

The Life and Times of Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin

A talk to The Eltham Society by Ruth Fletcher
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To start our series of lectures for autumn 2009 it was the turn in October for member, Ruth Fletcher to bring us a very interesting account of the man most closely associated with one of the British Museum's prize possessions, the Elgin Marbles. The classical Greek Marble Sculptures removed from the Parthenon by Thomas Bruce in the early 1800s have remained a controversial issue, but how much did we know about the man himself?

Thomas Bruce was born in 1766 and became the 7th Earl of Elgin when he was only five. After a short career in the Army he began his diplomatic career serving as an envoy to Austria and Brussels before being appointed Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople from 1799 to 1803. Like many men of his stature he was influenced by the golden age of the 'Grand Tour' and took a great interest and enthusiasm for the collecting of antiquities.

It was while he was in Constantinople that Bruce secured permission for free access to the Acropolis in Greece, at that time part of the vast Ottoman Empire. The intention was initially to sketch and take casts of the Greek sculptures but this eventually led to the removal of the sculptures in part due to the worsening instability of the region and their future survival.

Those removed sculptures were transported to Britain and purchased by the British Government in 1816 for permanent display in the British Museum. As for Bruce, Ruth described his life after the Elgin Marbles as not successful and always in poor health and forced to live abroad. Financially he was ruined as the purchase price of the Marbles by the British Government was well below his expectations. He died in Paris in 1841. Although the issue of whether the Elgin Marbles should be returned to Greece remains controversial to this day a highlight of any visit to the British Museum is to view them.

David Sleep