

PARTHENON SCULPTURES 4 May 2007

A regular meeting took place today between Greek and British government officials on the subject of the Parthenon Sculptures in the British Museum. Representatives from the British Museum and UNESCO were also present. The UK government has always made clear that this is a matter to be decided by the Museum's Trustees.

At the meeting, the British Museum representatives restated the Trustees' position, set out in a press release of 21st April*. The Trustees see the sculptures as an integral part of the Museum's collection in London, part of the unique overview of world civilizations that the British Museum exists to present. In consequence, they have always made clear that they cannot contemplate the removal of all of the Parthenon sculptures to Athens, even for a short period of time. This remains their position.

The Trustees believe that it is important that friendly discussions continue with Greek colleagues to see if there is any reasonable ground on which a way forward might be constructed.

* See next page

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In the light of recent statements from the Greek Embassy in London and in order to avoid misunderstanding, the Trustees of the British Museum wish to restate their position on the Parthenon Sculptures in the Museum's collection.

The Trustees have for years been looking to see if there is any reasonable ground on which a way forward with Greek colleagues might be constructed. To date, this has sadly not proved possible. Among many problems has been that successive Greek governments have publicly disputed the Trustees' unquestionable legal ownership of the Sculptures. This has made any meaningful discussions virtually impossible.

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The Trustees frequently lend objects from the collection to museums all round the world. In the last year alone they have lent 4,400 objects to hundreds of museums worldwide. They will consider (subject to the usual questions of condition and fitness to travel) any request for any part of the collection to be borrowed and then returned. The simple precondition is that the borrowing institution acknowledges the British Museum's ownership of the object.

The Trustees have lent often to Greece, especially in the recent Athens Olympic year of 2004, but they have never received a normal loan request for any of the Parthenon sculptures. What successive Greek governments have always sought is the permanent removal of all of the sculptures to Athens. The Trustees do not foresee a situation where they could possibly accede to such a request.

The debate is of long standing, and necessarily involves complex issues. The UK government has always made clear that this is a matter to be addressed by the Museum's Trustees. The Trustees similarly believe that the best way of finding any way forward is through discussion with Greek museum colleagues, with whom the British Museum has always had friendly relations.

The British Museum