

SHOULD THE ELGIN MARBLES BE RETURNED TO GREECE?

Should precious artefacts taken from a country hundreds of years ago be returned?

Athens, and from other buildings. They are currently located in the British Museum in London.



One of the most famous artefacts in the world, the Elgin Marbles, has been back in the news recently. Also known as the Parthenon Marbles, the first thing to know is that the Elgin Marbles aren't actually marbles! They are, in fact, a collection of ancient Greek sculptures created around 2,500 years ago. The Elgin Marbles were removed from the Parthenon, an ancient temple in the Greek capital

Late last year, the Greek prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, visited the UK and urged Boris Johnson to return the Marbles to Greece. Then, at the start of 2022, the government of Italy announced it was returning a fragment of the Parthenon to Greece. A week after that deal was announced, the Great North Museum: Hancock in Newcastle said it was returning to Nigeria an artefact looted by the British military in 1897.



The fact that the Elgin Marbles are in the UK and not Greece has caused a big debate about who the rightful owners are, and whether art and artefacts should always be kept in their country of origin (the country they came from).

The Marbles were brought to England at the start of the 19th century by Thomas Bruce, also known as Lord Elgin or the Earl of Elgin. He said he had received permission to remove artefacts from the Turkish government, who controlled Greece at the time.

Elgin also claimed the Marbles were at risk of being destroyed in a war or being damaged because they weren't looked after properly. He sold the Marbles to the British Government, who passed them on to the British Museum in 1816, where they went on permanent public display a year later. You can go and see them today, for free, at the museum.

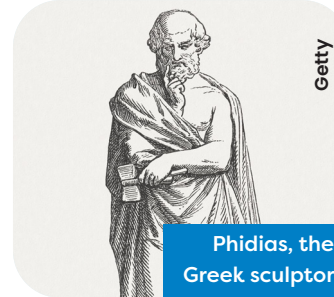
The British Museum has no plans to return the Elgin Marbles. But is it time they went back to Greece? Or is it fair that they stay in London?



The Greek prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis (left), with Boris Johnson

FACTS & FIGURES

The Elgin Marbles were created by Greek sculptor **Phidias** in the **5th century BCE**



Phidias, the Greek sculptor

Lord Elgin began shipping the Marbles to England in **1802**. The final shipment arrived in London in **1812**

In **1816**, the entire collection was acquired from Elgin by the Government for the sum of **£35,000**, only half of Elgin's costs

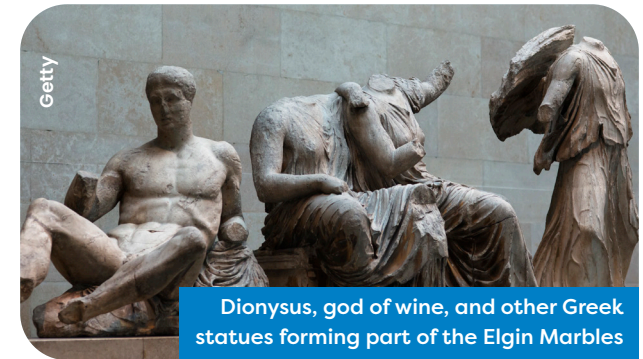
The majority of the sculptures are divided between the **Acropolis Museum** in Athens, Greece, and the **British Museum** in London

The Elgin Marbles collection in London consists of roughly half of what now survives of the Parthenon: **75** metres of the original **160** metres of frieze (a narrow, horizontal decoration); **15** of **92** metopes (a rectangular element in a frieze); **17** figures from the pediments (other elements of a building's decoration) and various other pieces of architecture

A recent poll found that **59%** of Britons said they believed the Elgin Marbles belong in Greece

In the **1930s**, British Museum workers caused permanent damage to the Marbles by cleaning them using incorrect products

In **2014**, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) offered to lead negotiations between the British Museum and Greece, but the museum said no



Dionysus, god of wine, and other Greek statues forming part of the Elgin Marbles

QUOTES

"The British Museum should understand that the time has come for the Parthenon Marbles... to finally return here, to their natural home."
– Kyriakos Mitsotakis, prime minister of Greece

"I understand the strong feelings of the Greek people – and indeed Prime Minister Mitsotakis – on the issue. But the UK Government has a firm, longstanding position on the sculptures which is that they were legally acquired by Lord Elgin under the appropriate laws of the time and have been legally owned by the British Museum's Trustees since their acquisition."
– Boris Johnson, prime minister of the UK

Geoffrey Robertson, a human rights lawyer in the UK, has said the British Museum is the **"world's largest receiver of stolen goods"**

90-95% of Africa's cultural history is currently held by museums outside the continent, according to a French government report



Getty

Lord Elgin

ELGINISM

The removal of the Marbles from the Parthenon led to a new word being invented: "Elginism". It means "the taking of cultural treasures, often from one country to another (usually to a wealthier one)".

Many people argue that what Elgin did was an act of "cultural vandalism". Cultural vandalism is when something cultural, such as a painting or sculpture, is removed from its home. It is considered destructive. They believe that taking objects in this way damages the cultural identity of the country of origin. They also argue that displaying objects out of their original location and context is wrong.



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Since Greece gained independence from the Ottoman Empire (Turkish control) in 1832, Greek governments and others all over the world have called for the Elgin Marbles to be returned to Athens.

Recently, the *Times* newspaper in England changed its opinion on the Elgin Marbles and called for them to be returned. This has led to more calls from the Greek government. The Greek prime minister's foreign policy adviser recently said: "The sculptures are the most important link between the modern Greeks and their ancestors. Our strategy will be to turn up the heat, to keep this issue in the public sphere and to raise it at every opportunity."



Getty

A frieze, part of the Elgin Marbles

WHAT THE BRITISH MUSEUM SAYS...



"The British Museum acknowledges the difficult histories of some of its collections, including the contested means by which some collections have been acquired such as through military action and... looting.

"Lord Elgin... acted with the full knowledge and permission of the legal authorities of the day in both Athens and London. Lord Elgin's activities were thoroughly investigated by a Parliamentary Select Committee in 1816 and found to be entirely legal. Here they are seen by a world audience and are actively studied and researched by an international community of scholars, to promote understanding both of ancient Greek culture and its role in the cultures of the world. The British Museum tells the story of cultural achievement throughout the world, from the dawn of human history more than two million years ago until the present day. Millions of visitors from around the world admire the beauty of the sculptures each year – free of charge. They also gain insights into how ancient Greece influenced and was influenced by the other civilisations it encountered. The sculptures are part of everyone's shared heritage and transcend (go beyond) cultural boundaries."

BENIN BRONZE RETURNS



The Benin Bronzes are a group of brass and bronze sculptures that date back to the 16th century in the Kingdom of Benin in west Africa (now part of Nigeria). The Kingdom of Benin was invaded and occupied by the British from 1897 to 1960. British forces launched an attack on Benin City, which led to multiple casualties. The city's Royal Palace was burned down and many artefacts were stolen.

In recent years, several museums have returned high-profile art and artefacts looted from Africa to their countries of origin. They include:



GERMANY

Last year, the German government announced it would start returning priceless artefacts to Nigeria. The items were stolen when Africa was colonised by the British. Soldiers from the British army looted thousands of the Benin Bronzes in 1897. Some of the Bronzes ended up in museums and private collections across Europe, including Germany.

SCOTLAND

In 2021, the University of Aberdeen in Scotland returned a Benin Bronze to Nigeria. It had been bought at an auction in 1957. The university says it is the first institution to agree to the full return of a Benin Bronze.

ENGLAND

Earlier this year, the Great North Museum: Hancock in Newcastle announced it was returning a bronze stave to Nigeria. The item is one of the Benin Bronzes. Vee Pollock of Newcastle University said: "There is no real question for us that the right thing to do was to offer its return."

The British Museum contains 900 Benin Bronzes. So far, no plans have been announced to return any of them.

THE ITALIAN CONNECTION

In early January 2022 it was announced that Italy was returning to Greece a marble fragment that depicts the foot of a goddess. It is held at a museum in Palermo, Sicily, but was originally bought by the University of Palermo from the wife of a British diplomat in the early 19th century. It's thought the diplomat might have got it from Elgin.

The Parthenon fragment is returning to Greece on a four-year loan deal that will also involve the Acropolis Museum in Athens loaning artefacts to Sicily. The deal took several years to arrange. Sicily's councillor for culture, Alberto Samonà, said: "For us, this is a gesture of friendship – Greece and Sicily are two areas of the Mediterranean that share a common story."

It's expected that the loan period will be extended by a further four years. The fragment was loaned to Greece in 2002 and in 2008, too. But Samonà said the latest transfer could become permanent.



DOES CULTURE BELONG TO EVERYONE?

If you go to a major art gallery anywhere, the chances are you'll see priceless works of art by artists from countries all over the world. For example, at the National Gallery in London, there are paintings by artists from Spain, Italy, France and other countries.

That's because art is frequently bought and sold by individuals and museums from all over the world, and has been for centuries. You can see works by one of Spain's greatest ever painters, Pablo Picasso, in dozens of museums and galleries across the planet.



Sometimes, a rich individual who buys a painting at auction will then loan it to a museum so it can be seen by the general public. Some people get upset when a classic work of art is sold and leaves its country of origin. They argue that some important, famous paintings should always belong to the country where the artist was from. Others say that artwork should be bought and sold like anything else, and that it belongs to the entire world, not just the piece of land where the artist was born.

YES, THE ELGIN MARBLES SHOULD BE RETURNED TO GREECE



1. THEY'RE NOT BRITAIN'S TO KEEP –

These ancient sculptures came from Athens, at a time when the Greeks couldn't protest against their removal because the country was under Turkish rule. Ever since Greece gained independence, they have asked for the Marbles to be returned home. The British Museum should do the right thing.



2. THE BRITISH MUSEUM IS OUT OF STEP –

All across Europe, precious artefacts are being returned to their countries of origin. The British Museum is starting to look out of step with other museums and galleries, and with modern attitudes.

3. THE BRITISH MUSEUM SHOULD LEAD BY EXAMPLE –

These sculptures form a really important part of Greek history. The British Museum is one of the most important museums in the world. Returning the Marbles to Greece could lead to lots of other "treasures" being returned to their home countries.

NO, THE ELGIN MARBLES SHOULD NOT BE RETURNED TO GREECE

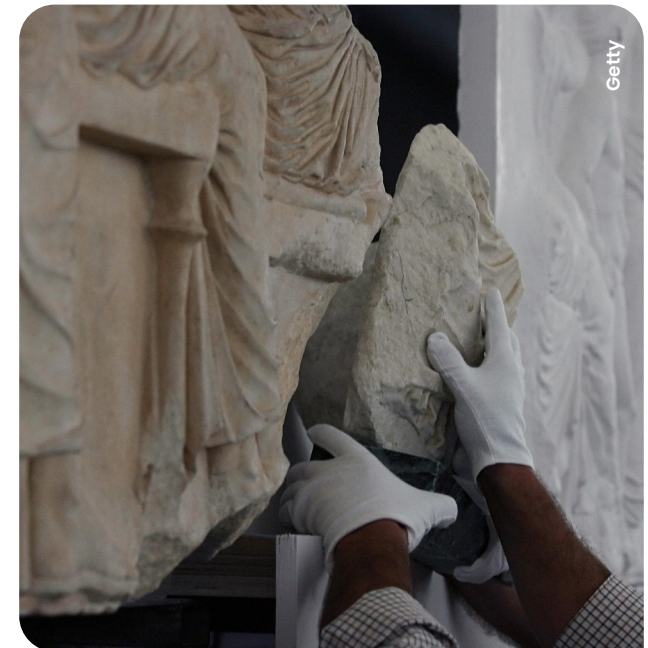


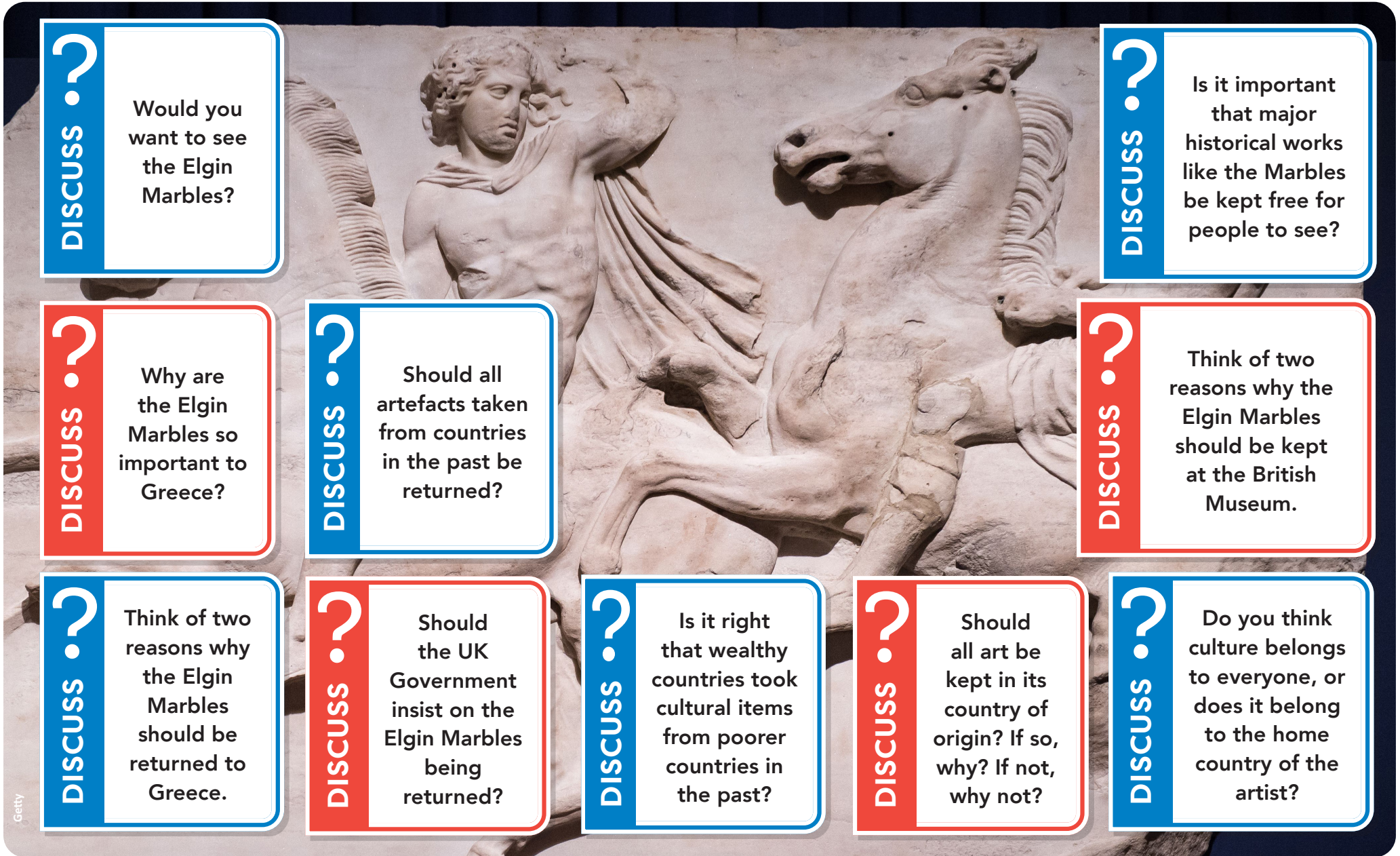
1. IT WAS A FAIR DEAL – Lord Elgin presented to MPs the document that gave him permission to take the Marbles. They decided everything was legal and above board. These sculptures were brought to Britain fairly and squarely, so they should stay here.

2. THE BRITISH MUSEUM SHOULD MAKE ITS OWN DECISIONS – Just because other museums and countries are returning artefacts, it doesn't mean the British Museum must do the same.

3. CULTURE IS UNIVERSAL –

Works of art spread all over the world, and can be enjoyed by millions of people. The culture of the planet is shared by everybody, and doesn't have to be kept in countries of origin. It would be a very boring world if all art had to remain in the home country of the artist.





DISCUSS

Would you want to see the Elgin Marbles?

DISCUSS

Is it important that major historical works like the Marbles be kept free for people to see?

DISCUSS

Why are the Elgin Marbles so important to Greece?

DISCUSS

Should all artefacts taken from countries in the past be returned?

DISCUSS

Think of two reasons why the Elgin Marbles should be kept at the British Museum.

DISCUSS

Think of two reasons why the Elgin Marbles should be returned to Greece.

DISCUSS

Should the UK Government insist on the Elgin Marbles being returned?

DISCUSS

Is it right that wealthy countries took cultural items from poorer countries in the past?

DISCUSS

Should all art be kept in its country of origin? If so, why? If not, why not?

DISCUSS

Do you think culture belongs to everyone, or does it belong to the home country of the artist?