

Antiquity

VOL. XXXV No. 139

SEPTEMBER 1961

Editorial

TWO very controversial archaeological issues have been much discussed in the British Press in the last few months. The first is the suggestion—not made now for the first time—that the Elgin Marbles should be returned to Greece; the second that Stonehenge should be prevented from becoming a centre of neo-Druidism and hooliganism at Midsummer. The controversy about the return of the Elgin Marbles was started on this occasion by Mr Francis Noel Baker, M.P., who asked the Prime Minister if the Government would return the marbles to Greece. Mr Macmillan's refusal was backed up by a leader in *The Times*. A heated discussion followed. On one side it was said that as we had rescued the marbles we had a right to keep them, and that they are better preserved in a museum than being left on the Acropolis at Athens. (Those left on the Parthenon have badly weathered, true, but does it have to be a museum in London?) On the other side it was argued that the marbles were an integral part of the Parthenon and that our title to them was uncertain since they were removed with Turkish, not Greek, permission.

The facts about the removal of the marbles from Athens to Bloomsbury are not in dispute. The Earl of Elgin was Ambassador to Constantinople from 1799 to 1803. He very wisely used his mission for archaeological research and from 1800 onwards had a band of artists drawing, measuring, recording, and taking casts of the antiquities of Greece. In his *Greek Studies in England, 1700–1830*, M. L. Clarke writes, 'At first Elgin's intention was only to make drawings and casts, not to take away any of the sculpture, but as he learnt more of conditions in Athens and saw the constant destruction and defacement to which the antiquities were subject, he changed his plan, and determined to remove as much of the sculpture as he could.' In 1801 the Porte gave him a firman which included permission to take away 'any pieces of stone with inscriptions or figures'. The Elgin collection included, in addition to the great majority of the sculptures from the Parthenon, four reliefs from the temple of Nike, and one of the Caryatids from the Erechtheum. It might have contained much more. His chaplain, Dr Hunt, when supervising the work of clearing the Caryatid porch of the Erechtheum, wrote to Elgin, 'If your Lordship would come here in a large Man of War, that beautiful little model of ancient art might be transported wholly to England'. Elgin's collection was shipped to England, and in 1807 was displayed in a room at the back of his house in Park Lane; it was bought for the British Museum for £35,000 in 1816.

Elgin himself was quite sure of what he was doing and why; it was to rescue ancient Greek art for posterity. 'The Turks have been continually defacing the heads', he wrote,

ANTIQUITY

'and in some instances they have actually acknowledged to me that they have pounded down the statues to convert them into mortar. It was upon these suggestions and with these feelings that I proposed to remove as much of the sculpture as I conveniently could.' It was clear to him at the beginning of the 19th century, as it appeared clear to many for decades after this, that it was our duty as a nation to collect and house art treasures from other countries too backward or too negligent to look after them themselves. The famous second leader of *The Times* for 4 November, 1861, which begins with the passage 'The crowded state of the British Museum has been for a long time the reproach not so much of any particular person or set of persons as of the administrative system under which these vast national treasures are placed . . .' contains a splendid passage about the problems of housing in London the treasures of the world. 'We have got to lodge Halicarnassus, Cyrene and Carthage and we absolutely know not where to put them. The impending disruption, if not the present feebleness of the Turkish Empire, seems about to throw open to us all the many treasures of Asia Minor. Who knows what objects of art may be brought to light by the exertions of a liberal and energetic Government in the whole territory of Naples, where every step the traveller takes is over crumbling ruins of ancient Greek and Roman art? Who can tell what may be found in the bed of the Tiber, from the candlesticks of the Temple of Jerusalem to the masterpieces of PHIDIAS and PRAXITELES? We are going to Mexico: what may we not discover in the halls of the MONTEZUMAS or in the buried treasures of Palenque! Egypt is but half-ransacked, and Arabia and Mesopotamia have still much with which to reward the exertions of an intelligent traveller.'

This was 1861—fifty years after E. Daniel Clarke had exclaimed on finding what he thought was the 'Tomb of Euclid' in Athens, 'Such an antiquity must be for the University of Cambridge, where the name of Euclid is so particularly revered', and the very time when the Mudir of Kenh was stealing Mariette's finds, Belzoni and Drouetti were fighting each other for possession of an obelisk and Rassam was pirating other people's excavations to find Assyrian treasures for the British Museum. We would not do these things now; we now possess and parade an archaeological conscience, the development of which has been studied so interestingly by Seton Lloyd in the last two chapters of his *Foundations in the Dust*.

The real issue is this: does our archaeological conscience work retrospectively to change what we did in the past when viewed in the circumstances of the present? In his *Journey through Albania*, written in 1810, Hobhouse said: 'I have said nothing of the possibility of the ruins of Athens being, in the event of a revolution in the favour of the Greeks, restored and put into a condition capable of resisting the ravages of decay; for an event of that nature cannot, it strikes me, have even entered the head of anyone who has seen Athens and the modern Athenians.' By today Greece has been an independent country for 140 years and a great number of archaeologists have seen 'Athens and the modern Athenians'. It does enter the heads of all of us that the Elgin Marbles might now in justice go back to Athens where they belong and where there is a modern, vigorous nation deeply conscious of its ancient past and aware of the need for conserving and protecting its antiquities.

But if we begin with the Elgin Marbles, where do we stop? The Rosetta Stone must surely by the same token go back to Egypt. Indeed, it has less claim to be in the British Museum than have the Elgin Marbles. Found by accident in 1799 by a French soldier digging near the old Fort Rashid five miles from Rosetta in the Nile Delta, it was taken to Cairo and studied by the scholars of Napoleon's Institut d'Égypte. Later it was placed in the private house of the French General, Jacques-François de Menou. General Menou

EDITORIAL

was forced to capitulate to the British Army in 1801 and the French were ordered to give up all the Egyptian antiquities acquired by them during the previous three years. Attempts were made to keep the Rosetta Stone by saying it was the private property of General Menou and outside the terms of the surrender. But the English General, Lord Hutchinson, insisted on the stone being handed over; it arrived in Portsmouth the following year and was sent to the British Museum, where, wrote Turner in his report on it, 'we hope it will remain for many years . . . as a glorious trophy of British arms . . . not captured from a defenceless population, but conquered honourably and according to the rules of warfare'. *Many years? How many years?* It is the rules of archaeological warfare that need formulating, and the ethics of the retention of other peoples' archaeological treasures that need thinking out. But with the full knowledge that a logical application of these rules and principles might mean that it is the Louvre and the British Museum which would be half-ransacked!



Stonehenge is our own national affair, and what we do with it and to it is perhaps no direct concern of any other nation. The Greeks are not going to say that, because it may be inspired by Mycenaean architecture and may have on it the representation of a Mycenaean dagger, Stonehenge should be set up in the Peloponnese. Even the most rabid Welsh nationalist born on the slopes of the Presely mountains is not going to say, 'Give us back our stones'. But the British Government, through its Minister of Works, guards Stonehenge in trust for all posterity. In their Annual Report for 1960 the Ancient Monuments Board for England suggest very clearly to the Minister of Works that all is not well at Stonehenge during the annual Midsummer celebrations. They say to him, 'While we see no objection to you allowing a ceremony to be held, we deprecate the behaviour of some of the large crowd of onlookers and fear the possible harm to the monument. Last summer spectators forced their way through the boundary fence and a large crowd assembled in the centre of the monument. Many individuals climbed the stones to use them as vantage points and outside the boundary visitors parked their cars on prehistoric earthworks. As much of this activity takes place in darkness, we fear that there is a serious risk of accidents to a supremely important monument. There is no excuse for anyone at any time forcing their way through the fences and there should be an absolute prohibition on climbing the stones.'

This report was published just before Midsummer this year and we waited with considerable alarm to learn what happened at Stonehenge at the summer solstice of 1961. We quote from the report in *The Times*: 'Nearly 3000 people, it is estimated, watched the dawn ceremony on this day of longest light. As on previous occasions, unruly elements sought to lessen the dignity of the proceedings by their behaviour. On the lighter side was the man who on being asked by a custodian for his 6d. entry ticket replied that he had not bought one as he was only attending a party in the circle to which he had been invited. More serious was the litter of broken bottles—eight barrowfuls were later removed from the enclosure—and the groups of jeering louts perched on top of the stones. Strenuous efforts by the police kept the dawn ceremony moving, but lack of numbers prevented them from keeping more than a watching brief on earlier antics, which began in the late hours yesterday and continued until after the dawn broke. A strong force of military police was also on duty.'

This is a monstrous, wicked and most undesirable state of affairs and one which the Minister must bring to an end; and certainly by next Midsummer. We see *every* objection to his allowing a ceremony to be held and for two good reasons. The first is that the

ANTIQUITY

Ancient Order of Druids has no claim to an association with Stonehenge, and the second that the existence of these strange ceremonies attracts crowds some of whom behave deplorably. We are no spoil-sport and we love the minor faiths that flourish away from the main stream of religion as we love the lunacies that flourish away from the main stream of archaeology; but Dr R. MacGregor-Reid, Chief Druid of the Companions of the Ancient Order of Druids, should be told that, in the best interests of Stonehenge and British Archaeology, the Minister of Works can no longer give permission for these grave Midsummer antics. Next June there should be, we suggest, no admission to the monument at Midsummer and a completely adequate guard of civil and military police. After all, Dr MacGregor-Reid and his Druids can do what is done by the Gorsedd of Bards of the Welsh National Eisteddfod, who build their own stone circle in a different place each year.

The Ministry of Works, we understand, is asked each year by the body concerned for permission to hold a ceremony at Stonehenge. The line that has been taken by the department ever since Stonehenge came into its care in 1919 is that any applicants may hold a religious ceremony at the monument provided they pay the appropriate entrance fee and observe the department's general rules. It is understood that in the past forty years quite a number of bodies claiming the name of Druid have sought and received permission on this basis. All these claimants, we feel, should no longer receive this permission, on grounds of archaeology and the conservation of our ancient monuments. We do not expect the Minister and his advisors and staff to evaluate what of religion and what of fantasy, what of truth and what of rubbish, exists in the claims of these bodies. They are all foolish people confusing fact with fiction. If it makes them happy—splendid. But their private happiness must not endanger one of our great prehistoric monuments—a piece of our ancient heritage which it is our duty, from the Minister of Works downwards, to conserve and preserve.



The protection and preservation of the material heritage of the past presents, of course, to every nation a great problem. Stonehenge on Midsummer night is perhaps a small and domestic issue. The objects and sites of antiquity threatened by the raising of the River Nile as a result of the completion of the High Dam at Aswan in 1970 are, like the Parthenon sculptures now in Bloomsbury and the Rosetta Stone, matters in which we are all concerned. Of these sites the two temples at Abu Simbel are the most impressive and pose the most complicated technical problem. Everyone will have read with great interest the details of the French-sponsored scheme to surround the temples with a dam curving out from the present line of the river, and the Italian project to cut both temples away from the rock, enclose them temporarily in huge concrete boxes and elevate them 190 ft. so that they would then stand above the new level of the new Nile.

Surely the Italian project is the thing to do and it is good to know that on 20 June the Government of the United Arab Republic accepted the advice of international engineers to adopt this plan, described by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in a recent article in *The Times* (7 July, 1961), as 'this unparalleled and indeed almost frightening feat of engineering'. The cost of this operation is likely to be £20 millions or 60 to 70 million dollars. An angry letter in *The Times* for 26 June, 1961, declares that if 'Egypt thinks it necessary to attract the tourist by giving him something *kolossal und wunderbar* at Abu Simbel . . . the cost of it should surely be the affair of none except the country in which Abu Simbel is situated'. Professor Mallowan, in his wise reply (*The Times*, 28 June, 1961), says that

EDITORIAL

Abu Simbel 'a unique, incomparable monument . . . which for over 3000 years has enshrined the spirit of ancient Egypt, is the heritage not of one country but of all mankind'. And in the article we have just quoted from, Sir Mortimer says the same thing with eloquence and force: 'There is nothing in 3000 years of Egyptian civilization quite comparable with this. It is the veritable entry into the underworld to which Pharaonic Egypt gave so much of its thinking. . . . To lose it would be irreparable loss. . . . Failure would mean something more than the loss of Abu Simbel: it would be in a real sense a defeat of the human spirit'.

We must see that this does not happen. The Egyptian Government is giving 10 million dollars towards the cost of this unparalleled and frightening feat of engineering, and no doubt other governments will give comparable sums. (We can lobby to see that they do.) But there will be a large sum remaining. This must be produced by private subscription from all over the world. The hot-dog seller outside the Ashmolean said to us recently: 'Wot's all this about raising an antique in Egypt? Is it O.K. by you? Yaas? Fine. Then have this hot-dog on me and put the money in the fund.' This is, of course, the spirit in which we should all approach these problems, from the Elgin Marbles and the Rosetta Stone to Stonehenge and Abu Simbel. They are all part of our common heritage of the past, in whatsoever nation-state boundaries they may now be confined. No country is an archaeological island, and hardly any modern states can pay for all the major archaeological repairs and restorations they want to do or ought to want to do. But Abu Simbel is exceptional; because it is being destroyed and because sentimentalists, opportunists and politicians will say that this great sum of money should be used instead for improving the standard of living of the *fellahin*. But this is to confuse the economy of one state in the 20th century with the heritage of all centuries and to muddle our debt to our fellow men with our debt to our past. We may never be able to deal properly with our fellow men, but we need not wilfully deny the possibility of discharging our duties to our ancestors. Abu Simbel is different in kind and urgency from the Elgin Marbles, the Rosetta Stone and Stonehenge, though they all are aspects of the central question—how *do* we deal with the heritage of the past? The overall contract for the elevation of this wonderful monument must be given by 1 January, 1962, and UNESCO must be able to give the go ahead by the end of September, 1961. As we write there is no sign of a world-wide appeal for funds, but perhaps by the time we are in print such a fund will have been launched. Five million archaeologists and their friends who would forego their hot-dogs for a while (and much else), could produce a very large sum of money and also make a gesture which showed that we all realize the common ancient heritage of all civilization, and are not prepared to allow that defeat of the human spirit which the submergence of Abu Simbel would mean.