

# For the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles: An Immodest Plea

A BCRPM publication, written by Professor Paul Cartledge, Vice-Chair of the BCRPM and IARPS

## What are the Parthenon Marbles/Sculptures?

The Parthenon Marbles or Sculptures are those architectural (not freestanding) sculptures crafted, under the aegis and inspiration of Athenian sculptor-designer Pheidias, in the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century BCE (between 447 and 432) from local Attic Pentelic marble, in order to adorn the temple on the Athens Acropolis devoted to Athena Parthenos ('the Virgin'). The Temple as a whole - of which originally the 'Parthenon' was just the name of one chamber - was unique at the time of its construction, and both in Antiquity and subsequently the entire building complex was recognised as a world-class masterpiece. A substantial portion of the original building, despite various destructive accidents and incidents over the subsequent 25 centuries, remains intact on its original consecrated site. The 'shadow' cast by the Parthenon – aesthetically, culturally, politically - is a long one indeed.

Several European museums and some individuals outside Greece hold more or less important pieces of the Parthenon today, but by far the most extensive such holding is that of London's British Museum, where about half of the extant remains (of the 160m frieze, the metopes and the pedimental sculptures) have been housed since 1817 and were generally known as the 'Elgin Marbles'. Today, however, even the British Museum now refers to them as the 'Parthenon Sculptures'. A shift of attitude is discernible.

Beginning in 1801, and over some years, they were violently and crudely removed from the Athenian Parthenon on the instruction of the 7<sup>th</sup> Lord Elgin, then Britain's ambassador to the Sublime Porte (the Ottoman court in Constantinople), allegedly under the authority and authorization of a *firman*, an official legal permit. No original official Ottoman documentation granting him any such legal permission to remove the sculptures has ever been found. Elgin did procure an Italian document with an English translation, but it was a mere summary at best of any genuine *firman*. He claimed that it allowed him to 'take away any pieces of stone that had fallen to the ground with inscriptions or figures'. Given the document's form and language this is unlikely. The Italian wording refers vaguely to *qualque pezzi*, roughly 'some pieces' not 'any pieces'. He and his employees on the spot did very much more than that, brutally cutting sculptures from high up on the building, prompting philhellene (pro-Greek) Lord Byron to denounce Elgin in fiery public verses as a plunderer and a vandal; that he '*basely stole what less barbarians won*'.

After being shipped to his estate in Scotland, but then later suffering bankruptcy, Elgin proffered them to the nation. In 1816, after a major and contradictory special parliamentary enquiry, the 'Elgin Marbles' were appropriated under an Act of Parliament. Lord Elgin was further compensated - he had already received public funds as His Majesty's Ambassador - to the hefty tune of £35,000 (roughly £ 3,000,000 in today's money). Since 1817 those Marbles have been housed, you might say imprisoned, in Room 18 of the British Museum, in a dedicated gallery known after its principal sponsor, art-dealer Lord Duveen, as the 'Duveen Gallery'.

The sculptures in this gallery were not acquired with the permission of the Greek state. For the simple reason that in the early 1800s there was no such entity. The land of Greece was under Ottoman occupation, as it had been since 1453.

Further information about the Parthenon and its sculptures can be found at BCRPM's website:

[parthenonuk.org](http://parthenonuk.org)

For even more about the history of the Parthenon Marbles, please visit [odysseus.culture.gr](http://odysseus.culture.gr)

<https://www.historyextra.com/period/ancient-greece/7-facts-about-the-elgin-marbles/>

### **What Does the Greek Government Ask For?**

In 1821 Greeks began to rise up against the Turkish occupation of Greek lands that had existed since 1453. The ensuing War of Independence, aided by friendly foreign powers including Britain, was ultimately successful. From the time of the foundation of a modern Greek state in 1832, all subsequent governments have argued for the return to Athens of all materials taken by any means fair or foul from the Parthenon.

Since 2009 their argument for reunification has received a massive new buttressing in the shape of the New Acropolis Museum. This is a Museum for all the Acropolis, at all stages and epochs of its history, but the special place of the Parthenon within that history is recognised physically and symbolically by the Museum's topmost gallery, which echoes the dimensions and orientation of the Parthenon. That gallery is built on a level with the Parthenon itself, clearly seen through huge glass windows for visitors to make an instructive visual connection. The Museum was designed to reproduce as faithfully as museum conditions allow the disposition of the original Sculptures.

Greece disputes the UK government's claim to legal title, to 'ownership' of the Parthenon Marbles. To quote Greece's current Minister of Culture, classical archaeologist Dr Lina Mendoni, 'I can assure you that we remain faithful to the principle that Greece cannot accept that the British Museum or any other museum is the owner of the Parthenon Sculptures. These Sculptures are a product of theft, and therefore a product of an illegal act.' (03 November 2020, addressing the Greek Parliament).

### **What is the history of the campaign for restitution/reunification?**

On 18 October 2020 famous actor Melina Mercouri (universally known as just 'Melina') would have turned one hundred. It was she who as Greek Minister of Culture in a PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist) government in the 1980s fired up the current debate about the proper home for the Parthenon Marbles. She presented a spirited case in the Oxford Union - chaired by a young Boris Johnson - for the return, and when she visited the BM she had no hesitation in robustly stating the Greek case for reunification. To no avail. The old colonialist viewpoints still prevailed.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-55664796>

But Melina's initiative struck an instant chord not only in the UK but especially 'down under', where there are many 'Greek Australians'. The first national Committee to be formed outside Greece was that founded in Australia in 1983. The UK was not far behind: our British Committee for the Reunification [originally 'Restitution', a legal term since abandoned as unhelpful] of the Parthenon Marbles was founded in 1983.

## Arguments For Reunification

The Parthenon itself, and thus the case for Reunification, are both unique: very substantial remains of the original Temple still stand proud atop the Acropolis which soars above the city of Athens. There is no other distinguished building from the Ancient world still standing so prominently.

The New Acropolis Museum (NAM) contains roughly 50 per cent of the total remains of the original Temple, the other roughly 50 per cent being held in the BM. The NAM's display is in the sharpest possible contrast to that of the BM's in its cold grey rooms, with no natural light.

In Athens the sculptures are arranged so they face outward, as they were intended to do. Their alignment is accurate; they are bathed in Athenian light, and viewed against the Parthenon and Acropolis. At night the glass walls of the museum afford dynamic comparisons, reflecting the sculptures against the illuminated Parthenon and Acropolis. In the day it is possible to understand the sculptures close to their original environment where sun, cloud, and rain sweeping over the remains of other sacred buildings, all add vividly to the story.

In Athens visitors approach the sculptures in a correct sequence, walking up towards them from the excavated site of a village at the base of the Acropolis where once in Ancient times villagers made religious offerings for pilgrims to present at the Parthenon. As if taking part in an ancient Panathenaic ('All-Athenian') procession, visitors climb slowly from floor to floor, each filled with wonderful sculptures, up to the NAM's Parthenon Gallery. More in sorrow than in anger it seems, plaster casts occupy the spaces patiently reserved for the BM's originals.

If you would like to know more, do visit [www.theacropolismuseum.gr](http://www.theacropolismuseum.gr)

Artistic and aesthetic considerations cry out for reunification in a very specific sense, where one half of a sculpture is in the NAM and the other half is in the BM - sometimes half a horse, sometimes half a warrior. Scholars too can only benefit from the completest possible reunification.

But there are also compelling ethical arguments: the sculptures removed by Elgin were taken when there was no 'Greece' politically speaking to defend them. To the Greeks they are symbolic of their whole history and their culture and their unarguable contribution to the development of the West, politically, aesthetically, ethically. There is no equivalent in Britain and so comparisons cannot usefully be made.

The return should therefore be made as a gift, as a charitable deed of internationalist cooperation. Not for 'nothing' of course, but against a Greek governmental promise of generously loaned gifts of ancient archaeological 'treasures', of which there are still many.

Every modern survey of popular opinion – whether informal 'vox pop' or formal votes – has always registered a large majority of voters in favour of reunification. These votes have now acquired ever increasing force from the contemporary reaction against colonialist expropriation by imperial powers or their servants of other countries' cultural treasures.

The Parthenon Sculptures are chief among the world's very greatest cultural treasures. It would mean so much more positively to Greece and its citizens to have the Parthenon Sculptures back in Athens than it would negatively to the citizens of the UK to return them. They have sat there for over two hundred years and it's time for them to go back home. An old joke goes: 'Why is it called the "British" Museum when so few of its 8 million (yes, 8 million) artefacts are actually "British"?' Is

it more accurately the British Imperial Wars Museum, or even, as someone else has dubbed it, the Brutish Museum?

## **Arguments *Against* Reunification: The British Museum's claims - answered.**

### **1. Universal versus Local/National**

The BM claims to show the story of cultural achievement in the world, from the beginning of human history to the present. It says this is the major justification for keeping the Parthenon Marbles. It also claims, without any scientific evidence, that visiting the Museum allows people from all over the world to re-examine cultural identities and explore connections between them, indeed that this is a more beneficial way of viewing them than within a merely 'national' museum. Indeed, the BM's current Director, Dr Hartwig Fischer, is on record (June 2020) as claiming that the functions of the Parthenon Sculptures in his Museum and those of the Parthenon Sculptures in the NAM are complementary: while the NAM provides an in-depth view of one major ancient city, his provides a sense of the wider context and a sustained cultural dialogue with the neighbouring civilisations of Egypt and the Near East in antiquity.

You be the judge. How easy is it for the ordinary visitor to explore the connections between museum exhibits? Besides, the NAM is a world-class repository of some of the most important of all humanity's cultural achievements and boasts world-class research facilities.

The quality of Dr Fischer's overall judgment may perhaps best be judged from his quite extraordinary view that the displacement - dismemberment, rather - of the Parthenon Sculptures is a 'creative act'.

Trustees of the BM also assert that the sculptures are part of everyone's shared heritage and transcend cultural boundaries. This may be intellectually true, but with the sculptures completely out of context, all that can be gained is a 'British' viewpoint. More importantly, the visitor is not told the full story of how they were acquired. If this pamphlet were available in the Duveen Galleries, the visitor could begin to make his or her own judgement about their legitimacy. They are moreover very poorly displayed so that visitors can gain no insight into their seminal connection with the Parthenon structure itself, and only a very limited view of their contribution even to British, let alone world, cultural heritage.

### **2. Ownership**

The BM Trustees claim that the UK legally 'owns' the Parthenon Sculptures, since it was the Act of Parliament of 1816 that 'bought' them from Lord Elgin, as if he 'owned' them, and they have been 'in trust for the nation' in the BM ever since then.

By what right can Lord Elgin be said to have legally owned foreign cultural materials, except by the right of theft, possession being proverbially 'nine points of the law'? So far, after thorough searches of the Ottoman archives, not a shred of reliable evidence exists that Elgin was somehow given official 'permission' by the Turkish Sultan to remove forcibly any Parthenon Sculptures and have them shipped - hazardously it transpired, as the ship carrying them sank and they had to be retrieved from the seafloor on their way to Britain. The Greek Government is entirely within its rights right to dispute the British government's supposedly 'legal' claim.

### **3. Numbers of visitors – free entry**

Of the 5 million visitors that the BM officially registers per annum, many do indeed enter the Duveen Gallery. But is it really possible, in a day or a morning, for most of those - many foreign visitors - to make much sense of the objects in the collection without some help? Entry is free, but an audio tour must be purchased to enable even a basic introduction to the Duveen Gallery, not to mention the very special features of the unique and very complex Parthenon? In this setting, how can it be possible for most people to gain useful insights into how ancient Greece influenced and was influenced by other civilisations, as the Museum's Trustees claim?

Then there is the (not small) matter of the display in the Duveen Gallery, unchanged since 1962. Here the Metopes, Frieze and Pedimental Sculptures are positioned on the *inside* of a room, so that they face inwards and not, as was intended by the ancient Greeks, *outwards*. Lighting conditions are poor, the skylight above is uncleaned, and the environmental controls inadequate, particularly in summer when side doors must be opened to reduce heat. The two little side-galleries that greet the visitors before they enter the Duveen Gallery are actually far more informative, but they are – not surprisingly – relatively little visited.

#### **4. Curation**

The BM claims that its curation of the Sculptures since their accession in 1817 has been of a very high standard. It has been by no means impeccable. One particularly notorious episode occurred in the late 1930s, just before the outbreak of WW II, when corrupt art-dealer Lord Duveen, then a BM Trustee, ordered the head of the Greek & Roman Antiquities department to organise the 'cleaning' of some Frieze Sculptures by removing the (naturally formed) patina so as to make them appear more 'white'. Not only was this archaeologically grossly ignorant but the 'cleaning' resulted in permanent damage of the surfaces. Pentelic, local Athenian, marble is indeed white, but the Athenians preferred their architectural sculptures to be brightly painted. Conservation is better done in an environment where the nature of the materials is properly understood. There was once an argument that the BM protected the sculptures from pollution and weather, but that is no longer relevant with the arrival of NAM in the last decade.

The British Museum has held the Parthenon marbles since 1817, vowing they would never be moved. In 2014 that tradition was broken when the pedimental figure of 'Ilissos' was loaned to the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. And in 2015 some figures were used in a British Museum exhibition entitled *Defining beauty: the body in ancient Greek art*. Again, in 2018 some Parthenon sculptures were moved to another gallery and displayed as if they were independent art-objects alongside works by the French sculptor Auguste Rodin. If anything, the supremacy of Pheidias as a sculptor of the human form was emphasised, but the show also highlighted the intentions of the sculptor and how diminishing it would be if, say, even one figure from Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais* were to be removed from the group and shown separately, in another country, as an independent figure.

Such disintegration diminishes the meaning of the Parthenon Sculptures. Presenting them as standalone works of art denies the essentially intimate and integral connection between them and their architectural setting.

More about the Parthenon and this British view can be found at [britishmuseum.org](https://www.britishmuseum.org).

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/parthenon-sculptures-trustees-statement>

#### **5. The Role and Aims of Lord Elgin**

Elgin was certainly on a mission to collect antiquities but his was no disinterested, or patriotic, let alone universalist cultural mission. He was also in competition with the French for elements of the Parthenon, at a time when there was an unseemly scramble for objects in Greece to be brought back to the collectors' native countries. Elgin had no intention of sharing his collection with the British public. Far from it.

Once back in England, a member of his team produced a document titled 'Memorandum On The Subject Of The Earl Of Elgin's Pursuits in Greece' which carefully listed what he had acquired, as if preparing a type of sales catalogue. From 1807 he exhibited the Parthenon Marbles in his own private museum in his northern Scottish seat. It was only later in 1816, when sick and desperately in need of money, that he offered them for sale - to the British Government.

The British Museum claims only a little damage was inflicted on the Parthenon when Elgin's team were removing the Sculptures. In actual fact, great damage was inflicted on the building by Elgin's agents both in the removal of those sculptures he wished to have shipped out of Athens and to much of the remaining carvings. Loosening the interlocking blocks of the exquisitely balanced building meant that several pieces of the cornice dropped to the ground and smashed. Sections of the frieze were so thick (almost 46cms) that they had to be sawn through before they could be moved. The saws were clumsy and crude and the machinery to winch them to the ground even more so. The damage was catastrophic. And it was witnessed by several visitors.

**See further reading:**

Christopher Hitchens *The Parthenon Marbles: the Case for Reunification*, new and 3rd edn (2008), ebook (2016) both by [Verso](#).

William St Clair *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (1998), [Oxford Press](#)