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Unveiling the Right Side

A Conversation with Pheidias and Pericles about the Elgin Marbles and Other Matters

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Just before a scientific conference in Porto Heli, Greece, in September of 2009, I visited the newly opened Acropolis Museum in Athens, which is very close to, and overlooks the old hill and the ruins of Parthenon. It was a busy day and the museum was packed with people. I really felt proud of being Greek, knowing that my ancestors created these beautiful antiquities. As I was glancing around, I saw two gentlemen who were strangely dressed, wearing ropes and sandals. At first, I thought these were two cuckoos, but as they came closer, I realized that they wanted to have a conversation with me. I introduced myself as a Greek biochemist living in Toronto and they returned the favor by introducing themselves as “Pheidias” and “Pericles.” My God, they were crying like kids! We sat in a corner of the museum overlooking the ancient field and the ruins of the Parthenon on the Acropolis and started chatting.

I asked them first, “Why are you guys crying so much? Do you need food or money or something? I can spare some Euros for you.”

I could see that they were heartbroken.

They said, “No, no, no, we don’t need food, euros, or anything like that. We have enough of these.”

And then I told them, “I thought you guys were dead 2000 years ago.”

They said, “Yeah, our bodies are dead but our spirits are not.”

They mentioned that they were there, at the bottom of the hill, every day, looking at the Parthenon and remembering the good old days. They revealed to me that

they had been crying like kids for over 2000 years and, then, they told me more of their story.

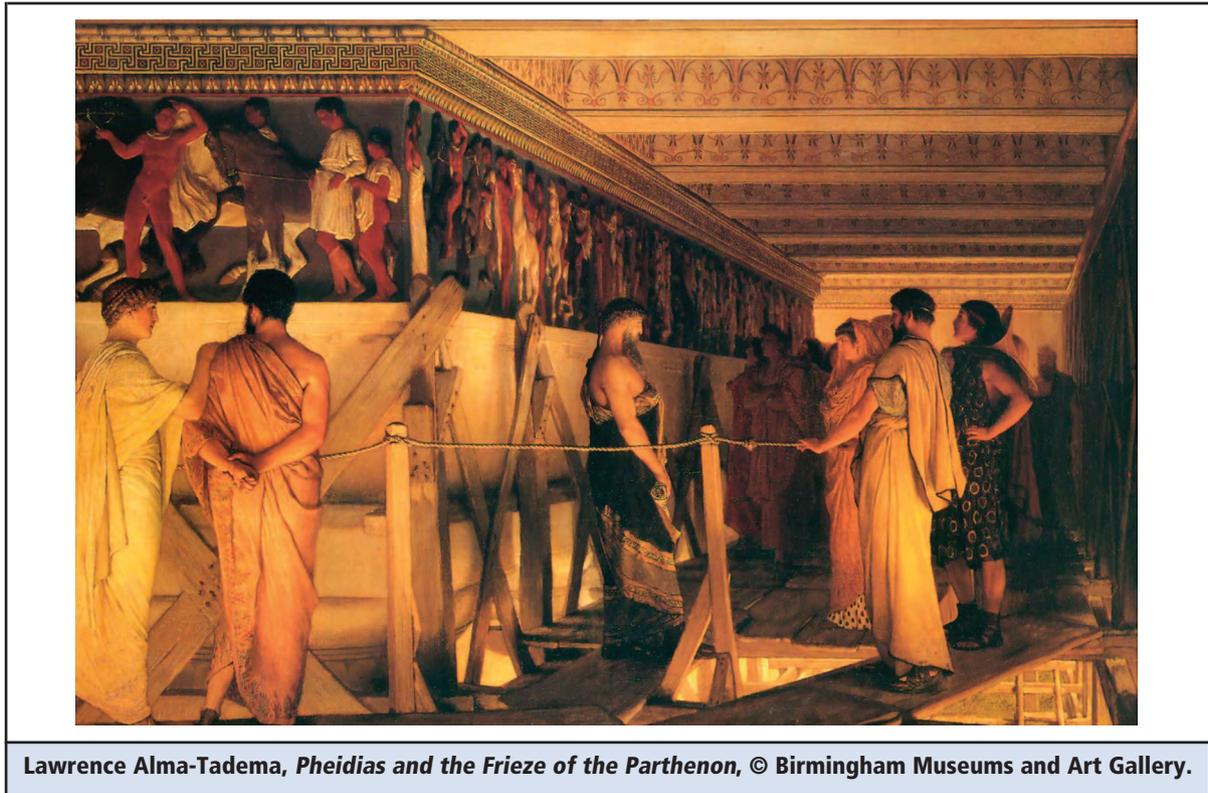
They said that 2000 years ago, one of them, Pericles, was the democratically elected Leader of Athens, which had a population of about 30 000 or so. Pheidias was an architect who lost his job during the deep recession of that time. Pheidias then told me that he went to Pericles and unveiled a glorious plan that he had been working on for 20 years. If he were to provide the funds, he would design and build the greatest monument humanity had ever conceived and executed, by using thousands of available workers and hundreds of masters of sculpture, architecture, engineering, mathematics, and other sciences. He wanted to involve just about all available labor and talent of the city, to execute this plan. Pericles thought that it was a crazy and expensive idea, but since most of these highly talented citizens of Athens were unemployed and had no internet or blackberries to play with, and they were just sitting around drinking ouzo and retsina (a Greek wine supplemented with pine resin), enjoying the sun and philosophizing, that maybe it would be a good idea to get them busy. He asked Pheidias why he thought this would be a worthwhile project.

Pheidias said that the objective was to develop something that would withstand the test of time, as the greatest creation of the human mind, and that this architectural masterpiece would be a gift to future generations of Athenians (and probably some visiting Spartans; he did not have any concept of international tourism at that time) who would look at it and say, “Wow, was this done 2000 years ago . . . with no instrumentation, computers, heavy trucks, mechanized equipment and the like?” He envisioned it to be a showcase of human creativity for centuries to come.

Pericles told me that he decided to invest and offer a job to every Athenian citizen, to participate in the project.

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Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Pheidias and the Frieze of the Parthenon*, © Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

Some were just carrying stones and marbles from a nearby mountain called Pentele. Others were cutting the marbles. Sculptors were making statues of all sizes, from small to gigantic. Designers were conceiving beautiful and original concepts, like the “Caryatides” (young women serving as pillars, holding the roof the Erechtion, one of the Acropolis monuments); and Pheidias was going around checking that everything was executed to perfection; nothing less.

They worked for years and years and years

And they shed a lot of blood, sweat, and tears

As they were telling me this story, they were still crying like kids. My God, they broke my heart!

I said, “Why don’t you stop crying now?”

They replied, “No, no, we will be crying for a lot more time.”

And I asked, “Why?”

They told me that as their spirits were going around the hill over the centuries, they witnessed the exact opposite of human creation and saw the evil minds of destruction and greediness. Barbarians and vandals started damaging the monuments in any possible way. They told me they shouted and they cried and they begged, but nobody would ever listen. This brought them to the years around 1800, which, as they told me, were the worst of all. They described how upset and disappointed they were when an “English Gentleman” (a “Lord” by the name of Elgin)

paid a few pounds to the Turkish conquerors of that time and hired cheap labor, brought them to the hill, and started looting in a most systematic way. They saw their sculptures, which had taken them months and years to create and bring up to the top of the Parthenon, where they were carefully mounted, only to be brought down to the ground and put in boxes on their way to the Port of Piraeus and from there, to England. They witnessed this systematic vandalism with their eyes for more than a year and they were crying and crying and crying.

My God, I was astonished! I did not know how much this meant to them and I would have not known if I did not meet them in person. I told them that my wife was waiting for lunch and I had to go for a stick of souvlaki. They would not let me. They insisted that I do something about it so that the stolen works of art are returned. I said to them, “Listen, Pheidias and Pericles, I am just a scientist who is practicing Clinical Biochemistry in Canada. How on earth could I help?” Then they started telling me that I should raise my voice and tell everybody I know about their story and get them to raise their voices too. I explained that this should not be my responsibility, since this sounded more like “politics” for which I have nothing to do as a scientist. Boy, they were angry! They explained that this could not be a political act of any kind, since they did not ask me to either run for parliament or vote for a party. They were

adamant that this was purely an ethical issue of gross and cruel injustice that has to do with stealing, looting, and vandalizing a masterpiece that their citizens and they have created. When I said that my single voice would not have any impact, they said, “Don’t you have any friends?” I told them that I was in Greece with a group of distinguished scientists from all over the world and that all these famous people were admirers of classical Greece (Philhellenes; from or related to the words *philos*, which means “friend,” and *Hellēn*, which means “Greek”). Pericles jumped off his chair with joy and exclaimed, “Why don’t you ask them to raise their voices too?” I said that this could easily be done by them and that our distinguished friends would be delighted to meet them anyway. They politely declined, explaining that they did not speak English. So, they assigned me the task of conveying the message.

I then went into great lengths to explain that some of my distinguished friends may consider this action nothing more than “a mouse that roared.” These words really troubled them. Pericles said, “If these ‘Philhellenes’ do not speak, whom would you expect to speak—the Eskimos?”

I was getting really hungry and I promised to convey the message and make an effort to write something for the newspapers and magazines. I further told Pheidias and Pericles that nations and governments other than the British, who possess Greek and other antiquities, and display them in their museums, may also get threatened. And I mentioned specifically the Aphrodite of Milos and the Victory of Samothrace, two other Greek masterpieces displayed at the Louvre in Paris that I saw last July. Pericles told me that we, as civilized people, who traveled to the moon and have invented so many things the last 2000 years, should have already addressed these simple issues through international organizations such as UNESCO and the United Nations. He advised me that the way he sees it, the issue is very simple. Like them, creators in many countries have done what they have done for their own country and their progeny and that they would want these

items be sent back immediately to their places of origin. In an era of open communication and cooperation, an international conference on culture, history and civilization, under the auspices of the United Nations, could mandate that all antiquities, stolen or acquired illegally, should be immediately returned to their legitimate owners, and be displayed in their national museums. He actually put it this way; and I was surprised he knew so much about modern times. He said, “You guys have international treaties against nuclear weapons, for saving the environment, et cetera. How come you have decided not to kill each other but have not as yet decided not to steal from each other?” “Beats me,” I replied.

On my way out, I saluted Pheidias and Pericles with a “*gia sou*” (goodbye in Greek) and I promised to do as much as I could, on my own, or with interested groups, to bring their creations back to them, so that the next time I visit the Acropolis Museum, we will walk around together and chat about their good old times. I managed to get their promise that when this happens, they will stop crying and come with me and laugh by watching a Euripides comedy at the “Herodes of Attica” amphitheater next to the Acropolis and the Parthenon.

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