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# The Benin Bronzes and the road to restitution

Why a digital record of the kingdom's looted treasures marks a new era in the battle to reclaim its history



Josh Spero in London and Aanu Adeoye in Benin City 10 HOURS AGO

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Approaching the Benin City National Museum in Nigeria's southern state of Edo — paint peeling, lawns weathered, stranded within a busy roundabout — there is no credible hint of the treasures inside. But once you step into its galleries, away from the heaving traffic, the grandeur of a defeated kingdom comes strikingly, painfully, to life.

The museum tells the dramatic story of the Benin kingdom from the earliest monarchs around 1,000 years ago, through the reign of Oba (King) Ovonramwen, who was deposed by the British in 1897, and on to its afterlife in independent Nigeria, where Ovonramwen's descendants have been restored to their title, if not their power. (Benin City and the oba of Benin have no connection to the nearby Republic of Benin.)

The exhibits include swords, pots, instruments and ornaments, including many objects crafted from brass, wood, ivory and other materials. But they are only a fraction of the original national treasure known now as the Benin Bronzes, which were scattered across the world after the British troops sacked Benin City. Only now, with the launch of a digital database drawing on more than 100 museums, is a full picture of what was lost coming into view.



Feedback

Feedback

At stake is far more than comprehensiveness. Supporters of the Digital Benin project say this is not just going to speed up the restitution of the bronzes from museums and private collections — it will change the debate over millions of other contested items, from the British Museum’s Parthenon Marbles to human remains acquired across centuries.

Sitting in his apartment in Benin City, Aiko Obobaifo, an oral historian of Benin culture who helped the Digital Benin researchers correctly identify the Edo names of the artefacts found in Nigerian museums, says the objects began as a way for the kingdom to record its “spiritual thought, activity and sacrifice” in durable materials. When the British invaded in 1897, Obobaifo says it severed a link between the Benin people and their religion and opened the door for the British to introduce Christianity. “The artefacts represented our life, culture and religion, and were yanked off our memory.”



## Benin’s lost treasures

In February 1897, the British launched a punitive raid against the kingdom of Benin, then looted thousands of sculptures such as this plaque (ama), some dating back as far as the 16th century



Britain’s Foreign Office acquired hundreds of bronzes soon after the raid and gifted them to the British Museum, which now has more than 900; further pieces were sold to other museums and collectors





The Benin Bronzes include not just metal objects but also wood and ivory, like this mask of Queen Mother Idia (uhunmwu-ekue) in the British Museum, which became an icon of the struggle for restitution

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One of five similar ivory pendant masks made for the Oba during the 16th century, and now in the British Museum. Three of the other masks are in public collections in the UK and the USA



This brass throne stool (erhe) represents the connection of civilisation (the seat) and nature (the base). In 1935, the oba (king of Benin) petitioned the Berlin museum holding the stool for its return, but was refused

Feedback



The bronze cockerel (Okporhu) is placed at the altar of the mother of the oba after her death. It came into the Weltmuseum Wien's collection two years after the raid

The main attraction on the ground floor of the museum is the commemorative head of Iyoba (or Queen Mother) Idia made out of brass and iron. Idia's place in history was secured when she fought a vicious battle alongside her son, Oba Esigie, in the 16th century. But the version on display here is a replica. A museum official giving a tour says wistfully, "The original is still in the British Museum."

Idia was "translocated" (in the academic jargon) to the British Museum — ultimately the biggest beneficiary of the looting of the kingdom of Benin, with 944 artefacts — because of a punitive military expedition that had momentous political as well as human consequences. In short order, the oba was captured, deposed and exiled, his chiefs were executed, and by the turn of the century the kingdom had submitted to the British, ending its independence of centuries.





The lighting not only scattered a living culture into the deadening embrace of museums and private collections but was so thorough that it made that culture wither at home too, depriving the people of Benin of their own history and religious practice. “Knowledge is part of what was actively destroyed,” says Dan Hicks, professor of contemporary archaeology at Oxford university and author of *The Brutish Museums*, a book on the Benin Bronzes and restitution. (Hicks’s forceful calls for restitution have attracted particular attention since he is also curator of world archaeology at Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum, which has long held a substantial collection of Benin Bronzes.)

What has been missing from the Benin Bronzes discussion, hindering a true understanding of the complex global situation, is some of that knowledge Hicks refers to. Seemingly the most basic prerequisite for any informed debate over ownership, the first comprehensive database of the Benin Bronzes will arrive on November 4, when Digital Benin officially launches. “Until that conversation started about Digital Benin, there was no catalogue that showed where pieces were located,” says Anne Luther, an expert in digital humanities who has managed the project.

Godfrey Ekhatior-Obogie, lead researcher in Nigeria for Digital Benin, knows the history of Benin and its bronzes better than most. The 40-year-old historian was responsible for identifying and documenting each Benin Bronze in the country’s museums. With the help of two research assistants and peer reviewers also steeped in Benin history, Ekhatior-Obogie and colleagues in Hamburg identified, sorted and documented Benin works across three Nigerian museums with both their traditional Edo and English names. Ekhatior-Obogie collected the artefacts’ histories through ethnographic research and oral accounts from contributors based in Benin City, all to learn about the meaning and uses of the works he had identified.



Visitors being shown around the Benin City National Museum last month © KC Nwakafor

“I came as a member of this project to tell Benin’s story,” Ekhatior-Obogie says. “These objects became known globally through the events of 1897 but the history of Benin did not start in 1897 . . . The take-off point for me was to talk about Benin history through knowledge documented by Benin people and Nigerians.”

Adding Ekhatior-Obogie’s efforts to those of his fellow Digital Benin researchers, what the project found were (at the time of writing) 5,240 objects in 131 museums, universities and collections in 20 countries, each with a tortuous, painful past, each about to become accessible like never before. It is the widest-scale accounting of what the British took. “They belong to the canon of what people should know about the world,” says Hermann Parzinger, president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, which oversees Berlin’s state museums and has transferred legal title of its 512 bronzes back to Nigeria.

**Why had it been so hard** to put together a list of the bronzes before now?

The answer lies partly in that eternal maxim, knowledge is power: European museums feared that if the Nigerian people knew who had what, it would make it easier for them to pursue claims. But as Professor Bénédicte Savoy shows in *Africa's Struggle for Its Art*, her book about the first major attempt by African nations in the 1970s to get back their heritage, the argument was framed much more mendaciously.

In a document from 1978 that Savoy uncovered, Germany's Unesco commission said the compilation of lists "would only encourage covetousness" among African nations. It planned not so much a disinformation campaign as a no-information campaign: "Lists of our collections must be avoided in writings without fail. This is an extremely important principle."

With tactics like that, Europe's museums and governments fairly successfully smothered the first great flare-up of the argument over restitution, almost extinguishing it for 30 years. But they did not succeed entirely: by the time Anne Luther and art historian Felicity Bodenstein met as postdocs in Savoy's research group in 2018, the debate was "smouldering", says Bodenstein, and was in fact about to combust once more.

Bodenstein, who had been working on the provenance (previous ownerships) of the Benin Bronzes, had a problem. "I have all these objects, they're all over the place, it's a mess, I don't know how to organise them," she recalls telling Luther. Luther, who had years of experience in the matrix of heritage, technology and data, knew a database would be the answer, but the potential cost and complexity were daunting.



Stalls selling traditional and contemporary Benin art in Benin City last month © KC Nwakalor

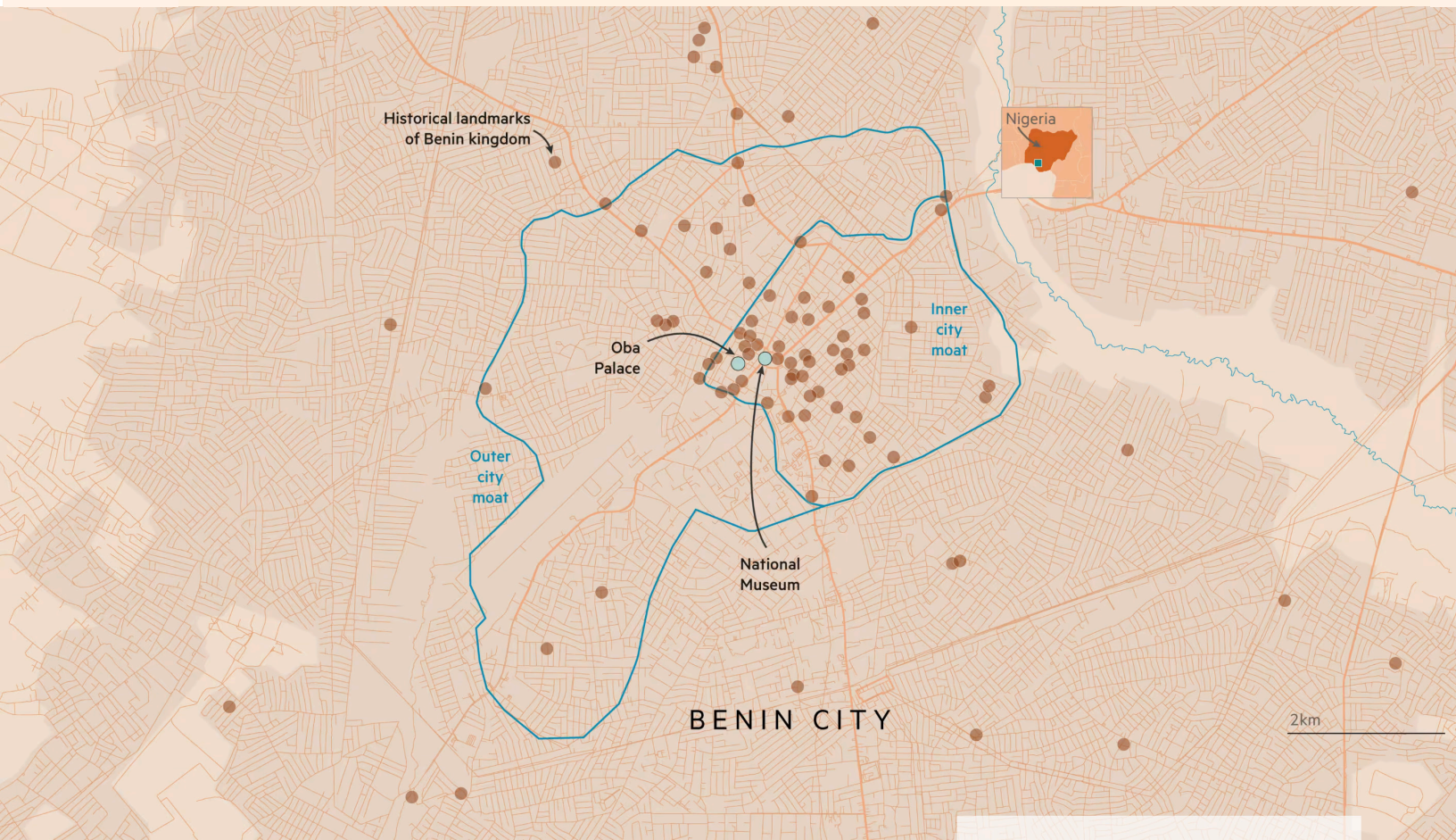


Their timing was fortunate. Professor Barbara Plankensteiner, director of the Museum am Rothenbaum-World Cultures and Arts (MARKK) in Hamburg, home of Digital Benin, had been talking to the Ernst von Siemens charitable foundation about such a project, informed by requests from Nigerian scholars, members of the current oba's court and others from the affected communities. After the foundation came through with an initial €1.2mn ("a fairly exceptional thing" for a humanities research project, says Bodenstein), Luther, Bodenstein, Plankensteiner and colleagues began work in October 2020.

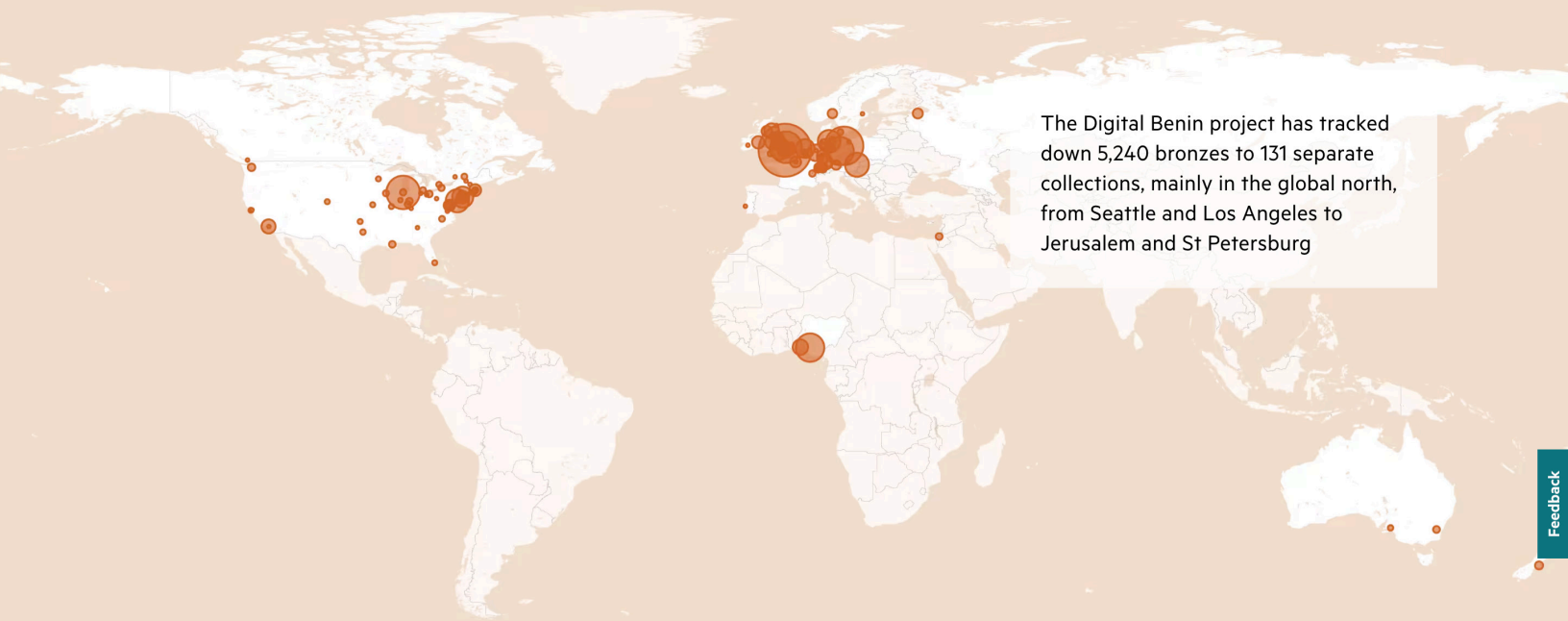
This project arose at a propitious moment. In 2017, French president Emmanuel Macron had shocked both his country and the museum world when he announced in a speech in Burkina Faso that he wanted, within five years, "the conditions to be met for the temporary or permanent restitution of African heritage to Africa". "I cannot accept that a large part of cultural heritage from several African countries is in France," he said.

Meanwhile, in Germany, the construction of the controversial Humboldt Forum museum of non-European cultures in Berlin put colonial-era collections front of mind. A broad bench of researchers who had developed a toolkit of skills in understanding the legal, moral and provenance issues around Nazi-looted art realised they could apply their efforts to other collections, the Benin Bronzes prominent among them.

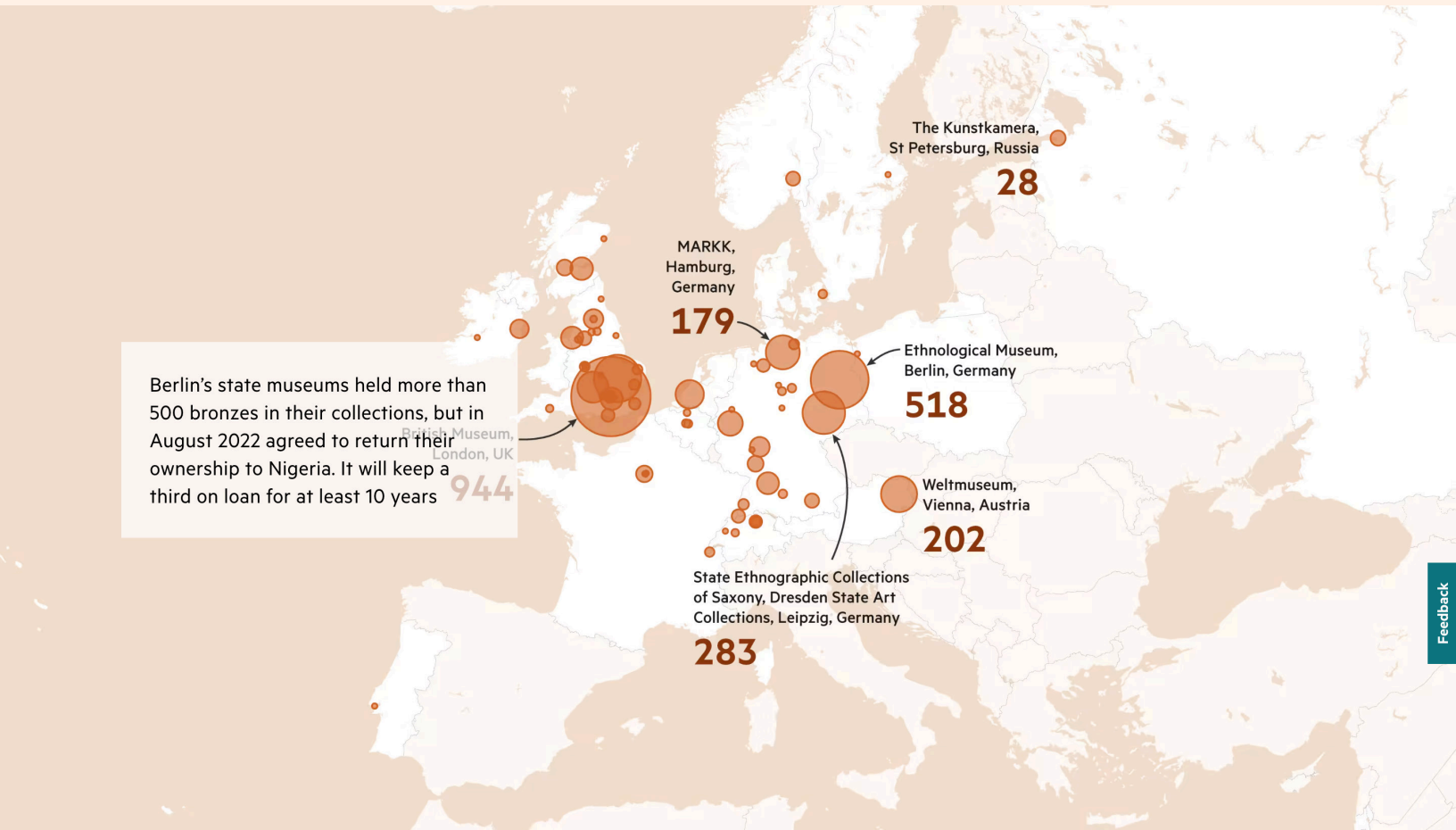
This change in atmosphere explains why the researchers' principal task — persuading institutions to hand over data on their Benin Bronze holdings — was much easier than it would have been even five years before, says Bodenstein, when the museums might have repeated their rearguard action from the 1970s. (The project defines "Benin Bronzes" as objects relating to the kingdom created and/or circulated from the African continent to Europe or North America between the raid and the 1930s.) Thanks to the museums' co-operation, Digital Benin was able to map where every piece now sits.





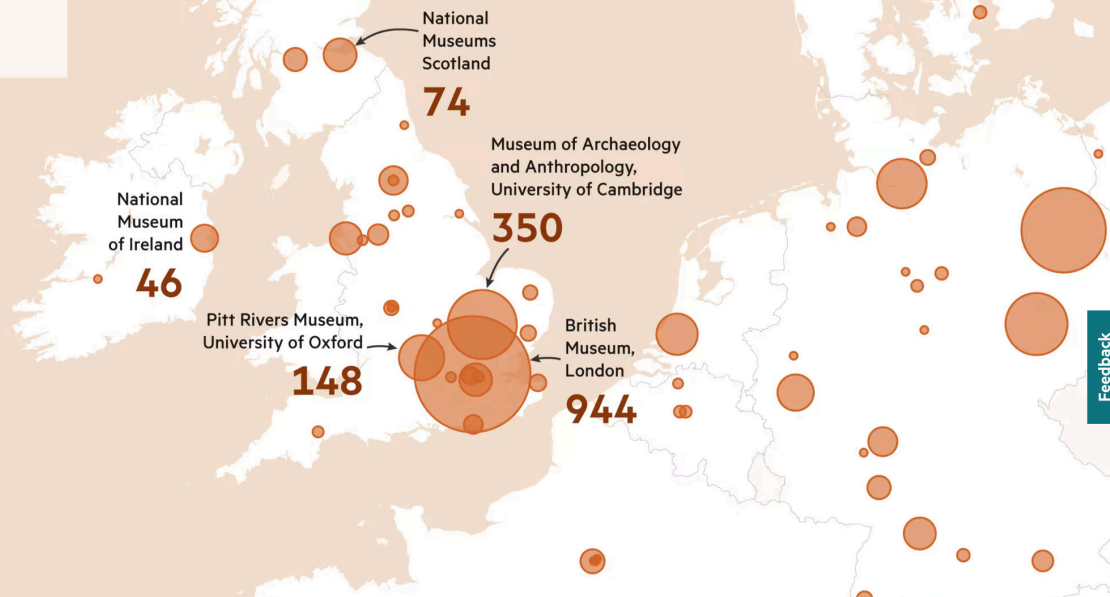


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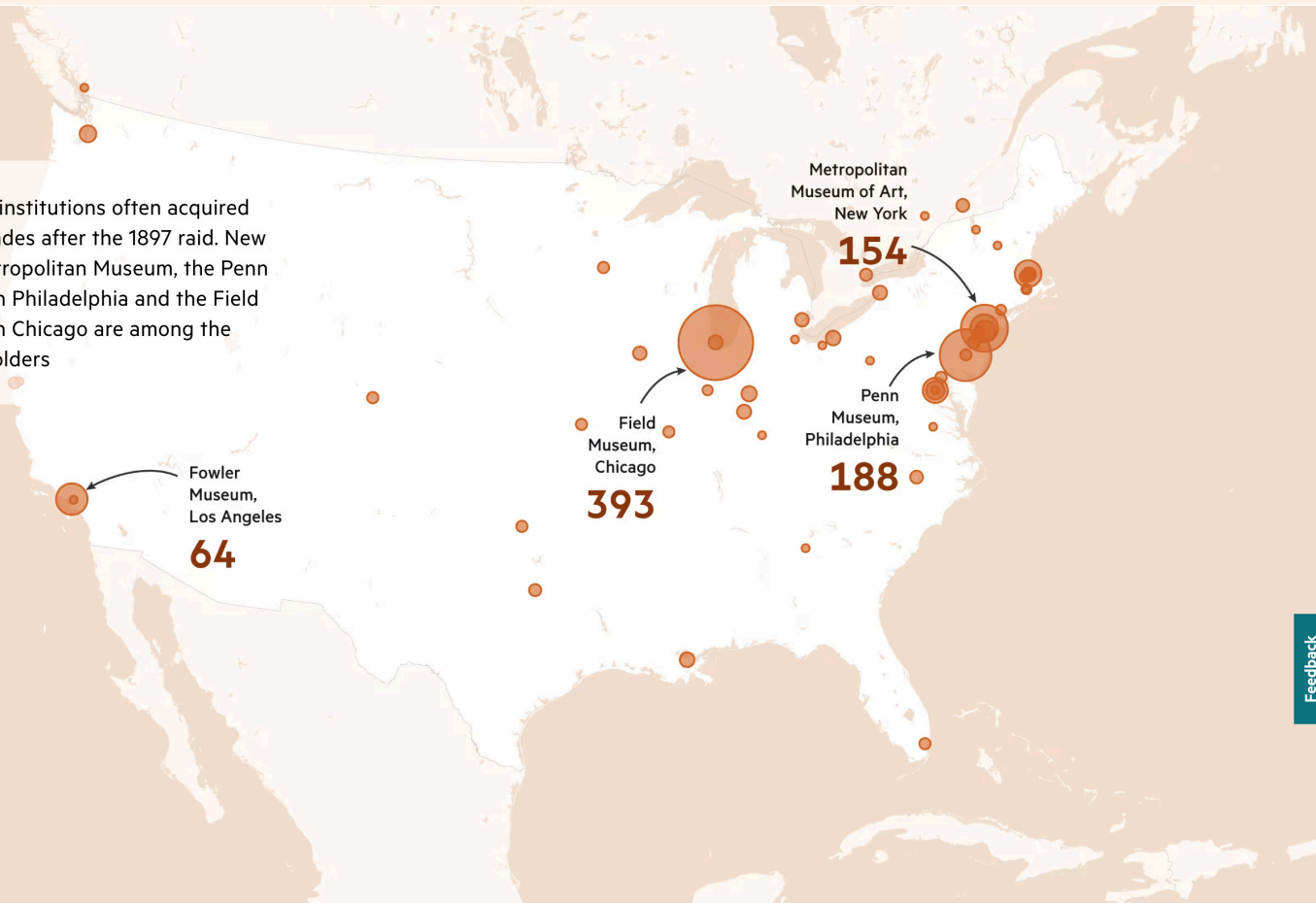
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The biggest possessor of Benin Bronzes by far, with 944 objects, is the British Museum, but Oxford and Cambridge universities also have significant collections



Feedback

American institutions often acquired them decades after the 1897 raid. New York's Metropolitan Museum, the Penn Museum in Philadelphia and the Field Museum in Chicago are among the biggest holders



Feedback



Even once they had the data, the problems multiplied. Plankensteiner says that “the documentation in most of the museums is really poor and many museums don’t have an online collection”, which would have made it much easier. And Luther says: “Every institution has their own way of describing the objects in their data structure and in their databases, so we received data from 131 institutions that looks completely different — there is not one data structure that is the same as the other.” Digital Benin, therefore, had to rework the data on these 5,000 objects into their own newly devised standardised structure, a fiendish undertaking.

One of the most important aspects of this structure is that objects are not just labelled with English-language terms (ancestral staff, commemorative head, pendant mask): the Nigerian team have given each a type-name in the Edo language of Benin City (*aken’ni elao, ama, emwiegbe*), labels that were often absent even in the grandest museums’ databases. What Digital Benin has done, in other words, is look at the Benin Bronzes through the Benin people’s eyes.

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**The question of restitution** — the return of both legal title and physical possession of items — might be most prominent in the public’s mind with regard to the parts of the Parthenon frieze now held in the British Museum and demanded back by Greece, but the debate around the Benin Bronzes has also risen in prominence, an awkward second controversy of law, justice and possession for the museum. Unlike the bitter, gridlocked argument over the Parthenon Marbles, there have already been returns from other museums of Benin Bronzes in partnerships aiming to show that restitution is not a zero-sum game: a gallery in Europe emptied, a gallery in Nigeria filled.





An arch over the road at Igun Street, which is known for the production and sale of bronzes and other artworks, in Benin City © KC Nwakalor

But there are more ways to restitute things than physically, and one main avenue of criticism of Digital Benin, or at least suspicion, revolves around what's known as “digital restitution”.

Onyekachi Wambu, executive director of Afford (the African Foundation for Development), which produced a report in 2020 outlining how best to bring about restitution of the Benin Bronzes, welcomes the immediate access to the bronzes that Digital Benin provides to all Nigerians. But he has a deep concern about the ownership of its data: “Where does the copyright reside? . . . Even sometimes those institutions that are willing to hand stuff back want to retain digital rights for commercial and digital purposes.”

Indeed, this was a tension Digital Benin faced from the institutions it was dealing with, says Bodenstein: “We had to reassure them that they remained owners of their data, we weren't asking for digital restitution, images, rights and things like that.”

Similarly, institutions would not have participated if they had thought Digital Benin was “crusading for restitution”, Bodenstein adds. “Obviously we're all pro-restitution of these pieces, there's no doubt about it . . . which doesn't mean that I saw this project first and foremost as a way of driving restitution because I had the feeling that by then we'd really gotten going, restitution was going to happen.”

While most people the Financial Times spoke to were clear that the universal visibility Digital Benin offers would certainly hearten and help pro-restitution advocates, with even the darkest museum storeroom opened up to a bright new light, Bodenstein is right that the momentum is on their side anyway: Germany transferred ownership of more than 1,100 pieces in July; the Smithsonian Institution gave back 29 objects less than a month ago. According to the Benin Bronze Tracker, run by artist and academic Minne Atairu, 1,402 objects have had their legal ownership promised or transferred to Nigeria, albeit most are still waiting for physical restitution.

Godwin Obaseki, the governor of Edo state, says that the most important conversation to be had about the Benin artefacts is about legal ownership. “Let it be understood,” he says emphatically, “that the pieces are owned by the people of Nigeria. It came from the Edo people in Nigeria. That is the basic minimum. Where they’re held and kept becomes secondary.”

Nigeria does not want physical possession of every artefact being held in foreign museums, he adds, because they’re “ambassadors” for the country: “The rest of the world still needs to know about the Benin works.”



Benin Bronzes on display in the British Museum © New York Times/Redux /eyevine

The biggest target for returning bronzes is the British Museum, which declined to put anyone up for interview, despite repeated requests. The museum, which said in a statement it “cares for” more than 900 bronzes and is “collaborating with a range of partners in Nigeria”, is generally understood to be banned by an act of parliament from “deaccessioning” objects. But in 2021 the then prime minister Boris Johnson’s spokesperson said, regarding the Parthenon Marbles, that it was “a matter purely for the museum”, which would give equal discretion to the trustees regarding the bronzes. As other institutions rush to return looted objects, the British Museum is looking isolated, inflexible and indifferent to strong moral-historical claims. But if it gives way on the Benin Bronzes, the fear or hope, depending on where you stand, is that the Parthenon Marbles will come next.

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**If Digital Benin’s strongest effect** on the bronzes restitution debate is to add momentum to an already thriving campaign, its most far-reaching success is likely to play out worldwide over the next decade and beyond.

Digital Benin is not the first project of this kind (the International Inventories Programme documented 32,000 Kenyan objects held outside the country) but it is easily the highest-profile. What it has conclusively shown is that — with sufficient money, time, expertise and co-operation — it can be done for every culture, giving the transparency that those German grandees of the 1970s so feared. A project such as Digital Benin is repeatable, scalable and global, says Luther: with €5mn, five years and an ambitious team, she could track “all objects in all institutions”. (One of her next projects will be looking for Tibetan objects dispersed around the world.)

Most people the FT interviewed wanted to clarify that, as acrimonious as the restitution debate in which Digital Benin arrives can appear, it should be a win-win process. Professor Nicholas Thomas, director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, which is in the

Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, which is in the process of transferring ownership of bronzes (subject to Charity Commission approval), says it's a mistake to think of restitution as a situation where it's "assumed that agreeing to return material is a sort of capitulation or loss". Instead, the relationships that grow between returning institutions and receiving communities can be generative and mutually beneficial.

Ekhaton-Obogie hopes the project is not the final word on unearthing Benin's rich history. "Digital Benin will spur more research about who the Benin people are, what has happened in the past and what stories have not been told. There is no way a Benin person will engage with Digital Benin and not feel a sense of national pride and loss."

#### Explore more items from Digital Benin

[Queen mother heads \(Uhunmwu elao Oghe Iy'Oba\)](#)

[Bird of prophecy \(Ahianmwe-Oro\)](#)

[Altar of the Hand \(Ikegobo\)](#)

[Bell \(Eroro\)](#)

[Osun pot \(Akhe-Osun\)](#)

[digital-benin.org](http://digital-benin.org)

*Cartography and design by Liz Faunce, Carolina Vargas and Sam Joiner.  
Data for locations of Benin Bronzes supplied by [Digital Benin](#). Benin City map based on data from Digital Benin and OpenStreetMap data. Map of Benin kingdom within Nigeria based on Henry B Lovejoy, *African Diaspora Maps**

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