

Opinion

Why the Elgin Marbles Should Not be Returned to Greece ... Yet

If it is justice we care about, and acknowledging and making amends for past wrongs, it is not the Elgin Marbles we should be focusing on.



by Elizabeth Marlowe
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The Duveen Gallery of the British Museum, where the Parthenon sculptures (the "Elgin Marbles") are housed (photo by Steven Zuker, used with permission)

The “Elgin Marbles” are back in the news. The most recent event in the long saga concerning the sculptures that were removed from the Parthenon in Athens by Lord Elgin, British ambassador to the Ottoman court, was triggered by reports of a leaky roof at the British Museum, the sculptures’ home since 1816. UNESCO’s Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin called upon the museum to enter into talks with Greece regarding the sculptures’ restitution. While such calls are well intentioned, the return of the Elgin Marbles today would not serve the larger goal of decolonization or restorative justice that many museums are working toward.

In the last three years, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium have all established commissions and issued reports regarding the colonial collections in their national museums. While differing in details and urgency, all state that the clearest cases for restitution are “spoils of war”: objects seized during episodes of military aggression, objects with “blood on them.” Each of those countries has many examples.

In the British Museum, there are two well-known cases. The Maqdala treasures were plundered in 1868 after 13,000 British troops sacked the imperial palace complex in Abyssinia to free a handful of British hostages. The operation resulted in hundreds of Abyssinian casualties (including the suicide of the Emperor Tewodros II). A British Museum curator was there to oversee the plunder, which required 15 elephants and 200 mules to transport.

The other famous collection of military spoils held by this institution is the Benin Bronzes. These were plundered when the British, unhappy about trade restrictions imposed by the king of Benin, sent 1,400 men armed with 3 million bullets to seize control of the Niger Delta. Tens of thousands of Edo people died. About 900 works in bronze and ivory seized from the Benin palace before it was burnt to the ground are today housed in the British Museum; thousands more are in other museums around the world.

If it is justice we care about, and acknowledging and making amends for past wrongs, it is not the Elgin Marbles we should be focusing on at the British Museum, but the Maqdala treasures and the Benin Bronzes. The British Museum’s possession of these objects is a direct result of specific, known atrocities. By contrast, there is no blood on the Elgin Marbles. Elgin may have exploited his position as ambassador, and stretched the terms of the permission he was granted; but his men were unarmed during the 12 years they spent slowly removing the sculptures from the Athenian Acropolis. Had they been doing so without the blessing of the Ottoman authorities, they could easily have been stopped.

So the question we really have to ask is: Given the indisputable brutality that attended the British looting at Benin and Maqdala, and the decades-long campaigns by the descendants of those communities to reclaim their royal and sacred belongings, why the intense focus on the Elgin Marbles all these years? Why is it *those* works whose restitution is debated at prestigious venues, advocated by dozens of international committees, championed by celebrities, and urged by UNESCO — and not the restitution of African collections seized during horrific episodes of colonial violence?

Could the different responses to these cases of plundered patrimony have something to do with the powerful myth of “Western civilization?” The retention of the Parthenon sculptures in London is a wrong done by one self-proclaimed inheritor of the classical tradition to another self-proclaimed inheritor of the classical tradition, an act of interfamilial bullying. It is, to put it bluntly, a wrong done by White people to White people. Those have always been the restitution cases that attract the most sympathy, the wrongs that get righted most quickly, from the return of Napoleon’s loot to the European countries he stole it from to the passage of the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict after World War II to the Washington Principles on Nazi-confiscated art.



Artist Unknown, “Hoia Hakananai’a” (“Lost, Hidden, or Stolen Friend”), ancestor statue, basalt, Rapa Nui, Easter Island, (1000-1200) on display at the British Museum (photo by the author)

The recommendations on colonial collections that France, Germany, Holland, and Belgium have issued recently are perhaps the first steps toward a long overdue equivalent to those agreements. Restitution is a complex process that requires collaboration, research, logistics, and resources. It is not always synonymous with decolonization, and it is not always the best solution. International protocols could establish basic principles, such as the importance of returning items plundered during episodes of acute violence; and of returning sacred objects that are part of living religious traditions, such as the Easter Island ancestor statues whose return from the British Museum was requested in 2018 by a delegation of Rapa Nui people. The return of human remains when requested by descendant communities should likewise be enshrined as a basic principle, so that the British Museum will not say no again the next time the Maori petition for the restitution of the museum’s collection of tattooed severed

heads, as they did in 2006.

So, here's why the British Museum should not return the Elgin Marbles, at least not now: because to do so *before* they have returned the Maqdala treasures and the Benin Bronzes and the Easter Island statues and the Maori heads, *before* a coherent set of precepts for decolonization has been articulated, would affirm the wrong principle. Returning the Elgin Marbles now would say to the world not, "We were wrong to exploit gross power imbalances to fill our vitrines," or, "We share the goals of decolonization and restorative justice that other museums have embraced." It would say, instead, "We were wrong to treat Greece the way we continue to treat our formerly colonized inferiors. Greece, foundation of Western civilization, member of the European Union, is one of us, not one of them." In other words, returning the Elgin Marbles today would only reinforce the colonial principle that museums are places where "Western" powers display the cultural treasures of the "global south." And that principle is intolerable.

Editor's Note: The author has written [a follow-up to this essay](#), explaining and expanding on some of the arguments presented here, in response to feedback from readers.