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On February 9, 1897, the British navy and the armed forces of the Niger Coast Protectorate launched an invasion of the Kingdom of Benin in modern-day Nigeria with an army of 1,200 men and a flotilla of warships. The invasion was a punitive expedition, a response to an attack that had taken place the previous month when acting consul-general of the Niger Coast Protectorate James Phillips had set off for Benin City to discuss the recently signed trade agreement between the Crown and the Oba Ovonramwen of Benin. Phillips had planned on using the expedition as a pretext to overthrow the Oba by first attempting to force the Oba to abide by the terms of the treaty; if the Oba complied the British would have forced the Kingdom of Benin into an exploitative economic and political relationship. If the Oba refused, that would have been grounds for the British to invade, overthrow the Oba, and install a new leader who would agree to an exploitative economic and political relationship. However, on January 4, 1897, before Phillips reached Benin City the party was ambushed and Phillips and all but two of the British representatives were killed en route. The British mobilized quickly and overwhelmed the Benin defenses. By February 18 the British had captured Benin City.

The Benin expedition was one of several similar punitive expeditions fought by European colonizers in Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While each event has had devastating consequences for their local populations, the Benin expedition has received renewed interest in the twenty-first century not for the battle itself, but for its aftermath and what the British brought home. The attack and its many afterlives are the subject of *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*, the new book by British journalist Barnaby Phillips (no relation to James Phillips). By the late nineteenth century Benin City and the Oba’s palace had become famous for housing some of the finest works of brass and bronze anywhere in the world. The looting began immediately after the British entered Benin City, Phillips writes: “The officers posed for photos, surrounded by their booty. They look tired and dirty, but satisfied, just as a white hunter looks pleased holding up the head of a fallen buffalo, or with his foot on a dead elephant” (p. 88). In the end, thousands of objects were hauled off by soldiers and quickly dispersed across the world in museums and private collections. These objects, collectively known as the Benin Bronzes, have become the symbols of a global movement to repatriate stolen and colonial artifacts from Western museums and
private collections. They have also been the subject of several recent works appearing in English, including *The Brutish Museums* (2020) by British curator Dan Hicks and *Africa’s Struggle for Its Art* (2022) by French art historian Bénédicte Savoy, and even featured in the *Atlantic* under the headline, “Who Do the Benin Bronzes Belong To?” (2022) by American journalist David Frum. The fact that many of these writers are white Europeans is a testament to how deeply the issue of repatriation has come to resonate throughout the West. Hicks offers a sweeping indictment of colonialism and advocates for the immediate and unconditional return of the Benin loot, while Frum offers a defense of the universal-museum thesis that museums like the British Museum have used for decades to avoid returning colonial objects. In this context, *Loot* offers a valuable primer on the history and controversy of the Benin Bronzes.

After many years as a correspondent for the BBC's Africa service, Phillips is able to move deftly back and forth between Benin City, Lagos, London, and several places in between. What sets *Loot* apart from many of the other works about the Benin Bronzes is Phillips's willingness to engage with ordinary Africans. He works not only with Nigerian officials and curators but with actual artists and brass casters in Benin City as well as local activists, all of whom offer a variety of different perspectives on the 1897 invasion and the fate of the Benin Bronzes. Phillips engages with several African interlocutors past and present, including Benin historian Philip Igbafe, artist Patrick Oronsaye, Prince Gregory Akenzua, artist Victor Ehikhamenor, brass caster Phil Omodamwen, and artist Joseph Alufa, among others. The book moves back and forth from the ancient origins of the Kingdom of Benin to modern Igun Street and the centuries-old home of Benin’s brass and bronze casting guild and the people who live and work there. Many of these artists, some of whom are descendants of the creators of the Benin Bronzes, struggle to make a living, often resorting to making cheap knockoffs of ancient art for tourists. Phillips’s definitively shows the cruelty of the British attack while debunking many of the claims used to retroactively justify the invasion. What emerges is not only an account of a historic injustice but a portrait of Benin City’s continued struggle in the wake of imperialism. Chapter 1 begins with Phillips visiting the famous earth wall of Benin City, a Nigerian national monument and one of the imposing features noticed by the first Europeans to visit the city in the sixteenth century. Today the wall stands neglected and diminished after years of people siphoning material from the wall for other construction projects.

Phillips, thankfully, avoids turning the wall into a metaphor for the failures of the Nigerian state, but that does not mean there are not challenges. *Loot*, in Phillips's journalistic style, does not shy away from describing the obstacles that any effort at restitution and return will have to overcome to become reality. In the UK, for example, the 1963 British Museum Act forbids the museum from de-accessioning any part of its collection, meaning that the British Museum cannot return the Bronzes even if it wanted to without an act of Parliament. Additionally, there are concerns about the receiving museums in Nigeria. Nigerian public museums have struggled at times with safeguarding their collections, due in no small part to funding issues. Phillips describes several instances of theft from the late twentieth century but is quick to remind readers that this is once again an ongoing effect of imperialism. Decades of theft and resource extraction created a lucrative market for Benin art and pressure from outside to sell: “The demand for Nigeria’s culture came from the dealers, collectors and museums of the West. In that way, the pillage of the 1990s bore some similarities to that of the 1890s” (p. 226). Things have begun to change, however, as the governor of Edo State has commissioned a new museum, the Benin Royal Museum, to be designed by Sir David Adjaye, the architect behind the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washing-
ton, DC. There are tentative commitments in place for museums in the West to loan Benin Bronzes to this new museum. It is not the same as return, but it would allow many more Nigerians access to their cultural heritage.

Ultimately, the story of the Benin Bronzes is also the story of how objects change. The Bronzes were ripped from their cultural and in some cases sacred contexts to become museum displays and art objects. Some of the Bronzes have spent more time in museums than they ever spent in the Oba’s palace. The problem with any kind of return is that the objects no longer mean what they used to mean, and they would be returning to a place that has moved on without them. Western museums turned these sacred objects into museum objects; returning them to African museums is still not restoring them to their original purpose, which may never be rectified. Something that comes up again and again in discussions of the Benin Bronzes is access. The return of the Benin Bronzes will not undo colonialism, nor will it undo the many ways that Nigeria and Africa more broadly have been dispossessed. What return can accomplish is access to cultural heritage. While the British Museum claims to be a universal museum that contains the world’s cultural heritage, arguments that the Bronzes should remain in European and American museums frequently rely on the implicit assumption that Europeans and Americans should have easy access to Nigeria’s cultural heritage while Nigerians should not.

Phillips’s style throughout is that of an objective journalist. Although he clearly recognizes the harms of colonialism, Loot never comes to a specific conclusion on what should be done, instead presenting multiple perspectives and allowing readers to decide for themselves. This is at times frustrating, but Phillips’s perspective occasionally shines through, as in a passage where he interviews an elderly London woman, a descendant of one of the 1897 British invaders, who possesses two small carved birds from Benin City. The woman, whom Phillips does not identify, considers them precious family heirlooms and doesn’t seem to grasp the controversy around them. As he is leaving, Phillips writes, “Outside, the winter sun had disappeared behind clouds, and London was returning to a more familiar grey. The room grew darker. Before me was a small old lady, sitting in her living room, clutching her birds” (p. 195). Although there are specific details yet to be worked out, return is the only way forward. Returning these stolen objects represents only the beginning of a much longer process of redress for imperial crimes. An ongoing process that may never be fully complete, but refusing to even engage calls for return makes all of us in the West small indeed.
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