

Critically Assess the Extent That Repatriation Claims are Motivated by Political Agendas of Self-determination and Sovereignty

This essay aims to critically assess the extent to which repatriation claims are motivated by political agendas of self-determination and sovereignty, through the lens of academic discourse, case studies, museum theory, legal frameworks and theoretical debates. The repatriation of cultural objects, human remains, sacred items and antiquities has become one of the most discussed and contested practices in academia, heritage, museums, and politics.¹ In the public debate, this issue is frequently framed as that of an ethical response to colonial injustice: wherein the communities of origin seek the return of items removed from them, through what might have been coercion, conquest, unequal exchange, or scientific extraction among a long list of methods of extraction deemed inequitable.² However, some repatriation claims can also overlap with political agendas and other ulterior motives. Governments of nation states, alongside smaller self-determining groups and organisations, often deploy repatriation arguments as a tool to assert sovereign authority, pursue cultural autonomy or strengthen narratives.³ Despite the dedication from archaeologists, anthropologists, historians and museum professionals to assist in repatriation claims, sometimes this community recognises certain campaigns as being ideologically and politically charged – thus presenting a challenge to “neutral” stewardship and research.⁴ This essay argues that political motivations are certainly widespread, but due to the uneven nature of them, can sometimes undermine or discredit unmotivated claims. State-led campaigns have been known to align alongside aims of international positioning, power assertion, or sovereignty projects. In contrast to this, Indigenous or community-driven repatriation movements often fuel

¹ Jeanette Greenfield, *The Return of Cultural Treasures*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xiii-xiv; Lynn Meskell, “Human Rights and Heritage Ethics,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2010): 841-843.

² Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*, trans. Drew S. Burk (Paris: Ministère de la Culture, November 2018); Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

³ Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett, eds., *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Kavita Singh, “Repatriation Without Patria: Repatriating for Tibet,” *Journal of Material Culture* 15, no. 2 (2010): 131-133.

⁴ Clement W. Meighan, “Some Scholars’ Views on Reburial,” *American Antiquity* 57, no. 4 (1992): 704-706; Madonna L. Moss, review of *Reckoning with the Dead: The Larsen Bay Repatriation and the Smithsonian Institution*, ed. Tamara L. Bray and Thomas W. Killion, *American Anthropologist* 97, no. 1 (1995): 186-188.

and reflect self-determination efforts, which despite being political, do not share all of the same agendas.⁵ Repatriation is best understood as a complex, entangled concept where ethics, identity, knowledge and power all play a role, which this piece will seek to synthesise.

When we approach political motivation, it is useful to consider the political nature of some museums. Bennett's analysis of the modern museum explores the "Exhibitionary Complex": museums are structures, which can organise objects into narratives which might display civility, progress, and national belonging - thus shaping citizens and rendering social order as something which is visible and teachable through public display.⁶ To expand on this point, museums are not merely holders of artifacts, but actively produce and direct authoritative knowledge relating to peoples and their pasts. However, it is noteworthy that such authority is partly historically bound to imperial power: collecting practices went hand in hand with colonial networks of extraction, military intervention and scientific classification, converting the material culture of other peoples into evidence for Western epistemologies. Hall presents an interesting argument that heritage can be a discursive practice, which sharpens the stakes here. Heritage is not simply a remnant of what services from the past; it is something which is selectively curated by parties to align with narratives they wish to promote.⁷ Such portrayals produce and reinforce belonging and legitimacy, but unfortunately also marginalise alternative perspectives and subjective positions. Therefore, repatriation claims hold the potential to contest representational power, since they invite uncomfortable questions: Who gets to define an objects meaning? Who gets to narrate its histories? Whose relationships to the past are being recognised as authoritative? In this regard, it is difficult to remove repatriation from politics, because it can actively challenge said museums' grip as the legitimate custodians and interpreters of heritage. Notwithstanding this point, the portrayal of museums solely as instruments of control and domination is too simple. Since the late twentieth century, museums

⁵ Vine Deloria Jr., "Indians, Archaeologists, and the Future," *American Antiquity* 57, no. 4 (1992): 595–597.

⁶ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 59–88.

⁷ Stuart Hall, "Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re-imagining the Post-nation," in *Whose Heritage?*, 14–15.

have increasingly followed a pattern and lead the charge of ethical reform and institutional reflexivity.⁸ Ideas of community co-curation, community consultation, shared stewardship, and transparency about provenance are just a few of the expanding ideas which have increasingly become central to discourse around the subject. A reflection of this can be seen when some institutions adopt or pursue joint displays, long-term loans, or returns as a recognition of accountability and consent. This is an imperative point in the focus of this essay, since it suggests that repatriation is not only driven through claimant politics, but also through certain transformations inside the museum: ethical and professional standards to uphold; moral “awakenings; public attention, scrutiny and reputational risk. To put this simply – the politics of repatriation is intertwined with relational aspects, with public and claimant relations and communication playing an ever increasing role.

International law has had an enormous impact on the vocabulary of restitution from a state-centred angle. Greenfield explains how some modern regimes of “cultural property” can in fact treat nation-states as the primary legal owners of heritage, whilst diplomacy provides an area for dispute resolution. This concept is reinforced by instruments such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention and 1995 UNIDROIT Convention, which although were designed to curb illicit export and theft of cultural artifacts, actually reinforce state export controls, registry and cross-border co-operation.⁹ O’Keefe’s discussion of the “European Convention on the Protection of Archaeological Heritage” likewise demonstrates the way in which heritage governance is deeply embedded in these state and intergovernmental frameworks

⁸ Louise Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis, eds., *Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); Harper Johnson and Suzanna Neal, “Trends in Repatriation of Cultural Objects from US Museums,” *ITS Art Law*, May 15, 2024, <https://itsartlaw.org/art-law/trends-in-repatriation-of-cultural-objects-from-us-museums/>; Geraldine Kendall Adams, “Spotlight | Leaning in to the Repatriation Process,” *Museums Journal*, 6 November 2025, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/in-practice/2025/11/spotlight-repatriation/>.

⁹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*, adopted November 14, 1970, entered into force April 24, 1972, <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural/>; International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT), *Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects*, adopted June 24, 1995, <https://www.unidroit.org/instruments/cultural-property/1995-convention/>; Greenfield, *Return of Cultural Treasures*, 3-9, 31-34.

which actively privilege and prioritise national jurisdiction and legal regulation.¹⁰ This sovereignty bias supports the following sceptical interpretation: repatriation is often politically charged because heritage is politically useful. This suggestion is evidenced by the state repatriation claims which have been used to affirm territorial claims, strengthen legitimacy and even project a type of moral authority into the international stage.¹¹ Some post-colonial states may frame return as the necessary corrective measure to combat imperial humiliation alongside acting as a symbol of renewed autonomy, with some artefacts being used to strengthen cultural tourism, education programmes, and national museums. From this perspective, repatriation



Figure 1. Adoption of the World Heritage Convention at UNESCO headquarters, 1972. UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Celebrating the 1972 Convention,” accessed January 18, 2026, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2056>.

can simultaneously be viewed as a powerful sign of restitution to the victimised states, alongside acting as an extension of state authority and national patrimony. Despite all of this, it is worth noting that many of significant repatriation disputes can be viewed as holding no legality, since many conventions are non-retroactive and sometimes colonial extraction did not officially violate the laws at the given time.

¹⁰ Patrick O’Keefe, “The European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage,” *Antiquity* 67, no. 256 (1993): 406–413.

¹¹ Kohl and Fawcett, *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology*, 3–7.

The relationship seen between repatriation and the illicit trade of antiquities further complicates assessments of political motivation, since oftentimes where legislation exists, enforcement is often weak and underregulated. Brodie et al. expand on this by explaining that looting and trafficking of the artefacts is dependent on demand and market infrastructure, which can sometimes be overlooked by governments.¹² In this context, it could be argued that repatriation appears as a form of political signalling, wherein a state or museum may choose to repatriate a few high-profile objects, whilst neglecting to enforce stricter measures to combat the deeper issues involving corruption and the very markets which remove the artefacts from source communities. From this perspective, it could be claimed that some nations' repatriation claims are mainly driven by political agendas, rather than the desire to truly resolve and repair the injustices faced through looting and removal of objects. This critique exposes how states might deploy partial returns to manage criticism, protect their reputations and even demonstrate ethical awareness, all whilst avoiding altering the very problems behind the dark underbelly of some collecting practices. This is a dangerous prospect, since it signals that repatriation has the potential to be exploited as a reputational instrument.¹³ Regardless of this point made, it would be unfair to treat repatriation as just performative theatre when it plausibly reshapes professional and public norms by changing what is considered to be acceptable collecting behaviour. It can deter illicit movement and trafficking by demonstrating that objects without robust provenance are reputational liabilities rather than trophies. In addition to this, there is strong potential to validate the authority of communities of origin, enabling them to rebuild their cultural practices, strengthen heritage infrastructure and educate younger generations for a more positive future. Crucially, political motives charged with ideas of self-determination and sovereignty do not necessarily trump ethical legitimacy. A state may well deploy such campaigns whilst still being a morally justified action.¹⁴ Arguably, the more important underlying critical question here is whether or not repatriation is accompanied by structural changes which reduce harm and actively address the identified conditions which made dispossession happen initially.

¹² Brodie et al., *Trade in Illicit Antiquities: The Destruction of the World's Archaeological Heritage* (2001).

¹³ Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 9–15; Singh, "Repatriation Without Patria," 140–145.

¹⁴ Sarr and Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage*, 15–20.

Indigenous repatriation is often where the accusation of “political agenda” becomes particularly contentious, as seen through NAGPRA examples. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) redistributed authority away from governmental American bodies and federally funded institutions in favour of recognising tribal rights to reclaim human remains or culturally significant items.¹⁵

On initial inspection this seems like a perfectly reasonable and straightforward act

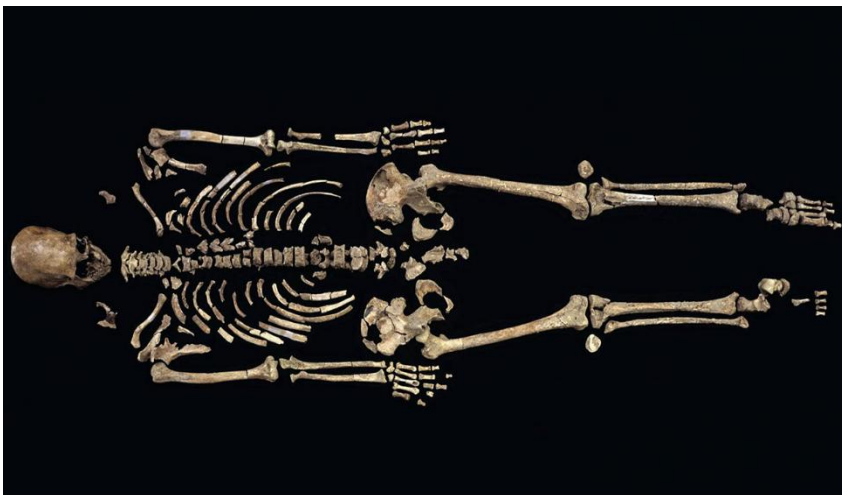


Figure 2. The remains known as “Kennewick Man” (The Ancient One). *Science*, “Mystery Solved: 8,500-Year-Old Kennewick Man Was Native American After All,” June 18, 2015, accessed January 23, 2026 <https://www.science.org/content/article/mystery-solved-8500-year-old-kennewick-man-native-american-after-all>.

which emerged from activism and negotiation, and as Nash and Colwell-Chanthaphonh explain, it is a major transformation in museum- indigenous relations which directly forces institutions to address the colonial nature of their collections and

negotiate authority rather than assuming it.¹⁶ By inspecting cases associated with NAGPRA, it becomes evident that it is not as simple as one might think, since some of the procedures end up generating disputes over affiliation and evidence, which sometimes projects indigenous communities into translating their histories through bureaucratic categories. The Kennewick Man (The Ancient One) is a suitable example to further illustrate the complexity of indigenous restitution within the NAGPRA framework. In this case a male human skeleton was discovered in Washington state in 1996, and initially radiocarbon dated to between 8,340–9,200 years old as a non-Native American. The scientific community and Confederated Tribes who both laid claim to the remains – the scientists because of the important

¹⁵ National Park Service, “Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA),” NPS website. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/index.htm>

¹⁶ S. E. Nash and Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh, “NAGPRA after Two Decades,” *Museum Anthropology* 33, no. 2 (2010): 99–104.

research potential, and the latter because of ancient tribal ancestry. This repatriation claim was a particularly contentious case, since it found itself at the centre of competing interpretations of ancestry, cultural affiliation and the authority of scientific research versus Indigenous rights. Eventually the Kennewick Man was put to rest in Columbia Basin by the Native American Tribes, after more modern DNA tests proved a relationship to Native Americans.¹⁷ Although this example of repatriation is mostly viewed as an ethical and morally correct decision, some people would argue that the rare opportunity to gain invaluable information from studying this skeleton outweighs this.¹⁸ Notwithstanding this, Deloria argues that demands for returns of human remains should be treated as people rather than specimens, and employing “Science” as a defence of retention can function as a political strategy which hides behind claims of neutrality.¹⁹ With all of this being said, it should be noted that the Kennewick Man reinforced the narratives and consolidated a concept of distinct ancient culture for the Confederated Tribes, which would certainly strongly contribute towards political agendas of self-determination.

Another case which highlights the depth of Indigenous restitution is the Larsen Bay Repatriation – a case involving returning human remains of almost 1000 individuals to their native homeland. As demonstrated throughout *Reckoning of The Dead*, repatriation for the Larsen Bay community of Kodiak Island is framed not simply a transfer of property, but as a conscious process embedded in ideas of mourning, community deliberation, and the restoration of perceived disruptions of relationships between the living and the dead.²⁰ In this instance,



Figure 3. “Larsen Bay Aerial, 2001.” Alutiiq Museum, “Larsen Bay—Alutiiq Word of the Week,” January 5, 2026, accessed January 18, 2026, <https://alaska-native-news.com/82252-2/82252/>

¹⁷ Morten Rasmussen et al., “The Ancestry and Affiliations of Kennewick Man,” *Nature* 523, no. 7561 (2015): 455–458.

¹⁸ Diana Valk, “A New Chapter to the Controversial Case of Kennewick Man,” *JSTOR Daily*, July 22, 2015.

¹⁹ Deloria, “Indians, Archaeologists, and the Future,” 595–596.

²⁰ Tamara L. Bray and Thomas W. Killion, eds., *Reckoning with the Dead: The Larsen Bay Repatriation and the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

“sovereignty” is not merely a territorial concept as it would be to many governments and nation states; instead it is ethical and relational, grounded in the right to control how a culture’s ancestors are named, represented, studied and generally treated. Krmpotich et al support this interpretation through their argument about the “emotive materiality” and “affective presence” of human remains, wherein bones aren’t just inert objects to be studied or observed but are social presences which maintain memories and kin relations.²¹ From this angle, repatriation therefore cannot be reduced to political signalling because it has the beautiful ability to address and resolve harms that are simultaneously spiritual, social and epistemological.



Figure 4. Marble relief (Block XLVII) from the North frieze of the Parthenon (part of the Parthenon Sculptures, sometimes known as the Elgin Marbles), carved 438–432 BC, British Museum, London. *The Parthenon Sculptures* (British Museum), accessed January 18, 2026, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/parthenon-sculptures>.

The political nature of repatriation is far more transparent in state-led claims over popularly recognised iconic cultural property. Perhaps one of the most internationally recognised examples of today is the dispute faced over the Elgin Marbles, which were extracted from the Athens Parthenon by the British in the early

nineteenth century. This case is placed within the boundaries of legality (the objects being removed under the pretext of Ottoman permission, who controlled Athens at the time), and conservation (the argument that the British Museum provides best protection and access.²² Despite these points, the legality issue is controversial,

²¹ Christina Krmpotich, Joost Fontein, and John Harries, “The Substance of Bones: The Emotive Materiality and Affective Presence of Human Remains,” *Journal of Material Culture* 15, no. 4 (2010): 371–374.

²² “The Parthenon Sculptures,” The British Museum, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/parthenon-sculptures>.

since the Parthenon Marbles are Ancient Greek, so the Ottoman authority in allowing removal holds little weight in the eyes of some. For the Greeks, who gained independence from the Ottoman Empire, the Marbles are not simply a stolen artwork, but instead represent national historical consciousness and international identity of culture in Greece.²³ Their retention in the British Museum can easily be framed as a lingering expression of imperial hierarchy and unjust domination from the Ottomans, with the return operating as a further affirmation of cultural sovereignty and historical continuity. Through this lens, it is difficult to ignore the political agendas behind these claims, but it is imperative to consider that this campaign is rooted in argument of legality behind their retention and direct link to Greek culture. Returning to the point of British retention, a major counter-position is the “universal museum” argument, which promotes the idea that some collections can transcend national ownership by serving as a form of global public education through comparative display.²⁴ This type of framing attempts to relocate the authority away from national sovereignty, and closer towards cosmopolitan access and stewardship – a perspective which puts repatriation in the category of “national property”, ultimately increasing heritage access for the public in one place and but decreasing it in another. Despite this point holding some gravity, it could be said that this position is not neutral and is politically charged itself. The ability for an institution to claim a universal mandate is unlikely to be evenly distributed, since it is historically produced through imperialist-style collecting networks, uneven capital, and power dynamics.²⁵ The authority of Western institutions to define what does or does not count as “world heritage” under their own protection for a greater good is flawed, since such collections were historically produced through imperialist-style collecting networks, uneven capital, and power dynamics. A critical assessment must therefore consider both claimants’ perspectives in cases like the Elgin Marbles, where there is an indication of political motivation on either side: Greece mobilises sovereignty and nationhood, whilst the British Museum defends with the politics of universality which protects institutional power.

²³ Greenfield, *Return of Cultural Treasures*, 48–52; Hall, “Whose Heritage?”, 14–16; British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles, *ParthenonUK.com*, <https://www.parthenonuk.com/>.

²⁴ “Document: Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums: ‘Museums Serve Every Nation,’” in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, ed. Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 247–49.

²⁵ Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 59–88.

An additional case which adds another layer of complexity is that of the Benin Bronzes, which were removed by the British during colonial expansion of the late nineteenth century in what is now modern-day Nigeria.²⁶ Whilst it is clear to recognise the violence and horrific conditions in which the Bronzes were seized, it is also necessary to recognise that these objects were part of the Benin Kingdom – a different nation to that which is claiming ownership over them today. The return of



Figure 5. “The Benin Bronzes on Display at the British Museum.” Photograph by Lauren Fleishman for *The New York Times*, January 28, 2020, accessed January 18, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/opinion/looted-benin-bronzes.html>.

these artefacts can be framed as a reversal of colonial domination and a restoration of Nigerian national patrimony; however questions quickly arise over who should be receiving the returned objects and who has the right to speak on them in the absence of the Benin Kingdom.²⁷ This suggests that some repatriation campaigns, whilst grounded in ethical or morally corrective reasoning, are also intertwined with political agendas of self-determination and sovereignty of modern twentieth century nation states.

²⁶ The British Museum, “Benin Bronzes,” *The British Museum*, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/benin-bronzes>.

²⁷ Singh, “Repatriation without Patria,” 131–33; Hicks, *The British Museums*, xiii–xv.

Beyond the scope of nationalism, indigenous self-determination, and legal sovereignty, repatriation claims are also intrinsically linked to the more overlooked political motivations linked to diplomacy, soft power and institutional self-preservation.²⁸ In recent years, some museums and states have attempted to use repatriation to their advantage, as a tool to maintain cooperative relationships, reduce political tensions and even enhance global reputation. Some high-profile returns may function effectively as gestures of goodwill between people and nations, alongside reinforcing states' moral authority on the international stage.²⁹ Similarly, museums which depend on public funding, donor relations and media funding may be in a position where agreeing to honour claims in order to maintain such things are necessary.³⁰ In this context, repatriation moves away from political agendas of sovereignty, edging more towards motivations of reputational risk management. Despite lacking the nationalistic nature, this logic still selectively shapes which claims are prioritised, how negotiations unfold and which forms of repatriation are deemed permissible. Arguably this drive behind repatriation aligns with institutional survival and public relations, rather than the primary focus being ideological assertion relating to sovereignty as seen with other claims.

This essay has critically assessed the extent to which repatriation claims are motivated by political agendas of self-determination and sovereignty from a holistic perspective, ultimately demonstrating that forms of political motivation involved are highly complex, deceptive and uneven across varying contexts. As explored earlier, state-led repatriation claims are indeed frequently closely interlinked with projects of sovereignty, national identity and international positioning, whilst institutional actors may be motivated by diplomacy and reputation. Furthermore, some Indigenous and community-driven repatriation movements can articulate forms of self-determination,

²⁸ Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 17–20. Rodney Harrison, *Understanding the Politics of Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with the Open University, 2010), 154–55.

²⁹ Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage* (2018), 7–12.

³⁰ International Research Alliance on Public Funding for Museums, *Network Addressing the Crisis: Final Report on Public Funding for Museums*, 23 January 2025, <https://icom.museum/en/news/addressing-the-crisis-final-report-on-public-funding-for-museums>; Amy Shakespeare, “Repatriation Is Urgent Work – It Needs to Be Part of the Accreditation Scheme,” *Museums Journal*, 4 July 2025, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2025/07/repatriation-is-urgent-work-it-needs-to-be-part-of-the-accreditation-scheme/>;

which despite being political, cannot be reduced to simple being nationalist or instrumental agendas. These rationales are never isolated, and often overlap with one another combining multiple factors, making it difficult to categorise claims as being solely driven by a specific agenda. By pushing the concept that repatriation is grounded in political motivation, it risks overlooking factors including relational ethics, spirituality and alternative understandings of authority. Expanding on this, it also obscures political foundations of archaeology, museums and heritage governance, arguably making it an insufficient point. Perhaps rather than blinkering on whether repatriation is politically driven by nationalistic and sovereigntist motives, a wiser assessment would be to distinguish and consider the deeper reasons which underlie each claim. Evaluating how such movements also combine elements of diplomacy, ethical responsibility, historical injustice, and goals of future protection offers a far more insightful understanding. Ultimately, it can be said that repatriation increasingly emerges as an entangled practice in which ethics and politics are inseparable, and where self-determination and sovereignty may not function as simply opportunistic agendas for hardline nationalism, but as necessary mechanisms to aid and redress long-standing imbalances of power and representation across different cultures and places.

Bibliography

Adams, Geraldine Kendall. "Spotlight | Leaning in to the Repatriation Process." *Museums Journal*, November 6, 2025, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/in-practice/2025/11/spotlight-repatriation/>. Accessed January 18, 2026.

Bennett, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Bray, Tamara L., and Thomas W. Killion, eds. *Reckoning with the Dead: The Larsen Bay Repatriation and the Smithsonian Institution*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994.

British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles. *ParthenonUK.com*. <https://www.parthenonuk.com/>. Accessed January 18, 2026.

Brodie, Neil, Jennifer Doole, Peter Watson, and Colin Renfrew, eds. *Trade in Illicit Antiquities: The Destruction of the World's Archaeological Heritage*. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2001.

Deloria, Vine Jr. "Indians, Archaeologists, and the Future." *American Antiquity* 57, no. 4 (1992): 595–601. <https://doi.org/10.2307/280822>.

Greenfield, Jeanette. *The Return of Cultural Treasures*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Hall, Stuart. "Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re-imagining the Post-nation." In *Whose Heritage?*, edited by Susan L. T. Ashley and Degna Stone, 13–25. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003092735-3>.

Harrison, Rodney. *Understanding the Politics of Heritage*. Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with the Open University, 2010.

Hicks, Dan. *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. London: Pluto Press, 2020.

International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT). *Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects*. Adopted June 24, 1995. <https://www.unidroit.org/instruments/cultural-property/1995-convention/>. Accessed January 18, 2026.

International Research Alliance on Public Funding for Museums. *Network Addressing the Crisis: Final Report on Public Funding for Museums*. 23 January 2025. <https://icom.museum/en/news/addressing-the-crisis-final-report-on-public-funding-for-museums>. Accessed January 18, 2026.

Johnson, Harper, and Suzanna Neal. "Trends in Repatriation of Cultural Objects from US Museums." ITS Art Law. May 15, 2024. <https://itsartlaw.org/art-law/trends-in-repatriation-of-cultural-objects-from-us-museums/>. Accessed January 18, 2026.

Karp, Ivan, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, eds. *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Kohl, Philip L., and Clare Fawcett, eds. *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Krmpotich, Christina, Joost Fontein, and John Harries. "The Substance of Bones: The Emotive Materiality and Affective Presence of Human Remains." *Journal of Material Culture* 15, no. 4 (2010): 371–384. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183510382965>.

Meighan, Clement W. "Some Scholars' Views on Reburial." *American Antiquity* 57, no. 4 (1992): 704–710. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/280831>.

Meskeel, Lynn. "Human Rights and Heritage Ethics." *Anthropological Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2010): 839–859. <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2010.0023>.

Moss, Madonna L. Review of *Reckoning with the Dead: The Larsen Bay Repatriation and the Smithsonian Institution*, edited by Tamara L. Bray and Thomas W. Killion. *American Anthropologist* 97, no. 1 (1995): 186–188. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1995.97.3.02a00250>.

Nash, Stephen E., and Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh. "NAGPRA after Two Decades." *Museum Anthropology* 33, no. 2 (2010): 99–104. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1379.2010.01089.x>.

National Park Service. "Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)." U.S. Department of the Interior. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/index.htm>. Accessed January 18, 2026.

O'Keefe, Patrick. "The European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage." *Antiquity* 67, no. 256 (1993): 406–413. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00045506>.

Rasmussen, Morten, Martin Sikora, Anders Albrechtsen, Thorfinn Sand Korneliussen, J. Víctor Moreno-Mayar, G. David Poznik, Christoph P. E. Zollikofer, et al. "The Ancestry and Affiliations of Kennewick Man." *Nature* 523, no. 7561 (2015): 455–458. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14625>.

Sarr, Felwine, and Bénédicte Savoy. *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*. Translated by Drew S. Burk. Paris: Ministère de la Culture, November 2018. https://www.about-africa.de/images/sonstiges/2018/sarr_savoy_en.pdf. Accessed January 18, 2026.

Singh, Kavita. "Repatriation Without Patria: Repatriating for Tibet." *Journal of Material Culture* 15, no. 2 (2010): 131–155. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183510364079>.

Shakespeare, Amy. "Repatriation Is Urgent Work – It Needs to Be Part of the Accreditation Scheme." *Museums Journal*, 4 July 2025. <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2025/07/repatriation-is-urgent-work-it-needs-to-be-part-of-the-accreditation-scheme/>. Accessed January 18, 2026.

The British Museum. "Benin Bronzes." *The British Museum*. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/benin-bronzes>. Accessed January 18, 2026.

The British Museum. "The Parthenon Sculptures." <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/parthenon-sculptures>. Accessed January 18, 2026.

Tythacott, Louise, and Kostas Arvanitis, eds. *Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*. Adopted November 14, 1970; entered into force April 24, 1972. <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural>. Accessed January 18, 2026.

Valk, Diana. "A New Chapter to the Controversial Case of Kennewick Man." *JSTOR Daily*, July 22, 2015. <https://daily.jstor.org/new-chapter-controversial-case-kennewick-man/>.

Figures

Figure 1. Adoption of the World Heritage Convention at UNESCO headquarters, 1972. UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Celebrating the 1972 Convention," accessed January 18, 2026, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2056>.

Figure 2. Balter, Michael. "Mystery Solved: 8,500-Year-Old Kennewick Man Was Native American After All." *Science*, June 18, 2015. Accessed January 18, 2026. <https://www.science.org/content/article/mystery-solved-8500-year-old-kennewick-man-native-american-after-all>.

Figure 3. Alutiiq Museum. "Larsen Bay—Alutiiq Word of the Week." *Alaska Native News*, January 5, 2026. Accessed January 18, 2026. <https://alaska-native-news.com/82252-2/82252/>.

Figure 4. British Museum. "The Parthenon Sculptures". Accessed January 18, 2026.

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/parthenon-sculptures>.

Figure 5. Fleishman, Lauren. "The Benin Bronzes on Display at the British Museum." Photograph.

The New York Times, January 28, 2020. Accessed January 18, 2026.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/opinion/looted-benin-bronzes.html>.