



What do the Parthenon Sculptures embody?

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The controversy over the Parthenon (or 'Elgin') Marbles is one of the world's longest-running debates. To my immediate knowledge, its duration is only matched, in any field, by the cases of the British possession of Gibraltar (an even older dispute) and of the Falkland Islands (a slightly younger one). One thing that all these three instances have in common is the fact that they are directly or indirectly connected with past British imperial expansion; and that, in each case, even a severely depleted British political and military potency has somehow succeeded in hanging on to all three, so far at least. But to talk in these terms is to treat the issue as a political one, whereas our business is with something at least as significant, the cultural content of the Marbles.

Before I address that issue, let me state a few of the background facts which we, in our work for the British Committee, have found to be little appreciated in this country. First and most important, what Lord Elgin's agents removed from the Acropolis in the years 1801 and following was nothing like the entirety of the surviving sculptural decoration of the Parthenon. Intentionally, Elgin left behind on the building the West section of the frieze, contenting himself with taking casts of it; a number of the external panels or Metopes which he did not consider well enough preserved to be worth taking; and two of the free-standing figures from the West Pediment which he mistakenly believed to be later substitutions from the time of the Emperor Hadrian. Unintentionally, he overlooked the fact that many components of the sculptures were still buried in the quite deep soil which then overlay the bedrock of the Acropolis. Thirty years later, when Greece had won its independence, the new Greek state was to finance a large operation to excavate the whole surface of the Acropolis down to this bedrock, revealing in the process these missing pieces.

The result of all this is that today the Greek Museum of the Acropolis, if one disregards all the qualitative questions of preservation, already holds almost exactly the same proportion of the surviving sculptures, something just over 49%, as does the British Museum. The remaining pieces, amounting to less than 2%, are held in nine other European museums, all of them tiny fragments apart from two complete slabs in the Louvre. This is hardly the

impression given to visitors to the British Museum who, unless they closely read the display captions, are seduced by what my Cambridge colleague Mary Beard describes in her book *The Parthenon*, 'The real trick of the arrangement is to present the Elgin Marbles as if they were a complete set'; and 'In order to bring this off, [the display] must effectively dismantle the original shape and layout of the sculpture as it was on the temple'.

A second point is Lord Elgin's motivation. Whatever has been said later, in justification of his actions, about his saving the Marbles from destruction, we have clear documentary evidence that at the outset, when first appointed as British envoy to the Ottoman Sultan in Constantinople, he wanted the Marbles as decoration for the Neo-Classical mansion whose building he had recently commissioned at the family seat at Broomhall in Fife. This is beyond dispute. What made him change his mind in 1816 and negotiate the sale of the Marbles to the British government was sheer financial pressure: the cost of their transportation had vastly exceeded his predictions, and to this was added the price of the various inducements given to the officials on the spot in Athens to persuade them to allow him to detach them from the building.

Next, this last point does not mean, as constantly stated in the British press, that Elgin "bought" the Marbles, comforting though that would be to certain mentalities. If I go into an expensive jeweller's, go up to the assistant at the counter and say "Here is ten thousand pounds in cash for you, if you will look away while I take that much more valuable diamond in the window", who is going to say that I have bought that diamond? Yet this is essentially what Elgin did. The officials in Athens were minor, underpaid and precarious in the tenure of their posts. They were not the owners: what concerned them was whether they would be called to account for allowing the Marbles to be taken, and it required considerable inducement to make them do this.

Finally, the Marbles themselves. The British press and public often refer to them as "statues". If this were so, Elgin's actions would have been very much more justifiable. But the truth is that every single item in the Marbles was designed to be incorporated in a very special building, the Parthenon; and that the vast majority of the pieces - the 522-foot-long frieze which ran round the outer walls of the inner building, inside the colonnade, and the 92 sculpted metopes which were on the outside, above this colonnade - were, in a much more literal sense, built into the Parthenon. That is to say, they were not decorative additions added at the end, but were sculpted on blocks that played a role in actually keeping the building up, and that then had substantial architectural members laid on top of them. Only the huge figures in the gables, originally over 40 in number, standing as they did on the floors of the two pediments, were at all readily separable from the building, or could in even the loosest sense be described as 'statues'.

Elgin's agents were able to lift off all twelve surviving figures in the East Pediment and most of those from the West Pediment without damaging the architecture. The crunch - literally - came when first the Metopes, then the frieze were to be detached. The Metopes could only be lifted down when the pieces of the cornice which crowned them was either removed or - as in fact happened - dashed in pieces by simply dropping them from a height. With the frieze, the blocks were so thick (about 18 inches) that they had to be sawn through sideways before they could be transported away, to reduce their weight..

So much for the background: now for the issue of embodiment. This question is commonly seen as a more or less symmetrical one. I don't mean now that roughly half of the Marbles is in London, half in Athens; I mean that the fate of the London component is seen as held in suspense between two roughly identical claims. On the one hand, the British Museum

argues that it has a valid legal title to ownership of its Marbles, established over nearly 190 years; if there is controversy around the exact legality of Elgin's original acquisition of them, there is not really any about that of Parliament's purchase of them from him in 1816, and none at all about the fact of their actual possession since then. Then, the validity of the continuing claim to retention rests on their central place in the presentation of world culture which the Museum offers. On the other side, the Greeks claim the London Marbles not only for completeness, but also on the grounds of their central place in the presentation of Greek history to their own public. Put thus, it is a contest between the universal and the local: two museums with competing agendas. On the British side, we pride ourselves on our present appreciation of the place of ancient Greece among universal world cultures, but also (if less openly) on the past political eminence which enabled us to acquire such rich specimens of these cultures; on the Greek side, they too pride themselves on their appreciation of ancient Greek art, but also on the - much more distant - past political achievements of Greek culture which made it all possible. One form of nationalism balanced by another.

But there are serious objections to this neat parallel. It slightly inflates the position of the British Museum, by equating 'universal' and 'world' with a prearranged selection of cultures that dates back to Enlightenment times, when Western culture was world culture, and when a simple evolutionary chain from Egyptian to Mesopotamian to western Asian to Levantine to Greek to Roman to Renaissance and European art could encompass all that was great in past achievement in this field. It suggests that no part of this chain can be understood in isolation from the others. I would describe this as a strategy to put the ancient Greeks in their place at the same time as the modern ones. It also overlooks the fact that a far more important forerunner of Classical Greek sculpture, the immediate ancestry of the kind of carving that we see on the Parthenon Marbles, is pre-Classical Greek sculpture: the real source for such masterpieces of form and drapery as we see on the Parthenon pediments. And it so happens that the sculpture of Archaic Greece is, at the same time, represented very weakly in the British Museum, and uniquely strongly in the other collections of the Acropolis, the very works which would share the space of the new museum with the Marbles themselves.

On the other side, this 'symmetrical' picture rather understates the Greek attitude. Greek feelings for the Parthenon and everything that belonged to it relate, not to mere nationalism, but to national identity itself. This could hardly be otherwise, when the Parthenon has since independence appeared as the national icon on countless bank-notes, coins and postage stamps; when even primary school education is incomplete without lessons on the Parthenon and a school trip to the Acropolis. Thus Greek sentiments are neither purely cultural, nor simply political, but partly visceral. This is why reunifying the Marbles has long been a bipartisan issue between the main Greek political parties, ever since the first recorded request for their return in 1835. This is why, when British questioners complain of the potential costs of removing the London Marbles to Athens, the answer is simple: the Greeks would pay literally anything to get them back. This is finally why an offer of a virtual, digitally-created replica of the London Marbles, which the British Museum proposed to the Greeks in January 2003, was unacceptable.

What the difference boils down to is a difference in the interpretation of the key term in this whole debate: context. We have seen that the Marbles were an integral part of a building; a building which, even though universally classed as a 'ruin', is at present in immeasurably better shape than most buildings of its age. For the Greeks, and indeed for anyone who happens to be an archaeologist, this is the most natural understanding of the word 'context' in connection with the Marbles. For the other side, we may turn to what can be

called 'the argument of the Happy Accident'. In two interviews in the national press early last year (THES, 10th January 2003, p.22; Sunday Telegraph, 23rd February 2003, p.7), Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, was quoted as saying 'The marbles are divided, with roughly half in the museum at Athens and half here. I would argue that this is a happy accident of history'. As he went on to explain, 'They can be seen both in their Athens context and here, where they can be seen against the sweep of the whole of human history... Each is valuable'.

Even more to the point of today's subject are his words (Financial Times Magazine, 14th June 2003, p.30), 'I would argue that the life of these objects as part of the story of the Parthenon is over... They are now part of another story'. What sticks out here is the complete incompatibility of the two uses of 'context'. This is indeed Dr. MacGregor's own view, as well as mine. In the same Financial Times interview, he says: 'All the people working in Greek museums are essentially archaeologists and you would expect any archaeologist to privilege original site and original context, and the location of the object at the particular moment of its making'. Just so. What he is privileging is the context of viewing today, whereas archaeologists (and others) are talking about the original context of deposition of an object.

Perhaps it is partly because I am an archaeologist myself that I have so much greater sympathy for this latter view. But it is also because I take exception to the British Museum's single-minded focus on its own understanding of 'context'. As we have seen, by presenting the 'Elgin Marbles' as if it were a self-contained whole, it has done its best to detach the Marbles from their architectural setting. It compounds this by exhibiting the sculptures inside-out, that is, facing inwards from the gallery walls, as they still are. This aim was reinforced in 1928, when the Museum commissioned a report from three eminent Classical Archaeologists. The Report started from the assumption that the Marbles were 'primarily works of art'; it concluded that their display should not be contaminated either by plaster casts of the missing pieces in Athens (that, after all, would undermine their presentation as a complete set), or even by Elgin's own sample pieces from the architecture of the Parthenon. To quote Mary Beard one more time: 'It was a victory for the transcendental quality of original masterpieces over completeness, context and history; it was a victory for the Parthenon as sculpture over the Parthenon as building.'

The history of the display of the sculptures bears this out. Fifty years ago, you could still see such sights as this: the square metopes from the South side incongruously placed above the West frieze and behind the figures of the East Pediment, as shown in this old view, in wilful disregard for their original contexts. Today, such amateurishness is no longer acceptable. In the Duveen Gallery since its reopening in 1961, the Metopes have been moved into the alcoves on each side of the pediments. Yet still the culmination of the Frieze, which was here, on the short East side of the temple, is brought round to join the North frieze, along one side of the Duveen Gallery. Nearby, an awkward gap in the Museum's holdings is masked by a false door, whose only purpose is to disguise the fact that the next slab of the East frieze, which belongs here, is in Athens; and so on.

In short, for the British Museum the sculptures are above all independent, supreme works of art. As such, they are of interest primarily to that educated public which seeks out such high points of world artistic achievement. To this public belong the Trustees of the Museum itself, who always emphasize that the Marbles are the very jewel in their crown, an indispensable and inalienable part of the collections. Whether the British public as a whole shares that view is very questionable. Over the past few years, a series of independent national opinion polls have been commissioned which reveal a very different attitude: they

all agree in saying that only between one-fifth and one-quarter of the Museum's public actually include the Marbles in their visit. In such circumstances, it is less surprising that the same polls show a large majority of the British population - 81% in the latest count - now support returning the Marbles to Greece. Nor is there any doubt as to which argument carries most weight with them: coupled with the terms offered by the previous Greek government, whereby the Marbles would remain in the possession and, if it wishes, partly in the care of the British Museum, even when re-located in Athens, it is the argument for reunification which carries the day. Once people learn that even individual figures and slabs are divided between London and Athens, to keep them 1500 miles apart seems to many people perverse.

For the Greek public, the issues are quite different. First, it is not just an educated élite, but the overwhelming majority of the Greek people, however little educated, which shares in the hope that the Marbles in London will, on whatever conditions and at whatever cost, return to them. Theirs is quintessentially a 'non-linguistic' reception of the Marbles: they are much less interested than the British Museum in what you can say about them or what cultural use you can put them to, much more concerned with the actual pieces of stone. The Marbles were quarried ten miles away from the city on Mount Pendeli, out of their marble, then carved on their Acropolis and put on their building. All parties now, regretfully or otherwise, agree that pollution and other factors make it impossible to replace the Marbles on the Parthenon itself. But the next best solution is to exhibit them in full view and close proximity to the building, and that is shortly to become a possibility with the completion of the New Acropolis Museum. It is hard to believe that anyone who has seen the plans for this - where, incidentally, the sculptures will be at last restored to their correct, outward-facing configuration - could seriously prefer the tomb-like setting in Bloomsbury to this purpose-built, beautifully-lit gallery in full view of the Parthenon itself.

I have said not a word about what the Marbles embodied for the Athenians who saw them set up, at the time of their creation between 447 and 432 BC. This, I know, is hardly what the Conference is primarily about; but there is a strand of continuity between ancient and contemporary Greek attitudes - and perhaps also ancient Greek and contemporary British ones. The story of the building of the Parthenon, suitably modified, can be seen as giving one hostage to the British Museum's position: it was financed from the accumulated tribute paid, for military protection, to Athens by its weaker allies in Greece. For "Athens" read "Britain" and for the weaker allies read "the Ottoman Empire" and you have what some people find a justificatory parallel for the British title to the Marbles; and, just as some Members of Parliament in 1816 questioned the morality of Elgin's appropriation of cultural booty from the Turks, so some contemporary Athenians had scruples about what the statesman Perikles had done, by using funds contributed by other Greeks for the war effort for embellishing their own city. Perikles' rejoinder and justification is interesting: he had acted 'so that, no less than those who served in the fleet or guarded the frontiers,... the population at home would... derive benefit from the public funds'.

Here is what the later historian and biographer Plutarch, writing from another part of Greece and about 500 years after their construction, said about the Acropolis buildings. After listing 19 professions involved in their creation, he remarks: "Just as each general has his own army under him, so each art had its own private cohort of labourers..acting as an instrument and body of public service." And about the results: "Each of the works of Perikles, though built in a short time, has lasted a long time... each in its perfection looks even at the present as if it were fresh and newly built. There is a certain bloom of newness in each building...". The emphasis is on craftsmanship and its results: on the things

themselves, not on their cultural significance. With modifications, there are many Greeks who would feel for the very same words today.

This conference is concerned, not with the curation or restitution of artefacts, but on their role in research. I would like to end with a question which may appear to relate exclusively to the former, but which I think to some degree involves the latter as well. The question most persistently raised in the Marbles issue is "Where would it stop?"; the word "floodgates" is almost invariably used. Such protests overlook several facts: first, that the Parthenon case is easily shown to be unique, not merely in involving a still-standing monument, but in the central and iconic place of that monument in the culture of another country. How many even loosely parallel cases could be made? It passes over in silence the fact that the last Greek government offered an explicit undertaking never to ask for the return of anything else from Greek soil in the British Museum. Finally, it overlooks the fact that in those rare cases where something like a similar case has been made, restitution has quietly and uncontroversially taken place: I am thinking of instances like the fragment of the Sphinx's beard and the Stone of Scone, both now reunited with their original context. What is it that prevents the Marbles being looked at in a similar light?

Distinct from the central place claimed for them in terms of display is the case which depends, precisely, on design and research. For a generation or so after their arrival in London, the sculptures were fêted, drawn and imitated by (mainly British) artists, critics and poets; then, in the 150-odd years after that, they became a subject of detailed scholarly research by (mainly British) art historians and archaeologists. For the British Museum and especially for its Greek and Roman Department, this has embedded them too deeply in the British scholarly and cultural consciousness for them ever to be uprooted. You may detect faint shades of Edward Said's Orientalism here: the propriety of knowledge acts as a legitimation for possession, in this case no longer territorial, but physical all the same. That is why there is such a large number of people in London who would view with genuine and abject despair the prospect of the Marbles ever leaving.

My main aims in this presentation have been to contest the idea that the Marbles debate is a symmetrical one, between two parties with conflicting but 'mirror-image' agendas; and to lay supreme stress of the original context of the building, from which the Marbles were so destructively detached, but to which they will, in some sense and in many people's analyses, always belong.

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