

Bring them back!

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It is a couple of years since an online campaign or e-petition has launched for the return of the Parthenon marbles and the reunification of the monument. This campaign is called "Bring them back". The idea belongs to three young Greek women who set about a collective effort to gather the largest number of signatures from citizens across the world, sending their own message loud and declare their own cultural values in the 21st century. Article 11.4 of the Lisbon Treaty establishes the right of citizens to submit their own proposals to the European Parliament by collecting 1,000,000 signatures!

Let us recur to some interesting and important historical figures. The Parthenon is the greatest monument of the Athenian State and the apex of the Doric order. Its construction began in 448/7 B.C., whereas the opening was held in 438 B.C. at the Panathenaic Games and the sculpture decorations were finished in 433/2 B.C. According to the sources of antiquity, the architects who worked for the construction of the Parthenon were Iktinos, Calicrates and possibly Phidias, who was also responsible for the sculpture decoration. It is one of the Greek temples that is entirely built of marble as well as the only Doric temple with anastatic metopes. Many parts of the sculpture decoration, the architrave and the coffers of the ceiling were drawn with red, blue and gold colour. Penteli marble was used, except from the stylobate, which was built of limestone. The pteron had 8 columns breadthwise and 17 columns lengthwise. The placement of the columns was unusually close, with the analogy between the column's circle and the column distance, being 1:2, 25 (compared to the analogy 1:2, 32 at the temple of Zeus in Olympia and 1:2, 65 at the temple of Aphaia in Aegina) there was also a second row of 6 columns. This row created a delusion of a double-pterion temple. Another extraordinary feature was the existence of frieze, which ran through the cella and probably consists one of the most obvious Ionic influences. The metopes of the east side represent the Fight of the Titans. On the right side, we can see the Amazons fighting, on the south side the Fight of the Centauro-machy and on the north side, scenes from the Trojan War. The frieze represents the Panathenaic procession, the biggest religious celebration of Ancient Athens and includes figures of gods, animals and about 360 human figures. The two frontispieces represent scenes inspired by mythology. Above the central entrance of the temple, on the east side, they represent the birth of Athena and on the west side, the dispute between Athena and Poseidon about the possession of the Athenian land. Although this temple was different from other Doric temples, as far as its decoration length is concerned, the decoration did not affect the unity of the whole temple.

The Parthenon had remained untouched, until the Macedonian times. On the contrary, after the Macedonian times and the the battle in the river Granicos, golden shields -the loot of Alexander's victory- were placed at the Parthenon, as trophies. The first damaging actions took place during the tyrant Lacharis times. Lacharis was appointed tyrant of Athens by Cassandros, according to Pausania's narration. He took the shields from the Parthenon as well as the gold and the jewellery from the golden and ivory statue of Athena. Damages were also caused in the opisthodomos of the temple, when Demetrius the Conqueror used it as his personal bedroom.

During the Roman times, no changes were registered in the Parthenon temple, preserving its physiognomy and its prestige even during the post-Christian centuries. However, at the emperor Justinian's era, the Panathenaic procession did not proceed up to the Parthenon and every kind of worship -public or private- had been lost, according to the Latin Orator Claudius Mamertine (4th century).

During the Byzantine times, although the Parthenon was not destroyed as the edicts of Theodosius 2nd dictated, the temple changed and became the Christian Church of St Sophia. The inauguration of this church was celebrated during the times of the emperor Justinian. In the antetemple, the arch of the sanctuary was added. According to Burnouf, because of these transformations, in 1877, only relics of murals and a few inscriptive engravements on the walls and columns remained.

During the times of Frangokratia (Greek: Φραγκοκρατία, lit. "Francocracy", rule of the Franks), the space around the Parthenon became the dwelling place for the first Frank ruler of Athens, Othonas Delaros, whereas the Acropolis became the head of the Frankish baronage and the centre of the historic life of the city, up to such a point that Athens was at the time known as "Castellym Athenarum". The Parthenon was given to the Roman Church and changed into a Latin temple that was worshiped in the name of the Virgin Mary. On the west side, a bell tower was added, that during the Turkish occupation, it became a minaret. During the Venetian rule, no changes were observed or registered about the monument.

According to the narrations of posterior sight-seers, like the Italian Nikolaos Martonis -who visited the Acropolis in 1395- and Kuriakos Agkonitis, who traveled in Athens in 1436, we have two descriptions of the Christian Parthenon. The first representative of the medieval ideology is wondering how the construction of such a huge building

could have been possible, whereas the second representative of the Italian Renaissance focused his attention on the beauty of the ancient monuments.

During the Turkish occupation, the Acropolis fell into the hands of the Turks in 1458, when Mehmet II the Conqueror visited it. The Holy rock was then known as the “Atina Kalesi”, that meant the fortress of Athens. During the 17th century, the Parthenon was a mosque and had a minaret, which was destroyed in 1687. This mosque did not meet the standards of the Islamic religion and that’s the reason why it never became a Muslim worship temple.

During Fragiskos Morozini’s crusade against Athens in 1687, serious damage was caused in the Parthenon, on the night of September 16th, when a bombshell blew up the powder magazine that the Ali Aga had installed, as the governor of the temple’s fortress. The biggest part of the temple towards the east side collapsed. Since that moment and till the monument it was given to the hands of archaeology, it was highly looted, mostly by Lord Elgin, while serious damage was caused during the Greek Revolution in 1821 and the Acropolis’s invasion by Kioutahi Bey.

The sculptures of the Parthenon, also known as the Elgin Marbles consist a big collection of marble sculpture, which was transported in Britain in 1806 by Thomas Bruce, Count of Elgin, ambassador in the Ottoman Empire from 1799 till 1803. Taking advantage of the Ottoman reign of the Greek territory, Elgin managed to obtain permission (the firman) by the Ottoman Sultan to remove the marbles in order to enumerate and register them in schemes, but later he moved on to their abstraction and their exportation out of the country.

According to the British Commission for the Return of the Marbles, the first permission was officially obtained in May 1801 and it seems that it had been sent directly to Athens by the Sultan’s clerks. The content of the permission is not known but we assume that it allowed to the Elgin’s team access to the Acropolis so that they placed scaffolds and formers. The specific permission though was soon considered inadequate by the team. The Team asked permission for the second time and they would get it. Since they got it, they were allowed to “dig” and remove tures sculp or inscriptions. The second firman was given to them on the 6th July 1801 and allowed Elgin to take rocks with inscriptions and numbers on them. A month later, in August 1801, Elgin asks Hunt Voivode to let him take the metopes of the Parthenon, a request which would even be disapproved by the Greek Vice-president, Ambassador of Britain in Athens. According to the writings of the British intellect Edward Daniel Clarke (1769-1822) in his work “Journeys”, Part II, P. 483, “One of the workers came

to notify Don Batista that the metopes were going to be cut. Then, we saw that extraordinary piece of sculpture being destroyed, huge masses of white penteli marble fell down making a huge noise among the ruins. When Disdar saw this, he couldn't control his feelings anymore. He shed a tear and stated in the most emphatic way: "This is the end!", "Never again", stating firmly that he would never give his consent again to any further dilapidation of this construction.

Always according to the historic evidence, set out by the British Committee, in the spring of 1802, Elgin came to Athens and congratulated his team, personally supervising the removal of pieces from the eastern frontispiece. The sculpture's exportation to London came across several problems. In September, "Mentor", Elgin's ship was sunk close to the island of Kithira, bearing some of the most delightful sculpture of the Parthenon. On the Christmas Eve of the year 1802, Hunt managed to ask captain Clarke (who governed the HMS "Braakel" for help, so that the sculptures would be saved. Lord Elgin left with his family from Constantinople on the 16th January 1803, while he was arrested by the French authorities and was under detention for the next three years. At the same period of time, one of his men, back in Athens, removed one of the Caryatids of the Erechtheion and replaced her with a pylon, so that the construction wouldn't collapse. In 1806, when Elgin was set free from captivity, the second big antiquities collection was still in Athens, supervised by his "loyal" guard Lusieri. In 1809, the new British Ambassador Robert Adair asked for the marbles' exportation, while the Ottomans answered that Lord Elgin was never given permission to remove the marbles from the Parthenon. Elgin's team arrived in Athens on the 20th March. Lusieri didn't lose time and all the marbles were boated on a ship that set sail to London on the 26th March.

The famous collection of these contentious sculptures includes some of the sculptures of the frontispieces and the metopes, representing battles between the Lapiths and the Centaurs as well as some of the frieze of the Parthenon, which decorated the upper part of the cella's walls of the temple lengthwise. As a result, they represent more than the half of the remaining sculpture decoration of the Parthenon that has survived through time: 75 metres out of the initial 160 metres, 15 out of the 92 metopes, 17 partial figures from the frontispieces, as well as more pieces of the architecture. More precisely, from a total of 97 surviving stones of the frontispiece of the Parthenon, 56 are in London and 40 in Athens. From a total of 64 surviving metopes, 48 are in Athens and 15 in London. From a total of 28 surviving figures of the frontispieces, 19 are in London and 9 in Athens. The Parthenon's frieze is considered to represent the Panathenaic Procession. The metopes on the east side represent the Fight of the Titans, on the west side the Fight of the Amazons, on the north side the Trojan War and on the south side the fight of Centaurs and Lapiths. On the east frontispiece, the birth of Athena is represented, whereas on the west frontispiece, the dispute of Athena

and Poseidon over Athena's custody. Elgin's collections even include objects from other constructions of the Acropolis of Athens, such as the Erechtheum -which had been in ruins during the Greek struggle for independence (1821-33)- the Propylaea and the Temple of Athena Niki. Lord Elgin took in fact half of the Parthenon's sculpture, while from the rest of it, plaster impressions were made. The collection was given Lord Elgin's name.

In a few years, Elgin managed to collect 33 shipments of antiquities, taken from the Parthenon, by cutting the frontispieces so that they could be easily carried and by removing sculptures, often carved on the construction itself. Although Elgin destined his collection for his private residence, he finally sold the so-called "Elgin Marbles" to the British Government in 1816. The sculptures were appreciated by the House of Commons Committee, which discussed the matter and regarded the method of their corruption, their value and the importance of this purchase as "public property".

Since Lord Elgin first removed parts of the Parthenon, many people characterized his attitude as an act of vandalism, which would garble the temple forever. Elgin was accused of looting an archaeological site, of corruption and deceit of the Turks in order to take the marbles away. As soon as the Greeks gained their independence in 1832, they started to ask for the return of the marbles, removed from their most important national symbol. After Lord Byron, there were many more firm supporters of the return, who were British or Greek and who appreciated the importance and value of the Parthenon, for the Greek and world culture too. There were serious arguments on whether Lord Elgin had legally obtained these treasures, while university professors were fighting, questioning his right to remove them. These disputes continued with accusations from both sides and were finally led to no conclusions. According to the historic turnout, the British Museum does not seem willing to lose any of its famous exhibits, whereas it officially supports that it doesn't wish to start a talk around the return of many of its treasures. On the other hand, the supporters of the return argue that the marbles' case is unique, since they consist an inextricable piece of a national monument. In its official diplomatic moves, Greece intends to cooperate with Great Britain for the sake of the monument itself and the world heritage. This goal can be achieved through a dipolar policy and educational cooperation. More specifically, the suggestion concerns the Sculpture Exhibition of the monuments at the special hall of the New Acropolis Museum. The rectification of the unity of the sculptures will give us the opportunity to enrich our knowledge on this unique monument, to upgrade our studies and reveal to the next generations the masterpieces of humanity.

And this brings us to today. On an announcement given by the British Museum in April 2007, it is reported that the Museum isn't planning to return the Parthenon Marbles to any Greek museum. A more recent announcement (2009) reported that apropos of the New Acropolis Museum opening, it would return the Elgin Marbles, as long as the Greek government recognized their rights of owners to the British Museum. The Greek Government declined this proposal.

All that has happened over the centuries to the Parthenon. These sculptures undoubtedly belong to the world cultural heritage and shall be displayed in the place they were created. By the establishment of the New Acropolis Museum there are no excuses for not returning them. They belong to the Parthenon and must be returned there. Melina Mercouri (actress and Hellenic Minister of Culture) has stated "... You must understand what the Parthenon Marbles mean to us. They are our pride. They are our sacrifices. They are our noblest symbol of excellence. They are a tribute to the democratic philosophy. They are our aspirations and our name. They are the essence of Greekness...". The vision of Melina, of many other great Greeks and foreign Philhellenes remains alive and will continue to enlighten us until this great injustice from the part of the British is corrected. It is time the slogan "Bring them back" to flesh out. It's up to us...

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