

The Elgin Marbles

At the beginning of the XIXth century, Lord Elgin, the British Ambassador in Athens stole some marbles of the Parthenon, the temple dedicated to Athena on top of the Acropolis, the holy hill in the center of Athens. They are now exhibited in the British Museum, in London and the Greek government has been asking the British government for their return in Greece ever since. The question of whether they would be given back to Greece has poisoned the relationships between the two countries and is still a source of conflict!

- How did the marbles from the Parthenon in Athens end up in the British Museum?
- What contemporary debates surround them?



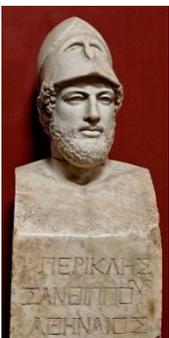
Document 1: The Parthenon, on top of the Acropolis in Athens; the Elgin Marbles, stolen from the Parthenon.

1) What kind of building is the Parthenon? What was its purpose?

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2) How do we know that it is a building of the utmost importance for the Greeks (Ancient and Modern)?

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Document 2 : A roman historian describes the rebuilding of the Acropolis

He [Pericles] boldly suggested to the people projects for great constructions, and designs for works which would call many arts into play and involve long periods of time. (...) The materials to be used were stone, bronze, ivory, gold, ebony, and cypress-wood; the arts which should elaborate and work up these materials were those of carpenter, moulder, bronze-smith, stone-cutter, dyer, worker in gold and ivory, painter, embroiderer.(...) And since each particular art, like a general with the army under his separate command, kept its own throng of unskilled and untrained [workers] (...) the city's great abundance was distributed and scattered abroad by such demands.

So then the works arose, no less [impressive] in their grandeur than inimitable in the grace of their outlines, since the workmen eagerly strove to surpass themselves in the beauty of their handicraft. And yet the most wonderful thing about them was the speed with which they rose.

3 For this reason are the works of Pericles all the more to be wondered at; they were created in a short time for all time. (...) His general manager and general overseer was Pheidias, although the several works had great architects and artists besides. Of the Parthenon, for instance, (...) Callicrates and Ictinus were the architects.

Source : Plutarch, *Life of Pericles*, XII-XIII, 2nd century A.D.

1) What shows the particular significance of the Parthenon for the Greeks?

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Document 3 : The firman, allegedly giving Lord Elgin permission to remove the Marbles from the Acropolis.

British translation examined by the British Parliament Committee in 1816. It was translated from an Italian version of the original Ottoman firman (authorization) now missing from all archives, both British and Turkish (at that time, the Turkish archives were considered extremely good and the archivists of extremely high competence).

It is hereby signified to you, that our sincere Friend his Excellency Lord Elgin, Ambassador Extraordinary from the Court of England to the Porte of Happiness, has represented to us, that the greater part of the [European] Courts are anxious to read and investigate the books, pictures or figures (...) of the ancient Greek philosophers. The ministers or officers of state, philosophers, primates (...) have a remarkable taste for the drawings, or figures or sculptures, remaining ever since the time of the Greeks.

And he has also at this time expressly demanded that [...] no opposition be made [to the artists], [...] that they meet no opposition in walking, viewing, or contemplating the figures and edifices they may wish to design or copy; or in any of their works of fixing scaffolding, or using their implements.

It is our desire that on the arrival of this letter you use your diligence to act conformably to the instances of the said Ambassador, as long as the said five artists dwelling at Athens shall be employed in going in and out of the citadel of Athens, or in fixing scaffolding around the ancient Temple [The Parthenon], or in modelling with chalk (...) the said ornaments and visible figures; or in excavating, when they find it necessary, the foundations, in search of inscriptions among the rubbish; that they be not molested by the said Disdar (or commandant of the citadel) not by any other persons, not even by you (to whom this letter is addressed); and that no one meddle with their scaffolding or implements, nor hinder them from taking away any pieces of stone with inscriptions or figures.

(signed with a signet) SEGED ABDULLAH KAIMACAN, Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire

Source : <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmcumeds/371/371ap15.htm>



1) INTRODUCE THE DOCUMENT :

What kind of document is it?

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When and in which context was it written?

Who allegedly wrote it? Who is it addressed to? What do you know about these persons?

2) ASSESS THE DOCUMENT AS A SOURCE OF HISTORICAL INFORMATION.

What was the purpose of the writer of the document?

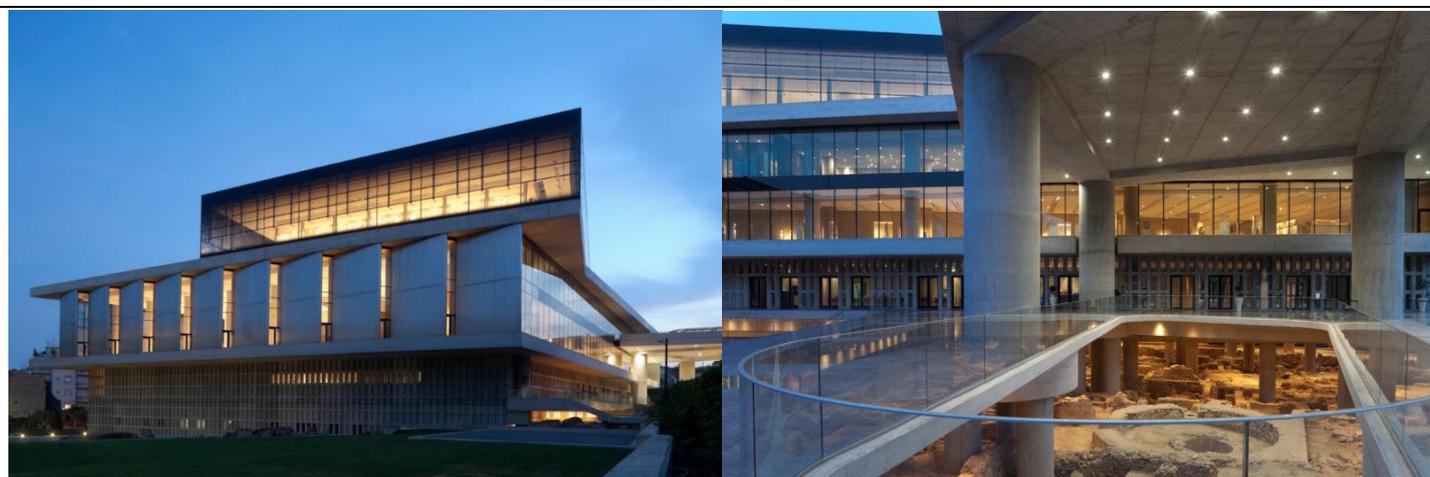
What can you say of the validity of such a document, given the successive translations and the fact that the original is missing?

3) COMMENT THE DOCUMENT.

What were Lord Elgin's goals?

What was Lord Elgin allowed to do by the Turks?

In what way is this document relevant in today's controversy between Greece and the UK?



Document 4 : The brand-new state of the art Acropolis Museum opened in 2009.

1) Why is the new museum at the center of the negotiations between the two countries? Why is it used by Greece as an argument to get the Marbles back?

Political Relations

Greece and the United Kingdom

Relations between the two countries have a major historical dimension, from the Greek struggle for independence to the two World Wars and recent Greek history. Today, the two countries collaborate closely within the framework of the European Union and NATO and across the range of their bilateral relations, with frequent exchanges of high-level visits, as well as consultations on the Ministerial level.

However, the issue of the return of the Parthenon Marbles, which are in the British Museum, remains pending, despite the shift in British public opinion in favor of Greece's positions and the ongoing efforts of the Greek side.

Document 5: Copy of the front page of the Greek foreign office website. Article "United Kingdom".

1) What is the position of the Greek government regarding the marbles?

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2) What kind of diplomatic and political relationship do Greece and the UK have?

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2) How does the "ongoing efforts on the Greek side" materialize?

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3) What is the latest argument in favor of the return of the marbles to Greece? Do you think it can make a difference?

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■ British Museum Director: "Marbles must not return"

"Last autumn Greece intensified its campaign to have the Marbles return to their place of origin, and had even started to build a museum at the Acropolis to house them in time for the Olympics in Athens next year. 'I do not believe that there is a case for returning the Marbles', Mr McGregor told *The Sunday Telegraph*. 'They have a purpose here, because this is where they can do more good. The British Museum can situate the achievement of

those Greek sculptures in the context of the wider world'. [...] Any long-term loan of the Marbles to Greece would need to be sanctioned by the museum, while a permanent return would have to be decided by Parliament. Mr MacGregor said that the world needed somewhere to view all the Ancient World in context. 'The British Museum is one of the great cultural achievement of mankind!'"

The Times, February 24, 2003.

■ The Greek Culture Minister refutes arguments against the return of the Marbles

"First, the Marbles were obtained by proper transaction: [...] is it proper to transact with the Turks for the most treasured of Greek possessions when Greece is under Turkish invasion and subjugation? A second argument is that: '...the ignorant, superstitious Greeks were indifferent to their art and their monuments.' Who? [...] These Greeks who in their struggle for independence sent the Turkish soldiers bullets to be used against themselves. Yes, against themselves. The Turkish soldiers besieged on the Acropolis ran short of ammunition. They began to attack the great columns to extract lead to make bullets. The Greeks sent them ammunition with the message: 'Here are bullets, don't touch the columns'. [...]"

Argument number 3: if the Marbles are returned, it will set a precedent that could lead to the emptying of museums. [...] We are asking only for something unique, something matchless, something specific to our identity. [...]"

Argument number 4: pollution! [...] Now we don't make pretence that the sculptures can be reset in the frieze. [...] There will be, ready to receive them, adjacent to the Acropolis for relevant context, a beautiful museum with the most developed systems of security and preservation. [...]"

The argument most perpetuated is that removing the Marbles saved them from the barbarous Turks. [...] The fact is that the Turks gave no permission to Elgin to remove sculptures from the works or the walls of the citadel, and [...] barbarously they were removed. You must understand what the Parthenon Marbles mean to us. They are our pride. They are our sacrifices. They are our noblest symbol of excellence. They are a tribute to the democratic philosophy. They are our aspirations and our name. They are the essence of Greekness.

We say to the British government: [...] please give them back."

Melina Mercouri, Speech to the Oxford Union, 1986.

'Give Africa its art back', Macron's report says

A new report on the status of African objects in French museums will urge the president to return works taken "without consent" in the colonial period

A report commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron will recommend the full restitution by French museums of works in their collections which were taken "without consent" from former African colonies. In the short term 24 items or groups of objects [will] be returned immediately to Mali, Benin, Nigeria, Senegal, Ethiopia and Cameroon. Most are spoils of war, taken in Abomey, Ségou or Benin City, which were pillaged by French or British troops in the 1890s.

The French art historian Bénédicte Savoy and the Senegalese economist and writer Felwine Sarr will present their study to President Macron this Friday, 23 November [2018]. In it they argue that the complete transfer of property back to Africa and not the long-term loan of objects to African museums should be the general rule for works taken in the colonial period unless it can be proven that these objects were acquired “legitimately”.

President Macron will have to face strong opposition from his Culture Ministry and the museums themselves. The report’s authors urge the president to cast aside “political prudence and museum anxiety” and lift the sacrosanct principle of the inalienability of national collections. Bénédicte Savoy strongly denies that the new policy might lead, as museums fear, to the emptying of institutions such as the *Musée du Quai Branly* in Paris which houses 70,000 African objects. The report also aims to put strong pressure on museums throughout Europe to review their policies.

France would be required to deliver to each African country an inventory of all works originating from their territory under the rule of “colonial violence”. Through bilateral commissions, African governments would then select the items they wish to have returned. If France objects, it would have to prove that the pieces in question were legitimately acquired.

Document 6: Should Europe give back the stolen art?

VINCENT NOCE, *The art Newspaper*, 20th November 2018

1) According to this article, does the question of the devolution of stolen art only concern Great Britain? What other countries are concerned?

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2) Why is so much African art in European museums? Is it the case with the Elgin Marbles?

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3) What is this art compared to? Quote the document to give a specific answer.

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4) What are the arguments in favor and against the devolution of stolen art to their countries of origin? (doc 6&8). Fill the table below.

Arguments in favor	Arguments against

5) Do you think all works of art, looted or bought, should be returned to their countries of origin?

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6) Imagine a discussion between the director of a European Museum and the culture minister of a country where art has been stolen, about the devolution of some pieces of art. Use specific examples from the documents above.

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