

EUROPE AND THE PARTHENON MARBLES : A COMMON CAUSE

Why am I so passionately committed to the reunification of the Marbles? My interest was aroused when I studied architecture at the Polytechnicum in Lausanne where my main professor was none other than the father of Bernard Tschumi. He explained to us the evolution of architecture from the Egyptians to the Ancient Greeks and so on. The second reason for my commitment was the fact that I married a Greek woman and was invited to spend a year in Greece, where I attempted to learn Greek. Whenever I had any personal problems, I would go to the Acropolis. This was my place, where I could clear my head and regain perspective!

During the same period, 1955-56, I met Denis de Rougemont with whom we engaged in a dialogue about European culture and the founding principles of a future European federalism, our mutual dream. We agreed that European culture – culture in the sense of any creative work – is based on three major pillars; firstly the Ancient Greek pillar, secondly the Roman Empire and finally Christianity. Hence the importance to us of the Parthenon, the perfect embodiment of our Ancient Greek heritage.

It is interesting that we think the concept of the recognition of the « human being » can be attributed to Christianity. Before this Christian belief, the Hellenistic philosophy of Stoicism taught that we are all equal human beings. This was the first recognition of the person as such. For Denis de Rougemont and myself this was a bedrock of our European and Western culture.

The remarkable 5th century B.C., the Age of Pericles, represented the height of Ancient Greek culture. I have always felt inspired by the speeches of Pericles, particularly those he gave during the war against Sparta. Spartan culture was totally different, and the fight against Sparta represented the victory of democracy in Greece. In his speeches to fellow Greeks, Pericles stressed that Athens was functioning through power given to citizens, exercising their civic rights in the *Agora*. In fact already at that time, there was almost direct democracy. There were slaves during this period, but they were

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generally well treated and in many cases they were granted citizenship after some years.

I would like to consider briefly the history of the Parthenon. As we know, the Parthenon was built to replace an older temple on the Acropolis, also dedicated to Pallas Athena, the patron divinity of Athens, which had been destroyed during the Persian invasion of 480 B.C. Under the leadership of Pericles, who was determined to transform Athens into one of the most powerful and splendid cities in Greece, the rebuilding of the city commenced, and with it the construction of the most beautiful, perfect monument of the Ancient world. Work started on the Parthenon in 447 B.C. and was completed in 438 B.C. It was indeed a major feat to have erected this architectural masterpiece in only 9 years! It is also extraordinary to think that this monument has no absolute straight lines. Take for example the new Acropolis Museum whose columns are straight. When looking at the Parthenon, you have the impression that its columns are straight and of equal diameter all the way up, whereas in reality they are slightly curved. The Greeks developed an augmentation technique known as *entasis* to avoid an optical illusion caused by the shaft's fluting (parallel vertical lines). In a tall structure like the Parthenon, such lines appear concave. To compensate, the Greek architects made the columns slightly convex.⁽¹⁾ The architects of the Parthenon appear to have been excellent scholars of visual illusion. This proves that at that time the Ancient Greeks were already using highly sophisticated techniques regarding perspective.

Many Athenians were opposed to the construction of the Parthenon as they thought it wiser to invest money in a more powerful army and navy rather than in culture. A dilemma which still exists today. Pericles responded to his opponents by saying that the city's gold would be stored inside the temple, and if need be, the gold could be sold to finance the army. The Parthenon Marbles, the beautiful sculptures which adorned the temple, represent the daily lives of Greek citizens at that time as well as their gods. The cavalry is depicted, and it is these very riders and horses of the Parthenon frieze which inspired Sergei Eisenstein's epic film « Alexander Nevsky ».⁽²⁾ In my

(1) N.S. GILL, « Doric columns and the other orders – optical illusions of the columns and Parthenon », http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/partheno2/ss/aa061300a_6.htm (accessed 1st April 2014).

(2) B. TSCHUMI ARCHITECTS (Ed.), *The New Acropolis Museum*, New York, Skira Rizzoli, 2009, pp. 88-89.

opinion, like the different shots of a sculpted film, the frieze forms a whole telling us the story of the Greek gods followed by that of Athenian democracy. This film was mutilated by Lord Elgin and it is our duty to reunify the different parts of this carved narrative which reproduces the most significant scenes of this Golden Age. Various fragments are to be found in several European museums, but approximately half of what survives of the Parthenon Sculptures is exhibited in the British Museum.

How did such a large part of the Parthenon sculptures end up in England? Lord Elgin was made British Ambassador to the Sublime Porte of Constantinople in 1801. Like many people at that time, he had a keen interest in Classical Greek art and culture. We cannot be sure of his motivations in removing the Marbles. One theory is that he wished to use them to decorate his home. On another occasion, he said he was motivated by the idea of the British Museum having an exceptional exhibition. Apparently, he also claimed that his intention was to save the Marbles. It cannot be denied that the Parthenon suffered extensive damage over the years before Elgin's arrival. In the 5th century AD it was converted into a Christian church. In the 15th century, after the Ottoman conquest of Greece, the Parthenon was used as a gunpowder magazine and the temple was converted into a mosque. When the Venetians besieged the Ottomans on the Acropolis in 1687, a Venetian shell exploded the magazine, destroying the interior of the Parthenon and to a large extent the North and South sides of the frieze. However, the monument was subjected to even greater mutilation at the hands of Lord Elgin!

He is said to have received a letter of permission (*firman*) from the occupying Turkish authorities; however the only proof of this is an Italian translation of the lost original, made for Lord Elgin by a clerk at the British Embassy, which can be seen on the British Museum website. From a judicial point of view it can be argued that this was not a real *firman*, but rather just an ordinary permit of limited power. This is open to different interpretations. For example George Bizos, the Human Rights Advocate who represented Nelson Mandela, says that the legality of the document could be proven invalid in court. He points out that a *firman* had to be issued by the highest authority in Constantinople, the Sultan, beginning with an invocation to God: « In the name of Allah... ». It also would have been headed with the

Sultan's monogram.⁽³⁾ However, we have never had the opportunity to see the original *firman*, just an Italian translation.

The fact is that under the Ottoman Empire it was possible to negotiate and obtain certain favours in exchange for gifts. Taking into account the general standards that applied under the Ottoman occupation, we can conclude that in fact, when one looks in detail at Elgin's letter of permission, he was granted limited power. It was through his own personal interpretation, and clearly an example of *abuse of power*, that he allowed himself to remove whatever he wanted from the Parthenon and take it out of the country. Moreover we know that Ottoman laws regarding antiquities did not allow for their export.

As Bernard Tschumi pointed out in his presentation,⁽⁴⁾ Lord Elgin mutilated the Marbles by slicing off the backs of the blocks of the frieze in order to facilitate their transportation by sea. Further damage was inflicted by the fact that one of the ships carrying the treasures sank on its way to Britain and the salvage work nearly bankrupted Lord Elgin. Meanwhile he was captured and imprisoned for three years by the French and on his return to England was forced to sell the Parthenon Marbles to the British Parliament. He obtained much less money than he had expected from Parliament who decided to entrust the Marbles to the British Museum as its inalienable property.

I am personally always shocked to see that the name « Elgin Marbles » was given to these works of art which can solely be attributed to Phidias and his disciples. Not only was Greek ownership denied, but also copyright. Now fortunately the trend is changing – even the British Museum refers in its documentation to the Parthenon Marbles. But the major obstacle we face is that for the British Museum the debate centres around the question of property, whereas the Greek Government wishes to move beyond the issue of ownership. It is interesting to note that during the debate in Parliament in 1816 to ascertain whether Lord Elgin had legally acquired the

(3) G. BIZOS, « A legal and moral issue – was a valid *firman* issued ? », keynote speech, *International Colloquy on the Reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures*, London, 19th June 2012, <http://www.parthenonuk.com/articles-and-research/76-george-bizos-sc> (accessed 1st April 2014).

(4) B. TSCHUMI, « The Acropolis Museum – the ideal home for the reunited Marbles », video presentation, *The Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles : A European Concern*, European Parliament, Brussels, 15th October 2013.

Marbles, there was strong opposition amongst certain MPs. For example, MP Hugh Hammersley said that the Marbles should be returned once Greece had regained its independence. Another ardent critic was Lord Byron who regarded the actions of Elgin and the British authorities to have been dishonest.

As we know, it was Melina Mercouri, former Greek Minister of Culture, who initiated the fight for the return of the Marbles. The difference with our campaign today is that she was pleading a Greek cause on behalf of the Greek nation, whereas we believe – hence the title of our Round Table in Brussels – that we are defending a European cause. It is also a universal cause. Indeed Ancient Greek culture, at that time already so advanced in the field of mathematics, philosophy, science, the arts, forms the very basis of our modern civilization. One only has to look at the number of words in modern languages which originate from Ancient Greek and at the central role played by our Ancient Greek heritage in European culture.

To explain why I am against settling the issue of the Marbles in court, I would like to quote the historian Thucydides : « For you know, as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is in question only between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must ».⁽⁵⁾ In the case of Greece making a claim to the UK, we are dealing with an asymmetrical situation which makes me doubtful about justice being done. Therefore we should express our support for a European rather than a solely Greek cause. Melina Mercouri obtained the support of UNESCO when, at a meeting of Ministers of Culture in 1982 in Mexico, the Greek proposal for the return of the Parthenon Marbles was put to a vote and a vast majority of State Members voted in favour (54 for, 11 against, 23 abstentions). The following recommendation was issued:

« Considering that the removal of the so-called Elgin marbles from their place in the Parthenon has disfigured a unique monument which is a symbol of eternal significance for the Greek people and for the whole world,

Considering it right and just that those marbles should be returned to Greece, the country in which they were created, for reincorporation in the architectural structure of which they formed part,

(5) THUCYDIDES, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Melian Dialogue, V (89), 431 B.C.

Recommends that Member States view the return of the Parthenon marbles as an instance of the application of the principle that elements abstracted from national monuments should be returned to these monuments ».

Looking in detail at the results, all the UNESCO Representatives from communist and developing countries at that time voted in favour. Those against were all representing developed countries such as USA, UK and many European countries in possession of large collections of cultural property. Obviously, their main concern was that the return of the Marbles would set a precedent leading to the emptying of their museums. Whenever the question of precedent is voiced, we reply by stressing that the Parthenon Marbles represent a *unique case*. We are asking to reunify a 160 metre-long frieze, a sculpted film, not to return to Greece every single sculpture now exhibited in a foreign collection.

After the UNESCO resolution, the European Parliament issued a Declaration in 1998 in favour of return, taking the view that:

« the return of the Elgin Marbles to Greece would be a key move in promoting Europe's common cultural heritage ».

In the same year, in answer to a written question from Greek Euro-MP Alexandros Alavanos concerning « unsuitable methods used by the British Museum to conserve the Elgin Marbles », the European Commission replied:

« The Commission shares the view of the Honorable Member that the Parthenon of the Acropolis and its sculptures form an integral and invaluable part of the European cultural and architectural heritage ».

More recently, in 2011 a final Act was passed by the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers establishing an EU « European Heritage Label ». ⁽⁶⁾ The Parthenon is already a UNESCO World Heritage Site and now that the new European label has been created, it will be able to gain official recognition of its European significance.

Various polls have been conducted on the issue of the Marbles which clearly indicate public support for their return. For example, according to a MORI poll conducted in the UK in 1998 – which is where public opinion interests us most – 40 % were in favour and 15 % against. A survey conducted by the campaign group « Marbles

(6) Decision No. 1194/2011/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council.

Reunited » in 2003 revealed 70 % for and 18 % against. More recently, in 2012 the result of the Museums Journal's poll showed 73 % in favour. Another highly significant barometer was the « Intelligence Squared Debate », broadcast in Britain in 2012, at which Stephen Fry and MP Andrew George, Chairman of Marbles Reunited, argued the case in favour of return. Before the debate 196 members of the audience were for return and 200 against, whereas after hearing the arguments, the number in favour had increased to 384, as opposed to 120 against. This goes to show that when the public are properly informed about the subject of the Marbles, how they were acquired and how they are preserved and exhibited today, they tend to advocate restitution. Influencing public opinion is the main challenge for our International Association and national Committees. We can count on the efforts of our members, but we need to broaden that support throughout Switzerland and beyond in other countries, starting with the UK.

Regarding future strategy, it is the Swiss Committee's view that the best way to move forward is through *dialogue* and pressure on the British authorities through the influence of public opinion. I must admit that dialogue is very difficult since at the moment neither the British Government nor the British Museum are willing to negotiate. For example, on a recent official visit to India, Prime Minister David Cameron publicly ruled out returning either the Koh-i-noor diamond to India or the Elgin Marbles to Greece, saying he did not believe in « returnism ».⁽⁷⁾ Fortunately, the current strategy of the Greek Government is very similar to that of the Swiss and the majority of European Committees who feel that litigation would be an ambiguous and dangerous option. If a court is to decide the issue, which legislation is more legitimate, Greek or British? And if the Greeks lose the case, the Marbles will never be returned to Athens.

The latest initiative by the Greek Government, which is fully supported by the International Association for the Reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures, seeks a solution through mediation. The Greek Minister of Culture, Panos Panagiotopoulos, approached UNESCO last summer to initiate a new mediation procedure which came into effect in 2010. Letters have been sent to the British Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for Culture and the Director of the British

(7) T. TIMPSON, « Parthenon Marbles and Koh-i-Noor: Cameron opposes "returnism" », *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21623965> (accessed 4th March 2013).

Museum, inviting them to take part in this procedure to seek an amicable agreement. We are still waiting for a response from the British Government. I personally am dubious about the possibility of obtaining concrete results through UNESCO, but I am convinced that litigation is not a viable line of action, unlike certain American and Australian supporters of our cause.

I would like to underline the following points:

- This is a European cause ;
- This is a unique case and therefore does not set a precedent ;
- The new Acropolis Museum, so spacious and bathed in Attic light, is a much more suitable environment to exhibit the Parthenon Marbles than the gloomy, cramped Duveen Gallery ;
- The conservation techniques used in Athens are superior to those used by the British Museum ;
- What better place to exhibit the Marbles than in their original context, facing the Parthenon in the very place where they were crafted by Phidias?

To conclude, it is my personal opinion that the strategy of the Greek Government and of the International Association should focus exclusively on claiming the return of the Parthenon Marbles, namely the panels from the frieze, the metopes and the pediment sculptures which are exhibited in the British Museum. Moreover, since Melina Mercouri started campaigning in 1983, all Culture Ministers since then have been clear about this. If we go beyond this objective to include other sculptures from the Acropolis, we risk losing our legitimate cause, the integrity of an inseparable whole. In fact, we will not be able to advocate the uniqueness of our claim and will jeopardize any hope for reunification.

It is my dearest wish that we will gain enough dynamic support in the future to reach a win-win solution.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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*Chairman of the Swiss Committee
for the Return of the Parthenon Marbles*

Speech delivered on 3rd April 2014 at Zurich University at the invitation of the Association of Greek Academics in Switzerland

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