

What Should Be Done With the Elgin Marbles?
Using the History of the Controversy and Modern Considerations
to Propose Best Practices

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Vol. 4(1), 2019

Title: What Should Be Done With the Elgin Marbles? Using the History of the Controversy and Modern Considerations to Propose Best Practices

DOI:

ISSN: 2381-800X

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the Elgin marbles repatriation debate. It includes historical, logical, legal, and ethical perspectives, and addresses the main arguments presented by professionals and scholars in the history and museum fields. It contributes to the field by analyzing all arguments that have been made regarding this debate, rather than focusing on one or two specific arguments, as has been the approach of previous scholarly work. This paper argues that the marbles from the Parthenon are an intricate part of the heritage and history of Greece. Presently, the marbles are not displayed together, but are instead separated into displays at both the British Museum and the Acropolis Museum. While the marbles may initially have been preserved better in London (at the time of their removal from Greece), this no longer holds true. Additionally, it is not clear whether the Elgin marbles were taken to London legally or illegally in the 1800s. Finally, according to modern ethical standards and practices in the museum field, the British Museum should repatriate the marbles to Greece to join the rest of the collection.

Keywords: Elgin Marbles, heritage, repatriation, reliefs, Parthenon, British Museum

Introduction

“The marbles are part of a monument to Greek identity, part of the deepest consciousness of the Greek people: our roots, our continuity, our soul. The Parthenon is like our flag.”

– Melina Mercouri¹

The debate surrounding the Parthenon marbles is about more than just repatriation: it is also a question of national identity. Almost half the sculpted marbles on the Parthenon were taken by Lord Elgin, ambassador to Constantinople, in the early 1800s, and soon after sold

to the British Museum.² Greek citizens argue that the Parthenon marbles are part of their national identity and heritage and therefore should be returned; however, there is no international organization with the power to force repatriation.³ By analyzing the history and significance of the Parthenon and its marbles, the marbles’ removal from Greece, past and present controversies, and legal and ethical considerations, one can make a

¹ James Cuno, *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 168.

² Christopher Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles: The Case for Reunification* (New York: Verso, 2008), 11-12.

³ Per terms of the sale, the marbles were to be called ‘The Elgin Marbles.’ The figures are still commonly referred to as the Parthenon Marbles though, and will be referred to as the Parthenon marbles to ensure readers understand which marbles are being discussed.

strong argument for repatriation. This paper offers an unbiased analysis of these facts and attempts to argue that the marbles should be repatriated to Greece.

History of the Parthenon and Its Marbles

The Parthenon was constructed in the 5th century BC under the leadership of the influential statesman and general Pericles, at the height of Athenian power in a period known as the Golden Age of Athens. Designed by Phidias, one of the most well-known ancient architects and sculptors, the Parthenon “far surpass[es] both in the quality and quantity of its decoration any other building of the classical age.”⁴ It is the largest Doric-style temple of the Greek world ever completed.⁵ The builders did not stucco white over darker stone, as was a cost-saving measure typical of the period, but instead used all white marble.⁶ This alone would have made the Parthenon unique; however, the marble itself came from Mount Pentelikon, whose quarries were ten miles from Athens and produced premium marble, making the Parthenon the first Athenian temple to be made only of premium Athenian marble.⁷ The inside of the Parthenon contained a forty-foot statue of Athena made of ivory and gold.⁸ The gold would have cost between forty and fifty talents—a significant amount of money; the average Athenian laborer would have to work for 230 years to earn a single talent of gold.⁹

⁴ Christopher Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils: The Curious Case of the Elgin Marbles* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), 17. In the ‘History of the Parthenon and its Marbles,’ ‘History of Lord Elgin and the Parthenon Marbles,’ and ‘Beginning of Controversy’ sections many of the sources used address the same topics and agree with each other about these topics, some of which are presented in this paper. The sources that have been chosen for each individual footnote are those with the most information about the correlating topic, but other sources agree with what is being cited.

⁵ Panayotis Tournikiotis, ed., *The Parthenon and its Impact in Modern Times* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 25-27.

⁶ Vincent Scully, *Architecture: The Natural and Man-made* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 84.

⁷ John Boardman, *The Parthenon and Its Sculptures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 28.

⁸ Mary Beard, *The Parthenon* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 28-30.

⁹ McGregor, *Athens*, 43-44.

The building’s architecture makes for an impressive view, using optical illusions to make the building appear to have straight lines. In reality, the platform of the building is lifted on both ends, and the columns are bigger in the middle and tilt inward. The architects of the Parthenon understood how the human eye perceives lines and building shapes and had the knowledge and skill necessary to design a building that appeared rectangular and straight.¹⁰ The Parthenon was also built at an angle, which allowed two sides to be seen at once and created a more imposing appearance.¹¹

The Parthenon stood as a symbol for the political, military, artistic, and intellectual leadership of Athens in ancient Greece. The sculptures on the metopes and friezes of the Parthenon depict mythological stories of gods, goddesses, centaurs, amazons, giants, and the fall of Troy, as well as the religious Panathenaic festival.¹² The sculptures are much more than a representation of famous mythologies, though. Because the Parthenon was built soon after the Persian War, the stories compared the gods’ fights against barbarians to the Athenians’ fight against the Persians. The Athenians wanted to depict themselves as bringers of civilization and forces of order in a chaotic world. The sculptures on the Parthenon represent the idea that the Athenians mirror the actions of the gods in their military and political activities.¹³ The Athenians wanted to send a message that “Greeks can triumph over the wild and uncivilized” and “remind us how mortals can sometimes rival even divinity when their struggle is just.”¹⁴ Thus, the Parthenon sends an important message, both political and mythological, with strong ties to Greek heritage.

For the first few thousand years after it was built, the Parthenon sustained surprisingly little damage. A small fire in the second century BC damaged some of the interior, but it was restored in the 160s BC.¹⁵ It was repaired again in the 360s AD, and then was converted into a Christian church in the fifth century AD, a process which involved minor structural and decorative modifications.¹⁶ In the mid-1400s, the Ottoman Turks won control of the Byzantine Empire, including Greece

¹⁰ James H.S. McGregor, *Athens* (Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 39-40.

¹¹ Scully, *Architecture*, 84.

¹² Tournikiotis, *The Parthenon*, 25.

¹³ McGregor, *Athens*, 50.

¹⁴ Boardman, *The Parthenon*, 39.

¹⁵ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 17.

¹⁶ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 20.

and the Athenian Acropolis. The Parthenon was then converted into a mosque for the garrison, but was not significantly altered.¹⁷

A few centuries later, in 1687, the Parthenon was hit by a bomb during conflict between the Venetians and the Turks. The Parthenon was a gunpowder storage facility at the time and sustained substantial damage from the explosion.¹⁸ In the late 1700s, many tourists took home or sold scattered pieces of the Parthenon; others used pieces for construction.¹⁹ These tendencies were especially detrimental because the Parthenon was more than just another building on the Acropolis; it was one of the best-designed and most influential buildings in Athens and all of ancient Greece.

The Parthenon influenced later Roman architectural styles, which drew inspiration from the famous temple to create buildings like the Pantheon.²⁰ The Parthenon also inspired many sculptures, buildings, and national monuments. Examples include a monument to Frederick the Great, the German Valhalla, the monument for victory at Waterloo, the Parthenon replica in Scotland, the Mausoleum of Antonio Canova, Second Bank of the United States, the Indiana Capitol building, and the New York and Boston Customs houses.²¹

The Parthenon has also been influential in academia. "By the late eighteenth century...the Parthenon was a fundamental feature on the cognitive horizon of all students of architecture. When the teaching of history and theory was introduced into the schools of architecture, the Parthenon established itself in the collective consciousness of architects as the ultimate moment in Classical Greek architecture and as one of the greatest achievements of the Classical tradition in architecture...²² The Parthenon has influenced the world both in the arts and in academia and was an important point of study even before Elgin became ambassador.

It is easy to understand why people around the world would have been interested in the Parthenon, considering its legacy and influence throughout history. The Parthenon represents the height of Greek power and civilization in Athens, artistic and architectural talent that has since not been matched. It memorializes the contributions ancient Greeks made to the world in the form of democracy, art, civilization, and military

power.²³ Because it was one of the best examples of classical art to survive into the 1800s—a time when artists and noblemen were greatly influenced by art from Greece and Rome—there was immense fascination with the Parthenon and its marbles.

History of Lord Elgin and the Parthenon Marbles

In 1799, Thomas Bruce, seventh earl of Elgin, was appointed ambassador to the sublime porte at Constantinople. He wanted to be known for his dedication to the arts and planned to obtain sketches and casts of great ruins in Athens.²⁴ In 1801, Elgin gathered a group of men with artistic experience and bribed his way onto the Acropolis—at the time controlled by the Turks—where his men made sketches and casts of the Parthenon and its sculptures. Later that year, possibly due to rumors of attack from the French, the Turks revoked their access, even though Elgin's men had a legal document (a firman) from the Turkish government saying they could be there.²⁵ Elgin's men wrote to him and asked him to apply for another firman. Elgin was granted the firman only after British forces defeated the French in Cairo, assuring the Turks that the French would not attack them in Greece. Upon this victory, the Turkish government presented Lord Elgin with lavish gifts and immediately granted his firman, which had been denied up until then.²⁶

Elgin's men's actions on the Acropolis changed drastically after this second firman. Though the original document did not survive, we know that the firman allowed Elgin and his men to "take away some pieces of stone with inscriptions or figures thereon, that no opposition be made thereto."²⁷ In a letter, Lady Elgin wrote that the firman "allows our artists to go into the citadel, to copy and model everything in it, to erect scaffolds all round the Temple, to dig and discover all the ancient foundations and to bring away any marbles that may be deemed curious by their having inscriptions on them, and that they are not to be disturbed by the soldiers,

²³ This will be discussed in more depth in the 'Ethical Considerations' section of this paper.

²⁴ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 39.

²⁵ William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 60-87.

²⁶ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 62-88.

²⁷ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 42.

¹⁷ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 21.

¹⁸ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 22.

¹⁹ Beard, *The Parthenon*, 85-86.

²⁰ Tournikiotis, *The Parthenon*, 25-27.

²¹ Tournikiotis, *The Parthenon*, 207-215.

²² Tournikiotis, *The Parthenon*, 222-223.

etc. under any pretense whatsoever.”²⁸ Lord Elgin also interpreted the firman this way, and instructed his men to remove all interesting detached pieces they found.²⁹ However, since the firman’s wording was somewhat vague, Elgin’s artists took liberties and removed pieces still attached to the Parthenon.³⁰

Unfortunately, Lord Elgin did not put as much effort into planning the extraction of artifacts as he did into obtaining the firman. He had not even visited Athens when his men started taking marbles from the Parthenon,³¹ and therefore had no firsthand knowledge of the environment or extraction procedures being used outside of what his men reported in letters.³² Lord Elgin’s men used saws to remove the marbles from the Parthenon, which damaged the building itself. Some of the marbles they removed broke during removal or transport, and one ship transporting marbles even sank.³³ Despite these setbacks, over the course of many years, Lord Elgin removed 15 out of 92 metopes and 56 out of 115 friezes.³⁴ He sent the marbles in shiploads back to his home in Britain.

The marbles were not on display to the general public until approximately 14 years after their removal from the Parthenon. On his way home from his travels as ambassador in 1803, Lord Elgin was arrested and held prisoner in France for 3 years. War had broken out between France and England, and the first consul of France had published a decree that all men who were currently or could potentially be enrolled in militia ages 18-60 were to be prisoners of war.³⁵ Even after Elgin was allowed to go home, he found that the cases containing the marbles had not been opened; since they were

addressed to him, they could only be opened by him.³⁶ After opening the cases, Lord Elgin kept the marbles in a private collection for 10 years.³⁷ He did allow select guests to view the marbles in 1807-1809, groups that usually consisted of close friends, famous artists, and academics.³⁸ Initially, he displayed the marbles in a garden shed in a rental house on Park Lane.³⁹ Elgin slowly acquired more debts, and in 1812 he moved the marbles into storage in the Duke of Devonshire’s home, where they stayed until their purchase by the British government.⁴⁰

Negotiations between Lord Elgin and the British government occurred on multiple occasions and over many years. The first time that Elgin approached them was in 1811. He asked for about £64,000 and a title of peerage, but was denied.⁴¹ In 1815, Lord Elgin again approached the British government, but this time he proposed they create a committee from the House of Commons to investigate the collection’s value. Unfortunately the session of Parliament ended before this could be done, so Elgin resubmitted his petition in 1816.⁴² In 1815 and 1816, due to storage costs, Elgin asked for about £74,000 for the marbles.⁴³ On recommendation from the committee, the British government paid £35,000.⁴⁴ Of the £35,000 to be paid, the government immediately claimed £18,000 for Elgin’s debts and the remainder quickly went to other various creditors.⁴⁵

Beginning of the Controversy

By selling the marbles to the British government, Elgin created a controversy on a national level. In addition to speculating on Elgin’s financial woes, the general public debated the pros and cons of keeping the marbles

²⁸ Jacob Rothenberg, *“Descensus ad terram”*: *The Acquisition and Reception of the Elgin Marbles* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 154.

²⁹ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 91-92.

³⁰ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 95.

³¹ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 12. This will be discussed in more depth in the ‘Beginning of Controversy’ section of this paper.

³² St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 96.

³³ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 33-35. See also: Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 24. And Tournikiotis, *The Parthenon*, 302.

³⁴ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 24. This is an important factor in the ‘Modern Debates and Criticisms’ section of this paper.

³⁵ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 122.

³⁶ Vincent J. Bruno, ed., *The Parthenon* (New York: Norton, 1974), 154. This is also addressed in the ‘Modern Debates and Criticisms’ section of this paper.

³⁷ Bruno, *The Parthenon*, 163.

³⁸ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 50.

³⁹ Jenifer Neils, *The Parthenon Frieze* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 230.

⁴⁰ Rothenberg, *“Descensus ad terram,”* 320.

⁴¹ Rothenberg, *“Descensus ad terram,”* 313-316.

⁴² Rothenberg, *“Descensus ad terram,”* 359-378.

⁴³ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 55.

⁴⁴ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 259-261.

⁴⁵ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 261.

in Britain rather than Greece. Parliament discussed many of these topics, which made the debate one of national identity and imperialism. One of the loudest opponents to buying the marbles was Lord Byron. He and a few other Members of Parliament argued that the wishes of Greeks should be taken into account and that Elgin had acted improperly.⁴⁶ Byron also argued that Greek feeling and wishes were ignored while Elgin's team was excavating, and even published poems depicting distraught Greeks mourning the marbles' removal.⁴⁷ His extreme passion is most likely the result of renewed interest in Classical art during this time.

H. Hammersley, a member of Parliament, proposed that Parliament pay £25,000 to Elgin to hold the marbles until Greece gained independence, had the ability to protect the marbles, and asked they be returned.⁴⁸ This proposal attempted to balance the concerns of MPs like Lord Byron and the opinions of other members who thought Elgin had acted properly. The proposal was criticized as impractical and did not pass.⁴⁹ It was later discovered that Lord Elgin and his men had lied to the House of Commons when saying there was no Greek or Turkish opposition to the marbles' removal. In personal letters, Elgin stated that the Turks and Greeks were extremely attached to the ancient buildings, which is why he had to get an additional firman to continue the work.⁵⁰

Parliament was also concerned that Lord Elgin had abused his authority as ambassador in order to retrieve the marbles.⁵¹ In addition to heavily bribing Turkish officials in order to access and work on the Acropolis,⁵² Elgin was only given special firman documents because of his connection with the British government and its recent military success.⁵³ Elgin denied this, claiming that any Englishman could get a firman and that he had not abused his powers in obtaining the marbles.⁵⁴

Elgin's actions led the British government to question his motives. Elgin claimed that although his original plan was to take sketches and casts of the ancient artifacts, when he saw the destruction wreaked on the Acropolis by fighting between the Greeks and the Turks, he decided to "rescue" the marbles by taking them home.⁵⁵ This claim proved to be false, since Elgin's men started removing marbles before he even visited Athens.⁵⁶ Although he may have heard about possible destruction in letters, Elgin never saw anything himself before the decision to extract the marbles was made. Moreover, Elgin claims his intentions were to preserve the marbles; however, many of the marbles were damaged during removal or transport.⁵⁷ One piece even fell while being removed and smashed into pieces.⁵⁸ The carelessness of his men—who used saws to cut from the Parthenon and did not ensure proper handling during extraction and transportation—indicates that Elgin did not take preservation as seriously as he claims.

Finally, Lord Elgin and his men presented their case as one of clear legality. However, no document was produced as evidence for this legality; the only surviving copy of the firman was an Italian copy stored in a private house in England and was not presented because the owner claimed not to have enough time to retrieve it.⁵⁹ The wording in the firman as reported to the committee and as analyzed in the existing copy did not provide clear direction. The wording was vague and up to interpretation by the officials of the time; therefore, the legality of Lord Elgin's actions are not completely clear.⁶⁰

Ultimately, the select committee compiled a report that "upheld all of Elgin's claims and vindicated him of charges of spoliation and misuse of powers."⁶¹ Many members argued that the Greeks had no claim to the marbles since they were ruled by the Turks at the time.⁶² Many also argued that having the marbles in

⁴⁶ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 54-55.

⁴⁷ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 63.

⁴⁸ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 261.

⁴⁹ Rothenberg, "Descensus ad terram," 431.

⁵⁰ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 74.

⁵¹ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 55.

⁵² Neils, *The Parthenon Frieze*, 241.

⁵³ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, Pg. 88.

⁵⁴ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 43.

⁵⁵ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 251-252.

⁵⁶ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 12.

⁵⁷ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 24.

⁵⁸ Tournikiotis, *The Parthenon*, 302.

⁵⁹ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 256.

⁶⁰ Beard, *The Parthenon*, 91. This is also important in the 'Legal Considerations' section of this paper.

⁶¹ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 258.

⁶² Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 56.

England increased national prestige and could help spur an artistic revolution inspired by Classical art. These arguments were supported by testimonies from artists who saw the marbles and confirmed their superiority.⁶³ These arguments, in addition to many that were a point of public discussion, led to a vote with 82 in favor and 30 against buying the marbles.⁶⁴

One of the main concerns the British public voiced was, if the British government did not buy the marbles, who would? They were specifically worried that the French, who were constantly vying with Britain for superiority, would snap up the artifacts. In fact, many Brits justified Elgin's taking the marbles by saying it was better than the French taking them.⁶⁵ British citizens were also legitimately concerned for the marbles' safety in Greece. In addition to the supposed damage occurring on the Acropolis,⁶⁶ constant warfare and political instability was not an environment ideal for the preservation of important classical artifacts. Consequently, many people saw removal of the marbles as an action of protection; however, it is regrettable that the methods used by Lord Elgin's men caused so much damage in the process.

Another popular view was that the marbles were better off in the British Museum than they were in Greece. The museum was able to make copies of the marbles and send them to schools in most major cities in the world.⁶⁷ This, in combination with the large tourist industry in London, ensured that after the British Museum obtained the marbles, more people could see them than when they were in Greece.⁶⁸ The British Museum also had better preservation capabilities than Greece at the time.⁶⁹ Thus, even though the debate about the firman could never be resolved, these perspectives allowed most of the general British public to accept Parliament's decision and view the Parthenon marbles as a British acquisition.

Modern Debates and Criticisms

Modern debate has shifted from a mostly British perspective to a mostly Greek one; Greece is now independent and able to voice the opinions of its

citizens, and many of the original points of justification for the British government have changed. One obvious change is political. In 1830, Greece was recognized as independent from the Ottoman Empire and became a self-ruling kingdom.⁷⁰ Since then, Greece has maintained its independence. Since they have not been occupied by another country, the argument that they are unable to protect their artifacts because they are unable to protect themselves is irrelevant. Many other British arguments used when buying the marbles have now become invalid.

The Marbles Were Safer in London

The argument that the marbles should have been taken because they were safer in London was partially true. The marbles lasted for thousands of years on the Parthenon, but war and misuse were beginning to affect them.⁷¹ The political uncertainty was also troubling, since no one could predict when Greece would gain independence. When Elgin took the marbles, it may have seemed like they were safer in London. However, several events proved this statement false, not the least of which was the damage caused by the removal, transportation, storage, and display of the marbles before they were acquired by the British Museum.⁷²

Britain was not as safe for the marbles as English citizens anticipated. Although Britain was politically stable, it was involved in many wars and subject to occasional bombing. One such bombing—during World War II—damaged the gallery where the marbles were kept.⁷³ Luckily, the marbles had been moved to storage for safekeeping, but this proves that the British Museum was not the sanctuary some painted it to be. While there is no account of damage to the Parthenon during World War II, there was the potential for damage during the Nazi occupation. Another cause for concern was air pollution in Athens, which became a serious problem

⁶³ Tournikiotis, *The Parthenon*, 232-233.

⁶⁴ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 56.

⁶⁵ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 98.

⁶⁶ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 251-252.

⁶⁷ Beard, *The Parthenon*, 18.

⁶⁸ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 64.

⁶⁹ Neils, *The Parthenon Frieze*, 241.

⁷⁰ Neils, *The Parthenon Frieze*, 233.

⁷¹ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 251-252.

⁷² Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 33-35. See also: Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 24. And Tournikiotis, *The Parthenon*, 302.

⁷³ John B. Nici, *Famous Works of Art-And How They Got That Way* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 45. See also: A. W. Gomme, *Essays in Greek History and Literature* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, Inc., 1967), 297.

in the 1900s.⁷⁴ While this is concerning, Britain also had severe air pollution which noticeably affected the marbles.⁷⁵

The most compelling argument for why the marbles may not have been safer in London is the cleaning scandal of the 1930s. Sir Duveen financed a new gallery to display the marbles, but clung “to the old-fashioned notion that classical marbles were pure white” and had his workers secretly clean them with harsh metals and abrasives.⁷⁶ This stripped most of the marbles of the small amount of original coatings they had.⁷⁷ The British Museum was so embarrassed that they never investigated or reported the incident in the hope of avoiding public outcry.⁷⁸ Although this was a major error, it is still arguable that the marbles were safer in London than they would have been in Athens.

The Marbles Are Safer in London

Not all of these arguments hold true today, and a lot of modern evidence points to the conclusion that the marbles are just as safe in Athens as they are in London. Neither country has had problems with air pollution in recent decades, and bombing has not been a major concern. Greece has made enormous efforts to catch up with England in museum and preservation methods, and by the end of the 1800s, Greece had significantly improved their archaeological practices.⁷⁹ Furthermore, there is now an Acropolis Museum in Athens located right next to the Acropolis which has just as many capabilities preservation-wise as the British Museum today.⁸⁰

Building the Acropolis Museum is only one of many initiatives Greece has taken to excavate and preserve the Acropolis, initiatives which began as soon as Greece gained independence. Just over a decade after independence, the Greek Archaeological Service was formed with goals for conservation, excavation, and restoration of the Acropolis and other ancient

Greek artifacts and monuments.⁸¹ A few years later, in 1837, the Greek Archaeological Society was founded, an organization which repaired many buildings on the Acropolis. When air pollution began to affect them, a special committee was formed to fix the problem and preserve the ancient structures.⁸² In addition to these initiatives, professionals and organizations in Greece have constantly been studying to improve their preservation methods and update their archaeological practices, actions which led to the creation of the Acropolis Museum and movement of the remaining marbles to the museum for preservation.⁸³

Although Greece may not have been the best place for the marbles to be at the time that they were removed, today it is—at least—as equally capable of protecting the artifacts as England. Both have modern preservation practices and no longer suffer from air pollution. Both countries have museums that could adequately store and display the marbles for public viewing. Despite their recent financial troubles, Greece has shown dedication to protecting the marbles, demonstrating their passion for and cultural pride in the Acropolis.

Greeks Did Not Try To Stop Elgin

The argument that the Greeks did not care enough to oppose the marbles’ removal has proved to be untrue for several reasons. The Turks occupied Greece when the marbles were taken; therefore, the Greeks had no way of stopping Lord Elgin’s men.⁸⁴ Because they were under Turkish rule, whatever the Turkish government mandated could not be changed, no matter the force of Greek sentiment. There is also evidence in letters written by Lord Elgin’s men that Greeks living near the Acropolis did oppose the removal of the marbles; the letters urge Elgin to acquire a firman so his men would stop being hassled by the Greeks.⁸⁵ Finally, it is clear that the Greeks do care about ancient artifacts, especially on the Acropolis, through their vigorous, post-independence work to protect and preserve the

⁷⁴ Beard, *The Parthenon*, 113-114.

⁷⁵ Neils, *The Parthenon Frieze*, 246.

⁷⁶ Beard, *The Parthenon*, 246.

⁷⁷ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, xiv.

⁷⁸ Beard, *The Parthenon*, 246.

⁷⁹ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 62.

⁸⁰ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 25.

⁸¹ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 24-25.

⁸² Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 25.

⁸³ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 116-117. For more information about footnotes 80, 81, 82, and 83 see also: Neils, *The Parthenon Frieze*. And Beard, *The Parthenon*.

⁸⁴ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 21.

⁸⁵ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 67.

Acropolis. When Greece began restoration, the Acropolis and the Parthenon became political symbols of the newly independent Greece.⁸⁶

Lord Elgin Had Good Intentions

Another argument that has proven dubious is that Lord Elgin took the marbles with good intentions. As has been discussed, Elgin did not visit Athens before removal began; therefore, he could not have been swayed by the destruction he claimed to have witnessed.⁸⁷ He and many of his men repeatedly lied to the British government about this and other subjects such as bribery, abuse of ambassadorial power, and more.⁸⁸ Though their claim was one of preservation, Elgin and his men caused significant damage to the Parthenon and many sculptures when removing the marbles.⁸⁹ Some were even lost at sea when a transport ship sank, making some marbles impossible to recover.⁹⁰ Collectors and noblemen criticized Elgin when he returned to England because the marbles were in such poor condition.⁹¹ If Elgin had truly wanted to preserve the marbles, logically he would have given or tried to sell them to the British government immediately, rather than waiting until 1811.⁹²

Lord Elgin and some supporters also claimed that bringing the marbles to England would contribute to artistic learning across the world. He allowed many artists to view the marbles at his home, and many praised them for their beauty and superiority to modern sculpture. This admiration heavily influenced some artists, influence which showed in their work.⁹³ Of the artists interviewed by the select committee of the House of Commons, only two said the marbles were not comparable to other great

classical works of art.⁹⁴ However, while there was some definitive impact on British art, the marbles' presence did not significantly change it. Thus, while artists may have learned about and better appreciated classical art, the arrival of the marbles did not significantly change the world of British art.⁹⁵

The British Museum Is More Accessible

Some modern critics of the repatriation movement argue that more people can see the marbles if they stay at the British Museum.⁹⁶ This claim definitely held true in the 1800s and part of the 1900s, but not today. With the invention of modern modes of transportation, Greece—and Europe in general—has become much more accessible. Although more people visit the British Museum annually than do the Acropolis Museum,⁹⁷ the British Museum is much bigger, and the number of museum visitors does not necessarily reflect the number of visitors to the marbles. Finally, it is important to note the difference in presentation. Perhaps more people are able to see the marbles if they stay in the British Museum, but on the Acropolis they could view them in their original context and thus gain a better appreciation for them.

The marbles can be better appreciated when placed alongside their companion marbles and the building from which they came.⁹⁸ Currently, the collection is separated, a separation which contradicts their purpose. The sculptors who carved the marbles intended them to be shown together in order to tell a story.⁹⁹ The sculptures were conceived as one work of art, and should

⁸⁶ James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle over Our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), x-xi.

⁸⁷ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 12.

⁸⁸ See 'Beginning of Controversy' section.

⁸⁹ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 12.

⁹⁰ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 33-35. See also: Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 24. And Tournikiotis, *The Parthenon*, 302.

⁹¹ Rothenberg, "Descensus ad terram," 164-165.

⁹² Rothenberg, "Descensus ad terram," 256-257.

See also: Tournikiotis, *The Parthenon*, 233.

⁹³ Rothenberg, "Descensus ad terram," 228-283.

⁹⁴ Rothenberg, "Descensus ad terram," Pg.408.

⁹⁵ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 264-266.

⁹⁶ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 64.

⁹⁷ "Annual Report," *The Acropolis Museum*, n.d., accessed Oct. 10, 2017. http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/press_releases/2015/annual_review_2015.aspx.

And: "The British Museum celebrates successes in London, the UK, and around the world: Annual Review Launch 2015," *The British Museum*, n.d., accessed Oct. 10, 2017. <http://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/content/annual-report>.

⁹⁸ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 15.

⁹⁹ Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles*, 24.

be displayed accordingly.¹⁰⁰ Without seeing both halves, the viewer cannot understand how these marbles' themes tell the story of Athenian superiority. Furthermore, the buildings on the Acropolis were made to be cohesive and to portray a sense of order.¹⁰¹ The buildings in the city of Athens had been improved, and therefore the Acropolis was rebuilt in order to match these improvements.¹⁰² It is logical, then, to display the marbles together in their original Greek context to facilitate better understanding of the marbles—what they signify, and their importance to the Acropolis and Athens as a whole.¹⁰³

Repatriation Would Set a Precedent

Another major argument against repatriation is that this action would set a precedent for all other museum artifacts to be returned to their places of origin. First, it should be acknowledged that this case is unique and does not relate well to any other cases for repatriation. The marbles may have been taken illegally,¹⁰⁴ but there is not enough evidence to support either a legal or illegal conclusion. This significantly limits the number of repatriation cases for which this decision would set a precedent. Greece has the capacity and ability to display the marbles, something not all countries possess. Although countries may develop more modern practices for displaying and preserving artifacts—in which case this precedent would apply—many countries do not and will not have these capabilities in the near future. Another unique aspect is that half the artifacts are in one place and half are in another.

A final factor that distinguishes this debate from others is the number, frequency, and length of time that Greece has been asking for the marbles. As soon as Greece gained independence, they began unofficially pressuring England to repatriate the marbles. These requests continued until the late 1900s, remaining unofficial mostly due to the political systems in Greece during this time. The first official request for repatriation was submitted to Britain in 1983, not even a decade after

Greece transitioned into a democracy.¹⁰⁵ The request was rejected in 1984 on the grounds that Elgin's actions were legal; many identical requests have since been made.¹⁰⁶ Greece also requested repatriation of the marbles through the UNESCO procedure for return of cultural treasures, but in 1985 the British government again claimed that Elgin legally acquired the marbles.¹⁰⁷ In 1988, a member of the House of Commons proposed that the marbles be repatriated to Greece, but was rejected by Parliament on the grounds that repatriation would set a dangerous precedent.¹⁰⁸ Greece requesting the marbles' return for hundreds of years, although unofficially at first due to political constraints, signifies another unique aspect of the case and dismantles the argument that precedent would be set by repatriating the marbles.

Legal Considerations

A solid understanding of the legality of Lord Elgin's actions helps determine the British Museum's obligation to repatriate the marbles. Regardless whether Elgin used his influence or money to obtain the firman, he did supposedly have one. The only record that we have of its contents is an Italian copy, testimonies from Elgin's men who worked in Greece, and letters about the firman from Lord and Lady Elgin.¹⁰⁹ The wording that allowed Elgin's men to take away "some pieces of stone with inscriptions or figures thereon..." was originally interpreted as allowing excavation and removal of stones that were already detached from the Parthenon. Both Lord and Lady Elgin understood the firman this way; however, interpretation was up to the reader. This allowed Elgin's men to convince Turkish officials that they had permission to remove marbles.¹¹⁰ In addition to the firman's vagueness, only a copy has been produced, casting further doubt on the legality of Elgin's actions.

A few major bodies and conventions have passed legislation and created guidelines on the trade, selling, and repatriation of artifacts and antiquities. The two main conventions are the Hague Convention of 1954 and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and

¹⁰⁰ Hitchens, *Imperial Spoils*, 26.

¹⁰¹ McGregor, *Athens*, 38.

¹⁰² Boardman, *The Parthenon*, 22.

¹⁰³ Sharon Waxman, *Loot: The Battle over the Stolen Treasures of the Ancient World* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008), 238.

¹⁰⁴ For more information, see 'Legal Considerations' section.

¹⁰⁵ Neils, *The Parthenon Frieze*, 241.

¹⁰⁶ Jeanette Greenfield, *The Return of Cultural Treasures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 83-84.

¹⁰⁷ Greenfield, *The Return*, 87.

¹⁰⁸ Greenfield, *The Return*, 87.

¹⁰⁹ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 256-257.

¹¹⁰ St. Clair, *Lord Elgin*, 91-92.

Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention of 1970. A few sections of the protocols released under these conventions bear relevance to the Parthenon marbles debate. Article 1 of the Hague Convention protocol says that “a State party must prevent the export of cultural objects from territory it occupies during armed conflict” and “following cessation of hostilities, a State party must return all cultural objects removed in contravention of the protocol to the competent authorities of the territories occupied....there is no time limit for lodging a claim for the return of such cultural objects.”¹¹¹ The 1970 UNESCO protocol provided support and further detail, saying that “the export and transfer of ownership of cultural property under compulsion arising directly or indirectly from the occupation of a country by a foreign power shall be regarded as illicit” and all State parties should “take all appropriate measures to prohibit and prevent the illicit transfer of cultural property within the territories for the international relations for which they are responsible.”¹¹²

Although neither of these conventions have bodies for enforcing these protocols, Greece and the UK ratified the Hague protocol, Greece ratified the UNESCO protocol, and the UK accepted the UNESCO protocol.¹¹³ Presumably, then, these bodies agree with the protocols, even though they seem to contradict Britain’s stance on the legality of the Parthenon marbles’ presence in the

British Museum. Because there is such uncertainty surrounding the conditions of the marbles’ removal, it can be argued that this case does not fit neatly under any of the protocols; however, it is at least similar and relevant to the ones presented.

In 1978, UNESCO created the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation Committee (ICOM), whose job was to facilitate agreements between countries regarding claims of restitution for objects removed prior to the 1970 convention.¹¹⁴ Although this committee has not always been successful in brokering agreements, it has released several statements defining illicit trade and offering guidelines on what objects should be repatriated. To summarize, ICOM states that museums should see evidence of a valid and legal title before accepting objects; museums should not accept objects that damaged their monuments upon being removed; museums should avoid purchasing objects removed from occupied territories as these are often illegally exported; museums should repatriate objects that violate the UNESCO 1970 protocol if the country of origin asks; and members of the museum profession should fully comply with the ICOM code and other codes on museum ethics.¹¹⁵

UNESCO directly addressed the case of the Parthenon marbles and provided recommendations, and Greece brought their concerns to ICOM. At the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies in 1982, the convention recommended that the marbles be returned, since they are “a symbol of eternal significance for the Greek people.”¹¹⁶ In 1983, Yannis Tzedakis, the Director of the Department of Antiquities at the Ministry of Culture in Athens, said that removing the marbles “destroyed the unity of a unique monument,” and “all countries have the right to recover the most significant part of their respective cultural heritage lost during periods of colonial or foreign occupation.”¹¹⁷ In addition, the director-general of UNESCO said in a speech in

¹¹¹ Ana Filipa Vrdoliak, *International Law, Museums and the Return of Cultural Objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 149.

¹¹² Vrdoliak, *International Law*, 209.

¹¹³ “Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict with Regulations for the Execution of the Convention 1954,” *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, n.d., accessed Oct. 14, 2017. http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13637&URL_DO=DO_TOP-IC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

And: “Convention on the means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Paris, 14 November 1970,” *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, n.d., accessed Oct. 14, 2017. <http://www.unesco.org/eri/la/convention.asp?KO=13039&language=E&order=alpha>.

¹¹⁴ Vrdoliak, *International Law*, pg. 211. See also: Greenfield, *The Return*, 221.

¹¹⁵ Marie C. Malaro, *Museum Governance: Mission, Ethics, Policy* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 151-155.

¹¹⁶ Greenfield, *The Return*, 76-77.

¹¹⁷ Greenfield, *The Return*, 67-68.

1970 that “the return of a work of art of record to the country which created it enables a people to recover part of its memory and identity, and proves that the long dialogue between civilizations which shapes the history of the world is still continuing in an atmosphere of mutual respect between nations.”¹¹⁸ ICOM attempted to facilitate an agreement between the British and Acropolis museums, but Britain refused to acknowledge the attempts.¹¹⁹

It would be ideal if most repatriation cases could be solved through unbiased international committees like ICOM who could mediate between countries; however, since they have no official power, many countries ignore the codes and protocols they do not wish to follow and suffer no repercussions. Even if a committee like ICOM makes a ruling on a case, they have no way to enforce that ruling. The only body that could force the British Museum to repatriate the marbles is the British Parliament. Since they have denied all political requests to return the marbles, it is doubtful they will ever force the museum to do so. Because the legality of the firman and the application of international protocol are inconclusive, it is necessary to turn to ethics for further consideration.

Ethical Considerations

In order to debate ethical concerns, the term *cultural property* must be defined and applied as it is used throughout scholarly literature on repatriation. As one prominent scholar writes, “antiquities are the cultural property of the nation, products of the collective genius of its nationals, important to their identity and self-esteem. They are of the nation and cannot be alienated from it.”¹²⁰ In simpler terms, cultural property should be thought of as property of its culture since it is part of their heritage. Some scholars argue that cultural heritage should belong to the world rather than individual countries, but this argument is dangerous because it allows the most powerful countries to justify taking antiquities.¹²¹ Especially in the case of the Parthenon marbles, the country of origin should have access to the most famous and revered antiquities of their culture in

order to preserve their heritage and remember the proud moments of their forebears. The ICOM committee of UNESCO argues that “an object likely to provoke a call for restitution is defined as that object which is highly charged with cultural significance. It therefore follows that the removal of this object from its original cultural context irrevocably divests that culture of one of its dimensions.”¹²²

Some museums, like the British Museum, argue that the universality of major museums is more important than individual countries keeping all of their cultural property.¹²³ Many major museums around the world have publically stated that repatriation presents a threat to the universality of their museums.¹²⁴ Many scholars have criticized ‘nationalist retentionist cultural property laws’ as “segregating the world’s cultural property within the borders of modern nation-states” and that they “serve the interests of one particular modern nation at the expense of the rest of the world.”¹²⁵ By this line of thinking, any artifact that is extremely culturally significant could be displayed in any museum in the world. Arguments like this ignore the value of seeing objects in their original context, whether that be an archaeological site or the country of origin.

These arguments also diminish the importance of cultural property. Normally, cultural property relates to the heritage of that culture; therefore, it is important that cultures keep objects in order to learn about—and from—their heritage.¹²⁶ The Acropolis and Parthenon are inalienable parts of Greek history and belong to the Greek people.¹²⁷ Why, then, are key artifacts displayed in the British Museum? Monuments and artifacts such as the Parthenon and its marbles are a “crucial link between group members and their ancestors and heirs; a relationship that satisfies a basic need for identity

¹²² Greenfield, *The Return*, 253.

¹²³ “The Parthenon Sculptures,” *The British Museum*, n.d., accessed Oct. 20, 2017. http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/statements/parthenon_sculptures.aspx.

¹²⁴ Gail Anderson, ed., *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift* (New York: Altamira Press, 2012), 414.

¹²⁵ Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity?*, 124-126.

¹²⁶ See earlier argument in ‘Ethical Considerations’ section.

¹²⁷ Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity?*, 172.

¹¹⁸ Vrdoliak, *International Law*, 197.

¹¹⁹ Greenfield, *The Return*, 87.

¹²⁰ Cuno, *Whose Culture?*, 1.

¹²¹ Greenfield, *The Return*, 81.

and also symbolize[s] shared values.”¹²⁸ Ignoring the importance of context and heritage obscures the marbles’ greater meaning, and their value to Greek society is essentially lost.

Ethical standards of conduct have not always been set in stone, but current standards are relatively consistent and should be taken seriously by museums worldwide. Legal requirements are the very minimum that museums should abide by; ethical requirements are higher and reflect museums’ integrity and character. Some museums abide by legal codes because they are binding but ignore ethical codes because they cannot be directly enforced.¹²⁹ They can be indirectly enforced, however, by “self-education, self-motivation, and peer pressure for their promulgation” and “a consistent and voluntary commitment from a sizable portion of the profession.”¹³⁰ The codes may also be indirectly enforced by fear of public outcry if museums fail to follow ethical guidelines. Museums that do not follow codes such as the ones set forth by UNESCO and ICOM may be swayed by indirect enforcement.

Another form of ethical behavior is the updating of standards and beliefs based on modern realities and practices. Even though the marbles may have been better off in Britain at the time of their removal, today, they are just as safe in Greece as in the British museum.¹³¹ Furthermore, the marbles from the Parthenon are scattered around the world, a situation which creates associability problems. As many scholars argue, “there is little basis for objects from one site to be housed in several museums. If such a scattered collection could be consolidated at the museum closest to the site of origin, archaeological interpretation would be enhanced”; “the field has matured to a point where avarice is a professional disservice that impedes research, forcing investigators to criss-cross the country examining portions of the same collection in multiple museums.”¹³² It can easily be argued that the British Museum is being

selfish, or perhaps even indulging nostalgia for its imperial past,¹³³ in refusing to give up some of their most prized collections.

Even if it were possible to prove the legality of Lord Elgin’s actions, the British Museum’s behavior does not meet modern ethical standards. Museums must be held accountable for their actions and must reevaluate them based on modern considerations rather than dwelling on the past. If actions were legal in the past but are not considered ethical today, a museum with integrity would adjust their practices to reflect modern standards. As it is, the current legal debate about the Parthenon marbles is inconclusive; as such, the ethics of the case must be significantly considered.

Possible Solutions

There are multiple solutions that could solve the Parthenon marbles repatriation debate, but all of them require that Greece and Britain work together. One solution is that the British government order the British Museum to return the marbles to Greece. This solution is *possible* because Parliament has the power to do this; however, it is unlikely because it has repeatedly denied Greece’s requests for repatriation.¹³⁴ Greek officials have threatened to sue the British Museum in British court, but it is unlikely that British courts would decide in their favor.¹³⁵ Additionally, this solution would not resolve the tension between the British Museum and Greece. Although a legal ruling would be more straightforward and easier to enforce, the British Museum—and possibly the public—would most likely harbor resentment toward Parliament and Greece.

Another possible solution is that the British Museum loans the marbles to Greece for a period of time, or indefinitely. Unfortunately, even a short-term loan seems unlikely, seeing as the British Museum would not loan the marbles to Athens even when they hosted the 2004 Summer Olympics.¹³⁶ If the museum decided on a loan, even short-term, this could be an important first

¹²⁸ Cuno, *Whose Culture?*, 173.

¹²⁹ Heather Hope Kuruvilla, *A Legal Dictionary for Museum Professionals* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 172-173.

¹³⁰ Malaro, *Museum Governance*, 17.

¹³¹ See previous arguments in the ‘Ethical Considerations’ section of this paper.

¹³² Ernestene L. Greene, *Ethics and Values in Archaeology*. (New York: Free Press, 1984), 137.

¹³³ David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 5-6.

¹³⁴ Refer to ‘Legal Considerations’ section of this paper.

¹³⁵ Greenfield, *The Return*, 87.

¹³⁶ Jason Felch and Ralph Frammolino, *Chasing Aphrodite: The Hunt for Looted Antiquities at the World’s Richest Museum* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 229.

step to a permanent agreement of some sort between the two countries. Still, even a long-term loan would only prolong tensions, rather than dissipate them. It could even anger British citizens, making the British Museum less willing to form a permanent agreement with Greece.

Thus, the best—and most ethical and logical solution—would be for the British Museum to repatriate the Parthenon marbles. Due to prevailing attitudes in both the British government and the British Museum, this solution seems highly unlikely. If this were decided, though, the British Museum could keep casts of the sculptures, much like the Acropolis Museum does today.¹³⁷ This way they could keep the display and would not completely lose one of their most valuable collections. If the British Museum did decide on repatriation, they would likely gain much respect from international communities and museum professionals, and could even be a leading influence for more museums to adopt modern, ethical policies. Though repatriation could cause fear of precedents being set, it is important for all museums to consider modern ethics and adapt outdated policies.

Conclusion

Because the debate over repatriating the Parthenon marbles is unique, it seems unfair and illogical to compare other debates to this one. One must focus on the modern arguments, which have changed from past arguments due to changing political and professional practices in Greece and Britain. Since both countries are equally capable of protection and preservation today, modern arguments over the safest location for the Parthenon marbles are inconclusive. Arguments over the legality of Lord Elgin's actions are also inconclusive, due to lack of evidence. One must rely on the only arguments left: the logical and ethical. It seems logical for the marbles to rejoin the rest of the collection and to be displayed as close to their original context as possible. It seems ethical for the British Museum to repatriate the marbles, based on current ethical standards. Although no one can force the British Museum to repatriate the marbles, hopefully they will seriously consider the points being made and decide to change their stance.

¹³⁷ “Troubled history capped with success,” *The New Acropolis Museum*, n.d., accessed Nov. 2, 2017. <http://www.parthenon.newmentor.net/museum.htm>.

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