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Difficult Heritage:

The Case of the Parthenon Marbles



Figures from the Parthenon in Athens

(Source: Wikipedia under CC-SY3.0)

The Parthenon Marbles are often known as the 'Elgin Marbles' after Lord Elgin who obtained many of the sculptures for Great Britain. This in itself is an indication of the difficult, controversial, and highly politicised heritage of these artefacts which are a part of a marble frieze and associated statues removed from the Parthenon - an iconic building on the Acropolis in Athens, Greece - in the early years of the 19th Century by the then British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul, Turkey) Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin.

Since 1864, they have been held by the British Museum in London, England. They represent about a quarter of the total artefact. Other parts of the artefact are currently held in France, Germany, Denmark and Greece (Harrison, 2010:175).



Sections of the frieze from the Western wall of the Acropolis, Athens (Source: Wikipedia under CC-SA 2.0)

However, commencing in 1983 – and subsequently on a number of occasions since then - the government of the Hellenic Republic of Greece has made requests for these world-renowned sculptures to be returned to their country of origin, a request which has, to date, been rejected both by the Trustees of the British Museum and the British Government (Harrison, 2010:176-177).

This physical and cultural heritage - claimed by two separate countries as their own and both members of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) – marks a key battleground in current widespread disagreements around the world regarding the ownership and potential repatriation of Cultural Heritage to post-Imperial and post-Colonial countries and reparations for the perceived or actual loss. It is a complicated case involving, on one side, the attitudes, mores and diplomatic constructs of the long gone, imperialist regime at the court of King George III, the desire for personal and national gain over a period of centuries, and the loss of many of the original documents from the period which might aid a definitive resolution of the issues and, on the other side, the perceived theft and loss of historic national treasures by a country which, in its present constitution, did not exist at the time of the perceived offence. These are some of the issues which make the Parthenon Marbles a case of ‘Difficult Heritage’.

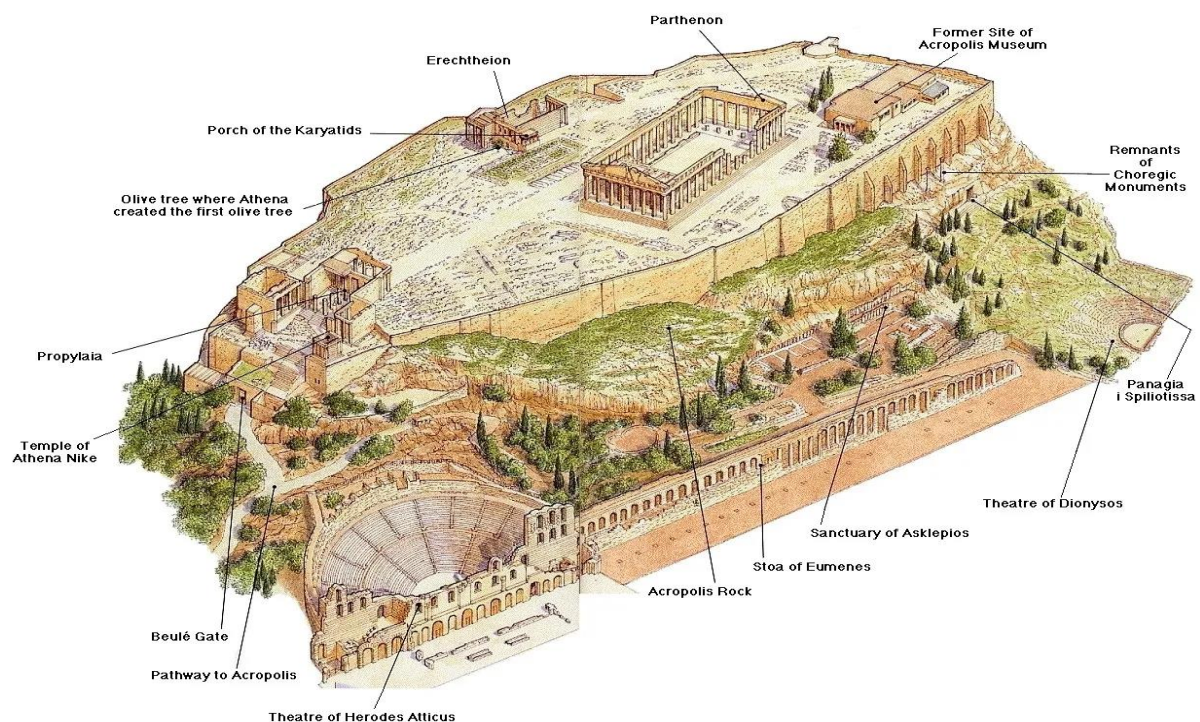
The literature on the artefacts is extensive and dense and, in some instances, conflicting.

This paper will investigate the historical, cultural and political issues surrounding the ownership and custodianship of the Parthenon Marbles and investigate ways in which a resolution to the conflict regarding their display might be achieved.

The Acropolis and the Parthenon

The Acropolis was the Upper City of ancient Athens; a large rocky outcrop overlooking the city state. It formed a secure, defensible citadel upon which a number of grand ceremonial and religious buildings were constructed (Cook, 1984:5). The Parthenon was built in the third quarter of the 5th Century BC as a temple dedicated to the goddess Athena. Even in this period it was a contested space; during the Persian invasion of Athens in 480 BC the Persians overran the citadel and burnt the site whilst it was still under construction (Haynes, 1965:5-6).

The Parthenon temple formed the centrepiece of the citadel and was a grand building begun in its current form in 447BC and completed around 432BC. It was constructed as a 'Doric peripteral amphiprostyle temple' - i.e. it has a double row of columns on each long side and a double row of porches on each end (Browning, 2008:5-6). The temple contained a carved marble frieze which represents a ceremonial procession as part of a festival and it is the panels of this frieze above the columns which are the contested artefact under discussion here, along with associated statuary of ancient Greek gods (see Haynes, 1965; Jenkins, 1994 for highly detailed descriptions and drawings of the frieze and statuary).



The Acropolis and its associated buildings

(Image: theculturemap.com)

By the time of the building of the Parthenon, Athens already controlled the lands in the surrounding area (Attica) and this situation continued, albeit with internal conflict until, under Byzantine control, it became a Christian church in the sixth Century AD. It remained so, in varying states of repair, for around another 1000 years until Athens was conquered by the Ottoman Empire ("the Turks") in the fifteenth century (Haynes, 1965:7).

The Parthenon under Ottoman control became a mosque and remained little-changed for a further two centuries until it was besieged by Venetian forces under General Francesco Morosini in 1687. At that time, it was being used as a powder magazine. It received a direct hit from a Venetian shell and exploded, largely destroying the interior of the building, dislodging and breaking or damaging many of the friezes and leading to the removal of some of the sculptures and friezes (Hitchens, 2008:10). This was the approximate state of the building when Lord Elgin appears in the history of the Parthenon.

Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin.

Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin, was appointed as his Britannic Majesty's Ambassador to the court of the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) in 1799. King George III himself had suggested to Bruce that he apply for the position (St. Clair, 1998:1).



Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin. Painting by Anton Graff , ca.1788
(Source: Wikipedia - public domain)

The Ottoman Empire had ruled Athens and much of what is now Greece since the 1450's and the previous Ambassador, Robert Liston, had left to join Nelson in his Mediterranean campaign against the French forces under Napoleon. Bruce had been in the diplomatic service for some eight years at the time of his appointment and was still a young man of just thirty-three years of age. Previously, he had risen to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in the army, been elected to the House of Lords and entered the diplomatic service at the age of twenty-five (Sinclair, 1998:2-3).

It would appear that Lord Elgin proceeded to select the other members of his embassy himself and whilst undertaking this procedure met with the architect Thomas Harrison who suggested to Elgin the idea of pursuing the collection of the artefact as a way to improve the understanding of ancient Greek architecture (St. Clair, 1998:6). What Harrison suggested was the creation of plaster casts of the frieze and the figures, but Elgin appears to have seized on this suggestion as a means to raise the profile of his embassy in order to make it and, by extension himself, 'beneficial to the progress of taste in England' (St. Clair, 1998:6-7). Elgin tried to negotiate with the artist, J.M.W. Turner to join the expedition but his conditions – including ownership of any paintings, drawings or sketches being transferred to Elgin's ownership – and Turner's 'high' salary demand (£400 per annum – Elgin later spoke of this to a House of Commons Select Committee as £800 (Hitchens, 1987)) meant that negotiations could not be completed and, instead, he engaged a young and little-known artist named Lusieri at Palermo at half the cost (Cook, 1984:53). Elgin's own salary was negotiated at £6600 plus expenses (St. Clair, 1998:9).

The picture painted of him in the literature is of an ambitious and self-serving aristocrat out to make money and further his reputation (see Cook, 1984; Hitchens, 1987; St. Clair, 1998 for further details). However, Elgin had a strong reputation and influence in Constantinople; Great Britain had recently rescued the Ottoman Empire from Napoleon's forces and as the ambassador from King George III, Elgin enjoyed a position of influence 'such as no Christian ambassador had ever approached' (St. Clair, 1998:84).

The acquisition of the artefact and the beginning of a cultural conflict.

According to Hitchens, the most complete account of the acquisition of the artefact is that published by A. Hamilton Smith in the *Journal of Hellenistic Studies* in 1916 (Hitchens, 1987:26). This paper, some two hundred and twenty pages long, references many original documents, mostly now lost, and these lost papers have contributed greatly to the conflict and discussion of the rightful ownership of the artefact and thus whether or not the Greek government have a rightful claim to its return.

Elgin first acquired two marble statues, which had already been removed from the Acropolis, from a small village in the Dardanelles – with the approval of the local authorities - whilst en route to Constantinople where he arrived in 1800 (Cook, 1984:54; Haynes, 1965:9).

His team proceeded to Athens to commence drawing and taking casts of the frieze but they were prevented from doing their work by the local authorities. Lusieri returned to Elgin in Constantinople to obtain a 'firman' to enable them to carry out their work unhindered

(Haynes, 1965:11). Elgin used his influence to obtain the ‘firman’ from the Ottoman government which stated that no person was to obstruct him or his agents in their work at the Parthenon. A firman was, at the constitutional level, a royal mandate or decree issued by the sovereign of an Islamic state and was incontrovertible by lesser authorities. However, for some reason it did not arrive at Athens and all work was stopped until July (Haynes, 1965:11). A second firman was obtained, this time including the facility to remove ‘sculptures or inscriptions which do not interfere with the work or walls of the citadel’ (Haynes, 1965:11). This, second, firman was delivered personally by Philip Hunt, the embassy chaplain in Constantinople, and it was at his bequest that facility to remove examples from the Parthenon had been inserted into the document (Haynes, 1965:11). This is a key part of the modern argument of the British Museum that the marbles were removed legally and this is why this small section of the British Museum Guide from 1965 has been interrogated so closely. It is contested by the Greek government.

These documents were central to the Parliamentary Select Committee set up to investigate the legitimacy of the obtaining of the artefact in 1816 (see below). The text of the documents are more fully discussed in chapter nine of St. Clair’s monograph (St. Clair, 1998:86-97).

Between 1801 and 1805, Lusieri and his team removed 15 metopes, 17 pediment figures and approximately 75m of the original frieze, in the process doing considerable further damage to the building and the remaining sections of the artefact, and all this despite the second ‘firman’ being rescinded in 1804 due to representations by France (in 1803, war broke out again between France and Great Britain. At this time Elgin and his wife were returning to Britain via France and were made prisoners of war (St. Clair, 1998:120-121)). This constituted a massive amount of material comprising some 120 tons of marble (St. Clair, 1998:145).

The artefacts arrived in England in two main shipments, one in 1804 and one in 1812 (St. Clair, 1998:151-161; 214). The story of the delivery to England is a fascinating one, complicated by pan-European war and changing national loyalties and by the changing fortunes of the individuals involved. However, Elgin eventually returned to England and by 1807 had begun to display the marbles in a rented building, ‘Burlington House’, in London (Haynes, 1965:13). But Elgin’s fortunes were waning; much of the costs for the removal, transport and display of the artefact were at his own expense and his years as a prisoner and consequent diminished political and diplomatic career meant that he was short of money. He offered his collection (how it became ‘his’ is still a murky unknown) to the nation for the sum of £62,440 (Haynes, 1965:14). This equates to approximately £6.7 million at 2020 values (www.officialdata.com). The offer was rejected; the most the government being prepared to pay was £30,000.

He tried again in 1815, offering the collection directly to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for the increased sum of £73,600. The Chancellor seems to have agreed to the proposal but decided that the price to be paid should be set by a Select Committee of Parliament. The committee met in March 1816 and examined four areas of the offer:

- “1 The authority by which the collection was acquired.
- 2 The circumstances by which that authority was granted.
- 3 The merit of the marbles as works of sculpture and the importance of making them public property, for the purpose of promoting the study of fine Arts in Great Britain.

- 4 Their value as objects of sale; which included consideration of the expense which had attended the removing, transporting, and bringing them to England.”

(Haynes, 1965:15)

After two weeks of debate, the committee recommended purchase at a value of £30,000 (Haynes, 1965:16).

Thus, the Parthenon Marbles passed to the British nation and have been in the care of the British Museum since 1864. The Parliamentary Select Committee of 1816 is frequently cited as the legal validation of the artefact as British property (see Cook, 1984:4; Harrison, 2010:175;).

However, in recent years the British Museum have somewhat moved away from this position, now citing the artefact as more than legally-held national property; rather, they position their situation as custodians, the museum being, “a unique resource for the world [enabling people to] admire the artistry of the sculptures and gain insights on how ancient Greece influenced... other civilisations that it encountered” (British Museum 2008, cited in Harrison, 2010:180).

The Greek claim

The modern state of Greece was first recognised following the signing of the 1830 ‘Protocol of London’. This agreement, between the United Kingdom, the Russian Empire and the kingdom of France, recognized Greece as an independent state following its war of independence against the Ottomans (1821-29). Its current constitution came into being in 1975 and it became a member state of the European Union in 1981 (wikipedia.org).

Greece first called for the return of the artefact in 1965; the Greek Minister of Culture called for all Greek cultural heritage to be returned to Greece (Harrison, 2010:176). This call was taken up at Prime Minister’s Questions in the Houses of Parliament on 1st July 1965. William Hamling MP (Labour, Woolwich West) asked the (Labour) Prime Minister, Harold Wilson,

“...would the Prime Minister introduce legislation to return the Elgin Marbles to Athens?”.

Wilson replied,

“The Elgin Marbles are vested in the Trustees of the British Museum and I do not propose to introduce legislation to require the Trustees to return them to Athens”.

(Hansard, 1965)

Hamling persisted, asking the Prime Minister whether,

“...the cultural imperialism of the 19th century is not in keeping with his own standards. Would he further agree that it would be an act of grace and would contribute greatly to good relations between ourselves and Greece”.

(Hansard, 1965)

Thus immediately, in Britain as well as in Greece, questions of ‘cultural imperialism’ were being raised at the highest levels of government. This had, indeed, been the case even in the 1800’s, soon after the artefact was put on display. George Gordon – Lord Byron – wrote scornfully of Elgin’s conduct in ‘The Curse of Minerva’, written in Athens in 1811 (Hitchens, 2008:51).

In 1982 the well-known actress Melina Mercouri became the Greek Minister of Culture and at the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies of that year, she proposed a resolution that the artefact be returned to Greece. The resolution was passed, despite abstentions and absentees, and a formal bilateral request for return was made to the British government the following year. This request was rejected in 1984 (Woodhouse, 2017:3).

Further requests (particularly leading up to the Athens Olympic Games in 2004) were consistently rejected both by the British government and by the Trustees of the British Museum. The government continues to argue that to force the Museum to return the artefact would require the passing of an amendment to the British Museum Act of 1963 because the Trustees of the museum are the keepers of the artefact (Allegretti, 2023:1). The Trustees take the position that they are providing the whole world – not just the people of Great Britain – the opportunity to view the artefact for free and, due to the other artefacts on display, in the context of the development of world history and culture. The whole argument is treated comprehensively by Harrison as a case study on the politics of heritage (Harrison, 2010:174-182) and by Woodhouse and Pepin in their House of Commons briefing paper (Woodhouse, 2017).

In 2013, both the UK government and the British Museum rejected a UNESCO proposal for mediation over the artefact (Woodhouse, 2017:4).

In 2015, it was reported that the Greek government had sought legal advice regarding the taking of legal action against the British government for the recovery of the artefact, but had subsequently rejected that advice and not gone ahead with the action (Woodhouse, 2017:8).

As recently as March 2023, the British government refuses to accept Greek calls for the return of the artefact, despite on-going talks between officials of the two countries (Allegretti, 2023:1).

Mediation and Re-negotiation

Hamling's question to Prime Minister Wilson seems to have been eminently reasonable; regardless of the rights or wrongs of Elgin's acquisition of the artefact, Elgin, the British Museum and the British government had laid themselves open to claims of 'cultural imperialism', first in the removal of the artefact and then in the refusal to return it. It would, indeed, be 'an act of grace' (as Hamling put it) to return the artefact to Athens.

Any suggestions that the Greek nation could not now look after the artefact safely and display it effectively are now spurious – Greece is a modern democracy, a member of the European Union and a long-time signatory to the UNESCO conventions and with multi-national support (through the multiple resolutions and recommendations at UNESCO conferences) within that organisation (see Harrison, 2010).

The argument that the British Museum cannot return the artefact appears to also be spurious; it has been in discussions with the Greek government regarding a 'loan' of the artefact but could not transfer ownership without an Act of Parliament and the government is not prepared to do that. This is complicated - on both sides of the House of Commons - by the conflicting views of the Members and by the perception that returning this artefact would be the 'thin end of the wedge'; the fear is that there would then be a flood of requests to return all the other artefacts subject to claims of cultural imperialism.

So how could this impasse be resolved?

Modern technology allows the recording of artefacts with millimetre accuracy. Laser scanning linked to CNC machining has been shown to enable the accurate reproduction of artefacts either at a smaller scale or at full-size. This has been shown to be the case by the Institute for Digital Archaeology, both with their reduced-scale model of the Petra Arch and by full-scale modelling of parts of the current artefact in question.



The unveiling of the first marble reconstruction by IDA
(image: digitalarchaeology.org)

This has huge potential throughout the archaeology and heritage sector; in the case under discussion it has been established that originally the artefact would not have been seen in its white marble state but have been painted in rich colours (BBC, 2004). Irrespective of who has custody of the artefact this could not be done to the original, but could be done with a reproduction. The frieze could be re-assembled in its entirety – over time some 50% of it is believed to have been lost – and set at a realistic height at the level of the top of the pillars.

Similar technology is being investigated by University of Southern California Institute for Creative Technologies who have aimed to recreate the whole length of the frieze, including missing sections from extant artefacts and drawings and descriptions of the missing parts. All institutions holding parts of the artefact (apart from the Greek government) agreed to participate in this project which has begun to recreate the frieze (BBC, 2004).



Alma-Tadema's 1868 painting, "Phidias Showing the Frieze of the Parthenon to his Friends"

(Image:Wikipedia.com (public domain))

If the British Museum were to come to an arrangement with the Greek government regarding the artefact (even on a temporary basis) then this technology would enable replacements to be acquired and, it could strongly be argued, fulfil their stated aim of showing the artefact in its full context better than it is currently able to do.



Re-creation of the colours of the Parthenon frieze

(Image: @elginism via twitter.com)

Other ways in which the artefact could be renegotiated is through the medium of Virtual Reality. This has now developed to the stage where objects and places can be engaged with to the fullest extent and the technology will only improve with time.

Conclusion

As a lay person, before researching this topic, whenever the subject of the return of the Parthenon Marbles came up in the news media, this writer was strongly against it for many of the reasons described above. The mental reasoning went along the lines of “it’s here; it’s ours”; “if we give this back, what will be next”; “they couldn’t look after it then, how will they now?”. These are all spurious and somewhat xenophobic reactions. They appear to be commonly held within the British public from this writer’s understanding.

With the establishment of the new Acropolis Museum in Athens in 2007, the Greek nation is certainly able to curate these and other artefacts; there are dedicated spaces built into the museum to house them (see Harrison, 2010:178-180). However, this writer doubts whether the British political and cultural establishment will see fit to return the artefact because of the potentially large consequences stemming from this country’s wide-ranging and long history of cultural imperialism and the potentially denuding effect returns would have on our museums and heritage sector.

It is to be hoped that, over time, realistic negotiations and solutions can be reached for this and the wider cultural heritage conflicts which exist in Great Britain and throughout the world.

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