

A Brief History of The Parthenon Marbles

The Parthenon Marbles, known for a period as the Elgin Marbles, are from a Doric temple on the Athenian Acropolis, Greece, built in 447-432 BC and dedicated to the goddess Athena. The marbles used to sit in the eastern pediment of the temple and celebrate the glory of Greece to those who entered. They depict the Birth of Athena, who was the daughter of Zeus and the goddess Metis.



In 1687, the temple was largely destroyed due to conflict between the Ottoman Empire and Venice. During the fighting it was used as a weapon store, which led to an explosion causing most of the damage.

Lord Elgin was a British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th Century. They were acquired by Lord Elgin in Athens, Greece, between 1801 and 1805 under permit (firman) and were transported to his estate for many years. They were purchased by the British Crown from Lord Elgin in 1816 and were presented to the British Museum by Parliament where they have been ever since. The display in the British Museum consists of 247 feet of the original 524 feet of frieze, roughly half of survives today.

*"Dull is the eye that will not weep to see
Thy walls defaced, thy
mouldering shrines removed
By British hands, which it had
best behaved To guard those
relics ne'er to be restored."*

- Lord Byron, Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, 1812.

Still in the British Museum today these sculptures are just some of the controversially acquired objects in the collection. For some time, they were referred to as the Elgin Marbles however awareness has been raised to change their name to the Parthenon Sculptures. Greece disputes that they were removed illegally from the country when under Turkish occupation under the Ottoman Empire. A formal request was made in 1983 to return the sculptures to Greece and there have been discussions consistently since.

The 2013 proposed mediation by UNESCO was declined by the British Museum. The museum remains confident in the opinion that the sculptures that survive are best seen and conserved in museums.

