

Parthenon/Elgin Marbles: The Greek position, as per governmental information to the public

(<http://odysseus.culture.gr/a/1/12/ea121.html>)

The Memorandum of the Greek Government

In 1999 a team of Greek experts visited the British Museum in order to examine the extent of the damage done to the surface of the Parthenon Marbles, during the cleaning of 1937-1938. Following this, the British Museum organized an international conference in London ("Cleaning the Parthenon Sculptures", 30 November - 1 December 1999) in order to examine the issues concerning the conservation of the Parthenon Sculptures; the results of the Greek experts' visit to the British Museum were presented among others during this conference.

During the same year, the British Government assigned the Committee on Culture, Media and Sport to consider all the issues relevant to British cultural heritage policies. The Greek request for the return of the Parthenon Marbles was among the examined issues.

In 1999 members of the Select Committee visited Athens and the Acropolis, and saw the area where the New Acropolis Museum will be constructed. After appointing a special task force, the Greek Ministry of Culture sent to the Committee a memorandum concerning the Greek request for the return of the Parthenon Marbles (Memorandum on the Parthenon Marbles submitted by the Government of the Hellenic Republic to the House of Commons Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport). Moreover, in 2000 relevant oral testimonies from the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, the former Secretary General of the Ministry of Culture and the President of the Melina Mercouri Foundation were presented before the Committee. Later, in July 2000, the Select Committee published its report entitled "Cultural Property: Return and Illicit Trade" (House of Commons, Session 1999-2000, Culture, Media and Sport's Committee, "Cultural Property: Return and Illicit Trade"). The report includes comments by Mr Graham C Greene, Dr Robert Anderson and Mrs Vivian Davies (The British Museum), Mr Donald Toon and Mr Roger Sanbrook (HM Customs and Excise), Ms Isabel Letwin, Mr Hurh Corer and the former Minister of Culture Mr Alan Howarth (Ministry of Culture, Media and Sport). Mr Howarth encouraged the bilateral discussion between Greece and the United Kingdom in view of finding a ground of mutual understanding: "I think there needs to be a closer meeting of minds, a closer mutual understanding of each other's point of view

The Official Greek Position

Axcerpt of interview from Mr. Konstantinos Karamanlis, Prime Minister

"Culture is a social investment because the world needs values and humanity"

Journalist: Is it meaningful to continue the campaign for the return of the Parthenon Marbles with the same passion, when the British appear negative toward our request, or would it be wiser to change our tactics and start negotiations in a different manner?

Prime Minister: The return of the Parthenon Marbles is a fair request of all the Greeks. It is a request of all the people, regardless of nationality, who visualise the reunification of a mutilated monument belonging to the world cultural heritage. We are dedicated to our goal, the return of the Marbles, and we shall remain so. We have persuasive arguments for our just cause. We feel optimistic that in the end, even the most doubtful will be convinced, and will change their attitude forward the matter. In the

meantime, with the creation of the New Acropolis Museum, which is a real masterpiece in museological and architectural terms, we are strengthening our arguments even more.

'Apogevmatini tis Kiriakis', June 4th 2004

Georgios Voulgarakis, Minister of Culture

The request for the Parthenon Marbles restoration exceeds our national territories and it has nothing to do with chauvinism, as it is universal. I will always lay emphasis on the uniqueness of the Parthenon, as a universal monument, since this is the determinant of making our demand ecumenical.

This is exactly the way Greeks conceptualize it, but also those who think of it as a self-evident. Today, we are sending this moral to all foreign museums that possess sculptural elements of the Parthenon. At this point, I would like to make clear that the marbles restitution will not set up a claim for other monuments or collections of antiquity.

The case of Parthenon is absolutely distinctive. The reunion of the Marbles is our debt of honor towards history. The museums ought to meet their moral obligations towards the cultural and spiritual coherence of the United Europe. I am hopeful and confident that the restoration of the fragment from Heidelberg will rekindle the conversation for the restitution of the fragmented members of the Parthenon Marbles. I believe in the prospect of a calm and objective dialogue. I also believe in the acquiescence, the cooperation and the mutual help between all the European cultural organizations. I look forward to the power of the future and its positive prospect. For every Parthenon fragment that is been restored, various "gifts in return" will be offered derived from our wealthy cultural history, as a proof of good will and cooperation. The scientific work that is being held on the Sacred Rock and the forthcoming completion of the New Acropolis Museum predispose for the welcome of all the Sculptures in Greece. All extant members of the Monument will be reunited in the Exhibition Hall of the Parthenon at the New Museum. Inside the hall, a new great and homogeneous collection will be developed, consisting of the Marbles we claim from the British Museum, which were thought as independent from the rest of the monument, since there were separated from their historical and cultural frame. At the Exhibition Hall of the Parthenon, some specific window-cases will remain unoccupied waiting for the restitution of the fragmented Sculptures.

Speech, at the presentation of the first fragment of the Parthenon marbles that was returned in Greece by the University of Heidelberg, September 5th 2006

A review of the seizure

In 1799 Lord Elgin was appointed ambassador of Great Britain to the Sublime Porte at Constantinople. In 1800 he dispatched a team of artists to Athens, which then formed part of the Ottoman Empire. They were charged initially with drawing the monuments and making casts to adorn the lord's country house in Scotland. At that time Elgin was not considering the removal of anything from the Athenian Acropolis.

When, in the course of international political events, Turkey forged a fruitful alliance with Britain against France, the Sultan became favourably disposed towards Elgin, as British Ambassador, who seized the opportunity for personal gain by acquiring an enormous collection of antiquities. His attention was focused primarily on the monuments on the Acropolis (the Parthenon topmost) which were very difficult of access and from which no one ever had been granted permission to remove sculptures.

Concurrently, by showering Turks in Constantinople and Athens with gifts and money and by using methods of bribery and fraud Elgin persuaded the Turkish dignitaries in Athens to turn a blind eye while his craftsmen removed those parts of the Parthenon they particularly liked. Elgin never acquired the permission to remove the sculptural and architectural decoration of the monument by the authority of the Sultan himself, who alone could have issued such a permit. He simply made use of a friendly letter

from the Kaimakam, a Turkish officer, who at the time was replacing the Grand Vizier in Constantinople. This letter, handed out unofficially as a favour, could only urge the Turkish authorities in Athens to allow Elgin's men to make drawings, take casts and conduct excavations around the foundations of the Parthenon, where some part of an inscription or relief might be buried, with the inevitable proviso that no harm be caused to the monuments.

Between 1801 and 1804 Elgin's team was active on the Acropolis, hacking off and causing considerable damage to the sculptures and the monument, eventually detaching and dismembering a significant part (more or less half) of the remaining sculpted decoration of the Parthenon, together with certain architectural members such as a capital and a column drum. London and Athens now hold dismembered pieces of many of the sculptures.

Of the 97 surviving blocks of the Parthenon frieze, 56 have been removed to Britain and 40 are in Athens. Of the 64 surviving metopes, 48 are in Athens and 15 have been taken to London. Of the 28 preserved figures of the pediments, 19 have been removed to London and 9 are in Athens.

The shipping of these precious antiquities to Britain was fraught with difficulties, since they were moved from port to port. One ship sank and the sculptures, after prolonged exposure to the damp in various harbours, eventually arrived in England. In London they were shifted from sheds to warehouses, because Lord Elgin had been reduced to such penury by the enormous costs of wages, transportation, gifts and bribes to the Turks, that he was unable to accommodate them in his own house. So, after the mortgaging of the collection by the British state, he was obliged to sell the Parthenon Marbles to the British government, which transferred them to the British Museum in 1816.

Prior to this transaction a select Committee was appointed to consider the purchase and the evidence it gathered was placed before Parliament. A debate took place, where many voices expressed their skepticism and disapproval. Even thoughts about the return of the Marbles were expressed for the very first time. Strenuous objections were heard outside Parliament as well, the most impassioned being that of Lord Byron.

The British Museum Position

The Parthenon Sculptures

The question of where the surviving sculptures from the Parthenon should be displayed has long been a subject of public discussion. This document provides key information for understanding the complex history of the Parthenon and its sculpture.

You can find out about the Acropolis Museum's history at theacropolismuseum.gr

What is the Parthenon and how did the sculptures come to London?

The Parthenon in Athens has a long and complex history. Built nearly 2,500 years ago as a temple dedicated to the Greek goddess Athena, it was for a thousand years the church of the Virgin Mary of the Athenians, then a mosque, and finally an archaeological ruin. The building was altered and the sculptures much damaged over the course of the centuries. The first major loss occurred around AD 500 when the Parthenon was converted into a church. When the city was under siege by the Venetians in 1687, the Parthenon itself was used as a gunpowder store. A huge explosion blew the roof off and destroyed a large portion of the remaining sculptures. The building has been a ruin ever since.

Archaeologists worldwide are agreed that the surviving sculptures could never be re-attached to the structure. By 1800 only about half of the original sculptural decoration remained. Between 1801 and 1805 Lord Elgin, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, acting with the full knowledge and permission of the Ottoman authorities, removed about half of the remaining sculptures from the fallen ruins and from the building itself. Lord Elgin was passionate about ancient Greek art and transported the sculptures to Britain. Their arrival in London was to make a profound impression upon western ideas of art and taste. It promoted the high regard that the European Enlightenment already had for ancient Greek civilisation.

Before they went on show at the British Museum in 1817, they were first seen from 1807 in Lord Elgin's temporary museum. The public display of the sculptures from spring 1807 encouraged Hellenists in their love of ancient Greece while, at the same time, it inspired the Philhellene movement in its sympathy for the inhabitants of modern Greece and their struggle for independence. Since then the sculptures have always been on display to the public in the British Museum, free of charge.

Figure of Iris from the west pediment of the Parthenon

Where can the surviving sculptures from the Parthenon be seen?

The majority of the sculptures are roughly equally divided between Athens and London. Important pieces are also held by other major European museums, including the Musée du Louvre in Paris, Vatican Museums, the National Museum in Copenhagen, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the University Museum in Würzburg, and the Glyptothek in Munich.

Parthenon Sculptures in Athens

The programme of restoration of the Acropolis monuments, begun in the 1970s, is ongoing. As part of this work, the Greek authorities have now removed all the architectural sculptures from the

Parthenon to the Acropolis Museum. They have thus completed a process begun by Lord Elgin 200 years ago, and all the Parthenon sculptures have now become museum objects.

Parthenon Sculptures in London

The sculptures in London, sometimes known as the 'Elgin Marbles', have been on permanent public display in the British Museum since 1817, free of charge. Here they are seen by a world audience and are actively studied and researched by an international community of scholars, to promote understanding both of ancient Greek culture and its role in the cultures of the world. The Museum has published the results of its own research extensively. New discoveries of ancient applied colour on the sculptures have been made with the application of special imaging technology.

Parthenon sculptures in temporary exhibitions

The British Museum continues to seek new ways to study and interpret the Parthenon sculptures, and to share them as widely as possible. In this spirit, the sculpture of the rivergod Ilissos was exhibited in the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg in 2014, to mark the 250th anniversary of that museum's foundation. In 2015 the Ilissos and other Parthenon sculptures were featured in the British Museum's special exhibition *Defining beauty: the body in ancient Greek art*. Here they were shown for the first time together with masterpieces borrowed from other museums. In ways such as this the British Museum aims to illuminate not only the classical Greek achievement, but also its impact on the world.

What has the Greek Government asked for?

Since the early 1980s, Greek governments have argued for the permanent removal to Athens of all the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum. The Greek government has also disputed the British Museum Trustees' legal title to the sculptures.

What is the British Museum's position?

The British Museum tells the story of cultural achievement throughout the world, from the dawn of human history over two million years ago until the present day. The Museum is a unique resource for the world: the breadth and depth of its collection allows the world's public to re-examine cultural identities and explore the connections between them.

Within the context of this unparalleled collection, the Parthenon sculptures are an important representation of the culture of ancient Athens. Millions of visitors admire the beauty of the sculptures each year – free of charge. They also gain insights into how ancient Greece influenced and was influenced by the other civilisations that it encountered.

The Acropolis Museum allows the Parthenon sculptures that are in Athens to be appreciated against the backdrop of ancient Greek and Athenian history. This display does not alter the Trustees' view that the sculptures are part of everyone's shared heritage and transcend cultural boundaries. The Trustees remain convinced that the current division allows different and complementary stories to be told about the surviving sculptures, highlighting their significance for world culture and affirming the universal legacy of ancient Greece. More about the Parthenon and its history can be found at theacropolismuseum.gr

Further reading

The following books provide good introductions to the Parthenon and its sculptures:

- *The Parthenon Frieze*, Ian Jenkins (British Museum Press, 1994)
- *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, William St Clair (3rd edition Oxford University Press, 1998)

- *The Parthenon*, Mary Beard (Profile, 2002)
- *Greek Architecture and its sculpture in the British Museum*, Ian Jenkins (British Museum Press, 2006)
- *The Parthenon Sculptures in the British Museum*, Ian Jenkins (British Museum Press, 2007)
- *Explore the Parthenon – an ancient Greek temple and its sculptures*, Ian Jenkins and Kate Morton (British Museum Press, 2009)
- *Acropolis Restored*, Charalambos Bouras, Maria Ioannidou and Ian Jenkins (British Museum Press, 2011)
- *Parthenon: Power and Politics on the Acropolis*, David Stuttard (British Museum Press, 2013)
- *Defining beauty: the body in ancient Greek art*, Ian Jenkins (British Museum Press, 2015)

These titles, and others, are available in the British Museum shop.