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Museum rejects Greek minister's Marbles 'deal'

By **Dalya Alberge**
Arts Correspondent

THE Greek Minister of Culture went to the British Museum yesterday and sought a souvenir of his visit — the Elgin Marbles.

Evangelos Venizelos appealed to Tony Blair to make "a great political gesture at a world-wide level" by agreeing to place the ancient sculptures on loan in an "annexe" of the British Museum in Athens.

The proposal, which was turned down flat, was made during an hour-long meeting with the director and chairman of the museum, where the Marbles have been housed since their removal from the Parthenon in Athens in the 19th century. The museum has always argued that the Marbles were legally acquired by Lord Elgin, the British Ambassador.

Greece is building a £55 million Acropolis Museum crowned with an upper glass gallery called the Parthenon Hall which will remain empty until the 176-yard frieze — the greatest national symbol of Greece — has been restored to its original home. The Marbles, Mr Venizelos argued, only made sense when they

were displayed in the context of the Parthenon. In return, Britain would be offered a permanent series of rotating exhibitions on loan.

Neil MacGregor, the museum's director, dismissed speculation that it would ever consider giving up the jewel of its collection. He said that the museum would lend important exhibits, including Renaissance drawings, to Greece, but that the Elgin Marbles were among treasures that could never leave. In London, they were seen by five million visitors a year, free of charge. "The Marbles are central to the museum," he said.

He continued: "The range of the museum's collections is worldwide. They cover millennia of human history. Hence the visitor can move from Egypt to the Aztecs, from Africa to Greece and Rome, from Ancient Britain to Ancient China. It is this story which the British Museum exists to tell. The museum was set up so that the world could explore itself."

Mr Venizelos left the museum saying that he was "optimistic but realistic". He was due to meet Tessa Jowell, the Culture Secretary, this afternoon.

Olympic plan delayed

From **John Carr**
in Athens

THE discovery of a mass of archaeological finds has slowed work on a museum being built next to the Acropolis for the 2004 Olympics in Greece.

The site of the museum was believed to be largely ruin-free when digging began in 1998. However, an entire residential

district has been discovered, which was occupied between the 2nd and 7th centuries.

Archaeologists are criticising the Government's "indecent haste" in building the museum over the site. They say they need more time to study and preserve the trove of items found. The Government is hoping to house the Elgin Marbles in the museum at the Games.

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UN hands over peace proposals for Cyprus

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**From Michael Theodoulou
in Nicosia**

THE United Nations has submitted a comprehensive peace plan for Cyprus aimed at resolving a dispute that has defied settlement in the former British colony for nearly 30 years. Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General, has asked Cyprus for a response within seven days.

There will now be intense high-level diplomacy to help to secure at least the outline of an agreement to re-unify the island before the European Union invites Cyprus to join a mid-December summit.

Alvaro de Soto, the UN's special envoy, said that the plan was submitted simultaneously to the Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders of Cyprus yesterday and was being sent to the leaders' backers, Greece and Turkey, as well as Britain.

The 150-page proposal, drawn up by a team under

Señor de Soto, to solve one of the world's most complex diplomatic puzzles, urges the rival parties to decide in one month to make peace before an EU summit in Copenhagen in mid-December that will decide on EU expansion.

It comes after nearly 11 months of face-to-face talks between Glafcos Clerides, the 83-year-old Greek Cypriot leader, and Rauf Denktas, the 78-year-old Turkish Cypriot leader, failed to produce any evident progress.

The sources said that the document offered several proposals on territorial trade-offs, with Turkish Cypriots yielding between 7 and 9 per cent of territory that they presently control in the northern third of the island.

The trade-offs would focus on the eastern coastal city of Varosha, which has been virtually a ghost town since 1974, when Turkey invaded the island, the northwestern region of Morphou and some

villages in the Mesaoria Plain east of Nicosia.

The unprecedented interest from both sides of the Atlantic in the island is not surprising. The EU is ready to admit Cyprus, represented internationally by the prosperous Greek Cypriots, who have met its strict accession criteria for the next wave of enlargement in 2004, whether there is a settlement or not.

Yet Brussels is desperate for a solution, fearing the prospect of taking in a split country. That would leave the Turkish Cypriots out in the cold and could damage the bloc's relations with Turkey, an aspiring member of the EU, which would be left occupying 37 per cent of the territory of a new one.

The United States Government is keen to avoid friction between its European partners and Turkey, a key Nato ally, whose help will be needed in any attempt to oust President Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

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