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13 December 2023

Dear Year 6 Class (2022),

Firstly, my sincere apologies for overlooking your letters for such a long time. You will now all have moved to a new class, but I hope this letter will still reach you.

Thank you for taking the time and trouble to write to the British Museum. I heard from your letters that you were learning about the Kingdom of Benin at school and the brass plaques that once decorated the pillars in the palace of the Oba (king). I'm really pleased that you have taken an interest in the histories of the cultural and ritual objects that were made by artisans in Benin City.

**Many of you described the circumstances by which the bronzes were looted from Benin City by British troops in 1897 and the destruction caused to the palace and its compounds.**

I have spent many years working in Nigeria and talking to Nigerian colleagues both in Africa and in the UK. I have heard firsthand that the violence suffered in 1897 and the subsequent loss of material heritage has caused lasting pain to the Edo people and, it is often argued, has led to a loss of identity. The British Museum fully acknowledges this loss and the looting that took place in 1897.

**Some of you also commented that the plaques were a 'diary' of the history of the Edo people and the Benin kingdom.**

This is true. The stories depicted on the Benin plaques are an important record of Benin's trade networks, relationships with foreigners, as well as the military achievements of the Benin kingdom at the height of its power and influence in the 1700s. These histories continue to have importance to people living in Benin City today.

**Most of you asked for some or all of the bronzes to be returned to Nigeria.**

More than 6 million people visit the British Museum each year and all of these visitors can enter the Museum without paying. The Museum's collections cover the entire world so it provides an important place for people to see and learn about their own culture and history as well as those of other people. There are many people in the UK of African or Nigerian heritage who will be able to see their heritage displayed here and to learn about the Benin kingdom and in turn about their ancestors and culture. The history of the Kingdom of Benin and the UK's colonial past is now taught in UK schools (as in your school) so having some Benin objects on display in museums around the UK is helpful in giving you a chance to see these important objects.

The Museum receives many requests for repatriation from a wide range of visitors, scholars, colleagues in Nigeria and in the Diaspora and through the official channel of the Nigerian government. We are currently in dialogue with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (on behalf of the Nigerian government) following the most recent claim in 2021. At the moment, UK law (specifically the British Museum Act 1963) prevent the British Museum from removing objects from its collection (except in specific instances). We are therefore exploring other options, including long term loans, with colleagues in Nigeria.

There are currently plans to build a new museum in Benin City to house objects that are being repatriated from museums around the world. The British Museum has made a commitment to support the development of a new museum as well as providing iconic objects from the collection on a permanent, but rotating basis, for display there.

**Many of you commented that the original bronzes need to be seen in Nigeria.**

Nigeria has an extensive museum network with more than 52 museums across the country. The flagship museum in Lagos as well as the museum in Benin City both hold significant collections of historical material from the Kingdom of Benin. Some of this material is on display and some in storage. Unlike the British Museum entry to Nigerian museums is not free (even for schools) so it may not be possible for everyone to visit the museums to see the bronzes.

**Some of you suggested that replicas should be displayed at the British Museum.**

A number of you suggested that replicas could be made to replace the originals shown in the Museum. We are working with specialists in the field of photogrammetry (taking numerous images of an object from all angles) and 3D modelling to test this technology.

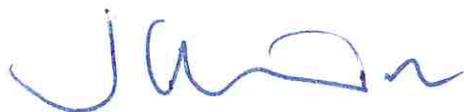
**Some of you commented on the ownership of the Benin Bronzes in Nigeria**

This is a complicated issue and is not yet agreed in Nigeria. Some people think that the bronzes should return to the Oba (king) as they were originally taken from the palace in Benin City. Others feel that they should be returned to the official custodian responsible for Nigerian antiquities - [National Commission for Museums and Monuments](#). There are some that feel that a new approach is needed and that they should be returned to the [Museum of West African Art](#) (MOWAA) which is being established now in Benin City.

We work very closely with a range of different people in Benin City to find ways to work together, to share knowledge, and to exchange skills. For example, the Museum is supporting a new series of archaeological excavations in the city that we hope will reveal more about the historic kingdom and perhaps uncover new artefacts that will remain in Nigeria for display and study. We are also a member of the Benin Dialogue Group which supports the building of new museums in Benin City with proposed rotating displays of Benin artefacts from museums in the UK (including the British Museum) and Europe. You can read more about the Museum's activity and response to requests for repatriation on our website: [Contested objects - Benin bronzes](#).

Thank you once again for being in touch. It is important to us to hear your views.

Kindest wishes,



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