

Ending the Impasse

by Dennis Menos

With a brand new Museum on the foothills of the Acropolis eagerly anticipating the return of the Parthenon Sculptures, but with no apparent movement toward that goal, a logical question arises: What is holding up progress?

The usual tendency is to blame the British Museum, the custodian of the Sculptures. The Museum, critics charge, derives enormous benefits from the Sculptures presence in London and, accordingly, is not about to let them go.

But on examination, an equal if not greater responsibility for the prevailing impasse falls on the British government. It was the British government, after all, that purchased the Sculptures from Lord Elgin; turned them over to the British Museum for safekeeping; and then sealed the deal by enacting the Museum Act of 1963. The Act prohibits the Museum Trustees from removing any art object in their possession, unless a duplicate is on hand. No duplicate Parthenon Sculptures exist, of course, in London.

Having created this state of affairs, the British government now acts as if the issue of the Parthenon Sculptures is one for the Museum Trustees to resolve. The Sculptures belong to them, it points out, and any requests for their return must be directed to the Trustees, not the British government. The British Museum uses a similar tactic. The restrictive rules, it claims, enacted by the government prevent it from responding to such requests.

A kind of a “shell game?”

Certainly looks that way. The British government refers all inquiries on the Parthenon Sculptures to the British Museum, and the British Museum, in turn, points to the British government and the restrictive rules it has imposed upon it for its inability to act.

From all indications, the government of Great Britain has no plans to remove the restrictive legislation. Neither is it inclined to initiate direct negotiations with the Greek government on this issue. Any such moves, it claims, would have to be preceded by a formal Greek request for the return of the Sculptures. It is ironic, of course, for the government of Great Britain to pretend that it does not know what Greece wants, and to demand a formal request before taking any action. Greek officials have repeatedly addressed the issue, informing London in no uncertain terms of their desire to see the Sculptures return home.

By its demand that a formal Greek request precede negotiations, the British government attempts to obscure its true objective, i.e., to obtain a formal Greek admission that the legal title to the Sculptures in London belongs to the people of Britain. This is a demand that no Greek government can entertain, much less accept.

Clearly, misguided actions by the British government have tied the Parthenon Sculptures issue into knots. The situation is not without hope, however. Great Britain is a centuries old friend and ally of Greece, and it has within its means the power and wisdom to resolve the issue in a fair and even-handed way.

But first, Britain must abandon the fantasy that it owns the Sculptures of Phidias. It must also be prepared to enter into bilateral government to government negotiations with Greece without preconditions. Greece will undoubtedly respond to such a gesture, with a major gesture of its own, possibly by a formal Declaration of Appreciation to the British Museum for its past stewardship of the Parthenon Sculptures. Gifting to the New Acropolis Museum one of the statues removed from the Acropolis by Lord Elgin (the Caryatid comes to mind) would similarly help move the process along.

Direct government to government negotiations is the only positive way for breaking the Parthenon Sculptures impasse, and the time has come for the government of Great Britain to make the first move.

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