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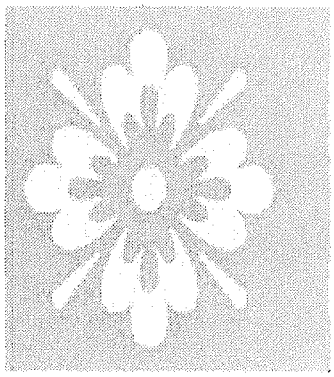
GREECE: ELGIN MARBLES

Should the Elgin Marbles be returned to Greece?



Viewpoint: Yes. The Elgin Marbles should be returned to Greece because their illegitimate removal from the Parthenon compromised the integrity of the temple. Moreover, the Greeks have begun to implement the conditions set by the British government for the return of the marbles, most notably the restoration of the Acropolis and the building of a new museum.

Viewpoint: No. The marbles should remain in the British Museum because Lord Elgin's legal removal saved them from destruction. They are available to a wider public than they would be in Athens, and their return to Greece would set a precedent that would empty many great museums of their collections.

The Greek temple to the goddess Athena, *Parthenos* (Maiden) —the Parthenon—is one of the most revered historic monuments in the world. It was built between 447–432 B.C.E. on the rock of the Acropolis in Athens, where it still stands, a holy ruin. For nearly 2,500 years the Parthenon has embodied the ancient Greek ideas of justice, freedom, and intellectual and artistic excellence that marked the height of the political power of Athens in the fifth century. It has endured centuries of earthquakes, military operations, weather, pollution, and looting. Fragments of monumental sculpture from the Parthenon and other buildings on the Acropolis can be found in museums around the world, but the largest collection outside Greece—and the most hotly debated—are the so-called Elgin Marbles, housed in the British Museum in London.

In 1801, Thomas Bruce, seventh Earl of Elgin, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in Greece, obtained a permit from the occupying Turkish government in Athens that he used to remove and carry away half of the surviving sculptures from the Parthenon. In 1816 the sculptures were acquired by the British government and presented to the British Museum, where they remain to this day, housed in the Duveen Gallery. The Elgin Marbles properly include architectural sculpture from four monuments on the Acropolis in Athens, but the objects of greatest dispute in the collection are the fifty-six blocks of the frieze, fifteen metopes, and seventeen pedimental figures that belong to the Parthenon proper. For two hundred years, from the moment that Lord Elgin's Italian overseer Giovanni Battista Lusieri removed the sculptures from the building using saws, ropes, and pulleys, the Greeks and their friends in Britain have been lobbying for their return. The British government has consistently rejected requests for restitution.

Both the Greeks and the British agree that the Parthenon marbles must remain in a museum, for their safety, preservation, and for the enrichment and education of the widest possible audience. The current retentionists argue their case on several points, most strongly on precedent: that Elgin's legal removal saved the marbles from probable destruction at the hands of the Turks or their successors, and that the artifacts were, and are, much better off in the British Museum than they would have been, or would be, in

Athens. Further, the retentionists argue, returning the marbles to Greece would open an alarming "floodgate" of return that would divest museums of their collections.

The restitutionists reject these arguments; they argue most emphatically that the Parthenon metopes and frieze are not freestanding sculptures that can be appreciated on their own, but are structurally part of a building, and can only be understood in that context. For this reason, they argue exclusively for restitution of the Parthenon marbles and are willing to give up their right to claim any other pieces in the museum. Moreover, Greece has accepted and implemented all of the conditions that the British people have set for the return of the marbles. Supporters of restitution believe that the ethics of the case, and the global goodwill that the return would foster, should be the final motivation for making Greece a "gift of their marbles."

The issue of who owns cultural property is complex; all passion and politics aside, the most important issue is how to best preserve archaeological context and cultural heritage for present and future generations.

—Nancy Sultan



Viewpoint:
Yes. The Elgin Marbles should be returned to Greece because their illegitimate removal from the Parthenon compromised the integrity of the temple. Moreover, the Greeks have begun to implement the conditions set by the British government for the return of the marbles, most notably the restoration of the Acropolis and the building of a new museum.

In a 1986 speech to the Oxford Union, Melina Mercouri, former Greek minister of culture, pleaded for the return of the "Elgin Marbles" to Greece, declaring: "There is a Michelangelo 'David'. There is a da Vinci 'Venus'. There is a Praxiteles 'Hermes'. There is a Turner 'Fishermen at Sea'. *There are no Elgin Marbles*!" Who has the right to the sculptures from the Parthenon—Greece or Britain? How do we define "ownership" of archaeological artifacts? This question is a complex one that affects all objects in museums and at excavation sites around the globe. How have museums acquired the best examples of ancient art, and has the acquisition of antiquities over the centuries been legal and ethical?

The Parthenon temple was commissioned by the Greek general Pericles after Greece defeated the Persians in 480 B.C.E. The temple, dedicated to Athena, patron deity of Athens, replaced the old temple to the goddess on the Acropolis, which had been destroyed by the Persians. Conceived by Pericles as a symbol of "the adventurous spirit" of Athens that had "forced an entry into every sea and into every land," the Parthenon embodies the ancient Greek ideas of justice, freedom, and intellectual and artistic excellence that marked the height of the political power of Athens in the fifth century. "Mighty indeed are the signs of our power which we have left. Future ages will wonder at us, as the present age wonders at us now," Pericles boasted some time after the completion of the temple. Clearly, he envisioned the monument as the embodiment of the confidence and pride of democratic Athens, whose people paid for its construction.

The Parthenon held panhellenic importance in antiquity, and later became the visible symbol of Greece's legacy to Western European culture, ideas, and values. Designed by architects Iktinus and Kallikrates under the watchful eye of Phidias, the sculptor who acted as general director for Pericles' building program on the Acropolis, the temple represents a culmination of Greek artistic expression. A model for future ages, the Parthenon is unique, both in conception and construction. The building and its sculptures were conceived and executed as part of a plan to construct a larger temple than the norm, which called not only for a Doric style peripteral temple measuring 69.51 x 30.86 meters with 46 columns on the exterior (with others inside) and two pediments on the gable ends with freestanding sculptures depicting the birth of Athena and her contest with Poseidon for supremacy in Attica, but also, uniquely, for 92 metopes in high relief narrating Greek myths of special interest to Athens, and a low relief frieze of 111 panels depicting the Panathenaia—the great civic festival honoring Athena. Inside the temple stood a colossal gold and ivory statue of the goddess herself, designed and executed by Phidias. The temple was executed in nine years (although work continued on the pedimental sculptures until 432 B.C.E.) and dedicated at the Panathenaic festival in 438 B.C.E.

The Parthenon stood almost intact for more than two thousand years. During the Byzantine period, it was transformed into a church, and between 1208 and 1458 it served as the church of the Frankish dukes; later it became a Turkish

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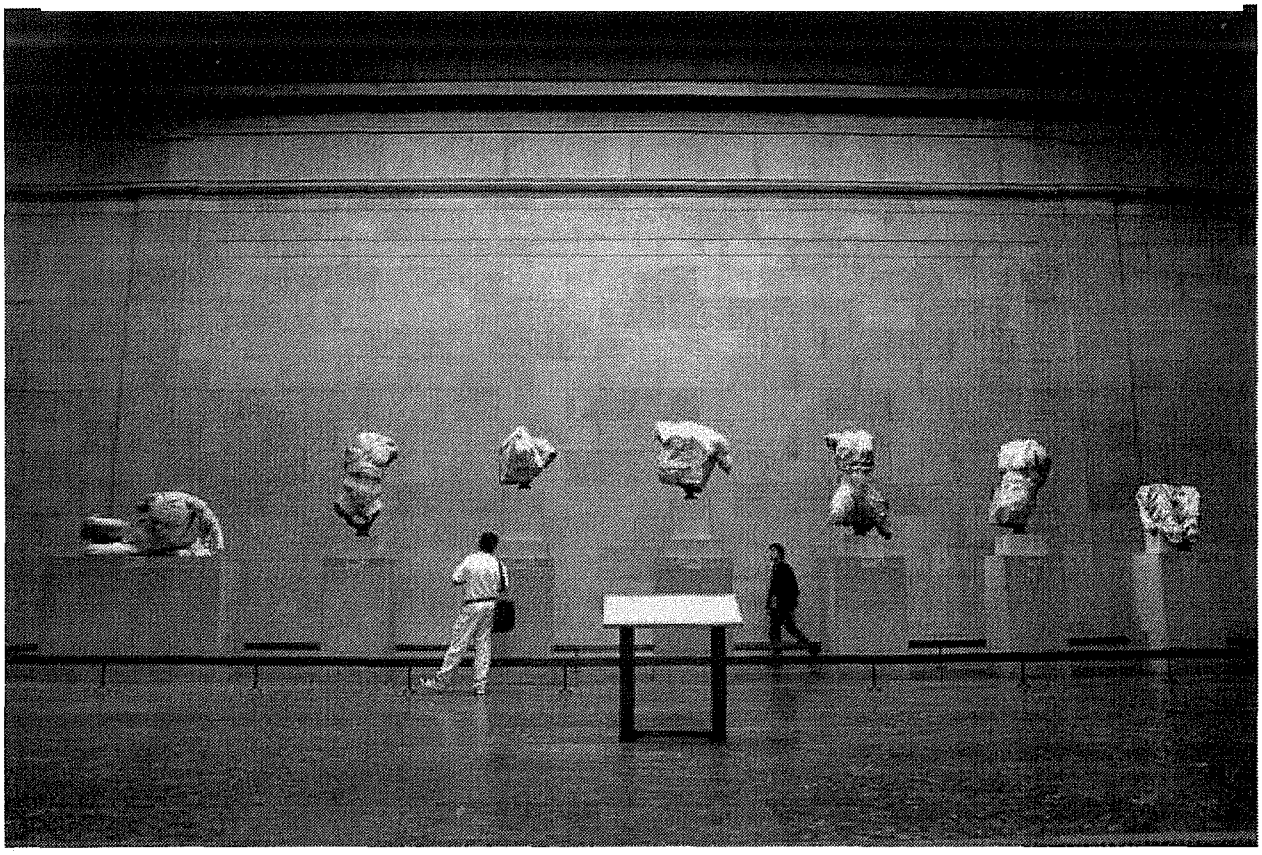

Visitors viewing some of the Elgin Marbles on display at the British Museum

(© Reuters/CORBIS)

mosque, complete with minaret. Despite a good deal of remodeling and transformation of purpose, the building remained holy, revered, and well preserved. The first great destruction of the temple occurred on 26 September 1687, when the Franks attacked the Turks and bombarded the Parthenon, exploding a powder magazine that had been stored inside. Fourteen columns of the peristyle were destroyed and nearly all of the interior building. The building stood in this general condition throughout the Turkish occupation of Athens, until the arrival in 1799 of the new British ambassador to Ottoman Turkey—Thomas Bruce, seventh Earl of Elgin.

Lord Elgin was a product of a generation of Europeans captivated by classical Greek culture, art, and architecture—a revival of interest that began in the eighteenth century. Aware of the drawings of the Acropolis published by Stewart and Rivett twelve years before, Elgin was well informed about architectural sculpture, but also knew that the Europeans were more interested in sculpture than architecture and valued it more. In his desire to help reposition England as the cultural center of Europe, Elgin decided that he would have drawings and casts made of the antiquities in Athens, especially the sculptures on the Acropolis. He would send them back to England and make them available to British artists in order to improve the modern art of Great Britain. For two years Elgin's workmen and subordinates, under the direction of Italian painter Giovanni Battista Lusieri, made copies and drawings of the ruins. Then, in the middle of 1801, Elgin changed his plan. Why settle for drawings and casts, when he could obtain the real thing? At this time Greece was part of the Ottoman Empire, ruled from Constantinople, and Elgin took advantage of his political position to obtain a *firman,* or permit, from the Turkish government that he used to remove the sculptures from the building and ship them to England.

Elgin later explained to the British House of Commons that he took down the sculptures from the Parthenon in order to "save them" from probable destruction at the hands of the Turks. The truth is rather different. The removal of the marbles was neither legal nor moral. Eyewitness accounts and correspondence, especially Elgin's own letters written between 1801 and 1816, along with Parliament records previously unused and unpublished, are the primary source of the facts in the case. The legitimacy and propriety of the removal of the marbles was disputed immediately, first by Constantinople and the Greeks themselves, a subjugated and impoverished people under Ottoman rule, and by philhellenes like George Gordon, Lord Byron, who spoke out on behalf of the Greeks who, he knew, were outraged by the acts but helpless to stop them; other Britons at the time and thereafter joined the protest. Elgin was obliged to defend his actions from the start.

In his letters, Elgin's "altruism" is proven false, for he intended not so much to "save" the marbles from the Turks as to "collect as much marble as possible" to decorate his own home, "Broomhall," in Scotland. "You do not need any prompting from me," he exclaimed in a letter to Lusieri in 1801, "to know the value that is attached to a sculptured marble, or historic piece. Look out for . . . fine marble . . . that could decorate the hall . . . ," he requested. Sadly for Elgin, a series of unfortunate circumstances short-circuited this new plan. The cost of removing the marbles, shipping them, rescuing them when his cargo ship *Mentor* sank off Kythera, and storing them for years broke him financially. In the end, as we learn from Elgin's correspondence with his colleague William Hamilton, a trustee of the British Museum in 1815, Elgin was forced to sell the marbles to the British government to pay off his debts.

As allies with the British against the French, the Ottoman Turks at this time were especially indebted to the British for Admiral Horatio Nelson's victories over Napoleon Bonaparte in Egypt. As Elgin himself and his chaplain Philip Hunt admit in correspondence and recently published documents from the Select Committee of the House of Commons, this political situation cleared the way for him to make deals; the *firman* itself, which is in fact a second permit granted to Elgin, was identified by William St. Clair and published in full for the first time by him in 1998. The only existing copy of the permit is what may be an official Italian translation of the original Turkish document.

The wording of the *firman* clearly grants Elgin access to the Acropolis and permission to make drawings, to cast molds, and to "dig," and then, in ambiguous language, he is allowed to "take away any pieces of stone with inscriptions or figures." Nowhere does the Italian document explicitly give Elgin permission to dismantle the building of the Parthenon. Hunt admitted to the Select Committee in 1816 that the ambiguous terms of the *firman* had been exceeded; it was he, a self-described "fortune-hunter," who had arranged for the removal of the sculptures. Furthermore, the amount of money exchanged between Elgin and the Turkish officials exceeds any tradition of gift-exchange that existed at the time, and amounts rather to bribes and pay-offs to secure that Elgin's workmen would not be disturbed. In 1810, when Elgin pressured another British ambassador, Robert Adair, to help him get the marbles away, Adair was told by the Turks that Elgin had never had permission to carry off any Parthenon marbles, and that all of Elgin's actions on the Acropolis had been illegal from the start. One year later Elgin himself admitted as much in a letter to the prime minister. Shifts in politics alone eventually enabled Adair and others to help Elgin.

Therefore, though Hunt had obtained for Elgin a *firman* from Turkish authorities, the published evidence proves that by removing the architectural marbles Elgin exceeded the terms even of a loosely written document; he paid large bribes to corrupt officials and took immoral advantage of his position as ambassador and relied on the political clout of British friends such as Adair and Hunt to remove and ship away the sculptures of the Parthenon. Further, he misled the Select Committee about his motives, which were not to "save" the marbles from destruction, but to decorate his house and to make him and his colleagues rich.

The actual removal of the marble metope and frieze sculptures was difficult, for these panels, unlike the pedimental sculptures, are not freestanding decoration added to the building, but are built *into* the structure. Lusieri and the workmen used saws and chisels to quite literally hack the panels of the metopes and frieze off the building, damaging both the sculptures and the monument in the process; several of the panels were irreparably harmed, and some destroyed utterly during removal. The destruction of the architectural elements caused by the saws and accidents could not be duplicated by any fate under normal circumstances. It is impossible to say whether the remaining sculptures would have suffered a "worse fate" if left on the building. Further, we must consider the negative impact of transportation and improper storage during thirty-three missions and seventeen trips to England, not to mention an eighteen-month salvage operation to recover sculptures from the bottom of the sea after Elgin's ship *Mentor* sank.

After much debate over the authenticity and acquisition of the marbles, the British Parliament finally purchased Elgin's lot of Parthenon sculptures in 1816 and presented them to the British Museum to be "held in perpetuity." Thereafter, they became known as the "Elgin Marbles," and were moved around in the museum until Joseph Duveen, first Baron Duveen, funded a new building for them in 1938. Were the sculptures "safe" once they were finally installed in the British museum? Indeed not. "In her sooty vitals, London stores these marble monuments of the gods, just as some unsmiling Puritan might store in the depth of his memory some past erotic moment, blissful and ecstatic sin," complained Nikos Kazantzakis in his poem *England* in 1939.

As investigating scholars have proven, the sculptures were damaged when molded for plaster casts, which removed all the surviving polychromy and some of the patina; by pollution in London, as Duveen admitted in 1939; by unde-

sirable climatic conditions in the museum; and worst of all by several "cleanings," the most serious of which, in 1937–1938, employed abrasives and copper chisels to remove "London grime" and to satisfy the erroneous perception that the marbles should be white (they had in fact been painted, perhaps by the famous ancient Greek artist Polygnotus). The cleaning scandal was covered up by the museum for sixty years. Art historians, archaeologists, museum curators, and scholars who have studied the pieces and continue to study them have shown that the marbles have been divested of their surviving paint and luster, their color, and their surface texture since being installed in the British Museum. Further, they are devoid of all context. What worse fate would they have suffered if left on the building? The Parthenon marbles are sacred images inextricable from the temple monument itself. Only when viewed together with the monument do they explain the religion and culture of the ancient Athenians.

The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the transfer of cultural property made it a crime to acquire smuggled objects, and the large collections of ancient art purchased by museums from private individuals in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, such as the Cessnola Collection of Cypriot Art in the Metropolitan Museum in New York or the Elgin Marbles, would not be acquired today. Although the trustees of museums have created acquisition guidelines that are in full compliance with the UNESCO Convention, the traffic in stolen antiquities remains a multi-billion-dollar international business.

This being said, over the years museums around the world, responding to legal pressures, have returned objects after convincing claims were made. No "floodgate" of return has occurred. These restitutions have been handled on a case-by-case basis and kept as quiet as possible. In 1982 Melina Mercouri, the minister of culture for Greece, urged England to return the Parthenon marbles to Greece. Her request was denied; however, in response, the British Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon Marbles was formed and has been lobbying actively. Recent polls show that the British people support 3-1 the return of the marbles as a gesture of international goodwill and friendship toward a country whose culture has so influenced Europe and the world. Polls in the House of Commons find that 66 percent of the M.P.s (84 percent of Labour) support restitution of the marbles to Greece as long as three conditions are met: 1) Greece pays for the cost of return, and for the creation of a complete set of copies; 2) Greece makes no further claims on the museum for restitution; and 3) Greece develops a complete restoration project of the Acropolis and builds a new Acropolis museum to house the collection.

These conditions have been accepted gladly by the Greek government, and are being implemented. In 1983 the Greeks began a set of twelve restoration programs that included securing the rock of the Acropolis, reducing pollution in Athens and dealing with its effects, archival research, construction restoration, inventory, and the relaying of ancient paths leading to the Acropolis. In the summer of 2000 Athens began a two-stage tender process for their new Acropolis Museum. The chosen architect, Bernard Tschumi, in collaboration with Athens-based architect Micael Photiadis, created a 210,000-square-foot space with the capacity for visitors to simultaneously view the Parthenon sculptures, the Parthenon building, and the Acropolis. In November 2004, Deputy Culture Minister Petros Tatoulis announced that the construction contract has been signed, and the New Acropolis Museum is scheduled for completion in 2006.

At least ten thousand visitors per day would experience the marbles in their homeland, in an Athenian museum facing the Parthenon where they can be understood and appreciated as architectural elements of a sacred building. In January 1999, a majority of members of the European Parliament (339 of 626) signed a petition urging the British Museum to return the Parthenon marbles to Greece, and the EU supplied funds for the construction of the new Acropolis Museum. Therefore, the return of the Parthenon marbles to Greece is not simply a matter of dispute between Greece and Britain but holds much wider significance. Restitution would be just and generous, beneficial not only to Greece and Britain but also to the world.

–NANCY SULTAN,
ILLINOIS WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY



Viewpoint:
No. The marbles should remain in the British Museum because Lord Elgin's legal removal saved them from destruction. They are available to a wider public than they would be in Athens, and their return to Greece would set a precedent that would empty many great museums of their collections.

There is no doubt that Thomas Bruce, seventh Earl of Elgin, revered ancient Greek art and wanted it preserved for posterity. Like many edu-

cated upper-class Britons of his day, Lord Elgin was a philhellene, captivated by the form and design of classical Greek artistry. In 1799 he realized that his new appointment as ambassador to Ottoman Turkey would afford him an opportunity to improve the arts of Great Britain by making available to artists and writers casts and drawings of the great Greek monuments. He employed architects, draftsmen, and craftsmen to execute this plan on the Acropolis, working under the direction of Italian painter Giovanni Battista Lusieri; work began on this ambitious project with a legal *firman* (permit) from the ruling Turkish government in 1800.

By this period in history, Greece had been under the rule of the Ottoman Turks for more than three hundred years. The ancient Acropolis had been converted into a garrison, and the Parthenon, into a mosque. The Greeks were a subjugated people, with no power to protect or preserve their antiquities; the situation was not a healthy one for the surviving monuments and artifacts. Lusieri reported to Elgin that "the Turks continually defaced the statues and pounded them down to make mortar." Hearing constant news of the destruction of the artifacts on the Acropolis, Elgin determined that the marbles must be removed for their safety; as he stated before the House of Commons, Elgin believed that if he did not remove the best examples of ancient Greek art, they would be lost to the civilized world.

Knowing that the Ottomans were indebted to the British for their alliance against the French, he requested, and obtained, a second *firman* to allow removal of the sculptures to England, with language allowing the workmen to "take away any pieces of stone with inscriptions or figures." Collection continued from 1801 to 1804 with additional *firmans*; when the political climate was again favorable for Britain in 1810, Sir Robert Adair, British ambassador in Constantinople, acquired for Elgin a final *firman* allowing him to ship all the remaining antiquities in his collection program to England. Had he the financial resources, Lord Elgin would likely have established his own private museum for the collection, which he would have made available to artists and scholars. He was certainly not trying to "get rich" from the Parthenon marbles, as his detractors have implied. In fact, the expense involved in his collection program ruined Elgin financially. Having spent all his energy and resources for the better part of twenty years striving to enrich the culture of his country and preserve classical Greek art for posterity, he died in poverty in 1841; it took his family thirty-four years to pay off all his debts.

Lord Elgin's reputation has been unfairly damaged by Romantic poets whose passionate adoration for all things Greek skewed the facts of the matter. Soon after he heard of the removal of the marbles, the Romantic poet George Gordon, Lord Byron wrote two poems criticizing Elgin: *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) and *The Curse of Minerva* (1812). These poems, which became widely popular, amount to character assassination and are responsible, in large part, for the exaggerated and unfairly negative opinion of Elgin held by people today. Furthermore, the nineteenth-century passion and admiration for classical Greek art and culture espoused in popular poetry as well as classical scholarship helped to fuel the international trade in antiquities by increasing the value of Greek art around the world. (The market value of a cultural artifact rises in direct proportion to the amount of admiration and importance placed on it by respected individuals and leading authorities.) In short, those who loved Greece unwittingly aided and abetted the looting of her antiquities. The Greeks themselves at the time were not entirely blameless in this regard. They, too, recognized the value of their legacy to the international market, and contributed to the trade in antiquities both before and after Greece became independent in 1829.

The Acropolis of Athens had been looted by treasure hunters since antiquity, but in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries major European powers, motivated by this period's romantic passion and enthusiasm for classical antiquities, were eager to fill their museums. If Elgin had not removed the marbles, someone else certainly would have. The French, the British, and the Americans at the time of Elgin were engaged in "museum wars," on behalf of the Louvre, the British Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, respectively; trustees never met without acquiring a work of classical art for their great collections. Such practices are characteristic of the morality of the time and cannot be judged by contemporary mores or laws.

In the unlikely event that no one removed the Parthenon marbles, they would most likely have been destroyed by earthquake, weather, conversion, or war. The Parthenon had suffered through earthquakes, a ruinous fire in the second century B.C.E., and a series of renovations since it was built, but conversions—the most severe of which occurred around 450 C.E., when the temple was converted into a church for the first time—caused the most damage. The Byzantine Christians constructed an apse on the east end of the building and dismantled, destroyed, and/or defaced the sculptures of the east pediment, frieze, and metopes; the remaining metopes on the other three sides were also deliberately defaced. In the following centuries the

Parthenon suffered from further conversions, renovations, and pilfering.

In the mid fifteenth century, the Ottoman Turks defeated their Frankish predecessors in Athens and set up their stronghold on the Acropolis. They stored their artillery and powder magazines in the ancient monuments; the Propylaia, the Temple of Athena Nike, and the Parthenon were all destroyed by accidental or war-related explosions and conversions by the Turks. The greatest overall damage to the Parthenon came not from the removal of the marbles but from an artillery projectile, fired by the besieging Venetians on 26 September 1687, which exploded one of the powder magazines stored inside the temple. Two centuries later, during the Greek War of Independence, the Turks happily destroyed the columns of the Parthenon to get at the lead clamps inside, which they used for bullets.

Clearly, the monuments of the ancient Greeks held no cultural interest for the occupying Turks, but, recognizing the value of Greek art, they were ready to sell (or gift) artifacts to whomever they courted as an ally at the moment. Elgin did not steal the marbles. The legal status of the collection is established beyond a doubt; any argument against the legality of removal of the Parthenon marbles is a boondoggle. The *firmans* (permits) acquired by Lord Elgin between 1801 and 1810 were absolutely legal according to the international law at the time, as the Ottoman government in Greece was recognized both *de jure* and *de facto;* the Ottoman Turks had absolute legal authority over the Parthenon. Although the language of the *firman* is ambiguous, the document was twice ratified by the Turkish government to allow the removal of the Parthenon marbles.

In 1816, after determining that Elgin had the legal authority as a private individual to remove the marbles and that the marbles were authentic fifth-century Greek artifacts, the Select Committee of the House of Commons bought Elgin's collection and donated it to the British Museum to be held "in perpetuity." The marbles were housed in a permanent "Elgin Room," which was constructed for them in 1832 on the west side of the museum, and, as it was quite common at that time to name a collection after its donor, the antiquities became known by the public as the "Elgin Marbles." The entire collection comprises architectural sculpture from four monuments on the Acropolis in Athens, including the fifty-six blocks of the Parthenon frieze, fifteen metopes, and seventeen pedimental figures. Shortly before World War II, a new gallery funded by another philhellene, Joseph Duveen, first Baron Duveen, was built especially for the collection. It is in the Duveen Gallery, renovated and reopened in 1962, where the Parthenon marbles are installed today, officially labeled "The Sculptures of the Parthenon."

SHRINKING GODS

George Gordon, Lord Byron's narrative poem Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. A Romaunt *(1812) recounts the journey of an imaginary pilgrim through the Mediterranean region. This excerpt from Canto II makes an obvious reference to the Elgin Marbles:*

XV

Cold is the heart, fair Greece! that looks on thee,
Nor feels as lovers o'er the dust they loved;
Dull is the eye that will not weep to see
Thy walls defaced, thy mouldering shrines removed
By British hands, which it had best behoved
To guard those relics ne'er to be restored.
Curst be the hour when from their isle they roved,
And once again thy hapless bosom gored,
And snatch'd thy shrinking Gods to northern climes abhorr'd!

Source: *George Gordon, Lord Byron,* Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. A Romaunt *[Cantos I and II] (London: Printed for John Murray, William Blackwood, Edinburgh, and John Cumming, Dublin, by Thomas Davison, 1812).*

From the moment that the British Museum acquired the Parthenon marbles, the curators have done everything in their power to preserve, protect, and display the artifacts in the context that will allow for the greatest safety, accessibility, and understanding by the widest possible audience. To this end, the curators of the collection have worked continually with their Greek colleagues, and over the decades the British Museum has supplied many casts of the sculptures to Athens. Six million visitors from the far corners of the world visit the British Museum annually—twice as many as would visit them in Athens. The British Museum—free and open seven days a week to the world—holds international status as a center for Parthenon studies. It offers conferences, seminars, scholarly and general publications; it maintains a state-of-the-art web interface and facilitates learning through close links with the Center for Acropolis Studies in Athens.

Could Athens better provide for the marbles? Would the marbles be safer? Would they be more available in Athens to educate the public? The answer to all three of these questions is "No." Over the centuries since Greek independence, the Greek archaeological service has been working hard to preserve the Acropolis, but a deteriorated environment has ravaged the monuments. Political instability and a lack of sufficient

resources impede progress toward restoration. Mistakes were made in past restoration projects, which caused much more harm than good. The iron clamps are a case in point. The Greek Archaeological Service has spent years replacing the oxidized iron clamps with titanium.

The original jointing of the monuments was close-cut and fitted without cement or mortar, but accomplished with wooden dowels or iron clamps made rustproof with a sheathing of lead, which sealed the clamp and provided a cushion. So tight and solid were these joints that Lord Charlemont, visiting the Acropolis in 1749, could not fit a penknife between them. This ancient technique was not studied thoroughly and carefully by modern archaeologists and engineers who, beginning in the 1830s, attempted to restore blocks and columns damaged by violence or earthquake; the modern use of iron clamps and dowels sheathed in lead or mortar, repeated for decades culminating with the damaging work of N. Balanos in the 1920s and 1930s, proved disastrous for the structures. Oxidation of the iron caused by sea air, pollution, and acid rain have caused the clamps to rust, swell, and split, shattering the marble. As Graham Binns, chairman of the British Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon Marbles, remarked in 1997, the columns "look like patients in a hospital, draped in drip-tubes."

The structural integrity of the monuments is dangerously undermined, and the surface of the surviving marbles has been worn away. Pollution in Athens has done irreparable damage to all the surviving surfaces of ancient buildings and artifacts on the Acropolis, and continues to threaten their existence, despite Athenian attempts to improve conditions. The Greeks are painfully aware of this, and have removed most—but not all—of the architectural sculptures on the Parthenon. Despite a plan announced in 1983 by the Committee for the Preservation of the Acropolis Monuments to remove all surviving sculptures to the museum in Athens, some sculptures even now remain on the building, where they are covered by carbon and sulfur dioxides from automobiles and factories.

It has been more than a decade since former minister of culture Melina Mercouri announced the third of four international competitions for a new Acropolis museum, but it has yet to be built. At this writing, the winners of the most recent competition, Bernard Tschumi Architects, have broken ground; construction may be delayed, however, because the museum is being built on top of an archaeological site. Furthermore, it is unclear how long it will take for the installation of the artifacts that are currently housed in Athenian museums, many of which must be repaired and restored. The fact is that though their intentions are good, the Greeks have yet to fulfill their commitments on behalf of the marbles.

The rich cultural heritage of ancient Greece is, in the words of the ancient Greek general Pericles, "an education," not only for Greece itself, but the world. The Parthenon marbles are a source of national pride in Britain, where they have been enriching the artistic and cultural life for more than two hundred years, inspiring generations of writers, poets, artists, architects, and scholars. As the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley so eloquently wrote: "We are all Greeks." The British have long-standing cultural, emotional, and political ties to Greece—ancient and modern. Indeed, it was the philhellenism of the British, fueled in great part by the installation of the Parthenon marbles in 1816, that facilitated the freeing of Greece from Turkish rule and the creation in 1833 of the modern Greek state.

Those who insist that the British government should return the marbles in order to "restore the integrity" of the Parthenon by "uniting it with its sculptures" are romantics who deny the hard fact that for the sake of their conservation and preservation the Parthenon marbles must be housed in a museum—they will not go back on the monument. Experts on all sides agree on this point. Furthermore, the British Museum is only one of many institutions to hold artifacts from the Parthenon. Pieces of the monument can be found in France, Germany, Italy, the Vatican, Denmark, and Austria. Should all these museums return these objects? What would happen to world culture if museums were entitled only to display objects from their own countries? The whole notion of a museum as a center of world cultural and historical education would be called into question.

Political nationalists who claim that no one but the Greeks themselves are entitled to the Parthenon marbles have less of an interest in preservation, conservation, and education than they do in power and prestige. This attitude, when taken too far, is dangerous and goes against the UNESCO Convention of 1970, which encourages the interchange of cultural property among nations to "increase knowledge of the civilization of Man, enrich the cultural life of all peoples, and inspire mutual respect and appreciation among nations."

Even if every museum sent their collections back to Greece, there would be no restitution of the Parthenon to its original glory. The best way to ensure proper contextual viewing of the entire monument of the Parthenon is to place plaster casts of the sculptures on the building. This is achievable, and by far the best solution. Legisla-

tion enacted in 1963 prohibits the British Museum from deaccessioning its collection, though it may loan objects: it will take an Act of Parliament, therefore, to change the permanent status of the Parthenon marbles. The most important concern should be how to best preserve archaeological context and cultural heritage for present and future generations; at the time of this writing, Greece is not yet prepared to do right by the marbles, and they should remain in the British Museum. The British government legitimately owns them, and is morally committed to conserving the artifacts and making them available for the world to appreciate and admire.

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