



British Museum considers Elgin Marbles 'swap' to reduce £6m debt

By James Morrison
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The British Museum is considering a radical plan to return the Elgin Marbles to Athens in exchange for a series of rotating exhibitions of ancient Greek artefacts. Neil MacGregor, its new director, is understood to be contemplating a deal over the long-disputed Parthenon sculptures in an effort to raise funds to help reduce the museum's £6m deficit. As the museum has never charged for entry and the sculptures are part of its permanent collection, access to the gallery that houses them has always been free. But by "swapping" them for a series of temporary displays of classical treasures, the museum would be able to charge for entry, giving it a lucrative new source of income.

News of the possible change of tack comes on the eve of a meeting between Mr MacGregor and Evangelos Venizelos, the Greek Minister of Culture. Officially, Mr Evangelos is in London to mark his accession to the rotating chairmanship of the European culture ministers. But few doubt that the continuing question over ownership of the marbles will be top of his agenda when he sees Mr MacGregor and Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell.

As if to underline its renewed determination to win back the marbles, the Greek government has also organised an official VIP London "launch" of its proposed new Acropolis Museum on Tuesday. Plans for the museum, which is due to open in time for the 2004 Olympics, include a space specifically designed to house the marbles. Mr MacGregor's willingness to break with decades of intransigence at the British Museum and contemplate returning the marbles emerged at a private meeting with Anthony Snodgrass, the retired Laurence Professor of Classical Archaeology at Cambridge University. Professor Snodgrass, the chairman of the British Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon Sculptures, said last night: "I suggested to him the idea that the Greeks' offer of touring exhibitions could be used to raise money through entry fees. He agreed that was a theoretical possibility. With the museum's present financial situation, they've got to look at everything."

Mr MacGregor was unavailable for comment last night. A statement issued on behalf of the museum's trustees said: "The British Museum is a truly universal museum of humanity, accessible to five million visitors every year entirely free of entry charge. Only here can the worldwide significance of the Parthenon sculptures be fully grasped."

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