

THE PARTHENON SCULPTURES

A NEW CULTURAL SPRING OR



When John Keats, the fragile Romantic poet, first laid eyes on the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum in 1817 he penned a sonnet, describing the Grecian glories that lay before him, referring to them as such “dim-conceived glories of the brain” ... which bring round the heart an “indescribable feud”, so mesmerised was he by their classical grandeur and marbled immortality.

Almost 200 years later international campaigners for the Parthenon sculptures (they were never Elgin’s to name in the first place) have been perplexed for far different reasons by the apparent vacillation in the position of successive Greek Governments on the thorny issue of return.

Does Greece really want the marbles back? To answer this question we need to reflect on the recent past.

In early 2014 the campaign was given an unexpected boost when the actor George Clooney famously proclaimed that, just as with the works of art which were stolen by the Nazis during World War II but later recovered and featured in his film *Monuments Men*, the Parthenon Sculptures should be returned to Greece. We now know that he was inspired by his better half, the human rights lawyer Amal Alamuddin (now Clooney), who had co-authored a brief advice to the Greek Government in 2011 with the well-known Australian QC, Geoffrey Robertson, and a leading UK academic, Professor Norman Palmer. In that brief

advice they proposed a number of different scenarios by which Greece could force Britain’s hands through the judicial system if all else failed.

However Greece was still waiting on a response from the British Government to a request made through UNESCO for a mediation of the dispute. That offer had actually been tabled in 2013 and was finally (and predictably) rejected by the British in March 2015. So the idea of litigation was not at the forefront of the Greek Government’s plans as it sought to rely on cultural diplomacy and seeming goodwill between two friendly States.

In October 2014 the trio of lawyers went to Athens and of course the mere presence of Ms Clooney in the Greek capital was a public relations coup that helped raise the profile of the Parthenon Marbles cause around the world. However, hidden behind the throng of camera lenses and out of sight of the traditional and social media, the legal team convinced the former New Democracy-led coalition government to allow them to research and prepare a much more detailed and considered legal opinion as to Greece’s realistic prospects of litigating the issue in the International Court of Justice or the European Court of Human Rights given the ongoing intransigence of the British Museum and its supporters to any diplomatic initiatives.

AND THE NEW GREEK GOVERNMENT: RETURN TO THE DARK AGES?

The Robertson team was given the go-ahead and their not insubstantial fee was paid by an anonymous Greek benefactor who, like many others, wants to see this historical wrong corrected. The advice was to be delivered by the end of April 2015.

In January 2015 following the Greek elections the radical SYRIZA party assumed government and appointed a former journalist and editor, Nikos Xydakis, as Culture Minister. His appointment was initially greeted with enthusiasm because of his outlook on the arts and his journalistic and editorial experience with the leading Greek newspaper, Kathimerini. In his first parliamentary speech outlining the new government's plans, Xydakis spoke of the dawn of a new "cultural spring".

Clearly Greece has been beset with well-documented problems on the economic front and the issue of the return of the marbles has understandably taken a back seat as the government negotiates with its European lenders to stave off bankruptcy and/or a feared Greek exit from the Euro. Having said that, the new Culture Minister rightly condemned the British refusal of mediation and indicated - more in hope - that Greece would renew its efforts for a mediation to take place.

Then in mid-May 2015 Mr Xydakis without prior warning or consultation announced on a Greek morning TV show that the Greek Government would not entertain litigation but would continue to rely on diplomacy and political initiatives in its dealings with the British Government and the British Museum. The new spring had disappeared.



Nikos Xydakis, Minister for Culture

According to Xydakis, Greece though its diplomatic and political endeavours has achieved much in recent years, pointing to an upsurge in public support for return. This was just after the Conservatives had swept power in the UK elections and appointed a new Secretary of Culture who is on record as denouncing George Clooney's comments about the marbles because he is an American and he would therefore not know any better. The barbarians are well and truly entrenched in Whitehall for the next five years.

There followed an immediate hue and outcry on social media and in the international press as some in the English media predictably welcomed Greece's perceived 'backdown', dismissing Greece's claims to the sculptures as if Lord Elgin's actions had finally been vindicated. Within 48 hours the Greek Culture Minister, issued a ministerial media release in which he declared that the legal opinion of the British legal team is extremely useful and reinforces the arguments of Greece for the return of the Parthenon Marbles. Although he pointed out that the Greek Government had never committed to legal action in the near future, he conceded that the judicial route is one of the many avenues still open to the Greeks.

And that's how it should be. You cannot rule anything in or out as the changing cultural and diplomatic landscape in both Great Britain and Greece demands a flexible response, diplomatic panache and a credible and plausible threat of litigation if cultural diplomacy fails.

What exactly is the art of diplomacy Greek style? Can we be confident that diplomacy will eventually triumph? How do you persuade a country which is still beset with an imperial mindset, which treats the cultural spoils of war (Benin Bronzes) and looting of ancient archaeological sites (the Parthenon Marbles) as legitimate national acquisitions and in the case of the Parthenon Sculptures simply photoshops history to portray the sculptures as now being part of British culture and an intrinsic part of London's history, removed in time and space from their original location. The British Museum after all describes itself as a "universal museum" and the repository of the collective memory of mankind.

Let us explore the nuanced Greek diplomatic overtures for the marbles. The art of diplomacy is the art of persuasion; the essence of cultural soft power is to be persuasive without resort to force or coercion. But for diplomacy to have any realistic chance of success it actually requires at times both forceful and subtle overtures. It's called Realpolitik. It needs its government ministers, diplomats and consular staff in England in particular to actually embrace the campaign and to articulate, consistently and forcefully, Greece's profound disappointment at the continual stonewalling by the British Museum and its supporters within the British establishment.

A realistic cultural diplomatic offensive also calls for a concerted and co-ordinated campaign by non-State actors, including lobby groups, campaigners and others who are equally passionate about the marbles but who can also arise above petty squabbling and entrenched positions.

Since the late Melina Mercouri first confronted Sir David Wilson, the former director of the British Museum, in the early 1980s and famously demanded the return of the sculptures, the campaign for return as practised by the Greeks has not exactly been a textbook example of cultural diplomatic statecraft.

In 2002 the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, George Papandreou, told a British Parliamentary Committee that the "issue of the Parthenon marbles presents an important opportunity for Greek-British relations", noting that Britain and Greece have been faithful allies in the struggle for freedom and democracy, and heirs of common intellectual traditions and values.

This was a great motherhood statement, but how has that translated into practice?

In October 2003 the Greek Prime Minister Simitis was unknowingly captured by TV cameras approaching British PM Tony Blair on the sidelines of a European Summit and sheepishly enquiring: "Tony, I would like to discuss with you about the marbles ... as you know we have elections next year in Greece. Maybe this could be useful". Not exactly subtle diplomacy.

In 2009, shortly before the official opening of the New Acropolis Museum, according to various reports at the time, the Karamanlis Government had decided that the issue of return would not be raised during the official speeches because it would be seen as a breach of diplomatic protocol at the unveiling of the new museum and might 'offend' the British. That decision was quickly reversed after pressure from international campaigners but it says a lot about the Greek mindset when it comes to confronting the British over anything Elgin.

Then in November 2013, amidst much fanfare and publicity, the Greek Foreign Minister Evangelos Venizelos met with his British counterpart, William Hague, in London to discuss the broad sweep of Anglo-Hellenic bilateral relations. Despite the fact that Greece through UNESCO had already written to the British Government, including the British Foreign Secretary, formally requesting mediation, the lengthy communiqué that was released following their meeting was completely silent on the Parthenon Sculptures.

According to the Greek Government's official website, Greece places particular emphasis on the functioning of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation (ICPRCP), in what it describes as the "ongoing negotiations with the British side regarding



the issue of the return of the Parthenon Marbles”. Those meetings have been taking place, without any movement whatsoever from the British side, for over 30 years.

The website still proclaims the UNESCO-driven request for mediation, pointing to a “dynamic that has already been created in favour of reuniting the Parthenon Marbles; a dynamic of which both Great Britain and the international community must take note”. As we have seen, the British summarily dismissed the idea of mediation in March 2015 and have effectively said that the Parthenon Sculptures will never go back, not even on loan. So much for the dynamic force within.

At around the same time, the British Museum, after having ‘lent’ a solitary Parthenon pedimental sculpture to the Hermitage Museum in Russia in a calculated snub to the Greeks, unveiled a Defining Beauty exhibition in a separate exhibition hall within the British Museum and has literally dragged six sculptures from the Duveen Gallery under the pretext of displaying how the Classical Greeks sculptured the ideal human body. The Parthenon sculptures have been reduced to mere works of art, disassembled from the rest of the collection. In the official guide published to accompany the exhibition its author discusses the reception in nineteenth century Europe of the Parthenon sculptures “that Lord Elgin had brought to Britain”. In other words, just another museum acquisition. No mention of the bribery of Ottoman officials or the structural damage inflicted on the Parthenon by Elgin’s men as they plundered the Acropolis. No indication of the controversy that has stirred for two centuries. Elgin just brought them to London as if that was and is still the natural order.

How does soft power diplomacy respond to such blatant reconstructions of history?

When the British Museum claims to have offered to lend specific items from the Elgin collection to Greece, why are they not openly challenged?

Where is the academic, museological and archaeological chorus in Greece denouncing the British Museum’s shameless exercise in historical revisionism?

Greek governments of whatever political make-up have to adopt a realistic approach. Putting blind faith in diplomacy and political dialogue is totally misconceived in the absence of a proper, thought out and above all sustained diplomatic campaign that also includes a cogent litigation strategy. As Nelson Mandela’s lawyer and trusted friend, George Bizos SC, told the International Parthenon Colloquy held in London in 2012 when acknowledging the worldwide campaign for return, “we will, without abandoning the litigation threat, try our best to persuade the people of the world and particularly the people of Britain as to what is the right thing to do”.

All diplomatic, political and legal options must therefore remain on the table. A legal challenge in an international court, based on the developing principles of international customary law and in recognising Greece’s legal property and cultural rights in the sculptures that by their very creation and existence define the essence of Classical Greece, is not a forlorn or dangerous strategy if there also is a strong political will. Mr Xydakis should know this. It’s not just public opinion polls that matter. The decision-makers in Britain have to be made to understand the seriousness of the claim for return and a good starting point would be if Greek Culture Ministers could refrain from making conflicting or inconsistent media statements which can only reinforce in British minds the perception that despite all the rhetoric the Greeks will do nothing.

Only then will we be able to truly appreciate how Keats – perhaps speaking for all of us - contrasted his own mortality to “each imagined pinnacle and steep/of godlike hardship,” and the great artistic achievement of immortal “Grecian grandeur” and “magnitude” that is projected by the Parthenon Sculptures.

The Greeks and Philhellenes around the world deserve no less.

George Vardas
Vice-President, Australians for the Return of the Parthenon Sculptures

The British Museum - Parthenon Marbles Display - *photos courtesy of George Giaouris*

