SPLASH 2018 Controversial Archeology Notes:

The Parthenon has always testified to the glory, sophistication, and cultural power of the civilization which controls it. The structure was built in 447BC by the Athenian statesman Pericles to commemorate his military victories in the Peloponnesian wars; it is a rectangular structure 70 by 30 meters, corbeled by colossal marble pillars on all sides. It was adorned with the finest marble statues of the classical world – every figure and visage brought vibrantly alive from the contours of pared stone. Hamilakis writes: “The project, [of the Parthenon and its marbles] … was an exercise in conspicuous consumption, with clear political connotations and symbolism related to the Athenian political hegemony in the area, as well as the political status, reputation and desire for posterity of the main protagonists…. the political message was addressed to an audience far beyond [merely] Athenian or Pan-Hellenic society. (Hamilakis 1999: 305-306). The artistic mastery of the Parthenon marbles marked the aesthetic, cultural, and literal domination of Athenian civilization over its competitors: the barbarous centaurs and unruly amazons encircling the structure alluded to the uncivilized Persians, each beast shown slain or vanquished by Greeks of the idealized Hellenic form.

The iconic beauty of the Parthenon marbles has made them prominent in the mind of all imagined communities claiming a Hellenistic past. The imagined foundations of western democracy and civilization are inseparable from ancient Athens; since the renaissance, western states have looked to ancient Athens as the place where ‘they’ began. The marbles, as the living iconography of ancient Athens, are thus indispensable from the western perception of itself: its history, its values, and even its democratic mission/purpose. The emotional and ideological weight of the Parthenon and its marbles in the western imagination *cannot* be understated.

It is because of this immense weight that “the sculptures are the subject of one of the longest cultural rows in Europe” (Ward 2014). Today, the Parthenon marbles have all been stripped from their crumbling structure of origin. They form the centerpieces of museums scattered across Europe–primarily the British museum, which houses some 30% of the surviving sculptures. Since its conception in the 1830s, the modern Greek state has fiercely argued for the return of the marbles to Athens, while the British Museum has firmly refused to budge–asserting the marbles belong to a “global heritage,” and can’t be hoarded by Greece. This charged and complex debate invokes myriad questions concerning the ethics of archeology itself – ideals of repatriation, the connection between modern peoples and ancient precursors, the authority of modern states over the artifacts within their boarders, and, perhaps most importantly, the effect of colonialism and looting on indigenous populations. The battle for the Parthenon marbles is a battle for the soul of western civilization. To understand this battle, we must understand how the Parthenon marbles were taken from their place of origin, 200 years ago.

*Lord Elgen: Pirate or Preserver?*

Thomas Bruce was an English nobleman and the seventh lord of Elgen. Lord Elgen (as Thomas Bruce is commonly referred to) held a deep appreciation for Hellenic artefacts and culture. In the early 1800s, Elgen played a prominent role in driving the French army out of Egypt; Elgen returned the territory to the control of the Ottoman Empire, receiving the praise and admiration of Ottoman Sultan Salim III. He exploited his newfound popularity in the Ottoman court to secure a permit to excavate the Parthenon in Greece– then a territory of the Ottoman empire. Salim III’s official edict read: “When they wish to take away some pieces of stone with old inscriptions and figures, no opposition be made” (Sánchez 2017). Elgen took this edict to mean he had permission remove and bring back to England any Parthenon sculptures he wanted; the validity of this interpretation of the excavation edict has come under scrutiny in recent years by those who claim Elgen acted as a looter without the full consent of local authorities. Yet Elgan saw himself as a humanist, not a looter. As Sharon Waxman writes, “Elgin was inspired by this mission [to take the Parthenon marbles]. He saw that he could single-handedly raise the level of artistic appreciation in Great Britain and bestow ‘some benefit on the progress of taste’ while aiding in the “advancement of literature and the arts” by bringing back copies of Greek artwork” (Waxman 2008: 222).

At the time of Elgin’s excavation in 1803, the Parthenon was a dilapidated ruin of what it once was. The Ottoman forces in Athens had transformed the structure into a military garrison, rearranging ancient stones that had fallen off the building into fortifications and walls; the pillars of the grand gate, the propylaea, had been bricked up to protect Turkish guns. The marble reliefs that had encircled the building had been stripped off by the Turks so the lead frames supporting them could be melted down for bullets. The Parthenon was also half destroyed. The Turks had used the structure to store gunpowder; during the Venetian’s 1687 siege of the acropolis (the raised platform on which the Parthenon stands), the Parthenon had been hit by a direct cannon blast which had caused the gunpowder to explode. An entire row of colonnades was decimated and the roof had collapsed. Looters had further destroyed the structure; Venetian general Morosini had attempted to remove some of the marbles as war trophies after his 1687 sedge, but broke many–including a life-size sculpture of Poseidon– in the process (Waxman 2008: 226).

Despite the Parthenon’s decimation, some of the marbles had managed to survive. Elgan and his men removed many of sculptures still attached to the building, and salvaged what they could from the scattered ruins around the acropolis. In total, Elgan and his men removed “15 metopes [square marble panels set between veridical supports] from the Parthenon. They also took 247 feet—just under half—of the total frieze, as well as removing one of the caryatids (female sculptures) from the nearby portico of the Erechtheion, and four fragments from the frieze of the temple to Athena Nike” (Sánchez 2017). All these artefacts were packed into 200 boxes and shipped off to be sold in England.

By the standards of the time, Elgen’s excavation was entirely conventional. As Howard Carter writes: “Those were the great days of excavating. Anything to which a fancy was taken, from a scarab to an obelisk, was just appropriated, and if there was a difference with a brother excavator, one laid for him with a gun” (Waxman 2008: 217). Waxman furthers this sentiment: “For centuries, plunder had been the rule rather than the exception, and the privileges of colonial tribute and empire seemed to bestow similar entitlements” (Waxman 2008: 223). Thus, a person such as Elgen could strip an archeological site and sell its artefacts for personal profit while simultaneously claiming to be acting for the “advancement of literature and the arts” (Waxman 2008: 222). Archeology and piracy were not distinct in the 19th century. Indeed, Elgen himself acknowledged before a parliamentary committee that his excavation was likely illegal, but justified it as a way to save the pieces from the damage and looting they had been subjected to under the Ottoman rule. (Sánchez 2017)

Elgen sold the marble statues to the British museum in London, for £35,000 (the equivalent of 50,000 USD today). The museum exhibited them stating in 1807 to a mixed public response. Some museum patrons praised Elgen for the sculpture’s “rescue from barbarism” (Waxman 2008: 229). Others set to diminish the sculpture’s importance, most notably influential critic Richard Payne Knight, “who called the marbles overrated and at first declared them Roman rather than Greek” (Waxman 2008: 229). The controversial act of the excavation itself also plagued the sculptures’ reputation. In his book published in 1819, British traveler Edward Dodwell wrote: “I had the inexpressible mortification of being present when the Parthenon was despoiled of its finest sculpture…Instead of the picturesque beauty and high preservation in which I first saw it, it is now comparatively reduced to a state of shattered desolation” (Waxman 2008: 226-227). A 1816 cartoon by George Cruikshank humorously articulates the mixed public response to the sculptures. Depicted is Lord Elgen trying to sell the marbles to “John Bull” a caricature of the English common man who would rather spend his money on practical matters (Sánchez 2017):

**1**. Here’s a bargain for you, Johnny? Only £35,000!! I have bought them on purpose for you! Never think of Bread when you can have Stones so wondrous cheap!!

**2**. I don’t think somehow that these here Stones are perfect! And had rather not buy them at present. Trade is very Bad and provision very Dear, and my Family can’t Eat Stones! Besides, they say it will cost £40,000 to build a place to put them in—As the Turks gave them to our Ambassador in his Official capacity for little or nothing & solely out of compliment to the British Nation —I think he should not charge such an Enormous price for Packing & Carriage.

**3**. Don’t buy them, Daddy! We don’t want them Stones. Give us Bread! give us Bread! Give us Bread!

**4**. Let him take his Stones back again to the Turks. We don’t want them in this Country!!

Despite the mixed public response, the marbles remained on display in the British museum and have ever since. As Sánchez writes, “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” (Sánchez 2017). The Museum’s retention of the pirated/excavated marbles has remained the greatest archeological controversy to the present day.

*Greece and the Plea for Repatriation*

The modern state of Greece has repeatedly lobbied for the the Parthenon marbles to be returned to Athens. The Greek government has asserted that the sculptures were taken illegally by lord Elgen, who bribed the Turkish occupying forces to permit his theft; consequently, it maintains the British Museum has no legitimate legal title to the sculptures because they constitute stolen artefacts. The Greek Ministry of Culture conveys feelings of cultural victimization at the hands of the British in its official statements on the Parthenon marbles: “Over a period of 10 years [Elgen’s] men dismembered the Parthenon and removed sections of the buildings on the Acropolis. For 10 years the enslaved Greeks watched this great crime against their cultural heritage being perpetrated before their eyes” (Waxman 2008: 237).

This quote touches on a key point: modern Greece views itself as descended from an ancient Greek civilization–exemplified in the line “Greeks watched this great crime against *their* cultural heritage” (Emphasis added). This connection is in no way an obvious or necessary one. Ancient Greece existed some 2500 years ago–populations migrate and states change considerably over such a stretch of time. Thus, there is no reason *necessarily* that people living within the boarders of modern Greece should feel a personal connection to the Parthenon marbles and the ancient Athenian civilization they represent. This connection to the marbles and their call for repatriation stem from the tactical political considerations of the Greek elite.

The Greek government’s demands for the ‘return’ of the marbles represents a desire to strengthen its democratic legitimacy. The Greek state was a dictatorial monarchy up until 1974, when a bloody revolution led to the formation of a shaky democracy. Its monarchical past and ubiquitous corruption have kept Greece’s democratic institutions quite unstable, even to the present day. Thus, “[b]ecause Greece’s modern democracy is so recent, it is relatively fragile and in need of reaffirmation by the tie to its ancient roots.” (Waxman 2008: 263-264). The Parthenon and its marbles are indispensable symbols of these “ancient roots.” Thus, “the restoration of the Parthenon has been a national focus as a symbol of [Greece’s] embrace of democracy” (Waxman 2008: 238). The “restoration” Waxman references refers to the Greek government’s attempts in the 1980s and 1990s to clean up the destitute Parthenon and exhibit the marbles it still possessed.

The government’s desire for the repatriation of the Marbles is also inseparable from the formation of a new Hellenic nationalism. Hamilakis writes:

[Greek] elites ‘rediscovered’ their ancestral heritage and engaged in the project of constructing the imagined community of the Hellenic nation, a process which was seen as a process of national resurrection and regeneration. The foundation of the Hellenic state as a result of this process led to the systematic care, collection and study of antiquities, since they represented the visible material proof of the national continuity and they became deeply embedded in the newly constructed national memory. (Hamilakis 1999: 308).

Thus, the Greek elite intended the marbles to serve as a rallying point for a Greek imagined community which derived its history from ancient democracy. The formation of this imagined community (and the democratic mythology surrounding it) was indispensable to garnering Greek public support for *contemporary* democratic institutions. The formation of this imagined community around the marbles and the past they represent has proven mostly successful. As Waxman writes, “the reuniting of [the Parthenon’s] marble sculptures from around the world is a subject that animates the average citizen in this small country of 11 million. Any taxi driver and barkeep will have a strong opinion about it” (Waxman 2008: 237).

In line with its assertion of a Hellenistic past, the Greek government has continually pressured the British Museum to return the marbles on the grounds that they belong to a Greek cultural heritage. The Greek government completed a new acropolis museum in Athens in 2009 to house the Parthenon marbles, should they be returned. The museum boasts on its website: “Today, the new Acropolis Museum has a total area of 25,000 square meters, with exhibition space of over 14,000 square meters, ten times more than that of the old museum on the Hill of the Acropolis. The new Museum offers all the amenities expected in an international museum of the 21st century” (Acropolis 2018). Its reference to “the amenities” is a clear jab at the British Museum, which up until 2009 had maintained that it couldn’t return the marbles because the Greeks had no venue suitable to put them. In another jab at the British Museum, the Acropolis museum has plaster casts of marbles taken by lord Elgen on display, but hidden behind veils (Britannica 2008).

*The British Museum: An Argument for Global Heritage*

The British Museum has mobilized various arguments as to why it should keep the Parthenon marbles. Each of these arguments invokes serious questions about the ethics of modern archeological. First and foremost, the museum asserts that the acquisition of the statues by Lord Elgin in the 1800s was entirely legal and that returning it would set a disturbing president for all major museums (Ward 2014). The Museum’s argument is *legally* sound: there is evidence Elgan had permission to excavate from the authorities in control of the acropolis of the time (the Ottoman Sultan). Yet this argument immediately invokes questions pertaining to the authority of states over archeological sites: should the international community acknowledge the rights of occupying forces to give away the rights to artefacts in their domains? The Ottomans certainly did not claim the Parthenon as part of their historic heritage; thus it would appear Elgen’s removal of the marbles simply represented the collusion of two exploitative colonial forces with no relation to the artefacts in question.

The British Museum has disarmed arguments along these lines by saying that even if Elgen’s excavation constituted a looting, the sculptures would still be protected under UNESCO. For those unfamiliar, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) banns the procurement of archeological artefacts with no clear acquisition history from 1970 onward. The British Museum agreed to adhere to these guidelines starting in 1998. Because the museum’s acquisition of the marbles predates 1970 by over a hundred years, the question of whether or not they constitute looted artefacts is irrelevant to their legal retention (Waxman 2008: 220-221). Because this argument hinges on a superficial technicality, the British Museum has mobilized other justifications for its maintenance of the marbles.

One of these justifications was that “Lord Elgin did the world a great favor by removing the marbles because pollution and grime in Athens had caused the deterioration of the marbles that remained” (Waxman 2008: 239). This argument for careful stewardship was pulverized in 1998 when it was discovered that the British Museum had “cleaned” the sculptures with metal tools and harsh chemicals in the 1930s. Worse still, the museum had tried to cover up its mistake for over half a century (Waxman 2008: 247). It is estimated that “80 to 90 percent of the frieze, all the metopes, and half the pedimental sculptures were damaged by the cleaning. Only a minority were not damaged” (Waxman 2008: 250). William St. Clair, the British historian who discovered the cover-up wrote: “Now that the British Museum’s stewardship of the Elgin Marbles turns out to have been a cynical sham for more than half a century, the British claim to a trusteeship has been forfeited” (Waxman 2008: 250). In a rebuttal, Ian Jenkins, the British Museum’s curator for the Greek and Roman collection wrote that the 1930 cleaning was merely “an unfortunate incident of another generation and another age” that didn’t change the museum’s commitment to safeguarding the sculptures (Waxman 2008: 251).

Yet regardless of the museum’s hypocrisy, its assertion that the sculptures were better cared for in its possession highlights another major issue in archeological ethics. The museum maintained that it knew what was best; it supported the removal of the sculptures from their place of origin without regard for local populations. It said that *it* knew how to take care of artefacts, and that that knowledge justified its actions. This assertion proves deeply problematic if widely applied: it allows colonial forces to simply take what they want under the pretense of their own grandeur and sophistication.

The most powerful–and compelling–argument made by the British Museum regarding the retention of the Parthenon marbles is that they belong to a ‘global heritage.’ Kevin Childs writes that the Parthenon marbles have become “more than a piece of modern Greece’s heritage. They are now icons of global culture; international symbols of what human beings can achieve in all their god-like serenity” (Childs 2018). This argument is reflected in the British Museum’s official statement on the controversy surrounding the marbles:

“The Acropolis Museum allows the Parthenon sculptures that are in Athens to be appreciated against the backdrop of ancient Greek and Athenian history. This display does not alter the Trustees’ view that the sculptures are part of everyone’s shared heritage and transcend cultural boundaries. The Trustees remain convinced that the current division allows different and complementary stories to be told about the surviving sculptures, highlighting their significance for world culture and affirming the universal legacy of ancient Greece” (British Museum 2018).

The British Museum maintains that the marbles belong to humanity, and that by keeping the marbles in London, they are accessible to more of humanity.

Yet this argument in favor of a ‘global heritage’ is loaded with perhaps the greatest ethical problems. Clauss writes: “When perused as top-down [or]…government-mandated practice, Archeology… disenfranchise[s] people from their heritage in real and powerful ways…. This is particularly visible when the archeological record is framed as global culture heritage...that must be shared equally by all” (Clauss 2016: 9). To the extent that modern Greek’s do have an historical connection to the marbles, their characterization as “global” erodes that connection; indeed, many British historians consider the Parthenon marbles to be “relics of an Athenian civilization rather than the modern Greek state” (Ward 2014). Thus, the stripping of the Parthenon marbles followed by their subsequent description as “global heritage” has essentially told modern Greeks: not only is this no longer your own personal heritage, but *indeed it never was*; it was always everyone’s and you had no right to hoard it away.

Furthermore, this idea of a ‘global’ human heritage carries deep national-elitist undertones. Smaro Toloupa, a tour guide in Athens, remarks on a pamphlet at the British museum which asserts that the marbles ought to be housed in a “world museum:” “When I hear that, I feel they are still living in the colonial world that disappeared years ago…Why should England, or New York, or Berlin, be the center of the world? Why? And who makes it that? It’s not an argument about the marbles. It’s an argument about the colonial attitude.” (Waxman 2008: 259). Those espousing a global heritage use it to put themselves at the center of the globe. Interestingly, the Greek government has started to adopt the “global heritage” strategy for its own ends; in 1997, the Greek cultural minister E Venizelos wrote: “The request for the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles by the Hellenic Government is … submitted in the name of World Cultural Heritage and with the voice of the mutilated monument itself which demands the return of the marbles” (Hamilakis 1999: 312). It appears neither side in the battle for the marbles is above exploiting the sculptures to put themselves at the center of the world.

*Conclusion*

Archeological repatriation invokes a quagmire of national, cultural, and political agendas. As Waxman writes: It’s a complicated game, this business of repatriation. It allows fingers to be pointed in so many directions, and in many cases the fingers end up pointed at oneself. It is an endless tangle, with one injustice piled on another and one agenda merely masking another (Waxman 2008: 258-259). There are no easy answers, nor will there ever be. The intense politics of the Parthenon marbles will rage for the foreseeable future. Yet change is on the horizon. The British Museum has started loaning out pieces from its marble collection to various museums in Europe, most recently the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg (2014). As the Acropolis museum approaches its 10th anniversary, perhaps the Parthenon marbles will be temporarily loaned there too. While this may hardly quell the debate, it would be a step towards dialogue and the open exchange of ideas. Fittingly, these are the very democratic values the marbles have come to symbolize.

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