

The Ethiopian Tabot from Scotland

In Hollywood movies, the ark of the covenant is usually uncovered by a whip-wielding hero abseiling into a cave, but in Edinburgh they do things rather differently. The Rev John McLuckie has found it while clearing out a cupboard.

The Scottish Episcopal church vicar was searching a dusty recess at the church of St John the Evangelist, a notable landmark in the city's Princes Street, when he found the Ethiopian ark - or a sacred representation of it, at least - in a Victorian leather box at the back of the cupboard.

[The Guardian](#), Dec 6 2001



A Tabot is a consecrated wooden altar slab, made of wood or stone, which symbolises the Ark of the Covenant (containing the Ten Commandments) and represents the presence of God in every Ethiopian church. It is the Tabot rather than the church building which is consecrated.

Removal of a Tabot is an act of sacrilege comparable to the removal of the Reserved Sacrament in an Anglican or Roman Catholic church.

In the aftermath of the battle of Magdala in April 1868, a Tabot was acquired by Captain William Arbuthnot (1838-1892) of the 14th Hussars. He was Aide de Camp and Military Secretary to General Robert Napier, the leader of the expedition, created Lord Napier of Magdala in July 1868.

Arbuthnot was a grandson of Sir William Arbuthnot, a Lord Provost of Edinburgh, who is buried in St John's graveyard. On his return to Britain, recognising the religious significance of the artefact, Arbuthnot presented the Tabot to St John's Church (1868).

It remained here, its true meaning apparently unrecognized until it was found in 2001 by the Associate Rector, Rev'd John McLuckie, who realised what it was, having spent some time in Ethiopia as a student.

The tabot was handed back to representatives of the Ethiopian Orthodox church on 27th January 2002. The Ethiopian delegation included Archbishop Bitsu Abune Isaias from Ethiopia, Arch Mandrite Nibure-id Abba of the London based Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido church and the Attaché d'Affaires of the Ethiopian embassy.

A joint Eucharist was held, at the end of which the Holy Tabot was carried in, wrapped up and covered by liturgical umbrellas. Speeches were made before it was handed over to the Archbishop. Music, dancing and a riot of colour created spectacular scenes of joy within the church.

The Tabot was then taken back to Ethiopia where people lined the streets from the airport into Addis Ababa and a national holiday was declared.



Archbishop Isaias, of Ethiopia, presents a gift to Rector John Armes, right, at the handover of the tabot, which is on the head of Arch Mandrite Nibure-id Abba. Photograph: The Scotsman.

[Read a fuller account](#), including more historical background and an account of a visit to Ethiopia by members of our congregation (PDF file).

Sunday, 27 January, 2002, 15:28 GMT

Ethiopian artefact returning home

See also:

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[Sacred artefact found in cupboard](#)
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The ceremony was held in the Scottish capital

A delegation of religious leaders from Ethiopia has travelled to Edinburgh to collect a sacred carving which was unearthed in a church cupboard.

The holy wooden tabot, or tablet, is thought to be more than 400 years old.

It is believed that it was taken from Ethiopia by British soldiers trying to free hostages from the home of Emperor Theodore the Second in 1868.

Some 200 mules and 15 elephants were loaded with plunder after victorious British forces stormed the mountain fortress at Maqdala.

The treasure - which included solid gold crowns - was bought up by many respected UK institutions, including the British Museum.



The tablet can only be seen by priests

The tabot was brought to the Princes Street church in Edinburgh by a soldier returning from the campaign.

Significance

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It was discovered by the Rev John McLuckie in a battered leather box while he was looking for a communion set in a cupboard at St John's last October.

Mr McLuckie recognised the carved piece of wood as he had worked in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, and he recognised its religious significance.

The tabot - a 6" square carved with an Ethiopian inscription - represents the ark of the covenant and is sacred to Ethiopia's Orthodox Christians.

Mr McLuckie said: "It was very exciting because I knew it was an object of great significance and holiness.

Stolen artefacts

"I was also slightly surprised that we had one and slightly shocked that we should be keeping it in a cupboard when it is something of such significance to Ethiopian Christians."

Ephrem Mehret-ab, a spokesman for the delegation, praised the church for returning the artefact.

The Scottish Episcopal Church has called on all other artefacts stolen from Africa to be returned.

The country has been campaigning to get back hundreds of precious manuscripts, crowns and other sacred items ever since.

“
**The Tabot is
part of our**

Ephrem Mehret-ab said:
"No-one can underestimate just how significant and joyful this hand-over is.

history and tradition and it's rightfully ours

”

"The people of my country, a number of whom travelled here to see this, are simply delighted.

Ephrem Mehret-ab

"The Tabot is part of our history and tradition and it's rightfully ours.

"What this event in Edinburgh symbolises is a beginning and we hope others take note and wake up to the fact that they have property, very secret and irreplaceable property, which does not belong."

Judy Holland spokeswoman for Afromet (Association For The Return Of The Magdala Ethiopian Treasures) said: "We were surprised but thrilled when we heard this Tabot had been found here and that it was being given back.

"This is as significant to Ethiopia as The Elgin Marbles are to Scotland, so we think Scots understand exactly what this gesture means."

Saturday, 9 February, 2002, 16:53 GMT

Ethiopia hails return of sacred artefact



The "tabot" was carried on a priest's head

By the BBC's Nita Bhalla in Addis Ababa

Hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians have packed the streets of Addis Ababa to welcome home an ancient Ethiopian relic looted by British troops more than 130 years ago.

The 400-year-old "tabot" - a replica of the Ark of the Covenant - was found in a Scottish Church in December.

It was handed over to a delegation from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church last month, who travelled to Edinburgh to receive it.

In a colourful celebration at Addis Ababa's Trinity Cathedral, Ethiopians rejoiced at the return of the tabot to its rightful home.

Excitement and pride filled in the air as the plane carrying the ancient Ethiopian artefact landed at Ethiopia's Bole International airport on Saturday morning.

“
**We must be happy
 and celebrate today
 as a national holiday
 for what we lost in
 violence, we have
 gained in peace**
 ”

**Ethiopian church
 elder**

Celebration

Many Ethiopians gathered outside the airport to catch a glimpse of the tabot, held sacred to the 25 million-strong Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Adorned in resplendent vestments made of bright velvet and gold and carrying silver and gold processional crosses, thousands of priests and religious elders from Addis Ababa's 106 Orthodox churches led a procession from the airport to Addis Ababa's Trinity Cathedral, where the wooden relic will be stored.

Beating drums, they chanted in the ancient language of Ge'ez welcoming the tabot home.

Ethiopians sang and danced alongside the processional cortege as it made the four hour journey along the 11 km (7 miles) route to the cathedral.



Hundreds of thousands arrived at the airport to witness the tabot's return

Looted

The tabot of St Michael, which can only be seen by priests, was covered in gold embroidered velvets and silks and mounted on the head of a chosen priest in the true tradition of the 2,000-year-old Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Ethiopian ministers, diplomats, heads of agencies and tourists joined the crowds at Trinity Cathedral to welcome the tabot, which was looted from the Ethiopian fortress of Maqdala by British forces in the 19th century.

Some 200 mules and 15 elephants were loaded with plunder after victorious British forces stormed the mountain fortress.

The treasures include 10 other ancient tabots, 500 ancient parchment manuscripts, two gold crowns, crosses and chalices in gold, silver and copper, religious icons, royal and ecclesiastic vestments as well as shields and arms made between the 14th and 19th centuries.



**two gold crowns
royal vestments
precious icons**

Historic day

Teshome Toga, Ethiopia's Minister for Youth, Sports and Culture said it was a historic day for all Ethiopians.

"We are all excited and we think that it will be good start to bring back all our cultural heritages."

The Patriarch of the church, Abune Paulos, said it was impossible to describe how Ethiopia was feeling on this historic day.

"You can sense the feeling of the people on the streets today, it is beyond all explanation."

Ethiopians on the streets did not hesitate to express how they were feeling.



"It is a victory for the Ethiopians over the British," said one man.

Ethiopians from all walks of life celebrated the tabot's return

"We must be happy and celebrate today as a national holiday for what we lost in violence, we have gained in peace," said one church elder.

Ethiopians now say they hope that this may lead to the return of all other ancient Ethiopian relics currently still on display in British museums.

Render Unto Ethiopia...

Volume 55 Number 3, May/June 2002

by Jarrett A. Lobell



Church leaders celebrate a tabot's *return from Scotland to Ethiopia in a ceremony that attracted thousands of worshipers.* (Courtesy Gail Warden) [\[LARGER IMAGE\]](#)

Ethiopian officials were thrilled when the fortuitously named Rev. John McLuckie happened upon the 400- year-old wooden Tabot of St. Michael (an inscribed wooden tablet representing the Ark of the Covenant), which had lain in a dusty box in an Edinburgh church for more than 100 years. Taken by a British soldier in 1868 from the fortress of Emperor Tewodros II at Maqdala, Ethiopia, the tabot was recently returned to the country.

Other treasures from the sack of Maqdala remain in Great Britain despite efforts of the Ethiopian government and AFROMET (the Association for the Return of the Maqdala Ethiopian Treasures) to have them returned.

Objects taken from the fortress and the nearby church of Madhane Alem include ten more *tabots*, approximately 500 religious manuscripts, precious icons, gold and silver crosses, royal vestments, and two gold crowns--all carted off by the British on no fewer than 15 elephants and 200 mules.

Several British museums and libraries, including the British Museum and the Royal Library at Windsor Castle, house the sacked objects; there are also Ethiopian sacred objects scattered among institutions in France, Portugal, and the United States. While acknowledging that the artifacts have been well looked after, the Ethiopian religious and political communities now are pleading for their return, assuring that there are secure and appropriate places for them to be displayed and stored. The answer so far has been no.

The Ethiopians also seek the return of the Axum Obelisk (technically a stela used to honor the local ruler's authority), which now stands in the Piazza di Porta Capena in Rome. In 1937, Mussolini ordered the dismantling and removal of the 1,700-year-old obelisk to Rome to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of his march on Rome. Segwale Abaye, a 101-year-old priest who witnessed the event calls the removal of the obelisk "the deepest regret of my life."

On at least three separate occasions since World War II, the Italians have agreed to return the obelisk. The latest was in 1997, when stamps were issued in Ethiopia to commemorate its return. But like the treasures from Maqdala, the obelisk remains on foreign soil. While it may seem strange that Italy would want to retain this monument to Fascism, politicians cite the threat to the monument if it is returned to Ethiopia. But can anything threaten a stone monument more than Rome's atrocious pollution?

The "Edinburgh" Tabot to Be Handed Over to Ethiopia.

Article from: Africa News Service | January 25, 2002 | [Copyright](#)
Jan 25, 2002

The Ethiopian Tabot, or Representation of the Ark of the Covenant, in Edinburgh, Scotland, will be handed over to Ethiopia this week-end.

The Ethiopian delegation, led by Archbishop Isayas, and a representative of the Ethiopian Embassy in London, is expected to arrive at Waverly Station, Edinburgh, tomorrow, 26 January, and will attend an official ceremony, in the Edinburgh City Chamber.

Those present, on the Scottish side are expected to include the Scottish Minister of Education, Mike Watson, the Edinburgh Deputy Lord Provost, and the Bishop of Scotland, as well as the Rev. John McLuckie, the "discoverer" of the Tabot.

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Newspaper

[Ethiopian joy as church returns Ark of Covenant; Handover may increase pressure for return of other stolen artefacts](#)

The Sunday Herald; January 27, 2002; 700+ words

...officer bought the **tabot** as a souvenir...to St John's **Episcopal Church** in Edinburgh...the Scottish **Episcopal Church**, explained that the **tabot** was found by...the Edinburgh **tabot** by St John's **Episcopal Church** as British museums...



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...wooden tablet, known as a **tabot**, was taken from an Ethiopian...McLuckie at St John's Scottish **Episcopal Church**, in Edinburgh. Mr McLuckie found the **tabot** in a battered leather box...Mr McLuckie returned the **tabot**. Ephrem Mehret-ab, the...



Magazine

[One Down, More to Come. \(Ethiopia\)](#)

New African; March 1, 2002; 700+ words

...Scotland handed over the "**Tabot**", Ethiopia's equivalent...Orthodox Tawahido Church. The **Tabot** was found in a cupboard in the Scottish **Episcopal Church** of St John in Edinburgh by...visited Ethiopia in 1986. The **Tabot** was "donated" to the Church...

THE
INDEPENDENT

Sacred Object Plundered by British Forces in 1868 Returns to Ethiopia

The Independent (London, England); January 28, 2002; 516 words

...Museum in London. The **tabot** was bought by a British...donated to St John's **Episcopal Church** in Edinburgh. For more...service to receive the **tabot** from the Reverend John...St John's Scottish **Episcopal Church**. "It is a gesture...grateful to have the **tabot** rightfully returned...



News Wire

Ethiopians Greet Treasure's Return

AP Online; February 10, 2002; 700+ words

...Church, said the arrival of the **tabot** was the first victory in the...number of manuscripts. The **tabot** returned Saturday _ one of...McLuckie at St. John's Scottish **Episcopal Church** in Edinburgh last October while...which McLuckie returned the **tabot** to Ethiopians. The seized...



Associated Press

Scottish church to return sacred carving to Ethiopia

AP Worldstream; January 20, 2002; 328 words

...the Scottish **Episcopal Church** said Sunday. The...the Evangelist **Episcopal Church** in Edinburgh found the **Tabot** _ believed to be...Orthodox Church, the **Episcopal Church** said. The church...discovered the **Tabot** had been seized...



Newspaper

Rector urges return of loot

The Scotsman; January 21, 2002; 596 words

...John McLuckie of St John's **Episcopal Church**, Edinburgh, said the British...associate rector will hand back a **tabot** - which represents the Ark...McLuckie, who discovered the **tabot** in a store room at St John...It is understood that the **tabot** will be welcomed back to its...

Hundreds of singing Ethiopians line Addis Ababa's streets to welcome return of treasure stolen by British troops

AP Worldstream; February 9, 2002; 650 words

...Church, said the arrival of the **tabot** was the first victory in the...illuminated manuscripts. The **tabot** returned Saturday _ one of...McLuckie at St. John's Scottish **Episcopal Church** in Edinburgh, last October...which McLuckie returned the **tabot** to Ethiopians. The stolen...

Ethiopia: The "Edinburgh" Tabot to Be Handed Over to Ethiopia

25 JANUARY 2002

The Ethiopian Tabot, or Representation of the Ark of the Covenant, in Edinburgh, Scotland, will be handed over to Ethiopia this week-end.

The Ethiopian delegation, led by Archbishop Isayas, and a representative of the Ethiopian Embassy in London, is expected to arrive at Waverly Station, Edinburgh, tomorrow, 26 January, and will attend an official ceremony, in the Edinburgh City Chamber.

Those present, on the Scottish side are expected to include the Scottish Minister of Education, Mike Watson, the Edinburgh Deputy Lord Provost , and the Bishop of Scotland, as well as the Rev. John McLuckie, the "discoverer" of the Tabot.

...

Ethiopia: The Story of the "Edinburgh" Tabot

BY RICHARD PANKHURST, 25 JANUARY 2002

The story of the "Edinburgh" Tabot, or Ethiopian Representation of the Ark of the Covenant, soon to be returned to Ethiopia, began with Emperor Tewodros's suicide at his mountain fortress of Maqdala on 13 April 1868.

This was immediately followed by an evening of looting by forces of the British Expedition. The booty they acquired was then collected from them by prize-masters, and transported on 25 elephants and nearly 200 mules to the nearby Dalanta plain, where a two-day auction was held.

Ethiopia: The "Edinburgh" Tabot Returns Home Tomorrow

8 FEBRUARY 2002

The "Edinburgh" Tabot, or Representation of the Biblical Ark of the Covenant, discovered in St John's Episcopal Church in Edinburgh, Scotland, by the Reverend John McLuckie, and returned to Ethiopia through the auspices of AFROMET, the Association for the Return of Maqdala Ethiopian Treasures, will arrive at Bole International Airport tomorrow.

The Tabot's journey from Scotland to Ethiopia was halted last Sunday when it was taken to St Philip's Ethiopian Church at Battersea, South London, where a commemorative service was attended by upwards of one thousand Ethiopian members of the Diaspora.

They heard the visiting Ethiopian Archbishop Issayas, the Rev. McLuckie, and the AFROMET representative, Judy Holland, call for the return of Maqdala loot now housed in the British Museum, the British Library, the Royal Library in Windsor Castle, and other institutions in England.

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

For the festival in Indonesia, see [Tabut](#).



A priest carrying a covered tabot on his head during a [Timkat](#) ([Epiphany](#)) ceremony in [Gondar](#), [Ethiopia](#)

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This article contains [Ethiopic text](#). Without proper [rendering support](#), you may see [question marks](#), [boxes](#), or

[other symbols](#) instead of Ethiopic characters.

Tabot ([Ge'ez](#) ታቦት *tābōt*, sometimes spelled **tabout**), is a [Ge'ez](#) (as well as [Ethio-Semitic](#)) word referring to a replica of the [Tablets of Law](#), onto which the [Biblical Ten Commandments](#) were inscribed, used in the practices of the [Ethiopian Orthodox Church](#). *Tabot* can also refer to a replica of the [Ark of the Covenant](#). The word *tsellat* ([Ge'ez](#): ጽላት *ṣallāt*, modern *ṣellāt*) refers only to a replica of the Tablets, but is less commonly used.

According to [Edward Ullendorff](#), the word *tabot* is derived from the Jewish [Aramaic](#), or more specifically the [Aramaic](#), word *tebuta* (*tebota*), which in turn is derived from the [Hebrew](#) *tebah*.^[1] "The concept and function of the *tabot* represent one of the most remarkable areas of agreement with Old Testament forms of worship."^[2]

A *tabot* is usually six inches (15 cm) square, and may be made from [alabaster](#), [marble](#), or wood from an [acacia](#) tree—although David Buxton states the maximum length of 40 cm is more common.^[3] It is always kept in ornate coverings to hide it from public view. In an elaborate procession, which has often reminded literate onlookers of the sixth chapter of [2 Samuel](#) where King [David](#) leads the people dancing before the Ark,^[4] the *tabot* is carried around the church [courtyard](#) on the patronal feast day, and also on the great Feast of [Timket](#) (known as [Epiphany](#) or Theophany in Europe).^[5] Buxton describes one such procession, on the festival of [Gabra Manfas Qeddus](#):

To the uninstructed onlooker the climax of the service came at the end, when the *tabot* or ark was brought out, wrapped in coloured cloths, carried on the head of a priest. As it appeared in the doorway the women raised the [ilil](#), a prolonged and piercing cry of joy. At first the *tabot* remained motionless, accompanied by several processional crosses and their attendant brightly colored canopies, while a group of cantors ([dabtara](#)) performed the liturgical dance so beloved of the Abyssinians. The dancing over, a procession formed up, headed by the *tabot*, and slowly circled the church three times in a counter-clockwise direction. Finally

the *tabot* was carried back into the sanctuary; all was over and the assembly broke up.^[6]

Although [Ethiopia](#) was never colonized by the British, many *tabots* were looted by them during the [1868 Expedition to Abyssinia](#), which is a cause of anger among Ethiopians. During the looting of the Ethiopian capital of [Magdala](#) in 1868, British soldiers took hundreds of *tabots*. The return in February 2002 of one of these, discovered in the storage of St. John's Episcopal Church in [Edinburgh](#), was a cause of public rejoicing in [Addis Ababa](#).^{[7][8]}

Ethiopia: Returning a Tabot

Orthodox demand that British give back all looted sacred items.

Odhiambo Okite

[posted 4/22/2002 12:00AM]

The return to Ethiopia of a 400-year-old tabot, a sacred replica of the Ark of the Covenant, sparked celebrations in the traditionally Orthodox nation on the Horn of Africa in February. It also rekindled hopes that public opinion will force British leaders to return hundreds of sacred items plundered in 1868. "These treasures are some of the most important items in Ethiopian history," Endrias Eshete, chairman of the Association for the Return of Magdala Ethiopian Treasures (AFROMET), said. He said Britain's refusal to hand over the treasures "would be the equivalent of Ethiopia refusing to hand over the British crown jewels."

British forces attacked the Ethiopian capital of Magdala in 1868. Victorious soldiers and officers looted more than 400 priceless artifacts from Orthodox churches, including many carved wooden tabots, which are about six inches square and modeled after the biblical Ark of the Covenant. According to Ethiopian tradition, the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba bore a son whose father was King Solomon. The son swapped the Ark with a full-size replica and brought it home after a visit to the Jerusalem temple, the legend says. The Orthodox believe that the Ark remains there, under Orthodox protection, to this day (CT, June 14, 1999, p. 58).

Italian soldiers looted Ethiopia's tallest obelisk from Axum in 1937. More than 1,700 years old, the obelisk still occupies a

prominent spot in Rome. Italian officials have so far reneged on two promises to return the 79-foot, 200-ton piece of granite. February's raucous celebration over the tabot on the streets of Addis Ababa briefly moved the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) back to center stage in Ethiopia's national life. The EOC, once the state church, now claims 57 percent of the country's 62.5 million people. It has been losing members to Protestants (18.5 percent) and Muslims (31 percent). Still, the EOC is growing rapidly in other parts of the world.

John McLuckie, associate rector of St. John's Episcopal Church, Edinburgh, discovered the tabot last October. McLuckie, once lived in Addis Ababa. He and other United Kingdom church leaders have called for the return of all plundered artifacts.

"I was surprised that we had one and shocked that we should be keeping it in a cupboard when it is something of such significance to Ethiopian Christians," McLuckie told British reporters.

McLuckie became chairman of AFROMET UK in March to pressure the British Museum and other institutions to return Ethiopian sacred objects. The British Museum holds 10 other tabots, but the bulk of the plunder remains scattered in numerous British institutions, as well as in private collections. Despite pleas from EOC Patriarch Abuna Paulos, British Museum officials say a 1753 law prevents them from relinquishing any object without a duplicate.

A spokesman told *CT*, "The museum's collections are preserved for the benefit of international scholarship and the enjoyment of the public." The spokesman admitted, however, that the 10 tabots are not on public display.

The patriarch said in reply, "The British government will now have to come up with compelling reasons why they should keep the items."

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Church to return relic to Ethiopia — *The Daily Telegraph*, London (Dec. 6, 2001)

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Ark relic found in cupboard

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- [Stephen Bates](#), religious affairs correspondent
 - [The Guardian](#), Thursday 6 December 2001 02.28 GMT
-

In Hollywood movies, the ark of the covenant is usually uncovered by a whip-wielding hero abseiling into a cave, but in Edinburgh they do things rather differently. The Rev John McLuckie has found it while clearing out a cupboard.

The Scottish Episcopal church vicar was searching a dusty recess at the church of St John the Evangelist, a notable landmark in the city's Princes Street, when he found the Ethiopian ark - or a sacred representation of it, at least - in a Victorian leather box at the back of the cupboard.

The artefact, known as a tabot, is a blackened flat piece of wood, 17cm by 18cm, covered with a carved inscription and a pattern. Similar artefacts have been traditionally kept as sacred centrepieces in

Ethiopian Orthodox churches, although they are always wrapped in cloth and are seen only by priests.

Ethiopian Christians believe that they still possess the original ark itself, which is traditionally supposed to have held the ten commandments.

The rediscovered tabot was looted by the British army when it captured the fortress of Magdala in 1868, and was later given to the church by a parishioner. It seems to have lain in the cupboard ever since.

The tabot will be handed back to the Ethiopian authorities next month.

Fisseha Adugna, Ethiopia's charge d'affaires in London, said: "We are hugely grateful to St John's for offering to return the tabot to us.

"There is great excitement in Ethiopia. This is a very significant act. We have lost so much of our heritage and this is a first step to having it restored."

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Is it true Menilek, the son of Biblical King of Israel?

Richard Pankhurst

The return to Ethiopia of the Tabot looted from Maqdala by the British in 1868 has caused several beloved readers to beg me to postpone my articles on Ethiopia's twentieth century confrontation with the

European powers, and write something about Tabots and Manbara Tabots.

Introduction

Before doing so I think two points are in order: Firstly, now that the Episcopal of Scotland has returned the Tabot found in Edinburgh, we wonder when the British Museum will disgorge the ten Tabots in its possession likewise looted from Maqdala.

Secondly, now that the Episcopal Church, motivated by a most praiseworthy belief in justice, has, of its own free will, carried out this act of restitution, we wonder how long the Italian Government will continue to violate its supposedly solemn agreement, signed with the Ethiopian Government in 1997, to return the Aksum obelisk looted on Mussolini's personal orders in 1937.

But to return to the Tabot question!

Ethiopian Legend about the Ark Legend in Ethiopia, since early times, has had it that one of the country's first rulers was Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, who travelled to King Solomon, the Biblical King of Israel, to learn of his wisdom. On returning to her country she bore him a son, by name Menilek, who later visited his father in Jerusalem. The Jewish king, it is claimed, begged the young man to remain with him as his heir, but Menilek insisted on returning to his mother in Ethiopia. Solomon sadly agreed, but, declaring him his first-born child, insisted that he should be accompanied home by the first-born son of the High Priest, as well as the first-born of the principal men of state.

Menilek and the children of Israel duly departed, but before they did so they are said to have purloined the Ark of the Covenant, which they wanted to take with them into Ethiopia as "they could not live without it". Menilek was not privy to the plot, but when told about it some days after their departure from Israel, supposedly declared that as they had succeeded it "must have been the will of God". Drawing of three Manbara tabots, at the church of Golgotha, at Lalibla This tradition is embodied in the "Kebra Nagast", or Glory of Kings, an early fourteenth century Ethiopian national epic, which has been described by Professor Edward Ullendorff, perhaps the doyen of Ethiopian studies, as "the foremost creation of Ethiopic literature".

The story has more than one version, and finds interesting expression in one of the most popular of Ethiopian traditional paintings: "strip cartoons" of Sheba's visit to Solomon. The legend of Sheba's visit to Solomon was widely cited in the Ethiopian royal chronicles, and is also referred to in Emperor Haile Sellassie's two Ethiopian Constitutions, of 1931 and 1955, which state that the monarch must be of that descent. In the first Solomon is mentioned before the Queen; in the second, Sheba before the King!

The tradition that the Ark embodying the Almighty's commands to Moses had been reported at least a century before the "Kebra Nagast" when the

very early thirteenth century Armenian writer Abu Salih wrote: "the Abyssinians possess the Ark of the Covenant"

The Tabot, or Altar Slab

The above tradition also finds expression in an important feature of Ethiopian Orthodox Church life: the existence in every Ethiopian church of at least one Tabot, or altar slab, which is considered as a symbolic representation of the Ark of the Covenant. The Tabot is in fact so important that it is this Ark - and not the church building - which is consecrated, and which gives sanctity to the building in which it is placed. This can most vividly be seen at the Temqat, or Epiphany, celebrations at Gondar when the city's Tabots are taken into the Fasiladas palace with the pool.

The significance of the Tabot is likewise evident from the fact that churches are sometimes referred to by the name of the Tabot: An eighteenth century land charter of Emperor Takla Giyorgis states for example that this ruler granted land to "the tabot of Gabre'el at Adwa". Because of its sanctity the Tabot is invariably housed in the central section of the church: the "Qedus Qedusan", or Holy of Holies, into which none but the clergy may enter. The Tabot plays moreover a major role in church ritual. The Tabot, as many readers will have seen this Temqat, is thus covered in costly cloth, and carried around with much singing and ritual dancing, the beating of drums and staffs or prayer sticks, and the slow and elegant rattling of sistra.

This practice, as many commentators have noted, is strongly reminiscent of the Biblical passage which tells of King David and the people dancing in front of the Ark. Tabots, always honourably shrouded in specially chosen vestments, are taken out of their churches each year on especial occasion, most notably on the eve of Temqat, when they are carried to a river or lake beside which they spend the night before the main celebrations on the morrow. Tabots are likewise carried around on Saints' days, as well as on military campaigns when they accompanied the soldiers.

One of the most celebrated Tabots, now housed at the Medhane Alem church on the opposite side of the road from Addis Ababa University, and the institute of Ethiopian Studies Museum, accompanied Emperor Haile Sellassie during his exile in Bath, England, in 1936-41.

The Tabot is conventionally a small slab of wood - or occasionally stone - two and a half inches or more thick, and ranging from perhaps six inches by five to sixteen inches by ten in length and width. It is often engraved with one or more cross, or sometimes with a representation of Christ in the

form of a lamb, or of the Virgin and Child. There is usually an inscription, in Ge'ez, indicating the Biblical personage or Saint to which it is dedicated, and sometimes the Ge'ez words for Alpha and Omega.

Few will, however, ever read such words, for the Tabot is invariably closely closeted, and, despite its above-mentioned peregrinations, will never be seen except by officiating priests. Despite its religious and cultural importance, the Tabot is usually but simply decorated. Tabots, because of the veneration in which they were held, have seldom been described. One of the first to do so was the seventeenth century Jesuit Manoel Barradas. He says Tabots were "commonly of wood, some well wrought and incised or painted... other are of stone, white and beautiful like marble" He claims to have seen one which was unusual in bearing the names of no fewer than seven Saints.

The Manbara Tabot, or Altar

The Tabot is traditionally kept in a Manbara Tabot, which is a kind of Altar Chest, in a sense comparable to an Altar. There are two basic forms. The simplest consists of a single hollow wooden cube with a hinged door and four small legs. The more complex version are formed out of three similar cubes, arranged horizontally, likewise with four feet. Only the lowest cube will, however, be used as a repository for the Tabot. Some other Manbara Tabots are designed more in the shape of "sentry boxes". Some such Manbara Tabots may nowadays be man-high, and indeed sometimes so tall that it may be difficult to pass them through a church door.

Manbara Tabots are in many cases beautifully carved, and painted with considerable skill. Because of the awe with which they are regarded they are seldom seen by either lay Ethiopians or visiting foreigners. It is, however, possible to see new ones at the studios of church artists commissioned to produce them - and one such artifact found its way into the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

For the same reason relatively little has been written about Manbara Tabots. Perhaps the first reference is in the chronicle of the early seventeenth century Adal conqueror, Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, better known as Ahmad Gragn, or the Left-handed, which tells of his men breaking into the church of Atronsa Maryam, in Amhara, where his men came across one such artifact, with four legs, weighing no less than a thousand ounces. With the above deviation I trust, dear readers, to return next week to the ramifications of the Tripartite Agreement of 1906, by which the three colonial powers sought to partition the country into three

spheres of economic interest, "in the interest", as the British representative wrote, "of Whites as against Blacks".