

RESPONSE TO THE GREAT GREAT GREAT GRANDSON OF LORD ELGIN



*Two riders at the end of the west frieze Parthenon Marbles,
Greece, now in the British Museum, London.*

Alastair Bruce may have a filial duty in respect of the Parthenon/Elgin Marbles and no one can criticise him for that. <[sharonwaxman](#)> After all, we are not responsible for the deeds or misdeeds of our ancestors. What he should really not expect from the rest of us is to buy the argument that his Great Great Great Grandfather, Lord Elgin, “*wanted to preserve them from the destruction they faced, at a time when war and local indifference was grinding away at the edifice.*” This is a baseless argument which has been used by all those who have taken illegally or in a questionable manner, the cultural objects of others. It is an extremely weak argument which does not gain credibility by being repeated often. Who preserved these objects before his Great Great Great Grandfather ever set foot in Athens?

Nowadays, nobody except officials of the British Museum and their friends, believe that the Parthenon/Elgin Marbles that were put into that museum “*are owned by us all, in trust for the world*”. Tell this to the Greeks! The rest of the world, led by the Greeks, has not accepted the British Museum propaganda that the actions of Lord Elgin “*spared them further damage by vandalism, weathering and pollution*”. (From a notice affixed to a wall in the British Museum, entitled ATHENS AND LONDON). The vandalism involved in physically removing these objects from their original location is conveniently forgotten. The United Nations and UNESCO have in countless resolutions urged that cultural objects such as the Parthenon Marbles be returned to their countries of origin.

Equally groundless is the argument that “*If Britain repatriates the Elgin Marbles, it will not be long before every country in the world puts in claims for items displayed in the British Museum to be returned. Museums in London, New York and else where might face a mass repatriation from the precedent.*”

Are the big museums made up only of stolen/looted artefacts or objects of doubtful acquisition? Anytime some country or some person asks for the return of an unjustifiably taken object, he or she is told that if it were returned all the others will claim their looted property. Is this a valid

argument? Can one legally or morally advance the argument that because one has wrongfully taken objects from many other persons, nobody should have their property back because the illegal holder would have nothing else in his possession?

It is also remarkable that once a claim is made with respect to a specific object, the holders broaden the argument to cover all objects. If you ask for the return of the Benin Bronzes, you are told that cannot be done because there would then be a claim for the Parthenon/Elgin Marbles. If you ask for the return of a Nazi-looted object hanging in the British Museum, you are told that cannot be done because then there will follow a claim for the Parthenon/Elgin Marbles. Thus the different histories of the acquisition of the various contested objects in the British Museum are mixed. Can one injustice be used to defend another injustice?

Are the makers of such arguments not worried at all by the moral implications of their reasoning? I recommend to those with such views a quotation from some members of the House of Lords:

“The public interest must surely be in upholding the rule of law, rather than promoting an international free-for-all through the unrestricted circulation of tainted works of art. Do we really wish to educate our children to have no respect for history, legality and ethical values by providing museums with the opportunity freely to exhibit stolen property?”

Extract from a letter by several members of the British House of Lords:

www.timesonline.co.uk

The Greeks have built a New Acropolis Museum which is intended to house, inter alia, the Parthenon Marbles. The Greeks and indeed the whole world, including the majority of British citizens, hope that the British Museum and the British Government will finally do what is morally and legally correct: return the Parthenon Marbles to Athens!



New Acropolis Museum, Athens.

Kwame Opoku, 23 January 2009.