

## Disputation CCXV

February 27, 2020

Dear Peucinians,

God is not so dead as was once thought. Last time, we declared that religion is still needed in this world: for our community and our souls. As we enter the season of Lent, and give special attention to the sacred, we turn to consider one of the most consecrated locations on Earth: the Parthenon upon the acropolis of Athens. It was once a Christian church, but, even before that, it served as a place of refuge and divine supplication for the ancient inhabitants of Greece's most famous *polis*.

After their acropolis was burned during the Persian Wars, the Athenians, even at the height of their subsequent war with Sparta, resolved to build a new monument—and this time out of marble. The Parthenon was adorned by the work of Phidias, one of the most celebrated sculptors of all time. In the intervening two and a half millennia, the acropolis has been built upon and plundered, and has functioned as both a place of worship and a military fortress. Once occupied by Roman legionnaires and Ottoman janissaries, it now endures the march of over two million tourists each year.

Tomorrow night we take on one of the greatest controversies in the field of archaeology. This was set off by the 7th Earl of Elgin, who, in 1801, began removing a significant number of sculptures from the Parthenon. He ultimately sold them to the British Museum, where they remain today. Please join us tomorrow as we investigate the ethics of museums, and the reciprocal claims which the living and the dead continue to make upon each other.

### **RESOLVED: THE ELGIN MARBLES BELONG TO GREECE**

**Affirmative: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn '21**

**Negative: Simone Weil '20**

The Parthenon is a defining symbol of Greek culture which stands today desecrated by imperialist vandals. Pericles championed its construction as a public works project with the express purpose of glorifying his people. Modern Greeks are the living descendants of these people. It is a moral cruelty of the highest order to distend a nation from its historical inheritance. The marbles should also be returned as a matter of aesthetics, as well as out of respect for the artist and his intent. Museums violate property rights and exoticize cultures far from their genuine context.

Yet, the very concept of the museum would be destroyed if we decided it best only to display artifacts in their original homes. The acropolis has been exposed for centuries: to weather, destructive wars, and Greek fiscal mismanagement. The British Museum can save the marbles from all of these things, and provide a place for people without huge travel budgets to admire foreign cultures in one place. If we are talking about cultural property, then culture should be the standard of justice, and not such measures as blood or geography. Ancient Greece profoundly influenced Western history, if not the entire world, and it is difficult to determine whether modern Greece can establish an exceptional link on this basis.

What rights do we owe the dead? What does physical culture give us that other forms cannot? If we aspire to transcend the idea of nation, what can we do besides declare artifacts “possessions of all humanity?” Should this be feared as the new face of imperialism? I am very excited to discuss with you all!

**Thursday, February 27th, 7:45 PM**  
**Massachusetts Hall, Third Floor\***  
**Semi-Formal Attire**

Sincerely yours,

✍️

Gilgamesh

*Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus*

\* This room can be reached only by stairs. Please contact me if you wish to attend and this presents a difficulty for you.