

Greece may go to court to get ancient sculptures back from Britain

By Helena Smith, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.13.16

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A woman looks at the Parthenon Marbles, a collection of stone objects, inscriptions and sculptures on show at the British Museum in London, England, Oct. 16, 2014. Photo: REUTERS/Dylan Martinez

Greece is investigating new ways to bring a claim against the British Museum. The country wants its Parthenon marble statues back and is willing to use international justice to get it done.

Campaigners are getting ready to mark the 200th anniversary of the antiquities' so-called imprisonment in London. At the same time, Athens is creating alliances to further empower its longstanding battle to have the sculptures returned.

The Greek cultural minister, Aristides Baltas, revealed that they are trying create a relationship with an international body like the United Nations. They hope to use the relationship against the British Museum.

Greeks Hope For Support From U.N.

“If the U.N. represents all nations of the world and all nations of the world say ‘the marbles should be returned’ then we’ll go to court,” he said. “We do not regard the Parthenon as exclusively Greek, but rather as a heritage of humanity.”

He admitted that there is a risk that the courts would rule against them. This would ruin Athens' chances of having the artworks reunited to the Parthenon, the magnificent monument they once adorned.

"Courts do not by definition regard (any) issue at the level of history or morality or humanity-at-large. They look at the laws," Baltas said. He is an academic and a philosopher. He also played a pivotal role in founding Syriza, Greece's governing leftist party. He pointed out that the courts have no clear historical standard in a case like this.

Marble Sculptures Taken From Parthenon

The move came to light as the world's longest cultural disagreement looks poised to intensify. Almost 200 years ago, the British Parliament voted on June 7, 1816, to purchase the collection, also known as the Elgin Marbles, from Lord Elgin.

Elgin was the British representative to the Ottoman Empire. He ordered the marble frieze, a carved panel of decoration, to be torn from the Parthenon and shipped to England. Activists are counting down to what they call the "black anniversary."

Only steps away from the British Museum, a huge billboard funded by campaigners in Australia appeared recently. The billboard says "Please give us back our marbles," across a Greek statue. Above it is a list of the important contributions Greece has made to modern democratic life.

"There is no point any longer in taking the gentle approach, because that has failed," said Alexis Mantheakis. He is chairman of the New Zealand-based International Parthenon Sculptures Action Committee. "The British have never given anything back, be it colonies or artifacts, without pressure. To ignore that fact is to undermine the chances of any success in the campaign for the return of the Parthenon sculptures."

Legal Advisers Say Greece Could Win

The Parthenon marbles are seen as the high point of classical art and a prime example of beauty in carving. They were purchased for about \$50,500. The terms of the sale were that they be exhibited in the British Museum. Mortified, steeped in debt and determined to get rid of rumors that he had exploited his post to plunder the Acropolis, Elgin reluctantly accepted. It had cost him nearly twice what he got.

A 141-page document of legal advice has been leaked exclusively to the Guardian. Important British lawyers say Elgin clearly exceeded his authority when he ordered the marbles to be "stripped." They insist that Greece could mount a strong case to win back the marbles. International law has reached a point where a state has the right to retake wrongly taken cultural property, especially if the property is of great historical significance. Therefore, Greece is entitled have the Parthenon sculptures returned.

The advice shows how Athens could pursue its claim to the classical masterpieces. Greece could bring Britain before the European court of human rights. The U.N. cultural body Unesco could also apply for an advisory judgment by the international court of

justice. The advisory judgment would not require action but would set a standard. Court action could prompt Britain to agree to a third party to help settle the dispute. Up until now, Britain has refused every attempt.

Don't Wait Too Long, Lawyers Warn

“The legal case is strongly arguable, both under international customary law and provisions of the European convention. (Greece) would stand a reasonable prospect of success.”

The advice took almost a year to draft. The lawyers reportedly were paid by a Greek shipowner sympathetic to the cause.

The lawyers also suggest that Athens should move fast in pursuing legal action. Stuck in bad economic times, many fear that the cash-strapped country would not have the means to take such action. They think that if they do not bring the claim soon, Greece may be accused of "sleeping on its rights" for too long. They added that even if initial court action failed it would not be the end of the fight.

“If Greece does fail, it will very likely be on technical ‘admissibility’ grounds, which will have nothing to do with the merits of its claim. A case lost on a legal technicality can often be fought again.”

Quiz

- 1 Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) Only steps away from the British Museum, a huge billboard funded by campaigners in Australia appeared recently. The billboard says "Please give us back our marbles," across a Greek statue.
 - (B) Greece is enlisting the help of the international community in its fight to win back the Parthenon marbles.
 - (C) The Parthenon marbles are considered a high point of classical sculpture and an important cultural treasure.
 - (D) Legal experts have drafted a 141-page document advising the Greek government how to pursue its case against the British Museum.
- 2 How do paragraphs 2 and 3 of the section "Don't Wait Too Long, Lawyers Warn" develop a central idea of the article?
- (A) They explain that Greece will likely lose its case to win back the Parthenon marbles on a legal technicality.
 - (B) They give an idea of how long it will take for Greece to finally win the Parthenon marbles back in court.
 - (C) They describe some of the difficulties Greece will face in trying to win the Parthenon marbles back in court.
 - (D) They illustrate how important it is for Greece to take legal action in its fight to win back the Parthenon marbles.
- 3 Based on the section "Greeks Hope For Support From U.N.," which statement BEST describes how the Greek government feels about its case to win back the Parthenon marbles?
- (A) They feel it is in the best interests of all humanity that the Parthenon marbles are returned to their rightful owners.
 - (B) They feel that courts should make special exceptions regarding artifacts of historical interest like the Parthenon marbles.
 - (C) They feel that they have a strong legal case in their fight to win the Parthenon marbles back from the British museum.
 - (D) They feel that it is the duty of international bodies like the United Nations to protect cultural treasures like the Parthenon marbles.

Read the paragraph from the article.

The Parthenon marbles are seen as the high point of classical art and a prime example of beauty in carving. They were purchased for about \$50,500. The terms of the sale were that they be exhibited in the British Museum. Mortified, steeped in debt and determined to get rid of rumors that he had exploited his post to plunder the Acropolis, Elgin reluctantly accepted. It had cost him nearly twice what he got.

What was the author's MAIN purpose for including this paragraph in the article?

- (A) to show that Lord Elgin had originally stolen the Parthenon marbles in hopes of selling them to pay off his debts
- (B) to show that the British Museum legally acquired the Parthenon marbles by paying Lord Elgin market value for them
- (C) to show that many people at the time felt that Lord Elgin had acted unlawfully when he brought the Parthenon marbles to England
- (D) to show that Lord Elgin was only acting in the interests of preserving cultural treasures when he took the Parthenon marbles to England