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This paper addresses the differing embodiments of culture and knowledge which the Parthenon Sculptures (or 'Elgin Marbles') offer in today's world rather than at the time of their creation, although there are continuities between the two.

There are first some widespread factual misconceptions to be corrected about the Marbles, two of which are important: that they are 'statues' or free-standing works of sculpture; and that virtually all of what survives of them is in the British Museum.

Next, I examine the Anglo-Greek debate over the location of the London Marbles. This is widely seen as a roughly symmetrical argument: each side presents a partly nationalist, partly cultural case. For the British Museum, the London Marbles were legally purchased from a British subject, and anyway have been retained for so long that they have become a vital and central element in the Museum's presentation of world art and culture to the British but also the world public. For the Greeks, they were originally illegally abstracted from Greece by that same British subject, and anyway belong where they came from, reunified with the rest of the Marbles and located as close as possible to the monument from which they were taken, as a central element in the presentation of Greek culture to a Greek and international public. The British case starts out from the issues of ownership and possession: the Greek case, in its most recent form, sets both these issues aside and concentrates solely on location. But I shall argue that any such 'symmetry' is illusory: the Greek case, unlike the British, is aimed less at the cultural significance of the Marbles and what they stand for than at the stones themselves and where they came from, both as raw material and as finished works.

The issue is finally found to revolve round two different understandings of the word 'context': the context of the modern viewer (London) as against context in the archaeologist's sense of provenance (Athens). To the former case is added an argument especially relevant to this Conference: the long-standing role of the Marbles in Britain as a model for artists and as a subject of research for scholars.