

Chapter 10

Unknown facts of Elgin's looting

A rare edition by an "anonymous" author, dated 1815 in London, can be found in the library of the Estia of Nea Smyrni. The "anonymous" author is William Richard Hamilton, private secretary to Lord Elgin. The book appeared at the time when Elgin was negotiating with the British government for the sale of his famous collection of sculptures which he had looted from Greece, taking advantage of Turkey's need for British support against Napoleon.

The object of the book was to stress the incomparable value of the collection, which is described, in the text, as infinitely more valuable than any other collection in the world. The fact that the book was published anonymously, for obvious reasons, reveals one more facet of Elgin's character.

However, this rare London edition contains some very interesting information which is unknown to those who are familiar with the story of the Elgin Marbles.

For instance, the book tells us Napoleon was very keen to acquire the Elgin collection at any price, so that Britain would be deprived of it. Indeed, at about that time, Napoleon had bought the famous Borghese collection for the staggering amount of £500,000.

A more interesting fact contained in the book is that Elgin's team dug up and looted the graves of Euripides and Aspasia. Unfortunately, the author describes only the finds in the grave of the famous courtesan from Miletus. They were contained in an impressive tomb, outside the gates of Piraeus on the ancient road to Eleusis. The excavation turned up a huge marble crater with a diameter of 1.5 metres. Inside it was a funerary urn containing the ashes and charred bones of the woman whose presence in Athens had so greatly influenced the city's political and cultural life. There was a gold wreath over the ashes in the shape of flowers made of gold.

Among the other priceless antiquities looted by Elgin in Athens and the surrounding area are the statue of Dionysos from the theatre of the same name, as well as the theatre's sun dial which, according to the "anonymous" author, gave the time in the days of Sophocles and Euripides.

Elgin also removed important architectural members from the temple of Aphrodite at Daphni, while from the courtyard of the Athenian Logothetis, who was British consul at the time, he acquired exceptional ancient sculptures which decorated a fountain. Among them was an Athenian inscription of inestimable importance to ancient Greek history, since it contained the names of the Athenians who fell at the battle of Potidaea. There was also a funerary inscription with the name of Socrates.

Another bit of information provided by the book is that Elgin had obtained permission from the Bishop of Athens to remove sculptures embedded in the walls of churches or monasteries in Attica. He also removed many ancient bas-reliefs and many inscriptions containing irreplaceable historical data.

Among the works of art he plundered from the monasteries was the marble throne of a gymnasiarch with beautiful carvings on the back depicting the assassins of the tyrant Hipparchus, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, with daggers in their hands and the death of Leana who, in order not to betray the plotters under torture, bit her tongue off.