

The ordinary man in the street, such as me, relies to a large degree on public libraries to research history and in looking into the Elgin Marbles affair I had to mainly draw on the papers and letters of the main characters as published in books.

Such documents were published in the early nineteenth century, at a time when the Elgin Marbles was a very controversial matter and the Memorandum on the Earl of Elgin's pursuits in Greece as well as the Letters of The Rev. Philip Hunt took account of this public disquiet and were edited accordingly at that time.

The Letters of Lady Elgin were mainly published under her maiden name, Mary Nisbet at a much later date in 1926, that is, about 110 years after parliament bought the marbles. They were 'sorted' before being published by her great grandson, Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Nisbet Hamilton Grant and even though this 'sorting' or editing was done at a date far removed from the early nineteenth century controversy over the Elgins acquisition of their artefacts in Greece etc., it is apparent that much of what Mary Nisbet wrote while with her husband's embassy was removed from the original letters because of the wish of her descendants to portray her in the best possible light.

I only became aware of this fact whilst researching the subject of the Elgin or Parthenon Marbles when I came across extracts from a letter written by Mary Nisbet on June 14 1801 included in an article by Dyfri Williams (former Keeper of Roman Antiquities and now Research Keeper at the British Museum).

The Mary Nisbet's 1801 letter quoted by Williams had obviously been taken from her original papers, held by the British Museum, and when I compared it with the Letters of Mary Nisbet (published in 1926) held in the National Library of Scotland that I used in my research it was immediately apparent that there was a huge difference between the two versions of the same letter.

I have set out both versions of the letter as follows, highlighting commonality:

**Extracts from Dyfri Williams's article: "THE ELGIN PORPHYRY" in Minerva**

***'But now my Dearest Father prepare to hear with ecstasy what I am going to tell you! The other day E. took it into his head to make, Chabert ask the Favourite of the Valida Sultana, Yousouf Aga, for four pieces of porphyry: the one in the sea beyond the Seraglio point, the top of Constantine's Sarcophagus, and the one at the gate of the Old Seraglio which being broken is considered as two. The answer given led to a great deal of negotiation at the Porte, and various refusals were given, "it being quite impossible to touch anything belonging to the Seraglio &c." Till at last Pisani came bo-owing one morning with a little specimen of porphyry which the Porte offered to give E. if he chose it. Upon which the Great Elchy-Bey [EIchy means ambassador] took the bit out of Pleasancy's hand [Lady Elgin loved nick-names: this was hers for Pisani] & without even condescending to look at the little innocent echantillon, chucked It out of the window, saying that he would have all or none, &. that since they knew how to refuse him such a trifle as a few bits of Red Stone he would take the hint upon the many various favours they were just now asking him!!! This had the desired effect, Pisani in afright flew out of the room. I do not know whether he did not leave his calpack behind him; but sure it is the next***

*day Yousouf sent to say he had asked the Grand Seignor's leave for the pieces of porphyry & sure it is that Selim said it was too trifling a thing to refuse his Beloved Friend Elchy-Bey. There was a modification however from the impossibility of touching anything from the precinct of a Mosque, therefore they could not give him the Top of the Sarcophagus, but offered in lieu of It another piece that was within the Seraglio. The matter now stands thus: **Captain Briggs , Commander of the Salamine Brig, has at this moment on board, one piece of porphyry 4 foot & a half long, & 3 foot & 1/2 round; another 5 foot long, & 3 1/2 foot round; another 7 foot long & a half long, & 3 1/2 round; and another - open your eyes! Eight foot long & seven feet round!!! Pon honor fact, Dear Sir'***

“These four pieces, all from columns were shipped from Constantinople on 17 June on board the Salamine to Alexandria and thence on the Madras to England, together with antiquities from the capitulation of Alexandria in 1801, which included of course, the Rosetta Stone.”

*“Lord Elgin, however, was not to give up on his desire to secure the lid of the great porphyry sarcophagus mentioned in Mrs Hamilton Nisbet's journal. On 17 October Pisani wrote to him hesitantly that:*

*‘the Effendi with regret mentioned his failure on the subject of the sarcophagus (sic)’.*

By 10 November, however, Lady Elgin was able to report:

*'We have got the top of the sarcophagus! What say you to that Dear Mother?...Yesterday with the greatest difficulty we got the top of the sarcophagus on board the Niger'.*

Unexpectedly, a record of all the transactions, especially the last one over the sarcophagus lid, has been preserved among the archives at the Basvekâlet Arsivi in Istanbul. A memorandum to the Sultan records:

*'When heretofore the English Ambassador asked for various porphyry stones situated in different places, his request to remove the sarcophagus cover in the courtyard of the Osmaniye Mosque was considered unsuitable and the matter was put off. He has now sent a private message again requesting this cover. There would be talk over his being allowed to remove it from the courtyard of the mosque. I suggest that you give permission for it to be removed from there to the Palace, and then, from some appropriate place, be given to the ambassador'. The Sultan annotated the document with his own command: 'Let it come to Inculi and let them take it from there'.*

The Ambassador, though unnamed, is clearly Lord Elgin and the Sultan Selim III, while the context must be the series of requests for porphyry charted above. The device devised to avoid the religious issues was a simple one: remove the piece from next to the Osmaniye Mosque to the Palace, a move to which apparently no objection could be raised, and then down to the Incili Kösk (Kiosk of the Pearl), which was just within the palace boundaries on the Marmara shore, from whence it could easily be easily transhipped without, attracting undue attention.” **Extracts from Dyfri Williams’s Minverva article ends.**

**N.B.** My copy of the same, 14 June, 1801 letter from Mary Nisbet to her father edited by her great grandson, Lieutenant Colonel, John Patrick Nisbet Hamilton Grant simply states:

My Very Dear Father,

You can have no idea of the pleasure your letter and my Mother's from Athens gave us; You know I was always against the Formatori, and I remember you did not admire the idea of them; so I feel the greatest comfort at your approbation of their work. After having been at such expence it is certainly very pleasing to hear things are done in so superior and masterly a stile; I really now do not feel to grudge them. Your letter put Elgin in greatest glee, he was quite charmed at your entering so heartily into his cause; your visit would undoubtedly renovate the Artists and make them work with fresh spirit – Elgin is going immediately to set about getting the proper Firman for Minerva's Temple. I shall write you word if it succeeds.

But now my Dearest Father prepare to hear with extasy what I am going to tell you! Captain Briggs, Commander of the Salamine Brig, has at this moment on board, one piece of porphyry 4 foot and a half long, & 3 foot and 1/2 round.

Another 7 foot and a half long, & 3 1/2 round.

And another - open your eyes!

Eight foot long & seven feet round!!!

Pon honor fact, Dear Sir'

But as no human success is perfect, the Salamine Brig being so deep in the water, has been under cruel necessity – after many fruitless attempts with the aid of the great sheers of the Arsenal – to abandon the idea of taking the fifth piece, being a Column of Twelve foot long and about two foot in diameter. This is now in Dock Yard awaiting some other conveyance.

What say you to this, Dearest Dad?

I hope this letter will not be lost, as I shall forget the dimensions, which I wrote down on purpose to send you. But do not think I am so elated with my success as to forget your piece of grey granite, or a piece of the red Oriental Granite, the latter I know not where to find, but I will enquire.

Elgin is going to send off tonight, I have not time to write to my Mother, and indeed I have nothing new to say as I sent a long letter to her the 10<sup>th</sup> of June and directed it to the care of Lord Minto. I shall do the same with this, as I think he will take care of them.

Hamilton is going to Egypt in the Brig which is to sail, the first wind. The Captain will be a great loss for he is a smart pleasant young Beau and an admirer of Caroline. Elgin desires his best love. He will write soon to you, but begs you will excuse him tonight as he is most completely faged; he has been working like a slave for these three days past. All is going comfortably without any Discompostures.

Your dutiful and most affectionate Daughter,  
M. Elgin

June 14<sup>th</sup> 1801.

2 o'clock in ye morning of ye 15<sup>th</sup> of June.

[See appendix 2]

## COMMENT

So in the 1926 publication of the Letters of Mary Nisbet only the first sentence and most of a later paragraph describing the dimensions of the porphyry would appear to correspond with what she actually wrote.

The whole shocking episode of Elgin's arrogance and rudeness in return for the Sultan's kindness and generosity has been deleted so that the public would not know of his appalling behaviour or of his wife, Mary Nisbet's approval of same.

And I might never have found out about it, but for a Director of the British Museum, Dyfri Williams, writing about it in a different context in his article: "The Elgin Porphyry: From Constantine The Great To Robert The Bruce". [See appendix 1]

I have sought sight of a copy or photograph of the original letter from the British Museum as there is no copy of it on their website. This is unusual in that they display many of the copies of correspondence and firmans connected with Lord Elgin's affairs in Greece and yet their catalogue Item, reference: **"2002,0802.1; Description: Some 170 letters and documents written by Lady Elgin spanning the period 1799-1807."** is not published.

Mr Iain Calderwood of the British Museum advised me that he has: **"contacted the dept. of Greece and Rome to ask if this specific letter is available."** He says he will let me know of the results of his enquiry next week.

He also advised me that: **"if identified, new photography of this letter would be required"**, and this will cost £60 (+vat if applicable) per image and take approximately 30 days upon receipt of payment.

I find the response of the British Museum unacceptable and I am sure other researchers on the Parthenon Marbles will take a similar view. The British Museum prides itself on being a body that informs the public on art and related matters and in my experience it normally does a first class job. I have used their "Free Image" service extensively in the past for images for my website, which is a strictly non-commercial informative analysis of the Elgin Marbles affair.

In order to use the British Museum's images I had to apply for a licence and assure them I wished to use their images in line with their policy which is to: **"encourage the dissemination and use of information about our collection and expertise that we publish on our website."**

It seems to me that the British Museum are being hypocritical in that they apply double standards in encouraging the dissemination and use of material that fits their agenda with regards the Elgin Marbles, but are positively discouraging any sight of documents which do not match their agenda, such as the letter I seek.

Why would the British Museum spend a large sum of money in 2002 to buy the collection of Some 170 letters and documents written by Lady Elgin spanning the period 1799-1807, from Julian H. Brooke to simply hide them away from the public?

I think that the answer to my rhetorical question is to be found in the text deleted by Mary Nisbet's great grandson, which is damning on her and her husband Elgin and is evidence of acts, which, if the same evidence is contained in the other 169 letters may be very embarrassing for the defensive stance the British Museum put up for their former Director, Thomas Bruce, 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Elgin.

But leaving aside my opinions on this matter, I know that as a matter of general propriety, education and the availability of same to all is a cornerstone of our society.

I find it shocking that the British Museum might, just might, agree to allow me to see the letters they bought with public monies. And while I can, and probably will, stump up the £60, £120, £180 + Vat., if I get the chance, it is wrong that other researchers not having the funds to do so might be prevented from doing the same.

Quite simply this is wrong and I have written to my MP urging him to take up my concerns in this matter with the Westminster parliament.

#### Footnote to the edited letters of Mary Nisbet.

The weight of the porphyry columns mentioned in the book *The Letters of Mary Nisbet* can be established by using the following formula to calculate the volume:  
Right cylinder volume =  $\pi r^2 h$ .

Then once the volume is established it is multiplied by the weight per cubic centimetre for porphyry, which is 2.547 grams. **N.B.** It is assumed that the second dimension given as 'round' by Mary Nisbet refers to the girth or circumference.

So for a "***4 foot and a half long, & 3 foot and 1/2 round***" column . = 122 cm long X 107 cm in circumference or 17 cm radius. Result = 282122 grams or **282kgs**

For "***Another 7 foot and a half long, & 3 1/2 round.***" Column. = 229 cm long x 107 cm in circumference or 17 cm radius. Result = 529556 grams or **530 kgs**

***“And another - open your eyes!***

***Eight foot long & seven feet round!!”*** = 244 cm long x 183 cm in circumference or 29 cm radius. Result = 1,641,967 grams or **1,642 kgs**

The total weight of porphyry load on board the brig *Salamine* in this one recorded incident was **2.454 Metric Tonnes** and this does not include the fourth column detailed in Dyfri Williams's copy of this letter taken from the papers of Mary Nisbet held by the British Museum. If that "***5 foot long, & 3 1/2 foot round***" column were taken into account Captain Briggs's brig would have been burdened by close on 3 Metric Tonnes of porphyry.

Nothing is said of any artistic merit in the material and it seems to be a case of 'never mind the quality feel the width', so the bulk building material requisitioning for Broomhall is evident in this letter.



# FROM CONSTANTINE THE GREAT TO ROBERT THE BRUCE: THE ELGIN PORPHYRY

*Dyfri Williams describes the history of an imperial porphyry sarcophagus lid in Scotland, related here in honour of Andrew Elgin's 80th birthday.*

**G**reat cities are scattered with the fragments of earlier ages and different cultures. They are like museums without walls and speak to us across time of the many and various peoples of the world. Byzantium or Constantinople, 'Queen of Cities', originally a Greek foundation, has drawn many conquerors from other lands, from Alcibiades to Septimius Severus, and from Constantine the Great to Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror. It has drawn generations too of more anonymous visitors, traders, artists, and travellers, casual or official.

It was to this 'city of the World's Desire', to the Ottoman 'Sublime Porte', that in 1799 the 33 year-old Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin and 11th Earl of Kincardine (Fig 1), was appointed as Ambassador Extraordinary. Some three years earlier, in 1796, he had determined to make substantial improvements to Broomhall, his family home on the northern shore of the Firth of Forth in Scotland. For this purpose he engaged the services of the architect Thomas Harrison (1744-1829), a quiet Yorkshireman who had studied in Rome. They became good friends and Elgin even took Harrison with him two years later when he went courting his bride-to-be, the beautiful heiress Miss Mary Nisbet of Dirleton.

In the period between Elgin's appointment to the Porte and his departure, Harrison began to encourage Elgin to attempt to bring back moulds from the great buildings of Athens, since they were so less well-known amongst architects than those in Rome. Harrison also no doubt pointed out to Elgin the potential of acquiring fine porphyry, verd'antique and marble in Constantinople, material that might be used in the decoration and furnishing of Broomhall.

In autumn 1799 Lord Elgin and his young bride, pregnant with their first child, set off for Constantinople. Their arrival brought them face to face with the historical palimpsest that is that city. Elgin had attempted before he left London to interest the British Government in the artistic potential of his Embassy, but they would not support him. In the end, as he passed through Palermo, his encounter with Sir William Hamilton, the great connoisseur and founder of the British Museum's collection of Greek vases, encouraged him to engage a group of

artists and *formatori* (moulders). These arrived in Constantinople in May 1800.

The continued presence of the head of Lord Elgin's artistic team, Giovanni Batista Lusieri, in Constantinople for some seven months after the departure of the rest of the team to Athens, combined with the arrival of Mr and Mrs Hamilton Nisbet, Elgin's cultured parents-in-law, no doubt encouraged Lord Elgin to pay more attention to his surroundings, despite the press of diplomatic business. Indeed, Mrs Hamilton Nisbet frequently mentions in her journal her sightings of porphyry and verd'antique on her jaunts around the city. In particular, on 13 August 1800 she recorded how she 'proceeded to the Mosque of Sultan Osman near which stands Constantine's tomb of Porphyry and a burying place of two Sultanas'. On a later outing on 27 October, she noted how she 'passed the Osmani Mosque, observed the pieces of Porphyry said to be the foundations of Constantine's tomb, then a broken piece of what had been the top of Constantine's tomb, another large piece lay as a door sole; examined the tomb itself'.

Lord Elgin's daily contacts with the administration of the Porte naturally had to be carried on through interpreters. Two were assigned to the British Mission, Bartolomeo Pisani and Antonio Dané. It is from Pisani's somewhat oleaginous letters to Lord Elgin, advising him of daily progress on a wide range of issues that involved Britain and the Porte, that we first see evidence of Elgin's attempts to acquire a variety of decorative hard stones in Constantinople.

Pisani wrote to Lord Elgin on 3 June 1801 with the following news: 'Having had no opportunity of waiting on your Excellency on my return from the Porte yesterday, I did not mention my having spoken of the Stones in a very particular tho' polite manner. I saw my remarks did make an impression, and I am happy to be able to acquaint Your Lordship now, that I was by no means mistaken. The first thing the Effendi told me today when I waited on him after finishing Dané's business completely, was, that having considered of the particular wish which your Exy continued to express about the Stones, he wrote at once to the Sultan (excepting only about that in the Osmani Church) in answer to which his



Fig 1. Lord Elgin, 1786. Drawing by Harding, British Museum.

Majesty wrote word this morning that he looked on these objects of a trifling nature, & that the R[eis] Effendi was welcome to order on board, the one proposed you on Friday last; that in the sea under one of the Kiosks; a third on this or the other side of the Seraglio point; & the fourth pointed out near the Esky Seray in the Tower...'

A later letter from Lady Elgin to her father of 14 June 1801, after their departure home, paints a fuller picture: **But now my Dearest Father prepare to hear with ecstasy what I am going to tell you!** The other day E. took it into his head to make Chabert ask the Favourite of the Valida Sultana, Yousoûf Aga, for four pieces of porphyry: the one in the sea beyond the Seraglio point, the top of Constantine's Sarcophagus, and the one at the gate of the Old Seraglio which being broken is considered as two. The answer given led to a great deal of negotiation at the Porte, and various refusals were given, "it being quite impossible to touch anything belonging to the Seraglio &c. &c." Till at last Pisani came bo-owing one morning with a little specimen of porphyry which the Porte offered to give E. if he chose it. Upon which the Great Elchy-Bey [Elchy means Amba-



## The Elgin Porphyry



**Fig 2. Giant granite Egyptian scarab beetle, Ptolemaic, in the British Museum.**  
© The British Museum.

sador] took the bit out of Pleasancy's hand [Lady Elgin loved nick-names: this was hers for Pisani] & without even condescending to look at the little innocent echantillon, chucked it out of the window, saying that he would have all or none, & that since they knew how to refuse him such a trifle as a few bits of Red Stone he would take the hint upon the many various favours they were just now asking him!!! This had the desired effect, Pisani in afright flew out of the room. I do not know whether he did not leave his calpack behind him; but sure it is the next day Yousouf sent to say he had asked the Grand Seigneur's leave for the pieces of porphyry & sure it is that Selim said it was too trifling a thing to refuse his Beloved Friend Elchy-Bey. There was a modification however from the impossibility of touching anything from the precinct of a Mosque, therefore they could not give him the Top of the Sarcophagus, but offered in lieu of it another piece that was within the Seraglio. The matter now stands thus: **Captain Briggs, Commander of the Salamine Brig, has at this moment on board, one piece of porphyry 4 foot & a half long, & 3 foot & 1/2 round; another 5 foot long, & 3 1/2 foot round; another 7 foot long & a half long, & 3 1/2 round; and another - open your eyes! Eight foot long & seven feet round!!! Pon honor fact, Dear Sir!**

These four pieces, all from columns,

**Fig 3. Box of 'Constantine's Sarcophagus', Istanbul. Photo courtesy of Arne Effenberg.**



were duly shipped from Constantinople on 17 June on board the *Salamine* to Alexandria and thence on the *Madras* on to England, together with antiquities from the capitulation of Alexandria in 1801, which included, of course, the Rosetta Stone.

This exchange with the Porte in June 1801 over 'stones' is important. It shows the parameters within which the authorities were prepared to work. The property associated with a mosque was beyond anyone but the Sultan's reach, even if it was actually of no importance to the religious authorities. It also reveals the diplomatic dance that the Ottoman Court and its Ambassadors performed in the search for suitably reciprocal favours. Finally, we see something of the extraordinarily high esteem in which Lord Elgin was beginning to be held as a result of the growing expectation of good news from the British campaign in Egypt against the French forces taken there by Napoleon in 1798.

Elgin's continued desire to acquire more decorative stone of all varieties and colours can be seen from further notes penned by Pisani to Lord Elgin throughout July and August. On 10 July Pisani wrote, 'I am concerned to repeat a message sent me by the Calpha, about the marbles which does not correspond with our expectations. He says after spending all this day between Sentary & Cum Capy in endeavouring to get a bargain as Your Excellency wishes, all his endeavours have been fruitless. 800 piastres is the last price at Sentary, & 600 at Cum Capy...The Calpha after finishing his business at the Cap. Pasha's this evening, or tomorrow morning early, will go to see the beetle'. On 5 August Pisani reported the Calpha's 'eagerness to execute your wish'.

The beetle mentioned must be the huge granite scarab beetle of Ptolemaic date (Fig 2). One may presume that it was brought from Egypt as a trophy in Roman times, but such a removal could have happened later, even in the Ottoman period. The large, careful cuttings at either end suggest that it was broken and repaired during its transfer. Its precise location in Istanbul does not seem to have been recorded.

On 25 August, Lady Elgin reported further success: 'Tell my Father the Gd Seigneur has given E. the pillar of porphyry in the sea by the Seraglio & the two small pillars of Verd Antique by the Janisary Towers. They think it very extraordinary why we wish for these marbles; but they recollect that in Days of Yore people knew how to convert them into gold, which Art has since been lost, now perhaps we intend to endeavour to regain it!' This final comment should be compared with the many other observations of the Turkish

and Greek attitude to pieces of ancient sculpture and the like, both in the 19th and even 20th centuries, which reveal that the people often imagined that gold was buried inside such remains or that they possessed some magic not unlike the Philosopher's Stone. It was for such reasons that so much ancient sculpture and architecture was being vandalised and destroyed in the last decades of the 18th century.

Lord Elgin, however, was not to give up on his desire to secure the lid of the great porphyry sarcophagus mentioned in Mrs Hamilton Nisbet's journal. On 17 October Pisani wrote to him hesitantly that 'the Effendi with regret mentioned his failure on the subject of the circophagus [sic]'. By 10 November, however, Lady Elgin was able to report: 'We have got the top of the Sarcophagus! What say you to that Dear Mother?...Yesterday with the greatest difficulty we got the top of the sarcophagus on board the *Niger*'.

Unexpectedly, a record of all these transactions, especially the last one over the sarcophagus lid, has been preserved among the archives at the Basvekâlet Arsivi in Istanbul. A memorandum to the Sultan records: 'When heretofore the English Ambassador asked for various porphyry stones situated in different places, his request to remove the sarcophagus cover in the courtyard of the Osmaniye Mosque was considered unsuitable and the matter was put off. He has now sent a private message again requesting this cover. There would be talk over his being allowed to remove it from the courtyard of the mosque. I suggest that you give permission for it to be removed from there to the Palace, and then, from some appropriate place, be given to the ambassador'. The Sultan annotated the document with his own command: 'Let it come to Incüli and let them take it from there'.

The Ambassador, though unnamed, is clearly Lord Elgin and the Sultan Selim III, while the context must be the series of requests for porphyry charted above. The device devised to avoid the religious issues was a simple one: remove the piece from next to the Osmaniye Mosque to the Palace, a move to which apparently no objection could be raised, and then down to the Incili Kösk (Kiosk of the Pearl), which was just within the palace boundaries on the Marmara shore, from whence it could easily be easily transhipped without attracting undue attention.

The box of the sarcophagus, although once in the open in the outer court of the Nur-i Osmaniye Mosque (Fig 3), is now walled up in a niche there and serves as a cistern. It is plain and measures 2.58m in length, 1.76m in width, and 1.29 in height. Mrs

## The Elgin Porphyry

Hamilton Nisbet noted the existence of 'pieces of Porphyry said to be the foundations of Constantine's tomb', which must have been the moulded socle on which the box sat. She also mentioned 'a broken piece of what had been the top of Constantine's tomb', which is, of course, what Lord Elgin eventually secured, the dimensions of which were recorded by Captain Hillyard of the Niger as 'Length - 7ft 8 inches; Breadth - 5ft; Height at one end - 4ft; at ye other 3ft. 8'. These dimensions reveal that this piece must have been of the regular pedimental form, although clearly not complete in length. Finally, Mrs Hamilton Nisbet observed that 'another large piece lay as a door sole', presumably the remaining section of the lid.

A number of early sources of the 11th to 13th centuries describe the arrangement and particulars of the series of porphyry sarcophagi in Constantine's Mausoleum and in the northern and southern colonnades of the atrium of the nearby Church of the Holy Apostles. These contained the remains of the 4th and early 5th century AD emperors and some of their wives.

These imperial burials may well have been disturbed at the time of the Latin conquest in 1204. They had certainly all been removed when the Church of the Holy Apostles was demolished between 1462 and 1470 to make way for the Mosque of the Turkish conqueror, Sultan Mehmet II, the so-called Fatih Camii. At the beginning of the 19th century, as we have seen, one of these porphyry sarcophagi was in the courtyard of the Nur-i Osmaniye Mosque and was at that time referred to, rightly or wrongly, as the sarcophagus of Constantine the Great. From the middle of that century others began to be gathered together in the atrium of the Church of Agia Eirene, which was to become the city's first storehouse for antiquities. The identification of the remaining porphyry sarcophagi with those of the particular emperors mentioned in the early texts is fraught with difficulty: indeed, no firm associations can be made, nor can the early 19th century connection between the sarcophagus beside the Nur-i Osmaniye Mosque and Constantine the Great be discounted.

Lord Elgin's embassy was to end in catastrophe as he returned home with his wife. They landed in France just as war was declared and, when they reached Paris, were consequently detained, despite Lord Elgin's status. This detention, which for Lord Elgin lasted until 1806, was to see not only his marriage come to an end but also all chance of continuing his very promising diplomatic career. It was also to leave him and his estate at

Broomhall deeply in debt.

When the 7th Earl died in 1841, he was succeeded in the title by his son James. He was, in a sense, to continue the diplomatic career of his father, serving with great distinction first in Canada, then in China, and finally in India where he died. His widow, Mary Louisa, Countess of Elgin, set about perpetuating the memory of her remarkable husband, while at the same time allowing the trustees of Broomhall to radically simplify the estate so that financial stability could be achieved. As a result she was able to institute the final phase of the restoration of the exterior of Broomhall, including the construction of an entrance door and porch on the north side. In connection with this project she had Charles Heath Wilson of Glasgow, her architect, assess the collection of porphyry and other stones at Broomhall.

In 1876, Lady Augusta, the 8th Earl's sister, died. She had been a close companion and confidante of Queen Victoria, indeed her favourite Lady-in-Waiting, and had, late in life, married the Revd Arthur Stanley, who was thereupon appointed Dean of Westminster. As a result, she was buried in Henry VII's Chapel in Westminster Abbey and in her memory Victor Alexander Bruce, the 9th Earl (1849-1917), presented some of the Elgin porphyry to be used beside the main steps leading up to the High Altar.

The 9th Earl was a quiet but very capable man, who devoted much time to Scottish matters, in particular education. Before he too was called on to be Viceroy to India, following the family tradition of service to the nation, he was able to devote more attention to Broomhall and redecorated the front hall, giving it a marble floor with a pattern of coloured marble, including a border of red porphyry and inserts of verd'antique.

It was at the same time that he became involved in a committee to finally mark, in a suitable manner, the spot where King Robert the Bruce had been buried in the Abbey Church of Dunfermline, a spot only discovered by accident in the course of the excavations of the foundations of the church in 1818. Within a vault of polished masonry had been found an oak coffin covered with two sheets of lead and inside the coffin a shroud of gold cloth. The breastbone of the body had been severed to remove the heart in compliance with the wish of Bruce that his heart be taken to the Holy Land. As the senior Bruce and Lord Lieutenant of Fife, Lord Elgin expended great pains and expense on this commission. As a result of the need to combine a monument on the exact spot where the burial had actually been with the

*Dr Dyfri Williams is Keeper of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, The British Museum.*

continuation of worship in the church, Elgin came up with the idea of 'a slab that would not rise above the pavement'. For this purpose he provided a huge piece of porphyry taken from the lid of the sarcophagus acquired by the 7th Earl in Constantinople. The porphyry was worked by McGlashen of Edinburgh and the splendid brass inlay was created by W.S. Black of Edinburgh (Fig 4).

On 21 December 1889, the Bruce Memorial was officially unveiled by Lady Louisa Bruce (1856-1902), sister of the 9th Earl of Elgin. At the ceremony, Provost Donald is reported to have noted in his speech of thanks that 'the brass design was very beautiful, but it was the least rare and costly material in the memorial. The porphyry in which the brass design was set was the richer and rarer material, and was very much more costly...It was taken out of one of the Elgin trophies brought from Athens [sic] by Thomas, the seventh Earl of Elgin, about the beginning of this century...It was said to have been the tomb of Constantine the Great...'

Thus what was once thought to be part of the tomb of the founder of Constantinople became part of the memorial to the restorer of an independent Scotland. In such ways is history kept alive and its rich and never ending tapestry further embroidered.



*Fig 4. Tomb of Robert the Bruce, Abbey Church Dunfermline. Photo courtesy of the Abbey Church.*



hollowed out "Oh non, c'est impossible, nous sommes en Guerre!"

Babs sends a kiss to Grand M. and Grand P. He can walk along famously now.

Goodbye dear dear Mother. I long to hear from you again.

BOUYOUK DÉRÉ, *June 14th 1801.*

MY VERY DEAR FATHER,

You can have no idea of the pleasure your letter and my Mother's from Athens gave us; You know I was always against the Formatori, and I remember you did not admire the idea of them; so I feel the greatest comfort at your approbation of their work. After having been at such an expence it is certainly very pleasing to hear things are done in so superior and masterly a stile; I really now do not feel to grudge them. Your letter put Elgin into the greatest glee, he was quite charmed at your entering so heartily into his cause; your visit would undoubtedly renovate the Artists and make them work with fresh spirit—Elgin is going immediately to set about getting the proper Firman for Minerva's Temple. I shall write you word if it succeeds.

But now my Dearest Father prepare to hear with *extasy* what I am going to tell you! Captain Briggs, Commander of the *Salamine* Brigg has at this moment on board, one piece of Porphyry<sup>1</sup> 4 foot and a half long, & 3 foot and  $\frac{1}{2}$  round.

<sup>1</sup> Porphyry.—The term Porphyry is used in a more general sense nowadays. But originally, and under the designation *Imperial Porphyry* it was applied to a magnificent purple stone, found in only one place on earth, viz. in the *Gebel Dukhan*, or Hills of Smoke, which are situated in a remote part of the Egyptian desert.

It was one of the most highly prized ornamental Stones, and the great distance which it had to be brought over parched deserts and perilous seas must have sent its price up, beyond the reach of all, save the rulers of the Earth. The quarries were worked until about the fifth century, A.D.—*Travels in the Upper Egyptian Deserts.*



William Hamilton Nisbet of Dirleton and Belhaven.

(From a miniature by Henry Bone, R.A., after the painting by Battoni.)



Another, 7 foot and a half long, &  $3\frac{1}{2}$  round.

And another—Open Your Eyes!

Eight feet long, & seven feet round!!!

Pon honor, fact, Dear Sir!

But as no human success is perfect, the *Salamine* Brig being so deep in the water, has been under the cruel necessity—after many fruitless attempts with the aid of the great sheers of the Arsenal—to abandon the idea of taking a fifth piece, being a Column of Twelve foot long and about two foot diameter. This is now in the Dock Yard waiting some other conveyance.

What say you to this, Dearest Dad?

I hope this letter will not be lost, as I shall forget the dimensions, which I wrote down on purpose to send you. But do not think I am so elated with my success as to forget your piece of grey granite, or a piece of the red Oriental Granite, the latter I know not where to find, but I will enquire.

Elgin is going to send off tonight, I have not time to write to my Mother, and indeed I have nothing new to say as I sent a long letter to her the 10th of June and directed it to the care of Lord Minto. I shall do the same with this, as I think he will take care of them.

Hamilton is going to Egypt in the Brig which is to sail, the first fair wind. The Captain will be a great loss for he is a smart pleasant young Beau and an admirer of Caroline. Elgin desires his best love. He will soon write to you, but begs you will excuse him tonight as he is most completely faged; he has been working like a slave for these three days past. All is going on quite comfortably without any Discompostures.

Your dutiful and most affectionate Daughter,

M. ELGIN.

June 14th 1801.

2 o'clock in ye morning of ye 15th of June.