

# Why Britain should give the Parthenon Marbles back to Greece

The Spectator has unexpectedly spoken out in favour of the return of the Elgin Marbles from the British Museum to Greece. This is the second positive article in a year about the subject – from a source that historically has been against such action.

From: Spectator

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Why we should give the Elgin Marbles back to Greece  
Daniel Korski



While we're talking about countries on the brink, it's worth taking a look at Greece – which has probably passed beyond it. The government has published its package of austerity measures – aiming to reduce its deficit to 8.7 percent of GDP by the end of 2010 – and the markets are deciding what they think. But, in the meantime, the country faces strikes; the Euro is taking a pummeling; there are fears that problems may spread to countries like Portugal and Spain; and Greek foreign policy – particularly with regard to Macedonia and the Balkans – is stalling. Nobody is through the woods yet.

All this mean that George Papandreou's problems are also the EU's problem. Sure, as one of Greece's best known scholars Loukas Tsoukalis says, "there is no denying that the prime responsibility for dealing with the Greek problem lies with the Greeks themselves." But answers to these problems will also have to come from

Berlin, Paris and Frankfurt, home of the ECB. But London can play a role too.

Here is my humble suggestion: we give back the Elgin Marbles. Nothing would boost Papandreou's popularity more than if the marbles were brought home under his premiership. Don't take my word for it – just recall the exchange in October 2003 at a European summit in Brussels, when the cameras caught a conversation between Tony Blair and the then Greek Prime Minister, Costas Simitis. "Tony," Simitis said, "I would like to discuss with you about the marbles ... as you know we have elections next year in Greece. This could be useful."

Then, the Greek pitch was for party political advantage; now it would serve national unity. Papandreou will only be able to reform

his country if he is strong; he will only manage to stabilise Macedonia if he is popular – and only reform and stability will prevent the problem getting worse.

Numerous obstacles, including legal, stand in the way of this course of action. Lord Elgin brought the marbles from the Parthenon in 1811 after a negotiation with the Ottoman authorities; he did not steal them, but took them for preservation. Officials far wiser and more experienced than me have therefore argued against giving the marbles back – and strongly.

One, a man I greatly admire and whose knowledge of that part of the world far supersedes mine, argued to me that the difference between Britain and Greece was exactly that here rules cannot just be broken for political aims. For its part,

the British Museum is reluctant to part with the marbles because they think doing so would be to open the floodgates to demands of other things Britain taken in the past. Nor is it clear it will work – the Greeks may just take back marbles, and continue as is.

But I'm not sure the rules are that clear, that a precedent would be set, or that the benefits to Britain of keeping the marbles are that obvious now that Greece has a museum to house and preserve the treasure. The

benefits in Greece (and, by extension, to Britain's strategic interests) are also quite clear.

There was never an open and shut case for the marbles to be returned; and there was no open and shut case for them staying in London. It was always a question of political calculation. Now, the balance tilts towards handing Elgin's loot back – in exchange for a private undertaking on reforms and a resolution to the Macedonian name dispute.

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