



PART 3

Read the text below and answer questions 27–40.

THE PARTHENON MARBLES: A PERSISTENT CULTURAL DISPUTE

The sculptures commonly called the Parthenon Marbles, also known as the “Elgin Marbles”, were produced in the fifth century BCE as part of the Parthenon’s sculptural programme on the Athenian Acropolis. In modern debate, they have become more than celebrated artworks. Their division between Athens and London is often treated as a test case for how a globalised museum world should balance universal access with cultural integrity, and how it should weigh legal title against moral responsibility. Arguments about where the marbles “belong” therefore operate on multiple levels at once: aesthetic coherence, national symbolism, preservation, and the legacies of unequal power.

The modern controversy is usually traced to Lord Elgin, Britain’s ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, who oversaw the removal of substantial sculpture from the Acropolis in the early nineteenth century. Elgin maintained that Ottoman authorities authorised his activities, often described as permission granted through a firman. The absence of the original document matters because the precise scope of the permission cannot be checked: later copies and translations differ, and scholars dispute what was intended and what was actually allowed. The problem is amplified by political context. Athens was governed by the Ottoman Empire at the time, which raises questions about who had the legitimate authority to grant such permission and whether any approval given under occupation should be treated as morally valid, even if it was formally issued.

Those who defend the British Museum’s position tend to emphasise legality for its era and the museum’s long record of stewardship. They argue that the acquisition occurred within the norms of the early nineteenth century and that the marbles were subsequently preserved for more than two centuries in an institution with substantial conservation expertise. A further claim is conceptual: the marbles can be understood within a “universal museum” setting, where visitors are able to compare them with artefacts from other ancient cultures such as Egypt, Assyria, and Rome. In this view, juxtaposition encourages cross-cultural literacy, showing how different civilisations answered shared problems of politics, religion, and artistic representation. Some supporters also make a risk-based argument: distributing major collections across countries reduces exposure to catastrophe, since war, earthquake, or political instability could threaten any single location.

Greek arguments focus less on universalism and more on aesthetic integrity and cultural meaning. The sculptures were designed as a coherent whole, deriving meaning from their



architectural context and intended to be read in relation to a specific building, a particular city, and a set of civic rituals. When key sections are separated, scenes are fragmented and relationships between figures become harder to interpret. Greece also argues that “permission” obtained under occupation is ethically compromised, even if paperwork existed. Since the opening of the Acropolis Museum in 2009, Greece has strengthened its case with a practical proposal. The museum’s top-floor gallery was designed to align with the Parthenon, allowing surviving elements to be displayed in the monument’s sightline, while leaving visible gaps where missing pieces would fit. This approach treats absence itself as evidence, presenting the separation as an interpretive problem rather than a neutral distribution.

Debate has been sharpened by conservation history, which has turned technical questions into political ammunition. In earlier museum practice, “cleaning” often meant producing brighter surfaces that matched contemporary tastes, even if this removed traces of original tooling or weathering. In London, controversial cleaning carried out in the 1930s is widely discussed because it removed surface detail from some pieces and later became the subject of institutional reviews. Greece, meanwhile, has faced criticism for damage associated with pollution on the Acropolis and for earlier restoration materials that proved harmful over time. Each side points to the other’s mistakes to argue that the opposing institution is an imperfect steward. As a result, conservation becomes more than a scientific question; it becomes a proxy battlefield over legitimacy, competence, and moral authority.

Law offers only partial resolution. International conventions restricting cultural-property export are generally not retroactive; they do not apply to early nineteenth-century removals, and the passage of time complicates legal challenges through limitation periods and evidentiary gaps. Litigation has also been constrained by political realities: states may be reluctant to pursue court action when outcomes are uncertain and the diplomatic costs are high. In the United Kingdom, an additional barrier is domestic legislation that restricts the British Museum’s ability to permanently dispose of items in its collection, even when ethical arguments for return appear compelling. Consequently, the controversy often shifts away from courts toward public persuasion and negotiated arrangements, where law shapes what is possible without providing a decisive answer.

Proposed solutions reflect this legal and political landscape. Greece has repeatedly called for permanent return, framing it as the restoration of a dismembered monument. The British Museum has at times raised the possibility of loans, but Greece resists this approach because a loan can imply that the museum is the rightful owner and that Greece is merely a temporary borrower. That implication is a central sticking point, since the



dispute is as much about recognition as it is about physical possession. More recent discussions therefore explore longer-term renewable loans, exchanges of objects, or shared curatorship arrangements designed to enable reunification in practice while allowing both sides to avoid explicit admissions. Such compromises depend on trust, and they are shaped by domestic politics: museum trustees, governments, and public opinion influence what can be offered without triggering backlash.

Beyond the Parthenon itself, the dispute has become symbolic within broader repatriation debates. Museums worldwide face growing scrutiny over provenance, especially where objects were collected in colonial or unequal contexts. Critics of restitution worry that returning iconic artefacts could empty “world museums” and encourage narrow nationalist narratives. Advocates counter that restitution can correct historical imbalances, restore cultural relationships, and allow communities to interpret key objects within their original settings. The Parthenon Marbles are frequently invoked because they combine exceptional artistic significance with a powerful national symbol and an acquisition history marked by legal ambiguity.

The persistence of the dispute reflects the fact that it is not simply a problem of transport or display. It is a debate about how to interpret the past in the present: whether the highest value lies in global comparison or architectural coherence, whether legality in a past political order should carry moral authority today, and how museums should respond when public ethics evolve faster than statutes. For that reason, the argument has proved unusually durable, and any settlement is likely to be judged not only as a practical compromise but also as a precedent for future cultural claims.

Questions 27–31

Select the correct answer.

27 According to the passage, why is the absence of the original firman important?

- A** It proves the Ottomans never governed Athens.
- B** It prevents historians from knowing exactly what permission was granted.
- C** It shows the British Museum has lost key records since 2009.
- D** It confirms that Elgin removed only small, portable items.

28 What is one reason supporters give for keeping the marbles in London?

- A** The Acropolis Museum cannot display stone sculpture safely.
- B** The Parthenon was not intended to be seen as a single programme.
- C** London allows comparison with objects from other ancient cultures.
- D** Greek law forbids the marbles from being exhibited in Athens.



29 What does the passage say Greece's Acropolis Museum adds to the debate?

- A** A gallery designed to align with the Parthenon and show gaps for missing pieces.
- B** A legal guarantee that no artefact will ever be loaned abroad.
- C** A plan to replace missing sculptures with modern replicas.
- D** Evidence that the British Museum accepted responsibility for earlier damage.

30 The passage suggests that conservation disputes have become political because they

- A** reveal that no sculptures survived the 1930s cleaning.
- B** are used by both sides to argue about stewardship.
- C** show that pollution has never affected the Acropolis.
- D** prove that modern museums cannot conserve marble.

31 Which proposed arrangement is resisted because it may imply recognition of the British Museum as the rightful owner?

- A** Permanent return.
- B** Shared curatorship.
- C** An exchange of objects.
- D** A loan arrangement.

Questions 32–36

Choose **TRUE** if the statement agrees with the information given in the text, choose **FALSE** if the statement contradicts the information, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if there is no information on this.

32 The Parthenon Marbles dispute is presented as a debate only about legal ownership.

33 The passage names a specific international convention that would apply to the early nineteenth-century removal of the marbles.

34 UK legislation restricts the British Museum's ability to permanently dispose of items in its collection.

35 The passage states that the courts have provided a decisive answer to the dispute.

36 Some proposed compromises attempt to avoid either side making an explicit admission.

Questions 37–40

Complete the summary below. Choose **ONE WORD ONLY** from the text for each answer.

Legal and cultural barriers to reunification



Elgin claimed authority through an Ottoman **37**, but the original document has not survived and later versions are disputed. Greece argues that the sculptures lose meaning when separated from their architectural **38**, and points to the Acropolis Museum as evidence of improved display conditions. Legal solutions are limited because modern rules are not **39**, and UK legislation constrains the museum's ability to **40** of items permanently.

Answer Key

27. B

28. C

29. A

30. B

31. D

32. FALSE

33. FALSE

34. TRUE

35. FALSE

36. TRUE

37. firman

38. context

39. retroactive

40. dispose