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Learning About the Parthenon

Public relations specialists (known as PR specialists) communicate with the public on behalf of a company, person, or organization they represent. For example, PR specialists work for companies like Target, Apple, and Nike. They also work for musicians and politicians running for president. PR specialists have a lot of responsibilities. Here are a few examples:

- Providing an opinion on whether a company's new commercial will be well-received by the public.
- Writing a press release when a musician announces a new tour coming up that people can buy tickets for. A press release is a statement or announcement given to the media.
- Writing press releases when a negative event happens and a company needs to apologize to the public or clarify a statement made by someone in the company (e.g., Healthy Choice, a company that creates frozen meals, released a press release after they recalled 130,000 pounds of frozen meals because customers found rocks in them).

Today, you will imagine that you are a public relations specialist who works for a museum that is dealing with a controversy surrounding artifacts from Ancient Greece. You will learn about the ongoing controversy and write a press release with your museum's response. Follow the steps below.

Step 1: Learn About the Parthenon and the Elgin Marbles

Read the passage. Then, answer the questions.

Background on the Parthenon

The Parthenon is a famous temple that was built over 2400 years ago in Athens, Greece. Construction of the temple began in 447 BCE and was completed in 438 BCE. The Parthenon sits upon a hill as part of the Acropolis of Athens. The Acropolis is an ancient fortress that had several buildings used by the royalty, military, and religious leaders.

The Parthenon was built out of marble and is one of the most outstanding examples of Greek architecture. Its size alone is astonishing! It stands 45 feet tall, while the base of the structure is 228 feet by 101 feet. This made the temple visible from anywhere in Athens. It is estimated that approximately 14,000 stones were used to build the temple at the cost of almost 470 silver talents, or about 7 million dollars today!

The Parthenon's design also has many references to Greek mythology. Mythology was an important part of Greek culture. The Parthenon was built to honor Athena, who was the most important goddess to the Athenians. Athena was the goddess of wisdom, courage, inspiration, and warfare. People in Athens worshiped her so that she would protect their city. The Greeks built a large statue of Athena that was housed in the Parthenon. While the statue no longer exists today, historians know that the statue was over 12 feet tall and was constructed of wood and covered with ivory and gold.



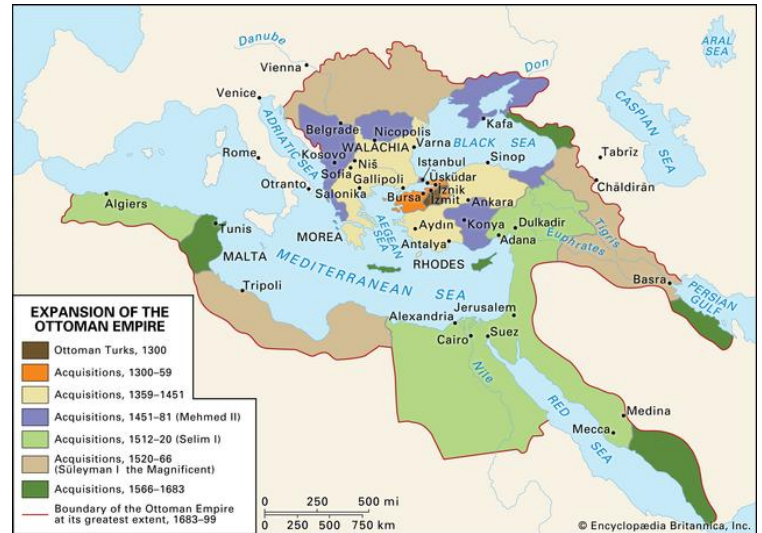
This is an artist's rendition of what the statue of Athena in the Parthenon looked like.

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The Many Lives of the Parthenon

Within a few years of the Parthenon's construction, the Peloponnesian War, which was a conflict between the Athenians and the Spartans, began. The Parthenon was untouched but around 427-426 BCE, an earthquake struck, moving some of the columns on the temple. In 295 BCE, the gold was stripped away from the statue of Athena by an Athenian general to pay his troops. By the third century CE, the statue itself was removed, possibly because of a fire in the temple. During the sixth century CE, Greece found itself as part of the Byzantine Empire, and the Parthenon was converted to a Christian church.



In 1456 CE, Greece became part of the Ottoman Empire. At this time, the Ottoman Empire controlled much of southeastern Europe, Western Asia, and North Africa. The empire was founded in Anatolia, which is modern-day Turkey. At first, the Parthenon was used as a mosque for the Muslims living in Athens. Parts of the Parthenon were destroyed as the result of lightning strikes.

By 1687, the Ottoman Empire was fighting a war against a Venetian army that wanted to reconquer the European lands that were taken by the Ottomans. At this point in time, the Parthenon was being used as housing for Turkish soldiers and storage of gunpowder. For eight days, the Venetians bombarded the Acropolis with cannon fire. It was estimated that over 700 cannonballs were fired at the front of the Parthenon alone, igniting the stored gunpowder. The explosion destroyed 28 columns and blew out the center of the temple.

The Elgin Marbles

In the early 1800s, Lord Elgin, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, visited Athens. Elgin was a great lover of art, especially the art and architecture of Ancient Greece. Elgin was alarmed when he saw the terrible condition of the Parthenon. He feared that the surviving art was in danger of being destroyed or stolen. Lord Elgin later claimed he received permission from the Turkish sultan to remove sculptures, statues, and other pieces of the temple and take them to London. Between 1801 and 1803, Elgin removed about half of the surviving art in the Parthenon.



In London, Elgin stored most of the artwork in a private area. However, he put a small collection of the marbles on display in 1807. In 1816, he sold these pieces to the British Crown for £35,000, or approximately 500,000 in American dollars today. These various pieces of marble became known as the "Elgin Marbles." The marbles are still housed in the British Museum. The remaining art from the Parthenon was removed and taken back to the Acropolis Museum in Athens, Greece.

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Debate Over the Elgin Marbles

By 1832, Greece successfully won their independence from the Ottoman Empire. Afterwards, the Greek government asked the British to return the Elgin Marbles. The British Museum refused to do so. The question of who owns the marbles has been a topic of international debate among museum and government officials, historians, and other professionals.

The British Museum believes it is the legal owner of the Elgin marbles. The museum claims that Lord Elgin received a firman, or official decree, from the Turkish sultan that allowed him to take the art. However, there is no official documentation that exists today. Without primary sources to look at, historians and other professionals are left to draw their own conclusions about whether Elgin was legally permitted to take the art. Some say there is an Italian translation of the document that says that Lord Elgin could take “some stones.” However, others say that this document is not authentic and cannot be used as proof of official documentation.



Lord Elgin

The British Museum published the following statement on their website about why they should keep the Elgin marbles:

“The Acropolis Museum allows the Parthenon sculptures that are in Athens (about half of what survives from the ancient world) to be appreciated against the backdrop of Athenian history. The Parthenon sculptures in London are an important representation of ancient Athenian civilization in the context of world history. Each year millions of visitors, free of charge, admire the artistry of the sculptures and gain insight into how Ancient Greece influenced – and was influenced by – the other civilizations that it encountered. The [museum] firmly believes that there's a positive advantage and public benefit in having the sculptures divided between two great museums, each telling a complementary but different story.”

The British Museum Board of Trustees. “The Parthenon sculptures: the Trustees’ statement.” The British Museum, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/parthenon-sculptures-trustees-statement>. Accessed 2 June 2020.

Greek officials, conversely, argue that the marbles are Greek and belong in Greece. Myrsini Zorba, the Greek Culture Minister, stated in 2019, “Greece is the birthplace of the Parthenon Marbles, Athens is their city, and the Acropolis and its Museum their natural place.” For the Greek people, the Elgin Marbles are an important part of their culture and heritage. The marbles belong to Greece.

The Greeks also have argued that Lord Elgin’s removal of the Parthenon marbles was both legally and morally wrong. In addition, the Greeks built the Acropolis Museum of Athens so that all of the Parthenon artwork could be together. The museum displays the artwork as it was displayed in the original Parthenon.

“Greek Culture Minister Says Parthenon Marbles “Natural Place” is Athens.” The National Herald. https://www.thenationalherald.com/archive_general_news_greece/arthro/greek_culture_minister_says_parthenon_marbles_natural_place_is_athens-49420/. Accessed 2 June 2020.

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International Response

The debate continues over the marbles. Professors, government officials, and other professionals around the world have provided their own commentary on whether the British should return the marbles. For example, Dr. Dimitri Gonis, a professor in Australia, wrote in May 2020, "Britain must return the Parthenon marbles to Greece as a moral duty." Gonis further states, "The Parthenon is to Greece what the Pyramids are to Egypt, the Colosseum is to Rome, Stonehenge is to Britain, or Uluru is to Aboriginal Australians. Everyone knows who they belong to."

In addition, the general public has posted opinions on social media about whether the marbles should be returned. Memes, cartoons, tweets, and news articles have surfaced online with differing opinions on whether Britain should return the marbles to Greece. Take a look at the following examples!

PH PoliticsHome.com

Returning the Elgin Marbles is the right thing to do

To this day, the Elgin or Parthenon Marbles are one of the British Museum's most well-known artefacts. The actions of Elgin over 200 years ago, ...
Mar 2, 2020



Author: Unknown

City A.M.

DEBATE: Is there a case for Britain keeping the Elgin Marbles?

Tiffany Jenkins is author of *Keeping Their Marbles: How Treasures of the Past Ended Up in Museums and Why They Should Stay There*.
Feb 24, 2020



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Answer the questions below based on what you read.

1. What has made the Parthenon a famous and important building in world history? Paraphrase at least two pieces of evidence from the text.

2. Why did Lord Elgin remove the marbles from the Parthenon? Directly cite evidence from the text.

3. What are two reasons the British Museum believes the Elgin Marbles should remain in England? Paraphrase information from the text.

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4. What are two reasons Greece believes the Elgin Marbles should be returned to the Acropolis Museum? Paraphrase information from the text.

5. Dr. Dimitri Gonis, a professor from Australia, states that it is Britain's moral duty to return the marbles. What is a moral duty? Explain your reasoning.

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Step 2: Writing a Press Release

Imagine you are a public relations specialist. You will choose whether to represent the British Museum or the Acropolis Museum. You are in charge of writing a one-page press release.

If you choose to represent the British Museum, you will inform the public as to whether the Elgin Marbles should remain in London or if the British museum will be returning them to Greece. If you pick the Acropolis Museum, you will explain why the marbles should be returned to Greece.

Your press release must include the following:

- Compelling headline that will hook readers and explain the museum's position.
- Response to the memes, tweets, and articles from the public. Your response should be professional and show that your museum is taking the issue seriously.
- Thesis statement that gives your museum's stance on whether the marbles will be returned or not.
- At least four pieces of evidence, including two direct quotations, that back up your thesis statement.
- A clear call to action that tells readers what you want them to do to support your organization's position. (e.g., you could give the contact information of a government official that you would like people to contact in order to bring changes to the issue).

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Press Release:

Headline: _____

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