

A New Home for Treasures of the Acropolis

by Jarrett A. Lobell

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The busiest person at the new Acropolis Museum in Athens on the morning of its official opening was the window washer. I watched as he moved his ladder across the building's facade, holding a bottle of glass cleaner in one hand and a red towel in the other. With thousands of square feet of glass panels forming the walls, he had a lot to do before the museum welcomed heads of state, diplomats, and European royalty for a formal opening ceremony that evening. Despite the magnitude of the event - the culmination of decades of lobbying and lawsuits - everything was remarkably calm. Uninterested policemen stood around, chatting loudly. The occasional tourist stopped to take photos. Kids played a noisy game of soccer and kicked up dust. People were out walking their dogs, shopping, or just enjoying the sun before the Athenian summer heat kicked in. True, there were still a few cranes in the museum's backyard, and some exposed electrical cables still snaked across the ground. But the city was ready.

It's hard for outsiders to conceive of this museum's importance to the Greeks. The ancient world is part of their identity in a way that can be difficult to appreciate. And there is no more potent link to this past than the buildings and artifacts of the Acropolis. This enormous flat-topped rock rising 500 feet above sea level is home to iconic buildings representing Greece's fifth century BC "Golden Age" - the Temple of Athena Nike (Victory) covered in friezes showing Athenian military prowess; the striking mar-



The new Acropolis Museum integrates the history of Athens, from the 19th century former military hospital (left) that houses the museum's offices to the excavation under the museum's courtyard, and especially the Parthenon, visible in reflection at the top.

ble women who take the place of columns on the Erechtheions porch; and the Parthenon, dedicated to Athena, the patron goddess of Athens - all symbols not only of the city, but of the highest artistic achievements of classical Greece. In the words of culture minister Antonis Samaras, addressing the first group of foreign journalists touring the museum, "Be inspired by the museum's transcendent message, which is Greek and therefore universal, but ours alone to share... and please remember that what you will discover is not just part of our history, it is also a part of our soul, of who we are."

Some 300 yards from the south slope of the Acropolis, the new museum couldn't be more different from its predecessor next to the Parthenon. The old museum - now used as storage and space for restoration work - was a dark, claustrophobic, 19th-century building with peeling walls and fading displays. The new one is a large and airy ultra-

modern creation of glass, concrete, and marble. The old museum displayed 400 artifacts. The new one has 4,000, all found during centuries of excavation (and less formal collection) on the Acropolis, and reflects more than 5,000 years of continuous habitation. Most of these objects have been in storage for years and many are displayed here for the first time. There are masterpieces, such as the Kritios boy - one of the first-known works to highlight the transition from the stiffness of Archaic sculpture to the movement of Classical art - and an extraordinary marble relief of the goddess Nike, whose body shows through her somehow transparent drapery as she bends to untie her sandal. And there are sculptures from the Parthenon honoring Athena - the pediment with her victory over the sea god Poseidon to become the city's patron, and a frieze depicting a procession of Athenian citizens, musicians, sacrificial animals, and horsemen celebrating her. While the old museum was created simply to house archaeological remains, the new one has a more complicated agenda. Architecture and politics have long been intertwined in Athens. In the fifth century BC, Athenian statesman Pericles directed an ambitious building program, which included the Parthenon, to glorify Athens and reconstruct many of the monuments on the Acropolis that had been destroyed by the Persians in 480 BC. Some

vestiges of these structures remained and many were incorporated into the new designs. Perhaps the most meaningful statement was the inclusion in the Parthenon of the foundation blocks of the ruined temple to Athena begun in the early fifth century. By preserving these remains, the Athenians created a potent monument to the Persian destruction that would remind any visitor to the Acropolis how far the city had come since those dark days.

The modern Greek Govern-

ment insists that one of the museum's main purposes is to force the British Museum to return the Parthenon Marbles (commonly known as the Elgin Marbles) to Athens. These include nearly half of the surviving architectural sculptures from the temple's exterior - 15 of the original 92 metopes, hundreds of feet of the 426 foot long frieze, and the majority of the east pediment. Between 1801 and 1805, Thomas Bruce, the seventh Earl of Elgin and British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, which then controlled Athens, removed the sculptures from the Acropolis. At first he intended to decorate his estate in Scotland with the works, and then tried to sell them to the British Museum, before finally using them as collateral for debts owed to the British government. Almost since the sculptures were removed, the Greeks have been trying to get them back. One of the British Museum's long-standing arguments for keeping the marbles in London has been that there was no appropriate place to display in Athens. There is now.

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Left: Two rarely displayed terracotta second to third century AD figures of the goddess Nike greet visitors.

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