

Egypt demands return of the Rosetta Stone

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Egypt is demanding that the Rosetta Stone, a 2,000-year-old relic and one of the British Museum's most important exhibits, should be returned to Cairo.

The stone, which became the key to deciphering ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, was found by Napoleon's army in 1799 in the Nile delta, but has been in Britain for the past 200 years. It forms the centrepiece of the British Museum's Egyptology collection and is seen by millions of visitors each year.

Now, in an echo of the campaign by Athens for the return of the Elgin Marbles, the Egyptian government is calling for the stone to be returned and threatening to pursue its claim "aggressively" if the British Museum does not agree to give it back voluntarily.

Zahi Hawass, the director of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Cairo, confirmed to The Telegraph that he had begun negotiations with academics and curators at the museum. He said he hoped that they would agree to "voluntarily return the stone", but gave a warning that, if the request was rejected, he would intensify his campaign to bring it back to Egypt.

"If the British want to be remembered, if they want to restore their reputation, they should volunteer to return the Rosetta Stone because it is the icon of our Egyptian identity," said Dr Hawass.

"Otherwise I will have to approach them using a different strategy. There are various stages to our negotiations. I don't want to fight anyone now, but if the British Museum doesn't act, we will have to employ a more aggressive approach with the Government. I don't care if people know my strategy, the artefacts stolen from Egypt must come back."

Dr Hawass said that he had been discussing a possible three-month loan of the stone with the museum. "More immediately, we are prepared to accept it peacefully on a temporary loan and we are in discussions about that right now. That is a short-term solution, however. Ideally, we would like the stone to come back for good."

Dr Hawass said that the Cairo Museum, where the Rosetta Stone would be kept, had a replica of the relic which it would be willing to give to the British Museum in return for the original.

The Rosetta Stone, which dates from 196 BC, was discovered by French troops in 1799 in the village of Rosette (Raschid) in the western delta of the Nile. The stone's

importance was that it provided a key to understanding hieroglyphic text because it was accompanied by a Greek translation.

Although the stone was Napoleon's most coveted war acquisition, the French ceded it to Britain under the Treaty of Alexandria in 1801 and it has been exhibited in the British Museum since 1802.

Vivian Davies, the keeper of the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan at the museum, expressed sympathy with Dr Hawass's claim, but suggested that legislation on the repatriation of artefacts would prevent the relic's permanent return.

"Will the Rosetta Stone be returned? I would say that our priorities are elsewhere at the moment. We are working with our Egyptian colleagues to preserve the heritage of today rather than concentrate on problems - or issues, perhaps I should say - that are very old," he said.

"We would like to co-operate with the Egyptians insofar as we can under the law. It is the same law that guides us on the issue of the Elgin Marbles - the British Museum Act of 1963." This rules that no artefact can be repatriated without the permission of the museum's trustees.

Mr Davies added: "Perhaps, if I were in Dr Hawass's position, I would feel the same way. We are having constructive negotiations over the loan for three months. It's a new idea he has produced and we appreciate very much that Dr Hawass is being constructive on these matters. We enjoy working with him and his staff."

Dr Hawass, one of the world's leading Egyptologists, has pioneered a major new museum development programme and encouraged the Egyptian government to pour considerable funds into archaeological research. The Egyptian government has asked for the stone as part of a wide-reaching programme to return "stolen" antiquities from all over the world. Among the items it wants to retrieve are the bust of Queen Nefertiti from the Berlin Museum, the statues of Hatshepsut in the Metropolitan Museum of New York and, perhaps most controversially, the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde, one of the most famous landmarks in Paris.

Dr Hawass added: "The obelisk in France is needed because the Luxor temple from which it came is left with only one. The second one should be there with it."

Last night Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum, was unavailable for comment, but in the past he has described the personal significance of the stone. "I remember the first visit I made to the museum was with my father at the age of eight," he said. "I was fascinated by the Rosetta Stone. I was thrilled to be able to touch it - it was uncovered at the time - and physically connect with history."

If the stone were to be moved, it would be seen by far fewer people than is the case today: the Cairo Museum has about 2.5 million visitors a year, compared to the 5.5 million who visit the British Museum annually.