

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.

COMMENTARY

Transition: Choose *any aspect of the text that will bring you to the larger issue of the difficulties for former colonial empires to face their own history*: for example, the Parthenon Marbles are not the only disputed artifacts in the British Museum. You can even use your knowledge about **the British Museum itself, and its links to colonization and slavery**: indeed, Sir Hans Sloane, who founded the British Museum, made his fortune through the slave trade in Jamaica.

Key question for the commentary: How has the issue of restitution of colonial artifacts become the epitome of the difficulties former colonial empires like the UK have in **confronting their past**?

I. The restitution of cultural artifacts to former colonies: a debate that remains heated in Great Britain.

- The Parthenon / Elgin Marbles are an example among many others:
- **Compare with other examples of colonial artifacts held in the British Museum and disputed**: many examples available, some explained in the Prezi presentation, don't hesitate to choose one and develop it.
 - The Benin Bronzes: looted by the British army during the colonization of the Benin Kingdom (now Nigeria) in the 19th century: the Benin Bronzes are bronze plaques telling the history of the kingdom. Their looting represents a **significant cultural loss for the country**: indeed, while the plaques were

scattered all around the world while **they should have stayed together** to keep their meaning, the order in which they should be displayed was also lost. Since the mid-20th century, Nigeria has claimed their restitution. Some cultural institutions have already accepted to do it (for example Germany gave back 20 of them in 2022), while the British Museum has refused. They are still displayed there.

- Moreover, society and politicians remain strongly divided on the question, with arguments that appear irreconcilable:
- Negotiations and arguments given for and against restitution of colonial artifacts: *Don't hesitate to develop those arguments (look in the Prezi) and to **give your opinion on the matter**: do you think cultural artifacts should be given back or kept in the museums that acquired them?*
 - Arguments in favor of restitution:
 - The objects **belong to a place**, are **meaningful to its history**, and should be directly accessible to the citizens of a country who need to reconnect with their past.
 - The objects were often **acquired in dubious circumstances**, during a time of occupation or colonization. The alleged “legality” of the process at the time does **not legitimize keeping the objects today**, as colonization isn't an appropriate legal framework anymore.
 - The objects have been **taken out of their proper context**, and their display in faraway museums destroys at least part of their significance. They should be given back so that they finally recover their proper place, and serve their proper purpose.
 - Giving back colonial artifacts would be **a very meaningful gesture of good faith** on the part of the former colonial powers, showing that they acknowledge the errors committed during colonization, and are trying to make amends for them.
 - ...
 - Arguments against restitution:
 - **The colonial artifacts were acquired legally at the time**, and even though laws and processes have changed since, we cannot judge the past with the framework of the present.
 - The objects acquired are **better cared for** in institutions that exist with the sole purpose of tending to them, while some former colonies do not possess such institutions, or in not enough numbers. The objects given back would therefore **risk being damaged over time**, impairing their conservation.
 - Great cultural institutions such as the British Museum or the Louvre in Paris are **universal repositories of knowledge**, which means they display art and artifacts coming from all over the world and all history, which allows to contemplate the history of the world in one place: those **places are necessary to have a comprehensive vision of our**

history, and they are accessible to all (for example, it is free to visit the British Museum).

▪ ...

II. **The British Museum: a more restrictive approach contrasting with a trend moving towards restitution.**

- Indeed, when **comparing** the British (and the British Museum in particular)'s approach, there seems to be a contrast with how the issue is managed elsewhere. -
 - *Take a look at the rest of Europe, France and Germany in particular:* the approach seems to be **more proactive**, with museums and even governments **committing to work with former colonies** (especially in Africa) on restitution of their heritage: a “Dakar declaration” was for example signed in 2024 by 50 museum directors making such commitments. The French president Macron also made official statements making such promises (in Burkina Faso for example).
 - But those processes **take long to actually yield results**, and so far few artifacts have actually been given back.
- Additionally, **the British Museum faces a legal challenge:**
 - The British Museum Act renders the issue quite specific to this museum itself, as other British institutions aren't held by law, and have made other decisions concerning restitutions. However, the issue has also been **weaponized politically**, in a larger debate about how former colonial powers should view and work on acts committed during colonial times.

III. **A necessity to review the narrative of the British colonial history?**

- Actually, this question of legality pertaining to the British Museum brings forward the **larger one of the colonial legal framework**, that at some point included **slavery**: today the issue of reparations goes further than the sole restitution of cultural artifacts.
 - Example of the **celebration of public figures linked to the slave trade**: the statue of Edward Colston toppled down in Bristol in 2020 sparked a debate about how the colonial history of the UK is displayed in the public space: should we celebrate people who participated in such an activity, even if it was legal at the time?
 - An issue that impacts **the current relationship between the UK and its former colonies**, especially when the apologies and acknowledgments of

horrors of the past have only been lukewarm so far: *You can find examples and arguments in the Prezi here:*

- A **wave of Republicanism** in some former colonies (especially in the Caribbeans, particularly concerned with the history of slavery): example of Barbados that became a Republic in 2021.
- **Protests and hostile welcomes of members of the Royal Family**, current representatives of an institution that promoted the slave trade at the time.
- ...

Conclusion: *Should former colonial powers be more proactive in their approach to reparations of acts committed during colonial times? Should the narrative be changed?*

*Don't hesitate here **to give your opinion** on the matter.*