

Loot of a Royal Library: the Siege of Mäqdäla Revisited

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(Reference number: I-79/17 (starting at 01/09/17 / until 31/08/2020 / closing date for applications 21/04/17))

Before being plundered under the hands of a British army led by General Napier (1810-1890), Mäqdäla (also Magdala) was a mountain palace of the Ethiopian king Tewodros II (1855-68). This natural stronghold, located on flat topped mountain in Northern Ethiopia, is remembered for its being a palace and a royal library; the library is believed to have housed thousands of precious manuscripts. King Tewodros, commonly described as modernizer, is said to have asked European especially of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) of England's favor. She sent him some missionaries and some firearms and declined further assistance. This escalated into a diplomatic tension after the king imprisoned the missionaries. In April 1868, the British finally sent an invading force of 32,000 to rescue their men. In the brief siege of the citadel which lasted for about a week (April 13-21, 1868), many objects of precious value were looted: manuscripts, processional crosses, and *tabots* (altar slabs), etc. and finally the whole place set on fire. These objects are in esp. in British and some were dispersed within Ethiopia with their whereabouts not yet known. The focus of this project shall be identification and description of the manuscripts which were looted in an attempt to reconstruct the contents of the library. This can be done through the identification of the manuscripts using the itinerary of the military expedition within Ethiopia relating to the manuscript holdings of the churches and monasteries around such a route and using manuscript catalogues of the main libraries in England (British Library and British Museum) which house such manuscripts. Furthermore, the issues of ownership of such manuscripts and ongoing debates on their repatriation to Ethiopia will be the subjects of the research.