that is during the height of so-called Romantic Hellenism (Ferries 2000, pp. 205–206, n. 17; Levin 1931; Stern 1940). In discussing three British projects for reconstructing the Athenian Parthenon in London, Cambridge and Edinburgh from an art historical point of view, I will show how the intended recreation of this monument was part of a larger metonymic reduction of Greek history. For financial reasons, the Parthenon projects were never fully realized. However, had they been completed, they would have crowned Britain’s successful defeat of France, while at the same time symbolically completing the unification of an empire that in some sense seemed analogous to that of Athens in the fifth century B.C. To nineteenth-century Britons, Athens was seen as the dominant force in ancient Greece—a leading naval power that had become rich and strong through free trade
and the liberty of its subjects. These Parthenon reconstructions thus provided a potential site for the process of retaining and propagating collective memory: they seemed to anchor the past in the present and the present in the past. Further, the reconstructions offered a vast canvas for reenacting the British victory over Bonaparte and celebrating Britons’ sense of liberation from the threat posed by the French. This was certainly the case in London and Edinburgh (Figures 1 – 3), where the Parthenon was to have been adapted as a memorial to the Napoleonic wars. At the same time, these projects can be understood as a defensive move made in response to contemporary Greek reality that then must have been rather disturbing. Specifically, it reminded the British that Periclean Athens—its strength and heroic deeds notwithstanding—eventually fell into decline. Ultimately, then, the planned reconstructions of the Parthenon supported the British claim to global superiority and thus confirmed Britain as the rightful heir to the cultural heritage of ancient Greece.

Reflecting on what is to be gained by studying these past claims, allegiances and antagonisms, the conclusions seem quite obvious: such self-staging demonstrates the twists and turns of collective memory. It offers an instructive model for current archaeological, art historical and political approaches to the interpretation of commemorative activity. Further, we gain insight into the ways in which the cultural heritage of ‘another’ culture

![Figure 1](image.png) Andrew Robertson, Proposal for a Reconstruction of the Parthenon on London’s Trafalgar Square, Lithograph, 1817/1834, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland.
Figure 2  William Home Lizars, A Vision of Calton Hill, ca. 1828, Engraving, Edinburgh University Library Special Collections.

Figure 3  Charles Robert Cockerell and William Playfair, The (Uncompleted) National Monument on Calton Hill, Edinburgh, from Southwest (1825–1829).
may be appropriated for specific cultural, political and economic ends. The arguments presented here are based on three assumptions. First, claims about the impact of Greek ideas, beliefs and achievements on British culture vary considerably from one historic moment to another—the perception of the classical past was thus shaped and expressed in different ways. Second, the values and ideals projected onto classical Greek culture—Periclean Athens in particular—were not at all homogenous and constant but always in flux, often selectively chosen, arbitrary, and even mutually contradictory. Finally, a nation’s collective memory is often enshrined in the memorials it chooses to erect: what is memorialized in a physical monument—and also what is ignored—provides some indication of the dominant collective memory that prevails in a specific society at a given time. In addition, by discussing the early nineteenth-century British reception of what is arguably the most canonical of all Greek buildings—the Parthenon—I will show how and why, after the Napoleonic wars, the British epitomized this building as the pinnacle of human accomplishment. In my view, the Parthenon was reintegrated into the Western art canon, and consequently came to be thought of as the object of general knowledge, principally because of the material presence of the Elgin Marbles in London. Their frequent replication in plaster and print form, along with the emotional debate they sparked before their acquisition for the British Museum in 1816, are among the significant reasons for this canonization. Hence, it was not only a change in taste from Roman-dominated classicism to the purer Greek Revival that caused this canonization and implied a political stance against Napoleon’s Empire; it was also the consequence of a specific form of material culture and of an imperialist self-understanding that would only gain in virulence under Queen Victoria in the latter part of the century (Brown 1989; Turner 1989).

As Robert Hallberg (1984) has shown, certain historical moments, in particular the moments of political consolidation that follow a war, seem especially propitious for canon formation. Such a historical moment was borne out of Bonaparte’s defeat at Waterloo. Reenactment theory challenges us to choose from different versions of a narrative, while at the same time reminding us that any version of the past will always be provisional and reveal only one element of the historical ‘evidence’. Even if reenactment implies the direct replication of an action, it always remains a projection of the reenactor’s own, current attitude to his or her historic alter ego. Thus the British not only linked themselves to an alien past by renaming the Parthenon sculptures ‘the Elgin Collection’ by an act of Parliament, they literally erased the Athenian origin of these
artifacts and used them as a means of conveying the idea of national, that is British, superiority. It was this notion that preceded the various attempts to reconstruct the whole Parthenon in London, Cambridge and Edinburgh in the late 1810s and 1820s. Yet, as I shall have occasion to demonstrate, these projects would not have been comprehensible had the Parthenon’s sculptures not been brought to England from 1803 onward.

There are a number of factors that explain how the perception of ancient Greece developed prior to this historical conjuncture and how Periclean Athens became a role model for Britain. Since the Glorious Revolution, observers of British political life and historians of ancient Rome had perceived a strong affinity between the ancient Roman Republic and contemporary British policy (Turner 1989). The decisive turning point came in the eighteenth century, when respect for Rome gave way to admiration for Greece: Greece, and principally Athens, would henceforth become a reference point for all art and literature, so too for many of the political and ethical aspirations of the day. Until the mid-eighteenth century, ancient Greece had, for the most part, constituted a textual heritage, but few examples of its material culture had crossed the Channel thanks to the collecting activities of Lord Arundel and Henry, Prince of Wales, in the early seventeenth century (Jaffé and Allan 1995; Scott 2003, pp. 9–22). Ancient Greek artifacts were scarce and, hence, inadequate explicators of the culture that had produced them. At the same time, written historical accounts on ancient Greece were hardly extant. Yet two decisive factors contributed to the shift in perception about classical antiquity during the mid- to late eighteenth century: the publication of a number of literary and archaeological treatises and a series of travel accounts on Athens and the Levant that dealt specifically with ancient history and included images of ancient monuments.

Among the more influential of these publications were Thomas Blackwell’s (1735) An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer and Robert Wood’s (1775) posthumously published An Essay upon the Original Genius and Writings of Homer, Richard Pococke’s (1743–1745) Description of the East, and Richard Dalton’s (1751) 52 prints of ancient monuments. Also popular were William Robertson’s translation of Pons Augustin Alletz’s (1768) Abrégé de l’Histoire Grèque, Oliver Goldsmith’s (1774) compilation The Grecian History, Sir William Young’s (1777) The Spirit of Athens and James Stuart and Nicholas Revett’s (1762–1816) pathbreaking, four-volume work The Antiquities of Athens (see also Crook 1972, pp. 1–62). Stuart and Revett praised those historical conditions that had enabled five decades of antiquity to become the classic period during which the
heights of human accomplishment could be attained. In essence, they singled out the political situation following the Persian Wars:

After the defeat of Xerxes, the Grecians, secure from invaders and in full possession of their Liberty, arrived at the height of their Prosperity. It was then they applied themselves with the greatest assiduity and success to the culture of the Arts. They maintained their Independency and their Power for a considerable space in time, and distinguished themselves by a pre-eminence and universality of Genius, unknown to other Ages or nations.

(Stuart and Revett 1762, vol. 1, p. iii)

In other words, Stuart and Revett claimed that freedom and security, independence and power generate prosperity, and it is prosperity that gives rise to superiority—‘that superiority of Genius, which distinguished her [Athens] in the Age of Pericles’ (Stuart and Revett, 1762, vol. 1, p. iii). A similar conclusion linking high cultural achievements with political freedom had been drawn by David Hume as early as 1741:

It had been observed by the ancients, that all the arts and sciences arose among free nations; and, that the Persians and Egyptians, notwithstanding their ease, opulence, and luxury, made but faint efforts towards a relish in those finer pleasures, which were carried to such perfection by the Greeks, amidst continual wars, attended with poverty, and the greatest simplicity of life and manners. It had also been observed, that, when the Greeks lost their liberty, though they increased mightily in riches, by means of the conquests of Alexander; yet the arts, from that moment, declined among them, and have never since been able to raise their head in that climate.

(Hume 1994 (1741), p. 52)

Alletz, on the other hand, attributed all major artistic achievements not to a political system but rather to the visionary character of a single man: ‘Pericles excited a noble spirit of emulation among the professors of the fine arts; and adorned Athens with the masterpieces of the most skilful artists’ because ‘the fixed object of Pericles’ whole conduct was to raise Athens insensibly to an unrivalled superiority over the other states of Greece…’ (Alletz 1768, pp. 147 – 149). John Gillies (1786) and William Mitford (1784 – 1810) gave similar explanations for Athens’ glorious past. Both traced Athens’ exceptional cultural and artistic output of the fifth century BC back to the existence of one strong leader, Pericles, whose ‘purpose was to form, of the several little states, one great commonwealth, of which Athens should be the capital’ (Mitford 1790, vol. 2, p. 110). Gillies even described the Athenian strategist as an ideal ruler and projected onto him
certain qualities that neither George III nor William Pitt the younger and his predecessors seemed to possess:

He [Pericles] deemed it the duty of a statesman to provide, not merely for the army, the navy, the judges, and others immediately employed in the public service; the great body of the people he regarded as the constant and most important object of his ministerial care. The immense revenues of the state, which had hitherto chiefly been squandered in shows and festivals, in gaudy ostentation and perishing luxury, he directed to objects more solid and durable, which, while they embellished the city, might exercise the industry and display the talents of the citizen. [...] he opened the treasury [...] and animated every art, excited every hand, enlivened every exertion, and called into service the whole dexterity, skill, and genius of his countrymen; while the motives of gain and glory which he proposed, allured from all quarters the most ingenious strangers, who readily transported their talents to Athens, as to the best market.

(Gillies 1786, vol. 1, pp. 500 – 501)

The result of this policy culminated, according to Gillies, in one single building: ‘The Parthenon [...] the noblest piece of antiquity existing in the world’ (Gillies 1786, vol. 1, pp. 503).

Thus it does not come as a surprise to find that the Parthenon had already gained a degree of fame long before Lord Elgin had large parts of its sculpture transferred to England. The first-known fragment from the Parthenon frieze had been brought to Britain by William Chambers and given to the Society of Dilettanti, where, in 1784, the young John Flaxman sketched it (Jenkins 1992, p. 80; Whitney 1964, p. 185). Probably even more decisive in this context was the reconfiguring of aesthetics as a source of both historical knowledge and political ideals. We see this at work in Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s writings. While the formation of eighteenth-century Hellenism was, in general, an idealized and idealizing phenomenon, it was Winckelmann’s Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Mahlerey und Bildhauer-Kunst (Reflections on the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks) and his more expansive Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums (History of the Art of Antiquity) that bound aesthetics and the political existence of the nation indissolubly together (Winckelmann 1755, 1764). As has often been remarked, it was he who charged classical antiquity with a powerful new and contemporary relevance by offering an evocative system of stylistic analysis grounded in the cultural, social and political history of the ancient world. For him, the ideal represented a point of departure, a reference for subsequent history (Potts 1994). His ideas of ancient Greek art were based
mainly on literary sources from the Roman period, on Roman copies of lost Greek originals, and on concepts espoused by Giorgio Vasari. This notwithstanding, and despite never having set foot on Greek soil, Winckelmann’s influence on the formation of taste and on the concept of ‘ancient Greece’ lasted for the remainder of the century. The notion that Greece was the cradle of European culture—‘the epitome of youthful dynamism and purity’ (Bernal 1995, p. 7)—lasted even longer. This association of Greece with youthful dynamism followed from Winckelmann’s use of the Vasarian concept, which held that cultures followed the same stages as biological organisms by progressing in ascending cycles from youth to old age and, ultimately, death.

It was only after Napoleon had usurped power and fashioned himself an emperor along ancient Roman lines that Greece, and above all Athens, emerged as the cultural icon of a free world—much as many people like to remember the polis even today (e.g. Marouli-Zilemenou 2004). Prior to this shift, invoking Athenian democracy had been considered politically challenging, even provocative; republican Rome, on the other hand, had served as a model for liberal ideas. Thus the Scottish historian John Gillies had reserved for democracy nothing but contempt, which is why, in his publication dedicated to George III, he warned that ‘the History of Greece exposes the dangerous Turbulence of Democracy […]’ (Gillies 1786, vol. 1, preface). William Mitford, who, like Gillies, was considered a Tory, took a similarly critical stance toward democracy, while clearly ‘praising tyrants’, as Byron would later phrase it (McGann 1986, p. 1063). Still, fifth-century BC Athens ultimately superseded republican Rome as a model for British emulation, probably because Roman ideals were betrayed at least twice in Western history: first by Julius Caesar, and then by Napoleon Bonaparte. Hence, what had at one point seemed dangerous and subversive was again idealized once different political and economical conditions came to prevail.

Yet, despite the fact that ‘freedom’ had migrated from its home within philosophical and political discourse—as in the writings of Hume—toward the animating principle of aesthetic inquiry as in Winckelmann’s interrelation of history, politics and culture, it required the real threat of conquest by an external force to make the British turn to archaeologically correct, pure Greek models from the fifth century BC. This tangible threat also generated a political fantasy that was projected onto one specific place in ancient Greek history and topography—Athens. Consequently, ancient artifacts became ideologically charged, turning any vestige of the Athenian classical past into a highly valued relic, an encoded sign that referred to a culture that was, in fact, hardly known at the time. This shift was part of a
larger process in which reenactment was going to play a significant role. Reenactment was a means of imaging and experiencing the past and building in new, more recent experiences such as Napoleon’s threat. Thus the consensus within the British elites on what classical Athens and ancient Greece might have been was temporal and bound to change in line with those developments that occurred both within and without British society.

Needless to say, in the early nineteenth century, Athens’ Byzantine past was completely ignored because Western Europeans perceived the Greek Orthodox Church to be rather backward. In addition, following Edward Gibbons’ negative verdict on the Byzantine Empire, British elites made the Byzantine Empire and Greek Orthodoxy responsible for the decline of ancient Greek civilization and the apparent ‘mental’ weakness of the people who populated what had once been Greece (Vasiliev 1964, vol. 1, pp. 6 – 13). On the other hand, it was assumed that the relics of Athens’ classical past could serve as a foil to the present: they were thought to be reminders of an ideal (and rather idealized) condition, a testament to unsurpassable past achievements that were worth imitating and emulating in order to gain moral, cultural, economical and political freedom—or even superiority. Stemming from the same time and place as Aristotle’s and Plato’s philosophy, they seemed to provide a link between contemporary society and a past social and intellectual elite that seemed to have functioned and maintained itself on the basis of a democratic system. Thus they provided models for the present political and economic elite that saw itself legitimated by merit as well as by moral and intellectual superiority. Such were the underlying beliefs in Britain, but they also existed in Prussia during the Napoleonic wars (Oechslin 2002, pp. 685 – 688). Yet Winckelmann’s principles of literary Hellenism were overtaken only as late as June 1807, when the sculptures from the Parthenon were presented for the first time in London. From then on, Roman culture would be viewed repeatedly as a derivative one, not original like the culture from Greece (Turner 1989, pp. 70 – 75; Fehlmann 2007).

The history of the Elgin Marbles remains as contentious as it is famous, ever since Arthur Hamilton Smith’s detailed account dating from 1916 (Hamilton Smith 1916). While Napoleon was plundering Europe and the Mediterranean, and after British troops had driven the French out of Egypt in 1801, Thomas Bruce, 7th Lord Elgin, the newly appointed ambassador to Constantinople, used Ottoman enthusiasm for Britain to obtain permission from the Turks to investigate the antiquities on the Acropolis of Athens. As the Ottomans ruled what was later to become modern Greece, they were entitled to give such permission—although the precise terms of this
arrangement have been disputed ever since (St Clair 2006; Williams 2002). The more important result, however, was that, in 1801 and 1802, Elgin’s employees removed a vast quantity of ancient sculpture and architectural specimens from the site and from the Parthenon itself.

When Lord Elgin introduced his Greek trophies to the visual entertainment marketplace of late Georgian London in June 1807, with the intention of improving public taste, the sculptures came as a surprise to most artists and connoisseurs: as Gillen D’Arcy Wood has phrased it, it came as ‘a shock of the real’ (D’Arcy Wood 2001, pp. 130–169). The sculptures generated debate about traditional perceptions of beauty and the introduction of new values such as ‘nature’ and ‘reality’, because the Parthenon sculptures presented original Greek art to an extent previously unknown, but also because they offered a new form of aesthetic perception that differed from the rules set down by Winckelmann and his colleagues. In addition, they were the ‘real’ visual material of a glorious past that was otherwise known mainly from written accounts (Michaelis 1877; Rothenberg 1977). Thus, when seeing them for the first time, the sculptor Joseph Nollekens was puzzled by the fact that ‘the ancients did put veins to their gods’ (Smith 1828, vol. 1, p. 388), while Sir Henry Fuseli, full of excitement, exclaimed in a strong Swiss accent: ‘The Greeks were Godes! The Greeks were Godes!’ (Schiff 1973, vol. 1, p. 304). Fuseli’s friend Robert Haydon was also overwhelmed by the marbles’ ‘truths of nature’ and concluded that the only way the Greeks could achieve such an effect was ‘by taking casts directly from life’ (Elwin 1853, p. 141). When visiting London, Antonio Canova is said to have declared at first sight of the Parthenon sculptures, ‘È vera carne!—it’s real flesh!’ (Licht 1983, pp. 217, 271, note 3), while the Gentleman’s Magazine reported on this occasion that ‘the celebrated sculptor, Canova […], said they were superior in style to everything else on earth’ (Gentleman’s Magazine 1815, p. 624; Elwin 1853, p. 264). In response to this news, William Wordsworth wrote to his friend Haydon, ‘I am not surprised that Canova expressed himself so highly pleased with the Elgin Marbles. A man must be senseless as a clod, or perverse as a fiend, not to be enraptured with them’ (qtd in Larabee 1943, p. 129). The beauty of the Elgin Marbles came to many as a revelation of the unexpected and suggested a new vision of how society ought to be—natural and realistic in contrast to the way they had been conditioned to perceive it. Thus, some quality in those ancient remains came to stand for possibility and became a synonym for all that was better in art and society. One might say that it was a sort of aestheticized model of the revolutionary ideas that Bonaparte had betrayed on the Continent but which now found curious asylum in Britain.
As a result, the beauty of the Elgin Marbles, and the many connotations attached to them, helped focus attention on classical Athens. Stylistically, they influenced contemporary production of sculpture (Willers 1984) and stimulated various literary, musical and artistic works that celebrate them or Athens’ glorious past. They include, to mention only a few, Lady Morgan’s novel *Woman, or Ida of Athens* (1809), Ludwig van Beethoven’s *Die Ruinen von Athen* (Op. 113, 1812), William Hogarth’s *Greece* (1814), Felicita Hemans’s *Modern Greece* (1817), Keats’s *On Seeing the Elgin Marbles and Hyperion* (1819), Shelley’s *Hellas* (1822) and Bryan Waller Procter’s (pseud. Barry Cornwall) *On the Statue of Theseus—One of the Elgin Marbles* (1819). The sensation caused by the Parthenon sculptors might even have motivated Robert Barker and Robert Beauford to paint the *Panorama of Athens*, which was acquired by Theodore Lyman for Harvard University in 1819 (D’Arcy Wood 2001, pp. 101–120; Winterer 2002, p. 66). Consequently, Romantic Hellenism became a fad for anything Greek—from art and architecture to philosophy, literature and myth, hairstyles, garden ornaments, household furniture, fabrics, ceramics, and pots and pans. In addition, it even transmogrified into politically liberal and sexually emancipated fantasies of a past golden age, as expressed in Shelley’s *Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks relative to the Subject of Love*, written in 1818 but not published until 1833. There, the bard drew a line from the Elgin Marbles to sexual freedom and concluded that the ‘sculptures are such as we in our presumption assume to be the models of ideal truth and beauty and to which no artist of modern times can produce forms in any degree comparable’ (Clark 1988, p. 217). In time, Romantic Hellenism became such a dominant force that, in his introduction to *Hellas*, Shelley even proclaimed, ‘We are all Greeks’ (Hutchinson 1914). The prevailing characteristic here was the steady mix of authentic antiquity, free imagination and the transfiguration of Hellenism into timelessness that permitted the construction of a supposed kinship between modern Britain and ancient Greece (e.g. Leoussi 1998, pp. 157–179). Within this context Greece—and thus Athens—became not only a synonym for cultural and intellectual achievement but also the term through which British superiority was defined and justified.

Hence, when, in Spring 1816, the Select Committee that had been appointed by the House of Commons to determine the monetary value of the Greek sculptures in Lord Elgin’s possession asked a group of esteemed artists and connoisseurs ‘Do you conceive any of the sculptures from the Parthenon to be of a higher class than the *Apollon Belvedere*?’ (Select Committee 1816, p. 89), it not only expressed concern about spending £35,000 for some badly damaged marble sculptures from Athens, but it also
enquired about their aesthetic status in comparison with the then most celebrated statue of Antiquity. The remaining part of this story is well known: on 7 June 1816, the British Parliament ruled with 82 to 30 votes for acquiring the ancient sculptures in Lord Elgin’s collection for the nation, while at the same time renaming them in perpetuity ‘The Elgin Collection’, in honor of their previous owner (George III 1816, p. 867). Thus the British government not only gained title of the Parthenon sculptures, but it also distinctly erased their Greek origin, claiming that ‘no other country can be better adapted than our own to afford an honorable asylum to these monuments’ (Select Committee 1816, p. 27).

Soon after their acquisition, the British Museum started with the controlled production of plaster casts from the Elgin Marbles (Jenkins 1990). Although casts had been accessible on the Continent as early as 1808, Goethe had seen some in Darmstadt already in 1814, and Dannecker had two casts in Stuttgart by 1816, while Canova owned a cast of the Ilissus that seems to have been sent to him after his visit to London (Grumach 1949, vol. 2, pp. 494 – 511; Hamilton Smith 1916, p. 304; Michaelis 1871, pp. 86, 94 – 95; Quatremère de Quincy 1818, p. 16). These early casts spread the marbles’ fame and, together with various publications, helped increase their reputation and monetary value. In 1817, the British Museum sent sets of plaster casts to the Royal Academy in London and the Academies in Rome, Florence, Venice and St Petersburg (Jenkins 1990). In 1818, the Louvre started to produce its own casts from the Parthenon sculptures taken from molds that Choiseul-Gouffier had brought back from Athens; and by 1825, plaster casts from the Elgin Marbles were on show not only at the Academies of London, Paris, Florence, Venice, St Petersburg, Naples and Rome, but also in Edinburgh, Plymouth, Dublin, Copenhagen (Figure 4), Jena, Breslau, Bonn and Berlin (Bauer 2000, p. 167; Borbein 2000; Fehlmann 2006; Jenkins 1990; Kammel 2001). At the same time numerous publications spread word of their beauty, and images themselves, all over Continental Europe. In 1816, the year of their acquisition, at least six publications on the Elgin Marbles and/or the Parthenon appeared in London alone (e.g. Burrow 1816; Elgin 1816; Hamilton 1815; Haydon 1816; Lyons 1816; Taylor 1816; Visconti 1816; Wilkins 1816).

Illustrated publications and the production of mechanically crafted plaster casts were part of an enduring trend toward an ever-increasing democratic and collective notion of knowledge and its dissemination. At the same time, this visual culture shaped and defined public opinion and collective memory. Hence the fame and glory of the Elgin Marbles grew year by year, and their unquestioned superiority to any other antique work of art became dogma. With this, the Elgin Marbles’ reputation, their unique
status and their growing fame were even projected onto the whole building, the Parthenon, and made it a perpetual reminder of the heroic age of Pericles and of the artistic genius that men had once displayed. In addition, because it had been successfully demonstrated that specimens from the Parthenon’s sculpture could easily be transferred from one place to another, a conviction began to gain shape that believed in transferring even the genius loci of that very building by recreating its imagined ‘original’ looks on a different spot. It was in this context that the first proposal for a reconstruction of the Parthenon in London was published in the *London Times* on 8 April 1817.

The building would have served as a monument to the victory over Bonaparte and was to be placed on a platform to the north end of London’s Regent’s Park on Primrose Hill. The author praised the Parthenon as

> the taste of the purest age of Athens; the production of the very ablest artists the world ever saw, acting under the guidance of the most

![Figure 4](https://example.com/figure4.jpg)

**Figure 4** Christian Købke, ‘A View into the Royal Cast Collection at Charlottenberg, Copenhagen’, 1830, Oil on Canvas, The Hirschsprung Collection, Copenhagen.
accomplished patrons. It is admitted, beyond all dispute, to be the perfection of Greek architecture: and now that a large proportion of the original sculpture belonging to it is deposited in the British Museum, it is equally beyond all cavil, that these ornaments of the temple are of the highest scale of excellence.

(Anonymous, signed with ‘B.’ 1817)

In the end, the author concluded that this monument would offer

a suitable opportunity for commemorating the Sovereign of the country, whose councils have led to so glorious a consummation, and supported and restored the liberties of the world. It would equally admit of celebrating the distinguished Statesmen of our day; and while it presented the noblest testimonial of the nation’s gratitude to her heroes, it would prove the most animated incentive to future eminence.

(Anonymous, signed with ‘B.’ 1817)

Three weeks later there appeared in the same paper a fervent reply discussing the proposed reconstruction of the Parthenon and claiming that

The Parthenon has ever been considered [...] as the purest model of a public building which ever came from the hands of man; [...] What, then, can be more worthy of a nation,—than by raising—in equal if not enlarged proportions, another glory of the civilized world, another triumph of cultivated art, another sanctuary of a purer religion; and by these means perpetuate to the latest posterity the knowledge of a building which was the boasted of a country, the nurse of all that was great in arms and arts; and from which we glory to derive all our philosophy, all our morals, all our taste, all our love of liberty, all our eloquence, all our poetry; in short, all that is good, except what came immediately from Heaven—?

(Anonymous 1817)

Lack of funds caused the initial project to fail, but the idea of reconstructing the Parthenon as a national monument in London was reactivated in 1838 by Andrew Robertson, who proposed that it be placed in Trafalgar Square (Robertson 1838). However, by then, Periclean Athens was again increasingly supplanted by Imperial Rome, making this proposal seem somehow outdated. Yet, soon after the failure of the first London project, in 1820 the Egyptologist William John Bankes proposed building the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge in the shape of the Parthenon (Figure 5). Bankes, whose father had chaired the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Elgin Marbles, thought that only this Periclean monument was fit to serve as an architectural model for the intended function. The ideology implicit in this
distinctive mode of constructing and representing an educational institution is quite obvious: the reconstruction of the Athenian Temple and Treasury to *Athena Parthenos* would have stood not only as a temple for the arts and consequently served as treasury too, it would also have served as a reminder of Athens’ artistic achievements during her golden age after the Persian wars and fused the *ancient Greek temple* into a *British* national symbol of cultural superiority. Just as Leo von Klenze aimed at similar objectives while planning the Walhalla near Donaustauf, the Parthenon was to serve in Cambridge as the highest expression of artistic achievement that could be emulated (Hildebrand 2000; Traeger 1991). Within the urban context that Bankes had chosen for his project, the Fitzwilliam Museum would have become the pinnacle of a ‘promenade architecturale’ already present at Cambridge’s *King’s Parade*. However, the syndicate’s inability to obtain the necessary plot of land led to the project’s delay until the mid-1930s. By then the Parthenon had fallen out of fashion and a more eclectic solution was offered by George Basevi, Charles Robert Cockerell and Edward Middleton Barry (Salmon 2000, pp. 169 – 188).

Nevertheless, enthusiasm for the Parthenon spread further north, and from 1819 on a committee of Scottish patriots launched the project in Edinburgh for a faithful reconstruction of the Parthenon on Calton Hill. It was to house the mortal remains of those who had fallen in the Napoleonic Wars, and the committee chose as architects the English archaeologist and architect Charles Robert Cockerell and the Scotsman William Playfair, ‘Pheidias & Callicrates’ as a contemporary observer called them (Fehlmann 2005). Building activities started in 1826, but in June 1829 they came to an instant halt owing to the lack of necessary funds. Today there remains an odd ruin with only part of the stylobate, twelve columns and the architrave crowning the Caledonian metropolis on Calton Hill (Fehlmann 2005).

These three attempts at reconstructing the Parthenon in Britain reveal quite a lot about how the protagonists who were planning these monuments wanted to be remembered. First and foremost, one must bear in mind that their objectives were predicated on various contemporaneous
beliefs—even if they liked to picture themselves as part of one grand design stretching across space and time that ascribed to them heroic actions and timeless prestige. Yet there was another reason for the perception of the Parthenon as the ultimate monument of ancient Greece, namely the idealization of the present on the basis of a perished civilization and the resultant wishful construction of Britain’s glorious future. While the revival of interest in the ruins of classical antiquity that characterized neoclassicism remained a primary component of the romantic experience, the numerous foreigners who then traveled in the Levant were looking for the ancient Hellenes and their material heritage, not for the living Rhômaioi, as the then living population of Greece had called themselves. By recovering Athens’ monuments and traces of its glorious past as material proof of a hitherto nostalgic evocation, and by transferring them to England and Scotland, or even by reconstructing them, the British substituted the irretrievable past with a strong idealization of their present and the fantastic projection of a prosperous future. Like readily available fragments, the Parthenon and its sculptures were regarded as part of an invisible cultural whole, thus representing the site of recovery and an immanent historical condition that were more fictional than real. Hence the three projects to reconstruct the Parthenon of Athens, if completed, would have offered a multilayered message that included a form of reenactment.

When Robin G. Collingwood critically applied this term in his contested The Idea of History, he did so in an attempt to explain what historical understanding means (Collingwood 1946). He posited the idea that reenactment occurs when a historian undergoes the selfsame thought processes as did the historical individual whom the historian attempts to study. According to Collingwood, the ‘recollection’ of past thought and action by a historian must be akin to the very same ‘thinking’ and ‘acting’ as the person whose thoughts and actions the historian studies. Yet Collingwood recognized the Achilles’ heel in his concept and found that ‘the historian not only re-enacts past thought, he re-enacts it in the context of his own knowledge’ (Collingwood 1946, p. 215). On the assumption that people within different cultural, racial and chronological contexts think, act—and therefore perceive—‘history’ differently, one might conclude that those living in the present are, in fact, unable to recover or reconstruct the history from the past (as it then was). Hence, trying to make a complex issue simple, one must conclude that every history is a fictive reconstruction, because those who write or ‘reenact’ it do not possess the same ‘habits of thought’ as those whose actions are part of this history (Collingwood 1946, pp. 307–308; Margolis 1993, pp. 23–35). This is why, in accordance with Collingwood’s concept, the British attempts to reconstruct the
Parthenon of Athens in London, Cambridge and Edinburgh must not be misunderstood as forms of a historically accurate reenactment with a strong antiquarian component, but rather as fictitious productions that expressed what at the time was perceived, imagined and believed to be typically and ideally Greek. Through the loose interpretation of the term ‘reenactment’—and in line with Vanessa Agnew’s (2004) definition—we may safely describe the British efforts to reconstruct the Athenian Parthenon as a form of historical reenactment that pursued ideological and political interests.

One crucial feature of this reenactment within Romantic Hellenism was the selective process of perceiving and emulating only the positive aspects of the past while ignoring present conditions and historical developments. Here, the peripheral position of Greece in early nineteenth-century Europe and its political vassalage to the Ottoman Empire was of primary importance in the Western discourse, because this situation led to the marginalization of the contemporary Greek population, the Ῥώμαιοι. Western Europeans justified their attitude toward these people by presenting them as backward, irrational and contaminated by Balkan vices, but they certainly did not recognize them as the glorious Hellenes that Phidias and Polykleitos had once shaped in marble and bronze (Eisner 1991, pp. 79, 91, 100–102; Leoussi 1998, pp. 7–24). Various accounts blamed the Byzantine and Ottoman occupations for the current state of contemporary Greeks, their deficits and weaknesses, their lack of respect for the past, and the absence of any artistic sensitivity (e.g. Hamilton 1815, p. 3). The Byzantine occupation was thought to have had a negative influence because it represented an archaic, orthodox and hence backward form of Christian belief that stood in stark contrast to the more progressive Protestant practice of the Anglican Church. The Ottomans were described with yet greater hostility because they were not even Christians but Muslims and therefore perceived to be even less trustworthy. Construing the contemporary Greeks or Ῥώμαιοι as the recipients of continuous oppression, which itself implied weakness and corroded moral values, offered a welcome contrast to the glorious past of classical Greece—or the even more glorious present of Great Britain after Waterloo. This seems to have justified a certain patronizing behavior on the part of the British toward the people living in what once was Greece when acquiring or looting relics from classical antiquity. Such reasoning still pertains today: if the native custodians of ancient Greece were not capable of conserving the cultural heritage of their ancestors because they were indifferent toward it, they had to be replaced by a more suitable force, the British. This enabled the British not merely to obtain the spoils of the glorious past of others (in this case their supposed role model, the Greeks of fifth-century-BC Athens) but also to assume the role of the morally
legitimate heir. Stylized as a civilizing good deed, this stance was recently taken up again in a BBC interview when Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, stated that ‘the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum are in the best possible place for them, and they must remain here if the museum is to continue to achieve its aim, which is to show the world to the world’ (MacGregor 2002).

This suggests that positive notions of the classical past have been repeatedly used to frame a relationship of inequality, superiority and power (Bernal 1994; Hingley 2000; Stray 1998). Since the once successful classical Greeks had perished and were never again to resurface, whether during the Roman and Byzantine Empires or during the rule of any other power that followed them, one might also read the specific British attachment to Periclean Athens, the Elgin Marbles and the Parthenon within a psychological perspective, namely as a reluctance to accept historical change and political fates. This ‘dehistorization’ of what was once Greece by focusing on a monument from one specific historical moment was a defensive action toward a contemporary reality that the British found rather disturbing. After all, it reminded them that no leading power lasts forever. Further, the British attachment to Periclean Athens and its ultimate monument, the Parthenon, might also have been motivated by the fear of defeat by Napoleon, leading to what many non-British observers perceive as a British obsession with the imperial Corsican. It is one element within the whole perceptive process of emulation that clearly tries to repress a reality from which the people in the United Kingdom as a whole felt threatened and which for them was so difficult to bear—the thought of ultimately being overwhelmed by an enemy force.

Nonetheless, the three projects to reconstruct the Parthenon of Athens enabled the British to express even more sophisticated messages: Athens’ fame lay in her history, mythology, philosophy, literature, cults, monuments and arts. While the Greek revival imitations of Athenian models, copies and variations were commonly adapted as unspecific codes of an exotic, idealized past, ‘reconstructing’ the Parthenon in London, Cambridge and Edinburgh had a rather different goal: here, a building and its locations were being elevated to the realm of the heroic not simply by association with Athens’ myth and fame but through association with the very specific historical moment of her Golden Age after the Persians’ defeat. The promoters of these reconstructions exploited the parallel between the historical moment after Marathon, Salamis and Plataea and their own situation after Trafalgar and Waterloo. Thus Athens’ legendary struggles against the Persians for freedom and prosperity became an appropriate prefiguration for the campaigns against the French, allowing the British
forces to claim the role of the heroic Greeks, who protected Western civilization from the ‘barbarian world’—just as classical Athens had found mythological justifications for her victories in the battles of the Greeks against the Amazons—and the Gods against the Giants. Hence, the intention of ‘restoring’ the Parthenon was clearly an attempt to exploit antiquity for contemporary political interests, one that expressed British superiority over the defeated enemy to the east and the rest of Europe. After all, the 1815 Treaty of Paris had expressly stipulated that the British alone be a protecting power—just as Athens became the leading force in the Attic-Delian League.

By inserting the glorious idea of the Periclean metropolis and its ultimate symbol, the Parthenon, into their own self-image and political biography, those involved in these schemes could argue for their own cultural power and leadership. In addition, by adding the ultimate Athenian monument to either London, Cambridge or Edinburgh, they could articulate a truly cosmopolitan self-understanding while claiming that each place with such a monument would be the new cultural and intellectual center of the British Empire, or even the whole civilized world. By linking themselves to an alien, even fictitious, past, those who were responsible for these reconstructions wished to associate themselves with an aura of greatness that would suggest their own heroic power. Putting themselves on the same level as Pericles, Pheidias, Iktinos and Kallikrates, they could argue for their own military, artistic and moral superiority while hoping for kleos apthiton—fame and glory that outlast death. No other monument from the ancient world could, at the time, have offered a more suitable basis for such approbation because there was nothing in the world that embodied more successfully what was ‘Greek’.

In conclusion, when during the Napoleonic wars the British were seeking new forms of self-identification, they turned toward Periclean Athens and classical Greece. Transforming Greece into an alternative site for outstanding artistic and political achievements was a consequence of Romantic Hellenism. Moreover, Athens became not only a synonym for superior cultural, intellectual and political achievements; it became the term through which superiority itself could be defined and justified. After the battle of Waterloo, Britons’ sense of superiority called for a material symbol, a relic or entity of some sort, that would memorialize the glorious victory over Bonaparte. It also had to sum up all the positive connotations projected onto Athens’ glorious past that would then reflect positively on the British. This was found in the ‘building from which derived all that is good’ (Anonymous 1817), the ultimate symbol of Greek civilization to which they felt akin, and the pinnacle of human accomplishment, the Parthenon. Since
Britain owned several important specimens from the Parthenon thanks to an act of Parliament in 1816, increasing numbers of people came to know about the building and its cultural significance. Between 1819 and 1829, there were three different attempts to reconstruct the Parthenon because the British believed that they possessed, as Felicia Dorothea Browne Hemans phrased it in 1817, ‘the power to be what Athens e’er hath been’ (qtd in Larrabee 1943, p. 274). Yet the Parthenon’s fame truly began in 1807 when the Elgin Marbles were introduced to the British public, because they were, at that time, the only relics that were as Greek as anything could possibly be.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on a paper delivered at the 37th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies on 31 March 2006 in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. I thank the Council of the Swiss National Science Foundation for awarding me the grant that made the research for this article possible, during my postdoctoral research at Zurich University. In the process of writing this article, many colleagues and friends offered critical advice and valuable information: I am particularly indebted to Richard Melville Ballerand (London), Dr Uta Kornmeier (Oxford), Dr Hildegard Wiegel (Paris) and Dr Christoph Schmälzle (Berlin). I am also indebted to Dr Ian Jenkins (British Museum, London), Dr Britta Tøndborg (Staatens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen), Dr Liliane Schaffner (Bern) and Professor Oskar Bätschmann (Bern) for their advice and support.

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