



# Department for Culture Media & Sport



# Foreign & Commonwealth Office

26 March 2015

Alfredo Pérez de Armiñán  
Assistant Director-General for Culture  
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
1 Rue Miollis  
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France

*Dear Mr Pérez de Armiñán,*

## PARTHENON SCULPTURES IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

We are writing in response to the letter of 9 August 2013 from your predecessor, Francesco Bandarin, to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and Minister for Equalities, the Foreign Secretary and the Director of the British Museum.

We would first like to express how much we value the role that UNESCO plays in helping to safeguard cultural heritage and in providing a forum for the resolution of international disputes through the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation (ICPRCP). The issue of the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum has been the subject of much discussion over the years both within the Committee and elsewhere, and while the UK is not formally a member of the Committee, officials from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Museum have regularly attended and sought to assist the Committee in its work.

Mr Bandarin asked us to consider a request put forward by the Greek Government to agree to a process of mediation, facilitated by UNESCO, with a view to transferring the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum to Greece. At the Nineteenth Session of the ICPRCP in October 2014, the UK acknowledged that UNESCO stands ready to facilitate mediation discussions and the ICPRCP adopted a recommendation that invites the parties to consider making use of the mediation process as proposed by Greece.

While we remain keen to cooperate with UNESCO in its work, the fact remains that the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum were legally acquired by Lord Elgin under the laws pertaining at the time and the Trustees of the British Museum have had clear legal title to the sculptures since 1816. Neither the British Government nor the British Museum are aware of any new arguments to the contrary since 1985, when a formal Greek request for the return of the sculptures was turned down by the British Government. We have seen nothing to suggest that Greece's purpose in seeking mediation on this issue is anything other than to achieve the permanent transfer of the Parthenon sculptures now in the British

Museum to Greece and on terms that would deny the British Museum's right of ownership, either in law or as a practical reality. Given our equally clear position, this leads us to conclude that mediation would not carry this debate substantially forward.

In addition to the matter of clear legal title, a further relevant factor is that the Trustees of the British Museum are prevented by law from de-accessioning objects in the Museum's collections unless they are duplicates or unfit for retention. Successive governments have indicated their support for this important legal principle, which is in common with the legal obligations of all the UK's major public museums and protects the integrity of the British Museum's collections.

We acknowledge that the Greek Government has aspirations relating to the transfer of the sculptures to Greece and all of us who have had the opportunity to visit the Acropolis Museum greatly admire it. The Acropolis Museum has allowed a greater proportion of the rich collection of sculptures from the Acropolis in Athens to be exhibited than ever before, and has provided a fitting home for many of the Parthenon sculptures that have been removed from the temple in recent years.

Given the global nature of the collection held by the British Museum, the many millions of visitors who visit each year have the opportunity to understand the significance of the Parthenon sculptures in the context of world history and they can do so free of charge. While we understand the strength of contrary opinion, we think that this is something of incalculable international benefit.

In that spirit, the British Museum has a long history of friendly collaboration with colleagues in the Greek Archaeological Service and has contributed to discussions around the restoration of the Acropolis monuments. It has also worked on a project to scan elements of the surviving Parthenon sculptures in both Athens and London. The UK Government is keen that the process of mutual, bilateral cooperation that exists between the UK and Greece on cultural matters should continue to develop.

Setting aside the differences relating to the Parthenon sculptures, we believe that there is scope for further co-operation and collaboration between the British Museum and the Acropolis Museum in the years ahead, and we hope that this path can be pursued.

We are copying this letter to Sir Richard Lambert, Chairman of the Trustees of the British Museum, who is replying separately to Mr Bandarin's letter.

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Minister of State for Culture and the Digital Economy

**RT HON DAVID LIDINGTON MP**  
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