

Cultural Restitution: Repatriation Cases and their effectiveness and success in the Modern Era

There is much debate over the repatriation of many ancient artefacts, and the question of who really owns them. With many of these artefacts such as the Elgin marbles (Parthenon Marbles), the Ishtar gates or the Rosetta stone being taken from their countries of origin, often during periods of colonial rule or when a country is in a state of bedlam. Which raises many ethical as well as legal questions about their rightful ownership, with one side of the overall argument being that these artefacts should be returned to their countries of origin for the sake of restoring the countries historical and cultural identity as well as to the communities that reside there. On the other side of the argument, the claim that such artefacts that are currently held in first world museums, serve a higher purpose in terms of global educational purpose and awareness, and that the artefacts housed there would be much safer and better preserved in such prestigious museums.

The Elgin marbles had always been wanted to be returned by both the Greek government and its people. “The British say the marbles were legally acquired and are the best shown alongside other artifacts in a universal museum, while the Greeks view them as looted treasures that are a foundation of their national heritage.” (Marshall 2023). But official plans and requests for their return have been around for decades. In the 80s, the Greek minister for culture; Melina Mercouri, launched a campaign asking for the return of the marbles to Athens. Athens opened a museum of their own called the Acropolis Museum “in part to dispel argument from the British that they would have nowhere to house the Elgin marbles safely”. (Guzman & Gordon 2023). Even with this fact, the British government still refuse to meet with the Greek government to truly discuss the return of the marbles; with Rishi Sunak cancelling meetings with Kyriakos Mitsotakis in 2023. “Sunak’s refusal to contemplate the sculptures’ return to Athens is in opposition to the view of most of the British public, Mitsotakis has Greece squarely behind him.” (Bland 2023). These show numerous attempts made by the Greek government to have the marbles returned to them, with the British government being very unwilling, under the principle that they believe that the marbles are under better care within their possession, as well as that they think that Greece does not have suitable facilities to house the artefacts. Showing that attempts of repatriation have been unsuccessful and ineffective.

In terms of the Germans acquisition of the Ishtar gates, the German government took the vast majority of artefacts during their expedition of Iraq unlawfully; with them taking 118 of the 120 parts of the Iraqi frieze. “The Iraqi government has petitioned the German government to return the gate several times, most recently in 2002 and 2009” (Raalte 2023). After the American invasions of Iraq in 2003 there was much looted from Iraq; of which local archaeologists want returned. Especially Zainab Mohammed, who makes his opinion known in an article, “The return of all pieces acquired illegally following the American invasion should be pursued. Iraq has the right to reclaim these items and sue the museums that have bought, displayed, and stored the pieces looted from Iraqi museums and archaeological sites.” (Mohammed 2009). Which further explains that such items were all taken systematically. Mohammed has said that he would very much like to see the Ishtar

gates especially be returned to Iraq as it would mean that the Iraqi government could then press further on other countries to repatriate further pieces of their history. But he also mentions the flawed laws that Iraq has on this subject. This shows that the Iraqi government have made little effort in requesting the repatriation of their ancient artefacts in recent years; and that their success in the modern era in terms of repatriation has been minimal.

Ancient artefacts such as the Rosetta stone have been requested to be returned to Egypt for a while now, primarily by Zahi Hawass; a well-known archaeologist from Egypt, and former minister of state for antiquities and affairs. Who makes the argument that Egypt had no say in the 1801 treaty/agreement that resulted in the Rosetta stone being taken to the British museum, and says “Anything that left illegally, it should be back to Egypt” (Kotb 2023). More recently, Dr Monica Hanna has set petitions for the Rosetta stone to be returned from the British museum, saying “The Rosetta stone for me, is a symbol of Western colonialism over my culture. It represents a spoil of war; it represents cultural violence ... I’m also training generations of students who will become researchers to continue the fight until the Rosetta stone is back in Egypt.” (Inside edition 2022).

The debate over repatriation for decades has been and remains to be a deeply contentious issue, fuelled by both sides of the argument, where some argue that returning artefacts to their original countries is needed for correcting the past wrongs in cases where artefacts were taken unlawfully in order to restore a sense of cultural ownership and pride. Whereas these museums themselves worry that repatriation could lead to the loss of access of these artefacts to a global community, and possibly put them at risk because of inadequate preservation facilities and resources. But at the heart of this debate is the questions of whether these heavily important cultural items belong to specific nations, or to humanity as a whole. It is clear that the only way to have this tug of war argument settled is finding a proper balance between historical restitution and the global value of education, will be key to resolving such a complex dispute.

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