

After years of controversy, could a compromise be coming on the Parthenon marbles?

George Osborne, chair of the British Museum, and Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the Greek PM, seem to be talking a similar language about a deal for the sculptures

When the chair of the British Museum, George Osborne, hosted its annual dinner for trustees this month, the choice of venue was as notable as anything he had to say. Guests were seated (...) “for the first time in as long as anyone can remember”, noted Osborne – the Duveen gallery, home of the Parthenon marbles.

5 It was a conscious choice, Osborne told guests, precisely because of the sculptures’ controversial status. “We should not shy from that controversy. (...)

“There is a big conversation happening about this museum, and other great museums like it – it’s just not taking place just in this building. We want that to change.”

10 If Osborne welcomes controversy, he got his wish on Monday, when Rishi Sunak cancelled a meeting with Greece’s prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, apparently as a result of remarks the Greek leader made to the BBC’s Laura Kuenssberg when asked about the sculptures.

15 “It’s as if I told you that you cut the Mona Lisa in half, you would have half of it at the Louvre and half at the British Museum, do you think your viewers would appreciate the beauty of the painting?” Mitsotakis said. “This is essentially what happened with the Parthenon sculptures.” (...)

Greece has been asking for the sculptures back since the 1830s, after all, not long after they were stripped from the Acropolis in 1801-12 by Lord Elgin, supposedly with the permission of the governing Ottoman authorities. (...)

20 What is new, though, is the hint in recent years of a possible pragmatic compromise. Osborne has been energetic in trying to negotiate what he has repeatedly referred to as a “partnership” with the Greek authorities that could see the sculptures returned, potentially on loan.

25 He repeated those calls in his trustees’ speech, calling for an arrangement allowing the sculptures to be seen in Athens and London, but which “requires no one to relinquish their claims, asks for no changes to laws which are not ours to write, but which finds a practical, pragmatic and rational way forward”.

30 In light of that, it was instructive to listen carefully to what the Greek PM said in his BBC interview. (...) “This is not in my mind an ownership question, this is a reunification argument – where can you best appreciate what is essentially one monument?” The Greeks, he said, wanted a “a partnership between Greece and the British Museum”. The two sides may not yet have found a way forward, but they do seem to be talking a similar language. (...)

35 Public opinion has moved swiftly on this issue, and almost two-thirds of Britons would support sending the sculptures to Greece, according to a poll in July. The Times has argued in a leader that they belong in Athens.

Last week, the British Museum announced that the Meidias Hydria vase, a spectacular Greek masterpiece dating from 420BC that it calls “one of the most influential ancient Greek pots of all times”, is to be loaned for the first time in 250 years. Its destination? The Acropolis Museum.

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Esther Adley, *The Guardian*, Tue 28 November 2023.