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From Ownership to Place-Based Care in Cultural Heritage Preservation: The Case of Hattusa and Anthropomorphizing Anatolia

Kültürel Mirasın Korunmasında Mülkiyetten Mekâna Dayalı Koruma Yaklaşımına: Hattuşa Örneği ve Anadolu'nun İnsanlaştırılması

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Araştırma Makalesi

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the restitution of Hattusa's archaeological heritage contributes to debates on the preservation of cultural heritage by shifting attention from ownership-based restitution to the preservation of meaning in place. Focusing on the phased return of the Boğazköy finds, the study asks how cultural objects come to be framed as heritage that requires protection within its original geographical and cultural setting. The analysis draws on memoirs by Veysel Donbaz and Ertuğrul Günay, public statements surrounding the restitution process, and the TRT documentary on the Boğazköy finds. It compares earlier provenance- and documentation-based arguments with later narratives that emphasized emotional attachment, collective memory, and the bond between artifacts and Anatolia. The article argues that this case reveals an important shift in preservation thinking toward a relational model grounded in place-based care and guardianship. Its contribution lies in proposing the concept of Anthropomorphizing Anatolia to explain how land itself was represented as a living locus of memory, loss, and return, thereby expanding preservation debates beyond legal possession and physical conservation alone.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage Preservation, Restitution, Place-based Care, Collective Memory, Anthropomorphizing Anatolia.

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ÖZ

Bu makale Hattuşa'nın arkeolojik mirasının iade sürecinin kültürel mirasın korunmasına ilişkin tartışmalara nasıl katkı sunduğunu incelemektedir. Bu katkı, odağın mülkiyet temelli iade anlayışından anlamın kendi yerinde korunmasına kaydırılmasıyla ortaya çıkar. Boğazköy buluntularının aşamalı iadesine odaklanan çalışma kültürel nesnelerin nasıl olup da kendi coğrafi ve kültürel bağlamları içinde korunması gereken bir miras olarak çerçevelendiğini sorgulamaktadır. Analiz Veysel Donbaz ve Ertuğrul Günay'ın anılarına, iade sürecine ilişkin kamusal beyanlara ve Boğazköy buluntularına dair TRT belgeseline dayanmaktadır. Çalışma erken dönemdeki köken ve belge temelli argümanları daha sonraki dönemde öne çıkan duygusal bağlılık, kolektif hafıza ve eserler ile Anadolu arasındaki ilişkiyi vurgulayan anlatılarla karşılaştırmaktadır. Makale, bu vakanın, korunma anlayışında yer temelli bakım ve koruyuculuk ekseninde şekillenen ilişkiyi bir modele doğru önemli bir dönüşümü ortaya koyduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Çalışmanın katkısı Anadolu'nun insanlaştırılması kavramını önererek toprağın nasıl yaşayan bir hafıza, kayıp ve geri dönüş mekânı olarak temsil edildiğini açıklamasında yatmaktadır. Söz konusu yaklaşım koruma tartışmalarını hukuki mülkiyet ve fiziksel muhafaza sınırlarının ötesine taşımaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kültürel Mirasın Korunması, İade, Yer Temelli Bakım, Kolektif Hafıza, Anadolu'nun İnsanlaştırılması.

1. Introduction

What if a sphinx could long for home and home for the sphinx? In 2011, Türkiye celebrated the return of the Hattusa's archaeological heritage with an emotional homecoming ceremony that represented the artifact as a being in exile, yearning to reunite with its homeland. What stood out was not the restitution itself alone. Rather, it was the narrative constructed around it. The sphinx was coming home and Anatolia, in turn, was welcoming back its child. This rhetorical shift reframed cultural heritage as life to be restored. It marked a departure from conventional legalistic approaches to restitution and introduced a powerful new cultural policy discourse, which this article conceptualizes as Anthropomorphizing Anatolia.

While legalistic approaches to cultural heritage restitution centering on ownership, provenance and property rights have been studied (Campfens, 2020; Gerstenblith, 2020), recent scholarship has moved beyond juridical frameworks (Gerstenblith, 2023). Critics have emphasized the inadequacy of these legal regimes in addressing colonial-era expropriations, calling for alternative political and ethical paradigms such as cultural self-determination (Caligiuri, 2024). Parallely, new international dialogues and initiatives have expanded the scope of restitution debates to include identity and memory (UNESCO & G20 Culture Working Group, 2025). Critical heritage studies have interrogated the universalist narratives promoted by market museums and international institutions, exposing their role in perpetuating epistemic asymmetries (Geismar, 2015; Meskell, 2015). Expanding this critical turn, recent scholarship has introduced the notion of "insurgent heritage," which reframes preservation as an "ethical form of place-based care" driven by the interplay of collective memory and the specificities of place (Novoa, 2022, p. 1016). By moving the focus from professionalized stewardship to community-driven emotional engagement, these studies create a space for rethinking the relational ties between artifacts and their geographical origins.

This article examines how the Turkish officials reframed the restitution of Hattusa's archaeological heritage as the emotionally charged return of a being to its ancestral homeland. The case concerns two Hittite sphinxes and more than 10,000 cuneiform tablets unearthed at Boğazköy/Hattusa, the capital of the Late Bronze Age Hittite Empire (Bryce, 2019). Excavated beginning in 1906 by Hugo Winckler (1863–1913) and Theodore Makridi Bey (1872–1940), the finds were transferred to Berlin between 1915 and

1917 for restoration (Kanmazalp, 2023a). Although one sphinx and thousands of tablets were gradually returned, the return of the remaining tablets in the 1980s was closely associated with the efforts of Sumerologist Veysel Donbaz (Donbaz, 2014). The second sphinx, however, remained in Berlin until its restitution to Türkiye on July 27, 2011, during the tenure of Minister of Culture and Tourism Ertuğrul Günay (Güçlütürk et al., 2012, p. 133; E. Günay, 2019). The artifact is now exhibited in the Boğazköy Museum near Çorum.

Date / period	Event	Summary	Analytical relevance
1906	Excavations begin at Boğazköy/Hattusa	Hugo Winckler and Theodor Makridi Bey lead excavations in cooperation between the <i>Müze-i Hümayun</i> and the German Oriental Society. Two Hittite sphinxes and more than 10,000 cuneiform tablets are uncovered.	Discovery and archaeological context
1915–1917	Transfer to Berlin for restoration	The sphinxes and tablets are transported to Berlin for restoration and scholarly decoding with the expectation that they would later be returned to the <i>Müze-i Hümayun</i> .	Temporary transfer / restoration
1938	First Turkish demand for the second sphinx	Türkiye requests the return of the sphinx kept in the Berlin State Museums. The process becomes entangled with wartime and diplomatic uncertainties.	Early restitution claim
By 1943	Partial return of Boğazköy finds	Approximately 3,000 tablets and one of the two sphinxes are returned. The second sphinx and thousands of tablets remain in Berlin.	Partial restitution
1946	Postwar diplomatic complication	Türkiye is advised by the United Kingdom to direct its claim to the Soviet Union, which controlled the Berlin State Museums as the relevant occupying power. German authorities are not officially contacted at this stage (Müller, 2021, p. 31).	Postwar geopolitical obstacle
Post-1949	Division of Germany and diplomatic deadlock	The museum and the sphinx remain in the German Democratic Republic.	Cold War context
1974	Renewed Turkish efforts	Türkiye renews its efforts to reclaim both the sphinx and the remaining cuneiform tablets.	Renewed restitution initiative
1987	UNESCO appeal and return of tablets	Türkiye appeals to the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation. The clay tablets are repatriated, but the sphinx remains in Berlin.	Internationalization of the claim
2011	Return of the Boğazköy Sphinx	The Boğazköy Sphinx is finally returned to Türkiye.	Final restitution of the sphinx

Figure 1. Chronology of Hattusa Heritage Restitution

While previous research has analyzed the Boğazköy Sphinx case within the context of shifting cultural heritage regimes and the economic potential of heritage tourism in Türkiye (Kanmazalp, 2023b), this article offers a theoretical departure. Instead of focusing on fiscal dividends or the strategic redefinition of the country's image, this study explores the emotional and ontological dimensions of the restitution process through the lens of place-based care. By comparing the statements of two crucial individuals in the restitution process, Donbaz and Günay, the research uncovers the transition in Türkiye's approach from a legalistic perspective of possession to an understanding of guardianship that focuses on the intrinsic worth of cultural objects and their geographical roots. This paradigm-shifting discourse emphasizes the primacy of the geographic origin and appropriate safeguarding of cultural artifacts over societal considerations. Distinct from instances where anthropomorphism was restricted to artifacts and their societal significance, Anthropomorphizing Anatolia shows the importance of geographical origin and dedicated preservation in cultural artifacts.

2. Collective Memory and Emotional Heritage

Collective memory does not preserve a fixed past. It is continuously reconstructed within socially shared frameworks, allowing cultural heritage objects to acquire meaning through ongoing processes of interpretation and re-signification (Haas, 2025). Collective belonging is produced through rituals and socially regulated feeling rules that position cultural objects as focal points of shared attachment (Flam, 2023). The meaning of cultural objects comes into being in the course of reflexive interpretative practices in which discourse both constructs and is shaped by the social contexts it articulates (Maynard & Heritage, 2023). In this process, cultural objects actively structure collective identities by functioning as narrative devices through which shared meanings and senses of belonging are materially organized and made recognizable (McDonnell, 2023). Accordingly, collective memory is organized and transmitted by way of narratives as social practices. This enables cultural objects to operate as structured sites where meanings of the past are articulated and stabilized in the present (Bachleitner, 2022).

Cultural heritage constitutes a discursive space in which different social groups negotiate and assert divergent meanings, as the value and significance of cultural objects are constituted via ongoing struggles over interpretation and legitimacy (Liu et al., 2020). Within this space, collective emotions arise from shared interaction and mutual reinforcement, and cultural objects become sites of collective effervescence, where meanings and attachments are socially generated rather than individually experienced (Pizarro et al., 2022). These meanings are stabilized by emotionally reinforced narratives that sustain prevalent interpretations and render alternative readings less visible or more difficult to contest socially (Zhang et al., 2024). At the same time, heritage meanings are produced within polyvocal and participatory digital arenas, where multiple actors turn cultural objects into sites of ongoing discursive interaction (Kelpšienė et al., 2023). Discourse delineates the boundaries of meaning by structuring how cultural objects are interpreted. It also allows emotionally charged representations to gain legitimacy within collective frameworks of understanding (Hassan & Ahmed, 2026).

Heritage is seen as an affectively charged contact zone in which emotions and identity intersect, as narratives mobilize the past to produce forms of collective memory that render certain representations collectively compelling (Sierp, 2025). Heritage objects function as cultural and spatial anchors that stabilize collective identity by providing emotionally resonant points of reference, helping explain why anthropomorphic framings acquire particular force in moments of social and symbolic reorientation (Rossitti et al., 2025). These dynamics show that the concept of anthropomorphization is a socially embedded strategy that transforms heritage into an emotionally charged medium through which collective identity is negotiated and made meaningful in the present.

These perspectives align with a sociology of heritage perspective, which conceptualizes heritage as a socially negotiated process in which diverse actors construct emotional attachments around cultural objects (Bai et al., 2021). Heritage operates as a field of symbolic power in which certain narratives seek to stabilize meaning, while alternative actors intervene through affectively resonant reinterpretations to renegotiate the cultural significance of the past (Posso-Yépez et al., 2026). Heritage is thus understood as a continuously negotiated process (Shreya et al., 2026).

3. Rethinking Cultural Property and Heritage

The notion of cultural heritage entered international law with the 1815 Treaty of Vienna, which established an early framework for the unconditional restitution of cultural objects removed during wartime and thereby contributed to the formation of modern understandings of cultural heritage (Kowalski, 2005, p. 87). Throughout the early 20th century, debates remained largely centered on the concept of cultural property as the dominant legal and interpretive category within heritage discussions. This orientation was formalized in the 1954 Hague Convention, which defined cultural property by including monuments, archaeological sites, and works of art (Vadi & Schneider, 2014, p. 5). The interchangeable use of the terms property and heritage generated conceptual ambiguity, as each term reflects distinct legal regimes and different modes of interpreting and claiming culture (Bendix & Hafstein, 2009, p. 5). A more detailed classification emerged with the 1970 UNESCO Convention that specified eleven categories of protected objects, including “elements of archaeological sites that have been dismembered” (Roussin, 2003, p. 707).

The 1972 UNESCO Convention later reinforced the idea that heritage constitutes a shared global concern shaped through collective recognition and normative consensus (Smith, 2006, p. 27). It prioritized the safeguarding of immovable cultural resources such as archaeological sites, while simultaneously articulating the interdependence between natural and cultural environments (Lixinski, 2008, p. 383). The convention advanced the notion that the common heritage of humanity could extend to sites located within national territories and thus established a hybrid legal and symbolic space grounded in shared responsibility and ownership (Brumann, 2018, p. 1209). This development

contributed to the emergence of a legal framework for cultural property that integrates national and international law, the interpretation of which varies across legal systems but generally reflects the relationship between domestic regulations and transnational norms (Roussin, 2003, p. 710). The 1978 UNESCO Recommendation expanded this framework by foregrounding the cultural and symbolic significance of objects beyond their material characteristics (Blake, 2000, p. 65).

The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage directed attention to non-material forms of cultural expression (Craith, 2008, p. 57). The convention emphasized the continuation of these practices within communities and their role in fostering cultural diversity (Price, 2010, p. 202). By recognizing heritage as an assemblage of people, objects, practices, and processes, this framework expanded the analytical scope of heritage to include both material and immaterial dimensions as products of ongoing cultural practices (Geismar, 2015, p. 73).

Although UNESCO's convention acknowledges the importance of intangible elements embedded within tangible cultural artifacts, the concept of universalism is an area of critique. Market museums often present themselves as "centers of world culture" (Geismar, 2015, p. 76). They argue that their ability to preserve cultural objects legitimizes their role in exhibiting them (Price, 2010, p. 210). These institutions position themselves as global hubs for cultural heritage that go beyond national boundaries (MacMillan, 2013, p. 355). However, adopting a universalist approach can also marginalize cultures and countries that do not align with dominant Western perspectives (Meskell, 2009). This raises ethical concerns and political consequences, as sites granted world heritage status gain protections that other culturally significant sites may not receive. While UNESCO conventions emphasize a shared human experience, it is debated whether all communities truly feel represented within that narrative (Nicholas & Andrews, 1997, p. 7).

Hamilakis (2011) expands on the concept of indigenous archaeologies with a focus on the Greek communities within the Ottoman Empire, where local communities engage with artifacts in a multisensory way. This approach challenges the dominant frameworks of modern archaeological practice. These communities do not treat artifacts as distant or isolated objects. Instead, they incorporate them into the social and cultural rhythms of everyday life. In such contexts, artifacts are seen as having agency, which reflects a different understanding of materiality and time. Indigenous archaeologies often reject Western ideas of linear temporality and the commodification of heritage, instead viewing artifacts as existing across multiple timeframes and realities. This perspective aligns with the call to recognize the existence of "multiple pasts" (Nicholas & Andrews, 1997, p. 2). This shift has direct implications for preservation, as it supports the view that cultural objects are best safeguarded within their original contexts, where their cultural meaning and collective memory can be sustained.

4. The Importance of the Sphinx as Monumental Hittite Heritage

The archaeological and artistic significance of the Boğazköy Sphinx lies in its connection to Hattusa. Schachner (2022) identifies the Bronze and Iron Age settlement southeast of modern Boğazköy as the site of the Hittite Great Kingdom's capital (p. 57). This setting was shaped by a royal and administrative landscape in which Büyükkale functioned as the royal citadel and political center of an empire that, from the mid-fourteenth century BCE onward, ranked among the major powers of the eastern Mediterranean world (Becker & Schachner, 2025, p. 115). The monumental building complex in central Hattusa has often been regarded as a representative expression of Hittite culture as a whole, while the palace complex on Büyükkale has been described as a unique indigenous Anatolian architectural formation through which the ideological claims of the Hittite Great Kings were manifested (Schachner, 2022, p. 58; Becker & Schachner, 2025, p. 116).

The Boğazköy Sphinx should therefore be understood within this architectural and political environment. Canby (1989) describes the limestone sphinxes of the Sphinx Gate as monumental works,

more than eight feet tall, that once looked down over Hattusa from the highest point of the Upper City at Yerkapı and ranks them among the finest examples of Hittite sculpture known to date (p. 109). Their form combined sculpture in the round and architectural relief: the heads, forequarters, and hindquarters were carved in the round, while the wings and bodies were carved in high relief on the door jambs (Canby, 1989, pp. 109, 122). Their tight-fitting horned caps, long Hathor curls, and placement at the Sphinx Gate connected them to Hattusa's monumental gate architecture and to a visual environment in which urban space, royal representation, and monumental form were closely linked (Canby, 1989, p. 109).

5. Provenance, Legal Claims, and the Sphinx Case

Türkiye's legal approach focused on the provenance of the Boğazköy sphinx and the cuneiform tablets, their documented history of ownership since its modern discovery. Official negotiations for its repatriation between the Republic of Türkiye and the German Democratic Republic took place in Berlin from October 11 to 15, 1987. Veysel Donbaz was among the members of the negotiation committee. According to his account, the cuneiform tablets, accompanied by two sphinxes, were transferred to Berlin only for conservation purposes (Donbaz, 2014). Between 1924 and 1939, 33 crates containing a portion of these tablets were returned to Türkiye. However, the returns were halted with the outbreak of World War II. Due to the political situation after the war, Türkiye refrained from officially recognizing East Germany for a long period. As bilateral negotiations failed, Türkiye appealed to the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and UNESCO in 1972 for assistance (Donbaz, 2014, p. 284).

Donbaz's direct involvement began at this point. He compiled a detailed file including copies of all relevant documents held by the Istanbul Archaeology Museums. Officials from the German Democratic Republic raised no objections to returning the cuneiform tablets (Donbaz, 2014, p. 286). However, the restitution of the second sphinx, which had been sent to Berlin in 1924, became the main issue in negotiations. Donbaz stayed in Germany for two extra days after the rest of the Turkish delegation left, during which he secured the shipment of 1,650 tablets. Two weeks later, he returned to Türkiye with approximately 7,300 more tablets. Despite this progress, East German officials remained reluctant to return the sphinx (Donbaz, 2014).

Negotiations with the East German delegation held in Ankara in 1990 also ended without success. Donbaz asserts that during a meeting at the German Foreign Ministry, German officials acknowledged that Türkiye's claim for the repatriation of the sphinx was convincing and well-supported by the documents presented (Donbaz, 2014, p. 286). However, they stressed the need for a formal legal process to carry out the restitution (Donbaz, 2014, p. 286). Nurettin Yardımcı, who led the Turkish delegation, argued that the sphinx should be returned based on existing bilateral agreements. His position was reinforced by Germany's previous approval of the return and the original purpose for which the artifacts had been sent, namely, for cleaning and scholarly study (Donbaz, 2014, p. 286). Between November 2 and 22, 1987, Donbaz made further efforts to recover the remaining cuneiform tablets (Donbaz, 2014, p. 287).

During the bilateral negotiations between Turkish and German authorities on November 19, 2002, the Turkish committee claimed that the sphinx had been loaned to the Berlin Museum in the 1920s. They supported this claim with documentation, including letters from Otto von Falke (1862–1942), then General Director of the Berlin Museum, and Walter Andrae (1875–1956), Director of the museum's Near Eastern Department in 1938. However, German authorities disputed the Turkish position, arguing that Walter Andrae had officially registered the sphinx as the property of the Berlin Museum in 1935 (Donbaz, 2014, p. 477). They also presented a document dated November 15, 1899, from the Ottoman archives, indicating that Sultan Abdülhamid II (1842–1918) had authorized German archaeologists to claim fifty percent of the findings from excavation sites (Donbaz, 2014, p. 478). Turkish authorities rejected this argument by referring to Article 4 of a later decree issued on December 17, 1906, which annulled the

earlier permission. This decree stated that all antiquities, whether movable or immovable, found on public or private land were the property of the Ottoman Empire (Donbaz, 2014, p. 477).

This legal reasoning also resonates with the modern framework of Türkiye's Law No. 2863 on the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Property (as amended by Law No. 5226). Although the original law was enacted long after the Boğazköy finds had been transferred to Berlin, it codifies a continuing principle in Turkish cultural heritage law: movable and immovable cultural and natural properties that are known or later discovered on public or private land have the status of state property (Özel, 2011, p. 129; Uzun, 2024, p. 107). This principle is significant for archaeological objects, since finds unearthed from the ground enter state ownership without requiring any further legal act (Özel, 2011, p. 129). The "state property" status of cultural objects is also central to restitution claims, because it enables the state to pursue the return of cultural property removed abroad without authorization (Uzun, 2024, p. 107).

6. Place-Based Care and the Return of the Sphinx

The cultural heritage discourse adopted by Turkish officials underwent a significant shift between 2003 and the return of the Boğazköy Sphinx in 2011. In his book *Sevgili Anadolu* (Dear Anatolia, 2019), former Turkish Minister Ertuğrul Günay (born 1948) reflects on the cultural heritage scattered across Anatolia. The preface, written by his daughter Pınar Günay, focuses on the return of the Boğazköy Sphinx to Çorum. It begins with a historical narrative of the two sphinxes that were taken from Anatolia 3,400 years ago for restoration and it anthropomorphizes the Anatolian peninsula by comparing the removal of the sphinxes to the loss of "two ribs of Anatolia" (P. Günay, 2019, p. 14). In this imagined voice, Anatolia speaks of a painful separation in the preface, stating:

I, Anatolia, learned that one of my twins was spirited away to Istanbul, among the world's most enchanting places. A resplendent edifice was erected there, a sanctuary for ancient relics, and my 3,400-year-old progeny, the sphinx, was compelled to remain. Constrained, for I could neither retrieve her nor could she journey back to where she truly belonged. Her sister, held captive in the place she was taken for so-called care, her return obstructed by a myriad of pretexts. This confinement persisted for nearly a century. At last, following copious correspondence, negotiations and unwavering efforts, she too was escorted to Istanbul. Yet, my desire was not for their sojourn in Istanbul but for their return to me... to their rightful abode. Please, fathom my feelings and convey my plea to all. They are my offspring destined to thrive within the embrace of my very essence. (P. Günay, 2019, pp. 14–15)¹

Anatolia is represented as experiencing a deep sense of separation, longing for the sphinxes not to be returned to Istanbul, but to their original homeland. This personification highlights Pınar Günay's emphasis on the artifacts themselves, arguing that they should remain within the "bosom of Anatolia" (P. Günay, 2019, 14–15).

The book discusses the significance of the Hittite Empire in world history. Ertuğrul Günay addresses the Boğazköy restitution case and describes one of the sphinxes as being "held hostage" at the Berlin Museum for over a century (E. Günay, 2019, p. 19). In the section titled *Sfenkslerin Hasreti* (Longing of the Sphinxes), he underlines the importance of displaying the sphinxes in the Boğazköy Museum. He claims that this is their rightful place. Günay also acknowledges the local community's interest in Hittite cultural heritage as well as the economic benefits the museum brings to the region (E. Günay, 2019, pp. 21–22). He further emphasizes that, alongside the preservation of cultural assets at UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the repatriation of associated artifacts is essential for protecting global cultural heritage (E. Günay, 2019, p. 85).

¹ The translations from Turkish to English were completed by me unless otherwise indicated.

The Boğazköy Sphinx was finally repatriated to Türkiye on July 27, 2011. Günay announced that the sphinx would be displayed in Çorum, referring to it as its “birthplace” (Altuncu, 2011). After the return, Günay emphasized that the ministry had worked to repatriate many other artifacts closely tied to Anatolia (Uzun, 2011). On October 9, 2011, Günay reflected on the idea that objects, much like humans, might have emotions and an inner life that science has yet to fully understand. Günay stated:

[The Sphinx] will be displayed alongside its twin, which has so far been exhibited at the Istanbul Archaeology Museum. Since I believe that just as people have souls and emotional worlds, the soil and stones could also have emotional worlds. Science does not yet provide us with sufficient information on this subject, but we did not know about electricity in nature about 100 years ago, and now we know that such energy exists in nature. Maybe stones also have souls and perhaps, today here, an incredible joy will emerge in a world unknown to us when these upper and lower parts [of Weary Herakles] reunite. When the Boğazköy Sphinxes come from Istanbul and Germany to the soils of Çorum, a deep pain that has continued for over 100 years may come to an end and they will have reunited. (as cited in Sakarya, 2011)

7. Anthropomorphism and Place-Based Meaning

The anthropomorphizing of antiquities seen in the Boğazköy restitution case forms a key part of indigenous archaeological discourse. It challenges the idea of archaeology as a uniform discipline, as indigenous archaeologies offer alternative perspectives that emphasize the agency of objects, the value of engaging with material culture through multiple senses and understandings of time that go beyond linear chronology (Hamilakis, 2011). Well-known cases like the Elgin Marbles and the caryatids illustrate how artifacts can be anthropomorphized, viewed as human-like, within indigenous archaeological thinking. In this framework, artifacts, especially statues with human forms, are seen as connected to national heritage and are not just historical symbols but representations of ancestors themselves (Hamilakis, 2007, p. 297). These objects are understood as living beings that suffer from separation and displacement. For example, the caryatids of the Erechtheion on the Acropolis are said to mourn the absence of their “sister” who was taken away (Hamilakis, 2011, p. 56). This anthropomorphic perspective creates space for a narrative that connects physical artifacts with emotions like longing and the desire to return home. This example shows how anthropomorphic representation can strengthen restitution claims by creating empathy and emotional impact.

However, anthropomorphism in archaeological discourse does not have to be limited to objects with human-like form. In some indigenous perspectives, the capacity to feel extends to the land itself. This is evident in accounts where excavation is described as “a kind of wound in the earth that might not heal” (Londoño, 2021, p. 393). This logic extends even further in contemporary contexts, where digital replicas and museum objects are treated as “kin” (Morgan, 2022, p. 224). Anthropomorphism in this sense depends on relational ties that frame objects as part of a moral and familial network. This is poignantly illustrated in the Australian context, where local people described the destruction of the Juukan Gorge rock shelters as “akin to losing a treasured family member” (Bell & Hutson, 2025, p. 218). Within this perspective, sacred sites are understood as living cultural entities that carry an ongoing ancestral presence.

The concept of Anthropomorphizing Anatolia operates through a similar extension of human qualities to the land. However, what distinguishes it is that this anthropomorphic logic is directly mobilized within a restitution discourse. In this context, geography itself becomes an active subject of loss and return. Anatolia, the geographical origin of the Sphinx, is imagined as a grieving mother longing for the return of her lost children. Anatolia here becomes a living land that has been wronged and is now seeking to reunite with what was taken from it. In cases like the caryatids, it is often difficult to generate the same emotional awareness for objects that lack human form. Although the Boğazköy Sphinx has some anthropoid features, the emotional narrative surrounding it is not only about its own exile, but also about

the sorrow of a land deprived of its creations. This anthropomorphism of both the artifact and the land creates a new rhetorical strategy. It overcomes the visual or sculptural limitations of non-humanlike objects by grounding their meaning in their connection to place.

This inclusive quality is especially clear in the case of the cuneiform tablets returned alongside the Boğazköy Sphinx. Although they lack human-like features, the tablets were included in the story of homecoming. Their return affirmed that cultural value and emotional meaning are not tied to an object's form, but to its connection with place. In a 2023 documentary aired on TRT 2 (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation), the Deputy Director General of Cultural Assets and Museums, Dr. Yahya Coşkun, expressed this vision with remarkable clarity:

From our perspective, there is no difference between a person who has been torn from their homeland and held captive and an artifact that has been removed from its native soil. Because that artifact was created through the experience, accumulation and wisdom of the land to which it belongs. It belongs to that land. Otherwise, [exhibiting such an object elsewhere] is like plucking a flower and placing it in a vase. No matter how grand the museum or how dazzling the display, that artifact is doomed to wither like that flower. It must be brought back to the place where it was made, to where it truly belongs. Only there can it find meaning. Each of these tablets has now returned to this land, to the very place where it was inscribed thousands of years ago and where it still has thousands of things to tell us. The Sphinx, too, has returned to Çorum. (Coşkun, 2023, 23:23–24:08)

These points show that Anthropomorphizing Anatolia shapes how cultural objects are understood within their geographical context by linking them to shared emotions and collective memory. This perspective supports a preservation approach that prioritizes the original setting of cultural objects, where their meaning and cultural continuity can be maintained. In this sense, anthropomorphic narratives reinforce the view that safeguarding heritage includes both the protection of objects and the preservation of their connection to place.

8. Conclusion

The evolving conceptions of cultural property and cultural heritage throughout the 21st century have significantly influenced governance, recognition politics and the symbolic value of tangible heritage, leading to the rise of new heritage narratives. Restitution claims have increasingly emphasized the intangible dimensions of heritage, as claimant states are expected to explain the deeper cultural and societal meanings of contested artifacts (Thompson, 2003). This study has shown that changing conceptions of cultural property and cultural heritage have led to a shift in how cultural objects are understood and preserved. In earlier periods, restitution debates were largely shaped by legal ownership and provenance. Over time, greater attention has been given to the relationship between cultural objects and their geographical and cultural context. The Boğazköy Sphinx case demonstrates this transition clearly, as the focus moved from establishing legal claims to emphasizing the connection between the artifact and its place of origin.

This shift has important implications for cultural heritage preservation. As this study argues, cultural objects are increasingly understood as elements that require “place-based care” within their original environments, where their historical and social meanings can be sustained (Novoa, 2022, p. 1016). The case shows that the removal of such objects can be perceived as a disruption of collective memory, while their return supports the continuity of cultural meaning and local engagement with heritage. The concept of Anthropomorphizing Anatolia helps explain how this transformation takes place. By linking artifacts to a living geography, it highlights how heritage gains meaning through its connection to place. This approach supports a preservation framework in which safeguarding heritage involves maintaining both the physical integrity of objects and their relationship to the environment in which they were produced.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the preservation field by addressing the tension between utilitarian value, referred to the scientific research and physical integrity, and social value, referred to the emotional connection and ancestry. Traditional museum-centered preservation has often excluded emotion and memory from heritage discourse (Bienkowski, 2016, p. 39). By contrast, the guardianship model proposed here reintegrates the social value of objects, acknowledging that their removal constitutes a rupture in collective identity, while their return supports the continuity of meaning (Bienkowski, 2016, p. 39). In alignment with this view, Casini (2026) argues that restitution facilitates a “restoration of meaning” by allowing an artifact to “regain its identity and integrity” in its place of origin, thereby actively contributing to the healing of collective memory (p. 21). In the Hattusa case, this logic is exemplified by the inclusion of cuneiform tablets in the homecoming narrative, where even these non-figurative artifacts were reimagined as children of a living Anatolia and restored to the collective memory of their homeland. Finally, this shift toward a relational approach aligns with a global trend that treats archaeological sites and objects as “living agentive expressions and embodiments” of the land and its ancestors (McNiven, 2024, p. 82). In the case of the Boğazköy Sphinx and the cuneiform tablets, the evidence points to a shift from an ownership-based approach toward one grounded in guardianship.

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