

# Elgin Marbles: ‘Stolen’ treasure to be returned to Athens?

“Greece is on the phone again, they want their statues back.” The Greek minister of culture is “determined” to get the famous sculptures out of the British Museum. Should they be sent home?



**Lost their marbles:** Sculptures were acquired by the Earl of Elgin in the early 1800s. © Getty

## WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Thomas Bruce, Lord Elgin, began removing the [Elgin Marbles](#) in 1801. They have been on display in the British Museum for over two hundred years. [Athens](#) wants their masterpieces back. The recent message from the Greek minister of culture makes action seem far more likely.

Who do the sculptures really belong to?

## FIND OUT MORE...

Lord Elgin said he had permission from the [Ottoman sultan](#) to remove the sculptures. There were strong [objections](#) from Greece and many sympathisers. The British Museum bought them in 1816. There have been arguments about them ever since.

Two years ago, lawyers suggested that Greece should take legal action and sue the UK government to get the sculptures back. But for the time being the Greeks are continuing to [negotiate](#).

The Greeks want to display them in Athens's Acropolis Museum. In its Parthenon Gallery there is a reconstruction of how the sculptures were displayed in the ancient temple. It is made from a combination of the original blocks of the frieze and cast copies of the pieces in museums abroad, such as the British Museum and the Louvre in Paris.

Should the originals be returned to Athens?

## SOME SAY.....

“No! Keep them safe,” say some. The [air pollution](#) in Athens could destroy them. The beautiful works were acquired to preserve them when they were in danger of being lost for ever. Let them rest in peace for millions of visitors to enjoy in the British Museum; it has kept them safe through 200 years and two world wars. It would be foolish to move them now.

## OTHERS THINK.....

“Send them back!” say others. It is time the British returned what is not theirs. The argument for keeping them “safe” is just a poor excuse for selfish [covetousness](#). Many items in the British Museum and elsewhere have, at some point in their histories, been stolen from other countries. Britain is just worried it will draw attention to its stolen treasure trove.

## DISCUSSION POINT

“Finders keepers, losers weepers!”

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

## YOU DECIDE

Should Britain give the Elgin Marbles back to Greece?

## ACTIVITY

Split the class in two. One half is the legal team for Greece, the other is the legal team for Britain.

1. The aim for the Greek team is to bring back the Elgin Marbles. The aim for the British team is to keep them in the British Museum.
2. Each team must prepare a short introduction or fact file about these statues that explains what the Elgin Marbles are.
3. Each team must then put a case together which includes strong reasons to support their argument. They should read the history of the Elgin Marbles on the British Museum website, and re-read the content of this article to inform what they say.
4. Take the debate to assembly. Ensure the question from 'You Decide' is clearly visible: "Should Britain give back the Elgin Marbles?"
5. Each team must present their case in turn.
6. Have the assembly audience vote either for sending the statues home, or letting them stay in the British Museum.

## GLOSSARY

**The Elgin Marbles** - Also known as the Parthenon marbles, a series of sculptures carved nearly 2,500 years ago. They originally formed a frieze all round the temple (ie, the Parthenon) in Athens dedicated to the Greek goddess Athena.

**Athens** - The capital city of the new state of Greece since 1832.

**Ottoman sultan** - A person with a lot of power: the sovereign or ruler of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire, which controlled what is now Greece (1453-1821).

**Objections** - Feelings or expressions of disapproval or disagreement.

**Negotiate** - To talk and discuss to come to an agreement.

**Air pollution** - According to the World Health Organisation, Athens has twice the amount of particle pollution as London. Some worry this could damage the statues.

**Covetousness** - Wanting something that is not yours. One of the "seven deadly sins".