

From Janet Suzman
Chair: British Committee for the Reunification
of the Parthenon Marbles (BCRPM)
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It really is very dispiriting that eminences like Lord Sumption (Sunday Times Dec 31st 2023) still make so many wrong assumptions. (Sorry). Here are some of them:

He fails to find a difference between a bas relief (the frieze, running round the perimeter of the building) and the 3D sculptures (metopes and pedimental figures). He can't see why those pedimental figures make a stunning triangular pedimental shape when placed together, quite lost by enforced separation. The half of the extant frieze not in Bloomsbury is in Athens.

He avers that Lord Elgin obtained a 'decree from the sultan authorising him to remove the sculptures.' No such document has ever been found, only a permit (a 'firman') from a high official in Constantinople allowing him to retrieve '*qualche pezzi di pietra*' already fallen down (it is an Italian copy) and to make drawings of pieces out of reach. Elgin, who kept a careful record of his expenses, bribed functionaries at every level to turn a blind eye to his crude attack on an already fragile building. Tourists reported shocking falls of precious metopes and such smashing to pieces, and a disdar – a guard at the time – was described as weeping at the mayhem inflicted on the building.

Elgin commandeered a ship of the line to transport his booty to Britain – so, taxpayers' money – and had every intention of displaying the pieces at Broomhill, his Scottish seat, and none of sharing them with the public. Only when bankrupted after his rich wife left him did he turn to the British Government for a hasty sale.

Yet what's done cannot be undone, and what matters now is a solution to a modern moral maze and not an old blame-game. And yet, Lord Sumption widens his argument to justify how artifacts have always voyaged to distant lands for our enlightenment. But this avoids the point; these Parthenon Marbles are *sui generis*. Elgin took far more than those cut off the Parthenon, but Greece is not asking for the caryatid he stole from the Erechtheum, nor is it asking for the Winged Victory of Samothrace from the Louvre.

In 2019 at a conference in Athens, I was invited into the then President's rooms in his official residence where he took care to explain to me that Greece is proud that Hellenic pieces are in the Louvre (apart from Parthenon pieces...) and proud that around the world Greece's treasures are displayed. "Let me be clear: we want only those pieces that Elgin took off the Parthenon itself", he told me. The Greeks first claimed those Marbles when it was freed of Ottoman rule and became the Hellenic Republic in the 1830s. Melina Mercouri cast a spotlight on that claim in the 1980's. Boris Johnson, when he was still an honest scholar, wrote a spirited article for the Oxford Union paper pleading for their return to the land of Achilles. The world is today more aware of cultural plunder than during colonial times. The

British Museum is the only major museum in the world staying silent about its often ill-gotten contents. All of UNESCO is aware of this silence and is finding it embarrassing.

Sumption seems unmoved that panels from Duccio's altarpiece are divided between nine museums, as if it might be diminished in some way were the whole to be displayed as Duccio intended. That altarpiece is a separate inspiration, whereas the Parthenon marbles are part of the very fabric of the building; it is one thing, conceived and carved as one thing. Alexander Herman ('The Parthenon Marbles Dispute; Heritage, Law, Politics' – Hart, Bloomsbury, 2023) makes this point: 'Because we live in democratic times, we tend to have a predilection for remnants that connect us to the Athenian prototype. For this reason the Parthenon as a symbol continues to dominate'.

After two hundred years in London and badly displayed in a grey gallery in Bloomsbury since the 1960s, the Marbles have done their work of enlightening Europe to the glories of the ancient world. The United Kingdom is second to none in classical scholarship; the British Museum has millions of other ancient artifacts in its collections, and wonderful objects are promised for exhibition by the Greeks themselves to compensate for the (inevitable) return. George Osborne, Chairman of the BM Trustees, is embarking on an important act of international co-operation.

As to numbers, only one sixth of the 6 million annual visitors that enter its portals visit the Duveen Galleries. Approximately that same number passes through the Acropolis Museum in Athens, and why, one wonders, should not a Greek child be as astounded as a British one at the god-like figures caught in a high wind off Mount Olympus, and be as proud as Punch that his distant ancestors were so utterly brilliant with white stone? Why should the Greek people not thrill to such visions? They might be as far down the line as the Druids are to the English, but just listen to the fuss if half of Stonehenge had been nicked and plonked in Potsdamerplatz.