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As a Briton, I hang my head in shame. We must return the Parthenon marbles

Now Amal Clooney has reignited the debate over the Parthenon's crowning glory, it's time we rectified a historic wrong. Reunite these ancient sculptures with their home



- [Helena Smith](#)
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The marbles once adorned

the Parthenon in Athens Photograph: Peter Walton/Getty Images

Almost every day I take a walk around the Acropolis. "Around" is the operative word, because the Greeks have gone to great lengths to unite their Athenian antiquities with a pedestrian path.

At the centre of this classical treasure trove stands the craggy outcrop known as the Sacred Rock. As you ascend the walkway, it is what crowns its summit that leaps out at you. For there, amid the pines, is the Parthenon, the greatest temple of all, peerless, incandescent white, the embodiment in marble of the glory that was the Golden Age.

Though hacked and fragmented, a haunting shadow of the masterpiece hewn 2,500 years ago, it takes your breath away. A gift to behold under the Attic skies. But something more: the best riposte to any doubt that the Parthenon – or Elgin – marbles, the artworks that once adorned this magisterial edifice – but which have spent the last 200 years displayed in the badly lit British Museum – should be reunited with the place where they were created.

I will not hide. In the immortal words of Lord Byron: “I am with Greece.” And so naturally enthused that a squabble that should have been resolved long ago, if logic and common decency had prevailed, has re-erupted with such vigour following [Amal Clooney’s visit to Athens last week](#).

That it should take a young Anglo-Lebanese barrister, recently married to a Hollywood star, to reanimate the debate (in a whirl of camera-clicks and flash bulbs), says much about the times we live in. But in stating the obvious – that it is only “just” that the Parthenon sculptures are returned to Greece – the new Mrs Clooney has focused minds.

It is more than three decades since the late Melina Mercouri, actress in spirit, Greek by profession, first raised the issue of repatriating the 88 plundered slabs that, thanks to Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin, ended up in exile at the other end of Europe. The carvings, part of a frieze that in beauty and scale are regarded as the high point of classical art, were ripped from the Parthenon when Greece was without voice, a powerless province of the Ottoman empire, and Elgin was ambassador to the Sublime Porte.



One of the Parthenon

marbles sculptures at the British Museum. Photograph: FACUNDO ARRIZABALAGA/EPA

Were a British national monument to suffer the same fate, I dread to think what the reaction would be.

But again and again, I have been struck by the equanimity displayed by Athens. With the courtesy that one nation knows for another, the Greeks have trodden a path of conciliation over anger, placation over rancour, humour over hostility.

Even now, when the goalposts have been moved again, when a magnificent museum – purpose-built to display the marbles – demolishes any argument left, they advocate a “win-win” situation where Britain does not lose face and, if anything, comes out looking the winner. All the while, they are treated with a dismissiveness that borders on contempt. In the battle to reclaim what is rightfully theirs, the move to explore legal options marks the furthest they have gone yet.

The decision to hire Clooney, the youngest in a group that includes the distinguished QCs Geoffrey Robertson and Norman Palmer, reflects what is increasingly being seen as the exhaustion of channels, both political and diplomatic, to resolve the dispute.

It is easy to see why. Fifteen months ago, Athens requested that the row be mediated through the offices of Unesco, the United Nations cultural arm, after the organisation changed its rules dealing with stolen cultural property. Fifteen months later, it is still awaiting a response.

There is some merit in the argument that as the most significant surviving ancient artworks – and representations of the achievement of classical Athens – this masterwork of narrative in stone is not Greek but universal and, as such, belongs to the world.

But the claim, postulated by the British Museum, that they are better positioned in London to “serve world audiences” is to make a nonsense of a lie. The Greeks first asked for the marbles under King Otto, their first king shortly after the nation won independence in 1830, long before Mercuri put the dispute on the map. To brush off that demand as Greek cultural nationalism is patronising in the extreme.

To harp on about modern Greeks’ tenuous ties with ancient Hellenic culture is to miss the point. To hide behind the law, as London has done, insisting that it is up to the board of trustees at the British Museum to make decisions on its collections – and add that, even if it wanted to, the institution has no legal power to “deaccession” antiquities – smacks of obfuscation.

Greece’s legal case may well be shaky. At the time of the carvings’ removal, the Acropolis was a citadel and Elgin (though this does not justify his mutilation of the monument) would have required a firman, or written decree, to cart them away. To date, it is the one permit that has not been found. But as Heraclitus said: “Everything changes and nothing remains still.” International law moves with the times. It evolves with changing circumstances and in recent years international cultural policies have changed dramatically. We live in a postcolonial age, where attitudes towards disputed items in museum collections have altered significantly and dubious acquisitions policies are increasingly being questioned and returned to countries of origin.

Ownership of objects is no longer important and the Greeks are willing to put that issue aside. In this digital age, this era of interconnectedness and mass travel, what is far more important is context, appreciating artworks in their places of birth.

Every country, after all, has a right to the heritage that is an inherent part of its cultural identity. And Greece, underlining the importance it attaches to the marbles, has offered all manner of treasure in return. This is not about opening the floodgates (that other fear so often voiced by those who claim the antiquities are better off in London). Athens wants nothing else back – including that other pillaged masterpiece, the Bassae frieze, which in high relief depicts the Greeks fighting the Amazons and is also on display at the British Museum, but on account of staff shortages rarely available for viewing.

Indeed, Greece has gone so far as to propose joint curatorship of the marbles through the establishment of a branch of the British Museum, within sight of the Parthenon, on the top floor of the New Acropolis Museum.

As a Briton, I hang my head in shame but take heart in what the poet Titos Patrikios, an old friend, calls Greece’s “unbeatable weapon”; the common sense of ordinary Britons who for almost two decades have overwhelmingly endorsed repatriation in successive opinion polls. It was another poet, Yannis Ritsos, who summed up the marbles’ predicament best. “These stones don’t feel at ease with less sky,” he wrote. They needed the luminosity of Attica to be appreciated most.

More than anything, the argument for the marbles’ return is as much about scholarship as it is about aesthetics or ethics. To go on advocating that Phidias’s masterpieces are better off in London is, in essence, to argue that the finest carvings of classical times are better amputated and broken up.

With some of the antiquities divided between the countries – a huge statue of Poseidon has his upper part in London, his lower part in Athens – that is tantamount to not only denying future generations the simple pleasure of enjoying the marbles in their original context, set against the most perfect temple ever built. It is the equivalent of refusing them the right to view them reunited, as they were meant to be seen.

Greece has gone through its darkest hour in recent years. The reunification of the sculptures would be a huge shot in the arm for a nation that in times of difficulty has always stood by Britain. Rarely do we have such opportunities to right a wrong. That opportunity is here now and in the name of everything it stands for, Great Britain should seize the moment. It would, as Stephen Fry put it, be the classiest of acts.