

## Italy returns Parthenon fragment to Greece amid UK row over marbles

*Loan deal could renew pressure on Britain to repatriate ancient Parthenon marbles to Athens*



The fragment, part of a draped figure from the east side of the Parthenon frieze.

Angela Giuffrida *in Rome*  
Thu 6 Jan 2022

Italy is returning a fragment belonging to the Parthenon's eastern frieze to Greece in a breakthrough deal that could renew pressure on Britain to repatriate the 2,500-year-old Parthenon marbles removed by Lord Elgin in the early 19th century.

The marble fragment, which depicts the foot of a goddess, either Peitho or Artemis, peeking out from beneath an elaborate tunic, is currently held at the Antonino Salinas Regional Archaeological Museum in Palermo, Sicily. It was originally bought by the University of Palermo from the widow of Robert Fagan, the British consul for Sicily and Malta, after his death in 1816.

The artefact is being returned on a four-year loan as part of a cultural exchange agreement between Sicily and Greece, with the intention for the loan period to be extended by a further four years. However, the move back to Greece could eventually become permanent.



*A headless statue of Athena, to be loaned to the Antonino Salinas museum in Palermo.*

In return, the Acropolis Museum in Athens will loan the Palermo museum a 5th-century BC headless statue of the goddess Athena, as well as an 8th-century BC amphora.

The deal, which includes an exchange of cultural initiatives between the two museums, comes after several years of negotiations between Sicilian and Greek authorities.

“Sending back to the context of its origins a small, but significant, fragment belonging to the Parthenon has a very strong symbolic value,” said Sicily’s councillor for culture, Alberto Samonà. “It is also a response to the international debate [about the Parthenon artefacts]. But I don’t want to get into that debate. For us, this is a gesture of friendship – Greece and Sicily are two areas of the Mediterranean that share a common story.”

The fragment was loaned to Greece in 2002 and in 2008. Samonà said the latest transfer could become permanent, but that it would be up to the Italian culture ministry to take the measures needed to make that happen.

It is not known how Fagan, an amateur archaeologist, acquired the fragment, although one theory suggests it might have been given to him by Elgin, the British aristocrat who excavated the bulk of the ancient Parthenon marbles between 1801 and 1804 before selling them to the British Museum in 1816, where the artefacts are currently on display.

Greece has long fought for the marbles to be repatriated from the UK. In November, the Greek prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, demanded that Britain return the marbles to Greece, while at the same time offering to loan some Greek historical treasures to the British Museum. In response, Downing Street said returning the marbles was a matter for the British Museum. The UK prime minister, Boris Johnson, had previously said the marbles would remain in Britain, arguing that they were legally acquired.