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RESPONSE

On "Distorting history": a reply to Staffan Lundén

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Abstract

Earlier this year a Swedish archaeologist based at Gothenburg University's Centre for Critical Heritage Studies published an unfounded ad hominem attack on me in the pages of the International Journal of Cultural Property. I am grateful to the editors for this right to reply to Staffan Lundén's wholly spurious claims, and order to correct the record. Despite its provocative, "clickbait" title, not one substantive mistake or incorrect fact was identified in Lundén's article in my book "The Brutish Museums". The motivation for Lundén's serial accusations against colleagues with whose scholarship on the history of the Benin Expedition he disagrees - from curators at the British Museum to members of the Royal Court of Benin - is discussed. In conclusion, the allegation that my book The Brutish Museums is "part of a trend away from pro-British perspectives" is contextualised and refuted. On the contrary, this reply argues, openness and transparency about the colonial past and present is a key element of the reclamation and reimagining of Britishness that is unfolding in the 2020s – this unfinished period that the book calls "the decade of returns".

Keywords: Staffan Lundén; right to reply; "Distortion of History"; Restitution; Benin Bronzes; Benin Expedition

Earlier this year, a Swedish archaeologist based at Gothenburg University published an *ad hominem* attack on me in the pages of this journal. The title of Staffan Lundén's paper included my name, the title of my book *The Brutish Museums*, and the words "Distorting history in the restitution debate."[1] I am grateful to the editors for the opportunity to reply to this article and correct the record.

This is not first time that Lundén has leveled the charge of "distorting history" against other writers and museum curators with whose accounts of the history of the Benin Expedition he disagrees. Lundén has previously accused John Mack, Nigel Barley, and Neil MacGregor of the British Museum of "exaggeration," "mythmaking," and writing that is variously "inconsistent," full of "opaque sentences" and "veiled" meanings, "misleading," "heavily biased," "erroneous," "vague," and "distorted".[2] He similarly dismissed *Summon My Ehi to Ugbine*, a landmark book by Prince Okpame-Edward Oronsaye of the Royal Court of Benin, as "bas[ing] its version of the past on wishful thinking rather than on a careful

[1] Lundén 2024; Hicks 2020.

[2] Lundén 2016, 8, 21, 141, 246, 283–84, 327, 354, 358, 366, 414, 453, 491, and *passim*; see Mack 2000; Barley 2010; MacGregor 2010.

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examination of the documentary record."[3] There is no space here to review how in each of these cases Lundén marshalled scores of minor, technical disagreements and nit-picks to express his differences of opinion as speculative attacks on the scholarly integrity of others. Instead, this reply is limited to outlining the gross errors and sustained misrepresentations in Lundén's account of *The Brutish Museums.*

Strangely for such a long piece of writing with such a provocative title, appearing almost five years after my book was published, Lundén's paper does not identify a single substantive mistake or incorrect fact in *The Brutish Museums.* There is nothing that could be included as a correction in a future revised edition of the book. Instead, the paper presents a series of insinuations, obscurantist misreadings, and consistently spurious suggestions of technical inaccuracies or omissions. Every one of these is based purely on Lundén's personal opinion or interpretation rather than any hard evidence. The paper undertakes this extraordinary exercise in order to back up its principal allegation: that my book is "part of a trend away from pro-British perspectives (or distortions) to pro-Edo ones."[4] I will address that allegation after working through the matters of fact that the paper repeatedly misrepresents. They fall under three headings.

First, there is the question of the numbers of African people killed in nineteenth-century colonial conflicts. Lundén misrepresents the nuanced argument, which is put again and again throughout the book, about how these numbers were unrecorded or downplayed by official sources at the time.[5] *The Brutish Museums* makes the point that such silences were acts of erasure and dehumanization: that the violence was such that any precision is impossible, and indeed that this imprecision was part of how the dehumanizing violence operated and continues to operate. Lundén claims that I exaggerate the numbers when I write that "we know that an estimated 60,000 people" were killed in the Matabele Wars (a figure suggested for example in Kenneth Panton's *Historical Dictionary of the British Empire*[6]) and makes the bizarre accusation that my source "appears to be a vastly inflated figure from Wikipedia." Tellingly, Lundén offers no alternative estimate of his own but instead cites Lord Baden-Powell (most famous as the founder of the Boy Scouts and a British Army director of military intelligence) as an alternative source in a footnote.[7] Lundén cites Michel-Rolph Trouillot's book *Silencing the Past* and yet fails to grasp the argument of that study, or indeed the issue that Ann Laura Stoler has called "colonial aphasia," when he claims that a lack of casualty numbers "hardly reflects any deliberate suppression of knowledge." A silence is always "active and transitive," Trouillot shows us: never just a gap.[8]

Second, Lundén states that "the reader of *The Brutish Museums* is repeatedly assured that the British looted 10,000...or more than 10,0000 objects...in Benin City."[9] There is no suggestion of 100,000 objects in *The Brutish Museums.* Presumably this is a typo on Lundén's part rather than a wilful distortion; but in any case what the book actually says is that:

> We must acknowledge that the total figure of what was looted may quite possibly be 10,000 bronzes, ivories and other objects – but also that any hope for a definitive or final number is futile – since there is so much hidden in private and family collections. There is an inherent lack of fixity in number here, an intrinsic instability.[10]

[3] Lundén 2017, 105, 106; see Oronsaye 2016.
[4] Lundén 2024, 20.
[5] Hicks 2020, 2, 78, 83, 104, 105, 112, 115, 117, 119, 122, 126–27, 136, 137, 205, and *passim.*
[6] Panton 2015, 321
[7] Lundén 2024, 18.
[8] Lundén 2024, 6; see Trouillot 1995, 50–51; Stoler 2011; cf. Hicks 2023a.
[9] Lundén 2024, 218.
[10] Hicks 2020, 137.

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Lundén attacks the idea of there being potentially more than 10,000 looted items. He cites the 5,285 objects listed on the Digital Benin website as a corrective. (Since his article has been published, the number has gone up to 5,299.) As he notes, this resource was published two years after my book. (Indeed, the Digital Benin project made use of some of the primary research included in *The Brutish Museums* to build its list.) But in fact, Digital Benin's figure matches my own very well. This is because we're talking about different things. On the one hand, the Digital Benin figure represents fully documented museum pieces with unquestionable provenance from the sacking of Benin City in February 1897. On the other hand, I was offering an estimate of how much may also remain in private collections (inherited down the generations or bought and sold), or else languishes warehoused in museum stores with little or no provenance documented. In such cases the evidence trail would understandably be insufficient for them to be listed on Digital Benin. *The Brutish Museums* also pointed to the many examples of looted ivory tusks (as evidenced by the photographic record), so that as the book says "it is impossible to tell how many billiard balls, combs, or piano keys may have come from this loot."[11]

In hindsight, now the Digital Benin figure is published and continues to grow, it seems perfectly feasible that perhaps 4,701 items taken from Benin have not made it onto the Digital Benin database. Consider, after all, how little is still known about what is held in museum storerooms around the world. Even with the largest and best funded institutions like the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, estimates of what is not on a public database stand around the 35–40% mark.[12] And that's not to mention the hundreds of other, less well-funded museums and collections. But again, Lundén's article misrepresents the argument of *The Brutish Museums.* As with the question of killings, the point that the book repeatedly makes is that the chaotic violence was such that no comprehensive inventory of what was taken was made at the time, and no final *catalogue raisonné* will be possible in the future.[13] Violence took the form of the destruction of knowledge as well as the killing of people and the theft of sacred royal artefacts.[14]

Third, Lundén makes an unevidenced attack on my use of primary material. There is "one glaring omission in *The Brutish Museums*," he writes: that the book "hardly make any use of" "the administrative records from the Foreign Office and other governmental offices in the National Archives, Kew, in London." Oddly, Lundén offers no suggestion of any specific material, from the vast range of potential official government documents, that he believes the book should have referred to, or why. In reality meanwhile, as even the most cursory glance at the endnotes would show, there is a great deal of primary archival research represented in the book – including numerous examples of Foreign Office/Colonial Office material held in the National Archives.[15] What *The Brutish Museums* definitely does not do, however, is rely uncritically upon official accounts produced at the time. As the book shows, the sequence of events was spun at the time by propagandistic journalism such as that of Flora Shaw (correspondent for the colonies at *The Times* and the future Lady Lugard, wife of the governor-general of Nigeria) and also by Commander Reginald Hugh Spencer Bacon (intelligence officer for the Expedition) and Alan Boisragon (a commander of the Niger Coast

[11] Hicks 2020, 144.

[12] Hicks 2023b, 2025a.

[13] Hicks 2020, 136, 137, 142, 146, 147, 149, 170, and *passim.*

[14] See discussion in Hicks 2021a.

[15] For references in *The Brutish Museums* to Foreign Office and Colonial Office files held at the National Archives, see Hicks 2020, 261n90, 262n23, 263n48, 264n35, 269n31, 269n57. This is in stark contrast with Lundén's own book on the Benin Bronzes, in which the reader is offered no evidence that a single visit to an archive or to examine museum collections was part of the research (Lundén 2016).

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Protectorate Forces who returned to England rather than joining the Expedition), who both rushed out book-length accounts of the attack and its supposed justification within weeks of the operation.[16] Against this background, *The Brutish Museums* contributed to the urgent work of exposing, reassessing, and where possible correcting this 125-year-old spin. It did so not by relying just on government records or authorized accounts (although these are certainly discussed at length) but also using evidence held in museum archives and collections. *The Brutish Museums* argues that world culture museums themselves represent unique archives of empire and militarism – and that these institutions will play increasingly important role in the revision of our collective understanding of colonial violence in the coming years.

Finally, we come to Staffan Lundén's claim that my book is "part of a trend away from pro-British perspectives (or distortions) to pro-Edo ones."[17] Yet again, Lundén's accusation is itself a distortion of my writing. Lundén cites, without discussion, my critique of tendencies toward "anti-anti-colonialism" – an analysis that I have recently expanded by examining the claim that movements for decolonization, restitution, and reparations are grounded in "a desire to spit on Britain."[18] He proceeds to discuss the employment in such work of the disingenuous tactic of "questioning the academic legitimacy of post-colonial research" – but then makes the claim that through the various ungrounded assertions he has leveled against *The Brutish Museums* he has himself managed to "call its status as a scholarly work into question"![19] I have little understanding how and why Staffan Lundén's theoretical, methodological, and political approaches have led him so egregiously to misrepresent the scholarship of others.[20] But let us be clear about his misrepresentations. The insinuation that *The Brutish Museums* represents a "distortion of history" is itself an unworthy distortion, wholly unfounded. Lundén's article identifies no substantive errors or "distortions of history" in my book. Moreover, *The Brutish Museums* is definitely not "part of a trend away from pro-British" approaches. On the contrary, openness and transparency about the colonial past and present is a key element of the reclamation and reimagining of Britishness that is unfolding in the 2020s – this unfinished period that the book calls "the decade of returns."[21]

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[16] Bacon 1897; Boisragon 1897; see Hicks 2020, 43, 56. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* notes that some of Boisragon's journalism took "great liberties" with the truth (Reynolds 2020).
[17] Lundén 2024, 221.
[18] Hicks 2023c; see discussion in Hicks 2025, 397–98.
[19] Lundén 2024, 219, 220.
[20] But see some pointers in Hicks 2021b; Hicks 2024; Hicks 2025b; Hicks and Ladewig 2025.
[21] Hicks 2020, xx, 235–42; Hicks 2021b.

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