

Rule of Law in four objects at the British Museum

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This mini tour is intended to suggest how objects might be used to tell, and to unsettle, contemporary and historical stories about law.

It draws directly on *A History of the World in 100 Objects* ([book](#), [podcast](#)).

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See further:

- [Pop-Up Museum of Legal Objects](#)
- Perry-Kessaris (2021) [Doing socio-legal research in design mode](#) Routledge

1. [Ife Head](#) Room 25 (Level -1) [Africa Galleries](#)

This sculpture represents the head of an Ooni—a King of the (in European terminology) medieval civilisation of Ife, which was in what we now know as Nigeria. It was made in the 15th century (about 600 years ago).

When Europeans first came across these heads in the 1920s they could not believe that both the extremely complex process for making these heads and the powerful and calm peoples that they represent were local to the area.

The Ooni was a spiritual and a practical leader. Here he is presented as both calm and charismatic. He is sure

of himself, and perhaps you feel as if you can be sure of him too. This kind of background sense of security is both a cause and an effect of the Rule of Law.

Today, Ife heads—together with, for example, the [Benin Bronzes](#) which were looted from Nigeria in 1897 and are also displayed in this room—are part of an intense global debate over rights and duties around displaced cultural heritage, especially where it has been acquired by (often colonial) force. They also play an important part in generating new perceptions and perspectives on history among, for example, school children and [poets](#).

2. [Pillar of Ashok](#) Room 33 (Level 1)

This is a fragment of a pillar created by the Emperor Ashok in India around 238 BCE (2200 years ago). As a young man, Ashok was extremely violent. But he later found Buddhism and became a figurehead for ideas of unity, tolerance, non-violence and multicultural harmony.

He used these columns as a public address system. They were placed across his empire and written in local languages. The ability to know what the law is—for it to be communicated to and comprehensible by the general population—is another central

component of the Rule of Law. If you don't know what the law is, you cannot follow it, which makes law ineffective and unjust.

This pillar specifies Ashok's commitment to treat all equally regardless of rank or religion, and regardless of whether they are known to him (from 6th pillar edict)—another key element of the Rule of Law. During colonial times British lawyers and academics managed to promote the idea that the Rule of Law, including equality before the law, was a British invention, or at least that it was part of

a uniquely European tradition originating with Aristotle and Plato (around 400-300 BCE).

Today, increasing attention is paid to the fact that bare equality before the law can be unhelpful if you have different needs due, for example, to disability, gender or race.

3. [Standard of Ur](#) Room 56 (Level 3)

This wooden box is known as the Standard of Ur because, when it was found in the early 1920s, it was thought to be a battle standard. No-one knows what it is actually for. It is 4500 years old and was found in what is now Iraq.

One side shows how our current social system arose. 5000 years ago people in Mesopotamia began living closely together and growing more food than they needed to survive. So they could afford to give some of it as taxes in exchange for protection. That allowed for the creation of different classes on top of the workers: rulers, artists, bureaucrats; and a legal system to organize it all. The other side shows organized violence (war), which is made easier and more likely by organized wealth creation.

Maintaining the Rule of Law both requires and generates wealth and peace. So today we often hear international organisations and leaders in richer countries speaking about the need for poorer countries to respect for the Rule of Law in order to be prosperous. But there are questions about the extent to which the rule of law is enhanced by the enforcement of laws which have been established, for example, without the historical engagement or consent of the governments of poorer, often formerly colonised, countries; or without the contemporary engagement or consent of marginalised group; or without regard to the needs of future generations. And we also see rich and poor countries alike breaching laws to acquire wealth and/or in the name of maintaining peace.

4. [Suffragette-defaced coin](#) Room 68 (Level 3)

This coin was defaced by Suffragettes at some point between 1903 when the coin was made and 1918 when women (over 30 and property holding) got the vote. They smashed the words VOTES FOR WOMEN across the face of King Edward VII in a way that shows power and inventiveness. These were low-value coins which everyone would see. It would give comfort to those who agreed and irritate those who did not.

This, and many other things that the suffragettes did, was an illegal act. And they were often violent towards property and sometimes people. Sometimes you have to break the law in order to make it right or better. Law often appears to be rules coming from above and bossing around people below; but any law holds within it the power to be subverted—turned back on itself and applied against its creator.