

Critically assess the extent that repatriation claims are motivated by political agendas of self-determination and sovereignty.

Heritage often finds itself entangled with politics. Since the finalisation of Brexit and changing migration laws, 'heritage' is often a word seen with the likes of 'immigration' or 'migration,'¹ topics which regularly find themselves on front pages of news sites and articles written every day. Ideas of heritage and culture are easily drawn into the hottest political topics. In the case of immigration, one might consider the bringing of a foreign culture to their country as a threat to their own culture or heritage. Politics also finds its way into heritage in the era of decolonialisation, where formerly colonised nations seek out heritage and culture lost to them during the process of colonialism. Even nations primarily responsible for colonialism have instances of heritage sites and museums acknowledging the past and harmful ways in which material was acquired², though the approach may differ greatly between institutions. It can certainly be argued that sovereignty and self-determination is sought by nations in a post-colonial world, where sovereignty is independence³ and self-determination is a nation forming its own government in the context of a national consciousness or identity⁴. Material culture can be an excellent tool for the desire of self-determination and gain or solidification of sovereignty, and thus repatriation claims of material culture by the country of origin are no surprise.

The construction of what is known as the Parthenon began in Athens in 447BC on the foundations of a temple established after the Greek victory at the Battle of Marathon⁵. It was ordered to be done by the Athenian leader Perikles during a time of peace with the Persians, who had destroyed the previous temple⁶. The commission was part of an effort to rebuild statues and temples that had been destroyed by the wars, and construction would continue until 432BC with a mixed reception⁷. Notably, the temple was built using funds from Athens and its allies, given for the war effort against the Persians⁸. A later comment from the likes of Plutarch was regarding the use of the war budget for "gilding and bedizening"⁹ the city. At the time it was observed, however, that such a project would establish Athens as a formidable enemy. When discussing the polis involved in the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides states¹⁰:

"Suppose, for example, that the city of Sparta were to be come desolate and that the only temples and foundations of buildings remained, I think future

¹ (*Heritage and Immigration*, 2020)

² (*Human Remains at the Pitt Rivers Museum*, University of Oxford, n.d.)

³ ("Sovereignty," 2021)

⁴ ("Self-Determination," 2025)

⁵ (Tomlinson, 2003, pp. 1116)

⁶ (Tomlinson, 2003, pp. 1116)

⁷ (Tomlinson, 2003, pp. 1116)

⁸ (Beaton, 2021/2022, pp. 129)

⁹ (Plutarch, 1916, 12.2)

¹⁰ (Thucydides, 1972, 1.10)

generations would, as time passed, find it very difficult to believe the place had really been as powerful as it was represented to be ... if, on the other hand, the same thing were to happen to Athens, one would conjecture from what met the eye that the city had been twice as powerful as it in fact is.”

The Parthenon was constructed despite concerns for its funding, and what remains to the modern day has become iconic in the image of Greece. Even the Graeco-Persian wars that influenced its construction are popular within modern media, such as the movie 300, loosely based on the Battle of Thermopylae. A quick online search shows bright blue seas, skies, and rooves accompanying views of the Parthenon raised above the city of Athens. Visit Greece’s page on Athens features an immediate image of the Parthenon facing out towards the Port of Piraeus and begins its introduction to the city with “the historical capital of Europe.”¹¹

Figure 1. *The Parthenon on the Acropolis of Athens.*



History is still embedded into the modern image of Greece. It is a history that expands over two thousand years and includes many years of being ruled by foreign powers. While under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, “Hellenic” bore a negative connotation¹². However, more Greeks progressively made the connection between their language, identity, and cultural heritage¹³, such as Dimitrios Katartzis in the late 18th century, whom, according to Beaton, stated¹⁴: “We can become once again a nation, civilised

¹¹ (Athens, n.d)

¹² (Haldon & Danforth, 2026)

¹³ (Kitromilides, 1989, pp. 153)

¹⁴ (Beaton, 2021/2022, pp, 399)

and envied, to the extent that we are able to approach the education of our ancestors.” With influence from western scholars and in light of revolutions happening throughout Europe, the concept of a free, modern state continued to rise. Despite previous failed attempts, a revolution by Hellenes resulted in an independent state with formal recognition in 1832¹⁵.

The Parthenon serves as a reminder of this history, of both the golden age of Athens, and of the periods under foreign rule. As such, repatriation claims of the sculptures removed from the Parthenon by the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire between 1801 and 1805¹⁶ are unsurprising. It can be argued that these claims are made in the interest of a national identity. As stated by Beaton, the Parthenon “must be the most widely recognised “trademark” of Greece and Greek civilisation – just as it was in the century it was built.”¹⁷ The Parthenon is important to the presentation of Greek identity to the wider international world, therefore making the marbles important to this identity. Having them repatriated to their country of origin would serve to reinforce this identity and solidify the country as independent. It can be suggested that, much like how the revolutionary Greeks regained their language in a struggle against foreign rule, modern Greeks seek material lost to them under this foreign rule. Symbolically, the repatriation of the Parthenon marbles can be seen to reflect its initial construction. Much like the original temple before the Parthenon was damaged by invasion, the Parthenon was damaged during the rule of the Ottomans by sieging Venetians¹⁸, then, 200 years later, almost half of the frieze, 15 of the metopes, and 17 figures were purchased and removed¹⁹. Conservation of the temple and repatriation can be a reestablishment of a sovereign and powerful state, much as it was when it was built in the 5th century BC.

¹⁵ (Danforth et al., 2026)

¹⁶ (The British Museum, n.d.-b)

¹⁷ (Beaton, 2021/2022, pp.126)

¹⁸ (Tomlinson, 2003, pp. 1117)

¹⁹ (“Elgin Marbles: British Museum Lends Statue to Russia,” 2014)



Figure 2. Marble statue from the East pediment of the Parthenon

While the repatriation of Greek material, in this case the Parthenon marbles, can be seen to be motivated politically, there are other reasons for which the country of Greece may want this material back. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the total contribution of tourism on Greece's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) decreased from 31.7% the year before to 9.7%²⁰. This resulted in a nominal GDP decrease of €17.9 billion²¹. After the removal of international travel bans, in 2024 the total contribution had returned to pre-COVID measures numbers, ranging from 28.0% and 33.7%²². Compared to other countries, such as the UK where in 2023 tourism-related industries were estimated to be 5.2% of the economy²³ and Greece's 18.5%²⁴, tourism is a fundamental part of the country's economy. When looking to visit Greece, tourism brochures heavily focus on the historic nature of Greek culture. The first two available brochures on Visit Greece's website are on 'City Break'²⁵ and 'Culture'²⁶ and immediately discuss the country's ancient history. The first brochure available on

²⁰ (Tourism's Contribution to the Greek Economy 2019-2020, 2022, pp. 2)

²¹ (Tourism's Contribution to the Greek Economy 2019-2020, 2022, pp. 2)

²² (Ikkos & Koutsos, 2025, pp. 6)

²³ (Murray, 2025, pp. 18)

²⁴

(Greek Travel & Tourism Sector to Approach Full Recovery This Year, 2023)

²⁵ (City Break Athens, n.d)

²⁶ (Culture, 2026)

Audley Travel is on Greek islands, but still states “This is the land of Homer’s wine-dark seas,”²⁷ referencing classical poetry.

Due to the relationship between the economy and tourism, it can be argued that repatriation attempts may be made to further boost the tourist industry, and therefore the country’s overall GDP. However, history is intertwined with tourism, not just for foreign visitors, but also for Greeks. Of the independent 948,135 visitors, not including those for events, restaurants, or temporary exhibitions, between June 2019 and May 2020 to the Acropolis Museum, 20%, or 183,204 were Greek²⁸. The next biggest specific country was the USA, at 19%²⁹. Of the 659,041 visitors to the museum website, 57%, or 365,385, were Greek³⁰. In 2023, €2,254 million was accounted for by domestic tourism expenditure with at least one overnight stay³¹. While not nearly as much compared to international tourism, it is obvious that tourism by Greeks within Greece is still significant. It could be suggested that, much like the revolutionary Greeks, modern Greeks seek to explore the ancient culture that has fascinated western scholars for centuries. This reinforces the concept that material may be requested to be repatriated to solidify sovereignty and the national identity required for self-determination.

Another set of examples regarding repatriation claims comes from the return of Indigenous ancestors returned to Australia. Australia was colonised in the late 18th century by Britain, claimed for the country by Captain James Cook³². Settlers originally consisted of convicts to ease the pressure on the prisons within Britain that had become overcrowded with those awaiting trial or debtors³³. These convicts were organised by gender and criminal status, with the most difficult male prisoners sent to isolated prisons or penal colonies³⁴. In the 19th century, more Europeans arrived with the intent to gain land, partake in industry, or farm. Settlers fought with Indigenous inhabitants until the 1930s, assisted by local police³⁵. They tolerated each other at first, but competition for land and cultural differences resulted in killings, which resulted in out of proportion reprisals. The casualty numbers lie at 2,500 for the settlers, and some 20,000 for the Aboriginal inhabitants through direct conflict with settlers³⁶. These numbers increase when disease and other results of colonialism are factored in.

Initially claimed for the Dutch in the mid 17th century, Tasmania was claimed for the British in 1803, after fears of French territorial expansion³⁷. At the time, an estimated

²⁷ (Laura*, 2024)

*Laura does not have a last name.

²⁸ (Zaoussis, 2020)

²⁹ (Zaoussis, 2020)

³⁰ (Zaoussis, 2020)

³¹ (Ikkos & Koutsos, 2025, pp. 15)

³² (Campbell, 2023)

³³ (Campbell, 2023)

³⁴ (Campbell, 2023)

³⁵ (Australian War Memorial, 2021)

³⁶ (Australian War Memorial, 2021)

³⁷ (Anae, 2023)

6,000 Aborigines resided on the island, and had done for 40,000 years³⁸. Violence between settlers and Aborigines increased in frequency, though the spears of the Indigenous people did not fare well against the settler's firearms³⁹. Competition over the trade in oil and skins by whalers and sealers would only increase violent crimes⁴⁰. The European population of the island would increase in the mid 19th century to more than 57,000 inhabitants⁴¹, and at the same time just over 100 Aborigines in forced exile⁴². Tasmania gained colonial self-government in 1855-56 and its population continued to grow into the 20th century⁴³. Since the late 20th century, Aboriginal people have asserted their identity and heritage, and, with the passing of new legislation, state historic and cultural sites have been returned⁴⁴. Since the 1990s, it has been commonplace for museums in Australia to repatriate Indigenous remains to their communities, provided there is no unsolvable conflict of ownership⁴⁵.



Figure 3. *Ruins of the Port Arthur penal colony in Tasmania.*

In 2025, 1,775 ancestors, used to refer to native remains, have been returned to Australia, of which 200 are from the Natural History Museum⁴⁶. Remains were removed by colonisers to study the origins and nature of racial difference, and the practices of

³⁸ (Taylor & Kiernan, 2023, pp. Summary)

³⁹ (Anae, 2023)

⁴⁰ (Anae, 2023)

⁴¹ (Roe, 2026)

⁴² (Taylor & Kiernan, 2023, pp. Summary)

⁴³ (Roe, 2026)

⁴⁴ (Roe, 2026)

⁴⁵ (Harrison, 2010, pp. 183)

⁴⁶ (Armstrong, 2025)

“primitive” races⁴⁷. The removal of remains for the purposes of being sent abroad occurred into the mid 20th century⁴⁸. Initially, repatriation claims of these remains were rejected for fears of losing “valued research tools”⁴⁹ and that their scientific benefit was too great⁵⁰. Some museums returned material, including human remains and artefacts, to Indigenous groups, however others, notably the National History Museum and the British Museum, were prevented from doing so due to legislation such as the British Museum Act 1963⁵¹. As a result, the Human Tissue Act 2004 was passed, giving museums unable to repatriate remains under previous legislation the ability to do so, provided they are less than 1000 years old⁵². As such, the British Museum has repatriated human remains to Tasmania⁵³, as has the Natural History Museum⁵⁴, and other museums from around the UK⁵⁵.

In a BBC article regarding the return of remains, Thomas Holden, a representative for the Warrgamay community, stated⁵⁶: “Repatriation is about more than just bringing our ancestors home. It is about reaffirming our sovereignty, our rights, and our deep cultural and spiritual obligations to care for our people, even in death.” The communities issuing these repatriation requests do so for a variety of reasons, as stated above. There are motivations of sovereignty, not just of a community wounded by colonial action, but also for the individuals and their identity. Rodney Dillion, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission commissioner, stated⁵⁷: “It is very offensive. We Aborigines were not put on this earth for British scientists to do research on.” Repatriation of these remains reaffirms a cultural identity, allowing the people within the community to gain independence from the concept that they are “research tools.”⁵⁸ However, as stated by Holden, there are more reasons than just sovereignty for remains being returned. The physical land and its relationship with the people that live upon it is fundamental for Indigenous Australians, as a source of spiritual and economic wellbeing⁵⁹. The repatriation of remains acts culturally, allowing remains to be returned to the land so important to their culture.

Both these examples show repatriation claims from two different cultures, each with different outcomes and results. In Parthenon Marbles remain within the UK in the British Museum, despite requests for their return. The British Museum is not the only

⁴⁷ (Errol, 1923, pp.45)

⁴⁸ (Harrison, 2010, pp. 183)

⁴⁹ (Harris, 2003)

⁵⁰ (MacAskill, 2000)

⁵¹ (Harrison, 2010, pp. 184)

⁵² (Harrison, 2010, pp. 185)

⁵³ (*Request for Repatriation of Human Remains to Tasmania*, 2006)

⁵⁴ (Armstrong, 2025)

⁵⁵ (Harrison, 2010, pp. 184)

⁵⁶ (Armstrong, 2025)

⁵⁷ (Harris, 2003)

⁵⁸ (Harris, 2003)

⁵⁹ (Harrison, 2010, pp. 183)

museum to house parts of the Parthenon, the Louvre and National Museum of Copenhagen also contain marbles, among other museums in Europe⁶⁰. The Vatican also possesses some marbles, but in 2023 repatriated three items⁶¹. However, the British Museum contains “about half”⁶² of what survives, and as such its repatriation, or lack thereof, is most in the spotlight. As the British Museum website states multiple times, the Greek government has not requested a loan of the Parthenon marbles, rather their “permanent removal,” which the trustees of the museum will not consider⁶³. Another commonly cited reasoning for the rejection of repatriation lies in the inability of the Greeks to care for items returned to them⁶⁴, though this is not the stance of the British Museum⁶⁵. Officially, the British Museum believes “the strength of the collection is its breadth and depth which allows millions of visitors an understanding of the cultures of the world and how they interconnect.”⁶⁶ In 2019, the British Museum had 6,239,983 total visits⁶⁷, some 6 times the amount of the Parthenon Museum⁶⁸, however, it is worth noting that the British Museum has almost 24 times the objects the Parthenon Museum has listed on its digital collections⁶⁹, just on display⁷⁰.



Figure 4. *The Ergastines plaque, block seven of the East frieze of the Parthenon.*

The repatriation of ancestral remains to Indigenous people in Australia has been far more successful by comparison. As discussed, multiple museums have returned

⁶⁰ (Harrison, 2010, pp. 175)

⁶¹ (Radford, 2023)

⁶² (The British Museum, n.d.-b)

⁶³ (The British Museum, 2023)

⁶⁴ (“Elgin Marbles: British Museum Lends Statue to Russia,” 2014, comments)

⁶⁵ (The British Museum, 2023)

⁶⁶ (The British Museum, n.d.-b)

⁶⁷ (ALVA | Association of Leading Visitor Attractions, 2019)

⁶⁸ (Zaoussis, 2020)

⁶⁹ (EXPLORE THE COLLECTIONS | Acropolis Museum | Official Website, n.d)

⁷⁰ (The British Museum, n.d.-a)

remains over the course of the 21st century, with 1,775 having been returned⁷¹. Existing legislation initially prevented such repatriation taking place but was amended by the Human Tissue Act 2004⁷². Further resistance to repatriation stemmed from arguments rooted in the supposed scientific benefit of the remains being unaltered within the care of the museums. There does not appear to be much public discussion on the repatriation of ancestral remains.

Each of the discussed cases involves material in the UK that does not originate there. To some residents of the UK, this could be just as important to their heritage as the items are to the heritage of the country they are removed from. Comments on a BBC article relating to the loaning of a Parthenon sculpture to Russia suggest that residents within the UK do not wish for items to be returned for a variety of reasons, including that they do not believe the material will be cared for, or a belief that the material fairly belongs in Britain⁷³. Material brought to the UK during the time of the British Empire can be argued to become a part of British heritage by the process of colonisation and acquisition, as the UK becomes a part of that object's biography. To accept claims of repatriation can be viewed as removing material that contributes to the heritage of the UK through the lens of a colonial heritage. Therefore, the rejection of repatriation claims from other countries can also be influenced by political motivations. Repatriating material could be seen to harm the sovereignty of the nation that possesses the material, as they are no longer in control of their “possessions.” Self-determination can be affected as colonial heritage plays a large part in overall British heritage for some citizens, a factor which more museums are beginning to consider, and therefore national identity.

These have been examples of repatriation claims issued by different cultures, as well as the rejection or accepting of repatriation claims. While these claims can be seen to be motivated by the politically motivated aims of self-determination and sovereignty, this is not the only reason a community may choose to request material be returned to them. Economic benefit produced by historic material and culture that bolsters a country's economy could equally be a driving factor for the seeking of material originally from that history and culture. More cultural factors, such as spiritual obligation, can also be seen playing a role in the repatriation of material, especially ancestral remains. However, in a post-colonial world, politically charged reasonings for the repatriation of material are the most prevalent. Material can be repatriated for politically motivated reasons, such as sovereignty and self-determination, and repatriation attempts can be rejected for politically motivated reasons.

⁷¹ (Armstrong, 2025)

⁷² (Harrison, 2010, pp. 185)

⁷³(“Elgin Marbles: British Museum Lends Statue to Russia,” 2014, comments)

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