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**IN THE SHADOW OF THE ROSETTA STONE:
THE SINGAPORE STONE, REPATRIATION AND
DECOLONISATION¹**

ABSTRACT. The story of how the Rosetta Stone was found by the French at the mouth of the River Nile in 1799, the machinations that engineered its delivery to the British Museum in 1802, and its role in the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics, continues to hold the public imagination. Less well-known is the story of how the British discovered a three-metre boulder at the mouth of Singapore River in 1819, which had been split in half to carry fifty lines of yet another ancient language. Unlike ancient Egyptian, it will never be deciphered, for despite the interest it evoked in Sir Stamford Raffles and the linguists of the East India Company, it was simply blown up by British engineers in 1843.

¹ The Rosetta Stone is still in British Museum against the wishes of the Egyptian people. While the Singapore Stone – the largest surviving fragment of the boulder – is on display at the National Museum of Singapore, it belongs to the Indian Museum. Museums are, of course, institutions heavily implicated in the process of colonisation and the damage it wrought over vast lands, as well as the plants, animals and people who lived on those lands. Lord Byron himself famously criticised the theft of the Parthenon Marbles in the second canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1816). The Parthenon Marbles, the Rosetta Stone, and many other museum artefacts are embroiled in the storm brewing over the issue of cultural repatriation. When France was defeated, Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, returned the artworks of the Louvre that had been taken from Italy in what was perhaps the first act of cultural repatriation in modern history. While I do engage in a critique here of the legacy of colonisation, my focus is on restoration, specifically, the possibility of accepting a mission of repatriation as an integral part of conservation ethics. Raffles was instrumental in the founding in London of the world's first zoological gardens, and even though it is still rarely carried out in practice, re-wilding – the return of animals to the habitats from which they originated – is an integral part of the conservation ideology of zoos. Museums and zoos have been the beneficiaries of colonisation, and perhaps the time has come to consider how what they have contained might be returned as part of a rehabilitation process for damaged human and nonhuman environments, a glimpse of which we were given in the Romantic era.

KEYWORDS: Rosetta Stone. Singapore Stone. Byron. Wellesley. Raffles. Keats. Hunt.

The Rosetta Stone may be the single most visited object in Britain. Every year, millions of people see it at the British Museum: a plain picture of it is the museum's best-selling postcard (Ray 4–5). Ptolemy V, who ruled Egypt from 204 to 181 BCE, had his instructions carved on the stone in three scripts: the hieroglyphic and demotic register of Egyptian, as well as Greek. Found by Napoleon's army in the Nile Delta near the Egyptian port of Rosetta in 1799, its implications were widely understood. The British took it from the French in 1801 when they defeated them at Alexandria, and the story of how the stone came to the British Museum in 1802, as well as of the race between Thomas Young and Jean-François Champollion over the next two decades to decipher the hieroglyphs, have been the subject of books for adults and children alike. Being able to read ancient Egyptian, Champollion and his heirs have revived a distant past in rich detail: we can read a letter to a king written on a potsherd, look into the mind of an official going about his daily business, and appreciate from a story where cows talk the long history of anthropomorphism as a literary

device (Ray 122–123). As the ancient Egyptians apprehended, ‘To speak the name of the dead is to make them live again’ (Qtd. in Ray 90).

Less well-known is the discovery in 1819 of a three-metre slab of sandstone at the mouth of Singapore River, which had been split in half to carry fifty lines of another forgotten language. Bengali sailors in the employ of the East India Company (EIC) came upon the monument while clearing the jungle at Rocky Point, and the inscription on it had so frightened them that Chinese labourers had to be requisitioned in their stead to complete the task (Laidlay 230). The so-called ‘Inscription on the Jetty at Singapore’ aroused considerable interest. In the words of Peter James Begbie, an officer with the Madras Artillery, ‘The principal curiosity of Singapore is a large stone at the point of the river, the one face of which has been sloped and smoothed, and upon which several lines of engraven characters are still visible’ (355). The leading India scholar James Prinsep noted, ‘Numerous have been the inquiries about this inscription – numerous have been the attempts to procure a copy of it’ (680). Thomas Stamford Raffles applied powerful acids to bring out the characters with the view of deciphering it. William Bland, who was to become Australia’s first private doctor, used soft dough to take an impression (Prinsep 680–682), to

which is still owed the most complete record of a language that might well have been in use a thousand years ago (Kwa, Heng, Borschberg, and Tan 42).

A statue of Raffles currently stands on the north bank of Singapore River with a plaque bearing the inscription: ‘On this historic site, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles first landed in Singapore on 28th January 1819, and with genius and perception changed the destiny of Singapore from an obscure fishing village to a great seaport and modern metropolis’. While this narrative of how the British had brought civilisation to wilderness has been critiqued by left-leaning historians, most recently and vividly by Faris Joraimi (122), the archaeological record has so far proven the greater threat by giving the lie to the colonial idea that the island was ‘barren ... and has hitherto been ... a small fishing village with 20 or 30 houses ... of no consequence, [whose] inhabitants ... are a rude race’ (Moor 244). As John N. Miksic has shown, six centuries before the arrival of Raffles, Singapore – called Temasek back then – had been a vibrant multicultural place comparable with ‘trading ports in the Mediterranean Sea’ (23). Some of this history is recorded in *Sulalatus Salatin* [Genealogy of Kings], of which Raffles owned a 1612 copy (Ooi 285). Raffles had himself characterised the development he was bringing to Singapore as an attempt to

revive an ancient Malay port. The inscription on the sandstone is ‘the only evidence of writing in Temasek available to date’ (Kwa, Heng, Borschberg, and Tan 42), but shocking to relate, despite its celebrity status ‘that memorial of long past ages’ was blown up by British engineers in 1843 to make way for a bungalow (Low 66). James Low, an army officer with the EIC, had petitioned in vain for it to be spared. After the explosion, he crossed the river and saved what pieces he could that ‘had letters on them’ (66). At the request of the soldier-historian Joseph Davy Cunningham to ‘secure any legible fragments that might yet exist’, William John Butterworth, then Governor of the Straits Settlements, recovered another part from the veranda of the Singapore Treasury, where it had been ‘used as a seat by the Sepoys of the guard and persons in waiting to transact business’ (154). These remains were sent to the Imperial Museum at Calcutta for further analysis. In 1918, the management committee of the Raffles Library and Museum applied for their return, and received a 67-centimetre-long portion. The other pieces are lost: packed away in some massive storage room – Miksic colourfully imagines – like the Ark of the Covenant in the first *Indiana Jones* movie (15).

The Raffles Library and Museum became the National Museum of Singapore after the island’s independence in 1965, and the Singapore Stone

refers to this 67-centimetre fragment that was sent back. Having since been designated as one of Singapore's eleven national treasures (Lim 31 January 2006), it is the first display that greets visitors to the museum's Singapore History Gallery. Its aura of collected time is supercharged by the boulder-effect entryway (Fig. 1), in which it is conferred the antiquity of a Stone Age artefact.

The message conveyed by the exhibitionary techniques is undeniably that one is approaching a special object. Hunched and whispering, the visitors I observed adopted reverent postures, and, notably, when small children were present, adults almost always took their hand, as if being in the presence of such an object required extra supervision. I also overheard frequent comments on its rarity and perceived age, again expressing awe and wonder. Many visitors clearly desire more information about the stone than they are given (Stokes-Rees 210).

According to Thomas McFarland, 'The phenomenology of the fragment is the phenomenology of human awareness' (3). His focus on 'incompleteness' underestimates however the countervailing force against the fragment's own fragmentariness, which is far more than an implication of 'a larger whole, which is not' (McFarland 13–30). As George Gordon Byron insisted in *The Curse of Minerva* (1812), Ancient Greece itself seemed to him reborn within the walls of the Parthenon: 'Oft, as the matchless dome I turn'd to scan, / Sacred to gods, but not secure from man, / The Past return'd, the present seem'd to cease, / And Glory knew no clime beyond her Greece!' (ll. 59–62). Ruins may revive a past,

even a fragment in the right place and at the right time can generate a national identity:

within the museological afterlife ... an object like the Singapore Stone can transcend its own history to become a symbol of common values and experiences. In drawing attention to the age of the stone as well as the air of mystery surrounding the origin of the undecipherable script, the museum offers a pre-colonial history – the possibility of an origin myth – for Singapore. It is interpreted as concrete evidence of a pre-British, innocent past uncontaminated by either colonialism or modernity (Stokes-Rees 211).

Considering the role national museums continue to play in nation-building (Jenkins 319–320), and considering the proliferation of historical texts undertaking the so-called ‘longue durée’ approach to Singapore history in the advent of prominence accorded to the Singapore Stone, it has taken Singaporeans far beyond ‘the possibility of an origin myth’ by giving birth to an entirely new historical trajectory. In backdating the birth of Singapore, from 1819, when Raffles first set foot on the island, to the late 13th century, when ‘a riparian society emerged on the southern coast’ (Kwa, Heng, Borschberg, and Tan 21), Singaporeans are able to step out of the narrative that they could not have advanced economically without the British. It is affirming for those of us identifying as Malay to learn about the civilisation that preceded the colonial encounter. This is of no small importance to counter the discourse of backwardness evolved during colonial times that continues to disenfranchise

them politically and economically (Alatas 16–17; Mohamad 3–11). To those of us identifying with one of the diasporic communities, on the other hand, it can give a greater sense of rootedness learning about the presence *and* contribution of Chinese, Indian and Arabic peoples to this older civilisation. Indeed, the ‘longue durée’ approach in admitting the engagement of other colonial actors – the Dutch, and before them, the Spanish and the Portuguese – who shaped the British response, allows a more pluralistic history. If downgrading the significance of Singapore’s colonial period erodes the deference some Singaporeans might feel toward the British, it also reduces the wrongs that other Singaporeans might feel they suffered from that same time. Meditating upon the regenerative potential of ruins, fragments, artefacts and art pieces, this essay argues for repatriation of objects whose acquisition was facilitated by colonisation.



Fig. 1. The Singapore Stone as seen in the entrance of the Singapore History Gallery:
posted on *Facebook*, 17 June 2016,
<https://www.facebook.com/National.Museum.of.Singapore/photos/pcb.1091295070931204/1091294874264557/>. © National Museum of Singapore.

The discourse of ruins is not the only way of seeing the Singapore Stone. British people from the time in which it was recovered also consciously trivialised their experience of objects, art and animals that the directors of their museums, galleries and zoos took equal pains to frame as wondrous. In ‘A Visit to the Zoological Gardens’ (1836), Leigh Hunt thought the London Zoo had too many animals. ‘When a pleasure is great and multitudinous, one is apt to run it all over hastily in the first instance; as in an exhibition of paintings’ (Hunt 481).

You do not need to walk through the Louvre or the London Zoo to know the feeling: five hours in the much smaller National Museum of Singapore was quite sufficient for me to empathise. Wonderment was the *raison d'être* of zoos and museums that benefited from colonisation, and to reject it was to resist their use in the nineteenth century as a tool for social control (Miller 5 & 43; Jenkins 177). Though they are no longer deployed as such (at least in England), enclosures, exhibitions and displays are constructions reflecting choices and prejudices which wonder only obfuscates. But I have not drawn in the zoo as an institution merely to inveigh against this rubric of mass entertainment, I am also going to suggest that museum objects such as the Singapore Stone are under much the same oppression as captive animals in a zoo enclosure.



Fig. 2. The Singapore Stone. Photographed by the author on 14 March 2018.

Like the animals in a zoological garden, the artefacts in an encyclopaedic museum come from all over the world. The relationship between them was more obvious during colonial times when museums also featured zoological specimens. The Raffles Museum and Library used to accumulate botanical, zoological, and ethnographic specimens across Southeast Asia. As a national museum, it now ‘focus[es] more specifically on material related directly to the history of Singapore’ (Stokes-Rees 206), but the connection to natural history is

still visible. Suspended behind its pane of plate glass (Fig. 2), the Singapore Stone reminds me of the Coelacanth I first saw as a child at the London Natural History Museum. Indeed, David Attenborough has employed the trademark register of nature's bounty to extoll the British Museum:

we will once more be able to view superb golden jewels made for the kings of East Anglia, and others, equally astonishing, made for the emperors of the Andes. We will be able to compare delicate textiles woven in China with others made in the forests of Borneo ... we may admire the superb statuary of ancient Egypt, then walk a few yards and be astonished and moved by the great masterpieces of sculpture from sub-Saharan Africa (Qtd. by Howarth 5 February 2002).

It is the desire for wonderment which drives people to see signature objects such as the Rosetta Stone, the Parthenon marbles, or, in the case of the London Zoo, megafauna: Hunt, for example, regretted not managing to 'even see the rhinoceros; nor the beaver, which would not come out' (482). Hunt moves swiftly from wonder to disillusionment and unease. 'The lynx is not ... here, in the proper sense[.] You see by daylight without proper fire in his eyes. You do not meet him in a mountain-pass, but in a poor closet in Mary-le-bone; where he jumps about like a common cat, begging for something to eat' (Hunt 482). As an animal loses something of its wildness away from its habitat, so does an object lose something of its culture simply by not being in its place. After a time, variety in a zoo or museum descends to miscellany, which creates a growing

sense of alienation that the animal or object as spectacle only reinforces. According to Stokes-Rees, ‘Many visitors clearly desire more information about the stone than they are given’ (210). But as Tristram Besterman has pointed out, ‘museums seldom disclose the sequence of chance events and calculated decisions that result in the display of a particular sculpture, picture, fossil, flint tool or jet engine. Nor is the source of authority of the voice in its interpretation discussed’ (245). It is with closer scrutiny that the dislocation of museum objects and zoo animals really begins to weigh on the visitor. The two sonnets written by Keats on seeing the marbles in the British Museum with Benjamin Haydon in 1817 are instructive, in particular the last four lines of ‘On Seeing the Elgin Marbles’: ‘So do these wonders a most dizzy pain, / That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude / Wasting of old time – with a billowy main / A sun – a shadow of a magnitude’ (Milnes 27). Taken to England ostensibly ‘to instruct the English in sculpture’ (Byron, *The Works*, 546), they were to Keats a spectacle of suffering. Like the marbles themselves, the zoo animals seemed to Hunt to be wasting away: ‘The lioness was asleep ... and another, or a tigress (I forget which), pained the beholder walking incessantly to and fro, uttering little moans’ (482).

I loved zoos as a child, but as I grew older the captivity of animals began to weigh on me as it did on Hunt. My love for museums was more enduring, but in time the exact status of some of their displays started to weigh on me too. The Singapore Stone is in the same curious situation shared by the Rosetta Stone, the Parthenon Marbles, and countless other artefacts from sub-Saharan Africa, Borneo, China, Andes and East Anglia in which the museum as an institution may own a cultural object made for another land no matter how terrible the circumstances under which it came to be removed from that land. The Singapore Stone does not belong to Singapore, but to the current incarnation of the Imperial Museum at Calcutta: the Indian Museum. The people of Greece want their marbles back, and the British people are themselves willing to give them back: 94.8%, according to a poll conducted by *The Guardian* newspaper in 2009. However, the trustees of the British Museum are unmoved. The appointed custodians of culture answer only to humanity as a whole, rather than the will of any one people including their own. As Alan Howarth stated in his capacity as the British arts minister: ‘This universal museum, this place of big ideas, cannot be reconciled with the narrow claim that because a thing was made in a particular geographical place, it should be returned to it. Modern nationalism seems small-minded in an institution which embraces the world’ (5 February

2002). The leading museums of Europe and North America issued, in December 2002, a Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museum, which ‘recognize[s] that objects acquired in earlier times must be viewed in the light of different sensitivities and values, reflective of that earlier era’ (Qtd. by Peter-Klaus Schuster 4).

On the contrary, as I’m demonstrating by quoting Byron, Keats and Hunt, people ‘of that earlier era’ were sensitive to the acquisition of museum objects and the captivity of animals in much the same way as some of us are now. Byron’s *The Curse of Minerva*, a ‘fierce philippic on Lord Elgin’ (Moore 187), was published right when the marbles were being removed from the Parthenon by the agents of Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin. The Greek and Turkish inhabitants opposed the removal of the antique statuary at the Parthenon and elsewhere ‘protesting that the loss would bring ruin on the local community’ (St. Clair 100, 202 & 207), and even after arriving in England the parliamentary motion in 1816 to purchase the marbles for the British Museum faced stiff opposition passing by the narrow margin of 82 to 80 (St. Clair 245–255). Moreover, it was in 1815 that Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, took the historic decision to return the art in the Louvre that Napoleon had taken from

Italy. It was the first act of repatriation since the days of the Roman Empire, and what was even more extraordinary, 'France and the Louvre was not plundered of their own artistic possessions' (Miles 329). That repatriation is recognised philosophically, as a matter of government policy, and under international conventions as not only legal, but also as a mechanism for healing after war or occupation draws from this very precedent (Pickering 266–267). In the current environmental holocaust, living sustainably means being accountable to future generations for the use of the planet and its resources. Museums are supposed to be in the business of stewardship – in museum-speak – of tangible cultural resources, and if Benedict Anderson's concept of a nation as 'an imagined political community' (6) is extended to animals, plants *and* objects, then surely they have a restorative role to play. Zoos have stepped up by engaging the public on issues of animal welfare, as well as returned animals to lands where they were critically endangered or had gone extinct. It is about time that the 'Universal Museum' considered a similar more compassionate role, for it is not repatriation but the rejection of it that has enabled the victimhood nationalism of the countries that were colonised.

I would now like to answer two main arguments against repatriation, beginning with the one most frequently adopted which represents repatriation as an existential threat to the encyclopaedic museum as an institution. Simply put, acceding to repatriation for such an institution is tantamount to it agreeing to its own dissolution. That there are museologists who are even worried about this is indicative of the huge number of objects under their stewardship that have a questionable provenance. However, repatriation has been requested for only a tiny fraction of the collections held by these museums. Granting them would lead to more applications, but only over the short to medium term as the most significant items are returned and relations between countries and peoples improve. It is inconceivable that every artefact that could be repatriated would be, or for that matter, even be asked for, and items that are returned could be replaced with reproductions. Museologists wedded to authenticity would do well to understand that the museum-going public are ‘highly tolerant of the use of copies’ as ‘the success of exhibitions that are based on reproductions instead of originals ... indicates’ (Schwan 217).² With respect to experts who need to

² Authenticity is a major concern for the child visitor. As the public interest in fake historical objects – such as *Difference Engine No. 2* constructed for the London Science Museum in 1991 to mark the 200th anniversary of Charles Babbage’s birth, or the steampunk sculpture of *The Time Machine* that was unveiled at San Diego Comic-Con 2001 one year before the release of Warner Bros and DreamWorks’ film adaptation of H. G. Wells’ novel – suggests, the adult visitor is more concerned with narrative than with authenticity. (Please let me

access the original, the fact that they have to travel to it and work with counterparts in an ex-colony is a plus surely in terms of the necessity for international cooperation.³ Indeed, seeing no pressing reasons to hang on to the originals, the Romantics – the early museum-goer and museologist alike – could value the copy as much as the original (St. Clair 264–247): with respect to the Parthenon marbles, for example, the prices the British Museum was charging for plaster casts were almost as high as the market value of the originals (St. Clair 268).

The second argument against repatriation is that it should not be resorted to as a means of making amends for colonisation. According to Jenkins, as ‘pressure for restitution ... was more likely to come from the perceived perpetrators’ (282), it is a manifestation of a navel-gazing ‘politics of regret’ originating in the 1980s solving nothing: ‘Throughout history, harm has been done; but it cannot be ‘repaired’, only studied and understood. The obsession with museums and their ‘loot’ can mean that we avoid engaging with the deeper

acknowledge here the JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (20K00457) I am receiving for work on steampunk.)

³ It is Seng Ong who first suggested to me the idea that decolonisation is a process for the ex-coloniser as well as for the ex-colonised.

forces that brought about war, colonisation, and imperialism’ (Jenkins 289). Not that she would acquiesce to such a request even if it originated from ‘the victim’ because ‘the process relies on supplication, [and in] asking the historical victor for a handout or a statement of recognition, power relations are ... reinforced’ (285). Moreover, ‘the victim’ might be a ‘perpetrator’ too: ‘The ancient Athenians were not angels, but warriors. The Parthenon was a display of power and it was built by slaves[.] We consider slavery wrong now, so should we also be making amends for these actions?’ (287–288). I have already shown that repatriation as an idea is at least as old as that of the universal museum, and traced a very different political pedigree of international reconciliation, social and environmental regeneration. And while peoples who were formerly colonised do have egregious histories, shouldn’t the more recent injustices and inequalities engendered by the ex-coloniser be addressed first? How can the people of Greece and other ex-colonies even begin to treat the injustices they inflicted on others more distant in historical time when they don’t have – or, at least, aren’t fully in possession of – the items in question in the first place? But in asking this question, I am perhaps according this anti-repatriation line of argument of Jenkins’ a tad too much respect.

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