

Opinion Column

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« Free the Parthenon Marbles imprisoned within a gloomy and cramped gallery at the British Museum »

More and more countries in possession of fragments of the emblematic temple in Athens are inclined to return them to the Acropolis Museum whereas London is still showing resistance, say archaeologists and academics from half a dozen European countries in an article published in “Le Monde”.

The issue of the Parthenon Marbles exhibited at the British Museum in London is becoming increasingly topical and thorny for the British authorities. As the wave of restitutions and exchanges of cultural artefacts gathers momentum, it will induce all those countries which have held on to fragments of the Parthenon to offer them to the Acropolis Museum, one of the most beautiful specialist museums in the world.

At a highly moving ceremony on 10th January, a fragment of the Parthenon frieze representing the foot of the goddess Artemis, was returned to Athens by the Antonino Salinas Museum in Palermo. This long-term loan is highly symbolic. As the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis pointed out during the ceremony, this gesture is “an important step” paving the way for other museums to “follow the same path”.

Black sheep

In the current context where other former colonial powers, such as France and Belgium, are willing to return African artefacts looted during the period of colonialism, the British government is seen as the black sheep. Particularly since its continued refusal to enter into talks centres on the very special case of the reunification of the Parthenon Marbles, a narrative sequence which, like a film, was mutilated by Lord Elgin two centuries ago and cut in half.

Before the magnificent Acropolis Museum was built, the British Museum could argue that the Parthenon sculptures would be better looked after in London than in Athens. However today it is clear that, since their infamous cleaning using ammonia and copper brushes in the late 1930s, they have suffered damage under the care of the British Museum Trustees. And in recent years images of water seepage in the British Museum’s Parthenon Gallery have raised fears that these peerless sculptures are gradually crumbling. In contrast, the security guaranteed at the Acropolis Museum, designed by Bernard Tschumi and co-financed by the European Union, at the cutting

edge of modern technology and architecture, advocates the return of these authentic pieces to their place of origin.

An intergovernmental matter

During his official meeting with Prime Minister Boris Johnson at Downing Street on 16th November 2021, the Greek Prime Minister clearly stressed the importance and the necessity of the reunification of the Marbles for Greece and for Europe. He insisted, like UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Country of Origin at its 22nd session in September 2021, that this is a matter between governments and not only the responsibility of the British Museum. Clarifying the Greek government's position, Mitsotakis proposed a win-win solution. The Greek authorities and museums would commit to lending other priceless pieces for rotating temporary exhibitions, in exchange for the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum and thereby restore the UK's reputation for generosity and fairness. Especially since the Marbles are a unique symbol of European civilization and the world's first democracy.

The Hellenic Prime Minister astutely appealed to Boris Johnson's philhellenism, to his intuitive understanding of the inseparable link between the modern world and our ancient Greek heritage. He also appealed to Johnson's vaunted vision of "global Britain", open to the world, pointing out that a fine example of such a mindset would be the restitution of the Marbles.

The momentum which Mr Mitsotakis has brought to the campaign for the reunification of the Marbles seems to be changing public opinion and that of the media in the UK. Indeed, not a day goes by without an article or a statement appearing in favour of the return of the Marbles to Athens.

Historic about-face

This trend was confirmed by the leading article published by The Times on 11th January, which reveals a historic about-face in the positioning of this reputed daily newspaper that embodies the British establishment. The article states:

"The museum and the British government, supported by The Times, have resisted the pressure. But times and circumstances change. The sculptures belong in Athens. They should now return".

And a YouGov poll, published just after the meeting between Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Boris Johnson, indicated that 59% of Britons surveyed believe the Parthenon Marbles belong in Greece.

The time therefore seems increasingly ripe for the British government, who could benefit from closer relations with its European neighbours, to make a historic decision and perform a noble and generous gesture by releasing the Marbles imprisoned within a gloomy and cramped gallery at the British Museum. As Rodin reminds us:

« No number of electric lights can stop them from eternally seeking the sweet light sung by Homer. »

Let us hope that, as at the time when Boris Johnson invited Melina Mercouri (in 1986) to plead the case for the return of the Marbles to Athens before the students of the

Oxford Union, the British Prime Minister will reassert his conviction that these timeless treasures, symbols of our European culture and democracy, are destined to shine within the context of their place of origin.

Signatories:

Hélène Ahrweiler, historian, former Principal of the Sorbonne and Rector of the Academy of Paris, Chair of the French Committee for the reunification of the Parthenon sculptures.

Louis Godart, archaeologist and philologist, former advisor for the Conservation of Artistic Heritage to the Italian President, Chair of the Italian Committee for the reunification of the Parthenon sculptures.

François Roelants du Vivier, former MEP, honorary Belgian Senator, Co-Chair of the Luxembourg Committee for the reunification of the Parthenon sculptures.

Dusan Sidjanski, political scientist at the Global Studies Institute, University of Geneva, Founder and Chair of the Swiss Committee for the reunification of the Parthenon Marbles.

Christiane Tytgat, archaeologist, former Director of the Belgian School in Athens, Chair of the Belgian Committee for the reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures, Chair of the International Association for the reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures.

Patricia van Gene-Saillet, Secretary of the Swiss Committee for the reunification of the Parthenon Marbles.