The Elgin Marbles
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Background of the Parthenon Marbles

The statues that reside in the British Museum in London, England, now known as the “Elgin Marbles,” were originally structures on top of the Parthenon in Greece. Architect and sculptor, Phidias, and his associates created these marbles between 447BC and 432BC to adorn the Parthenon (parthenon.newmentor.net). There are three sets of sculptures: The metopes, the frieze, and the pediments. A total of 92 metopes were placed around the Parthenon above the outside row of columns. They depicted the Trojan War, mythical battles of centaurs and Greeks, and the Olympian Gods fighting giants. The frieze, a long wall showing the procession to the temple at the Panathenaic festival, was placed above the inner row of columns. At the ends of the temple in the large triangular space, the pediment statues stood. These statues were so damaged that we only that they show Athena, Zeus, and Poseidon because a Greek writer had recorded it.

Thomas Bruce, the seventh Earl of Elgin, later known as “Lord Elgin,” became British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in 1799 (bbc.com). The name “Elgin Marbles” derives from the Earl of Elgin. Lord Elgin supposedly received permission from the Ottoman authorities to remove statues from the Parthenon. Shortly after, travelers began to take pieces from the rubble to sell on the black market in an attempt to save them from destruction, claiming it was not illegal. Lord Elgin, the British Ambassador of the Ottoman Empire, was known as a lover of art. He, too, wanted to save these pieces of art. He received a now controversial message from the sultan: “When they wish to take away some pieces of stone with old inscriptions and figures, no opposition be made,” and made arrangements for the marbles to be transported to England (nationalgeographic.com). It is not known if this was actually permission for Lord Elgin to take the Marbles to England, but he did it regardless.

Controversy

People feel that it was not Lord Elgin’s place to remove the Marbles and that he did not have official permission. Some question his true love of art if he was able to allow the removal and added destruction of the Parthenon Marbles. The other side argues that in doing this, he preserved them from being even further destroyed. Also, London is an international city, so people from all over the world can see these structures while they are in London. Greece is a place of tourism, but London draws in even more tourists yearly. The Marbles being in London enables many more people to see them than if they were in Greece.

Removal

Since the 15th century, Greece had been ruled by the Ottoman Empire (nationalgeographic.com). During a war fought between Venice and the Ottomans in 1687, the Parthenon structure was used by the Ottomans to store gunpowder, making it a target for attacks. Soon, a Venetian mortar struck the building and left only partial pieces of the Marbles standing. The Ottomans to store gunpowder, making it a target for attacks. Soon, a Venetian mortar struck the building and left only partial pieces of the Marbles standing. Shortly after, travelers began to take pieces from the rubble to sell on the black market in an attempt to “save” them from destruction, claiming it was not illegal. Lord Elgin, the British Ambassador of the Ottoman Empire, was known as a lover of art. He, too, wanted to save these pieces of art. He received a now controversial message from the sultan: “When they wish to take away some pieces of stone with old inscriptions and figures, no opposition be made,” and made arrangements for the marbles to be transported to England (nationalgeographic.com). It is not known if this was actually permission for Lord Elgin to take the Marbles to England, but he did it regardless.

Preservation or Destruction?

After seeing the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum on my trip to London, England, it is clear to me that they are extremely fragile and in bad shape. Although it seems Lord Elgin did not have the right permission to remove the Marbles, they should stay in England solely because if they are removed and transported again, they may be damaged even more. Most sculptures are at least missing a piece, if not more. Most pieces were damaged by the mortar strike or the removal from the Parthenon.

Bibliography

Sources:

Photos:

Seeing the Marbles Firsthand

After seeing the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum on my trip to London, England, it is clear to me that they are extremely fragile and in bad shape. Although it seems Lord Elgin did not have the right permission to remove the Marbles, they should stay in England solely because if they are removed and transported again, they may be damaged even more. Most sculptures are at least missing a piece, if not more. Most pieces were damaged by the mortar strike or the removal from the Parthenon.