



Dear George Osborne and Trustees

### The Parthenon Sculptures

In January, as you may have seen, an editorial in *The Times* expressed strong support for the case for reunifying the Parthenon sculptures in Athens. Since then, *The Observer*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Art Magazine* and many other publications have carried articles to the same effect. The issue is again a major news story. Meanwhile the UK government continues to say that this is a matter not for them but for the Trustees of the British Museum. So, we are writing to you directly, hoping that you may be persuaded to take time to reflect on the issues, and discuss the case afresh with your fellow Trustees.

Things are moving fast across the world in the international debate about reclamation and restitution. Not one nation in the May UNESCO meeting supported the BM's continued intransigence. "All museums now are in a state of transition," Bonnie Greer remarked in her public conversation about reparation with Hartwig Fischer at the BM. A great change is happening, as the panellists observed, with reclamation, restitution, and restoration everywhere in the air. At heart are profound questions of memory and identity. And in all this the Parthenon sculptures present a unique case, which we believe deserves fresh consideration. We feel the time has now come for the conversation about their return to begin in earnest. Perhaps we could explain why.

As you no doubt know, the Parthenon was built in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE in the age of Pericles. It was the temple of Athena and the city shrine of Athens, the greatest ancient centre of Greek culture. Later a church, and then a mosque, it remained largely intact until it was partially blown up in a siege in 1687. The surviving sculptures, which depict the primordial mythology of Athens, were removed (with considerable damage being caused) by Lord Elgin from the still standing remains of the building between 1801 and 1805, when Greece was still under Ottoman Turkish occupation as it had been since 1453. They were bought from Elgin by the British government in 1816 after a debate in Parliament where, it is interesting to note, one speaker called their removal a national disgrace, and proposed an amendment that they should be 'held in trust by Great Britain' only until such time as the government of Greece changed, and that Britain should commit 'without question or negotiation to restore them'. (The amendment was not adopted). Only five years later, in 1821, the Greek War of Independence began. When freedom came in 1832, one of the one first acts of the new Greek state was to begin the restoration of the Acropolis and to save the remains of the Parthenon, which symbolised what Greece meant to all Greeks, and indeed to the whole of the western world.

Our first point is a wide one. This letter is about bigger things than legal arguments over ownership, which we think are irrelevant (though it is doubtful that Lord Elgin's actions were in any sense legal). It is about bigger things than the facts surrounding the actual removal of the sculptures (though the Museum's recent claim that many of the pieces Elgin removed were lying on the ground is demonstrably false, and seems to us to be clutching at straws).

On the contrary, the case for reunification is, we believe, about basic decency and respect for culture. It is bound up with the highest ideals of civilisation, in which the Hellenic legacy plays such an important part. These are, needless to say, the very ideals for which the British Museum has stood for 250 years.

The European museums created in the colonial era are full of treasures and artworks taken from other countries and cultures. Calls for the return of artefacts are growing everywhere, as the world comes to terms with the cultural damage the European powers did in the age of imperialism. Benin bronzes (seized in a punitive raid in 1897) are now on their way back to Nigeria from everywhere in the 'Global North' with the (partial) exception of Britain. In his Nobel lecture the late Derek Walcott eloquently spoke (with reference to his native Caribbean) of a need for "the restoration of our shattered histories." This is true too of the Greeks, who tenaciously survived almost 400 years of occupation, the loss of their cultural and religious capital, and the wholesale plundering of their history by European powers.

The British Museum today holds over one hundred thousand individual pieces taken from Greece, most of which are not on show. But the case of the Parthenon Sculptures is unique, as is shown by the offer by successive Greek governments to renounce all other claims for return after reunification. They are bound up with Greek identity. As the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said recently in London, they are the preeminent symbol of the link between the Greek people and their past. Yet, as outlined in the British Museum's current programme of public conversations about identity and restitution, Greece is no different from the rest of the world: indeed, if Greece were not in Europe, the calls for the return of its most important cultural treasures would be much louder.

In the Second World War, when for a time Greece stood alone with Britain (and its empire), it was suggested that Britain should give the marbles back, but no action was taken. Our strong feeling now is that this can and should happen. But we hope that you will not see this as an enforced concession, to be made through gritted teeth. When Prime Minister Mitsotakis appeared on *Good Morning Britain* recently, there was a flood of support from the British public for the return of the Parthenon marbles. UK public opinion, as the largest recent poll shows, is strongly behind reunification (3:1 across all age groups). That, we argue, is the key. The return of the sculptures can be seen as a magnanimous act of generosity by the British people; it will make the British people feel proud; it will make the world a better place. It will be, we might suggest, a big plus for 'Global Britain'. In return the Greek government has offered the BM loans of many extraordinary treasures that have never been seen outside Greece.

The Museum has asserted in the past that the sculptures 'belong to the world' and that London is 'as good a place as any' for them to remain. These statements are debatable. But the fact is that the sculptures are divided. Though the BM possesses most of the surviving pedimental sculptures, portions of the frieze and other sculptures, including parts of the pediment figures, are in Athens. It is obviously desirable that the Parthenon marbles should be reunited in one place; and in that case by far the best place is Athens, where all the sculptures can be united under one roof, in the beautiful new custom-built Acropolis museum looking out to the Parthenon, the building for which they were created.

There are fears, which have been expressed even by former British Prime Ministers, that the British Museum's collections would be 'mutilated' by their return. We disagree. The statistics show that most people do not go to the BM to see the marbles. Indeed, in our view, the BM's status as 'Museum of the World' would be enhanced rather than diminished by such a gesture. It would emphasise that though the sculptures are a legacy for all humanity, they are Greek; and in this new era of restitution and reclamation, giving them back to Greece is the right thing to do. As we have said, in the last few years public opinion has changed on matters of museum ownership, part of a dramatic wider shift of attitudes towards the legacy of imperialism; and British public opinion strongly supports this shift.

We hope, then, that the BM's Trustees will want to move with the times and recognise this as the unique case that it is. Many exciting creative developments could flow from returning the sculptures. For example, taking a new initiative in Parthenon studies, the Museum could commission and create full-scale replicas of all the Parthenon sculptures in the form that current scholarship believes they might have looked (on the lines of the Ashmolean's eye-opening 'Gods in Colour' show in 2015), i.e. painted as we now know they once were. This could even include the destroyed central sections of the pediments with the great figures of Zeus and Athena and Athena and Poseidon – powerfully bringing back to life, as it were, these lost images. The effect would be little short of sensational, and could form the centrepiece of the newly announced Rosetta Project to refresh the very old fashioned displays of BM galleries.

In a BM revitalised by the Rosetta Project the newly conceived Parthenon replica project would make a wonderful showpiece that would draw even more visitors to Bloomsbury. Replicas no longer mean second best; think of the astonishing Grotte Chauvet, or the BM's own displays of replicas of Achaemenid Persian reliefs. After all, the Duveen display has always been deeply inauthentic in its organisation and layout; a new, imaginative and thrilling exhibition of replicas could help the BM's claim to be a universal museum, rather than one that increasingly feels tarnished by the intransigent retention of questionably provenanced works of art.

This new era in museum studies would be amplified by the very exciting inter-museum loans that the Greek government is proposing to share with the UK. This bids to inaugurate a new and dynamic phase of cooperation, leading to new scholarship and public engagement with the Hellenic legacy in general and with Parthenon studies in particular. In all this, the BM could be a leading institution, perhaps even spearheading a Europe-wide festival of exhibitions in 2032 for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Greek independence.

In short, there is no need to think small on this, nor to feel diminished. There are many positive and exciting ways in which the repatriation of the Sculptures can be turned into a huge plus for the Museum and for Britain. We hope you will agree.

We propose, furthermore, that this should be part of an international effort. Though most of the marbles are in London and Athens, there are pieces in the Louvre, the Vatican, Vienna, Würzburg, Copenhagen, and elsewhere. Only recently, the Italian government announced a change in its laws to facilitate the permanent gift of the Palermo fragment to Greece. Negotiations should therefore begin without delay to give all these pieces back, so that Europe as a whole contributes to the reunification of all the surviving elements of this foundational monument of Greek and European culture.

Our Committee has been in contact with BM for the past 40 years, during which the Museum's position has not changed. In May, the Deputy Director of the Museum, Jonathan Williams said that "there will never be a magic moment of reunification." But we are now asking you as Trustees to acknowledge the massive sea-change in public opinion over the last few years and seriously to rethink the question of return. Attitudes are shifting so fast now on matters of restitution that there is a danger that the Museum, despite its admirably forward-looking policies in many other areas, will alienate the younger generation. Young people believe passionately in change; they understand how Greeks feel when they stand in the Duveen Gallery in Bloomsbury; and in this case they see the BM trying to defend the indefensible. Here is the chance to take the lead and make a very positive and magnanimous gesture; not under any kind of coercion, but acting freely and generously, and setting the tone for all museums with an eye on future generations. This, we believe, would not only represent just conduct towards Greece, but be good for the reunification of a globally significant peerless collection of sculptures. With its great standing, and its long and distinguished history, the Museum has a singular responsibility to show ethical leadership in tune with the times and the universal values it espouses.

We hope that it may be possible to arrange a meeting as soon as possible between Trustees and a sub-group of the British Committee for Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles to continue this important conversation.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Wood  
BCRPM

c.c. Dame Janet Suzman, Chair; Professor Paul Cartledge, Vice-Chair ; Professor Anthony Snodgrass, Hon President & Members: Professor Oliver Taplin, Professor Judith Herrin, Dr Peter Thonemann, Professor Edith Hall, Professor John Tasioulas, Professor Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, Alexi Kaye Campbell, Dr Christa Roodt, Victoria Hislop, Baroness Shami Chakrabarti, Bruce Clark, Dr Rebecca Lowe, Professor Armand D'Angour, Keith Hunter, Dr Christopher Stockdale, Benjamin Ramm, Christina Borg, Stuart O'Hara, Alexander Benakis & Marlen Taffarello-Godwin