

UK government snubs key NATO ally Greece over stolen Parthenon sculptures

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A diplomatic row erupted last month between Britain and Greece after UK Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak cancelled a meeting with his Greek counterpart Kyriakos Mitsotakis, head of the ruling conservative New Democracy Party (ND).

The meeting was scheduled to take place in London on November 27 but was cancelled at the last minute over comments Mitsotakis had made the day before to BBC journalist Laura Kuenssberg regarding the statues and friezes known as the Parthenon Marbles, or Elgin Marbles in the UK. The artefacts were part of the Parthenon temple, situated on a hill overlooking Athens, that was built in the fifth century BC in dedication to the Ancient Greek goddess Athena.

They were removed from the Parthenon in the early 1800s by Lord Elgin, Britain's ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, who ultimately sold them to the British government in 1816. They have been in the trusteeship of the British Museum since.

Greece has campaigned for their return since the 1830s, after the country secured independence from the Ottomans. In the interview, Mitsotakis likened their removal to “cut[ting] the Mona Lisa in half and you would have half of it at the Louvre and half of it at the British Museum.”

Sunak told reporters, “It’s very clear, as a matter of law, the marbles can’t be returned, and we’ve been unequivocal about that. I think the British Museum’s website itself says that in order for the loans to happen the recipient needs to acknowledge the lawful ownership of the country that’s lending the things and I think the Greeks have not suggested that they are in any way shape or form willing to do that. Our view and our position on that is crystal clear: the marbles were acquired legally at the time.”

Doubling down on its snub, Downing Street said that Mitsotakis could meet with Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden instead—an insult turned down by Mitsotakis.

Speaking to parliament on November 29, Sunak accused the Greek prime minister of wanting “not to discuss substantive issues for the future, but rather to grandstand and relitigate issues of the past,” claiming, “Specific assurances on that topic were made to this country and then were broken”.

Talks have in fact been going on in the background since 2021 after UNESCO called on Britain to resolve the issue. With

his Tory Party trailing 20 points behind Labour in the polls, a leadership challenge brewing and a general election looming next year, it was Sunak who decided to grandstand on a nationalist platform.

Mitsotakis’ actions were no more progressively motivated, intended to whip up his own right-wing constituency. They found a response in the front page of the fascistic *Eleftheri Ora*, which greeted Sunak’s snub with an English headline that read, “Fuck You Bastard.”

Sunak’s buffoonish jingoism notwithstanding, negotiations between the Greek government and the British Museum have been fraught. Mitsotakis told Kuenssberg, “We have not made as much progress as I would like”. The sticking point has always been Britain’s position that the marbles were legally removed by Elgin, who claimed that he was granted permission to do so by the Ottoman authorities. This was not accepted by many even at the time, most famously British poet Lord Byron, who denounced Elgin’s actions in his poem “The Curse of Minerva”.

Such was the controversy that the British government felt it necessary to convene a parliamentary inquiry in 1816, which duly concluded that Elgin had acquired the marbles legally. This was reinforced in 1963 by the passage of the British Museum Act forbidding the museum from disposing of its holdings except in a very small number of instances.

To gloss over the fact that most of the artefacts on display are the fruits of imperialist plunder, the British Museum has postured as a benign custodian of cultural treasures that would otherwise have fallen into ruin in their home countries.

In the case of the Parthenon Marbles, this arrogance is belied even by the manner of their removal, which caused structural damage to the Parthenon as well as to the marbles. In a letter to Elgin, the Italian painter Giovanni-Battista Lusieri, who was overseeing the operation, wrote, “I have been obliged to be a little barbarous”. Further damage was inflicted to the sculptures in the 1930s after they were cleaned with an acid solution.

The “benign custodian” narrative has been further undermined by the Museum’s being allowed to fall into disrepair, with frequent leaks from the roof in the galleries housing the Greek and Assyrian exhibits. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the museum’s budget was cut by 30 percent.

The stand taken on the marbles creates problems for British imperialism. Many museums in Europe are actively engaged in returning artefacts to their countries of origin, animated by geopolitical considerations. An article two years ago in *The Art Newspaper* commented, “The restitution debate has afforded certain governments a new way of establishing themselves through diplomatic links and geopolitical influence, a particularly cultural form of ‘soft power’.”

This “soft power” is seen by the imperialist governments as an important means of maintaining good relations with their Greek client state. By virtue of its proximity to the wars raging in Ukraine and Gaza, and as a member of the alliance, Greece forms an integral part of NATO’s war efforts. The country ranks as the highest military spender by proportion of GDP among NATO members, spending 3.54 percent of GDP last year, even higher than the United States’ 3.46 percent.

Greece is also at the forefront of the European Union’s war against migrants, employing barbaric “pushback” tactics and abandoning people in distress to the sea, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of refugees and migrants. The UK is engaged in its own fascistic “Stop the Boats” campaign. In her interview with Mitsotakis, Kuenssberg remarked, “Not so long ago, Suella Braverman, who was the Home Secretary until recently, visited Samos in the Aegean Sea, and she said she felt the UK had a lot to learn from Greece.”

Sunak’s diplomatic stunt prompted concerns that these partnerships were being undermined. The heavily pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph* cautioned that Sunak “could have taken the opportunity to spell out his position without a diplomatic breach.”

Labour leader Keir Starmer again presented himself as a safer pair of hands for British imperialism, stating in parliament, “The Greek prime minister came to London to meet him, a fellow NATO member, an economic ally, one of our most important partners in tackling illegal immigration. But instead of using that meeting to discuss those serious issues, he tried to humiliate him and cancelled at the last minute. Why such small politics, Prime Minister?”

Even King Charles subtly intervened, opting to wear a tie incorporating the design of the Greek flag while addressing the COP28 summit last week, interpreted as a signal of his support for the deal being negotiated between Greece and the British Museum.

Addressing the proposed “Parthenon Partnership” in a speech last month, Chairman of the Trustees at the British Museum George Osborne (chancellor under Prime Minister David Cameron), described “an agreement with Greece” for at least some of the British Museum’s sculptures “to be seen in Athens” in return for “other treasures from Greece, some that have never left those shores, to be seen here at the British Museum”.

The British Museum, he said, was seeking a deal which “requires no one to relinquish their claims, asks for no changes

to laws which are not ours to write, but which finds a practical, pragmatic and rational way forward”.

A similar deal was reached last year between the Greek government and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York over the private Cycladic Art collection of New York City-based billionaire Leonard Stern.

Composed of 161 Neolithic and Bronze Age figurines from the Cyclades islands in the Aegean, the deal stipulates that the artefacts will be displayed at the Met for a period of 25 years, with the collection gradually being relocated to Greece between 2033 and 2048 in exchange for loans of other antiquities. Meanwhile ownership of the antiquities will be held by a non-profit entity set up by the Athens-based Museum of Cycladic Art in the US tax haven of Delaware under the name of the Hellenic Ancient Culture Institute, HACI.

The deal has been slammed in Greece and internationally because it has excluded any oversight by archaeologists over the artefacts. The illicit trade and forgery of Cycladic art is rife. Writing in *Kathimerini* last year, archaeologist and former UNESCO official Maria Andreadaki-Vlazaki said the Stern collection deal “not only legitimizes the collection, it also certifies its authenticity, without any proper evidence.”

These concerns were substantiated by Christos Tsirogiannis, a forensic archeologist and head of UNESCO’s Working Group on Illicit Antiquities Trafficking, who has traced one of the artefacts back to Sicilian art dealer Gianfranco Becchina, convicted in 2011 of dealing in illicit antiquities from Greece and Italy.

The Parthenon deal will likely be watered down even further; Starmer has also signalled that a future Labour government will uphold the 1963 British Museum Act. Given that the question of ownership will be bypassed altogether, any agreement will likely involve leasing the marbles to Greece in exchange for antiquities as collateral to be displayed in the British Museum.

Greek Culture Minister Lina Mendoni responded by declaring that “reunification of the Parthenon sculptures through lending or leasing is out of the question.”



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