

The Parthenon - that 24-century-old universal symbol of Greece - is literally falling apart. The process is not new, but it has reached the point where definite action must be taken. Especially after the destabilizing effect of the 1981 Greek earthquake, it is obvious that there is no time to lose. Thus, a special symposium was held in Athens this past September to discuss what is now known as "the Parthenon project". Some 130 experts in archaeological

conservation techniques participated.

What these experts learned about the structure was not encouraging: iron clamps used in previous restorations are rusting, expanding and splitting the marble; air pollution has made this rusting increase; and acid rain is corroding the marble blocks as well. The Greek authorities have already been forced to remove the famous Caryatid statues from the Erechtheum (just to the north of the Parthenon) in order to preserve them from further damage, mainly due to acid rain. What, then, can be done for the endangered Parthenon?

The experts' more pressing concern is to stabilize the temple, lest the northeast corner (shifted 3 centimeters by the 1981 quake) collapse. (At present scaffolding has been used to reinforce the area temporarily.) But the project goes far beyond this in its goals: a special crane has been ordered from France which is to be used to dismantle certain sections of the structure block by block. In this way, those destructive rusting clamps will be removed and replaced with clamps of non-rusting titanium (on order from Japan); the sections will then be painstakingly reassembled, with new blocks of Pentilic marble used to reinforce the original stones wherever possible. It is hoped that, in this way, the Parthenon will eventually be more fully restored to its ancient condition.

In this computer-age, it is not surprising that experts have applied modern technology to the project: not only the special crane (which can even be retracted and hidden "during tourist hours") and titanium clamps come into play, but also a highly sophisticated computer-assisted inventory of all the blocks and fragments that lie strewn around the entire Acropolis has made it possible to place roughly 500 of these derelict blocks back into their original positions, thus keeping the use of modern blocks down as much as possible. It is now thought, in fact, that much of the cella (interior sanctuary) wall can be restored, while the colonnade on the eastern front may be completely reassembled. Thus, in the words of journalist Sylvia Diveky, "On completion [of the project], the Parthenon will be closer to its original state than at any time since the 17th century - minus, of course, looted sculptural decoration".

On this final front - the "looted" decoration - the Greek government has also been active recently, but to no avail. It petitioned the British government to return the famous Elgin Marbles (in the British Museum), so that they could be reunited with the culture and the monument from which they came. Not surprisingly, the British government refused, not only in the desire to keep the precious marbles in Great Britain, but also in the recognition that handing the sculptures back would set a precedent for museums all over the world, opening a veritable "Pandora's Box" of international squabbles over artefacts. However, it is unlikely that the Greek government will drop the issue, so one must wait for the next (inevitable) round in the battle.