

Open Forum 3

Web Site Transcript

Chapter 12

A = Professor

A: Today, we turn to one of the greatest controversies in modern archeology. Or rather, I should say in classical archeology. I'm talking about the Elgin Marbles. How many of you have been to the British Museum in London? A few. Okay, well if the rest of you ever do go there, you'll find that one of its prize possessions is in fact called the Elgin Marbles. That's the popular name for the Parthenon Sculptures, which were brought to England by the 19th century diplomat and amateur archeologist, Lord Elgin.

To explain the significance of the sculptures, let's go back to ancient Athens. In the 5th century BCE, Greece was a loose collection of city-states, and Athens was the most influential of them, both militarily and culturally. After one particular battle against Persia, the democratic leader of Athens, Pericles, decided to build a temple to Athena. Now, Athena was a goddess, and, as you might guess from the name, she was the patron goddess of Athens. Athena was a very powerful god in Greek mythology, so Pericles had a very large temple built for her. The temple was called the Parthenon, and it contained a massive gold statue to Athena, which unfortunately no longer exists.

Around the inside walls of the Parthenon was a frieze. This frieze was a long series of marble sculptures which ran along the entire length of each wall of the temple. That's a total of around 160 meters of sculptures! Since the sculptures have been damaged over time, it's sometimes hard to interpret them, but they basically depict processions of Athenians—ordinary citizens of Athens—walking and riding horses towards the goddess Athena herself, who is probably surrounded by the other Olympian gods, those are the 12 major gods in Greek religion. It was very unusual during this time for ordinary people and gods to be depicted in the same frieze.

In 1816, the British Museum purchased a large collection of Parthenon sculptures from Lord Elgin. Between Pericles and Lord Elgin, a lot had happened to the Parthenon. In the year 450, for example, it was converted into a church by the early Christians. During this conversion, some of the sculptures were damaged or removed because they did not fit the new religion. The Parthenon remained a church until

the 15th century. At that time, Greece became part of the Ottoman Empire. Turkey was one of the most powerful countries in the world at that time, and it conquered many surrounding countries, including Greece. The Ottoman Empire was Muslim, so the Parthenon was converted into a mosque, a Muslim place of prayer. Despite these changes, no major damage was done to the ancient temple until 1687 when Athens was under attack from the city of Venice in Italy. The ruling Turks used the Parthenon to store gunpowder—that's the explosive material used in guns. Unfortunately, the gunpowder caught fire and exploded during the battle. The roof and some of the sculptures of the Parthenon were destroyed. The Venetians won that battle, and tried to take some of the sculptures from the frieze, but they caused more damage in the process.

By the time Elgin became the British ambassador to Athens in 1799, the Parthenon was in terrible condition. Elgin secured permission from the Turkish authorities to study and remove some of the sculptures. Greece, by the way, was part of the Ottoman Empire until its independence in 1829. Many people, especially in Greece, say that Elgin stole the sculptures, and the Greek government has repeatedly asked the British government to return the sculptures. The British Museum with the support of the British government has always refused. One major reason for this refusal is the condition of the rest of the Parthenon.

The 20th century has not been kind to ancient sites in Athens. Athens is a heavily polluted city, and the pollution has destroyed many of the remaining Parthenon sculptures. The temple itself is almost falling down. The British Museum authorities maintain that they look after the Elgin Marbles better than the city of Athens could. Not surprisingly, the Greek government is unhappy about this, and they have been building a museum specifically for the Parthenon sculptures. Unfortunately, after years of delays and yet more controversy, it's still unfinished.

So, onto your assignment for this week. I'd like you to write a position paper in which you argue either that the Elgin Marbles should be returned to Athens, or that they should stay in London. You can use your textbook, this lecture, and the British

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Museum website as resources. Your paper should be 750-1000 words, typed and double-spaced. Be sure to properly cite your sources. Please turn in your paper 24 hours before our next class to my mailbox in the Archeology Department. If you would like me to look at a draft of your essay, you can bring it in during my usual office hours on Friday. Any questions?