

Foreign travellers to pre-revolutionary Athens: antiquarians and treasure hunters

by Fani-Maria Tsigakou

“At the period when every young man of fortune, in France and England, considered it an indispensable part of his education to survey the monuments of ancient art remaining in Italy, only a few scholars and artists ventured to trust themselves amongst the barbarians, to contemplate the ruins of Greece. But these terrors, seem at last to be dispelled; Attica at present swarms with travellers ... and a few years may furnish the Piraeus with all the accommodations of a fashionable watering-place”, comments Lord Byron’s travel-companion John Cam Hobhouse Broughton in 1813.¹ Indeed, Athens in the first two decades of the 19th century was the fashionable meeting place for travellers of all nationalities (fig. 1).²

The traveller who reached Athens by sea realized that his worst fears were confirmed as soon as he perceived Piraeus. A few fishing boats, the wooden shack of the Turkish customs officer and a handful of humble huts on the shore were the dismal witnesses to its former glory. This initial disappointment was followed by the practical problems travellers had to face once they had landed, due to the rudimentary facilities for transport. Travellers had to hire horses or carriages to take them to Athens. The road from Piraeus to Athens passed through fields, or along the Long Walls raised by Themistocles, while travellers arriving overland followed the Sacred Way from Eleusis and cut through olive groves.

The Athens that gradually unfolded before the

visitor’s eyes was no more than a large village with low, tiled-roofed houses, the monotony of which was relieved by palm trees, cypresses and minarets. The traveller was struck by the city’s oriental aspect, with its camels, open fountains and a host of mosques. During the Ottoman period, Athens comprised two separate sectors, just as in Antiquity: the *Kastro*, that is the Acropolis (fig. 2), which was the seat of the Turkish garrison commander and was covered by houses of the Turkish soldiers, and the lower city. Below the rock and inside the 18th century Turkish wall spread the densely built town of some 10,000 people.

Where were the numerous foreign travellers accommodated during their stay in Athens? Distinguished visitors were usually offered hospitality in the consuls’ residences. Unlike consul Louis-François-Sebastien Fauvel, who is said to have provided rather uncomfortable lodgings in his house crammed with antiquities, the Consul of Great Britain, Spyridon Logothetis, was considered particularly hospitable. In his mansion he entertained Lord and Lady Elgin. The Capuchin monks also willingly housed foreigners in their monastery. Most visitors took rented rooms, the best known being at the house of Mrs Makri, widow of the Consul of Great Britain and mother of the famous “Maid of Athens”. The homes of affluent Athenians were two-storied and surrounded by a high wall, which enclosed a courtyard planted with lemon trees and flowers,

1. Broughton 1813.

2. Selected bibliography for this article: Bouras & Korres 2001, Haugsted 1996, Matton 1963, Papanicolau-Christensen 1985,

Spencer 1954, Tournikiotis 1994, Tregaskis 1979, Tsigakou 1981, Tsigakou 1985, Tsigakou 1987, Tsigakou 1991.



Fig. 1: *View of Athens*, c. 1790 William Page. Water-colour on paper, 29x41 cm. Benaki Museum, Inv. No. 23048.

while a second yard beyond was used as a vegetable garden.

Foreign visitors did their sightseeing sometimes in the company of a guide, sometimes alone, with a copy of Pausanias' *Description of Greece* under the arm. Sightseeing began from the Acropolis, which being the Ottoman fortress was forbidden to foreigners so that travellers secured entry through bribes. The entry permit was paid for in cash or in kind, such as sugar, coffee or precious textiles. The drawing permit cost more and was less easy to obtain, since foreign artists were at the mercy of the Disdar's (i.e. the Turkish governor of the Acropolis) greed. Here is Edward Dodwell's experience: "I was one day engaged in drawing the Parthenon (fig. 3) with the aid of my Camera Obscura, when the Disdar, asked what I was performing with the extraordinary machine? I endeavoured to explain it, by putting in a clean sheet of paper, and making him look into the Camera Obscura. Soon as he saw the temple reflected on the paper, he imagined that I had produced the effect by

some magical process ... When he looked again and saw the reflection of some of his soldiers happening to pass at that moment, he became outrageous. He called me pig, devil, and Bonaparte, and said that he would never permit me to shut his soldiers into my box. When I realized that it was in vain to reason with his ignorance, I told him that, if he did not leave me unmolested, I would put him into my box and that he should find it very difficult to get out again. So, he immediately retired, and never afterwards gave me any further molestation".³

Visitors to the Acropolis took the path leading to the entrance, crossing an Islamic cemetery that stretched alongside the ruins of the Odeon of Herodes Atticus. The first ancient construction the visitor encountered was the Propylaia (fig. 4), which at that time had a strange aspect, because its central part had been destroyed during the bombardment of the Acropolis in 1687 by the Venetian troops under Admiral Francesco Morosini, and the void between the six columns had been blocked up. On the right side of the Propylaia

3. Dodwell 1819, I, 210.

Fig. 2: View of the Acropolis of Athens from the south west, 1804. W. Walker. Aquatint on paper, 47x56 cm. Benaki Museum, Inv. No. 26536.



stood the Frankish tower built in the 14th century by the Florentine Dukes Acciaiuoli, while the charming temple of Athena Nike was nowhere to be seen because the Turks had pulled it down in 1786 in order to use it for the fortifications on the Acropolis. The monument was reconstructed in 1835-1836.

On entering the Acropolis the visitor faced the Parthenon, surrounded by Turkish houses. Visible between the columns of the dismembered temple was a small mosque built after Morosini's bombardment. Very few of the sculptures of the west pediment remained *in situ* after Morosini's vandalism. Christians had disfigured the east pediment when the Parthenon was turned into a church, and its entrance removed to the west, a conversion that confused visitors, who tried in vain to verify Pausanias' descriptions. The Erechtheion too was in a lamentable state, having been pillaged by Christians, Franks and Turks. A piece of its epistyle had been broken off by some Disdar, to use as a watering basin for animals, while above the brick column which substituted for the Karyatid removed by Elgin some foreign traveller had carved the inscription "opus Elgin".

Descending the Acropolis, travellers visited the hill of the Areopagus, the rock of the Pnyx, and the hill

of the Muses, crowned by the monument of Philopappus. A little way beyond, on the hill of Agoraios Kolonos, visitors beheld the Theseum, the best-preserved monument of the Classical period even though the Turks used its doorway for target shooting. It was transformed into a Christian church and was the last resting place of several foreign travellers, so that it was knick-named "the Travellers' Mausoleum".

To the southeast of the Acropolis, visitors discovered the Capuchin monastery. Incorporated in the monastery was the elegant choregic monument of Lysikrates (fig. 5), popularly known as the "Lantern of Demosthenes" or "of Diogenes", which the monks used as a library. In the Roman Agora foreign travellers were fascinated by the sight of an ensemble of picturesque monuments such as the Gate of Athena Archegetis, half-hidden by houses, and the Horologion of Andronikos Kyrrestos, better known as the "Tower of the Winds" (fig. 6). This too was preserved in good condition because it had been converted into a *teke* ("clubhouse") of the "Whirling Dervishes". In the same quarter stood the propylon of the Library of Hadrian (fig. 7), which at that time was referred to as the "Poikile Stoa" or "Stoa of Hadrian" or "Gymna-



Fig. 3: *West front of the Parthenon*. E. Dodwell. Aquatint on paper, 32,5x45 cm. Benaki Museum, Inv.No. 26456.

sium". At one end of the monumental colonnade was the church of Hagioi Asomati, which unfortunately was demolished during the reign of King Othon, a victim of the then-current adoration of Antiquity that caused the disappearance of many Byzantine monuments in the city.

The ruins of the temple of Zeus Olympios towered above a wheat field. The monument's dimensions overwhelmed visitors, even though only 17 out of the 104 enormous columns remained *in situ*. Above the epistyle of 13 columns was a brick building that was the hermitage of a stylite. The columns of the Olympieion, in combination with the neighbouring Arch of Hadrian, constituted one of the artist-travellers' most popular Athenian subjects. The tour of Athens usually ended on the banks of the River Ilissos. The Ilissos Bridge had vanished, having been used as building material in the 18th century "Turkish Wall". On the banks of the river could be seen some pentelic marble seats belonging to the ancient Panathenaic Stadium.

The foreign community of early 19th century Athens was a mosaic of cosmopolitans and treasure-hunters, the majority being Britons. In 1766, William Pars came to the city as draughtsman to the group of

the Society of Dilettanti, while in later years the French painters Jean-Baptiste Hilaire, Louis-François-Sebastien Fauvel and Louis François Casas, who drew a city panorama, were in Athens. The Scottish maecenas Thomas Hope, who played a leading role in introducing the Greek Revival into Britain, was also guided around Athens by the French Consul Fauvel.

Before the end of the 1820s, most examples of the Greek orders had been studied *in situ* by Greek Revival architects, such as Thomas Allason, William Wilkins, Robert Smirke, William Walker, John Spencer Stanhope, Charles Barry and William Kinard. The British artists Hugh William Williams, Charles Lock Eastlake, William Page, and the French painter Michel François Préaux (or Preault) visited Athens. So did the landscapist William Gell accompanied by his fellow artist, the Irishman Edward Dodwell, who collaborated with the Italian Simone Pomardi, and of course, the topographer Colonel William Martin Leake.

As a contemporary British periodical commented, "No man is now accounted a traveller who has not bathed in the Eurotas, tested the olives of Attica, and scratched one's name upon a fragment of the

Fig. 4: View of the Parthenon from the Propylea. E. Dodwell. Aquatint on paper, 25x40 cm. Benaki Museum, Inv. No. 26455.



Parthenon”.⁴ Alas, many travellers were not content to confine themselves to souvenirs of this kind. The theologian Rev. Edward Daniel Clarke arrived in the harbour of Piraeus in 1801, bringing the colossal Roman statue of Demeter, which he had bought in Eleusis. He

managed to export it by bribing the Turkish governor of Athens with Lusieri’s telescope.

The most spectacular case in point was Elgin’s acquisition of the Parthenon marbles. In August 1800, Elgin’s agent, the Italian landscapist Giovanni Battista



Fig. 5: *The Monument of Lysicrates*. Engraving on paper, 12x15,5 cm. From E. Dodwell, *A Classical and Topographical Tour Through Greece...*, London, 1819.

4. Mordaunt-Crook 1972, 43.



Fig. 6: *The Tower of the Winds*. Th. Du Moncel. Coloured lithograph on paper, 40,2x53 cm. Benaki Museum, Inv. No 27891.

Lusieri, was residing in Athens as head of a mission for the removal of the Parthenon marbles. The firman to the Turkish governor of Athens was sealed with generous gifts, such as binoculars, watches, crystal, Wedgwood porcelain, and silver candlesticks. Operations to remove stones from the Parthenon began on the 31st of July 1801. They were purchased eventually by the British Museum in 1816. Elgin's activities were to be condemned by the poet Lord Byron who reached Athens in 1809 accompanied by Hobhouse. They lodged in the home of Mrs. Makri, mother of three daughters, of whom the youngest, Teresa, then twelve years old, is immortalized in the poem, which he composed for her, "Maid of Athens". In 1812 Byron published *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, a landmark in English poetry and in philhellenic literature, in which he lamented, "Dull is the eye that will not weep to see thy walls defaced, thy mouldering shrines removed by British hands".

Byron's sojourn in Athens for several months added a touch of grandeur to the foreign community in the city. The poet is referred to by the Danish archaeologist Peter Oluf Brøndsted, who came to

Athens together with his brother-in-law to be Georg Heinrich Koës. Both travellers disembarked at Piraeus in September 1810 and stayed in Athens for four months. During their sojourn they were impressed by the fever of treasure hunting for antiquities that was plaguing the city: "All the travellers we meet here are pitiable. Sole topic of their conversation is stones, coins, vases. Never do they refer to the beauty of nature. They are concerned exclusively with excavations"⁵. Koës mentions seeing in the outskirts of Athens a mound surrounded by pits, which was being dug by "a Hungarian count with 28 men, Fauvel with 6, a Signor Andreas an Italian with 10 and Lord Ruthven with 10"⁶.

At this time Athens was also hosting the other protagonists in the despoiling of Bassae and Aegina, the Estonian aristocrat Otto Magnus Baron von Stackelberg, and his fellow traveller the German architect-artist Baron Carl Haller von Hallerstein, who lived in Greece until his death and was buried there. This group of treasure-hunters was completed by the British architect Charles Robert Cockerell and the German painter Jacob Linck.

5. Haugsted 1996, 54.

6. Haugsted 1996, 57.

Fig. 7: *The Library of Hadrian*. Engraving on paper, 34x49 cm. From James Stuart and Nicolas Revett, *The Antiquities of Athens*, 4 vols., London, 1762-1816.



The renowned French painter Louis Dupré, who was in Athens in 1819, published a luxurious illustrated album. Viscomte de Marcellus son-in-law of Comte August de Forbin, Director of the French museums, came to Athens for a few days in 1829, sailing into Piraeus in his yacht that was carrying a statue of Aphrodite which he had just purchased on the island of Melos and which he subsequently presented to his King. Incidentally, the first foreigner to carry out official excavations in Athens for remuneration was the eccentric Earl of Guilford. He excavated on the site of the Library of Hadrian (for 140 grossi) and although no important finds were recovered the unfortunate aristocrat was forced to pay a fine of 1,000 grossi because his digging damaged the neighbouring wall of the Turkish governor's residence.

The entertainments of the Athenian cosmopolitan community included invitations to homes of leading Athenians, or to local celebrations, masked balls and dances organized by the consuls and eminent foreigners. The meeting place of foreign visitors was the home of "Don Tita", as Lusieri was nicknamed. He had married the daughter of the French merchant Giraud and remained in Athens until his death, living in the house he himself had built on the north slope of the Acropolis.

At the foot of the Acropolis, was a conspicuous two-

storey house, the residence of the notorious French Consul Fauvel. All travellers speak in a mixture of admiration and envy of his collection of antiquities – among them an intact block from the Parthenon frieze. During his stay in Athens, until 1821, Fauvel made enormous efforts to compete with Lusieri's achievements, selling antiquities to foreign travellers. Another distinguished supplier of antiquities was the Austrian Consul Georg Christian Gropius.

Until 1821, when the Greek War of Independence broke out, a large number of ancient tombs throughout Attica, including the Marathon Tumulus, were systematically plundered, as were old dried-up wells, caves, churches and chapels. By the late 1820s the whole of Attica had been cleared of whatever antiquities were lying on the ground and could be moved.

Besides hunting antiquities, the sketching of the ancient sites and the city was also part of the travellers' programme. We owe to the landscape paintings of the nineteenth century an ensemble of magnificent Athenian images, which remodel a setting that satisfied the sense of nostalgic quest for the Classical world. Again and again those who study the "Greek" works of the period come across pictures staged with noble dignity and suffused with a golden haze – a visual cliché that was a mechanical vehicle of recourse to the Golden Age, given that the principal element of the picture

was a recognizable motif, e.g. the Acropolis, providing the attraction for the prospective purchaser.

From an art-historical point of view, these Athenian views, although products of pre-conceptions and perceptions overcharged with the emblematic character of Athens, are without doubt an iconographic ensemble,

which stimulates the viewer's imagination. Nonetheless, the archive of Athenian representations by foreign artists constitutes as well an invaluable tool for the function of historical memory and the reconstruction of the antiquities, the land and the people of 19th century Athens.