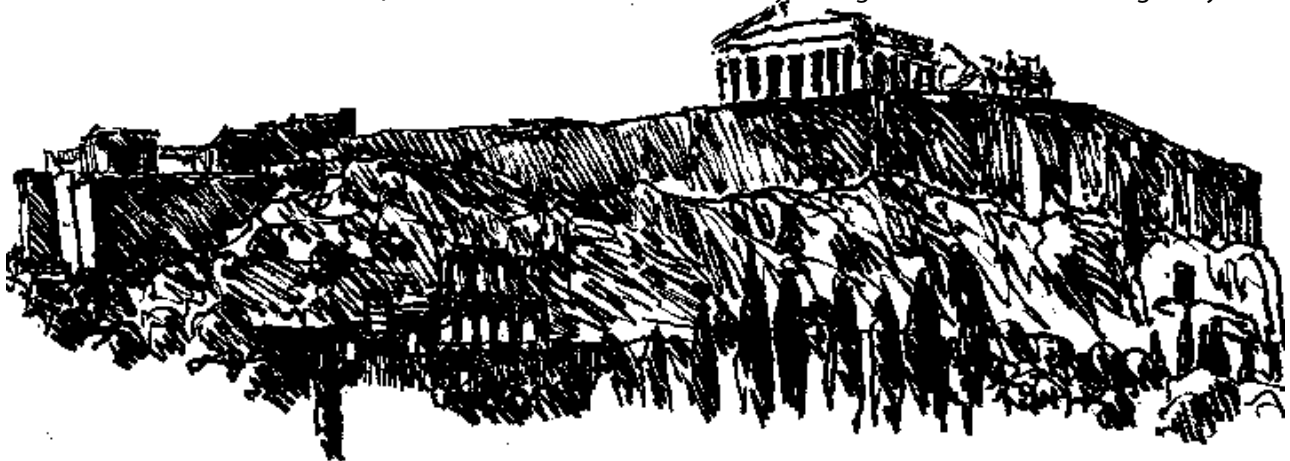


A PARABLE ON AUTHENTICITY

Some time ago in Athens, a meeting took place concerning the restoration of the Acropolis Monuments¹. Naturally, the Parthenon was a central topic. For several decades, the temple has incurred intense debate as to the most appropriate means of maintaining this ruin when confronted with the choice between a careful restoration of selected parts and an actual reinsertion of elements in what is now believed to be their proper positions. Previous restorations are re-established, yet at the same time friezes and metopes are removed from

the positions they have held since the erection of the temple in order to protect them in the museum to be constructed just towards the south of the Acropolis. Instead exact copies are inserted, cut from pentelic marble side by side with the recovered original building stones and fragments which after intense in-depth studies are meticulously put together using the most advanced techniques and modern binders. The numerous discussions concerning these difficult and contradictory problems brought to mind Plutarch's famous "case study" and gave rise to the following essay over



the differing perspectives on history that often appear when we seek to preserve irreplaceable values².

Theseus' Ship in Piraeus

Plutarch's prologue:

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question as to things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.³

I.

In the city of Athens the discussion about the ship's irreplaceable values had been ongoing for many years. Many people, perhaps indeed most people, remembered their parents talking of the ship in Piraeus. It lay by the old quays where, according to the story, it had lain since time immemorial. Its distinct outline and tall mast were visible long before the actual harbour. Many years ago the Athenians had each year sailed to Delos on this sacred ship on which Theseus had been happily returned from the Cretan Labyrinth. Every child in the city knew the tale of this divine journey. Therefore it was simply referred to as the ship of Theseus and was maintained as an icon to the endurance of tradition. During the summer, the children stood on the edge of the quays watching the shipwright taking measurements in order to replace a plank or two of the ship's arched hull. He had been specially selected for the job as he was the best at his craft and when he was done, it was impossible to tell where a new plank had replaced the old one. The new plank then became part of the ship of Theseus. The old one, however, was carried up onto dry land and thrown in a corner of the carpenter's enclosure. Over the years a whole pile of these planks had amassed here. Once they had lent their shape to the ship, but now the children played on them and on all the other refuse that had accumulated

as a result of the shipwright's work.

II.

Some Athenians considered this disgraceful.

These planks were, after all, the very timber that formed the original construction of the ship. They were part of the city's cultural heritage. These people objected to the replacement of old planks and believed that the shipwright's work gradually reduced the ship of Theseus to mere analysis. Granted, it was a tradition stretching back further than anyone could remember, but they believed that the time had come to stop. A single plank or board might be acceptable to keep the ship afloat, but at this stage it was impossible to know whether all the planks had been replaced thus leaving a ship built from timber of which one knew neither the age nor the provenance. Was this any way to preserve irreplaceable values? However, they could not agree as to the exact point at which the ship ceased to be original. Some of the observers were of the opinion that even a single new plank imperilled the ship's historical significance; some felt that this was not the case until over half the wood had been replaced, others maintained that the timber used for repairs should be the same type as the original wood, and should be fashioned in the same manner. Thus the shipwright continued his work and the ship of Theseus was continuously maintained in the manner which many considered must always have been part of Theseus' story.

III.

One day an inspector from the new naval museum passed by the shipwright's enclosure. He saw the planks in the corner, which by now formed a huge heap. He talked to the shipwright, who commented that it was about time he burned the lot, since he needed the space. It had taken the museum no time at all to develop the same kind of storage problems itself, but yet the inspector asked permission to take over the entire pile. The shipwright was quite happy to let him provided he took it all so that he might continue to discard his refuse from the ship on that same spot in the summers

to come.

Shortly afterwards, a full-size hull was set up in the entrance hall of the naval museum. The copious catalogue described it as the ship of Theseus and portrayed it as a unique example of its type. Each plank had been measured and registered just as the shipwright and his predecessors had done it. The inspector of the museum had even hired an architect who had been to the harbour to watch the shipwright at work and familiarise himself with the manner in which every element in the vast stack of historical remains might be assembled into the hull they believed to be the original one. Yet, this failed to entirely satisfy the inspector's ambitions. Analysis instruments and advanced calculations, which had never been part of the shipwright's craft, nor were necessary for its execution, gave rise to dissertations, where both the hull and its separate parts were established in typologies of corresponding ships from distant regions. All this became an esoteric tale about the ship, one that was previously untold, and to which many people, besides the children at the harbour, had difficulty relating. This was partly because of the many significant ships from unfamiliar places to which the local hull might be compared. They now formed part of a past that bore no connection to the voyage for which this hull was apparently built. Yet the inspector had painstakingly set up numerous descriptions and maps of the world at every fragment which left no doubt as to the significant role played by this hull in naval history. Incidentally, the ongoing process described in the inspector's narrative was brought to a halt on the very day the inspector of the naval museum obtained permission to take the shipwright's scrap heap away with him. This was the heap that the children had used as their everyday playground by the ship that still lay moored in the harbour.

III.

One day at the museum, the old inspector retired and a new one was hired in his place. Her passion was museology. With time she became occupied by the manner in which her predecessor had collected the exhibit he had termed the ship of Theseus and which now re-

quired annual maintenance to prevent its decay. During these repairs of the apparently original hull, she came to realise the necessity of instigating further reconstructions, believing it would be more truthful to re-establish the restorations. Therefore, rooms were found in the basement of the museum in which to place the well-intentioned efforts of the earlier inspector and the planks involved. This was done because her investigations indicated that some planks might originate from a repair carried out by Theseus after the launch of the ship. Her reports expressed the opinion that the planks in question, now lying in the basement of the museum, could not be ascribed to the original hull. The wood from which they were made was not authentic, she added in a footnote. In their place she therefore inserted new ones, complete with a little marker on each, in order to ensure that other historians might not be misled. At this stage she attempted to convince the shipwright to change the mast of the ship in the harbour. Winter storms had created a fissure at the top of the mast, which had otherwise remained intact throughout the years. The museum would pay for a copy in return for the original mast. As it turned out, the shipwright had already filled out the crack using a piece of wood, which had originally come from the side of the ship. As the inspector's research progressed, yet more storage space had to be found in the basements. This was rendered necessary by the ever more advanced analysis instruments that the museum was now able to purchase using the entrance fees people paid to see the unique ship. These instruments were able to separate the original wood from that which had been added at a later date. This work, too, inspired discussions among the Athenians as to which relics, according to the museum, might be said to have formed a part of the ship of Theseus, whether it was the numerous fragments that had been removed from the hull and now lay in the museum's basement or those on display in the front hall.

V.

In addition to these four perspectives on how the Athenians might best preserve the irreplaceable memo-

ries of Theseus' voyage, a fifth view on the matter now presented itself. It entailed a proposal to move the naval museum's ship down to the harbour as a replacement for the one that had hitherto been moored at the old quays. This group of citizens felt that the hull belonging to the naval museum was, in any case, closer to the original ship of Theseus than the one that had always lain in that place.

The inspector was not entirely dismissive of this suggestion. She saw the opportunity of establishing a branch of the museum located in the harbour at the shipwright's enclosure. It would express a new museological context for what she imagined would become the ship's identity-forming role in local cultural heritage. Thereby the cohesion between the ship and its enclosure would be demonstrated and the traditional shipwright's craft would be practiced in its maintenance along with the rituals it had given rise to. She even offered to pay for the shipwright's clothing, which was now to be a perfect copy of a set belonging to the museum. However, having tried it on, the shipwright found it too alien to the methods with which he had been trained. The inspector's intention was for the old harbour to re-emerge as the setting for living culture, passing on traditions of the past to the generations of the future. At the same time the basements of the museum could be cleared of the planks that had been exchanged and could now be replaced in the corner from which the old inspector had originally obtained them. Since the shipwright's refuse was now to become part of an exhibition displaying the history of the museum the children would have to find somewhere else for the games they had played there since time immemorial.

However, the inspector's idea of moving her ship out into the harbour gave rise to a great deal of debate. The view was put forward that, in time, the museum's ship would become the same mixture of old and new as the one that was already there. Furthermore the argument went, it was a decisive factor that although the museum ship was launched and moored at the old quays, it would never be possible to claim that it had lain there since the time of Theseus. Therefore many Athenians felt that the museum ought to keep its hull

in the front hall as an authentic memory of the former inspector's outstanding vision. Thus, the shipwright carried on with his maintenance and the children were able to continue their games that had always been part of their parents' story of the ship of Theseus⁴.

Epilogue – as Plutarch might have written it:

Over the years, advocates for various ways of maintaining the ship of Theseus came to me. They felt that I, a writer of history, ought to have an opinion on how best to serve its interests and contribute to its truthfulness. However, I replied that my task was to describe the events that would be the history of tomorrow; no matter what the ship was subjected to and was therefore unable to assist them.

Gregers Algreen-Ussing, Professor, Arkitekt
Institute of Building Culture
The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts
School of Architecture
Copenhagen
gregers.algreen-ussing@karch.dk

Notes

1. 5th International Meeting for the Restoration of the Acropolis Monuments, Athens, 4–6 October 2002
2. An abridged version of this article was previously been published in the journal *Arkitekten*, 11, 2003. Translated by Madden and Maclean Translators, Copenhagen
3. Plutarch's *Lives; Theseus*; XXIII, 1 (John Dryden translation, revised by Arthur Hugh Clough, 1864)
4. Inspired by a discussion carried on in the British journal *ANALYSIS* introduced by Brian Smart in 1972.