

The British Side

What are the Elgin Marbles?

At its broadest, the term 'Elgin Marbles' refers to a collection of stone sculptures and architectural pieces which Thomas Bruce, Seventh Lord Elgin, gathered during his service as ambassador to the court of the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul. In practice, the term is commonly used to refer to the stone objects he gathered – an official Greek website prefers “looted” - from Athens between 1801-05, particularly those from the Parthenon; these included 247 feet of frieze. We believe that Elgin took around half of what was surviving at the Parthenon at that time. The Parthenon items are increasingly, and officially, called the Parthenon Sculptures.

The Elgin Marbles in Britain

Elgin was heavily interested in Greek history and claimed he had the permission of the Ottomans, the people ruling Athens during his service, to gather his collection. After acquiring the marbles he transported them to Britain, although one shipment sank during transit; it was fully recovered. In 1816 Elgin sold the stones for £35,000, half his estimated costs, and they were acquired by the British Museum in London, but only after a Parliamentary Select Committee – a very high level body of inquiry – debated the legality of Elgin's ownership. Elgin had been attacked by campaigners (then as now) for “vandalism”, but Elgin argued the sculptures would be better cared for in Britain, and cited his permissions, documentation which campaigners for the return of the Marbles often now believe supports their claims. The Committee allowed the Elgin Marbles to stay in Britain. They are now displayed by the British Museum.

The Parthenon Diaspora

The Parthenon, and its sculptures/marbles, have a history which stretches back 2500 years, when it was built to honour a goddess called Athena. It has been a Christian church and a Muslim mosque, but has been ruined since 1687, when gunpowder stored inside exploded and attackers bombarded the structure. Over

the centuries the stones which both constituted and adorned the Parthenon had been damaged, especially during the explosion, and many have been removed from Greece. The surviving Parthenon sculptures are divided among museums in eight nations, including The British Museum, the Louvre, the Vatican collection and a new, purpose built museum in Athens. The majority of the Parthenon Sculptures are split evenly between London and Athens.

The Elgin Marbles and Greece

Pressure for the return of the Marbles to Greece has been growing, and since the 1980s the Greek Government has officially asked for them to be permanently repatriated. They argue that the Marbles are a prime piece of Greek heritage, and were removed with the permission of what was effectively a foreign government as Greek independence only occurred a few years after Elgin was collecting. They also argue that the British Museum has no legal right to the sculptures.

Arguments that Greece had nowhere to adequately display the Marbles, because they can't be satisfactorily replaced in Parthenon itself, have been made null and void by the creation of a new £115 million Acropolis Museum with a floor recreating the Parthenon. In addition massive works to restore and stabilise the Parthenon and the Acropolis have been, and are being, carried out.

The British Museum's Response

The British Museum has basically said "no" to the Greeks. Their official position, as given on their [website in 2009](#), is:

"The British Museum's Trustees argue that the Parthenon Sculptures are integral to the Museum's purpose as a world museum telling the story of human cultural achievement. Here Greece's cultural links with the other great civilizations of the ancient world, especially Egypt, Assyria, Persia and Rome, can be clearly seen, and the vital contribution of ancient Greece to the development of later cultural achievements in Europe, Asia, and Africa can be followed and understood. The current division of the surviving sculptures between museums in eight countries, with about equal quantities present in Athens and London, allows different and complementary stories to be told about them, focusing respectively on their

importance for the history of Athens and Greece, and their significance for world culture. This, the Museum's Trustees believe, is an arrangement that gives maximum public benefit for the world at large and affirms the universal nature of the Greek legacy."

The British Museum has also claimed they have a right to keep the Elgin Marbles because they effectively saved them from further damage. Ian Jenkins was [quoted by the BBC](#), while associated with the British Museum, as saying "If Lord Elgin did not act as he did, the sculptures would not survive as they do. And the proof of that as a fact is merely to look at the things that were left behind in Athens." Yet the British Museum has also admitted that the sculptures were damaged by "heavy handed" cleaning, although the precise level of damage is disputed by campaigners in Britain and Greece. Pressure continues to build.

There is a longstanding debate over whether the Elgin Marbles should be returned to Greece. When Lord Elgin removed the sculptures, Athens was under the control of the Ottoman Empire and had been for more than 300 years. In 1832, after a war of independence, and nearly two decades after the sculptures were removed, Greece gained its independence.

The British Museum's position is that at the time Lord Elgin removed the sculptures, in the first decade of the 19th century, he got proper permission from the Ottoman authorities.

"In 1801 he was granted a firman (licence and letter of instruction) as a diplomatic gesture in gratitude for Britain's defeat of French forces in Egypt, then a dominion of the Ottoman Empire. The firman required the Turkish authorities in Athens not to hinder Elgin's employees in their drawing, modelling, erection of scaffolding and also allowed them to 'take away any pieces of stone with inscriptions or figures'," says the British Museum in a statement.

"A final firman, secured by Sir Robert Adair (Ambassador in Istanbul) in February 1810 from the same authority as the earlier firman, instructed the authorities in Athens to allow the embarkation of all the remaining antiquities collected by Lord Elgin."

The museum also argues that time had not been kind to the sculptures and Elgin had good reason to be concerned for their safety. In 1687, the Parthenon had been used by the Ottomans for gunpowder storage and the structure was badly damaged in an explosion when a Venetian force attacked the city.

Rationale for retaining in London[\[edit\]](#)

A range of different arguments has been presented by scholars,^[24] political-leaders and British Museum spokespersons over the years in defence of retention of the Elgin Marbles within the British Museum. The main points include:

- the assertion that fulfilling all restitution claims would empty most of the world's great museums – this has also caused concerns among other European and American museums, with one potential target being the [famous bust of Nefertiti](#) in [Berlin's Neues Museum](#); in addition, portions of Parthenon marbles are kept by many other European museums, so the Greeks would then establish a precedent to claim these other artworks;^[12]
- some scholars argue that the marbles were saved from what would have been severe damage from pollution and other factors, which could have perhaps destroyed the marbles,^[12] if they had been located in Athens the past few hundred years;^[24]
- experts agree that Greece could mount no court case because Elgin was granted permission by what was then Greece's ruling government and a legal principle of limitation would apply, i.e. the ability to pursue claims expires after a period of time prescribed by law;^[24]
- more than half the original marbles are lost and therefore the return of the Elgin Marbles could never complete the collection in Greece. In addition, many of the marbles are too fragile to travel from London to Athens;^[24]
- display in the British museum puts the sculptures in a European artistic context, alongside the work of art which both influenced and was influenced by Greek sculpture. This allows parallels to be drawn with the art of other cultures;^[62]
- the notion that the Parthenon sculptures are an item of global rather than solely Greek significance strengthens the argument that they should remain

in a museum which is both free to visit, and located in one of Europe's most visited cities. The government of Greece intends to charge visitors of the New Acropolis Museum, where they can view the marbles (as of 2011 the price is €5).^[63]

- a legal position that the museum is banned by charter from returning any part of its collection.^[64]

Despite the British Museum's position on its ownership of the marbles, in 1998, a poll carried out by [Ipsos MORI](#) asking "If there were a referendum on whether or not the Elgin Marbles should be returned to Greece, how would you vote?" returned these values from the British general adult population:^[70]

- 40% in favour of returning the marbles to Greece
- 15% in favour of keeping them at the British Museum
- 18% would not vote
- 27% had no opinion

A more recent opinion poll in 2002 (again carried out by MORI) showed similar results, with 40% of the British public in favour of returning the marbles to Greece, 16% in favour of keeping them within Britain and the remainder either having no opinion or would not vote.^[71] When asked how they would vote if a number of conditions were met (including, but not limited to, a long-term loan whereby the British maintained ownership and joint control over maintenance) the number responding in favour of return increased to 56% and those in favour of keeping them dropped to 7%.

Both MORI poll results have been characterised by proponents of the return of the Marbles to Greece as representing a groundswell of public opinion supporting return, since the proportion explicitly supporting return to Greece significantly exceeds the number who are explicitly in favour of keeping the Marbles at the British Museum.^{[70][72]}

Popular support for restitution[\[edit\]](#)

An internet campaign site,^[73] in part sponsored by [Metaxa](#) aims to consolidate support for the return of the Elgin Marbles to the New Acropolis Museum in Athens.