

Loot of an Ethiopian Royal Library: The Siege of Mäqdäla Revisited

Gidena Mesfin Kebede (PhD)

Ethiopian King Tewodros II (1855-1868) came to power putting an end to what is usually called 'The Era of Princes' in Ethiopian History. He was the first King to rule a somewhat reunited Ethiopia after a century of internal turmoil and regional lordship. He made his capital a natural strong hold called Magdala. He built a church there, furnished it with manuscripts he collected from the churches of the former main Ethiopian capital-Gondar. With this background, he was much more into modernizing the country. As part of his efforts to modernize his country, he made diplomatic contacts with European powers of his time among which Victorian England was one. Though Victorian England showed signs of cooperation at first, it didn't last long; the letters sent by the King were not answered. Especially the fact that the letter he sent to England 1862 remained unanswered made Tewodros rethink his relations to foreigners and this change in his attitude made him imprison all Europeans (missionaries of different countries of origin and an English consul alike) under his command. After this diplomatic tension, things escalated into the eventful punitive British expedition of 1868 which caused the king to commit suicide.

In this expedition the national library and archive was looted: a selection of 350 manuscripts was made by the Head of the Manuscript Section of the then British Museum and taken to Britain, some other 600 manuscripts were scattered along the Northern return route the expeditionary force followed (The Church of Chelekot the main one; 600 manuscripts believed to have been given to this very church according to some sources), crowns, processional crosses and other valuable treasures taken away. Focusing on the manuscripts, it happened that the king himself has forcibly taken from the famous and main churches of the former Ethiopian capital Gondar which in turn were again looted by the British. This implies the manuscripts have seen at least a two layered translocation: both within Ethiopia and overseas. The inland translocation is from the Churches at Gondar to Magdala and finally further north to Tigray. The international translocation comprises of the dispersal of manuscripts almost worldwide (about 350 manuscripts are kept in the British Library, other locations which contain manuscripts from this very library include: Ireland, Germany, France, Vatican City, India and USA); not to mention those lost in the private hands of soldiers. Therefore, an atlas showing the dispersal will be produced based on the official itinerary of the expedition. Issues of language used i.e. the way the expedition was described and presented by the expeditionary force and how it is remembered by Ethiopians finally relating to ownership and memory will be discussed.

To put it in a nutshell, the focus of the project is to draw the trajectories of the loot of the manuscripts both within Ethiopia and abroad in attempt to reconstruct the contents of the library and discuss their repatriation in relation to ongoing debates.