https://doi.org/10.29013/EJHSS-22-6-33-43

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CONTENTIOUS ARTIFACTS: THE HISTORY AND LEGALITY OF THE ELGIN MARBLES

Abstract. In the early nineteenth century, Lord Elgin of Britain removed a number of pieces from the monumental complex of the Parthenon in Athens. Since that time, these pieces of the famous temple of Athena have not been returned to Greece but instead remain in a museum in London. Over the course of the past two hundred years, the artifacts have come to be known as the Elgin Marbles and due to questions surrounding their provenance, they form one of the most controversial subjects in the study of the classical world. The present paper reviews the historical background and circumstances surrounding their removal by Lord Elgin during the Ottoman period. Emphasis is given to the role that the Ottoman firman has played in the legal and ethical debates over whether the artifacts should be returned to their original setting in Athens. Rather than arguing for a specific conclusion over their provenance, the following presents both sides of the conflict in order to allow the reader to appreciate the tension between the question of cultural heritage and international law.

Keywords: Parthenon Marbles, Lord Elgin, Firman, Cultural Heritage, Legality.

"… the Parthenon Sculptures raise some of the biggest questions of cultural property, ownership and where works of art 'belong'" [15].
– Dr. Mary Beard

Introduction

Between 1801 and 1805, pieces of the Parthenon frieze, metopes, and pedimental figures, located around 34 to 45 feet high on the most lavishly decorated Greek temple on the Acropolis in Athens, were removed by the agents of Thomas Bruce, the seventh Earl of Elgin, also known as Lord Elgin (Neils [18]; St. Clair 1998; Hamilakis [10]; Jenkins 2016) [29; 30; 31]. By claiming that the Ottoman Sultan who controlled Athens had issued him a *firman*, Lord Elgin arranged for the pieces to be transported from Athens all the way to Britain. While Lord Elgin had hoped for the marbles to decorate his Broomhall House in Scotland, a pricey divorce forced him to place the marbles in the hands of the British Government for a fee less than half of his expenditure ("The Parthenon Sculptures") [24]. The marbles came to be known as the "Elgin Marbles" after Lord Elgin removed them from the Acropolis. They are now located in the Duveen Gallery of the British Museum, where they showcase some of the most important accounts of Athenian history and tales of Greek mythology.

The legacy of this event can still be felt two hundred years later. As recently as 2014, the *BBC News* commented on the arrival of the Elgin Marbles in London, stating that it "transformed Europe's understanding of ancient Greek Art" ("How Did the Elgin Marbles Get There?") [13]. While the BBC's commentary may be accurate, it is also the case that the marbles continue to form one of the most heated debates in international diplomacy and cultural affairs in the modern world ("What is the Controversy Surrounding the Elgin Marbles?") [26].

One of the most pressing controversies about the Elgin Marbles revolves around whether the artifacts

should be returned to Greece. Formal requests for a permanent restoration of the Elgin Marbles were made by the Greek Government in 1983, followed by presentation of historical data from the Ottoman Era revealing that the current possession of the marbles under the British Museum is illegal (2009) [9]. Meanwhile, Lord Elgin's family and close associates insist that the Elgin Marbles should stay in the British Museum "as one of its highlights." ("As Europe Returns Artifacts, Britain stays Silent") [16]. With the construction of a new museum at the Acropolis in Athens, 36 panels of the 94 existing pieces of the frieze and 39 of the original 92 metopes are now displayed for the public (Beresford [32]). Plaster casts of the marbles housed in the British Museum are displayed together with the original pieces that were left behind by Lord Elgin presenting a contrast through the difference between the white plaster color and the "ancient honey-colored stone" [25]. ("What are the Parthenon Marbles?") The vacant spaces in the Acropolis museum linger and pose an important question for visitors: should the marbles be returned to the Acropolis?

While the Greeks' emotional plea for the Parthenon marbles appeared convincing and coherent due to the importance of the artifacts to Greek cultural heritage, the British appeals present more solid legal arguments along with contentions about the ripple effects that the potential repatriation of the marbles could bring. Moreover, the inability of both sides to develop a clear legal strategy due to the vanished *firman* continues to impede the debate from reaching a resolution. As a result, the following paper evaluates the historical background and original setting of the marbles, analyzes the role that the Ottoman *firman* has played in the debate, and presents the arguments that both sides have made in the past few decades. Rather than offering a position in the debate, what follows stresses the importance of looking at both the cultural heritage of the artifacts as well as the problematic legal issues that surround any attempt to understand the relationship between artifacts and nationalism.

The Parthenon

While the Elgin marbles are now allocated in different places in the world, they were originally constructed to adorn the most celebrated temple in Greece – the temple of Athena Parthenos, also known as the Parthenon ("The Parthenon Sculptures: The British Museum") [23]. Though it was not the first attempt to build a temple in tribute to Athena-the goddess of wisdom, war, literature, and arts– the Parthenon was certainly the largest and the most ornate of such buildings up to the Classical Period (Pollitt [33]). With plans drawn by the celebrated architects Iktinos and Kallikrates, the Parthenon was known for its refinements. The straight lines of the structures displayed relatively imperceptible arcs, and the exquisite decorations inside the temple, along with the harmonious proportions, established the Parthenon as an archeological paragon ("The Parthenon") [24]. According to the architectural historian Arnold Lawrence, the Parthenon "came as near perfection as is humanly possible, both in design and in meticulous execution" (Lawrence & Tomlinson [14]).

One of the main arguments that the Greek government has made concerning the return of the marbles has to do with their relationship to the Parthenon and Acropolis. The marbles were originally constructed under the guidance of Pericles between 477/6 and 433/2 B. C. Pericles sought to replace the earlier temple known as the Older Parthenon, which had been destroyed by the Achaemenids in 480–479 B.C. during the second Persian invasion. The new temple and its symbolic location atop the rebuilt Acropolis would be a sign to the rest of the Greek world of Athens' renewed might.

While the temple itself was apparently completed in the year of 438/7 B.C., the rest of the years spent on construction were devoted to decorative works and sculpture. An estimate of 13.400 stones were used in the construction of the temple, roughly costing 470 silver talents (around $7 million U.S. dollars) ("Parthenon") [22]. Even though the temple itself appears to be perfectly symmetrical and straight, it is "subtly curved"

to make the Parthenon appear "more active" ("How the Ancient Greeks Designed the Parthenon to Impress– And Last") [22]. In fact, with 46 outer columns and 19 inner columns standing on a 23.000-square-foot base, the Parthenon contains no right angles and no straight lines. This feat of Greek architecture was a center for religious life and activities. A shrine within the Parthenon housed an incredible statue of Athena, which was covered in ivory and gold and stood 39 feet high [22]. Despite undergoing damages, disasters and being transformed into different centers for religious worship during the centuries that followed, the Parthenon still stands as a persistent symbol of Athens' dominance and contributions to the Western world.

The Metopes

The Parthenon featured a splendid display of sculptural decorations, the finest among Greek temples at the time ("The Parthenon") [23]. This colossal sculptural production included ninety-two polychromatic carvings presented on the Doric frieze called metopes. These metopes, with a height of around 5 feet, were rectangular slabs carved and situated into the high reliefs on all four margins of the temple (Schwab) [38]. These metopes were placed between the "three-channeled triglyph blocks", adorning the exterior walls of the Parthenon ("Parthenon) [22]. Fourteen metopes were located both on the west and east facades, while the thirty-two other metopes were each placed on the north and south flanks. The metopes on the main entrance or east side of the Parthenon depicted Gigantomachy, the Olympian gods battling against the earthborn giants for sovereignty of Mount Olympos. Moving towards the south, a mythical fight erupts amongst the Lapiths and the centaurs during a wedding feast in chronological order, also known as Centauromachy. Continuing to the west, Amazons on horsebacks and on foot were portrayed fighting against the Greek soldiers. Lastly, the north metopes showed the fourth mythical battle, illustrating the Sack of Troy.

With their divine and human figures and focus on war, the metopes likely contain layers of psychological and political meaning (Schwab, "Celebrations of Victory,") [38, 167]. For example, the centaurs on the south wing embodied a continuous battle where the civilized humans were frequently threatened by the undisciplined natural behaviors of animals (Schwab, "Celebrations of Victory,") [38, 168]. Lapiths, who were fully human, eventually won the battle over the undisciplined behaviors of the centaurs. This rivalry has been interpreted as a metaphor for the conflicts between the Greeks and the barbarians. Another interpretation suggests that this is an internal conflict in which "the human is relentlessly confronted" by these wild, animal-like behaviors shown by the centaurs (Schwab, "Celebrations of Victory,") [38, 167]. These interpretations align with civic values promoted by Athena and Athenians.

The Frieze

The Ionic frieze was another major decoration that made the Parthenon, a Doric building, culturally significant for Greeks. This wide and decorated band made up of 114 blocks was 160 meters (524 feet) in length, 1 meter high and ran along the entire inner chamber, also known as the cella, of the Parthenon (Neils [34]). Through bas-relief techniques, the figures on the frieze were sculpted to protrude slightly from the background. Scholars have generally believed that the frieze depicted a "religious procession" mainly because the standard components of a Panathenaic procession are included (Boardman [35]). Separate groups of figures formed two parallel processions in sequence that went around the cella beginning at the southwest corner and ending at the eastern corner (Neils [24]). A row of "eleven swiftly moving chariots" were presented on the north frieze, which filled a large expanse and moved the viewers towards the the all-important east side.

As the temple's main entrance, the longest block, measuring 4.43 meters (normal block length: 1.22 meters), was centered at the east side of the doorway. Five divinities and five mortals, including a priest holding a cloth with the help of a young assistant, were carved on this block. The central position of

this selected group represented the high point of this religious ceremony, which happened every four years and featured the adornment of the statue of Athena Polis with a peplos. This fascinating accomplishment indeed took up a large portion of the sculptor team's time. A rough calculation showed that it would take a sculptor around a year to carve 3.5 meters [24].

While sculptures on the Greek temples normally depicted episodes of Greek myths, the frieze again broke the tradition by showing religious processions. The people presented at the ceremony were not just everyday people. Instead, they represented the citizens of a utopia because the Athenians of the Pericles' time wanted to be evoked at their best by the generations that followed (An Introduction to the Parthenon and its Sculptures) [1].

The Pediments

The Parthenon pediments were the "two sculpted, triangular-shaped gables" on each end of the temple, with a size of around 100 feet wide at the baseline and 11 feet high at its peak (The Parthenon) [22]. The two sets of statues surpassed those of their predecessor, the temple of Zeus located in Olympia, in both scale and quality of completion (Palagia & Neils [36]). The Parthenon pediments were in fact inspired by the Olympia pediments in ways such as compositions and techniques. The West pediments were believed to echo the East pediments of Olympia as they borrowed figures such as the river gods and personifications that encompassed the actions of Olympia. While the Parthenon was sacred to Athena, in the center of the pediments stood male figures, Zeus on the east side and Poseidon on the west [36, 233]. The sculptures on the East pediment, above the entrance of the Parthenon, depicted the birth of Athena from the head of her father, Zeus. Athena's birthday was celebrated along with Panathenania in midsummer, which became the subject of the Parthenon frieze [36, 234]. On the other hand, the West pediment on the rear illustrated Athena and Poseidon's conflict as Poseidon challenged Athena for an ancient region of Greece named Attica ("The Parthenon") [22]. The figures in the West were the earliest visual evidence of the disputes between the gods over the land of Attica. In sum, the two sets of fifty pediment statues designed to fill in the enormous triangular space at the highest point of the temple contributed to the ideal beauty of the perfect Classical Greek temple.

The *Firman*

The Background

Lord Elgin's removal of the Parthenon marbles was accompanied by one of the earliest and most controversial documents known as a *firman*. This specific *firman* is an "Italian translation of the letter from Sejid Abdullah, Vali of Anadolu", to "the Justice (Cadi) and also to the Voivode of Athens" (Williams [27]). While no original Turkish text was discovered during the search in Istanbul, an Italian translation of the firman was kept and examined. The use of this document dates back to 1801 when the Ottoman Empire occupied Athens and was ruled by Sultan Selim III (1789–1807) [27].

As the "Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of his Britannic Majesty to the Sublime Porte at Constantinople", Lord Elgin intended to contribute to the development of Fine Arts in Great Britain [27]. After discussing his plans with Thomas Harrison, an architect that he had selected in 1796 to reconstruct his country seat at the Broomhall in Scotland, Lord Elgin adopted the mission to make Greek architecture and cultures more well known. Models of the objects could be brought to Britain, instead of just possessing the detailed sketches and drawings of the architecture [27, 13]. Immediately after, he proposed to the Foreign Secretary to assemble a team of skilled architects, artists, and mold makers at government expenditure. His attempt was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, Lord Elgin went forward to Palermo and presented his ideas to Sir William Hamilton, who recommended the outstanding Italian artist, Giovanni Battista Lusieri, to come to an arrangement with Lord Elgin.

On 22 July 1800, the team of remarkable artists arrived in Athens and busied themselves measuring

all the monuments on the Acropolis. A *firman* was required if the team attempted to draw and mold the reliefs, and Lord Elgin had sent one directly to Logotheti. Yet the French naval build-up in Toulon halted the work on the Acropolis due to the orders of securing all the fortresses throughout Greece in "the face of a possible attack" [27, 14]. In order for the project to continue on the Acropolis, Lusieri and Logotheti urged Lord Elgin for the need of a proper *firman.* On 12 June, Lord Elgin sent out an initial document to the Porte that proposed his wishes. At the same time, Lord Elgin negotiated with the Porte for pieces of the porphyry for himself at the Broomhall, and turned to Mr. Hunt in request for the guidelines of acquiring a new firman. Mr. Hunt suggested that the new firman should be "procured from the Porte, addressed to the Vaivode and Cadi of Athens, as well as to the Disdar or Governor of the Citadel; stating that the Artists are in the Service, and under the immediate protection of the British Ambassador Extraordinary" [27, 16]. The copy of this granted firman, however, is not extant and all attempts to understand what the *firman* said must resort to investigating the Italian translation.

The Text and Translation of the Firman

While the original firman was an Ottoman document written in Turkish, the only current record of the archive remains an Italian-translated version. This Italian version was under the possession of Lord Elgin's chaplain, Revd Philip Hunt. The Italian translation of the firman was inscribed on paper, along with a watermark of "three simple trefoils with curled bases", enclosed around the letter "F" on the left leaf, and "VG" on the right [27]. "VG" identified Valentino Galvani as the papermaker, and the translation itself was made by Antonio Dané. During Hunt's visit to Athens, he assisted in completing an English translation of the Italian version of the *firman* in order to publish it in the Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee of 1816. Later on, the Italian translation was passed by descent to Mr. Hunt's great-grandniece, who then gave all the remaining "Hunt papers" that were under her possession to Mr. William St. Clair during 1962 [27]. St. Clair then offered the large collection of the documents, including the Italian translation of the firman, to the British museum for them to secure under their property. A total of three English translations of the firman have been published. The following section will examine the so-called third English version of the text.

Sejid Abdullah began the letter by addressing the European Court's desires and excitement in seeing the ancient buildings and the images of the City of Athens. He then mentioned the scaffoldings and molds in lime pastes that the five English painters Lord Elgin commissioned had set up on the Acropolis. Considering the abiding friendship and alliance between the Sublime, Ottoman Court, and England, Sejid Abdullah requested that the English artists be treated with courtesy and met with no opposition while walking, viewing, scaffolding and excavating according to their needs.

Throughout the letter, Abdullah emphasized repeatedly that the artists may enter and excavate the ancient ruins on their own will and that "no opposition" should be taken against them. Significantly, Abdullah's order stressed that this "no opposition" pertained to the removal of the marbles. For instance, he orders,

"And should they wish to take away any pieces of stone with old inscriptions, and figures, that no opposition be made" [27, 7].

As we see in this quote, it is apparent that Abdullah did provide Lord Elgin and his artists the permission to remove the marbles and that the act of unearthing objects from the Parthenon was entirely legal under Ottoman jurisdiction.

Toward the end of the letter, Abdullah repeats the importance of leaving the artists alone and also allowing them to remove pieces of stone should they wish. For example, in this part of the letter he remarks:

- "No one meddle with their scaffolding and implements, nor hinder them from taking

away any pieces of stone with inscriptions, and figures, and in the aforesaid manner you must conduct and comport yourselves" [27].

Not only did he reaffirm the importance of keeping the artists to themselves while they work on the Acropolis, but Abdullah also urged the people guarding the Acropolis to treat them with absolute respect with their work and follow exactly what the letter asked them to do.

Removal of the Marbles

According to Williams, when Lusieri and Hunt received permission in the *firman*, they assembled a team of skilled workers and began operations [27, 20]. They started off by gathering the sculptures and inscriptions that lay around the Acropolis. Lusieri's team took down a section of the cornice from the Erechtheum in addition to working on the West ends of the Parthenon. This removal was seen as the first officially accredited action on a piece of antiquity from the Acropolis. Hunt's attempt could be understood as him testing Voivode's "interpretation of the firman", or how Disdar would have stuck to Voivode's understanding of the *firman* that was accepted during the meeting on 23 July [27, 20]. It was not until the 31st of July when Lord Elgin's men climbed on to the Parthenon in order to remove sculptures from the temple. They started off with the "series of metopes at the eastern end of the southern flank" due to its well preserved qualities. The first metopes to be removed was South Metope 27, followed by Metope 26 [27, 21].

The removal of the Parthenon marbles ended by early 1804 and the operations carried out under the firman of 1801 helped Lord Elgin secure approximately half of the "preserved sculptures from the Parthenon" [27]. When the marbles arrived in England, Lord Elgin stored them with him until he succeeded in persuading the British Museum to purchase the marbles in 1816 "for the price of £35.000" (Banteka [2]). From this point on, the marbles have been on display in a special room designed specifically to host these antiquities [2].

The Elgin Marbles after Greek Independence

The Ottoman Turks "conquered Greece in 1453" and controlled Greece as an "occupying power" [2]. A few years after Lord Elgin's removal of the Parthenon marbles, the Greek War of Independence allowed Greece to become an independent state in 1832. This celebrated revolution ultimately led to the formation of modern Greece.

Since the achievement of independence, the Greek authorities have filed numerous requests for the restoration of the Parthenon marbles (Banteka [2]). Yet, in 1984, the British government "officially declined this request" and has maintained a consistent position in the ongoing debate, declining all consecutive requests for the full return of the marbles.

There are two core issues in the legal debate over the Parthenon Marbles. The first is focused on the "authority of those who gave" Lord Elgin the permission to remove the marbles. If the power that granted the removal was doubted, it could completely overturn the debate as one side has the ability to accuse and question the legality of the removal as a whole. The second is the range and depth of this permission [2]. This narrows down the amount of pieces that was considered legal, therefore maneuvering the arguments from the two positions of the debate. Both sides have mustered arguments to support their position over the final possession of the marbles.

The British side has presented four main arguments in favor of keeping the marbles in the British Museum. In order to understand the development of the British case for keeping the marbles in London, we must start with an appeal to the legality of the Ottoman document (Greenfield [37]). Lord Elgin's removal of the Parthenon marbles was conducted with "full knowledge and permission" under the International Law applicable at the time of Lord Elgin's actions (British Museum [24]). The firman issued from Sultan permitted Lord Elgin's relocation of the marbles. Upon the marbles' arrival in London, the Parliamentary Select Committee investigated the

purchase and found the acquisition of the marbles to be entirely legal in 1816 ("Elgin Marbles") [7].

Art historian Sir John Boardman has further noted that rather than a "beacon of democracy", Athens was more of an imperial state during the time when the marbles were created in the fifth century B.C. ("What Were the Elgin Marbles?") [7]. In other words, the Greek "nation" did not exist during that time. Therefore, the Parthenon temple was not built for the purpose of celebrating the democracy, glory and heritage of Greece as a "nation," it was instead constructed to represent the profound military and cultural power that Athens held as a city ("Elgin Marbles: The Case for Keeping") [8].

Since the foundation of the British argument lies in their removal and placement, the second part of the argument is centered around the cultural influences and the role the marbles played in the history of Britain. The Parthenon marbles have become an "integral part of British cultural heritage" due to their presence in Britain and their effects on British art throughout the neoclassical movement (Banteka [2, 1240]). The removal and installation of the marbles have contributed significantly to our understanding of ancient Greek history as it brought these antiquities to a larger audience. Their immeasurable impacts on artistic legacy have inspired generations of artists and historians that "steered the course of art history ever after" ("Elgin Marbles: The Case for Keeping") [8]. The Greeks may rebut that this has deprived Greece of its cultural heritage since the marbles were on display in another country. However, the Parthenon marbles housed in the British Museum only represented a small percentage of the classical works that have endured in Greece to the present day.

Not only did the marbles bring long lasting impacts to cultures outside of their origin country, they were also well protected from prospective hazards by the British museum. The presence of the Parthenon marbles in the British Museum has saved them from potential damage due to significant alterations to the Parthenon throughout the centuries. The temple was converted to a Christian church in the sixth century AD and then to a mosque under the Ottoman Empire in the 1460 s. In 1687, the interior of the Parthenon exploded after the ammunition dump inside the temple was ignited [8]. The British Museum has argued that its stewardship of the marbles prevented the sculptures from being ground into limestones by the Ottomans and subjected to constant environmental pollutants such as acid rains (Bruney [9]).

There are also concerns about the impacts of the potential repatriation of the Parthenon marbles. The surviving pieces of the Parthenon marbles are held in 10 museums across Europe, including the Vatican, Munich, the Louvre, and Copenhagen (Elginism) [28]. The return could set the precedent for "a ripple effect" that would lead to the universal emptying of antiquities from the encyclopedic museums back to their "origin" countries (Banteka [2]). The Rosetta Stone that was on display since 1802 would follow the marbles out the doors of the British Museum. Shortly thereafter, the bust of Nefertiti located in Berlin's Neues Museum would have to be forced to be shipped back to Egypt (Bruney [9]). In fact, a majority of the countries in the world have had pieces of their "artistic heritages fallen into foreign hands". Should all of them be returned back to their so-called "source countries?" (The New Yorker) [19].

Greek Arguments

With the advent of Greek independence, Greek authorities have presented four main arguments advocating for the return of the marbles to Athens (Hitchens, 2008; Fincham, 2013) [28]. Since the British arguments are built upon the supposed legality of the firman, Greek argument has usually started with questions about this document. According to the Greek government, the legality of Lord Elgin's removal of the Parthenon marbles was in question due to the absence of the Ottoman *firman*. The translation of the document stated as below:

1. "to enter freely within the walls of the Citadel, and to draw and model with plaster the Ancient Temples there.

2. to erect scaffolding and to dig where they may wish to discover the ancient foundations.

3. liberty to take away any sculptures or inscriptions which do not interfere with the works or walls of the Citadel" (Merryman [17]).

Some scholars argued that the *firman* only gave Lord Elgin permission to perform minor excavations in the ruins instead of removing major segments of the temple. The *firman* itself did not mention anything about the authorization of shipment of the marbles all the way to another country. The removal of the sculptures clearly "interfered with the works or walls" of the temple (Banteka [2]). The Greeks contested that Lord Elgin "deliberately violated his permit" and transported the marbles without any official consent ("The Case for Return") [20].

Likewise, the Ottomans' legal right to authorize the firman in the first place is dubious. The Ottoman Empire ruled over Greece during Lord Elgin's excavation, and during this period, the Greeks actively resisted Ottoman rule. If the Ottomans acted as an illegitimate occupation force, then arguably, the Ottomans did not have the legal power to sign away any antiquities that belonged to Greece. In addition, with the absence of the original *firman* that was issued by the Ottoman government, the authenticity of its translation could be doubted as well.

While most of the attention has centered on the legality of Elgin's actions, more recent focus has been drawn to the cultural heritage of the artifacts. Greeks view the Parthenon marbles as an inseparable monument that epitomized "the apogee of the Greek Classical Civilization" [20]. The removal of the marbles led to the destruction of the special and alluring whole since the marbles were designed to be situated in proximity to the monuments and appreciated as a larger work of art. Edward Daniel Clarke, an English writer, once commented that since the Parthenon was already in great ruins and casts of the marbles have already been made, he saw no need in removing the authentic sculptures [20]. The British could have left with accurate moulds of the sculptures and enjoy viewing the originals in their "proper place on the Parthenon" [20]. While the British Museum may state that the marbles have contributed to a better understanding of Ancient Greece and that it helped the marbles reach a wider audience, the works were displayed inaccurately in the Duveen Gallery. Phidias designed the marbles to be viewed at a height of 35 feet (Bruney [9]). Now with the Acropolis Museum built especially for the purpose of storing the Parthenon marbles, situating the marbles away from where they were built "demeans their value as art and historical objects" (Banteka [2]). Visitors over the world would have the opportunity to enjoy the grand view of the monument along with the marbles that would be "exhibited in close proximity to the sight of the Parthenon" [2, 1241].

Third, the Greeks raised the issue of the damages caused by the British Museum when they requested the repatriation of "the marbles through UNESCO in 1982" (The Guardian) ("British damage to the Elgin Marbles "Irreplaceable" (The Guardian). After inspection, a group of Greek conservationists came to a conclusion that "the very morphology of the sculptures had suffered" due to scrapings and efforts using wire brushes and copper chisels to make the marbles appear whiter in the 1930 s ("British damage to the Elgin Marbles "Irreplaceable" (The Guardian). The original carvers' marks have been removed and the unskilled laborers have wiped out the fine details given to the marbles such as the sinews and muscles. By using the latest technology in examining the marbles, the "excessive rubbing and polishing" not only impaired the surface of the antiquities but also "deformed them to a shocking degree." ("British damage to the Elgin Marbles "Irreplaceable" (The Guardian). The features that defined the core of classical sculptures could no longer be traced on the Parthenon marble.

Conclusion

As noted at the beginning of the paper, the construction of the New Athens Museum brings new life to this age-old question of the appropriate setting for the Parthenon Marbles. The museum houses a num-

ber of the original reliefs that were a part of the frieze and they look out at the remains of the Parthenon outside of the museum. This setting reminds visitors to the museum that the marbles played a vital role in Greece's cultural heritage. For many Greeks, the setting of the marbles in Athens symbolizes their link to an ancient past and ancient identity. Hence, their display in the museum points to the reasonability of the Greek request for them to be returned to the ancient capital of Greece.

Nonetheless, the return of the marbles to Greece could potentially establish a legal precedent for the repatriation of artifacts around the world. If the Parthenon marbles were returned to Greece and placed back on display in the Acropolis Museum, it raises questions about other antiquities that are currently not in their origin country. For instance, should the Ishtar Gate of Babylon in the Berlin Museum be returned to the modern country of Iraq? Perhaps the Temple of Dendur in the Metropolitan Museum of Art would follow its way back to Egypt after the Ishtar Gate of Babylon. This possible ripple effect demonstrates the complexity of the affair. In brief, with the loss of the mysterious original *firman*, the resolution of this discourse becomes progressively unclear as both sides presented persuasive arguments. Oversimplification of the issues is not an option, particularly with a piece of antiquity that "transformed Europe's understanding of ancient Greek Art" ("How Did the Elgin Marbles Get There?") [13].

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