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## **Letter from the Archbishop to the Prime Minister regarding the return of the Parthenon marbles**



A warm letter to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Mr. Rishi Sunak, was sent by His Eminence Archbishop Nikitas of Thyateira and Great Britain, requesting

the return of the Parthenon sculptures to Athens.



GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF THYATEIRA AND GREAT BRITAIN

Ref. No. A01822

March 22, 2023

The Right Honourable Rishi Sunak  
Prime Minister  
Prime Minister's Office  
10 Downing Street  
London SW1A 2AA

Dear Prime Minister,

On behalf of hundreds of thousands of citizens and other residents of the United Kingdom – people who hold dear the cultural and intellectual traditions of both Britain and Greece – I would like to address you, very respectfully, about a matter which has been in the news recently, and which concerns us acutely.

In the context of a broader global debate about cultural artefacts that were acquired in controversial circumstances, attention is now refocusing on the glorious marble sculptures which were removed from the Parthenon in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and are now kept in the British Museum. These artefacts, which include about half the frieze that once adorned the Parthenon, reflect the artistic genius of Athens in its golden age.

Whatever the direction of that wider global debate, I would urge you to consider the Parthenon sculptures as a distinctive case, crying out for a courageous and visionary solution which could generate enormous goodwill among Greeks, Britons and everybody else who prizes the Hellenic heritage.

As you will be aware, the sculptures now in London formed part of a single monument whose break-up (described even by its perpetrators as “a little barbarous”) followed a private initiative by a diplomat which would be unthinkable today and was highly contested at the time.

In the solemnly chosen words of historian William St Clair, who researched the matter deeply, Lord Elgin’s agents used “cajolery, threats and bribes” to induce the Ottoman authorities in Athens to permit an aggressive stripping of the Parthenon and other monuments on the Acropolis. In the long and mostly rich history of British scholarly interest in the Greek heritage, this is hardly an episode of which anybody can be proud.



Two centuries on, there is surely an overwhelming case for reunifying the array of sculptures which were so abruptly separated. There is one obvious place for them to be reunified, namely the gallery of Acropolis Museum which already houses about a third of the frieze, bathed in Greek light with the Parthenon in close view.

As residents of the United Kingdom, we respect the British Museum as a centre of scholarly excellence and understand its aspiration to present the pageant of world history. We also understand the independent status of the Museum and the legal obligations of the museum's trustees to safeguard the collection.

However - along with many British scholars, cultural figures, politicians and ordinary folk - we think the Museum's global standing would be enhanced, not diminished, if it were to act boldly and work actively for the reunification of the sculptures. Just as the law was amended to make possible the restitution of art works seized by the Nazis, it is surely not impossible - with goodwill - to find legal solutions that would facilitate the restoration to wholeness of this unique frieze.

Britons and Greeks already collaborate very productively in the study of the Hellenic heritage and its presentation to the world. Among the fruits of that collaboration are generous endowments by Greek benefactors of British universities; the flourishing British School in Athens, a UK-registered charity which promotes academic exchanges, research including archaeology, conferences and lectures; the strong Greek presence among the staff and students of British universities; and as of recently, the selection of a British architect's proposal for the upgrading of the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.

All that has happened despite the "stone in the shoe" caused by the terrible wrong that was perpetrated on the Acropolis 200 years ago. We would put it to you that British-Greek cultural collaboration could reach new heights, with immense benefit to all, if that stone in the shoe were removed.

As we celebrate 200 years of the rebirth of Hellas, we have the unique opportunity to crown this moment in time.

Sincerely yours,

\* Archbishop Nikitas of Thyateira and Great Britain