SUMMARY OF A PRELIMINARY REPORT BY THE TEAM OF EXPERTS FROM THE HELLENIC MINISTRY OF CULTURE ON THEIR FINDINGS CONCERNING THE PARTHENON MARBLES IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

by

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The on the spot investigation carried out on the Parthenon Marbles housed in the British Museum in October 1999 by a team of experts from the Hellenic Ministry of Culture has confirmed to a large extent the conclusions of precious reports and also the British Museum's archival information on the cleaning of the Parthenon Marbles in 1937-1938, made public mainly through the third edition of Mr William St. Clair's book "Lord Elgin and the Marbles" (1998).

The preliminary results and conclusions of this investigation are revealing and show that the problem is even more serious than it had originally been surmised. All the southern *metopes,* the greatest part of the surface of the frieze and at least four figures in the *tympanum* of the eastern pediment went through the ordeal of "cleaning".

The intervention aimed, no doubt, at improving the image and the appearance of the Parthenon sculptures as they were at the beginning of the 1930's. The intention was to endow the sculptures with the desired qualities of whiteness and gloss.

During the processing of the surface to make it ultimately white, the gray-yellow patina of the sculptures was removed from all the places where it was still visible. In other words, the patina was not considered as being integral to the aesthetic value of the marbles and was, therefore, systematically expunged.

The scraping of the patina sometimes resulted, as one could expect, in the removal of the surface of the marble itself, especially in the most sensitive areas in terms of preservation. This fact is also attested by the examination of samples taken from the patina. Consequently, the anomaly that the scraping created on the surface of the marble had to be smoothed out according to the above-mentioned aesthetic specifications. To ensure uniformity, this smoothing was also extended to surfaces that were free of patina. The project of smoothing the surfaces on the background of the high-reliefs and on the sculpted figures themselves increased the damage to the surfaces. It led to a considerable -and in certain cases excessive- loss of material. Some of the *metopes* represent glaring examples of this intervention. Thus, for instance, the reduced, because of grinding, surface of both the background and the figures of the high-relief is not only macroscopically visible but also, in certain cases, measurable.

The pedimental sculptures have proven to be especially useful in understanding how that cleaning proceeded. In their case, the cleaning remained incomplete. As a result its impact on the surface of the sculptures is especially obvious.

In spite of the original intention to achieve uniformity in the method of application of the intervention, the final outcome was affected by a number of factors resulting in a visible gradation of impact. One of these factors, that made the operators be more careful, was the precariousness and the "crumbling state" of certain high-relief surfaces. Another, in certain areas of the *frieze*, was the tendency of the marble to peel off.

The microscopic examination of the surfaces of the sculptures was especially revealing as to the form and the kind of tools used. On the *frieze* and the *metopes,* residues were found indicating the use of copper tools that served for

the scraping of the patina and the smoothing of the surface. The accumulation in certain *metopes* of green traces produced by the oxidation of copper is quite impressive.

There are a few indications that iron tools were used. On certain stones of the *frieze* and at least in two *metopes* the linear traces left by a thin, pointed, metal tool seem to be associated with the process of scraping and the removal of the patina.

The final scraping of the surfaces was carried out through the use of an abrasive substance that was in all probability carborundum (silicon carbide), at the time a well known material used for grinding steel instruments and granite, second only to diamond in hardness and used in the form of plates, paper or powder.

The consequences of this intervention on the sculptures that were submitted to this ordeal in 1937/38 are incalculable and irreversible. Due to the scraping, grinding and friction applied to them, the marbles were deprived for ever of certain elements of their authenticity and history having lost numerous valuable items of information embedded in their surface -as it stood before the intervention.

The excessive friction and scraping applied to the sculptures caused in certain cases a partial alteration and even distortion of their form. A number of sculptures lost their unique morphological features that were part of their identity and constituted criteria for their classification amongst the works of art of that era. In such sculptures, it is no longer possible to trace those characteristics that define the specificity of the classical art as expressed in the architectural sculpture of the Parthenon.

According to information provided by Dr A. Oddy, Director of the British Museum conservation section, extensive cleaning operations were carried out towards the end of the 1960's for the removal of the dirt particles that had settled on and adhered to the surface of the Marbles, as well as the products of erosion and possibly of coating or appearance-enhancing substances.

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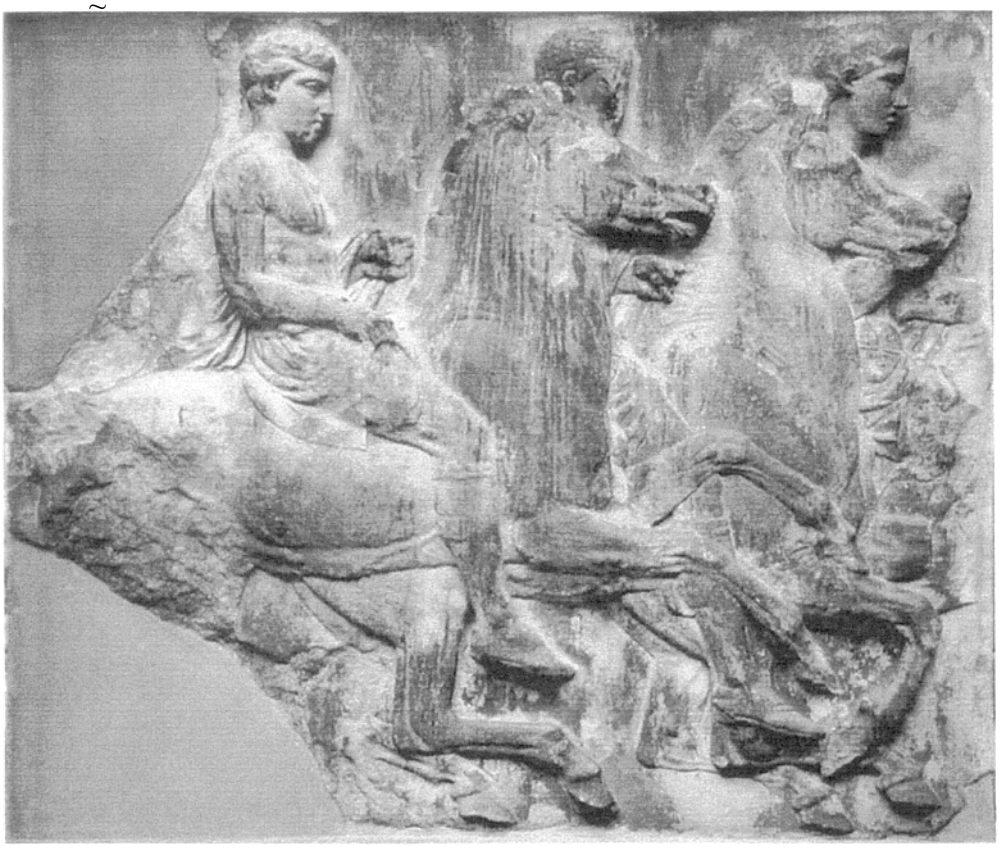

South Frieze of the Parthenon. Block X.
Before the intervention of 1937/38
Photo Fr. Boisonnas

South Frieze of the Parthenon. Block X.
After the intervention of 1937/38
Photo S. Mavrommatis