



WONDERS OF THE WORLD

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THE ROSETTA STONE  
AND THE REBIRTH OF  
ANCIENT EGYPT

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pedantic, although it is sometimes unavoidable: it depends on what you mean by history.

The German language has two words for 'history', and it would be helpful if English did too. One of these, *Geschichte*, refers to the events of history, together with their causes and the sequences into which they fall. The other, *Historie*, is applied to the narrative which we choose to weave round these events, and also to the philosophy and assumptions which we bring to understanding them. There is a difference, after all, between thinking about ancient Egyptian history and writing a *history* of ancient Egypt. In terms of the first type of history, there is no doubt that the Rosetta Stone has a part to play, although it is not a part in the first division: instead, it has to be content with a supporting role. What it does is to give us an episode in the *Geschichte* of its original homeland.

When it comes to the second concept of history, the stone's role is very different. It is the creator of the entire *Historie* of ancient Egypt, because it has enabled us to read the texts which led us to start writing that history. In this second story it is the starring player; it may even be that there are no other players, and the play is really a monologue. The home of the events the stone describes is Egypt. But where is the homeland of the play, the entire drama which it has brought into being? The real impact of the Rosetta Stone has been not on the ancient world, where it originated, but on the modern world, to which it migrated in 1802. Its contribution to our international understanding of that history is what makes the stone unique. Learning French was perhaps the best thing the stone ever did. It enabled us to recreate its past, and to make that past an element in our present.

## WHOSE LOOT IS IT ANYWAY?

*What are the hopes of man? Old Egypt's King  
Cheops erected the first pyramid  
And largest, thinking it was just the thing  
To keep his memory whole and mummy hid;  
But somebody or other rummaging,  
Burglariously broke his coffin's lid:  
Let not a monument give you or me hopes,  
Since not a pinch of dust remains of Cheops.*

Lord Byron, lines added as an afterthought to *Don Juan* (1819)

*Indeed, had the monuments nothing to fear but the water and  
the seasons, they might exist for ages, but they have to encounter  
the violence of the Turks ... and yet more, the hands of certain  
Europeans. I shall mention no names, but merely observe that  
they are not French ...*

introduction to catalogue by Frédéric Caillaud (who was French) (1822)

The stone may have given us Egypt's past, but it can also be a source of strife. In the second chapter of this book it was explained how animosity broke out between the English and the French military immediately after it was discovered. This rivalry later migrated to the camps of scholarship, with

supporters of Thomas Young trying to undermine the claims that were being made across the Channel for Champollion. Even now, the question of where the stone rightly belongs continues to surface. From time to time articles appear in the Egyptian press, questioning the right of the British Museum to claim it as its own. Some of these articles are linked to other causes, such as a campaign to build a new Egyptian museum or a similar prestige project. The Egyptian government has put in a diplomatic request to have the stone returned, but they have not contacted the British Museum directly about this. But this may change, and the question is one that we ought to think about. To do this, it will help if we turn away from the stone for a little and look at the wider picture.

The best-known claim for repatriation is of course the campaign to bring the Elgin Marbles back to Athens. There are legal aspects to this, but the case that reaches the public tends to be an emotional one, which depends heavily on the notion of the Glory that was Greece and the feeling that the Parthenon sculptures were designed to rest under the blue skies of Attica, inhaling the stimulating pines, and not under the rain of London, breathing in the smog. At the least, the campaign to restore the marbles can give a *raison d'être* to ageing actors or politicians, since it helps to keep their names before the public. Some major figures in the academic world outside Greece are known to favour the marbles' return. It is very difficult not to sympathise with a cause like this, which appealed so strongly to Elgin's contemporary Lord Byron. But what does it imply for the rest of the world's collecting habits?

What happens if we start to reverse the history of acquisition? How many chances of events or quirks of human nature

will need to be righted if we are to do justice all round? The United States is full of paintings, furniture and manuscripts which were created in Britain. Should these be returned to British skies and the scent of English hay? No doubt these treasures were acquired legally, but would they be given export licences today? Should the law of this particular day take precedence over the values of yesterday? In general we do not take kindly to the idea that human beings should be returned to their places of origin, in spite of the fact that their homelands might have a moral claim on their talents. This applies especially when the newcomers have made honest efforts to build up a new life. What about the Rosetta Stone, which has similarly found a new home, and perhaps even a new life? If a piece of granite had rights, what would these rights be? If it has no rights, what does this tell us about our responsibilities towards it?

Some while ago there was an exhibition in London devoted to some of the finest animal sculptures ever made, the bronze horses which used to stand on the façade of St Mark's in Venice. These horses have been in Venice ever since 1204, so we can argue that they have found a home there. But they were looted by the Venetians from Constantinople, as part of the breakaway crusade which Venice financed and which led to the sacking of the greatest city in Christendom. This was a distinctly shameful affair, which has never been forgotten by the Orthodox Church. Does this mean that the horses should be sent back to Istanbul, the city that Constantinople has become?

The horses were created not in Constantinople, but more likely somewhere in the Greek or Hellenistic world. So do they belong in some part of Greece? The Genoese tried to grab

them off the Venetians, but failed. Napoleon took a shining to them and carted them off to Paris in 1797, two years before his officers discovered the Rosetta Stone. In Paris they were probably more accessible to scholars, but does this accessibility amount to a claim that they were better off in Paris, and should be put back there? The outcome of Waterloo restored the statues to Venice. Does a battle, which was determined by force of arms and in all likelihood the weather too, have the right to be an arbiter of things like this? Who owns these horses, and who should own them?

Constantinople, properly known as New Rome, was designed to be one of the treasure-houses of the world. The emperor Constantine and his successors went out of their way to cram the place with relics of paganism and Christianity alike. In the hippodrome there stands an Egyptian obelisk, similar to the ones which have made their way to Rome. Under the great column in the forum there were nails of the Crucifixion and fragments of the True Cross, which had been recovered by Constantine's mother, Helena, the most successful archaeologist in history, at least to judge from the stories about her. The mysterious portrait of Jesus known as the Mandylion found its way there from Edessa in south-east Turkey. None of these items was native to Constantinople.

Also in the hippodrome there is a bronze column, surmounted by a golden tripod. This object was earlier set up in the courtyard of the great church of Hagia Sophia, whence it was later transferred. This too was an immigrant. The column was described by the patron of all tourist guides, the writer Pausanias, in the second century AD. He saw it on the Sacred Way in Apollo's holy city of Delphi, in north-central Greece. According to his account, which there is no reason

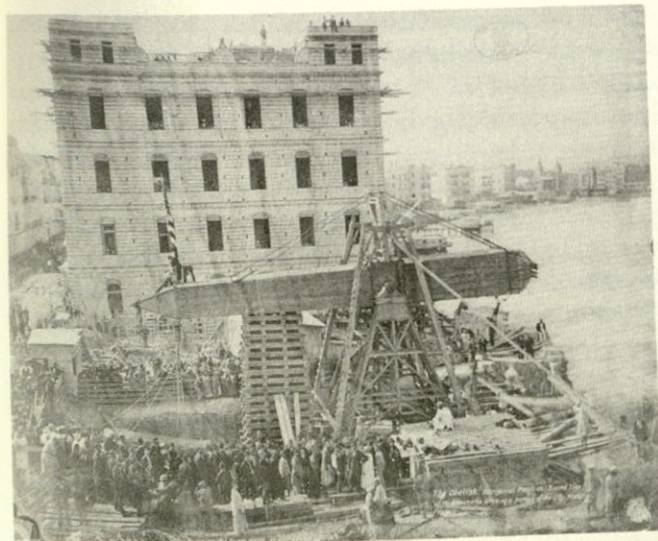


23. Obelisks and remains of the tripod from Delphi in the hippodrome at Constantinople, photograph c. 1890.

to doubt, the tripod and the column, which took the form of three serpents intertwined, was a dedication to the god of Delphi by another Pausanias, the general of the confederacy which won the final victory over the invading Persians. This was the Battle of Plataea, in 479 BC. A Greek claim to ownership of this object must surely be very strong. But the bronze itself was melted down from the spoils of the defeated Persian army. The odds are that the metal of which this column is cast is of Iranian origin. Should the serpent column be presented to the Islamic Republic as a gesture of reconciliation and solidarity?

Another object in Istanbul is the so-called Alexander sarcophagus, where it is one of the many treasures of the Archaeological Museum. In spite of its name, this is not the resting place of the great conqueror, who was buried in Egypt. It is carved with exquisite scenes of Alexander and his companion Hephaestion hunting, and it was found in the royal necropolis at Sidon, on the coast of what is now Lebanon. It may have been intended for a man named Abdalonymos, who was plucked from his gardening job by Alexander and told to rule the city for him while he went on to conquer the rest of the Persian Empire. Should the Lebanese government be putting in a claim for this masterpiece, or does it belong in one of the places that identify themselves with Macedonia, the home of the Alexander without whom the sarcophagus would never have been made in the first place? One empire in the making created the Alexander sarcophagus, and another, the Ottoman, was responsible for moving it to Istanbul. Which empire is supposed to win out, in a case like this?

The horses of St Mark's are still in Venice, inside the



24. The other Cleopatra's Needle, awaiting transport from Alexandria to New York, 1880.

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basilica (the ones outside are replicas), but this only serves to remind us that this building can be culturally dubious as well. It is erected over the resting place of the remains of the Apostle who gave his name to the second of the four Gospels. St Mark can be regarded as a Venetian by adoption, and his emblem, the lion, can be seen all over the city where he now lies. But he was originally buried in Alexandria in Egypt, and he is still the patron saint of that country. Surely he is as much a part of the history of Egypt as the Rosetta Stone is, and perhaps more so? The saint rested in peace for the greater part of a millennium in Alexandria in another basilica, but the city began to fall on meaner days. In the year 829 two Venetian adventurers succeeded in acquiring the body of Mark from his impoverished guardians, and they proceeded to smuggle him out through customs in a barrel, declaring on oath that he was pickled pork and offering to pay the appropriate rate of duty. The body of St Mark is in Venice today only as a result of this deception. Perhaps he should be returned to the country where he devoted so much of his life to spreading the new faith. There are elements in the Catholic Church who seem to agree with this; at any rate, some small parts which are thought to belong to his body have been returned to the Coptic authorities in Egypt, as a sort of token. We can agree that this is a start, but what about the rest of him?

St Mark died in Egypt, but it is equally important to remember where he was born. According to tradition, he came from one of the wealthier families in first-century Jerusalem, and a spacious room in his family house was the one used for the Last Supper. He was a Jew, and therefore in theory the Israeli authorities might have an interest in him. However, he

did go on to become a Christian, so this is one act of repatriation which may not take place. But what if DNA analysis moves on to the point where we can identify living relatives, among either the modern Israelis or the Palestinians? Would these claims of flesh and blood be allowed to outweigh the sentiments of religion, Coptic, Orthodox or Catholic?

With the coming of Christianity to Alexandria, St Mark took the place of Alexander the Great, who had enjoyed the honour of being corpse-in-residence in that city during the centuries of pagan rule. From time to time the story surfaces that the priests who sold the body of their saint to the Venetian traders could not bring themselves to part with the Apostle who had been the companion of St Peter and St Paul. Instead, they substituted the body of Alexander, a discredited megalomaniac whose day had long since passed. What if the remains underneath St Mark's should turn out to be the great Alexander in person? It is perhaps every schoolboy archaeologist's dream to find this greatest of all conquerors. In adult reality, the result would be a cacophony of focus groups, and a politically correct nightmare. All sorts of countries would lay claim to him, and politicians would fight proxy wars using his name. Whole continents would want him, since he was born in Europe, died in Asia and was buried in Africa, that is if he is not in Venice. Like a certain breed of cat, Alexander had one eye a shade of blue and the other greenish brown, a condition which is known to medical experts as *heterochromia iridium*. Organisations defending the rights of people who are born with eyes of a different colour, or mothers who play with snakes as part of their religion, would immediately number him as one of their own and make demands accordingly. Somebody would then point out that the Greek

kingdoms which he founded in the east were responsible for dragging the Romans into the Mediterranean and setting up an even bigger empire there. People would start making formal apologies for their ancestors' wrongdoings, and claims for reparations would probably follow, addressed to the governments of Italy and both the Macedonias.

With luck this will remain a harmless fantasy, but there is enough absurdity in the real world to make us worry about our sanity. The Treasure of Priam is the name given to a collection of jewellery and other objects found by the German archaeologist and adventurer Heinrich Schliemann (1822-90) at some point around the year 1873. According to the excavator, the treasures came from the site of Troy, where he had been working. Whatever the truth about this, there is no doubt that most of the find passed into Schliemann's possession. It was given by him to the German people in 1880, with the intention that it should be housed in Berlin, the capital of the newly unified state. There the treasure remained until 1945, when it disappeared amid the chaos at the end of the Second World War. Its whereabouts, if it even had one, remained unknown until 1994, when it was revealed that the objects had been for the previous forty years in Russia, most of them in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow.

Several countries soon put in claims to the Trojan treasure. One was Germany, on the understandable grounds that the objects had been in Berlin and had been acquired from the owner legally. Another was Russia, on the basis that it had them by right of conquest, and anyway it was entitled to reparation for the damage that their own works of art had suffered during the war. The third was Turkey, which argued that Troy was situated squarely within that country,

and the original ownership of the finds had been disputed; in addition, the Turkish state was now in a position to devote the care to their preservation that such masterpieces deserved. An extra complication was provided by the heirs of Schliemann's business partner, Frank Calvert, who had bought part of the site of Troy. His descendants might well be entitled to a share in the finds which came from there. There were even rumours that the Greeks were thinking of putting in a claim to the treasure, possibly because Homer, who put Troy on the map, had written in Greek, and Schliemann's wife had also come from Greece. As far as I know, this claim never materialised, which is just as well, since it could have undermined the same country's claim to objects, such as the Elgin Marbles, which had been taken from there. The wrangles over Priam and his treasure still continue. This may benefit the lawyers, but it does nothing for the archaeologists.

How easily the moral high ground can shift from one peak to another. There is even a murky side to the Parthenon which is not often explored. After the Persians left the Greek mainland in 479 BC, there was no certainty that they had gone for good. Under the prompting of the Athenians, a league was formed, comprising many of the islands in the Aegean and the ports surrounding that sea. The headquarters of this league was the sacrosanct island of Delos, and its treasury was also to be situated there. It was not long before Athens started leaning on its smaller allies to move that treasury. The threat was too great. The new headquarters turned out to be the Acropolis of Athens, but the threat which was so great was no longer from the Persians; it was now from the big brother himself. Some of the Parthenon was built

from money appropriated from the Delian League, and the famous Elgin Marbles are, in a sense, the product of a protection racket. Should the other islands who helped pay for the treasures of the Acropolis be compensated after all this time for the injustice which was done to them by their Athenian protectors?

If there are injustices between nations, there can also be inequalities within the same nations. There are calls from time to time to repatriate the Lewis chessmen from the British Museum to the more bracing climate of the Hebrides or somewhere else in Scotland. On the Greek island of Lemnos there is a charming museum. It was on this island in 1885 that an inscription was discovered which has turned out to be related to Etruscan, the great mystery language of ancient Italy. On a visit to the island I was keen to see this inscription, which I imagined would be in the museum there. When I could not find it, I asked an assistant. The assistant looked wistful and told me in hushed tones of regret that it was in Athens. They wanted it back on Lemnos, and it would be quite safe there. Where does this inscription belong: in a city which happens to be a European capital or in the microclimate of its original home? Can the people of modern Tuscany also make a claim to it, on the grounds that it contains the language of their ancestors?

Whole nations can lose their cultural heritage through no fault of their own. The modern state of Bangladesh used to be part of British India, and as a result many of its treasures went to Calcutta, or later New Delhi. Then it became East Pakistan, and yet more valuable objects found their way to the western part of this divided country. Now it is an independent state, but none of these treasures has been returned.

What claims does this poor country have on its neighbours? How should it be compensated, and by whom?

The truth is that the whole question of who owns what can turn into something surreal. An extreme case of this is shown in the saga of Kennewick Man, who everyone agrees is a very early American. The bones of this man were found in Washington State, in the summer of 1996. The skull appeared European, and at first it was assumed that he was an unlucky victim of a nineteenth-century gold rush. However, there was a stone arrowhead stuck into his pelvis, which appeared to be Neolithic. Carbon-14 tests then gave him a date of around 7500 BC. This was far too early for any known gold rush, yet the physical type to which he belonged did not seem to resemble any branch of the Native Americans. He might have been related to the Polynesians, or one of the peoples of South Asia. Received wisdom has it that the Americas had been populated entirely by people of Mongoloid stock, who were the ancestors of all the peoples that Columbus and his successors had found there. Work on the bones was soon halted, however, when modern indigenous peoples in the neighbourhood lodged legal claims to the body, arguing that the bones could only be ancestral to them, or at any rate that more proof was needed. How could Kennewick Man be related to these peoples, if the scientists had identified his racial type correctly? The case became fraught and complex, because it raises big questions. To what extent do we own our ancestors? Are we sure we even know who these ancestors are? Nowadays, the number of Native Americans is small, and perhaps getting smaller. Does your need for knowledge outweigh my desire to maintain my identity, particularly if there are more of you than there are of me?



What do we really mean by the word 'ownership', at any rate in the case of inanimate objects or works of art? A man (they are nearly always men) may decide to pay millions of pounds in order to buy some flowers painted by Van Gogh, or a scribble by John Lennon, or one of Napoleon's teeth. He will then believe that he owns it, and in several ways he would be right. He will have pieces of paper to prove that he bought it from the auction house. He can choose which bathroom wall to hang it on, or which bank vault to let it languish in. He can prevent anyone he does not like from looking at it, or he can give it to his new girlfriend to win her favours. He can throw it on the bonfire on Fireworks Night to impress his children, although he may come to regret this when the tabloids get hold of the story, or the insurers find out how reckless he can be. But in practice this does not happen very often, and it is difficult not to sense that the so-called owner has merely parted with a huge amount of money in order to buy the right to look after the thing for a few years or, if he is lucky, a few decades. What he has really bought is temporary stewardship of the work of art, not the work of art itself.

In the case of a museum or art gallery, the stewardship normally turns out to be longer than this. The Rosetta Stone has already spent two centuries in the British Museum, which is getting on for a tenth of its lifespan. There are acts of Parliament which underwrite the museum's claim to own the stone, and there is no reason why these should not be respected. When a museum or art gallery takes refuge in the argument that something has been legitimately acquired by the standards of its day, and has been properly cared for ever since, this is not a trivial piece of special pleading; it is a valid appeal to our sense of fairness. This sort of claim can even be

strengthened, when a museum returns other objects which have not been acquired lawfully. These may have been stolen in recent years, in which case they are regularly given back to the country which has illegally lost them, or they may have been looted in colonial times by way of reprisal or setting an overawing example to ungrateful natives. Concessions of this sort recognise that injustices can occur, and have done so on occasions. This can serve to underline legitimate claims rather than to undermine them. But even in undisputed cases, what we are really talking about is not out-and-out ownership, but a duty of care, since stewardship comes as the sister of responsibility. Is there a better way of looking at the problem than simply demanding our marbles back?

Even after three decades, I remember a conversation with an Egyptian colleague, an archaeologist who had become a respected journalist in Cairo. He said that, as far as he was concerned, Egyptian art belonged to the world, and for that reason he could not get worked up about the fact that there were Pharaonic sculptures in Canada or papyri in Copenhagen. It was the same with the many manuscripts and papers of British writers which are now housed in the United States. Rather than demanding their return, the British for the most part recognise that this is a tribute to the importance of English literature rather than an insult to their sense of self. It was time, my colleague said, to draw a line under things like that. Egypt was not in a financial position to look after all the treasures that were still in their mother country, so it was a matter of practical wisdom to put some of its heritage out to adoption. But it followed that, because Egyptian art belongs to the world, the world has a responsibility to look after that art, wherever it happens to be. Egypt is not a rich

country, except in the sense that it is the heir to a rich legacy of art. Lands such as Britain and France, and others who have been entrusted by history with a share of that legacy, have a responsibility here, which is to help the Egyptians to preserve the part of that heritage which is still in the care of its original homeland. Cooperation is the price that comes with stewardship, and it is a price we should be prepared to pay, since it is also the way to deepen our knowledge.

Perhaps this is a thing the Rosetta Stone has been trying to tell us. In the hands of Champollion, this wisest of stones deciphered a chapter of our past. Today it may be helping us to decipher something about our responsibilities in the present, and our opportunities for the future. The schoolboy who first saw the Rosetta Stone in 1958 had the rare good fortune to be able to turn his hobby into his profession. Ten years later, as a student of Egyptology, I had the even greater fortune to see inscriptions coming out of the ground one morning, at a site in Egypt where we were excavating. They were covered with texts in a language I had never seen before. With me was the expedition's surveyor, a New Zealander who had the happy task of working in Egypt during the winter months and in Turkey during the summer. I asked him if he knew what the mysterious language was. 'That is Carian,' he replied, 'and nobody can read it.' The Carians came from the coast of what is now Turkey, opposite the island of Rhodes, and they settled in ancient Egypt as mercenary soldiers. Their language had defied attempts to read it ever since scholars rediscovered traces of them early in the nineteenth century. Here on the sand at our feet were some of their gravestones, which were written in their own strange language, and also in Egyptian hieroglyphs. The hieroglyphs we could read. The



25. 'The last farewell'. A Carian funerary monument from Memphis, now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

texts were bilinguals, and these inscriptions which were lying in the sunlight that winter's morning turned out to be the Rosetta Stone of the Carian language. Trying to make sense of that language gave me a little of the challenge and excitement that Champollion must have known in his far greater decipherment of Egyptian, and it is one of the reasons which made me want to write this book.

Today the Rosetta Stone still stands in the Egyptian sculpture gallery of the British Museum. Its three registers were formerly highlighted in white to make the writing more distinct, but the chalk has been cleaned away, apart from one small area which has been left by the conservators. Millions of visitors view it, although many of them do so rather dutifully and briefly, before they turn to the labels on the wall nearby, which have the advantage of being in English. Some will know that a Frenchman used the stone to give rebirth to ancient Egypt, and a few may also spare a thought for Nelson and Napoleon, or perhaps Thomas Young. They may notice the extra inscriptions on the sides and wonder how George III came to be part of the story. Then they will probably turn away to view the more colourful and colossal pieces which ancient Egypt has given us, and of which we are all the temporary curators. They will buy their books and postcards on their way out. Some of them, like Champollion and his heirs, may be moved to visit the land from which it came, and which has given us so many of its treasures. If they do this they will, in a sense, be carrying the Rosetta Stone back with them, since it is the source which inspires all such visits and which acts as the interpreter to the civilisation which created it. The British Museum has given it a physical setting for the past 200 years, and it is a good home, but its true location is

different and it is universal. That homeland is the wonder which is the beginning of knowledge, and which speaks to the mind.