

THE BRITISH MUSEUM

THE PARTHENON SCULPTURES in the British Museum, Athens and other public collections

Periodically, the question of where the surviving sculptures from the Parthenon should now be displayed becomes a subject of public discussion. This leaflet provides key information for understanding the complex history of the Parthenon and its sculpture. The main arguments of the debate are also presented here. If you would like to know more, the British Museum's website gives a fuller account. For another view, see the website of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. Both websites are listed below.

What is the Parthenon and how did the sculptures come to London?

The Parthenon in Athens is a building with a long and complex history. Built nearly 2500 years ago as a temple dedicated to the Greek goddess Athena, it was for a thousand years the church of the Virgin Mary of the Athenians, then a mosque, and finally an archaeological ruin. The building was altered and the sculptures much damaged over the course of the centuries. When the city was under siege in 1687 and the Parthenon itself used as a gunpowder store, a huge explosion blew the roof off and destroyed a large portion of the remaining sculptures. The building has been a ruin ever since. Archaeologists worldwide are agreed that the surviving sculptures could never be re-attached to the structure.

By 1800 only 50% of the original sculptural decoration remained. Between 1801 and 1805 Lord Elgin, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, to which Athens had belonged for some 350 years, removed about half of the remaining sculptures from the fallen ruins and from the building itself, and brought them back to Britain. He acted with the full knowledge and permission of the Ottoman authorities. Lord Elgin's actions had the effect of preserving the sculptures that he acquired from further weathering.

These sculptures were acquired from Lord Elgin by the British Museum in 1816 following a Parliamentary Select Committee enquiry which fully investigated and approved the legality of Lord Elgin's actions. Since then the sculptures have all been on display to the public in the British Museum, free of entry charge.

Where can the surviving sculptures from the Parthenon be seen?

Sculptures surviving from the Parthenon are located in ten museums in eight different countries.

The sculptures are roughly equally divided between Athens and London, and some other important pieces are also to be found in other great European museums, including the Louvre and the Vatican.

1. Parthenon Sculptures in Athens

A proportion of the Parthenon sculptures in Athens are currently on display in the Acropolis Museum.

Many others are either in store or are still on the building. It is intended that most will be put on public display in the New Acropolis Museum, when work on it is completed. Fourteen blocks of the West Frieze, severely damaged by the weather, were removed from the Parthenon in 1993.

Following conservation, these are now displayed in the Acropolis Museum.

2. Parthenon Sculptures in London

The sculptures in London, sometimes known as the 'Elgin Marbles', have been on permanent public display in the British Museum since 1816, free of entry charge. Here they can be seen by a world audience of five million visitors a year in a dedicated suite of galleries designed to ensure that the sculptures are accessible for all visitors. The British Museum also displays casts of the West Frieze. Made for Lord Elgin in 1802, these casts are now a better record of the actual sculptures than the weathered originals in Athens.

3. Parthenon Sculptures in other museums

The following institutions also hold sculpture from the Parthenon:

Musée du Louvre, Paris

Vatican Museums

National Museum, Copenhagen

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

University Museum, Würzburg

Museo Nazionale, Palermo

University Museum, Heidelberg

Glyptothek, Munich

What has the Greek Government asked for?

Successive Greek governments have argued for the restitution of the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum and 'the reunification of a mutilated monument belonging to the world's cultural heritage'. The British Museum Trustees' legal title to the sculptures has also been a matter of dispute. More recently, Greece has sought the permanent 'loan' of all the sculptures in London to the New Acropolis Museum which is under construction in Athens. For more information on the Greek Government's official position, see the website of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture: www.culture.gr

What is the British Museum's position?

The British Museum's Trustees argue that the Parthenon sculptures are integral to the Museum's purpose as a world museum telling the story of human cultural achievement. Here Greece's cultural links with the other great civilizations of the ancient world, especially Egypt, Assyria, Persia and Lycia, can be clearly seen, and the vital contribution of ancient Greece to the development of later cultural achievements in Europe, Asia, and Africa can be followed and understood. The current division of the surviving sculptures between ten museums, with about equal quantities present in Athens and London, allows different and complementary stories to be told about them, focusing respectively on their importance for the history of Athens and Greece, and their significance for world culture. This, the Museum's Trustees believe, is an arrangement that confers maximum public benefit for the world at large.

More about the Parthenon debate can be found on the British Museum website

www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/gr/grparth.html

and the website of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture

www.culture.gr

The following books provide good introductions to the Parthenon and its sculptures:

- Mary Beard *The Parthenon* (Profile, 2002)
- Brian Cook *The Elgin Marbles* (BM Press, 1984)
- Ian Jenkins *The Parthenon Frieze* (BM Press, 1994)
- William St Clair *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* (3rd edition Oxford University Press, 1998)

These titles, and others, are available in the British Museum bookshop.

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