

Exclusive: Head of British Museum held secret talks with Greek PM, officials to agree deal for Parthenon Marbles' return

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George Osborne, the chair of the British Museum, has been holding secret talks with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis over the last 13 months to negotiate the possible return of the Parthenon Marbles, Greek daily newspaper *Ta Nea* can exclusively reveal.

The behind-the-scenes meetings have been taking place in London since November 2021. Osborne has also met with two senior Greek government ministers.

At least two of those meetings were held at the Greek ambassador's residence in Mayfair. Another one was held as recently as this week at a hotel in Knightsbridge.

The discussions have been kept out of the public eye. The chair of London's largest museum first visited the ambassador's residence, at 51 Upper Brook Street, in mid-November 2021, to hold "exploratory talks" with Mitsotakis about the fate of the 2,500-year-old sculptures.

In October this year, he met at the same venue with Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias. In the meantime, he held talks with Greek State Minister Giorgos Gerapetritis, one of Mitsotakis's closest aides.

This week, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer visited the five-star Berkeley hotel in Knightsbridge to meet the Greek premier, a year after their first secret encounter.

The return of Phidias's masterpieces to Greece was the only topic on the agenda of these meetings.

Mitsotakis was in London to promote Greek business and economic interests in Britain. He met with King Charles III, spoke at an investment conference, and took part in a talk at the London School of Economics. While those engagements were made public, his meeting with Osborne was meant to be kept secret.

Insiders have said negotiations between Osborne and the Greek prime minister are at 'an advanced stage'. However, an agreement has yet to be finalised and Greek officials cautioned that "we cannot rule out that talks might hit a stalemate at the eleventh hour, as is the case with any delicate negotiation".

"The devil is in the details," a Greek source said. "An agreement is 90 percent complete, but a critical 10 percent remains unresolved. It's hard to get there, but it's not impossible."

"Significant progress has been made. We will see in the coming months if that progress is enough to reach an agreement," they added.

The behind-the-scenes negotiations intensified in November last year, when Mitsotakis visited London to meet Boris Johnson.

In an [exclusive interview with *Ta Nea*](#) published in March 2021, Johnson claimed that the Parthenon

Marbles “were legally acquired by Lord Elgin under the appropriate laws of the time and have been legally owned by the British Museum’s Trustees since their acquisition.”

When the then Prime Minister met his Greek counterpart in No 10, he again rebuffed his request for the Marbles to be repatriated.

Mitsotakis did not lose hope, though. During his stay in London, he scheduled a meeting with Osborne, who formally became chairman of the British Museum in October last year.

“The meeting went very well,” a source said. It was followed by talks between Gerapetritis and Osborne in 2021 and this year, either in person or remotely.

'Deal to be done'

Speaking in June, the British Museum’s chair suggested in an interview with LBC that “there is a deal to be done” over the Parthenon Marbles, if both Britain and Greece “approach this without a load of preconditions, without a load of red lines”.

On October 13 this year, Osborne visited the Greek ambassador’s residence again, this time to meet Dendias.

The latest round of negotiations took place on Monday, November 28, two hours before Mitsotakis was received by King Charles at Windsor Castle.

That afternoon, the Greek Prime Minister was at the ambassador’s residence with Alex Patelis, his chief economic adviser, meeting investors and businesspeople.

The initial plan was for the Parthenon talks to take place at the residence – as on previous occasions. However, Mitsotakis thought that the secrecy of the meeting was not guaranteed given that too many people were in the building at the time, so he decided to meet the Museum’s chair at The Berkeley hotel instead.

“The discussion went well. We've come a long way. However, some matters remain pending. We agree on a lot, but there are also points of disagreement,” the official said.

Talks progressing

The aim is to reach a win-win solution that will be mutually beneficial to both Greece and Britain.

The two sides have been negotiating the possibility of a “long-term cultural partnership” between the British Museum and Greece. This will allow the sculptures’ reunification in the Acropolis Museum in Athens, while enabling the museum in London to host rotating exhibitions of Greek treasures never seen before outside Greece.

Speaking on Monday at the LSE, four hours after his meeting with Osborne, Mitsotakis said that the return of the Marbles is ‘possible.’ He also noted that he had seen ‘progress’ on the issue.

“A win-win solution can be found that will result in the reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures in Greece, while at the same time taking into account concerns that the British Museum may have,” the Greek premier added.

Greece's Ministry of Culture has also been working on a 'reunification strategy' under the supervision of Minister Dr Lina Mendoni.

In October, Lord Vaizey, Britain's longest-serving arts minister, was appointed chair of the Parthenon Project's advisory board, an organisation which seeks the return of the artefacts "in their home city of Athens" under a "cultural partnership" between the UK and Greece. He was joined, last month, by former Culture Secretary Ben Bradshaw. Actor Stephen Fry, journalist Sarah Baxter and Conservative peers Baroness Meyer and Lord Dobbs also sit on the advisory board of the Parthenon Project which was formed earlier this year by Greek businessman John Lefas.

The British Museum houses 15 metopes, 17 pedimental figures and more than 75 metres of the Parthenon frieze.

Greece has campaigned to have the 2,500-year-old sculptures returned from the Museum since they were removed by Lord Elgin in the early 19th century when he was Britain's ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. At the time, Greece was under Ottoman rule. Lord Elgin sold the treasures to the British government in 1816.

A Greek official said that senior British Museum figures have privately conceded that the sculptures will eventually be restored to Athens as a single work of art. If that happens, Greece intends to lend the British Museum rare ancient Greek artefacts.

The official said that several solutions are being considered that could 'set aside' the ownership issue in a possible deal. They added that there are ways to avoid mentioning ownership in an agreement on the Marbles' return.

The British Museum claims to have legal title to the fifth-century B.C. antiquities. Greece, however, maintains that the museum is not the legal owner of the sculptures.

The museum's trustees have always insisted that the acceptance of the lending institution's ownership is a 'precondition' for any loan. However, [when questioned by Ta Nea](#) in February, its spokesperson stopped short of reiterating the word "precondition", used by the museum for many years. Instead, they replaced it with the word "normally". "Borrowers also normally acknowledge that the lender has title to the objects they want to borrow," the spokesperson said.

"They're not saying that it is a precondition anymore. So, what you are seeing is a massive shift. They're opening the door," leading cultural property lawyer Mark Stephens told *Ta Nea*.

In repeated polls, Britons have voiced support for the repatriation of the carvings.

Palermo model

A solution under consideration is the so-called 'Palermo model'. A marble fragment of the Parthenon temple, known as the Fagan fragment, was 'deposited' to the Acropolis Museum in January for four years by the Antonino Salinas Archaeological Museum in Palermo, with a renewal option for another four years.

However, five months later, Greek Culture Minister Mendoni announced that the fragment will permanently stay in Athens, after having reached a deal with the Sicilian government and Italy's culture ministry. A similar model could be applied to the return of the Marbles currently in London.

It is understood that British officials have proposed a 'partial return' of the Marbles. They have also mooted the idea that London and Athens could 'share' the sculptures. A Greek official said that Athens has not signed up to such 'solutions'.

Asked what to expect from the talks between Osborne and Mitsotakis regarding the future of the Sculptures, a British Museum spokesperson told *Ta Nea*: "Deepening public access and understanding, creating new ways and opportunities for collections to be shared and understood right across the world, and forging connections between the present and the past, remain at the core of what the British Museum seeks to achieve."

A Conservative MP told *Ta Nea* that "if the Parthenon Marbles go to Athens, they are not coming back to London".

Bradshaw expressed a similar view. "I don't think anyone is seriously thinking that when the Marbles go back (to Athens) they won't go back permanently," he told *Ta Nea*.

This news report was published in the Greek daily newspaper Ta Nea (www.tanea.gr) on 3 December 2022.