

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

**Who Owns the Past?**  
In-Class Assignment #7  
ANT 101, Spring 2019, Skousen

Archaeological sites and objects play a critical role in shaping individual and national identities. Thus, many individuals and groups – not just archaeologists – are interested in the past and how it is reconstructed and presented. Because issues of identity are often complex and contentious, one of the most important ethical questions that face archaeologists is “who owns the past?” As you may imagine, the answer is usually not straightforward in practice. Below is a case study about the Elgin Marbles, a group of ancient Greek sculptures that are currently housed in the British Museum. Read the description below and follow the directions.

**THE ELGIN MARBLES**

After their defeat of the Persians in 479 BC, the Greeks returned to rebuild the destroyed city of Athens. As part of this effort, they built the world-famous Parthenon. This monumental building, which took 15 years to construct, was dedicated to the Greek goddess Athena in 432 BC and symbolized Greek power, culture, and creativity. The Parthenon included a frieze consisting of more than 600 human and animal marble statues that spanned the entire structure just under the roofline. These sculptures depicted an important annual festival in ancient Athens, which included celebrations, musical and athletic competitions, feasts, beauty contests, and more.

In 1801, Thomas Bruce, also known as Lord Elgin, was the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, which ruled Greece at the time. Lord Elgin obtained permission to remove numerous sculptures from the Parthenon frieze and shipped them to the British Museum in London, where they reside today. The Greek government has petitioned the British government to return these statues (now known as the Elgin Marbles). The Greek government argues that the Elgin Marbles are the cultural heritage of Greece, are an important part of Greek national identity, and should be reunited with the other sculptures from the Parthenon frieze. Opinion polls in the United Kingdom and around the world support the return of the Elgin Marbles.

However, the British Museum will not return the statues, claiming that they were bought legally by Lord Elgin, and that the purchase saved the sculptures from destruction. Moreover, the British Museum argues that the sculptures are viewed by millions of visitors each year and serve to educate the world about Greek history. The Museum also argues that the air pollution in Athens would corrode the sculptures, despite the fact that Greece has built a new Acropolis museum that could protect and display the marbles. The British Museum says it would consider loaning the sculptures to Greece, but Greek authorities want the Elgin Marbles back permanently.

**ASSIGNMENT**

Please write a short response (a few paragraphs at least) explaining the ethical issues involved and present a plan or solution on how you would handle this situation. You may consult with your classmates on plans or strategies, but your answer must be your own.



