

The Campaign for Return of the Parthenon Marbles: Quo Vadis?

The title of this piece is not a play on this writer's surname. Nor is it a reference to that famous Hollywood blockbuster set in the times of the Roman legions. The question is simple: Where is the campaign for the return of the Parthenon Sculptures heading?

Trawling through the internet recently, I came across a report that an English teacher was

overheard telling her students that they are looking at "one of our great national treasures" when standing in front of the Elgin collection of Parthenon Sculptures in the British Museum. That's right, the timeless sculptures from Classical Greece have become one of England's so-called national treasures, right up there presumably with Bobby Moore, the Beatles, fish and chips and the monarchy.

But who can blame the teacher? The British Museum is a past master in re-interpreting the past and in constructing grand narratives of nation and empire. As one commentator has remarked, in renaming the Parthenon sculptures 'the Elgin Collection' by an act of Parliament, the British not only saw themselves as the rightful heir to the cultural heritage of ancient Greece but they literally erased the Athenian origin of these artefacts and used them as a means of conveying the idea of national, that is British, superiority.

The latest incarnation of this appropriation is through the writings of the urbane director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, who over the last decade has been actively involved in the reinvention of the museum as the World's encyclopaedia and the "collective memory of mankind". The British Museum is a universal museum where the individual histories of its collection, whether they be the blood-stained Benin Bronzes or the tabots and other religious artefacts seized by the British Army in Maqdaia Ethiopia or the metopes and frieze hacked off the Parthenon, are no longer relevant nor significant. You see, it's a world museum and the visitor is only interested in comparing the artefacts of various civilisations on display in Bloomsbury.

So what can the Greeks and their supporters do?

The Greek Government formerly led by George Papandreou had made some noises about return but never seriously pursued the issue. The previous Karamanlis Government was no better. Indeed, a Culture Minister in that government promised certain things would happen when consulted by the David Hill-led international association lobbying for their return and then promptly did the opposite when talking to the media.

And of course things have gone downhill with the financial crisis that has driven a stake through the Greek national psyche and the social problems which currently bedevil the country. Unfortunately, that economic malaise has also compromised Greece's cultural self-identity.



Kythera's own Archaeological Museum has been closed for six years and even before that it was in a deplorable state. In early 2012 brazen robbers stole more than 70 artefacts from a museum in Olympia dedicated to the history of the Ancient Olympic Games. Agitators and

rioters are content to firebomb bookshops and threaten museums in their mindless protests. And the largely irrelevant KKE and its supporters show no respect for the Acropolis when they invade the Sacred Rock and unfurl their banners and hurl their vitriol.

Does Greece really want the marbles back? I think they do but it requires a change of thinking at both government, ministry and museum levels. For a start, it should take a leaf out of the Turkish Government's playbook. Turkey has recently negotiated the return of stolen artefacts from German and US museums, including the upper half of the torso of Weary Herakles statue that was in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts but has now been reunited with the bottom half in Turkey. The Turks had threatened to sever all archaeological cooperation with German and American archaeologists if their stolen cultural heritage was not returned.

Contrast that with the perpetual stalemate between Greeks and the British. The marble torso of Poseidon is fragmented and divided between London and Athens and yet the British Museum remains steadfast in its opposition to the return of even fragmentary sculptures.

Another way of highlighting the campaign for return is social media such as YouTube clips and other forms of online media content. A recent example is a clever campaign conceived by the Greek composer and photographer, Ares Kalogeropoulos, in his "I am Greek and I Wanna Go Home" YouTube promotional clip, images of which are reproduced with this article. The British Museum establishment is well-entrenched and any campaign to promote return must rise above self-indulgence and personal vanity. In this writer's view, litigation – whether in the International Court of Justice or elsewhere – is an increasingly attractive option which needs to be properly explored. But it requires the Greek Government (of whatever political complexion) to be serious about return. Will it rise to the occasion? Only time will tell.

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