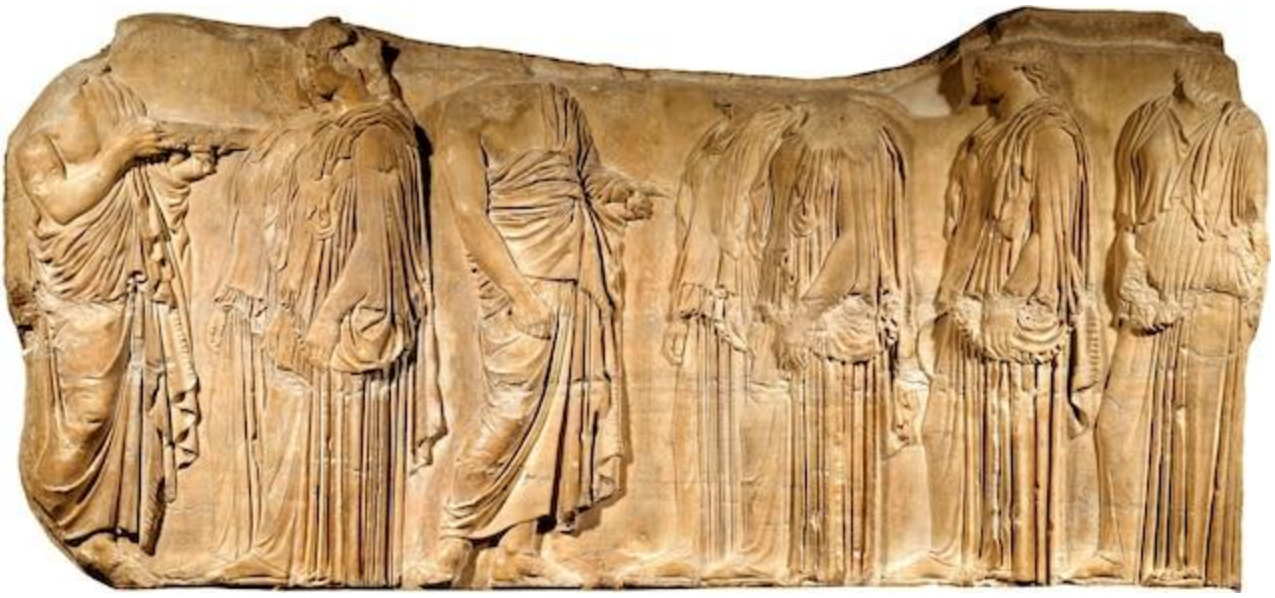
How the Parthenon Lost Its Marbles

In 1801 a British nobleman stripped the Parthenon of many of its sculptures and took them to England. Controversy over their acquisition by the British Museum continues to this day. Was it preservation, or pillage?

BYJUAN PABLO SÁNCHEZ

During the 1700s, a European Grand Tour was a rite of passage for the sons of wealthy families. Lasting for up to three years, and taking in Switzerland, Paris, and Rome, the high point of this secular pilgrimage for most travelers was Greece. On arriving in Athens, the first sight these young tourists would look for was the Acropolis and its crowning glory: the pillared Parthenon, dedicated to the warrior goddess Athena.

Yet even as the Grand Tour became increasingly popular, laying the foundations for modern tourism, this great monument, studded with the work of the great Athenian sculptor Phidias, was at risk of disappearing entirely. Since the 15th century, Greece had been ruled by the Ottoman Empire, whose troops had converted the Acropolis into a garrison, and whose sultan, Mehmed II, had turned the Parthenon itself into a mosque, complete with a minaret.



Detail from the western frieze of the Parthenon. British Museum, London

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSSE/SCALA, FLORENCE

In 1687, during a war fought between Venice and the Ottomans, the great monument was used by the Ottomans to store gunpowder. Exposed on the Acropolis, the Parthenon was a highly vulnerable target, and in September that year, a deadly blow fell: A Venetian mortar struck it, causing a colossal explosion that destroyed its roof, leaving only the pediments standing. Later, the Venetian admiral Francesco Morosini tried to remove sculptures in order to take them back to Venice. The pulley he was using broke, and the figures, including a large Poseidon, was smashed to pieces.

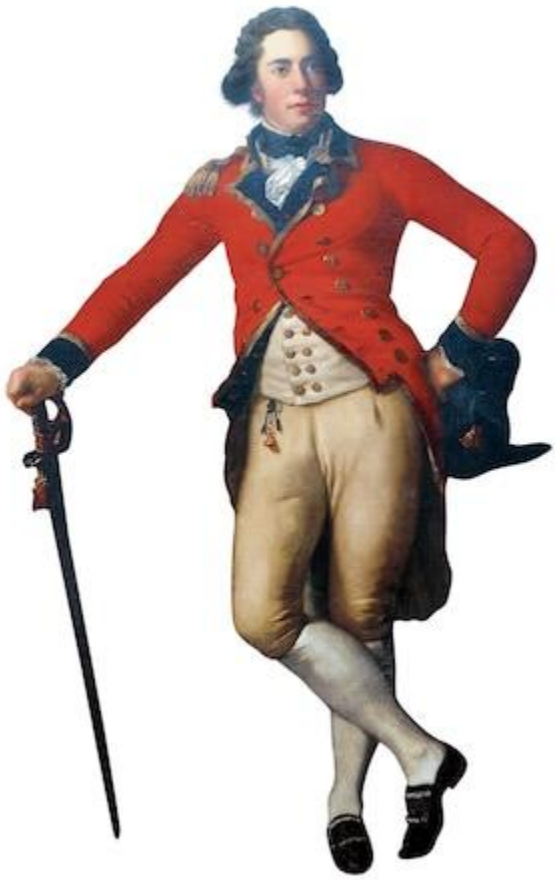
Morosini withdrew from Athens with the dubious honor of having caused more damage to the Parthenon in just one year than it had suffered in the two millennia since Socrates and Pericles had watched its slow rise over Athens at the end of the fifth century B.C.

Parthenon in Peril

By the middle of the 18th century yet more of the ruined Parthenon's decoration had been plundered. The site's precariousness only encouraged travelers to carry off items, as many believed it would be razed to the ground before long anyway. "It is to be regretted that so much admirable sculpture as is still extant about this fabric should be all likely to perish … from ignorant contempt and brutal violence" warned Richard Chandler, an English antiquarian, in 1770. A few years later, the Irish painter Edward Dodwell reported that huge quantities of marble from the Parthenon had been broken up in order to build cabins for a garrison. On hearing about the situation, many western travelers and collectors sought to acquire treasures pillaged from the Parthenon on the local black market in an attempt to "save" them from destruction.

Some collectors claimed this was perfectly legal, as they removed items with the connivance of the Ottoman authorities. Many collections of Parthenon statuary housed in the world's museums today were acquired in this way. The most famous and significant was brought to London beginning in 1803 by the former British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, the nobleman Thomas Bruce—more commonly known as Lord Elgin.

Taking the Marbles



Thomas Bruce, seventh Earl of Elgin. Portrait by Anton Graff, 1788

PHOTOGRAPH BY AKG/ALBUM

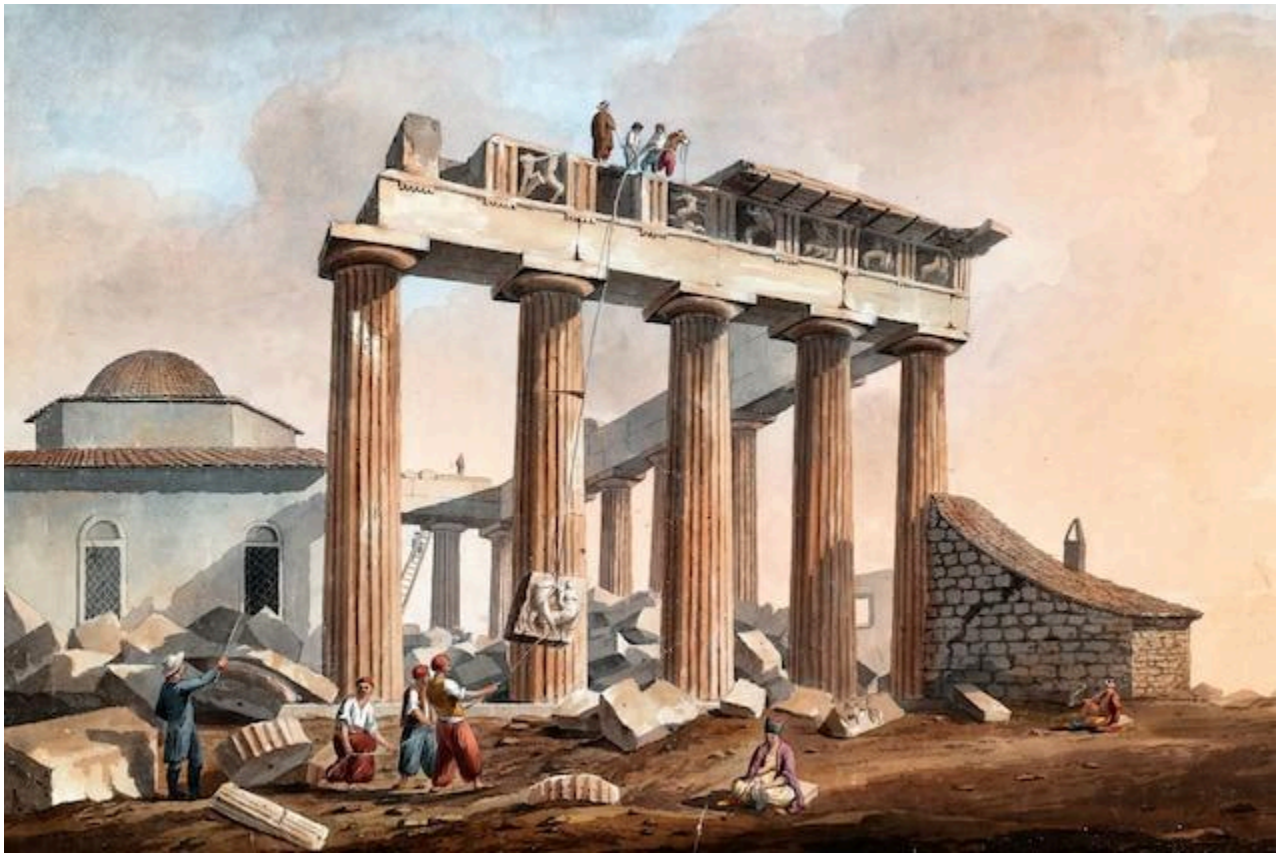
Thomas Bruce, seventh Earl of Elgin and 11th Earl of Kincardine, was an aristocrat with a promising political career. During the first years of the war with revolutionary France, he held various diplomatic posts in Vienna, Brussels, and Berlin. He returned to his native Scotland in 1796, where he built a splendid country mansion at Broomhall. The architect behind the project was Thomas Harrison, who shared his client's passion for Greek sculpture and architecture. In 1799 Lord Elgin's diplomatic services were again required—this time as ambassador to the Ottoman

sultan Selim III, who was keen to foster allies from Europe who would help him boost his defenses against Napoleon's campaign in Egypt, then under indirect Ottoman rule. Having married hastily in September 1799, Elgin set sail from Portsmouth with his new wife, the heiress Mary Nisbet, bound for Constantinople (now Istanbul). Before Elgin left, Harrison urged him to use his privileged position to get hold of drawings and copies of Greece's great monuments. Lord Elgin agreed and enlisted a team of artists directed by the painter Giovanni Battista Lusieri.

On their arrival, Lord and Lady Elgin were lavishly received by the sultan. While his wife organized sumptuous parties, Lord Elgin sent Lusieri and his team to Athens to sketch ancient works of art, as requested by Harrison. Lusieri was given free rein to carry out his work—except when it came to the Acropolis. In order to gain access to the monument, the Ottomans demanded large daily payments, and they refused to let the painter set up a single piece of scaffolding. Lusieri then asked Lord Elgin to request a *firman,* a special permission from the sultan himself.

On July 6, 1801, Lord Elgin received authorization, not only to survey and take casts of the sculptures but also to remove whatever pieces were of interest to him—or at least that's how Elgin interpreted this now controversial passage from the sultan: "When they wish to take away some pieces of stone with old inscriptions and figures, no opposition be made." Having won the favor of the governor of Athens, Lusieri and his men dismantled a large part of the frieze from the Parthenon as well as numerous capitals and metopes. Finally in 1803, the huge collection of marbles was packed up into about two hundred boxes, which were then loaded onto wagons and transported to the port of Piraeus to await their passage to England.

DID ELGIN HAVE PERMISSION TO TAKE THE MARBLES?



Removal of marbles from the Parthenon in 1801. Watercolor by Edward Dodwell. Packard Humanities Institute, California

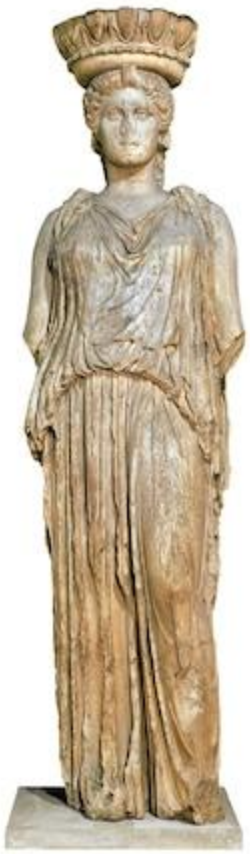
PHOTOGRAPH BY PACKARD HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Any answer to this question, one which has bedeviled British-Greek relations for years, is based on interpretation of the document at the heart of the affair: the firman, the decree issued by Sultan Selim III to Elgin, which was used as a justification to take the marbles. Despite the ambiguity of the language in the firman, the landmark 1967 study by British historian William St. Clair, Lord Elgin and the Marbles, concludes that the sultan did not allow the removal and export of statues and reliefs from the Parthenon. A clause authorizing the British to take stones “with old inscriptions and figures” probably referred to items found in the excavations conducted on the site, not artworks adorning the temples. Later, Elgin and his associates would recognize before the parliamentary committee that

this act was probably illegal, but they justified it as a way to save the pieces from the damage and looting to which they had been subjected under Ottoman rule.

The Marbles Go to London

Transporting the marbles to the United Kingdom was beset with problems from the outset. One of the ships was wrecked near the island of Kýthira, where the cargo of treasures lay on the seafloor for two years before being retrieved. Hostilities with France, and the possibility of the hoard falling into French hands, led Elgin to request that a British warship docked in the port of Piraeus near Athens take the heaviest sculptures from the Parthenon pediments. Elgin had managed to keep the marbles from the French, but the same could not be said about his own person: Crossing France on his homeward journey to London, he was impris- oned and remained in custody in Pau near the Spanish border for three years until 1806. Once back in London, he began new negotiations to get the Ottoman government to authorize the second shipment of statuary, which left Piraeus in 1809.



Caryatid from the Erechtheion, Arcopolis of Athens, taken to England by Lord Elgin in 1806. The remaining five caryati...

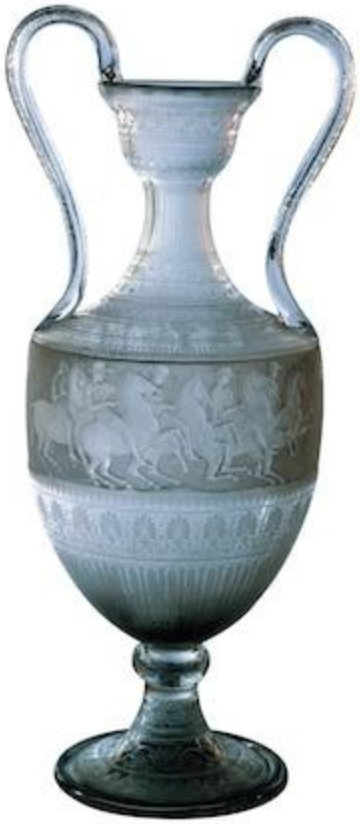
PHOTOGRAPH BY BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

Having brought the statues and reliefs to England, Lord Elgin proposed putting them on public display—a noble idea that was undermined by his intention to "restore" the statues. Elgin hoped to re-create the missing sections of each piece. To carry this out, he put forward the name of the most important neoclassical sculptor of the time, Antonio Canova. Canova, a Venetian, refused to touch the treasures, protesting: "It would be a sacrilege for any man to touch them with a chisel." From 1807, Elgin exhibited the marbles that had arrived in Britain in a house that he leased in Park Lane, near Piccadilly in London. The display was a sensation, attracting a huge number of artists and academics.

The costs of shipping the marbles were paid out of Lord Elgin's own pocket. He calculated he had spent a total of £74,000 in expenses and bribes—more than a million dollars in today's money. Despite his title, Elgin was not a very rich man, especially after 1808 when he faced a ruinous divorce settlement. Feeling the pinch, he put pressure on the British government to buy the collection. In 1812 he deposited the marbles in the home of the Duke of Devonshire and mobilized his contacts to talk up the value of the pieces and warn against the danger of them falling into foreign hands. In 1816 Parliament created a commission to assess Elgin's offer, a decision that caused a huge stir in the press. The country was divided among those who considered they should be bought for the nation, those who considered them a waste of money, and those like the poet Byron who excoriated Elgin for taking them in the first place.

Holding On to Their Marbles

In 1816 the commission finally fixed the price of the marbles at £35,000 (approximately $500,000 in today's money)—less than half Elgin's asking price. Parliament approved the sale by a very tight margin: 82 votes in favor and 80 against. Lord Elgin, a staunch patriot, had turned down lucrative offers from other governments for the treasures, and argued all along that the marbles would add luster to Britain's imperial image. Taking the long view, he was justified in anticipating the sense of national pride Britain would feel for the marbles, and in time it became commonly accepted that the nation had purchased them for a song. One of the greatest artworks in human history was now housed in the middle of London, a vital propaganda tool in projecting the image of the British Empire as civilized and benign.



The Elgin Globet, made from engraved crystal, shows a scene from the Parthenon frieze. John Northwood, 1873. M...

PHOTOGRAPH BY DEA/ALBUM

After spending several years in a temporary facility, the marbles were moved to the Elgin Room in the British Museum in 1832. As the exhibition had an educational purpose, providing models for artists, the original pieces were displayed together with molds of the missing fragments. The originals, in fact, made up only around 60 percent of the whole display. In the 1930s work began on a new room that would display only the originals, whose surface texture and color had been altered due to a rigorous (but poorly supervised) cleaning in preparation for display. The Duveen Gallery, named after the businessman who financed it, was completed in 1938 but installation of the marbles was halted by World War II. During the Nazi raids on

London, the marbles were put into storage, and the Duveen Gallery itself suffered serious bomb damage. The space was restored and finally opened to the public in 1962.

Since regaining independence in 1832, successive Greek governments have petitioned for the return of the Parthenon marbles. During her service as the Greek minister of culture between 1981 and 1989, the actress Melina Mercouri reenergized the repatriation campaign. The new Acropolis Museum of Athens, which opened in 2009, includes a specially designed space to house the marbles for the day—fervently awaited by many Greeks—they are reunited with other treasures from the Parthenon and the Acropolis. Not surprisingly, the British Museum has so far refused all requests to give up one of its most popular exhibits. The Parthenon marbles have become the most visible, and notorious, collection of Acropolis artifacts still housed in museums across Europe, often with the justification that such objects are emblematic of European civilization as a whole, not just of Greek heritage.