



ARTICLE

# Planned Plunder, the British Museum, and the 1868 Maqdala Expedition

Lucia Patrizio Gunning<sup>1</sup>  and Debbie Challis<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of History, University College London, London, UK and <sup>2</sup>Independent Researcher, Portico Library, Manchester, UK  
Email: [l.gunning@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:l.gunning@ucl.ac.uk); [drdebbie@gmail.com](mailto:drdebbie@gmail.com)

## Abstract

In 1863, Emperor Tewodros II of Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea) took a British consul hostage; five years later, the British sent a punitive expedition. This military expedition continued the brutal tradition of earlier ones and shaped later campaigns in Sudan and West Africa in the 1890s. Typically, a large contingent of non-military personnel accompanied these expeditions and the 1868 expedition to Maqdala was no different. What was unique for Maqdala was the inclusion of a member of staff from the British Museum. We argue that a letter from Charles Thomas Newton, keeper of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, to Sir Roderick Murchison, the president of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), illustrates that the plunder of cultural heritage was planned. We also argue that the plunder did not go to plan. The inclusion of a man from the museum made this expedition unique in the museum's history. The acquisition of these objects through colonial violence constitutes a strong moral reason for their repatriation from the British Museum and the numerous institutions in which they are dispersed. Understanding the planning involved in their plunder illustrates the entanglement of politics and imperialism with scientific and cultural institutions that constituted the backbone of Victorian Britain.

In 2022, the British Museum catalogue described a tabot, object number Af1868.1001.21, as 'carved from wood with a depiction of a cross and Ge'ez inscriptions'.<sup>1</sup> This online collections record informed the reader that at some point the tabot was moved from the 'former Medieval and Late History Department' to the Department of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. The catalogue entry explained that 'the tabot is the foundation of the Ethiopian Orthodox church and is what sanctifies and consecrates a church

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Tabot', British Museum website: [www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E\\_Af1868-1001-21](http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1868-1001-21) (accessed 11 Oct. 2022). Ge'ez is an abugida script related to the Amharic language.

building' and is 'the representation of the Ark of the Covenant'. The tabot is listed as not being on display but no mention is made of the fact that these sacred objects are only meant to be seen by Ethiopian priests.

The provenance history stated that it was previously owned by Sir Richard Rivington-Holmes, who 'accompanied the [Maqdala] expedition as an archaeologist' and acquired a number of objects and manuscripts for the British Museum, some of which are now in the British Library.<sup>2</sup> Although information was given about the British and Indian Army expedition in 1868, the ex-owner was not listed as being the Emperor Tewodros or the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The collections record acknowledged that Tewodros 'is a national hero for many Ethiopians' but there was no reference to the contested status of this tabot or the others. In 2022, the tabot was one of nine in the museum's collection to be taken in the raid on Maqdala by Holmes, and another two are likely to have come from the same expedition. One tabot's provenance listed it as 'unknown' and the other listed it as 'collected in the field' by Colonel Mackie, who served in the Queen's (Royal West Surrey) Regiment and was active in the Abyssinia expedition (Maqdala). It is thought that the British Museum has never displayed these sacred objects to the public and in 2003 a parliamentary select committee established that the British Museum had agreed not to display them or even to look at them.<sup>3</sup> This select committee pointed out the absurdity of the museum retaining these objects when they could not properly care for them amidst high-profile calls to return them to Ethiopia. These objects are in the collection due to the violent military campaign of 1868, which included a member of staff from the British Museum.

The inclusion of a member of staff from the British Museum was unique to the Maqdala expedition. A letter from Charles Thomas Newton, keeper of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, to Sir Roderick Murchison, the president of the RGS, requesting that a man from the museum be sent with the expedition, helped to put in motion the circumstances that led to these sacred objects entering the collection of the British Museum. The plunder of cultural heritage on the Maqdala expedition was premeditated but did not go to plan. Histories of the 1868 expedition have covered the looting and the sale at auction of the objects taken, but have not detailed the role of the British Museum and its staff in advance of the expedition.<sup>4</sup> Whereas, in writing about the Maqdala campaign as an example of colonial violence, and in support of the restitution of various objects from museums to source countries, Geoffrey Robertson has drawn attention to the fact that the museum

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons, *Culture, Media and Sport Committee: cultural objects: developments since 2003*, HC. 59 (London, 2003), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> The significance of the British 'violent, predatory appropriation of Ethiopian artefacts' was detailed in V. Matthies, *The siege of Magdala: the British empire against the emperor of Ethiopia*, trans. S. Rendall (Princeton, NJ, 2012), p. 44. Matthies takes a very different view from that of Darrell Bates, who suggests that 'by the standards of the time' the British troops 'seem to have been considerate and undemanding plunderers'; D. Bates, *The Abyssinian difficulty: the emperor Theodoros and the Magdala campaign, 1867-1868* (Oxford, 1979), p. 102. Both accounts mention Holmes but not the letter by Charles Thomas Newton in advance of the campaign.

‘appointed its own archaeologist to help soldiers identify treasure that was worth taking’.<sup>5</sup> The letter from Newton to Murchison actually demonstrates that the intention behind the appointment of an archaeologist by the museum was to carry out archaeology, not to oversee looting or to bid at auction for the most valuable treasures. Differentiation of intent from actual role is important to understand the nature of this expedition, and to contextualize its militarization of collecting.

Critical responses to and discussion of the role of prevalently European museums in colonial exploitation and the use of military violence in collecting objects informed the 2022 research for a new Museum Definition by the International Council of Museums (ICOM).<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on ‘service to society’, intangible heritage, and ‘participation of communities’ in the 2022 definition reflect critical literature written over the past three decades on museums formed during the colonial period, as well as activism by people whose cultural heritage has been taken from them.<sup>7</sup> Analysing the power dynamics and role of the museum in the formation of national and imperial identity has informed studies of colonial museums since the early 1990s.<sup>8</sup> The appraisal of new historical knowledge and its implication for understanding the fabric of Britain, such as that from data gathered by the Legacies of British Slave Ownership project (2009–12) hosted at University College London, has renewed analysis of the imperial politics behind colonial museums.<sup>9</sup> For example, the database put together by the Legacies of British Slave Ownership project detailing those who benefitted from reparations for owning slaves when slavery was abolished in 1833 helped to inform an interim and highly publicized National Trust report into the impact of colonialism and the slave trade on its properties.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the idea that museums in the global north have a monopoly on knowledge formation and collection preservation has been increasingly challenged by both activists and museum professionals. Shahid Vawda has criticized the continued defence by museums of the acquisition of collections that originated in violence as perpetuating:

---

<sup>5</sup> G. Robertson, *Who owns history? Elgin's loot and the case for returning plundered treasure* (London, 2019), p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> G. O. Abungu, ‘Museums: geopolitics, decolonisation, globalisation and migration’, *Museum International*, 71 (2019), pp. 62–71.

<sup>7</sup> See ‘Museum Definition’, International Council of Museums (ICOM) website, Aug. 2022, available at: [icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/](https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/) (accessed 5 Dec. 2022).

<sup>8</sup> An early example that looks at the plunder of a continent is A. E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: museums, material culture and popular imagination in late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven, CT, 1994), while the imperial museum and archive is dissected in T. Barringer and T. Flynn, eds., *Colonialism and the object: empire, material culture and the museum* (London, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> See the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery website, University College London: [www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/) (accessed 5 Dec. 2022).

<sup>10</sup> S. Huxtable, C. Fowler, C. Kefalas, and E. Slocombe, *Interim report on the connections between colonialism and properties now in the care of the National Trust, including links with historic slavery* (Swindon, 2020): [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/addressing-the-histories-of-slavery-and-colonialism-at-the-national-trust](https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/addressing-the-histories-of-slavery-and-colonialism-at-the-national-trust) (accessed 5 Dec. 2022).

notions that the civilised ‘races’ coming from Europe and North America are alone capable of defining and preserving the universals of humans in perpetuity. Such a presumption hinders the full acknowledgement of their own difficult and troubled history and relationship to colonialism, and it ignores and silences *other* voices, particularly their knowledge of the artefacts.<sup>11</sup>

In an article on the connections between the formation of the discipline of natural history, the development of museums, and European colonialism, Subhadra Das and Miranda Lowe contend that ‘museums were put in place to legitimize racist ideology’.<sup>12</sup> But they argue that by carrying out contextualized historical research into the provenance of collections and ‘being honest about how this furthered the colonial project’ removes ‘an obstacle’ that blocks the participation of wider communities in museums and in historical research. In this article, we highlight the role of the letter from Newton to Murchison to emphasize and contextualize the role of the museum in colonial violence. The acquisition of these specific objects through colonial violence creates a strong moral reason for their repatriation from the British Museum and the numerous other institutions through which they are dispersed. Our aim in this article is to provide a detailed, nuanced, understanding of the processes of colonialism and plunder in building museum collections. Indeed, we seek to show how the planning of this plunder adds another layer of colonial violence onto their acquisition, albeit one made in London’s clubland and through Trustee meetings.<sup>13</sup> We contend that this letter underlines the importance of undertaking accurate and wide-ranging research on the history of collections and that museums have a moral obligation to be clear about the collecting history of objects taken through imperial conquest.

Traditionally, accounts of the Maqdala expedition have concentrated on its military role and / or its context in the foreign campaigns of Britain’s smaller wars that cemented and expanded imperial rule in Africa and South Asia.<sup>14</sup> The work of Richard Pankhurst has drawn attention to the cultural heritage plundered in 1868 and then subsequently by Italian invaders in 1887–9 and in 1935.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> S. Vawda, ‘Museums and the epistemology of injustice: from colonialism to decoloniality’, *Museum International*, 71 (2019) pp. 72–9, at p. 75. The discussion around the Museum Definition arguably originates with an alternate view on the social and political role of museums highlighted in a collection of essays by curators and historians published in P. Vergo, ed., *The new museology* (London, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> S. Das and M. Lowe, ‘Nature read in black and white: decolonial approaches to interpreting natural history collections’, *Journal of Natural Science Collections*, 6 (2018), pp. 4–14, at p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Recent work on museum restitution has stressed the cultural plunder of heritage rather than just the legal issues that may enable the return of objects. For example, Robertson, *Who owns history?*; and D. Fincham, ‘The Parthenon sculptures and cultural justice’, *Fordham Intellectual Property, Media and Entertainment Law Journal*, 23 (2012), pp. 943–1016.

<sup>14</sup> Bates, *Abyssinian difficulty*; N. Rogers, ‘The Abyssinian expedition of 1867–1868: Disraeli’s imperialism or James Murray’s war?’, *Historical Journal*, 27 (1984), pp. 129–49; I. Herson, *Massacre and retribution: forgotten wars of the nineteenth century* (Stroud, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> P. Arnold and R. Pankhurst, *Prelude to Magdala: Emperor Theodore of Ethiopia and British diplomacy* (London, 1991). For example, R. Pankhurst, ‘Ethiopia, the Aksum obelisk and the return of Africa’s

In 1999, Pankhurst additionally helped to form the Association For the Return of the Magdala Ethiopian Treasures (AFROMET). The raised profile around the impact of the plunder of Maqdala has meant that it is used in more popular histories of Victorian collecting as an ‘extreme example of thievery’.<sup>16</sup> Andrew Heavens’s book *The prince and the plunder*, published in 2023, forthcoming at the time of writing, builds on the importance of looted cultural heritage and material culture in an increasingly public re-examination of Britain’s imperial past.<sup>17</sup>

In 1868, a British military expedition set out to punish the independent state of Abyssinia (current-day Ethiopia and Eritrea). This was in response to Emperor Tewodros II having taken hostage the British consul in 1864, and then other Europeans and envoys in 1866.<sup>18</sup> Tewodros’s reasons for doing so seem to have been his disappointment after a personal letter to Queen Victoria had gone unanswered. Yet, these events must be seen as part of a complicated context involving the protection of the British route to India, diplomacy with the Ottoman Empire, and the preoccupation over the growing power of Egypt under a new Khedive. The military expedition, mainly comprised of battalions from the British Indian Army and with some troops from Britain, was sent in early 1868, after various attempts at diplomacy by the British government had failed. This expedition can be seen as one of Britain’s many ‘small wars’ during the long nineteenth century, which, as Maya Jasanoff has pointed out, undermines the perception of the nineteenth century as a period of peace.<sup>19</sup> The expedition itself was expensive and, though successful in its immediate objectives, a subject of embarrassment for subsequent governments – mainly due to its cost.

Continuing the brutal tradition of earlier punitive raids, such as the 1860 Anglo-French burning of the Summer Palaces in Beijing, this expedition shaped the later military ones in Sudan and West Africa in the 1890s.<sup>20</sup> As with those later ones, the expedition to Maqdala in Abyssinia included a large contingent of non-military personnel. Yet, unlike those later ones, the Maqdala expedition

---

cultural heritage’, *African Affairs* (London), 98 (1999), pp. 229–39; R. Pankhurst, ‘The history of the Kwer’ata Re’esu: an Ethiopian icon’, *African Affairs* (London), 81 (1982), pp. 117–25; R. Pankhurst, ‘The Napier expedition and the loot from Maqdala’, *Présence Africaine*, n.s. 133/4 (1985), pp. 233–40. In addition, Rita Pankhurst put together an invaluable guide of the missing manuscripts as known in 1973: R. Pankhurst, ‘The library of Emperor Tewodros II at Mäqdäla (Magdala)’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 36 (1973), pp. 15–42.

<sup>16</sup> J. Yallop, *Magpies, squirrels and thieves: how the Victorians collected the world* (London, 2011), p. 223.

<sup>17</sup> A. Heavens, *The prince and the plunder: how Britain took one small boy and hundreds of treasures from Ethiopia* (London, 2023).

<sup>18</sup> In British documents from the nineteenth century, Tewodros is spelt in multiple ways but mainly as Theodore and Maqdala is usually spelt as Magdala. We will use the Ethiopian spelling apart from when we are quoting historic sources.

<sup>19</sup> M. Jasanoff, *Edge of empire: conquest and collecting in the east, 1750–1850* (London, 2005), p. 309.

<sup>20</sup> L. Tythacott, ed., *Collecting and displaying China’s ‘summer palace’ in the west: the Yuanmingyuan in Britain and France* (London, 2018); Coombes, *Reinventing Africa*; D. Hicks, *The brutish museums: the Benin bronzes, colonial violence and cultural heritage* (London, 2020); S. Lundén, *Displaying loot: the Benin objects and the British Museum* (Gothenburg, 2016).

included a member of staff from the British Museum. A letter from Charles Thomas Newton, then keeper of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, to Sir Roderick Murchison, president of the RGS, read by Dr Debbie Challis in the British Library in the early 2000s as part of her Ph.D. research and revisited in 2018, about 'a likely man to send' with the expedition, illustrates a pre-determined and ideological involvement of the museum and scientific clubs in supporting this expedition. The letter positions the British Museum as an active agent in the Maqdala expedition and, though cited in a biography of Murchison, we feel its significance has not been fully understood.<sup>21</sup> The British Museum already had a precedent for acquiring objects from military plunder – the Rosetta Stone with its inscription 'captured in Egypt by the British army 1801' is a notorious example.<sup>22</sup> This particular expedition went a step further, opportunistically seeing the military expedition as a source of antiquities and objects, much as Napoleon had done in equipping his Egyptian campaign with scientists and scholars.

In the 1840s and 1850s, the museum had actively sought antiquities using a combination of diplomacy and the military in the Ottoman Empire: Newton's own excavations at Halicarnassus (Bodrum) in Turkey, for example, involved Royal Engineers and the Royal Navy.<sup>23</sup> By 1863, the consuls in the Ottoman Empire were actively encouraged to look for antiquities as part of their official duties. The acquisitions from the Ottoman lands had been possible due to patient and skilled diplomacy. This planned participation by a museum representative in a military expedition at Maqdala went a step further; here diplomacy had failed, the use of brute force and coercion put this expedition on a different moral ground. The reasons for this new approach must be seen in the limited availability of classical antiquities from the Ottoman Empire at this stage. By 1867, the Ottomans had begun collecting antiquities for their own museum in Istanbul and diplomatic avenues for acquisitions were beginning to close.<sup>24</sup> The letter from Newton to Murchison illustrates the British Museum's search for a different method of acquisition in a land where, unlike in the Ottoman Empire, they had not been able to establish any diplomatic avenues for acquisition. Here, a request to actively take part in a military campaign in order to excavate and collect antiquities for the national museum was seen by the museum as an exploratory opportunity to enlarge its

<sup>21</sup> R. A. Stafford, *Scientist of empire: Sir Roderick Murchison, scientific exploration and Victorian imperialism* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 184 n. 208. Stafford compares Newton's enthusiastic canvassing with that of Joseph Hooker at Kew Gardens, who 'considered the [Maqdala] affair a fiasco' and refused involvement. Newton and his role or the content of the letter are not detailed.

<sup>22</sup> H. Hoock, *Empires of the imagination: politics, war and the arts in the British world, 1750-1850* (London, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> L. Patrizio Gunning, *The British consular service in the Aegean and the collection of antiquities for the British Museum* (London, 2009); D. Challis, *From the harpy tomb to the wonders of Ephesus: British archaeologists in the Ottoman Empire, 1840-1880* (London, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> E. Eldem, 'From blissful indifference to anguished concern: Ottoman perceptions of antiquities, 1799-1869', in Z. Bahrani, Z. Çelik, and E. Eldem, eds., *Scramble for the past: a story of archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753-1914* (Istanbul, 2011), pp. 281-330. See also W. M. K. Shaw, 'From mausoleum to museum: resurrecting antiquity for Ottoman modernity', in *ibid.*, pp. 423-41.

collections by acquiring antiquities from an as yet unexplored territory. However, the expedition was primarily a military one and in the event, instead of systematic collection, objects and manuscripts were acquired through uncontrolled looting by soldiers, leading to their dispersion through numerous institutions and private collections as well as the British Museum.

## I

The complaint that led to Emperor Tewodros taking hostages and the subsequent expedition was nominally over an unanswered letter from Queen Victoria. There was, however, a wider context. In the 1840s and 1850s, the British had cultivated a friendship with Abyssinia. By 1863, the British Foreign Office was balancing its relationship with Tewodros, who had been in power since 1855, with the need for diplomatic support for Egypt and the Ottoman Empire.<sup>25</sup> This was particularly important due to the partnership with France and Egypt in the building of the Suez Canal. In 1862, Charles Duncan Cameron was appointed consul to Abyssinia and, on his way there, visited Ottoman and Egyptian pashas along the Red Sea.<sup>26</sup> Egypt was nominally part of the Ottoman Empire but operated as an independent entity. Isma'il Pasha had become Khedive (or viceroy) of Egypt in January 1863 and was grandson of the powerful Muhammad Ali, Khedive of Egypt between 1805 and 1848.

Tewodros suspected the British of supporting Egyptian ambitions, which he perceived as threatening when the Ottomans granted the Egyptians control of Red Sea coastal ports and cities in 1865. The partnership between Britain, France, and Egypt to build the Suez Canal in 1859–69 fuelled his suspicions. In addition, Tewodros had strong 'cause for complaint' over the Ottoman removal of protection for Ethiopian Christians in Jerusalem in 1863.<sup>27</sup> He voiced these concerns in a letter to Queen Victoria sent on 12 February 1863 and expected a reply from her directly to him – monarch to monarch. No reply was sent due to an oversight at the Foreign Office. In January 1864, therefore, in retaliation for this insult from the British crown, Consul Cameron and some European Protestant missionaries were taken hostage. Although mistrusted by the emperor, it appears that Cameron had in fact urged the Foreign Office to back Tewodros.<sup>28</sup> The situation was delicate and needed careful handling. Mr Plowden, an earlier consul, had been killed by rebels in 1860, after spending five years at Tewodros's court. In April that year, the news had reached Aden, a port in Yemen under the control of the British and a mid-way point between Egypt and India.

In the early 1860s, Hormzud Rassam was working in Aden as a political agent for the British diplomatic service. Born in Mosul in what is now Iraq, Rassam had assisted Austen Henry Layard in the excavation of Mesopotamian sites for the British Museum between 1852 and 1854. Layard

<sup>25</sup> C. R. Markham and W. F. Prideux, *A history of the Abyssinian expedition* (London, 1869), pp. 74–6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>28</sup> Rogers, 'The Abyssinian expedition', p. 134.



was now a member of parliament and, as under-secretary for foreign affairs, took part in the decision to instruct Rassam to personally take a letter from the British government to Tewodros, demanding the release of the hostages.<sup>29</sup> In July 1864, Rassam left for Abyssinia accompanied by Henry Blanc, a doctor in the Indian medical service, and Lieutenant W. F. Prideaux, of the Bombay Staff Corps, and their Indian servants.<sup>30</sup> As they embarked for the Sudanese port of Massawa, which was under the control of the Egyptian authorities, they applied for permission to enter Abyssinia; this took one year to be granted.<sup>31</sup> Rassam finally met Tewodros and handed over the letter in January 1866.

As he did so, Rassam thought that the hostages would be able to leave with him; instead, he and his party were then also taken captive by Tewodros. Rassam recorded his experiences in a journal, as did many of the officers – particularly those sent by societies – these were written up retrospectively and published in a climate that, dependent on Conservative or Liberal political allegiance, was moving from triumphalism over the victory, to dismay over its expense and consequences. They are used here to record not so much what happened, but how Tewodros and the Ethiopians were represented, and how this campaign was manufactured to appear worthwhile to a divided British public. While the Liberal British government debated what to do, Colonel Merewether left Aden with Indian troops to scope out a possible expedition. In 1866, the Conservatives were elected to government. Lord Stanley, the new foreign secretary, wrote to Tewodros again in April of the following year (1867), warning that this would be a final letter peacefully requesting the release of the hostages. Receiving no reply, the cabinet took the decision to send an expedition to release the hostages by force.

Due to logistical reasons, the India Office and the government of Bombay took charge of the expedition. On 17 August 1867, General Robert Napier was ordered to lead an expeditionary force from India to rescue the hostages and punish Tewodros.<sup>32</sup> Napier was well known for his role in suppressing the Indian Uprising in 1857 and the earlier ‘Opium War’ campaigns in China. This time, the expedition combined the British Indian Army with troops from Britain and Egyptian auxiliaries. The heavy involvement of the British Indian Army and the tacit support from the Egyptian authorities made use of, and demonstrated, Britain’s ‘global power along two Eastern frontiers’. These two regions were effectively the ‘geopolitical gateposts of Britain’s empire in the East’.<sup>33</sup> The full force of imperial power was launched against a small kingdom. The networks of ‘officer-scholars’ that Holger Hoock has identified running the India Office, a legacy of the recently disbanded East

<sup>29</sup> G. A. Henty, *The march to Magdala* (London, 1868), p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> H. Rassam, *Narrative of the British mission to Theodore, king of Abyssinia: with notices of the countries traversed from Massowah, through the Soodân, the Amhâra, and back to Annesley Bay, from Mágdala* (London, 1869), p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20

<sup>32</sup> H. D. Napier, *Field Marshall Lord Napier of Magdala G.C.B., G.C.S.I.* (London, 1927), p. 200.

<sup>33</sup> Jasanoff, *Edge of empire*, p. 6.



India Company, were as important for organizing this expedition as the military might of the empire.<sup>34</sup>

Sir Stafford Northcote, secretary of state for India, sent a telegram on 16 September 1867 asking for scientific men to be sent to accompany the expedition.<sup>35</sup> This reached Sir Roderick Murchison, the president of the RGS, who had been himself in the army during the Napoleonic Wars, subsequently becoming a geologist in the 1820s. The RGS had long played an important role in imperial strategy, for example, it had carried out a geological survey in Bengal in the 1840s and had been instrumental in establishing an 'informal relationship between science and government', itself benefitting from imperial expansion, which both increased scientific knowledge and exploitation of natural resources, such as minerals.<sup>36</sup> Murchison was known for being 'at ease as much in society and politics as science'.<sup>37</sup> As the president of the Society, he had made his ambition to advance the progress of geography and exploration throughout the world. In his 1857 inaugural speech, he explained that the object of the Society was not just the exploration of unknown countries and the cultivation of physical geography, but also comparative geography, or what is today called regional geography.<sup>38</sup> He was a prominent advocate of exploring the physical geography of Africa, and especially concerned with African discoveries, and it was he who decided to send Clements Markham on the expedition. As well as being secretary of the RGS, Markham had a background in the Royal Navy and worked in the India Office. He was a typical officer-scholar and within the RGS, he played an 'important role in meticulously' organizing the non-military aspect of this expedition.<sup>39</sup>

Murchison was 'a man born to fill chairs'; not only he was one of the founding fathers of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (Section E: Geography) and of the Hakluyt Society, he was also a Trustee of the British Museum.<sup>40</sup> As such, he knew Charles Thomas Newton, who, after working for ten years as an assistant in the Department of Antiquities at the Museum, had in 1852 obtained an appointment as vice consul to the Greek island of Lesbos, then part of the western boundary of the Ottoman Empire. Whilst stationed there and then in neighboring Rhodes, Newton had selected, trained, and tasked a number of local colleagues to help in the search for antiquities.<sup>41</sup> By 1861, when he returned to the museum as newly appointed keeper of the Greek and Roman Antiquities Department, Newton had effectively put together an agency for the identification and collection of antiquities in the western part of the Ottoman Empire, namely the Greek Eastern Dodecanese islands and parts of western Turkey. The efficiency shown by the British in this

<sup>34</sup> Hoock, *Empires*, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> T. J. Holland and H. Hozier, *Record of the expedition to Abyssinia* (2 vols., London, 1870), II, p. 370.

<sup>36</sup> Stafford, *Scientist of empire*, pp. 112–13.

<sup>37</sup> J. Meadows, *The Victorian scientist: the growth of a profession* (London, 2004), p. 157.

<sup>38</sup> E. W. Gilbert and A. Goudie, 'Sir Roderick Impey Murchison, Bart, KCB, 1792–1871', *Geographical Journal*, 137 (1971), pp. 505–11, at p. 509.

<sup>39</sup> Matthies, *The siege*, p. 46.

<sup>40</sup> Gilbert and Goudie, 'Sir Roderick Impey Murchison', p. 509.

<sup>41</sup> Patrizio Gunning, *The British consular service*; Challis, *From the harpy tomb*, pp. 52–7.

field clashed with the newly found Ottoman interest in collecting antiquities.<sup>42</sup> Newton was aware of shifting attitudes by the mid-1860s, which were established by 1872 when he wrote to the Trustees that:

As attacks on the British Government permitted by the Porte, these articles have a certain significance and indicate in Mr N's opinion a less friendly disposition on the part of the Ottoman Government than formerly prevailed in regard to the granting of firmans for the exportation of marbles. Mr N has been for some time aware of this change in the disposition of the Porte in respect to firmans and it was with the hope of removing all reasonable grounds for such objections that in May 1869 at the suggestion of His Excellency Sir Henry Elliot, he had an interview with Ali Pasha the then Grand Vizir, and subsequently recommended to the Trustees the presentation of some statues and other antiquities to the Imperial Museum at Constantinople, in his report May 26th, 1869.<sup>43</sup>

After Newton's own excavations, extraction and removal of antiquities in Bodrum and Knidos in the late 1850s, John Turtle Wood's excavations in Ephesus during the 1860s irritated the Ottoman authorities. An informal request made to local governors that they should 'collect and send to Istanbul in chests any old artefacts', became by 1869 a directive that works of art found in the territories of the Ottoman Empire were to be sent to the Imperial Museum at Constantinople with only duplicates being allowed for exportation by foreign powers.<sup>44</sup> This was both a competitive response to European collecting practice and a part of Ottoman reform in establishing secular educational institutions.<sup>45</sup> In 1872, when Anton Dethier was put in charge of the creation and development of the Ottoman Archaeological Museum, all pieces had to be considered for the museum at Constantinople, selected, pre-authorized pieces could be exported, and permissions for excavation were increasingly denied to foreign powers.<sup>46</sup>

Newton was increasingly aware that new locations for antiquities and different acquisition methodologies were needed for the museum to expand its collections. The expedition to Maqdala in 1867–8 offered an opportunity that was worth exploring.

In Victorian Britain, science, military, and politics were deeply intertwined. A 'loose [yet] interconnected network of institutions and influence' and 'national cultural institutions, such as the British Museum' drove 'imperial taxonomic projects' in the 1860s.<sup>47</sup> This request was also part of Newton's campaign to recognize and practise archaeology as a science, much like geology.

<sup>42</sup> L. Patrizio Gunning, 'Cultural diplomacy in the acquisition of the head of the Satala aphrodite for the British Museum', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 34 (2021), pp. 219–32.

<sup>43</sup> British Museum, Central Archives, Officers Reports, 1870–2, fo. 441, 20 Feb. 1872.

<sup>44</sup> N. Baflgelen, 'Istanbul archaeology museums, from imperial museum to the present', *Arkeoloji / Archaeology*, 14 (2006), pp. 114–21.

<sup>45</sup> D. Baer, *The Ottomans: khans, caesars and caliphs* (London, 2021), p. 355.

<sup>46</sup> Patrizio Gunning, 'Cultural diplomacy'.

<sup>47</sup> Hoock, *Empires*, p. 15.

On 3 October 1867, Newton wrote to Murchison at the RGS precisely because he was aiming to encourage the different scientific societies and institutions to get officially involved in the Maqdala expedition. Newton wrote:

On the announcement of the Abyssinian expedition it occurred to me that it would be very desirable that an archaeologist should be sent out with the army. Adulis and Awasa were two cities lying in the track of the old Indian trade of the Ptolemies, and are full of Roman coins. Inscriptions of great historic interest have been found in both.<sup>48</sup>

At the same time, he informed Murchison that he had 'found such a man' on the staff at the British Museum but needed to get permission from the Trustees. His subsequent letter to the Trustees, as well as one from Captain Sherard Osborn – the naval arctic explorer, veteran of the Opium Wars and friend of Murchison – recommending a 'competent archaeologist', were discussed at the Trustees' meeting on 12 October 1867.<sup>49</sup>

Newton's proposal that Emmanuel Deutsch, assistant in the Department of Printed Books at the British Museum, accompany the expedition to Abyssinia 'to investigate the cultures of the area' was supported by his colleagues William Vaux (keeper of Coins and Medals), Augustus Franks (keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography), Thomas Watts (keeper of Printed Books), and Charles Rieu (keeper of Oriental Manuscripts). The principal librarian, John Winter Jones, provided a report in favour of the plan and Henry Hurt Milman, dean of St Paul's Cathedral and an historian of the early Christian church, also wrote a letter in support of the venture to Newton. These letters illustrated interest in antiquities from scholars of the classical period, the early Christian Church and anthropology:

The Trustees approved the Principal Librarian report and resolved that it appears extremely desirable to appoint a competent archaeologist to accompany the force about to proceed to Abyssinia, and in the event of a recommendation to that effect being favourably received by Her Majesty's Government, that the Principal Librarian be requested to take the steps which may appear to him desirable to have suitable instructions prepared for the Archaeologist so appointed. That the Principal Librarian make the necessary applications for carrying into effect the above Resolution.<sup>50</sup>

Although Deutsch was an expert on languages of the Near East, he withdrew from the expedition on health grounds. A month later, the Trustees agreed to send Richard Holmes, assistant in the Department of Manuscripts, in his

<sup>48</sup> Newton to Murchison, 3 Oct. 1867, London, The British Library / BL - AM, Murchison papers, III, Add MS 46127, fos. 271-4, F. 271.

<sup>49</sup> British Museum Central Archives, London, Minutes of the Standing Committee of Trustees, CE32 papers relating to excavations overseas, CE3/32, 11, 318-30, 12 Oct. 1867.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

place. Holmes joined a large contingent of journalists and men from scientific societies accompanying the expedition.<sup>51</sup> The journalists and scientists were 'subject to the commander in chief' Napier.<sup>52</sup> Holmes had £1,000 to cover the cost of excavations and acquisitions. However, Holmes's expertise was in prints and manuscripts, not in antiquities like Newton, or ancient languages like Deutsch, and arguably, this had a profound effect on what was eventually collected for the museum. This represented a break with the more informal connection between individuals and state military and diplomatic systems, described by Holger Hock as a 'public private partnership', that had informed British cultural practice from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries.<sup>53</sup>

## II

It is clear from his letter to Murchison that Newton's interest lay in the 'old Indian route of the Ptolemies', singling out Axum and Awasa as cities of particular interest.<sup>54</sup> In his account of the expedition, Markham also dwelt on the Abyssinian relationship with the Greek Egyptian empire of the Ptolemies, their early Christian conversion in 320 CE, and, like Newton, he singled out Axum and Adulis. He depicted the British expedition as following 'to some extent in the footsteps of the adventurous soldiers of Ptolemy, and met with a few faint traces of this old world enterprise'.<sup>55</sup> The British Indian Army identified itself with the Greek Ptolemaic empire of Egypt, perhaps due to the seeming fusion of cultures, but ultimately owing to an ingrained use of Greek and Roman history to justify and support imperial ideology.<sup>56</sup> Those involved in conquering and collecting believed themselves to be recreating the British empire as one of the great empires of the past, acting as the legitimate successors of those empires and believing that the spoiliations that came with it were rightful and legitimate. As Brian Dolan puts it, the battles of the nineteenth century were not just over the imperial frontiers, rather 'competition over symbolic resources for historical legitimization of modern democratic rule'.<sup>57</sup> And the competition about antiquities and art works was not just about possessing them, but about 'having the historical *right* to do so'.<sup>58</sup>

Whilst the British Indian troops already stationed at the port of Zula (now central Eritrea) were waiting for reinforcements from India and Britain and supplies from Egypt, the archaeological site of the ancient Greek city Adulis nearby was excavated for two weeks by Royal Engineer Captain William

<sup>51</sup> Holland and Hozier, *Record*, I, p. 450.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 370.

<sup>53</sup> Hock, *Empires*, p. 209.

<sup>54</sup> An obelisk at Axum was removed by the invading Italian army in 1937. It was repatriated by Italy to Ethiopia in 2003–7 and reassembled in 2008. See Pankhurst, 'Ethiopia, the Aksum obelisk'.

<sup>55</sup> Markham and Prideux, *A history*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>56</sup> P. Satia, *Time's monster: history, conscience and Britain's empire* (London, 2020), p. 262.

<sup>57</sup> B. Dolan, *Exploring European frontiers: British travellers in the age of enlightenment* (London, 2000), p. 131.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

West Goodfellow. With the assistance of sappers from Bombay and Madras, Goodfellow uncovered an early Christian church. There was little time for further excavation as General Robert Napier arrived at Zula on 7 January 1868, followed by the journalists and scientists, including Holmes, on 24 January 1868. Napier took 16,000 men and enough supplies for a six-month campaign, as well as six nine-pounder Armstrong guns. Although ‘taking every opportunity’ he could, and despite going close by the city of Axum, Holmes was unable to dedicate much time to archaeology on the march to Maqdala.<sup>59</sup> Instead, he ‘sought out churches’ and procured manuscripts.<sup>60</sup> This was due to Napier’s determination to press on with the expedition and his desire to form alliances with the Abyssinian leaders who were hostile to Tewodros’s reign, rather than getting their permission to excavate.

The troops reached Maqdala in early April 1868. On 10 April, Napier sent a letter to Tewodros, who refused to read it.<sup>61</sup> The Armstrong guns pounded the fort of Maqdala and the British won the battle. Tewodros then allowed the hostages to leave the fortress for the British military camp. They were joined by the European artisans who had been in Tewodros’s service. Maqdala was stormed by the British on Easter Monday, 13 April. As the British advanced between the gates of the fort, Tewodros shot himself – pointedly, using pistols gifted to him by Queen Victoria. A crowd of soldiers tore his clothes from his body whilst the British plundered the fort.

The English word for loot derives from the Hindi word for ‘spoils of war’ and was first recorded in the East India Company vernacular in 1788.<sup>62</sup> Thus, the Indians in the British Indian Army were tragically imposing the looting of cultural heritage of other people that had been applied to their own cultural heritage in India. Looting objects of cultural value was one of the defining acts of colonizing India, though it can be argued that looting as part of colonizing countries in western Europe has an inglorious history dating back to the Romans. Yet, the Romans placed a limit on their looting. Famous is the case of Verres, who in 70 BC, as Roman governor of Sicily, had used his position to seize public and private artworks. Verres was condemned for these takings. In his speech at his trial (known as *Verrines* or *In Verrem*), Cicero explained that there could be no justification for ‘robbing a people of their heritage...because of its continuing significance to the people from whom it has been wrested and a cultural value because of its religious or political context or connotation, or through the historical memories it evokes’. Cicero, therefore, had emphasized that gathering war spoils had limits, and that temples and private homes should be left untouched. He had on that occasion established the principle that ‘representatives of an occupying power had no right to take or to purchase at an undervalue, cultural items of significance to the people of those territories’.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Holland and Hozier, *Record*, II, p. 371.

<sup>60</sup> Matthies, *The siege*, p. 84.

<sup>61</sup> Rassam, *Narrative*, p. 317.

<sup>62</sup> A. Procter, *The whole picture: the colonial story of art in our museums and what we need to talk about it* (London, 2020), p. 95.

<sup>63</sup> Robertson, *Who owns history?*, pp. IX–XI.

In nineteenth-century Europe, this concept had not been forgotten. In the 1780s, Cicero's *In Verrem* had been quoted by the philosopher and member of parliament Edmund Burke when prosecuting Warren Hastings, governor general of India for the East India Company, at trial for his greed and rapacity in India. Hastings was acquitted. The French art critic and philosopher Quatremère de Quincy, in his seventh letter to Miranda, refers to Cicero's *In Verrem* to argue against the spoilation of Rome through the removal of sculpture from the Vatican collections and elsewhere by French revolutionary troops in 1796.<sup>64</sup> Yet, in his letters to Canova, Quatremère de Quincy supported Lord Elgin's removal of sculptures and other items from the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens, in part as Greece was on the western fringe of the Ottoman Empire and lay outside what was determined as Europe.<sup>65</sup> In London, the sculptures from Athens could be observed and studied. Margaret Miles has argued that *In Verrem* influenced the decision by the victorious allies, and the duke of Wellington in particular, to return the sculptures from Paris to Rome after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815.<sup>66</sup> *In Verrem* influenced modern ideas around cultural property and spoilation, but arguably – as in the case of Hastings in India and Elgin in Greece – they were not applied to lands and peoples outside Europe. The othering of non-European people and their cultures, especially by race, accelerated in the nineteenth century and led to a different attitude to looting in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Oceania.

In the 1860s, racial determinism and imperial domination were established in governmental policies as well as in scientific and cultural societies.<sup>67</sup> After his death, Tewodros was racialized in depictions of his almost entirely naked body and scrutiny of his facial features. Although William Simpson, the artist from the *Illustrated London News (ILN)*, joined the expedition after the storming of Maqdala, a post-mortem image of Tewodros was printed in the magazine with a physiognomic description of the face as having a 'brow massive and thoughtful, indicative of great natural intelligence'.<sup>68</sup> It is likely that this image was based on the sketch that Holmes had made of Tewodros and on the basis of this image, a paper reported that the face was 'very handsome – for an African – and the lip is determined'.<sup>69</sup> Readers would be used to such physiognomic descriptions since writers such as Dickens, Collins, and Gaskell regularly used them in describing characters.<sup>70</sup> The head shape, and brow in particular, was thought to be indicative of intelligence and facial features

<sup>64</sup> A. Q. de Quincy, trans. C. Miller and D. Gilks, *Letters to Miranda and Canova on the abduction of antiquities from Rome and Athens* (Los Angeles, CA, 2012), p. 116.

<sup>65</sup> D. Poulot, 'The cosmopolitanism of masterpieces', in de Quincy, *Letters*, pp. 1–91, at p. 42.

<sup>66</sup> M. Miles, *Art as plunder: the ancient origins of debate about cultural property* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 329–48.

<sup>67</sup> D. A. Lorimer, 'Race science and culture: historical continuities and discontinuities, 1850–1914', in S. West, ed., *The Victorians and race* (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 12–33, at p. 26.

<sup>68</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 30 May 1868, pp. 537, 542, 'The expedition to Abyssinia'; Matthies, *The siege*, pp. 159–60.

<sup>69</sup> For example, see *Inverness Courier*, 'The fall of Maqdala', 21 May 1868, p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> This is detailed in M. Cowling, *The artist as anthropologist: the representation of type and character in Victorian art* (Cambridge, 1989).

were read for moral virtues. There appeared to be much to admire in Tewodros's face:

The complexion was dark for an Abyssinian but the features showed no trace of negro blood. The eyebrows had a peculiar curve downwards and over the nose, and there was a deep-curved furrow in the centre of the forehead. The nose was aquiline and finely cut, with a low bridge; the lips very thin and cruel; the face though thin, rather round than oval.<sup>71</sup>

Markham's description suggests a European facial outline, as infamously depicted by Pieter Cuvier, which is underlined by his observation of 'no trace of negro blood'. Recording racial difference – that is difference from a European White 'normal' – became routine through photographs and descriptions. The descriptions above project Tewodros as an equal opponent for the British, perhaps implying that the expedition was fought on equal terms and power.

The official chronicle of the expedition recorded that the Royal Engineers also photographed the dead emperor; post-mortem photographs were common in this period.<sup>72</sup> However, this was not a mark of remembrance typical of mid-Victorian mourning culture, but a military act. Tewodros's wishes regarding his remains and his family were respected, to an extent. Rassam, as requested by Tewodros himself, oversaw the burial of the emperor according to Abyssinian custom on 14 April 1868.<sup>73</sup> Yet, a macabre and grotesque instance of the public jubilation of the fall of Maqdala was illustrated in the display of a 'lock of the late King Theodore's hair' as a war trophy in a shop in Plymouth. This lock had been 'cut from his head by Captain C. F. James and displayed in a shop window on George Street as a 'matter of curiosity'.<sup>74</sup> Tewodros was simultaneously racialized as 'other' and as an equal opponent for the British and British Indian Army despite the gross disparity in troops and weapons. Racial othering seen in the removal and display of his hair reflected a broad race determinism in cultures of display at this time.

Tewodros's queen and legitimate heir were taken from Maqdala under the protection of the British, again at Tewodros's request, to keep them safe from his local enemies. Clement Markham recounts that the twenty-six-year-old Queen Woyzaro Terunesh was 'grossly insulted' and Rassam saved her from 'further outrage'.<sup>75</sup> Again, these are accounts retrospectively written by senior officers and officials taking part in the expedition. In what manner the queen was grossly insulted is speculative, but the fact of her death on the journey and subsequent removal and collection of her personal belongings suggest a sexualized possession. Her jewellery and elaborately embroidered cotton dress were

<sup>71</sup> Markham and Prideux, *A history*, p. 335.

<sup>72</sup> Henty, *The march*, p. 348.

<sup>73</sup> Rassam, *Narrative*, p. 342.

<sup>74</sup> 'A relic from Maqdala', *Cambridge Independent Press*, 30 May 1868, p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> Markham and Prideux, *A history*, p. 361.



sent to the care of Sir Stafford Northcote at the India Office in London. Northcote donated them to the British Museum in 1869, from where they went to the South Kensington Museum, now Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A).<sup>76</sup> Chillingly, like Tewodros's lock of hair, a fragment of the queen's silk brocade dress was put on public display at the National Exhibition of Works of Art in Leeds in 1868 and was loaned by T. P. (or W.) Martin, 33rd Regiment.<sup>77</sup> This information, unearthed by Andrew Heavens as part of his research for his forthcoming book on the expedition *The prince and the plunder*, illustrates how widespread the looting was and the role of private collectors alongside a man from the British Museum.

Prince Alemayehu, the seven-year-old son of Tewodros and Terunesh, was taken to Britain and put under the guardianship of Captain Tristram Charles Sawyer Speedy, the interpreter in the Intelligence Department on the expedition. Speedy had in fact fought alongside Tewodros in an earlier campaign in the 1850s. After attending public school, where (despite the physiognomic worthiness of his dead father's head) he experienced racist abuse, Alemayehu died of pleurisy in 1879 in Leeds at the age of eighteen. He was buried outside St George's Chapel in Windsor. There has been a campaign, supported by the writer Lemn Sissay, for the repatriation of Alemayehu's remains to Ethiopia where he is seen as having been held hostage by the British.<sup>78</sup> Alemayehu was removed by the British for his protection from the potential violence of his father's enemies, but experienced institutional and day-to-day racism in his short life.

### III

Shortly after the fall of Maqdala and the death of Tewodros, the new Emperor Hatse Yohannes, a former Ethiopian rival to Tewodros, joined the British Indian Army at their camp. It took Yohannes several years to fully control Ethiopia – the removal of Tewodros was followed by three years of chaos.<sup>79</sup> Napier set fire to Maqdala and blew up the gates on 17 April. The British had on previous occasions burnt books and libraries as 'a deliberate political act designed to weaken the centre of politics and government' of a hostile country as in 1814 when they set fire to the Library of Congress at

<sup>76</sup> M. Bailey, 'Then & now: the V&A and Queen Woyzaro Terunesh's wedding dress', *The Art Newspaper*, 27 Mar. 2018, available at: [www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/the-queen-s-wedding-dress](http://www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/the-queen-s-wedding-dress) (accessed 5 Dec. 2022).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. A. Heavens, 'Royal regalia', 30 Aug. 2022, *The prince and plunder* website: [www.theprinceandthepunder.com/category/royal-regalia/](http://www.theprinceandthepunder.com/category/royal-regalia/) (accessed 5 Dec. 2022).

<sup>78</sup> L. Sissay, 'Hidden in Windsor Castle', blog on 20 Mar. 2019, available at: [blog.lemnsissay.com/2019/03/20/hidden-in-windsor-castle-subterfuge-the-stolen-prince/#sthash.cBwwtGo3.dpbs](http://blog.lemnsissay.com/2019/03/20/hidden-in-windsor-castle-subterfuge-the-stolen-prince/#sthash.cBwwtGo3.dpbs) (accessed 5 Dec. 2022). There is more on the prince on the Royal Collections' Trust website: 'Prince Alamyu', Black and Asian history and Victorian Britain: early photographs in the royal collection, available at: [www.rct.uk/collection/themes/trails/black-and-asian-history-and-victorian-britain/prince-alamayu](http://www.rct.uk/collection/themes/trails/black-and-asian-history-and-victorian-britain/prince-alamayu) (accessed 5 Dec. 2022).

<sup>79</sup> R. Pankhurst, 'The case for Ethiopia', *Museum International*, 38 (1986), pp. 58–60, at p. 59.

Washington DC.<sup>80</sup> This time, however, looted cultural treasures were used to pay reward money to the soldiers with no regard for the people or the country to whom these objects and manuscripts belonged. Tewodros himself had forcibly taken various documents from monasteries around Abyssinia with the intention of building a centralized church and treasury.<sup>81</sup> After Maqdala was stormed, the British soldiers plundered the fort and, though sentries 'were stationed at the gates to prevent plunder from being taken down to the camp', the treasury was 'entirely rifled'.<sup>82</sup> This 'regulated' plunder was collected to be sold at auction and distributed as prize money amongst non-commissioned officers and soldiers.<sup>83</sup> Captain Hayward 'tried to collect all the plunder for the booty', though small items were smuggled past him.<sup>84</sup>

The loot distribution is indicative of the class hierarchies for the reward. As in the looting of the Yuanmingyuan (the Chinese Summer Palace) in 1860 and the later looting of Benin in 1897, the officers who had made their way up through the ranks and not bought a place in the army (i.e. those not likely to be from the upper/upper-middle classes), were allowed a share of the cash sale of the artefacts.<sup>85</sup> Wealthier soldiers, some of the scientists, and the British Museum representative Holmes bought objects in this sale.

The sale of the plunder from Maqdala took place after the soldiers had left the fort with 15 elephants and 200 mules carrying the loot to relative safety on 20–1 April. The one line mentioning the sale in the official report stated: 'The plunder taken in Magdala was sold by auction and the proceeds of the sale distributed among the troops as prize money.'<sup>86</sup> Richard Holmes, as he had not been able to carry out excavations, had £1,000 to spend, and 'armed with ample funds', outbid most people. In addition, Napier directed that Holmes should be able 'to select other items as may be suited to the Museum' before the auction took place. Holmes was able to acquire 'the most expensive and beautiful books and manuscripts' for the British Museum, though, according to journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley, Colonel Frazer ran him hard as he was 'bidding for a wealthy regiment mess'.<sup>87</sup> The main account of the auction is given by Stanley, who recorded the event as taking place over two days with the 'indefatigable Lieutenant S.' acting as auctioneer taking bids from gentleman buyers. On auction was the royal seal of Tewodros, his silk shirt, weapons, art works, bibles, jewellery, religious tablets (or tabots), and numerous manuscripts. Stanley records that, though Holmes generally prevailed, there were many bidders for the personal items of Tewodros, with Stanley himself taking a piece of Tewodros's tent.<sup>88</sup> The sale made £5,000

<sup>80</sup> Richard Ovenden, *Burning the books: a history of knowledge under attack* (London, 2020), p. 90.

<sup>81</sup> Pankhurst, 'The library', p. 15.

<sup>82</sup> Markham and Prideux, *A history*, p. 359.

<sup>83</sup> Pankhurst, 'The case', p. 58.

<sup>84</sup> Pankhurst, 'The library', p. 17.

<sup>85</sup> Lundén, *Displaying loot*, p. 411.

<sup>86</sup> Holland and Hozier, *Record*, II, p. 78.

<sup>87</sup> H. M. Stanley, *Coomassie and Maqdala: the story of two British campaigns in Africa* (London, 1891; orig. edn 1874) p. 381. This was the 11th Hussars.

<sup>88</sup> Matthies, *The siege*, p. 139.

with just over £4 given to every non-commissioned officer and soldier entitled to the 'prize'.<sup>89</sup>

Holmes's role in the plunder was planned in as far as he took part in the expedition and was given preferential treatment by Napier. However, although sent officially as archaeologist for the British Museum, he carried out little archaeology and did not even manage to survey the sites that Newton had mentioned in his letter to Murchison. On his return to Zulis in May to June 1868, he inspected the excavations made by Goodfellow at Adulis and oversaw the removal of two crates of antiquities, although there was no time to extract the monumental throne that had been uncovered there.<sup>90</sup> This was fortunate for Eritrea, which has since established a national museum. Recent excavations in the same location have underscored the importance of the ancient trading city.<sup>91</sup> Yet, the scant excavations at Adulis were hardly the evidence of the 'old Indian trade of the Ptolemies' that Newton had had in mind, and ultimately an archaeologist could accomplish little on a military expedition. It was easier to buy or acquire the looted plunder afterwards, as the British Museum would do in future. William Wright noted in his *Catalogue of Ethiopic manuscripts in the British Museum acquired since 1847* that:

It was hoped that Mr. Holmes would be able to visit sites of importance, to collect antiquities, and to procure manuscripts. The state of the country, the hurried nature of the expedition, and the route chosen for the army, prevented the first part of this program from being carried out.<sup>92</sup>

The mass of manuscripts that Tewodros had built up at Maqdala, however, meant that Holmes had first pick from thousands of volumes with 'the assistance of that accomplished scholar Mr. Werner Münzinger, then one of the European consuls at Massowah'<sup>93</sup> and as such ultimately his presence was of benefit to the museum.

There was a scramble to report the news of the fall of Maqdala in May 1868. Stanley broke the story for the *New York Herald*. It is thought that he did this by bribing the telegraph office at Suez.<sup>94</sup> The immediate popular reaction in Britain was jubilant. Holmes's plundered acquisitions were triumphantly reported in the *ILN*, including the crown of Abuna and a chalice dating to 1560, as he 'recognised their importance and instantly purchased them for the national collection'. Reports elsewhere followed suit with breathless descriptions of 'Holmes of the British Museum' drawing the body of the king and finding a gold chalice and crown.<sup>95</sup> His role in the expedition was

<sup>89</sup> Pankhurst, 'Ethiopia, the Aksum obelisk'.

<sup>90</sup> Matthies, *The siege*, p. 153.

<sup>91</sup> C. Zazzaro, *The ancient Red Sea port of Adulis and the Eritrean coastal region: previous investigations and museum collections*, BAR International Series 2569 (Oxford, 2013).

<sup>92</sup> W. Wright, *Catalogue of Ethiopic manuscripts in the British Museum acquired since 1847* (London, 1877), p. iii.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> D. Jeal, *Stanley: the impossible life of Africa's greatest explorer* (London, 2007), p. 72.

<sup>95</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 'The Abyssinia expedition', 13 June 1868, p. 576; *The Inverness Courier*, 'The fall of Magdala', 21 May 1868.

celebrated and the removal of religious and royal objects for the national museum seen as evidence of success and scientific endeavour. The numerous manuscripts and religious objects that Holmes took for the museum were rarely mentioned. Napier arranged for hundreds of manuscripts not taken by Holmes or others on the expedition to go to churches in Ethiopia. In 1877, Wright counted 350 manuscripts in the British Museum, though he estimated that at least 500 must have been taken in the loot. Although Holmes's duties on the excavations were not able to be carried out, the British Museum was not a passive benefactor of the expedition, as Holmes had his pick of stolen manuscripts and objects still retained by the museum, some so sacred to the people of Ethiopia that they cannot be shown to the public.

#### IV

Shortly before the fall of Maqdala, Benjamin Disraeli became prime minister for the first time after the retirement of the earl of Derby in 1868. Maqdala is arguably the first scene in Disraeli's imperial theatre, which he staged more thoroughly during his second premiership in the 1870s. General Napier was rewarded with the title baron of Maqdala – part of the imperialization of the honours list and awarding of titles that began in Disraeli's first administration.<sup>96</sup> Markham observed that 'from most points of view this Abyssinian Expedition may be looked upon by Englishmen with unmixed satisfaction', even for the price of a penny on income tax. Yet, presciently, he observed that:

The Abyssinians are one of the proudest people in the world. Long after Theodore's cruelties are forgotten, his prowess and valour will be sang at every hearth, his utter defeat will touch a sore point in national character and the foreigners who committed so horrible and unexampled a slaughter will not be loved. The pride of the people will be touched to the quick.<sup>97</sup>

Napier himself donated antiquities from the campaign to the British Museum. Edward Edwards, an early biographer and employee of the museum, describes Napier as adding his honoured name to those soldiers 'who have justifiably turned victorious arms to the profit of learning, and the enrichment of honestly built-up collections'.<sup>98</sup> Writing his study of the British Museum shortly after the expedition, Edwards commends Richard Holmes for 'diligently' seeking manuscripts but chastises him for his acquisition of religious objects as 'utterly unworthy of the British arms and name'. Edwards was not alone in disparaging the results of the campaign. Joseph Hooker at Kew Gardens had refused to assist Murchison's efforts to put a scientific team together when planning the expedition, as he considered the affair 'a fiasco'.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>96</sup> D. Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: how the British saw their empire* (London, 2001), p. 86.

<sup>97</sup> Markham and Prideux, *A history*, p. 383.

<sup>98</sup> E. Edwards, *Lives of the founders of the British Museum: with notices of its chief augmentors and other benefactors, 1570–1870*, II (London, 1870), p. 705.

<sup>99</sup> Stafford, *Scientist of empire*, p. 184.

Edwards's view was, interestingly, shared by the newly incumbent prime minister. By 1871, the military prize money of purchases for the British Museum from the auction had still not been sorted out and the Liberals were back in power with William E. Gladstone as prime minister. There was, at this stage, a row over payment for the Abunas crown and gold chalice, whose value and significance were downplayed by the British Museum Trustees.<sup>100</sup> The quibbling over payment of extra prize money for these items resulted in questions in parliament and the tone from the new Liberal administration was very different. Gladstone regretted:

that those articles were ever brought from Abyssinia, and could not conceive why they were so brought. They were never at war with the people or the churches of Abyssinia. They were at war with Theodore, who personally had inflicted on them an outrage and a wrong; 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 a British Army.<sup>101</sup>

In 2002, the former British Museum director David Wilson commented that the acquisition of the Maqdala objects is 'one of the less glorious episodes in the history of the museum'.<sup>102</sup> A significant admission, given Wilson has been a vocal campaigner against restitution of objects from the British Museum, contending that the museum has a 'moral' duty to retain the objects in its care.<sup>103</sup>

Invaluable work by the late Richard and Rita Pankhurst and Martin Bailey for *The Art Newspaper* has located where much of the looted material from Abyssinia is in Britain. Most of the best-known objects are now mainly in the V&A and the British Museum. A number of manuscripts are in the British Library, the Royal Library at Windsor Castle, the John Rylands Library (University of Manchester), the Bodleian Library (University of Oxford), and the Cambridge University Library.<sup>104</sup> The manuscripts and objects from Maqdala found their way into these institutions by various means. A tabot in Westminster Abbey, which was placed into the altar of the Henry VII Lady Chapel, was donated by Captain George Arbuthnot, who was in the Royal Artillery and fought at Maqdala.<sup>105</sup> In 2010, the tabot was covered

<sup>100</sup> Parliament, House of Commons 1871, *Correspondence between the British Museum, the treasury, the War Office and Colonel Millward R.A. relative to the purchase of the Abyssinian abunas crown and gold chalice captured at Magdala*, Sessional Papers No. 117.

<sup>101</sup> Parliament, House of Commons Debate, 30 June 1871, vol. 207 cols. 939–52.

<sup>102</sup> D. M. Wilson, *The British Museum: a history* (London, 2002), p. 173.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>104</sup> The most extensive list of manuscripts is Pankhurst, 'The library', and of objects is Pankhurst, 'The Napier expedition'.

<sup>105</sup> M. Bailey, 'Ethiopia claims Ten Commandments tablet hidden in Westminster Abbey: sacred object taken by British troops in the 19th century is concealed inside an altar', *The Art Newspaper*, 2 July 2018, [www.theartnewspaper.com/2018/07/02/ethiopia-claims-ten-commandments-tablet-hidden-in-westminster-abbey](http://www.theartnewspaper.com/2018/07/02/ethiopia-claims-ten-commandments-tablet-hidden-in-westminster-abbey) (accessed 28 Dec. 2022).

over and there is a campaign for its return to Ethiopia, which is supported by Lord Carey, archbishop of Canterbury between 1991 and 2002.<sup>106</sup> The combination of the systematic purchase of what was considered the most culturally valuable objects by Richard Holmes for the British Museum, and random items scattered to numerous institutions, illustrate the collusion between the worlds of culture, politics, military, and royalty across the British nation-state at this time.

In 1872, Emperor Yohannes IV requested the return of a Kebra Nagast ('Glory of Kings') manuscript and a sixteenth-century icon of Christ wearing a crown of thorns, known as the Kwer'ata Re'esu Icon, directly from Queen Victoria. The British Museum returned one of the two copies it had of the requested manuscript, but Queen Victoria wrote that there was 'no trace' of the icon. Holmes had in fact kept the Kwer'ata Re'esu Icon for himself but this was not widely known until 1890, though he was librarian at the Royal Library at Windsor Castle between 1870 and 1905.<sup>107</sup> Since then, the Kwer'ata Re'esu Icon has twice been sold at auction and is now one of the campaign group the Antiquity Coalition's 'top ten most wanted antiquities'. It was last known to be in a private collection in Portugal.<sup>108</sup> It is an important symbol of power as Ethiopians swore allegiance to it and it was carried by the emperors into military battles for centuries. The loss of this item illustrates that objects are not necessarily safer in western collections or if held by western collectors than if held by source communities, as well as, rather crucially, that Holmes himself was less than transparent about what went to official collections, such as the museum or royal collection, and what he retained for himself.

The letter from Newton and those from his colleagues in support of his plan to send museum personnel on the Abyssinian Expedition illustrate that the British Museum did not just passively receive objects and manuscripts donated or bought from the military on the Maqdala expedition. By pre-planning, financing, and deciding to send a member of its own staff, it became an active participant (and, indeed, a catalyst as Holmes was expected to bring back objects for the collections) in the destruction of another country's cultural heritage albeit not in the manner the museum's keeper, principal librarian, or Trustees had anticipated. No excavations were carried out; instead, plundered objects and manuscripts were bought and taken during and after the sacking of the fort at Maqdala. These were seen as less prestigious than the classical antiquities from excavations, much like Egyptian objects were at the beginning of the century.<sup>109</sup> The lack of excavations, ultimately due to

<sup>106</sup> M. Bailey, 'King Charles faces pressure to return sacred tabot to Ethiopia', *The Art Newspaper*, 30 Sept. 2022, [www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/09/30/king-charles-faces-pressure-to-return-sacred-tabot-to-ethiopia](http://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/09/30/king-charles-faces-pressure-to-return-sacred-tabot-to-ethiopia) (accessed 10 Oct. 2022).

<sup>107</sup> G. M. Kebede and S. Meyer-Abich, 'A reflection: translocations and changes in perspective' *Journal for Art Market Studies*, 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.23690/jams.v2i2.55>.

<sup>108</sup> Antiquity Coalition, 'Combat looting: top ten most wanted antiquities', Oct. 2020, [combatlooting-gac.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=5e84e269fb42449a8478635866aa2ef7](http://combatlooting-gac.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=5e84e269fb42449a8478635866aa2ef7) (accessed 17 Mar. 2021).

<sup>109</sup> S. Moser, *Wondrous curiosities: ancient Egypt at the British Museum* (Chicago, IL, 2006), p. 101.

lack of support from the military leadership, no doubt contributed to the fact that directly sending museum personnel for the acquisition of war booty was not repeated. Instead, the museum continued to benefit from colonial violence in military campaigns by either buying or receiving donated material from such punitive expeditions.

Whilst the construction of national imperial museums went hand in hand with national military and diplomatic power, different peoples and regional powers were treated according to the importance placed on their perceived political strength and supposed economic and cultural value. Acquisitions for the British Museum from the Ottoman Empire, for example, took place through diplomatic channels, while in China and across Africa and South Asia, punitive expeditions destroyed and stole cultural heritage. Researching the full circumstances of acquisitions allows historians, museum professionals, and stake holder communities to understand the extent of historical and cultural erasure that, in particular historical circumstances, has been imposed on other cultures.<sup>110</sup> This research and analysis makes it transparent that the ethical duty of western museums and nations is to give objects, such as those looted from Maqdala, back, and in so doing return to the people whose objects they have taken the ability to better understand their past and determine their future. In his book *Burning the books*, the Bodleian's librarian Richard Ovenden places the Maqdala expedition firmly in an inglorious tradition of plundering and destroying cultural heritage in warfare, commenting that 'the removal of knowledge from a community can have very serious consequences' by 'undermining their narrative of cultural and political identity'.<sup>111</sup> Ovenden is a senior executive of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, and can push for change, even within a large complex institution, to address the colonial violence still embedded in systems of knowledge, through action as well as verbal acknowledgement of the 'serious consequences'. Making this history openly accessible assists and is part of the sharing of knowledge needed to repair colonial violence. The British Museum played an active role in the Maqdala campaign and plunder of Ethiopia and now has the opportunity to exercise restorative cultural justice.

In September 2022, the tabots in the British Museum, with which we began this article, became the subject of a Freedom of Information (FOI) request from the UK-based pressure group and online resource Returning Heritage for details around claims made for their return since 1991.<sup>112</sup> In the previous year, the same group had provided a legal opinion to support an exemption under the 1963 British Museum Act that would back their return as they are 'unfit to be retained' since no one can see them.<sup>113</sup> The Charities Act 2022

<sup>110</sup> Hicks, *The british museums*, p. 239.

<sup>111</sup> Ovenden, *Burning the books*, pp. 180–1.

<sup>112</sup> 'British Museum is pressed to explain its refusal to return sacred tabots to Ethiopia', Returning Heritage website, available at: [www.returningheritage.com/british-museum-pressed-to-explain-refusal-to-return-sacred-tabots](http://www.returningheritage.com/british-museum-pressed-to-explain-refusal-to-return-sacred-tabots) (accessed 11 Oct. 2022).

<sup>113</sup> 'British Museum seeks more time to consider the return of Ethiopia's tabots', Returning Heritage website, available at: [www.returningheritage.com/british-museum-seeks-more-time-to-consider-the-return-of-ethiopias-tabots](http://www.returningheritage.com/british-museum-seeks-more-time-to-consider-the-return-of-ethiopias-tabots) (accessed 11 Oct. 2022).



allowed ‘Trustees, of their own accord, to make ex gratia transfers of low valued property’; essentially allowing national museums to dispose of their own property under section 106 of the Charities Act if there is a ‘moral obligation’ to return objects.<sup>114</sup> This disposal was previously governed by statute: by laws made in parliament, rather than under the Charities Act.<sup>115</sup> Recognizing and researching the historical context behind a letter – from one man in an institution to another – about sending an insider on a military expedition that resulted in planned and violent plunder is critical to assisting our assessment of ‘ethical obligation’.

---

<sup>114</sup> A. Herman, ‘Museums, restitution and the new charities act’, *Art & Law*, 25 Sept. 2022, available at: [ial.uk.com/museums-restitution-and-the-new-charities-act/](https://www.ial.uk.com/museums-restitution-and-the-new-charities-act/) (accessed 2 Oct. 2022).

<sup>115</sup> Arts Council England, *Restitution and repatriation: a practical guide for museums in England* (London 2022), p. 15.

**Cite this article:** Patrizio Gunning L, Challis D (2023). Planned Plunder, the British Museum, and the 1868 Maqdala Expedition. *The Historical Journal* **66**, 550–572. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X2200036X>