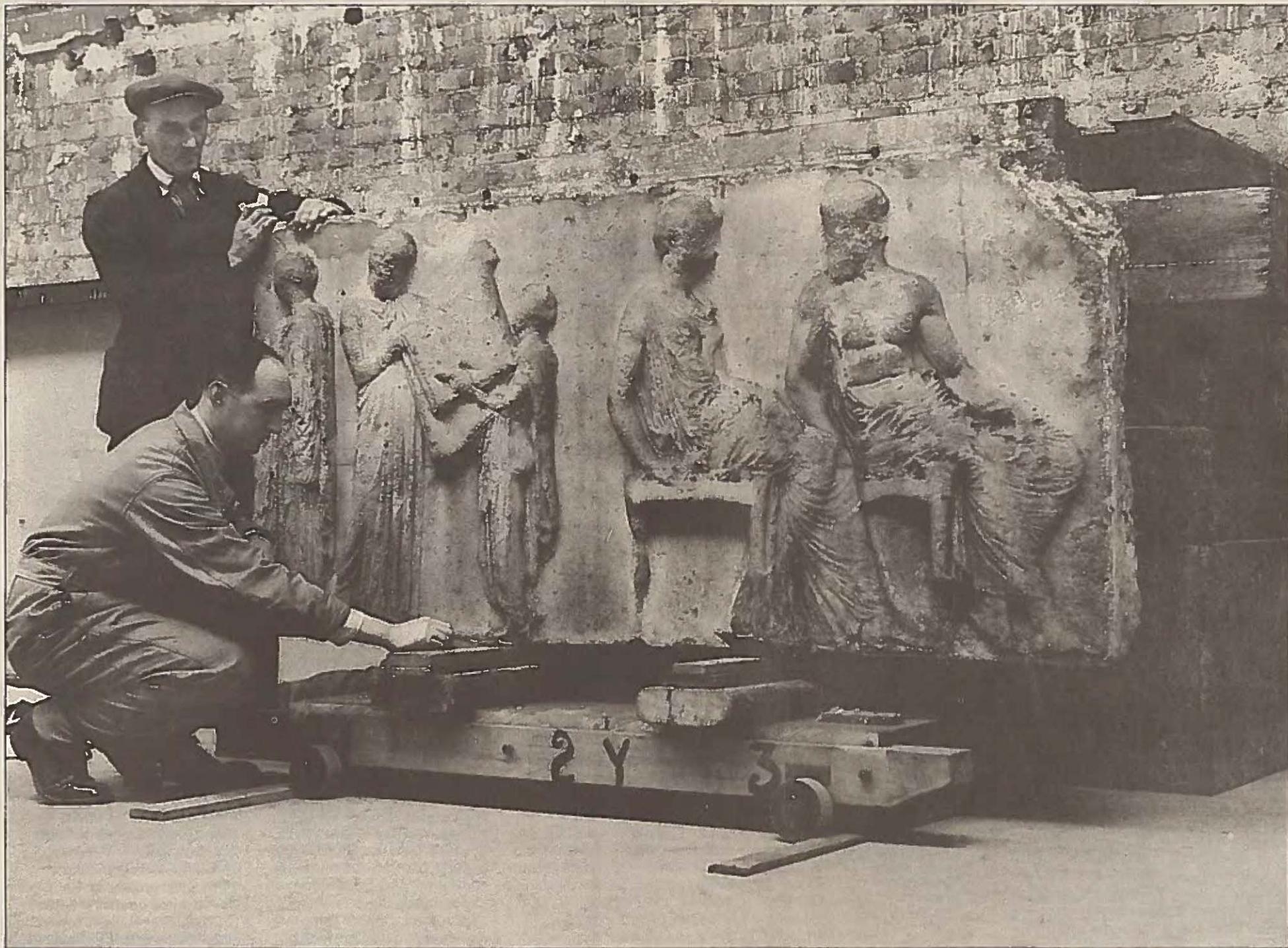


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AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

Nov. 27, 1948: Porters in London prepare to move some of the Parthenon marbles, which were stored in an underground tunnel during the Second World War.

Return Athena's exiles



Canadians can help end a 200-year-old fight over the Parthenon marbles by backing a new proposal to repatriate them, says classics professor **MICHAEL COSMOPOULOS**

The Parthenon marbles (formerly known as the Elgin marbles) are a collection of architectural pieces and sculptures removed from the Parthenon in Athens by a British diplomat, Lord Elgin, at the dawn of the 19th century. Housed since the early 1800s in the British Museum, these works continue to rouse passionate international debate — most recently, a few weeks ago when the Greek Minister of Culture, Evangelos Venizelos, wrote to Britain's Culture Secretary, Tessa Jowell, requesting the return of the marbles. The curt reply: "Nothing has changed. We believe the right place for the Parthenon marbles is in the British Museum."

But things are changing. And Canadians are invited to play a role.

The temple of the goddess Athena, commonly known as the Parthenon, was built on the Acropolis between 447 and 432 BC, at the high point of the Greek Golden Age. Designed by two brilliant architects, Iktinos and Kallikrates, the building was conceived and constructed as the perfect architectural form and as a universal symbol of humanity. During his tenure as British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire — which ruled Greece at the time — Elgin removed a large number of architectural and structural pieces from this unique building, taking advantage of his position as ambassador.

His agents shipped 56 panels and 15 metopes from the frieze, 19 pedimental sculptures, and other pieces, including parts of columns supporting the entablature. They ended up in the British Museum.

After centuries of plunder, many of Greece's antiquities were to be found in

European museums. As soon as Greece was free from the Ottoman yoke, it raised the matter of repatriation. Britain toyed with the idea of returning the Parthenon marbles several times during the last two centuries and came very close as a gesture of gratitude to the Greek people for their heroic fight against the Nazis during the Second World War.

It never happened.

In 1981, Greece officially petitioned the British government for the return of the marbles, arguing that they were integral parts of a unique monument. Since then, international support for this request has grown steadily. UNESCO and the European Parliament have passed resolutions, and British, U.S., and Australian committees have been formed to support the cause.

A group of politicians, academics, members of the art and business world, and of the general public launched a Canadian committee last year. We seek to unite the voices of Canadians to join force with the international efforts to repatriate the marbles.

Why should we bother?

We live in a society that prides itself on morality and justice, principles which Canada has had a long and outstanding tradition of defending. The importance of the Parthenon, as a universal symbol of humanity, can be fully assessed only when the integrity of the building is restored. The pieces removed by Elgin are not free-standing works of art, intended to be placed in a museum 1,500 miles away from their original setting. Quite the contrary: They are architectural sculptures.

To remove them from their original monument is to strip them and the re-

maning pieces of meaning and essence. If we are to conserve this unique building for future generations, the creators' original concept of the Parthenon must be restored. (We'd also like to put an end to the degrading toga parties held by the British Museum in its Parthenon Marbles Gallery).

Besides, there are legal arguments for their return. The Ottoman government had no authority to give the marbles away. It was an occupying force; it did not represent the Greek people. Even if we say for argument's sake that the Ottoman government was a legitimate sovereign of Greece, then according to The Hague Convention, in cases where a change in sovereignty occurs, a nation's cultural heritage is transferred to the new sovereign state *in trust* and cannot be disposed of.

Perhaps the strongest legal argument derives from the fact that Elgin did not even have a permit to do what he did. For years, the British Museum claimed that Elgin obtained an official permit (or "firman") from the Sultan to remove the marbles. Research has invalidated this argument; no firman exists, merely an Italian translation of an unofficial reference letter written on behalf of Lord Elgin by one of the deputies to the Grand Vizier. This letter does not come close to being a permit for removing antiquities.

Yet the British Museum continues to block attempts to return the marbles, claiming total ownership of the pieces. The museum's reluctance is understandable, given the two centuries the marbles have been its prized possessions. The museum also fears that returning the marbles to Greece would establish a precedent for restitution of other artifacts by all countries whose cultural heritage has been plundered in the last few centuries.

Recently, however, the Greek government has proposed a solution to the impasse: to uncouple the issue of legal ownership of the marbles from the issue of their location. This fresh approach opens the door to the British government

(which has the power to settle the issue through appropriate legislation).

The Marbles could be returned to their original location in the form of a permanent loan, while Britain would maintain ownership. No legal precedent would be set and the British Museum would appear as a benevolent protector of the Parthenon. As well, Greece would send the British Museum precise replicas of the marbles.

Times have changed.

The 19th-century imperialism that brought the marbles to London has been replaced by a new era of international cooperation. A 1998 poll found that 40 per cent of the British public support the marbles' return, as do 47 per cent of British MPs (as opposed to 44 per cent who don't).

Under the auspices of the UNESCO, the Parthenon is now undergoing extensive restoration. Plans for a new museum to house the sculptures from the Acropolis are moving along swiftly. The British government and the British Museum have a golden opportunity to align themselves with the needs and ethical principles of our time.

On May 7, at a press conference held in the Parliament of Canada, the Canadian committee launched a campaign to collect 100,000 signatures of Canadians supporting the cause. As an influential member of the British Commonwealth, Canada could help urge the British government to reunite the Parthenon with its exiled sculptures. It's important for Canadians to realize that what is at stake here is not the fate of a few pieces of stone sculpture. Rather it is our conscience and our commitment to the preservation of a unique monument of the world's cultural heritage — our heritage.

Michael Cosmopoulos is professor of archeology in the department of classics at the University of Manitoba, and coordinator of the Canadian Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon Marbles (www.parthenoncanada.org).