



The Parthenon, by
Mary Beard (Profile,
£8.99)

According to classicist Mary Beard, “more people have wept on the Athenian Acropolis than at any other monument anywhere in the world”. The Parthenon once housed a 13m statue of the goddess Athena and was the most sacred building in the city. Since it was built in the fifth century BC it has been a Christian cathedral, a mosque and - almost fatally - an ammunition store, which exploded in the 17th century, causing extensive damage. Notoriously, Lord Elgin plundered the ruins in 1801, removing about half of the remarkable sculptures - either an act of “insensate barbarism” (to cite one eye-witness) or one that preserved them for posterity. Should the British Museum hand them back, to be displayed in Bernard Tschumi’s new Acropolis Museum? Beard chooses her words carefully: “There have been bad arguments on both sides.” As a “wonder of the world”, the Parthenon is a vital part of global - and not merely national - culture, she concludes. First published in 2002 and now fully updated with notes for visitors, this is an excellent biography of a uniquely powerful building.

PD Smith