



## The **Monuments Men** stand up

**This is a story of imperial arrogance, conceit and self-proclaimed elitism displaced in time over two centuries of plunder of cultural treasures from Lord Elgin to Adolf Hitler.**

And it took an American actor, George Clooney, to reveal the arrant hypocrisy and pomposity of the British Museum and the broader British Establishment that continue to defend the detention of the Parthenon Sculptures in London.

Clooney may be an actor, but he is not clueless and in the events that have transpired in London over the last few weeks he has emerged according to some observers as the “Saviour of the Acropolis”. Clooney, together with other renowned actors such as Matt Damon and Bill Murray, has made a movie called

The Monuments Men, based on true events from World War II as the Allies rushed to find and protect looted treasures and artworks taken by the Nazis from their Jewish owners, museums and other institutions. The film is a tribute to the group of determined and skilled soldiers and experts who recovered much of that loot towards the end of the Second World War. George Clooney has created headlines by declaring more than once, when asked, that the Parthenon Sculptures should be returned to Greece.

In the book upon which the movie is based the author Robert Edsel recounts the orders issued by Adolf Hitler for the seizure of “Jewish art property” and other treasures. Hitler had in fact established a Nazi looting organisation. On 20 March 1941 Hitler received a report announcing the arrival of the principal shipment of “ownerless Jewish cultural property” by special train comprising 21 express baggage cars willed with the most valuable paintings, furniture, Gobelins,

works of artistic craftsmanship and ornaments. These “abandoned Jewish art possessions” were intended for Hitler’s private collections and for German museums in the new Reich.

The stripping of cultural treasures from museums and private houses was endemic. To this day efforts continue to reclaim works of art and other treasures that have a dubious provenance as a result of the Nazi war of terror.

Rewind history to 1801. Lord Elgin, the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, had issued specific and detailed instructions to his resident artist in Athens, Giovanni Lusieri, to strip the Parthenon of as much ornamental decoration as he could for Elgin’s stately manor in Scotland, declaring:

“I should wish to collect as much marble as possible. I have other places in my house which need it... You do not need any prompting from me to know the value that is attached to a sculptured marble or historic piece”.

But Elgin did not stop there. In

1802 he again wrote to Lusieri:

“The first on the list are the metopes, the bas-reliefs, and the remains of the statues that can still be found. In particular the figures on the pediment of the Parthenon—at least the figure of the man— as many metopes as you can obtain.... I beg you therefore to put some on board ship. To sum up, the slightest object from the Acropolis is a jewel.”

So what is the difference?

Artworks, sculptures and other treasures were forcibly and illegally removed from institutions and private collections or from their original setting. In both cases there have been demands over the years for their return. Had Clooney simply declared that all stolen Jewish artworks be returned to their owners, there would hardly have

agenda for London’s cultural treasures”.

Even the UK politicians could not help themselves. The Labour shadow Culture Minister Helen Goodman added a new intellectual dimension to the debate when she scornfully asked: “How would George Clooney feel if his American films were only screened in American theatres?” What was she thinking?

Or did I miss something? Hitlerian agenda? Ignorant Americans? Or is it just that the British know best when it comes to looking after cultural plunder that sits in their own museums?

But because George Clooney had the temerity to suggest that there should be a dialogue about the Parthenon Sculptures he is crucified.

it occupies. More relevant is the fact that the Parthenon marbles were chipped away from the Parthenon by (writer’s note: really under the gaze of) the occupying Turks and sold. It was a single monument broken into bits. It would be as if the statue of David’s head were sold to England, his arm to the Vatican and his torso to the Met. There are many pieces in nearly every country that this conversation should take place. The best place to start would be at the most obvious object. When polled the British people are overwhelmingly in favour of their return. The rest of the world follows suit. If you want to deal in facts.”

Bravo George Clooney.

And what was the Guardian poll result? 88% of correspondents voted overwhelmingly in favour of

## for the Monument of all Monuments

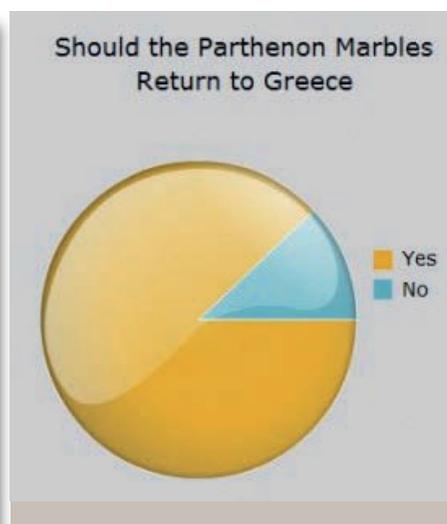
been a murmur. But when it comes to the Parthenon sculptures, the outpouring of disbelief and horror from the British establishment has been absolutely unbelievable. “What does he know, he is an American” was a typical gem. “It’s all Greek to Clooney” was another witty riposte from the Murdoch press. Or this profane observation by the pompous Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, who accused Clooney of “advocating nothing less than the Hitlerian

And yet Clooney is not just a pretty cinematic face. He could have recanted or simply put his hands up and declared that he is just an actor. Instead, Clooney responded to Johnson and his fellow critics in the most telling way:

“When it comes to real facts, not imagined history, you need only to look at the UNESCO rulings that have been agreed to by all parties. An occupying nation can’t sell off the national heritage of the country

return of the Parthenon Sculptures to Athens.

George Clooney deserves credit for encouraging a dialogue to take place to challenge the British Museum’s self-serving imperial narrative that the sculptures belong in the British Museum because they tell a “different story” and are now part of British history. And the British establishment should take a long hard look at itself. They have yet to respond to the UNESCO-backed



request for mediation of the dispute which Greece first mooted in mid-2013 and formally issued in October of that year. They have stonewalled at successive meetings of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee on the Return of Illicit Cultural Property whenever the issue of the Parthenon Sculptures is raised. They continue to hide behind the rhetoric and self-serving statements of the British Museum that in effect it knows what

is best for the display of the cultural treasures of the Parthenon.

It is about time that there was a serious international debate about this issue and that the Greek Government must engage the British at the highest level. Greece fought side by side with the British against the Nazis during World War II when the rest of Europe had either given up or had been overrun. To even suggest that a “Hitlerian” scheme

underscores demands for the return of the sculptures is a gross insult to every Greek and every Philhellene.

The film *The Monuments Men* is a timely reminder that the Parthenon Sculptures should be reunited in Athens in the context of a temple which, as the American archaeologist Robin Frances Rhodes has written, is truly the “Monument of all Monuments”.

George Vardas

