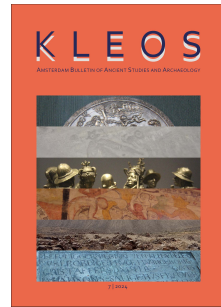




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## KLEOS - AMSTERDAM BULLETIN OF ANCIENT STUDIES AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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Emma M. Payne (2021). *Casting the Parthenon Sculptures from the Eighteenth Century to the Digital Age*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. ISBN 9781350120358.

Lindsay Morehouse

In early 2024, the British Museum saw negative press centred on the Duveen Gallery, the current home of the Parthenon sculptures.<sup>1</sup> These marble friezes, metopes and pediments were created to adorn the top of the Parthenon in Athens and were removed by Lord Elgin in the early 19th century. Recent news stories have revealed the gallery's urgent need for renovation and the controversial nature of staging a fashion show in front of the sculptures. Such press has contributed to the ongoing and contentious discussion surrounding whether the sculptures should stay in the British Museum or be returned to Greece.<sup>2</sup>

E.M. Payne's 2021 book *Casting the Parthenon Sculptures from the Eighteenth Century to the Digital Age* looks at the development and impact of plaster casts of the Parthenon sculptures, which were taken as a way to record and replicate the friezes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Payne's book is an immediate and relevant read, especially in light of these recent events and the ongoing debate. Based on Payne's PhD research at University College London, *Casting the Parthenon Sculptures...* contextualises the practice of creating plaster casts within the history of archaeology and assesses how casts serve not only as documentation of archaeological finds but also as valuable historical objects in their own right. By specifically focusing on the Parthenon sculptures—which were replicated many times, by many artists, and for many purposes—Payne presents a clear case study through which questions of value, biography, and authenticity can be examined and is a study that has the potential to contribute new perspectives to the repatriation discussion.

Chapters one and two take a historical approach to the subject of the Parthenon and its casts. Chapter one—"The Emergence of Fauvel and His Successors"—deals with the role of plaster casts:

**Lindsay Morehouse**

*researches questions of authenticity, heritage, and reception. In February 2024, she received her PhD in Archaeology from the University of Amsterdam, which focused on questions of authenticity and provenance of a group of Late Antique Egyptian Funerary stelae. She holds previous degrees in Classics (BA, Macalester College) and Classical Archaeology (MPhil, University of Oxford). She currently lives in Sweden.*

► [Profile page](#)

<sup>1</sup> Ho 2024; Ruiz 2021; Villa 2024.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Herman 26 September 2023, Herman 03 January 2023.

how they grew in popularity within the Early-Modern study of art history and as study and collection objects linked to the Grand Tour in the 19th century. Chapter two—"Plaster Casts, Elgin and the British Museum"—looks at the history of the Parthenon sculptures, outlining Elgin's missions to Greece and identifying the various methods employed to create the casts. The chapter highlights the impact and influence that such casts had on art history and archaeology in this period, their roles in museums, and how the British Museum in particular has treated and cared for both the casts and originals. Chapters three, four, and five look at modern documentation methods with a focus on 3D scanning. Chapter 3—"Condition Studies and the Role of 3D Imaging"—focuses on the different sets of casts that have been made of the Parthenon sculptures and how they differ from one another. Payne observes that the techniques used to create the casts introduces differences in the final result, as do environmental conditions and human interventions to the originals (both in situ and post-extraction). Chapter 4—"3D Imaging and the West Frieze"—uses the West Frieze as a case study to examine how 3D modelling can be employed in order to learn more about the relationship between the original sculptures that remained in situ and the casts taken in the 18th and 19th centuries (or, the 'indexical nature', p. 159). In the end, Payne's research on the West Frieze—consisting of analyses of 3D modelling data and historiographical research—demonstrates that some deterioration of the original sculptures may have occurred at a different point in the objects' history than previously thought, rewriting the timeline of the original sculptures and emphasising the many actors that have made an impact on them (p.111-114, 124-125, 129). In a similar vein, chapter 5—"3D Imaging and Cleaning the Parthenon Sculptures"—looks at the sculptures that were removed by Elgin and compares them with their cast counterparts. The history of conservation of both cast and sculpture is examined in light of shifting views of authenticity (or, as Payne specifies, 'veracity' and 'accuracy', p. 158), weighing various interventions and how they impact our understanding of the objects. Chapter 6—"An Authentic Source of Evidence?"—provides a more in-depth discussion of the sculptures, cast, and their authenticity. Examining the changing value and perceived significance of casts over time: from documentary to aesthetic.

Payne's study demonstrates how 3D scanning may be employed to learn more about an object's biography: by comparing original to reproductions, one may discover how and when changes have occurred.<sup>3</sup> It may also be used to document

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<sup>3</sup> Gosden/Marshall 1999; Appadurai 1988.

changes going forward: it has the possibility of being a valuable tool used to track rates of future decay (p.128). Payne cautions that 3D scanning also has weaknesses: it is not an objective analysis, and some steps in the process may have an interpretive bias (p.119): for instance, it is not always possible to acquire all necessary data for a scan, and the analysis requires a certain level of interpretation (p. 83-84, 119). Therefore, archival and historiographical research is still essential for understanding the full history of an object, even when such technology allows for new methods of analysis (p.120).

Payne's interdisciplinary examination of the Parthenon casts and sculptures not only leads to discoveries about the sculptures' biography—particularly the timeline of deterioration—but it also raises important questions about authenticity. In some cases, plaster casts may show a more faithful version of the Parthenon sculptures than the originals, since they were created before certain aspects of the originals were damaged (p.79, 81). However, like 3D scanning, the creation of plaster casts is not objective. Artist interpretation plays a role in the appearance of the final product (p.119): in some cases, details may be omitted in the casting process, and in others, details may be added based on artist interpretation or a desire for a more complete look (p.128). Since both original and cast have been influenced by many actors throughout their 'natural life use' (p. 182), it is difficult, if not impossible, to access the 'original' version of a sculpture or to see the 'maker's touch' (p.160). Ultimately, both the plaster casts and the originals are equally authentic and significant (p.183, 186) in their own ways, and "[...] while casts can, in many circumstances, form useful surrogates, it is essential to recognize that they contain additional layers of touch and intervention and are objects in their own right, separate from the sculptures from which they were moulded" (p.129). Therefore, because of the layers of human intervention to both original and cast, the relationship between the sculptures and the casts is one that requires a nuanced vocabulary: distilling the objects down to 'original' or 'copies' (or 'real' or 'fake') does not fully express the meaning and role that the objects have taken on over time (p.183-184).

Payne deals with these complex topics in a largely digestible manner. There is some repetition between various chapters, as Payne introduces the different angles through which the casts might be studied. For instance, both chapters one and two outline the history of the Parthenon sculptures. This repetition is noticeable, but at the same time serves a purpose to introduce the history of both originals and casts respectively. Payne's study is also incredibly detailed. However, in the middle chapters, this may run the risk of being marginally too technical for a general

audience.

The interdisciplinary nature of the study results in a final product that would be of interest to those wishing to know more about a multitude of topics within archaeology, reception studies, and art history. Specifically, this book is a great resource for anyone looking to learn more about possibilities of 3D scanning for archaeological study, object biography, ambiguous objects (forgeries, copies, objects with complex histories of intervention or alteration), histories of archaeological documentation and collecting, and the Parthenon sculptures. What Payne contributes to the latter discussion is an additional perspective and added nuance to the ongoing dialogue about the sculptures. Though repatriation itself is only mentioned briefly (p.29), links are made throughout the study between the casts, class, and nationalism (p. 23, for instance), reminding the reader that the collection, documentation, conservation, and display of archaeological material are not neutral acts. Likewise, Payne's invaluable discussion about authenticity and investigations into the history of conservation and damage to the sculptures inspires the reader to question oft-quoted motivations against repatriation, and to reflect on how the significance of an object can change for audiences over time.<sup>4</sup>

Once popular items in museum collections, the popularity and use of plaster casts saw a decline for many years as value shifted towards 'original objects'. Nevertheless, casts and their role within the history of art, archaeology, and museums have gained increased interest in recent decades both in scholarship and museum practice, and plaster casts are increasingly understood and valued as more than simply copies.<sup>5</sup> Payne's study is an invaluable case study for this. The casts of the Parthenon sculptures were used varyingly as reproductions: for recording purposes, as art objects, as pedagogical tools, as stand-ins for the originals in museums, and as objects for scholarly analysis (and sometimes experimentation) by archaeologists and scholars. Now, thanks to Payne's study, we get a clear picture of the unique value of the plaster casts of the Parthenon sculptures: not just as reproductions to replace the originals, but as authentic and significant objects in their own right.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Herman 26 September 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Frederiksen/Marchand 2010; Born 2002.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Hitch/Fennel 16 June 2024.

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