

COMMENTARY

The recent discussion concerning an eventual return of the Parthenon Marbles has once again drawn public attention to the problem of restitution of cultural property. We have asked Robert Browning, Emeritus Professor of Greek, University of London, and chairperson of the BRITISH COMMITTEE FOR THE RESTITUTION OF THE PARTHENON MARBLES, to write a short comment on this subject. A policy statement from Dr. David Wilson, the Director of the British Museum, was published and commented on in a recent editorial in Antiquity (Antiquity 56:2). We are therefore pleased to be able to present another point of view. The above mentioned committee was formally established in Dec. 1982, and it defines its aim as follows:

to secure the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece in accordance with the resolution of the UNESCO conference of the Ministers of Culture which was held in Mexico on 4th August 1982. To this end we intend to present the case as fully as possible to the British public and to bring the most effective pressure on the Trustees of the British Museum and on the British Government.

THE PARTHENON MARBLES AND THE POLITICS OF RESTITUTION.

Robert Browning, MA, D.Litt, FBA.

Ever since the seventh Earl of Elgin had the sculptures removed from the pediments and frieze of the Parthenon at the beginning of the nineteenth century, voices have been raised in England demanding their return to Greece. Byron's scathing denunciation of "the modern Piet ... cold as the crags upon his native coast" is too well known

to need quoting at length. Years later, when the marbles were already housed in the British Museum, he wrote more calmly: "I oppose, and will ever oppose, the robbery of ruins from Athens to instruct the English in sculpture; but why did I do so? The ruins are as poetical in Piccadilly as they were in the Parthenon; and its rock are less so without them. Such is the poetry of art." When Parliament in 1815 debated the proposal to purchase the marbles from Lord Elgin, Hugh Hammersley, MP, argued forcefully that the British Museum should be invited to hold them in trust, to be returned to Athens as soon as Greece was liberated from Turkish rule. In later years Thomas Hardy, Frederic Harrison, the influential editor of The Nineteenth Century, and Harold Nicolson were among those who called for the restitution of the marbles to the city which they had adorned for twenty-two centuries. Yet however much interest these protests aroused at the time, they were individual expressions of opinion and were soon forgotten.

Since the Second World War the changing relations between the former imperial powers and the developing countries have brought the question of restitution of cultural property into the foreground of international discussion. Many countries understandably feel that they have been deprived of important elements of their cultural heritage by circumstances over which they had no control. To take an example, the British removed more than 5000 objects -- presumably without payment -- from Benin before setting fire to the city in 1897. Bronzes, masks, carved ivories and other objects from the loot of Benin are to be found in many of the major museums of Europe and America, where they have long attracted the admiring attention of art historians and the general

public. Yet not a single product of this unique culture remained in Benin itself, until a few years ago when the Nigerian government bought a bronze head, a bronze relief, and an ivory at an auction in London for £561,000. These are now on exhibition in Benin among the hundreds of photographs of work of Benin art in foreign museums. Similarly, nearly all the major objects of Maori art and culture are in European and American museums, and only a few in New Zealand. The same story could be told of the cultural heritage of many countries. This is the background against which the problem of the Parthenon Marbles must be seen. For they too were removed under the authority of an occupying power.

This new situation is reflected in the attention paid by international bodies to the restitution of cultural property. In particular, UNESCO in 1978 set up an Intergovernmental Committee for the Return of Cultural Property to its Country of Origin and for its Restitution in case of Illegal Acquisition, and the committee's then Director-General issued an appeal for the return of the most representative works of a civilisation, the loss of which was most distressing to the dispossessed. The Second World Conference on Cultural Policy passed, by a large majority, a resolution dealing particularly with the Parthenon sculptures and calling on its member-states to make efforts for their restitution.

It is to be noted that these initiatives call for the return only of objects of special significance, not of all cultural property. There is no question of emptying the museums of Europe and North America. It may not always be easy to determine what is of special significance. Historical or religious considerations may complicate matters, as, for instance, with the Holy Crown of

Hungary or the Stone of Scone. That the sculptures of the Parthenon are a particularly important element in the artistic heritage of Greece can hardly be disputed. The argument for their restitution is strengthened by the fact that they were not portable or free-standing works of art, but an integral part of a single monument, which is the visible memorial of the society which discovered, among other things, tragedy, philosophy, and democracy.

There is a technical aspect to the problem of restitution, which is recognised in all international deliberations. The receiving country must be capable of conserving the objects returned and making them available for study. For some third-world countries this may be a problem, though one for which technical solutions are possible. Since its foundation in 1830, however, the Greek state has given high priority to the preservation of its artistic heritage, and today the Greek Antiquities Service and its museums enjoy an international reputation. It would be absurd to suggest that they are unable to look after the marbles or to make them accessible to millions of visitors. What they cannot do at present is to replace them in their original positions. Lord Elgin's architects, in removing the sculptures, destroyed the entablatures in which they were fixed. Whether some day they can or should be replaced is a problem for the technology and the taste of posterity. In the meantime the nearer they are to the building of which they formed a part, the easier it will be to look from the one to the other and so to form a conception of the whole. The argument that the marbles should not be returned because they cannot be replaced upon the building is neither artistically nor morally valid.

Partly as a result of international initiatives and partly in

direct response to the changed relations between nations, some cultural property has already been returned to its country of origin. Thus some sixty pieces have been restored to Zaire by the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale in Belgium; many objects have been returned to Indonesia by the Museum of Ethnography in Leiden; the Peabody Museum of Harvard University has returned material to Mexico and Guatemala; the Australian government has returned a large collection to Papua-New Guinea; the British government has restored to Burma the throne and crown jewels captured in the Second Burmese War of 1853. Many of the museums concerned were forbidden by

their statutes, as is the British Museum, to alienate any object in their collection. But the law is made for people, not people for the law. The legislators were ready to modify their own local regulations in the interests of international justice. Parliament bought the Parthenon Marbles from Lord Elgin and charged the British Museum to look after them. It is up to Parliament to consider whether the time has not now come for it to change its instructions. The whole question should be the subject of a debate, in which due weight can be given to the historical, legal, aesthetic, and moral arguments involved. This time the matter will not be forgotten.

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WILDMEN, PULP AND FIRE -
ARCHAEOLOGY AS POPULAR FICTION

Christopher J. Evans

There is obviously a substantial public demand for archaeologically related literature and archaeologists do occasionally descend to produce works for the non-academic market. However, those books which are penned by popular novelists and which have an archaeological content, usually far outstrip the sales of professionally acceptable archaeological reading for the general public. This growing literary genre is only rarely considered by archaeologists and yet, as reflected in their vast readership, these works must be a major influence in shaping the public's attitudes towards the past. This short review will consider Jean M. Auel's recent novel, The Clan of the Cave Bear, within the context of popular prehistoric fiction.

Auel's novel depicts the domestic life of a band of Neanderthals living in the Crimea during the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic transition, 35-25,000 BP. This

enormously successful novel suffers from its pulp packaging which does its utmost to disguise what is a very interesting and informative novel. The plot revolves around the character, Ayla, a Homo sapiens sapiens who is orphaned by an earthquake and subsequently adopted by the Neanderthal clan. Over some 500 pages we are witness to the clan's daily life and Ayla's development from child to adult within the context of Neanderthal cave society.

The author's narrative style is straightforward, Auel has none of the literary ambitions of Golding's The Inheritors or Grass's The Flounder. While the novel's unassuming literary style makes its characters more immediately accessible to the reader, it does, however, lack the exploration of different perceptual and communication processes which Golding dealt with so thoroughly. It is, of course, very difficult to express non-literate concepts in written form without making for awkward reading. In this regard, Annaud's film Quest for Fire, with its oral languages invented by Anthony Burgess and gestures by Desmond Morris, was

very successful, certainly more so than Rosny-Aine's original text.

Auel's novel does present us with a very convincing picture of Upper Pleistocene life and in doing so she extensively uses archaeological and ethnographic data. Solecki's Neanderthal burials at Shanidar are the source both for the character of Creb, the novel's crippled and one-handed shaman, and for a flower strewn inhumation. There is a ritual brain eating, harking back to the Monte Circeo skull, and there are numerous cave bear rituals directly inspired from the Drachenloch site. The novel's main ritual ceremony apparently has as its source the bear rites of the Ainu hunters of Northern Japan. Apart from these direct archaeological quotations, Auel's book is rich in detail concerning the subsistence activities of the Neanderthals. There are flint knapping lessons in the Levallois technique, a rare mammoth hunt, basket and net making, food preparation, and even Lepenski Vir-like days of catching sturgeon on the Black Sea coast.

Within this prehistoric panorama the Neanderthals are depicted as being well adapted to and fully exploiting their local environment. The economic and ecological factors which determine their existence are fully described and the novel is, in fact, framed by catastrophic earthquakes. However, the author gives great emphasis to the social structure and symbolic order of the Neanderthal band, concentrating on social conflicts within the cave in which Ayla naturally becomes the focal point. The Neanderthal band is structured along classic 'Man the Hunter' lines, in which male and female activities are strictly divided: hunting and rituals are male prerogatives, while food gathering and medicine are woman's work. Ayla, as the outsider, breaks this structure by first becoming 'the Woman who hunts' and later by secretly observing the

shaman's key rituals.

Though Auel's Neanderthals have only a monosyllabic vocabulary, they have a highly developed sign language, and while not unintelligent, their mental powers are essentially rooted in their deep memory. Ayla, on the other hand, comes to the clan with a developed vocabulary and the power of abstract and original thought. Ayla is, of course, us, whereas the Neanderthals are rather like a flock of dinosaurs doomed by their lack of cultural evolution in the face of 'the others' vitality. The question of Neanderthal extinction or survival is a very contentious issue, which the author overcomes by having Ayla give birth to a child after she has been raped by a prominent Neanderthal. This crossbreeding ensures that some elements of the Neanderthal way of life will survive. A similar situation is created by Golding in The Inheritors when the 'new people' carry off a Neanderthal infant.

It is relevant to question how prehistoric fiction tackles the problem of cultural change, for effectively it ignores it. This is largely the result of the limited time scale of most of these novels. In Quest for Fire change is actually only diffusion as the Oulhamr people come into contact with a multitude of contemporary groups strung out along the evolutionary ladder. Essentially, biological determinism is the sole agent of cultural development. While Auel does not stress this point too strongly, it remains an underlying theme. Ayla as an individual brings change to the Neanderthal band, but the clan cannot cope with it and hence their foreseeable extinction. However, Ayla is not acting as an individual but rather as an agent of her species, for when Creb telepathically has a vision of the distant future through her, he glimpses our world of aeroplanes and high-rise build-