From Caesarea to Athens: Greek Revival Edinburgh and the Question of Scottish Identity within the Unionist State

Author(s): John Lowrey

Published by: Society of Architectural Historians

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/991701

From Caesarea to Athens
Greek Revival Edinburgh and the Question of Scottish Identity within the Unionist State

JOHN LOWREY
University of Edinburgh

The description of Edinburgh as “The Athens of the North” is one that gained common currency in the early nineteenth century and still proudly graces the city’s promotional and tourist literature. It is the purpose of this paper to analyze what it was that Edinburgh was trying to achieve by presenting itself in this way and why the Athenian image was both relevant and important. Of course, the happy combination of topography and cultural achievement that ultimately underpins the accolade is well known. The idea that one of the great European centers of the Enlightenment—the city of David Hume, William Robertson, and Robert Adam—might pursue a claim as a cultural capital, is perhaps unsurprising. Indeed, the earliest references connecting Edinburgh and Athens are based mainly on the intellectual distinction of the city. In January 1762, the Scottish artist Allan Ramsay wrote from London to his friend Sir William Dick of Prestonfield about recent developments in Edinburgh:

The setting up an Academy for Riding is an excellent design. A few more such institutions will render Edinburgh the Athens of Britain; where instead of the awkward and monkish pedantry of the old-fashioned Universities, young gentlemen will be initiated into the principles of useful knowledge and at the same time exercised in all those liberal accomplishments which qualify a man to appear in the distinguished spheres of Life. The new Library proposed to be established by the Royal College of Physicians must be likewise a great advantage to the learned as well as to such as are desirous to become so; and joined to the Advocates Library, gives an advantage which this opulent City of London is hardly able to exhibit.1

Although the establishment of a riding academy may seem a rather tenuous basis on which to compare Edinburgh with Athens, the general thrust of Ramsay’s comments reflects an awareness of the enormous changes that had taken place in the cultural life of the city in the eighteenth century. The focus here is on both the intellectual and the gentlemanly aspects of education and is part of a general interest in improvement and the polite arts that was so much part of Enlightenment Edinburgh.2

Ramsay and Dick were, of course, natives of Edinburgh, and we might expect them to view their city in a favorable light. However, Edinburgh enjoyed a very high reputation for its intellectual achievements in this period, perhaps most famously celebrated in the observation by Mr. Amyat, “King’s Chemist, a most sensible and agreeable Englishman,” who stated, “Here I Stand at what is called the Cross of Edinburgh [i.e., the Mercat Cross], and can, in a few minutes take fifty men of genius and learning by the hand.”3 More importantly, for the purposes of this paper, such accomplishment suggested to at least one outside observer that Edinburgh and Athens could be appropriately linked. In July 1761, Alexander Carlyle wrote to Gilbert Elliot of Minto in London that the Irish writer Thomas Sheridan had told him that “Edinburgh is the Athens of Great Britain, . . . and we believe him.”4
Edinburgh, therefore, was a civilized and progressive city, but its connections with Athens were also based on the fact that, topographically and in its general planning, it reminded returning grand tourists of Athens. A number of authors have traced this connection back to the same year as Ramsay’s observations, to 1762, with the claim that James Stuart remarked on the similarity in the preface to *Antiquities of Athens*. In fact, there is no mention of Edinburgh in the first edition of Stuart and Revett’s book, and it seems fairly clear that the topographical connection was first made in the early nineteenth century. There are two important sources here. One, dating from 1818, is the Cambridge geologist and antiquarian Edward Daniel Clarke, who wrote that the relationship between Athens and the Piraeus was somewhat similar to that between Edinburgh and the port of Leith: “Edinburgh exhibits a very correct model of a Grecian city and with its Acropolis, Town, and Harbour, it bears some resemblance to Athens and the Piraeus.”

The second source is a remarkable individual named Hugh William Williams, an Edinburgh landscape painter who undertook a grand tour of Italy and Greece in 1817/18 (Figure 1). On his return he embarked on a series of projects over the following ten years that reflected his tremendous enthusiasm for all things Greek. These included a two-volume work, *Travels in Italy, Greece and the Ionian Islands* (1820); an exhibition of watercolors in Edinburgh in 1822, and, as a spin-off from that, a further publication, *Select Views in Greece* (1827–1829), all of which earned him the nickname “Grecian” Williams.

As a landscape and topographical artist, Williams was very sensitive to connections between the landscapes of Scotland and Greece. Like Clarke, he made the general connection, in the combination of mountains, plain, sea, and acropolis, not only between Athens and Edinburgh, but also between Athens and Stirling, a city that sits in the same river valley as Edinburgh and also has an acropolis at its core: “… there is a considerable likeness between Athens and Stirling as seen from the Sacred Way. … From every other point, it bears a striking resemblance to Edinburgh, especially as seen from the Braid and Ravelston Hills” (Figures 2, 3).

Williams is a key figure in the establishment of Edinburgh’s Athenian identity and, indeed, is credited with coining the phrase “The Athens of the North.” Not only did he influence people through his work, he also reflected ideas and developments in Edinburgh in the crucial decade of the 1820s. It has been correctly pointed out that at the time Edinburgh began to develop its Hellenic pretensions, it had little architectural justification for doing so. We now think of Edinburgh as one of the great neoclassical and Greek Revival cities, but in 1762, when Ramsay was writing, the New Town had yet to be designed and little else of any consequence had been built. Even by 1820, although the New Town was well advanced and growing fast, the major Greek Revival buildings in the city had yet to be built. One of Williams’s contributions was to move the debate on from the general, topographical connections between Edinburgh and Athens to the much more specific and architectural. In the conclusion to his 1820 book, he wrote:

... the leading persons in this city are still contemplating magnificent works, and are ever ready to give the preference to superior designs, with the view of giving a classical air to the modern Athens! Is it too much, then, to expect that a facsimile, or restoration, of the Temple of Minerva, may yet crown the Calton Hill as a monument, to proclaim to distant ages not only the military glory, but the pure taste which distinguishes our country in the present? Is it too much to expect, that an enlight-
ened patronage may call up genius, kindred to that of ancient times, and may direct our native talents to efforts, similar to those which gave splendour to the Age of Pericles?12

In this, Williams was involving himself in an important debate in Scotland at this time about the siting and nature of a new National Monument, which is discussed in more detail below. For the moment, however, the important points are, first, that the modern Athens was to stake its claim in the most direct and obvious way possible, by building (or, as Williams says, “restoring”) the Parthenon in the Scottish capital; second, the new Athens was to have a new acropolis. Just as Edinburgh had shifted its emphasis from the ridge of the Old Town to the gently shelving landscape of the New Town, so the new acropolis was to move from the Castle Rock in the Old Town to the Calton Hill on the east side of the New Town, between the city and the port of Leith (Figure 4). This proposed building and this location were to prove crucial to the development of the Greek Revival in Edinburgh and in Scotland as a whole.

Williams’s enthusiasm for Greece was shared by many of his fellow citizens, and the period between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the early Victorian period saw a flourishing of Grecian fashion that found its expression not only in the fine Greek Revival architecture that was erected in Edinburgh and other Scottish cities, but in many other aspects of life as well, affecting everything from hairdressing to tea sets.13 In this, there are strong echoes of the enthusiasm for the French goût Grec of some fifty years earlier, although a major difference, through what has been called some “imaginative wishful thinking,”14 was that the fashion of the 1820s was not only a matter of individual

---

**Figure 2** Hugh William Williams, Athens from the east, c. 1817

**Figure 3** Thomas Shepherd, Edinburgh from Craigleith, from Thomas Shepherd, Modern Athens . . . (London, 1829)
taste but became a question of the fundamental identity of the city. Thus, when John Britton collaborated on a series of views of Edinburgh with the engraver Thomas Shepherd, they were published in 1829 as *Modern Athens! Displayed in a Series of Views: Or, Edinburgh in the Nineteenth Century*. The emphasis was firmly on what was portrayed as the modernity of the project; Edinburgh was to be the new Athens, the cultural, literary, intellectual, and, increasingly, the architectural replacement for the Periclean ruin. There is even the implication that Edinburgh had surpassed Athens and that the replacement was in some ways superior to the original. This is found, almost inevitably, in "Grecian" Williams's description of the topography of the two cities, when he writes that the view of Athens from the sea "is extremely like Edinburgh from the Firth of Forth, though certainly the latter is considerably superior."15 Moreover, the image was not simply related to the locality and the architecture but also to the people. Members of Edinburgh's elite society were the "Modern Athenians" whom Benjamin Crombie celebrated in a series of publications in the 1830s and 1840s.16

This idea of the modernity of Edinburgh, and its relationship to Athens, is worth considering in a little more detail, not least because at the very time that Edinburgh was discussing the appropriateness of the Athenian analogy, Greece was embarking on a bloody war of independence that led eventually to the creation of the modern Greek state. Architecturally, one result of that in the 1830s and later was the remodeling of Athens in a conscious quest for an appropriate identity that would be both "equal with the ancient fame and glory of the city and worthy of the century in which we live."17 There is very little indication, however, that the motivation in Edinburgh had anything to do with contemporary events in Greece, far less the architecture of the new Greek capital, which was being built at much the same time as Edinburgh's Grecian buildings. There is no doubt that there was awareness, sympathy, and even active support for the Greek cause, but the cause itself was not the motivation behind Edinburgh's quest for identity.18 Edinburgh's concept of Athens was rooted in the Enlightenment tradition of Scottish historiography and in an enthusiasm for the classical past.

Historiography had been a major obsession of the Scottish Enlightenment. David Hume's famous dictum, "This is the historical age and we are the historical people,"19 was a reference to the importance of history in Scotland's attempts to understand itself in the years following the Union of Parliaments with England in 1707. One result of this was what has been termed "conjectural history," that is, a historiography that was based on the idea of the progress and development of peoples, which could be understood by cross-cultural reference, allowing the lessons of one people in a particular time to inform our understanding of a different people in another time. For example, the historian John Logan explained the move from barbarity to civilization in the following terms:

The first institutions take their origins from violence and disorder. The depredations and robbery committed in barbarous times naturally lead to leagues and confederacies, for common safety and defence. Such an union among the five nations of Canada gave them an ascendant over one half of America.20
That kind of historiographical method makes the idea of interpreting Edinburgh in terms of Athens quite understandable, and, given the city’s record of achievement from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, the idea that Edinburgh had actually supplanted Athens and become the “modern Athens” also begins to make sense. This, of course, brings us back to the real modern Athens. The implications of Edinburgh’s claim, occasionally made explicit by people like Williams, was that modern Edinburgh was superior to modern Athens and the worthy successor to the Periclean heritage. In this, Edinburgh fitted into the general British attitude of the time. Certainly, one author has specifically identified Williams, who was so important to the Athenian pretensions of Edinburgh, as someone who was entirely unsympathetic to the plight of the modern Greeks: “He brought back from his travels the single judgement that he was proud to be British, and the wish to erect a facsimile of the Parthenon at Edinburgh.”

It could be argued that, historiographically, at least, the idea of identifying Edinburgh with Athens was anything but modern because it was based on a historical method, conjectural history, that belonged firmly to the eighteenth century. However, it is one of the main strands of the argument presented here that the idea was indeed based in the eighteenth century and was the culmination of tendencies that can be traced back at least sixty or seventy years. The new history of the early nineteenth century was somewhat different, more antiquarian and even more romantic. This antiquarian approach also had an architectural significance in that it underlay the emerging Scots Baronial style of architecture. The relationship between Scots Baronial and the Greek Revival is considered below, and the main line of argument is developed to show that, despite being historiographically redundant, the Greek Revival in general and the notion of the “Modern Athens” in particular continued to have relevance.

Not everyone was comfortable with this conceit. Lord Cockburn, one of the great observers of the customs and manners of the citizens of Edinburgh in the first half of the nineteenth century, dismissed the idea as “a piece of affected flattery,” and English writers, or, more specifically, London writers, were particularly scathing about this upstart city’s pretensions. Robert Mudie, who visited Edinburgh at the time of George IV’s visit in 1822, launched a vituperative attack on what he saw as the failings of both the “Modern Athens” and its citizens, covering everything from architecture to literature. Thomas Love Peacock, writing in 1829, was even more dismissive in his Crotchet Castle, in which one of the characters says: “You call yourself Athenians while you know nothing that the Athenians thought worth knowing, and dare not show your noses before the civilised world in the practice of any one art in which they were excellent. Modern Athens sir! The assumption is a personal affront to every man who has a Sophocles in his library.”

However, this mixture of unease, ridicule, and metropolitan pique has not seriously affected the Athenian myth in Edinburgh’s history, and this is at least partly because of the buildings that were erected in the city in the first half of the nineteenth century (most of which had not been built at the time many of the criticisms were made). Because, whatever the original justification for linking the city with Athens, it is now seen as a reflection of Edinburgh’s importance in the history of the Greek Revival. Architectural historians tend to use the epithet “Athens of the North” as a convenient term to describe Edinburgh in the period when most of its great classical monuments and public buildings were erected. The nonarchitectural background is acknowledged and can easily be accommodated. The topographical similarities can be interpreted within the early-nineteenth-century interest in the Picturesque, which is undoubtedly a major factor in the Greek Revival in Edinburgh. The intellectual background can be seen in many ways as a perfectly reasonable reflection by Edinburgh on the glories of its Enlightenment heyday. So convenient has this tag become, and so accurately does it now denote a particular period in Edinburgh’s architectural history, that terms like “Modern Athens” and “Modern Athenians” are quite commonly used by contemporary authors, even in the context of buildings and artifacts that are not, in any obvious sense, Greek Revival.

There is, however, a case for analyzing a little more closely what the city of Edinburgh was saying about itself, consciously and unconsciously, by adopting an Athenian identity, just as there is a case for questioning the motivation behind the Scottish Greek Revival as a whole. The peculiar affinity of the Scots with the Greek style has frequently been commented on, although this has simply been explained by a combination of “the chilly northern temperament,” on the one hand, and religious conviction (i.e., anti-Gothic Presbyterianism), on the other. Quite what the connection is between the chilly Calvinist north and the cradle of Western civilization in the sunny Aegean is never explained.

A rather more analytical approach has been taken by some American scholars, notably Roger Kennedy, who has drawn a useful distinction between the Greek Revival in the United States, in which he stresses the political importance of the style to the newly emerging nation, and that in Scotland, where, he argues, the style had no political significance:
Though Edinburgh delighted in calling itself “the Athens of the North” throughout the Revolutionary Age, Scotsmen, including scholars, are apt to look baffled or even annoyed when asked about the political implications of Greek forms. There do not seem to have been any... The filaments of ideas tying the American Greek Revival to that of Scotland—the only nation in which it was as emphatic, conspicuous, and long lasting as in the United States—were not political.30

While it is certainly true, however, that the Greek Revival in Scotland did not have the same political overtones as it did in America, and that the connections between the two were not political, there is certainly nothing either baffling or annoying to this Scotsman in the suggestion that both the Greek Revival in general and the idea of Edinburgh as Athens in particular held some kind of political significance, albeit a different one from that of the Greek Revival in the United States. Indeed, it will be argued that it is precisely its political significance that gave the notion of Modern Athens its relevance and its right to claim modernity.

As our previous discussion has shown, “Modern Athens” emerged as an idea in the early nineteenth century, in the years immediately following the defeat of Napoleonic France. That political context is extremely important for Britain as a whole but it came to have a particular significance for Scotland and for Edinburgh. The post-Napoleonic era was the period when the British state emerged as the great nineteenth-century superpower. Therefore, far from the associations of political liberty, republicanism, and revolution that have been associated with the American Greek Revival,31 the Greek Revival in Scotland takes place in the context of empire and conquest. The defeat of France was, at one and the same time, the suppression of a dangerous revolutionary idea and of an emerging rival imperial power. Recent British historical writing has presented this period as a vindication of the Union of Parliaments in 1707. It was in this period that the idea of Britain as a United Kingdom came together, forged in the heat of battle in the many wars against the French in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.32 The most recent architectural history of this period also presents the Greek Revival and Romantic Classicism in general within the context of the Union and of British imperialism.33

To suggest, however, that the political significance of the Greek Revival was connected with Britain’s imperial ambitions is insufficient to explain either why the Greek Revival was so important in Scotland or why Edinburgh became so firmly identified with Athens. The important issue here is not so much whether Greek Revival architecture in Scotland had a specific political symbolism in particular buildings, but fundamentally it was a question of establishing an identity within the political realities of the British state. That question became focused on Edinburgh, as the capital of a nation that had lost its statehood, and within the city it became focused on a particular location, namely, the Calton Hill, the acropolis of the Modern Athens and, in some senses, a national Valhalla for Scotland. At an even more detailed level, the debate centers around one proposed building, the National Monument to the Scottish Servicemen killed in the Napoleonic Wars. The decision to build a Scottish monument, in addition to one in London, was taken in 1816, when James Gillespie Graham designed a triumphal arch. A broadly Roman theme was also adopted by Archibald Elliot in his design for a monument incorporating a church (Figure 5) and ultimately based on the Pantheon. Apart from the huge ambition of this design, it may have been compromised also by the general similarity of its plan to that of the double church of Les Invalides in Paris. By 1821, after debate about both the site and the nature of the monument itself, it was decided to build a replica of the Parthenon on top of the Calton Hill. The building was founded in 1822, and an Act of Parliament was passed in 1823 allowing the work to go ahead and setting up the Royal Association of Contributors to the National Monument of Scotland, whose committee was to oversee the project. The architects were C. R. Cockerell, the acknowledged expert on the Parthenon, and W. H. Playfair, who went on to be one of the most important and prolific of Scottish Greek Revival architects. The outcome of the project was, in most assessments, a failure; by 1829 the building was abandoned with only twelve columns standing (Figure

Figure 5 Archibald Elliot, design for National Monument, Edinburgh, 1819
6), and the picturesque “ruin” has stood ever since as testimony to the “pride and poverty of Scotland.”

The question of identity we are concerned with here is one that has been examined from time to time, with particular reference to this building. A complicating factor is that, at the very time Edinburgh was pursuing its Hellenic vision, another, in many ways more potent, identity myth was being created. Early-nineteenth-century Romanticism, represented by the writings of Sir Walter Scott, encouraged a much more specifically Scottish sense of identity through the study of history, landscape, and literature. In architectural terms, Scott has some responsibility for a shift away from the Romantic Classicism of the Greek Revival to medieval and ultimately Scots Baronial styles of architecture, which he pioneered at his house of Abbotsford, in the Scottish Borders (Figure 7).

Before considering the detail of the Hellenic vision of Edinburgh, therefore, it is important to examine this alternative and consider some of its implications for Edinburgh as Athens and the problem of reconciling a Scots Baronial identity with a Grecian one.

One approach to this, and perhaps a useful starting point, is not to attempt to reconcile them. The Baronial Revival, in general, came later than the Greek and substantially replaced it in the second half of the nineteenth century. At first, following on from the example of Scott at Abbotsford, it affected country house architecture, but gradually it developed into a vigorous Victorian urban style. Nowhere was this more evident than in Edinburgh, where, from the 1850s onward, the Scots Baronial style was seen as the appropriate model for the improvement of the Old Town, the original medieval burgh that had degenerated into slums since the construction of the New Town for the upper classes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

It is simplistic, however, to argue that one identity replaced another in the nineteenth century. The most important point is that both visions of an appropriate historical identity existed side by side, and in Scotland as a whole the Greek Revival persisted until well into the second half of the century, alongside the Baronial Revival. To explain this, we need to examine what they had in com-
mon. It was not the case that the Baronial Revival sprang from a Scott-inspired Romanticism in contradistinction to the classical revival. In fact, although its roots may have lain in the Enlightenment, the Greek Revival was also an aspect of the Romantic Movement, and in a number of important respects, the Scots Baronial and the Greek Revival can be seen to have much in common. One area that was particularly relevant in Edinburgh was the contribution each made to the Picturesque qualities of the city. In the early nineteenth century there was something of a reaction against the great formality of the original New Town layout (Figure 8). The focus of this concern was the architectural development of the Calton Hill, which was also the site of some of the most important Greek Revival buildings in the city. Greek Revival architecture, especially in combination with the unique topography of Edinburgh, was a very satisfactory vehicle for notions of the Picturesque. Similarly, in the Old Town in particular, Scots Baronial was also seen as an appropriate architecture, in terms of its associations and its visual qualities, for that particular setting. The two styles could therefore exist alongside one another and were thought, each in its way, to contribute to the Picturesque qualities of the city. Significantly, however, some of their effect was considered to derive from their contrast, and therefore we rarely find them mixed together in the same location. Broadly speaking, and with a few exceptions, Greek Revival was associated with the New Town and Scots Baronial with the Old Town. There were good symbolic reasons for this, relating to the contrast between new and old, enlightened and unenlightened, but there was a very clear understanding that it was this sharp division between the classical new and the medieval old that greatly enhanced the Picturesque qualities of the city. Two examples will suffice to demonstrate this understanding.

The first is in the work of William Henry Playfair, who in 1822 built the Royal Institution on a key site at the foot of the Mound, the earthen ramp that connected the elevated Old Town to Princes Street, the principal street of the New Town (Figure 9). When the opportunity came to expand this building in 1832, a rival architect, William Burn, argued that Playfair’s original building should be demolished and reerected in a more prominent position, higher up the Mound. Playfair’s response was made in terms of the Picturesque:

I should have thought, indeed, that to such a position only a lofty building would have been suitable; and that in architectural form and character it ought to harmonise with the picturesque objects with which it would be brought into immediate combination. That same sense of the distinctiveness yet interconnectedness of the two parts of the city and their relationship with the Picturesque is also found in one of Edinburgh’s most famous, yet most critical, commentators, Robert Louis Stevenson, who commented on how, on the one hand, the New Town “spread its draughty parallelograms . . . on the opposing hill” (i.e., opposite the Old Town) and yet Old Town and New Town “react in a picturesque sense, and the one is the making of the other.”

New and old, classical and medieval, Greek Revival and Scots Baronial are all, therefore, aspects of the Picturesque in Edinburgh and were appreciated as such in the nineteenth century. Moreover, there was an even stronger idea that linked both Greek and Baronial revivals. The Greek Revival was partly based on the idea that Greek architecture represented the original or primitive source of all classical architecture. A similar concern with the primitive underpinned the Romantic interest in Scotland. Scott’s image of Scotland as a noble, simple, and primitive land was rather similar to the idea of Greece evoked by the neoclassical interest in Greek architecture. Both were in some senses concerned with a primitive yet Golden Age of their respective cultures, and both had their separate architectural styles that evoked that age. In this way the Scots Baronial Revival and the Greek Revival were obviously distinct and yet had elements in common. The primitive histories were also imagined to have been linked through the epic poetry of Ossian, a supposed ancient Gaelic bard who had been “rediscovered” by James Macpherson in the 1760s and whose works sparked a debate linking ancient Scottish Highland culture with other oral traditions, particularly that of Greece, Homer specifically. The works of Ossian are sometimes seen as the beginning of the Romantic interest in Scottish history and therefore are a link with Scott’s later works. They are certainly an aspect of that very eighteenth-century progressive view of history discussed earlier, and thus this concern with the primitive and the ancient, along with the notion of a progressive civilization, links Scotland with Greece and provides a common base for the Greek Revival and the Scots Baronial.

Perhaps most important of all, for the purposes of this paper and the argument that the Greek Revival did have a political context in Scotland, is that these two architectural revivals are also linked in that, arguably, they are two aspects of a political identity reflected in architecture. To explore this notion further it is necessary to return to the National Monument proposal of 1822 and consider it in relation to two other nineteenth-century proposals and their interpretation by Scottish historians.

Among the great edifices of the Scots Baronial are a
number of monuments. These include the monument to Scott himself, in Edinburgh, by George Meikle Kemp (1840–1846) in a Gothic style derived from Melrose Abbey (Figure 10), and the monument to William Wallace, in Stirling (1863–1869), a fantastic Scots Baronial confection by the Glasgow architect J. T. Rochead (Figure 11). Both of these are in some senses “national monuments” and therefore provide us with a significant contrast to the Grecian proposal of 1822. To some authors, this represents a confident assertion of Scottishness and a rejection of an essentially alien (i.e., Greek) culture as a measure of Scottish identity. One author sees the failure of the National Monument project as a convenient symbol of the rejection “of that cultural timidity which has made Scotland ‘almost afraid to know itself’ since the Union of Parliaments in 1707.”\(^{40}\) Another sees the whole National Monument episode as a somewhat timorous attempt to portray a North British identity in deference to the imperial power of London and England: “The National Monument on Calton Hill is essentially a symbol of England/Britain’s ‘glorious past’—but an attempt was made to foist it on to Scotland’s heritage.”\(^{41}\)

The argument that Scotland could better explore its identity through its own history, architectural and otherwise, is, in some ways, obvious and incontestable. However, the situation is not as clear-cut as these two authors suggest. First, although the unfinished National Monument is a

---

**Figure 9** W. H. Playfair, Royal Institution, Edinburgh, from Thomas Shepherd, *Modern Athens* . . .

**Figure 10** George Meikle Kemp, Scott Monument, Edinburgh, 1840–1846

**Figure 11** J. T. Rochead, Wallace Monument, Stirling, 1863–1869
tempting symbol of the end of an era, it is an equally convincing symbol of the exact opposite because the National Monument certainly does not represent the end of the Greek Revival in Scotland but arguably the beginning. Almost every Scottish Greek Revival building of any importance was built after the abortive Scottish Parthenon. The combination of Cockerell’s archaeological knowledge, Playfair’s fastidious attention to detail, and the Edinburgh masons’ superb handling of the Craigleith stone used in its construction produced a small and incomplete but nevertheless exact and correct model of Parthenon Doric, which was there as an inspiration to any architect who wished to use it. Moreover, since arguments about its future raged for most of the rest of the nineteenth century, and even into the twentieth, it could be argued that in its incomplete state it has provided a focus for debate about Greek Revival architecture and, indeed, about appropriate architecture for national buildings.  

The idea that what made it alien was not so much that it was Greek but that it was English is also open to question. While there was official toleration for the path that Edinburgh chose for itself—for example, through the passing of an Act of Parliament to allow subscriptions to be raised across the country and the empire—there is no evidence of active encouragement. In a letter produced by the Committee of Subscribers on Christmas Day 1821, to encourage donations, it was noted that “we are by no means without sanguine expectations that assistance may be given by Government, which has contributed magnificently to a National Monument for England.” Such expectations were to be disappointed; financial support for the Edinburgh project seems always to have been left to the Scottish Committee rather than to the government. On the other hand, although various schemes were proposed for London, and very large sums of money were discussed in Parliament, nothing was ever built; the closest London ever came to a memorial was Trafalgar Square. The single event that most clearly indicated official approval for the Edinburgh monument was the foundation ceremony, planned for George IV’s state visit to Scotland in 1822. The official literature is very careful to state that this was carried out under his auspices, but the monarch, in fact, was very conscious by his absence, preferring to go shooting on the nearby estate of one of his Scottish noblemen.

In none of this is there any evidence of a government, or English, attempt to “foist” anything onto Scotland; indeed, we have already seen that there was a certain amount of resentment—among sections of the London literati, at least—at Edinburgh’s presumption. It is certainly true, of course, that the identity Edinburgh was claiming for itself, and by implication for Scotland, was, strictly speaking, foreign or “alien.” It was also closely connected with ideas about the unity of Great Britain as an imperial power. However, one of the problems with the notion of the Greek Revival as something “un-Scottish,” arising from an inferiorist lack of confidence in native culture, is that it ignores the essential duality of Scottish identity after 1707. To be both British and Scottish is the essential condition of Scottish national character, and, in terms of nineteenth-century architecture, the coexistence of Greek Revival and Scots Baronial Revival architecture for most of the century is an expression of this duality; both express identity. The concern of the Scots was to be both Scottish and British, and the British identity, at a time of growing imperial power, was one the Scots were quite happy to embrace. The story of the National Monument itself is an example of this outlook in that, at the very time Sir Walter Scott was bringing about his revolution in Scottish culture, when, for example, he was exhorting the painter David Allan to look to Scottish history for his subject matter, he was perfectly content to subscribe to the Athenian view of Edinburgh and was party to the decision to make the Scottish National Monument a copy of a Greek temple. Similarly, Britton and Shepherd’s Modern Athens has many plates of historical architecture from around the city, but the juxtaposition is not simply of the medieval past with the Grecian present, it also includes the Baronal present since Abbotsford is one of the images of the Modern Athens presented to the readers (see Figures 7, 9).

The inferiorist thesis, therefore, is open to challenge, and in the rest of this paper, by looking at the early-nineteenth-century situation in the context of the eighteenth rather than the later nineteenth century, it will be suggested that, far from adopting an inferiorist position, Edinburgh’s identification with Athens was actually an expression of a growing self-confidence that developed in the years after the Treaty of Union and culminated in the early nineteenth century. It was essentially an issue of identity, about the way that Edinburgh tried to portray itself, or even define itself, in relation to its past; in relation to its recent achievements; in relation to Scotland, England, Britain, and the empire; and, perhaps most important of all, in relation to London. Unsurprisingly, in an eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century context, much of the language (including the architectural language) of this debate was classical—sometimes Roman and sometimes Greek.

To demonstrate this, four main areas will be discussed. First, we will consider the proposals to improve the city published in 1752 by Sir Gilbert Elliot of Minto. Second, we will review James Craig’s plan for the first New Town of
1767, to see what it can tell us about the city's image of itself; third, we will consider the contribution of Robert Adam to the city of Edinburgh; finally, we will return to the National Monument and the other buildings on the Calton Hill.

In the short-to-medium term, the Act of Union of 1707 was a bad thing for Edinburgh. After political power, in the form of a Scottish Parliament and government, was lost, the aristocratic elite moved to London. Although the Union was unpopular across most of Scotland, the Edinburgh mob that tried to prevent the treaty being signed perhaps had more cause than most to voice their objections because of the loss of status and economic power that resulted for their city. It took until about 1750 before Edinburgh felt secure and optimistic about the benefits of union, while at the same time seeing an opportunity to appeal to Scottish patriotism with the idea that the country needed an appropriate capital.

In 1752, Sir Gilbert Elliot of Minto published a pamphlet entitled Proposals for Carrying on certain Public Works in the City of Edinburgh. This important document contained some of the key ideas for the improvement and regeneration of the city that dictated developments for the rest of the eighteenth century. Most important of all, of course, was the proposal to extend the boundaries of the city and lay out new streets to the north and south—in other words, to build the New Town. Apart from the actual proposals themselves, however, the pamphlet is important because of the analysis of Edinburgh's problems that it put forward. The key issue here is the unfavorable comparison it drew between Edinburgh and London and, by implication, between Scotland and England.

The first section of the pamphlet makes the connection between the prosperity of a nation and the beauty, situation, and amenity of its capital. In this connection it deals with the contrast between Edinburgh and London. London has every advantage: “Even upon the most superficial view, we cannot fail to remark its healthful, unconfined situation, upon a large plain, gently shelving towards the Thames.” Elliot goes on to praise its beautiful streets and squares, its bridges and great public buildings, including the two houses of Parliament and the Law Courts. One of the major benefits of all of this is the economic well-being, not only of London, but of the whole of South Britain (i.e., England). Edinburgh, by contrast, is presented as a city of horrendous congestion, with poor amenities and almost entirely lacking in the great public buildings we would expect a capital city to have. On the other hand, unlike some other authors, Elliot did not write off the situation of Edinburgh, beyond the medieval walls that still encompassed it: “The healthfulness of its situation, and its neighbourhood to the Forth, must no doubt be admitted as very favourable circumstances.” The area to the north of the city, with a large area of land gently sloping down to the river, is remarkably similar to the site of London as described by Elliot, and the implication is clear that Edinburgh, by expanding beyond its historical boundaries, could enjoy a situation similar to that of London, with many of the benefits that accrued to the English capital. Moreover, just as the beauty and prosperity of London brought prosperity to the whole of South Britain, so the development of the Scottish capital would bring benefits to the whole of North Britain. Edinburgh, therefore, would become a capital again, but firmly within the context of union and therefore offering no kind of political threat to London.

Proposals therefore is very much a document of the Union and very concerned with the issue of identity—especially that of Edinburgh. It is an identity for the city and the nation (Scotland) and, of necessity would have to be negotiated in relation to London and England. It is therefore worth considering some of the context in which the pamphlet was produced.

Part of this context was a degree of Anglicization of Scottish culture, which affected many aspects of Scottish life. Probably the most famous view of Scottish culture and of Scotland's relationship with England in the post-Union era is that propounded by Samuel Johnson. His observation that the highway to London was the most welcome sight a Scotsman ever saw is not only a criticism of what he considered the backwardness of Scotland, but a reference to the way London was seen by many Scotsmen, namely, as a place of opportunity and a standard against which developments in Scotland were measured. This, of course, was precisely how it was used by Elliot in his Proposals. Add to this Johnson's general view of Scotland as a place on the very fringes of civilization, in which the inhabitants spoke a barbarous tongue, and it is clear that he had a bleak, if rather Anglo-centric, view of Scottish culture.

Implicit within this was the idea that England represented a superior civilization and that the Anglicization of Scottish culture was in reality a spreading of civilization from south to north. In the context of the emerging British empire, and among an educated population who were trained to think in terms of the classics, the resonance with Rome and the idea of Romanization must have been quite strong. To strengthen that, there was the immediate Scottish background in the years before Elliot produced his Proposals. The end of the Jacobite rebellions, after the Battle of Culloden in 1746, led to a period of pacification and repression in the Highlands of Scotland. One of the most impor-
tant figures in this was General William Roy, who, from 1747, was involved in a huge military survey of Scotland. It was part of a wider process that involved the construction of military roads, bridges, and forts all over the country, culminating in the construction of Fort George, a vast and intimidating fortress near Inverness.

However, while Roy was responsible for the first-ever ordnance survey, he also indulged his antiquarian interests, studying and excavating a number of Roman or allegedly Roman sites, and often marking them on his Scottish maps.\textsuperscript{55} So Roy, on the one hand, was excavating and describing the relics of a past imperial civilization, and, on the other, was part of a program of bridging rivers, cutting and laying roads, building forts, and doing all the things a great Roman general would have done to a conquered people, who would subsequently enjoy the benefits of Roman civilization. In other words, the post-Jacobite settlement can be seen as a kind of process of Romanization. That image of the Highlands is one that would have greatly appealed to Lowlanders, and the proposed new city in Edinburgh could also be seen as a symbol of this spread of civilization.

This brings us to our second area of discussion, which is closely related to the first: the design of the New Town itself (Figure 12). A great deal has been written about the competition to build the New Town and on the sources of its plan, although the classical aspects of the idea and the plan have been little discussed.\textsuperscript{56} In some ways, we might expect large projects like the New Town to be influenced by notions of Romanization. Given the authority that ancient, particularly Roman, achievement was given, it was natural for people to look to that example when faced with large projects, whether legal, educational, or architectural. It was not seen as strange to look to ancient Rome for ideas and inspiration on how to deal with modern problems. In 1719, for example, the minutes of the Edinburgh town council subcommittee charged with the responsibility for improving the water supply are suddenly enlivened by a paper from Lord Provost Drummond and City Architect Alexander McGill about building a Roman aqueduct between Edinburgh and the southern suburb of Comiston.\textsuperscript{57}

That general respect for antiquity and the lessons it might hold is, however, given an added force in the context of mid-eighteenth-century Britain, for the reasons just discussed. Moreover, the concept of Romanization could also be linked specifically to urban form. For example, in a conscious attempt to “civilize” the region, and specifically following Roman precedent, the Commission for the Forfeited Estates tried to set up a number of colonies of retired soldiers in various places across the Highlands. The idea, therefore, that the villages and the New Town can be seen as part of a Romanizing or civilizing impulse is not so very far-fetched, and the grid-like formation of their plans can be related to Roman cities and even Roman camps, in which there was great interest at this time. Of course, the main efforts at controlling the Highlands fell not to farming veterans but to real soldiers in real forts, like Fort George, which has also been quite plausibly suggested as a source for the plan of the New Town.\textsuperscript{58}
So, in the Proposals and in the plan of the New Town, it can be argued that Edinburgh negotiated for itself an identity and a role that drew on Roman imperial ideas and allowed the city to walk a line between improvement and civilization, on the one hand, and Anglicization and conquest, on the other. Edinburgh was to be the Lutetia (Paris) or Caesarea of the North; it was certainly no Athens. As the eighteenth century progressed, however, and as the New Town project gathered pace, a more confident and assured vision of the city was established.

Before returning to Edinburgh’s relationship with Athens, it is worth pausing to consider the contribution of the greatest architect active in Edinburgh in the eighteenth century. In the work of Robert Adam, we find a much more European, neoclassical, and, indeed, Roman vision compared with anything that had been built in Edinburgh before. His contribution was crucial to the establishment of a new and confident self-image for the city. Adam was consistent in his demand for unity and monumental classicism. He also displayed an almost Romantic streak that allowed him, first, to imagine that Edinburgh was really Rome, and second, to attempt to exploit the peculiar topography of the city to a far greater degree than any of his contemporaries and in a manner that looked forward to the early-nineteenth-century Picturesque and Greek Revival.

His famous proposals for South Bridge show a Romantic, classical vision of Edinburgh as the Rome, rather than the Athens, of the North (Figure 13). He created, or imagined, a great Via Triumphalis, with an arch and aristocratic insulae lining a route that linked his university buildings in the south with a version of the Pantheon (Register House, the Scottish National Archive) in the north. At the northern end of this route there was a clear view from the viaduct of the North Bridge toward the Calton Hill, on which he erected what was to be the first of many monuments to great men, the monument to David Hume in imitation of a Roman tomb.

Although this vision was only partly realized, the idea of Edinburgh that it portrays is one that confidently asserts, primarily, the city’s intellectual preeminence as one of the great cities of the Enlightenment. It is also symbolically significant because it appears to reverse Johnson’s famous maxim: Adam’s great route is concerned with the idea of entering the city from the south, not with leaving it. Edinburgh, not London, is now envisaged as the destination.

However, this neoclassical city that Adam imagined for Edinburgh was not to be Rome, and although his supreme confidence, his sensitivity to the unique topography of the city, and his emphasis on monumental, classical, urban design were all key influences on the subsequent development of the New Town, Edinburgh’s identity within a Unionist and imperialist British state could not be Rome; once again, the Scottish capital would have to defer to London.

All of which brings us back to the Calton Hill and the decision to build the National Monument. The general background to this has already been discussed, and the idea that Edinburgh’s identification with Athens should be seen as the culmination of a tendency that goes back to the time of the Union has also been outlined. Within that imperial context, and in the context of the classical, mainly Roman, imagery that was frequently used, some of the arguments that were aired at the time of the debate over the National Monument are particularly relevant.

One author, Archibald Alison, a member of the committee of contributors responsible for overseeing the construction of the monument, writing in 1819, set the entire project within the context of the Union and the empire. He considered two areas: first, the justification for building a monument at all, and, second, the rationale for copying the Parthenon.

Briefly, Alison’s first argument held that history shows that great advances in arts, sciences, and philosophy are made in small states, where “the human mind arrives at its greatest
perfection,” and “the freest scope is afforded both to the grandeur of moral, and the brilliancy of intellectual charac-
ter.”64 The examples he cited were Athens and the Italian cities of the Renaissance. The undeniable problem that these states faced, however, was the danger of annihilation at the hands of much stronger, barbarous foes. Incorporation within a larger unit would avoid that problem but could lead to stagnation and decadence.65 In the British context, the danger was that Edinburgh might become a Venice, Lyons, or Toulouse—a provincial town, supported only by the occasional influx of gentlemen.”66 The way to avoid this, the argument ran, was an arrangement whereby the smaller state would be able to maintain a degree of independence within the larger while enjoying the various advantages in trade, defense, and other activities that their incorporation would bring.67

In 1819, this was the key argument in justifying a separate National Monument to the War Dead for Scotland. It was felt that a degree of independence would be good for Edinburgh, for Scotland, and for England, because it would maintain a certain meaningful rivalry between the two nations that would be creative and would benefit the new imperial nation as a whole. The monument would do this, not simply by acting as a focus of national pride in the exploits of the Scottish military, but because it would be, in effect, the “Westminster Abbey of the North,”68 meaning that Scotsmen of genius would be commemorated there and would provide an influx of talent and genius—dead, it is true, but inspirational nonetheless.

The next question is, of course, Why Greek? We have considered some of the fundamental reasons, but others were also given. These ranged from the association of Greek Doric, especially in the minds of the classically educated, with the “severe virtues and manly character of war”69 to the effect that such a pure model would have on the public edifices of the city (and possibly the country).70 There were even arguments at this time in other sources that the original was past saving and that Edinburgh, the new Athens, was the most appropriate place to build a replacement. Relative to this notion is the idea, already mentioned in connection with Hugh “Grecian” Williams, that the Calton Hill proposal was about the “restoration” of the Parthenon.71 The benefits of this would include the inspiration the building would provide to architects and craftsmen. It would also be instructive to the population at large who would come to muse upon the military prowess of Scottish arms as well as the achievements of the other great individuals who might be commemorated there. Moreover, Edinburgh’s claim to cultural supremacy would be boosted, as people flocked to the city from elsewhere in order to study “the rules of taste” that the building would come to represent. One of the effects of all this, the author hoped, would be that Edinburgh’s elite would choose to stay in the city, preventing, in other words, the provincialism that he had identified as an inherent danger of the Union. In this respect, the author, once again, can be seen to belong to a long line of Edinburgh writers whose starting point was to provide in Edinburgh a counterweight to the attractions of London. Elliot’s 1752 Proposals and the whole New Town project fall into this category, and it was also an important motive for those behind the National Monument project. Once again, Edinburgh’s identity was to be defined mainly in relation to London.

It should be stressed, however, that the identity that is envisaged is quite different from that in the mid-eighteenth century. The key point here is that the building of this edifice and the benefits that would flow from it would effectively mean that Edinburgh had renegotiated its role within the United Kingdom; it would become Athens to London’s Rome. London would be the seat of imperial power, but Edinburgh would be the cultural capital:

And thus while London is the Rome of the empire, to which the young, and the ambitious, and the gay, resort for the pursuit of pleasure, of fortune, or of ambition, Edinburgh might become another Athens, in which the arts and the sciences flourished, under the shade of her ancient fame, and established a dominion over the minds of men more permanent than even that which the Roman arms were able to effect.72

So, in one building, Empire, Unity, and Individuality are all subsumed. There is a subtext, however, specifically one that comes from the Roman author Horace: “Captured Greece defeated her rough conqueror and brought the arts into rustic Latium.”73 In other words, by assuming the identity of Athens, the implication was that Edinburgh and Scotland were superior to London and England. Scottish achievements in the Enlightenment period gave the city the right to claim that it was now the civilizing influence within Great Britain and the empire. This, of course, is the exact opposite of the mid-eighteenth-century. Jacobite-threatened period we started off with, and, for the first time, although Edinburgh was still defining itself in relation to London, it was claiming an identity that in some ways usurped part of the role of the capital. The Greek Revival was an important tool in marking Britain’s claim not only as military power but also as cultural power. The cultural superiority of Greek artistic achievement over Roman was clearly understood and was a basic foundation of Greek Revival theory. As early as 1762, in the publication of the first volume of Antiquities of Athens, James Stuart had outlined this idea very clearly, quoting the famous line from Horace given above.74
Clearly, for an emerging superpower, it was important to assert cultural credentials as well as military and industrial power, and, therefore, identification with Athens was an important part of the imperial project. The acquisition of the Elgin Marbles and the building of the British Museum in London firmly established that city’s Athenian credentials, and even the proposal to copy the Parthenon as a war memorial was first suggested for London. Edinburgh’s claims impinged directly upon this image, which perhaps partly explains the resentment felt by some London commentators.

In Edinburgh, the National Monument was the key building in representing a new role for the city, and the Calton Hill became its new acropolis. However, the vision represented by George Meikle Kemp’s lithograph (see Figure 4) was never realized, and it could be argued that the fragment of archaeological precision that was erected was not enough on its own to change perceptions either of the hill or of the city. For that to happen, other buildings had to compensate for the failure of the National Monument project, and, from the point of view of the Greek Revival and the idea of the hill as acropolis, the key building was Thomas Hamilton’s Royal High School (1825–1829), which is not only an important Greek Revival building in its own right, but also was deliberately designed to combine with the National Monument and thereby enhance the idea of the acropolis and Athens (Figure 14).

Hamilton’s building has been recognized almost since the day it was opened as one of the great buildings of the Greek Revival. Hamilton had never visited Greece and therefore was reliant on published sources for his detailed design. However, an indication of his mastery of the material and of his originality as an architect can be seen in the way that he avoids the obvious clichés of the Greek Revival, even though he uses some of the obvious sources. He was certainly aware of the context in which he was working and produced a design that was functionally excellent and stylistically appropriate to the building’s purpose and to the emerging symbolic themes of the hill. That this was part of his task seems clear from the Lord Provost’s speech at the foundation on 28 July 1825:

We trust, also, that instead of deforming this much admired hill, the building proposed to be erected will form one of the finest pictures in the scene, and will accord well with the natural beauties of the place, and with the other edifices which are soon to be raised in the vicinity.

Hamilton was certainly successful in achieving this, and it is almost impossible to assess his building without considering it in relation to the National Monument, which was rising at the same time. The High School functions as Propylaea to Cockerell and Playfair’s Parthenon. This is suggested partly by the approach from the Old Town, which involves
a steep climb up the hill to the school, with the Parthenon as the apparent ultimate goal beyond (Figure 15). This same idea is also symbolized by the approach from street level; the portico is elevated and has to be reached by a slightly indirect, steep climb.\(^7\)

Hamilton has also cleverly orchestrated his sources so that the hill can be interpreted in terms of agora and acropolis; that is, the High School represents the agora, and the National Monument, the acropolis. The relevant sources here are the Theseion, taken from Stuart and Revett, for the portico of the school, and the generic type of the stoa, which is represented by the colonnades across the front of the building. Every agora had a stoa, and the Athenian agora also had a temple to Hephaestus—the Theseion. There is, therefore, an explicit Athenian link, which gives this functional building a very important role to play in the interpretation of the building above, the hill as acropolis and the city as the new Athens.

These two key buildings provided a focus for subsequent development on the hill. Despite the fact that many perfectly functional buildings were erected there, including housing and prisons, the Calton Hill came to assume the air of a national Valhalla as a number of important monuments were erected on the site.\(^7\) Not all of these are Greek, although some of the most important ones are. These include Thomas Hamilton’s monument to the poet Robert Burns, directly opposite the Royal High School (Figure 16). This is a typically inventive response to a common archaeological source. Hamilton used the choragic Monument of Lysicrates, a standard source from volume 1 of Stuart and Revett, and turned it into a circular temple that sits on the south side of the Calton Hill, overlooking the Old Town in the valley below, with Arthur’s Seat forming a dramatic mountainous backdrop. One of Hamilton’s major concerns in this has been fully to exploit his picturesque site, and he has clearly been inspired in this by the example of the Temple of Vesta in Tivoli. Hamilton was no doctrinaire Greek Revivalist, and his building is a very clever combination of a standard archaeological Greek source with a well-known Roman example that sits in a rather similar site.

Playfair’s monument to Dugald Stewart, built in 1832 on the west side of the hill, responds to the site in a similar way, although in this case the architect has stuck closer to the scale and proportions of the original building but has eliminated its solid core entirely (Figure 17).
If the Calton Hill was the center for Greek monuments in Scotland, other building types in the Greek style spread all across the country. It was used for Presbyterian churches as a style unsullied with Roman and pre-Reformation connotations; it was used in buildings of authority, like court buildings (in Glasgow) and customs houses (in Greenock and Leith). Grecian school buildings proliferated; in Edinburgh alone, there are, in addition to the High School, Edinburgh Academy and John Watson’s, both austere Doric buildings by William Burn but lacking the dramatic site and composition of Hamilton’s building. Greek was also considered suitable for cultural buildings. Playfair had been able to indulge this interest from 1821 in the Royal Institution building, but from 1832 he was able to expand this building with a much more generous Doric portico and a full peripteral temple treatment. This was followed, at the very end of his career, with the National Gallery of Scotland, directly behind the Royal Institution building (Figure 18). Finally, at least one area of that intellectual prowess that had originally justified Edinburgh’s Athenian pretensions was celebrated by significant Greek Revival buildings: by the early nineteenth century, Edinburgh was a renowned center for medical studies, and both the Royal College of Surgeons and the Royal College of Physicians had new buildings erected that drew on forms and motifs from the Greek Revival. Playfair built Surgeons’ Hall on a site in the south of the city (Figure 19); its Erechtheion-Ionic portico seems to have some debt to the portico of the Royal High School in the way direct entry through the columns is blocked and access instead is through the side entrances and behind the columns. The physicians used the ever inventive Hamilton himself, in 1844, to build their new headquarters among the sober classical, domestic architecture of Queen Street, in the New Town (Figure 20). Here, a fairly austere façade, with architectural decoration drawn
from Greek archaeology, is enlivened by another standard-issue Stuart and Revett source, the Tower of the Winds, dramatically reworked into a suitably impressive entrance for what was a rather lavish public building.

To conclude, then, the idea of Edinburgh as the “Athens of the North,” despite its undeniable incongruity in some ways, was related to the city’s attempt to find an identity for itself within the British imperial state. Accusations of cultural timidity are open to question, and what has been presented here is the suggestion that the project should be judged against the background of the eighteenth century and the loss of independence and capital-city status that Edinburgh had endured, and in that context it can be shown to have been a confident assertion of importance and achievement, appropriate to the new imperial age. Although the reasons for linking Edinburgh with Athens were manifold, the focus of this idea came in the early nineteenth century, when a particular failed building project combined with a remarkable site to concoct an identity for Edinburgh that it has never lost.

On the Calton Hill, by the 1840s, an architectural
assemblage pulled together key themes and ideas of the previous century. In a strange mixture of building types, ranging from an observatory to a prison, along with innumerable monuments to great individuals, the location was concerned with education and science, with crime and punishment, with literature and politics, with philosophy and religion. It was concerned with the placement of the city in time and space, through the construction of an observatory in 1818 and the establishment of a base for the trigonometrical survey of 1815. It was a reflection of the history, ancient and modern, of Edinburgh and of Scotland and, in some senses, a summary of the achievement of the Age of Enlightenment. As such, it can also be said to represent Edinburgh’s image of itself in that period. This was rather different from what it had been a century earlier. Its aspirations were no longer to be merely a lonely, northern outpost of an imperial civilization, but the very fountainhead of that civilization—no longer Caesarea, but Athens.

Notes
This paper is based on an exhibition prepared by the students in my honors class, Edinburgh’s Calton Hill, A Capital Site, which took place in December 1997 in the Matthew Gallery, University of Edinburgh. I am grateful for the efforts and researches of all of those students, whose work has proved invaluable. In addition, I am grateful to the University of Edinburgh Faculty of Social Sciences for providing funding for the preparation of this paper; to Kirsty Burrell, who assisted with additional research; and to Alice Crossland, the department librarian, for assistance with plates and with proofreading.

7. Eileen Harris, British Architectural Books and Writers 1556–1783 (Cambridge, 1990), 439–450. This lists a number of subsequent editions running through until 1922. None of those available to this author had any mention of Edinburgh, although it is possible that some editions do make the connection. However, even if this is the case, it merely strengthens the case for the nineteenth century as the period when the similarities between the two cities were particularly noted.
10. Alistair Rowan, "The Athens of the North Exposed," Country Life 26 October 1967, p. 1052. According to this source, the phrase was first used in his Fairs of Greece (1827–1829). This information is also given by Joseph Mordaunt Crook, The Greek Revival, Neoclassical Attitudes in British Architecture, 1760–1870 (London, 1972), 104.
14. McKeen, Edinburgh, 149.
18. Active support for the Greeks was coordinated through the various

Figure 20 Thomas Hamilton, Physicians’ Hall, Edinburgh, 1844
Greek Committees. The most important one was in London, but the ear-
liest was actually founded in Edinburgh. See Christopher Montague Wood-
19. Quoted by David Daiches, "The Scottish Enlightenment," in David
Daiches, Jean Jones, and Peter Jones, eds., The Scottish Enlightenment
on the Governments, Manners, and Spirit, of Asia, reprint of 1781 and 1787
editions, with an introduction by Anthony Sher (Bristol, 1995), 52–53.
22. Sher, Church and University, 317 (see n. 4).
23. Forbes Gray, ed., Memorials, 174 (see n. 5).
and Things in the Scotch Capital, by a Modern Greek (London, 1825).
25. McKean, Edinburgh, 171 (see n. 13).
26. See, for example, Angus Macdonald, "The Athens of the North,"
28. See, for example, Ian Gow, "The Northern Athenian House," Rassgna
64, no. 4 (1995): 40–47.
29. J. Mordaunt Crook, Greek Revival, 104 (see n. 10).
30. Roger Kennedy, Greek Revival America (New York, 1989), 5.
31. Ibid., 190.
32. The idea that the Union was cemented by years of conflict with France is
33. Miles Glendinning, Ranald MacInnes, and Aonghus MacKechnie, A
History of Scottish Architecture, From the Renaissance to the Present Day (Edin-
34. Quoted from a letter of Playfair's by Alexander John Youngson, The
35. This is explored in the exhibition O Caledonia! Sir Walter Scott and the
Creation of Scotland, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, 7 May–17 October
1999 (catalogue available on CD-ROM).
36. The first clear expression of this opposition to the grid of the New
Town, with an appeal for a more sensitive approach to urban planning, was
made by William Stark in Report to the Right Honourable the Lord Provost,
Magistrates and Council of the City of Edinburgh, . . . on the Plans for Laying out
the grounds for Buildings between Edinburgh and Leith (Edinburgh, 1814).
38. Robert Louis Stevenson, Edinburgh: Pictoresque Notes (1878); quotes
from Edmund Gosse, ed., The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson (London,
1906), 295–296.
39. James Macpherson published various fragments of Gaelic epic poetry
between 1760 and 1763 that were supposedly the work of an ancient Celtic
bard, Ossian. They were fakes.
40. Frank Walker, "National Romanticism and Architecture," in George
Gordon, ed., Perspectives on the Scottish City (Aberdeen, 1985), 129. Walker
was quoting Shakespeare, Macbeth, 1.1.64.
41. Graham Morton, Unionists-Nationalists. Governing Urban Scotland,
1830–1860, Scottish Historical Review Monographs Series, no. 6 (East Lint-
on, 1999), 184.
42. It has, at various times, been suggested as the basis for the National
Galleries of Scotland and even a national parliament building, the latter as
recently as 1997.
44. National Library of Scotland, Ms. 638.
45. Up to £400,000 was estimated by the Treasury, although Parliament balked
at this in the present state of the country and envisaged something in the
region of £100,000, Hansard, 31, 1816, 102 (Commons), 30 April 1816.
46. Report on foundation by the "Royal Association of Contributors to the
National Monument of Scotland" (Edinburgh, 1822), 4.
47. Mentioned by Robert T. Skinner, "National Memorial, Scotland's 'Dis-
grace', The Architect's Letters," The Scotsman (Edinburgh), 3 December
1930.
48. O Caledonia! (see n. 35).
49. Scott sat on the committee and was a signatory of the document referred
to in n. 44.
51. Gilbert Elliot, Proposals, quoted in detail by Youngson, Classical Edin-
burgh, 4–12 (see n. 34).
52. Ibid., 5.
53. Samuel Johnson. A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland, 1775, letter
54. For a discussion of Johnson's view of Scottish culture in relation to the
image presented by Elliot in his Proposals, see James Lawson, "Civilisation in
47–55. For the significance of the Anglicization of the Scottish language, see
James G. Basker, "Scotticism and the Problem of Cultural Identity in Eight-
teenth-Century Britain," in John Dwyer and Richard Sher, eds., Sociology and
56. Youngson, Classical Edinburgh, chap. 4 (see n. 34). More detailed analy-
sis can also be found in M. K. Meade, "Plans of the New Town of Edin-
Fraser, eds., James Craig 1744–1796: The Ingenious Architect of the New Town of
Edinburgh' (Edinburgh, 1995), chap. 3.
57. Edinburgh City Archive, Sederunt Book of the Committee for manag-
ing the Malt Tax . . ., 28 May 1719, 58–59.
18–25.
59. Caesarea was the name given to a number of Roman colonial cities, established
either by generals and emperors to satisfy the demands of army veterans or by
dependant kingdoms seeking favor from Rome. An example of the latter is the
city of Caesarea in Judea founded by King Herod in the first century B.C.
26–33.
61. Iain Gordon Brown, "David Hum's Tomb: a Roman Mausoleum by Robert
62. Alison was the son of the famous Edinburgh associationist philosopher
of the same name. Of course, such a philosophical background also made it
quite easy to imagine Edinburgh as Athens. The idea that Edinburgh's
Athenian identity is a culmination of eighteenth-century concerns with clas-
sical identity is well summed up in the most modern interpretation of the
younger Alison's career, in Michael Michie, An Enlightenment Tory in Victo-
rian Scotland: The Career of Sir Archibald Alison (East Lothian, 1997).
63. Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine 5, no. 28 (July 1819): 377–387. Alison
returned to this topic, writing in a similar vein in "Restoration of the
64. Alison, Blackwood's, 377.
65. Here the author cited Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, "The Patriot," who
was one of the most vociferous opponents of Union in 1707, foreseeing
precisely this danger.
66. Alison, Blackwood's, 379.
67. In the late twentieth century, similar arguments were put forward as
part of the case for Scotland having its own devolved Parliament within the

156 JS AH / 60:2, J UNE 2001
United Kingdom. This was established in May 1999.

68. Alison, *Blackwood’s*, 380. This suggestion is made by a number of authors in the 1819/20 period, although none of them used this actual phrase.

69. Ibid., 385.

70. Ibid.

71. Letter to the Lord Advocate on the "Restoration of the Parthenon," *Scott’s Magazine*, February 1820, pp. 1–7, from "A Traveller."


74. Stuart and Revett, *Antiquities*, vol. 1 (1762), i–iv (see n. 6).

75. National Library of Scotland, Ms. 638, 2–3, printed copy of letter to the *Times*, Paris, 17 April 1817, recommending the Parthenon as a suitable model for a war memorial in London.

76. Sir Archibald Alison would have disagreed with this analysis, arguing that the monument was complete in the sense that it complied precisely with the builder's contract, and, more importantly, that it was so unique and faultless that it provided "the finest restoration of Grecian architecture which the British Islands can exhibit, and has contributed to introduce that pure and simple taste by which the edifices of Edinburgh have since been distinguished"; Archibald Alison, *Some Account of my Life and Writings. An Autobiography* (Edinburgh and London, 1883), 220.


78. There is also quite a strong similarity between the composition of Hamilton's centerpiece and Le Roy's published reconstruction of the Propylea, which has similar flanking pylons to the main portico; Julien-David Le Roy, *Les Ruines des plus beaux monuments de la Gréce* (Paris, 1758).

79. It has never really lost this quality, and even some of the functional buildings have been subsumed within a greater symbolic whole. For example, in the twentieth century, it became associated with government and aspirations to self-government. As early as 1908, there were suggestions that the incomplete National Monument should be turned into a national parliament. In the 1930s, administrative devolution resulted in the construction of Saint Andrew's House, the main government headquarters in Scotland. In the 1970s, the Royal High School itself was converted for use as a parliament building in the expectation that devolution would be achieved. This did not finally happen until 1997, by which time the building and the hill had become important nationalist as well as national symbols, and it is widely believed in Scotland that this is the main reason why the government did not select Calton Hill as the site for the new Scottish Parliament building, which is currently being built in the Old Town of Edinburgh.

**Illustration Credits**

Figures 1, 2. National Gallery of Scotland
Figures 3, 7, 9, 15. Edinburgh University Library
Figures 4–6, 16, 17. Royal Commission for the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland
Figure 8. Patricia and Angus MacDonald
Figures 10, 11, 18, 20. University of Edinburgh, Department of Architecture Library
Figure 12. National Library of Scotland
Figure 13. John Soane Museum, London
Figure 14. Joe Rock
Figure 19. Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh