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## The Elgin Marbles: New Light on an Old Controversy\*

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ON TUESDAY 10 APRIL 1984 the British government formally rejected the Greek government's request for the return of the Elgin Marbles to Greece. The British official response was to Greece's request for the return of the 2,400 year old frieze sculptures "rescued" by Lord Elgin from the ruins of the Parthenon at the start of the last century. In a House of Commons written reply on 10 April 1984, Mr. Ray Whitney, Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, stated that the collection secured by Lord Elgin "as a result of transactions conducted with the recognized legitimate authorities of the time" was vested by Act of Parliament in the Trustees of the British Museum in "perpetuity."

In Athens the Greek Government in an official statement rejected the British Government's position on the matter and said that Greece could not accept the negative reply and would pursue its claims.

Foreign Office documents recently opened to the public indicate that forty-four years ago British attitudes were rather different. It was a period when Britain was confronted by the Axis threat. It was a time when strategic considerations dominated British thought and policy. It was a period when Britain's policy was to prevent the German presence in the eastern Mediterranean region. The cooperation of strategically located Greece was of major importance to Great Britain. "In the eyes of British strategists, then as now, Greece was an essential part of the defensive complex of the eastern Mediterranean . . . Equally a British presence in Greece presented no less dangerous a threat to German interests in the Balkans."<sup>1</sup> Thus in an effort to secure Greece's cooperation, in 1941 some senior officials in the Foreign Office suggested that

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\* I am grateful to Mr. William St. Clair who provided helpful advice on a number of specific matters. For an excellent analysis of the history of the Elgin Marbles, see William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* (Oxford, 1983).

<sup>1</sup> Michael Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War* (London, 1968), pp. 10-11. See also John S. Koliopoulos, *Greece and the British Connection, 1935-1941* (Oxford, 1977).

Greece, once the war was over to be given back the "Elgin Marbles, including the Caryatid and the Column from the Erechtheum."

On 30 December 1940 Mr. S. H. Wright of the Treasury Chambers, Whitehall, wrote to Mr. (later Sir) Philip B. B. Nichols, Head of the South-East European Department of the Foreign Office:

We have to provide an answer to the following Parliamentary Question:

3. Miss Cazalet—To ask the Prime Minister, whether he will introduce legislation to enable the Elgin Marbles to be restored to Greece at the end of hostilities as some recognition of the Greeks' magnificent stand for civilisation.

We have asked the British Museum for their observations on the lines on which they think this question should be answered. The Foreign Office will no doubt also be interested and we should accordingly be grateful for the observations of your Department also.<sup>2</sup>

On 8 January 1941, Mr. (later Sir) R. James Bowker, Deputy Head of the South-East European Department of the Foreign Office, received the following note and memorandum:

Miss Cazalet's question about the Elgin Marbles. I enclose a copy

<sup>2</sup>FO 371/33195. During the Christmas recess the Parliamentary Question could not be answered until Parliament reassembled. It should be made clear here that at this time the *Treasury* answered for the British Museum in Parliament since they were not the department responsible for policing the Foreign Office. The usual method of doing business is for the desk officer (a relatively junior official) to prepare a memorandum and draft a reply which is then commented upon by more senior officials and, if necessary, by Ministers. Miss Thelma Cazalet (Mrs. Cazalet-Keir) was a National Conservative MP. Of the expert opinion on the matter of the future of the Elgin Marbles sought by the Foreign Office in preparing its advice, of interest is the letter of Miss Welsford, Librarian of the Courtauld Institute. Miss Welsford wrote:

I have consulted my Professors who agree that, provided they are not exposed to weather, scholarship would not suffer if the Elgin Marbles were returned to Greece. So much for a direct answer. Indirectly, however, scholarship could obviously suffer from a number of considerations which are political. The Balkans are likely to continue to be the cockpit of Europe, and though London is not as inviolate as it was, probably they are safer kept here, within easy and immediate access to vaults than they would be in Athens, whence they might be stolen for Stamboul for instance! Then, so long as they are here, they provide a focus for western Europe for interest in Greece and Greek art; both the Profs feel that probably it is, for that reason, in Greece's best interest to have them here—though in all probability Greece would not take that view. A set of the best possible casts to be put up on the Parthenon is the ideal from the Profs' point of view, leaving the original here. To erect the originals there would be disastrous as they would be destroyed by weather, and also they would be too far off to be studied—If they do go back to Greece a special museum must be built for them. . . [FO 371/33195].

of the British Museum memorandum of the 31st ultimo as requested. You will, I take it, be sending us the comprehensive memorandum you propose to write, as Treasury is the intermediary between the British Museum and Parliament, and we shall accordingly have to see that the Museum's standpoint is also considered by our Ministers.

#### THE ELGIN MARBLES

Historical *Considerations:* When the Earl of Elgin was appointed Ambassador to the Porte in 1799, he designed as part of his mission an artistic and archaeological survey of the remains of antiquity in Athens, and engaged for this purpose a party of draughtsmen, architects and moulders. They began making their records of the buildings on the Acropolis in 1800, but the obstruction of local Turkish officials made it necessary for the Ambassador to obtain an authoritative firman at Constantinople, and in this was included permission 'to take away any pieces of stone with inscriptions or figures.' Lord Elgin's reason for getting this clause added was the protection of the sculpture against Turkish vandalism: 'The Turks have been continually defacing the heads, and in some instances they have actually acknowledged to me that they have pounded down the statues to convert them into mortar; it was upon these suggestions and with these feelings that I proceeded to remove as much of the sculpture as I conveniently could.' (*Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons*)

The removal of the sculpture, mainly from the Parthenon but not all from the existing structure (most of it was lying on the ground), and its transport to England, was a long and expensive business, which was not completed until 1805. Most of the shipping was done by the Royal Navy, but rather by the arrangement of the Ambassador with Captains concerned than by instruction of the Admiralty. The whole thing up to this point was a private activity in which H.M. Government took no interest. On their arrival in London Lord Elgin placed the Marbles on public exhibition at a house in Park Lane until 1810, when at the invitation of the Trustees of the British Museum he offered them to the government (making his proposal to the Paymaster General) on condition that he should receive "a fair reimbursement of his expenses." The method ultimately adopted was a petition to the House of Commons offering to transfer to the nation the Elgin Collection (sculpture, coins, casts and drawings) and praying the House to institute an inquiry in the merits and value of the collection.

The question was referred in February 1816 to a Select Committee, which found that the Marbles were honourably and meritoriously acquired, that their artistic quality was of great national importance, and that their monetary value might be assessed at £35,000 (as against Lord Elgin's account for expenses of £74,000). In the debate of June 7th 1816 (Hansard XXXIV, pp. 1027-40) the Chairman of the Committee moved that the sum be granted to His Majesty for the purchase of the Elgin Marbles; the motion was carried (82 to 30) with some opposition based on the view that the sculpture was improperly taken from Athens; and the subsequent Act of Parliament (56 GEO.III.cap.XCIX) vested the collection in perpetuity in the Trustees of the British Museum.

*Legal:* Even if the acquisition had not been made by Parliament, an Act of Parliament would be necessary to remove them from the British Museum, since the Trustees have no power to alienate material of this kind, not being duplicate or unfit for Museum (47 GEO.III.cap.36).

*Moral:* There is no doubt that Lord Elgin's action was right in every way. It was a good thing to get the sculpture out of Greece in 1800, and a good thing to bring it to London; it was done with proper authority, and all the technical operations were expertly performed. But the Greeks regard it as a spoliation of their national heritage under Turkish tyranny. It is beside the point that the export of antiquities is now prohibited in Greece and Italy and all of Near Eastern countries. The principle of tying works of art to their places of origin is not recognised by Western nations, and the frequent claims that such as have got out shall be returned have never been admitted and seem to be preposterous. The point is that the Acropolis of Athens is the greatest national monument of Greece, and that the buildings to which the Marbles belonged are still standing or have been rebuilt.

*Practical:* There can be no question of replacing the sculpture on the buildings, even if enough of the Parthenon were left to carry all that belongs to it. Exposure of the weather would not be contemplated by the Greek authorities, or if it were, would be opposed by expert international opinion. The pieces that are now in London would be placed in a museum, probably not on the Acropolis, where there is hardly room to enlarge the present building and certainly not room enough inside it. The return of the Marbles would therefore not improve the appearance of the Parthenon or the Acropolis, though it would gratify Greek sentiment. But Greek pride

may reasonably be offended by the patronage (assumed in recent newspaper correspondence and in this Parliamentary Question) which proposes the return as a favour rather than a right.

The British Museum, E. J. F.<sup>3</sup>  
31 December 1940

On 12 January 1941 Mr. W. L. C. Knight, official on the Greek desk at the Foreign Office, prepared the following memorandum and draft reply to the Treasury:

#### *The Elgin Marbles*

The perennial question of the return of the Elgin Marbles to Athens has now cropped up again in a rather acute form, as a Parliamentary Question by Miss Cazalet in the following terms:

To ask the Prime Minister whether he will introduce legislation to enable the Elgin Marbles to be restored to Greece at the end of hostilities as some recognition of the Greeks' magnificent stand for civilisation.

Miss Cazalet's question has already been postponed once, but she insists on asking it in view of the "pressure to which she is being subjected by English and Greek friends." It is therefore necessary to consider urgently the nature of the reply to be returned to Miss Cazalet, and, less urgently, the nature of the decision on the general question which His Majesty's Government should eventually arrive at. That they should reach such decision in the fairly near future seems clear in the light of our present relations with Greece, and the interest now being taken in the question by the British public, as shown by the recent correspondence in *The Times*. Of the letters published, the great majority were in favour of the Marbles being restored to Greece.

In view of the time which may be required for a decision on the general issue it would seem necessary to return a non-committal reply to the Parliamentary Question. The reply might be to the effect that the present moment is inopportune for a final decision on a subject which raises several important issues, and has given rise to much controversy in the past; but that His Majesty's Government will not fail to give the matter their careful and sympathetic consideration.

<sup>3</sup>FO 371/33195 E. J. F. (John, later Sir, Forsdyke, Director of the British Museum). John Edgar Forsdyke was Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities in the British Museum from 1932 to 1936.

The Treasury, who are the intermediary between the British Museum and Parliament, have obtained from the former and communicated to the Foreign Office an interesting memorandum on the Elgin Marbles and the part taken by Parliament in their acquisition for the nation. The following three paragraphs are a summary of the British Museum memorandum:

(a) *Historical*

Lord Elgin, British Ambassador to the Porte, began to take active interest in the buildings on the Acropolis in 1800, and, in consequence of Turkish obstruction at Athens, obtained an imperial firman which included permission "to take away any pieces of stone with inscriptions or figure." This clause was secured to protect the sculptures from the vandalism of local Turks, who had been continually defacing the heads and had actually pounded down some of the statues for conversion into mortar. The removal of the sculptures and their transport to England, a long and expensive business, was not completed until 1805, the Royal Navy doing most of the shipping. They were publicly exhibited in a private house in Park Lane until 1810, when, at the invitation of the trustees of the British Museum, Lord Elgin offered them to the Government on condition that he should receive "a fair reimbursement of his expenses." In 1816 a Select Committee of the House of Commons found that the Marbles had been honourably and meritoriously acquired, that their artistic value was of great national importance, and that their monetary value might be assessed at £35,000 (Lord Elgin had claimed £74,000 for expenses). The Chairman of the Committee moved that this sum be granted to His Majesty for the purchase of the Elgin Marbles, and the vote was carried. The subsequent Act of Parliament (56 GEO.III.cap.XCIX) vested the collection in perpetuity in the Trustees of the British Museum.

(b) *Legal*

Lord Elgin's action was right in every way. It was right to remove the sculptures from Greece at that time, and to bring them to London. It was done with proper authority and in an expert manner. The Greeks indeed regard it as a spoliation of their national heritage under Turkish tyranny, but the principle of tying works of art to their place of origin is not recognized by western nations, and claims that they should be returned have never been admitted and indeed seem preposterous. In the present case, however, the point is that the Acropolis is the greatest national monument of Greece and that the buildings to which the Marbles belonged are still standing or have been rebuilt.

(c) *Practical*

There can be no question of replacing the sculptures on those buildings. Exposure to the air would not be contemplated by the Greek authorities, or, if it were, would be opposed by expert international opinion. The pieces now in London would have to be placed in a museum. The return of the Marbles would therefore not improve the appearance of the Parthenon or of the Acropolis. It would, however, gratify Greek sentiment, though Greek pride might be offended by any tone of patronage such as that perceptible in *The Times* correspondence and in this Parliamentary Question.

It remains to be considered whether scholarship would suffer if the Elgin Marbles were to be returned to Athens. From unofficial enquiries made by the Foreign Office it would appear that scholarship would not suffer, subject to the following considerations: The Balkans are likely to continue to be one of the cockpits of Europe and, though London is no longer as inviolate as it was, the Marbles are probably safer here than in Athens. Then, so long as they are here, they provide in western Europe a focus of interest in Greece and Greek art, so that it might be in Greece's interest to have the Marbles here, though she would not be likely to take that view. Moreover, at Athens they would be too far away to be conveniently studied.

The return of the Elgin Marbles, if decided on, should be in the nature of a gesture of friendship to Greece, and not be based on the principle that antiquities should be put back where they came from, which would be a most awkward and dangerous precedent. The best time for the gesture would be after the war, when transport would again be safe. It would thus set the seal on Anglo-Greek friendship and collaboration in the way that would most appeal—short of the cession of Cyprus—to Greek patriotic sentiment. We should, however, presumably ensure for ourselves, in perpetuity, a share in the control of the arrangements to be made for the preservation of these treasures, e.g. permanent British representation on the committee.

It is further suggested that, assuming it is decided to return the Marbles, His Majesty's Government might consult General Metaxas, telling him we are ready to send them back and asking him for his views and advice.

For the gift to be complete and completely acceptable it should comprise, in addition to the Parthenon friezes, the Caryatid and the Column from the Erechtheum which all together constitute the Elgin Marbles.

*Recommendations*

1. That the reply to Miss Cazalet's question should be to the effect that the present moment is inopportune for a final decision on a subject which raises several important issues, and has given rise to so much controversy in the past; but that H.M.G. will not fail to give the matter their careful and sympathetic consideration.

2. That, subject to the views of H.M. Minister at Athens, it should be decided in principle to return to Greece the Elgin Marbles, including the Caryatid and the Column from the Erechtheum, on the following conditions:

(a) it should be made quite clear that the decision to return the Marbles is in the nature of a gesture of friendship to Greece and is not based on any recognition of the principle that antiquities should be returned to their place of origin;

(b) the Marbles should not be returned until after the war;

(c) before they are returned, adequate arrangements should be made for their proper housing, exhibition, and preservation;

(d) H.M.G. should be assured of a share, in perpetuity, in the control of the arrangements to be made for their preservation.

3. That, again subject to the views of H.M. Minister at Athens, before anything is said officially to the Greek government, the decision of H.M.G. should be communicated unofficially to General Metaxas, who should be asked for his views and advice.<sup>4</sup>

On 14 January 1941 Mr. Bowker in a memorandum to Sir Stephen Caselee, Librarian and Keeper of the Papers, wrote:

Mr. Knight has written a most useful memorandum, which I think covers all the various aspects of this controversial question. Everything points to a decision in principle to return the Elgin Marbles to Greece on certain conditions, as enumerated in Mr. Knight's memorandum. In order that the memorandum should be quite complete I think it should include recommendations, and I have appended a draft final paragraph.

I submit that a copy of the memorandum should now be sent to Mr. Wright in reply to his letter. Mr. Wright tells me that he is most anxious to have our reply by tomorrow so that there may be

<sup>4</sup>FO 371/33195.

time for the matter to be submitted to Ministers over the weekend.<sup>5</sup>

Sir Stephen's comments on the memorandum were, "Yes, I am personally very much against the whole project: but since the British Museum has receded to a certain extent from its former rigid position, I suppose we must go as far as is now suggested."<sup>6</sup> On the following day, 15 January 1941 Mr. Nichols wrote:

Mr. Knight's clear and succinct memorandum covers, I think, all the points and I should hope that the recommendations now put forward would command general approval.

Personally I am strongly in favour of returning the Marbles, including the Caryatid and the Column from the Erechtheum, at the end of the war, not only because I think such a gesture would be warmly welcomed by the Greeks and by public opinion throughout the world, but also because I believe that it might to some extent deflect Greek eyes from Cyprus.<sup>7</sup>

Reflecting on the note of Mr. Nichols, Sir Orme Sargent, Deputy Under-Secretary of State wrote:

I cannot believe that the return of the Elgin Marbles will deflect Greek eyes from Cyprus. The two things are not comparable, and indeed it may well turn out, since *l'appetit vient en mangeant*, that if we make one gift to satisfy Greek archaeological sentiment, Greek ethnographical imperialism will demand that it should be similarly rewarded.

As regards the conditions under which the Marbles should be returned, I would deprecate condition (d), to the effect that H.M. Government should be assured of a share in perpetuity in the control of the arrangements to be made for the preservation of the Marbles. This would be all right if an offer to this effect came spontaneously from the Greeks, but for us to demand it would certainly offend Greek *amour propre* and undo a good deal of the psychological value of the gift. Besides, from the technical point of view, I should say it was quite unnecessary.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>FO 371/33195. Sir Stephen Caselee was a classical scholar as well as an official.

<sup>6</sup>FO 371/33195.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

To the note of Mr. Nichols and the comments of Sir Orme Sargent of 15 January 1941, the Honorable Sir Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Under-Secretary of State, wrote:

I don't know where this is going to end. Whose is the Bellini portrait of the Sultan which, unlike the Elgin Marbles, was obtained by direct fraud on the part of our Envoy? Public attention has been focussed on the Elgin Marbles, but they were actually acquired in a manner no more disreputable than many of the contents of European and American museums.

We can reply to the PQ on the lines proposed, but I hope we shall think twice before taking final decision.<sup>9</sup>

Mr. (later Sir) Anthony Eden, Secretary of State, on 15 January 1941 wrote, "I am prepared to advise reply to the PQ as suggested, but we should not go further at present. This is a matter that can well be decided after the war, with much else both artistic and political."<sup>10</sup>

On the 16th of January 1941 Mr. Nichols wrote to Mr. Wright:

With reference to your letter to me of the 30th December and your letter to Bowker of the 8th January about the Elgin Marbles, I write to say that my Secretary of State recommends that the answer to Miss Cazalet's question should be to the effect that the present moment is inopportune for a final decision on a subject which raises

<sup>9</sup>FO 371/33195. "On the lines proposed," i.e. a holding reply.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. Ministers and senior officials have been being asked to make decisions in principle or in advance of need. It is clear that the most senior people in the Foreign Office were only agreeing to the holding reply, not to the recommendations added by Bowker. Those recommendations were not even sent to the Treasury. Of interest, perhaps, is the note of Mr. M. L. C. Clarke to Mr. Knight dated 23 January 1941: "The German propagandists not infrequently refer to the Elgin marbles, which the British 'stole' from Greece and refuse to return to her. As usual the material for the propaganda comes from English sources. It was Byron who, at a time when everyone thought it right that the treasures of Greece should be transferred from a country where they were ignored and neglected to western European countries, attacked Lord Elgin as vandal and despoiler; and since the time of Byron there have been and still are many Englishmen who feel that the marbles should be in Athens rather than in London. Counter propaganda, if thought necessary, should be on these lines: Elgin was inspired by an enthusiasm for ancient Greek art which was shared by the educated of other European countries, not least by Germans, e.g. Stackelber and Haller, who were active in excavation, and Ludwig of Bavaria, who secured the Aegina sculptures for the Munich Glyptothek. The genuine philhellenism of the eighteenth and nineteenth century German scholars and literary men might be contrasted with the unsympathetic attitude towards which Germans are now forced by their propagandists to adopt. Reference might also be made to the notorious freedom with which Nazi leaders appropriate works of art from public and private collections." FO 371/33195.

several important issues and has given rise to so much controversy in the past; but that His Majesty's Government will not fail to give the matter their careful and sympathetic consideration.

Mr. Eden is not prepared to go further than this at present since he thinks that this is a matter that can well be decided after the war.<sup>11</sup>

Parliamentary Debates on 23rd January 1941 record the following exchange:

#### GREECE (ELGIN MARBLES)

*Miss Cazalet* asked the Prime Minister whether he will introduce legislation to enable the Elgin Marbles to be restored to Greece at the end of hostilities as some recognition of the Greeks' magnificent stand for civilisation?

Mr. Attlee: His Majesty's Government are not prepared to introduce legislation for this purpose.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>FO 371/33195. Also, Hansard of 23 January 1941, p. 319. I am grateful to the British Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon Marbles for helpful material provided for this essay. See also John Torode, "The Day the FO lost its marbles," *The Guardian* (March 21, 1984). For a controversial argument on the recent controversy on the Elgin Marbles, see Gavin Stamp, "Keeping our Marbles," *The Spectator* (London, 10 December, 1983) 14-17.