Opinion

'Dead and Dismembered on the Nile': Extract from *The Times*

Simon Jenkins

> 'Two trunkless legs of stone/Stand in the desert ... Near them on the sand,/Half sunk, a shattered visage lies.'

Not for long, it didn't. Shelley's lines on Ozymandias were stimulated by the impresario excavator, Belzoni, who had dragged the huge bust of Ramesses II from Luxor to London for public display. It now stands beaten but unbowed in the British Museum's splendid Egyptian gallery. 'Nothing beside remains,' Shelley continued. He was wrong. The bust's torso, snapped off at the chest, is still there in the sand. Its twin lies next to it, relic of another decapitation, and behind rises the stupendous Ramesseum temple.

To visit the monuments of the upper Nile is exhilarating but desperately sad. They greet the burgeoning winter tourists with gap-toothed smiles. And the gaps are not just those of age but of a century of stripping to fill the museums of Europe (and later Cairo). The removals have ceased but the holes are awful. The vast Temple of Luxor, one of world's noblest places of worship, had one of its great entrance obelisks torn out in 1836 to adorn the Place de la Concorde in Paris. The other remains, lopsiding the entire symmetry of the building.

A mile downstream at Karnak, poor Amenophis III is represented by his legs. The rest of his anatomy is not lost but scattered: his head, arm and fist came to rest in Bloomsbury. At Philae above Aswan the Ptolemies created the beautiful island temple to Isis. When it was moved in the 1970s to avoid the rising waters its *son et lumière* is without equal – nobody thought to return its obelisk. After surviving in the desert since 300 BC, this is now sadly eroding in the rain at Kingston Lacy in Dorset.

Time was when museums would claim, often rightly, that the Egyptians were unable to conserve their monuments and that taking them was the best way of saving them. Wealthy collectors could buy monuments on the open market, or cajole permits from Ottoman officials who cared little for the heritage of those they ruled. Even UNESCO, when it pondered 'restitution' in 1970, suggested the return only of cultural artefacts that had not been legitimately acquired.

All this is going to change. What is currently called the rising tide of nationalism will overwhelm all question of ownership rights. Like

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the Elgin Marbles, the great treasures of Mesopotamia and the Nile will be demanded back by peoples seeking to reassert their identity and rightly recognising in these monuments their unique gift to civilisation.

Most were removed by wealth (sometimes by stealth). Why should wealth, if not diplomacy, never get them back? Where is the equity in that? If museum statutes are an obstacle, change them.

The old arguments against restitution are wearing thin. Tourism and television are making the monuments of the Nile accessible to millions who previously could appreciate them only as museum pieces. Egyptian conservators, assisted by colleagues abroad, are capable. The Egyptian air, at least beyond Cairo, is cleaner by far than the fumes of London, Paris or Manhattan in which many obelisks now reside.

In addition, the art of facsimile is now advanced. The Italians are copying more and more of their open-air statuary to protect it from pollution. If Londoners wish to gaze on Ramesses II or Cleopatra's Needle, if Parisians are (improbably) in love with the Luxor obelisk, they can make do with copies. The originals 'belong' to the temples and gods for which they were designed. It is absurd that the marvellous Sekhmet lion goddesses in the British Museum should be forever condemned to a gloomy London staircase with only a fire extinguisher, a tannoy box and a wooden doorcase for company. They should be basking resplendent in the sun of Thebes.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of removal, it is aesthetically offensive for monumental works to be left scattered round museums when the means exist to reassemble, conserve and display them back where they were meant to be. How can we say to the Egyptians that the Sphinx's beard, sitting in a glass case in London, cannot in any circumstances go back to Giza; that Ramesses will not see again his Luxor pedestal in the sand; that the obelisks given away by obsequious Ottoman governors, may never rise into a clear African sky but must mark road junctions in Paris and Rome.

The worm is beginning to turn. The Hungarian crown jewels have returned from America to Hungary. King Priam's treasure is to go from Moscow back to Berlin, and I would hope one day back to Turkey when Schliemann dubiously removed it. States in the old Dutch East Indies are getting back their ancestral relics from the Dutch. The Maoris want theirs back too.

The more ancient monarchs of museumland shudder at this talk. Where will it all end, they wail, as preamble to demanding that 'it' never even begin. But it has begun and the demands are certain to become more radical. The best way of countering them must be preemption. UNESCO, whose 1960s saving of the Nubian temples was masterly, might redeem its recent poor image by drawing up a convention on what might, and would or should not, be returned.

I believe restitution should be restricted to two categories. First are 'crown jewels', objects taken abroad, however legitimately, that

are seen as part of a nation's identity. This might include the stone sarcophagi of which most pharaonic tombs have been denuded. Egypt's equivalent of Henry VII's tomb at Westminster, that of Seti I from Luxor, now rests incongruously in London's Soane Museum. Here is red meat for some international certification committee.

The second category would be large monuments and architectural statuary taken from ruins now able to be restored. Pillars from the acropolis dispersed round the globe, like the Egyptian colossi and obelisks, should in principle be returned to the buildings from which they were torn. Original bits of buildings should not be museum objects, however valuable the role of museums in saving them from destruction. Where they can be appreciated *in situ, in situ* is where they should be.

Conservation, pollution control and public display should be prerequisites for all restitution. Western museums should be encouraged, and assisted, to help poorer countries prepare for it. The British Museum, which already does sterling work with Third World museums, might steal a march on the extremists with a list of potentially restitutable objects in Britain. Either way, this is the cultural diplomacy of nationalism and it will not go away.

I believe that cultural diplomacy will come to dominate international relations far more than the old warhorses of economics and politics. The more people are on the move, voluntarily or as refugees, the more they will grasp at tangible memorials of their collective past. Hence the boom in ethnic identity in the former communist bloc. Where memorials have been taken from such people, the more fiercely will they fight to get them back.

The Theban hills are haunted by the ghosts of alien collectors, flitting over the ruins and crying 'mine, mine'. Today they might address the teeming tourists with 'Look on my works ye mighty, and despair.' But surely not despair for ever.

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