

# Sunken treasures found where Elgin lost his marbles

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ATHENS

MORE than two centuries after the frigate Mentor sank in rough seas in the Aegean, taking with it artefacts salvaged from the Parthenon by the 7th Lord Elgin, divers have begun to retrieve the vessel's last secrets from the deep.

Marine archaeologists diving on the wreck near the Greek island of Kythera have brought up a trove of coins, statues and jewellery.

Greek experts hope the finds could be followed by the recovery of lost pieces of the Elgin marbles.

In the aftermath of the 1802 disaster Elgin, then the British ambassador to the Ottoman empire, hired the men who made a living from diving for sponge to recover much of the cargo of ancient marble sculptures.

In a missive to London at the time of the loss, Elgin played down the significance of the shipment. "She had on board some quantities of boxes with stones of no value, but of great consequence for me to secure," he wrote.

He sold the marbles to the British government in 1816 when he found himself in financial straits. To this day Britain and Greece both claim ownership of the 2,500-year-old treasures.

The coins, fine jewellery and Egyptian statues found at the ship's last resting place have encouraged the archaeologists, and funds are in place for a larger dig next year.

"We always hope to find



Divers are discovering artefacts from the 1802 wreckage

some fragments or pieces of the marbles that were broken and left on the sea bed," said Dimitris Kourkoumelis, an archaeologist at the Greek culture ministry, who is heading the mission.

Should parts of the marbles be found, the ferocious battle between the British and Greek governments over the artefacts could be reignited.

Elgin was given permission by the Ottoman authorities to pack up and ship the marbles to his homeland.

The Scottish peer was determined to save the treasures of antiquity from the threat of destruction amid civil unrest, but the Greeks contend the marbles were illegally removed and should be returned.

The stones are regarded as some of the most important surviving monuments of the ancient world.

Commissioned in the 5th century BC, under the instruction of the great sculptor Phidias, they include exquisitely carved friezes hundreds of feet long, as well as smaller statues and inscriptions.

The so-called Golden Age of Athenian culture flourished at the time under the tutelage of Pericles, a philosopher, poet, orator and statesman who oversaw the development of one of the great civilisations and was known as the first citizen of Athens.

Last year, the British human rights lawyer Amal Clooney spearheaded a campaign for the marbles to be repatriated to Greece.

The British Museum, however, argued that the artefacts gave "maximum public benefit" by remaining in the UK.

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