

Dear Mr. Prefect

Since the 20th of June 2009, the whole world has been informed about one of the greatest cultural events in Greece, that is, the inauguration of the new Acropolis Museum. Thousands of people have been visiting ever since the museum and admiring its operation and architectural style, displeased, however, with the fact that the Parthenon (Elgin) Marbles are still missing.

The erection of the Acropolis Museum gives us the right to tell the people of England that they can now put into practice what the House of Commons had decided in 1816.

Allow me to briefly refer to the protagonists and to the chronicle of the most important archaeological theft in history, involving the Parthenon marbles and sculptures that were shipped to London in 1803.

But first, who was Elgin?

The real name of the Earl of Elgin was Thomas Bruce, who was born in Scotland in 1766 and who died in Paris in 1841. He served as ambassador at Constantinople in 1799, a year after Napoleon's defeat at the battle of Abukir in 1798, which forced the Ottoman Empire to enter an alliance with Great Britain in order to safeguard its titles and territories from the threat of French imperialism.

The Earl of Elgin is often characterized as an extremely opportunist money-grubber by historians. He dreamed of gathering a collection of works of art towards the aesthetic enhancement of the tower of Broomhall in Scotland. His fellows were the painters William Richard Hamilton and Giovanni Batista Lusieri, whom he sent to Athens in order to allegedly chart and manufacture casts of ancient remains of the city of Athens.

He was in constant contact with Lord Keith, then vice-admiral in the Mediterranean, and asked him to put a ship at his disposal to transport the architectural segments and sculptures from the Porch of the Caryatids of the Erechtheum to Britain. Which he refused.

In 1801, in order to legitimize his destructive actions, Elgin claimed that he had secured a diktat from the Turkish authorities of Athens, which allowed him to act as he pleased while entering or leaving the Acropolis of Athens. However, nowhere in the text is there any clause that would allow Elgin's crew to transport portions of the monuments of the Acropolis to England.

THE CATASTROPHIC PILLAGING OF THE PARTHENON

The catastrophic pillaging of the Parthenon started in 1801. Scaffolds were erected around the Temple of Idols, as the Ottomans used to call the Parthenon, and crates were loaded with the gods of the Greeks, ready to be shipped. The Parthenon, the Erechtheum, the Temple of the Winged Victory, the Propylaea were all plundered and the stolen pieces loaded on Elgin's private ship, the "Mentor." The gods of the Greeks sailed off to England in February 1803 on the ship "Braakel".

THE PARTHENON MARBLES TO ENGLAND

In 1807, the Parthenon sculptures were publicly exhibited at the house of some lord. At the beginning of 1810, the British Museum approached Elgin in order to secure the collection.

ELGIN SELLS THE MARBLES TO THE BRITISH MUSEUM

In June 1816, the House of Commons voted a decree stipulating the following: "... the lord in question agreed to sell these sculptures against the amount of thirty thousand (30.000) pounds, on condition that the entire aforementioned collection remains at the British Museum and bears the name "Elginian Marbles."

FIRST REACTIONS FOR THE RETURN OF THE MARBLES

At the assembly of the House of Commons that was held on the 7th June 1816, Hugh Hammerslay MP made the first recorded proposal for the return of the marbles and suggested that they should be carefully preserved at the British Museum until the gentlemen of Athens ask them back.

Mr. Chairman of the Prefectural Council, Mr. Prefect and Messrs. Prefectural Councillors.

The following proposal is based on Hugh Hammerslay's aforementioned recorded proposal, which makes the strongest case for the return of the Parthenon marbles to their homeland.

*** In 1890-1891, the marbles issue is again the apple of discord. K. Cavafys also took part in the public dispute (29/04/1863 – 29/04/1933), and wrote that "honesty in the case of the Elginian marbles means restoration."

*** In 1924, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Byron's death in Messolonghi on the 19th of April 1824, Harold Nicholson proposes the return of one of the Caryatids that Elgin had stolen.

*** And again in the 1960s, the novelist Colin MacInnes brings the issue of the return of the Parthenon marbles back to the forefront.

I wish to close this short historical flashback with what the Greek Prime Minister, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Acropolis Museum on the 20th of June 2009, pertinently underlined: "We honour all those who envisaged the creation of the Museum and collaborated to this end: Constantine Karamanlis, who conceived and ran the first procedures in 1976, and the unforgettable Melina Mercouri, who gave a great impetus to this common effort in the 1980s, for which ALL the Governments of Greece collaborated."

PROPOSAL

Mr. Chairman of the Prefectural Council, Mr. Prefect and Messrs. Prefectural Councillors and Mayors elected to the Local Administration of Greece, I say that we should ask from the House of Commons of our friend the country of England, to activate the effecting of Hug Hammerslay's proposal (1816).

To this purpose, I propose that the Prefectural Council make a decision and ask from the other Prefectural Councils to send similar decisions to the House of Commons in England.

It would be the first time that the Second-degree Local Administration would have discussed and contributed to this decade-long issue in an organized and distinct way.