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The Right Place for Cultural Artifacts

Humanity has a shared history. The events of past civilizations all tell the story of what we as a species have accomplished, and are all a part of our collective history. The idea that our histories are only tied to where we are descended from is dubious. History did not play out in a nicely ordered timeline where empires grew in vacuums isolated from one another. It is more complicated with many interactions happening between states simultaneously, with each event building off one another to bring us into our current modern era. Over the course of time, cultural artifacts have made their way into Western museums from imperialism. This has caused demands from sovereign states that these cultural artifacts be returned to their rightful homelands. For these states, repatriation is the only ethical and just course that can be done. However, repatriation can lead to cultural artifacts being put in danger – especially if they are going to warzones and unstable places.

The debate over repatriation of cultural artifacts will be explored. This paper will contend that repatriation is not just when it can lead to cultural artifacts being destroyed. Historical cultural artifacts belong to all of people of the world and not solely their country of origin. As a result, the demands for these artifacts to be brought back to their native lands should only be permitted if they can be safeguarded. The position of conditional repatriation will be supported with the cases of Greece, Nimrud Iraq, and Bamiyan Buddhas, by examining the stance for repatriation, ethical reasoning, and arguments on why it is the most just choice to make.

For example, the country of Greece wants to go to international courts to get the Parthenon Marbles (also called the Elgin Marbles) back from Britain. The Parthenon Marbles are ancient Greek sculptures that had been at the Parthenon until they were acquired by Lord Elgin, a British Ambassador, in the early 1800s from the Ottoman Empire (Seiff). The British Museum got the Parthenon Marbles when parliament voted to purchase them from the private collection of Lord Elgin (Smith). The request from Greece for the return of the Elgin Marbles has been met with mute ears by the British Museum because of Britain's "stringent law forbidding the removal of collections within the British Museum" (Seiff). Greece sees Britain's refusal as a violation to its sovereignty, as they believe that "international law has evolved to a position which recognizes, as part of the sovereignty of a state, its right to reclaim cultural property of great historical significance which has been wrongly taken in the past" (Smith).

However, the rights of a country do not necessarily translate to what is right for these cultural pieces. In light of Greece's recession, the country is not a hospitable place for its own ancient artifacts. Greeks are so poor and desperate for money that they are willing to loot their own ancient sites. As of 2015, police in Greece have been dealing with an uptick in "first-time offenders" looting ancient artifacts (Romeo). Usually, illegal stealing of Greece's ancient relics was done by professional black market criminals, with this swell of new looters coming at the worst time when Greece is drastically cutting back the agencies tasked in protecting these ancient relics (Romeo). This is problematic because, once antiquities vanish into the black market, they may never resurface: "The economic crisis is probably temporary, but the negative effects of looting are permanent" (Romeo). Even museums themselves are not safe for artifacts. Emboldened robbers in 2012 broke into Olympia Museum, attacked a guard, and stole some of

its collection (Labropoulou). Certainly, it is reasonable to deny repatriation in Greece's circumstances.

In addition, there are other places that should be considered off-limits for cultural artifacts to be repatriated. The country of Iraq is one such place. Currently, Iraq is in a civil war where the terrorist group ISIS controls vast swaps of the country. ISIS follows an extreme interpretation of Islam and enforces it onto the areas that it controls. This interpretation sees other religious artifacts as a sacrilegious affront to the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed, and therefore must be destroyed. Consequently, any non-Islamic ancient sites depicting other gods have been demolished by the terrorist group.

The ancient city of Nimrud is one such place that has been sacked by ISIS. Nimrud has stood for centuries during the times of the Assyrian Empire, and was a testament to the rich history of that civilization (Woodruff). It was a window into the past, but now the city is no longer able to be appreciated. This is because, for the months that ISIS controlled the city, they demolished it to rubble, and bulldozed the whole place. In a *PBS Newshour* segment, two archaeologists (Leila Salih and Tobin Hartnell) visited Nimrud and examined what was left of the grand city. For Hartnell, it was a deeply saddening experience. He cannot believe that the Lamassu winged bulls and the iconic Ziggurat in photos of Nimrud are gone (Woodruff). Even though most of Nimrud has not been unearthed and still remains buried, Hartnell sees the loss of these sections of the historic city as a tragedy (Woodruff).

Likewise, Khalid Al-Jabbouri was deeply saddened by what ISIS did to the ancient city. Al-Jabbouri is a Shia militant who grew up near Nimrud and protected it for many years (Woodruff). It was he and his militia who protected the city of Nimrud after the chaos of Saddam

Husain's fall (Woodruff). Al-Jabbouri was once a proponent of Iraqi requests that Assyrian artifacts from America to be repatriated back to Iraq, but after the events of Nimrud he has had a change of heart (Woodruff). He is now glad that some of the Lamassu Bulls of Nimrud were in America protected, and that their history still lives on in America: "Maybe we Iraqis felt hurt when we saw our monuments displayed outside of Iraq. We get hurt because it's our civilization. But when ISIS occupied the city, I felt relieved that Nimrud monuments had been transported outside of Iraq and remain protected. And we are proud of them wherever they are" (Woodruff). Al-Jabbouri is proud of his heritage regardless of where they are displayed, and wants the cultural artifacts of Iraq to be in a safe place where they can be appreciated for future generations.

Furthermore, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas is another example of the perils that cultural artifacts can be in if they are not secure in protected museums, which are in stable countries. The Bamiyan Buddhas had stood on the mountain side of Afghanistan for centuries until the Taliban decided that they needed to go. The Taliban saw the Bamiyan Buddhas as un-Islamic and shot these beautiful ancient monuments with rockets, until finally they strapped the Bamiyan Buddhas with explosives and detonated them (Flashback: The Destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan). Also, smaller relics at the Bamiyan site were destroyed, with museum curators offering to take them (Flashback: The Destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan). However, to their dismay the offer was rejected, and all of Bamiyan's cultural artifacts were destroyed. Philippe De Montebello, who had offered to bring Bamiyan relics to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was angered at the loss of history at the Bamiyan site: "It is a frontal attack on the cultural history of the world" (Flashback: The Destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan). Because the Taliban were determined on destroying Bamiyan Buddha idols, museum curators

like De Montebello should have been allowed to remove these historical artifacts before this tragedy. Sometimes, cultural artifacts are safer in museums that are in distant lands away from radical terrorist who want to destroy them.

Conversely, the arguments for repatriation need to be examined in order to see why other people back the proposal. The main argument for repatriation is that a country that takes a cultural artifact away from its place of origin has no right to claim them because it was not originally theirs. This situation is degrading for those people who then have to see their own national treasures being displayed in a country that is not their own. Therefore, the ethical policy of Restorative Justice is what a proponent of repatriation supports. Thus, Western countries that own the cultural artifacts should return them to make amends for the past and allow the hurt communities to move forward. Barbara Mumby, in an article for John F. Kennedy University Museum Studies, writes about her support for repatriation. Mumby says, "Words cannot describe the grief that is felt by indigenous people as they visit their ancestors, locked away for decades, sometimes centuries, in large institutions far away from their homelands" (Mumby). Mumby is a Native American and the return of her communities cultural artifacts is important to her because she wants to reconnect to her ancestor's past: "These sacred objects, infused with the spirits of our ancestors, are a reminder of the diasporic journey that uprooted and carried us far from the earth and bones of our grandmothers and grandfathers" (Mumby). In other words, Mumby is seeking repatriation so that her community can be whole once again by reconnecting to their once lost culture.

The ethical reasoning and arguments for repatriation by supporters of it fall under the Deontology realm of ethics. This is because it is a duty to seek the return of one's cultural artifacts, and the act in of itself is a moral act since the intention is ethical. However, a

deontological approach here is not appropriate because it does not focus on the potential consequences of the action. As the previous examples can testify, an unyielding pursuit of repatriation can have the inadvertent effect of putting the very cultural artifacts that they are trying to reclaim in danger and at risk of being destroyed, so that even the home country will not be able to enjoy them. Therefore, a utilitarian approach here is more suited because it focuses on the results that will lead to the greatest good for the greatest people. No one country can say that they have a monopoly on a cultural artifact, even if the artifact originated from the country. The reason why is that our history is collective. Everyone should have a say on something that is a part of all of our histories. Repatriation needs to be considered for what is best for the most people. If cultural artifacts are requested to be repatriated back, museums should be able to deny it if there is a reasonable cause to think it will result in the artifact's destruction. Otherwise, everyone will loss a piece of our history by pleasing a few – who themselves would lose their own history.

Conditional repatriation ensures that our ancient cultural artifacts are preserved and protected, so that all of humanity can appreciate them. Demands for these cultural artifacts should be considered only after careful examination determines that they will be safe. The hazardous conditions in Greece show that conditional repatriation is appropriate for its circumstances. Nimrud Iraq demonstrated how safeguarding cultural artifacts in foreign museums can save them, and that Iraqi's were glad that their cultural treasures were in foreign museums. Also, the Bamiyan Buddhas illustrated what happens when museum curators are not allowed to take in cultural artifacts. An analysis of pro-repatriation positions showed that indigenous people want their cultural artifacts back to make their communities whole again. And

lastly, ethical reasoning and arguments showed that conditional repatriation is the most righteous option to take. Our collective history is what makes us human and it is our duty to protect it.

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