

On the duty to repatriate “exiles”?

The author argues that, beyond the archaeological and aesthetic evidence, the return of the Elgin Marbles is a fundamentally ethical issue.

Preamble

The European crisis, financial in appearance, is in reality profoundly social, even societal. The problems that Greece has faced and those she is made to face are only the tip of the European iceberg. The number, types and levels of dishonourable shameless attacks on the birthplace of our civilisation should remind the thinking public = you, that Aesop’s lesson (the dogs and the fox) “it is easy to kick a man that is down”,¹³ is sadly relevant to the situation, in particular to the support from Britons, who pay or don’t pay income tax but advise Greece that if they want to stay in the Eurozone, they should accept the consequences and get on with it! Therefore we Europeans need to reflect on the meaning of the word ‘community’ and start building the group that calls itself the “European Community”. This research report on the Parthenon, a perennial issue since the 1816 parliamentary debate, now needs to be made accessible to a wider audience in the hope that the claims which attempt to justify the retention by Britain of goods received from an occupying power are, at last, seen to be what they really are...

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June - 2012

*The Parthenon, before its destruction in part by fire during the Venetian siege, had been a temple, a church and a mosque. In each point of view it is an object of regard; it changed its worshippers; but still it was a place of worship thrice sacred to devotion: its violation is a triple sacrilege.*⁴ (G G Byron, 1812)

Searching for the Truth

In 1811, having witnessed the most memorable task which Robert Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, George III’s Envoy Extraordinary to the Sublime Porte of Selim III, had completed during his term of office in Constantinople, Lord Byron felt compelled to accompany the victims of an enforced exile on their voyage to Britain. On board the Hydra he was already penning his impassioned plea for the return to the dismantled shrine of ninety statues sawn off the Parthenon. Over a century later Melina Mercuri became its new dedicated prophet.

Byron’s moving plea, insistent requests from Greece since it regained independence, overwhelmingly positive results of British academic, press, radio and telephone debates (95.2% in favour of restitution),¹ evasive responses of the British government, delaying tactics (Macmillan: ‘This is a complex question. I shall not dismiss it from my mind’), David Wilson’s

outrageous attack¹ on those who pleaded for restitution as ‘cultural fascists’: clearly the issue has preyed on Britain’s conscience for nearly two centuries. The time has come to find an ethically acceptable solution.

Between 447 and 438 BC, the Periclean building programme gathering impetus, the Parthenon was erected and dedicated to the Goddess Athena. Phidias, the greatest sculptor ever, conceived and achieved the precious monument whose perfection remains unsurpassed.

Misleading Terminology?

In July 1801, George III’s Ambassador to Constantinople (Greece was occupied by Turkey) wrote that he obtained from the Turkish government a document – whose original has rather unfortunately been lost – allowing artists and moulders access to buildings and permitting them to ‘take away pieces of stone with inscriptions or figures’ (extract from an Italian translation of the alleged “firman”).

Referring to the acquisition of 90 treasures – slabs of Frieze, Metopes and statues from the West and East Pediments – sawn off the Parthenon between 1801 and 1811 by a team of 400 men working feverishly at the top of scaffoldings, the expression ‘Elgin Marbles’ is appropriate. However, through a subtle semantic shift, the expression has led to an assumption that the ‘Elgin Marbles’ belong *in* Britain and belong *to* the British Museum, thus confusing the issue: ***possession of the ‘Elgin Marbles’ presuming ownership of the Parthenon Marbles.***

The Research

My first purpose is to analyse six popular statements against evidence gathered from a close study of two main sources: *The Elgin Marbles*² and *Sculptures Grècques*.³ Both are scholarly analyses of the artefacts indicating their original position on the Parthenon together with date, place, mode of acquisition, catalogue numbers and research undertaken to locate any pieces missing. I also consulted first-hand accounts by Lusieri, Clarke, Dodwell⁵ and secondary sources, in particular Sinclair,⁶ **to see if one could reach conclusions emerging from valid evidence.**

The *first statement* is that Elgin saved sculptures from oblivion and devastation. First-hand accounts by various witnesses suggest otherwise:

I had the inexpressible mortification of being present when the Parthenon was despoiled of its finest sculpture and when some of its architectural members were thrown to the ground. I saw several Metopes at the Southeast extremity of the temple taken down. They were fixed in between the triglyphs as in a groove and, in order to lift them up, it was necessary to throw to the ground the magnificent cornice by which they were covered. The Southeast angle of the Pediment shared the same fate and, *instead of the picturesque beauty and preservation in which I first saw it, it is now comparatively reduced to a state of shattered desolation.*⁵

The *second statement* condemning the Turks' wanton destruction (they had used it as a fortress) is countered by Clarke's testimony in a letter to Byron:

When the last of the Metopes was taken from the Parthenon – and in the moving of it great part of the superstructure with one of the triglyphs was thrown down by the workmen whom Lord Elgin employed – the Disdar who beheld the mischief done to the building took his pipe from his mouth and dropped a tear.....⁴

Moreover the second statement is annihilated by Dr Clarke's account of the dismemberment of the Parthenon:

Lusieri told us that it was with great difficulty he could accomplish this part of his undertaking from the attachment **the Turks** entertained towards a building which they had been accustomed to regard with religious veneration and had converted into a mosque. We confessed that we participated in the Mahometan feeling in this instance and **would gladly see an order enforced to preserve rather than destroy such a glorious edifice.**⁴

In contrast, the oldest monument in Edinburgh, the Chapel of St Margaret, Queen of Scotland was 'as recently as 1845 ... used by the Battery of the Castle for storing the gunpowder with which salutes were fired on special occasions ... it was not until 1929 ... that a start was made to restore it'.⁷ Hence **the perennial argument** that Greece should not be trusted with the protection of the Parthenon because it was once used, by an invader, to store gunpowder **seems a notoriously disingenuous and embarrassingly unconvincing one**, when set against the backcloth of our own culture.

The *third claim* is that 'all countries did the same ... foreigners carrying things off, especially the French' (William Stewart,¹). A study of the Parthenon Marbles kept in all countries being impossible, it was decided to limit this enquiry to those in the Louvre, to check if this assertion is based on evidence. The Louvre collection contains five pieces:

- *Tête d'homme* (Ma 3110), cannot be matched to any headless statue.
- *Tête de Laborde* (Ma 740), archaeologists believe it *might* be from the West Pediment.
- Tenth South Metope (Ma 736), 'found at the foot of the Parthenon'. The two missing heads later found by Greek archaeologists are preserved in the Acropolis Museum (Nos 737-787).
- Seventh Slab from the East Frieze (Ma 738), 'dug up around the Parthenon'.
- Lapith youth's head (Ma 737), from the seventh South Metope which Lord Elgin's men broke when shipping it off to Britain. Lifted from Piraeus harbour.³

Moreover the evidence (visits, museum catalogues, museum curators' publications, Lusieri, Clarke, Dodwell's testimonies, all primary sources) allows for triangulation of data and therefore quasi-certainty: it is thus more appropriate to state with Millin⁸ that '*Lord Elgin ... brought to England ... a greater quantity of original Athenian sculpture (in statues, alti and bassi relievi, Cornices, Friezes (sic) and Columns) than exists in any other part of Europe*'. Indeed the British Museum exhibits 250 feet of the Frieze whose original length was 524 feet. **Conclusive evidence indeed.**

The *fourth statement* is that, without Elgin, these treasures would now be lost. After Elgin's work only one metope was left on the South side, and one on the extreme left. Fortunately, it was one of the finest and best preserved of all and there it still stands in solitary splendour, a last example of the sculptors and architects' skill'.⁶

On the East Pediment ... Helios drives ... a four horse chariot ... – two among the Elgin Marbles, two left on the Pediment'. -- Today, as in antiquity, the Frieze shows a group of men and youths getting themselves and their horses ready for the procession, mounting and beginning to move off. **Most of the West Frieze is still in place on the building; Elgin removed only the first two slabs.**² Q.E.D.

The *fifth assertion* is that the Greeks would not have cared for them. Here too the British Museum document is helpful. 'From the North, a slab of Frieze extracted from a Turkish building after Greek independence and *now in the Acropolis Museum*'. From the East Pediment, 'a few sculptures ... having fallen earlier were excavated after Greek independence and are *now in the Acropolis Museum*'. From the West Frieze, the 'Charioteer's torso *now in the Acropolis Museum*' ... was not found until 1840. 'King Cecrops ... was left in the Pediment by Elgin's agents because it was then thought to be a Roman replacement, and was *removed to the safety of the Acropolis Museum in 1976*'. Finally, whereas the Elgin Marbles include the torsos of Poseidon and Athena ..., 'a fragment including part of her helmet is *preserved in the Acropolis Museum*'.² **Assertion refuted.**

The *sixth perennial claim* that the 'Elgin Marbles' have been better preserved in the care of the British Museum is **sadly contradicted by the facts**, revealed in the British Museum archives of 1924, that **they had been scoured with a bleaching agent**, in the mistaken belief that their appearance would be improved,² thus destroying their two millennium old patina. **Claim dismissed.**

The above examples prove that the Greeks have looked for, pieced together and preserved whatever treasures they could. Moreover the assumption of incompetence is hardly corroborated by the evidence found in Greek record keeping: details of the dates, plans, progress of the building programme, quarrying and transport of the Pentelican marble, carving followed by erection of the Pedimental figures, detailed costing of the colonnade, hourly pay rate for carvers, sculptors including Phidias, and the quantity of gold: 40 talents - 100 kilos – contained in the statue of Athena. In stark contrast any original document giving Elgin's team

permission to remove the treasures has unaccountably been lost. A none too flattering comparison. **Thus the six statements under scrutiny are popular fallacies based on ignorance bolstered by a patronising attitude towards Greece.**

Furthermore, when analysing historical events empathy is a crucial skill: At the time of Lord Elgin's embassy to Constantinople, the temple of Athena was badly damaged. Robert Bruce's first purpose was to make his "team of artists measure the monument, draw plans and elevations."⁴ However, Harrison convinced him to do mouldings of the Frieze and Metopes and then his chaplain Phillip Hunt fired him with a new enthusiasm that led to the devastation, well documented by eye-witnesses and archaeological evidence: **an appalling escalation.**

Although my study of his correspondence with Hunt and Lusieri makes it difficult to imagine Elgin as an altruist, to portray him as a villain is both anachronistic and disingenuous: when Robert Bruce removed the marble statues from the Ottoman Empire, Western Europe was the centre of the world. Historical empathy forbids us to reproach the Seventh Earl for believing this, as it forbids us to castigate mediaeval sailors for their fear of falling off the edge of the world.

While respecting the Eleventh Earl of Elgin's view: 'my feeling has always been that it was a tremendous rescue operation',⁹ we should interpret his presence at public debates as a gallant acknowledgement that, whatever the merits of his ancestor's decision, the issue is now worth debating.

What now?

The question is not to wallow in what should have been, but to consider what should be done *now*. The approach is based on aesthetic, philosophical, cultural and ethical principles. Although it would be ludicrous, as William Stewart argued, to blame Thomas Jefferson who campaigned against slavery for owning slaves himself, our twentieth century perspective enables us to call slavery slavery – and **the desecration of the Parthenon**, by its proper name: **cultural rape...**

Free-born men should spare what once was free:
Yet they could violate each saddening shrine
And bear these altars o'er the long reluctant brine.

Childe Harold Canto II

The monument emerged from, and was designed for, the uniquely inspiring Mediterranean light that saw the rise of philosophers, architects and sculptors yet unsurpassed in their excellence. A unique symbiosis subsists between the monument and the sacred Mount of Athena. Therefore the Parthenon Marbles should be on the Acropolis.

Now, consider the Parthenon as one, indivisible entity: the Frieze, an integral '*part of the wall of the cella*,¹² represents the procession of hundreds of different characters, each in his or her

role, moving simultaneously eastward from the preparation of the ceremony on the West Pediment to its culmination in the presence of all of the gods on the East Pediment. 'It was **unprecedented** in that **Phidias' design integrated all four sides of the Frieze and Metopes into a single composition with a single theme**'.² The West Frieze's frantic preparations are followed by the characters on the North and South Friezes which go at different speeds, giving a slightly different pace and atmosphere. As it reaches the east, 'to the sound of musical instruments and clamour of sacrificial animals, follows the calm of a sacred ceremony in the presence of the gods who are seated so that, with the same total height, they are given more prominence and status (slab IV and V)².

Each statue was designed for a specific message and purpose and, as **an integral part of the composition**, was given proportions commensurate with its status and significance: the *real* beauty of the 'best loved of the Elgin Marbles'², the horse of Selene, can only be understood in its relation to the whole. The nobility and appropriateness of every character in the procession can only be appreciated with reference to the whole monument. Not only the significance of **each statue** but its true sublimity depended on the whole. **Its size and proportions**, depending on whether it is sitting, crouching or standing, **are adjusted to be seen as perfect from ground level**. Such refinements, impossible and therefore undetectable in Bloomsbury, are an essential part of the splendour of the Parthenon. Defining absolute perfection (aesthetic, moral and spiritual), Simone Weil, the most inspiring twentieth century philosopher, chose the example of a Greek temple. Thus the Parthenon in its purity and power foreshadows Mozart's music:

Displace one note and there would be diminishment
Displace one phrase and the structure would fall.¹⁰

The Parthenon Marbles do not merely belong to, they **ARE the Parthenon**.

Whose cultural heritage?

John Boardman² has demonstrated that the 192 riders of the Frieze *were the 192 heroes of Marathon (490 BC)* being presented to the gods for 'heroisation'. As they celebrated **the heroic battle that secured Athens' freedom 'these splendid sculptures (... have a) central place in the cultural history of Athens'**.² So the Parthenon Marbles should, and therefore need to, be reunited with the rest of the monument – in Athens.

Although the "Elgin Marbles" have been *de facto* part of Britain's literary and cultural scene for 200 years, not least because of Byron's prophetic plea, who could deny that **the whole Frieze**, an integral element of the Parthenon for twenty two centuries, **was, and is, an intrinsic part of Greek historical and cultural identity?**

Moreover Pedersen's scholarly analysis has established that 'the Corinthian capital was closest to being 'invented' when the capitals of the Parthenon cella were created'.¹¹ Hence the Parthenon being copyright, the question of ownership is paramount: In 1811, Lord Elgin wrote

to the Paymaster General offering his collection to the nation for £62,440. In 1816, the Select Committee of the House of Commons decided to buy the collection for £35,000; therefore Lord Elgin died ruined. An Act of Parliament was passed 'transferring ownership of the Elgin Marbles to the Nation'. As early as 1816, the House of Commons debated a motion to the effect that 'Great Britain holds these Marbles only in trust till they are demanded'. **In 1980, UNESCO declared that the Parthenon statues are Greece's 'cultural property'.**

A Precedent?

The desirability of the restitution being established, the question of its feasibility needs addressing. First, this is a unique case: It appears that no other museum in the world has such a vast proportion of artefacts from a single monument, nor received as presents, like Cleopatra's Needle that was presented to the United Kingdom by the ruler of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, in 1819, or bought from their rightful owners (the Venus de Milo), or even dug up and pieced together from 110 fragments (the 'Winged Victory').² Restitution will not 'open the floodgates of piecemeal return of all cultural artefacts' or 'empty all the museums in the world', two perennial retentionists' claims unthinkingly and repeatedly made by otherwise intelligent people, who have not analysed the issue or thought about the real implications of their remarks namely:

1. Returning the Stone of Scone to Scotland and the Ashanti Stool to Ghana were noble gestures; a recognition that they held a central part in the national identity of these countries.
2. So for the sake of consistency and precedent! - Britain would be well advised to be similarly respectful of Greece's repeated pleas as well as her generous offers to pay for making the copies and for their transport.
3. However **the concept of precedent**, based as it is on English (though not Scottish) case law, **has no legal standing internationally** so the scary warnings that the return "would empty" all the museums in the world are as sound as a house built on sand.
4. Moreover, **refusing to return goods that do not belong to us might well be called "receiving"** by a morally discerning analyst.
5. Furthermore, refraining from returning these "exiled statues" (Lord Bryon) for fear of being copied, would signify **refraining from acting justly for fear of imitation, clearly a morally untenable notion.**

Thus the whole argument based on precedent is not only culturally but legally and morally discredited.

Towards Reunification

The call for reunification is based however on the acknowledgement, more worthy of a post-colonial ethos, that Western Europe can no longer patronisingly decide what is best for other countries. Negotiation is therefore mandatory. **William Stewart's goodwill cultural diplomacy**

has enabled progress to be made between key actors. The President of the Hellenic Republic is on record as stating:

Greece does not envisage, nor intend, nor has ever intended, to put any claims on the dozens of Greek Antiquities scattered in museums all over the world. We are asking just for **the Parthenon Marbles, one caryatid and one column missing from the Erechtheion. This is a unique case. This is what we ask for, nothing more.**¹

Indeed Greece has presented to the Louvre a finger recently excavated on Samothrace that was missing from the Winged Victory; another example of Greece's selfless intelligent generosity.

*The fact that **The British Museum** refuses to discuss the issue is unimportant, because it is the custodian rather than the proprietor of these treasures.* Since an Act of Parliament legislated on their 'ownership', it is **The House of Commons** that **should decide on behalf of the nation.** The result of the latest national consultation – 95.2% in favour of restitution – should sharpen our MPs' perceptions of the magnitude of this outstanding issue. So should the realisation that Western Europe is a small peninsula attached to one of several large continents. Travellers, whether they be scholars, students or members of the rucksack brigade, who wish to admire the Parthenon Marbles, would, can and do travel as easily – and certainly more willingly – to sun-drenched Greece than to misty Bloomsbury. Restitution will not reduce accessibility. **Reunification will celebrate community.**

The European Parliament having voted the budget for the building of the New Acropolis Museum, the Parthenon Marbles, protected from pollution in a state-of-the-art controlled atmosphere, will be displayed in a breathtakingly beautiful way, in relation to the very places they once held on *their* monument, seen from the galleries through glass walls. Moreover the Greek government has committed itself to paying for repatriation and, most gallantly indeed, for the plastercasts that Lusieri never finished. These can then be displayed in the British Museum. Lusieri's task can at last be accomplished much more accurately, thanks to up-to-date refined "lost wax technique" (wax used only once ensures that no residue of marble dust makes the curves of the next mould less perfect). Scholars, artists as well as parties of school children can, and will, still admire these timeless beauties in London.

From aesthetics to ethics

If he lived now, the seventh Earl of Elgin would never dream of depriving Greece of her "Crown Jewels" (Melina Mercouri). He would bear in mind Greece's unparalleled heroic gesture in 1820 (she sent lead to Turkey to stop the Turks from dismantling the columns in search of bullet-making lead). He would fulfil his first purpose: make perfect copies of these treasures that transcend time and culture.

Now **our own duty** is to focus on and duly honour this supreme symbol, this ill-fated monument and **seek reunification.** Rather than detailed analysis, it is **the synthesis** of the subjects of all the Metopes: fight of the Greeks against the Amazons, Gods against Giants,

Centaurs against Lapiths, which **reveals that the real theme is the victory of order against chaos to the fulfilment of peace.** Therefore, **the Parthenon** should be viewed as **a symbol of order and civilisation** achieved through, but transcending, the message of ancient Greece, **an early preview of a world culture**, a timeless reminder of how to achieve peace and a lone-star for today's globalisation of culture. If that is so, it could be argued that the Parthenon remains a symbol of world civilisation - whether it is made whole again, or remains amputated of its members - and that repatriation is thus not essential.

However, **the real issue is an ethical one.** What matters might not be the venue in itself, but *the decision to return a treasure* to its rightful owner, **to make a sacrifice in order to do what is right and honourable.** The Parthenon, reunited with itself, will not only be a reminder of the birthplace of a Mediterranean civilisation, a meeting point of cultures, but will reconcile the present with the past, celebrate the universality of art, reaffirm the cultural identity of Europe still lost in its economic and political squabbles, still 'powerless to be born' (Matthew Arnold).

Whose decision should it be?

No other country or organisation, neither the European Parliament nor UNESCO, can decide on behalf of Britain: The Congress of Vienna cannot be replicated. This should be a mature decision made by **a well-informed nation**, taking its collective responsibility in the sure knowledge of the sacrifice it implies and the reasons for doing so. **May MPs of all persuasions who believe in equity, heed the call of duty and seek reparation.** Having chosen conscience rather than power, Britain will regain the moral high ground as well as the trust and respect of her European partners, indeed of the world.

What is called for is an act of cultural heroism. This is an issue of justice and peace – no civilisation worth belonging to is based on '*wrongful interference with goods*'. No peace worth seeking is based on injustice.

And so, paradoxically, Britain's cultural heritage, far from being diminished, will be greater. The educational value of the 'Elgin Marbles' will be heightened. Not only will their artistic aura remain unaltered but their impact on the spiritual, moral, and social development¹² of the young will be stronger. Britain will show her consideration for the integrity of one of the greatest ever works of art, her respect for other cultures and her response to duty by returning to Greece what belongs to her. Moreover, by putting honour before self-interest, Britain will show that she does not merely teach her youth to act morally¹² but is willing to act according to her own stated principles.

I do not think the honour of England advanced by plunder.⁴ (G G Byron 1812)

Notes

1. *Elgin Marbles Special*, BBC TV, 16/4/96.
2. *The Elgin Marbles*, British Museum 1984.

3. Hamiaux, M., *Sculptures Grècques*, Musées Nationaux, 1992.
4. G G Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Notes to Canto II*, (1812 edition).
5. E Dodwell, *A Classical and Topographical Tour Through Greece* 1819.
6. W Sinclair, *Lord Elgin and The Marbles*, OUP 1967.
7. Menzies et al, *Saint Margaret of Scotland*, Kirkcaldy 1994.
8. W Hamilton, B West, A Millin, H Moses, *Memorandum on the subject of the Earl of Elgin's Pursuits in the Greek Islands during the years: 1801, 1805, 1806*. (Vol I & II) 1811.
9. *Eleventh Earl of Elgin in public debate* with Graham Binns, President of the British Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon Marbles and myself. Trinity and All Saints Debating Society 1985.
10. Shaffer, *Amadeus*, Deutsch 1980.
11. Poul Pedersen, *The Parthenon and the Origin of the Corinthian Capital*, Odense University Press 1989.
12. *Educational Reform Act*, HMSO 1988.
13. *The Fables of Aesop* – (6th century BC) English translation in Hodder and Stoughton (1909)

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Revised version of the article first published at the request of the B.C.R.P.M
in THE MONTH
A review of Christian Thought and World Affairs
December 1997

IN Memory of Howard John Evans 1932 - 2012