

UK's Sunak Cancels Talks With Greek PM Amid Parthenon Marbles Row

Why In News

- A **diplomatic spat** erupted between Greece and the UK on Monday after British Prime Minister **Rishi Sunak** canceled a meeting with his Greek counterpart **Kyriakos Mitsotakis**. It prompted Athens to accuse London of trying to avoid discussing the contested Parthenon Marbles.
- It prompted **Athens to accuse London** of trying to avoid discussing the contested sculptures, also known as the **Elgin Marbles**. Over the years, Greece has repeatedly asked for the sculptures' permanent return to Athens, but Britain and the British Museum have refused to do so.



What are the Parthenon Sculptures?

- The **Parthenon Sculptures** at the British Museum are more than 30 ancient stone sculptures from Greece that are more than **2,000 years old**.
- Most of them originally adorned the walls and grounds of the Parthenon temple on the rocky **Acropolis hill in Athens**.



- Completed in **432 BC**, the temple is dedicated to the goddess Athena and is seen as the crowning glory of Athens' Golden Age.
- While one notable sculpture, which is **75 metres long**, depicts a procession for the birthday of Athena, others show gods, heroes or mythical creatures.



How Did The Sculptures Reach Britain?

- They were removed from the Parthenon in the early **19th century** by **Thomas Bruce**, the **7th Earl of Elgin** and then-British ambassador to the **Ottoman Empire**.
- The marbles were taken to Britain and purchased by the **British Museum in 1816**.
- While Athen accused Lord Elgin of theft, he insisted he had permission to remove the marbles from the **Ottoman Empire**, which used to control Athen at the time.
- The original letter giving him permission, however, has been lost and its text remains disputed.



- Athens has been demanding the return of the sculptures since it became independent in the early 1830s.
- The campaign gained momentum in the 1980s after Greek Oscar-nominated actress **Melina Mercouri launched a movement** for their return when she was culture minister between 1981 and 1989.
- A day after the meeting was cancelled between **Sunak and Mitsotakis**, Greek officials said they would continue talks with the British Museum about the return of the Parthenon Sculptures.



- Reports suggest that although the **Tory government** insists that Britain owns the marbles, the Labour party, expected to win next year's national elections, will allow a loan agreement between the British Museum and the Greek government.



Conservatives

- Britain's government has always ruled out giving up ownership of the marbles, which include about half of the **160-metre (525-ft) frieze** that adorned the Parthenon.
- However, Athens has recently been pushing for a deal that would return the sculptures under some kind of loan arrangement.

What Does Britain Say

- A British government official, on the condition of anonymity, said the row over the marbles meant it was not suitable for the meeting to go ahead. A spokesperson for Rishi Sunak had earlier stated that there were **no plans to return the sculptures.**

