

Summary of talk by Prof. Nikolaos Stampolidis
“The Parthenon Marbles: The abduction of beauty”

Geneva, 20th March 2025

As the title of the presentation reveals, Prof. Stampolidis proceeded like a detective exposing his evidence, to prove that a base crime had been committed at the turn of the 19th century when the peerless beauty of the Parthenon was defiled by Lord Elgin who abducted half of its surviving sculptures.

This exposé, divided into chapters like a novel, began with the account of Edward Dodwell, eye witness to this heinous act:

“ I was on the spot at the time and had the opportunity of observing and indeed of participating in the sentiment of indignation which such conduct universally inspired”.

The second chapter referred to Matthew 27:35 and the dividing up of Jesus's garments by the Roman soldiers after his crucifixion, followed by references to the “Ergastines” block from the East frieze and the metope carried off by Fauvel and held by the Louvre. By showing us the cast of an old man leaning on a stick - depicted in the East frieze and based on a mould made by Fauvel before Elgin got his hands on it - in comparison with the original slab of which it was an integral part now on display in the British Museum, we see that the block was barbarically sawn in half directly through this figure who was deliberately chiselled off. Despite the fact that both Lusieri and Fauvel were artists, they showed no respect for the integrity of these “architectural sculptures” belonging to the body of the Parthenon. Other compelling proof of this defilement of beauty was shown through images of the blocks in London sawn in half, less than half their original depth.

Next followed a recap of the various fragments returned to Athens since 2022: 10 pieces from the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, the deposit of the “Fagan” fragment and later the decision by the Sicilian authorities to transform it into a **permanent return**. And finally, in March 2023, the permanent reunification of 2 fragments from the Vatican Museums. Prof. Stampolidis underlined the fact that the return of the Fagan fragment set a precedent for a restitution from one State to another, paving the way for the British government to do the same.

Further evidence of Elgin's illegal conduct was exposed in reference to the ongoing exhibition at the Acropolis Museum "The Parthenon and Byron" on the occasion of the bicentenary of the death of the famous poet. The exhibition showcases Byron's passport, an authentic firman signed by the Sultan, which allowed him to travel across the territory of the Ottoman Empire, together with that issued to Elgin permitting him to travel to Athens in 1802. This provides another opportunity to challenge, as recently confirmed by the Turkish delegate at the 24th session of the ICPRCP (May 2024), the existence of Elgin's licence to allegedly remove the Parthenon Marbles, of which, as shown at the exhibition, only the copy of an Italian translation exists, labelled "una lettera" and in no way bearing the marks of a firman.

Heart-wrenching examples of the absurd dismemberment of the frieze between London and Athens were then shown, and reference made to the exceptional detail, sense of perspective and meaning of the sculptures depicted in the frieze. For example, the bulging veins of the cavalry horses and the holes in the marble to which the bridles were attached, a Medusa head embossed on the breastplate of a cavalryman. Our attention was drawn to the uniqueness of Phidias's sculptures in that the Parthenon frieze was the first of its kind to depict mortals together with gods, and in a male-dominated society to show women and people of all social classes. Indeed Phidias and Pericles dared to depict their own reality, their own democratic society on the frieze, to place it on the walls of the cella not only for the eyes of the people but also for those of the gods, thereby elevating their Athenian democracy as a symbol for centuries to come.

Towards the end of his presentation, and reminiscent of the absurd division of the Parthenon Marbles, Prof. Stampolidis gave the example of the upper half of a grave stele held by the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which was restituted in 2008 to be reunited with its other half in Greece. He pointed out that nowadays, according to international law, the return of illicitly removed cultural property can apply retroactively. This then begs the question why the Parthenon Marbles cannot be returned.

To sum up, this talk was an evidence-based plea for the return of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece, delivered with the poetic vision and sensitivity characteristic of Prof. Stampolidis. He underlined the difference between simply "viewing" these treasures at the British Museum and "experiencing" them at the Acropolis Museum, and that their reunification would symbolise the integrity of our fragmented world.

The talk was not recorded at the wish of the speaker but will be subsequently documented as an appendix to Prof. Stampolidis's publication on the exhibition devoted to Byron.