For sale—The past: An archaeological approach to history’s ownership

Cody Ames
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Abstract: An Archaeological Approach to History’s Ownership: Since we were young, our teachers, parents and tutors have drilled pattern recognition into our subconscious, so by the time we reach maturity, it is second nature to ‘make things fit’. As a result, this paper focuses on the process of taking the abstract object and turning it into something which is seemingly tangible, relatable and able to grant power by identifying events in the past and crafting them into a modern perspective—making passed events contemporary manipulations. In other words, this analysis deals with humankind’s desire to control and attempts to own the elusive past by creating a desired, beneficial and, often times, faux historical narrative through an extremely limited human perspective of history to solidify the present and shape the future. Two case studies which demonstrate this model include: (1) the suspect acquisition of the Parthenon (or Elgin) Marbles and (2) the mid-twentieth century’s (specifically the Second World War) abuse of ancient, sacred iconography—the swastika. By leveraging these two didactics, I argue history is neither set in stone nor truly in the past.

Subjects: History: Theory, Method & Historiography; Archaeology; Archaeological Science & Methodology; Archaeological Theory; Politics of Archaeology; Greek History & Culture; Ancient Religions; Greek & Roman Religion; Cultural Theory; Heritage

Keywords: cultural studies; classical archaeology; the Second World War; Greek archaeology

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cody Ames’ desire to study the past’s reception is rooted in two master’s theses which included how Greco-Roman architecture (principally the Hippodrome) commissioned by the Judean (and Roman) aristocracy was received during the first-century CE in Caesarea Maritima, Judea. During Ames’ studies of Herod’s building programme, Ames learned the complexities of the past can hardly be exacted by investigating one discourse. Cody Ames’ background in Classics, Classical Archaeology, and Early Christianity has instilled and fostered a desire for a deeper understanding of the complex identity of Classical past and its impact on modernity. Ames’ passion for Classical reception is a multifaceted situation (i.e. Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Jewish, Christian, pagan and modern). As a result, the Classical past has cast a large shadow that dramatically helped craft the complexion of modern religion, entertainment, politics and Western identity.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

People often like to simplify the measurement and reception of history and its impact on the present. We generally personify the past by ascribing our uncertainties, longings and even shortcomings on it. People usually fail to acknowledge what it really is which is a self-ruling mechanism acting in the world according to its own laws while ironically making it so cherished to our self that it grows into our self. We tend to remove the past from its historical context or embed pieces of it in order to fit with scenarios we are currently facing either personally or collectively. As a result, this paper will attempt to draw out popular and unpopular conceptualizations, social manufactures and highly facilitated experiences of time which will elucidate the past’s perceived importance on modernity.
1. Introduction and research questions

It is common to generalize about time—to anthropomorphize it; to project our fears ... desires and loses on it; to acknowledge it is an autonomous dimension acting in the world according to its own laws while paradoxically making it so intimate to our beings that it becomes our being; to dis-historicize or naturalize what are in fact conceptualizations, constructions, and highly mediated experiences of time. (Ross, 2012, p. 1)

Everything is relative to everything; there is no difference which does not make a difference. If these sayings are true, then why has history, its scholarship and its reception been so problematic in terms of reception and acceptation (Hall, 2009, pp. 386–398; Hardwick & Stray, 2011, pp. 13–15; Martindale & Thomas, 2008, p. 21)? Time, space and especially history (or at least our preconceived notion of history) are all man-made constructs which often lie outside the eye of scrutiny ... until recently, relatively speaking, on account of the rise of minority interests and their impact on higher education and the general public (Diaz-Andreu, 2007, p. 29–35). Human beings have a complex, emotional and convoluted relationship with history (largely understood as monumental events which took place somewhere at some time), not necessarily recognizing or appreciating time and space’s impact as amorphous, abstract concepts, but that does not hinder our perceived connection with the ideals and lives of those in the past—making them our own, in essence (Shanks, 2003, p. 9). Since we were young, our teachers, parents and tutors have drilled pattern recognition—the way we receive and process information—(Sinha, 2003) into our subconscious, so by the time we reach maturity, it is second nature to “make things fit.” As a result, and using this as my premise, this paper focuses on the process of taking a hopelessly abstract object and turning it into something which is seemingly tangible, relatable and able to grant power by identifying events in the past and crafting them into a modern perspective—making passed events contemporary manipulations. In other words, this analysis deals with humankind’s desire to control and attempts to own the elusive past by creating a desired, beneficial and, often times, faux historical narrative through an extremely limited human perspective of history to solidify the present and shape the future (Shanks, 2012, pp. 127–144) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Metope from the Elgin Marbles depicting a Centaur and a Lapith fighting

2. Section 1: The conceptual framework

To begin, the analysis of any discourse needs clearly defined parameters, and this is especially true when dealing with something as expansive and general as history when history is generally understood to be a series of seminal figures and events notched on a timeline (Jennison, 2012). Such analyses of history are archaic and even insulting to the past. To combat these gross overgeneralizations, David Larmour correctly compares history to a palimpsest (Figure 2) with different discourses (gender, religion, politics, etc.) becoming more or less visible during varying time periods in a specified area’s stratigraphy (Larmour, 2007, pp. 1–59).

It is human nature to recognize patterns in our world to make things make sense. This is also true when dealing with the past and its assumed relatability to the present. In order to learn from the past, the past must first be encountered in its own context; only then can any true comparison between past and present take place (Hardwick & Stray, 2008, pp. 1–11). Working under this assumption—studying contexts of the past to understand modernity’s occasionally unsophisticated attempt to craft a new future—two case studies will be leveraged to tease out our often misunderstood relationship with those long passed: (1) the suspect acquisition of the Parthenon (or Elgin) Marbles (Carman, 2005, pp. 9–11; Hamilakis, 2007, p. 266) and (2) the mid-twentieth century’s (specifically the Second World War) abuse of an ancient, sacred piece of iconography—the swastika (Fleming, 2007, pp. 342–355). My hope for choosing these well-documented instances of nationalism and idealism, more or less respectively with occasional crossover, will bring to light a realization that the past was not created for us in the present, just as modernity’s role is not merely fodder for future generations. We are keepers (not owners) of the past (Renfrew, 2002; Trigger, 2006); as such, we do not have the right to disregard, modify or change outright history for gainful opportunities, but we do.

3. Lord Elgin’s Parthenon Marbles

“... the past is not identical to its representation; reality is irreducible to facts, is not information to be objectionably, quantitatively defined ...” (Shanks & Tilley, 1992, p. 116). The Parthenon (Erechtheion and Propylaea) Marbles (Figure 3) were constructed sometime in the fifth-century BCE and were taken by Thomas Bruce (Lord of Elgin) in the early years of the nineteenth-century (Figure 3). The marbles’ acquisition from Ottoman Turks is suspect to say the least, but the lesson I take away from the event is modernity’s description and reception of the past via its (mis)handling of material culture (Shanks & Tilley, 1992, pp. 68–102). As the title suggests, no one owns the past, but I want to make this statement as explicit as possible and suggest no one is able to own the past. In order to fully understand the significance of this statement, we first have to ask a more pressing question: “what is the past,” or more appropriately “what is our perception of the past, and how can the past be relevant in a society which is systematically breaking down the old making way for the new?”

By answering the second question, I believe we are able to accurately measure modern society’s position of what we understand to be important. In the case of the stolen or liberated marbles,
depending on which theory you choose to follow, the past is reduced down to artefacts. But Shanks and Tilley describe relegating past social conditions and circumstances to material remains misrepresentative and delusional. As such, this focus is not whether it was right or wrong for Lord Elgin to take the marbles or whether the British Museum, as a Universal Museum (Hamilakis, 2007, p. 269), has the right to maintain its ownership of the marbles; the analysis’ primary focus is modernity’s reception (Hardwick & Stray, 2008) of the debate—not the debate itself. Humans are not able to completely remove ourselves from anything (Shanks, 2003, p. 196), so rather than pretending this report is completely objective, it embraces its subjectivity, suggesting an up-to-date awareness of modernity’s understanding of events in the past which are reflective in the present.

4. The Elgin Marbles: Prisoners of the British Museum?

The physical action of taking the priceless marbles and sequential fallout speak volumes of the value placed on the sculpted stones (Figure 4). Marble quarries exist all over the world, so why is such importance placed on these particular lithics? The answer, I believe, can be found in the current argument of the Greek Government. Greeks, along with many other nationalities, argue the marbles “cry out” for freedom from their current bondage in the British Museum and beg to be taken home to Greece. Those who hear the cries lean on emotionalism and philhellenism to restore them to their “home” in a Greek museum (Cuno, 2008, pp. 1–20, 2009, pp. 71–86).

John Keats penned a poem which reflects current sentiments, “So do these wonders [Parthenon Marbles] a most dizzy pain, / That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude/ Wasting of old time—/ A sun—a shadow of a magnitude (Keats, 1817).”

Keats, who romanticized the issue before the current emotionalism-led movement for returning the marbles (Hamilakis, 2007, pp. 242–286), captured the essence of the current, (post)modern approach by personifying the stones as prisoners in a foreign land (Hamilakis, 2007, p. 282). This new approach is the latest idea to get back a piece of Greek nationalism. Hamilakis says nationalism and
modernity are mutually exclusive when dealing with physical bodies (human and non-human objects) because neither acknowledges these entities are made up of parts; they are not “… complete, indivisible, bounded (Hamilakis, 2007, p. 282).” Instead, according to Hamilakis, each lost artefact is a miniature representation of the autonomy of the state, so by retaining the marbles in the British Museum, Britain is actually holding a piece of Greece captive—*capta Graecia*.

This claim, that each person, thing, etc. is a miniature portion of the larger whole, has problems with its discourse, but the root of the matter is still based in our over-arching question: “can the past be owned ...?” In the years before the (post)modern approach to reclaim the sacred objects, Greece’s efforts relied heavily on the legal system—right of ownership. This tactic was spearheaded by the minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri, during the 1980s and early 1990s. Mercouri turned the issue into a highly publicized, national problem rivalling Greece’s ongoing territory battle with Turkey in Cyprus (Hamilakis, 2007, p. 256). The Parthenon Marbles issue was now sweeping the world, reaching a wider audience than readers of Keats and Lord Byron. This newfound publicity put stress on Britain to return the marbles, but it also progressed the debate on our comprehension of the past (again, understood primarily as material culture) and whether it could be owned.

5. Is the artefact equal to the past, and how does class fit in?

The marbles were fashioned during the golden age of Greece, but nineteenth-century Greece was riddled with war and destruction. Britain heroically swept in and saved the marbles from further destruction and neglect. British nationalism and intelligentsia in the nineteenth century coveted a relationship with the Greek past to substantiate Britain’s place as a world power (Bradley, 2010; Hoock, 2010, pp. 219–231). As mentioned above, the past must be understood and appreciated in its own context. We, who view the British acquisition of the Parthenon Marbles in hindsight, must attempt to recognize the different social customs, agendas and emotions of those who utilized what we, until recently, regarded exclusively as the past. Moreover, the attention classical (Hall, 2009, pp. 386–398) artefacts received from the world’s elite (Figure 5) was not rooted in academic interests prompting inquiry into past civilizations (Winterer, 2004, pp. 99–151) but rather as decorations which served as social status markers. “Others … assumed that archaeologically observable patterns of material behavior should correspond directly with the self-conscious ethnic groups whose existence is attested in literary texts” (Alcock & Osborne, 2012, p. 350).

The collection of things is a simplistic expression and cannot capture what the things (the Parthenon Marbles in this case) originally represent. As mentioned above, marble can be quarried and fashioned into almost anything, but these particular pieces of marble prompt great fervour from both sides of the argument because of their applied place as part of the world’s history. The world’s reception to Britain’s seizure of the marbles may be seen as stealing a portion of Greece’s past (Merryman, 2009, pp. 110–141), but the greater detail in understanding our current appreciation for the ancient past is the world, generally speaking, associates “things” to past. “Antiquities … vestiges; the bracketing of things in terms of an erstwhile existence, as the material past, has intended to fall into a scheme where the past is taken to exist apart from the present (Olsen, Shanks, Webmoor, & 

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**Figure 5.** Athena in the workshop of a sculptor working on a marble horse, Attic red-figure kylix, 480 BCE, Staatliche Antikensammlungen (Inv. 2650).

This assumption, that the past exists separately from our present, creates an artificial schism between “then and now,” but this manufactured break in history also creates an illusion of distinctiveness which lends itself to people, nations and ideologies competing for prizes opposed to sharing, disseminating and understanding cultures and lives past.

6. Summary of Parthenon (Elgin) Marbles’ role on the past’s ownership

Britain’s acquisition and retention of the Parthenon (Elgin) Marbles is a complicated problem which can be identified as the crux of a much larger argument about the possibilities of the past’s ownership. When Odysseus won Achilles’ armour in *The Iliad* which motivated Ajax to kill himself, it was not the armour which prompted such anger but the loss of glory (κλεοσ) represented as the accumulation of things. The issue of things as status markers and history markers is still very much at the foreground of nationalism and pride in general, and it is still evoking the same passion as it always has.

7. Section 2: The power of the symbol

The world of symbolic forms extends from pictorial representations, via verbal expression, to forms of orienting knowledge *e*, which in turn pave the way for practice … to lead from the visual image … to language, to religion, science and philosophy … which influence his patterns of behavior and his actions, the subject matter of history. (Habermas, 2001, p. 3)

The second section of this investigation will detail attempts to craft the present by leaning on the past’s exploitation. Specifically, I will explain how Adolf Hitler and his Third Reich transferred the Hindu and Buddhist swastika’s meaning of luck (Figure 6), well-being and fortune into a symbol of hate, persecution and intolerance. Hitler’s action of implementing another culture’s sacred iconography is, in and of itself, neither right nor wrong per se; however, the sequential effects of Nazism have forever tarnished the Hindu and Buddhist symbol and chipped away at its spiritual potential. I have stated multiple times throughout this report that no one is able to own the past, but Hitler has demonstrated that it is possible to modify what we think about the past and its iconography (Hardwick & Stray, 2011, pp. 47–48).

Owing the past and changing the past are not mutually exclusive, although there is potential for creating a perception of proprietorship. For example, 13 November 2013 was designated “Learn to Love the Swastika Day” around the world, and to celebrate, tattoo parlours gave free swastika tattoos to everyone who wanted one. The receivers of the tattoos were asked to sign a waiver stating they were not practitioners of the neo-Nazi party (theweek.com 2013). While, in theory, this may have sounded like a good idea with noble intentions, the execution was simple and base. The end result, in all probability, gave free Nazi swastikas to thousands of neo-Nazis worldwide.

Figure 6. Swastika, a symbol of auspiciousness in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

8. Can the past own the present?

There have been many attempts to locate a point in history (either real or imagined) and recreate it in order to fashion a beneficial situation in the present. Romulus Augustus(ulus), who is historically understood to be the last Roman emperor of the Western empire, is an example of this. He choose two of Rome’s greatest leaders—one real and one imagined—and attempted to leverage their namesake’s symbolic power (Ermatinger, 2004, p. xxii). Romulus Augustus(ulus) did not achieve his goal of maintaining his perceived status as a Roman emperor, just as Benito Mussolini failed in his attempt to resurrect passed Roman glory. History shows, that while past and present societies endeavour to own history, the outcome is always vice versa. Cultures which leverage past experiences are shaped by them (Figure 7), not the other way around. “If we want to find the past we must thus look for it in the concrete present of a consciousness which transcends its own present ...” (Barba, 2002, p. 109).

Using the past as a means to build the future, historically, is a stimulating idea. Looking back at Hitler’s use of the swastika and its undulating ramifications find us in a similar circumstance to the end of the Second World War. The first swastika in the archaeological record was found in Mezine, Ukraine and is dated to around 10,000 BCE (Campbell, 2002, p. 117), although they have been found all over the world at different points in history. In the span of about a decade, however, thousands of years of understanding and acceptance have been nearly wiped clean by one man’s cognizance. But is that a bad thing? Genocide, hate-mongering and tyranny aside, should history add stealing the past to Hitler’s list of war crimes? As I mentioned above, the swastika has been used and reused during different times all over the globe. In each context, the interpretation of the symbol, no doubt, would have elicited different meanings, so why have the actions of Nazism’s swastika been so powerful? Perhaps the speed which information currently travels helped establish the symbol of hate, or it may be we are not yet distanced enough from its odious usage to adequately compartmentalize it. Much like a river flowing from a contaminated source, the water can only be purified the farther it gets away from the filth.

9. Conclusion

In closing, ownership of the past is not possible, but ownership of other source countries’ (Flatman & Rockman, 2011, p. 131) possessions is very possible. Moreover, in the actions we investigated, we saw a tendency to establish an artificial environment which did allow for perceived ownership. Shanks and Tilley suggest humans are able to exploit and control their environment through logical explanation with “cold, calculating reasoning.” This eliminates the complexity of natural phenomena and makes everything explicit, ordered and accountable to scientific analysis. This, in turn, allows...
for the supposed possession of the natural realm (Shanks & Tilley, 1992, p. 7). The trend to manufacture and establish a theoretical ownership of past events seems as old as time itself, and shows no signs of slowing down any time soon. I want to leave this investigation with one additional example which I think ties everything together: the Russo-Ukraine situation and the UN’s reaction to it has everybody talking about a new cold war. In addition to a potential Cold War II, Germany refused to take the lead militarily because their aggression in the First and Second World Wars. Germany is not, at present, willing to spearhead any military campaign because of its role in the first two world wars. It seems the past is neither dead nor really even in the past (Falkner, 2011). The past is not things or ideas; the past is simply a word humans made up to refer to people, events and everything else which happens. The past is abstract; therefore, no one is able to own it.

Funding
The author received no direct funding for this research.

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Citation information
Cite this article as: For sale—The past: An archaeological approach to history’s ownership, Cody Ames, Cogent Arts & Humanities (2017), 4: 1275090.

Cover image

References