

# Make your own Parthenon marbles

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I have always loved the British Museum. I was eight years old the first time I walked between the great pillars of its Greek revival facade, a visitor from New York City who would eventually make her home in London. [...]

As a girl I'm sure I gazed upon the Parthenon Sculptures — or the Elgin Marbles, as they're often called. At the very end of the 18th century, Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin, had been appointed “ambassador extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary of His Britannic Majesty to the Sublime Porte of Selim III, Sultan of Turkey”; Greece was then under Ottoman rule. As the 19th century dawned, Elgin began to remove material from the Parthenon, the 5th-century BC edifice that had been a symbol of the Athenian city-state: this material was then transported to Britain.

It's common these days to say that these remarkable artefacts were stolen. Nicked. Swiped. Pilfered. Not so: as the British Museum's own website notes soberly, Elgin's actions “were thoroughly investigated by a Parliamentary Select Committee in 1816 and found to be entirely legal, prior to the sculptures entering the collection of the British Museum by Act of Parliament”.

Clearly, however, the matter is not settled. [...]

Greece has long petitioned for the return of the sculptures; the Acropolis Museum, designed by Swiss-French architect Bernard Tschumi, was opened in 2009 having been built to house the Parthenon Sculptures when — not if — they are returned. This week Rishi Sunak abruptly cancelled a scheduled meeting with the Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis after the latter told the BBC that the sculptures should be repatriated to Greece. Having some of the marbles in London and the rest in Athens was like cutting the “Mona Lisa” in half, he said.

In the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, in a country where a million children do not own a single book, Sunak's fit of petulance looks like — to mix our Classical metaphors — fiddling while Rome burns. It seems a needless stoking of the so-called culture wars at a time when only 15 per cent of the British public wish the sculptures to remain in London and 49 per cent would like to see them returned to Greece, as a YouGov poll revealed last month. [...]

As I said, I have always loved the British Museum. Yet we can love our friends and hope that they will mend their ways. [...] In days gone by the museum claimed to be guarding these treasures for the world. Yet just this past August the museum had to reveal that a number of items — largely jewellery and gems — from the collection were found to be missing, stolen or damaged; many have yet to be recovered. While no institution is perfect, this seems an astonishing lapse.

But even without introducing doubts about the British Museum's authority as custodian, surely technology can provide a solution to the issue of repatriation — and to an extent, has already. You can get up close and personal with Trajan's Column at the V&A, or at least with the remarkable plaster cast that's been part of its collection since 1873. The increasing sophistication of 21st-century 3D printing techniques would allow originals — of the Benin Bronzes, the Rosetta Stone, the Parthenon Sculptures — to be returned to their places of origin while remaining on view in London. It's not a simple solution by any means, and such negotiation will always be complex, but Britain can no longer afford to turn its back on these conversations.

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