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To Which Nation

Though an Englishman may exult in the possession of these unrivalled specimens of ancient sculpture, he cannot but grieve at the wanton devastation committed in their removal. That the Elgin Marbles will contribute to the improvement of art in England cannot be doubted. What can we say to the disappointed traveller who is now deprived of rich gratification which would have compensated his travel and toil?
- contemporaries of Lord Elgin

"I have been obliged to be a little barbarous" admitted Lord Elgin's collaborator, Lusieri, in 1802 as he ripped the frieze off of its mantle atop the Parthenon. Appointed as an ambassador of the British government, Lord Elgin reigned over the Sublime Port of Constantinople and 'liberated' one of the finest monuments of Classical Greece. Having made a deal with Ottoman authorities of which there is no record, the Lord chiseled away and transported to England a cultural property disputed ever since.

The friezes compellingly detail a host of Classical figures: a council of the Gods gives way to a procession for Minerva, with soldiers mounted on horses. The high relief of the figures allows them to vibrantly stand out from the stone tablets. The main frieze contains rudiments of Plato's Atlantis texts. This implies that the Parthenon was built to commemorate Athena and Hephaestus having championed the Athenians in the epic war between Athens and Atlantis. Both maritime powers were full of pride, duplicity and glorious artistic tradition. These two sea-bound nations fought for supremacy, neither able to triumph over its enemy. But their battle wounded both nations and eventually sank the island of Atlantis.

Somehow undaunted by the constant and absolute refusal of the UK, the Greek government is again requesting the reunification of the Parthenon frieze (or Elgin Marbles). The Hellenic Republic has capitalized on the 2004 Olympic games held in Athens and has called on the European Parliament and UNESCO for aid. Their case has been adopted by a number of prominent British academics, all to little effect.

According to the Greek cultural ambassador to Canada, the dismantling of the Parthenon endangered the temple's structural integrity and Britain's moral integrity.

Greece contends that only in Athens will audiences appreciate the full historical context of the Elgin Marbles. Only when the viewer can breathe the same air and taste the dust will cultural artifacts come alive. British authorities counter that they are the most effective caretakers and that Ancient Greece is a significant part of their own civilization.

A new Acropolis Museum is now under construction in Athens. It is planned to reside at the base of the Acropolis, to better illuminate the physical context of ancient art. This facility was built in part to silence the paternalistic English argument that only the British Museum can adequately care for the marbles.

A recent press release from the Hellenic Select Committee of Culture, Media and Sport begs for the restoration of the friezes to Athens, the "city in which they were created [to] ensure their reintegration in their historical, topographic, and cultural context."

To strengthen the Greeks' moral claim, the New Acropolis Museum will leave its top floor completely empty. This void will eloquently lament the Parthenon's loss and cry for restitution.

An interview with a representative of the British High Commission in

"The Marbles will never return to Greece"
- Director of the British Museum

Ottawa revealed that the British government and museum officials consider the issue to be over. To them, return is neither feasible nor sensible. According to the representative, Lord Elgin had the permission of recognized authorities at the time they were removed. Now the British Museum is not permitted under its governing statute to dispose of the pieces.

A firm 'no' is issued almost daily by the present director of the museum, Neil MacGregor. He is staunchly opposed to return and has cut off all debate with the Greeks. Prof. Michael Cosmopoulos, a leading American proponent of restoration, explains that the offer to send a computer-generated replica is MacGregor's sole concession to the Hellenic Republic. MacGregor

declares, "The marbles will never return to Greece."

A black mark against the British Museum surrounds their detrimental attempt to clean the marbles in 1938. Scoured with wire brushes and harsh detergents, the marbles lost much of their patina. This sepia-coloured sheen on the surface is a result of hundreds of years of dust, and an invaluable protective coating. Throughout the 20th century, this secret injury was hidden from scholars and the public. Only in 1996 did the director of the gallery, Robert Anderson, release this damning information. To this day, the gallery stonewalls those who wish to uncover the subterfuge and the extent of the damage. To the Greeks, this demonstrates the epitome of callous British stewardship.

A dialogue between UK and Greek authorities is ongoing, but trustees of the British Museum are of the view that the marbles are in trust for the British nation, that they are to be experienced by its multicultural population. And they are well looked after. In any case, they argue, the museum is a body independent of the government.

Not true, says Professor Cosmopoulos. In fact, the museum needs legislation by the Brits to decide the issue. Endless legal arguments can and have been made for either side, but the crux of the issue is emotional. It depends on subjective ethics and nationalistic pride.

The issue here is no less than ownership of history. Ancient Greece has been claimed as the root and spiritual predecessor for all of European civilization. But does the European community have a stronger claim to this history than modern day Greece?

Aside from the legality of the original loss, Greece and the UK must decide what is now best for the sculptures. For many Brits, the centralization of artifacts and scholarship in a protective environment is key to their own culture. If removed, the marbles would be missed from English cultural fabric. The scar left by the friezes' absence will hurt each

nation whether they return home or remain in England.

After fierce debate, the United Nations was unable to resolve their position on the Elgin Marbles. In the subsequent resolution of December 6, 1999, the body notes that it is "aware of the importance attached by countries of origin to the return of cultural property which is of fundamental spiritual and cultural value to them." It reaffirms the

marbles' return. 37% remain undecided. But as has been the case in so many incidents this year, the Blair government and museum official will disregard the will of the majority.

Greece awaits restitution of England's colonial damage. Britain seems unwilling to redress its history.

Neil MacGregor is correct to point out Greece's substandard care of the rest of the Parthenon. More

"The least thing from Athens is invaluable... I beg you therefore to put some on board ship. To sum up, the slightest object from the Acropolis is a jewel"
- Lord Elgin 1802

importance of provisions of the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, adopted by The Hague, May 14 1954. The UN calls upon all relevant bodies of its organization to work with UNESCO to address the issue of return or restitution of cultural property. UNESCO refuses to take sides, pressing only for bilateral talks.

Whether thief or conscientious preserver, Lord Elgin saw himself as a saviour of history. He was also a keen merchant. In 1816 the House of Lords purchased the marbles from him for 35,000 pounds.

The Royal Ontario Museum is a leader in the growing deliberation around repatriating cultural artifacts. The anthropology department has returned a number of sacred artifacts dear to First Nations. Research, display, and storage are carefully weighed to best serve the general public and the particular group from which the relics originated.

In 1999, the ROM returned to the Council of the Iroquois Confederacy a set of wampum records. These beads were woven into belts and strung for ceremonies of peace between peoples. They provide an invaluable record of laws, treaties and peace of the Haudenosaunee. The Department of Anthropology evaluates each claim for repatriation on a case by case basis.

Recent polls done by *The London Times* show that 56% of the UK population would support the

compelling and problematic is his view that Greek works of art have great value outside of Athens: "These works belong to humanity. The context of a universal museum is one of great value". 'Worryingly nationalistic' and 'anti-world' are his criticisms of Greek authorities.

Prof. Cosmopoulos maintains that the Greek government has been more than fair, offering a virtual reality replica to the British Museum in exchange. This is unacceptable to the Brits, who believe that the original piece holds historical authority. We must question whether a copy depreciates the value of the original or enhances it. Walter Benjamin pronounces that "Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object."

Thus, its value is tied to the object being fixed in a particular context: historical, cultural, and geographical. The Parthenon friezes are fetishized for their authenticity.

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Go the Spoils?

*My spirit is too weak; mortality
Weights heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep,
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.
Such dim-conceiv'd glories of the brain
Bring round the heart an indescribable feud;
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old Time - with a billowy main,
A sun, a shadow of a magnitude.*

- John Keats, On Seeing the Elgin Marbles for the First Time

*Dull is the eye that will not weep to see
Thy walls defaced, thy mouldering shrines removed
By British hands, which it had best behoved
To guard those relics ne'er to be restored.
Curst be the hour when from their isle they roved,
And once again thy hapless bosom gored,
And snatch'd thy shrinking gods to northern climes abhorred!*

- Lord Byron, Childe Harold

