

Are the Parthenon Sculptures finally returning to Greece?

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After conservative UK leaders refused to send Parthenon fragments home to Greece, a new government has ushered 'constructive' negotiations over a return.

For decades, Greek authorities have been arguing for the permanent return of the so-called Parthenon Sculptures, also known as the Elgin Marbles. These include about half of the surviving fragments of a 160-meter-long (520-foot) frieze from the Parthenon Temple, which dates back around 2,500 years. They currently sit in the collection of the British Museum in London. Greece wants them returned to Athens after they were taken from the Acropolis around 200 years ago. Former UK prime ministers Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak rejected any such move. "The UK has cared for the Elgin marbles for generations," Sunak said in 2023. "Our galleries and museums are funded by taxpayers because they are a huge asset to this country."

But in December 2024, UK prime minister Keir Starmer hosted Greek president Kyriakos Mitsotakis in London just as the British Museum announced it had been holding "constructive" negotiations with Athens over the return of marbles. British Museum chairman George Osborne said that "at some point, some of the sculptures" could be sent to Greece in return for "treasures" from Athens. [...]

Ongoing reluctance to return marbles

Presently, legal barriers make it difficult for the marbles to be returned to Athens. The British Museum Act of 1963 prevents the British Museum from permanently removing objects from its collections, with only a few exceptions.

Meanwhile, Tiffany Jenkins, the author of "Keeping Their Marbles: How the Treasures of the Past Ended up in Museums and Why They Should Keep Them" (2016), a book that argues the Parthenon Sculptures should remain in the UK, has recently been appointed to the board of trustees of The British Museum.

The British Museum has long argued that the marbles were acquired legally and should remain in the UK. Claims to the Parthenon Sculptures began when they were taken from Greece under order by Lord Elgin, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople — which controlled Athens until 1832. Elgin's staff began removing the antiquities from the Acropolis in 1801 and later sold them to the British government, along with hundreds of other antique items taken from Athens. [...]

Professor Nikolaos Stampolidis, director-general of the Acropolis Museum, spoke at a conference in Switzerland in March about the unifying power of restitution. "Today, the democracies of the entire free world should support the return and reunification of the Parthenon sculptures to Athens, the mother of Western civilization, the cradle of all democracies, so that their significance may once again be celebrated, united," he said. "Greece is not asking this for itself alone. It is asking it for all of humanity, as an example of reunification."