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**REWRITING THE NARRATIVE OF NEGLECT: THE PARTHENON
MARBLES AND THE POLITICS OF REPATRIATION**

MA Thesis in Cultural Heritage Studies: Academic Research, Policy, Management

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by

Çağla Aydın

(Turkey)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Historical Studies,
Central European University Private University, Vienna, in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the Master of Arts degree in Cultural Heritage Studies: Academic Research, Policy,
Management.

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU.

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Çağla Aydın

ABSTRACT

This thesis revisits the long-standing debate over the Parthenon Marbles by critically examining one of the most enduring yet underexplored justifications for their removal: the claim that they were "rescued" from Ottoman neglect and destruction. Rather than treating this idea as historical fact, the research investigates how this narrative was constructed, how it gained authority, and whether it continues to influence discussions today. The main argument of this research is that this so-called rescue was never simply about preservation, but part of a broader effort to position the British as protectors of ancient heritage, and the Ottomans as unfit custodians.

Drawing on early 19th century travel accounts, diplomatic correspondence, parliamentary records, and museum publications, the thesis traces how the image of the "barbaric Turk" took shape and became central to legitimizing the removal of the marbles. These texts did not only describe the Ottomans; they helped construct a story that made cultural extraction seem necessary, and even noble. However, the same sources also contain contradictions: moments of doubt, local resistance, and alternative perspectives that complicate the dominant narrative. By examining these overlooked details, this thesis offers a reassessment of not only how the marbles were taken, but also how their story was shaped, and whose voices were left out in the process.

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Introduction

Few cultural heritage disputes have generated as much passionate debate as the case of the Parthenon Marbles. Over more than two centuries, scholars, politicians, museum professionals, and activists have questioned their removal from Athens, their acquisition by the British Museum, and their rightful place today. Naturally, this controversy has produced a vast and diverse body of scholarship, touching on questions of law, ethics, cultural identity, and history of the imperial era. So much has already been said, written, and re-argued about these pieces that joining the conversation almost requires asking: is there anything left to add?

I believe there is. In this thesis, I focus on one particular story that has accompanied the Marbles for more than two hundred years — the idea that Elgin “rescued” them from Ottoman destruction. This rescue narrative was at its strongest in the early 19th century, when British officials, antiquarians, and museum workers openly portrayed the Ottomans as barbaric and incapable of safeguarding the remains of classical civilization. The language was often blunt, aggressive, and unapologetically imperial. Over time, this justification softened in tone but remained present — in more cautious, institutional, or academic voices that continue to suggest, directly or indirectly, that the Marbles are better off in London. Throughout this thesis, I trace how the logic of this narrative has endured, shifting in style but not in essence. My goal is to discover how this story was originally constructed, and to what extent it was true.

To find an answer, I look closely at the language used by Elgin and his contemporaries: travelers, antiquarians, and diplomats, who either observed or participated in the removal, or visited the site in question on similar dates. I examine how the Ottomans were described (often as ignorant, barbaric, or indifferent to antiquity) and how these descriptions served as justifications for cultural extraction. Additionally, I pay attention to sources that do not follow this dominant narrative. With

this, what emerges is a more complex and often contradictory picture. Not all observers agreed that the Ottomans were a danger to antiquity; in fact, many accounts record moments of local resistance, unease, or even reverence for the Parthenon. Some of these moments come from the very same writers who elsewhere accuse the Ottomans of barbarism, while others come from entirely different voices who reject that framing altogether. These inconsistencies matter. They show that the “rescue” story was never a universally accepted truth, but rather a selective narrative — constructed, repeated, and sustained to serve the political ambitions of its time.

Methodologically, my research combines historical analysis with discourse analysis, focusing on how language, metaphors, and narrative strategies were used to produce and reinforce ideas about cultural superiority. The primary sources include early 19th century European travelogues, diplomatic correspondence, parliamentary records, and the publications of the British Museum. While some elements of these sources have been cited in previous scholarship, they have not been systematically analyzed in relation to the specific construction of Ottoman “barbarism”. I aim to fill this gap by demonstrating how these accounts, individually and collectively, contributed to a broader ideological project of cultural appropriation.

The thesis is organized into three chapters: First chapter sets out the methodological and theoretical foundations of the study, taking part with critical debates on cultural ownership, cultural stewardship, the universal museum, and Orientalism. It positions the Parthenon Marbles case within larger discussions on repatriation and postcolonial heritage politics.

The second chapter turns to the historical context of the removal. I recount Elgin’s mission, the political and diplomatic conditions that enabled it, and the early reactions it provoked. I also put emphasis on the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)’s

later involvement and the current status of the debate. I must admit that this is a story that has been told many times before. Yet I believe it is still essential to revisit it carefully — not just as background, but as groundwork. Without understanding how the Marbles were removed and debated in their own time, we cannot fully grasp how their story has been shaped since.

The third and final chapter presents the core of my research: how the image of “Ottoman barbarism” was constructed, repeated, and eventually woven into the justification for the Marbles’ removal. Building on close readings of primary sources, I focus on the rhetorical patterns that defined the British portrayal of Ottoman Athens, and to what extent they were challenged by their contemporaries.

In the end, this is not just a study of one justification for one act of removal. It is a reflection on how stories are constructed, how authority over the past is claimed, and how certain voices are elevated while others are dismissed or completely ignored. If repeated often enough, historical narratives can turn into institutional truths that shape public opinion and policy. In this context, the case of the Parthenon Marbles is not only a legal or diplomatic disagreement between nations; it is also a deeper struggle over who is allowed to speak for the past, and what it takes to question the stories that have come to define it.

1. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Understanding the dispute on the Parthenon Marbles requires a critical revisiting of the narratives that have been constructed around their history.

This removal and continued retention of the Marbles has generated an immense body of scholarship over decades, including fields as diverse as art history, archaeology, international law, heritage studies, postcolonial theory, and museum ethics. This literature is vast and contested. So, rather than offering a comprehensive review of this broad discourse, I identify and build upon the key theoretical concepts and scholarly perspectives that shape the specific focus of this thesis.

Since the methodological basis of my work primarily relies on historical research and discourse analysis, this chapter does not provide an extensive discussion of methods in the technical sense. Instead, it outlines the key theoretical frameworks that are consistently used throughout the analysis of the Parthenon Marbles dispute. These frameworks (such as Orientalism, cultural ownership and repatriation, and the discourse of the universal museum) are drawn from a broad interdisciplinary literature and shape my reading of both primary sources and contemporary narratives. In presenting these themes, I also engage with relevant scholarly debates, thereby blending theoretical framing with a selective literature review.

1.1. Methodology

In this study, I combine historical research and discourse analysis to examine how British actors framed the removal and retention of the Parthenon Marbles as a benevolent "rescue" from Ottoman destruction. By historical research, I refer to the close examination of primary sources from the early 19th century to reconstruct the intellectual, political, and cultural conditions that shaped contemporary perceptions of the Ottomans and justified the removal of the marbles. Alongside this,

I use discourse analysis to interrogate how language, chosen metaphors, and rhetorical patterns contributed to the construction and legitimation of cultural appropriation.

My primary sources mainly consist of early 19th century British accounts and records that reflect both official and informal voices. I focus particularly on travelogues by Edward Daniel Clarke,¹ Charles Robert Cockerell,² Hugh William Williams,³ and Richard Chandler.⁴ These are complemented by the correspondence and memoranda of Lord Elgin, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire who planned and led the removal of the marbles between 1801 and 1812. Additionally, I analyze parliamentary records, particularly the 1816 House of Commons debates concerning the acquisition of the marbles by the British Museum, to assess how Elgin's actions were framed domestically. I also draw on 20th century British Museum publications, including exhibition catalogues, public statements, and more recent commentaries made by different museum trustees.⁵

While applying discourse analysis, I do not follow a rigid technical or purely linguistic model. Instead, I chose to adopt a qualitative, interpretive approach rooted in close reading. I pay particular attention to recurring metaphors and motifs — such as descriptions of the marbles being "in danger," the Ottomans being "barbarians," "ignorant," or "swine," and Elgin's activities framed as "rescue mission." I contextualize these patterns within the broader ideological frameworks of colonialism and Orientalism, to see how language shaped and legitimized imperial ambitions.

¹ 1769 – 1822, a Cambridge professor and traveler who visited Athens during the removals.

² 1788 – 1863, a British architect and archaeologist who worked at major classical sites in Greece.

³ 1773 – 1829, a Scottish painter known for his detailed accounts of Greece.

⁴ 1738–1810, an English antiquarian and traveler who visited Athens in the 1760s as part of a scholarly expedition sponsored by the Society of Dilettanti.

⁵ A British Museum Trustee is a member of the Board of Trustees, responsible for managing the museum's affairs and safeguarding its collection. Trustees have both legal and moral duties to preserve the collection, ensure accessibility, and guide the museum's strategic direction. For more information, see "Governance," The British Museum, accessed May 21, 2025, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/governance>.

Since the available materials are primarily drawn from Western sources, my aim is not to reconstruct the Ottoman perspective in full — a task made especially difficult by the lack of Ottoman archival material on this specific issue. Instead, I focus on how the Ottomans were described by European observers, and how those descriptions helped shape broader justifications for cultural removal. At the same time, I draw attention to inconsistencies and counter-narratives voiced by individuals from the same scholarly circles, which complicate the notion of a unified or widely accepted belief in Ottoman negligence. This approach allows me to examine the fragility and selectivity of the “rescue” narrative as an ideological tool.

This perspective also aligns with recent scholarship that challenges the assumption of passive or indifferent local populations. For example, Fredrik Thomasson’s study of the Sigeion inscription documents both local resistance and early European critiques of antiquities removals in the Ottoman Empire.⁶ While his focus is on Swedish travelers and a lesser-known case, his work invites further inquiry into the rhetorical strategies surrounding cultural appropriation. Yannis Hamilakis, similarly, examines how the 19th century Greek population actively engaged with classical heritage, showing that local communities not only recognized but embraced the cultural value of ancient ruins.⁷ While both scholars work on broader patterns of local engagement with antiquity, my study builds on their insights by focusing specifically on how British actors portrayed Ottoman custodianship of the Parthenon Marbles.

⁶ Fredrik Thomasson, “Justifying and Criticizing the Removals of Antiquities in Ottoman Lands: Tracking the Sigeion Inscription,” *International Journal of Cultural Property* 17, no. 3 (2010): 423–436.

⁷ Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and Its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Repatriation has emerged as one of the most pressing ethical, legal, and political issues in cultural heritage discourse. Broadly defined, it refers to the process of returning cultural property⁸ (such as artifacts, artworks, ancestral remains, and sacred objects) to their country or community of origin.⁹ This return is typically prompted by histories of dispossession, such as colonial looting, illicit trade, or unethical collecting practices. The legal and ethical framework surrounding repatriation has developed significantly in the past fifty years, led by key international agreements and museum ethics codes that seek to define and protect cultural ownership.

The foundational international instrument is *the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*. This treaty formalized the idea that cultural heritage constitutes an essential part of a people's identity and that its illicit removal (whether through looting, colonial acquisition, or unauthorized excavation) represents not only a legal violation, but also a moral one.¹⁰ Although not retroactive, the convention establishes the responsibility of states to protect cultural property and assist in its restitution when unlawfully removed.¹¹ It also encouraged the development of national laws to declare antiquities and heritage items as inalienable state property.¹² The *1995 Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects*, negotiated among state parties by the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT), built upon this framework, adding legal enforceability to the moral obligations outlined by UNESCO. It introduced clearer

⁸ For description of “cultural property”, see UNESCO, *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*, 1970, art. 1.

⁹ Irini A. Stamatoudi, *Cultural Property Law and Restitution: A Commentary to International Conventions and European Union Law* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011), 17.

¹⁰ UNESCO, (1970), preamble and art. 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, arts. 7(b)(ii), 13(b), 13(d).

¹² *Ibid.*, art. 5(a); see also Preamble, which encourages national efforts to protect cultural property through appropriate legal measures.

standards for the restitution of stolen or illegally exported objects, required the return of items regardless of the good faith of the possessor, and allowed for claims in foreign courts.¹³ Though not universally adopted, the UNIDROIT Convention signaled an increasing global consensus that certain forms of cultural ownership transcend private titles.

Another important development in the broader landscape of cultural rights came with the adoption of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) in 2007. Although focused specifically on indigenous communities, the declaration has deeply influenced contemporary thinking around cultural restitution. It affirmed the right of indigenous peoples to the repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains,¹⁴ and explicitly recognized their right to maintain and protect cultural sites, artifacts, and expressions taken without their consent.¹⁵ These provisions articulate a moral and legal responsibility for states and institutions to return cultural materials wrongfully removed, particularly when taken under colonial control. While the Parthenon Marbles are not indigenous property in this strict legal sense, the broader ethical principles established in UNDRIP, including free, prior, and informed consent,¹⁶ and the recognition of cultural self-determination,¹⁷ have been increasingly vocal in repatriation debates worldwide.

Museums have responded to these legal developments with their own evolving standards. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) *Code of Ethics for Museums* articulates a clear expectation: museums should be prepared to initiate dialogues for the return of cultural property to a country or people of origin and conduct these conversations with fairness and transparency.¹⁸ It

¹³ UNIDROIT, *Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects* (1995), arts. 1, 3(1), and 8(1).

¹⁴ United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007), art. 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, art. 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, art. 4.

¹⁸ International Council of Museums (ICOM), *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* (Paris: ICOM, 2004), sec. 6.2.

further states that museums must ensure their collections are built and maintained with respect and in accordance with internationally recognized moral principles.¹⁹ This position reflects a shift from legal defensiveness to ethical responsiveness — especially regarding artifacts acquired in colonial contexts or during periods of war and political turmoil. While international conventions provide the legal scaffolding for repatriation, it is often the ICOM Code and similar institutional guidelines that offer museums a way to navigate the moral dimensions of such claims.

Another important concept to understand repatriation is cultural ownership, which refers to the enduring connection between cultural objects and the communities or nations from which they originate, based not only on legal claims but also on historical, ethical, and emotional ties.²⁰ Though not always explicitly defined in international law, the idea is reflected in major heritage conventions and museum codes of ethics. *The UNESCO 1970 Convention* affirms that cultural property constitutes “one of the basic elements of civilization and national culture,”²¹ and recognizes that its illicit removal is both a legal and moral issue. Similarly, the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* calls on museums to recognize the special significance of cultural objects to source communities and to be prepared to initiate dialogues for their return, particularly when those objects were acquired under colonial or otherwise unethical circumstances.²² As Constantine Sandis also argues, cultural heritage is inseparable from the people and places that give it meaning; the right to reclaim such heritage arises not simply from ownership in a legal sense, but from its role in shaping identity,

¹⁹ Ibid., sec. 2.5.

²⁰ UNESCO does not offer a formal definition of “cultural ownership.” However, Article 4 of the 1970 Convention outlines categories of cultural property that are considered integral to a nation’s heritage. For more, see UNESCO, *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* (Paris: UNESCO, 1970), art. 4, <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural>.

²¹ UNESCO, (1970), Preamble.

²² ICOM *Code of Ethics for Museums*, sec. 6.2.

memory, and belonging.²³ This understanding of cultural ownership positions cultural artifacts as more than material possessions — they are tied to the lived experience and continuity of communities.

Another concept relevant to the discussion of repatriation is cultural stewardship, which should not be confused with cultural ownership. While cultural ownership is grounded in the idea of inherent rights to heritage (often tied to ancestry, identity, and historical continuity) cultural stewardship emphasizes the responsibility to care for and preserve cultural property, often irrespective of its origin.²⁴ This notion is frequently invoked by museums and other collecting institutions to justify the retention of contested objects, framing themselves as neutral caretakers. According to the *ICOM Code of Ethics*, museums serve as “repositories of the world’s heritage”²⁵ and are entrusted with safeguarding collections “in the service of society and its development”.²⁶ In this context, stewardship is about ensuring the long-term preservation, documentation, and accessibility of cultural artifacts. However, this perspective is often in tension with ownership-based claims, especially when the source communities²⁷ argue that preservation alone does not address the ethical and historical dimensions of dispossession.

Academic and institutional debates over repatriation are marked by a tension between competing opinions: one that sees cultural heritage as belonging primarily to the source communities, and

²³ Constantine Sandis, “Culture, Heritage, and Ethics,” in *Cultural Heritage Ethics: Between Theory and Practice*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2014), 17-18.

²⁴ Similar to the case of cultural ownership, there is no official definition of “cultural stewardship” provided by UNESCO. However, the term is actively used in its initiatives to describe the ethical responsibility and collaborative role of communities in safeguarding cultural heritage. For more, see UNESCO, Engaging Local Communities in Stewardship of World Heritage, *World Heritage Papers* 40, 2014, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/series/40/>.

²⁵ *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, sec. 2.11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Glossary, description of “museum”.

²⁷ Defined as “The communities from which objects originate, and whose identities, histories, and values are represented in museum collections.” in Alison K. Brown and Laura Peers, eds., *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003). 19-27.

another that views it as the shared legacy of all humankind. Scholars such as Alexander Herman describes repatriation as a growing global movement, noting that in recent years, governments and museums have increasingly acknowledged the symbolic and material violence inherent in their collections.²⁸ Dan Hicks, in his book *The Brutish Museums*, characterizes colonial collecting practices as acts of cultural aggression, arguing that the continued possession of looted artifacts constitutes an ongoing form of imperial domination.²⁹ In addition, C. Timothy McKeown's research on the enactment of *the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)* in the US further illustrates how repatriation can serve as a mechanism for legal recognition of cultural and spiritual rights, particularly in contexts where ancestral remains and cultural items have long been treated as museum specimens.³⁰

All these scholars see repatriation not only as the return of objects but as a rebalancing of relationships — between museums and source communities, between colonizers and colonized, and between the past and the present. For them, repatriation is an ethical imperative that helps to heal historical wounds and restores cultural integrity. As Herman further notes, there is now an implicit moral obligation for museums to engage with the communities from which their collections originate.³¹ And repatriation in this light is less about loss and more about repair — of trust and of cultural memory.

Opposing these arguments, however, are scholars and museum professionals who advocate for the concept of the universal museum. Figures such as James Cuno and Tiffany Jenkins argue that

²⁸ Alexander Herman, *Restitution: The Return of Cultural Artefacts* (UK: Lund Humphries, 2022). 41.

²⁹ Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence, and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

³⁰ C. Timothy McKeown, *In the Smaller Scope of Conscience: The Struggle for National Repatriation Legislation, 1986–1990* (University of Arizona Press, 2013).

³¹ Alexander Herman, *Restitution: The Return of Cultural Artefacts*. 57.

cultural artifacts, especially ancient ones, should not be confined within national boundaries or cultural claims. Cuno, in *Who Owns Antiquity?*, contends that the antiquities of the ancient world often come from societies whose boundaries do not align with modern nations, making nationalist claims to cultural property problematic and politically motivated.³² He promotes the idea of cultural property internationalism,³³ where museums act as custodians of world heritage, accessible to all. Furthermore, Jenkins, in *Keeping Their Marbles*, argues that the current wave of repatriation demands is driven more by present-day identity politics than by historical justice.³⁴ She warns that disassembling museum collections in the name of repatriation undermines the educational and cosmopolitan role of museums.³⁵ From this point of view, the universal museum serves as a space for global dialogue, where objects can be studied in cross-cultural context, free from nationalist narratives.

While these arguments put the emphasis on access, education, and shared heritage, they are not without problems. The universal museum concept often masks colonial histories and unequal power dynamics. Many of the world's so-called "universal" museums were built through imperial networks of extraction, and their collections still reflect this history. The claim that such institutions transcend national narratives can, somehow, reinforce a very specific Western framework of authority, one in which predominantly European or North American institutions continue to define, interpret, display and care for *other* peoples' heritage. Additionally, the idea that all humanity

³² James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle Over Our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 19-20.

³³ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁴ Tiffany Jenkins, *Keeping Their Marbles: How the Treasures of the Past Ended Up in Museums—and Why They Should Stay There* (Oxford University Press, 2016). 185.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 247-250.

benefits from seeing these artifacts in global museums ignores the fact that millions of people cannot easily access them. So, “universality,” in this sense, is just more rhetoric than reality.

Under these opposing views, there is a deeper ethical conflict about how cultural heritage should be understood and cared for. On one side, the repatriation argument sees heritage as something deeply connected to the places and communities it comes from. It is shaped by history, identity, and sometimes loss and painful experiences. On the other side, the universalist view sees heritage as something that belongs to everyone and should be preserved in institutions that are open to the world. Even though these two perspectives are opposites, the lines between them are becoming less rigid in practice. In recent years, more flexible solutions have emerged, including long-term loans, co-curated exhibitions, and cooperation between museums and communities. These approaches show that the debate is not only about who owns the objects, but also about how they can best be cared for and understood in ways that respect everyone involved. Repatriation, then, becomes part of a wider effort to build trust, share knowledge, and respond to the concerns of the people whose cultures are represented in museum collections.

So far, in this chapter I have focused on describing repatriation, and the frameworks that create repatriation debates. However, to fully understand why certain claims remain so contested, it is also necessary to examine the ideological foundations that caused the removal of these objects in the first place. This brings me to Orientalism, which helps explain how Western attitudes toward the Ottoman Empire (and the East, more broadly) created the narrative in question.

Orientalism is one of the most critical theoretical lenses for this thesis; a concept most notably developed by Edward Said in his groundbreaking work *Orientalism*. Said defines Orientalism as a system of thought in which the West (*Occident*) constructed the East (*Orient*) as its cultural and

political opposite: irrational, backward, uncivilized, and morally inferior.³⁶ According to Said, this discourse was not merely a product of prejudice or misunderstanding, but a strategic form of knowledge production that served imperial domination.³⁷ The Orient, in this framing, was not understood on its own terms, but through Western texts, travelogues, scholarship, and political discourse that portrayed it as both alluring and dangerous, incapable of progress or self-governance, and in need of Western intervention or control. Orientalism, then, was not only descriptive but prescriptive — shaping colonial policy, legitimizing conquest, and justifying cultural appropriation in the name of “civilization” or “preservation.”

Of course, the concept of Orientalism has not gone without critique. Scholars such as Bernard Lewis argue that Said’s approach overgeneralizes and dismisses the diversity of scholarship about the East,³⁸ while Lisa Lowe challenges the monolithic nature of Orientalism, suggesting instead that Orientalist discourse is historically specific, contradictory, and shaped by local conditions.³⁹ These critiques are important, and I remain attentive to the fact that the Western narrative was never entirely uniform, nor were all Western actors motivated by imperialist agendas alone.

1.3. Applying the Frameworks

Throughout this chapter, I have outlined a set of interconnected frameworks that guide my analysis: repatriation and cultural ownership as ethical and political responses to historical dispossession; cultural stewardship and the universal museum as institutional narratives that defend the retention of contested objects; and Orientalism as a lens for understanding the deeper ideological structures behind these justifications.

³⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Bernard Lewis, “The Question of Orientalism,” *The New York Review of Books*, June 24, 1982. 49-56.

³⁹ Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

While much of the literature on repatriation focuses on legal claims or institutional processes, my study shifts attention to the rhetorical and ideological justifications that have sustained the British Museum's position. By bringing together ethical debates on cultural ownership with the critical insights of Orientalism, I examine the assumptions that have helped the "rescue" narrative persist across centuries.

The concepts of cultural ownership and stewardship are especially useful for analyzing how institutions construct authority over heritage. Cultural ownership emphasizes identity, continuity, and ancestral connection, whereas stewardship centers on preservation, access, and care — often sidestepping questions of historical injustice. I use this tension to explore how the British Museum presents itself as a universal space of knowledge and conservation, even as it resists the moral and historical claims made by the modern Greek state.

Orientalism adds a critical dimension to this analysis. I use it not just as a general critique of colonial attitudes, but as a method for tracing how narratives of cultural incapacity were constructed and circulated. The portrayal of the Ottoman Empire as barbaric, negligent, or indifferent to classical heritage is a clear example of what Edward Said identified as a Western discourse of superiority, one that allowed the British to claim cultural authority over many different territories and histories. This is particularly visible in the writings of British travelers and officials who visited Athens in the early 19th century, many of whom justified Elgin's actions by depicting the Ottomans as unworthy custodians of the marbles.

However, I also approach Orientalism critically, acknowledging its internal contradictions. Scholars such as Edhem Eldem have pointed out that the relationship between the Ottomans and Orientalism was not one-sided; the Ottoman elite themselves sometimes adopted Orientalist tropes

in their encounters with other Eastern cultures.⁴⁰ By including these perspectives, I remain attentive to the internal contradictions within Orientalist discourse and avoid treating it as a static or monolithic structure.

This chapter has established the methodological and theoretical basis for the analysis that follows. I use these frameworks as tools to analyze the layered and often contradictory discourse surrounding the Parthenon Marbles. In the chapters that follow, these perspectives help to cast light upon the question of how historical justifications take shape and how they continue to influence contemporary debates over cultural heritage.



Figure 1. The Parthenon as seen from southwest. Photo courtesy of the Acropolis Museum. © Acropolis Museum, Athens.

⁴⁰ Edhem Eldem, "Ottoman and Turkish Orientalism," *Architectural Design* 80, no. 1 (2010): 26–31.

2. Origins and Developments

2.1. Historical Overview of the Removal

The dispute over the Parthenon Marbles traces back to 1800,⁴¹ when Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, arrived in Constantinople as the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. Collecting antiquities had become fashionable among European aristocrats by the late 18th century, serving to enhance social standing and intellectual prestige,⁴² and Elgin was eager to join this trend. His interest in classical heritage developed gradually, shaped by the Neoclassicist ideals of the Enlightenment, which glorified ancient Greece as the cultural cradle of Europe, and by personal ambitions to elevate his legacy and decorate his Scottish ancestral estate, Broomhall.⁴³

As the new British ambassador, Elgin proposed an artistic mission to Athens: to send a team of architects and artists to record and replicate the ancient Greek remains through detailed drawings and plaster casts.⁴⁴ However, shifting geopolitical conditions soon broadened the scope of his mission. Following the French occupation of Ottoman-controlled Egypt in 1798 and their eventual defeat with British naval assistance, relations between Britain and the Ottoman Empire improved considerably.⁴⁵ This new diplomatic climate placed Elgin in a favorable position to request greater access to classical ruins in Ottoman territories, particularly in Athens. What began as a documentation effort gradually turned into an extraction campaign. Many accounts suggest that Elgin's agents used bribes to secure local cooperation,⁴⁶ a strategy that would later raise further

⁴¹ Some sources state that Lord Elgin arrived in Constantinople in 1799, while others give 1800 as the official start of his duty. Both dates are commonly used in the literature, depending on whether the author refers to his appointment or his physical arrival.

⁴² Mary Beard, *The Parthenon* (London: Profile Books, 2002), 76.

⁴³ William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

questions about the legitimacy of the entire operation. As his team pursued official permissions from Ottoman authorities, the project was already changed from passive documentation to active removal.

Elgin claimed that he has secured a letter of authorization by 1801⁴⁷ (the so-called *ferman*) from the Ottoman authorities,⁴⁸ granting him permission to carry out his desired activities on the Acropolis. However, the original *ferman*, which would have been written in Ottoman Turkish, has never been found. When questioned by the House of Commons Select Committee in 1816, Elgin submitted instead an Italian translation of *a letter*, preserved by his chaplain Philip Hunt.⁴⁹ This letter is not a copy or direct translation of the *ferman*, but a translated version of a communication from the Ottoman *kaymakam* (acting grand vizier) addressed to local officials in Athens. While Elgin believed this letter to reflect the general content of the so-called *ferman* and treated it as evidence of his authorization, its relationship to the original *ferman* (in terms of both authority and scope) has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate.

The Italian letter in hand purportedly permits Elgin's team to make drawings, measure and take casts of the sculptures⁵⁰ but it contains vague phrasing regarding the removal of original architectural elements from the Parthenon.⁵¹ As Alexander Herman and many other scholars have noted, it does not explicitly authorize the extensive dismantling that took place⁵² — a fact that further casts serious doubt on the legitimacy of the operation.

⁴⁷ Great Britain, Parliament, *Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of Sculptured Marbles* (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1816), 3.

⁴⁸ William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, 159.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁰ Catharine Titi, *The Parthenon Marbles and International Law* (Paris: Springer, 2023), 72.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵² Alexander Herman, *The Parthenon Marbles Dispute: Heritage, Law, Politics* (Hart, 2023), 64-69.

Claim to have the necessary authorization, Elgin's team, led by the Italian painter Giovanni Battista Lusieri, started to physically remove many original sculptures from the Parthenon.⁵³ This was a massive operation, not only did Elgin's team take sculptures from the Parthenon, but they also gathered antiquities from other structures on the Acropolis and even conducted excavations in other locations in Greece.⁵⁴ Besides the marbles, this "collection" of Elgin's included hundreds of other artifacts such as columns, inscriptions, vases, architectural pieces, and even a colossal statue from Eleusis.⁵⁵

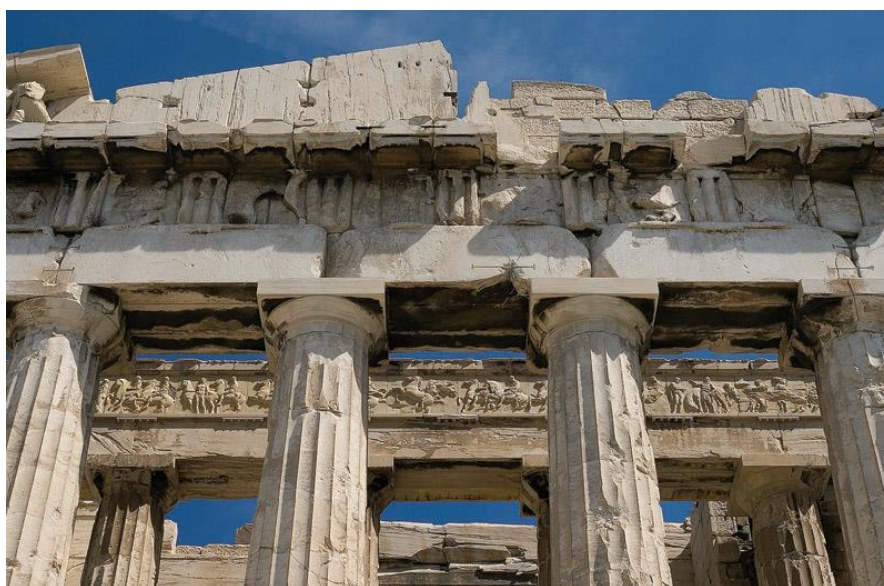


Figure 2. West side of the Parthenon, showing the original architectural setting of the frieze blocks removed by Elgin in the early 19th century. Photo courtesy of the Acropolis Museum. © Acropolis Museum, Athens.

Here, it is important to note that removing large marble sculptures from an ancient temple was a difficult, and destructive task. Elgin's workers had to improvise quite aggressive engineering solutions to detach multi-ton blocks from the high colonnades of the Parthenon. In the process, significant damage was done to the monument itself. Contemporary witnesses describe how, when

⁵³ William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, 91-92.

⁵⁴ Catharine Titi, *The Parthenon Marbles and International Law*, 3-4.

⁵⁵ William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, 101.

the first metope was ripped off in 1802, bordering architectural elements cracked and crashed to the ground.⁵⁶ Lusieri himself also admitted that while extracting one of the sculptures, he “*had even been obliged to be a little barbarous*”⁵⁷ — a confession that the removals involved force and damage. The Parthenon was deeply scarred by the operation, left with voids where sculptures had been sawn or levered off, and loose fragments littering the site.⁵⁸

By 1803, Elgin had left Constantinople, but his team continued the removals.⁵⁹ Crates of sculptures were shipped to England by sea.⁶⁰ One infamous occasion was the sinking of the ship *Mentor*, off the Greek coast while carrying a large part of the loot.⁶¹ After two years of efforts, divers at Elgin’s expense eventually recovered the sunken marbles from the wreck.⁶²

The last shipments from Athens arrived in Britain in 1812.⁶³ By this time, roughly half of the surviving sculptural decoration of the Parthenon had been detached.⁶⁴ The costs of their extraction, transport, and local *negotiations* had taken a serious financial toll on Elgin. He had personally covered the entire operation, which ended up costing him around £60,000, a great sum at the time.⁶⁵ According to William St. Clair, Elgin had initially hoped that his efforts would be seen as a patriotic contribution to Britain’s cultural prestige and that the government might reimburse him or reward

⁵⁶ Christopher Hitchens, *The Parthenon Marbles: The Case for Reunification* (New York: Verso, 2008), 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁸ Mary Beard, *The Parthenon*, 14.

⁵⁹ Tatiana Poulou, “Giovanni Battista Lusieri: Lord Elgin’s Unknown Agent And His Excavations In Athens” in *200 Years The Parthenon Marbles In The British Museum: New Contributions To The Issue* (The Society Of Friends Of The Acropolis: 2016), 65.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶² Dimitris Kourkouvelis, “Recent Underwater Research at the Brig “*Mentor*” Sunken at Kythera (1802)” in *200 Years The Parthenon Marbles In The British Museum: New Contributions To The Issue* (The Society Of Friends Of The Acropolis: 2016), 82.

⁶³ Alexander Herman, *The Parthenon Marbles Dispute: Heritage, Law, Politics*, 57.

⁶⁴ John Henry Merryman, “Whither the Elgin Marbles,” in *Imperialism, Art and Restitution* ed. by John Henry Merryman, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 98-113.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

him with an official post.⁶⁶ But as the sculptures arrived in London, he found himself not only deeply in debt, but also dealing with a highly public divorce that further damaged his finances and reputation.⁶⁷ At first, Elgin planned to use the marbles to decorate his family estate, or perhaps open a private gallery, but his financial troubles left him with little choice but to sell the collection.⁶⁸ In 1816, after months of negotiation and a formal inquiry by a select committee of Parliament, the British government agreed to purchase the marbles for almost £35,000 — a little over half of what Elgin had actually spent.⁶⁹ The sculptures were transferred to the British Museum, where they were placed on public display and began to be referred to as the “Elgin Marbles.” This transfer sparked immediate public debate. While some praised the acquisition as a great cultural achievement for Britain, others questioned the legality and ethics of how the marbles had been obtained.⁷⁰ The parliamentary inquiry and the wide attention it received in the press marked the beginning of a controversy that has continued ever since.



Figure 3. The Trustees’ Room at the British Museum, 1817, attributed to Alexander Day. The painting depicts the Elgin Marbles shortly after their arrival in London, surrounded by British officials and scholars. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

⁶⁶ William St. Clair. *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*. 184.

⁶⁷ Mary Beard. *The Parthenon*. 159.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶⁹ Alexander Herman, *The Parthenon Marbles Dispute: Heritage, Law, Politics*, 87.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

2.2. Is There a *Ferman*?

Before turning to the evolving debate over the Parthenon Marbles, it is necessary to briefly address the legal question at its heart. Here, I do not aim to resolve the legal controversy — many historians, legal scholars, and heritage professionals have already written extensively on the subject — but rather to lay the groundwork for understanding how the marbles' removal continues to be defended and challenged in legal and institutional discourse.

Since day one, the claim that the sculptures were removed with legal permission granted by the Ottoman Empire in the form of an official document, commonly referred to as the *ferman*, has been problematic. Such a document has never been found in any Ottoman archive. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, what exists today is a letter in Italian,⁷¹ presented to the British Parliament in 1816, during the Select Committee hearings on the British Museum's acquisition of the marbles, in Elgin's own legal defense.⁷² This Italian letter was allegedly issued by the *kaymakam* (acting Grand Vizier) Seged Abdullah.⁷³ This document granted Elgin's men permission to erect scaffolding, draw and mold sculptures, and remove "some pieces of stone with inscriptions and figures".⁷⁴ According to some scholars including Catherine Titi, the Italian phrase "*qualche pezzi di pietra*" (some pieces of stone) was later mistranslated in English as "any pieces of stone," significantly widening the interpretation of what was actually permitted.⁷⁵ In addition, the document lacked all

⁷¹ This letter was introduced by Philip Hunt, Elgin's chaplain, who testified that it was a direct translation of the original *ferman* obtained in 1801. See Parliament, *Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of Sculptured Marbles*, 4. The authenticity and accuracy of the translation have been subjects of scholarly debate.

⁷² Parliament, *Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of Sculptured Marbles*, 4-5.

⁷³ According to Eldem, the mentioned *kaymakam* was Seyyid Abdullah Pasha, who served as the deputy of Grand Vizier K r Yusuf Ziyaeddin Pasha, authorized to act on his behalf during absences from the capital. See Edhem Eldem, "From Blissful Indifference to Anguished Concern: Ottoman Perceptions of Antiquities, 1799–1869" in *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753–1914*. (Istanbul: SALT, 2011), 284.

⁷⁴ Catharine Titi. *The Parthenon Marbles and International Law*. 72.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

the formal characteristics of an imperial *ferman*: it had no Sultan's *tuğra* (imperial seal), no invocation of Allah, and no date in Arabic script – all of which are essential to an authentic Ottoman decree.⁷⁶ Scholars such as Edhem Eldem have pointed out that the document more closely resembles a letter of recommendation from a mid-level official rather than a legally binding authorization.⁷⁷

Even if we accept this letter as a form of permission, the way it was implemented in Athens further complicates the story. Elgin's agents engaged in a systematic pattern of bribery to local Ottoman officials, including the *voyvoda*⁷⁸ and *dizdar*⁷⁹ of Athens. These "presents," recorded in Elgin's own correspondence and British parliamentary records, included luxury items and cash payments reportedly worth 35 times the officials' annual salaries.⁸⁰ The idea that these exchanges were only diplomatic courtesies has been criticized by many scholars. William St. Clair, who was first sympathetic to Elgin's account, later concluded that the acquisition stemmed from imperial pressure and financial inducement.⁸¹ David Rudenstine similarly argued that these illicit payments undermined the legitimacy of any permissions given, especially considering that local Ottoman

⁷⁶ Zeynep Aygen and Orhan Sakin, *Ottoman Archives for the Acropolis*, presentation at the Acropolis Museum, February 19, 2019. Accessed April 12, 2025. <https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/multimedia/profs-zeynep-aygen-orhan-sakin-ottoman-archives-acropolis>.

⁷⁷ Edhem Eldem, *From Blissful Indifference to Anguished Concern*, 285-288.

⁷⁸ Governor of Athens, responsible for civil administration. During the time of Elgin, the *voyvoda* had significant local authority, including control over access to the Acropolis. I have not encountered the name of the *voyvoda* during the time of removals.

⁷⁹ Commander of the garrison stationed on the Acropolis. His duties were primarily military, but he also had control over physical access to the site. He held the keys to the gates of the Acropolis, making his permission essential for daily access to the site. According to William St. Clair's *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, "the *dizdar* at the time was most likely Yusuf Ağa."

⁸⁰ Alexander Herman, *The Parthenon Marbles Dispute: Heritage, Law, Politics*, 73–76.

⁸¹ William St. Clair, "Imperial Appropriations of the Parthenon." in *Imperialism, Art and Restitution*. ed. J. H. Merryman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 79, cited in Alexander Herman, *The Parthenon Marbles Dispute: Heritage, Law, Politics*, 74.

officials lacked legal standing to authorize the removal of integral architectural elements like the Parthenon's metopes and frieze.⁸²

Edhem Eldem situates the marble's removal within the period of what he calls a "blissful indifference," during which the Ottoman elite showed limited interest in antiquities. This disinterest allowed European diplomats and collectors to exploit the absence of protective heritage policies, removing artifacts under informal exchange, or bribery.⁸³ Only in the late 19th century did the Ottoman attitude start to shift toward valuing and protecting antiquities, but the damage had already been done.

These legal and historical uncertainties are not just minor details; they are central to understanding the dispute at hand. Whether or not the letter can be considered valid permission, it is clear that the removal occurred in a context shaped by complicated imperial power dynamics, informal arrangements, and legal ambiguity.

2.3. Early Criticism of Elgin's Actions

From the very moment Elgin's team began dismantling the Parthenon, the operation attracted disapproval among his own contemporaries. The first public voices to question the removals came from European travelers, artists, and intellectuals who either witnessed the damage or learned of it soon after. Their objections did not merely reflect aesthetic or archaeological concerns, but extended to questions of morality, patriotism, and imperial power.

⁸² David Rudenstine, "Lord Elgin and the Ottomans: The Question of Permission," *Cardozo Law Review* 23, no. 2 (2002): 464–71.

⁸³ Edhem Eldem. *From Blissful Indifference to Anguished Concern*. 281-321.

Perhaps the most famous and influential critic of Elgin was the British poet, Lord Byron. During his travels through Greece in 1810, Byron visited the Acropolis and was obviously appalled by the damage made to the Parthenon.⁸⁴ His anger became visible in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *The Curse of Minerva*, where he condemned Elgin as a “desecrator of sacred heritage” and decried the act of removing “relics ne'er to be restor'd” from the ruins of Athens.⁸⁵ Byron's critique went beyond poetry. In private letters, he referred to Elgin's actions as “robberies” and rejected any justification that framed the removals as preservation.⁸⁶

Others in Elgin's own country and social circle shared Byron's discomfort. Edward Daniel Clarke, a Cambridge professor and traveler who witnessed the removals firsthand, expressed his concern over the destructiveness of the operation and the moral implications of removing such deeply embedded cultural relics.⁸⁷ His account emphasizes the damage made during the extraction process and the local Ottoman officials' distress at the mutilation of what had been once regarded as a mosque and sacred space.⁸⁸ In addition to Byron and Clarke, the classicist and archaeologist Richard Payne Knight approached the situation from a different angle, and questioned the Marbles' authenticity and value,⁸⁹ while painter Benjamin Robert Haydon recorded public indignation at the disfiguring of the monument.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ William St. Clair. *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*. 189.

⁸⁵ “Dull is the eye that will not weep to see / Thy walls defac'd, thy mouldering shrines remov'd / By British hands, which it had best behov'd / To guard those relics ne'er to be restor'd.” Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto II, cited in William St. Clair. *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*. 189.

⁸⁶ “I know no motive, which can excuse, no name which can designate, the perpetrators of this dastardly devastation.” Byron, 1832 Note 6 to Canto II, 67. Cited in Catharine Titi, *The Parthenon Marbles and International Law*, 89.

⁸⁷ Edward Daniel Clarke, *Travels in Various Countries of Europe, Asia and Africa*, vol. 6 (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1823), 223–24.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁸⁹ Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of Sculptured Marbles, 97–101, quoted in Frank J. Messman, “Richard Payne Knight and the Elgin Marbles Controversy,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1973): 69–75.

⁹⁰ William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, 169–172.

Criticism also came from abroad. The French antiquarian and artist Louis-Nicolas-Philippe-Auguste de Forbin, upon visiting Athens in 1817, described seeing graffiti carved onto the Acropolis: “*Opus Elgin*” (the work of Elgin) written onto the brick support where a Caryatid once stood, and “*Opus Phidiae*” (the work of Phidias⁹¹) carved into a nearby ancient kore.⁹² The contrast here was pointed out clearly — a sign of contempt for what many saw as the desecration of a great historical site. French art critic Quatremère de Quincy, too, talked about the removal and wrote open letters condemning it as an act of vandalism and urging the sculptures to be returned to Athens.⁹³

Even within the Parliament, Elgin’s actions were viewed with suspicion. During the 1816 Select Committee hearings, some members of Parliament characterized the removal of the marbles as an act of “spoliation”⁹⁴ — a term evoking war crimes and looting. They questioned not only whether the marbles had been acquired legally, but whether they had been acquired ethically, even under the norms of the time.⁹⁵

These early voices established a framework for later critiques, showing that from the beginning, Elgin’s actions were not completely accepted and applauded, even by the standards of his own time. The British Museum’s continued reference to Elgin’s purported legal permissions often

⁹¹ Phidias was the Greek sculptor and architect responsible for much of the Parthenon’s sculptural decoration.

⁹² George Tolias. “An Inconsiderate Love of the Arts: The Spoils of Greek Antiquities, 1780-1820.” in *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753–1914*. (İstanbul: SALT, 2011), 83.

⁹³ Antoine Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, *Lettres sur l’enlèvement des ouvrages de l’art antique à Athènes et à Rome*, (1836), cited in Catharine Titi, *The Parthenon Marbles and International Law*, 162.

⁹⁴ Alexander Herman, *The Parthenon Marbles Dispute: Heritage, Law, Politics*, 81.

⁹⁵ Herman mentions one of the members cried “*wipe off the stain, and not place in our museum a monument of our disgrace.*” Hansard, House of Commons Debates, vol. 34 (1816): 1027–40, quoted in Alexander Herman, *The Parthenon Marbles Dispute: Heritage, Law, Politics*, 88.

obscures this rich and conflicted historical discourse – one in which the ethical questions were, and remain, at least as important as the legal ones.

2.4. Greek Repatriation Demands in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Greek demands for the return of the marbles started almost immediately after the country gained independence from Ottoman rule in 1830. The symbolic and cultural importance of the marbles, seen not only as architectural masterpieces but also as symbols of national identity, made their absence particularly painful in the context of a newly sovereign Greek state reasserting its connection to classical antiquity.

A key moment came in 1836 when the Greek Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs and Public Education instructed its diplomatic representatives to pursue the return of four reliefs from the Temple of Athena Nike,⁹⁶ which were removed during Elgin's mission. According to the research presented by Daphne Voudouri, this early request emphasized the doubtful legality of Elgin's actions and was framed not as a general repatriation claim but as a specific and strategic attempt to reclaim fragments during the temple's restoration.⁹⁷ While Britain ignored the request, this diplomatic communication is notable for introducing the language of cultural justice and national heritage into what would become a centuries-long discussion.

Despite this early diplomatic failure, Greece did not abandon its position. A renewed request followed in 1844, this time addressed directly to the Trustees of the British Museum by Kyriakos Pittakis, then Greek Conservator of Antiquities, along with the newly formed Archaeological

⁹⁶ Catharine Titi, *The Parthenon Marbles and International Law*, 127.

⁹⁷ Daphne Voudouri, "Law and the Politics of the Past: Legal Protection of Cultural Heritage in Greece," *International Journal of Cultural Property*. 17. no. 4. (2010): 549.

Society at Athens.⁹⁸ Though the marbles were not returned, the British Museum sent a set of plaster casts of the marbles⁹⁹ — a gesture that attempted to calm the Greek interest without revisiting the question of ownership.

Throughout the late 19th century, Greek cultural institutions struggled with limited resources and diplomatic leverage. But as the 20th century began, the issue of the Marbles resurfaced, this time grounded more explicitly in a discourse of national identity. As Yannis Hamilakis argues, the Greek nation-state actively constructed itself around a material connection to classical antiquity,¹⁰⁰ and the Acropolis played a central role in this effort. Therefore, the fragmentation of the Parthenon was not only a historical grievance — it was a symbolic wound undermining the visual and ideological unity of modern Greece’s imagined origins. It was within this cultural framework that Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos made a formal diplomatic overture in 1924, petitioning the British government to return the Marbles as an act of goodwill between allies.¹⁰¹ The British, however, rejected the request with legal reasoning.

These early efforts are essential for understanding that Greece’s claim to the Marbles has been part of the state’s official cultural policy since its foundation. By the time the Parthenon Marbles debate reached international audiences in the late 20th century, Greece had already spent over a century laying the rhetorical and institutional groundwork for their return. The legal language may have evolved (especially with the development of international cultural property law in the postwar

⁹⁸ Catharine Titi, *The Parthenon Marbles and International Law*, 127.

⁹⁹ Ian Jenkins, “Acquisition and Supply of Casts of the Parthenon Sculptures by the British Museum, 1835–1939,” *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 85 (2010): 107.

¹⁰⁰ Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and Its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece*, 111.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 262.

period), but the emotional and symbolic dimensions of the claim were embedded from the beginning.

2.5. UNESCO's Involvement and Current State of the Debate

UNESCO became directly involved in the Parthenon Marbles debate in the early 1980s, marking a new phase in the push for repatriation. In 1982, Greece's iconic Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri passionately appealed at a UNESCO conference in Mexico City for the Marbles' return, framing it not as a broad claim for all Greek antiquities abroad but as a specific moral case of reuniting "a unique monument" that had been torn apart.¹⁰² Her statement received a huge international attention. As Catherine Titi mentions, that UNESCO forum adopted a significant recommendation stating that the removal of the Parthenon Sculptures "has disfigured a unique monument" and declaring that "those marbles should be returned to Greece".¹⁰³ It further urged member states to view the Parthenon Marbles case as exemplifying the principle that parts of an indivisible monument should be reunified with their source.¹⁰⁴ This was one of the first major international endorsements of Greece's position and gave the issue a global profile.

Following Mercouri's advocacy, Greece formally requested the Marbles' return through UNESCO channels. In 1983, the Greek government submitted an official request to the British government, and when this initial entreaty met silence, Greece filed a claim via UNESCO in 1984.¹⁰⁵ Britain's response, delivered in 1985, was a firm refusal, notably citing domestic law. The UK argued that under the British Museum Act of 1963 the Museum's trustees were "prohibited by law from

¹⁰² "UNESCO in Mexico, July 29, 1982," Melina Mercouri Foundation, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://melinamercourifoundation.com/speeches1/>.

¹⁰³ Robert Browning, "The Case for the Return of the Parthenon Marbles," *Museum* 36, no. 1 (1984): 38–41.

¹⁰⁴ UNESCO, Final Report of the World Conference on Cultural Policies (Mexico City, July 26 – August 6, 1982), Recommendation 55, cited in Catharine Titi, *The Parthenon Marbles and International Law*, 130.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

disposing of these sculptures” and thus could not return them.¹⁰⁶ This legalistic reply, invoking British law in an international forum, was viewed by Greece as evasive, but it set the tone for Britain’s defense in years to come.

UNESCO, for its part, really tried to keep the dialogue alive. In 2014, UNESCO offered to mediate a resolution between Britain and Greece, an invitation Greece welcomed.¹⁰⁷ Britain, however, declined UNESCO mediation in 2015, with the British Museum and government opting not to participate.¹⁰⁸ However, by the 2010s, the international climate around repatriation had shifted significantly. High-profile returns of looted antiquities to countries like Italy, Egypt, and Nigeria were becoming more common, and the Parthenon case was frequently cited as an emblematic example in global cultural heritage debates. In 2021, the UNESCO committee urged the UK to reconsider its position and engage in good-faith talks with Greece,¹⁰⁹ an appeal that reflected the developing international opinion of removals in colonial contexts deserve fresh re-examination.

When Kyriakos Mitsotakis became Prime Minister in 2019, he placed the return of the Parthenon Marbles high on Greece’s diplomatic agenda, pushing for a renewed dialogue. However, his requests were firmly rejected by then-British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who insisted the sculptures had been legally acquired and that the British Museum was their rightful home.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Eddie O'Hara, “UNESCO and moving on,” *British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://parthenonuk.com/latest-news/30-2014-news/308-eddie-o-hara-chairman-of-the-british-committee>.

¹⁰⁷ “UK Declines Invitation by UNESCO for Mediation to Reunite the Sculptures from the Parthenon,” *British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://parthenonuk.com/latest-news/31-2015-news/323-uk-declines-invitation-by-unesco-for-mediation-process-to-reunite-the-sculptures-from-the-parthenon>.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Dan Hicks, “The U.K. Has Held Onto the Parthenon Marbles for Centuries—But the Tide Is Turning. Here’s Why I Expect Them to Be Returned by 2030,” *Artnet News*, December 14, 2021, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/parthenon-marbles-dan-hicks-2048268>.

¹¹⁰ Helena Smith, “Boris Johnson rules out return of Parthenon marbles to Greece,” *The Guardian*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/mar/12/boris-johnson-rules-out-return-of-parthenon-marbles-to-greece>.

Ironically, soon after this public refusal, a resurfaced article from Johnson's student days revealed that he had once supported repatriation. In his piece, he criticized the UK's possession of the marbles as "unacceptable to cultured people" and argued they should be returned to Athens.¹¹¹ The contradiction between his former stance and his later political position drew sharp attention, especially in Greek media.

Greece constantly intensified its diplomatic efforts. Mitsotakis personally raised the marbles issue in talks with UK leaders and in international forums. In September 2021, Greece achieved a symbolic victory at UNESCO, the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property (ICPRCP) adopted a decision urging the United Kingdom to reconsider its stance and negotiate in good faith with Greece for the marbles' return.¹¹² Greek officials celebrated this as an important diplomatic development supporting their claim, the British, however, did not change their stance.¹¹³

Behind the scenes, 2022 and 2023 saw quiet movement via cultural diplomacy. George Osborne, the former UK Chancellor who became Chair of the British Museum in 2021, emerged as a key figure seeking an understanding with Greece. He proposed the idea of "Parthenon partnership," aimed to loan a portion of the Parthenon Marbles to Athens in exchange for Greek antiquities being

¹¹¹ Helena Smith, "Boris Johnson's Zeal to Return Parthenon Marbles Revealed in 1986 Article," *The Guardian*, accessed April 17, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/dec/18/boris-johnsons-zeal-to-return-parthenon-marbles-revealed-in-1986-article>.

¹¹² "The ICPRCP's New Decision Recognises the Intergovernmental Nature of the Request for the Parthenon Marbles," *British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles*, accessed April 17, 2025, <https://www.parthenonuk.com/latest-news/564-the-icprcp-s-new-decision-recognises-the-intergovernmental-nature-of-the-request-for-the-parthenon-marbles>.

¹¹³ "Britain Is Legitimate Owner of Parthenon Marbles, UK's Johnson Tells Greece," *Reuters*, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/britain-is-legitimate-owner-parthenon-marbles-uks-johnson-tells-greece-2021-03-12/#:~:text=But%20the%20British%20Museum%20in,shared%20heritage>.

displayed in London.¹¹⁴ Such an arrangement would not require changes to UK law, or the renounce of ownership claims by either party. By late 2023, negotiations had advanced. However, by December 2024, Osborne acknowledged that a final deal remained "some distance" away.¹¹⁵

Throughout 2023, Greek officials continued to support this dialogue while maintaining their core demand for reunification of the marbles. Culture Minister Lina Mendoni emphasized that the sculptures are an integral part of Greece's heritage and must return permanently; she also stated that Greece would be willing to help "fill the void" at the British Museum by offering other significant artifacts if the marbles were returned.¹¹⁶ It appears that Greek officials adopted a cautious approach, fully aware of the sensitivity surrounding the negotiations.

However, the momentum was interrupted in August 2023, when the British Museum announced that hundreds of objects had been stolen or were missing from its collection.¹¹⁷ This scandal raised serious concerns over the museum's internal controls, and Greek officials seized the moment challenge Britain's claim of being a better custodian. Mendoni argued that the thefts "reinforce the Greek demand for the marbles' return,"¹¹⁸ while the Greek Archaeologists Association questioned the British Museum's credibility as a protector of cultural heritage.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Victoria Hislop, "Parthenon Marbles: Doing the Right Thing," *British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles*, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://parthenonuk.com/news/articles-and-research/2022-articles-research/50-articles-and-research/2022-articles-research/692-parthenon-marbles-doing-the-right-thing>.

¹¹⁵ Ian Aikman, "Sculptures Return Deal 'Some Distance Away,'" *BBC News*, accessed May 18, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c33dv3k47yko>.

¹¹⁶ Helena Smith, "Greece would offer major treasures to UK for Parthenon marbles, minister says," *The Guardian*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/dec/27/greece-would-offer-major-treasures-to-uk-for-parthenon-marbles-minister-says>.

¹¹⁷ Charlotte McLaughlin, "British Museum Approves Interim Director After Scandal Over Theft of 2,000 Artefacts," *The Independent*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/british-museum-thefts-mark-jones-director-b2403914.html>.

¹¹⁸ Gareth Harris, "British Museum thefts 'reinforce' Parthenon restitution claims, according to Greek minister," *The Art Newspaper*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/08/23/greek-minister-and-archaeologists-question-british-museum-security-in-wake-of-alleged-thefts>.

¹¹⁹ David Mouriquand, "Greece renews its calls for British Museum to return Parthenon Marbles in wake of priceless thefts," *Euronews*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2023/08/23/greece-renews-its-calls-for-british-museum-to-return-parthenon-marbles-in-wake-of-priceless>

In November 2023, tensions further escalated when Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (in office since October 2022) canceled a scheduled meeting with Mitsotakis after the Greek leader compared the sculptures' division to “cutting the Mona Lisa in half.”¹²⁰ The cancellation was widely seen as a diplomatic snub, though it also showed how sensitive the issue remains at the highest political level.

In early 2024, the Marbles sparked another fresh cultural controversy. In February, British fashion designer Erdem Moralioglu was granted permission to stage his London Fashion Week show in the British Museum's Duveen Gallery¹²¹ — the very room where the Parthenon Sculptures are displayed. Models paraded past the ancient Greek marbles as a dramatic backdrop for the luxury collection. Greek Culture Minister Lina Mendoni condemned the British Museum for allowing the marbles to be used as a runway backdrop.¹²² She accused the museum's leadership of “belittling and insulting not only the monument but also the universal values it transmits”, saying the sculptures were treated as “decorative elements” with no respect for their cultural significance.¹²³ Greek media and public opinion joined the outrage. To many in Greece, the spectacle of a fashion show beside the marbles (while Greece's formal requests for their repatriation were overlooked) was seen as provocative and tone-deaf.

Another important event in 2024 was the UNESCO meeting of May 2024. Zeynep Boz, head of the Turkish Ministry of Culture's Department for Combating Illicit Trafficking, publicly disproved

¹²⁰ Helena Smith, "Parthenon Marbles Row Raises Fresh Fears Over Fraught UK-EU Relations," *The Guardian*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/nov/28/parthenon-marbles-row-raises-fresh-fears-over-fraught-uk-eu-relations>.

¹²¹ "Dramatic Dresses: The Saltburn Effect Hits London Fashion Week," *The Guardian*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2024/feb/18/dramatic-dresses-the-saltburn-effect-hits-london-fashion-week>.

¹²² "Uproar Over Fashion Show in Room Housing Parthenon Sculptures," *eKathimerini*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/multimedia/images/1232112/uproar-over-fashion-show-in-room-housing-parthenon-sculptures/>.

¹²³ Ibid.

Britain's *ferman* narrative. She stated that exhaustive searches of Ottoman archives have found "no evidence of any document"¹²⁴ granting Elgin permission to remove the sculptures. This speech is significant, because it is the first time Turkey, the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, had publicly supported Greece's claim on an international stage, representing a powerful symbolic alignment between two historical rivals over a shared concern for cultural heritage. Boz's statement was widely welcomed in Greece, where officials described it as a turning point and a confirmation of what Greek authorities have argued for decades.¹²⁵ Turkey's intervention adds a considerable weight to the Greek position, as it directly challenges the authenticity of the British Museum's core legal defense. At the same time, it shows how the Parthenon Marbles case is increasingly seen not just as a bilateral issue between Greece and the UK, but as part of a broader post-imperial reckoning with cultural loss and historical accountability.

The British Museum, in response, did not concede the point and instead emphasized the desire for a "Parthenon partnership" with Greece.¹²⁶ While framed as a gesture of goodwill and cultural collaboration, this proposal avoids the core questions of the dispute, ownership and accountability. This approach remains tightly bound to the British Museum Act of 1963, which forbids the Museum's trustees from deaccessioning items in its collection except under very limited circumstances.¹²⁷ However, many legal scholars and heritage professionals have criticized the use of this domestic, mid-20th century statute as a shield against repatriation demands, that are

¹²⁴ UNESCO, *UNESCO ICPRCP 24th Session, Paris, 29–31 May 2024*, YouTube video, 4:33:00, published May 31, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/live/hIF_Br8ZeT0.

¹²⁵ "Turkey's Zeynep Boz Says There Is No Firman," British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles, accessed April 17, 2025, <https://parthenonuk.com/latest-news/64-2024-news/887-unesco-icprcp-24th-session-paris-29-31-may-2024>.

¹²⁶ "Greece is buoyed by a Turkish official's comments about Parthenon sculptures taken by Britain," *Associated Press*, accessed April 17, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/greece-turkey-britain-parthenon-elgin-marbles-e147bfb7070aba568630c7798b0e7c63>.

¹²⁷ British Museum Act 1963, accessed April 17, 2025, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1963/24>.

fundamentally international and post-imperial in character. By invoking internal legal limitations, the British state and its cultural institutions seem to have effectively placed themselves outside the scope of evolving global norms on cultural justice and repatriation. But here is the paradox: while the British Museum publicly advocates for dialogue and mutual understanding, it does so while invoking a legal framework designed in the colonial afterglow, with no mechanisms to respond or engage with the international community's changing expectations.

While the British Museum keeps its stance, public opinion in the UK has shifted significantly toward favoring reunification of the Marbles in Athens. Recent polls indicate that majority of British support returning the sculptures. For example, a 2021 YouGov poll found 59% of the British public believed the Parthenon Sculptures belong in Greece, with only 18% opposed.¹²⁸ By 2024, another survey showed 53% of respondents in favor of return, while 24% insists they stay in the UK.¹²⁹

In sum, the debate over the Parthenon Marbles has moved far beyond a bilateral disagreement between Greece and the United Kingdom. What began as a cultural heritage dispute now is a bigger question of international diplomacy, shifting legal interpretations, and changing public values. The involvement of UNESCO, symbolic significance of the Acropolis Museum, shifting political winds in both countries, and the support from Turkey have all contributed to a growing sense that the issue is no longer confined to museum corridors but situated within broader questions of cultural diplomacy and responsibility.

¹²⁸ "Where Do You Believe the Parthenon Marbles Belong?," YouGov, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/travel/survey-results/daily/2021/11/23/9b053/2>.

¹²⁹ "Do you personally think Britain should return the Elgin Marbles to Greece or keep them in Britain?," YouGov, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/entertainment/survey-results/daily/2024/12/02/919af/2>.

3. Rewriting the Narrative of Neglect

3.1. Introduction

Building on the historical overview of the Parthenon Marbles debate presented earlier, I now turn my focus to a crucial aspect of the justification for their removal: the portrayal of the Ottoman Empire as an unfit and negligent custodian of ancient Greek heritage.

From the late 18th century onwards, European antiquarians and collectors began constructing a discourse that framed the Ottomans as ignorant, barbaric, or, at best, indifferent toward classical heritage. Despite differing backgrounds and motivations, many of these figures contributed to the emergence of a persistent narrative that cast the East as incapable of stewardship, thereby positioning the West as the rightful inheritor of ancient heritage.

This chapter explores how this rhetoric evolved across time and through various channels (from travelogues to institutional narratives) and how it has been mobilized to legitimize cultural appropriation under the guise of preservation. How, then, was the image of "Ottoman barbarism" constructed? To what extent did it reflect the actual treatment of antiquities under Ottoman rule, and to what extent did it serve the broader political ambitions of Western powers?

In doing so, it investigates how this portrayal served multiple functions: it legitimized the large-scale removal of antiquities that eventually ended up in European museums, reinforced colonial hierarchies that positioned the West as the rightful heir to classical civilization, and masked the damage caused by European actors themselves.

3.2. Layers of Athens

Before examining how the narrative in question emerged, it is important to first take a look at the broader historical context of Athens. Once the cradle of Western civilization, Athens has endured

centuries of conquest, transformation, and destruction. While often romanticized as the untouched heart of classical antiquity, the city has in fact been shaped by many successive rulers who repurposed, rebuilt, and, at times, devastated its ancient monuments. The narrative of Ottoman Athens as a period of neglect and destruction has dominated Western discourse for many years, yet a closer examination reveals that substantial damage to Athenian antiquities occurred under earlier European rule, particularly during the Latin and Venetian occupations. The Ottomans, rather than engaging in systematic destruction, adapted Athens' ancient structures for administrative, religious, and civic functions. To make sense of the contemporary debate over the repatriation of the Parthenon Marbles, we should first understand this layered history of the city. Claims from both sides — the British argument that Elgin “saved” the marbles and Greece’s demand for their return — are tied to narratives about the historical treatment of Athens’ antiquities. So, a full understanding of the debate requires examining how Athens was shaped by different ruling powers, which inflicted varying degrees of damage, preservation, or adaptation over time.

With the establishment of Constantinople as the new capital of the Eastern Roman Empire in 330 CE, Athens gradually declined in political and economic significance. While it remained a center of learning and philosophy, its classical monuments were repurposed to fit the Christian ethos of the Byzantine Empire.¹³⁰ The Parthenon was converted into a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary in the 6th century, with significant structural alterations, including the addition of an apse and the removal of certain pagan sculptures.¹³¹ The Erechtheion and other temples were transformed into Christian places of worship, with interior modifications that erased or altered their classical elements.¹³² As indicated by these examples, Byzantine authorities had little interest in preserving

¹³⁰ Apostolos Vakalopoulos, *Origins of the Greek Nation: The Byzantine Period, 1204-1461* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 17.

¹³¹ Charalambos Bouras, *Byzantine Athens, 10th–12th Centuries* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 146.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 147.

the ancient city as a museum of antiquity; rather, they treated it as a functional space that had to be adapted to contemporary needs.



Figure 4. Digital reconstruction of the Parthenon as a Christian church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, with added basilica elements and a central apse. Image by Shadows of Constantinople, based on historical interpretations. Source: <https://shadowsofconstantinople.com/christian-parthenon/>. Accessed May 27, 2025.

The Fourth Crusade in 1204, marked one of the most devastating episodes in the history of Athens, leading to the imposition of Latin rule under the Duchy of Athens (1205–1456).¹³³ Originally intended as a campaign to reclaim Jerusalem for Christendom, the Crusade instead resulted in the sacking of Constantinople by Western European forces, particularly the Venetians and Crusaders of the Latin West.¹³⁴ The Byzantine Empire fractured into competing states, and the Crusaders established a series of Latin principalities, including the Duchy of Athens, ruled by Frankish nobles from Burgundy and later by the Catalans.¹³⁵ This conquest initiated a big transformation of Athens, as classical and Byzantine structures were repurposed, neglected, or in some cases, actively dismantled.¹³⁶

¹³³ Kenneth Meyer Setton, *Athens in the Middle Ages* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1975), 205.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 281.

In this period, Athens became a regional stronghold in a feudal system. The Parthenon, which had previously been converted into a Byzantine church, was repurposed again, this time as a Catholic cathedral under the authority of the Latin archbishop.¹³⁷ The Acropolis was heavily fortified and used as a military stronghold, leading to further architectural modifications and damage to classical structures.¹³⁸ The Franks reinforced the Propylaea and other key sites, often dismantling ancient ruins for building materials to strengthen their fortifications.¹³⁹ This handling of antiquities reflected a broader approach where classical monuments were just seen as useful resources.

Under Latin rule, the city endured not only political instability but also a marked decline in its architectural and urban unity. The Duchy's rulers, particularly the Catalans who controlled Athens after 1311, showed little regard for the historical significance of Athenian ruins.¹⁴⁰ Unlike the Byzantines, who sought to integrate elements of classical heritage into their Christian worldview, the Latin conquerors viewed Athens just as a strategic possession rather than a city full of historical and intellectual prestige. Many classical and Byzantine structures were either repurposed without concern for their historical significance or neglected altogether.¹⁴¹ As a result, parts of the Acropolis and other significant sites deteriorated significantly during this period.

One of the most destructive aspects of Latin rule in Athens was the widespread removal of architectural materials. The need to fortify the city against the enemy led to the dismantling of ancient temples and public buildings, with their stone repurposed for military and residential construction. This practice was not unique to Athens; throughout former Byzantine territories

¹³⁷ Ibid., 197.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 228.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 202.

¹⁴⁰ Apostolos Vakalopoulos, *Origins of the Greek Nation: The Byzantine Period, 1204-1461*, 98.

¹⁴¹ Benjamin Arbel, Bernard Hamilton, and David Jacoby, *Latins and Greeks in the Eastern Mediterranean After 1204* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 128.

controlled by Crusaders, ancient structures were regularly harmed to build new walls, towers, and churches.¹⁴² In some instances, classical sculptures were either broken down for lime or taken as decorative spoils to other parts of Western Europe.¹⁴³ Such reuse of materials was a widespread and often necessary practice during times of war and instability, seen not only under Latin rule but also in the late Roman and Byzantine periods, when city defenses were the priority. This pattern of neglect and destruction, however, contradicts later Western European claims that the Ottomans were uniquely responsible for the degradation of Athenian antiquities. While the Ottomans also reused ancient materials in later centuries, this was part of a broader historical pattern rather than a sign of cultural hostility. Much of the destruction attributed to them had its origins in the preceding Latin period, when Athens was already not a well-maintained medieval city.

When the Ottomans took Athens in 1456, they inherited a city already scarred by centuries of Latin neglect and exploitation. Contrary to later Orientalist narratives that depict the Ottomans as the primary agents of destruction, the Latin Duchy had already irreversibly altered Athens' urban and cultural landscape long before Ottoman rule began.

Following their conquest of Athens, the Ottomans started to repurpose existing structures, following a pattern common to many ruling powers before them. The Parthenon was converted into the city's main mosque, with a minaret added while its structural integrity remained largely intact.¹⁴⁴ The Erechtheion was transformed into the residence of the Ottoman commander (*dizdar*),¹⁴⁵ showing its administrative importance. The Tower of the Winds became a dervish lodge

¹⁴² Kenneth Meyer Setton, *Athens in the Middle Ages*, 203-205.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁴⁴ Mary Beard, *The Parthenon*, 68.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

(*tekke*),¹⁴⁶ showing that the Ottomans incorporated Athenian antiquities into their religious practices rather than demolishing them. Meanwhile, the Temple of Hephaestus remained in use, serving as the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint George Akamates.¹⁴⁷ All these adaptations reflect the Ottomans' pragmatic approach to ancient structures of Athens. While this approach indeed resulted in some damage, it also preserved several significant monuments that might have otherwise deteriorated or been destroyed through neglect.

However, a significantly destructive event in the history of the Parthenon occurred during the Ottoman rule, when Venetians besieged Athens in 1687.¹⁴⁸ Francesco Morosini, leading Venetian forces against the Ottomans, launched an attack on the Acropolis, where Ottoman forces had stored gunpowder, right inside the Parthenon.¹⁴⁹ A direct hit from Venetian artillery caused a catastrophic explosion, destroying much of the temple's central structure and scattering sculptures and architectural fragments across the Acropolis.¹⁵⁰ Morosini attempted to remove surviving sculptures, further damaging the friezes in the process.¹⁵¹ During the same siege, Ottomans also showed instances of severe damage to the Acropolis; they dismantled the Temple of Athena Nike to reinforce the Acropolis's fortifications.¹⁵² This act, driven by military aims, resulted in the loss of one of the most significant classical temples of Athens. These events are strong examples of the fact that while Ottoman rule over Athens was not defined by indiscriminate destruction, warfare and strategic considerations could lead to alterations that impacted the city's ancient heritage.

¹⁴⁶ William St. Clair, *Who Saved the Parthenon? A New History of the Acropolis Before, During and After the Greek Revolution*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2022), 139.

¹⁴⁷ Catharine Titi, *The Parthenon Marbles and International Law*, 111-112.

¹⁴⁸ Alexander Herman, *The Parthenon Marbles Dispute: Heritage, Law, Politics*, 37-38.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁵¹ Anthony Kaldellis, *The Christian Parthenon: Classicism and Pilgrimage in Byzantine Athens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 83.

¹⁵² Catharine Titi, *The Parthenon Marbles and International Law*, 67.



Figure 5. View of the Acropolis of Athens during the Venetian siege of 1687, showing the explosion of the Parthenon. Drawing by Captain Verneda, 1687. Engraved by F. Label. © National Hellenic Research Foundation / travelogues.gr. [https://eng.travelogues.gr/item .php?view=32398](https://eng.travelogues.gr/item.php?view=32398). Accessed May 27, 2025.

As evidence shows, while Athens declined in importance under Ottoman rule, it was far from being a forgotten ruin. It remained a functional town with a multicultural population of Greeks, Turks, Albanians, and many others. The Ottomans established markets, mosques, and baths, integrating Athens into the broader economic and political landscape. They generally treated the ruins as part of the city's existing infrastructure. Rather than systematically dismantling ruins, the authorities either adapted them for practical use or left them undisturbed.¹⁵³

3.3. The Narrative of Ottoman Barbarism

Two of the earliest and maybe the most influential figures to propagate the “barbaric Turk” narrative were the British architectural surveyors James Stuart and Nicholas Revett. Stuart, an architect and antiquary, and Revett, a classical scholar and artist, traveled to Athens in the mid-18th

¹⁵³ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 93.

century. Their seminal work, *The Antiquities of Athens* (1762), documented and measured the ancient ruins of the city, bringing Athens into the spotlight for European intellectuals and antiquarians. However, their observations were very much rooted in an Orientalist framework. In their introduction, they write:

Since the revival of the arts, Greece has been in the possession of barbarians; and artists capable of such a work have been able to satisfy their passion, whether it was for fame or profit, without risking themselves among such professed enemies to the arts as the Turks are.¹⁵⁴

They further described the Ottomans as an "uncultivated people" whose "ignorance and jealousy" made it dangerous for European scholars to study Greece's ruins.¹⁵⁵ While it is true that getting access to classical monuments under Ottoman rule was sometimes difficult (often requiring official permissions, payments, or diplomatic privileges), the authors made this assertion long before they had ever set foot in Athens,¹⁵⁶ meaning that this sense of "danger" was not based on any direct experience, but on preconceived notions rooted in Enlightenment-era Orientalism. There is also no mention of any specific incidents of Ottoman hostility or obstruction in their later work, which means the anticipated danger was more rhetorical rather than factual. The language they used is among the earliest articulations of the "barbaric Turk" topos in relation to cultural heritage, setting the stage for later figures to build upon and weaponize this perception as a justification of the Western intervention.

Richard Chandler, a British antiquarian who visited Ottoman-controlled Greece in the 1760s as part of the Society of Dilettanti's mission, was another early voice in this tradition. A sense of

¹⁵⁴ James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, *The Antiquities of Athens: Measured and Delineated* (London: John Haberkorn, 1762), 5.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵⁶ These lines were written by Stuart and Revett in their original proposal, included in the preface to *The Antiquities of Athens*, before they had begun their journey to Athens. See James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, *The Antiquities of Athens*, Preface.

urgency and contempt for local custodianship is also visible in his writings. In his *Travels in Greece* (1776), he comments on what he saw in Athens as “to be regretted that so much admirable sculpture as is still extant about this fabric should be all likely to perish, as it were immaturely, from ignorant contempt and brutal violence.”¹⁵⁷ Here, Chandler constructs a sense of cultural crisis, illustrating the ruins not as victims of natural decay but of human negligence and aggression. His word choices, such as “brutal violence” and “ignorant contempt,” invoke an emotional response and place the local population as an active threat to remains.

He further describes Turks¹⁵⁸ as “a people never yet illuminated by science. They are more ignorant than can easily be conceived. Athens now claims no pre-eminence in learning.”¹⁵⁹ Here, with the “science” reference, Chandler places his evaluation within Enlightenment frameworks of knowledge and reason, in which the Ottomans are positioned fundamentally outside the intellectual order of Europe. This is a discursive act that constructs Ottoman identity through the lens of deficiency, further supporting the imperial claims on antiquities. However, it is also important to mention that Chandler’s views were not entirely one-sided. In other parts of his account, he offers more nuanced, and sometimes even sympathetic, reflections on Ottoman officials and locals, which I will come back to later in the chapter. Still, the quotes above show how his harsher remark contributed to the growing narrative of Ottoman incompetence.

Following Chandler, Choiseul-Gouffier, a French diplomat and antiquarian,¹⁶⁰ traveled extensively through the Ottoman-controlled Greek territories in the late 18th century. His *Voyage pittoresque*

¹⁵⁷ Richard Chandler, *Travels in Greece*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1776), 50.

¹⁵⁸ In many of these primary sources, the words 'Turk,' 'Ottoman,' and 'Muslim' are used interchangeably.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁶⁰ Choiseul-Gouffier was also an active collector who assembled an extensive private collection, long before Elgin was on the scene.

de la Grèce (1782) contains numerous references to the supposed neglect of classical ruins by the local population. In this work, he writes: "the barbarity of the inhabitants has consigned [monuments] to the vilest of uses," depicting a sarcophagus used as a water trough for animals.¹⁶¹ This assertion was accompanied by a call for European intervention, as he suggested that such masterpieces could only be properly appreciated and maintained in Western hands. He also admired Elgin's later success, long before his extensive looting of the Parthenon:

Lord Elgin has made, throughout all of Greece, a rich harvest of precious monuments that I had long desired in vain. It is difficult for me to see them in his hands without a little envy; but it must be a consolation to all who cultivate the arts to know that these masterpieces have been rescued from the barbarity of the Turks and preserved by an enlightened amateur who will ensure that the public can enjoy them.¹⁶²

Choiseul-Gouffier's words also show a common reality among European collectors — what was framed as a noble act of preservation was often a competition for national prestige. Another example of this idea can be seen in Britain's parliamentary debates over the Parthenon Marbles. Sydney Smith, a British writer and aristocrat, wrote in 1816:

Lord Elgin has done a very useful thing in taking them away from the Turks. Do not throw pearls to swine; and take them away from swine when they are so thrown. They would have been destroyed there, or the French would have had them. He is underpaid for them.¹⁶³

Smith's statement is short but loaded. His words are grounded in a very strong civilizational hierarchy. The phrase "pearls before swine" comes from the Bible¹⁶⁴ and is traditionally understood to mean that something precious should not be wasted on those who cannot appreciate it. In this

¹⁶¹ Auguste de Choiseul-Gouffier, *Voyage pittoresque de la Grèce* (Paris: 1782), as cited in Benjamin Anderson, "An Alternative Discourse: Local Interpreters of Antiquities in the Ottoman Empire," *Journal of Field Archaeology*, 40, no. 4 (2015): 450.

¹⁶² Auguste de Choiseul-Gouffier, *Voyage pittoresque de la Grèce* (Paris: 1782), 85-86. Translation by Berker Bahçeci.

¹⁶³ Sydney Smith, *Letters*, ed. Nowell C. Smith, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953), cited in Timothy Webb, "Appropriating the Stones: The 'Elgin Marbles' and English National Taste," in *Claiming the Stones/Naming the Bones: Cultural Property and the Negotiation of National and Ethnic Identity*, eds. Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 2002), 73.

¹⁶⁴ Gospel of Matthew, 7:6

context, it is more than insult, it reinforces a deeper religious and cultural divide between West and East, where the Ottomans are positioned as both spiritually and intellectually unworthy of ancient heritage.

Yet, the question of Greek national identity of this period complicates this binary framing. In 1816, modern Greece had not yet emerged as a sovereign state, but it would begin the fight for independence five years later, in 1821. However, national consciousness was already beginning to take its form, and the Greek national revival was well underway. As Yannis Hamilakis points out, this awakening was also not limited to intellectual circles; local people believed that ancient statues had trapped souls inside them, waiting to be freed when Greece was independent once more.¹⁶⁵ These beliefs may not represent modern nationalism in the Western political sense, but they did reflect a deep cultural and spiritual continuity between the ancient past and a hoped-for national future.

Smith's comments, then, should be read as part of a broader imperial discourse that sought to delegitimize any local connection to ancient heritage, whether Ottoman or Greek. His words reflect a point of view in which antiquities are not seen as belonging to the lands where they stood, but as objects to be claimed, displayed, and possessed through imperial narratives.

Now, it brings me to the main character in question, Lord Elgin. He is perhaps the most infamous figure in this story, who actively used the stereotype of Ottoman neglect to justify his large-scale operation. In his correspondence with British officials, Elgin repeatedly framed his actions as a "rescue mission," asserting that "the Turks see these marbles only as mere stones and will

¹⁶⁵ Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and Its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece*, 69.

eventually destroy them".¹⁶⁶ He further claimed that the Ottomans had used the Parthenon as a "quarry" for construction materials,¹⁶⁷ an accusation that, while containing elements of truth, ignored the far greater damage caused by Elgin's own agents.

Elgin further defends his actions in his Memorandum that was published in 1811.¹⁶⁸ In this document he claims that any prior knowledge of these monuments had been acquired "under the peculiar disadvantages" created by the "prejudices and jealousies of the Turks."¹⁶⁹ He moves on to describe daily acts of "willful devastation" committed by Turks and travelers alike, including accounts of locals climbing ruins and smashing sculptures in search of hidden treasures,¹⁷⁰ a vivid image designed to evoke both ignorance and danger. The Memorandum repeatedly refers to the Ottomans as "barbarians"¹⁷¹ and blames them for the loss of countless sculptures and fragments.

While it is true that the Ottomans repurposed ancient structures for administrative, military, and religious functions, the claim that they were uniquely responsible for the destruction of the antiquities is flawed. As Catherine Titi also notes in *The Parthenon Marbles and International Law*, the Ottomans did incorporate fallen marble blocks from the Parthenon into later constructions, but this practice was neither unusual nor evidence of cultural neglect.¹⁷² In fact, the phenomenon of

¹⁶⁶ Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, Volume 32 (1816), cited in Catharine Titi, *The Parthenon Marbles and International Law*, 100.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 101.

¹⁶⁸ Elgin's *Memorandum* was published under his name as a means of justifying his actions. However, many scholars agree that it was the result of a collaborative effort by his team. In this thesis, I treat the *Memorandum* as Elgin's own work, since it was officially published under his name.

¹⁶⁹ "... any knowledge which was possessed of these buildings had been obtained under the peculiar disadvantages which the prejudices and jealousies of the Turks had ever thrown in the way of such attempts..." Memorandum on the Subject of the Earl of Elgin's Pursuits in Greece (London: William Miller, 1811), 3.

¹⁷⁰ "In the prosecution of this undertaking, the artists had the mortification of witnessing the very wilful devastation, to which all the sculpture, and even the architecture, were daily exposed, on the part of the Turks and travellers." Memorandum on the Subject of the Earl of Elgin's Pursuits in Greece, 6.

¹⁷¹ "barbarism of conquerors," Memorandum, 3; ravages of barbarians," Memorandum, 21; "The zeal of the early Christians and the barbarism of the Turks," Memorandum, 11.

¹⁷² Ibid., 49-53.

spolia (the reuse of materials from earlier structures) was widespread throughout both the Byzantine and Latin periods,¹⁷³ and was part of a broader historical pattern of architectural adaptation rather than deliberate destruction. Against this backdrop, Elgin's portrayal of the Ottomans as irrational and destructive stands out as a rhetorical tool, one that not only justified the violent extraction of the marbles but also laid the groundwork for arguments supporting their long-term retention.

Despite mounting evidence that the Ottomans neither systematically destroyed nor deliberately tried to erase the classical past of Athens, the British Museum relied on the "barbaric Turk" narrative for many years, to justify the retention of the Marbles. In 1816, the British Parliament's Select Committee on this case praised Elgin for having saved the marbles from the "wanton barbarity of the Turks," arguing that they would not survive if he had not removed them.¹⁷⁴ The same "rescue" narrative continued in the 20th century. A 1969 guide published by the British Museum described the Parthenon as long having been neglected and vandalized, emphasizing that Elgin's intervention was timely and necessary, and thanks to his operation and the British Museum's retention, the Marbles remained the way they are, without further damage.¹⁷⁵ However, the detailed guide forgets to mention something: the 1937–1938 cleaning scandal. The collection underwent an aggressive cleaning process in preparation for its display in the newly constructed Duveen Gallery.¹⁷⁶ According to Alexander Herman, the staff of the British Museum used abrasive tools, including wire brushes and carborundum, to scrub the sculptures to make them appear

¹⁷³ Catharine Titi, *The Parthenon Marbles and International Law*, 50–51.

¹⁷⁴ Select Committee of the House of Commons. *Report from the Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of Sculptured Marbles*. 108–109.

¹⁷⁵ Trustees of the British Museum, *An Historical Guide to the Sculptures of the Parthenon* (London: Balding and Mansell, 1969), 8–9.

¹⁷⁶ Alexander Herman, *The Parthenon Marbles Dispute: Heritage, Law, Politics*, 93.

whiter.¹⁷⁷ This resulted in the loss of surface details and caused irreversible damage to the collection. This approach raises serious questions about the very notion of rescue and care that the British Museum has long claimed to represent.

Today, while the tone has softened and more attention is paid to the debate itself, the British Museum still emphasizes that the marbles were removed legally.¹⁷⁸ In addition, while the official channels of the Museum does not explicitly mention Elgin as the “savior”, the narrative is still visible in the individual publications of trustees and supporters. British Museum curator Ian Jenkins, for example, appreciated Elgin in an interview by saying “far from being a robber, we regard him as being a conservator.”¹⁷⁹ He claimed “no Elgin, no marbles... If he hadn't acted as he did, the sculptures wouldn't survive as they do.”¹⁸⁰

In academia, too, we can find recent examples that can be considered as a continuation of these colonial narratives. Tiffany Jenkins, for instance, a currently appointed trustee of the British Museum, dismissed Greece's call for return in a 2009 article, claiming it was “divisive identity politics,” and arguing the marbles' history is so entangled that “their meanings are complex and they cannot be considered simply Greek.”¹⁸¹ According to her, “ancient artifacts belong in museums, often far away from their creation and discovery, where they can be cared for, studied, and shown to the world.”¹⁸² The implication here is quite familiar; British stewardship apparently

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 93.

¹⁷⁸ The British Museum, *The Trustees' Statement on the Parthenon Marbles*, accessed May 3, 2025, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/parthenon-sculptures/parthenon>

¹⁷⁹ Ian Jenkins' Interview by NPR Britain, *Greece Quarrel Over Ancient Relics*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/106027165#:~:text=Mr,wouldn%27t%20survive%20as%20they%20do>

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Tiffany Jenkins, “Check the History Before Making Demands.” *The Scotsman*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/letters/tiffany-jenkins-check-the-history-before-making-demands-2443175>.

¹⁸² Tiffany Jenkins, *Keeping Their Marbles: How the Treasures of the Past Ended Up in Museums...and Why They Should Stay There* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 123.

helped these objects and the world's knowledge of them. Jenkins essentially recycles the old narratives with a gentle 21st century polish, arguing that taking such objects was a good thing for humanity after all. To me, it is the same confidence that led many generations to think Elgin had "saved" the sculptures.

Many other scholars used a similar tone. Mary Beard, a famous classicist and another trustee of the British Museum, has argued while "Greece sort of owns the Parthenon Marbles," they are also "*objects which are international, they belong to humanity, not to one particular bit of it.*"¹⁸³ In an interview she likened the Parthenon Marbles to a "child in a messy divorce," suggesting a shared custody arrangement would be the best solution¹⁸⁴ (such as loaning or rotating exhibitions rather than full repatriation). This metaphor might soften the idea that London should retain control, but the underlying message still aligns with the Museum's standing: the marbles are beyond modern Greece, and they must somehow "do their job" in a global context. In other words, it is still the British Museum who knows best where these artifacts should be.

Another very questionable example I will use here is by Jonathan Williams, the deputy director of the British Museum in 2022. In an annual UNESCO meeting, Williams insisted that many pieces "were not all hacked from the building" but "removed from the rubble around the Parthenon."¹⁸⁵ Clearly intended to reinforce the idea of Elgin's actions as preservation, such a comment in front of substantial evidence of marbles being deliberately detached, is hilarious. Williams' statement

¹⁸³ Gareth Harris, "‘Like a child in a messy divorce’: Mary Beard and David Olusoga tackle Parthenon Marbles debate in British Museum panel," *The Art Newspaper*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/07/08/like-a-child-in-a-messy-divorce-mary-beard-and-david-olusoga-tackle-parthenon-marbles-debate-in-british-museum-panel>

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Helena Smith, "Greece rebuts British Museum claim Parthenon marbles were 'removed from rubble'," *The Guardian*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/may/23/greece-rebuts-british-museum-claim-parthenon-marbles-were-removed-from-rubble#:~:text=%E2%80%9CMuch%20of%20the%20frieze%20was,%E2%80%9D>

reflects the continued effort by the British Museum to soften the perception of Elgin's intervention, still trying to frame it as a careful rescue mission, rather than an act of imperial extraction.

Dominic Selwood, a historian from Oxford, also votes in favor of the British Museum's retention of the marbles. He asserts that Lord Elgin's actions were a form of preservation, claiming that the Ottomans were actively destroying the sculptures when he intervened, and if they would not have survived if it wasn't for Elgin.¹⁸⁶ He also argues that the marbles are "better off" in the British Museum, where they are accessible to a global audience free of charge.¹⁸⁷ His arguments repeat the classic rescue and better preservation narrative, without acknowledging the Greek efforts, and the damage made by the British that was mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Another supporter of the retention of antiquities in Western museums is the famous art historian and former director of many cultural institutions, James Cuno. In his *Who Owns Antiquity?*, Cuno argues that modern nation states have no special claim over ancient objects found within their borders, especially when these objects predate national identities.¹⁸⁸ He suggests that cultural property laws driven by nationalism are politically motivated and not inclusive; therefore, advocates for encyclopedic (or "universal") museums that present antiquities as part of a shared global heritage.¹⁸⁹ This means, for Cuno, keeping the Parthenon Marbles in London promotes cross-cultural understanding and reflects the interconnectedness of civilizations. However, this view ignores power dynamics (and imbalances) in how such "shared" heritage was historically acquired. While this model is framed as cosmopolitan, it ultimately legitimizes cultural

¹⁸⁶ Dominic Selwood, "The Case for Lord Elgin," *Classics for All*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://classicsforall.org.uk/reading-room/ad-familiares/case-lord-elgin>

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle Over Our Ancient Heritage*, 121-145.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 145.

dispossession by privileging museums in Western countries as the default stewards of this so-called global heritage. As Yannis Hamilakis discusses in *The Nation and Its Ruins*, such claims obscure the violent histories of acquisition and the material inequalities that allow certain nations to act as "guardians" while others are cast as incapable of stewardship.¹⁹⁰

3.4.Ottoman Perspectives: Local Reaction and Unease

As I mentioned earlier, the removal of the Parthenon Marbles is often portrayed as an initiative conducted with little concern or interference from the Ottomans. However, such portrayals ignore the complex and varied reactions among Ottoman officials, elites, and locals of the city. The historical record shows a far more layered picture, one that includes examples of religious reverence, cultural interest, practical indifference, and even opportunism. Rather than being just a unified stance of apathy or ignorance, Ottoman responses to Elgin's actions varied significantly, and were shaped by individual opinions, local conditions, and the broader political dynamics of the period.

Accounts from the period show moments of emotional attachment and dissatisfaction among Ottoman figures who witnessed the removal. These reactions were often rooted in the significance of the Parthenon and other ancient structures in Athens, which were integrated into the Ottoman culture in ways far different from European notions of antiquity. For instance, the Parthenon had been converted into a mosque, attributing a religious significance to it that extended beyond its classical origins. This religious transformation created a different type of reverence for the site,

¹⁹⁰ Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece*, 282-283.

complicating Elgin's operations in the area. Edward Daniel Clarke, an English traveler who was in Athens during the period of the removals notes:

The Disdar himself came to view the work, but with evident marks of dissatisfaction; and Lusieri told us that it was with great difficulty he could accomplish this part of his undertaking, from the attachment the Turks entertained towards a building which they had been accustomed to regard with religious veneration, and had converted into a mosque. We confessed that we participated the Moslem feeling in this instance, and would gladly see an order enforced to preserve rather than to destroy such a glorious edifice.¹⁹¹

With this short text we witness the *disdar*'s visible dissatisfaction and attachment to the Parthenon, a sentiment that was most likely rooted in its role as a place of worship rather than its aesthetic or historical value. Clarke, sympathetic to this attachment, acknowledges the difficulty faced by Elgin's team in overcoming such resistance. The reverence expressed by the *disdar* reflects a different, localized form of stewardship that was shaped by religious devotion rather than a Western ideal of preservation. But does this make his sentiment any less valid or meaningful than the motivations of those who sought to preserve the marbles in a museum setting?

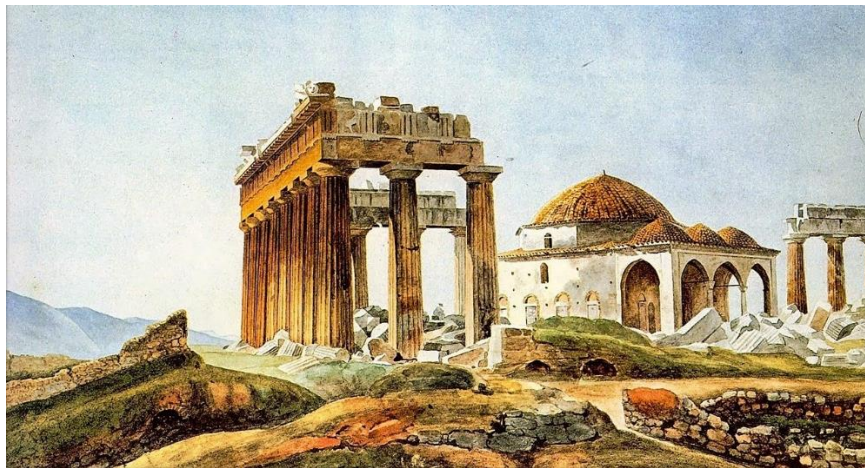


Figure 6. The Parthenon as a mosque. Lithograph by Pierre Peytier, 1830s. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peytier_-_Mosque_in_the_Parthenon.jpg. Accessed May 27, 2025.

¹⁹¹ E. D. Clarke, *Travels in Various Countries of Europe Asia and Africa*, Vol. 6, 223-224.

This attachment is further highlighted in again Clarke's description of the *disdar*'s reaction to the destruction made by Elgin's workers. When a metope was damaged and the *disdar* could not stand that view:

...they were then going to lower one of the metopes. We saw this fine piece of sculpture raised from its station between the triglyphs: but the workmen endeavouring to give it a position adapted to the projected line of descent, a part of the adjoining masonry was loosened by the machinery; and down came the fine masses of Pentelican marble, scattering their white fragments with thundering noise among the ruins. The Disdar, seeing this, could no longer restrain his emotions; but actually took his pipe from his mouth, and, letting fall a tear, said, in a most emphatical tone of voice, "τέλος!" [end/enough], positively declaring that nothing should induce him to consent to any further dilapidation of the building.¹⁹²

This moment is full of emotions, and it once again contradicts the image of Ottoman indifference. It illustrates a profound sense of loss, not necessarily for the marbles as classical artifacts, but for the integrity of a site that had become part of the local cultural and spiritual fabric. The *disdar*'s reaction emphasized the human dimension of Ottoman responses, revealing a protective instinct that challenges simplistic Western narratives of neglect.

Beyond the emotional responses of officials like the *disdar*, other accounts show a broader unease among locals and elites regarding Elgin's actions. Hugh W. Williams, for example, a Scottish painter and traveler, recounts the remarks of a Turkish gentleman who lamented the removal of a caryatid from the Temple:

The lovely little Temple of Pandrosos, which was supported by six caryatids, or female figures, similar in form and attitude, is, as I have said, attached to the Temple of Minerva Polias. Only four of the caryatids now remain, and these are greatly injured, and seem as if they mourned the loss of their companions. While studying this gem of architecture, a Turkish gentleman pointed to the rude support of the roof, which occupies the space of the last caryatid which was taken down, and with a mournful and significant expression of countenance, exclaimed, more than once, 'Mi Lor Elgin!' These words, from the mouth of a Turk, appeared to me infinitely

¹⁹² Ibid., 224.

more severe than all that has been said at home or here against the proceedings in the Acropolis.¹⁹³

Observing the ugly replacement left in its place, the man repeatedly exclaimed, “*Mi Lor Elgin!*” with a tone of bitterness and irony. This was a sarcastic critique with a sense of irreparable damage inflicted on the site, and it reflects a growing awareness of the loss caused by such removals. While these reactions may not align with modern notions of cultural preservation, they document a recognition of the cultural and symbolic significance of the marbles within their local context.



Figure 7. The Caryatids of the Erechtheion, displayed in the Acropolis Museum. One original remains in the British Museum. Photo courtesy of the Acropolis Museum. © Acropolis Museum, Athens.

However, Ottoman responses were of course not fully critical. In some cases, practical and economic considerations shaped attitudes toward marbles and other antiquities. C.R. Cockerell, an English architect and archaeologist, shares his account of the *voyvoda* (governor) of Athens, which exemplifies this pragmatism. When questioned about British interest in the marbles, the *voyvoda* expressed skepticism about their motivations, speculating that they were driven by financial gain rather than cultural reverence:

¹⁹³ Hugh W. Williams, *Travels in Italy, Greece, and the Ionian Islands* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1820), 307.

One day I went to the waiwode on business... After inquiring after his great friend Elfi Bey [Lord Elgin], he asked what on earth we came here for, so far and at so much trouble, if not for money. Did it give us a preference in obtaining public situations, or were we paid? It was useless to assure him that we considered it part of education to travel, and that Athens was a very ancient place and much revered by us. He only thought the more that our object must be one we wished to conceal. I told him of the fuss made in London over the Persian ambassador, and that if he went all the world would wonder at him. At this he got very excited, and said he wished he had a good carico of oil which he could take to England, thereby paying his journey, and that once he was there he would make everyone pay to see him... The man's one idea was money, and he kept on repeating that he was very poor. No wonder Greece is miserable under such rulers.¹⁹⁴

The portrayal of the *voyvoda* (described as ignorant, materialistic, and preoccupied with his poverty) clearly reflects the Western idea of Ottoman officials. While Cockerell's tone is condescending, the text raises important questions about the power dynamics, economic realities, and cultural misunderstandings that shaped interactions between Western travelers and Ottoman authorities. At first glance, the *voyvoda*'s fixation on money confirms the Western stereotype of Ottoman officials as greedy and self-serving. His repeated references to his poverty and his suggestion of taking a cargo of oil to England to fund his journey suggest a man more concerned with immediate financial gain than with the preservation or significance of antiquities. However, we should further analyze this pragmatic outlook within the broader economic context of the Ottoman Empire during this period. The empire's declining financial stability significantly impacted both the local population and the governing officials. Provincial administrators like the *voyvoda* of Athens operated within a system where economic pressures often shaped their decisions, leading to a reliance on unofficial practices such as charging fees or leveraging local resources to somehow survive these challenges. The *disdar* of the Acropolis, for example, admitted

¹⁹⁴ C.R. Cockerell, *Travels in Southern Europe and the Levant, 1810–17* (London: Longsman, Green and Co., 1903), 97.

to allowing travelers into the site to gain additional income¹⁹⁵, a practice that shows how the declining economic conditions affected everyone, even those in positions of authority.

Moreover, the *voyvoda's* remarks about Lord Elgin (whom he refers to as “Elfi Bey”) suggest a complex relationship between Ottoman officials and foreign collectors. While this text does not provide detailed insights into the *voyvoda's* view of Elgin’s activities, his reference to him as a “great friend” could be implying a pragmatic acceptance of, or even collaboration with, Elgin’s endeavors. At the same time, the *voyvoda's* questions about British motives hint at a degree of skepticism, suggesting that he was not entirely naive about the implications of these interactions.

Despite these practical concerns, instances of direct resistance to Elgin’s activities also can be seen in the historical record. Michael Greenhalgh mentions that Quinet, a French writer and traveler, recounts how an Ottoman military officer in Athens gave a harsh warning to a British captain attempting to smuggle a statue fragment aboard his ship:

...de violens reproches contre un capitaine anglais, qui, il y avait peu de temps, avait tenté d'emporter un fragment de statue sur sa frégate.¹⁹⁶

This act of defiance suggests a sense of ownership or responsibility toward the artifacts, even if the motives behind this act remain ambiguous. Perhaps the officer was genuinely concerned about protecting the artifacts from foreign hands, reflecting a sense of cultural or administrative duty. Or perhaps, his reaction was stemmed from fear or uncertainty regarding whether the British had the necessary permits for the removal, which takes us back to the questions about the legitimacy of Elgin’s actions. There is of course also the possibility that the officer himself sought to claim the

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 106.

¹⁹⁶ English: “...violent reproaches against an English captain, who, not long ago, had attempted to take away a fragment of a statue on his frigate.” Edgar Quinet, *De la Grèce moderne, et de ses rapports avec l’antiquité* (Paris, 1830), 340, cited in Michael Greenhalgh, *Plundered Empire: Acquiring Antiquities from Ottoman Lands* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 415.

artifact for financial gain, a likely scenario given the economic pressures and opportunism often present in such situations. Even though we might never know the true reason behind his action, such rare moments of resistance, once again complicate the narrative of Ottoman passivity and shows a deeper layer of engagement with the fate of these artifacts.

Another instance of this silent “resistance” is mentioned in C.R. Cockerell’s account:

We conduct all our affairs with respect to them in the utmost secrecy, for fear the Turk should either reclaim them or put difficulties in the way of our exporting them. The few friends we have and consult are dying with jealousy, and one [probably Lusieri] who had meant to have farmed Aegina of the Captain Pasha has literally made himself quite ill with fretting... The whole matter is still full of uncertainties, for the Turks may give us a good deal of trouble.¹⁹⁷

This account shows the concern among Elgin’s team about potential Ottoman interference. The secrecy surrounding their operations suggests that Ottoman authorities most likely have not been fully complicit or aware of the scale of Elgin’s endeavors. If the British had undisputed permissions, as they often claimed, why would they need for such strong measures?

Furthermore, the reference to Captain Pasha fretting over Aegina adds another layer to this narrative. Was his concern driven by an interest in these antiquities, whether for administrative control or personal gain? Or did he fear the consequences of allowing foreign powers unchecked access to these artifacts? Cockerell’s remarks reflect the uncertainties and tensions that underpinned these transactions, complicating the narrative of smooth cooperation between Western collectors and Ottoman authorities.

Let’s move on with another instance from H.W. Williams, this time there is no specific occasion but an observation from the author which I think is worth mentioning:

The capitals and flutings of the columns are much destroyed by time; chipped and broken, too, by various causes: yet, considering their amazing age, it is marvellous to me they are here at all. So delicate! so slender! they might easily have been

¹⁹⁷ C.R. Cockerell, *Travels in Southern Europe and the Levant, 1810–17*, 58.

destroyed by the slightest violence, yet here they are in ruins to be sure, but still giving important lessons to the world! We may accuse the Turks of barbarous wantonness, but are these not proofs that they have respected the precious works of art? Let us ask ourselves would such buildings have stood half so many centuries in Great Britain? No! ¹⁹⁸

Here, Williams questions the dominant Western narrative that accused the Ottomans of intentional neglect or destruction. His rhetorical question — whether such buildings would have survived as long in Britain — implicitly acknowledges the paradox of Ottoman custodianship: while they may not have actively preserved antiquities by Western standards, their lack of large-scale interference allowed many ancient structures to endure. Williams secretly refers to the fate of Arthur's Oven, a Roman antiquity in England that was deliberately destroyed,¹⁹⁹ to support this point. This comparison highlights a problematic double standard: while the West accused the Ottomans of neglect, it engaged in similar or worse acts within its own borders. By invoking Arthur's Oven, Williams challenges the justification for the removal of the Parthenon Marbles as a "rescue."

Williams elaborates on this idea in a later section, where he writes:

From what I have ventured to advance, I do not mean it to be understood, that the Turks, any more than ourselves, are free from the sin of destroying buildings; but that it appears to me, they are not barbarous, as is alleged, with regard to sculptured marbles. Have the Phygalion marbles not been found where they fell by accident or time? Those likewise of the Temple of Jupiter Panhellenius, in the Island of Egina?²⁰⁰

Here, Williams specifically acknowledges that no culture is entirely free from acts of destruction, but he challenges the specific accusation of Ottoman barbarity toward sculptures and marbles. He points to the given examples of ancient works that survived under Ottoman custodianship, largely untouched by human interference. These examples suggest that the marbles' endurance was due to their being left in situ rather than subjected to active destruction or even overzealous restoration.

¹⁹⁸ Hugh W. Williams, *Travels in Italy, Greece, and the Ionian Islands*, 306.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 307. See footnotes.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 317.

Williams's argument further complicates the Western narrative of cultural rescue. By framing the Ottomans as stewards whose restraint contributed to the survival of antiquities, he undermines the moral justification for removing artifacts like the Parthenon Marbles. His critique also invites the reader to reflect on the double standards in Western claims of superiority: while the Ottomans are criticized for neglect, the West's own record of preserving cultural heritage is far from immaculate.

William Wilkins, another traveler who was in Athens in 1816, a little bit later than the compilation of the removal, also writes about a similar topic:

The Turks are accused of mutilating, without distinction, the sculptures of the Acropolis. The comparative state of preservation these statues have retained, although open to public approach and within the reach of every hand, is a proof that so long as a building remains nearly entire, no disfigurement, on the part of the Turks, ensues.²⁰¹

Wilkins's statement directly challenges the accusation that the Ottomans were responsible for the destruction of antiquities. He argues that the relatively preserved state of the sculptures, despite their exposure to the elements and human activity, is evidence of Ottoman restraint. This observation further complicates the Western narrative that framed the removal of the marbles as an act of rescue from barbarism. These remarks also highlight the selective memory of Western discourse on preservation. While the Ottomans are criticized for their supposed neglect, the destructive methods employed by Elgin's team during the removal (resulting in significant damage to the Parthenon) are often overlooked or downplayed. This double standard once more emphasizes the extent to which the narrative of Ottoman barbarism was constructed to justify Western actions, obscuring the ethical and practical failures of those who claimed to "save" antiquities.

²⁰¹ William Wilkins, *Atheniensiæ, or Remarks on the Topography and Buildings of Athens* (London: 1816), 142.

While Williams often challenges the Western narrative of Ottoman barbarism, he also includes observations that reflect a different aspect of Ottoman attitudes, as seen in another one of his accounts:

It is a very uncommon circumstance to have these things pointed out by a Turk: but we had this good luck; for passing the door of a Turkish house, its owner hailed us with the usual appellation, — ‘Djoivrs! [infidels/gavur?] here is some rubbish suited to your taste: take it off my premises.’ He had found in his garden, among some old foundations, the half of a marble bas-relief, which represented the annual procession of the Athenian citizens, with their youth, to the ceremony of initiation at Eleusis; and for a trifle he allowed us to remove it, seeming to be quite happy in getting rid of a stone on which human figures were delineated.²⁰²

This paragraph exemplifies the recurring theme of Western accounts: the depiction of Ottoman indifference toward antiquities. The Turkish homeowner’s characterization of a marble relief as "rubbish" shows that for him, the relief held no value beyond being a physical object. His willingness to sell it for a small sum suggests the need for immediate financial benefit over any cultural or historical significance. However, just like the account on *voyvoda*, this narrative too invites deeper analysis. The homeowner’s indifference may not completely reflect a lack of cultural appreciation but rather the practical realities of life in a society where antiquities were not seen through the lens of Western romanticism. To him, the relief was likely irrelevant to his daily existence, representing an object of curiosity at best and an inconvenience at worst. This pragmatic view highlights the gap in cultural frameworks through which antiquities were understood.

At the same time, this anecdote emphasizes the agency of local actors in the commodification of antiquities. By selling the relief, the homeowner participated in the very process that facilitated the removal of artifacts to the West. His actions, while framed as ignorant or dismissive by Williams, tell a pragmatic engagement with the economic opportunities created by Western demand for

²⁰² Hugh W. Williams, *Travels in Italy, Greece, and the Ionian Islands*, 286.

antiquities. This dynamic further highlights how local actors both enabled and resisted the extraction of cultural artifacts.

Another interesting observation of Ottoman engagement with antiquities was recorded by John Cam Hobhouse, an English politician:

The solitary grandeur of these marble ruins is, perhaps, more striking than the appearance presented by any other object at Athens, and the Turks themselves seem to regard them with an eye of respect and admiration. I have frequently seen large parties of them seated on their carpets in the long shade of the columns.²⁰³

Hobhouse's observation stands apart from the predominant narrative. His depiction of Turks seated under the columns, regarding the ruins with what he interprets as "respect and admiration," paints a picture of quiet respect rather than neglect. This description challenges the idea of Ottoman indifference or disinterest in antiquities and instead suggests a very different form of cultural engagement. While the Ottomans may not have celebrated the Parthenon as a classical ideal in the Western sense, their presence in and use of the ruins reflects a form of integration of these structures into their daily lives. The ruins were not sacred artifacts of a distant past but were instead seamlessly woven into the lived experience of the people who inhabited Athens at the time. For the Ottoman locals, the ruins could have represented a communal space, a place of comfort and shade, or even a symbol of the city's layered history under different empires. The ambiguity of their engagement once again complicates the simplistic narratives of "barbarism" or "respect."

To conclude this section, I would like to go back to one of the figures I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Richard Chandler. Although he was in Athens before Elgin and published his work *Travels in Greece* in 1776, he shares many interesting anecdotes that raise many questions in my head.

²⁰³ John Cam Hobhouse, *A Journey through Albania, and other provinces of Turkey in Europe and Asia, to Constantinople, during the years 1809 and 1810* (London:1813), 322.

While he mainly describes Ottomans as “ignorant” and “barbarous,” he makes opposite statements as well. For instance, he notes being guided by a young Turkish man who explained mythological details on the Tower of the Winds:

A young Turk explained to me two of the emblems — that of the figure of Caecias, as signifying that he made the olives fall; of Sciron, that he dried up the rivers.²⁰⁴

This brief interaction presents a very different image than the one usually associated with Ottomans. The young man not only recognized the figures but also knew their mythological stories and commented further, though Chandler does not provide the full details. Given that formal education among Muslims at the time did not include Greek mythology, it is likely that this knowledge came from curiosity, or perhaps conversations with his Greek neighbors, after all, they lived together in a tightly interwoven city. Whatever the source, it is clear that some locals engaged meaningfully with their surroundings, complicating the idea of cultural indifference.

Chandler also mentions a moment of wonder at the Temple of Athena Nike, where both Greeks and Turks were captivated by a strange light phenomenon caused by the marble’s alignment:

... we desired to examine this extraordinary appearance, which the Greeks regarded as a landing miracle, and which the Turks, who could not confute them, beheld with equal astonishment.²⁰⁵

This passage captures something rare: a quiet, collective sense of awe, shared across religious and cultural lines. The Turks are shown as equally amazed, participating in the mystery of the space. They may not have viewed the temple as a monument of “classical heritage”, but they still engaged with it – emotionally, visually, and together.

This diverse selection of accounts shows that Ottoman reactions to the removal of antiquities, and specifically to the Parthenon Marbles, cannot be reduced to a single narrative of either indifference

²⁰⁴ Richard Chandler, *Travels In Greece*, 103.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

or opposition. Instead, we find a wide spectrum of responses — religious reverence, emotional distress, curiosity, resignation, and pragmatic cooperation — each shaped by the specific context, role of each specific individual, and different worldviews. While some locals and officials may have viewed the marbles as sacred or symbolic, others saw them as burdens or opportunities. What emerges most clearly is that the common Western type of the “barbaric Turk” fails to capture this complexity. Ottoman engagement with Athens’ antiquities was multifaceted and often more nuanced than the so-called “civilized” actions of those who claimed to rescue them. By revisiting these often marginalized or simplified voices, we begin to see a different story: one in which cultural value was not exclusive to the West, and where stewardship took many unexpected forms.

Conclusion

I started this thesis to look into a historically persistent justification for the removal and retention of the Parthenon Marbles: the claim that Lord Elgin “rescued” the sculptures from the “barbarism” of the Ottoman Empire. By analyzing 19th century travel accounts, diplomatic records, parliamentary debates, and later museum publications, this study addressed key questions about the construction of this narrative, its correspondence to historical reality, and its evolution over time.

Before turning to the core analysis in the third chapter, I first laid the necessary groundwork in the earlier chapters. In the first chapter, I outlined the methodological and theoretical framework, situating the case within broader debates on Orientalism, cultural stewardship, and repatriation. In the second chapter, I provided a detailed historical account of the removal and the evolution of the dispute, from Elgin’s original mission and contested legality to early criticisms, Greece’s 19th century demands, and the ongoing diplomatic struggle. These chapters provided a critical lens for this research through which the rescue narrative could be examined in depth.

In the third chapter, I firstly asked how the narrative of Ottoman barbarism was constructed and with what intentions. The findings showed that British actors deliberately crafted a discourse portraying the Ottomans as “ignorant” and “uncultivated” custodians of classical heritage. Early travel writers and antiquarians (from architects like James Stuart and Nicholas Revett to diplomats like Lord Elgin) described Athens under Ottoman rule as a realm of cultural decay, where the Turks were hostile to the arts and history.

Such characterizations were not neutral observations; rather, they served a clear purpose. By showing the Ottoman Empire as unworthy of the ancient heritage, these figures cast themselves (and ultimately Britain) as the rightful heirs and protectors of Greek antiquity. This Orientalist

narrative of the “barbaric Turk” was a convenient moral rationalization for what was essentially an act of imperial acquisition. It allowed Elgin and his supporters to frame the removal of the marbles as a benevolent rescue mission, obscuring the ambition and opportunism that actually drove the whole operation. So, the British justification for taking the marbles was consciously rooted in an imperial ideology that equated Western civilization with Enlightenment and the Eastern “other” with negligence or barbarity.

Second, I examined the actual attitudes and actions of the Ottoman administration and local Athenian community toward the Parthenon antiquities, to see how historical realities compared to the colonial narrative. Here, the research uncovered a much more complex and nuanced Ottoman response than the common stereotype suggested. Far from showing a general indifference or wanton destruction, Ottoman officials and local residents exhibited a variety of reactions, from religious reverence and protectiveness to acceptance and pragmatic cooperation.

Contemporary accounts revealed that some Ottoman authorities in Athens regarded the ancient monuments with genuine care, and sometimes even awe. For instance, the Parthenon’s conversion into a mosque resulted in a religious significance for local Muslims; the Acropolis *dizdar* is recorded as viewing the temple with evident dissatisfaction when Elgin’s workers began dismantling it, reflecting his reverence for a site he had long regarded as sacred. Such incidents of emotional distress and resistance demonstrate that certain Ottomans felt a custodial duty toward the monument, even though rooted in their own cultural and religious context.

On the other hand, there were also instances of Ottoman officials displaying pragmatic or financially driven behavior. Facing the Empire’s financial hardships and local power dynamics, some opportunists (like the *voyvoda* of Athens in Cockerell’s account) allowed removals in exchange for bribes or out of personal interest. These varied responses underline that Ottoman

engagement with antiquities was far from monolithic. Thus, the portrayal of the Ottomans as destroyers or negligent caretakers is a huge simplification. I must conclude that the Orientalist stereotype of the “barbaric Turk” does not withstand historical scrutiny: Ottoman Athens held attitudes of respect, adaptation, and concern for the ancient monuments, even if expressed in ways different from Western European notions of preservation. What was presented by Elgin and his admirers as a rescue from certain ruin was, in fact, a removal executed against a backdrop of local objections, cultural attachments, and reluctant permissions.

Third, I examined how the “rescue narrative” evolved over the following centuries and persisted in debates up to the present day. The research showed that while the language of “Ottoman barbarism” gradually receded from official discourse, the core narrative of Western guardianship endured in more subtle forms. In 1816, a British Parliamentary Select Committee vindicated Lord Elgin by explicitly praising him for saving the sculptures from “*the wanton barbarity of the Turks,*” asserting that the marbles would not have survived if he had not removed them. This verdict, coming at the conclusion of Elgin’s hearings, effectively wove the rescue story into the marbles’ early historiography. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, British Museum officials and supporters continued to invoke this theme. A museum guidebook as late as 1969 repeated the claim that the Parthenon had long been neglected and defaced under Ottoman care, implying that Elgin’s intervention was timely and ultimately preservative. Notably, such accounts overlooked disturbing facts, like the British Museum’s own 1930s cleaning scandal that damaged the sculptures’ surfaces, an irony that contradicts the trope of superior British “conservation.” By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Orientalist rhetoric had largely been replaced by the language of global stewardship and legality, but the supporting logic remained.

In this thesis, I demonstrated that in official statements and publications by museum trustees and academics, we still find an emphasis on how British custody benefited the marbles. For example, a British Museum curator defended Elgin as “*not a robber but a conservator*,” suggesting that “*no Elgin, no marbles*.” Similarly, a museum trustee argued that ancient artifacts belong in museums where they can be cared for and seen by the world, effectively polishing the old rescue narrative into a modern claim about universal heritage and superior institutional care. Such statements, as analyzed in this thesis, recycle the essence of the 19th century justification. They cast the British Museum as the ultimate safe home for the marbles; by extension, cast doubt on the ability of others — historically the Ottomans, today the Greeks — to properly safeguard or contextualize them.

The main contribution of this thesis lies in revealing how colonial ideologies, Orientalist tropes, and enduring institutional interests in fact, shaped a seemingly benevolent justification. Tracing the roots and transformation of the “rescue” narrative challenges the dominant assumptions surrounding the Parthenon Marbles debate, and encourages a more critical approach to heritage discourse. Whether framed as a legal standoff, a diplomatic tug-of-war, or a matter of ethical responsibility, the Parthenon Marbles remain one of the most visible symbols of contested heritage. And maybe, as calls for repatriation grow louder, what lies ahead is not merely the resolution of a centuries-old dispute, but the quiet restoration of something once torn apart, now seeking to become whole again.

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