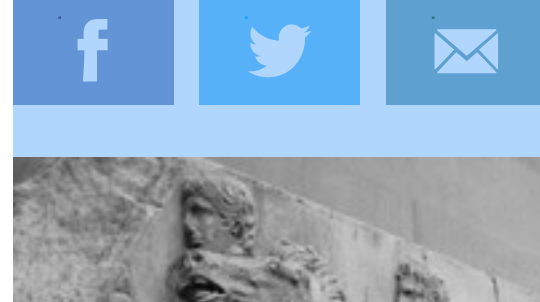


## 8 facts about the Elgin Marbles

The Elgin Marbles, a collection of stone sculptures and inscriptions more properly known as the Parthenon Sculptures, was acquired by Lord Elgin in Athens, Greece between 1801 and 1805 and today lives in London's British Museum



February 19, 2020 at 10:29 am

**Purchased by the British crown from Lord Elgin in 1816, the Parthenon Sculptures were presented by parliament to the British Museum, where they have remained ever since.**

**Greece has disputed the British Museum's ownership of the sculptures, maintaining that Lord Elgin removed them illegally while the country was under Turkish occupation as part of the Ottoman Empire. Lord Elgin was ambassador to the Ottoman court of the Sultan in Istanbul in the early 19th century.**

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How much do you know about the Elgin Marbles? Here, we bring you the facts...

### 1 The Elgin Marbles are sculptures from the Parthenon...

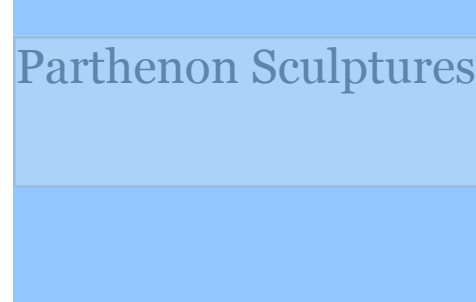
... a marble frieze temple (aka a Doric temple) on the Athenian Acropolis, Greece, built in 447–432 BC and dedicated to the goddess Athena. The temple was “the centrepiece of an ambitious building programme on the Acropolis of Athens,” [the British Museum explains](#). In 1687 the temple, which had stood for about 2,000 years, was largely destroyed during a war between Venice and the Ottoman Empire, which was then occupying Greece.

### 2 According to the British Museum, Elgin was granted a firman (letter of instruction) granting him permission to take away the pieces...

... “as a personal gesture after he encouraged the British forces in their fight to drive the French out of Egypt, which was then an Ottoman possession”. The legality of this document is today hotly debated.

### 3 The Elgin Marbles collection consists of roughly half of what now survives of the Parthenon

That is, 247 feet of the original 524 feet of frieze; 15 of 92 metopes; 17 figures from the pediments, and various other pieces of architecture, says the British Museum. It also includes objects from other buildings on the Acropolis: the Erechtheion, the Propylaea, and the Temple of Athena Nike.



Parthenon Sculptures

Parthenon Sculptures, also known as the Elgin Marbles, at the British Museum in London, January 2007. (Photo by Barry King/WireImage)

### 4 The Elgin Marbles should, technically, be known as the Parthenon frieze

From the beginning of 1817, the Elgin collection was first housed in a temporary gallery designed by Robert Smirke. “His permanent ‘Elgin Room’ (now Room 17) was completed on the west side of the Museum in 1832, and the collection remained there, and subsequently extended into adjacent galleries, until the Duveen Gallery was built in the 1930s,” [says the British Museum](#). Because the marble slabs are actually part of the frieze that ran around the whole of the Parthenon inside the peristyle, they should, technically, be known as the Parthenon frieze.

### 5 Elgin had originally intended to donate his collection to the nation...

... but his plan was scuppered when, on his return to England, he suffered financial problems. It is believed that many of the relics were for years stored in the grounds of Elgin's Park Lane house while he tried to find a buyer.

In 1810 Elgin began formal negotiations with the British Government for the sale of the objects. Elgin had hoped to raise £73,600, but agreed to accept the value determined by a select committee of the House of Commons, which held the collection to be worth £35,000. The collection was in 1816 vested in the trustees of the British Museum in perpetuity under the terms of the Local and Personal Acts 56 George III c.99. The Trustees now hold the Elgin collection under the terms of The British Museum Act (1963).

### 6 In 2004, art critic Andrew Graham-Dixon told the BBC: “I think it's important not to judge Elgin by the standards of the present”

“You have to judge the man in the context of his own time.” [The report says](#) that while “plundering” artworks would spark outrage today, during Elgin's era “it was common for the wealthy to collect ancient treasures from around the world. Tourists to Greece regularly took souvenirs from the Parthenon site, and as a genuine lover of art now armed with apparent authority to take whatever he wished, Elgin began removing his share.”

### 7 In 2012, Stephen Fry called for the Parthenon Marbles to be returned to Greece

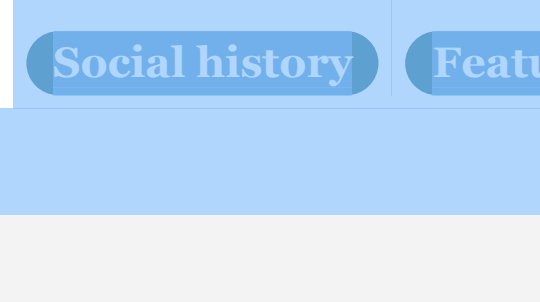
In a debate hosted by Intelligence Squared in London, Fry said it would be a “classy” move to [restore the sculptures](#). Opposing the motion, Tristram Hunt MP said he feared that restoring the Marbles could lead to a “purge” of museums in which “tit-for-tat recoveries” of objects by their countries of origin would lead to a “global loss of appreciation and understanding”.

### 8 Mediation was proposed in 2013

In August 2013, at the request of the Greek Government, the Assistant Director-General for Culture at UNESCO wrote a letter to the Director of the British Museum (as well as the UK foreign secretary and the minister for culture, media and sport) proposing a process of mediation on the subject of the Parthenon Sculptures in the British Museum. But “the UK Government and the Trustees of the British Museum replied separately in 2015, each respectfully declining this proposal”. You can [read the letters here](#).

To find out more about the Elgin Marbles, visit [the British Museum website](#).

This article was first published by [HistoryExtra](#) in 2015



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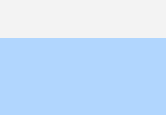
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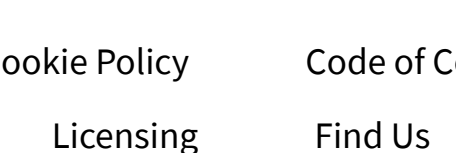
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