'The sculptures were taken by Lord Elgin while Greece was under a foreign occupying power:
Ottoman Turkish rule in Greece lasted from the mid-fifteenth century until the Hellenic Republic emerged from the Greek War of Independence in the 1820s-1830s. However unpopular, it was not a short-lived occupation. 'Greece' did not exist as a defined political entity until the nineteenth century. **This observation fails to acknowledge that ancient Greece remains as much a part of modern Greece's heritage as Stonehenge is part of Britain's.**

'The British Museum claims that the sculptures would not be looked after adequately in Greece:
This is not true. The British Museum has the greatest respect for the professionalism of staff at the Acropolis Museum with whom we collaborate. **Correct; the very modern New Acropolis Museum opened in 2009 to house all its Marbles.**

'The British Museum damaged the sculptures by overcleaning and then tried to cover this up'.
In the 1930s, some of the sculptures were cleaned with wire brushes to make them appear whiter and (by the standards of the day) more 'perfect'. This was done at the request of Lord Duveen, who had paid for a new gallery to display the Parthenon sculptures (in which they still stand). These actions were highly controversial at the time and were eventually halted. There are, other cases of similar procedures elsewhere. Greek conservators, for example, used the same method to 'clean' the sculptures of the Temple of Hephaistos in Athens in the 1950s. **One instance of bad practice doesn't justify another.**

In the 1990s, the British Museum organised an international conference, 'Cleaning and Controversy', to investigate and discuss the matter fully. It then published all relevant evidence.
Too late, alas.

We note that the central question of 'doing the right thing' by returning the marbles taken by Elgin to Greece is not broached here. The Parthenon Marbles were conceived and executed as part of a whole: the building itself. They are emphatically not separate pieces of sculpture relating to nothing but themselves.

To find out more

More information can be found on the British Museum's website, **britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/parthenon-sculptures**

For alternative sources of information, you can consult
theacropolismuseum.gr
parthenonuk.com
parthenonproject.co.uk

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The British Museum

Has issued a leaflet about housing what were once called the Elgin Marbles. The British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles insists they are the Parthenon Marbles and fills in some of the gaps here – in red.

The Parthenon sculptures

The question of where the surviving sculptures from the Parthenon should be displayed has long been a subject of public discussion and controversy. The British Museum welcomes debate. This leaflet provides some key information about the complex history of the Parthenon and its sculptures. **'Key' information, however, is notable by its absence: the BCRPM fills in these gaps.** It also lists websites that offer additional information and other points of view. **BCRPM thanks the British Museum for including parthenonuk.com**

What are the Parthenon sculptures?

The Parthenon sculptures come from an ancient building known as the Parthenon in Athens.
The Parthenon was built almost 2,500 years ago, in the fifth-century BC, in honour of Athens' patron goddess Athena, and as a statement of the city's power. It was converted into a Christian church, probably in the sixth century AD, and then into a Muslim mosque in the mid-fifteenth century. The building was dramatically destroyed in 1687 when it was being used as a gunpowder store during the Venetian siege of Athens and was hit by a shell. Today it is a much-visited UNESCO World Heritage Site.**Over the years the remaining building, stunning in its exquisite proportions and its prominence over the City of Athens, has been the universal symbol of democracy.**

How did the Parthenon sculptures come to the British Museum?

The first Parthenon sculptures were brought to Britain by travellers in the mid-eighteenth century. **The antiquities collected by travellers on the grand tour, are not in contention.** However, most of the sculptures in the British Museum today were brought from Athens by Lord Elgin between 1801 and 1805. **Only the major sculptures in the Duveen Galleries are the ones in contention.** At the time, Elgin was the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople (modern Istanbul), Greece was a province of the Ottoman Empire, and the Acropolis in Athens housed an Ottoman garrison. **Elgin used his special status as British ambassador to bribe officials and pull strings enabling him to have figures and friezes removed from the still erect Parthenon. These depredations were crudely executed and caused great damage to an already fragile building.** Because of Lord Elgin's role, the sculptures are often referred to also as the 'Elgin Marbles', **an outdated title - they are the Parthenon Marbles.** In 1816, **after heated debates on the matter,** the British government purchased the sculptures for the British Museum from a now-bankrupt Lord Elgin for £35,000, **However, these incomparable sculptures were strictly not his to sell. Without a firman, written permission from the occupying Sultanate, they were illegally taken. No firman has ever come to light, and on that basis UNESCO in its entirety (40 nations) has voted for their return to Greece.**

They first went on display in the British Museum in 1817. **Excitement from the public and a huge resurgence of classical scholarship. In that sense they have been very useful, but after 200 years they have done their job.**

Why are the Parthenon sculptures controversial?

Of the surviving sculptures from the Parthenon, around half are in the British Museum and the other half are in the Acropolis Museum in Athens. There are also some fragments in other museum collections across Europe. **Some of these have already been returned.**

Since the 1980s, Greek governments have argued for the return to Athens of all the Parthenon sculptures outside Greece. **Not all, only those taken by Lord Elgin from the building itself. The first request was made shortly after Greece gained independence, in 1836.** Greek governments have also **– and always have –** disputed the British Museum's **stated** legal ownership of the sculptures.

What is the British Museum's position?

The British Museum's position is that the displays in London and Athens are complementary to one another. In Athens, the sculptures are framed within a Greek national story. **For Greeks, the sculptures are considered part of the fabric of the Parthenon and the Parthenon itself is the Greek national story.** In London, they can be seen alongside masterpieces of Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian and Lycian cultures. **The BM's exercise in universality is admirable but speaks more of imperial Britain's wealth than its desire for cultural comparisons.** In future displays, we aim to bring out these connections even further.

The British Museum recognises the strength of feeling on this issue. **None too soon. Respect for other people's cultures is growing; the abduction of the Parthenon's Marbles by Elgin is a unique case.** The Museum is actively pursuing the possibility of a new partnership approach with Greece. **Some mutually beneficial agreement must be reached.** At the same time, in line with its wider mission, the Museum is committed to making the sculptures accessible free of charge to a global public. **Free access for the global visitor to enjoy is a great thing, but there is a strong argument for the Greeks to be able to see their own cultural heritage in situ. After all, the British can visit the largely intact and contemporaneous Stonehenge.**

True or False

'The sculptures were stolen by Lord Elgin: Lord Elgin received permission **(no, he did not)** to remove sculptures from the Parthenon from the ruler of the Ottoman empire, the Sultan. The text of this permission (or 'firman') only survives in an Italian translation, so some have questioned its accuracy. **A united UNESCO itself dismisses this contentious letter; it does not possess the stamp of the Sultanate. It gives permission only to make drawings or to take some ('qualche' in Italian) fallen pieces of stone from the ground.** Others have argued that Elgin went beyond the terms of what had been allowed. **Elgin without doubt exceeded his remit; these 'others' are correct.** It is clear, however, that he removed the sculptures openly and over many months, with the full knowledge of the Ottoman authorities in Athens. **There exists no proof of a 'full knowledge'. Further, the Turkish delegation to UNESCO has declared there is no proof of any permission. Elgin kept careful note of his expenditures, and it is clear that he bribed officials to turn a blind eye frequently. It is no wonder he went bankrupt.**

'Returning the Parthenon sculptures in London to Athens would "reunify" the sculptures: Clearly, this would bring together most of the surviving sculptures. But it would not create a unity. **Having all the Parthenon sculptures in the same space would mean they would be seen as a unified whole. The figures sculpted by Phidias to fit into the shape of the pediment would begin to make sense, and the frieze running round the outside of the building could tell a cogent story.** By 1800 the Parthenon was already a ruin, with only around half of the sculptures remaining. The rest had been destroyed over many centuries: not only by the explosion of 1687, but also by early Christian 'iconoclasts', and by the local inhabitants exploiting the building for construction materials. **All the more reason to join what remains so as to offer a visual logic to visitors of the Acropolis Museum. This was built expressly with the Parthenon in full view from its huge windows. There is no equivalent local context in the Duveen Galleries.** **'Lord Elgin hacked the sculptures off the Parthenon:** Around a half of the sculptures in the British Museum were removed from the Parthenon itself over a period of many months. The other half were excavated from the rubble around the structure or taken from later houses and fortifications into which they had been built.

Images of the Acropolis from before and after Elgin's time show clear evidence of an ongoing process of damage to the Parthenon. The building was partly incorporated into the surrounding Ottoman garrison base, and it was also a convenient source of building materials. So, whatever Lord Elgin's motives, it is likely that his actions helped to preserve the sculptures. **Elgin's motives were not public spirited. He wished to decorate his Scottish country estate, Broomhall, with them. Only when his wealthy wife left him and he found himself bankrupt was he constrained to sell them to the British Museum.**