

Are the Parthenon Sculptures finally returning to Greece?

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SUMMARY

Introduction:

Opening statement: Recently, the British Museum have been at the **center of many controversies regarding the restitution of cultural artifacts** to their countries of origin. For example, **Nigeria** has been claiming the return of the **Benin Bronzes looted in the 19th century** by the British and currently held in the cultural institution. The article under study presents **another example of disputed objects**: the Parthenon Marbles crystallizing tensions between the UK and Greece.

Presentation of the document: in this feature article written for *DW* on March 24th 2025, Sarah Hucal depicts the **recent progress in negotiations between the UK and Greece** concerning the return of the Elgin Marbles to Athens.

Key question for the summary: How has the election of a Labour government in the UK improved the odds of a restitution of the Elgin Marbles to Greece?

Summary:

I. The Parthenon Marbles, a Greek treasure taken by the British.

The Parthenon Marbles held in the British Museum are **half of the only remnants of a particular piece of the monument's façade**, and they were **detached** from it two centuries ago by **Lord Elgin**.

Indeed, Lord Elgin was **ambassador for the UK** in a Greece **occupied by the Ottoman Empire** at the time. The removal of the Marbles therefore occurred under **the colonial legal framework**, and the artifacts were then acquired by the UK's government.

To this day, **opposite approaches** to restitution have been displayed from the Conservatives and the Labour governments: the **Tories** were **against any restitution**, while the **left** has been more **open** during the talks.

II. A restitution stalled by legal challenges and conservative refusals.

In fact, the **former conservative government** lead by **Rishi Sunak** refused any form of restitution in 2023, arguing that the Elgin Marbles are **treasures that belong to the UK** which has tended to them for decades, with British money.

Moreover, the issue of restitution by the British Museum faces some **legal challenges**, especially a law passed in 1963, the *British Museum Act*, that **explicitly forbids the museum from giving back objects** from its collections.

At the same time, people who reject the idea of restitution like Tiffany Jenkins, are being **nominated at the governance** of the British Museum.

One of the main arguments used by the Museum is the **legality of the move by Lord Elgin at the time**, which would **legitimize** the fact of keeping the pieces today.

III. A new approach to restitution by the Labour government timidly supported by the British Museum.

However, a **slight reversal** occurred in December 2024, when the new government adopted a **new attitude in negotiations** for restitution with Greece. The British Museum's administrator George Osborne declared a **form of exchange** between the Marbles and other artifacts from Greece was being discussed at that point.

Additionally, **more and more voices**, such as the one of director-general of the Acropolis Museum, Professor Nikolaos Stampolidis, are rising **to defend the restitution of colonial artifacts**. In March, he called for a restitution in the name of **bringing together the democracies** of the world. He believes that only by returning the Marbles will the world be able to recognize their **true historical meaning**, as part of a fundamental period of the history of the Western world.