



HELLENIC REPUBLIC
MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND SPORTS

Address by the Minister of Culture and Sports, Dr. Lina Mendoni at the event titled “The Parthenon Marbles Case and the Universal Museum Myth: Policies and Politics”, Cardozo School of Law, New York, 28 April 2022

Dear members of the faculty and the student community of Cardozo School of Law in New York, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I address all of you today at the event entitled. “The Parthenon Marbles Case and the Universal Museum Myth: Policies and Politics”. Let me express my warmest thanks to the organizers, Professor David Rudenstine, the Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal, the Benjamin B. Ferencz Human Rights and Atrocity Prevention Clinic, and the Fame Center for the honoring invitation and the opportunity to present in brief the views of the Greek Government on the issue of the Parthenon Sculptures. An issue with scientific, legal, political and ethical aspects and important international implications, which unfortunately still remains unresolved.

Over the years, I believe that the Greek authorities and the international scientific community have demonstrated with unshakable arguments the true events surrounding the removal of the Parthenon Sculptures by Lord Elgin some 200 years ago. No bona fide and objective judge is left with even the slightest uncertainty or doubt about his motives and methods. Motivated by self-interest, opportunism and the prospects of profit, publicity and fame, Elgin used illicit and inequitable means – bribery, diplomatic pressure and false allegations – to seize and export from Greece, without real legal permission to do so, the Parthenon Sculptures and a host of other Greek antiquities, in a blatant act of serial theft. This theft, moreover, was aggravated by unprecedented vandalism, which caused ascertained immense damage to and destruction of the monuments, beyond the injury to their physical, conceptual and aesthetic integrity. Thereafter, acting as a true illicit antiquities dealer, Elgin sold the Sculptures to the British Museum through the British Government, which knowingly received the looted goods, ignoring the ensuing scandal in British and international public opinion, the direct denouncements and intense protests by eminent personalities of the time from all over Europe.

Greece’s struggle to repatriate the Sculptures began quite early, nearly immediately after the Hellenic State was formed. With the almost concurrent formation of the Archaeological Service, the oldest of its kind in Europe, the Hellenic State actively displayed its strong commitment to defend the country’s cultural heritage. This struggle has since then been continuous and uninterrupted. It became international and acquired a systematic and combative character in the early 1980s following the initiatives of the unforgettable Melina Mercouri and the submission of an official request to the British Museum and to UNESCO.

Right from the beginning, Greece’s position on this particular matter has been, and remains, national, unanimous, unchanged and unambiguous. From a legal point of view, the violent and

destructive dislocation of the Parthenon Sculptures from the monument and their removal from their physical and conceptual context violated existing laws, the common sense of justice and the established morals of the time at which they were committed. Ever so more, based on today's laws, it continues to contravene national and international legislation, international accords and agreements, as well as commonly accepted principles and perceptions regarding the protection and management of cultural heritage. Hence, the Hellenic State cannot and will not ever recognize that the British Museum holds any rights to ownership, possession, control or exploitation of the Parthenon Sculptures. The Hellenic State is constitutionally obliged and morally legitimized to seek and pursue by any lawful and appropriate means their definitive, permanent and irrevocable return, in order to reinstate justice and moral order, as well as to restore the integrity of the monument.

Greece's claim for the return and reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures rests on irrefutable historical, scientific, legal and moral foundations. Additionally, it has a broader cultural and ecumenical dimension. Contrary to other looted works of art and monuments of cultural heritage that are characterized by autonomous, self-standing, and independent from immediate surroundings existence, the Parthenon Sculptures form an organic and integral part of a composite architectural and integrated artistic creation; together they form a unified and indivisible physical, aesthetic and meaningful entity. As a whole, the building is in direct dialectical relationship with the surrounding structures, which together constitute an unbreakable unity, defined and highlighted by the rock and the natural landscape of the Acropolis of Athens. This unity has a particular ideological and conceptual background, and emits specific messages and symbolisms.

Therefore, the violent removal of the Sculptures from their natural environment severs this unity, deprives them of the conceptual framework that allows their understanding and interpretation, distorts and impairs the messages and symbolisms of the Parthenon itself and of the entire monumental compound of the Acropolis. A distortion of this kind constitutes grave and unacceptable damage to any monument. This is all the more true in the case of a monument registered on UNESCO's World Heritage List, and in fact the one universally accepted as all-important and emblematic. The Parthenon, apart from being a creation of unique artistic significance and value, is recognized as a symbol of the very founding principles and values of European and Western Civilization per se, as well as of the global community of citizens represented by the United Nations.

Tolerating the continued disruption of the unity of a monument of such global symbolic importance – which for millennia has proven to be beyond temporal associations and expediencies – and the brutal violation of its integrity and authenticity, is a lasting moral and cultural crime with universal implications. This is precisely why, from the very beginning, the just claim for the return and restoration of the Parthenon Sculptures was not restricted to the borders of Greece but acquired international and ecumenical dimensions. It was recognized, and has firmly been established, as a universal, imperative and always timely demand of the world's Civil Society and of all thinking and civilized people, which has gained the recognition and sturdy support of UNESCO and other

international organizations. On a symbolic level, it has become synonymous with the international demand for universal respect and defense of the common cultural heritage of all of humanity. For this reason, it continually gains new supporters around the world, leading in fact to the establishment of National Committees in many countries to coordinate and intensify actions, which contribute to the achievement of our common goal.

Apart from its legal, scientific and moral dimensions, the issue of the reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures is also highly political and governmental. Until recently, the British Government claimed that the British Museum was solely responsible for handling it, although the latter's fixed stance was dictated by a Parliament decision known as "the British Museum Act" of 1963. Last September, however, this claim was dismissed by the unanimous decision of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation. This decision characterizes the case as purely intergovernmental and within the competence of the British Government, upon which it calls to reconsider its position and enter into a bona fide dialogue with Greece regarding its legal and fair demand. At the same time, it expresses deep concern that the issue remains pending and frustration because its related previous recommendations have not yet been observed. The issue has also been raised in the House of Lords, with many members acknowledging that Britain has the largest horde of stolen cultural artefacts in the world, and pointing out that Prime Minister Boris Johnson himself had previously vigorously advocated the return of the Sculptures to Greece.

Meanwhile, it is now abundantly clear that the British Museum as well has entrapped itself in a sterile, unproductive policy, which, in the long run, leads to a dead-end. All these years, it has persisted with obstinacy and fixation in an anachronistic stance of complete denial, recycling myths, sophisms, and even lies, in an effort to maintain a semblance of legitimacy, order and due diligence around the possession and management of the Sculptures. In the era of the Internet and mass information, however, the already shaky and weak arguments of the British Museum are no longer convincing to anyone. On the contrary, they are recognized both outside and even inside Britain as sinful pretexts, and are scorned as such with increasing intensity. In fact, these arguments constantly undermine the public image of the British Museum, exposing and humbling its moral stature, squandering and depleting its scientific capital as a cultural organization of international acclaim. This is why its representatives are increasingly choosing to skimp over the growing condemnation and criticism with a guilty embarrassment and eloquent silence.

This embarrassment is no doubt related to contemporary museological trends and perceptions regarding the management and display of cultural heritage. These on a global scale now directly question museums of the traditional imperialistic and colonial type, the fundamental underlying component of which is the mentality of competitive collecting and displaying of all sorts of "possessions" and "trophies". Twenty years ago, 19 museums from Europe and America – including the British Museum – sought to alleviate growing pressure through the so-called "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums", which argued against the

repatriation of cultural property on the grounds that such institutions “serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation”.

However, these newly devised claims of “universal reach” and “encyclopedic character”, as if of the Enlightenment period, have already been completely deconstructed by the scientific community as backward, myopic, and pretentious. A myth, which only aims to defend the existing status quo and an ideological narrative attached to outdated perceptions of the time of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, which continues to treat cultural goods in a completely one-dimensional manner as independent and self-existent works of art, completely detached and alienated from any historical and conceptual cultural context. As has already been shown, especially in the case of the Parthenon Sculptures, any attempt at such a consideration brings about a direct and impermissible distortion and estrangement of their very nature and substance.

This new reality should be taken under serious consideration by those responsible at the British Museum, for in the long run it undermines its role and endangers its very future. The British Museum needs to show that it evolves, that it heeds to the considerations and demands of the universal community it claims to address, and that it shakes off the burdens and unsettled issues of the past. Certainly, the return and restoration of the unity of the Parthenon Sculptures is the greatest and gravest of these outstanding issues of historical, cultural, scientific, aesthetic, political and moral character.

At the same time, the Hellenic Republic has reinforced the arguments in favor of its claim with tangible proof of its tenacious will and practical ability to protect, preserve, promote and manage the Sculptures in the most scientifically and technically appropriate way, as soon as these are returned. On the one hand, over the past decades Greece has been conducting an exemplary and admirable project to preserve, conserve, and restore the monuments of the Acropolis, including the Parthenon. On the other, the country proceeded to construct a museum dedicated to these monuments, the new Acropolis Museum, which was designed, erected and equipped according to the latest standards in order to house, under the best possible conditions, the Sculptures after their repatriation. In doing so, it thrashed the last argument put forth by the British Museum that Greece does not possess appropriate and worthy facilities to receive them. The Museum has already celebrated more than ten years of exceptionally successful operation, ranked among the most important, iconic, and visited museums in the world.

The Hellenic State constantly affirms its sincere intent to creatively support and cooperate with the British Museum, as it has already done with other museums. To avert creating a void in the Museum’s collections and exhibition program as a result of the return of the Parthenon Sculptures, Greece has offered in return recurrent temporary exhibitions and loans of prestigious antiquities and objects of high artistic and historical value that will keep the interest of the public high and renew its enthusiasm. In an extremely substantial and symbolic move, the Regional Government of Sicily recently decided to submit for exhibition with the prospect of permanent repatriation the so-called “Fagan Fragment”. A broken off piece of the Parthenon frieze, which depicts the foot of

goddess Artemis, that was kept at the Antonino Salinas Museum of Palermo. In return, Greece undertook the obligation to renew every four years the exhibition of two important antiquities of the Acropolis Museum at Palermo. The first of them, the torso of a statue of Athena, is already exhibited at the Salinas Museum.

At this point, we should also not overlook the enormous new possibilities offered by 3D digital scanning technologies and ultra-high-precision exact copy creation. The British Institute of Digital Archeology has already proposed this solution for the Parthenon Sculptures, which is also endorsed by "The Times" as the most suitable for the British Museum after the return of the originals to Greece. Unfortunately, the Museum is currently not only opposed to this prospect, but recently even banned the Institute from continuing related tests it had already begun on a sample of the Sculptures.

Greece's readiness for fruitful and bona fide cooperation with the British side was clearly reiterated by the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in his recent meeting with his British counterpart, where he once again formally raised the issue of the reunification of the Sculptures. At the same time, however, our country assures and warns that as long as the British Museum insists on refusing, the Greek side together with its growing number of supporters around the world will continue to intensify the pressure until it becomes unbearable and the Museum is forced to reconsider its policy. The results are already apparent even in the UK. According to a recent British public opinion poll, 60% of Britons are in favor of the return of the Sculptures to Greece. This strong movement is now leading even the most conservative British media to change their stance. In a recent leading article that caused international sensation, "The Times" newspaper of London, one of the most ardent opponents of the Sculptures' return in the past, stated directly and officially that after 50 years it is changing its position and asked the British Government to accept the reunification of the Sculptures in Athens.

In closing, I would like to reaffirm that the Greek side, assisted by the numerous National Committees and the highly sensitive international public opinion, will continue to make full use of the possibilities offered by dialogue and cultural diplomacy with faith, perseverance and patience, but also with enhanced vigor, confidence and perseverance, until the reunification of the Sculptures is achieved. At the same time, Greece reserves its right to pursue the claim via legal channels, if deemed expedient or necessary.

Dr. Lina Mendoni,

Minister of Culture and Sports
of the Hellenic Republic