

Return the Parthenon marbles. The British Museum has too much stuff anyway

By Simon Jenkins, *The Guardian*, November 29th 2023

Polls show over half the nation are happy to see the Parthenon marbles returned and just above 20% want them to stay. Any civilised Briton knows they should be displayed where they belong – in their former home of Athens. But what fun it is to think up smart reasons why this should never happen.

5 Sunak's quest for a daily headline gets more frantic by the day. [...] But as any visitor to Greece knows, what to Britain is a boring scholastic quarrel is to Greeks a burning sense of grievance that will not go away. This is an asymmetrical row.

Of course Britain has legal title to the statues, but laws can be changed. [...] It is true that more people see the marbles in London than they would in Athens, but they do not see them complete. And so what? We are not moving the pyramids to London for a bigger show.

10 The marbles issue is simply about the integrity of one of Europe's greatest artistic compositions. These statues came from the fountainhead of European culture at its most formative moment, in the 5th century BC. That fountainhead was on the Acropolis in Athens, gazing out over the sunny Aegean with marble from the adjacent mountain, not imprisoned in a cold, grey chamber in Bloomsbury.

15 It is true that reproduction can nowadays enable the naked eye and the human brain to appreciate the beauty of the original in a copy. [...] Science could satisfyingly replicate the Parthenon marbles in both Athens and London. But to the Greeks – far more than any Britons – this is indeed about authenticity. The Parthenon is their ancestral temple and the marbles their crown jewels. They badly want them back. And surely a cultured country such as Britain should have the dignity to oblige. It has the power to restore integrity to this stupendous composition in the land of its creation. [...]

20 Bringing empire into these arguments is rarely helpful. But a post-imperial arrogance has crept into the marbles debate. Britain's government is telling the rest of the world: you may have got your independence back, but you are not getting your stuff. [...] Britain may not have its empire but it has the echo of one in the inviolability and "global context" of its British Museum. So tell the Greeks they should be proud to see their relics sit alongside the finest of Africa and Asia. They should thank British
25 taxpayers for being able to see them for free.

The great collections of antiquity are more or less confined to a few grand museums in Europe and America, products of national aggrandisement in the 19th century. [...] None of these millions of objects was created to be locked away in perpetuity in a London basement. Most were made in far-off countries whose citizens might be proud to display them in public. There is nothing sacred about a museum. It is
30 an unnatural place to leave thousands of objects frozen in time and place, vulnerable to theft and decay.

Museum walls are now crumbling ideologically if not physically. France has a major programme of repatriation of imperial objects, whether looted or not. So does Germany. Despite concerns over security, African bronzes are returning to Africa, ceramics to south-east Asia, tribal treasures to Polynesia. This does not mean the death of the Louvre.

35 The Victoria & Albert's museum director, Tristram Hunt, this week floated a reform of the 1983 National Heritage Act that at present curbs certain museums from "de-acquisitioning". He wants them to grow up and take charge of their own business. The truth is that most museums have too much stuff, far too much. They should distribute it to the rest of the world. Returning the Parthenon marbles might indeed be a precedent, and an excellent one.