

# The case for the return of the Parthenon Marbles\*

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When we speak of the Parthenon, we are speaking about the birth of western civilisation, the birth of democracy and the symbol of Greece. The Marbles were and remain an integral part of the Parthenon as a monument to the glory of Classical Greece and the civilisation it gave to the world.

Ownership might never be resolved but present intransigence attracts increasing diplomatic pressure. Surveys of British MPs reveal 66% support for the return of the Marbles. This paper will look at the legality of the ownership of the Marbles, the preservation of them and the current position. The Acropolis Museum allows Britain to show goodwill on this important cultural property issue.

## Introduction

It is now over 200 years since Lord Elgin, British Ambassador to Constantinople at the beginning of the nineteenth century, arranged for the removal of many of the magnificent sculptures from the Parthenon in Athens to England, where they remain to this day. These sculptures, otherwise known as the Elgin Marbles, but better known today as the Parthenon Marbles — even by the British Museum and the British Government — belong to a unique building that still stands after wars, earthquake and plunder. Despite a mounting international campaign, the British government has refused to return the marbles to Greece. Their return is one of the most important cultural property disputes in the world today.

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\* The conference was privileged to hear an address by the founder of the first international committee for the return to Athens of the Parthenon Marbles held in the British Museum. While it is not an academic paper in the usual sense we felt that it should be published in the *Proceedings* because it presents clearly and convincingly the historical and moral arguments for the return of the Marbles.

## The Parthenon and its sculptures

The Parthenon, the Temple of Athena, was built in 15 years between 447 and 432 BC by Iktinos the architect, and Phidias the sculptor. The man responsible for the project was the great Athenian statesman, Pericles, who began a huge program of building works to give Athens the magnificence of a great imperial city. In these few years Greek literature, philosophy, architecture, and politics — in fact the whole of Greek civilisation — suddenly burst into flower.

The Parthenon is a Doric temple built entirely of white Attic Pentelic marble with a row of 46 elegant Doric columns. The internal eastern chamber or *cella* of the temple once housed a 12 metre-high statue of the goddess Athena wrought in gold and ivory. The Parthenon sculptures featured in the triangular pediments at each end, in the 92 metopes running around the length of the temple high up outside the building, and in the magnificent 160 by one metre frieze high up on the inside wall of building.

The pediment sculptures were huge statues in the round depicting the story of the quarrel between the goddess Athena and Poseidon over the naming of the city of Athens and the birth of Athena, with all of the other gods looking on in amazement. The metopes were sculptures in high relief telling stories from Greek mythology, and the frieze, wrought in low relief, represented the ancient week-long festival of the Panathenaia. It consisted of 400 human and 200 animal figures.

Most statues from the pediments are now in the British Museum along with fifteen of the original 92 metopes. Many others were smashed during the removal of the sculptures. Of the original 160 metre-long frieze, more than half is now in the British Museum. Huge 10 metre-long saws that were used to cut and slice the heavy one metre-deep marble into sections in preparation for their transportation to London caused irreparable damage to the building and to the sculptures. One of the

*Phidias Showing the Frieze of the Parthenon to his Friends*, by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1868, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

most magnificent marbles is of the great sculptor Phidias himself. The details of his eyes, nose, beard, lips, robes and muscles are all rendered to perfection; including the shades on the sculptured marble which in ancient times were coloured with reds, blues and golds.

After the classical period, the Parthenon became a Christian church and in AD 450 it was dedicated to the Virgin Mary. In 1204 the French occupied Athens and turned the Parthenon into a Catholic church and in 1458 when the Turks arrived, the Parthenon became a mosque. In 1674 (13 years before the explosions which damaged the building), a French artist visiting Athens made drawings of the Parthenon sculptures. These drawings provide important evidence of how well preserved the marbles were at this time and how well the Turks were looking after the Parthenon — despite later claims to the contrary. The first significant damage in 21 centuries occurred on 26 September 1687 when the Venetian General Francesco Morosini laid siege to Athens. During the siege, a ball from a Venetian cannon hit the Parthenon and blew up the roof but the majority of the sculptures fortunately remained intact.

After capturing the Acropolis, Morosini attempted to remove the statue of Poseidon and his chariot that formed part of the west pediment sculptures. However, as they were being lowered to the ground, the ropes holding them broke and the figures were smashed. One hundred and fifteen years later, when Elgin was removing the sculptures, he failed to see the torso of Poseidon's body and that is why this magnificent piece is now in the Acropolis Museum and not in the British Museum.

These treasures were mainly taken between 1801 and 1803 while Greece was under Turkish rule. Elgin's main reason for taking the marbles was to decorate his Scottish mansion, and not to save them from "barbarians" as was later claimed by the British Museum trustees and supporters. After Elgin returned to England in 1806 and after getting into financial difficulties, he eventually sold them to the British government, who in turn placed them in the British Museum where they remain today.

## Lord Elgin (1766–1841)

Thomas Bruce, the seventh Earl of Elgin, was a Scottish aristocrat who had served in the British army as an officer, and as a consul before being appointed British Ambassador to Constantinople in 1799. Before leaving England to take up his post he married Mary Nisbett, the only child of wealthy parents. He took his team with him including his secretary the Rev. Dr Phillip Hunt, Sir William Hamilton and others. Before he left England he was renovating his mansion in Scotland. It was his architect, Thomas Harrison, who suggested to Elgin that he take advantage of his position of Ambassador to Constantinople to take with him artists and painters to make architectural drawings and plaster casts "to improve the arts in Great Britain".

Lord Elgin took up the idea with the enthusiasm of a crusader but there was no suggestion that original sculptures should be removed. He even asked the government of the day, the Prime Minister William Pitt and the Foreign Secretary Lord Grenville,

to provide him with qualified men to make architectural drawings but was advised that any such activity needed to be funded from his own pocket. He left England for Constantinople in August 1799 on *HMS Phaeton*. Just one year before his departure Rear Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson had destroyed the French fleet in Egypt. Elgin stopped in Italy on his way to Constantinople and hired the services of an Italian artist, Giovanni Battista Lusieri, who was initially contracted for the three-year period of Elgin's Ambassadorship. But the association was to last for twenty years — during which time Lusieri served as Elgin's chief accomplice in the looting of Greek antiquities which only ceased with the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence in 1821 and Lusieri's death in the same year.

Elgin was very warmly received on his arrival in Constantinople, thanks to the assistance Britain was giving Turkey in defeating Napoleon's forces in Egypt. His party was taken on golden chairs to the palace and lavishly entertained with two weeks of receptions and banquets during which he was served coffee in diamond cups and showered with gifts, including the use of a 200-ton yacht for his private exploration of the Greek Islands. In August 1800, 12 months after his departure from England, his artists arrived in Athens to "improve the arts in Great Britain". Athens was at the time ruled by two officials, the Turkish Governor and a military governor called the *Disdar*.

## Elgin and the Parthenon Marbles

In 1800 during Elgin's term as Ambassador to Constantinople, his artist Lusieri and others were at first given permission to make drawings and casts of the Parthenon sculptures. However, they were ordered off the Acropolis by the local Turkish commandant who claimed that the British would be able to spy on the Turkish women in the nearby houses from their vantage on the Acropolis. It took a lot of persuasion, sweetened by Lord Elgin's bribes, to gain permission for his artists to resume their work. They resumed work in February 1801. However, they were ordered out again in May 1801. Elgin's agents, Lusieri and Rev. Hunt, wrote immediately to Lord Elgin in Constantinople, begging him to obtain a *firman*, a letter from the Ottoman governor addressed to the local official in Athens, the original of which has never been found, requiring him to grant a favour by allowing the artists to resume their work.

As it turned out, events far away in Egypt conspired to deliver to Elgin exactly what he was seeking. In June 1801, the final victory of the British expedition over the French in Egypt made Elgin one of the most highly favoured men in Turkey. The Ottoman government could not do enough to show their appreciation of the country that had made this victory possible and they showered gifts on Elgin and his officials. The success in Egypt brought Elgin to the pinnacle of his diplomatic career; he now enjoyed a position of influence at Constantinople such as no other ambassador has ever approached. The government in Britain was pleased and they told him so in an official letter.

Lord Elgin could never have removed the Acropolis sculptures without the following three conditions: firstly, Greece was under Turkish rule; secondly, it was an era when the great powers, Britain and France, took whatever they wanted from the less powerful countries such as Greece and Egypt; and thirdly, Britain was the dominant power in the eastern Mediterranean at the time.

## Lord Elgin and the *firman*

Back in Athens, where Elgin's agents had in May been ordered out of the Acropolis, Elgin was on the point of giving up the whole enterprise, such was his frustration with the Turkish officials. But who happened to be in Athens at that very time but his very rich in-laws, the Nisbets. When his father-in-law saw the magnificent work that had been done in those three months (February–May) by his artists, he wrote to Elgin in Constantinople, urging him to obtain the *firman* at all costs so the work could continue. Elgin opened negotiations with the local Pasha on the day he received his letter, 14 June 1801. A few days earlier Rev. Hunt had arrived back in Constantinople from Athens and was able to give Lord Elgin an eyewitness account of developments in Athens. It was Rev. Hunt who drew up the memorandum of 1 July 1801 for the *firman*. The text of the original memorandum is important because it became the text of the *firman* that was shortly issued. It sought permission for the following activities:

- (1) To enter freely within the walls of the Citadel, and to draw and model with plaster the Ancient Temples there.
- (2) To erect scaffolding and to dig where they may wish to discover the ancient foundations.
- (3) Liberty to take away any sculptures or inscriptions which do not interfere with the works or walls of the Citadel (St. Clair, 1998:87).

Above: The bombardment of the Parthenon (1687), drawing  
by G. M. Verneda in F. Fanelli, *Atina Attica* (Venice 1707)

Right: Lord Elgin (1766–1841)

Left: Figure of Dionysos from the east pediment. Middle: Figure of Iris from the west pediment.  
Right: Fragment of a marble shield (© Trustees of the British Museum)

It is interesting to note that no specific permission was sought to remove sculptures from the building. The removal of the sculptures only took place as a series of accidents, all of them involving Rev. Phillip Hunt. Firstly, the *firman* would not have been drafted in the form it was had not Rev. Hunt been in Athens in May when the trouble started and back in Constantinople in June/July when the good news from Egypt came through. Secondly, the *firman* would not have been interpreted in the way it was, had not Rev. Hunt himself delivered it to Athens. When he arrived in Athens on 22 July he immediately asked the Turkish governor for permission to go up on the Acropolis to start the drawings and plaster casts. The authority was given for work on the Acropolis to be carried out from sunrise to sunset within the terms of the *firman*.

After this triumph, Rev. Hunt acted quickly. All the inscriptions lying about the Acropolis were collected and extensive excavations were begun. A few days later, Rev. Hunt made the decisive move. He asked the Turkish governor for permission to take down the metopes. But the governor hesitated, saying there was nothing in the *firman* that gave permission for sculptures to be removed from the building. However, with the aid of threats and bribes, Hunt managed to win the day. “With no great deal of difficulty, the vital twist to the *firman* was given on 31 July 1801” (St. Clair, 1998:93). Two metopes were removed in just two days, causing in the process significant damage to the building and to the sculptures themselves. Lord Elgin wrote in a letter to Lusieri and Rev. Hunt, “I should wish to have examples in the actual objects, of each thing and architectural ornament — of each cornice, each frieze, each capital — of the decorated ceilings, of the fluted columns — specimens of the different architectural orders and of the variant forms of the orders — of metopes and the like, as much as possible” (St. Clair, 1998:99). It does indeed seem clear that his intention was to decorate his castle in Scotland.

As the work of clearing and excavation was being carried out on the smaller adjacent temple, the Erechtheion, Hunt wrote to Elgin suggesting that the Caryatid Porch could be removed and relocated in England. “If your Lordship would come here in a large Man of War that beautiful little model of ancient art might be trans-

Left: East frieze. The sacred robe of Athena held up by cult officials, and Athena and Hephaistos.  
 Right: South frieze. Scene from a procession of sacrificial victims (© Trustees of the British Museum)

ported wholly to England” (St. Clair, 1998:100). Elgin was keen to act on this advice and wrote to Lord Keith in Britain requesting “a ship of war [...] to stop a couple of days at Athens to get away a most valuable piece of architecture [...] for the Arts in England”. And he added that “Bonaparte has not got such a thing from all his thefts in Italy. Kindly attend to this my Lord”.<sup>1</sup> It was indeed fortunate for the future of the Erechtheion that no such ship was available at the time and so the little temple with its beautiful Caryatid Porch remains *in situ* although a piece of its cornice, an Ionic column and one of the Caryatid statues were taken. They are now on display in the British Museum. Once an ancient piece of art is removed from its original and historical context, it loses its aesthetic value and becomes a piece of archaeological interest and nothing else.

On the Acropolis, Hunt and Lusieri had engineering problems removing sculptures from the building. The damage caused by their work was remarked upon by a number of British travellers to Athens at this time. One, Edward Dodwell, an artist who spent time sketching on the Acropolis wrote “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” (St. Clair, 1998:102). Another British traveller commented in October 1801 on the damage to the building. He was Edward Daniel Clark and he noted that as one of the sculptures was being lowered to the ground the ropes holding it broke and the sculpture was smashed into a thousand pieces.

In April 1802, Lord Elgin made his first visit to Greece to see the work. He was so pleased with the progress that he hired more men and architects to complete the removal of the sculptures. Elgin arranged for some 22 ships to transport approximately 220 cases of the marbles and other antiquities to England. One of the ships was sunk in a storm and the marbles it was carrying lay in deep water for three years before they were recovered and sent on to England.

<sup>1</sup> Navy Records Society, 1927–1955: *The Keith Papers, 1927–1955*, II, 405, cited in St. Clair, 1998:101.

Left: Horsemen from the west frieze. Middle: Metope. A fight between a human Lapith and a Centaur. Right: Caryatid from the Erechtheion (© Trustees of the British Museum)

## The Marbles in England

Between their arrival in England in 1804 and their sale to the British Museum in 1816, the marbles were stored in a coal shed in the grounds of Elgin's London home. Elgin's marriage failed during this time and when he found himself in extreme financial difficulty he began to negotiate for the sale of the marbles to the British Government. The Government eventually acquired them for the price of £35,000 and an Act of Parliament transferred ownership of the marbles to the nation. And so they found their way into the British Museum.

One of the very first to criticise Lord Elgin was none other than Lord Byron. In 1828, four years after Byron's death, his poem "The Curse of Athena", in which he refers to Elgin as a robber, was published for the first time in England. In another publication, dating to 1818, we find Byron and other Englishmen — travellers and historians who had visited Greece — calling Elgin "a shameless thief". Sir John Hobhouse, a friend and travelling companion of Byron, noted on a chapel under the Acropolis the inscription, "What the crooks did not do here, the Scot did here", an obvious reference to the Scotsman Elgin.

In 1890, an eight-page article entitled "The Return of the Elgin Marbles", by Franklin Harrison appeared in the magazine *Nineteenth Century*.<sup>2</sup> The writer appeals to the gentle feelings of the English people and maintains that "even if Elgin's looting is excused, [note the first use of the word looting] the retaining in London of parts essential to the Parthenon is no longer tolerable or convenient. Their restitution is urgent both as an act of international justice and as an act beneficial to science and the arts". In the same article, Harrison also maintained the sculptures "were a thousand times more dear and more important than they can ever be to the English nation, which simply bought them. And what are seventy-four years that these dismembered figures have been in Bloomsbury when compared to the 2240 years wherein they stood on the Acropolis". "What would be our feelings" he continued, "if some one had deprived *us* of *our* national monuments?"

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from Harrison are taken from Hitchens, 1987:67.



In November 1928, Phillip Sassoon, Private Secretary to the British Prime Minister of the day, wrote to *The Times*, saying that when he visited the Acropolis “I found myself wondering whether, after all, the noble ruins of the Parthenon and the glorious atmosphere of Athens would not be a better setting than Bloomsbury for the most exquisite marbles in the world” (Hitchens, 1987:75).

## British damage to the Marbles

The sculptures on display in the British Museum have suffered considerable damage since their removal from the Acropolis in the early 1800s. William St. Clair, the British historian, has exposed the cover-up by the British Museum Trustees of the enormous amount of damage they caused to the marbles. Lord Duveen funded the building of a special gallery at the British Museum to house the Parthenon Sculptures — on condition that his name be attached to it. In the 1930s, chemicals and wire brushes were used to scrape and “clean” the marble. As a result, the only pieces that retain their natural honey colour of aged Pentelic marble are those that were not cleaned because they were considered too fragile.

## The case for the return of the Marbles

In 1941 Sir Winston Churchill was asked in Parliament whether Britain would consider returning the Parthenon Marbles “in some recognition of Greece’s magnificent stand for civilisation against the might of Hitler’s army” (Hitchens, 1987:75). Churchill neatly sidestepped the issue by replying that he would “look into it after the war”. And that was where the matter rested for the next thirty or more years.

In more recent times, during the 1980s, the former actress and later Minister of Culture in the Greek Government, Melina Mercouri, brought the issue of the return of the marbles to world attention.

Figures of three goddesses from the east pediment (© Trustees of the British Museum)

In 1981 I established the first Committee in the world to campaign for restitution. Two years later in 1983, Melina Mercouri was instrumental in establishing a British committee in London, called *The British Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon Marbles*, whose current Chairman is Professor Anthony Snodgrass. In the same year the International Council of Museums, including the British Museum, met in London and overwhelmingly passed a resolution to initiate dialogue with an open-minded attitude concerning requests for the return of cultural property. One thousand delegates voted in favour of the motion, none against, and there were ten abstentions, five of them from the British delegation.

## What the Parthenon Marbles mean to us

They are our pride  
They are our sacrifice  
They are a noble symbol of excellence  
They are a tribute to the democratic philosophy  
They are the essence of Hellenism

When Lord Byron's friends were travelling through northern Greece, a learned old Greek said to them "You English are carrying off the works of our forefathers. Preserve them well. Greeks will come and redemand them".<sup>3</sup>

That day has come and Greeks around the world are demanding their return to Greece. Why? These Marbles are ours.

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<sup>3</sup> Memorandum submitted by Mr Jules Dassin, Chairman Melina Mercouri Foundation to the Select Committee on Culture Media and Sport, House of Commons. Published at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmcmuseds/371/0060504.htm>