



Research Report | GA6

Forum: GA6

Issue: Discussing Legal Methods to Redistribute the Displacement of Parthenon Marbles

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Welcome Letter

Often referred to as the Sixth Committee, General Assembly 6 addresses disarmament-related concerns, global issues that jeopardize international peace, and problems with the international security regime. This committee believes that all discussions and solutions fall under the purview of the UN Charter and any other relevant authorities and duties of any other UN body. The major goals of this committee are to uphold international peace and safeguard the security of every country, even though many global events may be relevant to its subject, in particular, rules governing armaments regulation or disarmament; encouragement of cooperative agreements and policies meant to fortify stability via reduced armament levels.

Background

The Parthenon Marbles, also referred to as the Elgin Marbles, constitute a renowned collection of classical Greek sculptures that were originally part of the architectural ornamentation of the Parthenon and other buildings on the Acropolis



of Athens. Crafted under the direction of the sculptor Phidias and his assistants, these marble masterpieces adorned the iconic temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, symbolizing the pinnacle of ancient Greek artistic achievement.

Commissioned during the Golden Age of Athens in the 5th century BCE, the Parthenon Marbles comprised a multitude of intricately carved metopes, friezes, and pedimental sculptures, depicting various mythological narratives, historical events, and religious ceremonies. These sculptures not only showcased the skill and creativity of the ancient Greek craftsmen but also served as a visual testament to the cultural and intellectual flourishing of Athens during this period.

However, the history of the Parthenon Marbles took a contentious turn in the early 19th century when Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin and British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, obtained permission from Ottoman authorities to remove a significant portion of the sculptures from the Parthenon. Motivated by a desire to preserve the marbles from further damage and to enhance his private collection, Lord Elgin oversaw the removal of approximately half of the surviving sculptures between 1801 and 1805.

Following their removal, the Parthenon Marbles were transported to England, where they were eventually sold to the British government due to Thomas Bruce's crushing debt and entrusted to the British Museum in London. Since then, these iconic artifacts have remained a subject of debate and controversy, with Greece consistently advocating for their repatriation and return to their country of origin.

The dispute over the ownership and rightful location of the Parthenon Marbles has raised complex legal, ethical, and cultural questions regarding the preservation, interpretation, and restitution of cultural heritage. Proponents of repatriation argue that the removal of the marbles constituted an act of cultural



appropriation and colonialism, depriving Greece of its cultural patrimony and undermining its national identity. They contend that the marbles belong in their original context, where they can be appreciated as integral components of the Parthenon's architectural ensemble.

Conversely, supporters of retention maintain that the British Museum provides a universal platform for the display and study of world heritage, ensuring global access to the Parthenon Marbles and facilitating cross-cultural dialogue and understanding. They argue that repatriation could set a precedent for the restitution of cultural artifacts, potentially leading to the emptying of museums and undermining the principle of cultural exchange.

Despite decades of diplomatic negotiations, legal challenges, and public campaigns, the question of the Parthenon Marbles remains unresolved, reflecting broader issues of cultural heritage management and restitution in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world. As stakeholders continue to engage in dialogue and exploration of potential solutions, the significance of the Parthenon Marbles transcends their material form, serving as a touchstone for debates surrounding the intersection of art, history, and identity in the modern era.

The Firman

The Firman, also spelled as "Firman" or "Firmane," was the official decree issued by the Ottoman authorities granting permission to Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, to remove the Parthenon Marbles from the Acropolis of Athens. In 1801, Lord Elgin, who served as the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, obtained a series of Firman from the Ottoman government, allowing him to carry out excavation and removal activities in Athens.



The exact contents of the Firman are subject to historical debate, as the original documents have not been definitively located. However, it is generally understood that the Firman provided Lord Elgin with authorization to conduct archaeological investigations and to transport sculptures and artifacts from the Parthenon to England. The circumstances surrounding the issuance of the Firman, as well as the extent of Lord Elgin's authority and the legality of his actions, have been contested by scholars, historians, and cultural heritage advocates.

The Firman has played a central role in discussions regarding the ownership and restitution of the Parthenon Marbles, with proponents of repatriation often questioning the legitimacy of Lord Elgin's acquisition and arguing that the removal of the sculptures was conducted without proper consent or oversight. Conversely, supporters of retention point to the Firman as evidence of the Ottoman government's authorization and argue that Lord Elgin's actions were conducted in accordance with the legal and diplomatic protocols of the time.

Definition of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Restitution	the restoration of something lost or stolen to its proper owner. Calls for the repatriation of the Parthenon Marbles are often framed in terms of restitution to Greece.
Repatriation	the return of someone to their own country. In this context, it refers to the call for the British Museum to return the Parthenon Marbles to Greece.
Cultural Heritage	Cultural heritage is the heritage of tangible and intangible heritage assets of a group or society that is inherited from past generations. The Parthenon Marbles are viewed as a crucial part of Greece's cultural heritage.
Legal Ownership	The legal right to possess and control property. This term is



	central to the debate over the ownership of the Parthenon Marbles, with Greece asserting its claim while the British Museum maintains legal ownership.
Colonialism	The policy or practice of acquiring political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically. Some argue that the removal of the Parthenon Marbles by Lord Elgin constitutes an act of colonialism.

Major Parties Involved

Greek Government:

The Parthenon sculptures belong in Greece and should be returned to Athens, according to the Greek government, which claims that Lord Elgin obtained them illegally. The Greek government made its first official request for their return in 1983, but it was turned down the following year, in 1984.

United Kingdom:

Reasons for keeping the Parthenon Marbles in Britain's possession are central to the country's stance on the subject of their return to Greece. A frequently used argument by British authorities is the claim that British ownership of the marbles was established by the original, lawful sale of the marbles to Lord Elgin. Concerns have also been raised about the Greek government's capacity to maintain a stable environment and ensure the marbles are properly conserved; Greek efforts to allay these worries have been demonstrated by the establishment of the Acropolis Museum in Athens.

The British Museum's position: (Quoted)

“The Museum takes its commitment to be a world museum seriously. The collection is a unique resource to explore the richness, diversity and complexity of all human history, our shared humanity. The strength of the collection is its breadth and depth which allows millions of visitors an understanding of the cultures of the



world and how they interconnect – whether through trade, migration, conquest, conflict, or peaceful exchange.

The Parthenon Sculptures are an integral part of that story and a vital element in this interconnected world collection, particularly in the way in which they convey the influences between Egyptian, Persian, Greek and Roman cultures. We share this collection with the widest possible public, lending objects all over the world and making images and information on over four million objects from the collection available online.

The approach of the Acropolis Museum([Opens in new window](#)) and the British Museum are complementary: the Acropolis Museum provides an in-depth view of the ancient history of its city, the British Museum offers a sense of the wider cultural context and sustained interaction with the neighbouring civilisations of Egypt and the Near East which contributed to the unique achievements of ancient Greece.”

Timeline

Date	Description of Events
490 BC	Athenians begin construction of the Pre-Parthenon to honor Athena after the Battle of Marathon. It remains unfinished due to Persian sack in 480 BC.
447 - 438 BC	Construction of the Parthenon begins and is completed by 438 BC, with sculptural ornamentation finished by 432 BC.
426 BC	Severe earthquake causes significant damage to the Parthenon, shifting parts of its façades.
334 BC	Alexander the Great hangs Persian shields on the east architrave. Later, during the Hellenistic period, Christianity begins to replace pagan rituals in Greece.
4TH-6TH	Parthenon converted into a Christian church, named "Our Lady of Athens," leading to removal of pagan sculptures and alterations to its structure.



1204-1456 AD	Acropolis under Frankish control, Parthenon serves as cathedral. Later becomes Archbishop seat with Papal permission.
1456-1460 AD	Ottomans seize Athens, convert Parthenon into a mosque.
1687 AD	Venetians bombard Ottomans on Acropolis, causing explosion in Parthenon due to stored gunpowder.
1801-1804 AD	Lord Elgin's crews forcibly remove significant portions of Parthenon sculptures and architectural fragments, which are later acquired by the British Museum.
1826-1833 AD	Continuation of historical events with no significant changes.

Possible Solutions

- **Repatriation through Diplomatic Negotiation:** Facilitate discussions between the Greek government and the United kingdom to reach an agreement on the return of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece.
- **International Arbitration:** Seek arbitration from international legal institutions to adjudicate the dispute and determine the rightful ownership of the Parthenon Marbles.
- **Cultural Exchange Programs:** Establish cultural exchange programs between Greece and the UK to foster collaboration and promote mutual understanding, potentially leading to the temporary or permanent loan of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece.

Useful Resources: (from most useful to useful)

“Elgin Marbles – Ancient Art.” n.d. Ancientart.as.ua.edu.

<https://ancientart.as.ua.edu/special-topics/elgin-marbles/>.



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“Legal and Ethical Issues.” n.d. Wwww.parthenon.newmentor.net.

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<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/uk-greece-parthenon-marbles-talks-1234629425/>.

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