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Nigel Biggar

The risk of 'loaning' the Elgin Marbles to Greece

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A selection of the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum (Credit: Getty images)



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Sir Keir Starmer’s government looks ready to smile upon the British Museum’s apparent desire to by-pass the legal prohibition of the return of the Elgin Marbles to Athens by negotiating a ‘long-term loan’ instead. Since Greece believes that the Marbles were stolen, that ‘loan’ is bound to be permanent.



The first hint of this came four days after the general election, when Dennis McShane, Labour's Europe minister from 2002 to 2005, published an article in the *Times* on 8 July: 'It would be smart politics to return Elgin Marbles now'. Waxing romantic in his love for the Greece of Lord Byron and Paddy Leigh Fermor, he decried Elgin's 'crime' and 'vandalism' in 'hacking off the friezes that were the very origin of western sculpture' and urged the return of the 'plundered sculptures'. Britain needs European friends like Greece, he pleaded, and now is the time to strike a deal – as George Osborne, chairman of the museum's trustees, has advised him – 'quickly in the first weeks of a new government, when all is in flux and the establishment can be sidelined'.

The next hint came on Monday, when a *Times* news article suggested that Labour's vaunted 'reset' of relations with Europe could include the museum's 'loan'. Last Friday, responding to a written question in parliament, Chris Bryant, the culture minister, referred positively to the 'constructive partnership' between Osborne and Greek ministers.

The Marbles have no single, authentic meaning

Making friends is a good thing to do, of course – but not on a basis of falsehoods. In his book-length case for the prosecution, *Who Owns History? Elgin's loot and the case for returning plundered treasure* (2019), Geoffrey Robertson, KC, begins by deploying the left's historical caricature of the British Empire as a guilt-inducing backdrop, describing it simply as a series of cultural despoliations and war crimes. Then he rolls out his argument. From 1801, Lord Elgin unlawfully looted sculptures from the Parthenon, falsely claiming he was rescuing them from destruction. Effectively, this has robbed the Greek people of 'the keys to its history' and 'the essence of Greekness'.

But the facts are these. The Acropolis, on which the Parthenon stands, had been used by the Ottomans as a strategic military base for centuries. In 1687, under siege by the Venetians, a gunpowder store in the Parthenon exploded, destroying part of the building. The Ottoman authorities cared so little that the antiquarian debris was still littering the ground

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more than a century later when Elgin's agents arrived on the scene. The latter then found Ottoman soldiers destabilising the remaining sculptures by prising out the lead from the clamps holding the marble blocks together, in order to make bullets. Elgin had secured from the highest official in Constantinople authorisation to take away 'any pieces of stone with old inscriptions, and figures.'

Now aware of the sculptures' vulnerability, he persuaded the city governor, in the presence of an official from the sultan's court, that this open-ended permission extended to those, too. The work of removing the Marbles then proceeded in full public view over two-and-a-half years from 1801. The last shipment to London left nine years later. Had the authorities objected, they could easily have stopped it. But they didn't. Elgin didn't nick the Marbles; he rescued them.

The argument that the Marbles should be returned to Greece because they represent 'the essence of Greekness' is nationalist nonsense. That essence is supposed to be democracy, and yet in the 'democracy' that Periclean Athens supported when the Parthenon was built, 30,000 citizens elected representatives to the legislative assembly, which ruled over 300,000 unenfranchised women and slaves. That was far more like England's medieval parliament than today's democratic one. And whereas contemporary Greeks may project onto the Parthenon's sculptures an embodiment of their own ideals, their original meaning to ancient Athenians was imperial triumph and to ancient Spartans and Corinthians, imperial oppression.

The Marbles have no single, authentic meaning. They meant contrary things to ancient Greek peoples. They mean something different to contemporary Greeks. And they mean something different again to international visitors to the British Museum, where their juxtaposition to art from all over the world provokes fresh insight into human cultures.

The case in favour of keeping the Elgin Marbles in London is a strong one. Moreover, returning them to Athens out of a misplaced sense of colonial guilt would serve to entrench the 'decolonising' left's narrative more deeply in our institutions and public opinion. And that, in turn, would increase Britain's vulnerability to further unjustified claims.

One such claim is the demand for compensation for slavery. Just over a year ago, the Caribbean community (CARICOM) reparations commission declared that it is seeking over £16 trillion in reparations from the British – notwithstanding the fact that Britain was one of the first states in the history of the world to abolish slavery

and then spent a century and a half suppressing it worldwide. This is where the colonial culture war stops being merely academic.

In 2019 the Labour Party manifesto committed a future Labour government to 'conduct an audit of the impact of Britain's colonial legacy to understand our contribution to the dynamics of violence and insecurity across regions previously under British colonial rule'. As Patrick O'Flynn commented in the *Spectator* in February 2021, the fact that Sir Keir did not dump this commitment after his landslide leadership victory in April 2020 suggested that he agrees with it. As did his readiness to take a knee for the Black Lives Matter statue-topplers later that year.

In March last year, Clive Lewis MP, supported by Labour colleagues Nadia Whittome and Dawn Butler, called for the UK government to enter into 'meaningful negotiations' with Caribbean countries about reparations. In April Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP demanded that the then prime minister, Rishi Sunak, apologise 'for our country's role in colonialism and slavery'. And since August, the Irish billionaire Denis O'Brien has been funding a parliamentary lobbying campaign for slavery-reparations through Clive Lewis's office.

Any prime minister who wants to shield British taxpayers from opportunistic claims for reparations, would treat the truth about Britain's imperial history with the greatest care. And any PM who cares about Britain's historical record would not support the British Museum's effective return of the Elgin Marbles until the strong case against it has been answered. Politics that trashes your own country's past and indulges another country's nationalist fantasy might seem smart in the short term. But in the long term, it foolishly surrenders serious hostages to national ill fortune.

WRITTEN BY

Nigel Biggar

Nigel Biggar is regius professor emeritus of moral theology at Oxford University and the author of In Defence of War.



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