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The Turkish harem in the Karyatid Temple

and antagonistic narratives on the Athenian Acropolis

Abstract

According to received history, the Karyatid Temple on the Acropolis of Athens (commonly known as the “Erechtheion”) was, in the city’s first Ottoman period (1456–1687), converted into a Turkish harem. In this article, I investigate the story by scrutinizing sources from this period. I argue that the notion of the harem, although historically suspect, found fertile ground in an orientalist worldview that has been prevalent among western visitors and scholars. I propose that the tale may have been inspired by the temple’s conspicuous Karyatid statues. I close by considering the story of the harem as part of a phenomenon of “antagonistic narratives” (stories that concern the desecration or destruction of monuments by enemies) in history and archaeology. The article offers new perspectives on later uses of and stories about the Karyatid Temple, on western attitudes towards the presence of Turks in Greece, and on the role that material remains can play in the creation of narratives about the past.*

Keywords: Acropolis, Athens, cultural heritage, Demetrios Poliorketes, Karyatids, materiality, narratology, orientalism, Ottoman period

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Introduction

On the north side of the Acropolis of Athens stands an ornate marble building of the Ionic order dating to the second half of the 5th century BC. Its south porch is supported by six modern copies of sculptures depicting maidens, the iconic Karyatids (*Fig. 1*). The building is traditionally known as the “Erechtheion” (the temple of the mythical king Erechtheus and Poseidon), but, according to several scholars, it should instead be regarded as the Old Temple of Athena Polias, the city’s guardian goddess, as the true Erechtheion was located elsewhere on the Acropolis.¹ The present article, largely sidestepping the complex debate on the building’s functions in antiquity, uses the more neutral term “Karyatid Temple”.

There may be no consensus on the building’s ancient uses, yet, to go by authoritative discussions of its post-antiquity life, it seems clear that it was converted into a harem in the Ottoman period. For example, Jeffrey Hurwit’s textbook *The Athenian Acropolis* (1999) states that “The Erechtheion became a church in the seventh century AD but, after the Turkish conquest, was transformed into a harem for the commandant of the Acropolis garrison.”² The Acropolis Museum and the Acropolis Restoration Service (YSMA) also mention the harem in descriptions of the temple’s afterlife.³ The information was included in the 1987 report that led to the designation of the Acropolis as a UNESCO World Heritage site.⁴ Details about the harem are usually not given, though some accounts

¹ E.g., Jeppesen 1987; Pirenne-Delforge 2010.

² Hurwit 1999, 295. Also, e.g., Pittakis 1835, 396, 404; de Laborde 1854, vol. 1, 6; vol. 2, 12; Ross 1855, 125 n. 5; Kambouroglou 1896, 132; Wachsmuth 1874, 13 n. 1; Miller 1904, 663; Sicilianos 1960, 96; St. Clair 1967, 55; Tsigakou 1981, 123; McNeal 1991, 55; Mackenzie 1992, 10; Korres 1994, 150; Yalouri 2001, 32–33; Beard 2010, 69–70; *New Pauly Online* s.v. “Athen” [C. Höcker]; McGregor 2014, 168; Giraud 2018, 39.

³ Pandermalis *et al.* 2016, 261; YSMA 2018.

⁴ ICOMOS 1987, 2.



Fig. 1. The Karyatid Temple from the west. Photograph W. Hege 1928/9; D-DAI-ATH-Hege-1818.

specify that it belonged to the *dizdar* (castle warden).⁵ One scholar imagines that the Karyatid Temple “functioned as a small enclosure, a luxurious marble courtyard for these enslaved women, who were kept locked in there” and that the spaces between the columns of its north porch were infilled to conceal the women.⁶

The assertion that the Karyatid Temple became a Turkish harem may surprise casual readers, who probably view the building first and foremost as an ancient temple. The information that Ottoman overlords converted this beacon of classical culture, one of the apices of Greek architecture and a

repository of the holiest cults of the city, to a harem—sometimes imagined as a secluded place of ungodliness and seduction—thrives on, and in turn propagates, contrasts between the sacred and the profane, liberty and occupation, and the west and the east. As such, the origin of this information deserves our close consideration. In this article, I begin by tracing the history of the harem tale in early modern sources, where it can be found for the first time in the late 17th-century travel accounts by Jacob Spon and George Wheler. I argue that the notion of a harem inside the Karyatid Temple, though historically suspect, found fertile ground in an orientalist worldview that has long been prevalent among western visitors and scholars. I proceed to highlight the similarity of the story of the Turkish harem to the ancient Greek story of the sojourn

⁵ E.g., ICOMOS 1987, 2; Hurwit 1999, 295; Venieri 2012.

⁶ Giraud 2018, 38–40.

of the Macedonian warlord Demetrios Poliorketes and his entourage of courtesans on the Acropolis. I argue that both tales have doubtful historical credentials and were independently inspired by the conspicuous Karyatid statues. The article closes by considering the story of the Turkish harem as belonging to a broader phenomenon of “antagonistic narratives” in history and archaeology: stories that concern the desecration or destruction of monuments by enemies.

The seraglio in the Karyatid Temple

In Athens’ first Ottoman period, which lasted from the city’s conquest by Sultan Mehmet II “the Conqueror” in 1456 until the town’s brief Venetian takeover in 1687, the few European travellers who succeeded in entering the city’s fortress seem to have usually ignored the Karyatid Temple. The building was then hidden in the Turkish garrison village and overshadowed by bigger complexes: the monumental gate house and palace (the Propylaea) and the Great Temple of Athena (serving as the city’s Great Mosque and known today as the Parthenon). Descriptions of the Acropolis dating to this period do not always offer absolute clarity about the topographical positions of mentioned buildings and there is only limited scope to recognize the Karyatid Temple in them. An author known as the Vienna Anonymous, who wrote a Greek-language account of buildings in Athens from c. 1460 that preserves contemporary modes of imagining about their former uses, mentions a very ornate stoa and a school of the Epicureans on the Acropolis. Some scholars observe here a reference to the Karyatid Temple,⁷ though others situate the structures inside the Propylaea.⁸ Three further testimonies can likewise be associated with either the Propylaea or the Karyatid Temple. The Venetian friar Urbano Bolzanio refers, sometime between 1475 and 1485, to “*un dignissimo palazzo antiquo apresso la detta chiesa, et è tutto di marmore fatto alla romana*” (a very remarkable ancient palace close to the mentioned church [the Great Temple], and it is all made of marble, in the Roman style).⁹ The Prussian apothecary Reinhold Lubenau, who visited Athens in 1588, was told by local Greeks that “*im Schlos eine hohe Schule gestanden*” (a high school stood inside the castle).¹⁰ And the French gem merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, in the

account of his voyage to India of 1663–1668 published in 1676, states that Athens’ Great Temple “*est accompagné d’un fort beau Palais de marbre blanc, mais presentement [sic] il tombe en ruine*” (is accompanied by a very beautiful palace of white marble, but now it falls to ruin).¹¹ It is unclear to what these visitors refer, but they record the common belief, which continued into the 19th century, that ancient buildings on the Acropolis originated as palaces and philosophical schools.

15th-century Italy saw the rediscovery of the work of Pausanias, the 2nd-century AD author who produced an account of sights and cults in large parts of Greece, including an extensive and archaeologically important description of the Acropolis of his day. Over time, Pausanias’ text equipped western readers with an incentive to travel to Greece to see the remains of its ancient past and, once there, with a prism through which the antiquities could be more accurately discerned and interpreted than before.¹² It became clear that the buildings that Pausanias calls the “Erechtheion” and the “Temple of [Athena] Polias” had stood somewhere north of the Great Temple—and perhaps still did.¹³ The first attested attempt at using Pausanias to identify structures on the Acropolis is in André Guillet’s narrative of a 1669 visit to Athens by his imaginary brother Seigneur de la Guilletière. Despite the book’s fictional nature, it is partially based on information sourced from French Capuchin missionaries in Athens. Guillet discusses at length a distinguishing feature of the Erechtheion described by Pausanias: Poseidon’s miraculous salt-water well, which, if Guillet can be trusted, was still to be seen somewhere on the 17th-century Acropolis. However, he does not provide its precise location.¹⁴ Cornelio Magni, who visited the Acropolis in 1674 as a member of the entourage of the French ambassador in the Ottoman Empire (Charles-Marie-François Olier, the Marquis of Nointel), is the first author who mentions the Karyatids. Despite his knowledge of Pausanias’ work, he did not use it to determine ancient functions of the Karyatid Temple.¹⁵

More consequential in later scholarship than the texts discussed so far were the two (slightly diverging) travel accounts by the French doctor Jacob Spon and the English botanist George Wheler. Guided by the French consul Jean Giraud, they ascended the Acropolis in 1676, where they recognized Pausanias’ Erechtheion in the Karyatid Temple. In

⁷ *Codex Vindobonensis Theologicus Graecus* 252, 29–32 (facsimile in de Laborde 1854 vol. 1, 16–25 n. 1). Cf. de Laborde 1854, vol. 1, 30–31; Ross 1855, 271–272; Wachsmuth 1874, 738 n. 4, 739 n. 1; Paton 1951, 176; Lesk 2005, 427–428.

⁸ Paton 1927, 520–522; Tanoulas 1997, 43–44; 2005, 90–93; 2011, 342–344; 2019, 54–55.

⁹ Published in Ziebarth 1899, 74. For the identification with the Propylaea, see Tanoulas 1997, 44; 2019, 59.

¹⁰ Paton 1951, 48. For the identification with the Propylaea, see Tanoulas 1997, 44–45; 2011, 344; 2019, 55.

¹¹ Tavernier 1676, 316. It is not clear whether Tavernier himself visited Athens; his inaccurate description of the Great Temple as having 6 by 16 columns does not imply autopsy of the Acropolis.

¹² On foreigners’ descriptions of the antiquities of Athens in the early modern period, see Kreeb 2003.

¹³ Paus. 1.26.6–27.3.

¹⁴ Guillet 1675, 200–203. Cf. Paton 1951, 10 n. 11; Constantine 1989, 1–9; Kreeb 2003, 360; Lesk 2005, 434–435.

¹⁵ Magni 1688, 57–58. Cf. Lesk 2007, 30–31.

doing so, they were led astray by the Dutch classical scholar Johannes van Meurs, who provided an incorrect interpretation of Pausanias' text in his *Cecropia* (an early analysis of ancient references to the Acropolis).¹⁶ The marble building was then obscured on most sides by Ottoman houses and its columns were connected by walls, but it still stood out as an impressive ancient structure. The travellers hoped to receive inside a glimpse of Poseidon's sacred well. However, they were frustrated in their attempt and it is here that the story of the harem first appears. Spon says that they were not able to see the well "*parce qu'il y avoit dans le bâtiment où il est enclos, des femmes logées, & qu'il n'y a que le maître du Serrail qui y puisse entrer.*" (because there were women lodged in the building that encloses [the well], and because only the master of the Seraglio could enter).¹⁷ Wheler's explanation is slightly different: "We could not have permission to go into the Temple, to see it; because the *Turk* that lives in it, hath made it his *Seraglio* for his Women; and was then abroad."¹⁸ South of the part of the Karyatid Temple that they identified as the Erechtheion, they saw "*quelques statuës de femmes enclavées dans un mur, qui étoient peut-être les trois Graces, que Socrate y avoit taillé: car les Autheurs remarquent expressement que quoy qu'on les représentât ordinairement nuës, néanmoins Socrate les avoit fait habillées, comme sont celles-cy.*" (several statues of women enclosed in a wall, who were perhaps the three Graces, who Socrates had sculpted there. For the [ancient] Authors remark expressly that, though they were ordinarily represented naked, Socrates had made them clothed, like the ones here).¹⁹ These women in a wall are the Karyatids.²⁰

Spon and Wheler use the terms *serrail* (French) and *seraglio* (English), both deriving from Italian *serraglio* or *seraglio* (enclosure for animals), a term descending from Latin *serraculum* (enclosure). In Italian, *serraglio* was applied to the imperial Topkapı palace in Istanbul, which, situated at a cape, was a point of orientation for western seafarers. The use of the term *seraglio* for Topkapı and other eastern palaces was the result of the association of two "false friends": the Persian-derived Ottoman Turkish word *sarây* (palace) and Latin-derived *serraglio*, as shown by the rendering of Ottoman Turkish *kârbânsarây* in Italian as *caravanserraglio*.²¹ Italian *serraglio* was adopted in French and other European languages as *serrail*, there still meaning "palace".

This is the sense used by Spon and Wheler in their accounts of the Acropolis. Part of the Topkapı palace belonged to the Sultan's household of women and children (properly called the *haremlük*). It seems that the word *serraglio*, possibly by way of its original meaning "enclosure", conjured up images of secret containment in an oriental, Muslim setting at the sultan's court. Thus, the word was confounded with the residence of women.

It is not always easy to separate fact and fantasy in 17th-century travel accounts.²² Spon and Wheler's works are serious but at times markedly confused, based as they are on recollections of a hurried visit to what was at the time a heavily protected fortress.²³ The two reports are occasionally inconsistent with one another, as appears from the two diverging reasons given by Spon and Wheler for their failure to visit the Karyatid Temple: while Spon says that no permission to enter the building was given because the presence of women rendered the building's interior unsuited for the strangers' gaze, Wheler states that they could not enter because the current tenant was not home. Even if the two travellers can be trusted regarding the topographical situation, it is doubtful whether they could accurately report on the contemporary purpose of a building to which their access was denied. It has been surmised that the Ottomans told these foreigners that the Karyatid Temple was a *seraglio* to keep them at bay from the ammunition stored inside.²⁴ The general notion—and fact—that the Ottoman-controlled Acropolis as a whole was off-limits or difficult to enter for visitors resonated with western European audiences and may have given rise to more localized stories about buildings to which outsiders had no access.²⁵

Spon and Wheler planted the germ from which grew the notion that the Karyatid Temple contained a Turkish harem. Not long after their visit, the Karyatid Temple suffered great damage in the siege of 1687 under the command of Francesco Morosini, the future doge of Venice. Along with the Great Temple, the Karyatid Temple was ruined. In 1707, the Venetian historiographer Francesco Fanelli notes that a part of the Karyatid Temple was in use as a gunpowder magazine.²⁶ An ornamental block of the building, adorned with an Ottoman Turkish inscription praising the *voivode* (civil governor) for fortifying the castle, could in 1805 be used to embellish one of the citadel's vaulted entrances.²⁷ As the Karyatid Temple disintegrated, Spon's and Wheler's tantalizing and widely

¹⁶ Meursius 1622, 52–57. On the incorrectness of the traditional reading of Pausanias' text, see Pirenne-Delforge 2010.

¹⁷ Spon & Wheler 1678, 159.

¹⁸ Wheler & Spon 1682, 364.

¹⁹ Spon & Wheler 1678, 160. Cf. Lesk 2005, 440–442.

²⁰ The reference to the Graces is based on a passage in Pausanias (1.22.8) that gained notoriety through the seminal mythological work of Natalis Comes (1567, 129). However, it does not concern the Karyatid Temple. This explanation is also found in Fanelli 1707, 322.

²¹ On the improper use of the term *seraglio*, see Penzer 1936, 5, 15–17; Behdad 2009, 84.

²² Cf. Constantine 1989; Lesk 2005, 430–431.

²³ Among other mistakes, Spon and Wheler reverse the locations of the two pediments of the Great Temple of Athena (an understandable mistake since the entrance when they visited was at the west end). Their identifications of the buildings mentioned by Pausanias are also problematic (Jeppesen 1987; Pirenne-Delforge 2010).

²⁴ Lesk 2005, 621. Cf. Spon & Wheler 1678, 133; Laurent 1822, 204.

²⁵ Cf. Lesk 2005, 430–431.

²⁶ Fanelli 1707, 321; Williams 1820, 305.

²⁷ Hamilakis 2007, 89–90.

published stories of the seraglio with women—that now, in any case, no longer existed—continued to entrance visitors of the post-Morosini Acropolis. James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, in their magnificent work *The antiquities of Athens*, mention the building's former use as a seraglio.²⁸ In 1776, Richard Chandler writes: “An edifice revered by antient Attica, as holy in the highest degree, was in 1676 the dwelling of a *Turkish* family; and is now deserted and neglected; but many ponderous stones and much rubbish must be removed, before the well and trident would appear.”²⁹ Chandler relied on what Spon and Wheler wrote a century before him; this must be the source for his remark that a Turkish family resided in the Karyatid Temple. He presents the temple's fate under Ottoman rule as one of deterioration. In the figure of the downfall of beauty, he suggests that the residence of a *Turkish* family in a former shrine of the gods was only the penultimate station in the downward trajectory to ruin and evokes the hope that, one day, archaeologists will lift the stones to reveal the ancient splendour hidden underneath.

The exploding harem

The idea that the Karyatid Temple housed a harem may have gained further credence through confusion with a tradition about the explosion of a house on the Acropolis where several women of the *ağa* (a standard name for Ottoman officials, often used for the *dizdar* or castle warden) had retreated. It appears in a manuscript entitled *Istoria della Lega Ortodossa contra il Turco* (c. 1688) by the Venetian historiographer Cristoforo Ivanovich, who associates the explosion with the Venetian siege of 1687.³⁰ Demosthenes Giraud has argued that the house with women refers to the Karyatid Temple.³¹ Ivanovich's story can perhaps be related to the remark by the Austrian historian Jakob Fallmerayer that the west part of the Karyatid Temple, according to unspecified manuscript fragments, was filled with gunpowder and exploded—but in 1500 rather than in 1687.³² The story is also similar to that of Giannis Gouras, a Greek military leader during the Ottoman siege of the Acropolis of 1826–1827, who is said to have brought his wife and family inside the north porch of the Karyatid Temple, where they perished under the collapsing roof.³³

Although Ivanovich's story may be set at the Karyatid Temple, this is unlikely to be relevant to the question of the histori-

cal presence of a harem in that building. James Paton surmised that the tale was a spurious narrative duplication of the well-recorded gunpowder explosion in the Great Temple in 1687.³⁴ In addition, Ivanovich and Fallmerayer, or the traditions on which they relied, may have topographically misplaced a widely attested story about a gunpowder magazine in the *dizdar*'s residence that was struck by lightning and exploded around 1640, killing the *dizdar* and his family—a divine punishment for his intention to fire canons at the church of Agios Dimitrios, now surnamed Loumbardiariis (“the Cannoneer”), west of the Acropolis between the Pnyx and Philopappos hills. This tale, appearing in various forms in several 17th-century accounts,³⁵ was clearly set at the Propylaea, which should be regarded as the residence of the *dizdar*.³⁶ What is relevant for the present investigation is not the historical location of the event—if it ever took place—but rather the tale's topographical perambulation: it seems that historiographers and scholars have been tempted to relocate the story of the harem's explosion from the Propylaea to the Karyatid Temple.

Ottoman sources on the Karyatid Temple

Sources from the Ottoman world, the cultural sphere to which the concept of the harem belonged, can be inspected for further perspectives on the building. One would hope that the Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi spared a few words for the Karyatid Temple in his massive travelogue (*Seyahatnâme*) that includes a report of his visit to the Acropolis in 1667.³⁷ Perhaps a description of the temple exists in his sighting, below the “remarkable light-filled mosque” where “Plato the Divine used to ... harangue the people” (i.e., the Great Temple), of a “building of wonders” with marble windows.³⁸ Evliya says

³⁴ Paton 1940, 70–71 n. 11. The theme of Turks responsible for blowing up Greek heritage is spread more widely, as in the story of the explosion of a column of the Olympieion to obtain mortar for the construction of a mosque, discussed in Cohen 2018 and below.

³⁵ Jean Giraud (cited in Collignon 1897; cf. Collignon 1914); Spon & Wheler 1678, 140–141 (observing visible damage caused by the explosion and stating that the current *ağa* still keeps his women there); Wheler & Spon 1682, 359; an account by the bomber Rinaldo de la Rue who was present during the Venetian siege (cited in von Duhn 1878, 57); a similar account by an anonymous officer from Hannover (cited in Dietrichson 1887, 372–373); Magni 1688, 56.

³⁶ Cf. Collignon 1897, 63 n. 1; Paton 1927, 528; 1951, 156; Tanoulas 1997, 49; 2011, 344–345; Lesk 2005, 410; 437–445; Giraud 2018, 39. Kambouroglou (1896, 132) seems to locate this event at the Karyatid Temple. An anonymous officer on the French ship *Assuré* who visited the Acropolis in 1699 reports that the schools of Pythagoras are on the left of the first gate as one enters and that the *ağa* lives there now (cited in Paton 1951, 156).

³⁷ On Evliya's understanding of ancient Athens, see Fowden 2019, 70–77.

³⁸ *Seyahatnâme* 8, 253a [Kahraman *et al.* 2003, 117]. The translations of passages in Evliya's work are partially based on those in Dankoff &

²⁸ Stuart & Revett 1787, ch. 2, p. 18; 1825, 69.

²⁹ Chandler 1776, 54.

³⁰ The relevant extract is published in Paton 1940, 11.

³¹ Giraud 2018, 38–40.

³² Fallmerayer 1836, 436–437. Cf. Paton 1927, 523 n. 1; Lesk 2005, 429.

³³ Cf. Giffard 1837, 161–162; Lesk 2005, 586 (with earlier literature), 646–647.

that this strange but delightful structure “in whose praise the tongue falls short” once contained classrooms of wise men, and after the Ottoman conquest became a gunpowder store that was struck by lightning, and served as a *mihmânsarây* (guesthouse, inn) in his day. Because the building of wonders is mentioned immediately before the reference to the castle gates, it has been interpreted as a part of the Propylaea complex, which, according to other 17th-century accounts discussed above, was damaged in a gunpowder explosion.³⁹ However, Evliya’s topographical indications are not diagnostic—the original Ottoman Turkish text does not clearly state that the gates were close by—and it cannot be excluded that the “building of wonders” is the Karyatid Temple.⁴⁰

Two other Turkish sources certainly refer to the Karyatid Temple and give us fascinating insights into Ottoman imagination about the building’s past functions. In 1715, Mahmud Efendi, mufti of Athens from 1698, began to write a work entitled *Târih-i Medineti’l-Hukemâ* (The history of the city of the sages, i.e. Athens) that was rediscovered in the 1970s. It includes an account of the 1458 or 1460 visit of Sultan Mehmet II to the city: “[Mehmet] surveyed the strange ancient buildings inside the citadel. The pavilion built of pure white marble, and standing on pillars in the form of four maidens, became a matchless imperial seat.”⁴¹ The mention of the maidens makes the passage an unmistakable reference to the Karyatid Temple. Mahmud commits to writing the belief that this *köşk* (a kiosk or pavilion like those found in Ottoman palace grounds) became a *cülûs-i hümayûnlar* (imperial seat or throne, i.e., a palace) at some point in the past, either before or after Mehmet’s visit.⁴²

Just over a century later, in 1826 or 1827, was produced the only preserved Ottoman map of Athens, titled *Atina kal’âsıyla varoşunun krokisi* (Sketch of the castle and suburb of Athens; Fig. 2). On this map, discovered in 2007, the Karyatid Temple is shown on the north side of the Acropolis and labelled *Belkîs sarâyı* (palace of Belkis).⁴³ Qur’an 27:38–44 relates the story of the legendary Queen of Sheba, who travelled to Jerusalem to meet with King Solomon. She was known in later Islamic tradition as Bilqîs (Arabic), a name that could be a rendering of a *Wanderwort* that means “concubine”, whose attestations include Hebrew *plgš* and Greek *παλλακίς*. The association of impressive

structures with Belkis was a common phenomenon in the Islamic world and happened in Athens another time in the case of the Olympieion. Solomon and Belkis had been carried by the wind from Jerusalem to Athens, where they resided in lofty palaces.⁴⁴

Neither Mahmud nor the map inform us about the Karyatid Temple’s contemporary (real or imagined) uses in the Ottoman period. Perhaps the most interesting finding that emerges from this exploration is that the Ottoman sources converge with Spon and Wheler in classifying the building as some kind of palace:⁴⁵ the Persian-derived Ottoman Turkish word *sarây* (palace) accords with the Latin-derived and Turkish-influenced terms *serail* and *seraglio* (palace; place of the harem) used by Spon and Wheler. It would seem possible that Spon and Wheler were told that the building was a *sarây* and rendered this in their works as *serail* and *seraglio*.

Spon and Wheler’s accounts, and the European tradition that they sparked, are inconclusive as to the historical reality of a Turkish harem in the Karyatid Temple. On the absence of good evidence, it can, of course, not be concluded that there never was a harem here. However, the presentation of this harem as an established historical fact in current discourse is at odds with the lack of affirmation granted by contemporary western and Ottoman sources. The present article proceeds with a question emanating from this discussion: if the historicity of the Turkish harem in the Karyatid Temple cannot be confirmed, what else might explain the story’s success?

European-Turkish antagonism

The reference to the harem was propagated in a historical context that all along featured intense and complex relations between Christian Europe and the Muslim Ottoman Empire. These relations varied from westerners’ rather positive fascination with exotic aspects of the Ottoman world (a phenomenon known as *Turquerie*) to warfare. Above all, the Republic of Venice was enveloped in a string of conflicts with the Ottomans from 1396 to 1718. The Ottoman attack on Vienna in 1683 led to the establishment of the Holy League of several European states with the aim of halting the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. In this period, anti-Turkish sentiments became prevalent throughout Christian Europe, including among Christian Greeks. Ottomans or Turks (i.e., Muslims of whatever ethnicity and language) were commonly, though not universally,⁴⁶ stereotyped as stupid, superstitious,

Kim 2010. I am grateful to Gülçin Tunalı and Machiel Kiel for help with understanding the Ottoman Turkish.

³⁹ Biris 1959, 42 n. 57; Tanoulas 1997, 45–46; 2011, 344; 2019, 55, 59; Lesk 2005, 431.

⁴⁰ I am grateful to Machiel Kiel for drawing my attention to this passage as a possible reference to the Karyatid Temple.

⁴¹ *Târih-i Medineti’l-Hukemâ* 240b. For the original text, see Tunalı 2012. Translation by Thomas Sinclair, as cited by Fowden 2019, 89–92. Cf. Tunalı 2019.

⁴² I am grateful to Gülçin Tunalı for clarification on this point.

⁴³ Discovered in the Hatt-ı Hümayun collection of the Başbakanlık (State) Ottoman Archives, see Stathi 2014; 2019, 220–221.

⁴⁴ Evliya Çelebi, *Seyahatnâme* 8, 253b [Kahraman *et al.* 2003, 118]. For discussion of Olympieion-Belkis associations, see Fowden 2019; forthcoming.

⁴⁵ See Fowden (forthcoming) on the common Ottoman belief that ancient buildings were formerly palaces.

⁴⁶ Brewer 2010, 167–171.

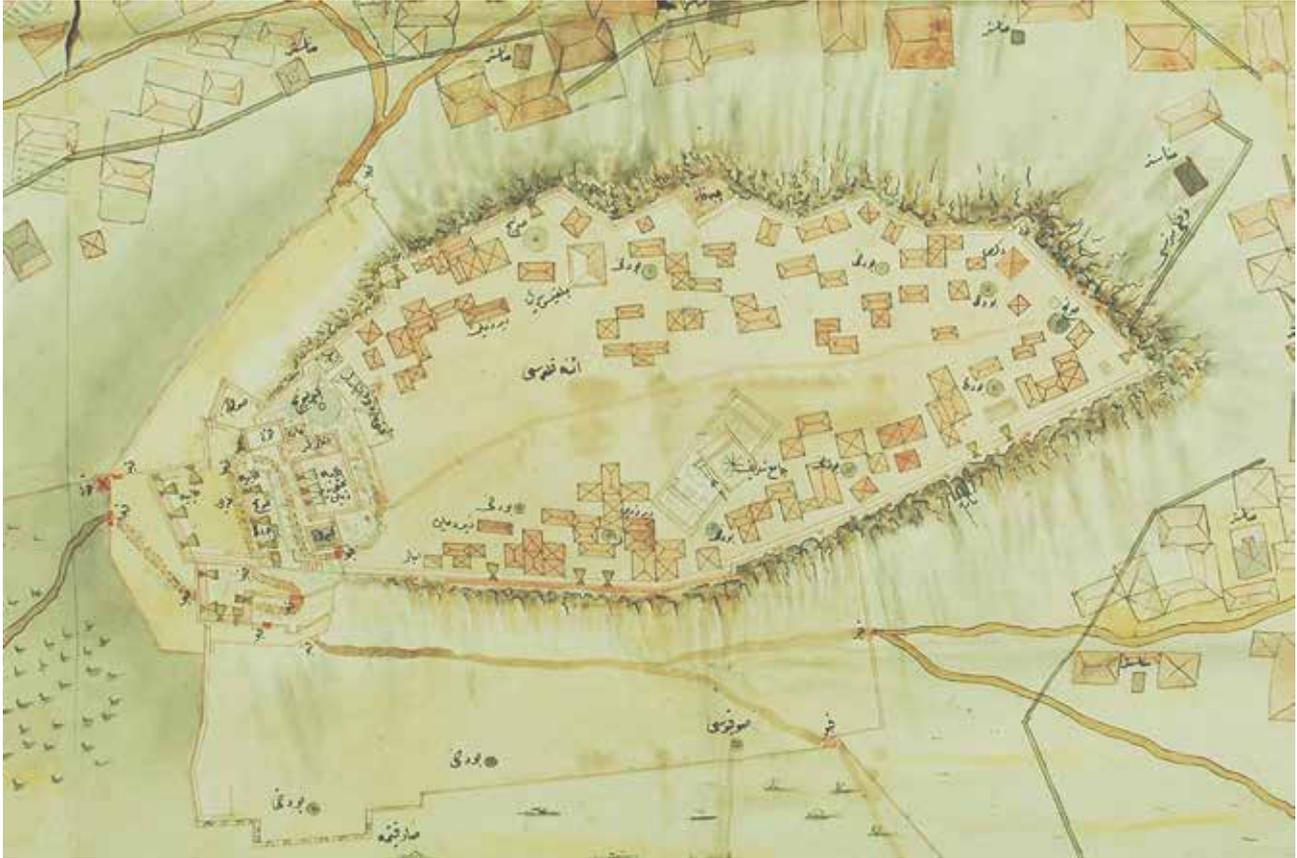


Fig. 2. Detail of the Ottoman map *Atina kal'asıyla varoşunun krokisi* depicting the Acropolis of Athens 1826 or 1827. © Ottoman Archives Istanbul, BOA, HAT 946.40721; courtesy Katerina Stathi.

corrupt, and dangerous. Such attitudes can occasionally be called “Turkophobia” and considered part of or partially overlapping with the phenomenon of orientalism.⁴⁷ Anti-Turkish views were, understandably, strong among the builders of the independent Greek state.⁴⁸ For example, Adamantios Korais, the linguist known for creating *Katharevousa* (an archaizing form of the modern Greek language purified from foreign influences) stated that, in his mind, *Touρkoc* (Turk) and *θηριον ἀγριον* (wild beast) were synonyms.⁴⁹ Negative attitudes to the *Touρκοκρατία* (Turkish rule) can still be recognized in today’s Greece, where revisionist histories of the Ottoman period remain controversial.⁵⁰ This sentiment can be viewed in the context of ongoing antagonism between the modern states of Greece and Turkey. It may also be related to the propensity in Greece to blame the Ottoman administration for offering

little to the country in the centuries in which it was “enslaved”, thereby causing the political and financial crises that it continues to endure.⁵¹

When western visitors began arriving in Ottoman Athens in greater numbers in the 17th century, contempt of the Turks was already part of their cultural baggage. They discovered that not much was left of the classical city of their Enlightenment dreams and sometimes concluded that the city’s contemporary inhabitants—Turks, Albanians, and modern Greeks—were the agents of that depredation.⁵² Yet, though Greek-speaking Christians could still be related to their ancient forebears by lineage and language—even if they could not live up to their ancient ancestors, whose virtues were now diluted by the influence of non-Greek peoples—the presence of Turks in this venerable territory could be seen as a historical aberration. Accounts of these early modern travellers reveal

⁴⁷ E.g., Said 1979; Lewis 2004; Athanassopoulos 2002, 279–280; Jezernik 2007; Brewer 2010, 1–8.

⁴⁸ Cf. Gourgouris 1996, 72; Peckham 2000, 82–84.

⁴⁹ Korais 1833, 21. Cf. Clogg 1992, 3, 28.

⁵⁰ Brewer 2010, 1–8, 268–269.

⁵¹ Cf. Clogg 1992, 5–6; Kalyvas 2015, 112–116.

⁵² Jezernik 2007, 3–4. Cf. Leontis 1995, 52–60 on the presence of these ideas in the 19th and 20th centuries.

contempt of the Turks, their superstitious religion, and their corrupt administration. This attitude is already explicit in the pioneering books by Spon and Wheler.⁵³ Johanna Hanink explains that, due to the popularity of these works, later travellers were “primed to view the Greek landscape, ruins and people through the lens of Spon’s and Wheler’s observations and prejudices.”⁵⁴ A century after Spon and Wheler, Chandler notes: “The spectator views with concern the marble ruins intermixed with mean flat-roofed cottages, and extant amid rubbish the sad memorials of a nobler people.”⁵⁵ He underlines the damaged state of the Karyatid Temple, the erstwhile sanctuary now guarded by superstitious and corrupt Orientals.⁵⁶ At about the same time, in his richly illustrated *Voyage Pittoresque de la Grèce* (1782), Auguste de Choiseul-Gouffier (known for his removal of a part of the frieze of the Great Temple of Athena to France) presented Greece as a land of forgotten glories, devastated by its eastern conquerors. The poetry of Lord Byron, who would ultimately fight for Greek liberty, idealized Hellenic glories and stereotyped the Orient as decadent and wrong.⁵⁷

The notion that the Turks were indifferent or hostile towards the magnificent antiquities among which they lived turned into a commonplace that exists to this day. In popular imagination, the Ottomans would have destroyed antiquities for obtaining building material or—worse—because of religious zealotry.⁵⁸ This idea was the main justification for the removal of ancient objects from the Acropolis, such as by de Choiseul-Gouffier and Elgin: the survival of these artworks was supposedly imperilled by the carelessness and hostility of the country’s modern occupants, and the only solace was their asylum in worthy countries such as France and the United Kingdom.⁵⁹ In their new, western homes, the antiquities may

have served as tangible evidence of the west’s superiority over the east.⁶⁰

Soon after Athens was annexed to the nascent Greek kingdom in 1833, the new administration decided to purify the Acropolis of its later accretions—especially the Ottoman buildings—and to restore it to the shape it had in the time of Pericles, according to the recommendations and work of prominent figures including Leo von Klenze, Kyriakos Pittakis, and Alexandros Rangavis.⁶¹ Von Klenze, comparing the Turkish rule of Greece to a bloody bear’s paw, stated that “... it will take several generations before the horrible traces of the Turkish rule will be erased from the land and the people ...”⁶² Now, in the words of Artemis Leontis, “The Acropolis would play the important role of making up for lost time and bad blood.”⁶³ As Ottoman Athens crumbled down, stereotypes about the Turks endured and were applied to their past occupation of the city. The 19th-century historian Dimitris Kambouroglou described the muezzin’s chants that once sounded from the minaret of the Great Temple as antithetical to the historical presence on the Acropolis of ancient and Christian Greeks.⁶⁴ This view of the past also informed interpretations of archaeologists, who automatically associated low-quality construction and traces of destruction with the former presence of Turks. For example, the Bavarian archaeologist Ludwig Ross, who conducted the first large-scale excavations of the Acropolis, interpreted the “patchwork” north wall of the Acropolis as the work of Turks, and held them responsible for the destruction of ancient sculptures discovered on the south side of the Great Temple.⁶⁵ Expectations about what the Ottomans had done to the Acropolis were so strong that they occasionally led to cognitive dissonance: the French archaeologist Léon de Laborde in 1854 bemoaned that a Christian army led by Venice had been able to destroy, with a single bomb, the Great Temple of Athena, that had been preserved for more than two centuries by the Ottomans. De Laborde, like his contemporaries, did not turn a blind eye to the devastation of 1687 enacted by fellow Europeans, but he was astounded that the temple’s ruin could, in this case, not be attributed to “*musulmanes, ces iconoclastes de tradition et d’instinct naturel*.”⁶⁶

This stereotype continued in the 20th century and today. For instance, according to tradition, Athens’ voivode Mustafa Ağa Tzisdarakis destroyed one of the columns of the Olymp-

⁵³ Brewer 2010, 173–174. Hanink (2017, 85) points out about their attitude: “If [Greece’s] present circumstances were of interest, it was because they served as an instructive illustration of just how far a great civilization can fall.” Cf. Hanink 2017, 80–86. In this context, Turkish officials including the kızlar ağası, the voivode, and the dizdar are portrayed as pursuing tyranny over their impoverished Greek subjects (Wheler & Spon 1682, 349).

⁵⁴ Hanink 2017, 85.

⁵⁵ Chandler 1776, 37.

⁵⁶ Chandler (1776, 57–58) describes his purchase of the building account of the Karyatid Temple, known as the Chandler Stele (*JGI* 3 474): it was found in the stairs of a house close to the temple and taken from a “female black slave” who was in the house in exchange for a ring and then smuggled from the Acropolis when the Turks were all praying at the mosque.

⁵⁷ Alber 2013.

⁵⁸ Such views are found in, e.g., Chandler 1776, 47; Hughes 1820, 262; Pittakis 1835, 81, 97, 192, 388, 444; Rangavis 1837, 6–7; Ross 1855, 99; St. Clair 1967, 54–57; McNeal 1991, 60.

⁵⁹ On this reasoning, see, e.g., Hamilakis 2007, 253; Jezernik 2007, 4–8; Constantine 2011, 8; Rose-Greenland 2013, 662, 668; Anderson 2015, 250–251; Hanink 2017, 137–138.

⁶⁰ Jezernik 2007, 15.

⁶¹ Athanassopoulos 2002, 294–298.

⁶² von Klenze 1838, 90.

⁶³ Leontis 1995, 117.

⁶⁴ Kambouroglou 1890, 27.

⁶⁵ Ross 1855, 92, 128. Cf. Chandler 1776, 36.

⁶⁶ “Muslims, iconoclasts by tradition and natural instinct.” de Laborde 1854, vol. 2, 175.

ieion in order to obtain mortar for the construction of the Tzisdarakis Mosque in Monastiraki in 1759. According to heritage historian Elizabeth Cohen, the story contributed to the decision not to revert the building—now used as a part of the Museum of Greek Folk Art—to its original function. It “emphasized the perceived problem of locating an operational mosque in direct sight of the ‘Sacred Rock’ of the Acropolis, and reiterated the pervading interpretation of the Ottoman period as traumatic and shameful and the Ottoman Turks as imperial oppressor and cultural vandal.”⁶⁷ Another example of this mechanism is the story that, during the Greek siege of the Acropolis of 1821–1822, the Greeks—according to one version, the prominent archaeologist Kyriakos Pittakis—offered ammunition to the defending Ottomans to halt their destruction of the ancient buildings for the metal clamps that could be reused as bullets. The story, emphasizing Greek reverence and foreign vandalism, has been referred to by Greek Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri and the archaeologist Manolis Andronikos as historical fact in calls for the restitution of the Elgin marbles. However, James Beresford has shown that there is no contemporary evidence to support the historicity of the tale, which should rather be classified as a legend that arose approximately 40 years after the purported events.⁶⁸ He argues that “it was a tale intended to strengthen the bonds connecting the population of modern Greece to the communities of the ancient past and, in so doing, provide support for the aggressive irredentism which underpinned Greece’s foreign policy throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth.”⁶⁹

It can now be said confidently that the destructive Ottoman indifference to antiquities has been overstated.⁷⁰ Several 19th-century commentators already realized that the survival of so many ancient sculptures would not have been possible if the Turks had not, on the whole, respected them.⁷¹ Benjamin Anderson argues that stories about Ottoman negligence or destruction of antiquities constituted a useful trope for western Europeans and that their historicity is contradicted by the many examples in which locals of Ottoman lands deeply cared

about their antiquities.⁷² As regards the Karyatid Temple, the *dizdar* is reported to have opposed and lamented Elgin’s removal of one of the Karyatids.⁷³ After all, in Ottoman eyes, this was once a matchless imperial seat—or perhaps the palace of the Queen of Sheba.

The harem as an orientalist fantasy

European disdain for Turks in Greece in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries coincided with a curiosity for harems, which in western imagination exemplified oriental mystery and decadence.⁷⁴ The notion of the harem fascinated the early travelers Guillet, Spon, and Wheler.⁷⁵ It was popularized in works belonging to the *Turquerie* fashion, such as Montesquieu’s epistolary novel *Lettres Persanes* (1721), in which a seraglio prominently features as the dwelling of the protagonist Usbek’s five wives and black and white eunuchs, and Mozart’s singspiel *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1780), set in the harem of a palace on the Turkish coast. Lord Byron included harems in stereotypical depictions of the Orient.⁷⁶ The Irish poet Aubrey de Vere in 1850 describes his visit to the pasha’s harem in Istanbul in the desire “to penetrate into that mysterious region.”⁷⁷ From the 17th century onwards, innumerable paintings were produced that presented imaginary harems as places of erotic seclusion—no matter that this portrayal was at variance with the historical reality of the Ottoman harem, the domain of women of all ages, in addition to children.⁷⁸

The notion of the harem also became relevant to locals and foreigners in Athens, where the classical, Christian, and Muslim worlds collided. It was, by the 19th century, embedded in local folklore and naturally associated with Ottoman despotism. The 17th-century story of the exploding palace with women discussed above could be an early example. Hadji Ali Haseki, the late 18th-century governor of Athens remembered as one of the city’s most cruel rulers, is supposed to have possessed a tower in the city containing a harem, where he imprisoned the most beautiful local women.⁷⁹ Other Athenian girls are said to have been taken to the imperial harem in Istanbul.⁸⁰ In a legend recorded

⁶⁷ Cohen 2018, 94–95.

⁶⁸ Beresford 2016a. The first references to the story are a letter by Aristotelis Valaoritis in 1859 and the 1863 funeral eulogy for Kyriakos Pittakis by the archaeologist Alexandros Rangavis (Odysseas Androutsos and Pittakis play the role of the ammunition-offering hero in the respective versions). Cf. Hanink 2017, 104–105, 163–164.

⁶⁹ Beresford 2016a, 905. Cf. pp. 922–926, where Beresford points out that the modern insistence on the apocryphal story is inappropriate in the light of the real atrocities committed by Hellenic Revolutionaries and the Athenian mob against the Ottomans of Athens during and following the event: the Greeks killed at least 1,100 men, women, and children.

⁷⁰ See, generally, Cohen 2018.

⁷¹ Wilkins 1816, 142 n.; Williams 1820, 306, 308, 317–322. Cf. Jezernik 2007, 5–6; Pollini 2007, 213–214.

⁷² Anderson 2015.

⁷³ Williams 1820, 316. Cf. Boettiger 1825, 139; Jezernik 2007, 7.

⁷⁴ Lewis 2004, 1–9, 12–52.

⁷⁵ E.g., Guillet 1676, 461–484; Wheler & Spon 1682, 180–181.

⁷⁶ Alber 2013.

⁷⁷ de Vere 1850, 291–300.

⁷⁸ On representations of the harem, see DelPlato 2002, especially 90–103; on the common misunderstanding of the Ottoman harem, influenced by the secrecy of the Ottoman court and romantic notions of the Orient, see Penzer 1936, 13–16.

⁷⁹ Sicilianos 1960, 143.

⁸⁰ Guillet 1675, 164–165; McGregor 2014, 168.



Fig. 3. View of the Karyatid Temple. Drawing by James Stuart in Stuart & Revett 1787, ch. 2, pl. 2; courtesy Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation, <https://www.travelogues.gr>.

in 1860 in nearby Eleusis—a fascinating adaptation of the ancient myth of Demeter and Persephone—an evil Turkish sorcerer abducted Lady Dimitra’s beautiful daughter Froditi to his harem.⁸¹ Even the city of Athens as a whole was metaphorically enslaved in the sultan’s harem in Istanbul, as it was officially considered the domain of the chief black eunuch, known as *kızlar ağası* (lord of the girls).⁸²

Depictions of Athens, from the 17th century onwards, reveal European visitors’ interest in the oriental flavour of the decrepit town, which contrasted with the city’s fame in ancient texts as a glorious centre of the arts and learning.⁸³ The first surviving illustrations of the Karyatid Temple date to the 18th century. The most famous and most reproduced of these is a drawing made by James Stuart in 1751, depicting, *mis en abîme*, Stuart south-west of the Karyatid Temple sketching the scene itself as well as several Turks, some of whom are lounging in the Karyatid porch (Fig. 3). Stuart and Revett describe the setting and the figures: the Turks were posted in the porch to keep an eye on the westerners; the little girl is the granddaughter of the dizdar; and the black man is a eunuch, responsible for the children’s care.⁸⁴ The drawing belongs to a fashion of depicting eastern-looking people near ancient ruins, as seen in a series of 19th-century

paintings of the Karyatid Temple.⁸⁵ These often show the ruin surrounded by persons featuring exotic headwear and dark complexions, as well as animals. Richard McNeal observes that works like Stuart’s are “more or less imaginary but true to local colour.”⁸⁶ Yet, these depictions, in which the overgrown landscape populated by easterners contrasts with the noble classical architecture, can also visualize the message, expressed in many reports of early visitors of the Acropolis, that the modern-day occupants of the citadel, whether Turks or Greeks, are not worthy of their ancient forebears. The paintings may have helped to establish western entitlement to the depicted antiquities.⁸⁷ As Linda Nochlin formulated this phenomenon: “Another important function, then, of the picturesque—Orientalizing in this case—is to certify that the people encapsulated by it, defined by its presence, are irredeemably different from, more backward than and culturally inferior to those who construct and consume the picturesque product. They are irrevocably ‘Other.’”⁸⁸

⁸¹ Lenormant 1864, 399–400 n.

⁸² E.g., Spon & Wheeler 1678, 134; Montagu 1799, 66; Hughes 1820, 256; Stuart & Revett 1825, 97 n. a; Blake 1861, 38; Miller 1904, 647; Sicilianos 1960, 104; Mackenzie 1992, 30; Junne 2016, 172–174.

⁸³ See, generally, Tsigakou 1981; 2007.

⁸⁴ Stuart & Revett 1787, ch. 2, p. 19.

⁸⁵ A privately-owned painting by Lancelot-Théodore Turpin de Crissé (1805) portrays robed Turkish men, veiled women, children, and a dog at the building’s south-west corner. An etching by Louis François Cassas (1813) in the Benaki Museum (Athens) depicts the excavation of the area south of the Karyatid porch by de Choiseul-Gouffier. In a painting by Prosper Marilhat (1841) in the Wallace Collection (London) the building is presented as a ruin overgrown with trees and with turbaned men riding camels in front of it. A painting in the Benaki Museum by Carl Werner (1877) shows five shepherd-like men in traditional costume and fezzes in front of the Karyatid porch.

⁸⁶ McNeal 1991, 58.

⁸⁷ Cf. Nochlin 1983; Szegedy-Maszak 1987, 125–126; Crinson 1996, 151–153; Vickers 2014, 130; Hanink 2017, 97.

⁸⁸ Nochlin 1983, 126.

Early depictions of the Karyatid Temple that visualize the contrast of the oriental and classical worlds can easily be mistaken as proof for the existence of the harem in the Karyatid Temple. This is clearly the case in the official guide to the Acropolis Museum, which, by depicting and referring to Stuart's drawing, corroborates the assertion that the temple contained a Turkish harem.⁸⁹ However, the drawing cannot be taken as evidence for that idea, because Stuart and Revett visited the building at a time when it was a roofless ruin as a result of the Venetian siege of 1687. A similar case concerns the painting titled *A Greek School in the Time of Slavery* by Nikolaos Gizis, which has given credence to the idea—now shown to be a myth—that Greek language, religion, and culture were, during the centuries of Ottoman suppression, preserved in secret schools run by the Orthodox Church.⁹⁰

The Macedonian harem on the Acropolis

The notion that the Karyatid Temple was home to a Turkish harem seems to be rooted in western imagination about Ottoman-controlled Athens. Yet, this cannot be the entire explanation, because a comparable story existed—independently⁹¹—long before the Ottoman conquest. It appears in the biography of the Macedonian warlord Demetrios I Poliorketes (“Besieger of Cities”, 337–283 BC) written by Ploutarchos in the 2nd century AD. Ploutarchos relates how Demetrios, following his conquest of Athens in 304 BC, took up residence with his entourage of women in a building on the Acropolis:

Although the Athenians had earlier bestowed all public honour on [Demetrios], and exhausted it, they still found a way to appear fresh and new in their flatteries, because they assigned to him as a place to stay the backroom of the Parthenon. And there he lived, while Athena was said to welcome and accommodate him. But he was not a very well-behaved guest and did not take up his residence there gently, as if with a virgin. When [Demetrios'] father heard that his brother Philippos resided in a house in which three young women lived, he did not say anything to Philippos himself, but when he was present, he called in the quartermaster and said ‘You! – Aren't you going to take my son out of this small space?’ And Demetrios, who should have felt shame before Athena if only as if before his older sis-

ter—because that is what he liked to call her—suffused the Acropolis which such *hybris* towards free boys and female citizens, that the place seemed most clean when he had sex with the whores Chrysis, Lamia, Demo and Antikyra.⁹²

For this striking story, Ploutarchos cites a lost play by the 4th-century BC comic poet Philippides, who was a historical opponent of Demetrios. The combined lines from the comedy read as follows:

About the encampment in the Parthenon:
 “He who seized the Acropolis as an inn
 and lead his courtesans inside to the virgin,
 because of whom the frost froze off the vines,
 because of whose sacrilege the peplos tore apart,
 as he rendered the gods' honours human.
 This—not comedy—destroys the people.”⁹³

The story of the Macedonian harem is usually believed to contain at least a kernel of historical truth,⁹⁴ and some commentators have considered Demetrios' behaviour—much like the Ottoman harem—a historical defilement of the holy citadel.⁹⁵ It is not unthinkable that the Athenians historically bestowed some kind of divine honours on Demetrios. Yet, both Ploutarchos and Philippides paint a hyperbolic picture of these honours: the Athenians allowed Demetrios to live with their city-protecting goddess herself. This hyperbole implies that the tale reflects traditions that portray Demetrios as a lascivious, hubristic foreign ruler, unable to understand or unwilling to respect the sanctity of his dwelling.⁹⁶ Caution is needed when ascribing historical veracity to the story of Demetrios' harem, because it fits the frequent stereotyping in Graeco-Roman literature of Macedonian rulers as licentious tyrants.⁹⁷ The same motif seems to have been applied to the Roman general Marcus Antonius in a legend, recorded by the elder Seneca, narrating that the Athenians allowed the general to marry Athena during his stay in the city.⁹⁸ The story of Demetrios' harem may also be compared to other tales of sex

⁸⁹ Pandermalis *et al.* 2016, 261.

⁹⁰ Brewer 2010, 110.

⁹¹ Though Spon and Wheler knew the work of Ploutarchos, the narratives of the Macedonian and Ottoman harems existed independently of each other. As discussed below, Ploutarchos' use of the word *παρθενών* has led previous scholars to locate the story in the Great Temple rather than in the Karyatid Temple.

⁹² Plut. *Demetr.* 23.3–24.1.

⁹³ *Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta*, vol. 3, F 25 = Plut. *Demetr.* 12.4, 26.3. Cf. Demochares, *FHG* 2 F4 = Ath. 6.62–63. On Philippides and his work's inclusion in Ploutarchos' *Life of Demetrios*, see Monaco 2013.

⁹⁴ E.g., Kondaratos 1994, 27; Ogden 1999, 263–264 (explaining the sexual debauchery as a sacred marriage); Wheatley 2003; Versnel 2011, 452–453; Diefenbach 2016, 120, 124.

⁹⁵ E.g., von Klenze 1838, 381; *CAH* 8, 101; Kondaratos 1994, 27.

⁹⁶ Cf. von den Hoff 2003, 182; Paschidis 2008, 118–120; Rose 2015, 16–17; Diefenbach 2016, 132–133. On the omens as comical reflections on anti-Antigonid propaganda by Philippides, see Rose 2015, 17, 172–173.

⁹⁷ Müller 2016; Pownall 2016.

⁹⁸ Sen. *Suas.* 1.6. Cf. O'Sullivan 2008.

or prostitution in temples, encountered in Greek descriptions of non-Greek peoples.⁹⁹

Ploutarchos' story may be fictionalized in whole or in part, but it was set at a real place: the *ἔπισθόδομος τοῦ παρθενῶνος*. The term *ἔπισθόδομος* can usually be translated as “back room”.¹⁰⁰ The term *παρθενῶν* literally means “room of the virgins” and in the Roman period sometimes referred to the Great Temple.¹⁰¹ Thus, Ploutarchos may have had a part of the Great Temple in mind as the location of Demetrios' sojourn on the Acropolis.¹⁰² However, according to my recent assessment of the ancient nomenclature of the Acropolis temples, the term *παρθενῶν* originally did not refer to the Great Temple, but rather to the west part of the Karyatid Temple—the part to which the Karyatid porch is attached.¹⁰³ There, the term described the presence of real and mythical virgins in and around the building. Because this usage continued in the Roman period, the term, as used by Ploutarchos, is ambiguous and can refer to either the Great Temple or the Karyatid Temple. Nevertheless, several details in the story about Demetrios, such as the references to a rather small dwelling, the peplos (Athena's sacred garment), and the young women, are more easily associated with the Karyatid Temple. Tellingly, not much later than Ploutarchos, Clemens of Alexandria wrote that Demetrios had sex with the notorious prostitute Lamia in front of the “Old Virgin”.¹⁰⁴ This must be Athena's ancient olive-wood statue, the recipient of the sacred garment, that was kept inside the Karyatid Temple.¹⁰⁵ Clemens' testimony implies that the story of Demetrios' harem was associated with the Karyatid Temple.

The notion of the harem was not only the subject of stories set at the Karyatid Temple, but can also be related to its ancient nomenclature. The term *παρθενῶν*, in ancient reli-

gious contexts, referred to temples of virgin goddesses or to associated buildings where virgin cults took place. In other contexts, such as tragedy, the word designated the apartments of *παρθένοι* (virgins or maidens).¹⁰⁶ In Byzantine Greek, the term denoted monasteries where women practised celibacy.¹⁰⁷ A *παρθενῶν* was therefore a sacred, inviolable place for unmarried women. Ploutarchos uses the word for women's apartments in his story of Alexander the Great's dealing with the female entourage of Dareios, consisting of his mother, wife, and unmarried daughters:

And the most beautiful and royal favour from him for the high-born and chaste women who had become prisoners of war was not to hear anything, nor think about, nor receive anything disgraceful, but, as if they were guarded in holy and sacred *παρθενῶνες* rather than in a camp of enemies, to live a life unspoken and unseen by others.¹⁰⁸

In this passage, the sense of the word *παρθενῶν*, emphasizing the women's seclusion, is close to what in an Ottoman context is called a harem: a house for women, off-limits to outsiders. Thus, the Karyatid Temple, the building imagined to have housed a Turkish harem was, throughout its ancient career, actually called by a term that carried the same connotations as the Ottoman harem. The appearance of so many harem associations at the Karyatid Temple prompts another question: why here?

The personification of Karyatids

I suggest that the prominence of harem stories in collective, cross-cultural imagination about the Karyatid Temple is a narrative response to the salient Karyatid statues.¹⁰⁹ Anthropological studies show that statues, generally, can be regarded as living beings and appear as protagonists in folkloric narratives.¹¹⁰ The assertion on the Ottoman map that the Karyatid Temple was a palace of Belkis can be understood as inspired by the Karyatids. Greek Athenians in the Ottoman period believed that the Karyatids and other ancient sculptures were spirited bodies, petrified by sorcerers, that would come back to life if they left their occupied country.¹¹¹ A parallel for such

⁹⁹ E.g., Hdt. 1.199 (temple prostitution in Babylon), 9.116 (the sexual pollution of the grave of Protesilaos by the Persian Artayktes). Budin (2008) argues that such prostitution did not exist.

¹⁰⁰ The term *ἔπισθόδομος* was in the Classical period typically used for the west room of the Great Temple of Athena: Meyer 2017, 128–134; van Rookhuijzen 2020, 12–17. If Demetrios in the story resided in the Karyatid Temple, this would imply that a part of the Karyatid Temple could also be designated as an *ἔπισθόδομος*. Ploutarchos calls the location of Demetrios' sojourn simply *παρθενῶν* in two other instances (*Demetr.* 26.3; *Comparatio Demetrii et Antonii* 4.2), as does Philippiades.

¹⁰¹ van Rookhuijzen 2020, 4–6.

¹⁰² E.g., Davison 2009, 70; Rose 2015, 216.

¹⁰³ van Rookhuijzen 2020. The Great Temple was more properly called the *ἑκατόμπεδος νεώς* or *ἑκατόμπεδον* (hundred-foot temple). Ploutarchos provides many examples of this (con)fused nomenclature, describing the Great Temple variously as *ἑκατόμπεδος*, *παρθενῶν*, or *ἑκατόμπεδος παρθενῶν*; for references see van Rookhuijzen 2020, 8. Cf. Gallo & Mocci 1992, 102 n. 82.

¹⁰⁴ Clem. Al. *Protr.* 4.54.

¹⁰⁵ On the passage, see O'Sullivan 2008. Cf. Ath. 13.38–39. Clemens describes the location as Athena's *παστός* (bridal chamber), a term that overlaps in meaning with *παρθενῶν* (virgin room).

¹⁰⁶ For references, see *LSJ Online* (www.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj) s.v. *παρθένος*.

¹⁰⁷ E.g., Pseudo-Zonar. s.v. *Παρθενῶνες*; Sozom. *Hist. eccl.* 5.15.5.

¹⁰⁸ Plut. *Alex.* 21.5.

¹⁰⁹ The pan-European word “prostitute” is derived from Latin *prostituere* (to place before; to offer for sale) and may originate with the notion that if a woman is found before or outside a building, she is available for sexual encounters.

¹¹⁰ Gell 1998; van Eck 2015.

¹¹¹ Hobhouse 1813, 348 n.; Hughes 1820, 259–260. Cf. Anderson 2015, 453–454.



Fig. 4. The Incantada monument at the Roman agora of Thessaloniki. Drawing by James Stuart in Stuart & Revett 1794, *cb.* 9, *pl.* 1; courtesy Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation Library, <https://www.travelogues.gr>.

approaches to the Athenian Karyatids is provided by the four pilasters with Karyatid-like sculpted figures on two sides in the upper story of a portico from the Roman agora of Thessaloniki (Fig. 4), shipped to France in 1864 and currently in the Louvre. When Stuart and Revett visited Thessaloniki, the portico was known as the *Goetia* (talisman) or *Incantada* (enchanted). According to a local legend, Alexander the Great and the Queen of Thrace had used the portico to reach each other for secret sexual encounters—until the queen’s jealous husband ordered a necromancer to cast a spell over the building, petrifying the royal company.¹¹²

The theme of imprisonment and submission is also embedded in the famous story about the origin of Karyatids by the Roman architect Vitruvius.¹¹³ He explains that such sculptures represent captive women from the Peloponnesian town of Karyai, who were punished for their siding with the Persians during the Greco-Persian wars. This story is unrelated to the original significance of the statues.¹¹⁴ Relevant, however, is that they are here rendered as enslaved women, “eternal

symbols of submission and humiliation.”¹¹⁵ Vitruvius records a similar story about the Persian stoa in Sparta, where male Karyatid-like sculptures represented Persian captives.¹¹⁶ The etymological origin of the term “Karyatid” may also point in this direction: though Vitruvius derives it from the town of Karyai, it more plausibly originates with the name of the region Caria in western Anatolia. With this etymology, the term may have carried connotations of defeat and slavery.¹¹⁷

Today, the Karyatids have come to be regarded as the embodiment of inherently Hellenic qualities and are, in that capacity, reproduced in all sorts of media.¹¹⁸ They continue to be personified: Dimitris Plantzos observes that they are “full-blooded, almost human creatures empowered by their classical pedigree and at the same time empowering their not-so-

¹¹² Stuart & Revett 1827, 119–124. Cf. Perdrizet 1930; Anderson 2015, 454–455, 457.

¹¹³ Vitr. 1.1.5.

¹¹⁴ On the passage, see Boettiger 1825; Plommer 1979; Vickers 1985; 2014; Lesk 2007. Vitruvius does not identify the location of the Karyatids, but plausibly had the Athenian temple in mind (which he certainly refers to as the “temple of Pallas Minerva” at 4.8.4).

¹¹⁵ Lesk 2007, 42. Vickers (1985, 28; 2014, 131) argues that the Karyatids were regarded as “collaborators and quislings, ready to place Greece beneath a Persian yoke.”

¹¹⁶ Vitr. 1.1.6. Cf. Paus. 3.11.3.

¹¹⁷ Granger (1931, 11, n. 1) points out that manuscript H has “Caria”, not “Caryae” (*vel sim.*) and suggests that the legend may have originated with the enmity between Greeks and Carians (cf. 2.8.12; 4.1.5). See also Hersey 1988, 69–72. Plommer (1979, 98) argues against this idea, believing that the Carians always fought on the side of the Greeks. Stuart & Revett (1825, 61 n. d) report a bas-relief found near Naples featuring two Karyatids and an inscription commemorating a victory over the Carians. The Greek term *Καρυάτις* is not attested in the sense of “Carian woman”, but *Καρίων* (Carian) is the name of a slave in Aristophanes’ *Plutus* and Menandros wrote a play titled *Καρίνη* (Carian woman).

¹¹⁸ Plantzos 2017.

distant modern Greek descendants.¹¹⁹ Their personification is most pronounced in the discourse concerning the removal of one of the maidens by Lord Elgin to the United Kingdom, where it currently resides in the British Museum, a situation that is deplored as part of the common opinion that the Elgin marbles should be returned to Athens. In this discourse, the Karyatids are frequently humanized as sisters, one of whom is imprisoned in London.¹²⁰ For example, a caption accompanying images of the London Karyatid in a 2012 restitutionist campaign by Ares Kalogeropoulos was “I am Greek and I want to go home.”¹²¹ The Acropolis Museum calls Elgin’s removal of the Karyatid an instance of *αρπαγή* (violent abduction), a term that is also used in the myths of Persephone, Europa, and Helen of Troy.¹²² According to 19th-century folklore and modern children’s books, the girls remaining in Athens can be heard crying out in lament for their sister’s incarceration in a foreign country.¹²³

The role of the Karyatids in discourse on the Elgin marbles showcases the potential of their personification and strengthens the possibility that they inspired harem stories. These tales are instructive examples of the intertwining of material culture, narratives, and the stereotyping of enemies. In the remainder of this article, I explore such intertwining as a more widespread phenomenon which is particularly palpable at the Athenian Acropolis.

Antagonistic narratives and the Acropolis

The study of the past is no longer exclusively concerned with the retrieval of historical reality, but has under the influence of memory studies grown sensitive to the perception, representation, and construction of the past in the past itself.¹²⁴ A parallel and related development has been the ascent of narratology in historical studies: in addition to trying to reconstruct past events and societies, historians have become interested in how, by whom, and why narratives¹²⁵ about those events and

societies are told in both historical sources and modern scholarship.¹²⁶ These questions are also increasingly asked from archaeological studies and their public retellings.¹²⁷ Material remains, especially when publicly visible and tangible, can have great symbolic power in communities.¹²⁸ They frequently ask for narrative explanations.¹²⁹ These narratives, though often considered historically authentic, can be embellished, exaggerated, or invented.¹³⁰ In this process, archaeologists and historians who professionally deal with material culture may play a role: they can authoritatively present and preserve material culture as providing the very evidence of a tale’s veracity.¹³¹ However, when narratives entangle physical remains, there exists a risk of confirmation bias. A necessary, though often unasked question is whether material remains can indeed prove the historicity of a story, or whether they only have an *effet de réel*: the suggestion of a story’s historical authenticity furnished by descriptive details.¹³² Recognition of the special relation between narratives and material culture widens the scope for the interrogation of this relation in individual cases.

This questioning can be part of an even broader area of study: the investigation of the (conscious or unconscious) ideological use of material culture.¹³³ Existing studies on the ideology of material culture focus primarily on the role that material culture plays in the creation of ideologies and of political and sociocultural narratives that exist in them.¹³⁴ However, a different mechanism also deserves consideration: the influence that such contemporary narratives have exerted—and continue to exert—on the interpretation of material remains and, thus, on the understanding of the past. Archaeologists have begun to consider this mechanism. For example, it can be argued that Arthur Evans’s work on the Minoan civilization is fraught with a Eurocentric and orientalist ideology that troubles our current understanding of

¹¹⁹ Plantzos 2017, 6.

¹²⁰ Hamilakis 2007, 279–280; Rose-Greenland 2013, 654–655; Plantzos 2017, 3–7.

¹²¹ Beresford 2016b, 2; Plantzos 2017, 5–6.

¹²² Panderimalis *et al.* 2016, 261. Cf. Hanink 2017, 193.

¹²³ Douglas 1813, 85–86; Hobhouse 1813, 348 n.; Hughes 1820, 259–260; Williams 1820, 307; Giffard 1837, 163; de Vere 1850, 62–63. Cf. St. Clair 1967, 212; Yalouri 2001, 68–69, 146; Lesk 2005, 557–559, 604, 671–672, 685. The legend also figures in a children’s book (Hadjoudi-Tounta 2012, 24). Cf. Panderimalis *et al.* 2016, 261; Hanink 2017, 134.

¹²⁴ On the growing influence of memory studies on the study of the past, see Tamm 2013.

¹²⁵ Narratives can be defined as chronologically ordered and logically connected sequences of events with a beginning, middle, and end. On the definition of “narrative” see, e.g., Pluciennik 1999, 654–655; Rigney 2012 (drawing a distinction between historical and fictional narratives).

¹²⁶ On the narrative turn in history, see Roussin 2017, 393–398.

¹²⁷ E.g., Silberman 1996; Pluciennik 1999; Joyce 2002; Lesure 2015.

¹²⁸ Loukaki 2008, 15–24, 47–52.

¹²⁹ Cf. Vansina 1961; 1985; van Rookhuijzen 2018; Rojas 2019.

¹³⁰ Taleb 2008 introduces the concept of the “narrative fallacy”, which describes the human tendency to find cause-and-effect relations in our knowledge of the past by condensing loose information into simple stories, even when no such relation actually existed and the truth is more complex.

¹³¹ Both local and foreign archaeologists in Greece are known to use their scientific credentials to confirm nationally relevant narratives, or use them for political purposes. Cf. Yalouri 2001, 22; Hamilakis 2007, 100–101, 121, 292–293; Lalaki 2012, 567.

¹³² Barthes 1984, 167–174. Cf. Joyce 2002, 136.

¹³³ Ideology has been described as the relationship between practice and thought motivated by power and inequality that produces meaning in social settings (Bernbeck & McGuire 2011, 2–3) and as thought that always refers directly or indirectly to a given material reality (Lull *et al.* 2011, 270).

¹³⁴ E.g., Yalouri 2001; Hamilakis 2007.

this culture.¹³⁵ A comparable case concerns the work on pre-historic “Old Europe” by the Lithuanian-born archaeologist Marija Gimbutas. By reconstructing Old Europe as a matriarchal culture, eventually superseded by that of invading patriarchal Indo-Europeans from the east, Gimbutas mythologized and misinterpreted material culture to reflect concerns dating to her own lifetime: misogyny and the domination of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union.¹³⁶ In these cases, material culture was not primarily used to bolster contemporary political and sociocultural narratives—rather, such narratives pre-existed and shaped the understanding of the past stemming from material remains.

The application of narratology to history and archaeology is urgent when stories concern the desecration or destruction of monuments by enemies. Such stories, that may be called “antagonistic narratives”, are often set in the distant past, but may in some cases contribute to contemporary nationalism and the stereotyping of “others”. They are ubiquitous in local histories all over the world, but, with the case of the Turkish harem at hand, I wish to highlight the abundance of antagonistic narratives at the Acropolis of Athens. Eleana Yalouri observes that the Acropolis is often portrayed as a living body that suffers from violation.¹³⁷ Non-Greeks, including Persians, Macedonians, Romans, Heruli, Ottomans, Germans, and British frequently appear in popular and scholarly writings, both ancient and modern, as antagonists of the Acropolis.¹³⁸ A typical example is the story, discussed earlier in the article, about the Greek offering of ammunition to the Turks defending the Acropolis to halt their destruction of the temples in their search for metal. Other stories here include the Persian destruction of the Acropolis temples and the Ottoman encapsulation of parts of the temple of Athena Nike (“Victory”) into a tower. Antagonistic narratives taking place on the Acropolis generally cast (Athenian) Greeks throughout the ages as heroes and guardians of civilization, and their enemies as the opposite, namely as desecrators or destroyers.¹³⁹ These stories frequently seem to relate to the citadel’s role as the foremost symbol of ancient and modern Greece and, more broadly, of western civilization.¹⁴⁰

Antagonistic narratives were already being told about the Acropolis in antiquity, but they became especially common from the beginning of the 19th century onwards, when ethnic

Greek resistance movements against their Ottoman masters were at full force and culminated in the Greek War of Independence (1821–1832). As the society of the classical Athens was chosen as the model on which the new state was founded, the city’s preeminent architectural achievement, the Acropolis, was claimed as the token of the country’s rebirth. In the periods leading up to and following the revolution, the historical non-Greek presence in Greece came to be regarded as oppressive and physically destructive. The stories resulting from this sentiment were retold by historians and archaeologists, who strengthened them with the materiality of evocative remains and new discoveries. A notorious example of such reasoning occurred when archaeologists associated several deposits on the Acropolis containing debris of buildings, statues, and pottery with Herodotos’ story of the Persian siege and destruction of the Acropolis in 480 BC.¹⁴¹ The material was baptized “*Perserschutt*” (Persian debris) and, by a circular argument, used to date the deposits and adjacent structures—which in turn were believed to furnish new evidence for the Persian siege.¹⁴²

The understanding of Greek history that facilitated the appearance and endurance of antagonistic narratives was efficiently formulated by the Greek poet and politician Alexandros Rangavis in the first issue of the archaeological journal *Αρχαιολογική Εφημερίς* (1837): “In the Glorious days of Greece, freedom produced all these beautiful works of art, the ruins of which are scattered in our land today; foreign despotism committed sacrilege upon them and destroyed them, and it was up to freedom again to restore their honour and to put them under its protecting aegis.”¹⁴³ From a narratological perspective, the fate of Greece invoked by Rangavis belongs to a common plot type: the acquisition, loss, and retrieval of wealth or glory.¹⁴⁴ The period of glory of the Acropolis was the Classical period, when Pericles’ building programme was executed. Its downfall was enacted by the arrival of Macedonians, Romans, Byzantines, and Ottomans. And the retrieval of its glory followed after Greek independence, when the Acropolis was restored to its Periclean appearance.¹⁴⁵ This meta-narra-

¹³⁵ Gere 2009; Schoep 2018.

¹³⁶ Meskell 1995.

¹³⁷ Yalouri 2001, 63–65.

¹³⁸ Cf. Gourgouris 1996, 275, where Neohellenic culture is described as “Other to all Others”.

¹³⁹ Giraud 2018, 30–31 is an example of this presentation.

¹⁴⁰ E.g., McNeal 1991; Loukaki 1997, 312; 2008, 201, 231; Yalouri 2001; Fouseki 2006, 535–536; Hamilakis 2007, 85–99, 215–224; Plantzos 2008; Beard 2010; Brewer 2010, 106; Lalaki 2012, 552; Martin-McAuliffe & Papadopoulos 2012, 334; Hanink 2017, 43, 158, 259–260;

Fowden 2018, 274. Cf. Marchand 1996 on the impact of philhellenism and orientalism on German scholarship of Greek antiquity.

¹⁴¹ Hdt. 8.53.

¹⁴² For critical discussions of the concept of *Perserschutt*, see Lindenlauf 1997; Steskal 2004; Stewart 2008.

¹⁴³ Rangavis 1837, 5. Translation from Hamilakis 2007, 61.

¹⁴⁴ Booker (2004, 51–68) calls this plot type “rags to riches”. Jezernik (2007, 3) points out that the history of post-classical Greece belongs to the “meta-narrative of the Fall”.

¹⁴⁵ Plantzos (2017, 17–18) discusses Greece’s unfulfilled promise that archaeological restoration would make it worthy of its classical heritage. The two Karyatids unearthed in the Kastis tomb at Amphipolis during the economic recession in 2014 were welcomed in Greece as personifications of Greek exceptionalism. Cf. Yalouri 2001, 89–91; Tanoulas 2021, 6–7.

tive is not exclusive to 19th-century attitudes, but still today underpins antagonistic narratives at the Acropolis, including the story of the harem inside the Karyatid Temple. The online portal *Odysseus* run by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, which expressly aims to provide reliable information about Greek culture, states that the building

burned in the first century BC and was subsequently repaired with minor alterations. In the Early Christian period it was converted into a church dedicated to the Theometor (Mother of God). It became [a] palace under Frankish rule and the residence of the Turkish commander's harem in the Ottoman period. In the early 19th century, Lord Elgin removed one of the Karyatides and a column and during the Greek War of Independence the building was bombarded and severely damaged. Restoration was undertaken immediately after the end of the war and again in 1979–1987, when the Erechtheion became the first monument of the Acropolis to be restored as part of the recent conservation and restoration project. Its restoration received the Europa Nostra award.¹⁴⁶

This freely accessible text, merely one example among a countless number of similar retellings, presents the Karyatid Temple's striking post-classical history in outline. By selectively listing simple "facts" about the building, including the presence of the Turkish harem, it conforms to the narrative scheme outlined above: following the structure's ancient function as one of Athens' holiest places, its history under foreign rule appears as one of increasing desecration and destruction—until Greek independence turned the tide and heralded the temple's material and symbolic resurrection as an icon of European and western architecture and civilization.

Conclusion

Histories of the Acropolis present the Turkish harem in the Karyatid Temple as an almost self-explanatory reality, but contemporary sources do not unambiguously confirm it. The independent appearance in antiquity of a similar tale about a harem, that of Demetrios Poliorketes, indicates that harems were easily imagined to be inside the Karyatid Temple, probably as a result of the easily personifiable Karyatid statues. This process belongs to the widely attested phenomenon of narratives inspired by salient material remains. Whether or not there ever was a Turkish harem in this building, vague information about it seems

to have evolved into an antagonistic narrative that adheres to a widely attested phenomenon of stereotyping of Turks in Athens. In a narratological sense, the harem story serves to emplot the history of the Karyatid Temple in the meta-narrative of the city's downfall under Ottoman rule.

Western nostalgia for classical glory has resulted in a lack of appreciation of later periods of Greek history and, through the demolition of the Turkish town on the Acropolis, in the material obliteration of Athens' Ottoman past. Yet, stories about this past linger on in ancient remains. Today, the six maidens of the Karyatid Temple do not merely serve as photogenic relics of a wonderful, bygone age—they narrate the liberation of Greek glory, once locked inside the harem on the Acropolis.

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¹⁴⁶ Venieri 2012. The Greek-language version of the page is less equivocal about what happened: "while a little later, in 1827, during the Independence Struggle of the Greeks, the building was blown up by a Turkish bomb."

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