

## Memorandum Submitted by Members of the House of People's Representatives of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

The Federal Government of Ethiopia is happy to learn that the Culture, Media and Sport Committee has arranged oral evidence sessions as part of its inquiry into Cultural Property: Return and Illicit Trade. This Committee has a great opportunity to correct the injustices of the past which still hangs as a dark cloud in the relationship between our two nations.



We refer to the British looting of Maqdala in 1868 involving the seizure of possession of the church of Madhane Alem (or saviour of the world). **It is an act of sacrilege** that shook Ethiopians of the day and continues to have painful memories for this generation, more so when one learns that this loot is to be found scattered all over the UK, most for public display.

It is our strong belief that the Prime objective should be the restitution of our national heritage which has been acquired by illicit means and removed from our country. We therefore feel that our objective is within the remit of your Committee to address. We hope sincerely that your Committee will use this power to take the necessary actions to ensure that Ethiopia's case is not forgotten.

We appeal to your good office to go the extra mile to accommodate our call for justice even if this means extending the deadline for hearings which we believe is 10 June 2000. There is an excellent opportunity to rectify this great injustice and we have every reason to hope that your Committee will be able to address this longstanding issue.

*June 2000*

### The Maqdala Campaign

The Association for the Return of the Ethiopian Maqdala Treasures (AFROMET) is campaigning for the return of the Maqdala manuscripts that were looted by the British in 1868.

#### **Background**

The Maqdala manuscripts and other treasures – including crowns and chalices - were looted from Maqdala, the mountain fortress of Emperor Tewodros in northern Ethiopia, in 1868, during the British Napier expedition.



Emperor Tewodros committed suicide rather than be taken prisoner by the British; his body was set upon by souvenir seekers – officers and soldiers alike – who stripped him of his clothes and tore out his hair. The British desecrated religious buildings, looted icons and totally destroyed the Maqdala fortress.

[See the AFROMET Memo to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee of the UK, 2000 for full details.](#)

### Professor Pankhurst and AFROMET

Professor Richard Pankhurst – son of Sylvia and grandson of Emmeline – lives in Addis Ababa and came to Britain in July 2000 to request the return of the loot in his capacity as secretary of AFROMET. Oral hearings at the British parliament had been suspended in June 2000 so AFROMET was denied a fair hearing by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee; AFROMET was consequently denied the opportunity to put forward very strong arguments for the return of the loot.

### Memo tells the full story

A six-page memo from AFROMET has provided parliament with evidence and will be a permanent record of the request for the return of the treasure, but it could not replace the opportunity to put the arguments face to face as the situation surely deserves. In July 2000 letters were sent to 30 British MPs about the Maqdala loot. Individual members of the Anglo-Ethiopian Society are involved in the campaign.



Professor Pankhurst addressed a meeting of the British Ethiopia All-Party Parliamentary group on Thursday 20th July. The parliamentary report Cultural Property: Return and Illicit Trade was published on 25th July 2000 by the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport. On the subject of objects taken before 1907 it states that the judgement is likely to be historical and ethical rather than legal, and no less difficult for that'. The Museums Association emphasised that "every repatriation request has to be considered separately". This was supported by the Museums and Galleries Commission, which considered that "each request needs to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, while mindful of the implications for the wider museum community".

The museums are charities and must act in

accordance with charity law and the individual charity's constitution. Under charity law

trustees cannot give away property without the approval of a designated authority – the Charity Commission, the Attorney General or the courts, as appropriate. The Charity Commission stated that: “trustees have to balance any moral case to return particular items of cultural property with their responsibilities to keep the property in the public domain for the public benefit”.

Furthermore, museums “may be constrained from returning an object by the terms of a particular gift”. But this is not the case with the Maqdala manuscript since Napier himself has recommended that it be returned.



"THE NEGUS, THEODORE II"

It concedes that British museums are going to face increasing claims for the return of artefacts and goes some way to address what Britain should do about items acquired in the past and whose presence in British museums causes distress to those from

whom they were originally taken. It proposes the establishment of a body to mediate between claimants and institutions.

The Maqdala manuscripts are sacred treasures whose looting caused, and continues to cause, great distress to the very many millions of Ethiopians who are extremely devout Christians.

Precedents have been set for the Maqdala loot to be returned – Queens Victoria and Elizabeth II have returned certain (relatively inferior) pieces. In 1911, Lady Valerie Meux bequeathed manuscripts from her private collection to Emperor Menilek; the will was overturned on the grounds that ‘he was dead’ but he did not die until 1913, and in any case he had heirs! The Irish government has promised to return some manuscripts (currently at the Chester Beaton Library in Dublin) at an Ethiopian studies conference in Addis Ababa later this year (2,000). If they do so, this will set another precedent.

### **Gladstone Furious, Napier remorseful**

Mr Gladstone spoke on 30th June 1872 in the House of Commons, on a request that Parliament should pay for an Ethiopian crown thought to belong to the Abun [head of Ethiopian church], but which Professor Pankhurst thinks belonged to Emperor Tewodros, and a golden chalice.

**HANSARD** reports the relevant part of the speech as follows:

"He (Mr Gladstone) deeply regretted that these articles were ever brought from Abyssinia, and could not conceive why they were so brought. They were never at war with Abyssinia. They were never at war with the people or churches of Abyssinia. They were at war with Theodore... and he deeply lamented, for the sake of the country, and for the sake of all concerned, that those articles, to us insignificant, though probably to the Abyssinians sacred and imposing symbols, or at least hallowed by association, were thought fit to be brought away by the British Army".



The British Museum, in applying for the money, had said that the two items would "constitute a permanent record of the most remarkable event of the present time". But was it the business of the Museum to accumulate records of the most remarkable events of the present time? In his (Mr Gladstone's) opinion, it was the business of the Museum to do everything else almost except that.

Gladstone then refers to a letter from Napier. He continues:

"With that just and kindly spirit which belonged to him, Lord Napier said these articles, whatever the claims of the Army, ought not to be placed among the national treasure, and said they ought to be held on deposit till they could be returned to Abyssinia".

It was rather a painful confession, because, if they ought to be returned, it seemed to follow that they ought not to have been brought from Abyssinia; but Gladstone said that he agreed with Lord Napier... If these articles were acquired, it should be on the basis described by Lord Napier, with the view of their being held only until they could be returned.

### **Microfiches acquired**

Ethiopia has so far paid the British Library £10,000 for microfiches of the Maqdala manuscripts. Other manuscripts are held in Uppsala and Paris. The Swiss have given Ethiopia microfiches of what they hold, but Ethiopia has not yet been able to acquire microfiches of all of the Maqdala treasure held abroad. A full inventory is difficult to compile.

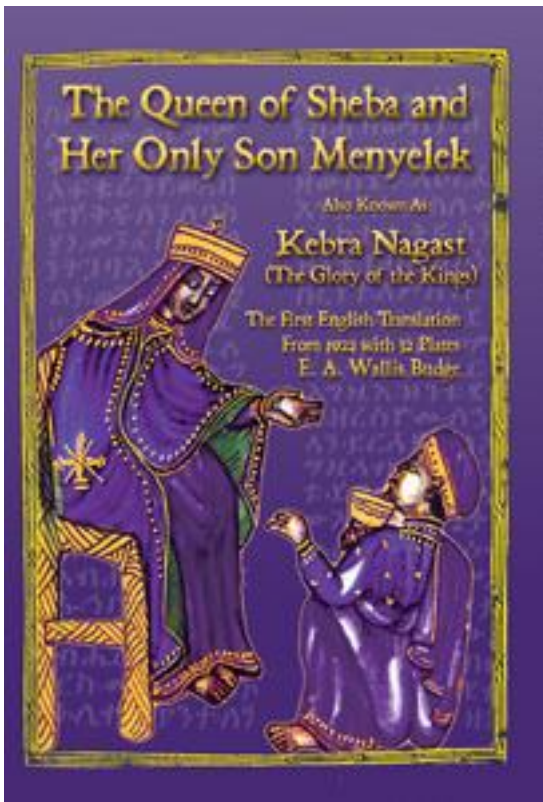
See \*\*\* for the full AFROMET memo prepared by its chair Andreas Eshete and secretary Professor Richard Pankhurst.

**[Memorandum on the Loot from Maqdala \(Ethiopia\) addressed to The Culture, Media and Sport Committee of the United Kingdom Parliament, by the Association for the Return of the Ethiopian Maqdala Treasures \(AFROMET\)](#)**

## in Addis Ababa.

### Introduction

The Association for the Return of the Ethiopian Maqdala Treasures (AFROMET), which was founded in Addis Ababa in 1999 to work for the return to Ethiopia of the loot unjustly taken by British troops as a result of the Napier expedition of 1867-8, wishes to recall the basic facts of this looting to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee of the United Kingdom Parliament.



In doing so AFROMET wishes to emphasise that the looting of Emperor Tewodros's mountain fortress of Maqdala in 1868 can in no way be justified in international law, and was therefore, we believe, in fact an act of injustice. We would further emphasise that the British looting of Maqdala involved the seizure of church property in the possession of the Church of Madhane Alam, or Saviour of the World, at Maqdala, **and was therefore an act of sacrilege.**

We feel that the injustice committed by the British at Maqdala, like other injustices of the past, must be repaired; and that this can be effected only by full restitution to Ethiopia of all cultural objects unjustly looted from the country. We feel, in the words of a British lover of justice, that nothing is truly settled

until it is settled justly.

We would further emphasise that the objects looted, crowns, manuscripts, processional crosses, and tabots (or altar slabs), etc., were an integral part of Ethiopia's cultural heritage, which, we believe, must be returned to their true owners: the Ethiopian people.

We would further emphasise that, whatever was the situation in the past, Ethiopia now possesses modern libraries and museums fully capable of preserving the loot unjustly taken from Maqdala.

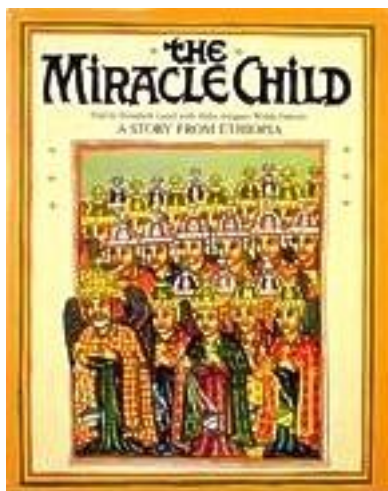
We would note that the principle of restoring the loot unjustly taken from Ethiopia has, in a way, long been accepted by the British Government, which over the years has returned two crowns, a royal seal, and an important manuscript to Ethiopia. These acts of restitution were effected, however, only on a piecemeal basis. AFROMET by contrast demands total restitution as a long overdue act of justice.

We reiterate that we are asking for this restitution, pure and simply, as an act of justice, and feel that the people of Britain, faced by the looting of their own cultural heritage, would rightly demand no less.

## History

We feel that to clarify the situation of the loot from Maqdala it may be useful to chronicle the story, as follows:

### I THE FALL OF MAQDALA



The British capture of Maqdala, Emperor Tewodros's mountain capital in north-west Ethiopia, took place on 13 April 1868, immediately after the Ethiopian monarch committed suicide to avoid falling into the hands of his enemies. The seizure of the citadel was described by an Ethiopian royal chronicler, Alaqa Walda Mariam, who, looking at the event from an Ethiopian point of view, states that when "everything fell into the hands of the English general... every [Ethiopian] soldier at Maqdala threw his weapons over the precipice and went and grovelled before the enemy". Those who failed to throw away their arms were, he claims, "considered as belligerents and many men thus perished", presumably at the hands of the victorious army.

Elaborating on this assertion, he declares that "the English troops rivalled one another" in "shooting down" any Ethiopian seen carrying spears or guns, and that "when anyone was seen taking up a weapon he was shot".

The above grim picture, it is only fair to say, finds no confirmation in British official records which, on the other hand, do not, however, provide any contradictory evidence.

### II. THE LOOTING OF THE FORTRESS

The pillage, and subsequent destruction, of Maqdala is well documented in contemporary British accounts. The geographer Clements Markham, one of the leading British historians of the Expedition, recalls that Napier's men, on entering the citadel, swarmed around the body of the deceased monarch. They then "gave three cheers over it, as if it had been a dead fox and then began to pull and tear the clothes to pieces until it was nearly naked". This account is corroborated by the Anglo-American journalist Henry M. Stanley, who reports seeing a "mob, indiscriminate of officers and men, rudely jostling each other in the endeavour to get possession of a small piece of Theodore's blood-stained shirt. No guard was placed over the body until it was naked".

The troops, it is agreed by all observers, also seized whatever valuables they could find in and around the citadel. Markham records that they "dispersed" all over the mountain-top and that the Emperor's treasury was "soon entirely rifled".

The nearby church of Madhane Alam, literally, the Saviour of the World, or at least its eqa bet, or store house, was apparently looted, though this action, constituting as it did a gross act of sacrilege, is glossed over in the British accounts. It is, however, evident that most of the many religious manuscripts, crosses, and other ecclesiastical objects acquired by the British troops at Maqdala could only have come from one or other of the its two churches. Several Ethiopian manuscripts later brought to Britain moreover contain tell-tale inscriptions to the effect that they belonged to Madhane Alem Church, while a manuscript in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, (M.S. Aeth. d. 1) bears a pencil note, in English, stating that it was "taken from a church at Maqdala in 1868", i.e. the year of the Expedition.



One of the tabots, or altar slabs, in the British Museum, is likewise incised with the words "TABOTA MADHANA ALAM", i.e. Tabot of Madhane Alam.

The loot from Maqdala, according to Stanley, included "an infinite variety of gold, and silver and brass crosses", as well as "heaps of parchment royally illuminated", and many other articles which were, before long, "scattered in infinite bewilderment and confusion until they dotted the whole surface of the rocky citadel, the slopes of the hill and the entire road to the [British] camp two miles off".

### III. SIR RICHARD HOLMES

One of those present at this act of plunder was Richard, later Sir Richard, Holmes, Assistant in the British Museum's Department of Manuscripts, who had been appointed the Expedition's

"archaeologist". He claimed in an official British Museum report that the British flag had "not been waved ...much more than ten minutes" before he himself had entered the fort. Shortly afterwards, at dusk, he met a British soldier, who was carrying the crown of the Abun, i.e. the Head of the Ethiopian Church, and a "solid gold chalice weighing at least 6lbs". Holmes succeeded in purchasing both for £4 Sterling. He was, on the same occasion, also offered several large manuscripts, but declined them because they were, he says, too heavy to carry!

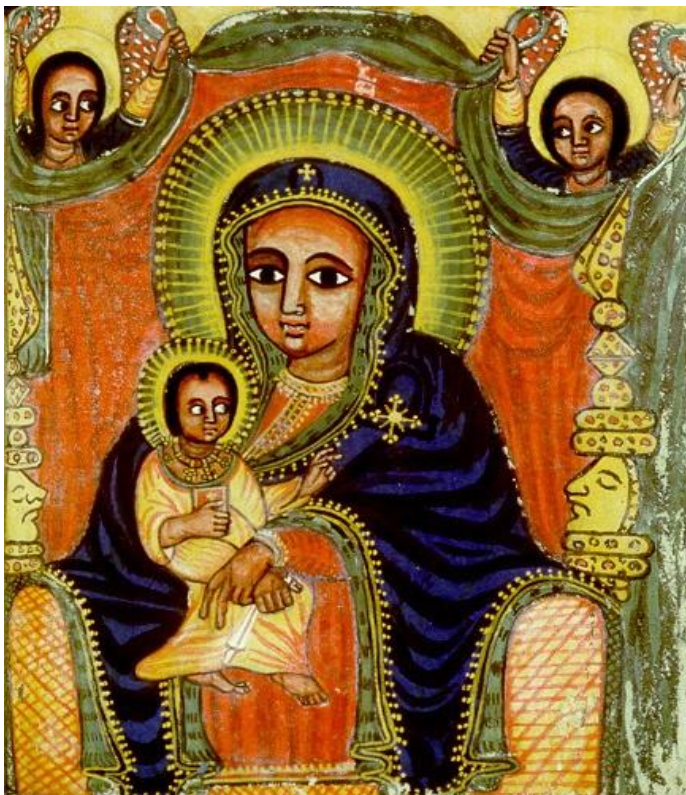
The British military authorities, which, in accordance with the custom of the day, saw no objection to the principle of plunder, sought, however, to regularise it: to render the distribution of booty "fairer", and in effect to ensure that officers, and others with ample funds, could acquire the lion's share - at the expense of the ordinary soldiers.

The loot from Maqdala was accordingly collected, on Napier's orders, for subsequent auction.

#### **IV. THE BURNING OF MAQDALA**

Steps were meanwhile taken by the British military authorities, on the afternoon 17 April, entirely to destroy the city. Working parties, according to a British officer, Captain Hozier, laid mines under the gate and other defences, as well as Tewodros's artillery, which had been cast with great difficulty by the Emperor's European

artisans. The fort was then blown up, together, Markham notes, with an "an ill-fated cow", who, unfortunately for her, happened to be present at that moment. The Emperor's palace and all other buildings, including the church of Madhane Alam, were next set on fire. The conflagration, Hozier reports, "spread quickly from habitation to habitation and sent up a heavy cloud of dense smoke which could be seen for many miles".



The British troops then secured "good positions", Stanley states, "from whence the mighty conflagration ...could be seen to advantage".

Describing the destruction of Tewodros's capital in some detail, Stanley continues:

"The easterly wind gradually grew stronger, fanning incipient tongues of flame visible on the roofs of houses until they grew larger under the skilful nursing and finally sprang aloft in crimson jets, darting upward and then circling round on their centres as the breeze played with them. A steady puff of wind levelled the flaming tongues in a wave, and the jets became united into an igneous lake!

"The heat became more and more intense; loaded pistols and guns, and shells thrown in by the British batteries, but which had not been discharged, exploded with deafening reports... Three thousand houses and a million combustible things were burning. Not one house would have escaped destruction in the mighty ebb



and flow of that deluge of fire”.

## **V TWO-DAY AUCTION**

The loot from Maqdala was then transported, on fifteen elephants and almost two hundred mules, to the nearby Dalanta Plain. There, on 20 and 21 April, the British military authorities held a two-day auction to raise “prize-money” for the troops. “Bidders”, Stanley states, “were not scarce for every officer and civilian desired some souvenir”, among them “richly illuminated Bibles and manuscripts”. Holmes, acting on behalf of the British Museum, was one of the principal purchasers. Stanley describes him “in his full glory” for, “armed with ample funds, he out-bid all in most things”. Colonel Frazer, buying for a regimental mess “ran him hard”, and “when anything belonging personally to Theodore was offered for sale, there were private gentlemen who outbid both”.

This officially organised sale raised a total of £5,000, which assured each enlisted man “a trifle over four dollars”.

## **VI BRITISH MUSEUM AND OTHER BRITISH LIBRARY ACQUISITIONS**



As a result of Holmes, the British Museum, now the British Library, became the receiver of 350 Ethiopian manuscripts, many of them finely illuminated.

A further six exceptionally beautiful specimens were acquired by the Royal Library at Windsor Castle.

Sir Robert Napier later presented another manuscript to the Royal Library in Vienna, while two others reached the German Kaiser, and a further two the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris.

Almost two hundred other volumes were subsequently acquired by the Bodleian Library in Oxford, Cambridge University Library, the John Rylands Library in Manchester, and several smaller British collections.

Several of these manuscripts contain extensive archival material, including Tewodros's tax records, which have been edited by Professor Richard Pankhurst in his *Tax Records and Inventories of Emperor Tewodros of Ethiopia* (London, 1978), constitute data essential for the study of Ethiopian history, including that of the history of the country's art.

The loot also included: two crowns, and a royal cap, all three seemingly belonging to Tewodros, and his imperial seal; a golden chalice, probably that mentioned in Holmes's above-mentioned report; ten tabots, or altar slabs, evidently looted from the churches of Maqdala; a number of beautiful processional crosses, which ended up at the South Kensington Museum, later the Victoria and Albert Museum; two of the Emperor's richly embroidered tents,

which are now in the Museum of Mankind, in London; and pieces of the deceased monarch's hair, some of it to be seen to this day in the National Army Museum, also in London.

## **VII. THE INITIATIVE OF EMPEROR YOHANNES IV**



Tewodros's successor, Emperor Yohannes IV, was deeply grieved by the loss of the treasures from Maqdala. Having no hope of obtaining full restitution he wrote two letters, on 10 August 1872, to Queen Victoria and the British Foreign Secretary, Earl Granville, respectively. In them he requested the return of two items, a manuscript and an icon. Both were considered of particular importance. The manuscript was a *Kebra Nagast*, or "Glory of Kings", which, though not specified in his letter, was of especial interest in that its end-papers contained "historical notices and

other documents" relating to the city of Aksum, as Dr Dieu of the British Museum was later to note.



The icon was no less notable. Known in Ge'ez as a Kwer'ata Re'esu, literally "Striking of His Head", it was a representation of Christ with the Crown of Thorns. This painting had, since at least the seventeenth century, been taken by Ethiopian rulers and their armies with them whenever they went on a major, or particularly hazardous, campaign. This highly prized painting had been captured by the Sudanese in the eighteenth century, but had later been repurchased, on which occasion, the Scottish traveller and historian James Bruce recalls, Gondar, the then Ethiopian capital, was "drunk with joy".

On receiving the two letters from Emperor Yohannes, the British Government informed the British Museum that it would be a "gracious and friendly act", if it complied with the Ethiopian request. The Museum authorities, on investigating the matter, found that they possessed two copies of the Kebra Nagast, both taken from Maqdala, and accordingly agreed to return one, in Dr Dieu's view the less interesting.

This manuscript is noteworthy in that it was the only acquisition of the Museum ever to be restored to its former owners, and thus sets an interesting precedent for the return of loot not only to Ethiopia, but also to the Third World.

### **VIII. THE MISSING ICON**

The icon, unlike the manuscript, could not be found. Queen Victoria accordingly replied to Emperor Yohannes, on 18 December, declaring: "Of the picture we can discover no trace whatever, and we do not think it can have been brought to England".

In this belief Her Majesty was, however, completely mistaken, for the painting had been acquired by Holmes, who had kept it for himself. Having some time later left the Museum's service, he was at that very moment none other than the Queen's Librarian at Windsor Castle.

His ownership of the painting was not, however, publicly acknowledged until 1890, a year after Yohannes's death; and it was not until 1905 that a photograph of the icon was allowed to appear in *The Burlington Magazine*, an art journal with which Holmes was associated. The reproduction bore the revealing caption:

"Head of Christ formerly in the possession of King Theodore of Abyssinia, now in the possession of Sir Richard Holmes, K.C.V.O."

By then, the request by Emperor Yohannes for the restitution of the icon had, of course, long since been filed away!

### **IX. LADY MEUX**

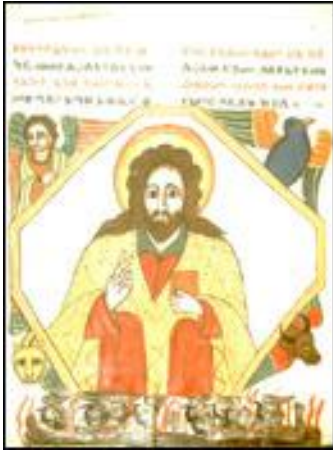
The most famous private collection of Ethiopian manuscripts from Maqdala was that acquired by an English woman, Lady Valorie Meux, who had several of them published in London, in facsimile editions, with translations by Sir Ernest Wallis Budge. These manuscripts were seen by Emperor Menilek's envoy Ras Makonnen, who had come to England, in 1902, for the Coronation of King Edward VII. When the Ras saw these manuscripts, he expressed great admiration, stating that he had "never seen any such beautiful manuscripts" in his country, and declared that he would "ask the Emperor to buy them back".



Later towards the end her life, when Lady Meux made her Will, on 23 January 1910, she bequeathed her Ethiopian manuscripts to Emperor Menilek. The Times, reporting this, stated that "envoys from the Emperor were sent over to arrange for their [the manuscripts'] recovery, and it is believed that the present bequest is the fulfilment of a promise then given".

Lady Meux died on 20 December of the same year. Her Will created a sensation, because a section of the British public apparently pined for the manuscripts' retention in England. An article in The Times, of 7 February 1911, stated: "Many persons interested in Oriental Christianity... will view with extreme regret the decision of Lady Meux to send her valuable MSS once and for all out of the country".

The Will was thereupon overturned, on the grounds that Menilek was dead when Lady Meux died. He did not in fact die until December 1913, and in any case had heirs. Lady Meux's intention was, however, frustrated. Ethiopia was in a sense robbed a second time - for the manuscripts were retained in England.



## **X. TWENTIETH CENTURY PIECEMEAL RESTITUTION**

The story of the loot from Maqdala came to the fore again several times in the twentieth century, and will continue to do so, no doubt, until restitution is finally made.

The British Government, though thus far apparently unwilling to recognise what would now be considered the original immorality of looting Tewodros's capital, found it convenient, when suitable occasions arose, to dole out a few articles of loot, almost as articles of charity.

During the visit of Ras Tafari Makonnen, the future Emperor Haile Sellassie, to Britain in 1924, the British Government thus arranged to send the then Ethiopian ruler, Empress Zawditu, one of the Tewodros's two crowns. The one selected was silver-gilt, enabling the Victoria and Albert Museum to retain the more valuable, gold crown. Forty years later, at the end of Queen Elizabeth's State visit to Ethiopia in 1965, the British Government likewise arranged that Her Majesty should present Emperor Haile Sellassie, with Tewodros' royal cap and seal.

The time has come, it is widely believed, to consider the return of the loot from Maqdala in its entirety, rather than to continue with such haphazard acts of belated repatriation.

(The above account is based on Professor Pankhurst's article "The Napier Expedition and the Loot from Maqdala", which appeared in *Presence Africaine* (1985), Nos. 133-4, pp. 233-40. The latter article contains full bibliographical references to all the passages above quoted).

## **Conclusion**

AFROMET urges the United Kingdom Parliamentary Committee to recognise the elementary right of all peoples to struggle for the restitution of their cultural property, no less than for their freedom, when taken away from them by force.

We recall that the British Expedition against Emperor Tewodros of Ethiopia in 1867-8 was accompanied by extensive looting of his capital at Maqdala.

We observe that this loot comprised numerous items of major historical and cultural importance for Ethiopia. They include over 350 Ethiopian manuscripts on parchment, many of them exquisitely illustrated; two crowns, one of them of almost pure gold; an early sixteenth century icon of Christ with the Crown of Thorns, traditionally carried by Ethiopian monarchs on campaign;

Tewodros's two royal tents; ten tabots, or holy altar slabs; and many fine processional church crosses.

We affirm our conviction that, whatever the rights and wrongs of the case, the dispute between Emperor Tewodros and the British Government over a hundred and thirty years ago, in no way justified Ethiopia's permanent deprivation of her cultural property.



We declare further that inasmuch as the loot was largely the property of Maqdala's church of Madhane Alam, i.e. Saviour of the World, it constituted not only an act of injustice, **but also one of sacrilege.**

We note further that British Governments, while insisting on the unjust retention of this loot, have long recognised the value of restitution. On three occasions, over the last century and a half, Britain, when wishing to purchase Ethiopia's good-will, returned a total of four items looted from Maqdala. We urge that such piecemeal restitution for political ends should be replaced by the return of all property looted from Maqdala, as an act of elementary justice.

Our Association, which has held numerous meetings on the subject in Addis Ababa, welcomes the initiative of the British Parliament in establishing your Committee, and trusts that, after due deliberation, your Committee will (1) recognise the injustice of the looting of Maqdala in 1868; and (2) recommend the restitution to Ethiopia of this loot.

*Andreas Eshete (Professor) Chairman*  
*Richard Pankhurst (Professor) Historian*  
AFROMET

## Ethiopia demands stolen crown back

President writes to British museums to call for return of more than 400 treasures looted in 1868

By Andrew Johnson

Sunday 23 November 2008

Ethiopia is demanding that Britain's museums return some of its most significant religious treasures. President Girma Wolde-Giorgis has personally intervened in a dispute to get the artefacts, including the Ethiopian royal crown, returned home 140 years after they were "looted" by marauding British troops.



The President has written to the British Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum, the British Library and Cambridge University Library seeking the restitution of more than 400 so-called "treasures of Magdala", which were stolen by British soldiers following a battle in 1868.

In the letter, obtained by *The Independent on Sunday*, the President wrote: "I must state that Ethiopians have long grieved at the loss of this part of their national heritage. Ethiopians feel that this act of appropriation had no justification in international law. I feel, therefore, that the time has come for the return of Ethiopia's looted treasures."

Among the items being held in the UK is an 18-carat gold crown and more than 300 priceless manuscripts, including Christian scriptures. Experts say the issue is particularly sensitive for Ethiopians because many of the artefacts hold deep religious significance for them. These include nine tabots, or sacred wooden altar slabs, which are recognised as so holy that the British Museum has pledged never to display them. When a tabot was returned in 2005 after being discovered in the back of an Edinburgh church, thousands of people turned out to greet its return in Addis Ababa.

The objects were among those seized by British soldiers after the storming of the Fortress of Magdala in 1868, a punitive expedition that followed the kidnap of several Britons. Emperor Tewodros committed suicide after the battle. According to contemporary accounts, British soldiers slaughtered hundreds of poorly armed Ethiopians after the battle, and then "jostled each other" to grab a piece of the emperor's blood-stained shirt, which they tore from his body. They also looted the citadel and a nearby church, carrying off treasures that included "an infinite variety of gold, and silver and brass crosses", as well as "heaps of parchment royally illuminated".

British museums have in the past resisted calls for artefacts from their collections to be returned to their countries of origin, but it is understood that Neil MacGregor of the British Museum and Mark Jones of the V&A have already met the Ethiopian ambassador to discuss the matter.



Museums often argue in restitution cases that the artefacts are better off in Britain because anyone in the world can view them, and the V&A is known to have asked Addis Ababa whether the silver crown of Emperor Tewodros, which it returned to Ethiopia in 1925, is available for public view.

The V&A said yesterday that discussions were still ongoing, even though the President's letter was sent in February this year. The four organisations involved have also held meetings over the way forward.

The Magdala treasure differs to other restitution cases, such as that of the Elgin Marbles, because it is acknowledged that the treasures were simply stolen. "It was straightforward looting," a spokeswoman at the Ethiopian embassy in London said.

A spokeswoman for Afromet, an organisation that has campaigned for the restitutions of the items, said: "These museums hold most of Ethiopia's heritage. It means far more to Ethiopians than it could ever do to anyone else."

## Give back looted treasures, Ethiopia tells the world

After decades of political wrangling, Italy agreed to return the Rome Obelisk to its home. Now Addis Ababa wants Britain to send back its ancient relics, including some held by the Queen, writes Meera Selva

Wander around Axum, a sleepy town in northern Ethiopia, and it is impossible to ignore the giant pit that has been dug right in the centre of town. It is to be filled with the Rome Obelisk, a 1,700-year-old carved granite stone that was hauled away by the Italians in 1937 during Mussolini's brutal occupation of the country.



Wander around Axum, a sleepy town in northern Ethiopia, and it is impossible to ignore the giant pit that has been dug right in the centre of town. It is to be filled with the Rome Obelisk, a 1,700-year-old carved granite stone that was hauled away by the Italians in 1937 during Mussolini's brutal occupation of the country.

Sipping macchiato made from an imported Italian coffee machine, 24-year-old Akul explains just why the stone should be returned. "It is our history and we are proud of it. They [the Italians] cannot be proud of their history in this country so they have no right to keep it."

Akul and others like him have found an unexpected champion in their fight to have their antiques returned.

Professor Richard Pankhurst, son of Sylvia, grandson of Emmeline and nephew of Christabel, the trio of suffragettes who won for women the right to vote in the UK, has taken up the Ethiopian cause.

Sitting in the study of his home in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, surrounded by grandchildren, he talks of how important it is that Europe returns the treasures it stole from the African country. "The youth of this country deserve to see the treasures produced by their ancestors," he said. "It is very important for them to feel a sense of pride in their country, and to know that they are from a civilisation that produced great things."

Professor Pankhurst, 77, and his family are almost Ethiopian treasure in themselves. His mother's tomb was given pride of place at the front of the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Addis Adaba. She was one of the few Westerners to notice and oppose Italy's occupation of Ethiopia. People in Addis still remember how she fought for Ethiopian independence, and eventually moved to the country to edit a newspaper. In many ways, the country suited her perfectly.

Except for the Italian invasion, which lasted from 1935 to 1941, the country had never been colonised, and the status of women in Ethiopia was in many ways better than it was in England. Women could own property and keep their own name after marriage long before they were given the same rights in England.



After she died, in Ethiopia, in 1960, Professor Pankhurst took up her mantle. In 1962, he set up an Institute for Ethiopian studies in the grounds of Addis Adaba University. He left the country in 1976, just after the socialist dictatorship, known as the Derg, took power, but later returned and settled in Addis. He is currently research professor at the institute.

His son, Alula, named after an Ethiopian patriot, teaches social anthropology at the university, and his daughter, Helen, who kept the Pankhurst name after she married, has brought her children to Ethiopia for a year to teach them Amharic, the country's main language. Every taxi driver in the capital knows the way to the Pankhurst house and every tour guide around the country claims to be Professor Pankhurst's closest friend.



"He is a very good man - he always talks well about Ethiopia abroad, which is why foreigners come to see us," said Menelik as he unlocked the door to King Ezana's stela, a fourth-century stone in Axum that has inscriptions in the ancient languages of Sabaeen, Ge'ez and Greek.

"Without him, everyone thinks we are people of only famine and war."

Ethiopia is one of the growing number of countries that are demanding the return of antiques that were taken away by Western colonial powers.

Like the Elgin Marbles, the Rome Obelisk has become a symbol of the wrongs inflicted on a developing country by a First World power.

Ethiopia has struggled to build up a tourism industry in the wake of Live Aid and other famine appeals, which destroyed its image abroad, and sees the return of its antiquities as a crucial part of an economic and political recovery.

"We need all the help we can get to rebuild tourism," Mulugetu Assefe, head of the Lalibela branch of National Tour Operators, said. "Our hotels and transport are not always reliable, but if we get these treasures back, we believe the stream of tourists that will come will help us improve standards." After decades of political wrangling, Italy agreed last year to return the Rome obelisk to Ethiopia, but so far, no one has found a way to get the 100 ton structure back to its original site in northern Ethiopia. It was taken away by sea at the port of Massawa but that port is now part of Eritrea, which refuses to help Ethiopia until a border dispute between the two countries is resolved.



Despite the deadlock over the obelisk, Professor Pankhurst is determined to secure the return of the Maqdala Treasures, a collection of precious manuscripts and artefacts that was stolen by the British, who invaded the mountain city of Maqdala in 1868. The Ethiopian ruler Emperor Tewodros committed suicide after the defeat and the British loaded up 15 elephants and 200 mules with the looted goods and carried them home, where they were auctioned off to raise money for British troops.

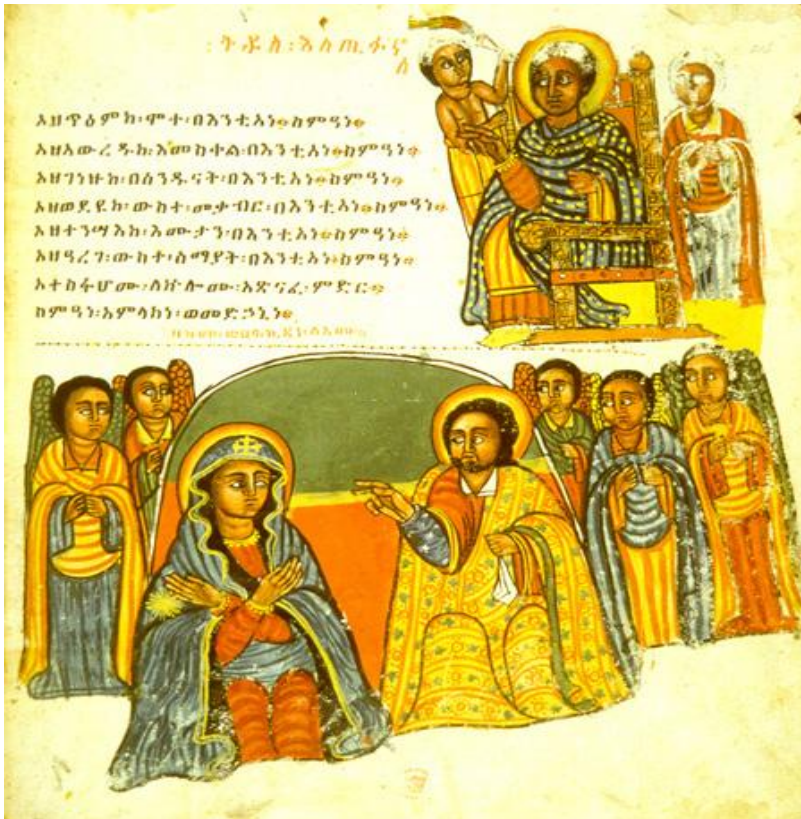
The collection, believed to be worth \$3bn (£1.7bn), is scattered around various houses and institutions including the British Library, the Royal Library at Windsor Castle, and the Cambridge University Library.

Tourists and rogue antique dealers still try to smuggle artefacts out of the country and the World Bank now plans to set up a catalogue of all remaining artefacts in Ethiopia, to stop them also being taken out of the country illegally.

Some of the looted art has made its way back in dribs and drabs. Reverend John Luckie discovered a tabot, a wooden replica of the Arc of the Covenant - used by Israelites to carry the Ten Commandments to the Promised Land - that is found in all Ethiopian Orthodox churches, in a

battered leather box in an Edinburgh church, and returned it to Ethiopia in 2002. More than a thousand Ethiopians lined the route from Addis Ababa's airport to the university to welcome it home.

The most recent return was in May, when a Danish professor, Fiona Wilson, returned a buffalo skin and silver shield belonging to Emperor Tewodro, which had hung in her parents' dining room during her childhood. Her grandfather had bought the shield from a dealer in 1890, and her family had assumed it was a Scottish antique. The shield has now become the single most visited item in Ethiopia.



Despite these small victories, Ethiopian academics want artefacts to be returned in a systematic way so they can build up a comprehensive collection, that they then promise will be available to academics around the world.

This week, the Ethiopian parliament will make a formal request to the British Government to return the Maqdala treasures.

"Individuals have returned antiques promptly but I just wish the Queen could be as generous in returning the six precious manuscripts she holds at Windsor Castle," said the professor. "It is part of her private collection and there is nothing to stop her returning them."

The main obstacle faced by Professor Pankhurst is a belief

that Ethiopia will not be able to care for the antiques properly. Indeed attitudes towards precious artefacts can seem somewhat cavalier in Ethiopia.

A manuscript made of goat skin that dates from the 16th century is left open on an office chair inside one of Lalibela's 900-year-old rock churches and others are left out in the sunlight for tourists to photograph. And centuries-old bronze artefacts are casually dragged out by priests from under wooden benches to be photographed by visitors. In Axum, local women collect murky green water to wash their clothes from a square pool which is believed to be baths used by the Queen of Sheba. Professor Pankhurst accepts this is a problem. "We will have to hold workshops for priests, teaching them how to store and handle ancient manuscripts properly," he admits. "But I would like to point out that the obelisks that remain in Axum are still intact, while the one in Rome has had its surface eroded by Roman pollution. It's simply not true that things will be better cared for in the West. Remember the fire at Windsor Castle? It could very well have destroyed our manuscripts."

He adds that the antiques that remained in Ethiopia survived all the country's political turmoils, including the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, and the war against Eritrea in 1998. "Everyone in Ethiopia recognises the value of the possessions we have. Even during the 1974 revolution, army generals took personal responsibility for the safety of even the smallest item of any historic significance."

The British Library tried last month to offer a compromise solution. It refused to return the 10 tabots it holds, but offered to give access to Ethiopian priests in London who wanted to view them. It adds that it wants to preserve its collections "for the benefit of international scholarship and the enjoyment

of the public". Historians argue that the tabots are religious objects that are meaningless outside a church. Professor Andreas Eshete, president of Addis Ababa University, said: "The *tabots* give a church its sanctity, and they only have a value if they are accompanied by a congregation and prayers. And if scholars are really interested in Ethiopian history, they surely cannot object to travelling to Ethiopia to see manuscripts in the country where they belong."

In September, Professor Pankhurst organised protests outside the Italian embassy in London. Afronet, the organisation he founded to lobby for the return of the Maqdala treasures, will target Britain's Commission on Africa, which meets in Addis Ababa under the chairmanship of Tony Blair on Thursday and Friday. It wants to take advantage of the fact that the commission has called for 'the preservation of African culture and heritage'. Other African countries, including Ghana, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, want their treasures back.

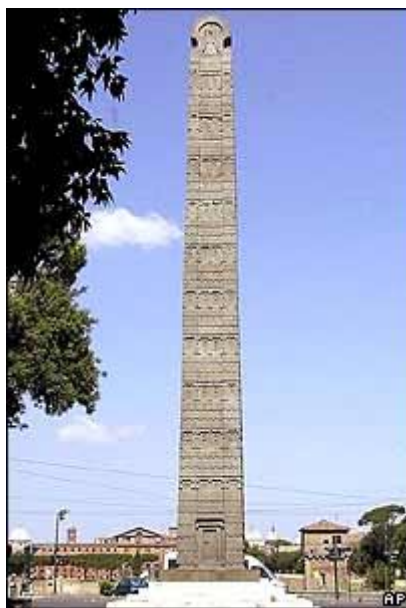
"Tony Blair tells us he wants us to maintain our culture," said Professor Eshete. "Well perhaps the best way to encourage us is to give us back all our treasures. Ethiopia's heritage is Africa's heritage."

### **Should Africa reclaim its stolen treasures?**

**Ethiopia successfully fought for the return of one of its national religious treasure, the Axum Obelisk.**

**The 1,700-year old stone obelisk looted by Italy nearly 70 years ago arrived in Addis Ababa last month to a rapturous welcome.**

Thousands of people lined the streets to see what they consider an important symbol of their identity restored to them.



The Obelisk was taken away by Italians in 1937

Two years ago a German museum handed back to Zimbabwe a soapstone carved bird after 100 years.

The Zimbabwe bird is an emblem of the country, appearing on the national flag and currency. The Ethiopian Obelisk and the Zimbabwe bird are just two of the many traditional and sacred objects that vanished from Africa and ended up in museums, learning institutions or private homes abroad during the colonial era.

### **The BBC's Africa Live asks: How important are historic artefacts to your sense of identity?**

**What should your government do to reclaim your country's lost treasures? Or should we stop dwelling on the past and concentrate on sorting out the problems of the present?** A Spanish Town compliance unit, OAU (AU) Golden Jubilee 2013 research paper. Contact [seymour\\_mclean@yahoo.com](mailto:seymour_mclean@yahoo.com)