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My ancestors were pillaged to bring the Benin bronzes to England. It is white supremacy that keeps them here

Noah Anthony Enahoro
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For me, as a descendant of the kingdom's rulers, repatriation isn't just diplomatic – it's personal

This month marks 126 years since the British punitive expedition resulted in the theft of more than 10,000 objects from the Benin kingdom. They came to be known as the Benin bronzes, and have been at the centre of repatriation debates ever since.

Though the original victims are long gone, their descendants have eagerly awaited the return of the bronzes, and still do. As one such descendant, the issue of repatriation isn't just diplomatic, it's personal. My great-great-grandfather, HRH Ogbidi Okojie King of Uromi, fought alongside his relative Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, the ruler of the Benin kingdom. What began as a family matter more than a century ago is now an international diplomatic issue.

Recently, Germany and the US – two countries not involved in the massacre and theft – as well as the Horniman museum and Jesus College, Cambridge all returned bronzes in their possession. Now other institutions, most notably the British Museum (home to more than 900 objects), have been forced to respond to calls to give back those in their possession.

The Benin kingdom was one of the last independent African kingdoms, and a thorn in Britain's side, with its Oba (king) refusing to allow Britain's Royal Niger Company to form a trading monopoly in the region. Britain ordered an expedition to dispose of him, but it was defeated by Nogbaisi and his allies. In response, Britain ordered another expedition, which began on 9 February 1897. Troops massacred an unknown number of people, destroyed the walls of Benin (at one point a longer structure than China's Great Wall), and looted everything valuable.

The bronzes were royal, sacred and ceremonial objects used to archive history and depict the centuries-old Benin civilisation. Researchers suggest that about 10,000 objects were stolen and then dispersed across the world, ending up in Britain, Germany, the US, Austria, Russia, Sweden, Holland and Belgium, among others.

Britain documented the theft with volumes of paperwork showing how the loot went to museums, using arguments about its subsequent availability to a wider audience to legitimise the violence, death and destruction used to acquire it. This also implied that Africa's cultural heritage is valuable, important and meaningful when objectified as "artwork" in European institutions. Edo history was stolen, and keeping it condones British imperial violence.

The other claim made by museums, that the bronzes would have fallen into disrepair because the owners did not have the facilities to care for them, is the same supremacist thinking. The argument that Africa has no museums is used to justify this opinion, when in reality museums as we know them today are a 19th-century Eurocentric construct. The bronzes were looted from their place of use – the royal palace itself – then kept by soldiers and sold to museums. This was no more "safekeeping" than stealing and selling a mobile phone would be today. The bronzes were then displayed to show the "success" of the empire in museums that venerated Britain's imperialism. They were meant to show Britons, who received little to nothing of the wealth that the empire provided the ruling establishment, that the empire was worthwhile and justified.

The Benin bronzes counter still-prevalent ignorance of Africa's pre-colonial history. They document centuries of trading relationships with the Portuguese before the British arrived. They teach the lineage of Benin's Obas and queen mothers, and are visual manifestations of Benin's spiritual, cultural and historical material heritage. The very existence of the bronzes represents a rebuttal of the ideas of white supremacy that underpinned empire, contradicting ideas of African barbarity and racial inferiority.

The continued retention of the bronzes, part of 90% of Africa's material cultural heritage that resides outside the continent, is an ongoing injustice. The deliberate refusal to return what

was stolen shows the descendants of the victims that the descendants of the thieves still consider them inferior in a way that hasn't changed since 1897.

As someone with this heritage, but also a British citizen, I am placed in a difficult position. Living in the UK, I benefit from seeing my ancestors' material heritage whenever I please. Yet I also experience a sense of unease, knowing this is not where they truly belong. I also live with the grief that the legacy and history my ancestors wanted to proudly record in the bronzes has been overshadowed by the colonial brutality used to steal them.

A visit to the British Museum is a reminder of the pain, violence, destruction and death inflicted on my forebears. The return of looted objects to their rightful places of origin is a necessary step for Britain to begin addressing and acknowledging its imperial past.

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The Elgin marbles and the rot of 'decolonisation'

Zareer Masani

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The proposed return to Greece, in the guise of loans, of some of the British Museum's most iconic objects, the Elgin marbles, is a measure of how far the 'decolonisation' campaign has gone in brainwashing the guardians of our cultural heritage. There's little doubt that the Greek government, which still claims rightful ownership, will never willingly return such a loan, and we all know that possession is nine-tenths of the law.

The current deal, designed to circumvent rules preventing British museums from giving away our national treasures, has been brokered by former culture minister Lord Vaizey and ex-chancellor George Osborne, now Chair of the British Museum, but its details have yet to be revealed. What is remarkably absent from it so far are any guarantees of the loan being returned or, despite claims to reciprocity, precisely what equivalent Greek artefacts we'll be getting in exchange.

The legality of Greek claims to the marbles are dubious at best

The legality of Greek claims to the marbles are dubious at best. The friezes from the Parthenon at Athens, built mostly by slaves in 500 BC, were allegedly 'stolen' by the art-collecting, antiquarian Earl of Elgin in 1802, while he was British Ambassador to Constantinople. The Parthenon at the time was a neglected ruin in the Ottoman Empire, then the internationally recognised ruler of what is now Greece, which had no legal existence as a state until 30 years later. The Parthenon had been used as an ammunition dump and badly damaged by explosions. When Lord Elgin arrived, the site was being cannibalised by Turkish *dragomen* selling off bits as souvenirs to tourists.

Elgin acquired the marbles quite legally, with official permission from the Ottoman government, shipped them to London at a personal cost of £5 million in today's money and later sold them, again quite legally, to the British government, who donated them to the British Museum. All these transactions are recorded in relevant documentation, and the new Greek nation, founded with British assistance, laid no claim to the objects until half a century later. Most retrospective legal claims, we know, are time-barred. But legality apart, the morality of such claims, backed by our current 'decolonisers', is hugely suspect. To begin with, there is no evidence that the population of modern Greece, after two and a half millennia, can legitimately claim descent from either the slaves who built the Parthenon or the Athenian rulers who commissioned it. Populations have migrated, mixed and altered across the world for millennia, so few of us can claim entitlement based on geographical or ethnic continuity since ancient times.

There is a wider ethical question. It was post-Enlightenment European and often British explorers, archaeologists, conservationists and art-collectors, like Lord Elgin, who rediscovered and rescued picturesque classical ruins from obscurity, neglect and destruction in most parts of the

globe. It was often through their 'cultural appropriation' by these European classicists, Orientalists, Egyptologists and Africanists, whom our 'decolonisers' decry, that natives like me learned about our own classical heritage and how to value its remains.

An uncomfortable reality we need to acknowledge is that most of Asia, Africa, the Americas and Australasia had no museums of any sort to conserve antiquities, until Europeans came along to found them and excavate, research and treasure the artefacts we enjoy today. In India, where I come from, we either worshipped idols or threw them away if they were old and damaged. The wonderful Amravati marbles, also on display in the British Museum, were rescued by British officials from an ancient Buddhist stupa that was being cannibalised by local builders.

An even more dubious morality applies to western collections of Benin bronzes, whose return to Nigeria may also be imminent. They were acquired as entirely legal booty by a British military expedition to punish the King of Benin for the brutal murder of an unarmed British delegation. The Benin kingdom was an unusually cruel, tyrannical regime by African standards, notorious for brutalities that ranged from widespread slavery to the most gruesome forms of ritual, mass human sacrifice, including women and children. The blood-soaked bronzes, to which western collectors have given their current financial value, were made from brass quite literally acquired by Benin in return for slaves. A sobering thought perhaps for the 'decolonisers', so anxious to return them to the descendants of Benin's rulers, but not of the slaves whose blood-money they represent.

A final thought, if our morality is to be based on the greatest good of the greatest number. More than six million visitors a year from across the globe enjoy the Elgin marbles at the British Museum, compared with less than a third that number at the Parthenon museum in Athens. I very much doubt that the many Benin bronzes still in Nigeria, housed in British-established museums there, attract even a tiny fraction of that number. I rest my case.

The New York Times

Park Service Is Ordered to Take Down Some Materials on Slavery and Tribes

The Trump administration ordered a famous Civil War-era war image removed from a National Park Service site in Georgia as it moves to promote what it considers a more positive view of American history.

By Maxine Joselow

Sept. 16, 2025

The Trump administration has ordered several National Park Service sites to take down materials related to slavery and Native Americans, including an 1863 photograph of a formerly enslaved man with scars on his back that became one of the most powerful images of the Civil War era.

The moves by the administration were outlined in internal emails reviewed by The New York Times and two people briefed on the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly.

The directives stemmed from President Trump's executive order in March that instructed the Park Service to remove or cover up materials that "inappropriately disparage Americans," part of a broader effort by Mr. Trump to promote a more positive view of the nation's history.

Critics say the effort could lead to the erasure of the contributions of people of color, gay and transgender people, women and other marginalized groups.

At Fort Pulaski National Monument in Georgia, Trump officials have directed Park Service staff to remove a reproduction of "The Scourged Back," the famous photo that depicts the formerly enslaved man, who was known as both Peter and Gordon, exposing severe scars on his back from whippings, according to the emails and one of the people briefed on the matter.

The Washington Post first reported on the directive to remove the photo. Elizabeth Peace, a spokeswoman for the Interior Department, the parent agency of the Park Service, said in an email that "all interpretive signage in national parks is under review." She accused media outlets of spreading "false claims" and "misinformation" about the review, although she did not specify what information was incorrect.

At Manassas National Battlefield Park in Virginia, Trump officials have instructed park employees to take down a sign that criticizes the post-Civil War "Lost Cause" ideology, which romanticized the Confederacy and denied slavery's central role in the conflict.

The sign at Manassas, the site of two major Southern victories during the Civil War, was erected last year during the Biden administration. It describes the 1940 dedication of a monument to Thomas Jonathan Jackson, a Confederate general who earned the nickname "Stonewall" during the First Battle of Manassas in 1861.

“The dedication ceremony perpetuated Lost Cause mythology, however, emphasizing Confederate valor and ignoring slavery as the central cause of the Civil War,” the sign says.

At Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia, officials plan to substantially alter an exhibit that memorializes nine people enslaved by George Washington. Mr. Trump’s executive order in March specifically flagged exhibits at Independence National Historical Park for review, claiming the Biden administration had advanced “corrosive ideology” there that taught visitors that “America is purportedly racist.”

And at Arlington House in Virginia, the former home of Robert E. Lee, who led the Army of Northern Virginia on the Confederate side, Trump officials have instructed park staff to stop using a booklet that was designed to teach children about slavery, said Stephen Hammond, a descendant of people who were enslaved at the house.

Trump officials determined that two sentences in the booklet, which has been given to children participating in the Park Service’s Junior Ranger program, ran afoul of the president’s executive order, Mr. Hammond said.

“In 1829, Robert E. Lee promised to serve the Army and protect the United States,” the sentences say. “In 1861, he broke his promise and fought for slavery.”

During the Biden administration, the Park Service asked descendants of enslaved people at Arlington House, as well as descendants of Mr. Lee, to help tell a more complete story to visitors of all ages.

“We think that this space could be used as a place for conversation, healing and repair,” Mr. Hammond said. “So to have this booklet targeted is really a disappointment for us.”

Stephanie McCurry, a professor of history at Columbia University who studies the Civil War and the Reconstruction era, said it was impossible to separate slavery from the history of these sites.

“There is no history of the U.S. without slavery in it,” Dr. McCurry wrote in an email. “It is impossible to edit it out or bury its horrors. The evidence is everywhere and can’t be destroyed, certainly not in one presidential administration.”

At several other national parks, the Trump administration has ordered the removal of signs and other materials that state that the land once belonged to Native American tribes, according to one of the people briefed on the matter.

Tribes were forcibly removed from lands across the American West that later became national parks. For instance, the U.S. military forced the Shoshone, Bannock and other tribes from what is now Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, Idaho and Montana.

The National Gallery of Art in Washington houses the original version of “The Scourged Back,” also known as “Whipped Peter.” Reproductions of the photo appear at Fort Pulaski, where the Union Army successfully tested rifled cannons in 1862, as well as other Park Service sites with connections to the Civil War.

The photo was widely circulated in the 19th century, providing a shocking image of the brutality of slavery that helped fuel support for the abolitionist movement among white Northerners. It was widely shared again in 2020, when Black Lives Matter protests surged globally following the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police.

“The ‘Scourged Back’ photograph shocked the nation and the world with its honest depiction of the vicious nature of slavery,” said Alan Spears, senior director for cultural resources at the National Parks Conservation Association, an advocacy group. “The decision to remove this photograph from the interpretive displays at national parks is as shameful as it is wrong.”

Mr. Trump’s March executive order directed Park Service employees to flag materials by mid-July that could be changed or deleted. It said the administration would begin removing all “inappropriate” content starting this Wednesday, Sept. 17.

The executive order also took aim at the Smithsonian Institution, saying it had “come under the influence of a divisive, race-centered ideology.” In a social media post last month, Mr. Trump accused the Smithsonian of focusing too much on “how bad slavery was” and not enough on the “brightness” of America.

The administration has given the Smithsonian’s museums until December to adjust any content that it finds problematic in “tone, historical framing and alignment with American ideals.”