

# The Parthenon Marbles as Icons of Nationalism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain

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**Abstract:** Theories of nationalism place native culture at the core of national self-fashioning. What explains a state's adoption of *foreign* objects to sustain national identity? In this paper, the incorporation of the Elgin marbles into Britain is presented as an early example of supra-national nationalism. The 19<sup>th</sup> century "art race" was a competitive field in which European nation-states vied for national prestige. Of the thousands of art trophies that were brought to Britain from Mediterranean and North African countries, the Parthenon marbles were uniquely iconicized. Using data from period newspapers and official documents, I argue that this was because they were assiduously presented as *pre-national* by British authorities. In this way, they belonged simultaneously to no nation, to every nation, and to Britain. The case demonstrates that national distinctions emerged in a cosmopolitan 19<sup>th</sup> century European culture in which national dignity was calibrated by the extent to which a nation-state transcended the smallness of particularity and rose to the level of universal civilization.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, Parthenon marbles, British Museum, neo-classicism

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## Introduction

On a June morning in 1808, a lucky group of art lovers was invited to a formal breakfast in a posh London home. The meal was hosted by Sir Anthony Carlisle, prominent society doctor and a Fellow of the Royal Society. His guests were exclusively male and upper-class. A little past half-twelve, the doctor invited his company to step into the front drawing room for a big surprise. There, to their delight, stood boxing champion Bob Gregson,

stripped naked, to be exhibited to us on account of the fineness of *His form*. He is 6 feet 2 Inches high – [we] all admired the beauty of his proportions from the Knee or rather from the *waist* upwards. (Farington 1925 [1808]: 80)

Gregson, the All-England title holder, was one of the most famous athletes in his day. Walking from the breakfast table to the drawing room to find him naked was the equivalent of modern houseguests finding a nude David Beckham in their host's living room. Joseph Farington wrote in his diary what happened next. All persons present agreed that Gregson was 'the finest figure' they had seen. By shank and by sinew, his anatomy was favorably compared to classical sculpture. Gregson's body was 'placed in many attitudes,' to resemble iconic art poses. Guests took up a collection of shillings and guineas in appreciation of Gregson's performance (Farington 1925 [1808]: 81). Appetites whetted, they were encouraged to visit Lord Elgin's storage shed ten days later. Here they could compare Gregson's body with a group of sculptures recently arrived in London under Elgin's orders: the marble figures from the Parthenon in Athens.

It was socially acceptable for elite British men to watch and bet on boxers. But such activity was not normally held in private homes, and boxers did not normally pose nude for the spectators. Working-class men's bodies were routinely exploited by aristocrats for a range of purposes. Using them to illustrate British likeness to classical Greece was not a routine purpose. What was happening in England that made the Carlisle breakfast seem normal, even inevitable, rather than bizarre?

Before we can answer this question, we have to understand the naked boxer episode as part of a much bigger story about national self-fashioning through culture. The Elgin Marbles are central figures in a long-running debate over national culture (Angelomatis-Tsougarakis 1990; Hamilakis 1999; St Clair 1972). Repatriation advocates present a number of arguments. Aesthetically, they assert that the sculptures are materially integral to the Temple of Athena Parthenos, and can be best appreciated in its close proximity. Culturally the sculptures are presented as abduction victims, forcibly separated from the Greek homeland. Greece's culture minister, Antonis Samaras, has likened them to a family portrait with 'loved ones missing' (Kimmelman 2009). This discursive strategy constructs a collective cultural trauma (Alexander 2004; Eyerman 2002). It seeks to bind Greek nationals by recalling the despoiling of the Parthenon in specific and continuous ways (Hamilakis 2007). Not just flesh-and-blood Greeks but *sculptured* Greeks – the objects themselves – are construed as having suffered trauma (Debs 2011).

Why does the British government continue to resist the legal and cultural arguments of the Greek government and its supporters? That the sculptures are central to Greek culture in *some* form – ancient or modern – is accepted on both sides of the argument. The crucial point of dispute is which of two nations, Greece or Britain, has the stronger claim to the sculptures. This dispute is normally the domain of legal scholars, historians, art historians, and archaeologists (Merryman 1985; Rudenstine 2000; Snodgrass 2004; Stewart 2001). Sociological analysis offers fresh insight into a key theme of the debate: the tension between the national and the supra-national.

Consider this: the British Museum's Trustees argue that the Parthenon sculptures are 'integral to the Museum's purpose as a *world museum* telling the story of human cultural achievement' (my emphasis). Further, according to the British Museum web site:

The current division of the surviving sculptures between museums in eight countries, with about equal quantities present in Athens and London, allows different and complementary stories to be told about them, focusing respectively on their importance

for the history of Athens and Greece, and their significance for world culture. This, the Museum's Trustees believe, is an arrangement that gives maximum public benefit for the world at large and affirms the universal nature of the Greek legacy.<sup>1</sup>

Attaching a supra-national narrative to the sculptures counters the argument that they are integral to Greek nationhood. More powerfully, in asserting that its service is to 'world culture,' the Museum relegates Athens's potential service to 'the history of Athens and Greece.' This paper does not offer an evaluation of the correctness of this position. Readers interested in advocacy for or against repatriation should consult one of several recent publications staking ground in the debate (Cuno 2008; Hitchens 1997, 2008; St Clair 1999).

My interest is in the sculptures' bearing on British nationhood, especially in the early- to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. At the heart of my inquiry lies an intriguing sociological puzzle: How did the Parthenon sculptures, products of non-British artisans and a non-British place, become powerfully connected to British nationhood? The answer, in short, is that the sculptures were construed as *pre-national*, by British élites presenting ancient Athens as a lost utopia disconnected from contemporary Greece. The *pre-national* aspect of the objects predisposed them to *supra-national* narration. In this way, they belonged to everybody but to nobody in particular.

The Parthenon marbles arrived in London at a time when the arts were 'a key expression of a distinctive 'national character' to help bind peoples to the emerging nation-states' (Hooock 2010: 14; see also Blanning 2002: ch. 7). Music, literature, drama, painting, sculpture, and architecture: all of these configured in the sense of collective belonging to the national body. Scholars of nationalism accept that a broad range of material culture helps to construct nationness. This is consistent with Herder's foundational theory of nations as agglomerations of individuals bound by unique language, culture, and modes of thought (Özkirimli 2000: 18). Herder's project was informed by his opposition to Enlightenment universalism, which he saw as undermining cultural particularities. This theoretical line

is prominent in nationalism scholarship today, which tends to take for granted a nation's desire to present itself as special and elect. The Parthenon marbles, however, destabilize Herderian thought. The marbles were imported to Britain from a foreign land. They became emblems of British nationhood. They functioned as signifiers of particular *as well as* universal cultural identity.

In the first part of this paper, I examine why the Parthenon sculptures became powerfully attached to British nationhood. Changing social and historical forces set the stage for the creation of new symbols of nationhood. This resulted in part from improved British fortunes abroad. It came, too, as a reaction to the emergence of nation-states on the European continent. All of this underscores the eminently cosmopolitan nature of the construction of British nationhood. This process of construction took place publicly, at the international level, sometimes in competition with other national powers. Britain needed symbols that could signify nationhood. But as an international power Britain also needed symbols whose meaning and potency could transcend borders and communicate with an international audience of rivals and imperial subjects.

Social forces alone, however, do not explain why the Parthenon marbles in particular became integral to British nationhood. Thousands of foreign objects reached Britain. What was different about *these* sculptures? To explain this, we need to bracket the social and political forces and drill down into the specific formal and iconographic features of the sculptures. This is my task in the second part of the paper. I demonstrate that British viewers did not simply view the objects; they were encouraged to bond with them. Didactic displays of naked bodies; somatic displays of affection; widespread circulation of the sculptures in print and cast: through these and other mechanisms, the marbles came to embody the British nation.

### *Theoretical and methodological context*

With Alexander, I understand icons as symbolic condensations: 'They root generic, social meanings in

a specific and “material” form. Meaning is made iconically visible as something beautiful, sublime, ugly, even as the banal appearance of mundane “material life” (Alexander 2008: 782). The power of the icon does not rest in universal acceptance of what it means. Its power derives from recognition that it has meaning, and that viewers have real, felt reactions to it. These reactions draw strength from tactile encounters with the icon. The aesthetic surface of the object, as Alexander writes, provides ‘a sensual experience that transmits meaning’ (Alexander 2008: 782). This point is particularly crucial in the story of the Parthenon marbles’ incorporation into the British nation: they were stroked, rubbed, wept over, and compared favorably with naked living bodies.

Building on iconic consciousness theory, Zubrzycki (2011) argues that the materiality of nation prompts phenomenological engagements with it (see also Verdery 1999). Images and figural objects render ‘the abstract idea of the nation concrete for (national) subjects’ (Zubrzycki 2011: 22). While the idea of nation is useful in many ways (because easily transportable, and conducive to multiple interpretations), its material aspect promotes affective investment in the nation-state. Zubrzycki’s rich data draw from Poland, which has a long tradition of mythologizing physical and emotional suffering in the national body. Early 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain also sustained widespread affective investment in its national body (Colley 1984; Hastings 1997). Its challenge was to encourage the development of a sense of nationhood contiguous with its emerging status as supra-national power. Affective investment in the Parthenon marbles did not merely reinforce long-held sentiments about the specific qualities of the British nation. Such investment charted the course for a new conception of Britain as supra-nation.

By ‘nation,’ I mean the geographical territory of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Wales, its institutions as well as the ethereal space in which nationalist ideas and sentiments reside.<sup>2</sup> With Anderson (1983) I accept the paramount importance of imagination work in sustaining nations. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the imagined national community was highly contingent in Britain, where most people’s experience of ‘Britishness’ was restricted to symbols, war, and rhetoric (Colley

1992; Hall 2002). It was later in this century that European nation-states would dig into the past to produce material evidence of the ‘common myths and memories’ that legitimated them (Smith 1996: 358). Emphasizing the ancient origins of cultural practices – language, religion, cuisine, holidays – in turn made national identities feel natural and inevitable (Smith 1986, 1993, 1998; see also Armstrong 1982; Hutchinson 1994). One aim of this paper is to build on this literature by asking how and why a foreign cultural product could make a nation’s existence feel natural and inevitable.

My analysis is based on archival data. I read minutes of the British Museum Trustees’ meetings from 1753 through 1830. I paid particular attention to the period 1810 through 1817, the years leading up to and immediately after the purchase of the Parthenon marbles. For this period, I focused on the minutes of the Greek and Roman Antiquities committee. In addition, I read the full record of the Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of Sculptured Marbles (Report ordered by the House of Commons, March 25, 1816).<sup>3</sup> The last major archival source was newspapers. I used two search engines, 19<sup>th</sup> Century Masterfile and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century British Library Newspapers, isolating the period 1800 to 1850. Using the search terms ‘Elgin,’ ‘Elgin marbles,’ and ‘Parthenon marbles,’ I located more than 1,000 newspaper and magazine articles that mention the sculptures. I read a random sample of 40 articles to get a sense for the major issues over time, and then read every article written about the marbles in the crucial period of 1816-1817 (the Parliamentary hearings). Finally, formal analysis of the sculptures was conducted at the British Museum in July 2010, April 2011 and August 2011.

## **I. Pre- to Supra-National: Appropriating the Parthenon Marbles for the British Cultural Nation**

Produced in the third quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC for the Temple to Athena Parthenos (‘virgin’) on the Athenian acropolis, the Parthenon sculptures were praised by ancient writers for their beauty, life-likeness, and perfect imitation of nature. They were produced by a team of Greek artisans supervised by Phidias, one of the best-known sculptors of his age. After the decline of Athens and the

displacement of its polytheistic religion, the temple and its sculptures were damaged by natural and man-made events. In spite of their decrepitude, the temple and its decorative features were respected and even revered by local residents (Beard 2010; Clogg 1983; Hamilakis 1999, 2007).

As ambassador to the Ottoman court, Thomas Bruce, 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Elgin, secured a *firman* from the sultan to remove statues and other objects from the Acropolis at Athens, which was then under Turkish rule. Beginning in the summer of 1801, Elgin's workmen (mainly local Greek laborers) pried or chiseled from the temple's façade a large number of marble figures. The work was finished the following year. It was not until 1804 that the major portion of the sculptures arrived in London.

Once there, the marbles were rejected by the government. Its cultural acquisitions advisers pronounced them worthless (St Clair 1998: 124). Elgin's friends were unwilling to display them in their stately homes. While Elgin was held as a prisoner of war in France (1803 through 1805), the marbles were stored in packed crates and eventually found their way to the Customs House in London.

After Elgin's return in 1806, he tapped a network of well-connected cultural élites. They launched what would be described today as a public-relations campaign. Letters to newspaper editors praised the aesthetic virtues of the sculptures, magazine articles commended Elgin's efforts to 'protect' ancient Greek masterpieces, and Parliamentary speeches warned against allowing the sculptures to be lost to foreign collectors. Through polemic and diplomacy, the Museum's trustees were finally persuaded to reconsider the purchase (Hooock 2010: 236-237; St Clair 1998: 176-177). Members of Parliament, exercising relatively new powers of cultural expenditure, approved £35,000 to acquire them (Select Committee Elgin Report 1816: 8-9). Though the marbles had a monetary figure attached to them, supporters of their appropriation moved quickly to present them as priceless. 'It is obvious that the money expended in the acquisition of any commodity is not necessarily the measure of its real value,' wrote members of the Select Committee. Of all the impressive collections of classical sculpture used as comparison cases in their evaluation – the Aegina Marbles, the Townleyan Marbles, and the



Phigalian Marbles – only Elgin’s possessed ‘that matter which Artists most require’ (Select Committee Elgin Report 1816: 7, 14). There were, they maintained, particular formal qualities not easily specified that set the Parthenon marbles apart from the rest.

What explains the marbles’ changed evaluation from worthless to priceless is the emergence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century of the idea that the measure of a nation’s seriousness lay in its cultural stock. As Holger Hock argues, ‘[...] nations and states collected for national prestige, and to display in their public spaces trophies of war and conquest. Diplomatic battles and international culture wars were fought over antiquities’ (Hock 2010: 21). The acquisition of big antiquities; the construction of new display spaces for art; the commissioning of paintings, statuary, oratorios: all of this enhanced the nation’s cultural profile, aggrandizing the state in its guise as the ‘cultural nation’ (Hock 2010).

By 1800 antiquities were well-established as value objects in the pan-European cultural economy, though the form and level of this value was fluid through time. Countless items, ranging from entire temples to small cameos, were appropriated. Size was no issue: military engineers made the immovable moveable, spiriting the Pergamon Altar from Turkey to Berlin, the Winged Nike from Samothrace to France, and the Zodiac Ceiling from Egypt to the Louvre.

The central players in the race to acquire Greek and Roman classical art were France, Bavaria, Prussia, Russia, and Britain. It was a symbolically-charged and sometimes violent contest (Blanning 2002; Mandler 2006). The contest was not simply to seize pieces that would signify the power of the ruling elites. That had been achieved for centuries by the loot and plunder of kings and generals for their palaces and pleasure gardens (Jardine 1996; Jasanoff 2005; Mukerji 1997; Schnapp 1997; Schnapper 1988). What was new about the early 19<sup>th</sup> century art race was its express intention to use public displays of borrowed art to imitate and *surpass* other nations’ cultural prestige.

Successful participation in this contest required substantial resources. The scale of the work was enormous. For example, in 1842, in order to remove 80 tons of sculpture from Xanthos (Turkey) for

installation in the British Museum, the British Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean ordered two naval ships and 160 enlisted men to recover the objects (Hooock 2010: 247). This operation was by no means an anomaly. At least a dozen major excavation and appropriation missions were carried out by British naval and military forces, from the Mediterranean to Assyria and India. Such exploits were reported in detail by British newspapers.

Appropriated objects were displayed in grand museums. In an earlier era, they went to private mansions or palaces. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onward, however, large public museums sprang up alongside other nation-state projects (Bennett 1995; Hoffmann 1994; McClellan 1994). The British Museum, established in 1753 by an act of Parliament, was the first public institution to be called ‘British.’<sup>4</sup> The new institution was not the English Museum, nor the Welsh or Scottish Museum, nor even a Royal Museum of art. In choosing to charter the *British* Museum, Parliament clearly signaled its support for a public civic space in which to display and reify the achievements of the national body. Museums had existed before the British Museum, but they tended to focus narrowly on particular epochs, cultures, or materials (MacGregor 2001). The new flagship national museum became a central point of dissemination of ideas (Livingstone 2003). Large numbers of people went to them – over 30,000 visitors to the British Museum on an average Whit-Monday in the 1840s (Golby & Purdue 1984: 109). They created an ‘elite experience for everyone’ (Zolberg 1994: 49).<sup>5</sup>

Lord Elgin’s supporters praised him for acting in the interest of the nation. They asserted that the purchase of the marbles was ‘of the greatest importance [...] in a national point of view.’<sup>6</sup> As the national idea took root, so too did the notion that a nation should have a set of aesthetic and material expressions that was uniquely hers (Alter 2006; Colley 1992; Hooock 2003). In a private letter several years prior to the Parliamentary hearing, Elgin exulted in his acquisition: ‘Bonaparte has not got such a thing from all his thefts in Italy.’<sup>7</sup> His Greek antiquities were, on the one hand, part of the materiality that highlighted the strengths of the British cultural nation. On the other, they were vivid reminders of

Britain's pretensions to protecting and inheriting a universal cultural tradition.

I trust that this opportunity [to purchase Elgin's collection], so as to rival our neighbours on the Continent, will not be neglected. [...] Even the French, after all their depredations, must at a peace, submit to cross the Channel, if they wish to see such specimens of art, as Paris, with all its boasted splendour, cannot exhibit.<sup>8</sup>

As illustrated by the letter-writer to the *London Monthly Magazine*, quoted above, art collecting was one way of proving Gallic inferiority. There was mounting concern, reflected in newspaper articles and public speeches, that Britain was losing the race for cultural wealth to France (Hooock 2010: 258-262; Select Cmte. Elgin Report: 7, 27). It was for this reason, Members of Parliament were told, 'very desirable' that Elgin's collection should become public property as a 'national object' (Select Cmte. Elgin Report, Testimony of Joseph Nollekens, p. 30).

Newspapers provided an ideal medium for charting Britain's progress in the art race with Napoleon and other European rivals.<sup>9</sup> Nineteenth century British newspapers frequently reported on elite cultural activity. Such news items were typically presented on global affairs pages, alongside reports of battles and tariff agreements. The rarified sphere of international elite culture overlapped significantly with other spheres concerning the identity and power of the nation-state. News reports from and about London were prominent in newspapers throughout the country, often outranking local news in terms of column inches and prominence of billing. They connected literate nationals from Land's End to John O'Groats. To paraphrase Benedict Anderson, they created 'an imagined community among a specific assemblage of fellow-readers,' to whom *these* stately homes, noblemen, and Parthenon sculptures belonged (Anderson 1983: 62).

Newspapers refracted an anxiety that was being played out at the highest levels of government. When Members of Parliament tried to decide whether to purchase the sculptures from Elgin, they wanted to know who else would buy them if Parliament did not:

Q (Member of Parliament): Does your Lordship happen to know whether there are any princes in Europe who are now collecting and will be likely to purchase such a collection [Elgin's], if offered to them?

A (Earl of Aberdeen): I think it extremely probable the King of Bavaria might, but I have no knowledge of that; and very possibly the Emperor of Russia, indeed the King of Prussia has bought a large collection of pictures [...]<sup>10</sup>

Q (Member of Parliament): The competition in the market, if [Elgin's collection] should be offered for sale without separation, could not be numerous? Some of the Sovereigns of Europe, added to such of the great Galleries or national Institutions in various parts of the Continent, as may possess funds at the disposal of their directors sufficient for such a purpose, would in all probability be the only purchasers.<sup>11</sup>

What swung the Committee vote was a combination of market value (in the sense of prestige within the pan-European cultural competition) and intrinsic value: the formal and historic properties of the sculptures. This phrase – ‘intrinsic value’ – recurs frequently throughout the testimony of the Parliamentary Select Committee. It provided a rhetorical space in which Members of Parliament and the cultural experts who testified to them could work through associated ideas about nationhood and the ‘fine arts’ of the British nation, as well as about the corporate values that predisposed Britain to act as heir to classical Athens. In the next section, I turn to British neo-classicism to understand how this slippage between national and supra-national conceptions was sustained.

## *Neo-classicism*

To believe in classicism in Georgian Britain was to believe in correctness. From the principle of rectitude stems beauty itself. But beauty, according to the neo-classicists, is secondary to correctness. Proportions are rooted in nature; nature is never wrong. This is what Diderot meant when he asserted that those who wish to see nature must study antiquity (Torrance 1998: 704). Correctness does not have a geography. It transcends boundaries of nation and culture.

While statesmen and poets strove to revive Greek and Roman virtues through words, artists made virtue visible (Ayres 1997; Coltman 2005; Scott 2003). Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the display of Greek and Roman-inspired statuary in private homes signaled status and prestige. This was not a hobby for a small group of aesthetes. Generations of aristocrats trained for careers in politics and diplomacy through rigorous schooling in Latin, Greek, and ancient history. Prime Ministers and Members of Parliament quoted Caesar, Cicero, and Tacitus in their speeches. The deeds of Roman generals and Greek soldiers were emulated. Neo-classicism was a powerful idea with broad impact.

The Greece that British intellectuals and officials wished to emulate was actually ‘Greece,’ an ideal-type in which certain positive qualities of ancient Greece were emphasized (Kumar 2012). Even as British territorial holdings expanded and the roster of colonies grew, there was unease in some quarters over the type of empire that Britain should try to be. Rome was more powerful and enduring than Athens, but ultimately fell. Athens produced unsurpassable gifts to western civilization, but ruled its colonies with distasteful brutality. Given the contingent nature of British ‘empire,’ the Parthenon marbles served as a palimpsest on which multiple orders of value could be inscribed.

In 1809 Benjamin West, the President of the Royal Academy, wrote to Elgin to compliment his generosity and courage in bringing the Parthenon sculptures to London:

Your Lordship, by bringing these treasures of the first and best age of sculpture and architecture into London, has founded a *new Athens* for the emulation and example of

the British student. [...] I sincerely hope that those examples of art [...] will be the means of enlightening the public mind, and correcting the national taste, to a true estimation of what is really valuable and dignified in art. The influence of these works will, I trust, encourage the men of taste and opulence in this country, to bestow a liberal patronage on genius to pursue this dignified style in art, for the honour of genius, themselves, and the country.<sup>12</sup>

West can be concerned that the national taste needs correcting because he knows, through the British variant of neo-classicism, that there is a 'correct' way of doing visual culture. Because correctness has no geographical boundary, it does not matter whether the national taste is improved through Greek, Roman, or British sculpture so long as it is classical. With the actual classical Athens gone, it made perfect sense that the marbles be removed: 'No country can be better adapted than our own to provide an honourable asylum to this [monument]' (Select Committee Elgin Report 1816: 15).

## **Part II. Incorporation and Replication: The Parthenon Marbles as icons of British nationhood**

The sculptures brought by Elgin to London drew from all three of the main decorative groups on the temple: the metope-triglyph series, the pedimental figures, and the ionic frieze. The last of these forms the main part of Elgin's collection as it is now displayed in the British Museum.

The metopes – square marble blocks carved with a single scene and inserted between two triglyphs – present a range of martial scenes. Gods and giants; Greeks and Amazons; Greeks and Trojans; and Lapiths and centaurs (mythical man-horse figures): each nemetic pair is seen fighting. Bodies are deeply carved, seeming to leap off the marble slab. Fine carving work rendered clear the fighters' strained muscles, veins, and fluid drapery folds. The fight sequences served as visual metaphors for the conquest of the barbaric by the civilized. The pediments were the triangular spaces formed just under the peaked roof at either end of the temple. The east pediment was badly destroyed

before Elgin's time, leaving only fragments of the sculptured figures in the corners. The west pediment presented the contest between Athena and Poseidon for patronage of the city of Athens. The two gods fill the center of the pediment, springing apart from each other dynamically. They are flanked by rearing horses, chariots, and seated and reclining figures from Greek myth. The pieces now in the British Museum were (and are) celebrated as paradigmatic of high classical Greek art. Members of the Parliamentary Select Committee asserted in their report, which agreed to the purchase of Elgin's collection, that the pediment sculptures were 'as large as life [and] beautifully well-worked.'<sup>13</sup>

The continuous ionic frieze from the interior (*cella*) of the temple is 160 meters long. It depicts a cavalcade of horsemen and chariots, and a procession of women, heroes and gods, culminating in a ritual scene (Neils 2001). More than half of the frieze is given over to the armed horsemen and charioteers. While scholars continue to debate the significance of the scene, its martial nature is clear. Dozens of nude and semi-nude young men gallop in formation, their bodies disciplined and taut. The Olympian gods are enthroned together, presiding over the cavalry and ritual procession. They are huge, taking up space even while inviting viewers to a privileged glimpse into the deistic realm.

The iconography offered numerous messages for British viewers: those looking to flatter British pretensions to masculine superiority could find it here; those wishing confirmation of the power of the British war machine could see here, too, a familiar line-up of élite cavalry paralleling British aspirations to military glory. There were countless visitors to the sculptures, and each individual will have had his or her private thoughts about the pieces. It is, nevertheless, possible to identify trends in reactions among the 19<sup>th</sup> century British audience. These trends in viewership shed light on the socially-driven norms governing culture, group identity, and public decorum. There were two principal modes of engaging with the sculptures.<sup>14</sup> There was intellectual engagement, in which viewers attempted to display their erudition by appraising the style and content of the work (Ayres 1997). This continued the long tradition, mocked by Petronius two millennia ago, of grandees advertising their

refinement by interpreting and finding arcane points of observation in antiquities. Intellectual engagement was on display throughout the Parliamentary Select Committee hearings, when professional collectors and aesthetes were called to testify to the marbles' historical and artistic value. It was on display, too, among British neo-classicists who found in the marbles a perfect beauty that could correct the nation's art and architecture. My focus in this section is on the range of emotional engagements with the marbles, including intense somatic reactions such as fainting, weeping, and exulting in their presence. Far from being mutually exclusive, the intellectual and emotional modes of engagement worked together to embed the marbles in the British nation.

From the sculptures' first years in Britain, bonding with them, physically and emotionally, was a powerful leitmotif. Key evidence for this argument comes from the diary of Joseph Farington, who was part of a circle of elite London circle of men who appreciated fine art and met regularly to discuss and critique it. We came across Farington earlier in this paper, when he attended the breakfast at Carlisle's house. Farington and his peers were treated to another display of nude pugilists one month later. To find out what happened then, we must move into Elgin's shed.

The rented shed was Elgin's temporary display space for his sculpture collection. Farington made numerous visits there, and describes it as cold in the winter and overly hot in summer. It was a non-descript structure in a bad part of town. But Elgin's showmanship transformed his shanty into the talk of the town.

On June 30, 1808, Gregson was a powerful draw. In his diary entry for that day, Farington wrote that a large group of men watched Gregson 'placed in many attitudes' alongside the sculptures. Once more, he was made to adopt poses similar to those of the Parthenon figures (Farington 1925 [1808]: 84). A few weeks later, an even larger group of men was invited to witness three pairs of pugilists sparring among the marbles. These<sup>15</sup> were no ordinary fighters. John Gully<sup>15</sup> was a successful prize-fighter and immensely popular figure. He retired from boxing in 1808, amassed a fortune, and



became a Member of Parliament by 1832. John Jackson was the prize-fighting champion of Britain, and private boxing instructor to Lord Byron. He was one of a small group of pugilists invited to stand as pages at the entrance of Westminster Abbey during the coronation of George IV. Jem Belcher was a bare-knuckle fighter and Champion of All England from 1800 to 1805. In sum, these men were more than celebrity athletes: they were national heroes, lionized as emblems of British manhood. The fighting was described as ‘the perfect match between nature and art’ (Smith 1916: 280). The body of Dutch Sam, the ‘Man with the Iron Hand’ who was described by contemporaries as one of the ‘best fighters in the kingdom’, was especially praised for its ‘symmetry’ with the ideal Greek physique (Farington 1925 [1808]: 84).

Prize-fighting began as a pastime of the working class but had, by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, attracted aristocratic viewers and patrons. As Golby and Purdue point out, ‘Many supporters of prize-fighting argued that it was an intrinsically English activity reflecting the sturdiness, the courage and the manliness of the race. [The sport] evoked an atmosphere redolent of an older, half-imaginary England where sporting squires and sturdy labourers rubbed shoulders in common appreciation of physical prowess’ (Golby & Purdue 1984: 76-77). Pugilism (and then boxing) featured an aesthetic that crossed classes in its appeal.

What Elgin was trying to do was persuade his audience of the sculptures’ natural place in Britain and in *Britons’ natural configuration in classical art*. If the naked pugilists looked just like the mounted Greek warriors in the frieze, then Britons could mount a claim to embody the legacy of ancient Athens. Farington does not say whether any of his fellow-guests fainted at the sight of the naked boxers – he says merely that they caused great excitement – but such a response would not have been unexpected. Somatic responses to art were increasingly popular among British aesthetes at this time (Kelly 2010). Such behavior was still somewhat suspect, suggesting effete tendencies in men or confirming weakness in women. But they signified a work’s importance. When the famous stage

actress, Sarah Siddons, was invited to Elgin's shed to see the sculptures she faints – a vignette circulated in society gossip and magazines as an example of the powerful effect of the objects on viewers (Smith 1916: 306; also Beard 2010; Farington 1925 [1808]; St Clair 1998: 164-5).

There was a dark side to the embodiment motif. Some Britons used the Parthenon figures to make normative distinctions in race or civilization. An 1811 newspaper article entitled 'Negro Faculties' contrasted the cognitive abilities and cultural achievements of black men with white men. The author used the Parthenon sculptures to conclude his argument:

The 'exquisite, unrivalled Greek form,' which is set forth as the epitome of the physiognomy of the 'white race,' is evident in the Elgin Marbles, 'which, when they are publicly studied by the academy, will enable England, in art as in arms to bid guidance to the world.'<sup>16</sup>

This discursive trope recurred widely throughout late 19<sup>th</sup> century British literature and popular culture. Bounding white from black underpinned imperialist claims to global rule, and using human bodies to make a range of distinctions (in intelligence, cultivation, morals, and ability) was a core mechanism for achieving this in the Victorian era (McClintock 1995). The elision of naked British bodies with ancient Greek bodies is thus an early example of this strategy. British pretensions to universal culture had a limit, and they were entrenched by Elgin's time: Africans and other persons of non-epitomized physiognomy were excluded from the supra-national classical family. The Elgin Marbles helped define British masculinity; they also served to exclude despised categories of people from national membership. The newspaper article's final sentence gives a sense for the broader stakes: England's successful incorporation of the marbles into her national stock positions her to lead the world – now in art, as previously in war.

How did Elgin, the boxers, Farington, and a motley crew of London élites look at the Parthenon figures and see Britons? For a start, it matters that the marbles are white. They were not always so. In antiquity, the sculptures were brightly painted, so as to be visible from the ground (Brinkmann &

Primavesi 2003). The natural pigment eroded through the years, leaving a white patina. Early collectors of sculpture noticed paint traces on Greek and Roman statuary, and some of it was recorded in water color paintings. The re-discovery of classical sculpture production by Renaissance artists ushered in a vogue for white sculpture. It was at first a radical break from the polychrome sculpture of the Middle Ages. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, white sculpture was assumed to be more accurate than the colored version (Brinkmann, Primavesi & Hollein 2010).

To understand why this is significant, we need to ask what color does. Color is social. In clothing, weaponry, and, above all, skin, it distinguishes groups. Color claims. Monochromy allows for the erasure of ethnicity, thus making it easier to project our own selves onto it. White marble can be read as white people – British white, as Elgin and his circle saw it. The ‘pure imperial white’ was contrasted with impure, uncivilized color (McClintock 1995: 32). The ruddy browns and reds that were actually used to depict Greek male skin would have diminished the possibility of teleological engagement with the sculptures. Monochromy also erases time. The antiquity of the sculpture group cannot be denied, but it can be repackaged as *timeless*. The bright reds, blues, and gold of the figures set them, in the Greek viewers’ eyes, in a particular period of fashion. To the 19<sup>th</sup> century British viewer and many viewers today, however, lack of color translates into lack of sartorial specificity, thus allowing the figures to seem present, relevant, and claimable by us. As Batchelor argues, the imperative to white reflects not just a disdain for color but a *fear* of it. ‘Chromophobia’ suggests pigmentation’s dangerous associations with the feminine, the morally corrupt, and the Other: white is widely construed as ‘clean, clear, healthy, moral, rational, masterful’ (Batchelor 2000: 46).

Without periodization and ethnicization through polychromy, the marbles were primed for absorption into the British nation. Given the obsolescence of ancient Greece, Britain could both rhetorically assert her right to the mantle of Greek civilization and visually enforce it through prominent display of the Parthenon sculptures. An example of this is the decision to use the marbles as

models for the new crown pieces of George III. As one newspaper described the obverse: ‘The figures introduced into this noble and simple composition, are not drawn according to the old manner, with all the stiff heraldic emblems and trappings of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but are pure and classical studies from the finest models of the ancients, exhibiting, in the muscular anatomy of the human form, all the attributes of power, which pourtray [*sic*] the heroic deeds represented in the sculpture on the bas-reliefs of the *Elgin marbles* (my emphasis).’<sup>17</sup>

The marbles’ star turn in kingly coinage was one of the more visible manifestations in a series of iconicizing re-presentations. The sculptures appeared frequently in political cartoons. A November 1860 cartoon in *Punch* magazine depicted Lord Elgin in full naval dress, holding a round marble and directing a cross Chinese emperor to kneel. There was no need to present the Elgin marbles as sculptured human figures: the combination of Elgin and marbles immediately brings to mind the Elgin marbles, while suggesting provocatively that statecraft itself is a children’s game (*Mr. Punch’s Victorian Era* 1886). A cartoon drawn by John Tenniel presented the entire staff of *Punch* riding to the derby on horseback, adopting the pose and manner of the equestrians on the Parthenon frieze. Here, too, the marbles were simultaneously mocked and revered. British men and women unable to travel to London could enjoy plaster casts of the sculptures, which were displayed in regional museum throughout the country. Drawing lessons that focused on the marbles also wove their images into the cultural life of Britons.<sup>18</sup> Disseminated through culture high-brow and low-, the Greek origins of the sculptures were gradually erased. A new national identity was grafted onto them.

### **Conclusion: From Pre- to Supra-National**

Theorists of nationalism accept that a range of symbols, objects, and ideologies can serve as core elements of national identity. What we expect to see in them is substantiated chthonic rootedness in the nations that claim them. The story of the Parthenon marbles in Britain undermines this view,

underpinned by the incorporation of foreign culture into the national idea. As I have argued, Britain's consumption of the Parthenon marbles was made possible by first denying their connection with the Greek nation, then reclaiming them for specific (British) as well as universal signification. They became teleological signifiers of the national destiny. Replicated widely, absorbed by popular culture and language, the sculptures were key components of iconic nationalism.

The Parthenon marbles were produced prior to nation-states. When Elgin removed them, Athens was a shadow of its former self – a tumble-down of ruins largely abandoned. In his mind, and in the mind of fellow-travelers, the sculptures had no place in Greece. Britain – politically and economically strong, culturally sympathetic – was the heir apparent. But Elgin was lucky. He came close to losing his marbles several times. Smart and influential friends persuaded powerful officials that the sculptures ought to be purchased by the government. Politics and the vicissitudes of history eventually ensured the marbles' place in the British Museum and in the nation.

The case suggests that scholars of nationalism must re-assess long-standing assumptions about the centrality of particularizing traits or qualities in the construction of national identities. Britain had its share of folk festivals, sartorial customs, and religious practices that tied its subjects together on the local level. In addition, the nation developed a conception of itself as a supra-national entity, whose significance transcended boundaries. The influential 19<sup>th</sup> century idea that a real, complete nation is a cultural nation (Hoock 2010) was exemplified by the appropriation of and successful bonding with classical artifacts. The story of Elgin's marbles demonstrates that national distinctions emerged in a cosmopolitan culture. This cosmopolitan milieu is often mistakenly contrasted with nationalism when, in fact, the two were mutually sustaining.<sup>1</sup> In this context, national dignity was calibrated by the extent to which a nation transcended the smallness of particularity and rose to the level of (pretenses to) universal civilization.

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Rogier van Reekum for this observation.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Downloaded on Aug. 3, 2011 at :

<http://europeanhistory.about.com/od/historybycountry/a/elginmarbles.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Although I make occasional reference to the British Empire, this paper does not attempt to construct an argument about a pan-imperial ‘national’ identity that fit all subjects. Given the vast heterogeneity of the British Empire, this would be empirically very challenging. As Krishan Kumar reminds us, the British Empire was actually ‘two empires: one made up of the white Dominions, the other centered on India’ (Kumar 2012: 34, quoting Sir C.P. Lucas).

<sup>3</sup> Select Committee Elgin Report 1816: 6.

<sup>4</sup> Neil MacGregor, quoted in *The Guardian* 19 April 2007. Retrieved 2 August 2011:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/apr/19/comment.comment1>. The term itself had a long history before its development and gradual adoption throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, even as English, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh identities still configured in people’s self-fashioning (and do today) (Levack 1987).

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note, however, that large sections of the population were unofficially unwelcome at the Museum, despite its public status. At the British Museum and at other museums and cultural institutions, working-class patrons were discouraged from entry if they were not dressed smartly, lacked sufficient money for subscription fees, or could not sign a visitor’s slip. (Golby & Purdue 1984: 91).

<sup>6</sup> Francis Chantry’s testimony, March 5, 1816, p. 53. Report to the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin’s Collection of Sculptured Marbles, 1816.

<sup>7</sup> The quotation comes from a letter written by Lord Elgin to Lord Keith, naval commander-in-chief for the Mediterranean. The subject of the letter was the Erechtheion, sister structure to the Parthenon on the Acropolis. Elgin proposed to remove the Erechtheion in its entirety and ship it to London, a ‘very essential service to the Arts in England.’ In the end, he contented himself with removing one Caryatid column. Quoted in St Clair 1998 [1967]: 100.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from George Cumberland to the London *Monthly Magazine* (July 1, 1808). From Harrison, Wood & Gaiger 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Stamp duty returns suggest that on any given Sunday in 1838, around 135,000 copies of five Sunday newspaper titles were in circulation throughout London, which then had a population of just under two million people. Retrieved from Wikipedia on 10/5/2011:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_newspapers\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_Kingdom\\_by\\_circulation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_newspapers_in_the_United_Kingdom_by_circulation)

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- <sup>10</sup> Testimony of the Earl of Aberdeen before the Select Committee, March 8, 1816, p. 49.
- <sup>11</sup> Minutes of Evidence before Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of Marbles, March 5, 1816, p. 8.
- <sup>12</sup> A letter by Benjamin West to the Earl of Elgin (dated Feb. 6, 1809). From Harrison, Wood & Gaiger 2001.
- <sup>13</sup> Report to the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of Sculptured Marbles, 1816, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>14</sup> I acknowledge, but do not analyze here, the possibility that some viewers had no reaction to the sculptures and pursued no engagement with them.
- <sup>15</sup> Farington misspells his name as 'Gulley' in his entry for July 29, 1808 (Farington 1925 [1808]: 92.
- <sup>16</sup> *The Examiner* (London): Sept. 29, 1811: 'Negro Faculties.'
- <sup>17</sup> *The Morning Chronicle* (London): Oct. 19, 1818
- <sup>18</sup> From *The Morning Chronicle* (London): Friday, Dec. 22, 1820 in the Classified ads: 'School for Drawing and Painting, No. 6, Charlotte-street, Bloomsbury, corner of Streatham-street, established for the Instruction of Students and Amateurs in Drawing and Painting in Oil and Water-colours, possessing every requisite for the study of the Human Figure, with Anatomy, Perspective, &c. forming a Probationary School for the Royal Academy and Elgin Marbles.' The same advertisement appeared in regional newspapers throughout England.

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