

The Parthenon: a Symbol of European Civilization

by Alexander M. Benakis
London, 21.04.2008

In March 2008, I had the honour to take part in the Athens International Conference organised jointly by UNESCO and the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, in the magnificent "New Acropolis Museum".

The programme discussed by many learned professors, advocates, archaeologists and other experts was "Return of Cultural Objects to their Countries of Origin".

However, as far as I am concerned one presentation stood out and this was not presented by an academic! Matthew BOGDANOS, a colonel in the US Marine Corps, is Head of the Investigation concerning Iraq's National Museum. This museum, which housed treasures comprising thousands-year-old Mesopotamian sculptures and other artifacts, was looted and severely damaged when the Americans invaded Baghdad in 2003. Col. BOGDANOS, stationed at the time in Basra, volunteered to get a legal team together and raced to Baghdad to try and save what he could. At the Conference he gave a brilliant description of the problem he and his team faced in trying to trace and locate the looted treasures. His efforts have seen about 40% of the missing items, so far, traced to collections in Britain, the USA, Switzerland and other countries.

As I said during the Conference, as an Anglo-Greek living in Britain, I am equally proud of both my British as well as of my Hellenic heritages. I found the colonel's vivid description of the looting and destruction of the National Museum of Baghdad particularly interesting, inasmuch as it reminded me of similarities in the removal of the Parthenon sculptures by Lord Elgin, over two hundred years ago.

Here we have two people -- the modern Greeks and the Iraqis, the descendants of the Ancient Athenians and the Mesopotamians -- who have seen their antiquities survive for thousands of years, only to have the great modern imperial powers -- the British, the Venetians and the Ottomans in the case of the Parthenon, and the United States in the case of the National Museum of Baghdad -- instrumental in their demise!

I have long been interested, as are many members of my family, in the efforts concerning the repatriation of the Parthenon Sculptures to Athens. My participation in this most interesting Conference convinced me that, the repatriation of the sculptures is a right and worthy cause and is bound to be successful in the end. The time has come for both the British Museum and the Greek Government to put aside their fixations, whether of patriotism or arguments of ownership, so that meaningful negotiations can commence without further delay. The New Acropolis Museum is ready.

The Ottoman Empire is no more, as is the British Empire. Neither is Ancient Athens. The Parthenon does not belong to Hellas nor Britain nor anyone else. If anything, it belongs to Europe. It is a symbol of European civilization and excellence as recognised by UNESCO. It represents all that is high and pure in Western Culture. I would like it to represent EUROPEAN UNITY, not European disunity.

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