

HELLAS ESSENTIALIZED: ANTIQUITY, THE GREEK CRISIS, AND POLITICAL CARTOONS IN THE GLOBAL MARKETPLACE

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“Wars, greed, corruption, political shenanigans, terrorism, infighting and intrigue. Should be a great year for us.” (quoted by Martyn Turner in his book *The Noble Art of Politics*, 1996)

Given the current state of world affairs, political cartoonists—practitioners of the so-called “art of ill will”—must surely find their plates brimming with possibilities, not least with the offerings served up by the recent Greek crisis. Indeed, the current economic woes in Greece have created a perfect menu for political cartoonists: the reach of the disaster is global, the country provides well-known, easily recognized images that encapsulate its national identity, and the world eagerly seeks to assign blame for the economic mess.

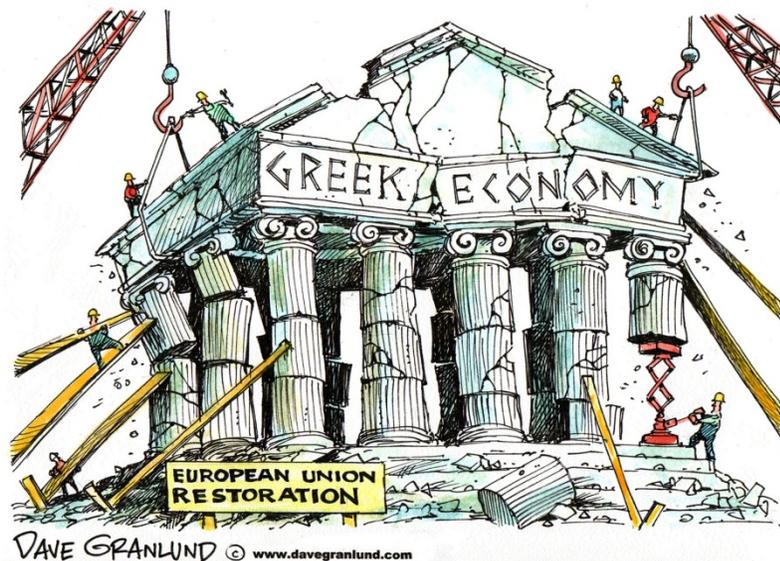
As an archaeologist who works in Greece, I found myself wondering whether classically derived images were repeatedly being chosen to satirize the current situation and, if so, how Greek identity was crystallized in those single-frame narratives. After all, the study and interrogation of Greek identity has often focused on the modern deployment of Greece’s antiquity; archaeological remains and ancient mythological images are omnipresent in modern Greece, comprising a major part of its symbolic and cultural capital.

My exploration, primarily through the Western press and social media, unearthed a small portfolio of ancient images frequently used by cartoonists in the global marketplace. Since my search focused (and continues to concentrate) on the Western media, the perspective is that of the outsider, not the insider, looking at Greek identity, its links to the current crisis and the country’s archaeological heritage. Whether Greeks and the Greek press are portraying themselves in a similar fashion is the subject for another discussion.

What became clear as I researched the topic was that the country’s classical heritage, which has long been associated with notions of elegance, high style, influential architectural

styles, powerful traditions of western intellectual thought, and the roots of democracy, was being set loose from those moorings. A very different picture of Greece and its past was taking shape.

Not surprisingly, the Acropolis takes front and center in many of these recent political cartoons. Those artists who select the Parthenon as symbolic of Greece and its place in the current economic crisis tend to portray the building in one of three modes: crumbling or falling, in disrepair but shored up by restoration, or in state of complete collapse. Within those three perspectives, a host of particulars fill the page, depending on the intended message of the artist. In one cartoon (**Fig. 1**; Dave Granlund, PoliticalCartoons.com; April 12, 2010) the Parthenon—prominently labeled as a stand-in for the Greek economy—is under restoration.

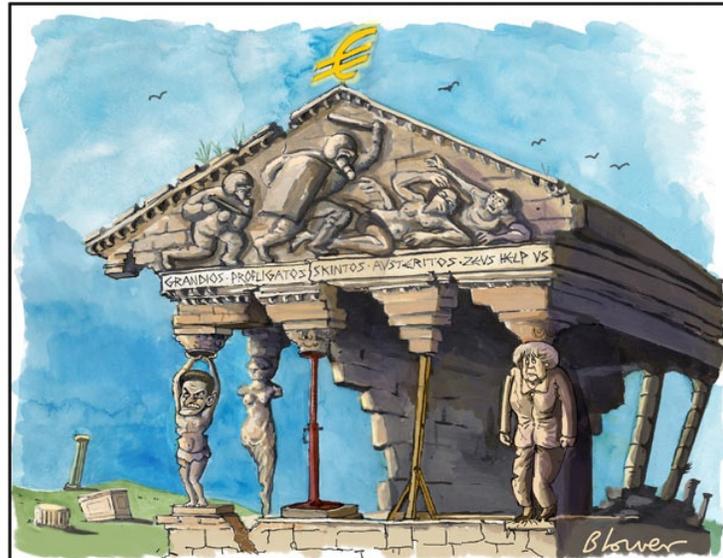


A sign mimicking company placards often posted in front of construction projects alerts us to the presence of the European Union as the ersatz company that is valiantly trying to rebuild Greece to a new level of financial stability. Although cranes struggle to hold up the roof and pediment, with workmen enlisting the help of jacks and wooden struts, the ongoing cracking of the structure and slippages in the columns are almost audible. Even with the help of the EU, restoration seems a losing battle. Comparable messages are broadcast by a series of other cartoons, but with a slight twist. In one, the columns of the Parthenon—which have stood tall for centuries, withstanding the ravages of time, war, and politics—are replaced by Greeks asking for handouts from an oblivious, rich American tourist. In another (**Fig. 2**; Arend Van

Dam, PoliticalCartoons.com; March 25, 2010) the columns are replaced by weary European taxpayers , who strain to stand one atop the other, holding up the upper structure of the building while the Greeks revel with excesses of food and drink in the pediment.



Images of Merkel and Sarkozy as stand-ins for the Parthenon columns are a common trope and one cartoon (**Fig. 3**; Patrick Blower; Daily Telegraph) published in the summer of 2011 shows not only Sarkozy and Merkel propping up a crumbling Greek temple, but a pediment with Greek riot police beating protesters, who have marched against the austerity bills. A phrase in fake Latin running across the lintel entreats: “Grandios Profligatos Skintos Austeritos Zeus Help Us.”



As a visual metaphor for the leading roles played by Sarkozy and Merkel in constructing the bailout, the cartoon may also be suggesting that they are complicit in the Greek government's violence against the demonstrators.

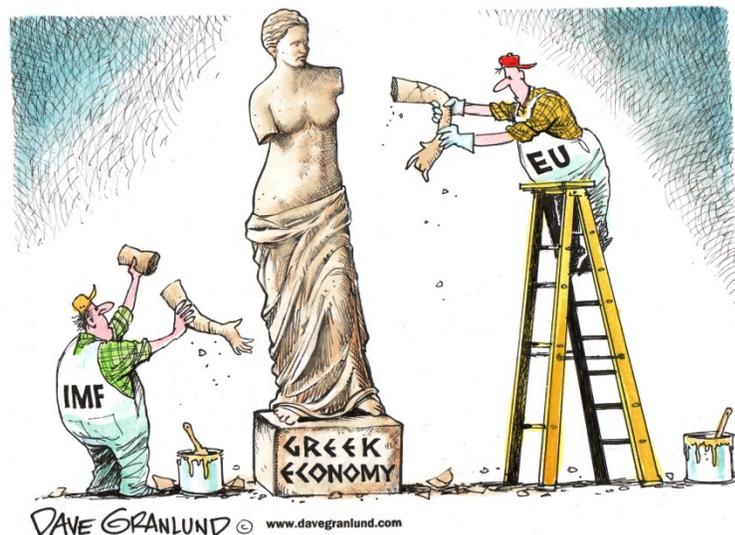
Other cartoonists depict the Parthenon “For Sale,” sometimes in the manner of the QVC Shopping network. One example depicts the seller as a hapless Greek who is not only willing to sell the building but deliver the purchase! A variant of this theme portrays a guard at the British Museum standing in front of the “Elgin Marbles,” and holding a phone. Looking at the presumed Director of the Museum, the guard states: “It’s Mr. Papandreou. How much would we offer for the rest of the Parthenon?” In some ways, these series of cartoons represents the ultimate insult to the Greeks, forced to sell the most precious symbol of their cultural identity, the very roots of their global Hellenism.

When we move to other images, the selection tends to include the Discobolus, Venus de Milo, a few easily recognized deities and super heroes, and the Trojan horse. The Discobolus, long associated with the athletic ideal of heroic nudity, is usually portrayed in two forms: fit and trim, but cracking into pieces under the weight of the country’s economic mismanagement, symbolized by the Euro as the discus, or as a bloated and out of shape athlete (**Fig. 4**; Martin Sutovec, Slovakia; February 16, 2010).



In both versions the message is clear: Greece is no longer fit to run its economy. The country, its people, and its heroes have become either too weak or completely indolent.

Cartoonists have found the Venus de Milo, symbol of divine beauty, a particular source of inspiration. In many of these depictions the goddess's arms have apparently been discovered and are being refitted onto the statue. In one cartoon (**Fig. 5**; Dave Granlund, PoliticalCartoons.com; April 28, 2010) it is the IMF and EU that are gluing on her arms in order to make the goddess (read the country) whole.

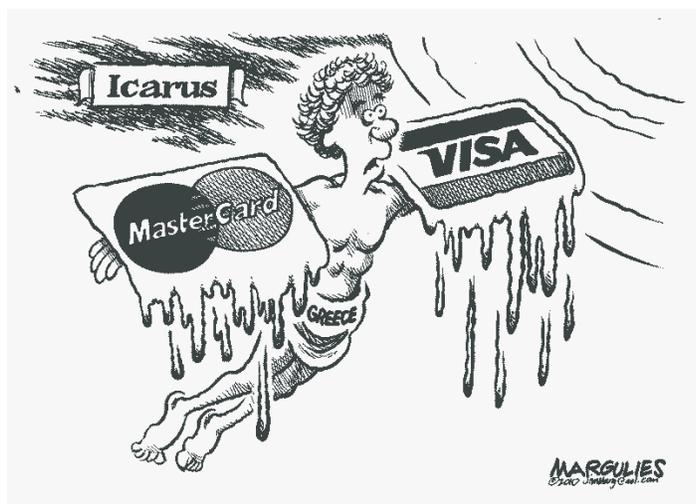


The fractured arms, and in general the fragmented nature of many of Greek antiquities, are a perfect trope for the present broken state of the country that must now be mended by European conservation efforts. Although not a cartoon, one of the most effective images of the



Venus de Milo recently “graced” the cover of the German magazine *Focus* (February 2010; **Fig. 6**). The cover, which has caused considerable outrage amongst the Greeks and a defamation trial against the magazine’s publishers, shows the famous statue raising her middle finger to Europe, with the title, “Betrüger in der Euro-Familie” (“Cheaters in the European Family”). Even if you can’t read the German, the meaning is inescapable.

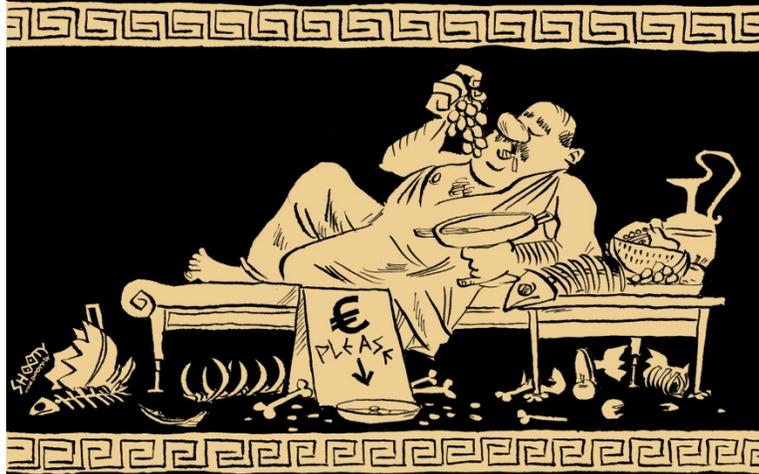
When we turn to the gods and goddesses and mythological characters we find, not surprisingly, some well-known characters. Herakles appears in several cartoons, with one identifying his 13th labor as the rescuing of Greece. Exasperated, the hero states that the goal is unattainable and he threatens to quit. Medusa also appears occasionally, cast as a welfare state, strangling on her snakes of debt, high spending, and protests. Icarus is a rare choice, appearing once as flying too close to disaster, melting his wings of credit cards (**Fig. 7**; Jimmy Margulies, *The Record of Hackensack, NJ*; May 3, 2010).



The well-known figure of Atlas surfaces in several cartoons. In one he has removed the burden of the Earth from his shoulders, replacing it with a large, globe-like sack of money labeled “Greek Debt.” Straining under its weight, he complains that holding up the world was easier. The pantheon of Olympic deities often find traction in these cartoons as well, with, for example, Athena being rescued by the EU, Zeus portrayed as homeless, begging, or forced to eat sauerkraut rather than ambrosia, or snapshots of the Olympic roster, often personified as Merkel, Sarkozy, and other key IMF and EU players, looking from on high at the Greek protests. The Trojan Horse, another favorite, takes several guises, usually seen as a greedy piggy bank that the rest of Europe needs to fill up, or as a symbol of deception, clearly referring to the perception that Greece lied about its economic situation to the EU.

Generic images of Greek pottery are also popular with Western cartoonists.

These take various forms, running the gamut from Greeks asking for handouts while they languish gluttonously at a banquet (**Fig. 8**; Martin Sutovec, Slovakia; May 3, 2010), to vessels in



the shape of piggy banks adorned with Classical red and black figures of Greeks marching, placards in hand, demanding more money. Regardless of where one places the blame, it is worth noting that there are almost no cartoons in the Western press portraying the current difficulties faced by Greeks from the lower socio-economic ranks.

There is much to mine in these cartoons and I offer only a few comments about the choice of ancient images, which are all used to explicate the West's anger towards Greece and the potential precedence it might set for countries like Portugal and Italy. Consider, for example, two of the mythological figures selected—Herakles and Atlas, a super-hero and a Titan whose histories are entangled with punishments for their previous behaviors and seemingly insurmountable tests. Even if the public knows very little about the personal life histories of these gods and demi-gods, many people may have a basic sense that these mythic characters have confronted significant challenges, with various degrees of success. But even these larger than life heroes, at least from the Western perspective, cannot fix the country. Atlas can't carry the economic burden of his nation and Herakles is on the verge of quitting. In the case of the Discobolos, he has grown either too weak or too fat, an unlikely candidate for the Olympic-level ordeal that now confronts the country, and in the case of Venus, she implores or gestures rudely, hardly fitting behavior for the goddess of love. At least one message is that Greece's modern inhabitants have strained even the most stalwart of their mythic ancestors. In the process, the country's behavior has diminished or fractured their classical gods and heroes.

The crumbling state of the Acropolis in many of the cartoons broadcasts a comparable message. This very essence of Greece's symbolic capital is in shambles; the country has disgraced its heritage. For centuries Greece has largely confined many of its problems to the Mediterranean sphere. Now, however, the Greeks are players on a global stage. These images, which the West has often adopted as its own for other purposes, are now employed to dishonor Greece's heritage.

These ancient images are, however, flexible symbols. One might well imagine at some future date, if Greece's economy stabilizes and no longer threatens world economy, that we might see a different set of political cartoons. If Greece is fortunate enough to move from a state of humiliation to some semblance of new national confidence, we may well find that the past is displayed in a more favorable fashion. The Discobolus may find himself fit and even gilded, perhaps a bit trimmer for meeting the austerity measures, the gods may once again be dining on ambrosia, albeit the low-fat version, and Venus, having found her arms, might be sporting a bit of modest bling.