

The Ploitics of Playing Fair, or, Who's Losing Their Marbles?

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THERE IS FIERCE ANTAGONISM BETWEEN those who possess cultural property and those who seek its return. Competing claims for cultural artifacts such as Greece's Parthenon Marbles engender some of the most intractable and contentious debates in the realm of international cultural heritage. A large number of cultural artifacts in Western museums, stately mansions, or hidden away in the private collections of businessmen have had a politically contentious history. Much of this cultural property has come under scrutiny by a burgeoning postcolonial consciousness, highlighting the inherently problematic nature of their current venues. Concurrently, the claims of ownership by indigenous communities are equivocal as issues of the "right" of ownership, the identity of the owner, the disposition of cultural artifacts as symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1990) in the global economy, and modern property law persistently infringe on these repatriation claims. Unrepatriated cultural property is caught in a type of limbo—never entirely connected to the countries where it is situated or to the places from where it originates. The questions of who owns the past and where cultural property belongs consistently arise.

The answer to the question of who owns the past is, with increasing frequency, the artifact's country of origin. A significant number of these objects have already been returned in response to popular demand, international initiatives and legal pressure. Notable examples include the Director of the Supreme Council of Egyptian Antiquities Zahi Hawass's campaign to have many Egyptian antiquities returned to Egypt (Lufkin 2002); the repatriation of the artifacts from the Sinai by Israel to Egypt in accordance with the 1979 peace treaty (Einhorn 1996; Hassan-Gordon 2000); the Metropolitan Museum in New York's return of the Lydian Hoard to Turkey (Kaye and Main 1995); and recent announcement of the intention of Italy, after years of international pressure, to return the Axum Obelisk to

Ethiopia (Williams 2002). The marble sculptures taken from the Parthenon in the first years of the nineteenth century are the best-known claim for the repatriation of cultural property, and the request for repatriation remains unfulfilled. As with other political and highly emotional controversies, there seems to be no middle or common ground in the dispute over where the Marbles should reside.

Superficially, this case appears to be little more than one nationalistic argument pitted against another. Even the name calls into question allegiances—the common term “Elgin Marbles” implicitly denoting British ownership. On closer inspection, the dispute is more complicated. The motives for requesting the repatriation of the Marbles may not be as multifarious as some voices in the debate would suggest but boil down to the economic benefit of owning the Marbles. Heritage tourism is a growth industry and in 2004 with additional visitors for the Olympic Games, Greece could see an unprecedented year of economic gain. The Marbles as an important tourist attraction in Britain continue to draw large crowds to the British Museum. This paper illustrates the deployment of the Marbles in the global economy of cultural commodities, and the ambiguities and ironies surrounding these transactions. The central issue of this paper is not the repatriation of the Marbles (although the issue is discussed to some extent), but the motives of each country to “own” the Marbles.

Historical Background

An acropolis, literally “high city,” was a central feature of most ancient Greek city-states. “No other acropolis was as successful as the Athenian: a massive urban focus that was always within view, and that at various times throughout uninterrupted 6,000-year-long cultural history served as a dwelling place, fortress, sanctuary and symbol—often all at the same time” (Hurwit 1999, 4). With high sheer rock walls on all sides it was an easily defensible location. By the end of the sixth century B.C., the Acropolis was no longer a protected residential area. Relatively more peaceful times, and resulting expansion of the city, meant that Athens was no longer limited to this citadel and now stretched around its lower flanks. By this time, the Acropolis had become the site of the city’s most important religious cults and, most importantly, the center of the city’s titular deity, Athena. Herodotus records that in 480 B.C., at the time of the second Persian invasion, the entire Acropolis was plundered and then burned by the invaders. Among the buildings lost were the temple to Athena Polias and the temple to Athena Parthenos, the latter still under construction at the time of the attack.

After their victory against the Persians at Plataea in 479 B.C., Athenians returned to their abandoned city and found all the buildings on the Acropolis had been laid to waste. Pericles wanted to rebuild the city and make it an artistic,

cultural, and political center. The Parthenon and the temple of the Maiden (Athene Parthenos), from which the Marbles came, were erected between 447 and 438 B.C. We know the architects, we know where the marble was quarried (Matthews 1992; Korres 1995; Pike 2002), we know that the votive statue of Athene was by Phidias and that he supervised the carving of the Marbles (St. Clair 1998, 46), and we also know in some detail what payments were made in the drachmas of antiquity (St. Clair 1998, 48). The construction of the Parthenon and the Acropolis involved a large workforce, many resources, and a vast amount of gold. The project was an exercise in conspicuous consumption, with clear political symbolism communicating the Athenian military victory over the Persians (Hamilakis 1999, 305) and sending a clear message to those city-states and warring nations contemplating a challenge to Athenian political dominance.

In the *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, Thucydides writes that “if only the temples and the foundations remained . . . one would conjecture that [Athens] had been twice as powerful as in fact it is.” Plutarch in his *Pericles* emphasizes that the reconstruction (at public expense) was a testament to the city’s wealth and power. Both Plutarch and Thucydides believe that architecture conveys both the power and the glory of its makers. In the past, as today, the question of whether the Parthenon serves as an outstanding and enduring achievement as suggested by Plutarch or only as propaganda, as Thucydides seems to suggest, is still relevant. Over the centuries changes in the symbolic meaning of the Parthenon illustrate a transformation in how the space and material culture was coopted for different audiences. Emptied of its deities and treasures, the Temple withstood its conversion into a church, a mosque and, finally, an arsenal.

In 1686 an alliance of European powers led by Venice and financed by the pope renewed their long-standing war on the Ottoman Empire. In 1687 Italian general Francesco Morosini led an army to free Greece from the Turks. During the siege the Ottoman military used the Acropolis as a vantage point and turned the Parthenon into a storage facility for ammunition. The fortifications were no match for modern warfare; the strategic significance of the Acropolis was negligible (Hurwit 1999, 291). Still the symbolic importance of the site was evident and Morosini reluctantly ordered his troops to surround the area. “Though it was now a mosque, the Parthenon had once been the cathedral of Athens and the Turks, overestimating European reverence for holy buildings and the Classical past, thought that Morosini’s men would not attack” (Hurwit 1999, 192). During the siege by the Venetians, a single shell pierced the roof of the Parthenon, directly hitting the gunpowder, igniting a colossal explosion that blew away the roof, two-thirds of the old cella walls, and brought down a series of colonnades that supported the metopes and frieze slabs (Hurwit 1999, 292).

Not only did Morosini and his men attack but they also took home some spoils of victory:

When the garrison surrendered and Morosini took possession of the Acropolis he decided to take home to Venice a trophy of his conquest the large group of sculptures from the west pediment which had survived the explosion. But when his engineers were lowering the massive statues their cables broke and the whole group was shattered. A head from one of the pedimental figures, now in Paris, was taken back to Venice by Morosini's secretary. Two heads from a metope, now in Copenhagen, were taken by another officer in his army. The following year Morosini was compelled to withdraw from Athens leaving the Acropolis a heap of marble rubble. More damage was done to the Parthenon in half a year than in all its previous history. (St. Clair 1998, 57)

For the next century or so the rubble from the Parthenon provided hearthstones and doorsteps for Athenian peasants and mortar for the building trade, while Ottoman soldiers used the carved figures for target practice. With every earthquake tremor more of both the building and the sculptures fell.

From the seventeenth century, with the onset of Classicism as one of the main ideological forces in the West, the classical monuments of Greece and Rome again became the center of European attention. Western Europeans traveled to Greece for inspiration and to experience the Classical ideal. This led to a corpus of travel writings and memoirs, as well as the "collecting" of many pieces of antiquity (Hamilakis 1999, 306). British readers became familiar with the features and sculptures of the Parthenon from the descriptions and illustrations in *The Antiquities of Athens* (1762) by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett. The designs in their book became the templates and models for many British stately homes and public buildings.

In 1795, Thomas Bruce, the seventh earl of Elgin (known as Lord Elgin), a career diplomat posted to Constantinople in the Ottoman Empire, went in search of classical inspiration. Elgin had been occupied for some years building a grand country house in Scotland, Broomhall. He engaged a rising young architect, Thomas Harrison, an excellent designer in the Greek style and passionate admirer of Greek classical architecture. Harrison strongly encouraged Elgin to arrange for drawings to be made of the Greek antiquities in Athens and especially "to bring back plaster casts in the round of the actual surviving objects. There was no suggestion at that time that the original remains themselves should be removed" (St. Clair 1998, 34).

Lord Elgin approached Sultan Selim III in November 1799 for permission to sketch and to make casts of the statuary and architectural elements of the Acropolis. Here the tale grows murky. Did he bribe the Ottomans, the ruling power? Did he exceed the authority given him by the permit? Did he remove sculptures that were safe and secure in their high original positions? Did his appetite for rescue develop into greed, unscrupulous, corrupt, and unethical?

The original Turkish firman (an official letter from the Ottoman government conferring favors) has long since been lost and the remaining copy is in Italian, subject to varied interpretations. The initial legal controversy of the Marbles turns on the seventeenth-century meaning of the Italian word *qualche*. Usually translated as “some,” it should read “some pieces of stone with inscriptions and figures.” But it can also be translated as “any.” Whether or not the original firman gave Lord Elgin this sweeping permission, Elgin’s men, led by the Italian landscape painter Giovanni Battista Lusieri and the less scrupulous Reverend Phillip Hunt, liberally interpreted the vague document. With Elgin’s enthusiastic if long-distance support (Elgin only visited Athens only twice, and very briefly), they immediately began dismantling the Parthenon frieze (Hurwit 1999, 296).

Under the law of the time the acts of the Ottoman officials with respect to persons and property under their authority were presumably valid (Merryman 1985, 1897). Some scholars believe that the Ottomans had a solid claim to legal authority over the Parthenon because it was public property, which the respective successor nation acquires on a change of sovereignty (O’Connell 1956, 226–27). In a series of articles based on extensive research into the question of the Turkish firman, legal scholar David Rudenstine has come to the conclusion that Elgin did not request or receive permission to remove the Marbles (Rudenstine 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002). Other experts have also questioned the Ottoman claim to legal authority over the Athenian Acropolis (Eagan 2001; Reppas 1999). In absentia, Elgin was convinced by Lusieri and Hunt that the sculptures were in grave danger from Turkish neglect. By the end of the expedition Elgin had accumulated much of the best of what the Acropolis had to offer. Elgin thought he was rescuing and preserving sublime examples of a culture that was the heritage of the West rather than specifically that of an Athenian culture. As Vinson (this volume) notes, “The British Empire wished to identify with the prestige of the Greek culture. This was not out of racial identification with the ancient Greeks. Rather, there was a sense that the British, as the greatest, freest, people on Earth, were the most natural possessors of the objects.”

Elgin left Constantinople in January 1803. The sculptures ended up in London’s custom house in 1804, after a long and adventurous journey involving the sinking of the ship *Mentor*, which carried one shipment of sculptures, subsequently recovered by Greek fishermen (Hamilakis 1999; Hitchens 1997). The remaining shipments of the Parthenon frieze remained in the custom’s house for two years during Lord Elgin’s French imprisonment. Napoleon’s forces seized Elgin on his way back to Britain and held him hostage using the Marbles as their ransom demand. Elgin refused to give up his beloved Marbles; he even lost his nose to a disfiguring disease. On returning to England, Elgin found himself destitute and with no means or motive for returning to Broomhall, and his only option was to sell

the Marbles. He placed the Marbles in the dirty, damp shed and grounds of his Park Lane house, where they remained for years, decaying in London's damp climate, while he tried to find a buyer. As the Marbles languished in Elgin's musty storerooms, they became the stuff of legend in London, inspiring artists, poets, authors, architects, and the general populace.

The classical style of architecture swiftly adopted by the nation and the mystique of the Marbles added to this craze. Some twelve years later, in 1816, the Marbles were bought by the British government through an act of Parliament. When Elgin offered the Marbles for sale, there was much public debate on the issue, specifically centered on whether Elgin illegally exported the Marbles, whether he abused his position as ambassador to obtain the Marbles, and whether he was trying to get rich by selling the collection (St. Clair 1998, 274). Both the government and the public opposed the purchase. In the end the Parliament purchased the entire collection for far less than the original asking price, by a vote of 82–30 (Trade Environmental Database 2002). Intriguing, the thirty members voting against felt Elgin improperly took the Marbles from Athens (Greenfield 1996, 59–63). Once purchased, the Marbles were subsequently transferred to the British Museum, where a special gallery was built and where they reside today.

According to Richard Prentice (2001, 8), museums are today immersed in a wider commodification of culture: the extensive proffering of artifacts as a means of attaining the real. The majority of the Parthenon sculptures now reside at the British Museum (Hitchens 2001, 84), where the visitor can experience the “real” Parthenon by viewing the sculptures on display in the Duveen Gallery. In the earlier part of this century Lord Duveen had the Marbles scrubbed with wire brushes to make them look more attractive. The British Museum buried the report of this treatment and kept the sculptures out of view for ten years, hoping that the damage wouldn't be noticed (St. Clair 1999). Arguments have been made that removing the sculptures from the Parthenon saved them from the pollution and earthquakes that plague Athens (Daley 2001, 88). But is this really for the best? Is the museum providing the best educational experience for the viewers by exhibiting the Marbles out of their original context? And is the audience having the “real” experience that the sculptor Phidias intended by considering the Marbles at eye level against the backdrop of a stone wall instead of hundreds of feet in the air against the brilliant blue of the Athenian sky?

In the very first years of the nineteenth century it must have seemed inconceivable to Elgin that the Greeks would in 1821 begin to wrest their independence from the Ottoman Empire and be a Christian kingdom by 1829 that took up the heritage of the ancient Greeks as its patrimony; he could only see his precious Marbles in terms of more hearth stones, more marble dust for mortar, more fingers, toes, and noses knocked off by potshot musketry. Had Attica remained un-

der Ottoman rule—as did Epirus, Macedonia, and Roumelia throughout the nineteenth century—even the Greeks might be grateful for his preservation of the Marbles, rather than vilifying Elgin's rescue operation. Elgin “saved” the Marbles, but should Britain now possess them?

To whom should the Marbles belong? According to Christopher Hitchens (2001, 88), the eminent political writer, the Marbles belong to the collective:

Not to us, not to Greece, not to London, not to Lord Duveen nor to the Elgin family heirs. They belong to Phidias and Pericles. To whom does the whole belong? The whole belongs to us, because it is the nearest definition of the global continuity and artistic patrimony (Hitchens 2001, 88)

Professor J. H. Merryman (1985, 1916), a noted legal expert on cultural repatriation, argues that “everyone has an interest in the preservation and disposition of the Elgin Marbles; the matter does not touch only on Greek and English interests. The Marbles are the cultural heritage of all mankind.” The idea that the Marbles represent the heritage of all people is based on the preamble of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which states that “cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever is the cultural heritage of mankind.” It is this sense of collective ownership that forms the basis for the concept of cultural internationalism (Merryman 1984) and begs the question of where and how cultural artifacts should be stored, displayed and interpreted.

The Greek government has officially requested the return of the Marbles on a number of occasions. The first request was submitted to the British government on October 1983 through diplomatic channels. “The Greek Minister of Culture, Mrs. Mercouri played into the hands of the museum authorities by asking the British ‘to make a sentimental and political gesture’ by returning the Parthenon frieze to Athens” (Wilson 1985, 99). The appeal was made so that the Marbles might be reunited in one collection, in a museum to be built at the foot of the Acropolis Hill where the remains of the Parthenon temple stand.

An interesting topic that is often debated when the issue of the Marbles arises is that of laches, the legal doctrine whereby those who take too long to assert a legal right lose their entitlement to compensation. According to Merryman (1985), Greece may no longer be able to claim ownership due to the extensive passage of time, regardless of whether or not the acquisition was legal. Greek independence from the Ottomans dates to 1828, and thus the Greeks had over 150 years to pursue their legal remedies before they finally demanded the return of the Marbles in 1983 (Merryman 1985, 1900). It appears that Greece may have lost any right of action they might have had for the recovery of the Marbles before an English court, where the application statute of limitations is six years (United Kingdom

Statute 1980). Thus far Greek governments have avoided making a narrow legal claim, wishing to avoid a judgment asserting that they have no legal standing in this case (Allan 2000).

The British have done everything in their power to keep the Marbles in England. They have refused official requests by the Greek government, refused international arbitration, and as of this writing, and have steadfastly clung to the conviction that the Marbles belong in Britain (Greenfield 1996, 107).

A Question of Restitution

Why should the Elgin Marbles be returned to Greece? From the Greek perspective, there are four points supporting their claims. First, the monument to which the sculptures belong is in Athens (Hellenic Ministry of Culture 2002). Second, in Athens the Marbles will be exhibited within sight of the Parthenon, and the visitor can form a complete image of the temple in its entirety (Prunty 1984, 1178). Third, the cultural and historical significance of the sculptures as well as their aesthetic importance to Greece act as symbols of national heritage—the symbol of Greek Classical civilization at its apogee. And fourth, “the Marbles were removed during a period of foreign occupation when the Greek people had no say in the matter” (Greenfield 1996, 83). Following this argument, the Marbles were wrongly taken by Lord Elgin and have never legally or morally belonged to him or Britain (Merryman 1985, 1897).

The British have consistently provided four arguments justifying their retention of the Marbles. First, the Marbles were removed legitimately on the basis of a legal document—the Sultan’s firman. Second, returning the Marbles to Greece would constitute a precedent for the universal removal of major acquisitions of the world’s museums, thus limiting the role of the museum in the education of the populace (Trade Environmental Database 2002). Third, the removals were necessary on conservation grounds, and they have proved highly beneficial in preserving the sculptures from 150 years of high levels of pollution in Athens. Fourth, the Marbles have become an integral part of the British cultural heritage (Reppas 1999, 917).

In theory, repatriation should be easy. Cultural property is, for most legal purposes, like other property; the owner can recover it, subject to the possible rights of good faith purchasers (Merryman 1985, 1889). In many analyses of this case the legal issues come down to two positions; first, the Marbles were wrongfully taken by Lord Elgin and have never legally or morally belonged to Britain and, second, even if they are British property, ethically they should be returned to Greece. The issue of repatriation, however, is not the only question. Why do the countries involved really want the Marbles and are their motives as selfless as they may appear at first glance?

Why Do Britain and Greece Really Want the Marbles?

Greece

In a 1999 article on the Marbles, Yannis Hamilakis, a Greek archaeologist living in Britain, states, “throughout history the Parthenon Marbles have at the same time been singularized and commoditized” (Hamilakis 1999, 313). They have been referred to as symbolic capital (Hamilakis 1999; Hamilakis and Yalouri 1996), as something that can be exchanged for economic capital or national profit. Placing the Marbles in Bourdieu’s definition of symbolic capital, the Marbles are traded for symbolic capital (Greek pride and nationalism) that is then converted back into economic capital in the future museum. The Marbles as symbolic capital are therefore a resource whose value derives from the ability to access and mobilize the symbols and symbolic resources of a culture (Bourdieu 1990, 118). Is Greece requesting the Marbles under the guise of nationalism, when perhaps their immediate motives are of an economic nature? In its request for the Marbles in time for the 2004 Olympics, is Greece exchanging its symbolic capital—the remains of the past—for potential national profit?

During their original conception and creation the Marbles functioned in the conspicuous consumption that accompanied the competition and power dynamics between Athens, other classical Greek city-states, and the Persians (Hamilakis 1999, 313). The Parthenon was about politics and commemoration of a glorified past. We witness their transition from a political instrument to commodity through a series of exchanges. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were given away as part of broader political transactions between the Ottoman Empire and other global powers, including Britain and France. Napoleon’s attempt to ransom the Marbles for the safe return of Elgin and then Elgin’s subsequent sale of them to the British public by way of an act of Parliament, further illustrates the utility for political purposes of the Marbles over time, although at this point they have made the evolution to commodity, which can be bought and sold. Today the Marbles represent symbols of the glories of the Classical era, the seed of Western democracy; but they have become commodities to be consumed by a global audience.

Their value is not only as a Greek icon but also as a contested commodity in the sphere of nationalistic movements. Nations all over the globe, as well as the collective European Community, have weighed in on this repatriation issue. In the United States, the 107th Congress introduced a concurrent resolution, “Expressing the Sense that the Parthenon Marbles Should be Returned to Greece” (H. CON. RES. 436). The resolution states “whereas the Parthenon is a universal symbol of culture, democracy, and freedom, making the Parthenon Marbles of concern not only to Greece but to all the world” (H. CON. RES. 436). This

resolution has been referred to the House Committee on International Relations where it will undoubtedly languish for an unspecified period of time.

Do the Marbles just stand for democracy and the Classical ideal or do they represent something further? Hamilakis suggests that "this issue stands for the broader negotiations of the Hellenic Nation in the present-day world arena, it operates as a metaphor for its attempt to escape marginalization, to remind the West of its 'debt' to Hellenic heritage" (Hamilakis 1999, 313). To be seen as a key symbolic monument, the Parthenon must be viewed in its entirety, a sentiment echoed in a concurrent resolution of the 107th Congress: "Whereas the United Kingdom should return the Parthenon Marbles in recognition that the Parthenon is part of the cultural heritage of the entire world and, as such, should be made whole" (H. CON. RES.436). In a June 2000 address to the British Parliament, the Greek minister of foreign affairs, George Papandreou, reminded the Members of Parliament (MPs) that he did not want to "rake over" the events of two hundred years ago when Britain was an empire and Greece a "subject" nation, but he went on to suggest that Britain took advantage of its global powers in the acquisition of the Marbles (Westminster 2000).

In an interesting turn of events Papandreou then introduced a more conciliatory overture by suggesting joint ownership, the Marbles back in Athens and the British Museum the beneficiary of rotating loan exhibitions of other antiquities. "We are talking about the Parthenon," he said to MPs, "we are talking about the greatest national symbol of Greece. What we are saying is that this masterpiece must be reunified and its integrity restored" (Westminster 2000).

Unwittingly, Papandreou uses the Marbles as symbolic capital in the global marketplace as he barter with Britain for the return of Greek cultural property. By suggesting joint ownership the Marbles are firmly established as a commodity, which can be possessed by two different parties, or exchanged for other Greek items. It is not the antiquities as physical objects, which will be jointly owned, but their value and symbolic meaning, which will be exchanged.

The reunification of the Marbles is somewhat of a falsehood. The facts are these: there are no plans to restore the Marbles to the Parthenon, the Acropolis is not to be significantly renewed, and nothing on the site will ever again be as it was in the days of Pericles. If the Marbles were returned to Athens they would not glitter in the hot sun against the bright blue of an Athenian sky, but would merely exchange one museum for another—an essential precaution, against the polluted Athenian air—and what is the point of that? "The Greeks just want an additional tourist attraction," says Michael Daley (2002), director of ArtWatch, a U.K. group that monitors the effects of restoration on works of art in museums. The bottom line is that the Greeks want to have those sculptures in a museum in Athens that would charge fees to the public and would be part of its tourist in-

dustry. Daley sees no point in taking the Marbles out of a museum with free public access and placing them in what he predicts will be an Athenian theme park.

In perhaps a counterconciliatory gesture in August 2001, the *Guardian* reported that the British Museum "was conducting talks with the Greek authorities about a temporary loan for the period of the Olympic Games" (Ezard 2001). The focal point of the debate has shifted from one of ownership to one of location, thus reinforcing the idea that the core issue may be more about the economics of the Marbles than the nationalistic pride engendered by the sculptures. Essentially the Marbles, like almost all of the antiquities of Greece, are seen as commodities that have material value and viable economic potential.

In anticipation of the extra tourism generated by the Olympic Games, Greece has stepped up the pressure on the repatriation of the Marbles. Over a million people a year pay to visit the Acropolis. During the Olympics, tourism estimates are at 3 million. In the final statement of the 107th Congress concurrent resolution, it was "Resolved by the House (the Senate concurring), that Government of the United Kingdom should enter into negotiations with the Government of Greece as soon as possible to facilitate the return of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece before the Olympics in 2004" (H. CON. RES. 436), stressing the importance of returning the Marbles before the 2004 Olympics. The timeliness of the restitution is predicated on the underlying assumption that there will be an economic windfall accompanying the repatriation of the Marbles to Athens. Reinforcing the notion of the Marbles as symbolic capital, the Marbles are indirectly exchanged for economic capital. Olympic visitors will pay to see the Marbles, the symbol of Greek greatness.

In October 2001, the board of the new Acropolis Museum in Athens announced that Swiss American architect Bernard Tschumi had won the design competition for the museum. The groundbreaking ceremony took place in early June 2002; the museum is scheduled for completion in time for the 2004 Olympics. The Acropolis Museum will remain an empty testament to the colonial attitudes of the West if the Marbles do not appear in time for the games (Alberge 2001).

Britain

Over 6 million (4.5 million of them foreign) people visit the British Museum for free (Trade Environmental Database 2002). At the British Museum, the magnificently displayed Marbles are seen in the context of wider Greco-Roman antiquity vis-à-vis the treasures of other civilizations (Daley 2001, 85). At no cost, visitors can experience the splendors of Egypt, Greece, Rome, Africa, and the Far East in an afternoon visit to the British Museum galleries. Through private parties such as champagne receptions, the British Museum reaps monetary benefits from the Marbles. The Marbles have become prized settings for corporate parties, perhaps

precisely because of their dual symbolism: Western democracy and British Empire at its height of global power.

The Marbles have been in England for more than 180 years and have become part of the British cultural heritage and the British Museum experience. The Marbles and other works in the British Museum have inspired British arts and architecture. In the view of the British government it would not be in the public's best interest to remove the sculptures from one of the world's richest museums where they form an integral part of the museum's collection and where they are available for study by scholars in the context of the collection as a whole. Even if it were accepted that the removal of the sculptures from the museum could be justified in the public interest, the necessary repatriation could only take place if compensation was paid to the Museum. The jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights suggests that such compensation must bear some relation to the market value of the possessions. Although in one sense the sculptures are priceless, it is clear that their market value is many millions of pounds.

As quoted in an article in the *Economist* (2000) British Museum spokesman Andrew Hamilton says "the Museum is forbidden by law to dispose of any objects from the collection, even if we were so minded. And the trustees are adamant that any piecemeal dismemberment would be a betrayal of their role as trustees, and spoil one of the finest museums in the world in comparative culture." In April 2001, British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced—in Athens, of all places—that he has no intention of returning the Marbles to Greece. His reason? They are being well looked after where they are. Besides, more people can see them in London. This stance fairly drips with imperial condescension, implying that the Greeks cannot take care of their own national treasures (*North Jersey Record* 2001).

In a recent panel discussion on ownership and protection of cultural property, James Cuno, former director of the Harvard University Art Museums, stated that one of the only reasons that there might be for Britain to return the Marbles would be that of political expediency. "Repatriation is based, not out of favor, but out of interest. For example, if Greece allows for British air bases so the British would have easy access to the Middle East, then Britain may repatriate the Marbles as a return gesture" (Cuno 2001, 314). Once again the Marbles are conveyed as symbolic capital, exchanging the Marbles for military favors. Conventional wisdom is that Britain will never return the Marbles, but in the prevailing world sentiment toward repatriation and the political pragmatism of the move, Britain may see that the economics of returning the Marbles may be in the best interests of global goodwill.

In its latest move, the British Museum is considering a radical plan to return the Marbles in exchange for a series of rotating exhibitions of Greek artifacts in order to reduce their £6 million debt. Even though the museum has never charged

for entry, in a swap they would be able to charge for admission, a lucrative new source of income (Morrison 2002). The symbolic capital that represents the height of British Classicism is exchanged for economic capital.

The Resolution?

Merryman (1983, 759) states, "if the matter were to be decided on the basis of direct emotional appeal, the Marbles would go back to Greece tomorrow." They originated in Greece and they should be returned to Greece as the primary symbol of Greek nationalism. "Their value stems not only from their origin and association with the Parthenon with its enormous symbolic value, but also from their additional value as a disputed commodity, involving one of the political and economic superpowers" (Hamilakis 1999, 313). Elgin's removal of the Marbles may have deprived Greece of part of its national heritage, but at the same time it has contributed to the increase in their value as an international cultural commodity. Their placement in the British Museum contributed to the worldwide recognition of the greatness of Greece in the age before globalization. Hamilakis (1999) suggests that their return to Greece may in fact diminish part of their value. The Marbles will be removed from the international market of cultural economy, losing their ability to stand as symbols of the heated debate over cultural patrimony, the entire body of unrepatriated cultural property in the world's museums and private collections and continued postcolonial dominance.

If Britain surrenders to Greek nationalistic pleading and returns Elgin's trophies to the land of Pericles, are they establishing a precedent that will inevitably be exploited without scruple and result in the impoverishment, even the dismantling, not only of the British Museum, but of all the major Western museums? If the Greeks back down from this debate and settle for a "loan" of their cultural patrimony, are they not acquiescing to thousands of years of colonial domination and setting the stage for continued abuses of cultural property by occupying nations? There is no easy answer to the debate surrounding the "ownership" of the Marbles but the exercise of thinking critically about the motives for claims of possession suggests a broader inquiry into who should lose "their" Marbles.

References

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