

**HELLENIC REPUBLIC
MINISTRY OF CULTURE
THE MINISTER**

**MEMORANDUM ON THE PARTHENON MARBLES
submitted by the Government of the Hellenic Republic
to the House of Commons Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport**

On behalf of the government of the Hellenic Republic, the Rt Hon. Elissavet Papazoi MP, Minister of Culture, submits to the Select Committee's inquiry on "Cultural Property: Return and Illicit Trade" (terms of reference of Press Notice no.12, 10 February 2000) evidence pertinent to the Return of the Parthenon Marbles housed in the British Museum in London.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The "Return of the Parthenon Marbles" refers explicitly to the Greek Government's claim for the repatriation of the architectural sculptures and structural elements of the Parthenon on the Acropolis of Athens. These were removed from the monument in the early 19th century at the behest of Lord Elgin, then H.M. Ambassador to the Sublime Porte, and subsequently purchased from him by the British Government, consequent upon an Act of Parliament passed in 1816.

1.2. The Parthenon Marbles were placed in the custody of the British Museum in London, where they have remained ever since. They include: 15 *metopes* from the south side of the ancient temple, 56 reliefs from the *frieze*, 19 sculptures from the two *pediments*, other fragments belonging to the aforesaid units, one column capital, one column drum and one *thranos*; that is almost half the sculptural decoration that was once an integral part of the monument (*see Appendix 1*).

2. THE GREEK CLAIM FOR THE RETURN OF THE PARTHENON MARBLES

2.1. The Return of the Parthenon Marbles has been an issue for Greece since its Independence (*see Appendix 2*). The claim for their return has been espoused by a significant number of distinguished personalities, including prominent British intellectuals and politicians, during the two centuries since their removal from the monument. In 1940/41 the return of the Marbles to Greece was seriously considered by the British Government. In October 1983 the Government of the Hellenic Republic submitted to the Government of the United Kingdom an official request for the Return of the Parthenon Marbles. The request was denied.

2.2. The Government of the Hellenic Republic has promoted the issue of the return of the Parthenon Marbles in several international fora including UNESCO, where it was first raised in 1982 and was approved by the overwhelming majority of representatives. The 1998 written declaration of the European Parliament in favour of the Return of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece, as well as the 1999 recommendation by UNESCO that bilateral talks be initiated between Greece and the United Kingdom, are among recent moves that bear witness to the strong and continuing European and international interest in the issue (*see Appendix 3*).

3. CONSEQUENCES OF THE DISMANTLING OF THE PARTHENON

3.1. The dismantling of the Parthenon, between 1801-1811, irreparably destroyed the monument's structural integrity. The removal of the *metopes* entailed the mutilation of several adjoining architectural and sculptural elements and resulted in the dilapidation of the building. The sculptures of the *frieze* were sawn off from their supporting blocks to facilitate their transportation. A Doric column capital was cut in two for the same reason. Essential structural elements of the temple (*geisa* and *triglyphs*) were destroyed. These interventions were recorded by Lord Elgin's agents and witnessed by foreign visitors to Athens. They were also censured, as tantamount to spoliation, by eminent British peers, politicians and intellectuals, contemporaries of Elgin (*see Appendix 4*).

3.2. The Parthenon Marbles were almost lost in a shipwreck on the voyage to Britain. Upon arrival in London they were stored temporarily inside a coal shed. From documents in the British Museum archive they are known to have been cleaned with metal brushes and abrasives in 1937-38, which action damaged irreversibly the surface of a large number of sculptures. These harmful interventions have been confirmed by the team of Greek experts who examined the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum in October 1999 (*see Appendix 5*).

4. THE CASE FOR THE RETURN OF THE PARTHENON MARBLES

4.1. *The uniqueness of the Parthenon*

Works of art from all periods of ancient Greek civilisation are exhibited in museums and galleries around the world, thus providing millions of people with the opportunity to enjoy, to appreciate and to study them. **The Parthenon Marbles, however, are a unique case.**

The sculptural decoration and architectural elements of the Parthenon were not created as independent works of art; they were conceived and designed from the outset as integral parts of the monument. And the monument, built in the 5th century BC, still stands on the Acropolis of Athens.

The Parthenon, symbol of the Athenian democracy, represents the art of Classical Greek civilisation at its zenith. The Acropolis, which the Parthenon graces, was the sacred epicentre of ancient Athens, around which all the important functions of the city (the Agora, the Pnyx, the theatres, etc.) were gathered. The Parthenon remains the emblem of the city of Athens and the symbol of Greek cultural identity. It is also part of the global cultural and architectural heritage, one of the first monuments entered by UNESCO in the World Heritage List. Indeed it is the logo of UNESCO. However, the cultural, historical, archaeological and aesthetic values of the Parthenon are most closely interwoven with the city in which it was created, Athens.

4.2. *The Unification of the Archaeological Sites in the Historical Centre of Athens*

The Acropolis and its surrounding area are the primary targets of the on-going programme for the Unification of the Archaeological Sites in the historical centre of Athens. This project, under the joint auspices of the Ministry for the Environment, Regional Planning and Public Works and the Ministry of Culture, comprises a series of interventions aimed at rehabilitating the historical, cultural, and natural environment around the Acropolis. A network of paved walkways, some following ancient paths, is intended to link the Olympieion (Temple of Zeus) to the ancient cemetery of the Kerameikos via the New Acropolis Museum, the Sanctuary and Theatre of Dionysos, the Odeion of Herodes Atticus, the Pnyx, the Ancient Agora and, of course, the Acropolis, creating a museum-park accessible to all. As the modern Athenian or visitor to Athens walks along this route, he will experience the

different phases of the city's history, with the rock of the Acropolis and the Parthenon in constant view, dominating all (*see Appendix 6*).

4.3. The Conservation, Preservation and Research Programme of the Acropolis Monuments and the Parthenon

The monumental and ground-breaking restoration and conservation programme begun on the Acropolis 25 years ago, is carried out on the basis of studies which are submitted beforehand for appraisal to the international scholarly community, through conferences and publications. The current restoration of the Parthenon aims primarily at its structural conservation, the conservation of surfaces, the maximum protection of the existing sculptures, the correct repositioning on the monument of pieces previously restored, and the restoration of parts of the building with joining pieces from those lying on the ground. Every intervention can be reversed without any harm to the monument. The architectural elements of the Parthenon in the British Museum (i.e., the column capital and column drum) will be incorporated in the monument upon their return (*see Appendices 7 and 8*).

In recent years intensive archaeological research on the Acropolis in general and the Parthenon in particular, has produced new evidence: numerous sculptural fragments belonging to the Parthenon have been found, several figures have been restored and fragments that join with the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum have also been identified. These remarkable results show that the Acropolis is still an inexhaustible source of knowledge for research (*see Appendix 9*).

4.4. The New Acropolis Museum

The New Acropolis Museum is a top priority for the Greek state; it will be completed by 2004. It will house the collections in the present Acropolis Museum, as well as the Parthenon Marbles, those in Athens and those from the British Museum upon their return to Athens. The New Acropolis Museum will be located at the foot of the Acropolis, in physical and visual contact with it.

The systematic excavation of the museum site has revealed large sectors of Roman and Early Christian city of Athens (1st-7th centuries AD), of considerable archaeological and historical interest. These will be preserved *in situ*: in fact they will be incorporated in the design of the new building. In order to accommodate these discoveries, it was necessary to modify the initial architectural brief. For this reason, the design for the New Acropolis Museum will be selected by means of a closed international competition with an international jury.

Visitors to the New Acropolis Museum will have a unique experience not only of Classical but also of Roman, Early Christian and modern Athens. All the Parthenon Marbles will be displayed in a special gallery. For the first time since their dismantling, they will be presented as a unified ensemble in their original sequence and correct relationships, and in visual contact with the unique monument they once adorned. The existing museum on the rock of the Acropolis and the New Acropolis Museum will complement each other. The vistas from either atop the Acropolis or from the New Acropolis Museum towards the rock of the Acropolis will provide the visitors with a unique experience of the place.

4.5. Legal issues

The legality of acquisition of the Parthenon Marbles by Lord Elgin is a controversial issue, not least because of the dubious documentary evidence. The 1801 "firman" does not survive, nor do the 1802 documents, which supposedly ratified all previous illegalities. The only surviving text is

an Italian translation of the 1801 Turkish document, the validity of which as a “firman” is questionable. Elgin’s actions by far exceeded the authority granted under the “firman”, which simply authorised his artists to enter the Acropolis, to draw and to make moulds for casts. Moreover, Elgin and his agents are alleged to have threatened and bribed Ottoman officials not to interfere with their activities. The mere accomplishment of the removal of the Marbles from Greece, which was at the time under Ottoman occupation, without final hindrance from the Turkish authorities is not proof *ipso facto* of legal title. Indeed, it is notable that the Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1816 was little concerned with the issue of the illegality of acquisition of the Marbles by Lord Elgin *per se*.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The Parthenon is acknowledged universally not only as a unique monument in the history of architecture but also as the epitome of the contribution of the Greek spirit to the cultural heritage of mankind. The monument’s uniqueness and the need to restore the unity of its sculptures make the return of the Parthenon Marbles housed in the British Museum imperative. At the beginning of the 21st century notions of historic preservation, protection, and interpretation of the world’s cultural heritage have drastically changed. Viewed in this framework, the Parthenon, a monument of universal significance, can no longer remain dismembered. The reunification of the Parthenon Marbles in Athens, the city in which they were created, will ensure their reintegration in their historical, topographic, and cultural context, and will contribute to their fuller understanding and interpretation.

On their return to Athens the Parthenon sculptures will be housed in the New Acropolis Museum in the very heart of their birthplace, Classical Athens. A great part of this “heart” survives intact on the rock of the Acropolis itself, as well in its environs; it will be accessible to all when the project for the Unification of the Archaeological Sites of Athens is completed in 2002. The Cultural Olympiad, as well as the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens present both Greece and the United Kingdom with wide-ranging opportunities for fruitful co-operation in the field of culture. In this context, the reunification of the Parthenon Marbles will be a unique opportunity for strong partnership and collaboration.

The Government of the Hellenic Republic is pleased that through the Select Committee’s inquiry discussions on the return of the Parthenon Marbles can begin between the interested parties. We believe that, in the light of the evidence presented in the Memorandum, the Select Committee will recommend to the House of Commons that appropriate measures be taken to secure the reunification of the Parthenon Marbles in Athens in due course. The time is ripe for reuniting the Parthenon Marbles in their original home. Their return will redress the cultural and moral injustice of their enforced exile. We are confident that the United Kingdom will demonstrate its willingness to address this important issue.

Elissavet Papazoi

9 March 2000

LIST OF APPENDICES

- APPENDIX 1: a. Ground plan of the Parthenon indicating current location of Parthenon Marbles.
b. “*Disjecta Membra*. The Plunder and Dispersion of the Antiquities of the Acropolis”, by Alexandros Mantis. *Anthemion*, Bulletin of the Friends of the Acropolis. Reprinted in shortened form from Vol. 4, December 1997.
c. Selected bibliography.
- APPENDIX 2: Texts by Greek General Makriyiannis and by K. Pittakis, General Keeper of Antiquities of Greece.
- APPENDIX 3: UNESCO, European Parliament and United Nations resolutions and recommendations.
- APPENDIX 4: English written source of the 19th century: letters by Elgin and his staff, texts by travellers and intellectuals.
- APPENDIX 5: Summary of a preliminary report by the team of experts from the Hellenic Ministry of Culture on their findings concerning the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum.
- APPENDIX 6: The Unification of the Archaeological Sites of Athens (brochure and plans).
- APPENDIX 7: Conservation programme of the Acropolis Monuments and the Parthenon:
a. “Conservation of the Surface of the Acropolis Monuments”, Committee for the Preservation of the Acropolis Monuments, Athens 1994.
b. Articles by H.C. Perkins and E. Papakonstantinou on air pollution in Athens and London.
- APPENDIX 8: Restoration programme of the Acropolis Monuments and the Parthenon:
a. “The *Anastylosis* of the Acropolis Monuments 1975-2000”, by F. Mallouhou-Tufano.
b. “Documentation of the Column Capital and Drum from the Parthenon in the British Museum”, by C. Zambas.
- APPENDIX 9: Results of archaeological research on the Acropolis and the Parthenon:
offprints by I. Trianti, Ephor of the Acropolis and
A. Mantis, Archaeologist, Ephorate of Acropolis.