



The Marbles should be returned to Athens

Christina Borg, Journalist

Respect



The Acropolis is discernible, even in the haze of sweltering heat, from the roof of my grandparents' apartment in Korydallos, Piraeus. There have been times when I've stood there - after hanging my swimwear on the washing line - and meditated searchingly on the far distance. For a time however, I wasn't fully aware of the significance of the monument that stands on that hill (Acropolis means, literally 'the highest point of a city') or even of the controversy that had surrounded it in the last two centuries. And though I'd visited its grounds several times and marvelled at its splendour, I knew little about the Parthenon's history. As I've gotten older, I've become better acquainted with this part of Greece's heritage.

In 2003, I had started a course in modern Greek and having later found out that I could become a volunteer at the Olympic Games I swiftly signed up. Athens 2004: the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad returned to their ancestral home.

But what's the relationship between the Games and the antiquities you may ask. It's simple. Critics have sometimes, rather unfairly applied a standard riposte when discussing today's Greece. "Huh, never mind ancient Greece they say, modern Greece isn't capable of organising a modern Games let alone take care of its antiquities." Yet in 2004, with the Games and the Euro 2004 football cup win, Greece showed that it could rise to a challenge. It is not a third-world country; it is a member of the European Union.

Now, more than 20 years after Melina Mercouri's campaign began, the work to send the Parthenon sculptures home continues. With the recognition that a world-class museum is now in place in Athens, it must only be a question of when the marbles can be reunited with their other halves.

In my uncle's apartment, on the eve of the 2004 Games, members of the family had gathered to watch the televised opening. The presenter Nikos Aliagas knocked a nail into the ground of the main stadium in an act of irony. The world was watching and

the message on this most magical of nights was clear: modern Greece could compete with the best of them.

The countdown was made against the sound of a heartbeat. The ceremony began with a moving parade of drum-playing volunteers, Alexis Kostalas provided authoritative commentary, a young boy emerged to greet the crowd, gaily waving Greece's national flag while crossing the water in his paper boat to the fine sound of Manos Hajidakis's Wilderness. We were then presented with a tour of the ages and faces of Greece's illustrious history from Mycenae and Alexander the Great to Byzantium and Maria Callas...

The following day the international press published words of praise and apologies. I was assigned to work in Press Operations at the Peace and Friendship stadium where coincidentally I found that our pressroom was dedicated to Melina Mercouri.

Whatever arguments may currently be made in favour of retention of the marble sculptures, the facts must not be embroidered. To blur the facts regarding the true nature of their acquisition by Elgin is plainly dishonourable.

Greece has given much to humanity, as indeed have other cultures. However, if anything should inform the direction of this debate it should be - RESPECT. The marbles should be returned to Athens - the birthplace of democratic society created by Pericles - as a mark of one nation's respect for another. This act, I believe shouldn't compromise the integrity of museum collections around the world, as this must be marked out as a unique case that deserves special attention.

As the official opening of the New Acropolis Museum draws near, the present custodians of the marbles might reflect on these lines taken from George Seferis's 1935 poem, Mythistorema: "I woke with this marble head in my hands; it exhausts my elbow and I don't know where to put it down. It was falling into the dream as I was coming out of the dream so our life became one and it will be very difficult for it to separate again." ■

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It is a moral issue



Anthony Snodgrass is chair of the British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles.

Everyone (except perhaps a few collectors and dealers) will concede that there is a moral or ethical dimension to the Parthenon marbles controversy. For the British Museum and its supporters, this centres on 'ownership', 'good stewardship' and the case for the 'universal museum', which has moral as well as cultural overtones. Armed with such arguments, the British Museum has striven long and hard (and with some public success) to occupy the 'moral high ground': even if you find the 'universal museum' argument logically flawed, you may accept that it is high-sounding - a world setting for world art as against nationalist pretensions - especially if backed by the merits of free admission for its public.

For their opponents, the ethical dimension is more concerned with natural justice and the righting of past wrongs. Of course it is difficult to reach agreement on what constitutes such a wrong. But if there is one issue on which everyone can agree, it is that, over the whole history of the twentieth century and longer, the Holocaust must occupy a position close to, or on, the bottom rung on the ethical ladder. To benefit, even unknowingly, from the Nazi looting of the property of Holocaust victims is, one might guess, the very last thing that a major public institution would wish to be seen to do.

But no: in certain circumstances, it turns out to be only the second-last thing. In 1939, the Gestapo seized from the home of Dr. Arthur Feldmann some 750 old master drawings, before he was tortured and murdered and his wife sent to her death at Auschwitz. More than sixty years later, his heirs discovered that four of these drawings had been inadvertently acquired by the British Museum in 1946: three of them bought at auction for nine guineas, the fourth bequeathed by a former Director of the Museum (can this really be true, only seven years after their first seizure?). The Museum now, in 2002, approached the Government to see if an exception could be made to the 1963 British Museum Act, which had generally forbidden the museum to dispose of any of its holdings. But Counsel for the Attorney General held that under existing legislation

this was impossible: why, if the principle were once established, it might be applied to other acquisitions where 'unseemly circumstances' prevailed: 'the door would be open'. In a judgment of 2005, Mr. Justice Morritt agreed: only new legislation could entitle the Trustees to part with the drawings. So the Museum fell back on the alternative course of offering the Feldmann heirs financial compensation, which was accepted.

Though no doubt soundly based in law, this whole episode wore a sufficiently sorry look for the Government to promise new legislation, confined strictly to the category of Nazi loot. In October 2008, the then Minister announced action on an enabling clause, as part of the Heritage Protection Bill for 2009. But now, a British Museum spokesperson is reported as saying that the Museum is today 'not in favour of a change in legislation' (The Art Newspaper, November 2008). Any doubt about the authenticity of this report is dispelled by a piece, attributed to Sir Norman Rosenthal, in the following issue (December, p. 30) where he proposes that heirs and distant relations of Holocaust victims no longer have an inalienable right to ownership, and that it is time to 'let go of the past'.

The motive for the change of heart, is clear: that other holdings of the big museums, might come into consideration as well - just as Counsel for the Attorney General had warned three years earlier.

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By this volte-face, the British Museum has comprehensively evacuated the moral high ground from which we started. The expediency of avoiding the risk of further pressure, stiffened by even a faint shadow of legal force, being applied in the Parthenon marbles issue, has overcome revulsion at hanging on to the former possessions of a Holocaust victim and buying off his heirs. Inevitably, this reminds one of other occasions when this great public institution acted in ethically questionable ways. Some of these, linked by a thread of real animosity against the modern Greek state, are too embarrassing to recall after the passage of years.

The Nazi loot question, however, touches a deeper nerve. Much as we may disagree with the British Museum on the Parthenon marbles issue, I personally would much prefer, win or lose, to be matched against an institution not so palpably at odds with its own high principles. Instead, we seem to have come to the point where the marbles factor is a tail that wags the dog of policy - in the process, shaking off some of its probity. ■

The returned fragments from the Parthenon

Before the New Acropolis Museum officially opens its doors to the public, it has welcomed three precious fragments from Germany, Italy and the Vatican.

In January 2006, the Rector's office of the University of Heidelberg made a gesture of great symbolic importance: returned the foot of figure 28 on slab VIII of the North Frieze, which depicts a procession of old men, following a procession of kithara players and flautists. On the 5th September 2006, the fragment was reunited with slab VIII in the New Acropolis Museum.

On 24 September 2008, a fragment of the Parthenon frieze was returned to the New Acropolis Museum, in the form of a loan, by the Salinas Museum. This fragment consists of the right foot and edge of the garment of the goddess Artemis. It belongs to slab VI, which is divided between Athens and London.

On 4 November 2008, the Vatican Museum returned, also in the form of a loan, one of the two fragments of the sculpted decoration of the Parthenon that belongs in its collection, slab V of the North Frieze, comprising the head of a skaphephoros (man carrying a tray) and the front part of the tray held on his shoulder. Slab V depicts three youths carrying large trays holding sweetmeats for the bloodless sacrifice performed during the festival of the Panathenaia in honour of the goddess Athena.

In a ceremony held in the New Acropolis Museum on 2 December 2008, the Greek state honoured three prominent figures of the international academic community, Tonio Hölscher, Louis Godart and Antonia Sophitkou, for their contribution in the matter of the repatriation of these three fragments.

The New Acropolis Museum, is the most appropriate place to display all the preserved sculpted decoration of the Parthenon. The proposed collaboration of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture with the British Museum to reunite the Parthenon sculptures will bring many benefits to the world's cultural community, for academic research, and for the public.

Elena Korika - Director of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities,
Hellenic Ministry of Culture

Decolonising culture

Chris Price - Vice Chairman, British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles

Time was when European imperial powers assumed that theft and despoliation of cultural treasures from more fragile countries could be carried out with immunity. This is why, in the 21st century, the issue of looted art from the colonial era refuses to go away.

In recent years some governments have begun to resolve this imperial legacy. At the outset of his premiership Tony Blair tried to kick-start an initiative to send back human remains of the aborigines of Australia which had been removed against their wishes - often for spurious 'scientific' purposes with the intention of using brain measurement to prove



the superiority of whites over blacks. It proved highly successful and helped stimulate what is now an increasing number of cooperation agreements around the world and has resulted in many looted objects being returned to 'first peoples' to whom they are meaningful and precious. Other countries, Italy in particular, have used the full extent of their legal powers to promote arrangements with US museums who are now in the process of returning disputed objects.

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Simultaneously a set of official initiatives on Holocaust looted art has produced positive results in returning art to their rightful owners; while international organisations - UNESCO and ICOM (the International Council on Museums) - are making real progress on constructing a global code of conduct over the restitution of disputed cultural objects. But this restitution process has not yet produced sufficient impetus to initiate serious discussions over the future of the Parthenon marbles.

For years the British Museum's line was that the Greeks had nowhere to look after them; with the New Acropolis Museum now about to open in Athens, that line of reasoning has been quietly dropped and a new one has appeared - context. The fragmented Parthenon frieze is currently split into two collections simply because Lord Elgin only managed to

saw off half of the frieze, much of it into fragments. The British Museum trustees now tell us on their website that maintaining the division and fragmentation of the frieze is justified by a global context in Bloomsbury and local one in Athens.

Neil MacGregor, the British Museum director, recently applied the same contextual 'logic' to the Benin Bronzes. These priceless artefacts were looted in 1897, by a punitive military expedition to destroy the city of Benin - purportedly to avenge to death of a British consul but actually to ensure Britain's control of trade in the area. (Stories of the expedition

stimulated Conrad to write *The Heart of Darkness*). MacGregor's reasoning in his centenary address in January was that if scholars could prove that the bronzes came from copper which had been traded by the British into Benin, his museum would have the right to keep them. In other words, in ethical terms, phoney legalistic 'ownership' always trumps colonial spoliation. In the *Museums Journal*, Felicity Heywood described MacGregor's tortured argument as 'desperate and convoluted'. Others might add that it exudes imperial nostalgia.

Happily, the argument about disputed cultural objects has recently resulted in a spate of books, among which "Loot", by Sharon Waxman gets closest to the core of the problem. In a nutshell, she insists that the current "politics of possession" should be replaced by a "culture of cooperation". Although the British Museum trustees are not yet convinced, the British public (to whom the Trustees often say they are responsible) disagree. Polling results from UK citizens consistently indicate a substantial majority for sending the Parthenon marbles back.

If MacGregor and Demetri Pandermalis, the Acropolis museum director, sat down to negotiate in earnest, in due course a deal could be struck. which could earn respect for both museums and would not be seen as a victory or a defeat for either. Such a deal would need imagination by the negotiators and courage by each of the two governments to make compromises. Pressure of public opinion worldwide could then probably do the rest; and real progress would have been made towards abandoning the relics of cultural colonialism and improving cultural cooperation between museums and governments worldwide. ■

George Hajifanis, Marbles Reunited member 1937-2008

George Hajifanis passed away on Monday 15th December 2008, in the same dignified manner as he led his life.

Five hundred people attended his funeral, at the Cathedral of St. Sophia in Bayswater in London. It is not often that one comes across a truly great man, and a real gentleman, one who can be described as such without fear of contradiction, without any embellishment.

The eldest of 6 children to Pavlos and Evangelia Hajifanis from Larnaca, George was sent to London at the age of 13 to live with his aunt. He taught himself English, which he mastered with such skill that puts most of us to shame!

An architect by profession, George was the General Secretary of the National Federation of Greek Cypriots in the UK. He was also a member of Marbles Reunited that continues to campaign for the return of the Parthenon marbles to Athens.

George was an exceptional academic. He was made Governor of the Metropolitan University, a member of the Ellinon Ebistimon and was also a tutor and moderator at the Inchbald School of Design.

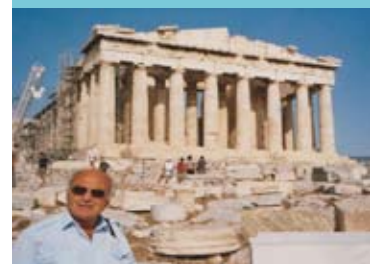
George had been elected Honorary Secretary of the Federation of Cypriots in the UK in 2007. He had also been a founder member and first president of the Union of Cypriot Students, a founder and General Secretary of the Cyprus Relief Fund and a founder member of the Cypriot Forum for Labour.

Undoubtedly George was an outstanding member of the community. A man of principles, he would by no means compromise his standards and beliefs for which he fought for with admirable zest throughout his life, including the reunification of Cyprus and the Parthenon marbles

Extremely touching and intuitive things have been said about George. One was "speaking with George was an education." We have all learnt from him, for he was an invaluable source of inspiration and knowledge to many.

I am grateful for the 26 years I had with him and honoured to be George's daughter, proud to be part of the extraordinary legacy he leaves behind.

Rea Hajifanis - Daughter



Changing reasons for retaining the Marbles

Andrew George MP - Chair, Marbles Reunited

As the New Acropolis Museum is about to open, it's worth reviewing the most common arguments deployed against reunification of the Parthenon Marbles. Below are set out comments on the primary points raised.

1. The "Universal Museum":

The British Museum states that "The Parthenon Sculptures play a role in world cultures & are integral to the British Museum's collection as a world museum telling the story of human cultural achievement." and that "The Parthenon Sculptures are best shared between various different European countries."

Universal Museums claim that they transcend national and cultural boundaries because of the importance and size of their collections. They see themselves as somewhere that artefacts from one culture can be directly compared with those from other cultures – setting the pieces within a wider international context.

Whilst the Universal Museum may have validity as a concept, there is nothing to suggest that museums outside this mould are lesser museums.

The argument centres on context. The suggestion is that comparisons with other cultures can be drawn. However, these are often of tenuous relevance, as the respective cultures were isolated from one another when the artefacts were produced. Even within the Universal Museums, little effort is made to highlight or explain these comparisons.

At the New Acropolis Museum, sculptures can be seen within the context of the Parthenon – the monument that they were designed to be an integral part of. They will be in the context of other artefacts from the same area. Who is to argue that one form of context is better or more important than another in this instance?

Universal Museums are self-appointed and are more the product of accident than intelligent design!

2. Elgin, the preservationist

It is argued that Lord Elgin rescued the Marbles from the Parthenon to prevent their destruction; that he planned to donate his collection to the nation; and that his actions must be judged according to the times he lived in.

Prior to and during the acquisition of the Marbles, Elgin indicates that he intended to use them to adorn his own house in Scotland. The preservationist plan was conceived later when bankruptcy forced him to sell the sculptures to the Government for the sum of £35,000.

We must assume that, given a choice, Elgin would have taken the best specimens. Many of the marbles now in London spent months on the Greek seabed after the ship that was carrying them sank. Any subsequent damage later caused to the remaining Greek Marbles through pollution was not something that could have been anticipated by Elgin.

3. Legal acquisition

The British Museum asserts that "The sculptures were legally acquired by Lord Elgin with permission from the ruling authorities."

There are two points here: First, Elgin had a permit (or firman) but only a translation of it is known to survive. The text of the firman indicates that the removal of fallen parts of the Parthenon by Elgin was allowed. The remit does not allow the sawing off of large chunks from still intact areas of the building – as Elgin did. New research questions the validity of the firman and whether it was

really the authoritative permission as claimed.

Second, the firman was issued by the Ottomans who were seen as an occupying power; a fact implicitly acknowledged by British support for the Greeks in their fight for independence less than twenty years later.

4. Greece only recently demanded return

This argument can be used as a way of explaining reunification campaigns as a contemporary nationalistic fad, yet even the British Museum's own website states that the first recorded requests for return from Greeks came in 1833.

5. Returning the marbles would open the floodgates, emptying the world's museums

Each case is different and would be dealt with on its own merits. The Greeks have stated that the Parthenon Marbles are a special case and that they are not making claims on any other Greek artefacts in the British Museum.

This is a point of principle. There is no justification for not doing the (arguably) right thing now, merely because this may mean that you potentially then feel compelled to do the right thing again in the future!

6. More people see the marbles for free in London:

This argument is given as fact, with little discussion of whether the lack of an admission fee and the number of potential viewers is really a justification for retention. The often used five million figure assumes that every visitor to the vast institution sees the marbles. If that's the purpose then they would be better exhibited in Athens where every visitor would visit the New Acropolis Museum for the reason of seeing them? If overall numbers and visitor maximisation were the primary objective then perhaps Shanghai would be the most suitable location?

7. The law prevents return of the marbles:

This argument refers to the British Museum Act. However, the Government insists, "that the return of the Marbles is a matter for the British Museum to decide, not the British Government."

The Act prevents the "deaccessioning" of artefacts, but it does not stop loans or other means for the relocation of artefacts. The Marbles were acquired by an Act of Parliament. Another Act of Parliament could be used to reunify them, if there was the will to do so.

Greece's current request does not seek to debate legal title; thus nullifying the argument.

8. The Marbles are dispersed throughout Europe:

Only about 1.5% of the surviving fragments are held outside Athens and London.

The reunification tide is turning. There have been high profile returns by Heidelberg, Palermo and the Vatican – slowly eroding the British Museum's arguments.

9. Greece has nowhere to put the Sculptures:

This argument - once very popular with the British Museum - clearly no longer applies. The British Museum still maintains that the marbles will only be seen in another artificial museum environment, so the location has little relevance.

The simple answer is the New Acropolis Museum. No one seriously proposes placing the sculptures back on the Parthenon. The new museum, within sight of the Parthenon, will provide the ideal location for the reunification of all the surviving sculptures – Once it opens this June, few could plausibly argue that any gallery outside Athens is a better alternative. ■

International Association for the Reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures

In October, Marbles Reunited became a member of the International Association for the Reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures.

Other recent committees to join are the Swiss Committee for the Return of the Parthenon Marbles and the Finish Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon Sculptures

There are now 17 committees from 16 nations in the International Association, a healthy expansion since its creation in 2005, testament to the widespread and growing support around the world for the Parthenon sculptures to be returned home.

www.parthenoninternational.org

How You Can Help

If you would like to support us, please consider becoming a member of our campaign. Membership of Marbles Reunited is open to anyone, the only pre-requisites are that you must be over eighteen years old & support the return of the Parthenon marbles to Greece.

Marbles Reunited is entirely funded through voluntary donations. Please get in touch if you would like to contribute, have skills to offer, or have other suggestions.

Our website has further information on the campaign.

<http://www.marblesreunited.org.uk>

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Marbles Reunited - Friends of the British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles

6 Duke of York Street,
London, SW1Y 6LA

Tel: +44 (0)20 7930 1813

campaign@marblesreunited.org.uk

www.marblesreunited.org.uk

Honorary President: Eddie O'Hara MP
Chairman: Andrew George MP
Deputy Chairman: Angelo Economou
Treasurer: Matthew Taylor
Secretary: Lazaros Filippidis
Consultant: Marlen Taffarello

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