

After 220 Years, the Fate of the Parthenon Marbles Rests in Secret Talks

The British Museum and Greece's prime minister are getting closer to a deal on returning the so-called Elgin Marbles to Athens. But key differences remain.



Visitors at the British Museum last week, looking at sections of the frieze that once decorated the Parthenon temple in Athens. Credit...Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

By Alex Marshall



Alex Marshall, who is based in London, has been reporting on the dispute over the Parthenon sculptures since 2018.

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When Lord Elgin, a British aristocrat, sailed home from Greece in the early 1800s, he also shipped to England some of the greatest treasures of antiquity: a collection that included statues of Greek gods and carved frieze panels depicting battling centaurs that once decorated the Parthenon in Athens.

Torn in some cases from the temple walls, ostensibly with the permission of the Ottomans who then ruled Greece, the so-called Elgin Marbles were later sold to the British government and became some of the most storied artifacts in the collection of the British Museum.

But they also became, almost from the very day they were removed, the subject of perhaps the world's most notorious cultural dispute.

Since the days of Lord Byron, the romantic poet who was an early critic of their removal, the fate of the marbles has been bitterly contested. The British say the marbles were legally acquired and are best shown alongside other artifacts in a universal museum, while the Greeks view them as looted treasures that are a foundation of their national heritage.

The debate has only deepened in recent years as the actions of old empires have come under new scrutiny, and restitution battles have come to challenge the foundations of Western museums. The pressure to return the marbles has grown as museums have given back high-profile items including Benin Bronzes, Italian antiquities and other fragments from the Parthenon that were relinquished just last month by the Vatican.

Now there are hopeful signals that perhaps a resolution between the British Museum and Greece could be in sight as officials on both sides have acknowledged that secret talks have taken place. But even as those disclosures have flowered into optimism that real progress will soon be made, both sides have made it clear that no deal is yet imminent.

Indeed, they remain far apart on some key questions.



Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis of Greece at the Acropolis Museum in Athens. Yannis Kolesidis/EPA, via Shutterstock

The talks have been ongoing in London since November 2021, between Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis of Greece and George Osborne, a former finance minister of Britain who is now the chairman of the British Museum. In the seclusion of plush hotels and at the Greek ambassador's townhouse, the parties have been trying to reach a deal on the marbles' future, according to two people with knowledge of the negotiations who were granted anonymity to discuss confidential talks. One of those people had knowledge of the Greek position; the other knew the British Museum's.

At several of those meetings, Giorgos Gerapetritis, a minister without portfolio in Greece's government, acted as Mitsotakis's representative, according to both people.

Just how well the negotiations have gone has been a matter of much speculation. One article last month in the Greek newspaper Ta Nea, which broke news of the talks, said they were “90 percent” complete, citing “well-placed” Greek sources. Bloomberg reported earlier this month that the parties were “closing in” on a deal, and other optimistic accounts have followed elsewhere. Under the discussed proposal, the Bloomberg article said, some of the monuments would return to Athens temporarily, in exchange for other ancient treasures.

But a deal remains much further away than those reports suggest, according to the two people with knowledge of the negotiations who spoke to The New York Times. And, in fact, in recent days officials from both sides have spoken publicly to pump the brakes on the soaring expectations that any deal was imminent.

For his part, Mitsotakis has asked the British Museum to return all of the frieze in its collection, some 250 feet of carved stone that once wrapped around the Parthenon, the person with knowledge of the Greek position said. Mitsotakis wanted an agreement that those panels would stay in Greece for at least 20 years, the person added. There, they would be reunited with other parts of the frieze already on display in the Acropolis Museum in Athens.

That person said Mitsotakis hoped that, after 20 years, the agreement would be extended so the frieze panels would remain in Athens.

The Greek side hoped to negotiate the return of the remaining sculptures at a later date, the person with knowledge of its position added. In return for the frieze, Greek museums would supply the British Museum with a rotating selection of priceless artifacts, some of which had never left Greece, the person added.



The British Museum has around 250 feet of the Parthenon frieze. A person with knowledge of talks between the museum and Greece's government said Greece wanted it all back for 20 years, at least. Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

The British Museum wants a different deal, according to the person with knowledge of its position. So far, Osborne has suggested returning a smaller portion of the frieze, as well as carvings of gods and centaurs, as a short-term loan, the person said. The museum could offer up to a third of the Parthenon artifacts in its collection, the person added.

Once Greece returned those artifacts to London, more would be sent to Athens to replace them, the person said. Over time, the number of artifacts sent to Greece would increase, to reflect growing trust between the two sides, the person added.

The British Museum's view is that it cannot offer more, even if it wanted to, the person with knowledge of its position said. Under British law, the museum cannot remove items from its collection unless they are "unfit to be retained,"

though it is free to loan objects to other institutions. The museum argues that Lord Elgin (whose name is pronounced with a hard “g” sound, as in “Helga”) acquired the artifacts legally, after administrators of the Ottoman Empire, which governed Athens at the time, gave him a permit. It also insists the sculptures are best presented among the museum’s global collections, so that they tell part of a broader story about human civilization.

If any agreement with the Greek government did not include a provision that the marbles must return to London, it could be challenged in Britain’s courts. But any deal would be written in a way that did not require Greece to give up its claim for ownership of the artifacts, the person with knowledge of the museum’s position said.

The British Museum declined to comment on the negotiations, but a museum spokesman acknowledged by email that they were taking place. “We’re actively seeking a new Parthenon partnership with our friends in Greece, and, as we enter a new year, constructive discussions are ongoing,” the spokesman said.

With an informal offer and a counteroffer on the table, the talks have reached a stage that “had not been seen before,” the person on the Greek side said. Both parties were “negotiating in good faith,” the person added, but they did not expect more progress until after Greece held parliamentary elections later this year.

All the while, pressure is growing on the British Museum. Last year, Italy returned a fragment from the Parthenon that for more than 200 years had been on display at a museum in Sicily. And in December, the Vatican announced it would give three Parthenon fragments to the leader of the Greek Orthodox Church, who is expected to pass them on to the Acropolis Museum.



Acropolis Museum technicians displaying a Parthenon fragment, returned by Italy in 2022, that had been on display at a museum in Palermo, Sicily, for over 200 years. Giorgos Kontarinis/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Other major Western collections, including the Smithsonian Institution and the Humboldt Forum, in Berlin, have recently returned high-profile disputed artworks, and the British Museum looks increasingly out of step. As well as the Parthenon artifacts, it holds an extensive collection of Benin Bronzes, claimed by Nigeria; the Rosetta Stone, which some archaeologists want returned to Egypt; and a statue from Easter Island that the Rapa Nui, the island's Indigenous people, have asked for.

This year, the British Museum is scheduled to announce a major renovation including roof and heating system upgrades that could result in some galleries being shut for long periods. The project is expected to cost 1 billion pounds, around \$1.2 billion, according to a report in The Financial Times.

Leslie Ramos, the founding director of Arteater, an agency that advises museums on fund-raising, said in an interview that potential donors for the renovation “might want to have a specific idea” of what the British Museum is doing about the Parthenon artifacts before deciding to contribute. For the museum, entering negotiations on disputed objects would “be a way of appealing to a new generation of philanthropists,” she added.

Aside from the two camps’ differing offers, there is another major stumbling block: whether British and Greek lawmakers would accept a deal. The British government said last year that it does not plan to change the law and allow a full restitution of the marbles. On Wednesday, Michelle Donelan, Britain’s culture minister, told the BBC that returning the artifacts would open a “complete can of worms” and could lead to demands for other items in the museum.

“Sending them back is a dangerous road to go down,” Donelan said.

It was also unclear whether Greece would accept a “partnership” if that implied that the marbles belong to the British Museum. Sia Anagnostopoulou, a Greek lawmaker from the opposition Syriza party who is the party’s spokeswoman on culture, said in an email that she opposed any deal that did not make it clear that the marbles are Greece’s rightful property, and that a loan would be unacceptable.

“It is a matter of dignity for all Greeks,” she said, “as it would be for the British people, if they were asked to temporarily ‘borrow’ stolen pieces of Stonehenge.”

Legal experts and museum administrators worldwide are watching the situation closely.



George Osborne, the British Museum's chairman since 2021, has been meeting in secret with Greece's prime minister to discuss the marbles. Dave Benett/Getty Images

“If there was some kind of deal, it would be a great symbol for others seeking restitution claims,” said Alexander Herman, the director of the Institute of Art and Law, in London.

Max Hollein, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, said by phone that “the whole question of the Elgin Marbles is such a long and complex story” that any solution “would be a major step for the institutions, and for the cultural dialogue in the world.”

The Met recently reached a deal with Greece so that the New York museum could display a collection of Cycladic antiquities assembled by the philanthropist Leonard N. Stern while acknowledging that, ultimately, the artifacts belong to the Greek state. Under the deal, artifacts will travel between the United States and Greece. Hollein said Greece’s government was open to negotiating innovative solutions to restore ownership of the country’s cultural heritage, while allowing items to be displayed abroad.

At the British Museum last week, the gallery where the marbles are displayed was filled with tourists, many snapping selfies in front of the statues and the frieze.

Dilan Polat, 20, an art student who was sketching a centaur’s muscled torso from one of the panels, said she felt “really lucky to be able to draw actual Greek sculptures.” But, she added, they should return “to their rightful place” in Greece. John Lancaster, 59, a bus driver, said the marbles should return to Greece since they were part of that country’s history. “It’s like the Crown Jewels,” Lancaster added. “If someone took those, you’d want them back, wouldn’t you?”

Last year, a survey by YouGov, a polling agency, said 59 percent of Britons believed the sculptures belonged in Greece.

But public opinion is unlikely to be the deciding factor in the negotiations. Herman, the legal expert, said that every few years “there is what seems to be a glimmer of hope” in the debate over the Parthenon Sculptures — but then the process stalls.

The same thing could happen now, he said. But he added that both Mitsotakis and Osborne were “practically minded” businessmen, used to striking deals. “If there are two people who can sit in a room and work it out,” Herman said, “it’ll probably be people like those two.”

Alex Marshall is a European culture reporter, based in London. [More about Alex Marshall](#)