Recognizing, Remembering, and Restituting Maqdala 1868: The Sociopolitical Meaning of the Maqdala Expedition Through the Lens of Cultural Restitution Debates

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the construction of historical narratives through cultural restitution debates has functioned to transform the collection of artifacts taken from Maqdala (Ethiopia) during a British military expedition into a mainstream and iconic 'case' of cultural restitution. Though artifacts from this collection have been present in British institutions for more than 150 years, they have recently undergone rapid and significant shifts in the representation of their history that align with the demands of decolonial frameworks, which are particularly evident in a renewed emphasis on their status as loot. I demonstrate, through an analysis of social and political framings, archival sources, curatorial praxis, and artistic interventions, that this shift was made both possible and predictable by the discourses that are produced within cultural restitution debates. Rather than contributing a moral or legal case in favor of the restitution of the Maqdala artifacts, the broader aim of this work is to offer insight into the ways that these debates – the international conversations about the legacies of historical injustices in the global heritage sector – shape the politics, salience, and relevance of the histories of contested collections through narrative devices. This thesis therefore traces the unfolding of a historical moment in the British cultural sector where high-profile cases like that of the Benin Bronzes have the power to determine the categories and terms through which other cases come into being. I pay particular attention to the tensions between the desire to acknowledge the specificity of individual cases and the demand for cases to fit within the accepted paradigms of the wider agenda for cultural restitution. In doing so, I open up the possibility of considering the ways in which various actors and institutional determinants interact to both entrench and resist these paradigms. I argue that restitution debates do not merely respond to objective historical realities waiting to be uncovered and that, instead, cases of restitution emerge as discursive outcomes of the production of historical knowledge, a process that is deeply entangled in the normative instruments and sociopolitical dynamics of the present.

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Introduction

The question of where to start the story of the Maqdala Expedition that forms the central focus of this thesis is no small task given that this work is fundamentally about the ways that this history has been narrativized and represented within the context of restitution debates. How I choose to represent the history here will therefore form part of my own contribution to this discourse, which burdens this choice with additional layers of meaning. But to understand this thesis's place in the scholarship on cultural restitution, it is essential first to identify what is meant by references to the Maqdala Expedition, 'Maqdala 1868,' or the 'Maqdala Collection.' While the details of this expedition, insofar as what has become relevant to ongoing cultural restitution debates, will be explored in greater depth throughout this thesis, it is for now sufficient to know that in 1868, after several years of public campaigning and political deliberations, the British Government launched a large-scale military operation against Emperor Tewodros II, the ruler of the Kingdom of Abyssinia (contemporary Ethiopia). This expedition was in direct response to a breakdown in diplomatic relations between the Emperor and the British Government, which culminated in the Emperor taking several British diplomatic representatives hostage in his military fortress at Maqdala. Upon reaching the fortress, the British offensive forces quickly overwhelmed the Ethiopian defenses with significant loss of Ethiopian lives, including the life of the Emperor himself, who committed suicide rather than surrender. The British troops proceeded to plunder the fortress, including the church and treasury, after which the looted artifacts were collected and sold at an auction to raise money for the Army Prize Fund. A large number of these artifacts were subsequently brought back to England, where, over the past 150 years, they have been dispersed among private collections and cultural institutions. Though there have been several instances of select objects being returned to Ethiopian rulers as diplomatic gestures, the concept of the 'Maqdala Collection,' referring to all objects that were associated with this expedition, as a target of restitution claims has largely emerged within the past two decades as part of a larger shift in how artifacts that were taken from their places of origin under imperial or violent circumstances are perceived.

This research project came at a time when cultural institutions were finding themselves subjected to greater public attention and pressure regarding the imperial histories that are embedded in their collections, where the restitution of artifacts has been conceptualized as a mode of addressing the historical injustices and imbalances of power that facilitated their removal and dispersal. Debates about cultural restitution are themselves as old as the practice of taking cultural artifacts – as early as the second century BCE, the Greek historian Polybius lamented the experience of having his cultural heritage plundered by the Roman invaders and then displayed as spoils of conquest. However, these debates have taken different forms depending on the social and political contexts in which they were situated, which affects the discursive frameworks, categories, and ideologies that shape their sociopolitical role in managing and governing heritage. Cultural restitution debates here refer to the increasingly mainstream dialogues about the status of material cultural heritage that was taken from its place of origin under unethical circumstances, the legacies of imperial systems in contemporary society, and the politics of reconsidering the histories that are memorialized in cultural institutions. In this thesis, I explore the ways that the restitution debates about the collection of artifacts now known as the 'Maqdala Collection' have constructed historical narratives that have shaped how the significance of 'Maqdala 1868' is understood. In other words, the aim of this project has been to analyze how a 'case study' of cultural restitution comes into being from the ways that histories are represented and to consider what it means for our understanding of the social and political significance of this history for it to be assimilated into these conversations. I propose that cultural restitution debates do not merely respond to objective historical realities that are waiting to be acknowledged but rather contribute to the writing and interpretation of histories, determining the terms in which they are discussed and the ways in which they are remembered. 'Maqdala 1868' is thus conceptualized as a discursive outcome of the wider discourses of cultural restitution debates. Furthermore, I explore how the narratives that are established and disseminated by restitution debates are intrinsically tied to assumptions about what it means to 'decolonize' collections that were formed under the conditions of Empire, whether through acts of imperial violence, exploitation, and coercion or through more sinister imperial structures. Decolonization is often understood as a moral imperative to acknowledge and address these connections between heritage

collections and Empire, which practically speaking has facilitated a shift towards displaying artifacts explicitly as loot with an emphasis on the contexts of their acquisition. However, defining the Maqdala artifacts by their history as imperial loot – including the propagation of the very idea of the 'Maqdala Collection' – may further entrench Eurocentric ideologies by imposing the history of Empire as the primary lens through which to consider their value. Thus, I also explore how these narratives can be and are challenged by restitution claims that seek to circumvent these categories. Through a combination of archival research and ethnographic research, I demonstrate how restitution debates have intervened in the construction and representation of 'Maqdala 1868' as a paradigmatic case of imperial violence and cultural dispossession.

Within this context, there has been a clear, concerted effort to link such cases of restitution claims together in order to establish patterns of imperial harm and reinforce the systematic nature of cultural dispossession, which motivates the need for large-scale, structural responses rather than incremental returns or symbolic gestures. The visibility of certain high-profile cases such as that of the 'Benin Bronzes' thus become important 'cases' through which other claims for restitution are represented and understood. Though this project has never been intended strictly as a comparative case study to 'Benin 1897,' it is a central assumption of this work that the narratives that are represented within such popular cases can have a profound impact on perceptions of the value of cases that share some similarities – or, indeed, that are molded to fit a similar pattern. In the case of the Maqdala Expedition and the collection of artifacts that are now being defined by this history, it is necessary to be critical of applying a sort of template of punitive expeditions to our understanding of its contribution to these conversations, as this can limit our ability to deconstruct the role that writing history plays in mediating the landscape of cultural restitution. With this in mind, I do not make a claim to be able to define how 'Maqdala 1868' should be understood, nor do I seek to make a moral or legal argument regarding the necessity, legitimacy, or importance of pursuing the restitution of the Maqdala artifacts. Instead, I approach restitution debates as sites of knowledge production, where narratives about the histories of these collections are both constructed and deployed. In doing so, I am able to explore the role that narratives play in creating 'cases' of restitution. This thesis is concerned

with uncovering how and why the artifacts that are connected by the plunder that took place during the Maqdala Expedition became a collection upon which restitution debates can act and eventually a coherent and recognizable 'case' that advocates can take up and that scholars (myself included) can explore. My analysis of the discursive and conceptual tools that have emerged from the landscape of contemporary cultural restitution debates demonstrates that this transformative process was predetermined not by any inherent quality of the collection itself or by the discovery of new information about its history, but by the evolving political and ideological frameworks that determine how the cultural sector interprets and engages with imperial pasts. In doing so, I contribute necessary insight into the role of restitution debates as discourses that shape how contested collections are represented and deployed in contemporary negotiations of history and identity.

The prominence of the Benin Bronzes in restitution discourse has not only shaped public understanding of what restitution looks like, and what restitution *is*, but has also influenced how other cases such as Maqdala are framed and perceived. In this thesis, the juxtaposition of Maqdala with Benin is deliberately employed not with the intention of continuing to elevate the latter as a model, but to analyze and critique the way its dominance has created a kind of narrative template for how restitution claims are articulated and legitimized. The Benin case has become paradigmatic – widely cited by institutions, governments, and media – not because it is inherently the most representative or urgent case, but instead because it conveniently fits the institutional language of decolonization. It involves a clear case of looting, a large source community, and objects of high artistic value and cultural weight. This prompts us to consider why other claims, including many equally longstanding and historically grounded ones, have remained on the periphery, perhaps because they do not conform as neatly to these institutional and political logics. The growing visibility of Maqdala within restitution debates, and the ways this visibility has affected the understanding of its significance, must be understood as partially shaped by the gravitational pull of Benin's visibility. The narrative strategies deployed in relation to the Maqdala Collection echo those used in the case of the Benin Bronzes, particularly emphasis on imperial military violence, demonstrating how institutional approaches to restitution have coalesced around a limited set of paradigms that determine the

possible trajectories of these cases. Meanwhile, countless other African claims exist, and have existed for decades, without attaining the same traction. That this is the case suggests that the conditions under which a claim is rendered visible and compelling within this discourse are structured by the dominant rhetorical and political frameworks of restitution that privilege certain histories and modes of representation over others.

Even in paradigmatic cases like the Benin Bronzes there are unresolved ethical and political complexities that are often sidelined in the dominant narratives. Not all of the opposition to the return of the Benin Bronzes to Nigeria has come from the museums themselves, but also from communities outside of Nigeria who put forward alternative claims to ownership, such as the Restitution Study Group based in New York City. This organization, comprised of African American advocates who advocate for restitution, reparations, and redistributive justice on behalf of the descendants of enslaved people in the United States, has challenged the proposed return of Benin Bronzes currently housed in the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. Their argument hinges on the involvement of the Kingdom of Benin in the transatlantic slave trade, contending not only that returning artifacts to institutions governed by the descendants of slave-trading elites fails to deliver justice to the descendants of those who were enslaved, but also that the Bronzes themselves are a product of the slave trade having been created using metal manillas that were used in trade as payment for enslaved Africans (Ibeh 2023). Their complaint is especially compelling given that, although the state of Nigeria has been the official recipient of Bronzes repatriated from American cultural institutions, the Nigerian government has since publicly recognized the Oba of Benin, Oba Ewuare II, as the rightful owner of artifacts looted from the Kingdom of Benin (Opoku 2023). Where this recognition has somewhat disoriented Western museums currently in negotiations to return Benin Bronzes because they generally expect that the returned artifacts will be on display in a museum setting, the Restitution Study Group's complaint stems from the belief that returning artifacts intrinsically connected to the slave trade to the descendant of a ruler who actively facilitated the sale of enslaved Africans would constitute allowing the heirs to be 'doubly rewarded' for their involvement in this system (Ibeh 2023). Some scholars understandably caution Western institutions, who themselves benefited from and

supported the same systems that enabled slavery, from questioning the right of the Oba to reclaim ownership over these artifacts on these grounds, noting that it would be hypocritical to apply this critique to African leaders while refusing to hold themselves to the same standards (Opoku 2023). However, can we issue the same warning to those groups whose ancestors were victims of these systems, and who today live in a society that has been shaped by their harmful legacies, when they leverage similar criticisms? The arguments of the Restitution Study Group, according to whom restitution should be inclusive of all communities affected by the intertwined histories of imperialism and slavery, unsettle the binary framing of restitution as a moral imperative flowing from colonizer to colonized, and invite deeper reflection on whose justice restitution serves and which historical wounds it aims to heal. That their proposal for a model of shared ownership has received relatively little attention compared to negotiations for return reveals important insights into the ways in which cultural restitution debates can rely on scripts that privilege certain framings while sidelining others, particularly those that contest the dominant narrative.

The case of the *Ngadji*, the sacred drum of the Pokomo people of Kenya, offers an example of how certain restitution claims remain peripheral within these debates despite the deep cultural and spiritual significance of the objects they concern, failing to become 'cases' in the way that the Benin Bronzes or the Parthenon Marbles have in terms of their influence, reputation, and ability to garner attention. As documented by Open Restitution Africa, the *Ngadji* is a powerful sacred artifact central to the cultural and spiritual life of the Pokomo community, used in ceremonial contexts to bring community members together in worship as well as to inaugurate a new phase of leadership with the enthronement of a new king. The *Ngadji* was confiscated in 1902 by British colonial authorities, ostensibly in a deliberate attempt to disrupt the cultural continuity and sense of unity among the Pokomo people. Without the *Ngadji*, the Pokomo were unable bring the community together in worship or announce a new king, so its confiscation essentially cut them off from both their spiritual practice and their independent structures of authority. Njoki Ngumi and Adéọlá Naomi Adérẹ̀mí (2024) describe the *Ngadji* as not just a cultural artifact, but a 'cultural spiritual asset' (p.177). This description alludes to the *Ngadji's* integral function, much like other sacred objects, as not only a product or symbol of a spiritual community but as something that plays an active role in

constituting that community's identity. William Mutta Taska, the researcher responsible for the *Ngadji* case for Open Restitution Africa, connects the loss of the *Ngadji* to the movement of many Pokomo community members away from traditional spiritual practice, choosing to convert to Islam or Christianity to fill the space left behind. Shortly after its confiscation, the *Ngadji* was donated to the British Museum, where it has remained off display in storage ever since. Despite the fact that the claim for its return has been active since its initial theft in 1902, alongside more recent efforts to reinvigorate community investment in the significance of the Ngadji, there has been relatively little headway made in the negotiations for its restitution, nor has awareness of this claim moved significantly outside of circles directly associated with members of the Pokomo community, not helped by rumors of tension between some of the nonprofit organizations that have been established to take up this cause and uncertainty about who has the right to represent the Pokomo community; this lack of clarity has provided the administration of the British Museum with a convenient excuse to pause progress in the negotiations, and, while the museum acknowledges that the *Ngadji* was taken from the Pokomo people against their will, it has given no indication of an intention to return it.

Unlike the Benin Bronzes or the Maqdala Collection, there is no dedicated page on the British Museum's website that documents the status of this 'contested' object from their collection. Given that the demands for the return of the *Ngadji* have been ongoing since it was first taken by the British, and were most recently reignited in 2013, it cannot be that the museum has simply not yet had the time to include information about the restitution claims related to this sacred artifact in its possession. Indeed, the *Ngadji*'s fate bears striking resemblance to that of the sacred altar tabots taken at Maqdala, who also play a central role in the spiritual practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and who have similarly languished in museum storage since they were removed from Ethiopia during the 1868 expedition. So, what is it then that has enabled the artifacts from the Maqdala Collection to rise to the forefront of debates about cultural restitution while others like the *Ngadji* are able to be quietly relegated to the sidelines? While it is not possible here to delve deeply into the possible reasons for this discrepancy, it is nevertheless essential to recognize that, though this is a thesis about a collection whose restitution claims have entered the public

restitution discourse, the issues that I raise here are also relevant to analysis of those claims who have not; in illuminating the factors that have turned Maqdala 1868 into an archetypal case of cultural restitution, my contribution also makes it possible to consider how these factors may have simultaneously limited or constrained the success of other cases. Perhaps the narrative of the confiscation of the *Ngadji* is not obviously violent enough to compel audiences who seek moral clarity in these accounts, for whom the lack of an overt assault on the Pokomo people creates enough ambiguity to avoid 'taking sides.' Beyond the framework of a large-scale military expedition, it is certainly possible that more subtle or insidious forms of violence against colonized people – for example, in the form of the intentional destabilizing of indigenous institutions that presented an obstacle to colonial rule – are less compelling for audiences who are skeptical about the inherent wrongfulness of colonial systems. Or perhaps it is to do with the legibility of the *Ngadji's* sacredness outside of the Pokomo community. Unlike the tabots, which are closely tied to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and thus to a form of Christianity that resonates, however distantly, with Euro-Christian epistemologies, the *Ngadji* exists within a cosmology that is more difficult to translate into the conceptual frameworks of Western understandings of spirituality and institutional religion. This imbalance alludes to a bias in the frameworks of restitution that may continue to privilege claims that can be rendered visible within the epistemic and moral logics of Western cultural authority. Recognizing such potential biases and considering their sources is essential to understanding why some objects are elevated as symbols of decolonization while others, no less significant, are relatively overlooked. While this is a thesis about a collection that has been molded to fit the template established by the Benin Bronzes and, more broadly, by the decolonial turn in museums, the insights gained from exploring the Maqdala Collection's transformation from claim to 'case' are also relevant to our understanding of why other claims do not achieve similar momentum.

Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully explore claims like those pertaining to the *Ngadji* and the dynamics that have prevented them from being elevated to the same status as the popular cases that I discuss, it is important to acknowledge that there are in fact many long-standing claims for restitution that have not achieved fame or notoriety. This work is about how a restitution claim does become

such a case and how this process is shaped by the terms, categories, and expectations set by the discourses that are structured around highly-visible, standard-setting cases. It is for this reason that I focus my comparisons on those cases, particularly the Benin Bronzes. However, an extended exploration of this subject would certainly benefit from engaging with cases which have not (or not yet) undergone this transformation in order to deepen our understanding of the underlying dynamics that enable the trajectories of different claims to diverge so significantly. While I focus here on the narrative devices and political developments that have set the Maqdala Collection on the path to recognition as a high-profile case study in cultural restitution, it would be an equally productive and interesting research direction to analyze the conditions under which a restitution claim does not gain similar levels of attention. This is not to suggest that for a restitution claim to be successful or impactful, it must necessarily become the stuff of media headlines, but rather to encourage critical reflection on why certain cases become popular reference points within these debates while others do not; instead of assuming a self-evident value or priority in the cases that are consistently documented and promoted, we can unpack the social, political, and ideological forces that shape this landscape and determine which claims gain traction and reputation over others. Through my analysis of the evolution of the Maqdala Collection's significance within these debates, I reveal some of the key mechanisms through which this elevation is made possible.

The core theoretical approach of this work is that history, understood in historiographical terms, is the product of material and discursive processes that are inextricable from the contemporary sociopolitical contexts in which they take place – that is, that the past as an idea, a concept, and a narrative is both in and of the present. Following the work of poststructuralist critical theorists such as Michel de Certeau (1988) and Michel Foucault (1969), I explore cultural restitution debates as sites in which historical narratives are constructed in relation to the demands of decolonial frameworks. Here, cultural restitution debates are conceptualized as a place in line with de Certeau's (1988) analysis, as a collection of forces that influence the way that knowledge is produced from a specific institutional or situational context. By approaching these debates as a 'place' that produces historical discourse ('History') rather than as a response to historical realities ('history'), I am able to demonstrate how such powerful and authoritative frameworks as

decolonization intervene to determine the terms and categories that define how histories are represented, signified, and understood. This is not to merely reiterate the claim that the writing of history is influenced by the cultural and political environment in which historians conduct their work; for example, to observe that the emergence of decolonial or anticolonial (re)framings of historical narratives has coincided with the independence movements and nation-building endeavors of formerly colonized states. Instead, it is to call attention to the nuanced relationship between the writing and representation of history and the power relations that shape the possible outcomes of this process. In this way, my approach to the history that is constructed by the narratives created within cultural restitution debates borrows from both Foucault's interpretations of historical knowledge as an outcome of discourses whose rules are pre-determined by power as well as de Certeau's emphasis on the role of writing and representation in constituting history. In doing so, I utilize Friedrich Nietzsche's (1887) genealogical method of analysis, wherein reality is considered to have no ontological meaning outside of that which is given to it by the value systems established by human action, as well as Foucault's (1997) elaboration on genealogy as a tool for revealing the interplay of power and knowledge that bring discourses into being while subjugating others. I consider genealogy to be a useful tool here because it encourages critical reflection on how the value of the Maqdala Expedition, and, by extension, the Maqdala Collection, have been created rather than assuming an intrinsic or objective value. Through a genealogical approach to the historical narratives and representations of the Maqdala Expedition that are constructed by cultural restitution debates, I uncover the underlying power relations and regimes of truth that have driven, and predetermined, the transformation of Maqdala 1868 into an archetypal case of cultural restitution.

Building from this theoretical foundation, I have employed multiple methods to explore the production and representation of historical narratives surrounding the Maqdala Expedition. By combining archival research, museum ethnography, and an ethnographic approach to cultural restitution debates, I have sought to uncover the multifaceted processes by which these histories are constructed, contested, and transformed. My archival work focused on colonial-era records, correspondence, expedition diaries and reports, and governmental documents from the periods immediately preceding and succeeding the

expedition, which were housed in the British Library, British Museum, and National Archives. These materials provided crucial insight into the formation of both the 'official' and 'unofficial' narratives of the Maqdala Expedition, including its framing as a military triumph in Victorian Britain and its entanglement in the imperial priorities of the British Empire. It also illuminated the process of collecting and accessioning Maqdala artifacts into British institutions, which offered key insights into the narratives and relationships that were attached to these objects as they were displaced from Ethiopia and integrated into British museum collections. Furthermore, through my archival research, I identified moments in the historical record where the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition was reconfigured in line with the emergence of different sociopolitical agendas, which enables me to propose an explanation of how and why certain details become (are made to be) defining features of the narratives used by restitution debates at the expense of others. This archival record was not treated as a static repository of facts but rather as a discursive formation as described by Foucault (1969), as a site of power where discourses are both produced and governed. The aim of treating the archive through Foucault's archaeological method is not to decisively identify the origins of a discourse but rather to uncover the conditions that make discourses both possible and authorized.

This conceptualization of the archive as a site of power and knowledge informed my analysis of the contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies within archival sources in relation to the historical narratives that are propagated in contemporary conversations about restitution and imperial histories. Foucault's (1969) emphasis on the rules governing the production of discourse laid the groundwork for my exploration of how restitution advocates, whether scholars, heritage professionals, or artists, engage with archival fragments. While such advocates often seek to challenge imperial narratives, their interpretations can remain framed within the dominant ideological assumptions and categories that form the core of the broader framework of decolonization – particularly emphasis on colonizer/colonized binaries. This framework, while ostensibly counter-hegemonic, is itself a product of historical processes that work to determine what ways of 'knowing' history are possible. My work demonstrates that advocates for restitution frequently draw selectively upon archival frameworks to reconfigure imperial narratives in support of calls for historical justice while simultaneously embedding their claims within the accepted logics of international

diplomacy and cultural heritage management that rest upon the premise of decolonization. This dynamic is particularly evident in the strategic use of archival documents, such as acquisition records or expedition correspondences, as tools for the legitimization of demands for cultural restitution. By considering these reinterpretations through the archaeological method offered by Foucault, I illustrate how these narratives do not entirely escape the same ideological systems as those produced by the original archives. Instead, they rearticulate imperial histories through specific discursive categories – including ownership, value, and cultural identity – that resonate with the political and moral imperatives of the decolonial agenda. Thus, while restitution advocates approach restitution as a mode of dismantling imperial legacies, their use of archival evidence can often reproduce the structures of visibility and authority that are embedded in those same records. Through the uncovering of these tensions, I offer a nuanced understanding of the ways in which the narratives of the Maqdala Expedition within cultural restitution debates are co-constructed with and against the epistemological foundations of the imperial archive.

To complement this historical lens, a significant component of my methodology was a year-long museum ethnography conducted at the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, with six months dedicated to each institution. In this stage of fieldwork, I investigated how historical narratives of the Maqdala Expedition are produced, maintained, and renegotiated within these prominent and powerful cultural spaces. Throughout this period, I reflected on curatorial practices and paid particular attention to the displays of Maqdala artifacts, exploring how these objects were contextualized – or decontextualized – within broader historical and cultural narratives. I interviewed curators and front-of-house staff (mainly gallery assistants) in order to understand the decision-making processes and institutional dynamics that shaped each museum's approach to representing the Maqdala Expedition through the display of specific artifacts, and positioned myself in the galleries with these displays in order to interview visitors about their impressions of the exhibit and observe their interactions with the information. Both institutions also provided me with the opportunity to consider the role of artistic interventions in giving voice to the 'conscience' of the museum, where artists have the license and the integrity to say that which the museum feels it cannot, or in artistic provocations, where artists challenge the museum's authority over the

representation of history. This dual-site approach revealed both consistencies and divergences in how the two museums responded to the contentious issues of imperial legacies and cultural restitution: where the British Museum originally resisted the growing demand to reframe the significance of the Maqdala artifacts, the Victoria and Albert Museum initially demonstrated more flexibility and openness to exploring 'honest' narratives through temporary exhibitions and new permanent displays. In my analysis of such shifts in how museums are grappling with their imperial histories and demands for restitution, and of their impact on the perceptions of visitors to these spaces, I situate this process within the wider context of heritage politics and public memory.

For much of the 150 years since their arrival in the United Kingdom, the Maqdala artifacts have been displayed – or often stored away – with relatively little acknowledgment of the violent circumstances of their acquisition. In both the V&A and the British Museum, these objects were historically positioned within narratives of British imperial achievement or within narratives of the Christian history of Ethiopia, wherein their provenance was either downplayed or framed as incidental to their artistic and cultural value. However, recent years have seen a significant transformation in how these artifacts are represented to the public. The V&A and the British Museum have increasingly displayed Maqdala artifacts not only as cultural treasures but as evidence of imperial cultural violence, specifically by highlighting their provenance as loot from the Maqdala Expedition. At the British Museum, this shift became strikingly evident in the final months of writing this thesis, when the museum reinterpreted objects that had previously been displayed as illustrations of the material culture of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity instead as loot, explicitly engaging in their imperial histories and entanglements. This reframing marked a significant departure from previous curatorial practices and clearly aligned with the broader discourse of decolonization that has swept through the British cultural sector. I argue that this shift was not merely a result of curatorial decisions to refresh an existing display or a response to new information about the objects' histories, but rather was both made possible and rendered inevitable by the ways in which museums have internalized the shock and awe of the decolonial critique of cultural institutions. This decolonial moment, which is characterized by increasing calls for restitution, public activism, and academic dialogue, has compelled these institutions to confront

their connections to the structures, systems, and ideologies of Empire more directly. In the British context, this moment has been further reinforced by political and professional changes within the museum sector. The appointment of politically engaged professionals, the recruitment of curators with expertise in decolonial theory, and the rise of an unprecedented public discourse around cultural restitution have created a social and political environment where the re-semanticization of Maqdala artifacts as symbols of imperial violence became not only likely but predictable. This shift in representation has important implications for how visitors perceive and respond to these artifacts. In framing the Maqdala objects as products of a violent imperial military expedition, museums invite visitors to engage with them through the lens of historical injustice, accountability, and reparations – though this invitation is certainly not always well-received. Interviews with visitors during my time in the V&A and the British Museum illustrated the power of this framing to provoke engagement with the ethics and politics of this collection and its history. They also revealed the importance of the recognition of patterns and concepts to visitors' evaluation of the morality of museums as the stewards of contested objects and the value of cultural restitution. In this way, my ethnography in these museums demonstrated how artifacts that had 'been there all along' are being reinterpreted and recontextualized within historical narratives that serve the needs of the decolonial project. This process is not just a matter of changing curatorial labels but instead reflects deeper structural changes within the museum sector. By analyzing these shifts in relation to the Maqdala artifacts specifically, I am able to explore these transformations in the landscape of cultural heritage where historical narratives are being renegotiated in response to contemporary political, social, and ethical dynamics.

Ideally, I would have spent more time in both the British Museum and the V&A, however I was restricted by the uncertainty and unpredictability that characterized the COVID pandemic, particularly during 2020-2022. For this reason, I was both unable to extend my time in the museums and unable to plan for any travel to Ethiopia during my research period. Thus, I found myself in the position to spend a significant amount of my research time without consistent, or sometimes any, access to physical spaces. It is important to recognize that, while I strive to be attentive to the interactions between global and local narratives throughout this thesis, these unusual research circumstances shaped the direction of this project

by determining the boundaries of both safe and practical research. As I negotiated the logistics and ethics of undertaking a multi-year research project in this context, it became evident that the best strategy was to remain based in the United Kingdom and to pursue this subject in a way that would enable productive analysis despite limited physical contact with participants. It was for this reason that this thesis became about how narratives and discourses function through a discussion about how this particular case, Maqdala 1868, became mainstream, iconic, and folded into this historical moment, specifically in the British cultural sector. Though this process is deeply connected to global developments in the heritage industry as well as national dynamics within Ethiopia, which I discuss in the first two chapters, I want to clearly articulate how the contours of this project were determined and acknowledge that it does not make any claims to speak on behalf of the Ethiopian community about the value or legitimacy of the restitution of the Maqdala artifacts. While I was fortunate to make connections with members of the Ethiopian diaspora in London and, remotely, with scholars and activists in Ethiopia, this project would have certainly taken a different form had I been based in the Ethiopian cultural industry. As such, it is a distinctly UK-based project and I have made an effort to lean into that context in my analysis. It was during this phase of reckoning with the new realities of the pandemic that I decided to, alongside my archival research and eventually my museum-based research, conduct a rather unconventional ethnography of cultural restitution debates, with a particular focus on the conversations that specifically concern the sacred altar tabots that were taken during the expedition; these dialogues essentially constitute a special restitution debate within a larger restitution debate about everything that was taken from Ethiopia as a result of the Maqdala Expedition. I describe this process as unconventional because the community that I focused on was varied both thematically and geographically, being united only by their involvement in, or desire to be involved in, the restitution of the altar tabots that are present in the UK as a result of the Maqdala Expedition. I interviewed key actors such as museum professionals, heritage activists, journalists, Ethiopian government representatives, religious figures, and members of the Ethiopian diaspora, first online and then in-person when possible, while also tracking the development of the narratives that propagated in online spaces such as news sites and social media.

This strategy allowed me to capture the dynamic interplay of historical memory, cultural identity, and diplomacy in shaping the discourse around the history of the Maqdala Expedition and the future of the Maqdala artifacts. What I am able to demonstrate through this ethnography is how restitution debates outside of or alongside the mainstream discourse of decolonial restitution have also intervened in shaping the historical narrative and significance of the Maqdala Expedition – in this case, by transforming it into a question of religious restitution rather than decolonization. At their core, restitution debates are about how one community seeks to persuade another, and therefore they hinge on the arguments and justifications that are made for this purpose, whether legal, ethical, financial, personal, or otherwise. Consequently, it is imperative to explore the concepts on which these arguments and justifications are based. In the case of my ethnography of the debates surrounding the altar tabots, the arguments and justifications that emerged revolved around the concepts of sacrilege, the sacred, respect, and the difference between decolonization and religious restitution. Therefore, the moral foundation of these debates becomes an issue of moral philosophy. To clarify, when I discuss the role of the debates that center religious restitution as the logic for the return of the sacred altar tabots, I do not mean to suggest that religious restitution is necessarily or always separate from decolonization. Indeed, religious restitution can certainly be situated within decolonial frameworks, particularly when it functions to address and repair spiritual harm inflicted by imperial violence against, for example, religious artifacts and institutions. However, in the case of the altar tabots, the appeal to restitution on religious grounds functions partly as a strategic distancing from the political and ideological associations of decolonization. Framing this debate as a matter of spiritual redress rather than anti-imperial reckoning allows advocates to avoid the polarizing discourse that often surrounds the conversation on decolonization. At the same time, this framing also reflects the fact that the concept of decolonization (as a goal, agenda, or motivation) does not always hold the most meaning or resonance for communities seeking the return of their heritage. In this context, calls for the return of the tabots, which have a profoundly sacred, ceremonial function within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, are often articulated through narratives of religious obligation and respect rather than through the language of structural decolonial critique. In this way, exploring these debates on their own terms as a case of religious restitution

highlights the need to recognize that restitution claims are not always driven by the frameworks of decolonial ideology, no matter how self-evident these frameworks have become in the debates about restitution; alternative moral, cultural, and spiritual imperatives may be equally or more important to the communities involved. This dynamic indicates a broader need to acknowledge and reflect on the plurality of ethical and political imperatives that drive restitution demands, and to resist reducing all such claims to a singular narrative of decolonization.

Finally, I was able to attend an event at an Ethiopian Orthodox Congregation in London where a tabot looted during the Maqdala Expedition was re-consecrated as part of a larger process of the restitution of several other artifacts. My observations of this event lead into the final chapter of the thesis, which is based on the complementary event wherein the non-sacred artifacts were formally restituted to Ethiopia. The dialogue between these two events provides unique insights into the ways that the processes of restitution both contribute to and reflect the narratives that circulate about the histories of collections. In sum, the multi-method approach enabled me to combine historical and anthropological insights to illuminate the contested processes of narrative construction that surround the Maqdala Expedition. With a combination of archival analysis, critical theory, and ethnographic insights, I demonstrate how the histories that are established and deployed in cultural restitution debates are not merely inherited from other spaces of knowledge production but are actively produced through processes of negotiation, resistance, and reinterpretation within them.

The thesis is structured according to the three themes referenced in the title: recognizing, remembering, and restituting. The first section looks at the context in which ‘Maqdala 1868’ has come to be included in the ongoing international debates about objects taken during imperial conditions, particularly in relation to the idea of decolonizing cultural institutions and to the development of the state-sponsored approach to heritage in Ethiopia. This section sets out the central assumptions that are used throughout this thesis, including the centrality of narrative construction to the creation of ‘cases’ of restitution, and introduces the foundation of the case study with an emphasis on the role of Ethiopian historiography in enabling the Maqdala Expedition to become a target of restitution claims that fits squarely within Ethiopia’s

approach to development, modernity, and national identity. In Chapter 1, I establish the relationship between cultural restitution and the histories of Empire, and briefly explore the influence of the turn towards postcolonial and decolonial frameworks in cultural institutions on how these histories are treated in museums. This chapter also examines how, in recent years, discussions about cultural restitution have moved from academic circles into public discourse, a process that has been driven by the emergence of high-profile cases like the 'Benin Bronzes' and the 'Elgin Marbles.' This is not to say that such cases have not existed as the targets of restitution claims for decades, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which these cases act as central reference points within the broader debates that have the ability to set the standards for how other cases take form. Chapter 2 delves into the context of the central case study of the thesis: Ethiopia and its restitution claims related to the Maqdala Expedition. It examines how Ethiopia's national narrative of freedom and independence intersects with the complexities of cultural restitution. Ethiopia's postcolonial identity has been shaped by the legacy of the modern state, particularly in how it inherited the political functions and expectations imposed by imperialism despite having not itself been colonized. This legacy is crucial for understanding the role of heritage and restitution within the modern Ethiopian state. The chapter explores the historiographical framework of the 'Great Tradition' which has influenced the development of Ethiopian identity since the 19th century. The narrative of the 'Great Tradition,' which positions Ethiopia as a divinely chosen nation, has played a role in both the domestic political centralization and the perception of Ethiopia in the context of African decolonization movements. The restitution of the Maqdala artifacts, particularly in the context of Ethiopia's heritage-making and modern state-building reflects these historical and political dynamics, which makes it a significant component of the unfolding national discourse on identity and sovereignty. Furthermore, I examine the emergence of AFROMET (the Association for the Return of the Maqdala Ethiopian Treasures, established by Richard and Rita Pankhurst) and its significance in integrating the Maqdala Collection into the international, and, especially, the British political landscape of cultural restitution. This chapter frames Ethiopia's restitution claims within its unique postcolonial context and highlights how the country's national identity and sense of heritage, rooted in historical traditions, inform its relationship to contemporary debates on restitution.

The second section begins by exploring the history of the Maqdala Expedition, drawing on archival sources to show how this history has undergone processes of semanticization and re-semanticization that have drawn it into the current discourse on the history of Empire. In Chapter 3, drawing from the work of Sarah Longair (2018), I conceptualize Maqdala as a 'colonial moment' in order to explore its relationship to imperial power. I then look specifically at the debate that took place in the House of Commons in 1871 about the fate of the crown and chalice that are now in the collections of the V&A. This debate, particularly several statements against the retention of these artifacts, has become a defining moment in the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition that is represented today and highlights how debates about the status of these objects also serve as a platform for negotiating the social and political significance of these histories. This chapter provides a critical foundation for understanding how the expedition has been represented, contested, and remembered in both British and Ethiopian contexts. I demonstrate how narratives of imperial success and Ethiopian resistance have been shaped by cultural memory, political priorities, and institutional frameworks. Exploring the political debates surrounding the acquisition and display of the Maqdala artifacts in British institutions, particularly the Victoria and Albert Museum, illustrates how these objects became focal points for negotiating imperial identity, cultural restitution, and historical representation. I then look at how the history of the Maqdala Expedition is 'remembered' in its current representations in relation to two influential museum spaces: the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum, linking the historical debates to current restitution-driven dynamics in museum spaces.

Chapter 4 builds from the discussion of the parliamentary debate about the crown and the chalice and is based on my ethnographic research in the Victoria and Albert Museum, where both artifacts remain on display today. The V&A houses a small but significant collection of objects taken during the 1868 expedition, several of which have been consistently on display for over 150 years. Following their initial display as trophies, they have, until now, primarily been represented as illustrative of the material culture of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as part of a wider display of other artifacts from Eastern Christian traditions. However, these objects were recently re-contextualized in a 2018 special exhibition that explored their 'complex' history in collaboration with the Ethiopian community in the UK. This exhibition was

pivotal in opening a dialogue about the growing concerns about the objects' status, ownership, and imperial origins. Though the exhibition was temporary and closed before I started this project, the V&A also chose to redesign the permanent display of the gold crown and chalice, shifting their representation from a Christian religious context to one that highlights their connection to the Maqdala Expedition. In my interviews and observations based in this gallery, I explore the echoes of the temporary exhibition in the current display and the lasting impact this narrative shift has had on visitors' perceptions of both the V&A's role and the larger debates surrounding restitution and material history. This chapter also highlights the role of this shift in curatorial practice in stimulating public engagement with these issues, in particular by sparking creative works that respond to the focus on themes of imperialism and cultural ownership. Through one work in particular set in a fictionalized version of the temporary exhibition from the perspective of an Ethiopian security guard at the museum, I am able to reflect on the dynamics of the exhibition through this lens. Chapter 5 is based on both ethnographic research in the British Museum as well as archival research in the museum's records. This chapter focuses on the British Museum's central role in narratives surrounding the Maqdala Expedition, particularly how its collection has become a focal point in debates about cultural restitution and imperialism. The museum's connection to the expedition is often represented through a focus on the figure of Richard Holmes, whose role has tended to be at the forefront of public discourse as the embodiment of the link between imperialism and cultural institutions like the British Museum, making him a symbolic figure in restitution advocacy. I complicate this portrayal by demonstrating that aspects of his involvement have often been exaggerated or misrepresented; this re-examination is not meant to absolve the museum of its accountability but rather to illustrate how certain details become amplified and embedded in restitution debates because they align with narratives that drive advocacy. Building from my historical analysis, this chapter critically engages with the assertions that Holmes's inclusion in the expedition is significant because it exemplifies the institutional entanglement with imperial ambitions. I position the Maqdala Expedition as an important moment in the British Museum's history that was not shaped solely by imperial ambitions but also by academic interests in biblical and Christian archaeology. This nuance reframes the museum's involvement, which again does not

negate its ethical responsibilities but deepens our understanding of its motivations in order to explore the processes of recontextualization that the Maqdala artifacts are currently undergoing. This dynamic is particularly significant as, at the time of my research, these objects were displayed within the context of the Coptic Egypt and Ethiopia Gallery, thematically and spatially separated from the Africa Gallery. This curation excluded explicit references to the history of their acquisition, unlike the Benin Bronzes which acknowledged their controversial origins, which I demonstrate had notable impacts on how visitors interpreted these displays. In highlighting these dynamics, I explore the interplay between institutional reputations, historical narratives, and the symbolic power of figures like Richard Holmes in the discourse of cultural restitution. The purpose of this section overall is to show how the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition has been reshaped by the social and political contexts in which this narrative is produced and represented, as seen through the ways that restitution debates drive, and demand, certain understandings of this collection's significance.

The third section explores the narratives that emerge from restitution in practice and draws heavily on interviews with individuals, institutions, and organizations involved in these debates and who pursue the restitution of artifacts, whether as heritage professionals, scholars, or activists. The restitution of a tabot prompts an analysis of the 'case within the case' of the debate that specifically concerns the sacred altar tabots that were taken during the expedition. Chapter 6 identifies the conceptual frameworks that are helpful for understanding how religious objects function, or do not function, within museum spaces, which lays the groundwork for considering the characteristics of the discourse(s) around the altar tabots. I engage with critical scholarship on the 'secularization thesis' as well as the philosophical questions that emerge from the demands to 'respect' religious objects. The aim of this chapter is to explore the themes and concepts that are invoked by the debates about the altar tabots in order to demonstrate the ways in which these debates have constructed a parallel, and sometimes competing, narrative of the need for restitution that emphasizes their spiritual identity over their identity as loot. In Chapter 7, I build from this discussion and consider the significance of the narrative of 'Maqdala 1868 as sacrilege' rather than 'Maqdala 1868 as imperial violence' as it relates to the motivation for cultural restitution. In addition to interviews with religious figures involved

in the campaign for the return of Maqdala artifacts, specifically the Christian artifacts, I also had the unique opportunity to observe the restitution ceremony of a sacred tabot at an Ethiopian Orthodox church in London and speak with members of the congregation about that process. Exploring the narratives that are constructed around the restitution of sacred objects highlights how restitution debates can intervene to reconstruct historical narratives outside of the decolonial paradigm, often in an attempt to unburden these cases from the weight of political assumptions. This exploration leads into the final substantive chapter of the thesis, Chapter 8, which is centered on a detailed discussion of a restitution ceremony that took place on the 21st of September 2023, in which a sacred tabot, a lock of hair belonging to Prince Alemayehu, and several other Maqdala artifacts were formally returned to Ethiopia at a private club in London. This chapter enables me to reflect not only on how cultural restitution debates construct historical narratives but on how the process and act of restitution itself also functions as a discursive space. The central contribution of this section is a firsthand account of witnessing restitution in practice in two separate but related events, wherein artifacts associated with the Maqdala Expedition were formally restituted from private collections. These observations, as well as a productive comparison between the public and private ceremonies, enable the thesis to make a unique perspective on the narratives that emerge from restitution in action, which segues into concluding points about the future direction of 'Maqdala 1868.' Finally, the conclusion of this thesis addresses the continuous development of this process of writing the history of the Maqdala Expedition through restitution debates and reflects on what it might mean for our understanding of the significance of this history, and more broadly, of restitution and decolonization, for 'Maqdala 1868' to become another paradigmatic case of cultural restitution. In my exploration of the micro-dynamics of this specific case's trajectory, I expose the macro-dynamics of the cultural heritage sector that influence social, political, and artistic engagement with the histories of Empire. Ultimately, this thesis offers insight into the unfolding of this historical moment through an analysis of how discourse has worked to transform 'Maqdala 1868' into a controversy, sensation, and spectacle.

PART ONE: RECOGNIZING MAQDALA

Chapter 1: Museums, Restitution, and the Legacy of Imperialism

1.1 The Relationship Between Cultural Restitution and Narratives of Empire

Popular 'cases' of cultural restitution emerge largely through the narratives constructed and amplified by ongoing debates, media coverage, and advocacy efforts. These narratives often highlight specific objects or collections as symbols of colonial injustice, transforming them into focal points for public and institutional discourse. Artifacts like the Parthenon Sculptures or the Benin Bronzes are elevated to iconic status not only because of their intrinsic cultural value but also due to the stories told about their acquisition, the ethical questions they raise, and their significance to national or cultural identity. As Richard Sandell (2016) explores, museums play an important role in presenting narratives to the public that help to construct both the moral and the political climate in which their audiences respond to and experience issues of social justice. The framing of these objects as emblematic of broader histories of exploitation and loss creates compelling moral arguments that resonate with audiences, reinforcing their centrality in restitution debates. However, much like their acquisition in the first place, the selection and promotion of certain cases is closely linked to trade, economic interests, demands for reparations, and the ongoing imbalance of global power and influence between Europe and formerly colonized territories, as well as the visibility of claimants, which often results in the privileging of high-profile objects from well-resourced campaigns over those that are less publicized. This process draws attention to the power of narrative in shaping which cases gain prominence, determining how restitution debates are perceived, and selecting which voices and perspectives are heard. To fully explore how the historical narrative of the Maqdala 1868 collection has been shaped by cultural restitution debates, it is essential to recognize the relationship between cultural restitution debates and the history of Empire. The acquisition of the Maqdala artifacts, whether through the plunder of the fortress at Maqdala or through other means along the way, like many other collections of African artifacts, was deeply intertwined with the practices and ideologies of imperialism. Though the

Maqdala Expedition evokes distinctly imperial connotations, it was not itself explicitly colonial; nevertheless, discussions of this expedition still operate within that kind of discursive space. The looting of Maqdala, which took place during a punitive expedition to Ethiopia, appears emblematic of the broader patterns of extraction and exploitation that characterized imperial encounters. In exploring the significance of the restitution debates surrounding this collection, we must acknowledge how many of these objects, particularly those that are the subject of restitution requests today, were removed from Ethiopia and placed within museums that were actively involved in promoting images of British superiority and the moral righteousness of colonialism. As cultural restitution debates have gained further traction in recent decades, the Maqdala artifacts have become assimilated into a discourse that demands not just the return of stolen objects, but also accountability to the impact of imperial legacies on cultural sovereignty and national identity. Understanding the relationship between cultural restitution and narratives of Empire is crucial to appreciating why Maqdala has emerged – been shaped into – a focal point in restitution debates and how these discussions have contributed to constructing the historical and contemporary narratives that circulate around the collection today.

In order to discuss the subject of the collections of African artifacts held in European institutions as a result of Empire, it is helpful to first briefly distinguish between some key terms that will be used throughout the remainder of this work, namely 'restitution,' 'repatriation,' and 'reparations.' While these terms are often used together or interchangeably in the larger debate about the concerns surrounding African artifacts that were taken under colonial or imperial circumstances, each has distinct connotations, and it is necessary to be intentional and specific about their applications here. Repatriation in this context refers to the return of a cultural artifact or collection of objects to its country of origin. The repatriation of African objects usually, but not always, means the formal transfer of ownership from a private or national collection to the state, even when the state was not necessarily the original owner. Reparations refers to a process of redress for an injustice and can involve the distribution of resources, symbolic gestures, financial compensation, or some combination thereof. Repatriation is sometimes considered as a mode of reparations for historical injustices, where the formal and permanent return of an artifact or collection can be an

acknowledgment of the harm that was done and the wrongfulness of the act, while also enabling the return of a resource that holds social, religious, and/or economic value for a community. Finally, restitution, specifically cultural restitution, which is the term I use most frequently when I refer to the debates that are the context of this work, has a broader scope than return or redress. Cultural restitution, in addition to covering both the return of cultural artifacts and redress for past wrongs, also alludes to a process of restoration. Where the repatriation of objects can be, and is often, part of this process, repatriation does not alone describe the complexity of the debates about the histories and futures of contested collections, which are as much about how, and whose, history is represented as they are about where the objects in question are located. And while the issue of restitution is closely linked with the logic of reparations, restitution has an explicit connection to the question of ownership over something that was lost or taken away. Critically, restitution seeks to address this loss not only in terms of the loss of ownership over the object itself, which can be restored through repatriation, but also in terms of the loss of control over how that object's significance is defined. In this way, the term cultural restitution refers to a wide range of processes that involve epistemic interventions, reconfigurations of the heritage field, and negotiations over the representation of history as well as the physical possession of objects. Thus, debates about restitution are debates about returning cultural artifacts to their places and communities of origin, but they are also about the desire for recognition and the power to determine the narrative framework in which history is told. This dynamic is important to acknowledge because it leads to a better understanding of the relationship between these debates and the restoration of the cultural sovereignty, agency, and capabilities of societies affected by imperial systems. To fully appreciate how these debates have emerged from the connection between cultural institutions and Empire, and how 'cases' of restitution come into being through these debates, we must recognize that restitution is inextricably intertwined with the politics of representation.

The ways that museums have functioned to support imperial systems and ideologies through their representations of colonized and formerly colonized peoples are well-documented. During the 19th and 20th centuries, museums came to the fore as powerful sites of knowledge and authority regarding material culture, which made them well-suited to the task of representing the colonized 'others' in order to foster

support for the imperial enterprise (Van Broekhoven 2018). But in a context of such unequal relations of power as is characteristic of both Empire and postcolonial contexts, the act of representation is implicated in the construction of categories and subjectivities that uphold Eurocentric ontologies. As Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018) discuss, 'representing is a toxic word in the vocabulary of modernity and modern epistemology because it presupposes a constituted world or reality that is somehow represented and then different schools or people in daily life provide different interpretations of something that is objective and real' (p.109). They argue that attempts to reconfigure modes of representation in relation to the legacies of Empire often entrench the same patterns of domination and control that they purport to disrupt. The symbiotic relationship between cultural institutions, particularly museums, and the structures of imperialism has been analyzed and discussed extensively across numerous academic disciplines, and it is not my prerogative here to repeat these explorations. However, 'cases' of restitution emerge largely through the narratives that are constructed and amplified by cultural restitution debates, which are deeply intertwined with the discourses of museums as imperial agents. As such, exploring how the historical narrative of Maqdala 1868 has been shaped by its transformation into a coherent case of cultural restitution requires briefly unpacking the key points and themes upon which cultural restitution debates rely to represent these histories. In doing so, it is possible to see how the conceptualization of museums as sites that require decolonization both informs and constrains the conversations that surround the significance of cultural restitution. Full engagement with the role of cultural restitution debates in shaping historical narratives requires understanding not only the material history of contested objects and collections but also the ideological frameworks that affect our perception of heritage institutions. Media coverage and scholarly discourses together work to reinforce these narratives, which further entrench the symbolic power of representative examples within restitution debates. This process reveals how narrative construction is instrumental in determining which collections become cases and highlights the role of storytelling in framing issues of ownership, ethics, and the legacy of empire in debates about the restitution of cultural heritage.

The origins of many cultural institutions in the United Kingdom are deeply intertwined with the history of the British Empire, which spanned the globe and facilitated the accumulation of vast quantities of cultural artifacts. Museums like the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum gained power and prestige during the height of colonial expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries, and their collections were built largely through the extraction of cultural heritage from colonized regions. Often, these objects were obtained through coercive means, including military conquest, looting, and exploitative trade agreements, reflecting the oppressive dynamics of Empire. Tony Bennett (1995) emphasizes the role of museums in consolidating the authority of both the state and the Empire wherein the display of material culture was deployed as an exercise in governmentality. As social and political institutions, museums legitimized the imperial project through the control over the representation of cultural artifacts, which were often presented as trophies of conquest or as symbols of imperial benevolence. By curating artifacts from colonized territories, the exhibitionary complex of the museum served as tangible evidence of the Empire's influence and superiority. Furthermore, as Franz Fanon (1963) poignantly articulates, the colonizer's seizure of the representation of culture and history was a central component of the colonial regime, not a peripheral consequence; colonialism ingrained a sense of 'cultural estrangement' through this denigration and devaluation that permeated the colonized subject's psyche, reinforcing the idea of the museum as a tool of Empire. Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (2018) use the term 'captations' to refer to the various forms of symbolic and material domination that were implicated in the unethical acquisition of African cultural items in this context, whether through looting or exchange. They argue that we should not only consider that these goods were physically displaced or captured in the process of their taking, but also that they have continued to be assimilated into symbolic regimes of knowledge that perpetuate colonial domination and humiliation, especially through their display in Western museums.

We will probably never know about the fate of many, if not most, of the objects that were removed from their places and communities of origin under violent, coercive, or otherwise unethical circumstances. In the major anthropological and art museums across Europe and North America there are hundreds of thousands of artifacts to be accounted for, with only a small fraction of those ever going on display, much

less attaining the kind of fame and notoriety that allow them to appear in news headlines and become household names. And the collections housed in those major national museums barely scratch the surface of the number of objects in other institutions and private collections, which only very rarely ever attract public attention. Those objects or collections that do achieve this status become social and political touchstones for the ongoing debates about the legacy of imperial systems, the lasting impact of historical injustices, and the responsibility of former imperial powers to make reparations (financial or otherwise) for these wrongs. The restitution or repatriation of artifacts, artworks, and human remains to African countries are part of a larger process of analyzing and understanding the histories of Empire, wherein the display of objects, whether that be in a museum or online, is closely intertwined with the social and political negotiations over the power to define and represent historical narratives. The ways that these histories are represented visually and discursively are not just a matter of virtue signaling but are integral to the construction of perceptions of their significance, which in turn influences their status within restitution debates. The display of loot in Western museums has been conceptualized as an ongoing assault on African cultural agency through the continued dominance of former imperial powers over the writing and telling of the histories of these events. Within this framework, the debate on cultural restitution has mainly been understood as an arena for reclaiming this agency in the wake of postcolonial independence and decolonization. It has furthermore been closely linked to the renegotiation of national identity in order to construct and perform particular notions of modern statehood – that is, as an essential component of the nation-building projects undertaken by newly independent or modernizing states (see Aronsson and Elgenius 2015; Crinson 2001 Bernhardsson 2005; Abungu 2018). The push for the return of looted objects to their countries of origin is not only about demanding that former imperial powers make reparations for the wrongs that were committed under the conditions of Empire, but also about rewriting the histories and reshaping the meanings of these objects.

1.2 A Decolonial Turn in Museum Praxis

Cultural restitution debates have emerged as a response to these imperial legacies, seeking to address the ethical and political questions surrounding the ownership and display of artifacts acquired during colonial rule or through encounters with Empire. Given the relationships discussed above, cultural institutions in the United Kingdom have increasingly embraced the idea of decolonization as a response to growing public and academic scrutiny of their historical roles in imperial expansion and subjugation. Decolonization, in this context, refers not only to the restitution of cultural objects to their countries of origin but also to broader efforts to critique and dismantle the imperial ideologies embedded in museum practices, narratives, and institutional structures. This turn has been shaped by global movements, including calls for restitution, and the influence of postcolonial scholarship, which have emphasized the enduring legacies of colonial rule and imperial systems in cultural spaces. The roots of this movement can be traced to the postcolonial critiques of the late 20th century, particularly the rise of critical heritage studies and the influence of postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said (1995), Frantz Fanon (1963), and Aimé Césaire (1972). These scholars deconstructed and challenged the Eurocentric frameworks that had shaped cultural institutions and argued for the need to prioritize the perspectives of colonized peoples. From this body of work emerged the idea that decolonization went far beyond the pursuit of political independence for formerly colonized peoples, but also demanded a thorough re-examination of the systematic ways that imperial assumptions and patterns continue to be embedded in these institutions. As Dan Hicks (2020) argues, decolonization in museums is as much about transforming the epistemological frameworks and power relations underpinning the formation, retention, and display of collections as it is about the physical repatriation of artifacts.

While the concepts of decolonization and restitution are often discussed together in contemporary museum discourse, they are not synonymous. Rather, they operate at different but intersecting levels of practice and theory. Restitution typically refers to the restoration of a community or country's ownership over cultural objects, frequently but not always through a formal return, which is often seen as both a legal

and ethical response to historical injustices. Decolonization, on the other hand, refers to a broader epistemological and structural transformation aimed at dismantling the enduring structures of imperial power within museums and heritage spaces. The conflation of decolonization with restitution risks narrowing the scope of decolonial work to a series of object-based transactions rather than recognizing it as a complex political project. Restitution may be one mode of decolonization, but when treated as an endpoint rather than part of a relational and transformative process, it risks reproducing the very hierarchies that decolonization seeks to dismantle. In this sense, the term 'decolonial restitution' can be understood as referring not only to the physical return of objects but to the restoration of agency, narrative, and power to source communities. However, despite the compatibility between the aims of restitution and those of decolonization, it is not a given that the pursuit of cultural restitution must be predicated on decolonial logic – as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, when the terms and concepts of decolonization as a political agenda do not resonate or become hindered by assumptions, restitution can still take on meaning outside of this framework. I therefore use 'decolonial restitution' not only to acknowledge that restitution can contribute to the goals of decolonization when it helps to forge new relational ethics in cultural institutions, but also to distinguish between restitution that is driven by the political imperative to decolonize and restitution that is grounded in alternative motivations.

The broader framing of restitution as reparative rather than transactional moves it away from being a moral-legal obligation and towards conceptualizing it as one example of the practical enactment of decolonial thinking. As Csilla Ariese and Magdalana Wróblewska (2022) articulate, decoloniality in museums goes far beyond the repatriation of artifacts to encompass a wide set of practices aimed at 'denormalizing' the systems, assumptions, and structures that are deeply embedded in institutional approaches to cultural heritage (p.15). In this thesis I use decolonization in two distinct but interrelated ways. First, as a political practice rooted in decolonial theory, which draws on the frameworks such as those developed by Ariese and Wróblewska (2022) wherein decolonization is a multilayered and intentionally disruptive process that seeks to radically re-think how knowledge systems, institutional authority, and historical narratives are configured in the museum space. Here, decolonization is not a prescribed set of

actions leading towards a defined result, but is understood to encompass a broad range of small and large shifts that reshape how heritage is valued, interpreted, and governed. Second, I refer to decolonization as a curatorial strategy adopted by cultural institutions. Decolonization in this sense often manifests through surface-level reforms such as reframing labels, adjusting exhibition narratives, or acknowledging imperial histories in displays. While these changes are important symbolic gestures that can contribute to the aims defined by Ariese and Wróblewska (2022) by, for example, improving transparency, they can easily risk becoming performative if not accompanied by continuous work to enact deep structural changes that redistribute authority and meaning-making power to source communities. Thus, when I refer to curatorial praxis that is immersed within the dominant frameworks of restitution, I seek to emphasize that the institutional approach to contested collections is shaped by a context where restitution, while not synonymous with decolonization, is considered almost inseparable from decolonial reasoning. This logic encourages institutions to adopt specific curatorial strategies, particularly those that cater to the imperative to be 'transparent' and 'accountable' to the violent histories of collections.

Despite its prevalence in museum discourse now, the process of incorporating the practice of decolonization into the museum has certainly not been a smooth one. In 2002, a selection of the world's largest and most prestigious museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, and the Louvre, released a statement entitled the *Declaration of the Importance and Value of Universal Museums.* In this statement, the directors of these institutions attempted to defend their collections against the perceived threat posed by the growing push for cultural restitution. The declaration summarizes many of the most frequently invoked arguments against restitution and repatriation, including the claims that not only were objects taken under colonialism acquired legitimately, but also that it would be unproductive, and even unsafe, to pursue the deaccessioning of museum collections. These arguments reflect the reluctance on the part of heritage institutions to part with their collections, as well as the fact that museums have often seen themselves as antagonized by calls for cultural restitution. Recent years, however, have seen a notable transformation in how museums engage in these debates, particularly in a willingness to, at least superficially, make efforts to 'decolonize' their collections. The International Council of Museums

even identified ‘addressing decolonization’ in its Strategic Goals for 2022-2028 as one of the key challenges faced by museums today (ICOM 2022). In the UK, large national institutions such as the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum have found themselves at the center of these debates, with their practices under fire for how they engage with their historical and contemporary relationships to the legacies of Empire. In an era marked by Brexit and resurgent nationalism, the move to confront imperial legacies has provoked backlash from certain groups, with critics accusing museums of undermining British history and values. This tension is among the challenges of decolonization in a context where imperial narratives remain deeply embedded in national consciousness and cultural institutions must navigate competing demands for restitution, representation, and public engagement from diverse and often divided communities.

Exploring how or why decolonization should be pursued is not the aim of this thesis and has been explored at length in the scholarship on museums and their relationship to imperialism (see Kreps 2020; Simpson 1996; Smith 2007; Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Rather, I take as a starting point that cultural restitution debates currently rely heavily on the logic of decolonization to address the legacies of historical injustices and advocate for the return of cultural artifacts to their countries of origin. It is necessary to understand what decolonizing means in this context because it provides the foundation for analyzing how its preeminence in restitution debates as both a theoretical framework and as a practical approach to curation affects the way the historical narrative of the Maqdala Expedition is constructed and represented. It is within this context that the Maqdala Collection has become a prominent case precisely because its history – marked by violent extraction during a British military expedition – has been shaped to fit within the broader narrative of imperial exploitation that is integral to the rationale of decolonization. By the rationale of decolonization, I mean the idea of decolonization as an ongoing political process based on the belief that colonial epistemologies continue to permeate institutions and that the inequalities established by colonialism remain embedded in contemporary society. Bruno Brulon Soares and Andrea Witcomb (2023) discuss decolonization in these terms, as a process and a method of ‘continually combatting the coloniality of knowledge, power, and being’ which manifests in these entrenched social, economic, and political

inequalities (p. 3). They therefore emphasize the multiplicity and plurality of decolonization as something that can take many different forms or pursue different goals depending on the context in which it is situated. In this understanding, decolonization is conceived as a necessary strategy to address these lasting effects of colonial systems and has become a hallmark of the discourses surrounding, among others, structural imbalances of power between the Global North and the Global South, historical injustices, and racism. It is also worth noting that they acknowledge that the concept of a journal issue based on the theme of moving 'towards decolonization' came about organically as the result of an open call for papers through which they received so many submissions on the subject of decolonizing the museum or applying decolonial analysis to the museum that they decided to make decolonization the focal point of the issue (Soares and Witcomb, 2023, p.2). This speaks to the extent to which decolonization discourse, and particularly the conception of decolonization as mode of addressing institutional inequalities, has become a dominant, and even expected, framework in contemporary museological scholarship and practice. To describe the work of decolonizing museums and other cultural institutions as 'ongoing' in the way that Soares and Witcomb (2023) do is generally intended as a gesture of self-reflection, a way of acknowledging that the impact of colonialism on both colonized societies and imperial centers was not immediately resolved in the wake of political independence.

However, as much as this conceptualization of decolonization might appeal to those seeking a guiding framework to signal their alignment with the prevailing trend toward addressing problematic histories, others critique the widespread appropriation of decolonization as a catch-all term for such agendas. Olúfemi Táíwò (2022), for example, critiques the way that this use of decolonization implicitly suggests that colonialism remains the primary structuring force in African societies – an idea that he rejects – which not only perpetuates the centrality of colonial categories but also functions to reinscribe Africa's historical and contemporary experience within a framework of unending victimhood and infantilization. He argues that to treat colonialism as an 'eternal category' or to assume without reflection that colonialism remains the root of all social, political, and economic problems – which must, then, be solved through decolonization – is to effectively, and ironically, deny the existence of African agency within both colonial systems and

independent states (Táíwò, 2022, p.35). Such perspectives portray African societies exclusively as passive recipients of imposed systems rather than active agents with the capacity for discernment, adaptation, and innovation, who selectively engaged with, repurposed, or rejected elements of colonial modernity. This intervention is critical because it challenges a key assumption in much of decolonial discourse: that authenticity and self-determination must be grounded in the wholesale rejection of anything connected to the colonial, an assumption that is unreasonable and unproductive in its reduction of African engagement with modernity or liberal institutions to false consciousness or mimicry. It is not that the aims that decolonization purports to address, such as facilitating more inclusive and equitable approaches to cultural heritage management or dismantling racial inequalities, are not themselves invalid, but that we do not necessarily have to frame them as decolonizing. In the context of restitution, as will be explored throughout this thesis, the critique offered by Táíwò (2022) draws attention to the ways in which the dominant decolonization discourse's emphasis on the primacy of colonialism as a lens to approach African histories and futures can impose rigid expectations on claims. These expectations often privilege narratives of victimhood in the name of 'decolonizing' while marginalizing those that demonstrate resilience and agency. As will be explored throughout this thesis, the Maqdala Collection has been shaped into a 'case' of decolonial restitution precisely through this kind of narrative emphasis on the expedition as a prime example of imperial violence, a process which has been closely entangled with the imperative to 'decolonize' museums, at the expense of other modes of understanding the collection's significance outside of the rhetorics of decolonization. In doing so, I do not intend to reproduce the version of decolonization that Táíwò (2022) dismisses but rather to accept that it is this understanding of decolonization which has become integrated into the discourses and practices surrounding cultural heritage management, and to contribute to problematizing the reliance on decolonization as an explanatory framework for addressing the histories and futures of African objects.

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), focusing on settler colonialism and indigeneity, build on this critique of the expansion of the meaning of decolonization to offer further insight into the ways that the language of decolonization has been co-opted into broad frameworks of social justice that diminish the

impact of, or even erase, its specific demands – particularly the repatriation of indigenous land and the restoration of indigenous sovereignty. They caution that the treatment of decolonization as a metaphor encompassing nearly all justice-oriented initiatives enables what they call 'settler moves to innocence' through which institutions and individuals seek to assuage their sense of guilt for and responsibility to contemporary and historical injustices without actually disrupting the structures or systems that maintain their positions of power (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p.10). Throughout their analysis, there is an underlying concern about how decolonial language can become a tool of epistemic enclosure, a way of subjugating decolonization's unsettling potential by subsuming it into existing discourses surrounding justice and social change that, in their anxiety about the unfinished nature of the settler colonial project, prematurely seek reconciliation to soothe this discomfort rather than to truly disrupt colonial systems. These arguments, or perhaps warnings, about the institutionalization and sanitization of decolonization require us to reconsider how decolonization is being invoked in restitution debates where it is generally presented as the natural or expected lens for interpreting restitution claims. The risk here for how claims related to, for example, the Maqdala Collection, are discussed and valued is that restitution can become a demonstration of a museum's commitment to this perception of decolonial values. As a result, claims that do not align as neatly with dominant decolonial narratives may be seen as less urgent or legitimate, narrowing the field of restitution to those clams that can be most easily reconciled with institutional desires for symbolic progress. Throughout this work, I engage directly with this tension by questioning the epistemological and political consequences of allowing 'decolonization' to stand in as the default framework through which restitution is understood, performed, and judged. However, this thesis does not ultimately seek to determine whether decolonization is an appropriate or sufficient framework in itself, but rather begins from the recognition that a broad, and often shallow, understanding of decolonization currently dominates the discourse surrounding cultural institutions, restitution, and contested collections. Through my analysis of the trajectory of the Maqdala Collection within this discursive landscape, I demonstrate how the decolonial turn in museums based on the mainstreaming of the decolonization framework has functioned to create

rhetorical and institutional conditions that make demands on restitution claims to align with dominant narratives of decolonial repair.

One of the noticeable manifestations of the impact of decolonization-driven restitution on curatorial praxis has been an institutional emphasis on provenance research, which has gained significant traction as a strategy for museums to respond to calls for transparency, accountability, and decolonization. This approach treats the tracing of an object's history of ownership and acquisition as both an ethical imperative and a mode of reflexivity on the part of the institution and has become central to how museums frame their relationship with restitution. By actively emphasizing a critical engagement with the circumstances that have facilitated the accession of objects into their collections, museums demonstrate a willingness to acknowledge ethical issues, even where this acknowledgement may not necessarily result in material changes. Provenance research, or focus on provenance more generally, furthermore enables the museum to highlight the violent, coerced, or ambiguous origins of their collections and, in doing so, to demonstrate a kind of moral self-scrutiny that aligns with the broader discourses of 'coming to terms' with imperial or difficult histories. This curatorial praxis is consistent with the ideology of decolonization as it is currently understood within Western museum contexts in that it is closely linked to the visibility and transparency of imperial violence in museum narratives, exhibition texts, and public programming; in making imperialism visible, the museum makes an institutional gesture that signals progressive change despite often leaving deeper structural issues of power, ownership, and authority largely intact. This practice is rooted in the rationale that visibility equals accountability, however, while foregrounding imperial histories of extraction may appear to follow Ariese and Wróblewska's (2022) guidelines on visibility and transparency as key decolonial aims, it does not inherently challenge the institution's authority to interpret and frame those histories.

This dynamic is particularly evident in cases like that of the Maqdala Collection, where provenance research and narrative shifts have reframed the artifacts in terms of imperial violence – seemingly fulfilling the aims of transparency and visibility – but have not actually decentered British perspectives or voices, which is another aim of decolonization (Ariese and Wróblewska, 2022, p.51). Notably, the provenance of

the Maqdala objects has long been well-documented, and their violent extraction during the 1868 expedition is not newly discovered fact. What has changed is the curatorial framing wherein recent efforts have chosen to feature this history more prominently, representing it as evidence of imperial injustice. This shift is less about uncovering unknown histories than it is about highlighting a particular facet of a known provenance to align with the moral and symbolic demands of decolonization. As will be explored in greater detail throughout this work, although visibility and transparency appear achieved (or improved) to some degree, the absence of Ethiopian epistemologies and historiographies in these displays undermines the broader decolonial objective of disrupting entrenched hierarchies or redistributing the right to authorship. While provenance research is increasingly mobilized as a curatorial tool in response to restitution efforts that are driven by the logic and politics of decolonization, this process reveals a key tension within contemporary curatorial praxis: museums may, with good intentions, adopt the language and gestures of decolonization while simultaneously reaffirming the power structures they claim to subvert.

In line with the focus on provenance, a central consequence of the decolonization efforts of UK museums in this environment has been the acknowledgment of the violent and coercive means by which many objects entered their collections. In practice, this decolonial turn in cultural institutions has largely manifested in the ways that displays are curated, particularly through narrative shifts that focus on the contexts in which they arrived at the museum in addition to their cultural significance. One of the most common approaches to 'decolonizing' displays has been the move to focus explicitly on the contexts in which objects were acquired, emphasizing their histories of extraction, colonial violence, and imperial domination. Historically, museums have often presented their holdings through anonymous narratives of universality, emphasizing the artistic, cultural, or spiritual values of objects while minimizing or erasing the circumstances of their removal from their original contexts. This approach aligned with imperial ideologies that framed the extraction of cultural artifacts as an act of preservation or, later, as a service to formerly colonized peoples who were supposedly unable to care for their own material heritage. By contrast, contemporary efforts to decolonize collections have prioritized the explicit naming of colonial violence and exploitation as defining features of the artifacts and collections taken under imperial

circumstances. By redefining these narratives, museums are attempting to reframe their role from agents of Empire and stubbornly passive keepers of global heritage to active participants in reckoning with the legacies of imperial injustices. However, this re-narrativization often results in objects being defined predominantly in terms of their relationship to Empire and as loot, which, while sometimes seen as more transparent and honest about the histories of collections, also raises questions about how museums balance these narratives with other facets of objects' cultural value and how they decide what constitutes historical truth.

The term 'loot' itself carries a significant rhetorical charge, evoking images of plunder, theft, and illegitimacy. That museums are increasingly using this term freely in object labels and exhibitions represents a deliberate attempt to disrupt the evasive language that has often been used to describe colonial acquisitions. For example, words like 'collected,' 'gifted,' or 'procured' were historically employed to obscure the violence and exploitation that facilitated the removal of objects from colonized regions or under imperial conditions. By clearly and explicitly labeling such objects as loot, museums are not only acknowledging these ethical issues but also more directly acknowledging their own historical roles as beneficiaries of imperial systems. At the same time, this reframing transforms these objects from artistic and cultural works into contested artifacts that carry the burden of imperial histories and can inadvertently reinforce the dominance of imperial narratives by making colonial violence the primary lens through which objects are understood. However, reframing objects as loot is not without its own limitations and does not necessarily resolve the issue of entrenched Eurocentric modes of representation that reproduce imperial domination. This approach, while potentially challenging visitors to reconsider the legitimacy of their continued presence in UK collections, also risks reducing objects to their histories of acquisition, overshadowing other ways of considering their cultural, religious, or artistic significance. By focusing predominantly on their status as loot, museums may inadvertently reinforce a colonial lens by defining these objects solely in terms of their relationship to Empire, neglecting their status as multifaceted cultural artifacts with ongoing significance and value for the communities from which they were originally taken. As will be discussed in detail later in this thesis, the Maqdala artifacts have undergone this process of

‘decolonization’ through the re-narrativization of their history as loot in response to debates about this collection’s restitution. By emphasizing the exploitative contexts of their acquisition, the logic of decolonization has transformed the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition from one of imperial triumph to a case study in the ethics of restitution, a representative challenge to the legitimacy of retaining artifacts acquired under similar conditions in Western institutions. This shift is indicative of how the demands of cultural restitution debates are reshaping the ways imperial histories are understood and communicated. The rewriting of the Maqdala Expedition’s historical narrative, while reframing it as an act of imperial violence, still often centers the imperial perspective over alternative narratives that are more compatible with Ethiopian historiographies. In focusing on the plunder and the subsequent debates around restitution, much of the discourse remains tethered to the legacy and actions of the British Empire, inadvertently reaffirming its centrality. Ethiopian perspectives, which might emphasize themes such as national resistance, cultural resilience, or the spiritual significance of the looted treasures, are often secondary or subsumed within the broader framework of imperial critique. This dynamic reflects a tension within the logic of decolonization itself, as discussed above, which seeks to dismantle imperial frameworks but can sometimes reinforce their dominance by framing historical interpretation primarily in terms of the impact of Empire rather than in terms of local or indigenous narratives.

In addition to a focus on provenance and rhetorical shifts, the decolonial turn in museum praxis has also ignited an interest in demonstrating the museum’s willingness to work with source communities through collaborative initiatives. The purpose of collaboration within decolonial logic is to challenge the hierarchical and extractive relationships that have historically defined the production and ownership of knowledge in museums. Collaboration is thus seen as a means to redistribute power back to source communities by affirming the value of their lived experiences and community knowledge in curating diverse collections. However, as Robin Boast (2011) observes, collaboration can still reproduce asymmetrical power relations under the guise of inclusion when collaborative efforts, well-intentioned as they may be, become another resource for the museum – something on which it can capitalize and which it can use to reinforce its authority (p.59). Furthermore, as Njabulo Chipangura (2025) discusses, the idea of

a well-defined and identifiable 'community' as a participant in the curatorial process, and with whom the museum can collaborate, is itself contested as it can reduce diverse and heterogenous communities to monolithic entities represented by authorized voices. This observation points to a complication in operationalizing collaboration as a form of decolonizing praxis in museums, wherein the museum frequently defaults to engaging with politically sanctioned or institutionally visible 'community representatives.' As a result, the voices elevated through collaborative processes may be those that are already shaped by and accommodated to institutional forms of recognition, leaving little room for diverse perspectives from within communities, especially those that dissent from the mainstream views – the exclusion of the Restitution Study Group, discussed above, from the dialogues about the Benin Bronzes offers a relevant example of this concern. As will be explored in greater depth later in this thesis, this tension was also reflected in the Victoria and Albert Museum's commemorative *Maqdala 1868* expedition, which presented objects looted during the British military expedition to Ethiopia alongside interpretive texts produced by members of the Ethiopian community in the UK. The inclusion of community voices was constituted in label texts that shared personal reflections, memories, and emotive responses to the objects. While this was a gesture towards collaborative curation, these contributions were framed as supplementary to the authoritative historical narratives presented by the museum; the museum ultimately retained control over the factual and contextual information presented. In this way, while well-meaning, the collaboration was undertaken within a structure that maintained the traditional division between emotional resonance (delegated to the community) and historical interpretation (authorized by the institution). The exhibition thus illustrates how collaborative efforts can fall short of decolonial aims when they remain constrained by institutional power structures that continue to differentiate between affective testimony and historical knowledge.

As we consider the role of narrative in shaping the perception of the significance of contested collections, the concept of entanglement (borrowed from Thomas 1991) offers an important lens through which to understand the relationship between decolonization and restitution debates. At its core, decolonization seeks to disentangle the narratives of imperial violence from the frameworks that have

historically obscured them, making these histories visible and undeniable. This process is not only about acknowledging the violence inherent in the theft of cultural artifacts but also about creating a narrative landscape where the moral logic of restitution can be more clearly understood. Charlotte Joy (2020) uses the concept of 'entanglement' to describe the sense of moral ambiguity, or a practice of avoiding making a judgment about what happened, to whom, and under what conditions that creates resistance to efforts to decolonize cultural industries. She discusses this concept in relation to the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art (1998), international legislation that put the responsibility on institutions to identify and return art and cultural objects that were looted during the Holocaust. Because of the Washington Principles, in reality it is actually routine practice for museums in the United Kingdom to return looted objects. Britain's National Museum Directors Council 'recognizes and deplores the wrongful taking of works of art that constituted one of the many horrors of the Holocaust and World War II,' and therefore adopted the Washington principles. Doing so has had the effect of shifting the responsibility for understanding the provenance of collections from potential claimants to the institutions themselves, leading to the establishment of provenance research with an eye toward flagging items with violent histories. Joy (2020) argues that the deaccessioning of Nazi-looted art has not been met with the same resistance and opposition as the claims for the restitution of African artifacts taken during imperial contexts because the idea of entanglement is not applied to the history of the Holocaust. In this case, the story of what happened is 'known,' which supposedly makes the path to justice clear and relatively uncontroversial. In the cases of colonialism and European imperialism, however, the narratives have not yet been 'fixed.' That is, there is no consensus on the moral status of the European colonizer within the sphere of cultural heritage, which in turn leads to an institutional uncertainty about museums' relationships with their imperial-era collections. The turn towards decolonization in museum practice can be understood here as a push toward fixing the narrative in such a way that it is consistent with the demands of cultural restitution debates. While this effort has been largely successful in the way that contested collections and restitution claims are now primarily associated with the idea of decolonization, this framing also influences public perception by reducing complex histories to singular narratives of theft and return, often neglecting the diversity of experiences

and voices involved. Consequently, while narratives that connect restitution to decolonization can raise awareness and mobilize support for the return of cultural artifacts, they also risk oversimplifying the nuanced realities of these debates, emphasizing symbolic victories over systemic and structural change. As we will see below, solidifying this association for public audiences can also contribute to negative perceptions of restitution when the narratives promoted by decolonization efforts come into conflict with certain cultural values and identity politics.

1.3 Restitution Revolution: Public Confrontations of Imperial Pasts

The decolonial turn in museums cannot be understood in isolation from the broader political and cultural shifts that have compelled institutions to engage, however cautiously, with the legacies of structural violence. Over the past decade, a series of critical moments have mobilized public discourse around race, imperialism, and reparations. The rise of social movements such as *Rhodes Must Fall*, which began at the University of Cape Town in 2015 and quickly spread to Oxford, have played a pivotal role in demanding not only the removal of imperial iconography, such as that exemplified by monuments to Cecil Rhodes, but also a deeper interrogation of the imperial legacies embedded in educational and cultural institutions. Building on the momentum of the *Black Lives Matter* protests, which emerged in 2013 response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of black teenager Trayvon Martin and grew into a national phenomenon calling for accountability to police and vigilante violence against black communities, these movements shared a common goal in their insistence on recognizing the connections between historical structural violence, including colonization and slavery, and the continued existence of systemic inequalities. They emphasized the enduring nature of this violence, representing it as not being confined to a discrete historical period but rather as a foundational logic of society whose effects are reproduced in contemporary social, political, and economic life. In doing so, these movements drew attention to the ways in which institutions like museums have helped to construct, reinforce, and naturalize inequalities through the ways they have historically collected, displayed, and interpreted cultural heritage. Within this climate, museums

have become focal points of critique not only for what they hold but for their role in the politics of representation. In this way, in addition to raising public awareness of the links between museum collections and historical systems like Empire and slavery, these campaigns have functioned to redefine the parameters of institutional responsibility – no longer merely the passive beneficiaries of such systems, but active agents in the production and maintenance of their power and authority. This process has generated a powerful shift in public consciousness, particularly around museum collections of African cultural heritage, which does not merely reflect a new wave of moral outrage but also constitutes a sustained and organized effort to politicize cultural institutions and render their historical complicity visible within wider struggles for racial and social justice.

This atmosphere has enabled the rhetoric of 'decolonizing the museum' to enter public discourse with an intensity that institutions can no longer ignore, even as the claims and demands made by such movements are far from universally accepted. Cultural restitution, which has long been confined to the realms of professional diplomacy and specialized scholarship, has been absorbed into a broader activist vernacular that frames it as both a moral reckoning and a reparative justice demand. Yet, while calls to 'decolonize' museums and facilitate restitution have proliferated, the institutional uptake of these agendas has frequently translated into carefully calculated gestures related to high-profile cases that do not inherently challenge the underlying issues surrounding curatorial authority and control over cultural heritage. Thus, the growing institutional interest in addressing imperial legacies motivated by publicized criticisms has generally remained tethered to the preservation of institutional legitimacy. The structural ambitions of decoloniality – disrupting hierarchies of knowledge and dismantling oppressive systems – are flattened into strategies of public relations, resulting in a version of 'decolonization' that risks becoming both aestheticized and instrumentalized as a means for institutions to navigate reputational crises rather than confront their entanglement in enduring forms of imperial power. What emerges here is a dynamic where activism has driven visibility and forced institutions to engage more publicly with restitution, but this engagement is often subsumed into a controlled narrative, which minimizes the radical potential of decolonial discourse and transforms it into a brand of progressive reform that leaves the fundamental

imbalances intact. Ultimately, the association with widespread and influential, but also deeply controversial, movements like *Rhodes Must Fall* and *Black Lives Matter* can be a double-edged sword. Bringing the issue of imperial legacies in museums into the public spotlight as part of a wider decolonial agenda ensures that cultural institutions cannot avoid participating in these conversations. At the same time, it entrenches museums within a polarized political landscape where skepticism towards activist movements tends to extend to the concepts that they center, such as restitution and decolonization, framing these goals as ideologically driven rather than ethically necessary.

In a statement made at the University of Ouagadougou in 2017, Emmanuel Macron became the first European leader to explicitly pledge to facilitate the large-scale restitution of African heritage objects from public French museums. He boldly declared to the audience "I cannot accept that a large share of several African countries' cultural heritage be kept in France […] African heritage must be showcased in Paris but also in Dakar, Lagos and Cotonou; this will be one of my priorities. Within five years I want the conditions to exist for temporary or permanent returns of African heritage to Africa" (Macron 2017). He elaborated that these conditions included working to develop museum partnerships and an infrastructure for safeguarding this heritage – implicitly suggesting that the only way such a restitution project could succeed would be through the creation of public national museums. This statement appeared to indicate a distinct shift away from France's, which had as recently as 2016 fiercely resisted calls for the repatriation of looted artifacts (Monroe 2019). At the time, Macron's speech appeared to be more than just empty promises, as he subsequently backed his claims by commissioning an academic report on strategies to achieve this goal from Senegalese writer and economist Felwine Sarr and French art historian Bénédicte Savoy. This report, which was released to the public in November 2018 and which is now known as the 'Sarr-Savoy Report,' describes European museums as the unwilling public archives of the brutal system of exploitation and appropriation that defined the colonial period (Sarr and Savoy 2018, p.2). In the report, they argue for the unconditional return of African objects acquired under colonialism, legislative changes to make it easier to remove African works from public collections, and for France to sign the 1995 Unidroit convention enabling restitution from private dealers and collectors (Sarr and Savoy 2018). This debate has

only continued to gain momentum - just a year later at the Paris Peace Forum 2019, which brings together major projects in global governance, one of the first panels explored potential pathways to moving forward with the restitution of looted African objects.

While the substance of the claims of state leaders and museums has yet to be validated, the turn towards a more proactive approach to restitution has come on the heels of a marked rise in public concern for the history and ethics of museum collections. Bénédicte Savoy (2022) has argued that all of the debates happening today about cultural restitution and African artifacts are repetitions of those that took place in the 1970s and 80s, which were silenced by state authorities and museum administrators who fiercely resisted even using the word 'restitution' in these conversations. While it is certainly true that these debates are far from new, their ability to disseminate rapidly and their incorporation into mainstream politics has drawn an unprecedented amount of public attention to the question of cultural restitution. Where issues related to the management of cultural heritage and the development of museums have historically been confined to the elite politics of international organizations and inter-state relations, to intellectual circles, or to the art/museum industry itself, the past two decades have seen these issues increasingly moving into the public sphere. Exhibitions and collections have become the subject of social activism and political campaigns alongside other issues of human rights and justice, and questions of restitution and museum practice have found particular synergy with organizations and movements that focus on anticolonial activism. Groups like Decolonize This Place, which describes itself as an 'action-oriented movement and decolonial formation in New York City and beyond,' staged a protest on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Columbus Day/Indigenous Peoples Day in 2019 to call attention to what protestors perceived as the museum's failure to decolonize its collections. In a widely publicized example of restitution and anticolonial activism, Congolese activist Emery Mwazulu Diyabanza attempted to remove an artifact from the Louvre in a demonstration as part of his campaign for the restitution of African artifacts. Two weeks prior to this incident, Diyabanza had also made a similar attempt to remove an African funeral pole from the Musée du Quai Branly. The video of Diyabanza was posted online and received a range of responses from outrage to commendation. Transforming museums into the sites as well as the subjects of

activism, with material cultural heritage as the rallying force, has put museums in a defensive position. Their traditional role in society as the revered caretakers of the world's most valuable artifacts is gradually being overshadowed by their association with the 'sins of the West' (Pratt 1991, p.34). As part of the growing awareness of this relationship, museums are faced with the expectation to account for their collections and practices more so than ever before. This growing expectation stems from a heightened awareness of how museums' acquisitions and displays are intertwined with historical processes such as colonialism, imperialism, and cultural appropriation. As public consciousness about these issues grows, institutions are facing increasing pressure to address their roles in the displacement of cultural objects and to consider the ethical implications of their collections. This shift is part of a broader movement towards transparency, accountability, and the decolonization of cultural heritage, where museums are being called upon to reassess and rectify past injustices related to the acquisition of artifacts. It also has a significant impact on how people engage with the ongoing debates about cultural restitution, how they perceive efforts to 'decolonize' cultural institutions, and how they evaluate the histories of contested collections.

The rise in public engagement in these issues is reflected in the increasing prominence of restitution, particularly in the form of repatriation, in popular culture and civil society. From the early 2010s onward, the debate on the repatriation of artifacts has moved outside of the elite circles of professional heritage institutions and academia and into a public discourse that is widely recognizable online and in social media. Museums are now contending with audiences that are unwilling to passively accept the narratives they represent, that challenge their authority in the heritage sector, and that are critical of the way they acquire and display their collections. This is a notable shift away from the traditional characterization of museums as neutral, scientific institutions that merely care for cultural artifacts from around the world and who objectively educate people about a variety of cultures. Instead, museums are frequently represented as institutions that have served as engines of empire, and that continue to actively contribute to the persistence of Western political and cultural hegemony. What perhaps might have been seen as radical or hyperbolic critiques (such as the suggestion that museum collections are stolen) are now common enough to appear as recurring themes in film, television, and literature. This is not to suggest that restitution requests are

themselves novel, nor to suggest that greater public engagement in these issues necessarily reflects the emergence of a majority favorable opinion towards restitution – if anything, the growing visibility of the developments in negotiations over certain contested collections has contributed to the assimilation of these debates into a highly-polarized political atmosphere where opposition to 'negative' interpretations of imperial histories, including the call for reparations, is often associated with conservative politics. We need only look at the intense backlash to a report published by the National Trust in 2020, which explored the connections between the properties under their care and colonialism and slavery, to see how politically charged these subjects are today. Though the report merely documented the varied ways that National Trust sites were affected by and entangled in these systems, such as the role of the labor of enslaved peoples in building the wealth of their owners, and even acknowledged some links to abolition and anti-colonial resistance, the National Trust received harsh accusations of tarnishing the reputation of historical figures and forcing political ideologies on visitors. A group formed of members of parliament and peers penned a joint letter urging public bodies to reconsider providing funding to the National Trust in light of this perceived attack on the integrity of British history, with news outlets documenting a public outcry of members against the so-called 'woke agenda' and 'witch hunts' of former property owners (Hope 2020). The combative response to the National Trust's report was largely motivated by the belief that discussing the histories of violent structures such as slavery and colonialism is the direct result of pressure from a left-wing political agenda to erase and devalue British history – and particularly the idea that these discussions are meant to instill a sense of shame and guilt about British culture. These divisions, wherein certain historical subjects or terms are almost inherently politicized, are the hallmark of what has been called the 'culture wars,' an increasingly heated contest over the politics of history, identity, and representation. As a result, cultural institutions now face pressure on multiple fronts to curate their displays and exhibitions in a way that satisfies the demands to 'decolonize' at the risk of inviting hostility from those who feel alienated by confrontations with the histories of Empire.

Within this context, the elevation of certain cases to particular prominence does not only reflect success on the part of the advocates who seek to create momentum for restitution negotiations. Public

awareness plays a pivotal role in transforming specific collections into ‘cases’ within cultural restitution debates, because it amplifies both the visibility and the perceived importance of contested artifacts, regardless of whether the majority of the public agrees with the logic of restitution or not. The collection of artifacts associated with the Maqdala Expedition of 1868, a selection of which are currently on display in institutions like the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, exemplify this process. These artifacts, looted during the British military expedition to Ethiopia (often referred to as the ‘Abyssinian Expedition’ or ‘Maqdala Expedition’), have become a focal point for restitution debates through the construction and propagation of narratives that highlight the violent circumstances of their acquisition and their cultural and spiritual significance to Ethiopian communities. Public awareness of this collection, which is directly linked to greater public engagement with the wider restitution debates as discussed above, has steadily grown through campaigns by Ethiopian and British advocates, increased media coverage, and recent institutional acknowledgments of its contested history. Within this context, the push for the return of these objects through advocacy and scholarship has shifted towards framing the Maqdala artifacts as casualties of imperial violence, situating them within patterns and themes that are quickly recognizable even for members of the public who are unfamiliar with the specific historical context of this expedition. The efforts of activists, politicians, heritage professionals, scholars, and journalists have brought the Maqdala Collection into the public eye, curating it into a case study in the broader conversation about the ethics of imperial acquisitions and the motivations for restitution. As a result, public engagement not only increases pressure on institutions to address or respond to restitution claims but also shapes how these collections are perceived, framing them as representative of the legacies of Empire and the moral imperative of cultural restitution. In the next chapter, we will build on the themes outlined in this chapter to explore how the Maqdala Collection has come to be recognized as a case for cultural restitution within the context of Ethiopian historiography, national identity, and state-sponsored conceptions of heritage. In doing so, we will consider how the Maqdala Expedition, and the associated cultural artifacts, have come to be integrated into Ethiopia’s heritage discourse and how it intersects with its ongoing efforts to assert cultural sovereignty and shape its national identity.

Chapter 2: Decolonization Without Colonization? The Case of Ethiopia

2.1 Postcolonialism, National Pride, and Ethiopian Exceptionalism

Since the 19th century, Ethiopia's historical narrative has been shaped by a distinct historiographical framework often referred to as the 'Great Tradition.' This framework served as the primary vehicle for state-sponsored nationalism during the Ethiopian monarchy. The political centralization of the 19th century both reinforced and drew strength from the Great Tradition, as successive Ethiopian rulers consistently used it to legitimize their authority. Central to the Great Tradition are several key claims, most notably that Ethiopians are God's new chosen people and that the Ark of the Covenant was relocated from Jerusalem to Aksum (Marzagora 2017). These assertions are grounded in the *Kebra Nagast* (The Glory of Kings), which is a foundational text that provides a textual basis for the Ethiopian monarchy and which has been instrumental in establishing hierarchical distinctions between Ethiopia's Christian centers and its non-Christian peripheries. The Great Tradition has profoundly influenced how Ethiopian identity and the Ethiopian nation have been conceptualized by both political leaders and intellectuals. This historiographical lens has been central to the articulation of Ethiopian modernity and the broader project of nation-building. The vision of Ethiopia as a strong and unified state, drawing legitimacy and continuity from its exceptional biblical heritage, supported the centralization of power, imperial territorial expansion, and the modernization of the Ethiopian state. Visual and rhetorical representations of Ethiopia's biblical past have consistently been employed to consolidate national identity and affirm Ethiopia's place as a historically and spiritually unique nation (see Finneran 2003 for examples). Through this lens, the Great Tradition continues to serve as a powerful ideological tool in shaping both internal governance and external perceptions of Ethiopia's historical and modern trajectory. National pride in Ethiopia is inextricably linked to this narrative of Ethiopian exceptionalism. The country's history as one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations, its claim to a biblical heritage through the Solomonic dynasty, and its role as the only African nation to defeat a European colonial power are sources of immense pride for Ethiopians. This pride has been reinforced through state-sponsored narratives that highlight Ethiopia's ancient Christian tradition, its

notable heritage sites such as the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, and its purported connection to the Ark of the Covenant. However, the narrative of Ethiopian exceptionalism is not without its challenges. While it has on the surface attempted to unify the country around a shared sense of pride, it has also been criticized for privileging certain groups and histories over others. The emphasis on Orthodox Christianity and the Solomonic monarchy, for instance, has often marginalized Ethiopia's Muslim communities and ethnic groups, who do not share equally in this vision of national identity. This exclusionary aspect of exceptionalism has exacerbated internal divisions by fueling ethnic and religious tensions that continue to affect Ethiopian politics and society.

Ethiopia's distinctive historical position as one of Africa's oldest empires and its achievement in maintaining independence during the imperial era has furthermore profoundly shaped its relationship with the concepts of postcolonialism and decolonization. Unlike most African nations, Ethiopia was never formally colonized – notwithstanding the brief Italian occupation from 1936 to 1941, after having accomplished an unexpected and now iconic victory in defeating the Italian would-be colonizers at the Battle of Adwa in 1896 (see Jonas 2011 for a full analysis of the significance of this event). This legacy of independence has served to both illustrate and justify a narrative of Ethiopian exceptionalism, where the nation is often represented and celebrated as a symbol of African sovereignty and resistance against colonial domination. Ethiopia's historical narrative became a beacon of resistance during the mid-20th century, playing a central role in inspiring anti-colonial movements and the broader process of decolonization across Africa (Perham 1969). This unique position also complicates Ethiopia's relationship to the concepts of postcolonialism and decolonization. While many African nations grapple with the legacy of imposed colonial structures, Ethiopia's challenge has been to build the political and social infrastructure necessary to maintain its desired status while still integrating into the postcolonial and decolonial frameworks that continue to resonate throughout the African continent. In this context, Ethiopia's pursuit of cultural restitution is not just about reclaiming stolen property but also about asserting its place as a sovereign African state free from the lingering shadows of imperial exploitation. Yet, while the rhetoric of exceptionalism highlights Ethiopia's ancient civilization and unbroken sovereignty, it has also perpetuated

internal inequalities, strained regional relationships, and at times undermined inclusive approaches to cultural heritage and decolonization. Ethiopia's exceptionalism narrative often overlooks the fact that it was not only a victim of imperial aggression but also an imperial power in its own right, exerting domination over peoples and territories on a regional scale. Beginning with the centralizing campaigns of Emperor Menelik II in the late 19th century, Ethiopia expanded its borders through conquest, annexing large areas inhabited by non-Amhara ethnic groups, such as the Oromo, Anywaa, and Sidama. This imperial legacy complicates Ethiopia's claims to exceptionalism, as it has been implicated in the creation of lasting inequalities and grievances that continue to shape Ethiopia's internal politics and identity today. Recognizing this dual history of resistance to external imperialism and participation in regional empire-building is essential for a fuller understanding of Ethiopia's place within the postcolonial and decolonial discourse.

Postcolonialism and decolonization, as frameworks, examine the lingering effects of imperial domination, focusing on the ways in which formerly colonized societies grapple with the cultural, political, and economic legacies of Empire. Ethiopia's position within these frameworks is complex, and the Maqdala Expedition's relationship to coloniality in particular will be explored in greater depth in the third chapter of this thesis. However, in exploring how the historical narrative of the Maqdala Collection has been both created and contested by restitution debates, it is important to briefly identify the most relevant ways in which Ethiopia is situated in relation to postcolonial and decolonial ideologies. This dynamic is essential to understanding the recognition of the Maqdala Expedition as a 'case' of restitution because it enables us to see, as will be demonstrated throughout the remainder of this work, how the dominance of these frameworks in restitution debates has affected the way that this history is narrativized and represented. It also lays the foundation for understanding why these narratives may be resisted and contested. Ethiopia's trajectory in terms of its political and economic development has followed a different path to many other African nations; even though Ethiopia experienced imperial encounters and was affected by the establishment of colonial rule on the African continent, it did not experience the overt establishment of colonial systems by a colonizing power, which has shaped its postcolonial relationships with both Europe

and other African countries. In this context, Ethiopia has historically relied on its narrative of continuous independence to assert its sovereignty and leadership within Africa, particularly during the decolonization movements of the mid-20th century. As the headquarters of the African Union (formerly the Organization of African Unity), Ethiopia became a symbolic leader in the fight against colonialism, framing itself as a symbol of African resilience and unity. Despite having not itself been subject to colonialism in an official sense, some scholars such as Donald Crummey (2003) have argued that Ethiopia's approach to history and heritage has nevertheless been shaped by both colonial and postcolonial systems. In particular, he claims that the European incursion into Africa that ultimately resulted in the establishment of the modern, bordered nation-state had a profound impact on Ethiopian concepts of nationhood. Others have expanded on this idea and argued that when the nationalist demands of the modern state came into conflict with the long-standing tradition of a divinely ordained monarchy, it created conditions of social and cultural contradictions, which in turn led to the series of revolutions that ushered in a significant reconfiguration of Ethiopian society and politics (see Makki 2011). In this way, the legacies of European colonialism and global imperialism have still been felt in contemporary Ethiopia, even though Ethiopia's negotiation of its history and national identity in the period of African decolonization has not necessarily been characterized by the same power dynamics as some of its neighbors. These analyses prompt us to consider the ways that the establishment of Ethiopia as a state has affected its approach to the management of cultural heritage and the pursuit of cultural restitution.

2.2 Heritage and Heritage-Making in the Modern Ethiopian State

A significant amount of work on the role of material heritage in state-building and nation-building has emerged from explorations of the intimate relationship between the prerogatives of the modern nation-state and the establishment of museums (see Aronsson and Elgenius 2015; Crinson 2001). Museums play an important role in these processes by defining what constitutes heritage, reaffirming historical narratives, and constructing national identity for both citizens of the state and visitors. Scholars have also situated the function of museums within postcolonial frameworks of independence and identity formation, arguing that

the historical and cultural erasure of colonialism drives newly independent states to both articulate and promote the story of the nation in museums (see Bernhardsson 2005; Fanon 1963). These works explore the assumptions about the 'modern' state's responsibilities with regard to the management of cultural heritage, particularly that professionally curated displays of heritage are not merely a reflection of the state's modernity but are essential building blocks of that modernity. As Laurajane Smith (2007) has demonstrated, the redistribution of power and resources and the struggle for political and economic equity are interlinked with struggles for recognition. She argues that the ability to control the cultural processes and negotiations that occur at heritage places (archaeological sites, museums, etc.) is crucial to any project concerned with self-determination of identity construction and expression. Because this process is mediated not only by the dominant discourse of heritage but also by the technologies of government (see Foucault, 2009) who validate and control the discourse, cultural restitution is therefore not simply a return of artifacts that have been lost but rather a process that creates a new history and identity in the governmental context of the nation-state. Cultural heritage, concerned with material histories and ideological narratives, has been integral to consolidating the Ethiopian nation as an ideal and to transforming this ideal into a political and social reality. This use of heritage is an intrinsic element of a process described by Richard Delgado as one where the dominant group (or the 'ingroup') creates stories about its culture and history in order to 'remind it of its identity in relation to outgroups and provide it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural' (p.60). In the case of Ethiopia, the focus on the restitution of the Maqdala Collection is part of a wider process of continuously (re)negotiating its national identity which has often seen the histories of the Orthodox Christian communities privileged, resulting in the exclusion of the other cultures that make up the fabric of Ethiopian society (Finneran 2012); these divisions have become even more salient in the wake of the reorganization of Ethiopia into an ethnic federalist state. The strategic and intentional construction of cultural heritage is thus implicated in the entrenchment of hegemonic or authorized discourses about the state of Ethiopia and the identities of its citizens.

There is already an enormous amount of scholarship on the restitution of cultural objects to African countries that builds on this framework, with an emphasis on postcolonialism and decolonization. Viewing

restitution through these lenses has often resulted in a particular focus on the role of international and national development in driving the state's interest in and approach to cultural heritage. These works often complement the theoretical analysis of heritage governance as an arena where knowledge and power intersect by expanding further on the role of governments and institutions in commodifying and marketing heritage to serve the goals of the state. From this perspective, some scholars have argued that the commoditization of historical objects and practices has led to the construction of mythological pasts that are explicitly oriented towards shaping the perceptions of consumer audiences rather than towards representing historical realities (see Lowenthal 1985; Hewison 1987). While this analysis has led to some interesting questions about the risks of essentializing 'traditional cultures' or reinforcing a dichotomy between authenticity and modernity, the heritage industry has nevertheless demonstrated itself to be a valuable source of both revenue and prestige, while contested collections are key diplomatic rallying points in the struggle for power. The conceptualization of heritage as a state-sponsored resource has therefore received attention for the potential of material history to both attract economic investment and strengthen political relationships, where asserting control over the governance of heritage becomes a key strategy in the pursuit of development initiatives. This dynamic was reflected in the UN World Decade for Cultural Development (1988 – 1997), which facilitated a wave of both academic and professional interest in the relationship between cultural heritage and development. In this context, which coincided with a period where many postcolonial states were undergoing processes of national identity formation and negotiation, the management of cultural heritage was assimilated into the international development agenda alongside other themes such as poverty alleviation, economic growth, and sustainability. This new perspective on cultural heritage and development contributed to a shift in the political landscape in which museums were situated. As Paul Basu and Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp (2014) show, this mode of valuing heritage gained a degree of legitimacy and power when it was incorporated into the international discourses on heritage. When it was subsequently embraced at the national level in state policies and administration, particularly through investment in museums and the resurgence in attempts to claim the state's ownership over material heritage, it became a way of demonstrating and articulating 'the nation's fluency in a shared global

modernity' (Basu and Zetterstrom-Sharp 2014, p. 59). Modernity here denotes not an ontological historical period, but rather a set of norms and values that form the contours of the dominant modes of socioeconomic organization (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). As Kristin Kuutma (2013) describes, heritage in this framework 'signifies interests for the state who promotes it with an expectation of accumulating symbolic and economic capital as well as presumably procuring a political position, either internally, among geographic neighbors, or on a wider international scale' (p.21). This dynamic has been central to investment and participation in the international heritage sector, such as when states request that a site be placed on the UNESCO World Heritage list. In this entanglement of modernity and heritage in the context of the state, demanding the return of cultural artifacts is a political strategy oriented toward the construction and deployment of modern technologies of government. This is precisely what has happened in Ethiopia and it is thus in relation to this process that we can look at how the cultural restitution of the Maqdala Collection has been imbued with a renewed social and political significance.

There is not enough space here to provide a detailed examination of how these dynamics have manifested in the evolution of the heritage industry in the Ethiopian state, which has been conducted by other scholars (see Huber 2021 and Silverman et al. 2021 for comprehensive studies of this subject). What is important to acknowledge is that the recognition of the Maqdala Collection as a highly promoted and familiar case of cultural restitution is as inseparable from the rise of political interest in using these debates to pursue state-sponsored agendas as it is from the general turn towards decolonization in academic and professional approaches to heritage. Since the establishment of the modern Ethiopian state in 1889, the country's historical narrative and cultural heritage have been deeply intertwined with the political agendas of successive regimes. These governments have frequently drawn upon historical references to reinforce their authority and legitimacy. Emperor Haile Selassie, for example, justified his reign by aligning it with the biblical Solomonic dynasty. Ethiopia's historical narrative also resonated beyond its borders, becoming a potent symbol during the African decolonization movements and the formation of post-independence nation-states. As Africa's oldest enduring empire, with ties to ancient civilizations and biblical history, Ethiopia's perceived historical exceptionalism challenged colonial narratives that denied the viability of

self-governance (Huber 2021). However, the regimes that sought to promote this counter-narrative often governed through authoritarian means and largely fell short of their developmental promises (Crummey 2003). A constant thread throughout their rule was the ambition to construct a modern state modeled on European ideals of absolute sovereignty and defined territorial boundaries. The framing of Ethiopian cultural heritage—particularly the concept of a national Ethiopian heritage—has been closely tied to notions of modernity, state-building, and development. As Elizabeth Giorgis (2010) observes, the discourse on Ethiopian modernity has frequently been shaped by the dynamics of modernization, where modernity, development, and Westernization are often seen as synonymous. This is particularly notable in Ethiopia, where, unlike many formerly colonized nations, there was no inherited framework of bureaucratic infrastructure from a colonial power. Temesgen Burka and Tsehay Eshetie (2022) highlight that this absence posed a major challenge to implementing international aid programs targeting the establishment of cultural institutions and the management of cultural heritage. It was largely for this reason that constructing an administrative system became a central aspect of Emperor Haile Selassie's efforts to consolidate imperial power. Marie Huber (2021) argues that Ethiopian heritage institutions exemplify the extensive process of institutionalizing and localizing Western methods of knowledge production and state bureaucracy in developing nations, a trend that gained momentum in the 1960s with significant support from the United Nations. Within this framework, we can begin to see how cultural restitution emerged as a critical component of Ethiopia's broader nation- and state-building endeavors.

Though the concept of cultural restitution is not itself new, the actual progress of returns has not been consistent. Unlike in many other African countries where restitution requests began to gain momentum in the aftermath of independence in the mid to late 20th century, the beginning of Ethiopia's engagement with this issue can be traced back nearly a century earlier. The sudden death of Emperor Tewodros as a result of the Maqdala Expedition created a three-year vacuum of power in Ethiopia during which Ethiopian chiefs struggled to fill his place. Eventually, once Emperor Yohannes had successfully succeeded Emperor Tewodros, he dispatched a letter to Queen Victoria requesting the return of a manuscript and the *Kwer'ata Re'esu* icon, which had both been taken from Maqdala during the 1868 expedition and had considerable

cultural significance. In this case, perhaps having learned from their mistakes in having ignored Emperor Tewodros's requests, Britain wanted to maintain a positive relationship with Emperor Yohannes II, particularly because he had cooperated during the 1868 expedition. They therefore agreed to ask the British Museum to return the requested manuscript (the *Kebra Nagast*). The British Museum had two copies of the same manuscript and selected one to be returned to Ethiopia – however, it should be noted that the one they agreed to return was the one that they considered to be the inferior copy (Pankhurst 1999). Richard Holmes had retained the requested icon for his personal collection, which wouldn't become apparent for another couple of decades, so Queen Victoria informed Emperor Yohannes that they couldn't locate its whereabouts and didn't believe it had been brought to Britain (Pankhurst 1999a). This exchange predated the widespread colonization of the African continent by the European Empires and demonstrated that Britain was willing to return certain individual objects, especially when they had some leeway to select those that they considered to be of lesser quality than the objects they retained, as token gestures of their relationship with Ethiopia. This dynamic was reinforced when, in 1924, Emperor Haile Selassie made a state visit to England with his wife Empress Zawditu. During the visit, the British government felt that they needed to honor the Empress in some way, so they offered her one of the two crowns of Tewodros in their possession (Pankhurst 1999b). They presented her with the silver gilt crown, which they had determined was significantly less valuable than the gold crown, which is today featured in a special commemorative display about the Maqdala Expedition at the Victoria and Albert Museum. In another example of limited restitution, Queen Elizabeth II presented Emperor Haile Selassie with Tewodros's cap and imperial seal as a token of respect during a state visit in 1965. While these moments mark important milestones in the history of the restitution debates about the artifacts from Maqdala, they were primarily about securing objects that legitimized the power of the Emperor or making symbolic gestures to consolidate diplomatic relationships rather than about systematically reclaiming heritage.

The establishment of Ethiopia's National Heritage Restitution Committee marks a significant shift in the country's approach to cultural heritage and represents a divergence from the policies of previous governments. Formed in 2020, this committee aims to systematically address the restitution of artifacts and

cultural heritage items taken from Ethiopia during periods of foreign aggression, particularly the Italian occupation and the Maqdala Expedition in 1868. This development highlights a break from the approaches of earlier regimes, which often prioritized consolidating internal power over engaging with international cultural diplomacy. During Emperor Haile Selassie's reign, for example, efforts to recover artifacts from Europe were framed primarily in terms of achieving imperial prestige rather than as part of a broader cultural restitution agenda (Zewdu 2023). The Marxist Derg regime that rose to power in 1974, following the revolution that overthrew Emperor Selassie, focused on political restructuring and economic stability, leaving little room for pursuing restitution claims. In contrast, the establishment of the current restitution committee signals an acknowledgment of the growing global importance of cultural restitution in international political agendas and a desire to leverage this momentum to enhance Ethiopia's diplomatic profile. The committee's formation reflects Ethiopia's recognition of the strategic value of cultural heritage in international development and diplomacy. Unlike earlier, more sporadic efforts that focused on reclaiming specific culturally significant artifacts, the committee reflects a more organized, large-scale, and strategic approach to restitution, exemplifying Ethiopia's determination to solidify its cultural legacy and improve its international diplomatic standing, as well as the recognition of the value of such debates for promoting historical narratives that support state initiatives. As debates about restitution gain traction globally, Ethiopia has sought to position itself as a leader in this discourse, using its historical narrative to uphold the perception of Ethiopia as the custodian of a unique African heritage and history. The push for the return of particular collections, such as the tabots of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, is a reflection of what heritage the state sees as valuable for its own political goals, but also strengthens Ethiopia's influence in broader discussions about reparations, cultural equity, and the legacies of imperialism. These actions reframe Ethiopia not merely as a claimant in restitution debates but as an active participant in shaping their trajectory. The establishment of the restitution committee can be seen as part of Ethiopia's attempt to reclaim a leadership role in both regional African and global affairs, while supporting national development initiatives. By capitalizing on the momentum of cultural restitution debates, Ethiopia strengthens its ties with other African nations similarly engaged in restitution claims and, by elevating the status of the Maqdala

Collection within these debates, it strives to leverage historical narratives to position itself as a driving force of progress. In doing so, Ethiopia hopes not only to reaffirm its own historical, cultural, and political significance but also to reinforce its position as a powerful spokesman for African sovereignty, justice, and cultural self-determination, which is closely linked to the state's political and economic ambitions to achieve middle-income status (Aberg and Becker 2019). The role of performing cultural restitution in modern statecraft reflects Ethiopia's evolving strategy to navigate the complex interplay of historical narratives, national identity, restitution, and development in the 21st century.

The Ethiopian government's more structured and organized effort to recover the Maqdala collection is embedded in both international and national dynamics. Internationally, the global prominence of cultural restitution debates provides Ethiopia with an opportunity to assert its historical narrative and cultural sovereignty. Domestically, however, these efforts resonate particularly strongly with the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian community, which holds deep pride in its cultural and religious heritage. This community has historically seen its traditions privileged in state-sponsored narratives of Ethiopian identity, positioning Orthodox Christianity as a central pillar of the nation's cultural and historical imagination. In the twenty-first century, as Ethiopia's Muslim population grows and becomes increasingly visible, Ethiopian Christians, who have long dominated cultural discourse, perceive (whether accurately or not) a potential challenge to their historical status and security (Finneran 2003). In this context, the Maqdala artifacts, many of which hold profound religious significance, take on deeper symbolic meaning as markers of Orthodox Christian identity and continuity. Their recovery is seen not only as a reclaiming of Ethiopia's cultural heritage but also as a reaffirmation of the historical primacy of Orthodox Christianity within the Ethiopian national narrative. The majority of the Maqdala artifacts that are the subject of Ethiopian cultural restitution claims are intimately tied to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, including spiritual manuscripts, sacred tabots (replicas of the Ark of the Covenant), and processional crosses, as well as items associated with the monarchy, which historically derived its legitimacy from its relationship to Christian mythology (as discussed above). This religious and royal provenance is crucial in understanding how the Maqdala Collection has been shaped into a prominent case of cultural restitution. This dynamic informs the

narrative constructed around the Maqdala restitution claims, which often frame these artifacts as symbols of Ethiopia's exceptional identity and historical sovereignty. By focusing on objects tied to the Orthodox Christian tradition and the Solomonic monarchy, the state reinforces a particular vision of Ethiopian heritage—one that privileges the historical dominance of Orthodox Christianity in the nation's cultural and political discourse. Furthermore, objects associated with the Ethiopian forces at Maqdala can be situated within Ethiopia's history of military development and resistance to colonialism, making them well-primed to become powerful symbols of Ethiopia's perceived exceptionalism. This approach aligns the restitution effort with the state's broader agenda, leveraging the Maqdala Collection to affirm and legitimize a specific narrative of Ethiopian identity, modernity, and heritage that resonates with its political aims.

2.3 AFROMET: Putting Maqdala on the Restitution Agenda

It would be impossible to talk about the process of transforming and recognizing Maqdala 1868 into a coherent case of cultural restitution without acknowledging the work of AFROMET, the Association for the Return of the Maqdala Ethiopian Treasures, in constructing and amplifying the narrative surrounding this collection. AFROMET was instrumental in placing the Maqdala artifacts at the forefront of global restitution debates. Established in 1999 in Addis Ababa with crucial support from well-known scholars and activists Richard and Rita Pankhurst, AFROMET's mission was, as its name suggests, specifically to recover the cultural and historical artifacts looted during the British punitive expedition to Maqdala in 1868. Though AFROMET is no longer active in its original form, its role in cultural restitution debates extended beyond lobbying for the physical return of these items; AFROMET's advocacy functioned in service of the critical task of creating narratives that frame these disparate and diverse objects as a cohesive collection with unified historical and cultural significance. This narrative construction is essential in the realm of cultural restitution, where the moral and political legitimacy of claims often depends on demonstrating the systemic, rather than incidental, nature of the looting and on making the cultural importance of the objects in question intelligible to wide audiences who do not necessarily belong to their communities of origin. Heritage professionals, historians, and other experts associated with AFROMET – as well as the

government officials who AFROMET brought into the conversation – have played a vital role in this process, mediating between the historical record, cultural meanings, and legal frameworks to build a compelling case for restitution. Here, I mean case not only in the legal sense but in the sense of an identifiable focal point for restitution debates. One of the central challenges in promoting restitution claims is that looted artifacts often become fragmented, scattered across multiple institutions and private collections. The artifacts taken from Maqdala are no exception; they are housed in museums, libraries, and private collections around the world, though many of them are concentrated in the UK. This dispersal can make it difficult to assert the unity of the collection or its cultural importance to the communities who initiate the demands for restitution, which is an essential component of strengthening these claims. That is, the cause of cultural restitution often becomes more compelling and more easily promoted when the narrative surrounding the collection as a whole is constructed in such a way that it supports the restitution of the collection regardless of the specificities of each individual artifact. AFROMET, formed of academics, politicians, church leadership, and heritage professionals, was an integral part of accomplishing this unification by constructing a narrative that links these artifacts into a coherent collection that should be restituted. The narrative they promoted emphasizes the dual significance of the Maqdala treasures: their religious importance to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and their political and symbolic value as part of the royal heritage of Emperor Tewodros II. By highlighting this duality, AFROMET framed the artifacts as essential components of Ethiopia's cultural identity and national history. This approach enabled AFROMET to advocate for restitution not as a piecemeal process concerning individual objects but as a unified claim for the return of a collection that embodies Ethiopia's sovereignty, spirituality, and cultural heritage.

The memorandum submitted by AFROMET in 2000 to the Culture, Media, and Sport Committee of the UK Parliament advocated for the restitution of cultural treasures looted by British forces during the Maqdala Expedition in 1868 and exemplifies the way that recognition of the Maqdala Collection as a case was achieved through the establishment and dissemination of historical narratives. AFROMET emphasized that the looting of Maqdala, including religious artifacts and royal items from the church of Madhane Alam,

was an act of both profound injustice and sacrilege. Their choice to additionally define the looting as an act of sacrilege here is important, as the concept of sacrilege is loaded with a distinct set of moral judgments and assumptions. This is an idea that we will return to in the third section of this thesis, as we will see how current restitution efforts have moved towards emphasizing this narrative over that of imperial injustice. The association asserted that these objects are an integral part of Ethiopia's cultural heritage and must be returned to their rightful owners, the Ethiopian people. They furthermore argued that the British government had previously recognized the value and legitimacy of restitution, as evidenced by the return of a few select items on some occasions, but insisted that such inconsistent actions are insufficient. Rather than requesting the restitution of specific objects or targeting particular cultural institutions, the organization called for a blanket policy of return for all of the Maqdala Collection regardless of any object's status in the UK at the time. In service of this goal, the memorandum outlined what it considered to be the relevant history of the looting that took place during the expedition, highlighting the British military's capture of the fortress, the plunder of valuable artifacts, and the subsequent auction of the loot. They described the collection of artifacts taken from Maqdala, which included over 350 manuscripts, religious icons, royal crowns, processional crosses, and altars, many of which remain in prominent British collections such as the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the British Library. AFROMET emphasized that it is an ongoing injustice that the people of Ethiopia have been permanently deprived of access to these cultural treasures, pointing out that many of the looted objects were of significant religious and historical value. Additionally, they noted the role of certain British authorities in facilitating the plunder, including the involvement of Sir Richard Holmes, who purchased several items on behalf of the British Museum. In fact, AFROMET dedicated an entire section of their statement to the role of Richard Holmes, making his presence a key component of the narrative of the expedition that justifies the restitution of the artifacts. The status of Richard Holmes within this narrative as it has continued to be disseminated by cultural restitution debates is discussed in detail in the fifth chapter of this thesis. AFROMET concluded by urging Parliament to acknowledge the historical injustice of the looting and recommend the full restitution of the Maqdala

treasures to Ethiopia as part of recognizing the broader principle that all nations have the right to recover cultural property taken under violent and coercive circumstances.

AFROMET's statement is a clear illustration of how the organization was influential in framing the looting of Ethiopia's cultural heritage as a case that fits squarely within the broader discourse of decolonization. In the decolonization framework, restitution is framed as a moral imperative, a form of taking accountability for the ongoing legacies of imperialism that continue to inflect social and political relationships. AFROMET positions the Maqdala collection not just as valuable artifacts, but as emblematic of Ethiopia's cultural sovereignty that was undermined by its encounter with Empire. This approach also creates a history of the Maqdala Collection that stands for more than a collection of isolated artifacts. The historical narrative of the Maqdala Expedition presented by AFROMET in order to demand restitution becomes a reference point for a much larger struggle where returning looted cultural objects is seen as a necessary gesture in the broader effort to decolonize cultural institutions and reverse the inequalities in cultural heritage that persist as a result of imperial-era practices. The association's emphasis on restitution as an issue of rights as well as reparations is compatible with the broader movements for decolonization, which demand that former imperial powers not only make amends for the injustices they committed by returning looted cultural property, but also acknowledge the wrongs of their imperial past – this element is intrinsically tied to issues surrounding the representation of that past. Deconstructing the narratives established by statements like those made by groups like AFROMET, who exert significant influence over the direction and nature of restitution claims, is crucial because it reveals how restitution debates are not simply about responding to objective histories but are actively involved in determining how histories are represented and how their significance is understood. When participants in these debates advocate for cultural restitution, they are not only seeking to address past injustices but are also shaping the historical memory and the political discourse around imperialism, decolonization, and cultural heritage. By examining these moments in the debates where ‘cases’ of restitution emerge from the representation of histories, we open up the possibility of exploring how these narratives are continually being renegotiated and contested.

AFROMET's work demonstrates how such organizations play a pivotal role in bringing historical injustices, such as the looting of Maqdala, into the public consciousness, fostering both awareness of the question of restitution and recognition of certain artifacts or collections as touchstone 'cases' within these debates. However, their power often hinges on the prominence of individual experts and professionals who champion these causes. These individuals determine which cases receive attention and resources, shaping public and institutional priorities. While this focus can powerfully amplify a case, it also risks making the validity or urgency of these claims appear contingent on the credibility or activism of specific figures. In the case of the Maqdala Expedition, the contributions of Richard and Rita Pankhurst have been instrumental, not only in the establishment of AFROMET but also in framing the looting as an enduring injustice. Their extensive writings and activism have brought global visibility to this case, increased the momentum for the restitution of the Maqdala Collection both within Ethiopia and abroad, and raised the Maqdala Expedition's scholarly profile; their work continues to be cited as foundational in nearly all publications on this event or collection (see Pankhurst 1973; Pankhurst 1982; Pankhurst 1985; Pankhurst 1999a; Pankhurst 1999b). But their influence also demonstrates how closely the momentum of such claims can be tied to the reputations and influence of particular individuals. The Pankhursts' advocacy has enabled the case of the Maqdala Collection to achieve a level of prominence, especially in the UK, that might not have been possible otherwise, particularly given the Maqdala artifacts' history of relatively limited visibility in British cultural institutions and the fact that the Maqdala Expedition was not a well-known historical event in British history outside of specific scholarly circles. While the Maqdala Expedition has often been represented in Ethiopian historiography (as will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter) as a significant event, the same has not always been true in the UK, where it is only recently and in tandem with the spread of cultural restitution debates that it has come to be more popularly recognized. The reputation of the Pankhursts as authoritative voices on Ethiopian history lent weight to AFROMET's claims, however, this dynamic also introduces certain concerns. When the momentum of a restitution claim becomes tied to the activism or scholarly prominence of specific individuals, it can create an impression that the significance of the claim is contingent upon their involvement rather than the intrinsic merit of the case. In the case of

Maqdala, the Pankhursts' involvement has undoubtedly brought visibility to the looted Ethiopian artifacts and framed their return as an issue of justice and respect for Ethiopian sovereignty. Nevertheless, the role of their scholarship and advocacy in creating this case highlights the broader structural challenge in restitution debates: the extent to which the prioritization of claims depends on the reputations and networks of particular experts rather than on consistent principles or frameworks for addressing cultural losses. While the Pankhursts' dedication has been invaluable, their prominence also illustrates how restitution movements can become personalized, raising questions about sustainability and inclusivity once such figures are no longer actively involved. Though AFROMET played a critical role in initiating the process of transforming the Maqdala Collection into a high-profile case of restitution, it is no longer an active organization. As will be explored in the third section of this thesis, their legacy is carried on in the work of other organizations who have taken up this cause. As one employee of the Ethiopian embassy in London described it to me, however, these issues are often dependent on individuals who are interested in pursuing restitution and who are willing to take on that role themselves; without this individual drive, the momentum can slow down significantly. As he put it, "there has to be a reason for someone to want to be associated with the headlines related to these debates." Thus, the recognition of cases is also tied up in the motivations of specific individuals to become spokesmen for the cause, a dynamic that will be explored in the final section of this thesis.

The AFROMET statement, which was presented by Richard and Rita Pankhurst, does not only summarize the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition that has become salient in restitution claims, but is emblematic of the way that such representations within cultural restitution debates actively construct and frame the historical narrative in line with the legal, moral, cultural, and historical arguments that underwrite restitution claims. AFROMET's ability to amplify restitution claims depended not only on constructing narratives around the Maqdala Collection but also on leveraging these narratives to generate public and institutional support. By framing the Maqdala artifacts as symbols of Ethiopia's historical sovereignty and spiritual identity, AFROMET invoked the broader discourses of decolonization and cultural restitution that resonate with international audiences. This framing has been particularly effective in generating media

coverage and public interest, which in turn places pressure on institutions to reconsider their holdings. Jacques Schumacher (2022) has demonstrated how AFROMET's coordinated advocacy contributed directly to reigniting debates about the status of the Maqdala objects within the Victoria and Albert Museum, which began with a 2004 letter that they authored to Tony Blair urging the government to return the objects held by the V&A (on the grounds that they were technically property of the Treasury rather than the museum) and culminated in the museum's shift in representing these artifacts through the lens of their history as loot (which is discussed in the fourth chapter). Collaborations with Ethiopian officials and international heritage organizations further amplify and entrench the campaign for the collective restitution of the Maqdala artifacts that was initiated by AFROMET. The Ethiopian government's establishment of a National Heritage Restitution Committee, as referenced above, reflects the institutionalization of these claims and their compatibility with national development goals; notably, Richard and Rita Pankhurst's son Alula Pankhurst, who is a well-regarded social anthropologist and scholar of Ethiopia, continues their work as a member of the National Heritage Restitution Committee and an advocate for restitution. Here, we see how AFROMET's advocacy for the return of the Maqdala Collection illustrates the critical role of narrative construction in restitution claims. Through the efforts of experts, heritage professionals, and committed advocates, the association succeeded in framing the Maqdala artifacts as a unified collection of profound cultural and historical importance with a violent history of imperial plunder, which continues to shape its significance within cultural restitution debates today. This framing not only strengthens Ethiopia's claims but also positions them as part of the broader global debates about decolonization, restitution, and the legacies of imperial injustices, which contributes to its ongoing relevance and salience. As cultural restitution debates continue to evolve, AFROMET's work provides an important starting point for exploring how these debates not only respond to histories, but actively intervene in the construction of historical narratives that support their goals and create the 'cases' of restitution that become paradigmatic examples of these issues.

PART TWO: REMEMBERING MAQDALA

Chapter 3: (Re)Constructing the Maqdala 1868 Expedition

3.1 Abyssinia at the Intersection of Imperialism and Diplomacy

In order to explore the ways that restitution debates have contributed to the construction of historical narratives of the Maqdala Expedition, and how these narratives are being remembered today, it is necessary to first unravel some of the key social and political dynamics that influenced the Maqdala Expedition and that continue to be salient in the narratives that are disseminated through restitution debates. The aim of this section is not to reveal a 'true history of Maqdala 1868,' nor is it to explain 'what really happened.' Rather, it is to show that from its inception the Maqdala Expedition has been represented by a variety of narratives that were constructed in relation to specific social and political contexts. While 'Maqdala 1868' as a reference point is currently situated within ongoing debates about the legacies of imperialism in European heritage institutions, decolonization, and the repatriation of objects to their countries of origin, even simply describing the collection of Maqdala artifacts as 'colonial loot' is burdened with assumptions that obscure other understandings of Maqdala's history. Thus, one of the challenges of exploring the meaning of Maqdala 1868 is reconciling its incorporation into a postcolonial or decolonial restitution agenda with respect for the potential erasure or silencing that those categories and labels may cause when they conflict with localized historiographies. As discussed in earlier sections, pride in having not been colonized, and, particularly, in having successfully thwarted an attempt at colonization, is a pervasive theme in Ethiopian historiography and has had a profound impact on the development of Ethiopian national identity. When I spoke to one Ethiopian politician about the current representations of the Maqdala history, he repeatedly emphasized that "Ethiopia was independent before the Maqdala items were taken and it remained independent after they were taken." He was the first of numerous participants throughout my research to invoke this idea – for all of them, it was important that a distinction be made between Ethiopia's sympathy for the aims of decolonization and its status as an uncolonized country. That

is, they were careful to avoid conflations of their solidarity with the suggestion that their own country needed to be decolonized. Yet most participants nevertheless agreed that the Maqdala Expedition bears the hallmarks of other colonial incidents and can be viewed in connection with later expeditions that did ultimately result in colonial rule in other parts of the African continent. As the Maqdala Expedition was undoubtedly an event in which the society and trajectory of Ethiopia were significantly impacted by the forces of imperialism, it is necessary to use an approach to this history that makes space for both the fact that this event took place within the context of the British Empire and the acknowledgment that uncritically labeling it 'colonial' is not necessarily compatible with how it is viewed by the Ethiopian community due to the connotations and assumptions that accompany that description.

For this reason, the framework that I find most effective for conceptualizing Maqdala's relationship to imperial power is Sarah Longair's (2018) discussion of the 'colonial moment' in object biographies. She defines this moment in the lives of objects as the 'period when an object's trajectory is influenced by the forces of imperialism,' (p.132) which allows for a broader scope of understanding the ways that the significance and consequences of an event can be impacted by the involvement of imperial power even when its ambitions are not obviously or explicitly colonial in nature. This room for nuance is important in discussions of the Maqdala Expedition because this period of British and Ethiopian history epitomizes this complexity wherein Ethiopia, a country that was occupied but never fully colonized, nevertheless experienced European imperialism in the form of a large military expedition organized by and for the British Empire. Subsequently, as will be discussed in greater detail later, many of the objects that were taken from Ethiopia and brought back to the United Kingdom as a result of this expedition were assimilated into a system of collection and display that, as described by Annie Coombes (1994) in her work on African material culture in museums, functioned to constitute racial and cultural difference. It was unavoidable that their representation in such a context would be affected by their association with other objects taken from around the world in the name of Empire. However, their role within this system was never straightforward because even within England there was a lack of consensus about the value and purpose of the Maqdala Expedition, and this was reflected in the uncertain reception of the Maqdala Collection in the country. This

section will demonstrate how imperialist desires and attitudes influenced the British Government's decision to launch the expedition, how the expedition was situated within the global context of the British Empire, and how its consequences produced broader patterns of imperial harm and exploitation. In doing so, I will show how conceptualizing Maqdala 1868 as a colonial moment provides a useful lens through which to consider how the Maqdala Collection in the UK has come to be situated within debates about decolonization and postcolonial restitution while still acknowledging its disputed relationship to those categories.

Describing Maqdala as a colonial moment is also consistent with the work of Helen Mears and Wayne Modest (2012), whose research on the history of African collections in UK museums emphasizes the need to recognize that these collections of material culture were not formed 'spontaneously or independently' but rather were a result of the 'significant social, political, cultural, and economic changes that were brought to the continent by the experience of colonialism' (p.301). To have been affected by colonialism, a society need not have necessarily been subject to a period of colonial rule – it can also experience colonialism through encounters with imperial power, as happened in the case of the Maqdala Expedition. Even as the so-called 'Maqdala Collection' (referring to all the texts and objects that were removed from Ethiopia as a consequence of the expedition) comes from a country that was never colonized, the histories of these objects and the representations of Maqdala have nevertheless been affected by the imperial connotations that have surrounded them since the expedition. Despite the expedition not being a precursor to colonization, an examination of the period leading up to the decision of the British Government to take military action demonstrates how the motivations of both those in favor of and those in opposition to this approach were closely related to the workings of the British Empire. After word spread throughout the public in London that Emperor Tewodros had taken the British consul Duncan Cameron hostage in 1864, how to respond to the hostage crisis became a focal point of British politics. Taking a British diplomat hostage was seen as a flagrant violation of international law, as well as an insult to England's national honor. However, the British Government did not immediately jump to the conclusion that violent measures were desirable or necessary – it was only after three years of failed diplomatic efforts, which included sending Hormuzd Rassam as an envoy to negotiate with the Emperor, that planning for a military expedition

began to even be considered. Yet much of the literature on the origins of the Maqdala Collection emphasizes the violent circumstances in which the artifacts were looted, and the links between Maqdala and other incidents of punitive expeditions (see Hicks 2020), while focusing less on the period of uncertainty and contestation that determined the British Government's approach and its responses to the aftermath. It is throughout these years of debate about the purpose and value of the Maqdala Expedition that we can see the ways that Maqdala was eventually molded into an exercise in imperial violence – an outcome that, at the time, certainly would not have been seen as inevitable in the way that the current narrative sometimes implies. As will be discussed further in chapters about the representation of the Maqdala Expedition in British cultural institutions today, an increasingly standardized narrative often represents 'Maqdala' as a singular event (or discrete series of events) in terms of provocation (the hostage situation) and response (the large-scale punitive expedition). Within the framework of restitution debates, the looting of the artifacts from Maqdala is represented mainly in terms of imperial violence largely because the nature of this response strongly resembles similar cases of the deployment of the British Empire's military resources against a sovereign foreign ruler that resulted in the theft of large numbers of cultural artifacts (see Gunning and Challis 2023). While it is of course understandable that advocates of restitution would focus on highlighting the thematic connections between Maqdala 1868 and, for example, Benin 1897, it is of equal importance to explore the points of divergence between such cases. In these, we find the opportunity to add nuance and complexity to our understanding of Maqdala's, and, indeed, Ethiopia's, relationship to the British Empire's imperial power, as well as to consider how the narratives of Maqdala that are represented in restitution debates today have been influenced by the imperative to emphasize its coloniality.

The case of the Benin Bronzes, looted during a punitive expedition to the Kingdom of Benin in 1897, has in recent years achieved a level of global visibility and momentum that has enabled this collection to become not just a focal point of restitution debates, but a powerful precedent for how collections with similar histories are examined and represented (see Stahn 2022; Eiser 2024). The narratives of imperial violence and cultural dispossession surrounding the Benin Bronzes have thus established a template for how other restitution cases are understood and addressed, making it necessary to identify the key points

that are relevant to the construction of the 'Maqdala 1868' case. In his analysis of the Benin 1897 expedition and the subsequent restitution debates surrounding the 'Benin Bronzes,' Dan Hicks (2020) describes the punitive expedition against the Oba of Benin as being something anticipated by the British Government years before the event that precipitated the expedition, the attack on James Robert Philips's unauthorized mission, occurred. Communications and statements by imperial administrators such as Sir Claude MacDonald and Major Henry Galway, both involved in the administration of the Niger Coast Protectorate, indicated that they envisioned that the use of force against the Kingdom of Benin could prove advisable should the Oba of Benin continue to prove an adversary to British economic interests in the region (Hicks, 2020, pp.68-69). In these same statements, the British consuls also alluded numerous times to the 'fetish customs' of the Kingdom, which they perceived as barbaric and inferior practices embedded in the native culture that served as significant obstacles to the ability of Britain to profit off Benin's rich natural resources (MacDonald 1892; Galway 1893). This attitude reflected both the frustration that the British were experiencing in the face of barriers to their economic aims as well as the lack of respect for the culture and sovereignty of the Kingdom that further enflamed this frustration. Given the escalating tension between the British, eager to disrupt the Oba's monopoly on trade, and the Oba, who continued to resist their attempts to establish further control, it is unsurprising that drastic measures were being seriously considered well before an incident provided a convenient justification for violent, punitive action.

The premeditated nature of the attack on the Kingdom of Benin was evident when such an event did eventually take place with the assault on the Philips mission, which occurred in early January of 1897. There were only eight days between the attack and Admiral Henry Rawlson being appointed to lead the Benin Punitive Expedition, which was charged with invading Benin City, destroying the capital and capturing the Oba (Bosraigon 1897). Given the amount of time it would have taken for word to reach England of the attack, this essentially constitutes an immediate, decisive response. One of the survivors of the Philips mission, Captain Alan Bosraigon, who subsequently wrote a book detailing the mission, attack, and punitive expedition, was himself impressed by the speed with which the British Government acted to organize and implement the punitive expedition. Of the fact that it only took five weeks from the initial

telegrams informing the government of what had happened to the Philips mission to the invasion of Benin City, he wrote that it was 'marvellously smart work, especially when one considers the distances most of the expedition had to come, the extraordinary arrangements that had to be made for it in the shape of carriers from all parts of West Africa […], and last, but not least, the nature of the country through which they had to fight their way' (Bosraigon 1897, pp.167-168). Evidently, there was virtually no hesitancy on the part of the British Government to launch a violent military expedition against the Kingdom of Benin, which supports the idea that the attack on Benin's sovereignty was predetermined, or at least prepared for, well before the purported catalyst. To be clear, this is not to say that retaliating to the attack on the Philips mission was merely a pretense for undertaking a destructive military expedition, designed to distract from the British Government's intention to do so regardless of overt provocation, as is suggested by the account in *The Brutish Museums* (Hicks, 2020, pp.55-56). As Staffan Lundén (2024) points out, it is important to not misrepresent the fact that the British Government had indeed drafted plans for a military assault on the Kingdom of Benin as evidence that the 1897 expedition was in the works before the incident with the Philips mission (p.204). Rather, to acknowledge the premeditated nature of the military expedition and the eagerness with which it was undertaken is to call attention to the underlying logics of colonial expansion and conquest that drove the British Government's approach to the Kingdom of Benin – the existing desire to dismantle Benin's sovereignty and to establish colonial control in its place enabled the expedition's almost immediate dispatch. It is in this sense that we can understand the 1897 expedition as being situated within a wider process of colonial conquest that had begun long before Philips mission was even conceived. As I will discuss below, this understanding becomes relevant when the Benin Expedition is used as a template to analyze or define the Maqdala Expedition three decades earlier, where the series of events can appear superficially similar despite significant contextual differences.

This seamless jump into action in the case of the Benin Punitive Expedition stands in stark contrast to the three years of debates and public media campaigns that occurred before it was eventually decided to dispatch a military expedition to Maqdala to deal with the so-called 'Abyssinian difficulty' (the hostage situation), as it was termed by the leader of the Conservatives, Benjamin Disraeli. Far from being the

obvious and undisputed course of action, whether or not to take a militaristic approach was a hotly debated issue both within politics and in the public sphere. This contestation can be attributed in part to a general lack of confidence in the British Government's readiness and capabilities to conduct such a large operation in relatively unfamiliar territory, stemming from recent embarrassing incidents that were still prevalent in public memory. These included the Crimean War of 1854-1856, during which the British military had made quite a negative impression on the public, and the failed intervention of the French into the affairs of Mexico between 1864 and 1867 (Matthies 2012). Given the poor organization of the British army and the lack of provision of adequate care to the troops throughout the Crimean War, there was concern that the British would suffer a humiliating defeat such as that experienced by the French in Mexico (Bates 1979). There was also, of course, the matter of the financial cost that such an expedition would incur, which was estimated to be millions of pounds of taxpayer money – indeed, the expedition did ultimately cost £9,000,000 which was more than four times the £2,000,000 that was originally proposed by Colonel William Merewether (Muller and Pankhurst 2007). Arguments referencing these concerns, the welfare of the British soldiers, and the expense of an expedition proliferated in the contemporary press alongside reports on the government's actions and sensational publications regarding the condition of the hostages. Many newspapers published letters written by the hostages to their families, which added an emotional and dramatic element to the unfolding narrative. This extensive press coverage ignited a lively debate in the public sphere, as members of the British public frequently contributed their opinions to the correspondence columns of newspapers in response to the latest news and developments – expressing a wide variety of arguments both in favor of and against a military expedition, as well as suggestions for the British Government as to how to better handle the issue diplomatically (Bates 1979). Despite the outrage and indignance that was provoked by the thought of British officials being held hostage by an African ruler, many British citizens also attributed blame for the whole debacle to the British Government for their mishandling of the Emperor's letter to the Queen.

Within this context, the British Government was facing pressure from multiple sources to act in a way that would not make them look weak and incompetent both at home and abroad – something they

risked whether or not they decided to undertake a military expedition. In order to justify such an approach to a skeptical public, a public that would be incurring an increase in taxes to provide the funding and who had become strongly invested in the outcome over the course of these three years, required a careful and deliberate re-shaping of public opinion. This became the self-appointed role of Colonel William Merewether, who served as a diplomat in Aden and was an important voice advocating the use of military force to free the hostages. Colonel Merewether, in an effort to sway the public, embarked on a media campaign in the same periodicals where people were sending in their opinions on the matter. Specifically, he wrote and published multiple articles that explicitly linked the situation in Abyssinia to the security of British rule in India, reigniting fears that had been seeded by the Great Rebellion (also known as the Sepoy Rebellion) of 1857, the largest, most threatening anticolonial uprising against a European Empire that occurred in the 19th century. According to Henry Morton Stanley (1874), Colonel Merewether warned that, were the British perceived as being placating and indulgent in their response to Emperor Tewodros, it could lead to another rebellion in India, the heart of the British Empire at this time. Suggesting that the situation in Abyssinia could have a spillover effect that would risk destabilizing Britain's control had a powerful impact on a public for whom the memory of the rebellion was still very present. But, while British officials like Merewether with connections to the East India Company were sowing fear of further unrest in India, they were also communicating a high level of confidence in Britain's ability to execute a successful military approach. As Captain Henry Hozier (1869), who authored an official report on the Maqdala Expedition, wrote of England's potential for success:

> Men in India, confident in the power shown in the suppression of the great mutiny, thought otherwise. Accustomed to treat princes of the more civilized East with a high and restive, who so much as lifted a voice against the English name, they writhed beneath the insult which a British envoy had received at the hands of an African savage. They loudly spoke out their opinions. These were carried home and acted as a stimulus on the minority of public opinion, which did not yet despair of the prowess of the country. The tiny band, which had always advocated the rescue of the captives by force, gained in numbers and brought its weight to bear upon the Government (pp.46-48).

In this way, the interests and attitudes of the administration of British colonial India played a key role in shaping the political-strategic approach to Emperor Tewodros and Abyssinia. While this

approach ultimately prevailed, it was in large part because it was sold as a necessity for maintaining and strengthening the Empire's position in India, including because Ethiopia was positioned on the politically strategic route to South Asia along the Red Sea. What these dynamics show is that the Maqdala Expedition was very much entangled within the forces and structure of the British Empire, though it was not conceived at the time as a vehicle for extending colonial power in the Horn of Africa.

3.2 Loot and Plunder

On the surface, the chain of events that led to the Maqdala Expedition of 1868 and those that led to the Benin Punitive Expedition of 1897 look quite similar and it is easy to see how they can be interpreted to show a pattern of British imperial behavior. In each situation, a perceived hostility against the British instigated by a sovereign African ruler was used as justification for a large-scale military operation that resulted in the destruction of a seat of power and the deposition of the targeted ruler. Both expeditions also cited humanitarian concerns to provide additional moral grounds for the invasion – the plight of the hostages in the case of Maqdala, and the practices of human sacrifice and slavery in the case of Benin. Furthermore, as Richard Pankhurst (2011) has pointed out, if the Maqdala Expedition has sometimes been singled out as unusual for the fact that it was not a precursor to colonization, it certainly was not unusual in that it involved the looting of cultural artifacts. In this regard, Maqdala followed in the footsteps of other military operations, such as the British-French attack on the Summer Palace in Beijing in 1860, and helped lay the foundation for later ones such as the expedition to Benin and Sudan in the 1890s.

Several years after the 1868 expedition, objects looted from Maqdala were first presented in a display of ‘trophies’ at the South Kensington Museum which, as Tim Barringer (2012) notes, ‘made no contribution to the museum’s original mission in relation to design and social reform but rather offered the Victorian public the spectacle of the remains of a defeated enemy whose perceived status as a racial and cultural inferior was implicit in the mode of display’ (p.21). This is consistent with the treatment of imperial

loot during this period, however, one of the complicating factors in the comparison between Maqdala and Benin has to do with the initial reception of the objects in the UK, particularly in British cultural institutions. As Dan Hicks (2020) has described in detail, there was a swift and enthusiastic jump to exhibit the looted Benin treasures upon their arrival in England, with displays appearing as soon as six months after the expedition at numerous sites, including the British Museum and the Royal Geographical Society (p.146). There was virtually no disagreement about the status of these materials, and institutions were eager to triumphantly present them as trophies of a defeated adversary – the British Museum even petitioned the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to have over two hundred Benin Bronzes donated to them so that they could be put on permanent display, such was their eagerness to have a role in solidifying the triumphalist narrative of Benin 1897.

As will be discussed in the fifth chapter of this thesis, much has been made of the British Museum sending a representative to participate in the Maqdala Expedition, which would suggest that they had a definitive interest in acquiring and exhibiting a significant selection of artifacts brought back from the expedition. However, communications between the Treasury, the museum's trustees, and the representative of the Army Prize Fund for the Abyssinian Expedition told a different story. Richard Holmes, who accompanied the expedition on behalf of the British Museum, had been generally empowered to secure objects of interest to the museum throughout the expedition and endowed with funds for this purpose. Among the collection of things that had been purchased at the auction or reserved for the British Museum were the golden crown and chalice of the Abuna, which were deposited in the museum upon the return of the expedition, but which evidently had not yet been paid for by Richard Holmes or officially donated. Consequently, the representative for the Army Prize Fund, Lieutenant-Colonel Milward (1868), wrote to the Principal Librarian of the British Museum claiming that the crown and chalice technically still belonged to the Army Prize Fund for the Abyssinian Expedition and requesting a payment of £2,000 to be added to the pool of funds. Rather than agree to this request, and thus acquire the crown and chalice for the museum's collection, the Principal Librarian responded that, while the Trustees had applied to the Treasury for the funding to complete the purchase, the Treasury had declined the request (Principal Librarian, March 1870).

As the Trustees of the British Museum are unable to make purchases without the sanction of the Treasury, the Principal Librarian therefore informed Colonel Milward that the museum would not be purchasing the crown and chalice after all and asked where the Army Prize Fund would like them delivered (Principal Librarian, June 1870). Far from being the end of the matter, this exchange ignited a heated debate about the British Museum's responsibilities regarding these objects and their future in England that made it all the way to the House of Commons.

Colonel Milward was shocked and frustrated with the British Museum's response, having been under the impression that, even in the absence of a formal agreement, there had been an understanding that the museum would be purchasing the crown and chalice for the requested sum. When the Under Secretary of State for War, Edward Lugard, declined to interfere with the decision of the British Museum, Colonel Milward wrote to him to further press the case that it would be unjust to deprive the Army Prize Fund of the contribution they had been expecting from the British Museum. He argued that, while admitting 'that nothing contained in the letters which passed amounts to a direct agreement to purchase, such as could be maintained in a court of law, there still exists as between Her Majesty's troops and a public department a virtual agreement, which the former have every right to expect to be fulfilled' (Milward 1870). He was also deeply frustrated by the fact that the British Museum had held onto the artifacts for several years if they hadn't intended to purchase them, as he wrote that the delay in receiving a definitive answer in this matter 'had the natural effect of lessening the interest in trophies from Abyssinia' and that other potential avenues of sale were now closed (Milward 1870). Apparently, while the Abyssinian Expedition of 1867 had ultimately been viewed as a military, if perhaps not financial, success in England, enthusiasm for souvenirs of the expedition and interest within cultural institutions for acquiring Abyssinian artifacts had dwindled in the years since its completion. This is not to say that the British Museum had never expressed any interest in purchasing the crown and chalice – the trustees had, as mentioned above, previously written to the Treasury requesting that they approve a special grant in order to facilitate the purchase, as the trustees had no more funds at their disposal from what had already been allocated for the Abyssinian Expedition. What may be surprising to anyone familiar with the British Museum's current firm stance on retaining all the

objects they hold from Maqdala is this equivalent firmness expressed by the museum's administration in 1870 that they refused to be pressured into acquiring two of the collection's most highly-valued pieces, or to accept any responsibility for them at all. As will be discussed in the fifth chapter, the British Museum's waning enthusiasm for Maqdala-related objects perhaps reflected their overall disappointment, and dissatisfaction, with the nature of the objects that had been acquired by their representative throughout the expedition, having set their hopes high that the Abyssinian Expedition would yield ancient biblical artifacts. Regardless of their reasoning for refusing to further push for the acquisition of the crown and chalice, their decision to do so ignited the first major debate within the House of Commons about the museum's, and, indeed, the nation's, relationship to the objects looted and plundered during the expedition to Maqdala.

Having ultimately been forced to accept that neither the trustees of the British Museum nor the Treasury could be compelled by the Army Prize Fund to pay for the crown and the chalice, Colonel Milward proceeded to seek alternative political channels through which to accomplish his aim of raising the £2,000. He found an ally in Colonel John North, a Member of Parliament for Oxfordshire who raised a motion in the House of Commons to encourage the Government to purchase the crown and the chalice on behalf of the nation, after which they could be deposited in the British Museum. Colonel North lauded the success of the Abyssinian Expedition, describing it as an event that "no Englishman could look back to without feelings of interest and admiration" and emphasizing in particular that many across Europe had been impressed when "they should have retired from that country after having accomplished the objects of the war in a manner that showed that they were actuated by motives entirely devoid of ambition" (House of Commons Debate, 1871). He therefore agreed with Colonel Milward that the refusal of the British Museum and the Treasury to authorize the purchase of the crown and chalice was a snub to the soldiers, and that it was not only an issue of honoring an agreement, but a matter of justice to ensure that the prize fund was not left without the £2,000 it had expected to receive for these items. Colonel North's motion was seconded by Sir John Hay, who further elaborated on the argument in favor of purchasing the crown and chalice from the Army Prize Fund by pointing out that the Government was already in the process of 'discussing how many millions ought to be given to the officers of the Army' and that it was strange that such a small amount

by comparison should become subject of such a large dispute (House of Commons Debate, 1871). Though both members of parliament praised the success of the expedition, neither really put forward an argument based on any value or quality of the crown or chalice themselves – that is, they did not champion the purchase of the artifacts on the grounds of their status as trophies of the expedition or on the grounds of their cultural value to the Kingdom of Abyssinia. The closest that either of them came to acknowledging the importance of the objects themselves rather than just the importance of contributing to the Army Prize Fund was when Colonel North referenced Lord Napier's statement regarding the crown and chalice made on the 27th of August 1868. Colonel North referred to Lord Napier's position which attributed 'political importance to the possession of that Crown' and suggested that:

> the best way of treating the crown and chalice would be for the State to purchase them and deposit them in the British Museum until an opportunity offered for restoring them; and that opportunity would arrive when a Government was established in Abyssinia with some prospect of stability. Their selection of the party to whom they should give the crown and chalice would be an indication that they regarded them as the rightful rulers of the Empire (House of Commons Debate, 1871).

From his motion in favor of purchasing the crown and chalice in order to support the Army Prize Fund, Colonel North clearly interpreted Lord Napier's statement to mean that the Government would facilitate the purchase of these objects in order to make a contribution to the Army Prize Fund and that, having done so, they would be temporarily housed in the British Museum until such a time as the Government decided to make alternative arrangements. Thus, he was essentially expecting that, like at the original auction, the purchase of the crown and chalice would serve as a donation, and he wasn't particularly concerned with where that donation came from, or where the objects went after it was made, as long as it was received.

This motion brought to the fore the ambiguity that surrounded the Maqdala Collection and raised questions about what to do with the remaining artifacts that had not already been assimilated into public or private collections. Despite being a voice in favor of purchasing the crown and chalice, Colonel North did not himself contribute to Lord Napier's assessment of the artifacts, and instead put forward an argument that was almost solely based on the potential breach of an unofficial contract between the British Museum and the Army Prize Fund. Even his characterization of the expedition as a success was primarily grounded in the idea that it demonstrated to other European countries that the British Empire could accomplish its

stated immediate aim without going on to pursue further imperial control. This was considered impressive because it lent an air of moral superiority to the expedition, suggesting that the British had not been driven by underlying motives to take advantage of the situation in Ethiopia but rather had been acting in honest response to the taking of British hostages. For Colonel Milward, this was important because it was yet another reason to commend the British troops and thus another reason why it would be disrespectful to deny them additional prize funds. However, the argument in favor of purchasing the crown and chalice on the grounds that, on the one hand, it was necessary to fulfill the implied commitment on the part of the British Museum, through their representative having set them aside and, on the other, to reward the British troops who should be commended for their conduct, was not entirely convincing to other members of Parliament.

Robert Lowe, the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time, was the first to voice opposition to the motion on several grounds, the first being that he objected in principle to the idea that Parliament would intervene to compel the Government to use funds set aside for the British Museum when the responsible parties had already declined the opportunity to use the money for this purpose. He viewed the pressure to follow through on this purchase as a misuse of authority and stated that the motion being considered was strange in nature because "a purchase was usually a free transaction, and not carried out at the dictation of a higher power" (House of Commons Debate, 1871). In other words, the Chancellor felt that it was inappropriate to consider overriding the decision of the Treasury, regardless of any desire to show appreciation for the British Army, as this was quite simply not the purpose of this money. Furthermore, he raised a second objection on the grounds that not only was it not the place of Parliament to enforce an unwritten agreement to purchase the crown and chalice, but that the crown and chalice, in his view, were not even worthy of special treatment in the first place. According to the Chancellor, neither the crown nor the chalice had enough value independent of their association with the Maqdala Expedition that would justify their being placed in the British Museum, and the expedition itself, while successful, was not so momentous so as to boost their value enough to change that (House of Commons Debate, 1871). In making this counterargument to Colonel Milward's and Colonel North's positions, the Chancellor was expressing a position that has often been lost in the more recent discourses: that the expedition, while successful in the

eyes of the British Government and those of other imperial powers at the time, was not necessarily considered significant enough for the artifacts taken to immediately be imbued with an additional layer of value for their connection to Maqdala. Later chapters based in the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum will explore the elevation of Maqdala to a higher level of significance, but for now it is important to note that, while initially a cause for self-congratulation on the part of the British Government and military, interest in the 'Abyssinian Expedition' dwindled faster than it took to build the initial enthusiasm for the operation. This was surely related to the fact that from the outset the British Government's goals in undertaking the expedition were relatively short-sighted: securing the release of the hostages and demonstrating to the international community that they were strong, reliable, and competent enough to carry out that task and move on. It was, in fact, only due to the financial dispute between the Army Prize Fund and the British Museum that the expedition was still being discussed in Parliament at all.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer implicitly reiterated this point in his comment, in response to Lord Napier's suggestion that the crown and chalice should be deposited in the British Museum until such a time as they could be gifted back to Ethiopia, that he "did not think that the British Museum was intended for a temporary storehouse for the reception of barbaric spoils of war, nor did he think it was right that public money, intended for a totally different purpose, should be applied in purchasing articles to be given away whenever a convenient opportunity should arise" (House of Commons Debate, 1871). In this remark, he simultaneously diminished the artistic and cultural value of crown and chalice while implying that they had not even gained historical value – meaning he could not envision a situation in which either the British Museum or the British Government stood to gain from their display in the museum. Not that he was advocating for their return to Ethiopia instead (his suggestion was simply to sell them on the open market and give whatever proceeds came of the sale to the Army Prize Fund), but his certainty that they had no place in the museum reflected a broader context of fleeting attention for events like the Maqdala Expedition, which captured people's interest when it was right in front of them in the newspapers, but was not immediately lauded as the stuff of legend to be memorialized in a museum. Ironically, this same point about diminished interest was one of the reasons that Colonel Milward was making his plea to Parliament, as he

recognized that the market was significantly less enthusiastic about objects from Maqdala than it had been shortly after the expedition. Though not everyone involved in this debate agreed with the Chancellor of the Exchequer that the crown and chalice held no value for the nation whatsoever, it is worth noting that in this first debate about the fate of the Maqdala collection, participants on both sides were in agreement that overall there was markedly less interest in the UK for objects connected to the Maqdala Expedition than there had been when the memory of the event was still fresh. Taken without context, this might not seem particularly notable as an event does not necessarily have to be considered monumental for its impact on material culture to be worth interrogating. The point here is not to diminish the significance of the Maqdala Expedition or to suggest that, because the crown and chalice weren't considered especially valuable at this time, the Maqdala Collection is not important enough to be such a focal point of restitution debates. Rather, the aim of highlighting the dynamics to which individuals like the Chancellor of the Exchequer alluded is to demonstrate that the political and social significance of the expedition was far from determined in the years following its completion. Thus, just as a narrative of Maqdala was initially created in the build-up to the campaign in order to promote certain agendas, the way that this narrative would come be represented in the UK continued to be revised and contested according to the different contexts in which it was situated. In other words, it was not only the value of the crown and chalice that were being debated here but also, by proxy, the value of the expedition itself. By understanding the narratives about the Maqdala artifacts that were emerging here, we gain crucial insight into the ways that these narratives have developed through the restitution debates about their status today.

The possibility for redefining the Maqdala Expedition moving forward was evident in the impassioned response to Colonel North's question that was made by the Prime Minister at the time, William Gladstone. The intervening responses between the Chancellor of the Exchequer's dismissal of the crown and chalice and the Prime Minister's statement were generally of the rather lukewarm position that the sum in question (£2,000) was too small to warrant such an extensive debate, so the Government might as well just provide the funds and move on as the matter was of little consequence. Far from simply agreeing that sanctioning the purchase was the best approach, the Prime Minister opened his remarks by emphatically

condemning that the crown and chalice had been taken from Ethiopia and brought to England (House of Commons). His straightforward denouncement that "he deeply regretted that those articles were ever brought from Abyssinia" and that he "could not conceive why they were so brought" because "they were never at war with the people or the churches of Abyssinia" is often cited as evidence in favor of the restitution of the Maqdala artifacts because it suggests that the characterization of the looting of Maqdala as unethical is not merely a product of moral hindsight or historical relativism (quoted in Gunning and Challis 2023b, who make this argument). As restitution debates have gained further momentum, Gladstone's statements have become an essential point of remembrance in the historical narrative of the expedition and the Maqdala Collection. They feature prominently, for example, in the displays at the Victoria and Albert Museum which will be discussed in the next chapter. It is worth considering, however, why Gladstone's remarks in particular have been singled out in the narratives that are used to remember the history of Maqdala and to acknowledge that the Prime Minister's response may have expressed more than just a familiar outrage over the violent acquisition of material heritage for the purpose of gleefully filling the galleries of national museums. Indeed, William Gladstone's position, accompanied by Lord Napier's suggestion that a selection of significant objects should eventually be returned to the sovereign ruler of Ethiopia, provides a powerful counterargument to the historical-relativistic claim that looting and plundering were universally accepted practices at the time and were not considered immoral until recently. But a close reading of his entire statement in the context discussed above also reveals that the way to narrativize and remember the Maqdala Expedition was far from clearly defined even in this period, so soon after the events had taken place. The British public was eager to celebrate a military victory given the recent difficulties discussed above and was certainly even more satisfied with the outcome given that their support had been tenuously won by a publicity campaign. But that fact alone, essentially the relief that such an expensive expedition had been, by British measures, a success, was not enough to finalize Maqdala's status in the history books just yet. It may have been seen as a positive outcome overall, but what that outcome signified and how it should be understood was still uncertain; as the Prime Minister made clear, this was still very much up for debate and negotiation.

The first argument against acquiring the crown and chalice, and also in favor of returning it, that was cited by Mr. Gladstone was indeed the fact that he "deeply lamented, for the sake of the country, and for the sake of all concerned, that those articles, to us insignificant, though probably to the Abyssinians sacred and imposing symbols, or at least hallowed by association, were thought fit to be brought away by the British Army (House of Commons Debate, 1871). This statement indicates quite clearly that he viewed the act of taking these artifacts as unethical, though he limits this judgment to the window of looting and plundering, and says nothing to suggest that anything else about the expedition itself was morally questionable. His next point, however, provides important insight into the role of Richard Holmes as the archaeologist accompanying the expedition on behalf of the British Museum. While much has been made of Mr. Holmes's participation in the expedition as evidence that the British Museum did not only passively benefit from the activities of Empire, but was an active participant in those activities, Mr. Gladstone's assessment portrayed him as someone who overstepped the bounds of his assigned task and implied that the claims being made were based on an assumption of authority that Mr. Holmes had not been granted. He suspected (perhaps generously, or perhaps correctly) that the description of Mr. Holmes as having "secured" the articles for the British Museum was merely an overstatement of what was likely just a suggestion that they be set aside for the Trustees consideration, as Mr. Holmes's task was "with respect to really ancient remains, and had nothing to do with uncertified unexamined articles" (House of Commons Debate, 1871). Here, he was referring to the fact that the British Museum's decision to send a representative was based on interest in Ethiopia as a place where ancient artifacts, particularly of biblical value, might be found; that Mr. Holmes ultimately was involved in the collection and acquisition of looted trophies was a secondary outcome of this goal rather than a primary motivation. In this account, the actions of Mr. Holmes insofar as they led to the circumstances in which this debate was being held are cause for critique rather than celebration – he is represented as a figure who did not arrive back in England triumphantly bearing the trophies of a job well-done, but who instead grasped at what he saw as the last opportunity to bring back objects of value on behalf of the British Museum and consequently put the Trustees and Parliament in the position of having to decide on the fate of objects whose value was still, apparently, up for debate. The

construction of the narrative around Richard Holmes in relation to his role throughout the Maqdala Expedition is explored later in this thesis in the context of the British Museum's representation of the Maqdala artifacts.

The ambivalent value of the objects in question was an issue that Mr. Gladstone referenced specifically in his remarks, noting that they were "uncertified, unexamined articles" whose provenance prior to being looted at Maqdala remained undetermined (House of Commons Debate, 1871). He criticized the fact that the Trustees hadn't been provided with any information that would indicate that the crown and chalice held sufficient historical and cultural value to warrant being accessioned into the collections of the British Museum, beyond, of course, their association with the Maqdala Expedition. Not only did Mr. Gladstone question whether the British Museum was intended to "accumulate records of the most remarkable events of the present time," and argue instead that it should exclusively acquire objects on the grounds that they "serve as sources of instruction, and tend to elevate the taste of the people" or are "of historic interest," but he also questioned the future status and value of the Maqdala Expedition that would justify the intent to purchase them on behalf of the British Museum (House of Commons Debate, 1871). That is, Mr. Gladstone disagreed with both the idea that the British Museum should acquire objects in order to form a material record of historic events and the assumption, inherent in the proposal that the crown and chalice should be purchased for this reason, that the Maqdala Expedition did in fact constitute an historic event in the first place. He stated that the claim of the Trustees that "they would constitute a permanent record of the event of the present time "was a "highly-coloured description when they considered what events had lately marked the 19th century," which effectively diminished the significance of the Maqdala Expedition (House of Commons Debate 1871). Given that by British imperial standards the expedition was largely considered a success – a strong show of force, swift defeat, and very little loss of life on the British side – it may come as a surprise to see that the Prime Minister would use the opportunity of this debate to oppose the acquisition of two looted artifacts, perfectly positioned to become trophies of the victory, and to suggest that the expedition was not as impressive as other events of the century (though he did not provide any counter-examples). Through his opposition to the purchase of the crown and the chalice for the British

Museum, Mr. Gladstone was able to use this debate about their restitution as a platform to challenge the narrative of the expedition as a whole. In doing so, he demonstrated that the perception of the value of the objects was now inextricably connected to the perception of the value from the event that would later come to define their history. In other words, the meaning of the crown and the chalice was now in symbiosis with the meaning of the Maqdala Expedition, whereby any elevation or diminishment to one had the same effect on the other. Mr. Gladstone was taking this moment to use that to his advantage to make a political point. Yet these points have not often been included in the narratives of Maqdala within restitution debates, which are typically limited to his statements of regret.

Mr. Gladstone may have believed that objects like the crown and chalice shouldn't have been looted from Maqdala and brought to the United Kingdom on ethical grounds, but there are also political dynamics that illuminate why he could have been motivated to cast the Maqdala Expedition in a negative light through his comments in this debate. As discussed previously, the decision to dispatch a military expedition to Abyssinia to address the problem of the hostage situation was not one that was taken rapidly, decisively, or without controversy. In hindsight, after the expedition had proven itself successful on the part of the British, it was easy to romanticize the story as a thrilling adventure across foreign lands to rescue hostages from a hostile and unstable ruler. The British public was quickly caught up in the excitement of the demonstrations of success, eagerly attending musical performances inspired by the event and cheering at celebrations for figures connected to it like the soon-to-be Lord Napier. Andrew Heavens (2023) notes that references to the expedition to Maqdala received overwhelmingly positive responses at political events and rallies, which were being held in anticipation of the upcoming general elections of 1868 in which the Liberals, headed by William Gladstone, gained 18 seats over Benjamin Disraeli's Conservatives. Throughout the planning and execution of the Maqdala Expedition, Gladstone, as a Liberal, and Disraeli, as a Conservative, had been at odds about how to approach the situation; furthermore, because the events and debates that preceded the ultimate decision to undertake the expedition spanned several years, they also spanned several different Governments.

While the majority of the negotiations in the years following the hostage-taking were handled under a Liberal Government, headed by Henry Temple and his successor Lord John Russell, in 1866 a Conservative Government came into power under the leadership of the Earl of Derby, Edward Smith Stanley. As the conditions for the hostages deteriorated and diplomatic negotiations remained unpersuasive to the Emperor, the pressure on the Government to authorize the use of force had been stronger than ever. Nevertheless, it was still not until August of 1867, almost three full years since Emperor Tewodros had taken the hostages in 1864, that the decision to use force was made. This decision ushered in the planning phase of the expedition, during which much of the opposition that was expressed by the public and the media, as discussed above, took place. The Liberal Opposition, concerned that disagreeing with the decision to use force would draw further attention to the fact that it was a Liberal administration that had (mis)handled the affair until now, stayed relatively quiet while the Conservatives now found themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to source the funding for the expedition. Darrell Bates (1979) notes that Benjamin Disraeli, who was responsible for the funding as the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was one of the first politicians to recognize that the skilled workers and small homeowners who had been enfranchised by the Reform Act were generally in favor of imperial expansion, and could be swayed to support a military expedition if it was framed as a way to restore Britain's honor and dignity. Ultimately, Disraeli did manage to arrange for a penny increase in income tax, which, combined with the contribution of the India Office, would financially back the expedition. And it was actually during the course of the expedition, in February of 1868, while the troops were marching towards Maqdala, that Benjamin Disraeli would come to serve his first brief term as Prime Minister.

Disraeli's first term as Prime Minister, however, was short-lived as he would be replaced by William Gladstone in December of the same year. So, while it was under a Liberal Government that the majority of the negotiations over the hostage crisis took place, it was a Conservative Government that authorized the ultimate use of force in the form of a large-scale military expedition and under which this expedition successfully carried out its aims (at great financial cost, but not at the expense of British lives or resources that would be clearly visible to the public). And then it was now under a Liberal Government

again that the aftermath of the event continued to play out. While it might be argued that changes in party leadership during this period were more superficial than substantive when it came to policy (that is, both the Liberals and the Conservatives were, at the end of the day, happy to approve the use of force against Ethiopia even if they had different motivations for doing so), it should also be pointed out that matters of political personality are closely related to one's connection to historical events and their remembrance. That is, the framing of Maqdala as an enormous political, military, and imperial success could seamlessly become not just a feather in the cap of the British Empire, but a trophy for Benjamin Disraeli's personal collection. Regardless of the many political complexities and contradictions that surrounded the Maqdala Expedition, a simplified narrative of a 'successful military expedition under the Conservative party, led by Benjamin Disraeli, in response to a hostage fiasco under the Liberal Party' could certainly lend itself well as talking point in a general election. If we read Mr. Gladstone's statement as Prime Minister in the context of these party dynamics, and especially with the knowledge that he and Disraeli would continue to be long-standing political rivals, it becomes possible to view it as an attempt by one rival to shape the representation of the event at the expense of the other. Again, Gladstone may very well have disagreed with the taking of the crown and chalice from Maqdala on ethical grounds. But, in suggesting that there had been misconduct on the part of the expedition by taking precious items from the people and churches of Ethiopia, and that the event was not even worth memorializing in the British Museum with these artifacts, he was also harnessing the narrative of Maqdala's political significance in his favor. He certainly wouldn't have wanted to outright denounce the expedition, which would have not been received positively by a voting public that had largely forgotten their concerns over taxes and capability, nor draw any extra attention to the fact that it was under the supervision of a Liberal Government that the hostage situation occurred in the first place. It was, however, politically sound to imply that the expedition would fade into the background as a footnote of British history, being not so remarkable, and to further cast a shadow over its success with a claim to a higher moral ground by condemning the looting. In this way, through his now-famous and oft-repeated comments about the restitution of the crown and the chalice, the Prime Minister attempted to rewrite the

history of the Maqdala Expedition so that it would be remembered as a minor achievement, rather than a grand feat, and, for good measure, slightly tainted by overzealous plunder.

Gladstone did find an ally to bolster his new narrative of Maqdala in Joseph Warner Henley, who concurred with the Prime Minister's conclusion that the crown and the chalice should not have been brought from Abyssinia. Mr. Henley expanded on the Prime Minister's statement that the crown and the chalice were "sacred and imposing symbols" to Ethiopians and that the conflict had not been between England and the churches of Ethiopia, but went further to condemn the looting of religious objects. In doing so, he also managed to belittle the authority and legitimacy of Richard Holmes such that the responsibility for the debacle lay with him rather than the soldiers, thereby leveling a strong critique at the plunder without appearing disrespectful of the troops who had been much-commended for their service. He stated that he "was glad to hear that the Prime Minister wished to send these things back to Abyssinia, for it looked very much as if the collector of curiosities had put the soldiers up to doing something very near robbing a church" (House of Commons Debate, 1871). By describing Richard Holmes as a 'collector of curiosities' rather than naming him as the authorized representative of the British Museum, Mr. Henley implied a lack of professionalism or expertise – suggesting that someone who did possess these qualities would have known better than to have encouraged such a thing. Mr. Holmes was, in fact, an employee of the British Museum, but this characterization made him seem like someone who had merely tagged along for the ride out of personal interest, whose directions should not have been followed so seriously and whose recommendations should not be considered binding agreements. As I will explore elsewhere, this was certainly not a view of Mr. Holmes's involvement that would become permanent in later representations of his role in the Maqdala Expedition. However, it is important to consider that in this first restitution debate relating to the artifacts from the Maqdala Expedition, Richard Holmes was essentially used as a scapegoat, and portrayed as someone whose authority had been overstated; as we will see, this stands in stark contrast to his later reputation as a figure who represented the full force of the British Museum and exemplified the strong relationship between the museum and imperial expeditions. What we see here in this comment by Mr. Henley is that this first debate about how to approach, and potentially return, artifacts taken during the

Maqdala Expedition was not only about determining the future of the objects themselves, but also about actively intervening in the writing of the expedition's history. In arguing for a particular understanding of the status of the objects, contributors to this debate were making statements about how the past, though here relatively recent, should be represented in accordance with their own motivations and associations. By expressing this perspective on how the crown and chalice came to be the subject of a debate in the House of Commons about purchasing them on behalf of the nation, Mr. Henley's language helped to construct a narrative of the Maqdala Expedition wherein the looting of religious artifacts was a stain on the overall tapestry of the expedition, but one which did not necessarily make it particularly remarkable one way or the other and which reflected primarily on the behavior of Mr. Holmes as an individual rather than as an institutional representative.

However, it is important to also be clear that Mr. Henley emphasized his disapproval of taking the crown and chalice from Ethiopia by pointing out that "from the description given, it seemed that one of these articles had been consecrated to the Altar, and he considered that neither of them should have been brought to Abyssinia" (House of Commons Debate, 1871). Without saying it explicitly, read in conjunction with his previous comment that the taking of these objects had constituted something "very near robbing a church," Mr. Henley was invoking the ideals of special respect and care that are meant to be afforded to religious, and, to even greater degree, sacred, objects; he was in effect proposing the idea that the treatment of religious objects and the church at Maqdala had potentially crossed the line into sacrilegious territory. This idea that the wrongfulness of the act of looting the crown and chalice from Maqdala stemmed from the principles of religious respect and avoidance of sacrilege is one on which contemporary debates about the Maqdala Collection have expanded. The logic of assessing restitution claims through the lens of sacrilege has re-emerged in contemporary debates about the Maqdala Collection, and particularly with regards to the sacred altar tabots that were taken, as a way of introducing an ethical framework to the conversation that is not dependent on colonial or imperial frameworks. These debates focus specifically on the treatment of religious and sacred objects during and after the expedition in order to frame the expedition as a violent and unethical context in which to take such artifacts; these debates deploy the language of

'sacrilege' in service of this goal in a manner similar to how 'imperial' and 'colonial' have been and continue to be utilized in these conversations, but without invoking the same connotations or assumptions. This narrative is discussed extensively in the third section of this thesis as it relates to the specific set of debates about the sacred altar tabots that were taken during the expedition and the demands for their return to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. For now, I wish simply to note that, though Mr. Henley's contribution to the debate may have been relatively small compared to those of other participants, taken in the context of the rest of the debate it is significant that the Maqdala Expedition was already being re-considered along the lines of religious principles in addition to the social and political context. For Mr. Henley, it seemed that he was opposed to the acquisition of the crown and the chalice, and in favor of their return, because he was concerned that doing so would effectively sanction the circumstances in which they were originally taken from Maqdala – and this would in turn reflect poorly on the expedition because these circumstances appeared alarmingly close to the boundary between acceptable looting (he did not, after all, express any remarks that would suggest that he similarly disapproved of the plunder of non-religious items) and sacrilegious looting. As we will see in the third section of this thesis, the contemporary debates that invoke sacrilege essentially reverse this process – where Mr. Henley wanted to avoid casting the shadow of sacrilege over the Maqdala Expedition and ensure that the soldiers were not implicated in these actions by returning the crown and chalice to Abyssinia, the contemporary debates seek to explicitly represent the expedition, especially the looting, as sacrilegious violence in order to construct an argument that encourages the return of these same objects to the modern Ethiopian state and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Altogether, the narrative put forth by William Gladstone and Joseph Warner Henley painted a portrait of these treasures as having been brought to the United Kingdom due to the overzealous maneuvers of a single individual acting under the pretense of exaggerated authority as opposed to a concerted effort by the British Museum to take advantage of the opportunity to steal religious objects. Even those who were in favor of facilitating the purchase of the crown and chalice in order to deposit them in the British Museum were more concerned with the fact that *not* purchasing them could be seen as breaking a promise made to the British troops – refusing to release this small amount for the Army Prize Fund would make the

Government look petty, disrespectful, and unappreciative. That these supporters were significantly less impressed by the idea of displaying the artifacts than they were convinced by the argument that the Government had to do right by the troops and honor the expectations of the Army Prize Fund demonstrates that it was not only the value of the crown and chalice that were up for debate, but also a matter of how to represent the Maqdala Expedition moving forward. Yes, there was eagerness amongst the public whose attention had been successfully captured, and whose support had largely been won, by the heroic rescue narratives propagated in the lead-up to the decision to launch a military expedition. This public, which had previously been apprehensive in the wake of less reassuring encounters involving the British imperial forces, was happy to celebrate an event that made them feel confident and self-righteous. However, as shown by the remarks in this debate, there was a difference between allowing the public to momentarily celebrate a victory through traveling exhibitions and temporary performances, and permanently committing to the Maqdala Expedition becoming a defining achievement of the 19th century. Recall that there was still the lingering belief that the entire ordeal would not have been necessary if the Foreign Office had responded more effectively to the Emperor's communications, and that this failure could have been avoided with better diplomacy. This debate that took place in the House of Commons three years after the expedition about how to deal with the situation of the crown and chalice, which are today subjects of requests for their return to Ethiopia, shows how even these first restitution debates were not only about the fate of the objects themselves but also about negotiating the narrative of the history that they represented.

3.3 Aftermath

Ultimately, despite the force of William Gladstone's objections to the acquisition of the crown and chalice, the British Government did facilitate their purchase. The suicide of Emperor Tewodros had left a power vacuum in Ethiopia that was yet to be filled and stabilized and the British Government was not eager to be seen as snubbing the officers who had participated in the expedition. The crown and chalice did not, however, go to the British Museum but were instead deposited in the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) where they remain to this day and have been on continuous display since

their accession into the collection. Notably, the crown and the chalice (unlike other items from the expedition) were not formally accessioned into the V&A's collections until 2005, almost twenty years after the passing of the National Heritage Act in 1983, but were instead given to the museum as loans from the Treasury – indicating a potential view towards their return to Ethiopia in the future, and implying that the Government viewed the South Kensington Museum as a suitable institution for such a temporary deposit where the British Museum was not appropriate for this purpose. Furthermore, the V&A did in fact resist the official accession of these items into the collection in 1983 precisely because they envisioned potential requests for their return to Ethiopia and anticipated that their accession into the collections would complicate this process (Watson Jones 2019). This raises questions about why they were never returned and what dynamics facilitated the turn towards accessioning them rather than leaving them available for restitution. As will be discussed in the next chapter, current perceptions of the V&A's relationship to British imperialism differ quite significantly from those regarding the British Museum, with much stronger associations and expectations of coloniality in the British Museum than in the V&A. This discrepancy is at least partially related to the belief that the two museums have distinct, yet intersecting, focuses because the V&A is identified as a museum of art and design whereas the British Museum is considered an ethnographic museum focusing on material culture and history. Even as recently as 2010, the Collections Management Policy of the V&A explicitly excluded the Americas, Australia, and most of Africa from the museum's remit, claiming that their normal prerogative is to collect and display objects that represent artistic traditions from Europe and Asia (Victoria and Albert Museum 2010). This position is understandable given that the vast majority of the museum's collections originate from these two regions, largely as a result of the fact that when the museum was established in the mid-19th century, East Asia and the Indian Subcontinent were the primary focus of the British Empire. As is demonstrated by the fact that the museum does actually hold a small but significant collection of African artifacts, this regional policy has clearly not been true for all of the museum's history.

Though the V&A is increasingly prominent and involved in the current debates about the return of looted and stolen artifacts (largely, as I will explain in more detail, due to their own initiative in this area),

it is the British Museum that has traditionally borne the brunt of decolonial and anticolonial criticism. But it was certainly not always the case that the V&A was able to avoid, or sought to avoid, affiliations with the British Empire; in fact, the first iterations of this museum fully embraced the prerogatives of British imperial culture and ambitions. Tim Barringer (2012) has explored at length the ways in which this close relationship between the South Kensington Museum and the British Empire manifested in the display of global collections acquired through violent and imperial channels. In 1871, at the time of this first debate about the fate of Maqdala-related objects, the South Kensington Museum was only twenty years old, yet it had already become a spatial and visual representation of a global order where England was the imperial center. As Barringer (2012) illustrates, during the first period of the museum's existence it 'offered a popular forum for the display of imperial tributes,' and transitioned easily into the triumphant display of objects acquired through imperial conquests (p.12). By accepting a collection of objects associated with the Maqdala Expedition, though they were not all as unambiguously looted as the crown and the chalice, the South Kensington Museum participated in what James Ryan (2013) describes as an imperial cultural attitude – this refers to imperialism as a system which is not only constituted in the acquisition of territory and systematic control over people and resources, but also in the social propagation of certain beliefs, perceptions, and dispositions towards the imperial project. Spaces like the South Kensington Museum were ideally positioned to promote the culture of imperialism through the display of objects from around the Empire, thereby making it visible and tangible to the wider public. Though the Maqdala Expedition did not result in the establishment of imperial control over Ethiopia, the representation of the British military's apparent success was closely related to the need to cultivate an imperial attitude.

But as the South Kensington Museum underwent a series of transformations to become what is today known as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the institution's priorities and sense of purpose also shifted, which was reflected in the reorganization of the museum's collections. Most notably, this process involved a much greater integration of the museum's non-Western artifacts into the Western collections as exhibits and departments became increasingly defined by materials, such as textiles, metalwork, and

prints/drawings, rather than places of origin.[1] Alexandra Watson Jones (2019) has discussed how, though it is unclear precisely how long the museum's Ethiopian (and, specifically, Maqdala-related) objects were on display as trophies of the expedition, it appears that by the late 19th century the crown and chalice had been assimilated into the metalworks department and from then on were mainly presented as examples of religious metalworks or royal adornments, with the exception of temporary exhibitions that were curated between 2005 and 2018; while these exhibitions tended to highlight the specific histories of the museum's Ethiopian collection, including brief acknowledgments of the controversies surrounding the Maqdala Expedition, the permanent displays back into which the objects were reassimilated tended to drop discussions of the expedition. That is, until 2018 when they were again re-contextualized into the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition, which has now defined the display of the crown and the chalice in the museum for over five years. In the next chapter, we will turn to the current display of the crown and the chalice and discuss in detail the ways that the shift in the sociopolitical landscape of restitution has impacted their significance and representation within the museum. What the context of their initial arrival in the South Kensington Museum has shown, through the debate in the House of Commons that led to the outcome wherein they were deposited in the museum on seemingly temporary terms, is that the representation of the Maqdala Expedition and its history was being contested and negotiated through debates on the status of the objects associated with the expedition that had been brought to the UK – even as early as three years after the conclusion of the expedition. This process was mediated through the social and political demands of the moment, particularly relating to the Government's perceived responsibility for the expedition and the desire to garner popular support for and confidence in the British Empire. Where William Gladstone's comments in which he expressed that the crown and chalice should never have been taken from Ethiopia in the first place are often used to refute the claim that the taking of cultural artifacts during military

[1] Note that this is true of, for example, the museum's African, Middle Eastern, and Islamic collections which do not have their own departments but are instead dispersed throughout a variety of departments on the basis of material composition (textiles, metalwork, glass, etc.). The exception, however, are the Indian, Southeast Asian, and East Asian collections which were some of the first major imperial collections to be displayed in the museum and which today are curated by their own separate departments. This reflects one of the ways in which the legacy of Empire remains visible in the museum's institutional structure.

expeditions has only recently been considered morally wrong, they also highlight the ways in which debates about cultural restitution can be used as platforms to reshape the narratives of historical events.

Another dynamic to highlight here is that the deployment of this debate about the crown and chalice in service of constructing a way of representing the Maqdala Expedition so that its image aligned with the goals of the British political establishment provides further evidence of the complex relationship between Ethiopia and the British Empire – and more broadly, the forces of European imperialism. However, it should also be noted that the narrative that this was an easily won and triumphant victory by a modern European army against comparatively undisciplined and unprepared African forces is also steeped in Eurocentrism, as it privileges the British perspective on the expedition over the Ethiopian understanding of its significance. We cannot and should not look only at how the representations of the Maqdala Expedition were negotiated in the aftermath of the expedition in the UK, but also at the impact it had within Ethiopia. The British Government and public may have perpetuated imperial patterns and assimilated the Maqdala Expedition into the history of the British Empire as a military success, but that does not necessarily mean that these patterns fully explain the role of this 'colonial moment' in Ethiopian history. In fact, it may even be reproducing an imperial attitude to perpetuate the assumption that the Maqdala Expedition is primarily situated within a history of British imperialism rather than a history of Ethiopian development and modernization, as has been referenced by several Ethiopian participants that I've spoken to as well as by Ethiopian scholars. Not only does this challenge the primacy of the British Empire in representing the Maqdala Expedition, but it also calls into question the role of decolonial frameworks in constructing this history in relation to restitution. Ethiopian historian Bahru Zwede (1991), for example, argued that the outcome of the conflict had already been determined before the English fired a single shot because of the pre-existing political dynamics within the Abyssinian Empire that were overwhelmingly stacked against Emperor Tewodros. While the British Government was busy debating the fate of the objects taken during the expedition and how to handle them in a way that reflected how they perceived the significance of the expedition within the context of the British Empire, the Kingdom of Abyssinia was working on rebuilding its political structure in the wake of the Emperor's death. As Volker Matthies (2012) has pointed out, the

outcome of the Maqdala Expedition cannot be fully explained in binary terms of British victory and Ethiopian defeat and is further complicated by the ways in which it can be seen as a crucial turning point in the history of the modern Ethiopian state. In particular, both Zwede (1991) and Matthies (2012) identify the successor to the throne, Emperor Yohannes IV, as well as, perhaps surprisingly, Emperor Tewodros himself as having both actually benefited from the expedition.

Recall that the reason for the deteriorating diplomatic relationship between the Kingdom of Abyssinia and the British Empire was the fact that Emperor Tewodros's communications to Queen Victoria seeking allyship went unanswered. As discussed by Donald Crummey (1969), Tewodros came to power at a time when Ethiopia was deeply fractured and characterized by power struggles between regional leaders. Within this context, Emperor Tewodros believed that he had been chosen by God to unify the kingdom and transform it into a modern Christian empire in the image of the European empires. Notably, this was an ambition that was praised and supported at the time by the British Consul Walter Plowden, who expressed optimism at the thought of an alliance between Great Britain and a Christian empire in Ethiopia led by Emperor Tewodros, believing that the Emperor had the potential to 'civilize and improve this distracted country' (quoted in Jonas 2011, p. 14). However, unifying such a socially and politically splintered territory was not an easy task, and much of the Emperor's time in power was spent traveling around the country looting local areas in order to fund his growing army and deploying force to repress any rebellions instigated by his enemies and competitors – strategies which made him highly unpopular among the people despite his motivation to build a stronger, more modern Ethiopia. For this reason, at the time of the Maqdala Expedition, Emperor Tewodros was seriously lacking in support for his leadership or agenda within his own Kingdom which meant that his hold on power was already becoming unstable. As it was becoming increasingly likely that Emperor Tewodros would be subject to a challenge for the throne by one of his rivals, the British expedition to Maqdala was initiated. Though, as I will discuss next, the British took advantage of the Emperor's unstable position by collaborating with the powerful political contender for the throne who would ultimately become his successor, the fact that the Emperor chose to take his own life rather than surrender to the British troops had the effect of dramatically transforming his representation and

role in Ethiopia's historiography of imperialism. While he is still considered in some academic circles to have been a tyrannical ruler, in Ethiopia Emperor Tewodros is also considered a national hero, the father of the modern Ethiopian state, and his suicide is cast as an evocative symbol of anti-colonial resistance (Matthies 2012). Thus, his role in the British invasion of Maqdala salvaged Emperor Tewodros's reputation, casting him as a defender of Ethiopia's sovereignty rather than a failed leader, situating his legacy within Ethiopia's history of resistance against European imperialism.

A further aspect of the expedition that is often either downplayed or missed entirely in narratives that emphasize the success of the British and the defeat of the Ethiopian forces is that the British troops collaborated closely with one of the challengers to the Emperor's power, who would then go on to take his place: Emperor Yohannes the IV. Kassa of Tigray, as he was known prior to his coronation in 1872, was a significant political figure in the north of Ethiopia, in a region through which the British expedition would have to pass to reach Maqdala. Seeing an opportunity to take advantage of the situation and sway the outcome in his favor, the future Emperor helped create a safe route for the British troops and even assisted in the provision of essential resources – this assistance is even more notable considering that one of the concerns voiced by skeptics in the lead up to the expedition was that the landscape of Ethiopia was unfamiliar and thus presented an obstacle to the security of the British forces. The cooperation of a local, influential political figure ensured that this obstacle was circumvented with relative ease. Under the assurance that the British had no hidden or ulterior motives for the expedition – that is, that they had no intention of going beyond their mandate to liberate the hostages in order to institute a permanent occupation of Ethiopia – Kassa was a willing participant in the campaign against Emperor Tewodros. This marks a crucial divergence between the Maqdala Expedition in 1868 and the Benin Expedition thirty years later in 1897, because the collaboration between Kassa and the British forces was integral to maintaining the continuity of Ethiopia's independence following the expedition, whereas the Benin Expedition resulted in the British occupation of Benin and its eventual integration into colonial Nigeria. In exchange for his assistance throughout the expedition, the British left Kassa with a stash of modern weapons and ammunition, which he used to his advantage over the next four years to fend off his competitors for the

throne in order to ensure that he was eventually crowned Emperor Yohannes IV (Marcus 2002). In this position, Emperor Yohannes continued Tewodros's goal of modernizing the Ethiopian military and deployed the new firepower to secure several victories in conflicts with Egypt – successes which had a psychological as well as practical impact on the Ethiopian troops, among whom the Emperor fostered not only improved battle tactics, but also a greater sense of unity and patriotism. This pattern of improving the Ethiopian army and further tightening the unification of Ethiopia as a nation continued after the death of Emperor Yohannes. He was succeeded by Emperor Menelik, who famously defeated the invading Italian forces at Adwa in 1896 (who, apparently ignorant to the significant developments that had occurred within Ethiopia over the past three decades, underestimated the Ethiopians on the basis of the reputation of the Maqdala Expedition as an easy victory) to ensure that Ethiopia entered the 20th century as a sovereign, unprecedentedly unified nation. When we consider the Maqdala Expedition as part of this lineage, as an important precursor to the Ethiopian success at Adwa that remains a core reference point for Ethiopian nationalism and historiography, we can see how the imperial context in which it was conceived and the way the expedition was shaped into an imperial success through the debates about the looted objects tell only one part of a multifaceted narrative.

It would paint an incomplete portrait of the context of the expedition to ignore the domestic politics that influenced the outcome and the subsequent developmental trajectory of Ethiopia in the aftermath. None of this is intended to excuse or justify the violence that was committed during the expedition or the plunder and retention of invaluable Ethiopian cultural artifacts. Rather, it is intended to demonstrate that one of the ways in which coloniality has impacted the significance of the Maqdala Expedition throughout its history is through the privileging of the British narrative and the assumption that the expedition is best/most accurately defined as a British punitive expedition or a British small war. While the expedition certainly can and should be analyzed through those lenses, it is inherently colonial and Eurocentric to primarily characterize it from the perspective of the British without giving equal weight to the expedition as it is understood from the point of view of Ethiopian historiography. In an interview with a research participant who works in diplomacy at the Ethiopian Embassy in London, he repeatedly emphasized that Ethiopia was

independent before the expedition, and remained independent after the expedition, and made reference to the complexity of labeling it in binary terms of victory/defeat where Ethiopian forces were defeated by the British imperial army. He noted that while it is true that the forces of Emperor Tewodros, unsurprisingly, lost the battle with the British, the wider trajectory of Ethiopia's relationship with the European imperial powers is defined more by success than by loss – something which is a source of national pride within Ethiopia. Maqdala in this framework is seen as only one thread of a historical narrative that, on a broader level, tells a story of successful resistance to imperialism. Simply put, he felt that it would be an oversimplification of this history to characterize Maqdala only as a loss for Ethiopia, particularly because the defeat at Maqdala did not represent all Ethiopians, nor did it fully reflect Ethiopia's relationship with Britain. This perspective is consistent with the way that the Ethiopian participants that I interviewed spoke about Maqdala, not as a stand-alone moment of loss but as a challenging stepping stone towards modernization, unification, and maintaining independence. Scholarship on the Battle of Adwa, in which the Ethiopian forces under Emperor Menelik II successfully defeated the Italian invaders (would-be colonizers) and defended Ethiopian sovereignty, has frequently referenced Emperor Tewodros's agenda to modernize Ethiopia and the subsequent events at Maqdala as key turning points in Ethiopia's political and military development.[2] Participants, especially those who I connected with through the Ethiopian Embassy in London, often reinforced this connection between Maqdala and Adwa when I spoke to them about the Maqdala Expedition, suggesting that the fact that Emperor Tewodros's successors focused on preparing to defend Ethiopia against foreign, particularly European, adversaries following the Maqdala Expedition was critical to Ethiopia's success at Adwa – an event which they speak about with obvious pride.

After spending time at the Embassy, I was able to meet with Frezer Haile, a former employee in public diplomacy at the Ethiopian Embassy who had consulted on the V&A's memorial exhibition of artifacts from Maqdala (which will be discussed in the next chapter). He elaborated extensively on the

[2] See Jonas 2011 for an in-depth analysis of the significance of the Battle of Adwa to Ethiopia's relationships with Empire and Crummey 1969 for an exploration of the influence of Emperor Tewodros on modernization and Ethiopia's response to imperial power.

correlation between the Maqdala Expedition, the Battle of Adwa, and Ethiopian independence as being based not only on the improvement of military structures and technology but also on cultural memory – particularly the memory of the loss of cultural and religious materials that were so closely connected with the sense of Ethiopian identity as being a potential motivation for a place that has historically struggled with fractured communities to be able to unify and resist a hostile external party. Frezer shared a personal story about his grandfather who was a priest in 1935 during the second Italo-Abyssinian War, which did result in a period of Italian occupation. He described how his grandfather, in the face of conflict with Italy, broke protocol to remove one of the sacred tabots from the altar of his church (something which is ordinarily only permitted during specific religious ceremonies and celebrations) and, in an even more exceptional act, brought it back to his home to protect it. Though the altar tabot of a church of the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, which consecrates it as a sacred space, can be taken out from its usual separate area in the church for special occasions (usually holidays and ceremonies), it is highly irregular to remove it from the church outside of these parameters, as doing so affects the sanctity of the church itself. However, Frezer described the actions of his grandfather as being illustrative of the way that the loss of cultural and religious artifacts at Maqdala continued to have a legacy in the collective memory of Ethiopians and how this memory affected their national trajectory. In this way, he explained, what Ethiopia became in terms of its relationship to colonialism and decolonization – a symbol and beacon of independence – has been partly shaped by what happened at Maqdala. What this narrative shows is that Maqdala has been written not only as a British victory, but also as a turning point in both Ethiopian military and cultural history that had a profound impact on Ethiopia's later responses to colonialism and decolonization. While members of the Ethiopian community that I spoke to indeed discussed Maqdala in terms of defeat and destruction, they just as often discussed it in terms of national development and pride. Without minimizing the harm that was caused by the expedition, this dynamic calls attention to some of the reasons underlying why Ethiopians express frustration about applying labels like 'decolonial' to the calls to restitute the Maqdala artifacts and why they sometimes feel that linking Maqdala to other cases of 'postcolonial restitution' has rewritten their history in a way that tries to make it fit neatly within the paradigm of decolonizing cultural institutions in the UK,

often at the expense of making space for these alternative histories that resonate much more strongly with them. This is a dynamic that came to the fore in particular in the Victoria and Albert Museum's approach to the display of the Maqdala artifacts.

As the 'Maqdala Collection' has increasingly become an example of high-profile debates on the restitution of cultural artifacts taken in the context of the British Empire, its representation has also been shaped by the dominant discourses embedded in these debates. However, as the demands for the cultural restitution of African artifacts taken during imperial and colonial contexts remain prevalent in conversations about decolonization, reparations, and postcolonial African development, it is necessary to reflect on the ways in which these frameworks are applied. What this section has shown is that the Maqdala Expedition's relationship to the British Empire, and, more broadly, European imperialism, is more complex than the fact that the British forces repeated patterns of imperial behavior. Furthermore, though much attention has been given to William Gladstone's statements in the House of Commons about the fate of the crown and the chalice as evidence of the wrongfulness of looting cultural artifacts, this debate also highlighted that the Maqdala Expedition has not always been represented as a major imperial encounter. From what can be described as the first restitution debate about the Maqdala artifacts in Parliament, we can see that the negotiations of the fate of the crown and chalice were integral to determining how the significance of the expedition would be represented in British imperial history and that this process was tied to shifting political priorities within the UK. The consequence of this process was that the history of the Maqdala Expedition was written in such a way that its representation aligned with the prerogatives of the British Empire. However, this representation is not necessarily consistent with the evolution of the narrative from the perspective of Ethiopian historiography.

It is for this reason that assumptions based on the British historical narrative of Maqdala, particularly those that seek to characterize the Maqdala artifacts as a collection that needs to be 'decolonized,' may actually impose imperial connotations in a way that, ironically, privileges the British history over the Ethiopian history of Maqdala. When we look at how the Maqdala Expedition is being 'remembered,' we must therefore ask which history it is that is being represented in these remembrances,

and how and why that history has been made. As was discussed above, there are a variety of reasons that the Maqdala Expedition can be described with nuance as a 'colonial moment' due to the roles that the interests and structures of the British Empire played in pursuing and executing the expedition, as well as the reception in England of a perceived imperial success. But this does not mean that we should assume that the Maqdala Expedition is fully or best explained from the British perspective as a successful punitive expedition, as this implies that the British agenda and the British perception of success is what primarily defines the significance of the expedition. While objects from the Maqdala collection like the crown and chalice were indeed incorporated into imperial modes of display in England, which ultimately reinforced the British narrative, a parallel process of history-making was underway in Ethiopia that told a very different story of the significance of Maqdala. Yet what the debate in the House of Commons reveals is the integral role of debates about the fate of the Maqdala objects in determining the way that the Maqdala Expedition's significance was constructed and represented in the UK – and as we will see in the following chapters, the legacies of these representations have continued to shape how this expedition is remembered as new debates and discourses emerged about the state of African artifacts in British cultural institutions and collections.

Chapter 4: Narratives of Maqdala 1868 at the V&A

4.1 Storytelling and Restitution Activism

Unlike the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London does not have any permanent exhibition spaces dedicated to sub-Saharan African collections, nor does it have a curatorial department that is specifically responsible for the research and display of artifacts from this region. Though there are several galleries devoted to the display of the museum's collections from the Middle East, the Indian Subcontinent, and East Asia, the museum has in the past attempted to distance itself from other areas, asserting its role as a museum of art and design from Europe and Asia. As discussed previously, the museum's establishment at a time when the British Empire was concentrated in South and East Asia had much to do with the disproportionate influx of objects from these areas. However, while the V&A's official position today may have been that it did not pursue the collection of art and artifacts from outside its designated geographical remit, in the first several decades of its existence it was certainly put to use as a forum for the display of imperial tributes without much concern for where in the world said tributes originated – so long as they represented the Empire positively to the British public. It was in this context that the V&A first received objects and memorabilia (including a selection of drawings from the Royal Engineers) that were taken from Maqdala or brought from Ethiopia as a result of the expedition in 1868, the most famous of which are the gold crown and chalice that were the subject of the debate in the House of Commons discussed earlier. Though, at the time of writing, there are only a handful of objects from Maqdala that are currently on display, along with a small selection of the drawings from the Royal Engineers, the V&A has in recent years begun to draw attention to its small collection of Maqdala-related objects as part of the museum's wider agenda to proactively address the difficult and complex issues embedded in its imperial-era holdings (and to attempt to get ahead of critiques about its relationship to Empire). This process has involved a significant reshaping of the way that the history of the Maqdala Expedition is represented in the museum, with a clear orientation towards the heightened public awareness of collections with controversial provenances. But in their determination to more openly 'address' the

histories that they anticipate may become the targets of scrutiny and criticism, the V&A has also directly contributed to the increasingly high profile of the Maqdala artifacts, molding it into a paradigmatic case of imperial loot. This process included the curation of a special temporary exhibition featuring the museum's Maqdala artifacts, called *Maqdala 1868*, which commemorated the 150th anniversary of the exhibition. The display was up for less than a year, prior to the commencement of this project, but its impact was not limited to this period. Though I was unable to attend the exhibition myself, I was able to explore its legacy through the responses that it generated which remain long after the display itself has been dismantled.

The ongoing debates about the cultural restitution of African artifacts in European museums are often discussed as a matter of academic scholarship or social justice activism, with the climate of these debates usually being assessed through these lenses. We look at articles published that explore the arguments for or against the return of collections and the popular discourses online in an attempt to understand the zeitgeist while deconstructing, as I have done above, the actions of museums as they either engage with or ignore shifts in social and political priorities. With temporary exhibitions like *Maqdala 1868*, even when they initiate changes to permanent displays it can seem like the attention and the impact are fleeting. In the absence of formal procedures to document responses to these exhibitions and displays, it can be challenging to observe their full roles in shaping and driving the narratives to which restitution debates are responding. However, one lasting outcome of the increased visibility that special exhibitions promote is that they can inspire the production of creative works that enable people to continue to explore and respond to these themes well after the conclusion of temporary exhibitions. Furthermore, as I will discuss below, creative engagement with cultural restitution can be a powerful mode of contesting the historical narratives and frameworks promoted by museums and challenging their authority over the representation, in particular, of non-European or marginalized cultures. Creative storytelling that emerges from the restitution debates provides the opportunity to reflect on the senses of identity and belonging that underpin deep connections between peoples and their histories that make these debates so emotive. For this reason, these stories offer an essential, human counter-voice to the institutional voice of the museum. They also show that as museums adjust the narratives they present in response to changes in social and political

demands, these narratives are not accepted unquestioningly by their audiences. For this reason, it is important to consider these responses as part of the process of using restitution debates to shape the significance of historical events.

There are a handful of works, from poems to children's stories, that are based on the Maqdala Expedition, many of which focus on the subsequent debates about the fate of the objects and Prince Alemayehu. The majority of these artistic and literary works have been created by members of the Ethiopian community and diaspora, but there are also a handful that have come from others, such as the book *The Prince Who Walked With Lions* by British author Elizabeth Laird (2012). This book, aimed at young audiences, is a fictionalized account of the life of Prince Alemayehu, written from his perspective from the Battle of Maqdala through to his subsequent experience being raised in the UK. The production of such content that draws inspiration from the events surrounding the Maqdala Expedition not only contributes directly to the proliferation of narratives about Maqdala but also provides insight into how these narratives are received and assimilated into the wider discourse. For the purposes of this chapter, I would like to focus on a short story that was published in direct response to the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition, which provides an alternative lens through which to understand the reception of this exhibition. This short story, entitled 'Maqdala 1868/London 2018,' was written by Ethiopian scholar and poet Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes as part of the anthology *In This Desert There Were Seeds* (Tan and Gresham 2019). This collection sought stories about the intersection of the lives of ordinary people with some of the wider social, political, and economic concerns that dominate the 21st century. Dr. Woldeyes sought to explore the debates about the return of cultural objects taken in violent and imperial circumstances through a story about a fictional Ethiopian security guard who works at the V&A during the time that the special exhibition *Maqdala 1868* is on display. Through the perspective of this security guard, whose name is Ermi, Dr. Woldeyes goes beyond an intellectual analysis of the display's merits and faults to explore the emotional and personal responses that can be elicited by seeing how artifacts taken from one's country are represented in another country's museum. In doing so, he raises key questions about whose history is being, and should be, remembered in the displays of these cultural objects and even challenges the museum's choice to define them primarily in

terms of their relationship to the expedition and Empire. Thus, through this story, he is able to capture many of the sentiments, themes, and issues described above.

The story opens with Ermi describing the pride and excitement he feels watching the preparations for the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition at the V&A museum, where he works as a security guard. Initially, Ermi looks forward to seeing a display that features cultural and religious artifacts from his home country, Ethiopia, and is pleased that these objects are being given an opportunity to be admired. From the second page, the reader is told that Ermi's connection to these objects is not merely based on the awareness that they share his Ethiopian origins but grounded in specific knowledge about their historical connections to Emperor Tewodros and personal experience with Ge'ez, the language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It's clear that Dr. Woldeyes wants the reader to appreciate that, for Ethiopians, the objects on display here are not relics of a forgotten past but evoke familiar memories and histories. This dynamic is further evident in the choice for the main character to be a security guard rather than, for example, a curator or historian, as it emphasizes the point that this is knowledge shared among many Ethiopians, unlike in the UK where it may be considered more obscure, limited to specialists and academics. Ermi reinforces his and other Ethiopians' knowledge of the Maqdala Expedition, saying 'I know the history of these objects – all Ethiopians do' (Woldeyes 2019, para.2). He demonstrates this by stating that Maqdala was the capital of Emperor Tewodros, who he describes as 'gallant,' and even notes, correctly, that, according to the Ethiopian calendar, the Maqdala Expedition took place in 1860, a note that I will discuss further on. But Ermi's initial excitement about the display is tempered by his interactions with one of the curators, who appears inexplicably uneasy about the idea of Ermi being stationed in the gallery where the exhibit will be on display, despite his obvious interest. Nevertheless, Ermi's supervisor is happy to accept his request to be rostered near the *Maqdala 1868* exhibit, presuming that he'll enjoy 'guarding things from home' (Woldeyes 2019, para.9). However, when Ermi agrees and proposes that he will be able to elaborate about the significance of the objects in Ethiopia to visitors, his supervisor dismisses him and tells him to leave the education of guests to the guides and the available written materials. This disappoints Ermi, who notes that the labels have very little information that is not explicitly linked to the expedition. This exchange

introduces one of the main themes of the story: that the knowledge of the curator/academic, as the presumed expert authority, is often elevated above the knowledge and lived experience of the communities from which museum objects originate. The unspoken but deeply felt boundary between Ermi and the curator evokes the tensions and discomfort that are present between museums, who are accustomed to having control over representation, and source communities who often challenge those representations. In this way, Ermi stands in for the voices who have been silenced or relegated in favor of the institutional perspective.

Ermi eagerly awaits the opening of the exhibit, even going so far as to carefully ensure his uniform is as neat and clean as possible and calling a friend back in Ethiopia to express his excitement. On the day that it opens, he arrives at the museum extra early and happily greets the members of the Ethiopian community who he recognizes have come to visit the exhibition; he observes that, while some of them greet him back, others merely glance at his uniform and move on, again driving home the hierarchies in museum spaces. At first, Ermi's attitude is so positive that he is largely unbothered by the lack of recognition, however his mood quickly dampens upon his arrival for his first look at the full, assembled display. Ermi is almost immediately dismayed to see that the title of the exhibition, *Maqdala 1868*, which has been written in both Amharic and English, has actually spelled 'Maqdala' incorrectly in the Amharic and that the date according to the Ethiopian calendar has been left out entirely. He realizes that the incorrect spelling stems from the fact that it is based on the English pronunciation of Maqdala rather than on the Amharic name. In other words, it has been transliterated to match the English, but the result is akin to using the English pronunciation of Algeria as the basis for spelling it out with the Arabic alphabet – the result would be a string of Arabic letters that roughly sound like the English pronunciation but which actually mean nothing, and the dissonance would be immediately obvious to a native speaker. The inaccuracy that Ermi finds here is, in fact, based on a real mistake that was made by the curators of the exhibition, who did indeed misspell Maqdala in the Amharic title because they based it on the English pronunciation rather than the actual placename in Amharic. While Ermi worries that the misspelling is intentional, a sinister way to erase the Ethiopian identity of Maqdala, the real mistake is more reflective of the lack of involvement of an Amharic speaker in the curatorial process. On one hand, this is relatively unsurprising given that, at the time of the

exhibition, there was only one Ethiopian curator responsible for an Ethiopian collection in the UK: Eyob Derillo, who curated the Ethiopian collection at the British Library before that position was removed and assimilated into a wider 'Asian and African Studies' framework. On the other hand, however, the exhibition did work with a focus group of members of the Ethiopian community (including from the Ethiopian Embassy) and ultimately included labels featuring their perspectives alongside the institutional labels. Thus, a blatant inaccuracy that would only be obvious to an Amharic speaker in something as prominent as the title of the exhibition does indeed call into question the extent to which Ethiopian participation was used superficially to show endorsement of the display rather than for substantive contributions to its content.

It also serves as a reminder that Ermi's personal knowledge of Ethiopian history is not shown as being valued in the museum space because he is a security guard and not an expert, yet the curator, who is considered qualified to educate the public on this subject and who is trusted to produce accurate research, has made an error that, to an Ethiopian, would be as basic as a British person misspelling 'Waterloo.' Alongside the reminder that even the year that the Maqdala Expedition took place would be different if one was using the Ethiopian calendar, the overall impression of the exhibition that Ermi communicates here is that, even when just looking at supposedly objective facts like names and dates, the lens of the display is unmistakably that of British imperial history. But, importantly, many of the subtleties and nuances that drive this home are only visible to a certain audience – namely the Ethiopian community – which can actually exacerbate concerns about exclusion and misrepresentation. Though the exhibition was an attempt to take a more proactive approach to acknowledging and discussing the controversies surrounding the Maqdala Collection, it also claimed to do so in a way that celebrated the significance of these objects outside of the framework of the Maqdala Expedition (Watson Jones 2022). Yet, the details and assumptions that Ermi is able to identify highlight that even 'open' and 'honest' displays can still perpetuate harmful patterns of representation. The objects are effectively still being displayed as spoils of war, defined by their connection to a British imperial expedition. This is one of the potentially harmful effects of the reshaping of the significance of the Maqdala Collection in line with the prerogatives of the current debates on cultural restitution, as the rush to be seen as 'decolonizing' collections with certain provenances is rewarded without

pausing to reflect on whether the 'honest' narratives actually disrupt representations or merely repackage them. For those, and there are many, who would share Ermi's disappointment with the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition, it is important to understand that it is not just how the history is told that is important, but actually *whose* history and *by whom*. Ermi does not look at the display and see cultural treasures that have been freed from the grasp of Eurocentric frameworks but instead sees a further erasure of the history that is meaningful to him. What Ermi's perspective at this moment shows is that, as I explored in Chapter 3, there are many layers to the history and consequences of the Maqdala Expedition that cannot be fully appreciated simply by admitting to the moral wrongness of looting cultural heritage. As the reader comes to see throughout the remainder of Ermi's story, it is the persistent focus on the British historical narrative that drives the cultural restitution debates towards these particular ways of understanding the significance of the Maqdala Expedition and that fuels disparity in perceptions of this narrative's honesty.

Initially, Ermi considers proposing a correction to the curator of the display but quickly remembers his less-than-friendly response to the idea that Ermi would be suited to being stationed near the exhibition and changes his mind. While the real exhibition was actually only a single display case in an existing gallery, the fictional version consists of several rooms of artifacts. Yet, Ermi still remarks that he wonders where the rest of the artifacts are, as he knows that the museum has more objects in their holdings than he can see on display – the author here is perhaps alluding to the critique that large European museums hoard thousands more artifacts than they can curate for public viewing while denying the repatriation requests of African countries who have been denied the opportunity to display some of their most historically and culturally significant artifacts. While he wanders through the exhibition, which has become relatively quiet and empty in the afternoon, he thinks to himself about how the visitors are perceiving the objects on display. He notes that many of them are made of gold, which in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is associated with spirituality and divinity rather than with wealth, and wonders if the visitors are seeing them in terms of their financial value. This observation serves as a reminder that objects hold different values in different contexts that may be at odds with one another – for Ermi, artifacts made of gold are priceless because they are an expression of the divine, but he recalls an instance where a stolen gold cross was purchased by a Belgian

collector for 25,000 dollars and returned to Ethiopia. As he reflects on how visitors might be perceiving these objects, he comes upon an elderly, white couple looking at the gold crown. Taking the opportunity to elaborate on its history, he tells them it belonged to Emperor Tewodros, who was considered a great innovator in Ethiopian history. The man is annoyed at the interruption, but the woman inquires if Ermi is from Ethiopia. He proudly answers that he is but is taken aback when she remarks that he must feel lucky to be here. Realizing that she means lucky to be in the UK rather than Ethiopia, Ermi begins to see the objects in the exhibition differently. He looks at his reflection in the glass display case of the crown and thinks that while he still sees himself reflected back, it feels different now and he no longer feels the same sense of pride. Instead, he sees 'the crown as they see it: an object of their history, not mine. Something needing to be saved' (Woldeyes 2019, para.62). Sadly, he thinks that this must be how people see him too.

Here, Ermi makes an important connection between the ways that histories and objects are represented in museums and how these representations reflect back on people's understandings of others, as well as people's own sense of self and belonging. Though the objects themselves may be Ethiopian, it is not only the fact of their status in the V&A that raises issues of ownership but also the narratives they are used to present to museum audiences. In this way, it is the ideological ownership over the historical narrative that is contested as much as the physical ownership of the objects. Again, as discussed above, it becomes a question of whose history these artifacts are used to tell and how this choice impacts our understanding of their significance and value. The author takes this point even further as Ermi's attention is abruptly drawn to a disruption in the lobby of the museum, where he arrives to find another elderly white British woman, who this time is shouting to an audience that they should be ashamed that Ethiopia's stolen treasures are on display in the museum. Ermi hesitates as he is ordered to remove her, distracted by her lecture about how Tewodros's efforts to ally himself with Queen Victoria were snubbed, and the British planned the plunder by sending Richard Holmes as a representative of the British Museum. He is reluctant to force her out of the museum both because she is elderly and because she appears to be speaking on behalf of Ethiopia, but eventually moves towards her. When the woman spots him, she quickly recognizes him as Ethiopian and when he admits that he is, she takes some papers from her bag which she claims are letters

in Amharic from Ethiopians demanding the return of the stolen treasures. She shoves them into his hands and demands that he educate himself about his history, her final words on being escorted out of the museum being that 'it's a shame' (Woldeyes 2019, para.86). Ermi is flustered and does not know whether she meant that he or the museum (or both) was a shame, but he notes that her words sting much like the words of the woman from the exhibit. It's a clear choice on the part of the author to make this character another elderly white British woman rather than an Ethiopian activist. Though she appears at first to be acting in Ethiopia's interest, her arrogant demand that Ermi educate himself about his own history echoes the attitudes of European scholars who presume to understand the histories of others, often because they have had privileged access to resources, which reinforce precisely the hierarchies that prioritize the curator's knowledge over Ermi's. One of the key points often missed in cultural restitution debates is that looting did not only result in the theft of cultural artifacts, but also the dispossession of knowledge. Emperor Tewodros had endeavored to collect the best examples of Ethiopian manuscripts in his library, and the enormous influx of these manuscripts to European cultural and academic institutions in the wake of the Maqdala Expedition enabled the development and flourishing of 'Ethiopian Studies' in Europe at the expense of Ethiopian scholars who are still today blocked from accessing them due to institutional barriers (Illiano 2021). This character evokes the image of the Western scholar or activist who becomes so caught up in the pursuit of a specific goal, in this case, cultural restitution, that they actually end up speaking over or diminishing the voices of the people they claim to represent. The comparison that Ermi makes between how her words affect him and how the earlier woman's remarks made him feel illustrates that even those who seek to accomplish something positive – like the special exhibition acknowledging the problems surrounding the Maqdala Collection – can repeat harmful patterns.

Though Ermi eventually escorts the woman out of the museum, the incident and his initial reservation at removing her prompts his boss to re-assign Ermi to another part of the museum. This experience has significantly diminished his pride and enthusiasm for the special exhibition, and for a long time, he no longer takes an interest in people who visit it. This changes one day when, while staffing the cloakroom, he is asked to retrieve the coats of two older men. As he approaches them, he notices that they

are engaged in lively conversation and are holding the exhibit guide for the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition. He overhears them discussing someone's military acumen and describing them as a hero and initially is pleased, assuming that they must be talking about Emperor Tewodros. But Ermi becomes angry when the conversation continues and it is revealed that they are actually discussing how impressed they are with General Napier, who they praise for liberating the hostages from 'the mad king Theodore' (Woldeyes 2019, para.107), referring to Emperor Tewodros as he was often described in British writings about Maqdala. They even commend the British for bringing back all the treasures, which they presume would have otherwise been lost to time. Enraged, Ermi drops their coats on the floor and compares himself to Emperor Tewodros taking his last stand, refusing to give in to the British when they demanded his surrender even after he had released the hostages. He snaps at them that 'his name was Emperor Tewodros…and we were writing books before the British had an alphabet' (Woldeyes 2019, para.110). Before they have a chance to respond, he rips off his security vest and storms out of the museum, declaring that he will never return until they return the stolen treasures of Maqdala to Ethiopia. The story concludes with a note that while Director Tristram Hunt stated that the exhibition would be the start of a dialogue about the status of these objects, there have been numerous requests for their repatriation with no commitment on the part of the museum to pursue their unqualified, permanent return to Ethiopia. It's obvious that the author, even if one has not encountered any of his other creative works or academic writings, is in favor of the return of the Maqdala artifacts to Ethiopia. Ermi is the clear protagonist of the story who is mistreated by a museum that silences his voice and enables the perpetuation of narratives about his history that reinforce harmful assumptions. Though Ermi's experience is much more dramatic in the fictional story than the responses reported to me by those involved in the actual exhibition, many of the issues Ermi encounters resemble the disappointments and criticisms expressed by real Ethiopian visitors to the display, particularly about its scope and its focus on British history. In this way, Ermi stands in as a lasting representative of the Ethiopian voice in response to the exhibition that would otherwise have been lost as the crown and chalice were re-incorporated into the permanent displays.

Ethiopia itself may not have been colonized, but Ermi's observations about the way the Maqdala Collection is represented in the V&A demonstrate how the history of Maqdala has nevertheless been assimilated into an imperial framework. 'Maqdala 1868/London 2018' demonstrates that it is not only the stories of history we tell in museums that contribute to these debates, but also the stories in creative works. These mediums can enable the exploration of the critical themes that emerge throughout these debates while providing an opportunity for personal experiences and human voices to challenge the institutional authority over historical narratives. Through this story, we can see how the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition has left a legacy both inside and outside of the museum by inspiring responses that persist even years after the temporary exhibition has been replaced by something else. Together with the imprints of the temporary exhibition in the current display, it is possible to see how debates about cultural restitution are not only responding to the history of Maqdala but are actively writing and re-writing this history as we negotiate how, and where, to represent these objects. The process of remembering Maqdala in the space of the museum is fraught with tensions over whose history and whose knowledge are included and, in the face of exclusion, stories like this one are a way to present alternatives to that which is presented in display cases. In doing so, it is also a way to reclaim ownership over the objects themselves by reclaiming control over the representation of their value and significance. In this chapter, we have explored the complex ways that these dynamics have played out as the V&A has shifted the curation of their Maqdala-related artifacts in response to the demands of the restitution debates. Their decision to navigate the new social and political environment of cultural restitution debates by taking an active approach to acknowledging 'controversial histories' has had a clear, if sometimes limited, impact on how visitors perceive the validity and accuracy of the narratives they represent – in both positive and negative ways.

4.2 The Maqdala 1868 Exhibition and Its Afterlife

Despite the frequency with which the V&A's Maqdala-related collections are invoked in conversations about the museum's imperial past, to actually find the Maqdala objects that are currently viewable on display requires some preparation and planning in advance, as they would be quite difficult to

stumble upon by accident. The most direct route involves entering the museum through the entrance on Exhibition Road and taking an immediate left towards the gift shop. Pass through the gift shop, heading towards the café, and you'll find an ornate set of marble stairs. You can climb these to the first floor, where you'll cross the creaky wooden floors through a gallery packed with gleaming gold and silver artifacts until you see a small arched doorway with a sign marking the Sacred Silver and Stained-Glass Gallery. This room, which is really more like a hallway, is noticeably darker than the adjacent galleries as it is fitted with beautiful stained-glass windows that create a dimly lit, intimate setting that immediately invokes the experience of stepping from bustling streets into a cool, quiet cathedral on a sunny day. Even on weekend afternoons during the summer holidays, the hum of conversations and footsteps that echo throughout the busier parts of the museum fade into the background in this gallery, replaced by the gentle trickle of a small water feature in the corner. In addition to the stained-glass panels that adorn the walls and windows, there are four main displays featuring gold and silver objects used by branches of Christianity from various regions as part of worship and ceremonies. On one end of the hallway, a huge silver-gilded bible sits in its own individual case, which I noticed would often draw the gaze of visitors, who might then take a moment to pause briefly as they made their way through the gallery. It is behind this case that you can find a glass window embedded into the wall, which only holds two objects: the gold crown and chalice that were taken from Maqdala during the 1868 expedition.

At first glance, the display is very simple. The two golden objects are gently lit and accompanied by a brief description of the Maqdala 1868 expedition; a 'timeline of events' that begins in 1855 with the crowning of Tewodros as Emperor and ends in 1871 with the crown and chalice being deposited into the South Kensington Museum; two brief descriptions of the crown and chalice as individual objects; and, perhaps unexpectedly, the excerpt from William Gladstone's statement to the House of Commons in 1871 where he criticized the taking of the crown and chalice from Ethiopia. Thus, for such a seemingly small and uncrowded display, it is actually attempting to accomplish quite a lot for the visitors who find themselves in this quiet corner of the vast museum. Here, I use the phrase find themselves' not to reflect the often slow, wandering nature of museum visitors who come to the galleries to walk around and see what

catches their eye but to deliberately note that almost none of the visitors who I observed or spoke to during the six months that I spent in the V&A had come to the museum with any intention of seeking out the display of objects related to the Maqdala 1868 Expedition. Nor had the vast majority made a particular effort to come to the Sacred Silver and Stained Glass gallery and had instead stumbled upon it as they made their way through the rest of the museum. In fact, in the entire time that I was in the V&A, watching probably hundreds of people walking through the gallery and speaking to maybe 1 in 10 of them, exactly one person stopped at the crown and chalice display and, when I initiated a conversation, told me that he had come to this gallery specifically to see these two objects. They were not the only things he had come to see that day, but he explained that he frequently visits the V&A because he enjoys both visiting the temporary exhibitions and spending time in the permanent galleries and that he always makes a point to stop and reflect at the crown and chalice. When I asked if he did so because they held some kind of special significance for him, he said that he was an Anglican priest, a vicar called Joe from a parish outside London (he did not specify exactly where). He also said that not only does he often visit the crown and chalice by himself, but that he ensures that when he organizes outings to the museum for groups of members of his parish, he takes care to always stop by this display on their visit. I was admittedly a bit surprised to hear this, as it was my very first day at the V&A seeing the display in person myself (though I had seen pictures sent by several contacts at the museum) and I had accidentally walked right by it on my way to find it on my first try. Situated as it is behind the grand silver bible, I suppose that I had been expecting a more prominent display and it took me another walk down the gallery from the opposite end to realize that, though I had been looking for the crown and chalice specifically, I had actually completely missed the display. This initial, somewhat awkward experience (as I had walked confidently down the hallway only to have to sheepishly make a U-turn and retrace my steps more carefully, before situating myself at what I hoped was a reasonable proximity to the display), had not made me particularly optimistic that I would have many subjects to speak to. So, I was happy and relieved to feel momentarily validated – people did indeed, as I had hoped, come to see the crown and chalice that so often appeared in articles about restitution

and on social media. However, as will be discussed later in this chapter, what appeared to be a promising start to the research period would eventually reveal itself to be an outlier rather than the norm.

Joe had entered the gallery from the side nearest to my post and the display, with the calm and assured manner of someone who knows where they are going but isn't in a rush to get there. He stopped briefly at the silver bible before moving over to the crown and chalice, where he came to rest for what felt like a few minutes. I tried to watch him discreetly, pen-in-hand hovering over my notebook and clipboard, waiting for any obvious reactions to the display and noting that he seemed particularly engaged with the objects. Like the difference between scanning your eyes over a room of people to take in the general scene and making eye contact with a specific person in the crowd, even without saying or doing anything overt, Joe appeared to me to have made contact with the crown and the chalice. By this, I mean to say that he was actively engaging with them specifically rather than absorbing them as part of the larger museum landscape, which I eventually saw as another common pattern to describe the ways that visitors interacted with the displays. The difference really seems to be a matter of the level of attention and focus given to the object or objects in question, where one involves intentionally stopping to look at and/or read about something that has piqued an interest while the other is more of a passing gaze that momentarily pauses over one thing but moves on to the next relatively quickly. From my experience, all visitors did a little bit of both throughout their time in the museum, which is virtually unavoidable in a museum like the V&A whose collections are so vast that it would take days to stop and thoroughly absorb every display and individual object. Thus, the movement of visitors throughout the galleries generally resembled a slow, continuous ebb and flow, slowly drifting towards and away from different points of interest. This would be interrupted with a temporary pause to read further information or take in a display more closely, at which point it would appear that the visitor had *looked at* the objects and texts with an intentionality that constituted engaging with them on a level beyond just *seeing* them as part of the wider whole of the room or gallery. It was visitors that belonged to the former category that I was hoping to speak with, as I wanted to know what it was about the Maqdala display that drew their attention and what their impressions were about the exhibit. Given the level of emphasis placed on the crown and chalice in media reports about restitution or contested

objects, I had expected that this display would more frequently be the object of visitors' attention rather than blending into the background of the museum. I was surprised to find then that, throughout the months I spent in the Sacred Silver and Stained-Glass gallery, it appeared that, in fact, the opposite was true. Rather than receiving frequent visitors eager to see how the V&A had dealt with the increasing notoriety of artifacts related to the Maqdala 1868 expedition, it turned out that Joe would be a standout in only a handful of visitors I observed doing so.

After what felt like a couple of minutes calmly looking at the Maqdala display, during which time he sometimes moved in closer as if to take in a detail and sometimes moved back as if to better take in the whole display, Joe made a motion like he was ready to move on. I took that as an opportunity to step forward and initiate contact with Joe by introducing myself as a PhD student researching the history of the Maqdala Collection. I asked him if he wouldn't mind having a quick chat about his perspective on the display he had just been looking at, and to my pleasant surprise I received an enthusiastic yes. After receiving his consent to partake in the research, my first line of inquiry was to ask what it was about that particular display in the gallery that had caught his eye and motivated him to stop and take it in more closely. He responded, "oh, I always make sure I visit these objects when I come, and I always bring the church group here when we do group trips to the museum." It was at this point that Joe explained that he was an Anglican priest who is a frequent visitor to the V&A both on his own and as the leader of the group visits, which are organized for interested church members because the V&A has such a large collection of objects of religious significance. I asked him why he had such a particular interest in the crown and chalice, especially given that there were many objects much more closely related to the history of the Church of England throughout the rest of the museum. "Well it's such a shame that they're here, really," he replied, "so I like to make sure to pay my respects." I hadn't expected a comment this early in the conversation to so overtly reference the idea that the crown and chalice should not be housed or on display in the V&A and was also intrigued by his reference to respect. In the third section, I explore in greater detail the idea of respect as it relates to objects of religious significance in museums, and specifically to sacred objects like Ethiopian altar tabots, but John's comment was the first to make me think about this collection in explicitly those terms. His use of that phrase

immediately conjured images of mourning, of solemn visits to graves, memorials, and funerals, of an atmosphere of sadness or tragedy; of honoring someone in death. Or, alternatively, of making a symbolic gesture to a person with whom you have some kind of relationship in order to reinforce your connection. Regardless, the phrase suggests that the objects have a presence that commands a particular kind of respect in the form of acknowledgment and visitation, which Joe feels a sense of responsibility to oblige when he visits the museum. For Joe, that obligation stems from his awareness of the objects' connection to the Maqdala Expedition, so it is intrinsically connected to a history that they acquired from circumstance rather than the perception of an innate quality in the objects themselves. How this respect manifests in the museum space is discussed more thoroughly later in a slightly different context related to religious and sacred objects in museums, but I feel it is important to acknowledge that one of the inspirations for pursuing that line of inquiry came from this early interaction with Joe.

Again, I was surprised that Joe had so easily directed the conversation in the direction of the debates about the status of the objects from the Maqdala Collection in the UK, so I asked him what information about the crown and chalice had helped him form the opinion that they shouldn't be in the V&A and where he had first learned about the objects and their history. He said that he had been coming to the V&A for a long time, but hadn't noticed the crown or chalice specifically until they were featured in a temporary special exhibition several years before that was located in a gallery he regularly walks through on his visits. This was a reference to the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition which was on display from April 2018 to June 2019, a couple of years before our conversation was taking place. The exhibition was curated by Alexandra Watson Jones, who was an assistant curator in the Metalworks department at the time and it was intended to commemorate the 150-year anniversary of the Maqdala Expedition. It was also conceived as a response on the part of the museum to the perception that the public was increasingly aware of the provenance of non-European collections, especially those connected to the period of the British Empire. And, really, not only more aware of their provenance but also more critical of it and more polarized by moral judgments of the origins of collections. When I spoke to her, Ms. Watson Jones explained that the idea behind curating a special exhibition to mark this anniversary was that doing so, in collaboration with members of the

Ethiopian community in the UK, would provide the V&A with the opportunity to demonstrate their consideration of these issues and to signal a willingness to hear the concerns about objects like the crown and chalice. The V&A also hoped to show itself as an active participant in these debates, which was reinforced in the statements made both on their blog and to media outlets covering the opening of the exhibition by Director Tristram Hunt, who said explicitly that the museum would be open to facilitating a long-term loan of the objects if requested. These remarks came right on the heels of the bump in momentum for cultural restitution that was initiated by French president Emmanuel Macron's claims that he would prioritize the return of African heritage while in office and his announcement that he was commissioning a report on the subject (now known as the Sarr-Savoy Report of 2018). The V&A was keen to be seen as responsive to the growing public engagement in restitution debates, particularly online and on social media, and displaying the Maqdala Collection offered an ideal opportunity to demonstrate these attitudes. Interestingly, neither the museum nor the display made any mention of the fact that the Ethiopian Government has had a formal request pending for the return of Maqdala artifacts since 2008, with no action initiated until the decision to curate this exhibition.

The special display was intended to showcase the objects in the museum's collections, many of which were scattered throughout different departments due to the museum's materials-based system of organization, that were related to the Maqdala 1868 expedition in a way that was 'open' about the context of their acquisition, but which did not make the expedition the primary lens through which to understand their significance. After all, the battle and looting of Maqdala was only one small snapshot in the biographies of many of the objects that are now associated with this moment, with many of them having a pre-existing social, cultural, and historical significance. It is interesting that this decision to acknowledge the anniversary of Maqdala, which was apparently taken after lengthy discussions with the Ethiopian Embassy in London, was made in a museum where the Maqdala Collection is arguably rather 'out of place' given the V&A's self-described geographical limitations; as discussed above, this is not a museum that one generally visits with the expectation of exploring African cultures and histories. Yet, something about this small and disparate collection warranted making an exception, and it is clear from the way that the

exhibition took form that it had much to do with the broader dynamics that were at play in the heritage sphere. It is no coincidence that this exhibition also coincided with the establishment of the Ethiopian Heritage Restitution National Committee, whose task is to use diplomatic networks to push for the return of Ethiopian artifacts that have been looted, stolen, or trafficked. Coordinating a display of artifacts from Maqdala and actively drawing focus to the question of how to handle their 'controversial' histories ignited renewed attention to and interest in this specific case, creating essential momentum for the committee's goals. This use of the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition as a tool for the furthering of a diplomatic agenda illustrates how, in the current and quite polarized climate where museums are frequently considered battlegrounds of the so-called 'culture wars,' the act of curating and exhibiting can be seen as a form of taking offensive or defensive action, rather than merely objectively reflecting the state of affairs. In doing so, the V&A's intervention in the representation of the Maqdala artifacts was not a response to new information – no new research on the objects themselves was undertaken in preparation for the new display, only a focus group with members of the Ethiopian and Rastafarian communities in London – but a way of reconfiguring the framework in which they are represented to the museum's audience of visitors to promote a certain narrative.

The *Maqdala 1868* display marked a distinct change in the way that the V&A approached the significance of the crown and chalice in particular, notably by shifting the focus from their religious and material value to their relationship to the Maqdala Expedition. While this of course makes sense for a temporary display commemorating that event, the legacy of this interpretive shift is still evident in the way that the crown and chalice were re-incorporated into the permanent galleries. The decision to emphasize the objects' provenance was also made in response to a focus group that was convened by the V&A's Program Manager for African Heritage and Culture, whose members stressed the importance of being 'open and honest' about the provenance of collections and expressed that they would view the exhibit negatively if it were to seem as if it was trying to avoid addressing the controversial issues surrounding their acquisition and ownership. In the final section of this chapter, I will discuss the relationship between honesty and controversy as it relates to visitors' reactions to the current display of the crown and chalice. Thus, from

the outset of the project, it was driven by this sense of obligation to be 'open and truthful,' which in this context manifested in the display taking a self-critical and borderline apologetic tone to the museum's contributions to the text. This was most evident in the prominent inclusion of the excerpt of former Prime Minister William Gladstone's quotation in which he expressed regret that the crown and chalice had been brought from Ethiopia to the UK (discussed at length in Chapter 3). This quotation serves multiple purposes, both providing some historical context to the debates about the looting of Maqdala and functioning as a sort of surrogate voice for the museum, allowing it to say that the acquisition of the crown and chalice was unethical without having to explicitly *say* it itself – without having to actually take ownership of that perspective. The choice in the first place to mark the anniversary of the Maqdala Expedition and to showcase these objects primarily through this lens set the stage from the very beginning for restitution debates to dominate the conversation about this collection of materials. This was solidified by the press coverage leading up to the opening of the exhibition, with many news outlets reporting on the V&A's plans to display 'looted Ethiopian treasures' and citing the Maqdala Expedition as a controversial example of Britain's 'murderous past in Africa.' The Ethiopian Ambassador to the UK at the time was also quoted at the opening of the event as saying that the exhibition marked an important step towards seeing the treasures returned home to Ethiopia. The consequence of this coverage was that Maqdala was thrust into the spotlight in precisely the right terms to link this collection to the ongoing conversation on the status of African collections in British museums. In this way, the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition was conceived as a method to not only respond to these debates but to help consolidate a particular identity for the Maqdala objects within them.

Alexandra Watson-Jones (2022) has discussed in detail the process of curating the exhibition as well as its reception, including noting responses by members of the Ethiopian community who expressed both excitement at the prospect of seeing Ethiopian history showcased and some disappointment at the smaller-than-expected scale of the display. However, as the temporary exhibition itself predated my PhD research, I am more interested here in the ways it functioned as a moment to re-write the historical significance of the Maqdala objects in the context of the museum and reverberating consequences of this

process. Though the exhibition only ran for a year, its goals have continued to shape the public's perceptions of and responses to the Maqdala objects now that they're back on permanent display. Whether through the memories of visitors like Joe, who first learned about their history through the lens of the temporary exhibition's focus on provenance, or visitors who now come upon a small permanent display that echoes this tone, the museum has effectively used the new curation of the crown and chalice to change the way we talk about them. The pre-exhibition labels mentioned the Maqdala Expedition to identify that the crown and chalice were taken during a military expedition and that that was how they eventually became part of the V&A's collection, but otherwise focused on its religious significance. It discussed how the crown and chalice would have probably been gifted to a church by an emperor in order to ensure that the emperor was kept in their prayers after death, noted the historical split of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church from the Coptic Church to become independent, and explained the images of the evangelists and apostles that comprise the crown's engraving. Likewise, the former gallery label for the chalice acknowledged its role in the consecration of the wine for church ceremonies and credited the engraving as the source of information that both the crown and chalice were gifted to the church of Quesquam by King Iyyasu II and his mother. These detailed descriptions of the objects themselves have been replaced by labels from the temporary exhibition which state that they were the subject of a House of Commons debate where 'Prime Minister William Gladstone passionately argued to return them to their homeland.' This is complemented by a longer excerpt of Gladstone's statement discussed above, specifically the section of the longer statement in which he expressed his regret that they had been taken from Ethiopia and brought to the UK.

The display has also adopted a panel titled 'Maqdala 1868' that introduced the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition as well as the timeline that framed the presentation of the objects, which are both new additions to the written materials that describe the crown and chalice. The timeline, titled 'Timeline of Events' begins in 1855 with the coronation of Emperor Tewodros II and ends in 1872 with the accession of the crown and chalice into the museum. While the description of the Maqdala 1868 expedition begins with April 13th 1868, the day that the siege of Maqdala began, the adjacent timeline does attempt to provide some of the background context to the expedition by alluding to the failed diplomatic communications between

Emperor Tewodros and Queen Victoria that precipitated the incident. The timeline notes that between 1857 and 1862 the Emperor had sought to appeal to fellow Christian leaders in Europe to garner military support in defense of his rule. It then moves to 1864, the year that the Emperor took, as the timeline describes 'a number of Europeans hostage.' The following point jumps to 1867 and states that 'Queen Victoria announces a large-scale military campaign to rescue the hostages.' Readers subsequently get three more detailed points on the timeline, which refer to specific dates rather than just a year or a range of years. These include the period between the 10th and 13th of April 1868 during which time the British laid siege to Maqdala and Emperor Tewodros committed suicide; the 20th and 21st of April 1868, the dates of the auction that saw objects taken from Maqdala sold to fund the Army Prize Fund; and the 30th of June 1871, when a debate is held in the House of Commons regarding the crown and chalice, which is the source of the statement by William Gladstone. The timeline ends with 1872, the year that the crown and chalice were deposited into the V&A (at the time, the South Kensington Museum). Interestingly, it was not actually until 2005 that they were considered formally accessioned into the museum's permanent collection and thus subject to the governance of the National Heritage Act. By necessity, a timeline of events in a museum display cannot possibly or reasonably be expected to cover every detail of a historical situation, and the act of selective omission is not something that would be fair to criticize here. Rather, I would like to draw attention to the role that this framing has in creating the narratives of the Maqdala Expedition that contribute to the formation of perspectives like Joe's – that is, their critical function in encouraging visitors to see the significance of the objects through the lens of debates around ownership instead of, for example, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the practices of Ethiopian rulers, or the consequences of the Maqdala Expedition on either British or Ethiopian society/politics. To be as clear as possible, I am not arguing that these would have constituted superior or more appropriate lenses through which to present the crown and chalice. I am seeking to illustrate that a choice was made in the representation of these objects and to explore the context and outcomes of that choice.

The timeline of events is a critical part of this display that facilitates the recognition of continuities with other well-known cases. Though the years are there for visitors to see and infer from, the information

in the bold descriptive text is what stands out and there is no context given to the intervening periods to suggest that there was anything but support and enthusiasm for the expedition. This idea is re-affirmed in the text panel that introduces the display, which begins with the attack on Maqdala and states that the 'British launched a "punitive raid" as part of their rescue attempt' in response to the emperor's taking of European envoys hostage. The current text is a slight adaptation of the text from the temporary exhibition, which stated that 'Tewodros had taken a number of European envoys hostage, and the British moved to retaliate.' Both forms reinforce the belief that the Maqdala 1868 Expedition conforms to currently well-known paradigms of British punitive expeditions, with an emphasis on the *punitive*. While we do know that some of the publicity surrounding the situation at the time stirred up feelings of indignation at the idea of an African leader disrespecting European envoys, we also know that there was an almost equal amount of sentiment that the British Government had woefully mismanaged the diplomatic relationship with Emperor Tewodros. Alongside a timeline that moves immediately from the taking of the hostages to the declaration of an expedition, the overall narrative being presented here is strongly evocative of, for example, the narratives that circulate about the Ashanti Expeditions of 1895 and 1900 and the Benin Expedition of 1897. These expeditions are also infamous for resulting in the large-scale looting of cultural artifacts and objects of sovereignty during assaults on African leaders who were perceived to have slighted the British – the key difference, of course, is that the Kingdom of Benin and the Ashanti Kingdom were both subjected to violent subjugation and forced to become part of the British Empire, while conquering Ethiopia was never part of the agenda of the Maqdala Expedition, nor did the British Government ever pursue this goal. It might seem excessively particular to emphasize this difference, however the point is not to provide some sort of excuse or justification for the Maqdala Expedition but to highlight that these are the narratives that have gained traction within the sphere of cultural restitution activism and become almost inseparable from the calls for the large-scale return of African artifacts. We can see the impact of their influence in the (re)presentation of the crown and chalice through this lens in the Maqdala display, which provides visitors with a history of the expedition that, without explicit comparison, evokes the continuities between this case and others. This is further reiterated by the fact that only two points on the timeline describe the expedition itself, one that

marks the siege of Maqdala and the suicide of Emperor Tewodros and one that marks the auction where the loot was sold, suggesting that the military victory of the British and the taking of loot were the two defining features of the expedition. According to the timeline, the story of the crown and chalice then ends with their being deposited into the South Kensington Museum in 1872. Thus, the visitor is introduced to these objects as the material evidence of a familiar narrative trajectory: insult leads to military expedition leads to punishment leads to loot leads to the museum. As Andromache Gazi (2014) has described in the context of museum labels, 'the way in which meanings are constructed through the use of language creates a 'representational framework' which has a great impact on visitors' understanding (p.5). The timeline's narrative not only provides context for the controversy referenced in the display's introduction but also contributes to the perception of the Maqdala Expedition as a paradigmatic case for cultural restitution due to the familiarity and resonance of this pattern in the current debates.

One key dynamic to highlight here is the equal presence given to each item on the timeline regardless of whether it marks a specific date or spans several years, which encourages visitors to read the timeline more as a linear narrative of the Maqdala Expedition than as a spotlight on key turning points. One of the visitors that I spoke to about the display, an undergraduate student from University College London called Kate, told me that she hadn't been previously aware of the Maqdala Expedition or collection specifically, but "knew about the British Empire's tendency to attack African rulers that they didn't like in order to establish imperial control" and that she "supported the return of things that were looted and acquired through the violent oppression of colonialism." When I asked her what her takeaways would be about Maqdala specifically from the display, she elaborated that "she was not surprised in the slightest that the British jumped on an opportunity to steal African artifacts to put in museums." I followed up by asking if there were any other examples that came to mind or if she felt that this display invoked any memories of other cases that she felt were similar. However, she said that while she had "heard a lot about the Elgin Marbles," she wasn't familiar with other specific cases and just "sees a lot of articles and stuff on social media about how British museums have a lot of stolen artifacts and thinks it's good that people are bringing attention to returning things that shouldn't be there." Throughout our conversation, she referred to the issues

of repatriation and decolonization as parts of a larger portfolio of topics related to global justice movements that are the subjects of discussion among her peers at the university. In other words, she was well aware that there are debates about the origins of some of the artifacts in museum collections and was also knowledgeable about the fact that these debates are closely linked to the history of imperialism, but her current position was based more on a recognition of general patterns and information acquired in conversation with other students than it was an investment in a specific case. In her view, the display of the crown and chalice essentially introduced her to an example that reinforced her existing understanding of the subject. It's clear how someone could come to the conclusion that the decision to launch the Maqdala Expedition was one that fit seamlessly into the narratives that Kate had described, wherein it was not only unsurprising but expected that the looting had taken place and that she did not need the display to do any more to convince her that the crown and chalice should be returned to Ethiopia; her recognition of the pattern in the way the museum represented the history of the Maqdala Expedition was enough for her to determine her position regarding the status of these objects in the V&A.

If this narrative alone was not enough to ensure that the Maqdala Collection is considered among the other iconic cases of cultural restitution, the only quotation that the display has kept from the original temporary exhibition, among those from historical British figures and current members of the Ethiopian community, is the famous excerpt from William Gladstone. This quotation is accompanied by the description that, during the debate in the House of Commons, he 'argued passionately for their return to Ethiopia.' As we explored in the previous chapter, there were several intertwined political threads that contributed to William Gladstone's statement, but this particular section is often cited in debates about the status of the Maqdala Collection because it appears to contrast so sharply with the argument, typically against the return of cultural artifacts, that moral standards regarding looting and plundering were different during the period of imperialism and therefore should be judged by those standards instead of so-called

modern ones.[3] This line of argument proposes that it is inappropriate to pursue a retroactive application of principles regarding the treatment of cultural artifacts that supposedly did not exist at the time that they were removed from their original cultural contexts. Proponents of repatriation use Gladstone's remarks to refute this claim by demonstrating that there were people at the time who did not have a favorable view of looting, and even actively opposed it. Considering that this quotation is extracted from a statement given to the House of Commons by the Prime Minister, it also has an air of authority and legitimacy that challenges assumptions that the debates about the taking and return of cultural artifacts are solely the novel products of contemporary social justice movements. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that it was chosen for this display rather than a statement from one of the members of the Ethiopian community who participated in the original project to curate the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition – as their perspectives presumably cannot be separated from the context of the current discourse of reinterpreting collections taken in imperial contexts, they may be more easily dismissed as biased towards a perceived left-wing agenda. Using Gladstone's comments allows the museum to validate the position that the crown and chalice are the subject of a debate about their status and ownership while remaining within the realm of 'historical facts,' which is so integral to the burden that is often placed on museums to 'remain neutral.' Put another way, the quotation from Gladstone allows the V&A to encourage its audience to consider the crown and chalice in light of the debates about cultural restitution in a way that is seemingly detached from the belief that these debates have solely emerged in response to the pressure of contemporary political divisions. This affects the tone of the exhibition in a way that would be different should it include, for example, a more recent statement from Tristram Hunt, the director of the V&A, who was quoted in 2018 in the Art Newspaper as saying that he 'made a clear statement to the ambassador, saying that if Ethiopia is interested in pursuing a long-term loan of the Maqdala items, we would stand ready to assist. Arguably, this statement more accurately represents the museum's current position regarding the status of the Maqdala objects than the comments made by

[3] See the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums, which was signed by the directors of numerous major museums located in the United States and Europe, for an example of the prevalence of this position in the international museum community.

William Gladstone in 1871, but it is also more vulnerable to political criticisms from both ends of the spectrum – potentially being seen as too noncommittal for those in favor of unqualified restitution but too capitulating by those who oppose it. Or, on the other hand, the museum could have balanced Gladstone's statement by including a complimentary quotation from the same House of Commons debate, where several members argued equally passionately against him. Instead, the curators clearly made a deliberate choice to feature this specific excerpt. By having only William Gladstone, a historical figure who cannot be accused of participating in the 'culture wars,' speak on behalf of the crown and chalice, the display more subtly signals the museum's favorable position towards the restitution of the Maqdala Collection. In this way, the new display accomplishes both the re-semanticization of the crown and chalice within the wider restitution debates and re-contextualizes the historicity of these debates.

Though the *Maqdala 1868* special exhibition was temporary and was only on display for a year, it marked a clear shift in the way the history of Maqdala was represented within the V&A and its legacy can still be seen today in the current display of the crown and chalice. Notably, the decision to re-contextualize these objects in terms of their Maqdala-related provenance and to emphasize their 'controversial history' was made not in response to new information about the expedition, but in a desire to write a history for them that was compatible with the ongoing debates about African cultural restitution and decolonization in museums. Now as well as during the special exhibition, visitors are prompted through the display to 'remember' Maqdala as another example of the British Empire's violence towards African cultures and rulers in a way that directly responds to these wider conversations. This is an understandable response on the part of a museum that wants to be seen as taking a proactive approach to collections with ethically complicated provenances, and my point here is not to suggest otherwise. Instead, my aim is to demonstrate how restitution debates have played a critical role in motivating the museum to represent these objects and this history in a particular way, and to provide a reminder that these histories are not independent of the social and political context in which they are told. In the next section, we return to the interactions of visitors with the displays and explore some of the moral and/or ethical judgments that they made in response to the museum's presentation of this history. Even though the new display of the crown and chalice simply

emphasizes different information about their cultural significance, history, and provenance rather than providing updated research, visitors I spoke to repeatedly praised the content for "being open" or "telling the truth," – again, despite the fact that the previous displays could hardly have been described as dishonest. It was as if the shift in focus not only encouraged them to think about the objects through the lens of repatriation debates but also changed their perception of the display's honesty. Just by acknowledging that there is controversy around the acquisition and ownership of objects related to the Maqdala Expedition, the V&A was therefore able to gain more trust from visitors in the accuracy of the history described in the display. In the next section, we turn to this dynamic and explore why a display that discusses 'controversial histories' is seen as being more truthful, and how this impacts visitors' engagement with the content it presents.

4.3 Encounters with an Ethiopian Crown: Different Perceptions of Honesty and Truth

I want to preface these observations by acknowledging that I did not speak to anyone who expressed an overtly negative perception of the current display. While I spoke to a good handful of people who did not have much to say in general, beyond broad comments about the display being interesting or the objects being aesthetically beautiful, I did not personally encounter anyone who expressed displeasure at the tone or content of the crown and chalice display. Given the strength of the conviction on different ends of the debates about cultural restitution, I anticipated perhaps speaking with one or two visitors who felt that the V&A's new approach to telling the history of the crown and chalice was the unwelcome result of liberal political pressure, or who felt that it brought modern political issues into a space where they didn't belong. People who hold these opinions may have been present at the same time as I was in the museum, but they either did not pass through the Sacred Silver and Stained Glass gallery when I was there, or they weren't drawn to the crown and chalice display. I would not be surprised to learn that it was the latter, as the display is rather tucked away and does not draw much attention, especially when visitors are motivated to look up at the stained glass on display as they move through the gallery. I would have welcomed any opportunities to include these perspectives in my analysis, but I unfortunately must instead comment on

their absence. Perhaps those who kept the conversation brief actually would have critiqued the display but didn't feel comfortable doing so due to assumptions about my motivations for conducting interviews about the crown and chalice. Regardless, the conversations I had with the few visitors who stopped to engage with the current display demonstrated that the V&A's representation of the Maqdala Expedition evokes reactions to the objects that focus on the museum's handling of the ethical issues surrounding their status in the UK.

Though it is impossible to conclusively link the changes in visitor perceptions to the shift in the representation of the Maqdala Expedition without being able to compare impressions before and after the special exhibition, I was still able to gain insight into the ways that visitors have been affected by the re-narrativization of the histories of these objects. Furthermore, thanks to interviews and conversations with people who were involved in curating the special exhibition and employees who were present in the galleries during the period in which it was on display, I learned that there were several notable differences in perceptions of the truth between Ethiopian visitors to the special display and the more general museum audience that responds to the current display. In their responses to the current display of the crown and chalice, which reflects the legacy of the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition, I found that visitors often made judgments about the truth of the information and the honesty of the display based on the way it represents the 'controversial' history. There is, of course, a general assumption among the public that museums already endeavor to present unbiased and accurate information about the objects in their collections – I would suggest that there are few people who come to a museum expecting to be presented with factually incorrect information (this is reaffirmed in Edson 2005). However, we also know that, both throughout history and today, there are museum practices that have reinforced untrue and harmful stereotypes, perpetuated racist narratives about non-white cultures, and sought to promote pro-imperial sentiments and agendas. Museums are expected to constantly undergo processes of reinterpretation and reflection in order to adapt to developments in our knowledge and understanding of different cultures as much as they also have to respond to changing social and political environments. So, the interesting thing that I noticed about visitors' perceptions of the crown and chalice display is not that they perceived the museum, as an institution, as

being honest, but that they specifically cited truth and honesty as positive attributes of this particular display. By contrast, when discussing the responses to the special exhibition by members of the Ethiopian community, it appeared that they were sometimes less enthusiastic about the way the museum presented the history of the objects – specifically, while some praised the acknowledgment of the controversy, others actually took issue with the idea of describing the status of the objects as controversial, believing that there should be no dispute in the first place about Ethiopia's rightful ownership. Thus, while some visitors who view the current display see a museum that has taken action towards addressing its connection to a violent history by being 'open' about the provenance of the objects, other visitors, especially those from the Ethiopian community, perceive this approach as borderline dishonest due to its potential legitimization of the British-focused narrative.

One young woman that I spoke to stated that she had no prior knowledge of the history of the Maqdala Expedition, nor did she know much about the debates about cultural restitution in general. Yet, when I asked her what her overall impressions of the display were, having encountered this information for the first time, one of the first things she did was praise it for being honest. I asked her if she could elaborate on what features of the display stood out to her, if any, that made her admire its honesty. She said she thought it was good that the museum acknowledged that there was controversy about how the objects had come to be part of the museum's collections because not many other museums that she had visited discussed that subject. She continued that "most places tell you where stuff is from, for sure, but they don't really tell you how it got here so you just assume that there are no problems. But it's cool to see museums talking about issues instead of just pretending like they're not there. You don't have to agree about whether they should be returned or not, but it's good to at least let people know that that's a thing that's being thought about." The reasoning underlying her trust in the display was essentially the assumption that museums that don't even acknowledge that there's any disagreement about the status or ownership of objects in their holdings are keeping that information from visitors to avoid having to deal with controversy or debate; a museum that is willing to make that acknowledgment is, therefore, more trustworthy. Another visitor reinforced her perspective, saying that it was "refreshing to see museums telling us more about all the

different ways that things travel around the world, even when those ways are a bit negative or don't always make the museum look good." So, while critics of these 'open' displays sometimes argue that they don't 'do enough' in terms of restitution, visitors like these, often learning new information, can view the inclusion of 'controversial' information as an almost courageous move on the part of the museum because it risks reflecting negatively on their institutional history and identity. David Dean (2005) makes an important distinction between accuracy and honesty in a museum display: where accuracy is used to evaluate the validity of the information presented in accordance with available knowledge, research, and scholarship, honesty has to do with the perception of the way this information is represented to the museum's audiences (p.219). While visitors generally expect accuracy from museums, their evaluations of honesty may be varied and complex as they are entangled in multiple layers of ethics and morality. As is the case for the Maqdala Collection, this complexity becomes even more evident when both the significance of the objects themselves and the narratives they represent are the subjects of negotiation and contestation.

A key feature of this perspective is that these visitors aren't just complimenting the museum's decision to include certain information in the display because it is interesting or new to them but are also effectively making a positive moral judgment about the display because of this inclusion. Ironically, suggesting that the crown and chalice are the subject of competing claims of ownership does not, for some, reflect negatively on the museum and instead creates the impression that it is willing to tell the truth even if the truth paints it in a less-than-flattering light. In a conversation with a different visitor, who, much like Kate, had many prior opinions about the cultural restitution debates and the role of imperialism in contemporary social injustices, she said she was "happy to finally see museums starting to own up to the ways they benefited from Empire, even if they're not doing it perfectly." These comments are not dissimilar to responses that other museums, such as the British Museum, have documented in reports on the impact of other exhibitions and displays that set out to 'address difficult histories.' In the reports published by the British Museum on its special exhibitions on Indigenous Australia (2015) and South Africa (2017), visitors were noted as having given feedback responding directly to the inclusion of information about colonial violence against Indigenous peoples and the violence of apartheid in South Africa – with the majority

expressing respect and admiration for the museum's willingness to acknowledge the negative or uncomfortable contexts of the histories being told through these objects. They praised the museum's transparency on the issues surrounding the subjects of the exhibitions, even going so far as to describe discussions of violence as "brave" (British Museum 2015, p.21). A minority of visitors made similar comments that instead expressed criticism of the perception that the museum was itself making moral judgments in the way it represented narratives of colonialism or apartheid, with one visitor quoted as saying "stop wittering on like a Post-Colonial Studies undergraduate; clear, detailed, historically accurate signage is sufficient for an intelligent audience to understand the issues of racism, war, and apartheid. Stick to facts: stop moralizing" (British Museum 2015, p.22). Another accuses the British Museum of curating the exhibition with bias due to the implication that British involvement in South Africa had uniformly negative consequences. These types of sentiments do not appear in the reports and evaluations relating to other exhibitions that showcase histories that are presumably not considered 'difficult' by visitor audiences, such as the British Museum's special exhibitions of ancient collections or the V&A's exhibition that explored the cultural evolution of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. The judgments made in these examples and about the current crown and chalice display reveal that perceptions of the honesty of the display, rather than just its accuracy, are closely intertwined with assumptions about the controversial nature of the subject and the narrative that is presented.

The *Maqdala 1868* special exhibition was not on the scale of some of the V&A's other temporary exhibitions, which can often encompass entire galleries that require separate ticketed entry rather than single display cases in the main halls. As it was integrated into a larger and centrally located gallery, there is no information available on how many visitors it received directly, nor were any formal reports produced on visitor impressions as was the case for the British Museum exhibitions referenced above. Unfortunately, it was therefore not prominent enough for some gallery assistants to remember specific responses to a display more than two years after it had been taken down. In fact, I was informed that many of the front-of-house staff throughout the museum, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the resources and functions of cultural institutions, were not the same members of staff that would have been present when the *Maqdala*

1868 display was available to view. A few gallery assistants that I spoke to apologetically informed me that they either couldn't recall the exhibition or weren't aware of it in the first place. This meant that, apart from the curatorial staff and focus group members who were directly involved in putting together the exhibition, there weren't many people available to speak to who were aware of the general reception of the exhibition or who had been able to witness the daily responses and reactions of visitors who did see the display, whether intentionally or by happenstance. However, I was fortunate to eventually come across several front-of-house staff members in the Sacred Silver and Stained-Glass galleries who, being relatively familiar with the current display of the crown and chalice, were able to recollect some of the engagement with the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition, particularly from visitors from the Ethiopian community. As they were employed by the V&A at the time and were concerned about being perceived as speaking on behalf of the institution as a whole, they asked to remain anonymous and that I make it clear that what they shared was purely their personal understanding of how the display was received based on their interactions with visitors. While I obviously respect their concerns, I did find it illuminating that one of the stated goals of the V&A in putting on the display in the first place was to be more open about controversial histories, yet the attitude of the front-of-house employees implied the museum might not have been as enthusiastic about discussing any controversial issues raised by the display itself. To me, this suggested that the V&A as an institution was willing to demonstrate its engagement with debates about provenance and restitution but was less willing to entertain critiques of its methods of pursuing said engagement. It wanted to be seen as addressing the issues raised by the debates around the ownership of objects acquired in the context of the British Empire, hence the publicity and statements made by the V&A throughout the exhibition's duration, but the museum wanted control over the narrative framework through which those issues were understood.

Some of the front-of-house staff members worked in the reception area of the museum and remembered Ethiopian visitors coming to see the exhibition, often families with children who seemed excited about the chance to see Ethiopian material heritage featured. Others were gallery assistants who worked in the area where the display was installed, which is adjacent to the small gallery where the crown and chalice are now housed permanently. Though sometimes museum staff will seek out structured forms

of feedback such as surveys, even when they are not conducting such evaluations gallery assistants still look out for opportunities to get insight into visitors' receptions of a special or new exhibition. One gallery assistant told me that she remembered the display getting a generally positive response from visitors, but that there were self-identified members of the Ethiopian community who did express some disappointment at its scale. Because it had been marketed as a 'temporary exhibition,' it seems that some visitors had anticipated perhaps an entirely separate gallery (as is often the case) rather than a single display case nestled in between other, non-Ethiopian displays. Though they were pleased with the concept and happy to see the objects getting more attention, they were also somewhat critical that the content of the display emphasized the status of the artifacts in the UK rather than their connections to Ethiopian history. For example, apparently, some visitors had been drawn to the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition due to its connection to Emperor Tewodros and hoped to use it to teach their children about this historical figure. As discussed in Chapter 3, Emperor Tewodros is a complex figure in Ethiopian historiography who is often associated with the early stages of Ethiopia's development as a modern nation-state and is seen as a hero who stood against European imperialism (for all his flaws). But the temporary exhibition actually spoke very little about the emperor's role in Ethiopian history and instead focused on the voices of British figures such as Henry Morton Stanley, William Gladstone, and Robert Napier. The emperor is only briefly quoted once on a small side panel in a statement lamenting his lack of military technology. Even when discussing the fate of Emperor Tewodros's son, Prince Alemayehu, whose short and tragic life in the UK after Maqdala is often used to further humanize the consequences of the expedition's violence, the exhibition gives him voice only through a quotation from the journal of Queen Victoria where she describes her sadness at his passing considering that he was alone in a foreign place with no family. It is unsurprising that a British institution like the V&A would, intentionally or not, tell the history of Maqdala from the British perspective – that is, Maqdala as it is understood in the context of British history. However, as we explored in the previous chapter, Ethiopian historiography has offered a different understanding of the significance of this expedition that situates it in relationship to Ethiopia's process of development. That some visitors came to the exhibition with the expectation of seeing the Ethiopian perspective represented is indicative of the ways that the narratives

created by restitution debates are not necessarily those that best serve the communities from which restitution claims originate; that Ethiopian visitors were disappointed to see Maqdala objects used to illustrate William Gladstone's remarks rather than Emperor Tewodros's historical role in modernizing Ethiopia reminds us that the 'open' histories that are amplified by restitution debates can inadvertently obscure other histories and voices from the conversation.

While I am unable to comment decisively on the demographics of the V&A's visitors, due to the unavailability of materials that would provide such information, I can anecdotally say that, from my time with the current crown and chalice display, it doesn't appear that the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition inspired a lasting increase in members of the Ethiopian community coming to seek out displays of Ethiopian artifacts. In six months, I unfortunately did not get the chance to meet or speak to anyone who identified themselves as having Ethiopian heritage. I think that it speaks to the nature of these issues that the prevalence or strength of the larger debate, the discursive attention given to the contested collections housed/on display in museums, does not always manifest in a lasting increase in foot traffic to engage with these collections in person in the institutions that are the subject of criticism. This is a dynamic that I will explore in greater detail in the next chapter, which discusses my complementary research in the British Museum. For this reason, I am grateful for the memories of the staff members who were able to recount their interactions with Ethiopian visitors to the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition. The fact that they did encounter enough Ethiopian visitors to the exhibition to remember some of their impressions of the display shows how effective such special exhibitions can be in revitalizing the attention that is essential fuel for debates about returning objects to their countries of origin. Even if the visitor engagement is only temporary, this attention can be perpetuated through changes to the permanent displays, as discussed above. One staff member said that she remembered several families who had come with young children to teach them about their heritage and history, but who were disappointed to find that "there wasn't actually much Ethiopian history in the display" and that 'it was really more about the British side of things." Aside from the acknowledgment that Emperor Tewodros had been seeking military alliances and support in the lead-up to the hostage incident, there is no information about the context of his rule, nor is there an explanation for why his requests were unsuccessful.

There is also no discussion about the effect that the Maqdala Expedition had on Ethiopian leadership. No display can cover everything, and this is not a criticism of the curatorship of the exhibition, which was put together in very good faith and with the support of leaders from the Ethiopian community in London. But it does raise questions about, when we speak about 'being open' about the provenance of collections with these types of histories, what that openness means from different perspectives. From the comments of the gallery staff, it seems that not a small number of Ethiopian visitors expected openness to mean a greater emphasis on Ethiopian history rather than showing Ethiopia as the backdrop for a more 'open' description of a chapter of British history. The V&A's understanding of their 'responsibility to shine a light on the complex histories behind these objects and to openly acknowledge the difficult questions relating to their provenance' manifested in a relatively detailed description of the events of the expedition itself. Emphasizing the context in which the collection was acquired provides visitors with information that can be used to form an opinion about their status in the museum and, more broadly, the UK. In the previous section, we saw how the information in the current display of the crown and chalice was used by Kate to arrive at the understanding that she would be in favor of their return to Ethiopia and that her position was primarily motivated by her perception that the objects from the Maqdala Collection conformed to a pattern of stealing/looting objects during periods of imperialism and colonialism. It was primarily the way the history of their acquisition was presented that formed her opinion, and it is clear that the V&A was operating under the assumption that this would be the case when they decided what it would mean to be 'open' with the *Maqdala 1868* display.

The responses to the display by members of the Ethiopian community that were observed by the front-of-house staff and gallery assistants illustrate, however, that this is not always the logic that resonates with the communities who are making the claims for restitution. I asked them specifically if they remembered speaking with any Ethiopian visitors who made comments referencing common terms in the restitution debate such as decolonization or (post)colonialism. Several recalled that some of the visitors, generally those who seemed disappointed about the lack of representation of Emperor Tewodros or frustrated with the Britishness of the display, also made a point to talk about Ethiopia's independence. One

person I spoke to told me about a conversation she had had with an Ethiopian visitor who had told her about Ethiopia's history of independence as though he was a tour guide providing additional context to the display, passionately describing with pride how "despite the result at Maqdala, Ethiopians weren't victims" (she remembered something very close to this particular phrasing) and how they went on to defeat the Italians when they tried to invade. When I spoke with Alexandra Watson Jones, the curator of the exhibition, she confirmed that, in the consultations with Ethiopian community members to prepare the expedition, one of the points that were consistently raised was to not use the term 'decolonize' to describe the purpose or context of the exhibition. She also explained that some of the feedback she received was that the Ethiopian visitors were worried that the way the display represented the Maqdala Expedition would inadvertently mislead visitors into believing that Ethiopia was a formal colony due to the emphasis on the role of the British Empire and the common assumptions about African countries that make restitution claims. This sentiment reminded me of a conversation I had myself with a representative of the Ethiopian embassy in London who was involved in the consultation process for the project. He reiterated multiple times that Ethiopia had never been colonized by England and had never been part of the British Empire – it was independent before the Maqdala objects were taken and it remained independent after they were taken – and that for this reason, the UK has no rightful claim of ownership. He then went on to state that it would be more fitting to compare Ethiopia to another country that had never been colonized (he suggested Germany) and to consider whether there would be any contestation over the ownership of the objects if it were one of these countries asking the UK to return stolen artifacts; he believes there would not be so much back and forth debate if this were the case, but feels that museums are reluctant to acknowledge this dynamic and return the Maqdala objects because "at worst it is a case of racism tainting the treatment of Ethiopia because they don't want to set a precedent of returning collections to African countries." While the *Maqdala 1868* exhibition does not, as requested, explicitly reference 'decolonizing' the V&A's collections or imply that Ethiopia was ever part of the British Empire, it also doesn't make a point to emphasize Ethiopian independence in relation to this 'controversial period in Ethiopian and British history,' which may have been the case if the same collection had been curated and displayed in an Ethiopian

museum. This difference in the responses to the exhibition's method of being 'open' about history demonstrates that the same approach that is celebrated by some can be seen by others as effectively overshadowing alternative histories. But in both cases, the museum's representation of the Maqdala 1868 narrative evoked responses that either complimented or questioned the honesty of the display, highlighting the role of perceptions of truth in responding to and judging the museum's approach to this history. In the next section, we will turn to a museum that has, until very recently, pursued a different strategy, the British Museum, and explore how narratives and remembrances can be made in a museum even when they don't initially appear to be present at all.

Chapter 5: Maqdala in the British Museum

5.1 The British Museum's Role in the Maqdala Expedition

If there is any institution that can be said to be at the heart of the cultural restitution debates that are taking place in the UK, it is the British Museum. Though there are many museums, private collections, and universities around the country that have objects and materials with controversial, imperial-era provenances, none are quite as infamous and notorious as the British Museum. Home to an enormous collection of objects from around the world, the British Museum has long been the subject of controversy for its claims to ownership over iconic collections and objects, including the Parthenon Sculptures (so-called 'Elgin Marbles'), Benin Bronzes, the Rosetta Stone, Asante Gold, and two Moai ancestor statues from Rapanui. The critiques about the status of these objects within the museum have become so ubiquitous that the museum has actually dedicated a page on its website under the About Us tab to 'contested objects from the collection.' According to the British Museum, this page compiles the 'statements on the most frequent requests' and provides 'information on the current status of the discussions.' Having a public page for this subject on its website enables the museum to give the impression that it is respecting the requests for repatriation – reassuring its audiences that it takes such claims seriously – while simultaneously seeking to ensure that these debates and the histories with which they are associated are framed in the museums' terms. The Maqdala Collection has indeed reached the level of attention to warrant inclusion on this page and will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter, as these online forms of display are an essential component in the museum's approach to defining the history of the Maqdala Expedition and its relationship to these objects (including those that are not currently on display in the galleries). This is particularly important for a museum that is frequently featured in the online discourses surrounding museums, decolonization, and the relationship between contemporary sociopolitical issues and Empire. On online forums such as X (formerly known as Twitter), posts that feature references, both humorous and serious, to the British Museum's holdings of stolen artifacts can reach tens, and even hundreds, of thousands of likes by users, reflecting the widespread familiarity of these debates outside of the professional cultural

industry or academia; in an episode of the popular talk show Last Week Tonight with John Oliver on the HBO network, which has over 10 million views, the host describes the British Museum as "the world's largest active crime scene" (LastWeekTonight, 2022). These are just a few of many examples that demonstrate the way that the British Museum has become one of the most widely-referenced cultural touchstones within the debates about the return of cultural objects from European cultural institutions to their countries of origin.

Given the focus on and visibility of the British Museum in this regard, it is unsurprising that the so-called 'contested collections' that are closely linked to the museum also tend to become pre-eminent in these discourses about restitution, imperialism, and repatriation. The growing reputation of the British Museum as an institution that was deeply entangled with, and frequently benefited from, the structures of the British Empire has created a perception that is similar to a sense of 'guilt by association,' where just the knowledge that an object or collection in the British Museum is the subject of repatriation claims can come with a set of assumptions about the context of these claims – even for those who disagree with the premise and logic of cultural restitution. As Stuart Frost (2019) has explored, there is a long-standing perception among visitors to the British Museum that there is a strong association between the museum and the British Empire, and who tend to connect this relationship to the issue of 'colonial loot.' In his analysis of the direct messages that are received by the museum from members of the public, he noted that there was a strong thematic focus on colonialism, with an emphasis on the historical contexts of collecting and debates about the repatriation of artifacts, and that these messages or posts tended to come from individuals rather than coordinated advocacy groups. He also observed that external factors play an important role in drawing increased attention to this subject, particularly that featuring these themes and subjects in the media often leads to critiques of specific collections; this was the case, for example, in the wake of the release of the 2018 film *Black Panther*, which led to a more prominent profile for the museum's African collections despite the museum and objects depicted in the film being fictional. Thus, there is a complex interplay between how the museum represents its collections and how the museum itself is represented which contributes to the way that the debates about cultural restitution are understood. As we will see throughout

the remainder of this chapter, assumptions about the British Museum's relationship to imperialism and the perception of its part in the Maqdala Expedition play a critical role in shaping the status of the Maqdala Collection within restitution debates. However, the broader discourses in which this collection is entangled are not always easily visible in the physical space of the museum. This creates an interesting disparity between the discursive focus on the Maqdala Collection as the subject of a well-known restitution debate and the material reality of their curation (or lack thereof) in the British Museum.

The relationship between the British Museum and the structures and ideologies of imperialism has long been the subject of academic interest, as seen in notable works like that of Annie Coombes (1994) on the role of exhibitions in shaping both intellectual discourses about and popular imaginations of Africa during the British Empire. More recent work such as that of Dan Hicks (2020) has extended this analysis to use the case of the Benin Bronzes to conceptualize the display of looted cultural artifacts in anthropological museums as an enduring form of imperial violence, rather than merely a consequence of that violence. As I explored in detail in the first chapter, a large amount of research on museums has been of this nature, devoted to deconstructing the varied and complex ways that museums benefited from and supported the systems of Empire, whether by promoting imperialist narratives about other cultures or amassing the huge collections of cultural materials that enabled these institutions to gain significant advantages as sites of knowledge production. The size, reputation, and nature of the British Museum in particular have made it a focal point of this conversation. Within this body of literature, the details of the museum's connections to the Maqdala Expedition specifically have only within the past few years begun to be treated with particular attention in light of the current social and political climate surrounding museums. While work on the Maqdala Expedition in European academia, mainly in the fields of British history and military history, has always included recognition of the presence of Richard Holmes as a representative of the British Museum who accompanied the expedition (see Bates 1979 and Matthies 2012), there has been comparatively little analysis of the context of his role. Though it was certainly not unusual for a military expedition of the British Empire to be accompanied by non-military personnel – it was typical, for example, for journalists to accompany expeditions in order to document and report on the outcomes –

the Maqdala Expedition was unique in the fact that the British Museum chose to directly send a member of their staff, something that was both unprecedented and unrepeated in other expeditions Given the increasingly public debates about the legacy of imperialism in British cultural institutions, this special circumstance has been subjected to an increase in attempts to characterize its significance. As I will show, these debates have strongly influenced the way that the involvement of Richard Holmes, and by extension the involvement of the British Museum, in the Maqdala Expedition is remembered and represented.

A large amount of work has already been done on the British Museum's various entanglements, discursive and material, with Empire, so research on the case of the Maqdala Expedition has gone to great lengths to emphasize and explore the meaning of the presence of Richard Holmes. The British Museum page on the Maqdala Collection (under the 'contested objects from the collection' heading) repeats the claim that Holmes was one of the 'principal buyers' during the auction of the loot from Maqdala and acquired more than 300 manuscripts for the museum. Recent articles, which have emerged as the profile of the Maqdala Collection has risen within restitution debates, have elaborated on this claim to assert that sending Richard Holmes to accompany the expedition constituted the British Museum taking an active role in premeditated plunder rather than just passively benefitting from circumstances outside their control (see Gunning and Challis 2023a). In the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition that has been disseminated in large part due to the debates about cultural restitution, Richard Holmes has become more than a unique supporting character, but a symbol for the strong connections between cultural institutions and the machinations of the British Empire – his presence appears to be clear, irrefutable evidence that museums could and did function not only as the beneficiaries but as the agents of imperialism. Holmes is the ideal boogeyman to challenge counterarguments that, however controversial the original circumstances of theft, plunder, or coercion may have been that brought these objects to the UK, the museum is a neutral place of research and appreciation. It is a sort of 'gotcha' moment as if to say 'look, the British Museum isn't just holding onto stolen and looted cultural artifacts, it actually went to steal some of them itself.' Scholars such as Gunning and Challis (2023a) argue that Holmes's participation demonstrates that the British Museum anticipated the plunder of Maqdala and sought to take advantage to enrich their collections; they explain away the fact that this

strategy was not repeated in subsequent expeditions in, for example, West Africa by noting that Holmes was also expected to take the opportunity to conduct archaeological investigations but ultimately was too constrained by the needs of the expedition to do so. Nevertheless, they describe Holmes as not only a participant in the plunder of Maqdala, but actually a catalyst because he personified the assumption, and, indeed, expectation, that objects of value would be brought back for the museum.

With these kinds of analyses, Richard Holmes has become an almost fantastical figure in the debates about the restitution of the Maqdala artifacts: the archaeologist who oversaw the plunder of Ethiopian heritage and triumphantly returned to the British Museum with some of the most prized treasures taken from the fortress, including hundreds of valuable manuscripts. In the remainder of this section, I want to dive deeply into the process of constructing this image to show how such a representation of Richard Holmes's role is intrinsically linked to the cultural restitution debate. The motivation to strengthen the link between the British Museum and the expedition has resulted in a selective emphasis on certain elements of his story to the detriment of others and has had a significant impact on the way the narrative of Maqdala is constructed in this context. Critically, this section is not intended to challenge the idea that the British Museum benefited from the Maqdala Expedition (or imperialism more broadly) by suggesting that the role of Richard Holmes has been mispresented. Instead, I aim to demonstrate how cultural restitution debates influence the process of writing the narratives that are represented within these debates, rather than merely responding to objective histories. In this case, we will also see that it is important to question the assumptions and frameworks that dominate these conversations because doing so enables us to explore alternative ways of knowing this history. Holmes's reputation is largely based on the account of Henry Morton (H.M.) Stanley, the famed journalist and writer whose writings on Africa and representations of expeditions fueled the Victorian imagination of the continent and upheld foundational ideologies of imperialism. Even at the time in which he was most prolific, H.M. Stanley, who wrote as a special correspondent for the *New York Herald*, was considered a brash and sensationalist writer (Driver 1991). Notoriously, and to the dismay of the British, his account of the Maqdala Expedition was the first to be published, even before the official reports from army officials had arrived in London – something that was

actually documented in his obituary, and which was rumored to be due to his having bribed a telegraphist (Ravenstein 1904). As much as his narratives enthralled the newspaper-reading public at the time, Stanley's accounts in later years were called into question as his tendency to exaggerate the details of expeditions, making them seem more grandiose and dramatic than they were, was revealed (Jeal 2011). This diminished trust in his reliability was certainly not helped by his involvement with King Leopold of Belgium's brutal project of subjugation in the Congo. Nevertheless, Stanley's chronicle of the Maqdala Expedition remains the foundational text on which subsequent understandings of this event are based, which is still true today. Stanley's later, more comprehensive account of the auction of the plunder from Maqdala includes a depiction of Richard Holmes and Colonel Frazer in an intense bidding war over many objects, where Holmes frequently emerged victorious, and is the initial source of the oft-repeated claim that Holmes's purchases accounted for almost £1000 of the £5000 that was raised (Stanley 1891, p.381). Holmes is credited with acquiring over 300 looted manuscripts on behalf of the museum as well as, according to the British Museum, 'regalia, sacred vessels, and liturgical equipment' – though we know from the earlier analysis of the debate about the crown and chalice in the House of Commons that some of his actions in doing so precipitated the disagreement between the Army Prize Fund and the Trustees of the British Museum.

Where Stanley's account of the auction is likely the origin of the understanding that Holmes used the ample funds available to him to out-bid most other bidders, this narrative has been entrenched in the representation of the Maqdala Expedition in large part due to the extensive work of Richard and Rita Pankhurst, whose research on Ethiopia is well-known and whose activism regarding restitution was discussed in the first section of this thesis. In her article on the library of manuscripts that had been built by Emperor Tewodros at Maqdala, Rita Pankhurst (1973) explicitly suggests that the £1000 that had been granted to Holmes to cover the costs of excavations and acquisitions was largely unused by the time the auction took place and therefore equipped him to be the most successful and prolific bidder, and she cites Stanley's account as the source of this information (p.20). Richard Pankhurst (1999), in his argument in favor of the return of the Maqdala artifacts to Ethiopia, also emphasizes Holmes's 'energy and funds' as

one of the main reasons that British institutions were able to receive 'a vast quantity of artifacts stolen from Ethiopia' (p.231-232). The Pankhursts were demonstrably passionate about the issue of the repatriation of Ethiopian heritage and their combination of activism and scholarship on this subject earned them a particular authority that has enabled their accounts to play a key role in the development of the Maqdala narrative. Gunning and Challis (2023a and 2023b) extensively cite the Pankhursts when referring to the impact of the Maqdala Expedition on Ethiopian heritage and the ongoing campaign to return looted artifacts to Ethiopia. Even significant works that recount the history of the Maqdala Expedition without a focus on the heritage issue such as those of Bates (1979) and Matthies (2012) repeat and cite the assertions of the Pankhursts when it comes time to recount the auction and the subsequent controversies. Matthies (2012) also cites Bates (1979) and we can see how, with enough repetition and propagation in the right circles, an anecdote starts to become not merely a footnote but eventually a key part of the historical record (p.145). In fact, this claim is actually a footnote in Bates (1979), where he states outright about the auction that 'the best bidder was Dr. Holmes of the British Museum. He used most of his allowance of £1000 to outbid everyone else and secure some 350 of the books from Theodorus' splendid collection of Ethiopian religious books and illuminated manuscripts' (p.204). Bates (1979) does not provide a citation for this information, though his bibliography of works consulted includes references for Rita Pankhurst's (1973) article, Richard Pankhurst's (1967) book, and Stanley's (1874) account. Notably absent from this bibliography, or from the other works mentioned above, are any archival references from the British Museum's records that discuss the activities of Holmes during the expedition.

However, a close examination of the British Museum's archives reveals a somewhat different story of Holmes's acquisitions than that of Stanley. It is true that, according to the treasury's record of salaries and expenses for the British Museum 1868-1869, there was indeed £1,000 allocated for 'Scientific and Antiquarian Researches in connection with the Expedition to Abyssinia,' which is listed under the category for 'Special Purchases and Acquisitions.' However, there is no indication in the British Museum's records that the majority of this money went towards the auction of the Maqdala loot. The planning and preparation to send a representative of the museum along with the expedition is well-documented in the Trustee's

minutes from 1867, and the results of this experiment are discussed extensively in the minutes from 1868-1869. On the 9th of November 1867, the Trustees discussed a letter dated the 30th of October 1867 from the Treasury in which their Lordships agreed to 'defray the costs of his outfit and passage, and supply him with rations, lodging, the footing of an officer, and sanction his expenditures of £2 a day and that their Lordships would further defray the cost of preparing and conveying home any articles discovered.' In response to this agreement to sanction funding to send a representative[4], the minutes dated the 23rd of November 1867 document a request made by the Trustees that the Principal Librarian write to the Treasury to follow up with a request that they authorize 'a sum of £600 be appropriated for scientific purposes, over and above the charge for his personal expenses (estimated at about £400), and that provision be made in the Estimates for the British Museum for the year 1868-1869 for the requisite sum.' The Treasury accepted the proposed budget of £1000 in a letter on the 29th of November 1867, which was acknowledged by the Trustees on the 7th of December 1867. The description of this letter in the Trustee's minutes notes that the Treasury consented to the insertion of £1000 into the Museum Estimates for 1868/9 for the purposes of covering the cost of sending a representative with the expedition and, importantly, stated that this sum was 'to cover all expenses, of every kind, connected to the mission.' In the 'Resolved' conclusion of the same minutes, the Trustees affirm that 'the sum of £1000 be provided in the Estimates for 1868-69 to cover all the expenses of an archaeological and scientific Mission to Abyssinia.'

From the above communications, which took place between the Trustees of the British Museum and the Treasury between October and December of 1867, it seems clear that the often-cited figure of £1000 allocated to the work of Richard Holmes is consistent with the records of the museum as it relates to the amount that was spent on the Maqdala Expedition. What seems less likely is the claim that Holmes arrived at the auction of the Maqdala loot in April with almost £1000 in his pocket to spend, as there is no indication in subsequent minutes or reports that additional funding was allocated as the expedition made its way towards Maqdala. Instead, it appears that the £1000 was set aside in the museum's budget for 1868-1869

[4] At the time of these exchanges, the Trustees were planning to send Emmanuel Deutsch, who was an assistant in the Printed Books Department, but he was ultimately unable to accompany the expedition for health reasons.

to cover all of the costs associated with sending an archaeological representative on a months-long military expedition – a costly endeavor indeed. Of this £1000, the Trustees apparently estimated that a significant proportion would have gone towards Holmes's research expenses, with whatever remained in the budget being allocated for travel, equipment, food, housing, and other logistical expenses. Thanks to the archives of the British Museum, however, it is not necessary to guess how much of the budget was actually spent by Holmes, as there are detailed records of his reports on the expenses he incurred throughout the expedition. At the very start of the endeavor, as documented in the minutes from the 25th of January 1868, the Trustees arranged for a credit of £350 to be allocated to Holmes by the India Office on the account of the Trustees to cover the cost of his participation in the expedition. This £350 is consistent with their estimate that his participation in the expedition would cost around £400. In the same minutes, the Trustees approved initial payments to Holmes's accounts of £60.17 for his outfit and £70 for expenses, which they noted would need to be accounted for by him. They also approved a payment of £18.10 for his passage from Marseilles to Alexandria. Once the expedition was underway, as per the arrangement with the Trustees, Holmes regularly sent letters back to the British Museum detailing his activities and reporting on his expenditures. These reports were discussed at the subsequent meetings of the Trustees and the results of these discussions were documented in the relevant minutes. Thus, we have a timeline in the record that accounts for Holmes's spending up to the day of the auction at Maqdala. The first report from Holmes was dated the 15th of January 1868 and was noted in the Trustees Minutes on the 8th of February. Holmes informs the Trustees that he has spent £64 on a horse, which likely came out of the aforementioned advance payments, and the Principal Librarian also acknowledges that £25 has been paid on his behalf for an unspecified bill. The next communication from Holmes is discussed by the Trustees on the 22nd of February, at which time they read two letters dated the 25th of January in Zoulla and the 31st of January in Senafe. In the latter communication, Holmes informs the Trustees that he has been advanced $200 (£23.15) from the paymaster and purchased two manuscripts. In his next report dated the 22nd of February at Adabagi, which is discussed by the Trustees in the minutes from the 28th of March, the Trustees approve £26.15 for expenditures. The Trustees then received a report from Holmes from Camp Meshak dated the 14th of March and in the minutes from the 25th

of April they approved a further £20.15 of expenditures. The next communication from Holmes dated the 6th of April at Talanta Plain, does not require the authorization of any further spending. Thus far, from the original £1000 budget, £350 has been set aside as credit with the India Office to cover the costs of his participation, £18.10 has been spent on his travel, and Holmes has spent £134.45 (including all of the money advanced to his accounts). Therefore, by the time the expedition arrived at Maqdala, far from having spent next to nothing, Holmes's budget was already depleted by about half.

This brings us to the infamous auction of the Maqdala loot and the matter of Holmes's participation. As discussed above, Stanley's account of events would suggest that Holmes was the most prolific spender and alone accounted for almost twenty percent of the funds raised. However, given the expenses he had already incurred, it is doubtful that Holmes had such a sum of money available to spend. Furthermore, if the expenses documented above were not sufficient to indicate that Holmes did not spend as much as has been implied, the Trustees minutes from the 23rd of May 1868 discuss letters from Holmes dated the 12th and 22nd of April, after the auction took place, that dutifully report on his spending. The Trustees note that Holmes has purchased 'a chalice and gilded or gold triple crown, a shield for £25, and a selection of the articles taken at Magdala for 1,232 Rupees or £123.40; also stating that he had found some manuscripts of which he would send a list.' Assuming that the crown and chalice are those that would later ignite the debate in the House of Commons after the British Museum declined to purchase them, Holmes's own report contradicts Stanley's narrative and indicates that he spent significantly less at the auction than has been suggested in most accounts of this event – only contributing about two percent of the overall amount raised for the Army Prize Fund if the shield was purchased separately. It is also worth noting that Holmes did not actually document purchasing more manuscripts, though he has often been credited with securing more than three hundred for the British Museum (see, for example, Bates 1979). It is possible that something got lost in translation due to the different currencies and the 1,232 Rupees was confused with the £1000 in Holmes's budget; or perhaps it was merely assumed that, because the £1000 was listed in the budget for 1868-69 under the heading of 'special purchases and acquisitions,' this money went exclusively towards

the purchase of artifacts rather than being the sum allocated to cover all expenses related to Holmes's participation in the expedition.

Regardless, given that Holmes's report of his spending indicates that he only spent £123 (£148 if the shield was acquired as part of the auction rather than as a separate purchase), it seems clear that in the process of telling and re-telling the story of Maqdala an inflated account of his involvement in the auction has become deeply entrenched in this narrative. That this is the case is confirmed in the discussions of the Trustees that took place after the expedition had concluded and Holmes had returned to England, during which they discussed the final costs of the endeavor. On the 4th of July 1868, two days after Holmes is reported to have returned to the museum, the Trustees note that Holmes had 'drawn various sums of money from the military chest to the total amount of £350,' consistent with the amount they had arranged to be allocated to him prior to the expedition. Almost a year later, on the 13th of March 1869, the arrangements are made to have this advance settled with the military chest for the expedition as the Principal Librarian reported to the Trustees that 'an order had been made on the Paymaster General for the transfer of the amount (£350).' Ultimately, after all expenses had been accounted for, the Trustees determined that about £600 had been spent in total of the original budget of £1000, including all purchases and expenses. On the 14th of November 1868, the minutes of the Trustees note that they discussed a report from the Principal Librarian dated the 7th of November that called their attention to Holmes's service to the museum in accompanying the Maqdala Expedition. This report stated that 'there was reason to believe that when all claims in respect of that expedition should be satisfied, about £400 out of the £1000 granted by the Treasury would remain unexpended; and suggesting that a sum of money (say £200) should be awarded to Mr. Holmes' (14 November 1868). The Trustees indicate their agreement with this suggestion and order that the Treasury should be contacted for approval; approval of the payment is received in a letter from the Treasury dated the 2nd of December 1868 and is documented in the minutes from the 12th of December 1868. Thus, there is no evidence in the accounts of his spending that supports the legend of Holmes enthusiastically dominating the auction and spending almost £1000 of a previously untouched budget. The story that is told in the minutes of the Trustees is much less dramatic, and indeed contradicts the argument

that Holmes's involvement in the auction was any greater than that of the other non-military personnel who attended. This leads us to the question of why it matters whether Holmes spent £100 or £1000, or, to be more precise, why his role in the auction has come to be so singled out in the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition as it is told in current debates about restitution. The short answer is that it doesn't really matter in a material way how much Holmes spent on the objects he acquired on behalf of the museum, as Holmes was still responsible for the accession of about 30 objects into the British Museum's collections (not including the selection of drawings that he contributed). The longer answer is that disentangling the threads that have together woven this chapter of the story of the Maqdala Expedition shows us how the frameworks of restitution debates have contributed to the writing of this history. And, crucially, doing so prompts us to reconsider not only what has been remembered and why, but what elements have been excluded from this remembrance.

Whether or not Holmes was indeed the highest spender at the auction or procured the most objects for the British Museum does not necessarily change the nature of the argument or debate, which fundamentally concerns the context in which the objects were taken (looted during a military expedition) and the ethics of retaining those objects in the British Museum's collections. As we will explore in the third section of this thesis, these issues can pertain just as much to the nature of the objects in question, and their cultural and religious significance, as they do to the matter of who facilitated their accession into the museum. However, the attention dedicated to Richard Holmes in the construction of the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition as it relates to the debates about the return of the Maqdala artifacts is revealing of the ways that the assumptions of the current frameworks of decolonization and cultural restitution influence this process. In exploring this dynamic, it is relevant to consider the extent to which any of the elements of the story have been, intentionally or unintentionally, misrepresented. I demonstrated in the first chapter of this section that the status of the gold crown and chalice was the subject of contestation upon their arrival in England that reflected the broader uncertainty about the value, both political and financial, of the expedition. While the debate in the House of Commons, and especially William Gladstone's remarks, has become a defining feature of the narrative of Maqdala, as seen in the current display at the V&A, I showed

that this moment is entangled in multiple layers of meaning rather than being a reflection of a singular truth. We can approach the significance of Richard Holmes and what he represents in the current debates from a similarly critical perspective to understand how and why his involvement in the Maqdala Expedition, more so than many other participants, has been consistently emphasized in the construction of the collection's history as it relates to the campaign to see the Maqdala artifacts returned to Ethiopia.

Through the propagation of this narrative that Richard Holmes, armed not with guns but with institutional funding, was an unrivaled force in the purchase of looted artifacts, the restitution debates related to the Maqdala Collection have turned the presence of Holmes at the auction into not only a ubiquitous but a defining and necessary feature of the overall narrative of the Maqdala Collection. It is precisely the way that, as a figure, he bridges the gap between the British Museum and the military expedition that enables those like Gunning and Challis (2023a and 2023b), Heavens (2023), and Robertson (2019) to use his presence to strengthen their arguments in favor of cultural restitution – the logic is easy to follow that the closer the British Museum's involvement in the taking, the stronger the link is between the museum and imperial violence, and then the greater the responsibility the museum has to make reparations for this violence. For this reason, it is easy to see why those who advocate for the return of these objects continue the work of the Pankhursts in ensuring that the role of Richard Holmes is remembered when the history of the Maqdala Expedition is told. It certainly makes a powerful point to represent the British Museum as an active agent in the theft of the Maqdala objects, as doing so emphasizes their accountability to repair the harm done by this historical wrong. Consequently, given the consistent repetition of the description of Holmes as an unmatched bidder, works that explore the impact of the expedition on Ethiopia's cultural heritage have sought to make sure that this detail specifically is remembered. In the early stages of this research, I also carried on the tradition of highlighting the extraordinary presence of Holmes and his apparent dominance during the auction of the loot from Maqdala because it is such a ubiquitous feature of accounts of the expedition.

What is ironic, however, is that all of the attention given to Holmes and his reported £1000 at the auction has actually overshadowed the fact that Holmes's own accounts of the events at Maqdala indicate

that his involvement was not limited to the auction after the dust had settled and the loot had been collected. As is documented in a letter from Holmes to J Winter Jones dated the 22nd of April 1868, the day after the auction had concluded, Holmes notes that he not only purchased items on behalf of the museum at the auction but also personally acquired several objects during the looting of the fortress (British Museum Central Archive, Original Papers Volume 94, April to July 1868). Richard Holmes did not wait for the loot to come to him but entered Maqdala during the assault with the military force and actively plundered a selection of objects that he was then given permission by Sir Robert Napier to keep rather than turn over to the auction (British Museum Central Archive, Original Papers Volume 94, April to July 1868). In the object directories of the British Museum, it is clearly documented in the acquisition notes that, while many of the objects in the museum's collections were purchased at the auction, about half of the objects attributed to Holmes were not accounted for in his list of purchases, leading to the conclusion that they were instead plundered directly by him during the assault on the fortress. Presumably, Holmes's status as a representative of the British Museum was integral to his receiving special authorization from Sir Napier to retain a selection of objects rather than surrender them to the auction. Yet the likely-exaggerated narrative of Holmes's participation in the auction that has become a cornerstone of debates about the restitution of the Maqdala artifacts has counterintuitively caused us to neglect this element of Holmes's participation – Gunning and Challis (2023a), in arguing that Holmes personified the British Museum's active involvement in the plunder, do not even mention that Holmes was literally an agent of the looting. The assumption that Holmes's participation in the auction was the most significant element of his role, and, by extension, the role of the British Museum, in the expedition has defined the ways that we have explored and written the history of this relationship. To reiterate, the goal here is not to absolve the British Museum of responsibility for the fate of the Maqdala artifacts or to suggest that, because the amount that Holmes spent at the auction has been inflated, his role was less important than previous analyses have argued. If anything, the fact that Richard Holmes participated even more directly in the plunder of Maqdala makes the case even stronger that the British Museum should take a proactive approach to the ethical issues pertaining to this collection. Rather, I have deconstructed this part of the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition to demonstrate the ways

in which the demands of restitution debates, resting as they do on the relationship between cultural institutions and Empire, have played an essential role in determining what moments are remembered and how. A better understanding of this dynamic opens up new channels of inquiry and challenges us to reflect on how we want to continue to remember these histories moving forward.

As discussed above, recent scholarship on the role of Richard Holmes has characterized his presence as evidence that the British Museum saw the military expedition to Maqdala as an opportunity to benefit more immediately from the mechanisms of Empire by creating a more direct channel between such expeditions and their collections. Though Gunning and Challis (2023a) acknowledge that the original intent was to do so through archaeological excavations rather than plunder, they assert that the museum's decision to send a representative was nevertheless a 'catalyst' for the looting due to the expectations placed on Holmes to acquire objects (p.570). In such an analysis, this strategy reflects both the British Museum's symbiotic relationship with Empire as well as its intentions to capitalize on this relationship to its benefit – whether through excavations or plunder, the museum actively encouraged the use of military force to build collections. While this is a compelling argument, it falls short when it comes to the fact that this approach was not utilized in other expeditions, which they dismiss as being due to the fact that the demands of military leadership were incompatible with the demands of archaeological excavations (p.570). Gunning and Challis (2023a) ultimately set up a dichotomy wherein '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 (p.571).' They then claim that, for example, objects from the Ottoman Empire were acquired through diplomacy while objects from China, Africa, and South Asia were stolen and destroyed during punitive expeditions. Their characterization suggests that the British Museum, and, by extension, the British people, saw all African cultural heritage, including that of Ethiopia (Abyssinia), homogenously as being of lesser cultural value than heritage from Europe. In addition to not differentiating between the many ways that material artifacts of different categories on the continent were valued (or devalued), it also neglects to acknowledge the diverse contexts and systems through which they arrived in Europe. While fitting neatly

within the wider narrative of African cultural restitution, this depiction of the museum's approach to Ethiopian cultural heritage provides little space to understand the nuances of the perception of Ethiopia that influenced the British Museum's choice to send a representative on this specific expedition rather than any other before or after – a perception, that, as we will in the next section continues to echo in the current display of Ethiopian artifacts in the British Museum.

5.2 The 'Paradox' of African Christianity

The decision to send a representative from the museum to accompany the expedition to Maqdala in the first place was not merely an opportunistic experiment on the part of the Trustees that happened to coincide with a military expedition to Ethiopia. That is, it is important to acknowledge that the context of this decision was reflective of a distinct perception of Abyssinia that influenced this choice, which is key to understanding why this strategy was not attempted earlier or again. To bring Ethiopia more fully into the conversation about the restitution of African artifacts in British cultural institutions requires understanding and appreciating the disparities as well as the similarities between this and other cases. Particularly as we attempt to be more reflective about the limitations of the decolonial framework in addressing the historical and contemporary injustices and ethical issues surrounding collections of African material culture in museums, we must also look at how this framework may perpetuate some of this harm. In the case of the Maqdala Collection, one dynamic we should be wary of is the potential erasure of Ethiopia's indigenous Christianity and the role that the heritage of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church has played in the cultural restitution debates about the Maqdala Collection. Scholars such as Zoe Strother (2020) have discussed the representation of Christian missionary violence against African material culture in relation to restitution. This research mainly focuses on the practice of systematically destroying artifacts while sending a select few back to Europe to be retained and displayed as trophies of the Christian missionary agenda to eliminate other forms of religion. Strother (2020) expands on this work to include the ways in which the forced Christianization of African societies also led to periods of iconoclasm, such as cases in which

converted people destroyed artifacts representing their own indigenous religion as a demonstration of their commitment to Christianity. Placide Mumbembele (2020) has critiqued Strother's argument to add that, in light of this history, cultural restitution efforts should also make space for the inclusion of religious institutions and acknowledge the 'religious abundance of the continent' (p.955). However, he primarily sees this inclusion as a way to address potential tensions between the restitution of diverse religious materials and the increasing threat that religious fundamentalism poses to the security of these artifacts (p.955). While these are significant and valid contributions to the conversation on African cultural restitution, we are left without a clear pathway toward understanding where Ethiopia, and specifically the Maqdala Collection, sits within this debate.

Without reproducing an ideology of exceptionalism that would imply that the history of Christianity in Ethiopia makes the Maqdala Collection more worthy of restitution, or that might suggest that the severity of the theft and destruction wrought by the Maqdala Expedition was mitigated by respect for this history, it should not be ignored that a particular perception of Ethiopian religious heritage was relevant to the British Museum's approach to the expedition. As David Northup (2002) has explored, Ethiopian rulers began seeking out alliances with the Christian West as early as the 14th century, and in the centuries that followed, both religious and political priorities were deeply involved in the evolution of the relationship between Ethiopia and Europe (p.45). During this period, Northup (2003) documents a sense of mutual respect between the leaders on both continents who were able to find common ground through their Christian identities, which in particular laid the groundwork for interest in Ethiopia as a site of ancient Christianity. Though military and economic power politics had long overtaken the religious motivations of the early modern period in Europe by the time of the so-called 'Abyssinian Difficulty,' there still remained a curiosity towards Ethiopia's identity as a place closely connected to Christian heritage (p.20). Even if forming religiously motivated alliances was not a priority anymore (on the part of European leaders, as it was established earlier that Emperor Tewodros was still pursuing this diplomatic strategy), consideration of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity nevertheless was present in British foreign policy. In one of his earliest sets of instructions as he embarked on his assignment in 1861, the British Consul Duncan Cameron, who

would eventually become one of the Emperor's hostages several years later, was advised by Earl Russell of the Foreign Office that among his responsibilities was the encouragement of Christianity, regardless of denomination. Earl Russell wrote that 'his study should be to extend as far as possible general toleration of all Christian sects, as being most consistent with the doctrines of Christianity and with sound policy. The British Government claim no authority to set up or advocate in a foreign country one sect of Christianity in preference to another' (2nd February 1861). The instructions to Consul Cameron, as a diplomatic representative, are an example of how Ethiopia's religious identity was viewed as being at the very least compatible with British political and economic goals insofar as it supported profitable trade relationships, even if the Foreign Office was not particularly concerned with protecting this identity. This is not to confuse or conflate the British attitude towards Ethiopia at this time with Ethiopia's own representation of its nationalistic sense of historical and religious exceptionalism; rather, it is to lay the groundwork for exploring the additional layers of meaning through which we can analyze the construction of the Maqdala Expedition in restitution debates. As we will see, it is not about determining what the British 'really' thought about Ethiopia before, during, and after the Maqdala Expedition. It is about the way that introducing these complexities to the conversation sheds light on the categories and definitions that restitution debates both create and act upon.

In looking at the writings of participants in the expedition, we can find some further clues as to the subtle ways that this understanding may have influenced the British Government's approach to the hostage situation, as they continued to pursue diplomatic channels and expressed willingness to accept the Emperor's desire to have a Mission from Abyssinia sent to England should he release the hostages and make an apology. The hesitance to use force in the early years of the situation and descriptions of the Emperor as a 'powerful despot of high aspirations and strong will but not a savage' indicate that Emperor Tewodros was perhaps given a sort of benefit of the doubt throughout this process that might not have been extended in a different cultural environment – and, indeed, certainly was not extended in later punitive expeditions such as Benin 1897. In his history of the expedition, Sir Clements Markham (1869), secretary and eventual president of the Royal Geography Society who was present at Maqdala, described how the

reputation of Ethiopia's history as 'the land of Prester John, the one Christian nation of Africa' was closely connected to the capture of the public's interest in the expedition (p.2). In his analysis of this history, he attributed 'the increasing barbarism of Abyssinia' as being the result of 'isolation' due to the rise of Islam in the region, which he wrote 'surrounded the little Christian community on every side' (Markham 1869, p.10). As the expedition proceeded, George Alfred Henty (1868), in his diary of the journey to Maqdala, mused on the prospects of Ethiopian Christianity, expressing some doubt about 'whether their Christianity, or the Christianity of any savage people, does them any good whatever' but still concluding that the Christian communities of Ethiopia were 'a settled people, living by the culture of their land' and were certainly superior to their Muslim neighbors (p.410). He does, however, describe the desecration of the coffin of the Abuna, a high priest, during the plunder of Maqdala as a 'very scandalous act of theft and sacrilege' suggesting that the Abuna's status as a priest of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church should have afforded him protection from this violation (Henty 1868, p.407). Though it is evident that the British did not view the Ethiopian Christians as equals, it is clear that they were thinking about this issue and what it meant for the Maqdala Expedition.

Henty's view captures well the overall ambivalence that we find in British perspectives on Ethiopia as a Christian Kingdom throughout the preparation and implementation of the Maqdala Expedition: generally unsure about the extent to which they felt any solidarity towards Ethiopia as fellow Christians but still leaning towards setting Ethiopia apart from other non-Christian kingdoms in the region. This approach to Ethiopia is consistent with what Ethiopian philosopher Messay Kebede (2003) has described as a process of what he calls 'Semiticization.' He demonstrates how the belief that the origins of the Aksumite kingdom, with which the ruling elite of Ethiopia identified themselves, were Semitic rather than natively African justified a Eurocentric explanation of how an African kingdom could exist as both an authentically Christian yet an 'underdeveloped' civilization. In this framework, the once powerful and civilized Christian Kingdom of Aksum had its growth stunted by the 'isolation' described by Markham (1869) above – in other words, Ethiopia had maintained its Christianity but in a 'hostile environment' due to the expansion of Islam, leaving it cut off from the support of other civilizing influences and unable to realize its full technological

and cultural potential (Kebede 2003). What Kebede (2003) has identified and articulated here is that European colonial powers struggled to reconcile their perception of Ethiopia as neither fully African nor fully Christian, which drove the writing of Ethiopian history as one of an elite minority of Christians resisting the encroachment of pagan and Muslim influences around them – precisely, it should be noted, the narrative that Emperor Tewodros sought to convey to Queen Victoria in his search for military assistance. We see the echoes of this uncertainty surrounding how the British Government should treat Ethiopia in the remarks highlighted above, which illustrate some of the dynamics that provide further context to the expedition, including the decision to exit Ethiopia without colonization and provide support to the new Emperor. These nuances are crucial to understand if we want to be able to see the histories of the Maqdala Expedition beyond its recognition and construction as another case for cultural restitution. I discuss them here because the questions about Ethiopia's Christianity did not just emerge in the execution of the expedition, but also played a key role in motivating the British Museum to become involved and because the idea of the 'paradoxical' African Christian Kingdom lingers in the museum today. This history also relied heavily on assumptions about the dynamics of the famed Kingdom of Aksum, which was credited with the introduction of Christianity into the region as well as its establishment, and which was as yet largely unexplored. As the British Government prepared to launch the expedition to Maqdala, Ethiopia's peculiar status within the Victorian imagination aligned with the increasing professionalization of collecting through the promotion of archaeological science: a perfect storm for the idea to combine the British Museum's interests with a military expedition.

It was in this context that the British Museum was discussing the possibility of sending an archaeologist along with the expedition to Maqdala. Here, Ethiopia was not just seen as a heretofore unexplored source of antiquities now that diplomatic channels with the Ottoman Empire were beginning to become less effective, though this was a concern (Gunning and Challis 2023a). It was discussed explicitly in the letters of recommendation written by, for example, William Vaux (9 October 1867) and Charles Rieu (12 October 1867), that Ethiopia was the known site of an ancient kingdom that was believed to have exercised a considerable degree of political influence for several centuries. Both Vaux and Rieu referred to

Ethiopia's uniqueness in having not been conquered during the early Arab conquests, leaving it the only country in the region that had not been converted to Islam, as one of the reasons for which it would be desirable to initiate archaeological research there – their logic being that the ancient monuments and artifacts would therefore be well-preserved and would provide insight into not only the Kingdom of Axum but also one of the oldest Christian churches of the East. Furthermore, the planning for the Maqdala Expedition occurred at a time when the intellectual authority of the British Museum coincided with an emerging interest in using the science of archaeology to enhance biblical scholarship. This new era of biblical archaeology and research was driven by Christian scholars in England seeking to validate the narrative of the Bible through the apparent 'proof' provided by unearthed antiquities and ancient texts and was of course deeply entangled in the machinations and power of the British Empire in its pursuit of artifacts and monuments abroad. As Gregory Cuéllar (2019) has explored, at the same time that the planning for the Maqdala Expedition was underway, there were ongoing research projects in the museum that were using its collection of manuscripts to seek to uncover the 'original text' of the Bible (p.99). This goal of the 'biblical critic' relied on assembling and studying ancient biblical manuscripts in an effort to identify evidence that pointed to the 'original text' (Cuéllar 2019). Perhaps the most well-known expression of the Victorian interest in biblical archaeology was the Palestine Exploration Fund, which had been established just two years prior in 1865 and which had just begun excavations in Jerusalem in 1867. It is not implausible, then, that the British Museum was beginning to see Ethiopia's potential through this same lens. While Charles Thomas Newton's interest in the expedition was primarily in the pursuit of classical antiquities and the prospect of tracing the movements of the Ptolemies through archaeological excavations along the route of the expedition, he was not the only scholarly influence who had a voice in this decision. Newton may have helped to set the process of considering a representative in motion, but other research agendas were at play that were more specifically connected to a curiosity about Ethiopia.

When Emmanuel Deutsch, an expert in Semitic languages who was originally selected to accompany the expedition, had to withdraw for health reasons, he was replaced by Richard Holmes, an assistant in the Department of Manuscripts with no expertise in either classical antiquities or relevant

language experience. Richard Holmes volunteered himself with the support of Mr. Corkson, an assistant in the Department of Coins and Medals, and Mr. Bruce, a former assistant in the Department of Printed Books, as well as an assurance from the Department of Manuscripts that he could be spared. He was ultimately recommended over other museum employees who put themselves forward for the task, including an assistant in the Department of Oriental Antiquities and an assistant in the Department of Printed Books. His selection prompts the question of what other interests might have played a role in this process, as the minutes of the Trustees do not elaborate on the details of the discussion that took place when it was decided that Holmes would be recommended as the replacement. In his letter of support for the endeavor, Charles Rieu actively encouraged the collection of manuscripts because the selection available in the museum was 'scarcely equal to the importance of that branch of literature, consisting of little more than a hundred volumes, most of which belong to the last three centuries' (12 October 1867). He expressed optimism that older and more varied volumes could be discovered and emphasized the desirability of doing so because of the 'importance of the Aethiopic version for biblical criticism' which would benefit from having 'the oldest possible copies' (12 October 1867). The connection that Rieu makes between the procurement of ancient Ethiopic manuscripts and biblical scholarship illustrates that the perceived value of Ethiopian material history and culture in the lead-up to the expedition was also defined by its proximity to the history of Christianity; the potential contribution it could make to this field would not necessarily have been considered possible in a different cultural context.

In light of the dynamics that I have outlined above, I would suggest that the interest in the material heritage of Ethiopia was not merely an opportunistic quest for new sources of antiquities but was also driven by a desire to better understand this place that presented a challenge to Victorian assumptions about both Africa and Christianity. The British Museum spent significantly less on Holmes's participation than they anticipated – having enough remaining in the budget to award Holmes £200 for his services even after all purchases and expenses had been settled. If they had wanted to ensure that they had the best pick of the plunder right at the source in future expeditions, they certainly could have continued to participate just as scientists and geographers, for example, continued to accompany imperial forces. The reality was that they

didn't need to send a representative to do so; the British Museum's mutually beneficial relationship with the British Empire meant that they would continue to function as both the recipient of colonial loot and the sponsor of imperial ideology without having to become directly involved in the plunder. Just as it had been given objects looted from the Summer Palace in Beijing in 1860, despite having no representative present, the British Museum received hundreds of Benin Bronzes from the Foreign Office alone in the wake of the plunder of the Kingdom of Benin in 1897, many of which were almost immediately put on display for the public. That the British Museum would have been a beneficiary of the plunder of Maqdala regardless of Holmes's presence is without a doubt, but the museum wanted to fill a gap in its collections with artifacts of an ancient kingdom whose history aligned with the ongoing institutionalization of archaeological science. Indeed, the British Museum was ultimately disappointed by the fact that Holmes was unable to carry out archaeological excavations, and the manuscripts that were brought back were also not as ancient as they had hoped, so the result of the experiment was generally underwhelming. However, it must also be considered that the British Museum did not re-entertain this idea for other expeditions to Africa because it did not view those sites as having archaeological value. At this time, museum staff like Charles Newton and Samuel Birch were promoting archaeology as a source of historical truth, with particular emphasis on classical civilizations and the history of Christianity, which were both considered relevant to Britain's sense of its own history and culture (Cuéllar 2019). Within this framework, the merging of a systematic approach to the collection of archaeological materials with the exhibitionary function of the museum privileged the display of objects from 'four great nations, the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Greeks, and the Romans' in order to present a linear narrative of human development (Newton 1880, p.40). Thus, it is significant that Ethiopia was the site of a particular intrigue that raised questions about the relationship between Christianity and civilization that were compatible with the new research methodologies and priorities gaining traction at the time. This understanding provides further context not only to the decision to undertake this experiment but also to the way the expedition has been represented in the British Museum and the re-negotiations of that representation that are taking place today.

That Ethiopia was seen as a 'valuable' site to exploit in this way does not negate the imperial attitudes that shaped the British Museum's sense of entitlement to do so, nor does it diminish the harm that was done as a result of the museum's participation in the plunder of Maqdala. However, the tendency of restitution debates to focus on establishing patterns of imperial violence means that the histories that don't fit those patterns are sometimes left out in favor of those that do. The characterization of the British Museum's involvement in the Maqdala Expedition as concrete evidence of the museum's culpability in the imperial theft and destruction of African cultural heritage is convincing and important insofar as it renders this connection more tangible than conceptual. The limitations of this interpretation lie in its ability to account for the way the Maqdala objects continued to be valued, or not valued, in the British Museum after they had been brought back to Britain. Unlike the crown and chalice that are now in the V&A, which I discussed in the first two chapters of this section, most of the objects that were acquired by the British Museum, whether through Holmes's purchases/plunder or through donations from the India Office, were quietly assimilated into the museum's vast collections rather than triumphantly displayed. The 350 manuscripts that were selected to be brought back have long been dispersed to libraries around the UK, with significant collections in the British Library and the Bodleian Library at Oxford. At the time of writing, only nine of the more than one hundred objects related to the Maqdala Expedition are on display, with several of those being exhibited for the first time in a temporary special exhibition (which will be discussed in the conclusion). The few that are in the main galleries are tucked away inconspicuously – in stark contrast to, for example, the 60 Benin Bronzes which occupy an entire wall in the Africa gallery, or the Moai ancestor statue which stands prominently just off the museum's main atrium. Acknowledging the specific ways that Ethiopia was viewed and understood in terms of its historical and contemporary relationships to Christianity provides a necessary insight into how accounts of the British Museum's relationship to the Maqdala Expedition have been affected by the wider agenda to decolonize museum collections. This framework has relied heavily on determining how things were taken and by whom, resulting in the construction of narratives of Maqdala that work to uphold its status within the wider debates about African cultural restitution. As we consider other ways that Maqdala's history could be written, it is not a matter of

'either/or' where one singular history exists to be uncovered, but rather one of reflecting on how these histories work to shape our perception in relation to the current social and political contexts in which they are remembered.

The relevance of Ethiopia's appeal to museum staff in terms of its value for archaeological interest in the history of Christianity and classical civilizations is not limited to the British Museum's decision to send Richard Holmes as a representative. In this chapter so far, we have seen how the motivation to emphasize the British Museum's involvement in the Maqdala Expedition is related to the focus on institutional accountability in debates about cultural restitution. Through the narratives that are propagated within these debates, the participation of Richard Holmes, particularly in the infamous auction, has become one of the defining features of the history of the Maqdala Expedition precisely because he personifies this accountability. In addition to demonstrating how this detail has proliferated despite the possibility that it has been, in some aspects, misrepresented, I have presented alternative frameworks through which to analyze the significance of Holmes's participation in view of the value that Ethiopia held for the burgeoning alliance between archaeology, biblical scholarship, and the museum – rather than the value the Maqdala Expedition holds for contemporary restitution debates. Understanding these different perspectives is essential to being able to see the ways that these debates have intervened in the construction of the Maqdala Expedition's history and its representation, especially as we now turn to the reality of the Maqdala Collection in the British Museum. As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the British Museum is both literally and figuratively at the center of restitution debates. Its internationally recognized reputation and its longstanding relationship with the instruments and ideologies of the British Empire have turned the museum into a global touchstone for the debates about restitution, colonial violence, and reparations, while its vast collections have ensured that it is the site of contestation over ownership of artifacts from all corners of the world. Given the Maqdala Collection's profile within these debates – even highlighted, as I noted earlier, as one of the contested collections on the museum's website – it would be reasonable to expect that, as the controversial Parthenon Sculptures have a dedicated room and the Benin Bronzes have an entire wall with a bench for those who wish to reflect, artifacts from Maqdala would similarly find themselves featured

in some way. If this collection and the controversies that surround it are so well-known so as to need to be addressed directly on a dedicated webpage, then surely the objects have a display like the one in the V&A which enables visitors to engage with these artifacts in person rather than through a screen.

When I began my six-month research period in the British Museum, intending to undertake a similar process of interviews and observations as I had in the previous six months spent in the Victoria and Albert Museum, I entertained the belief, fueled by the museum's own acknowledgment of the Maqdala Collection and the frequency with which this case appeared in articles about African restitution, that the museum would provide a constant flow of insights. Though the V&A is not as widely-referenced in terms of its relationship to Empire or restitution, it had nevertheless taken measures to anticipate and respond to the critiques surrounding its small collection of Maqdala artifacts and I expected that the British Museum would have done something similar to complement its online page – something to give those who maybe saw the page when planning their trip to the museum a chance to examine the artifacts up-close or to attempt to soothe the concerns of visitors who came across the display and recognized the hallmarks of a punitive expedition. So, on my first Monday, I didn't even bother to check the map of the museum to plan out my route as I had been required to do in order to find the Maqdala display in the V&A. I had been to the Africa Gallery multiple times on personal visits and I had already utilized the Anthropology Library and Research Center, so I knew it would be easier to enter the museum from the back entrance on Montague Place, which offers a direct route to the Africa Gallery while avoiding the long security queues and crowds that are typical at the front entrance. After a quick bag search and security scan (a procedure not in place at the V&A, and which always managed to put me a little on edge), I walked up towards Room 24 where the theme is 'Living and Dying.' This room is the current home of the Moai ancestor statue Hoa Hakananai'a, which is also the subject of a restitution request from the indigenous people of the island of Rapa Nui, but whose label does not address the conditions of the statue's removal from the island in the same year as the Maqdala Expedition. As the people of Rapa Nui consider the Moai to be the spiritual embodiment of their ancestors, it is even more poignant to see Hoa Hakananai'a (name meaning 'lost, hidden, or stolen friend') in a gallery focused on life and death, while I often observed visitors, who are not well-informed by the

curatorial label about the statue's spiritual significance or the living culture that values him, striking silly poses for photographs. As I always passed through this gallery on my way in and out of the museum, Hoa Hakananai'a served as a consistent reminder of the disconnect between how important restitution debates can feel for those of us who participate in them and how 'out of sight, out of mind' they actually are for most visitors.

Continuing on from Hoa Hakananai'a, there is no need to enter the iconic white atrium that serves as the British Museum's lobby, and which is often packed with visitors pondering where to start exploring the collections. The Africa Gallery is entered by a staircase set into the floor, which takes you down to the lower level of the museum. In stark contrast to the bright, light-filled entrance, the Africa Gallery is windowless and dimly lit by strategically placed spotlights that draw attention to the displays and descriptions. It is a single, large, rectangular room that does not lead to any other galleries, so visitors can either go left or right upon entering, then make their way from one end to the other before arriving back at the spot they came, from which they can continue on to other parts of the museum. On this occasion, I decided to go right first, which meant that I soon came to the featured display of Benin Bronzes. Though there are several display cases that have Benin Bronzes in this gallery, the wall display is what draws the most attention. The cast brass plaques are arranged in a seven by eight grid suspended on metal rods, in a loose impression of how they may have looked on display in the palace. There is a bench set directly in front of them for visitors who wish to spend an extra few moments taking in the details on each plaque, or who just find this spot nice for a rest. One panel explicitly discusses the instance of colonial looting and violence that saw the Kingdom of Benin conquered by the British Empire and thousands of objects brought to Britain, while the other briefly describes the Benin Bronzes. I paused here momentarily while I slowly made my way through the gallery looking for the equivalent display of Maqdala artifacts, but I did not linger for long. After all, though the case of the Benin Bronzes is in some ways part of the Maqdala Collection's story, I was not there to speak to people about their impressions of this display and so I was eager to move along. I carried on, pausing here and there to read a label more closely or view an object from a different angle, but as I got about two-thirds of the way through, I began to feel more confused. I

had yet to come upon a single display that even hinted at Maqdala. I retraced my steps to see if I had missed something, and stopped at a case containing various textiles. There, among textiles from an assortment of different cultures, I spotted an 18th-century woven tablet that was identified as coming from a Christian church in Ethiopia, with no other description about its accession into the museum. I pulled up the online collection search and looked up its registration number, which yielded the information that it had been purchased by the museum in 1973 from a woman whose grandfather had acquired the panel while participating in the Maqdala Expedition. I was disappointed to see that there was very little commentary on this specific article beyond where it was from, much less a discussion of the context of its acquisition, so it would be difficult to initiate an organic conversation with any visitors about their responses to the display without having to first describe that context myself. I figured that I could re-evaluate once I had seen the rest of the Maqdala artifacts on display, so I carried on walking through the gallery looking out for objects that I recognized and carefully checking all of the labels for names, dates, and places that would indicate the artifact might have come from Maqdala.

Eventually, however, I found myself back where I had started, looking at a painting titled 'The Crucifixion of Christ' that hangs by the entrance to the Africa Gallery. This painting hangs alone on the wall across from the central display of contemporary art that greets visitors to this space; the gallery is organized by type of object rather than by culture or historical period, as many of the other galleries in the museum are, but this painting is alone. It is attributed to an unknown artist, dated to 'about 1855,' and was purchased in 1893 from a church in Adwa by a man named James Theodore Brent, who then donated it to the British Museum. The painting depicts multiple scenes from the crucifixion of Christ and is described as having been intended to inspire spiritual devotion. Though this painting is unrelated to Maqdala insofar as it was not acquired during that expedition, one of the scenes shows the coronation of Emperor Tewodros by Bishop Selama in 1855. The label claims that this illustration provides 'an insight into the complex relationship between Church and state in Ethiopia in the 1860s' and that the painting overall 'acts as an important historical document of Ethiopian life while also retaining its original power to inspire religious passion.' There is no mention of the significance of Emperor Tewodros to Ethiopian history or to his

relationship with the British Empire, nor is there any complementary information offered about the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. As I stood in front of the painting, I reflected on what I had seen on this initial visit to the Africa Gallery and how it had diverged from my expectations and assumptions. Firstly, there were very few Ethiopian objects or artistic works on display at all: in addition to the textile and the painting of the crucifixion, there were a few accessories and articles of clothing in the 'personal adornment' section of the gallery and another painting depicting the coronation of Haile Selassie. Secondly, only one of these objects could be directly connected to the Maqdala Expedition, and that connection was obscured by the lack of information in the display. Thirdly, the only other trace of the Maqdala Expedition that could be found in this gallery was in the inclusion of two hats in one of the 'personal adornment' displays that were noted as having been donated as part of the collection of Captain Tristram Speedy, whose involvement in the Maqdala Expedition is not mentioned. I found myself feeling a bit lost, struggling to reconcile the notoriety and attention attached to the Maqdala Collection with the apparent absence of any representation of this history in the museum. That there could be so much discourse surrounding the significance of this case for the debate on African cultural restitution yet not even a small display like the one in the V&A, much less something on the scale of the Benin Bronzes display, seemed impossible. Yet there I was, standing in the Africa Gallery after having carefully checked every label, confronted with the realization that the history of the Maqdala Expedition was not being remembered here, at least not in this space.

I knew though from preparing for this research that there were more articles on display that had come from the Maqdala Expedition, they just apparently were not in the Africa Gallery. So, I went to sit on the bench in front of the Benin Bronzes and pulled up the online collection on my phone again – but this time alongside a map of the museum. I entered my key search terms (Maqdala, Abyssinia, Tewodros), filtered for objects that were currently on display and looked through objects again, this time taking note of the locations in the museum where they could be found. I noticed that they were mostly in G66, which on the map appeared to be a small room at the back of level three. I exited the Africa Gallery and made my way back up past Hoa Hakananai'a and over to the West Staircase. Following the map, once on the upper level I turned left towards the north side of the museum and found myself at the end of a series of rooms

that were all packed with people hovering around the display cases. While the Africa Gallery had been busy as well, it was a spacious and relatively minimalist gallery, which meant it didn't feel quite so congested even with a steady flow of people; these rooms, however, were smaller and fuller, connected by open doorways that often required people to squeeze together as they funneled through them. It came as no surprise to find these crowds, as I'd already seen what section of the museum I would be passing through: Ancient Egypt. Rooms 61 to 65 are home to hundreds of objects from various periods, including statues, jewelry, and pottery. But, of course, the displays that draw the most visitors are in the center two rooms, which deal with ancient Egyptian funerary practices and the afterlife, and are home to a large selection of sarcophagi and mummies. Visitors flock to these displays, fascinated by the iconic elaborate vessels and the preserved remains of the pharaohs, the stuff of legends. It is right off of room 63, through a doorway next to a large panel describing the process of mummification, that one gets to room 66. At this point, I was feeling optimistic about the prospect of foot traffic given this gallery's proximity to such a popular point of interest, anticipating that more visitors would come through and pause at the Ethiopian displays than I had encountered in the much-quieter stained glass gallery at the V&A. Stepping into room 66, I was interested to see that, like in the V&A, the Maqdala artifacts in the British Museum were also located in what is essentially a hallway, this time one which connected visitors to the elevators to get to the upper floors. I wondered what it said about the perceptions of curators in British cultural institutions that they persistently chose to represent Ethiopia in these spaces that embodied a sort of in-between-ness, a movement from one place to another. But I was also curious about why the Maqdala artifacts would be displayed here, adjacent to objects that were thousands of years old, in a part of the museum where all of the nearby galleries feature civilizations from the ancient world, when I knew that most of the objects taken from Maqdala could hardly be described as ancient.

Room 66 is labeled 'Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt,' and it is indeed the only gallery on this level that displays a non-European culture that is not from the ancient world; the only other early modern or contemporary galleries are under the category of Europe. So, Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt, both of which are long-standing but very much still living cultures, are situated in a somewhat odd position, particularly given

that many visitors enter this gallery having just been immersed in the artifacts of ancient Egypt. Though the introductory text for the gallery acknowledges that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church today is part of a diverse religious landscape in modern Ethiopia, the title of the panel is 'Christian Egypt and Ethiopia.' This title sets the tone that Christianity is the center of the display while the few artifacts of other religions are mainly there to illustrate the diversity of the peripheries, which is even reinforced by the fact that the central and largest section of the display case is devoted to Christian objects while the two smaller sections on the side contain a few objects each from Ethiopia's Muslim and Jewish communities. This arrangement is especially interesting considering that the state-sponsored construction of a narrative of Ethiopian national identity has consistently emphasized the country's Christian heritage as a centralizing political force, contributing to the social and political divisions that have agitated Ethiopia in recent decades (Finneran 2010). The centrality of Christianity here is further evident in the description that 'the objects in this gallery reflect Egypt and Ethiopia's place within a wider Christian historical context, and highlight exchange with other cultures and traditions.' The primacy, but also the historicity of Ethiopian Christianity play a central role here, as Christianity in Ethiopia is discussed in terms of its long lineage going back to the Kingdom of Axum while the acknowledgment of the existence of other faiths is limited to the statement that Christian traditions are part of a 'multi-faith culture and society in contemporary Ethiopia.' The smaller, italicized text under the main text informs visitors that they can find additional material from Christian Egypt and Ethiopia in room 25 (the Africa Gallery) or visit an entirely different part of the museum to learn about the Islamic history of the region. The overall impression of this separation is that Ethiopia is a place of fractured identities along temporal as well as cultural lines, simultaneously ancient and modern, Christian and Muslim, Arabian and African. Of course, Ethiopia is by no means the only country with a long history of exchanges and political shifts that has undergone periods of cultural change. Rather, given how Ethiopia's culture and history have been represented in these spaces, it is relevant to the discussion about the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition to confront how the museum's current curation of these objects echoes some of the same uncertainties and questions about Ethiopia that surrounded the expedition and its aftermath.

Consequently, we can then consider how the narrative of Maqdala has been constructed by and for restitution debates and how it has entrenched certain ways of knowing and remembering this history.

I tell this story of my first day in the museum and the mistake I made in assuming that the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition would be illustrated in the Africa Gallery through some of the objects connected through this history because, without intending to, I became my own first participant of sorts. By going straight to the Africa Gallery, I revealed to myself the ways that cultural restitution debates have shaped my perceptions of the wider context of the significance of the Maqdala Collection, particularly in my expectations that the reputation of this collection would align with the reality of its curation in the museum and that it would be represented, as it is in the discourse, alongside other African cases. Having to re-orient my approach and acknowledge my biases as I explored the discrepancy between how the history of Maqdala, and especially the history of the British Museum's relationship to Maqdala, is constructed in restitution debates and how this history is actually present/absent in the museum provided critical insights into the role of restitution debates in determining the frameworks through which we evaluate these cases. It was in light of this experience that I was motivated to look more deeply at how Ethiopia was perceived and valued in terms of its history of Christianity in order to understand the processes by which these debates have helped create Maqdala as a case of African cultural restitution – and, in doing so, to see how this is a classification loaded with a pre-packaged set of terms and conditions that can hinder rather than facilitate the development of our understanding of the meaning of restitution. The 'paradox' of African Christianity that confounded Victorian Britain's views on Christianity, history, and civilization echoes in the dispersal of the Maqdala artifacts between the Africa Gallery and the separate Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt gallery, which is located in the Ancient Egypt section of the museum. This physical separation reflects a continued struggle to categorize and curate these objects that are both African and Christian and reveals key assumptions that are embedded in these categories which have the power to influence our perception of the debates surrounding their ownership, history, and status in the museum. It also creates a sense of temporal separation, with Ethiopia's contemporary African identity being disconnected in time from its Christianity, which is represented primarily in terms of its origins in the ancient world. However, the blurred lines

between these two galleries and the thematic crossovers serve as reminders that it is ultimately impossible to define Ethiopia as one or the other. Examining this dynamic not only reveals how restitution debates have intervened in the way the history of Maqdala has been constructed in relation to dominant narratives about cultural restitution but also lays the foundation for understanding why competing narratives are emerging and what modes of representation they seek to promote.

5.3 Hidden Histories

At the time that this research was undertaken and at the time of writing, there were more objects connected to the Maqdala Expedition on display in the Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt gallery than in any other gallery or exhibition in the museum, though this selection did consist of only a handful of objects. Nevertheless, as I discussed in the previous chapter, even a small display of two objects can have an impact on the way the Maqdala Expedition is understood and perceived. The challenge of this display in the British Museum was that none of the objects directly connected to Maqdala (a censer, a diptych, a couple of processional crosses) were accompanied by a description that even hinted at the circumstances of their acquisition. Whereas many of the text panels in the Africa Gallery had openly addressed, at the very least, that many of the items on display had been brought to the UK under circumstances that raised ethical issues, there was not even a hint in the descriptions in this gallery that any of these objects were connected to a military expedition, much less that there were any questions about their rightful ownership. The only clues about their connections to the Maqdala Expedition could be found in the registration numbers under their descriptions, which showed that they were acquired by the museum in 1868. And even these are not fully reliable when searching for objects from an event like Maqdala, as many objects came to the museum later through purchases or donations from people who had participated in the expedition or whose family members had done so. Thus, I had to check each registration number in the case to confirm that was indeed only those four objects that had definitely been taken during the Maqdala Expedition. The only other object of interest to me for this purpose was a vibrant yellow painting, whose registration information noted that

it had been donated by a 'Mrs. Speedy' in 1912. This painting was one of many artifacts and articles that were donated as part of the donation of the collection belonging to Captain Tristram Speedy, who accompanied the Maqdala Expedition and is particularly known for becoming the caretaker of Prince Alemayehu on the journey back to Britain. It is, however, unknown whether this painting was taken during the Maqdala Expedition or whether it was acquired separately on one of his other trips to Ethiopia, as much of his collection was acquired before and after the expedition. So, while I had found a more obvious display of Maqdala objects, I still found myself in a position where these objects were not being used to illustrate the history of the Maqdala Expedition. Unlike in the V&A, it would either take an extremely dedicated visitor to stop and search for more information about these objects to learn that they were taken during a military expedition or someone like myself who was intentionally searching for such objects. At this point, I was finally forced to accept that I would have to reconsider my approach; for as much as the relationship between the British Museum and the Maqdala Collection is discussed in debates about restitution, frequently enough that these objects have their own dedicated page on the museum's website to address repatriation claims, the history of the Maqdala Expedition is, like the altar tabots, not on display for public viewing.

While I'd been taking stock of the objects in the singular display case, I was also becoming more aware of the dynamics of visitors in this gallery. As I mentioned previously, the Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt gallery is essentially a hallway that connects visitors from the bustling Ancient Egypt galleries to the North Stairs, which either lead back down to the ground floor and the main atrium or upstairs to the popular Asia galleries. Therefore, there is quite a lot of traffic between Ancient Egypt and the stairwell, so the gallery does see quite a few visitors, particularly those who have either already made their way around level one or who wish to take a shortcut back down to the main entrance. There are also several benches lined up in the middle, with the Ethiopia display case on the west side and the Coptic Egypt display case on the east side; given that the Ancient Egypt galleries do not offer many opportunities for rest, I noticed that visitors would often come into the room and gratefully take the first seat available, seeming to suffer from that particular exhaustion that comes from spending time in a crowded space while being inundated with

information and visual stimuli (i.e. a day out at one of the largest, most popular museums in the world). Unlike the Ancient Egypt galleries which draw attention by virtue of the legendary reputations of the artifacts on display, visitors often seemed drawn into the Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt gallery by the prospect of some rest, space, and the opportunity to regroup with their companions. Some would linger at the painting of the Battle of Adwa or wander over for a look at the window from an Egyptian Coptic Church, but many seemed to simply need a momentary break to get their bearings. Such a vast museum can be overwhelming at times in its scale, and it is understandable that a quieter room with places to sit offers a welcome respite. Despite the fact that this gallery felt markedly busier than the Sacred Silver and Stained Glass Gallery in the V&A had ever felt, I was getting the initial impression, which over the course of the next few months would eventually become evident was grounded in reality, that the Ethiopia case did not receive much more engagement than the display of the crown and chalice in the V&A. Of the visitors that did seem to have their interest piqued, it tended to feel like a game of chance based on whether they happened to have sat facing the Ethiopia Case or the Coptic Egypt case; often, when visitors were ready to move on, they got up and exited the gallery without stopping at the cases, potentially having a specific next destination in mind. The more time I spent in the Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt Gallery, which also never had a gallery assistant stationed there, the more evident it became that this particular space in the museum was not designed in such a way that it inspired reflections about the ethics of the British Museum's collections – if anything, it actively concealed those histories. As I will discuss below, the limited engagement I was able to have with visitors in this space therefore had to pivot towards what they didn't see rather than what they did.

On the second day that I went to the British Museum, I went back to the Africa Gallery with a different mindset. Instead of essentially 'searching for Maqdala,' I tried to take in the space for what it is without the assumptions and expectations I had carried with me the first time. This time around, I paid closer attention to the blend of contemporary artworks and historical artifacts, which itself provides the foundation for a conversation about ownership if we consider that the identities of the artists who made the historical pieces are not, and probably never will be, known. The presence of modern art here serves as a reminder that the production of African material heritage was not halted by imperialism, and as a critique

of the systems of value that have prioritized the retention and display of looted or stolen artifacts over supporting the creators who keep those creative traditions alive today. Throughout the gallery, there are several allusions to repatriation claims or references to unethical circumstances of acquisition, including multiple objects highlighted as being on a 'collecting and empire' trail, a sort of museum-sponsored scavenger hunt that prompts visitors to seek out objects that illustrate how the museum's collections are connected to colonial relationships. Those from this trail that can be found in the Africa Gallery are an ancestral screen from Nigeria that is used to discuss the slave trade in the Niger Delta, a palace door and lintel from Nigeria with an accompanying description of British-Yoruba relations, and a military tunic from Sudan taken as a spoil of war following the Battle of Atbara in 1898. Despite purporting to address the relationship between empire and collecting, the descriptions of these objects seem unwilling to explicitly address the relevant power dynamics, with each devoting part of the limited space available to assure the visitor that the object was given with permission or looting took place on both sides. There is also a section of panels devoted to explaining the processes of caring for and conserving African artifacts, with an emphasis on the need to 'control' environmental conditions and a description of the ways that the galleries facilitate this control. These panels reminded me of sub-debates within the conversation around African cultural restitution that question whether African institutions are capable of caring for artifacts to the specialized standards supposedly set by institutions like the British Museum, despite being the places where those artifacts were originally produced and valued. In these ways, the debates about cultural restitution felt like they had a visible presence in this gallery; even if the displays did not explicitly discuss the issue of repatriation, the themes of restitution debates were easily found in the consistent references to colonialism, collecting histories, empire, military violence, and object security.

Unlike the Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt Gallery, the Africa Gallery consistently has gallery assistants, whose role is to help visitors with everything from questions about the collections to advice on navigating the museum. Though some of the gallery assistants in the V&A had been able to recall visitor impressions of the special *Maqdala 1868* exhibition, there was no equivalent display or exhibition in the British Museum for me to ask about. Instead, I approached one of the gallery assistants, who later introduced himself as

Mark, to ask about what kinds of interactions he tended to notice in the Africa Gallery. I explained that I was interested in the history of a particular collection that was on display in different parts of the museum and that it would help to learn about some of the main themes and patterns that emerged when he spoke to visitors, to get a broader sense of how they might be approaching the Africa displays. He was enthusiastic to share and explained that the Africa Gallery saw a constant stream of visitors from all over the world who often initiated conversations about the collections, whether by asking for further information or by sharing their own opinions. "It's a really popular gallery, and people tend to have a lot to say about it, in both positive and negative ways," he explained. "There are so many different countries represented here and we get quite a few guests who are visiting from those countries, so it's understandable that they want to share their thoughts. It's actually really interesting to hear because often I'll learn something I didn't know, so it's not uncommon that the roles get reversed and they're the ones who end up explaining things to me." He chuckled at this description of a visitor subverting the power dynamic in the museum, where the institution is generally perceived as the authoritative voice. "But of course," he went on, "even though some people get excited to tell you about how something fits in their culture or history, there are always, you know, other people who are more like 'what is the museum doing to return these things' or 'these things would be more appreciated at home.' It's like even when we acknowledge that something was maybe stolen or looted, they always want the museum to be doing more. The little descriptions about stuff like colonialism, that doesn't really count and if anything it just makes people feel even more like 'if you know it's stolen why aren't you doing anything about it.' I asked him if he felt like those perspectives were directly in response to any of the displays or if they reflected more of a general sentiment, to which he responded "oh yeah well the Benin Bronzes are pretty famous now, as well as stuff upstairs like the marbles,[5] and there's a whole description about how they were looted and everything so I think for some people that kind of confirms the stereotype that the museum is displaying stolen stuff." He went on, however, to say "but you know there's also a lot of people, especially older English people, who have kind

[5] He was referring to the Parthenon Marbles, frequently referred to as the 'Elgin Marbles,' which are displayed in a dedicated gallery on the ground floor.

of the opposite opinion and they get kind of mad when they see all the information about the British Empire and slavery and all that. I've had some people come up to me and ask why some of the descriptions are so negative, even though I think a lot of them have tried to be pretty balanced and informative and not just say 'the UK is evil.' But that seems to kind of be how they feel." He laughed again at this and added "it's kind of funny how some people will get a little worked up about the idea that the museum is trying too hard to be 'politically correct' when it's really just describing how stuff got here. If they see that and think 'oh no too much political correctness' it's like they're projecting their own assumptions about what that means, especially since a lot of it has actually been here for a while."

I was particularly interested in this last point that Mark brought up, about the divide between people who come into the Africa Gallery and feel like it's not doing enough and those that feel it's doing too much. I asked what he meant by a lot of it having been here for a while and he said "obviously they update the information every so often and things like the collecting and empire trail are relatively new, but even with that most of the objects were already on display with similar descriptions. They just put it under the header 'collecting and empire,' and that triggers a response from people, which can be kind of frustrating when people say things like 'the British Empire wasn't just about slavery you know,' and it's like yeah of course that wasn't all there was to it, but it was a big part of it and I don't know why it's 'politically correct' talk about it. It's not like the museum is putting up signs saying things should go back to where they came from but even just mentioning certain words and that seems to be how people feel." I appreciated Mark's comments, which suggested that no matter how carefully the museum tried to curate the more controversial objects, there would be someone ready to be dissatisfied because of pre-existing biases about the political context in which this curation was happening. For example, I, and I'm sure many others, saw the description on the ancestral screen from Nigeria as going out of its way to emphasize shared guilt for the slave trade with the Kalabari people who are described as 'active intermediaries' who 'lost their position as independent traders' in the wake of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act (1807). Further, it described the screen as having been placed under the protection of a British officer during a period of religious unrest, reinforcing the image of the British (and by extension the British Museum) as the guardian of heritage in

the face of extremist movements that would seek to destroy it. Yet, as Mark had described it, there were also people who saw displays like this and perceived them to be an ideologically motivated capitulation to the pressure of so-called 'political correctness.' For those visitors, displays that to me seemed to paint the British Museum in a good light (deserved or otherwise) were seen as overly negative portrayals, and this reflected less the actual content of the descriptions and more the politicization of certain terms like 'empire' and 'slavery' in the context of cultural institutions. We only need to look at the response to the National Trust's report on colonialism and slavery (2019) which saw a profoundly angry, vitriolic backlash from members of the British public just for documenting the connections between National Trust properties and colonialism and slavery – even when some of these connections had to do with abolition – to understand that certain subjects are burdened with connotations and histories that affect how they are engaged with. What I learned from Mark was that visitors also came to the museum with pre-existing expectations and biases that affected their perceptions of the displays, particularly when it comes to issues like decolonization and restitution, and that these perceptions are closely tied with the framework in which a museum situates an object. Because of the prominence of cultural restitution debates and their relationship to the ongoing contentious renegotiation of identity politics in the UK, an object and/or display in the Africa Gallery that is linked to empire, slavery, or colonialism will often be responded to in terms of a visitor's beliefs about these frameworks.

Mark's insights into the behaviors and attitudes of visitors in the Africa Gallery reinforced what I had discovered through my own mistakes on my first trip to the British Museum, that where objects are placed in a museum and what thematic associations are conjured by this placement both have a strong impact on how visitors respond to the histories represented in these displays. This dynamic reflects a tendency to more heavily weight where an artifact came from and in what context it was taken or brought away when considering the relevance of cultural restitution. On the same day I spoke with Mark, I had another conversation with a woman named Louise, a different gallery assistant in the Africa Gallery, who reiterated many of the points that Mark had made about the expectations of museum visitors. She explained that "nowadays with so much social media, people spread a lot of ideas about museums so that when they

actually come visit in person, they're not just coming to 'the place that has the Rosetta Stone,' they're also judging the museum because they've heard that this shouldn't be here or that shouldn't be here. I mean, a lot of people do just come to enjoy the history, of course, but there are also a fair number that come expecting to see stolen stuff and so that's what they see, even when it's not the case. But if they've already come in thinking that the museum got all of its African materials unethically, then they're going to be suspicious of pretty much everything in here." So, even without presenting each object's individual history or circumstances of acquisition, what Louise identified was the sense that there was an aura in this gallery that was directly connected to the critiques and debates about the British Museum's relationship to Empire, where knowing an object's African-ness is sufficient to trigger certain assumptions. With so few Maqdala-related artifacts on display in the Africa Gallery, I decided not to use my limited time to focus on visitors there, but these perspectives were what lingered with me as I began my series of interviews in the Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt Gallery. While I wondered if just being in the British Museum was enough to reproduce similar patterns of engagement here, I eventually found that Mark and Louise's observations were particularly helpful because they provided a distinct contrast to my experiences with visitors to this separate gallery. As I will describe below, I struggled to elicit responses to the Ethiopia display, where opinions were not as forthcoming as Mark and Louise had indicated they were in the Africa Gallery. The gallery sees its fair share of crowds, but it is small and lacks the famous mythology that draws visitors to the ancient Egyptian artifacts next door. With many visitors moving through the gallery mainly out of convenience, the best I could hope for was that a visitor would pause momentarily to let their gaze pass over the objects or wander over to the painting of the Battle of Adwa while the rest of their group took a break. Ultimately, however, a pattern emerged that provided the groundwork for exploring the history of Maqdala in this space; the more I spoke to visitors, even briefly, the more I realized that they saw these objects, perhaps as the display intended, as primarily religious rather than African, or even Ethiopian, with their origins being of secondary importance.

In the V&A, I encountered obstacles to initiating conversations with visitors because so few had actually stopped to engage with the singular display of Maqdala artifacts. However, the discussions I had

with those who had been drawn to the Maqdala display were generally original and productive, with most participants being eager to share their unique impressions. In the British Museum, I found myself facing almost the opposite problem, with plenty of people available to talk to but with most conversations being quite short and vague. For the first couple of weeks, when I approached visitors to ask if they had any particular takeaways from the display, I received a lot of responses about how colorful and distinctive the painting was, with many visitors saying that they had never encountered art in that style before and explaining that it drew their attention from the silver artifacts below. Some of these participants also noted that they wouldn't have recognized one of the processional crosses, which was engraved with a scene of the Virgin Mary in the center, as a cross at all if the label hadn't described it as such. Those who said something of this nature were often quick to clarify that they thought the processional cross had aesthetic value, adding that they found the silver artifacts "really pretty and elaborate." There were quite a few of these positive responses that focused on the aesthetics of the artifacts themselves, interspersed with a smaller number of responses to the information presented in the text. One woman told me she found it "interesting to see how Christian figures are represented differently in different cultures," referring to the diptych on display, which holds a German artistic depiction of Christ alongside an Ethiopian image of an Ethiopian saint, and which was purchased by Richard Holmes at the auction of the Maqdala loot (though this information is not evident from the display). She continued that it was a "nice reminder that even in our differences, we often have more in common than we expect." I asked her if she could elaborate a bit on that point, hoping to get some more insight into who she meant by "we," and she responded that "we forget sometimes that we share a lot of values even if our cultural traditions have developed differently," by which I believe she meant that being Christian indicated a shared value system as well as a shared history. Almost no one that I spoke to pointed out any of the non-Christian artifacts on the ends of the display, probably because their attention was naturally drawn to the center and kept there by the colorfulness of the painting. It often felt like people weren't really sure what exactly they were meant to be responding to, whether the display was nice to look at or informative or both. The fact that they weren't sure, however, was telling in and of itself, particularly compared to the responses to the V&A's display and the responses to the Africa

Gallery displays that Mark and Louise had described. In just responding to general questions about their impressions of this display, visitors did not gravitate towards moral judgments (like when V&A visitors had talked about trust and honesty), nor did they express any concern about where the objects had come from or how they had gotten to the museum. Instead, it felt like they assumed I wanted to know if they liked the display visually or if the information was clear and understandable. They mostly seemed to want to demonstrate respectfulness for their religious status, eager not t to say something that could be perceived as rude or offensive. It was as if all of those tensions that I had discussed with Mark and Louise simply did not exist here, and the Maqdala artifacts on display were not controversial loot or reminders of imperial guilt, though they could have easily been represented as such. The absence of the narrative of Maqdala 1868 in combination with the context of the display meant that issues like cultural restitution and the ethics of museum collections were not affecting visitors' responses to these histories.

Seeing that visitors were primarily responding to the display's orientation towards the history of religion, with numerous visitors saying that they "didn't know much about Ethiopian churches" or that the display taught them that Ethiopia was "more religiously diverse than they realized," I decided to try steering the conversation in a different direction. Rather than just asking about their impressions of the display, I started drawing their attention to the painting in the middle, which shows a religious procession in Ethiopia. The accompanying label explains that 'the priests sing and dance in procession with a Tabot, the symbolic representation of the biblical Ark of the Covenant. The Tabot, carried on the head of a priest (2nd left), is veiled from public gaze by a canopy of velvet and silk.' This painting was donated to the museum by the wife of Captain Tristram Speedy, who accompanied the Maqdala Expedition and also escorted Prince Alemayehu back to England. The connection to 'Mrs. Speedy' and the description of the tabot are the closest that any of the labels get to providing information that could be directly linked to the debates about the Maqdala Collection. I asked visitors if they had ever heard of a tabot before, to which I received universally negative responses; if there was a population of visitors who were familiar with the controversy

about the tabots in the British Museum, they were ironically[6] not visiting the Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt Gallery. In this case, I realized I could turn my surprise that the British Museum was not contributing, in the museum itself, to the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition into an opportunity to explore how people responded to the issue of the artifacts' history without the pressure or influence of a gallery loaded with references to empire or predetermined ideas about the ethics of African collections in British institutions. And since the narrative itself was hidden, it made sense to discuss the artifacts that are also hidden: the tabots. When I pointed out the painting and its subject matter, after getting past the acknowledgment that they were unfamiliar with a tabot, I said something along the lines of "the label explains that the tabot is shielded from public gaze, but it doesn't explain why. Tabots are sacred to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, as they're believed to be the presence of God on Earth. Every church has one, and only priests are allowed to view it." This description usually invited a response like "oh that's interesting," and with no further elaboration I would usually allow the conversation to politely drop off so the visitors could continue with their day.

Sometimes, however, I got a follow-up question and, perhaps because we were in a space dedicated to the act of looking, it generally had to do with what they look like or how we knew what tabots look like if only priests could view them. At this point I could introduce the fact that there are tabots in some museum collections, including in the British Museum, but that they aren't on display. But since that wasn't always the case, tabots had been seen before so we had some examples of what they looked like. One conversation in particular exemplified the themes that emerged from this type of conversation. A woman named Alice, who was visiting the museum with her husband Oliver, asked, "if they're so sacred that they can't be seen by anyone, then why would the museum have them?" Her husband interjected before I could answer and said, "they must have them for research, I'm sure there are lots of them that aren't being used anymore." Alice looked back at me for confirmation, and I said, "actually the museum doesn't do any research with them out of respect for the wishes of the church, as really no one is ever supposed to see them besides the

[6] Or perhaps not ironically, as those familiar with the tabots and their debates would know that they are not on display.

priests." They both leaned in to look more closely at the painting, as if by focusing harder they would be able to see the tabot concealed underneath the pigment. "Well, that's quite unusual," Oliver said as he leaned back. "There doesn't seem to be much point in having something like that in the museum then. I really do agree that it's important to be respectful of all religions, so I'm not saying that they should go against that, but I wonder if it's the best use of the museum's space and resources to basically just store them." I asked what they thought would be a better solution, and Alice said "seeing as they're so important to the church I suppose it would make the most sense to talk to them and ask what to do or where to put them. I mean, how is it that they ended up here in the first place?" I responded that there are tabots in the UK that came here through a variety of channels, but that the ones in the British Museum were here because of a British expedition to Ethiopia, during which they'd been removed from their churches and transported back to Britain. "Ah, well that's quite tricky then isn't it," said Oliver. "The way I understand it, things were quite different back then so it wasn't frowned upon to bring things back from all over the world the way it is today. But I'm not sure about the idea of going into a church and taking something like that. Though I imagine the people who did it probably didn't realize just how disrespectful it would be and didn't intend to cause harm, that's why it's best to err on the side of leaving churches be. I mean, we'd be quite shocked if someone came in and started plucking things out of our churches, let alone stuff that was really important. I think we need to accept that things were different then and that's okay and we don't need to feel guilty about every little thing that was picked up by a soldier here or there. But taking things from churches without permission isn't really the kind of behavior we can excuse, and I would say they crossed the line there." It was this phrase that stood out to me, the idea that there was a boundary of acceptable looting and that the plunder of Maqdala's churches had violated that boundary. Alice agreed with him, adding that she "thought in most situations it's best to just move on from the past and focus on the future," but that in this case "it would be a nice gesture to return them to a church, just to sort of pay our respects." Alice and Oliver moved on, but their comments reflected a broader consensus that was emerging in this approach to conversations about the display; without being presented upfront with information about the ethical questions surrounding the Maqdala objects' status in the museum, and in a space that did not

automatically conjure the debates about African material culture, visitors evaluated these 'hidden histories' through different lenses than those typically emphasized in cultural restitution debates. Without references to decolonization or reparations or Empire, many concluded that it would be a matter of respect for religion and religious spaces to see the tabots in particular returned to the Ethiopian Church – even those like Alice and Oliver who hinted that they might be less likely to come to this conclusion in other cases. It is important to understand that embracing the absence of these historical narratives in institutions like the British Museum can reveal just as much about how restitution debates set the tone and parameters for approaching the significance of these histories. In the next section, we will explore how, as part of a campaign to see the collection returned to Ethiopia, alternative ways of writing the history of the Maqdala Expedition have emerged that seek to capitalize on many of the sentiments expressed by visitors to the Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt gallery, with an emphasis on objects' spiritual significance rather than their significance as loot.

Often, discussions of the nature of the artifacts that are the subject of restitution debates are sidelined in favor of discussions emphasizing the context in which they were removed, forcibly or coercively, from the African continent. That is, there is an enormous body of work spanning decades that explores how these collections were taken and the resultant ethical implications of their retention in British cultural institutions. This pattern creates the impression that, in terms of restitution debates, the matter of how things were taken is the most important lens through which to assess claims for repatriation and reparations. But defining these objects primarily in terms of their history as loot means that we miss out on the insights that can be gained from considering the other ways that they have been valued, which have affected their trajectories and representations in cultural restitution debates. In the British Museum, many visitors arrive, especially in the Africa galleries, expecting to be confronted in some way by acknowledgments of colonialism and violence, whether or not they agree with the inclusion of those narratives in the displays and materials. Their perceptions of certain objects or collections on display, such as the Benin Bronzes, reflect an association between narratives of taking, the museum, and debates about cultural restitution that they then apply to their understanding of other objects when they recognize similar patterns. However, their ability to recognize these patterns is highly determined by how and where the

museum represents, through curation, different cases. Unlike in the V&A, the British Museum has chosen to limit its representation of the Maqdala Expedition to its online resources, leaving this history rendered almost invisible in the physical space of the museum and unlikely to be stumbled upon by visitors without prior knowledge. Doing so has created an odd disparity between the prominence and reputation of the Maqdala Collection within the wider conversation about cultural restitution and the reality of these objects' lives in the museum. But it has also left the possibility open for restitution advocates to challenge the British Museum's retention of Maqdala artifacts beyond the dominant frameworks of decolonization, introducing alternative ways to conceptualize the narrative of Maqdala in relation to the restitution of these artifacts. In the next section, we turn to the question of what 'restituting' Maqdala looks like in practice by exploring the unfolding case-within-a-case of the sacred altar tabots that were looted during the expedition. Through this case, we will see how religious, and particularly sacred, objects function (or do not function) in museum spaces and how the restitution of spiritually-significant artifacts may be pursued along different axes than other types of objects. In particular, I will demonstrate that, in an effort to both revitalize the debate and distinguish the Maqdala Collection from other collections, new narratives are emerging within the restitution debate that focus on the religious and sacred nature of these artifacts and that write the history of the expedition as one of sacrilege, rather than colonial violence, to advocate for their repatriation. We then have the unique opportunity to see examples of what restitution looks like in practice, and the ways these narratives are deployed in this process, through my first-hand account of attending two related yet separate events in which artifacts from Maqdala were formally repatriated to Ethiopia.

PART THREE: RESTITUTING MAQDALA

Chapter 6: Religious Objects in Museums

6.1 Sacred Heritage: Secularism, Restitution, and the Making of Religious Objects

One of the key features of the Maqdala Expedition that has continuously been a focal point of restitution debates is the spiritual significance of many of the artifacts that were taken, which has raised a set of questions about the nature of religious objects and the ethical frameworks that are applied to them. This dynamic has been explicitly present in the debates that have taken place about the status of a particular sub-set of artifacts from Maqdala that share a unique character: a selection of sacred altar tabots of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church. Many of the objects that were acquired and looted during the Maqdala Expedition are religious objects that belonged to churches, such as manuscripts and processional crosses. However, despite being both spiritually and culturally significant, none belong to the same class of inalienable sacred objects as the altar tabots. These tabots, which are tablets upon which the Ten Commandments are inscribed, represent the Ark of the Covenant and are believed by the Ethiopian Orthodox church to be the dwelling place of God on Earth. Every Orthodox church must have an altar tabot, which is what consecrates it as a sacred space – a church is not complete without it. A tabot may only be viewed by priests, and thus is kept in a designated separate space within the church and is only brought out, fully covered, for certain special occasions, holidays, and ceremonies. A number of tabots were taken from Ethiopia during the Maqdala Expedition and brought to the United Kingdom, where the majority that are known remain today. Their highly sacred character and unquantifiable value to the Ethiopian Christian community have motivated passionate pleas for their return to the Ethiopian Church, as well as requests from priests to view and pray with them while they remain in their current institutions. The reluctance of some of these institutions, particularly the British Museum and Westminster Abbey, to relinquish the tabots in their possession has ignited debates about the circumstances of their taking and whether they should be returned alongside other ongoing debates about the rest of the Maqdala Collection. Unlike the debates about

other objects from the Maqdala Collection, however, the debates about the altar tabots have raised a separate but related set of issues and arguments that emphasize the spiritual and sacred significance of the objects as grounds for their return. As will be discussed in greater detail, these debates overwhelmingly focus on the categories of the sacred and the sacrilegious rather than on the ethical concerns surrounding imperial violence or punitive expeditions. In fact, participants in these debates often deliberately attempt to distinguish the altar tabots from other Maqdala objects by de-linking them from the questions about the legacies of Empire. In doing so, the history of the Maqdala Expedition is written as a sacrilegious offense, a violation against the church and the clergy, more so than an imperial punitive expedition.

The case of the altar tabots of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church highlights the ways in which the type of institutions that are involved in restitution debates can affect the way an event like the Maqdala Expedition is represented, and can shape how its history is written. In this case, the subset of religious, and specifically sacred objects in this collection have inspired restitution debates that have crafted narratives of the Maqdala Expedition that are parallel to those about its military and imperial impacts, in which churches in both the UK and Ethiopia are involved. While a significant portion of the Maqdala objects have made their way into British museums, there are also many of them that are in the possession of churches throughout England. This ranges from small local congregations, such as a parish in Brighton that is in possession of a gold cross brought back from the expedition, to the designated World Heritage site of Westminster Abbey, a royal church that is in possession of a deeply sacred Ethiopian tabot. While the parish in Brighton has expressed interest in returning the cross to an Ethiopian congregation in the U.K., Westminster Abbey has repeatedly denied the requests, without a detailed explanation, of Ethiopian Orthodox priests to view and pray with the tabot in London. This dynamic warrants exploring how the involvement of such religious institutions in restitution debates has contributed to the creation of alternative historical narratives of the Maqdala Expedition, as well as considering what these narratives seek to accomplish. In this chapter, I therefore discuss the continued social relevance of religion, particularly the category of the sacred, and show how this makes particular demands upon cultural institutions, even those that are secular, regarding the religious, spiritual, and sacred objects in their collections. I then build upon

this literature in the chapter that follows to discuss the debates about returning Maqdala objects on religious grounds, which both demonstrate the persuasiveness of the concept of the sacred and the way that this concept has been invoked to reframe the Maqdala Expedition as an act of sacrilege outside of the frameworks of Empire and decolonization.

While the 'Maqdala Collection' is often referred to as such, as if it is a cohesive whole, the objects, artifacts, and even people who are considered a part of it belong to a variety of different categories that raise their own sets of distinct yet interwoven issues and debates. For example, the hundreds of manuscripts that were taken from Maqdala and that are now housed in libraries throughout the UK have initiated a conversation about how to approach the restitution of lost knowledge – knowledge that was not produced as a result of the treatment of important cultural texts. The Maqdala Expedition, marked by the looting of manuscripts from the library of Emperor Tewodros, facilitated the development of Ethiopian studies in Europe at the expense of Ethiopia's cultural heritage and scholarly agency over their historical resources. One category of 'things' that were taken and that are now strongly associated with the Maqdala Expedition is human remains, in the form of locks of hair taken from the body of the Emperor, and the remains of his son Prince Alemayehu, who was brought to the UK as a child and buried in Windsor Castle upon his early death. The sensitive nature of human remains has led to the development of separate legislation regarding their treatment, restitution, and repatriation, which has also influenced the discourse surrounding how to approach sacred and spiritual objects due to the overlapping concepts of respect and ritual in these contexts. In the case of objects taken from Maqdala, this is particularly relevant to the altar tabots, where recent restitution claims have sought to emphasize their sacredness as the logic for their restitution over the fact that they were taken during an imperial military expedition – in delving into this case in particular, we see how the historical narratives that emerge from the dominant ideologies of restitution debates can be contested by those that seek to escape the limitations of those frameworks. For the altar tabots, this process has challenged the unification of the 'Maqdala Collection' under a singular narrative of imperial violence in order to advocate for restitution outside of the constraints and assumptions of decolonization. On the 21st of September 2023, these discourses intersected in a significant milestone in the current restitution debates,

as a sacred tabot, a lock of hair belonging to Prince Alemayehu, and a selection of other objects related to Maqdala were formally returned to Ethiopia due to the work of the Scheherazade Foundation. The Foundation generously invited me to be a part of this event, which provided me with the special opportunity to witness restitution in action and interview other attendees and participants about the importance of the ceremony in the context of the wider conversation about the fate of the rest of the Maqdala objects in the UK.

In 2003, Talal Asad challenged the notion that the history of human civilization can be written as a narrative of progress from the irrationality of religion to the rationality of secularism. He argues that the transformation of the meaning of myth emerged through the reconstitution of the natural and supernatural worlds facilitated by European encounters with the non-European world 'in a space and time that witnessed the construction of 'religion' and 'nature' as universal categories' (Asad 2003, p.35). In order to claim to be liberating people from religion, it first had to be established as an elusive and oppressive force. The result was the construction of the sacred as a domain rather than a quality and the simultaneous formation of a domain called the secular that served as its opposite; within this framework, the domains of the sacred and the secular are consistently formed contingent to and in opposition with each other. Where the sacred is represented as the space of the irrational and the supernatural, the secular emerges as the space of reason, rationality, and the real. Asad (2003) breaks down these assumptions through a critical analysis of the secularization thesis, which claims that the linear development of modernity will necessarily include the increased differentiation of social spaces resulting in the separation of religion from politics, science, etc., the privatization of religion into its own social sphere, and the declining social significance of religious commitment, belief, and institutions. He suggests that if the secularization thesis seems to be defunct, it is not merely because we see the resurgence of religions and religious discourse in our supposedly modern nations. Rather, he believes that this thesis no longer carries the weight it did in the past because our increased understanding of power in the modern nation-state has revealed that politics and religion are more closely involved than we once thought. This perspective on the secularization thesis is also expressed by Jürgen Habermas (2008), who described a post-secular world in which 'religion maintains a public

influence and relevance, while the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernization is losing ground' (p.21). He argues that modernity should not be understood as synonymous with secular and illustrates this point with the observation that even those Western societies that consider themselves to be the most modern have had their supposedly secular values shaped by Judeo-Christian traditions.

Acknowledging the continued relevance of religion and religious identities within modern societies, in opposition to the secularization thesis, does not, however, resolve the question of where concepts like 'the sacred' fit into multicultural and pluralistic spaces. A moral relativistic perspective might claim that it would be impossible for such a society to have a universal conception of the sacred because the numerous cultural and religious groups of which it is formed will inevitably regard different things as sacred and in different ways – for everything that is considered sacred by one group, there will be another group for whom that same thing is of no particularly special value, or even of no value at all. By the same line of reasoning, there could also be no agreement on what was sacrilegious, and thus no legal framework that would fully protect religious belief or safeguard religious objects. John Rawls (1985) used this kind of logic to argue that a democratic society requires a political conception of justice because 'as a practical political matter no general moral conception can provide a publicly recognized basis for a conception of justice in a modern democratic state' (p.225). Like the concept of justice according to Rawls, while most members of this diverse society would be able to articulate what they believe to be the meaning of the word, there would not be a shared, coherent moral framework underlying their deeper understanding of the concept. For this reason, the idea of sacredness is increasingly absent from public policy and public space. As Eilidh St John (2006) discusses, the word has become vernacular but the belief in the sacred itself has been relegated to the private domain of religious practice which is distinct from what she calls 'real life' (p.183). Even in countries like the United States of America, where attendance at church is still more common than in other examples of multicultural, 'secular' societies like Australia, sacredness is associated specifically with defined religious communities and is not practically relevant outside of them (Bellah et al. 1985). In other words, that which is sacred, belonging as it supposedly does to the religious sphere, is a

matter of personal belief rather than a universal experience and thus it is not a functional category for a secular society.

In his analysis of religious systems, Emile Durkheim (1912) argued that religion is defined by the separation of that which is 'sacred,' things that are set apart from everyday life, and the 'profane,' which refers to the rest of the ordinary, mundane things that constitute everyday life. Religion, according to Durkheim, is thus the act of maintaining the boundary between these two categories. Ritual practices like prayer or ceremonies of worship function to create the 'sacred' by affirming its status as separate from the profane. In this way, anything can be sacred but must be made to be sacred through this act of separation. St John (2006), however, claims that concepts like the sacred have actually been misappropriated by human religion. She argues that the sacred should not be understood as being exclusively attached to systems of belief but rather as part of the experience of being human. According to St John, sacredness is not an objective quality of a thing – a property of an object or place that exists independently – but is instead a subjective attitude or sentiment towards a thing (p.188). It emanates from the subject who has the capacity to feel and express this orientation with regard to something rather than from the thing itself, and for this reason, sacredness is not necessarily relative. In this way, it is like love or hate, which humans share the capacity to feel but not the same objects of these feelings. Because the belief in sacredness is something that anyone can have the capacity for, people can acknowledge and respond to the sacredness of something regardless of whether it is sacred to them or not. The sacred need not be restricted to the realm of religion, and respect for sacredness need not only be the purview of those who subscribe to religious belief – in other words, it can exist in society outside of the religious/secular binary. As St John (2006) writes, 'when we recognize that the possession of the faculty for sacredness, like the possession of the faculty for love, is an indelible characteristic of what it means to be human we can respect the sacrality which others recognize without needing to accept the specifics of their sacred objects or the idiosyncrasies of the system they adopt to identify the sacred' (p.188). If we build from this analysis to explore the place for sacred heritage in society, the question should not be 'are we spiritual or secular?' Nor should it be about whether or not something is sacred. Instead, the question becomes 'what modes of understanding are being invoked, and

what demands are being made, when individuals or communities utilize their capacity for engaging with the sacred.' I will discuss this question in the remainder of this chapter, and in the subsequent chapter, I will look at how this recognition of the sacred operates in the conversations about the religious and sacred objects that were taken during the Maqdala Expedition.

Despite the ambiguity surrounding the supposed separation between the spiritual and the secular, the rise of secularism as a framework for defining modernity has had a significant impact on the evolution of heritage preservation. While the establishment of a global discourse of heritage is frequently linked to the rise of international institutions like UNESCO, the preservation of material heritage within a secular cultural sphere was also an essential feature of the nation-building processes that took place across Europe in the 19th century (Rico 2021). Within this framework, museums and other heritage-oriented institutions are often conceptualized as Eurocentric spaces that are both products of a particular form of Western modernity and constituent elements of that modernity. In his essay 'Of Other Spaces,' Michel Foucault (1984) described both museums and libraries as "heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time," which he characterized as places where 'all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (p.24). He claims that these spaces are specific to and characteristic of 19th-century Western culture (Foucault 1984). This assertion is consistent with the work of French historiographer Pierre Nora (1989), who argued that modern society's self-conscious sense of rupture between past and present motivates the need to create 'sites of memory' – museums, archives, memorials – where there were once 'real environments of memory' (p.7). According to Nora (1989), the rise of heritage, as both an industry and an ideology, is thus an expression of a distinctly modern shift away from memory as a 'magical and affective phenomenon' which allows 'remembrance within the sacred' and towards history as an 'intellectual and secular production' which demands 'analysis and criticism' (p.9). Scholars such as David Lowenthal (1998) have also shown that this secularization of the value of material heritage was initiated by the emergence of European secular rationalism that began during the Reformation in the 16th century, during which time the groundwork was laid for a heritage discourse based on a separation of science and religion. Though Trinidad Rico (2021) demonstrates that the evolution of this

discourse was never truly detached from religion, the belief that heritage preservation operates in a distinct sphere from religion has influenced cultural policies regarding the management of religious heritage.

This context has affected the ways in which the material culture of religion has been incorporated into the space of the museum. As Crispin Paine (2012) notes, museums in the past often displayed religious artifacts with an emphasis on their aesthetic value or, in the case of non-Western religions, to assert the cultural superiority of Western societies. While this could involve using religious objects to visualize cultures, historical events, or institutions, museums rarely incorporated the actual religious meaning of an object into the practice of curating it. That is, there was relatively little attention paid to whether an object's religious status warranted different treatment from other non-religious objects in a museum's collection. Even in anthropological and ethnographic museums where religion has generally been taken seriously as it is practiced, religious objects have not traditionally been approached as being distinct from cultural, artistic, or historical artifacts. As it has become clear, however, that the significance of religion around the world has not, as predicted by the secularization thesis, diminished, museums are increasingly faced with the need to prioritize and account for the spiritual significance of religious objects that they hold. This prerogative is related not only to the impact of globalization on people's awareness and perception of other religions but also to the newfound responsibility of museums to promote positive relationships between communities based on understanding of different cultures (Paine 2012). The implication of this awareness of the continued social and political significance of religion is that museums are expected to have a multilayered approach to their religious collections. On the one hand, they must emphasize the religious context for the visitor in order to enable them to see the object through the lens of the spiritual value it holds for practitioners. On the other, they are accountable to the needs and desires of the people for whom the object is significant. Thus, museums are not only responsible for the care of the object itself but also for the way the object is perceived by their visitors and for the impact the object's presence in the museum has on the relevant living religious community. For this reason, a lot of attention is now paid to the ways that these communities make demands on museums for the return of artifacts or for greater control over how they are managed (Sullivan and Edwards 2004).

Before delving further into this subject, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by a 'sacred object,' and particularly to examine the strategic ways in which this label may be applied in claims for the return of objects to the places and peoples from which they originated. There is no singular definition within the literature for what constitutes a sacred object, and, importantly, an object having religious significance does not automatically equate to it being holy or sacred. Some objects that could be characterized as religious are connected to religious institutions or events, but may not themselves be imbued with an importance that sets them apart from other cultural artifacts. Furthermore, the act of labeling something 'religious' or 'sacred' is not neutral – neither is a universal or fixed category, but rather they are instead related to modes of identity and subjectivity that may not resonate (or have resonated) in all social, cultural, or historical contexts. Nor has the importance of materiality in studies of religion always been recognized. Scholars such as E.B. Tylor (1871) and Max Weber (1965) both favored an approach to religion that focused on belief and meaning rather than on religious material culture. For Tylor (1871), religion was fundamentally about a belief in spirits, or the spiritual 'animation' of matter, which stemmed from the urge to explain natural phenomena such as life and death. He believed that all religions could be traced back to this point of origin, but that, with the evolution of the human mind, religious belief would eventually be replaced by scientific reasoning. Later, Weber (1965) proposed a theory of religion that emphasized the centrality of meaning and symbolism, whereby the evolution of religion is marked by a turn away from dependence on the material form (such as the worship of icons) and towards a higher, meaning-driven religiosity. Despite the fact that Tylor and Weber predicted different trajectories for the development of religion, they shared the conviction that the materiality of religion was of secondary importance to the way it created and expressed meaning.

As Brigit Meyer and Dick Houtman (2012) explore, however, the past several decades have witnessed a shift in scholarly attention within the social sciences and the humanities from viewing ideas, values, and concepts as abstract forces that shape human societies to understanding the ways in which they take material form and become tangible. This so-called 'material turn' has had particularly important, and potentially disruptive, implications for the study of religion, which has historically been positioned in

opposition to materiality – as a domain that dealt primarily with the immaterial and intangible. But developments in the study of material culture have opened up space in the study of religion to explore how the material dimensions of religion are intimately linked to, and, in fact, inextricable from, the formation of religious beliefs, identities, and communities. This includes the acknowledgment that religion is not only comprised of what people believe but is also constituted in their actions, which often involve material *things*. Within this framework, Jonathan Smith (2004) describes the importance of performance, and, specifically, of ritual, in the making of an object into a religious or sacred object. He writes that 'a ritual object in action becomes sacred by having attention focused on it in a highly marked way' (Smith, 2004, p.33). This definition of the sacred quality of a religious object, as being dependent on the way that the object is used and treated in religious practice, is essential to understanding the place of these objects in museums, and especially how they are related to collections with histories of contested ownership and debates about the return of artifacts from museums to their places and communities of origin. The category of 'religious objects,' including sacred objects, is certainly not one that is straightforward to determine – there are many objects in museums that might once have been considered religious or sacred but which have since become deconsecrated or which have no living community to activate their spiritual significance. To define an object as religious or sacred is not to suggest that it has always been and will always be so. For this reason, I do not attempt to propose a static definition of what constitutes a religious object here, but rather I am concerned with the assumptions, meanings, and expectations that are invoked when an object is distinguished as such, whether or not that distinction is accepted by all parties involved in the object's life. Thus, for the purposes of this work, I consider objects to be religious and/or sacred when they have been assigned a spiritual significance by a specific community. As I will show below, the complex relationship between religious practice, identity, and objects is at the heart of one of the central conflicts of cultural politics today: the claims made by living communities for the return of their cultural heritage.

The momentum for debates about the status of religious objects in museums and demands for their restitution has largely come from indigenous peoples in the former settler states of North America and Australasia (Clavir 2002). This fact highlights that there is an important distinction being made when claims

are made upon objects on religious grounds that has to do with the nature of the entity, group, or community initiating the claim. Take, for example, the issues surrounding the Parthenon Sculptures (the so-called 'Elgin Marbles'), which are at the center of one of the most public and famous debates on cultural restitution. In this case, the government of Greece has repeatedly demanded that the British Museum return the marbles, which were removed from the Parthenon by Lord Elgin during the period in which Greece was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, on the grounds that they belong with the rest of the sculptures that were originally located on the Acropolis of Athens. While the Greek government and its sympathizers have consistently argued that the removal of the marbles from the Parthenon was a destructive and disrespectful act that can only be remedied by reuniting the disparate pieces of this highly-respected cultural and historical monument, there has never been a claim for their return on religious grounds. While the significance of the Parthenon Sculptures within debates on cultural restitution has been described at length in relation to the history of Western civilization and the emergence and development of Greek nationalism, no one has put forth the argument that their return to Greece is necessary for the sake of religious practice or worship. Despite the fact that the frieze, which was originally part of a Temple of Athena, depicts a religious procession and contains motifs that are significant to Greek mythology, the arguably religious nature of the sculptures is not considered relevant to the issue of their return because they are not of significance to a living, practicing religious community. Thus, the Parthenon Marbles draw our attention to an important feature of the category 'religious objects' as it relates to confrontations with museums: the identification of an object as religious, spiritual, or sacred for the purposes of evaluating restitution claims or adjusting its curation is directly relative to the recognition of a living community who still consider it important to their religious practice. Consistent with the work of Alfred Gell (1998), the status of the object is not so much about what it 'is' so much as it is about its relationship to people. As he put it, 'it does not matter in ascribing 'social agent' status what a thing or person 'is' in itself – what matters is where it stands in a network of social relations' (Gell, 1998, p.123).

This relational dynamic is essential to understanding how the meaning of a religious object is made through contestations over its representation and treatment in museums. For the purposes of reclamation,

an object acquires religious status when it is situated in relation to the ongoing religious practice or worship of a visible and defined religious community. Even as the application of the terms 'sacred' or 'religious' to describe these objects and groups is both historically and culturally contingent – that is, related to specifically contemporary and Western ways of constructing identity in relation to shared beliefs and practices that may not reflect the understanding of the object's original makers and users – it has nevertheless become a potent political category due to the particular demands it makes upon museums and other heritage practitioners. These demands have given rise to both moral and legal frameworks for guiding the treatment of religious objects that are closely tied to debates about the status of human remains and the restitution of unethically acquired collections.

6.2 Respect and the Moral Weight of the Sacred

One of the key developments in this area was the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990, which elucidates the crucial role played by indigenous communities in challenging museums to reconsider their authority over religious objects. This piece of legislation provides for the repatriation of certain categories of human remains and objects as long as some conditions are met. These conditions emphasize the return of remains and funerary objects for the purpose of reburial, and the return of cultural heritage and sacred objects for use in ongoing ritual practices. In addition to creating an avenue for indigenous communities to pursue redress for the taking and display of human remains and cultural artifacts, this act also acknowledged the fact that the societies from which these things and people were stolen are still, despite the violence of settler colonialism, living cultures. Significantly, the evaluation of a repatriation claim under NAGPRA may not consider what will happen to the object upon its return, which implicitly recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples to determine for themselves what constitutes appropriate usage. This clause is in direct contrast to the position usually enjoyed by museums, as 'professional' and 'scientific' institutions, to be the ultimate arbiters of heritage preservation. Indeed, this condition separates this class of objects from other claims for repatriation, in which concerns over object safety, educational value, or standards of display are frequently accepted as excuses to deny

requests for return. While NAGPRA does not apply outside of the United States, it nevertheless set an important precedent for the differentiation of categories of material heritage, with some warranting special treatment on religious grounds. Further, it reinforced that this exceptional status of the thing itself is dependent on and inextricable from the status of the people it comes from. Where certain groups have been threatened or disadvantaged through oppressive systems of power, such as settler colonialism, reclaiming objects for the sake of continuing spiritual practices and rituals is a form of resistance against the violence of erasure. In other words, it is a reassertion of the community's identity and right to exist in the world that is mediated through the control of 'their' objects. It is important to note, however, that this control does not always manifest in the deaccessioning of artifacts from museum collections even in the case of religious or sacred objects – in some situations, as will be discussed in further detail below, it can be satisfactory to leave an object in a museum as long as authority over its interpretation and representation is delegated to the relevant community. In this way, the restitution of religious objects does not only have to be about the return of the thing, but can also be about the creation of space for multiple ways of knowing and engaging with it.

Such shifts in the treatment of religious objects within the heritage sphere are also evident in documents like the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics (2006), which suggests that material heritage of sacred significance should be cared for 'in a manner consistent with professional standards and the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic, or religious groups from which the object originated.' Here, the ICOM Code, which defines the principles of museum practice that are generally agreed upon by the international museum community, alludes to the crucial concept of respect that is entangled in the debates on the treatment of religious objects. The provision that encourages an especially careful approach to religious objects is described under the heading 'culturally sensitive material,' and groups together sacred artifacts and human remains within this category. It stipulates that collections including anything of this nature should only be acquired so long as the museum is able to care for them 'securely' and 'respectfully.' This has the interesting effect of discursively linking the status of religious objects and the status of human bodies in museums – and also of blurring the boundary between

objects and persons – which prompts us to ask what is shared between sacred objects and human remains that warrants this special consideration. One answer to this question has to do with the moral obligation to respect – both in terms of action and in terms of feeling – that is assumed to accompany the things that belong to these categories. While it is beyond the scope of this work to fully explore the ethical philosophies that deal with the concept of respect, it important to underline the ways that it manifests in the space of the museum to govern approaches to their collections.

Within philosophy, there is a robust body of work dedicated to the nature of respect given its application in a variety of ethical discussions pertaining to, among other things, justice, agency, rights, and cultural politics. However, this literature is overwhelmingly focused on the idea of respect as it is applied to how people express, perform, and receive respect, with relatively little interest shown in exploring how respect is related to the classification of material things. Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that respect necessarily involves something that does the respecting (the subject), whether this is through behavior or attitude, and a thing, entity, or person that is respected (the object). With regard to this dynamic, Robin Dillon (2022) describes respect as an acceptance that something's significance exists independent of ourselves and our feelings towards it, and thus that it warrants a response that would also be logically understood and endorsed by others. A similar position is expressed by John Rawls (2000), who wrote that respect involves recognizing that something 'is directly determining our will without reference to what is wanted by our inclinations' (p.153). This does not mean that all things are deserving of (equal) respect, nor is respect expected to appear in the same way in different situations. Rather, it conceptualizes respect as something that is cognitive (involving beliefs, assumptions, and perceptions), behavioral (involving actions and physical expressions), and normative (related to certain social norms and standards). Though the earlier philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1785) on this subject argued that only people are legitimate objects of respect, more recent developments in the field have acknowledged that nonhuman things can also demand and receive respect, but this has predominantly been explored in the context of environmental ethics (see Schmidtz 2011; Foreman 2017). Given that the principle of respect is so central to the work of museums, and is so frequently cited as a mode of caring for objects, I consider it both fair and productive to apply

some of these philosophical frameworks to inform our understanding of the relationship between respect and sacred objects.

The call to afford respect to sacred objects and human remains in museums thus brings to the fore issues surrounding how these dynamics are present in museum practices of conservation and curation. Though museums would undoubtedly claim to respect all of the objects in their collections, the act of setting apart sacred objects and human remains as warranting a special assurance of respectful treatment suggests that respect here not only refers to a generalized approach to museum objects but also functions to categorize these things as demanding a particular kind of respect: a reverential respect. Joel Feinberg (1973) describes this form of respect as being a recognition of and response to the intrinsic moral value of the thing being respected, which is ultimately an acknowledgment that it holds a power unto itself to claim our attention and compel our obedience to its requirements. When sacred objects and human remains are given this reverential respect, they are united by the fact that the respect they are owed is a reflection of the way they are imbued with a form of dignity – in other words, by the way they are characterized as having unconditional, inherent, and inalienable worth that cannot be violated. For believers, practitioners, and worshippers, the dignity of a sacred object is accepted without question and respect is given easily on these grounds; in the case of human remains, this dignity is an extension of the principle of bodily autonomy and respect comes from the connection between the physical remains and the memory of personhood. However, it is not only a belief in their innate dignity that brings sacred objects and human remains together under the header of, to borrow from ICOM, 'culturally sensitive material.' It is also the ways in which the boundary between these two groups of material often becomes blurred when this dignity is recognized. In many cases, and across a wide variety of religious and spiritual traditions, an object is (or is made) sacred precisely because it is believed to have its own spirit or personhood. While the exact nature of this personhood is not always without contestation – take, for example, the rift between Protestantism and Catholicism over whether the communion wine represents or *is* the blood of Christ – the belief in its existence can challenge normative assumptions about what sacred objects *are* and how 'human' is defined within the context of the museum. Therefore, an object in a museum may be deserving of reverential respect

because it is sacred, because it is or was once a person, or because it is a combination of both of these. This complexity is key to understanding the central case study of this chapter, the sacred altar tabots of the Ethiopian church in the British Museum, which I will turn to later, but first I find it useful to illustrate this point with a brief example: the ancestor statues (moai) of from the island of Rapa Nui (Easter Island), two of which are also housed in the British Museum and are the target of claims for their return. In the future, it would make a valuable contribution to this discussion to include the perspectives of curators and museum professionals who work with sacred artifacts, to understand how their approaches to such collections are affected by this status and how they practice respect in the context of their work. However, due to the spatial limitations and focus of this work, the aim of this section is to introduce the core questions that circulate within cultural institutions regarding respect for sensitive material, particularly as it relates to potential tensions between community and institutional expectations. Doing so provides a useful foundation for considering the diverging narratives that have emerged through the debates about the altar tabots.

Moai are large stone statues constructed by the Rapanui people that are believed to be the living forms of the community's ancestors. The British Museum is in possession of two moai, one called Hoa Hakananai'a and another called Moai Hava, which were both removed from the island of Rapa Nui during a British survey expedition in 1868. There are almost one thousand moai that are known to exist on Rapa Nui, all of which are of sacred significance. Their sacred nature stems from the central importance of ancestry in Rapanui cultural and spiritual practice, which is evidenced by the fact that the moai are believed to be not just symbolic representations of the ancestors but to actually embody the ancestors themselves (Van Tilburg 2004). Though they are made of stone, their materiality does not prevent them from being no less alive to the Rapanui people than would be a flesh and blood grandfather, nor does it make them less human than a skeleton. For this reason, the Rapanui community submitted a written request for the return of Hoa Hakananai'a and Moai Hava in 2018, which has prompted a series of ongoing negotiations regarding their status in the museum. The British Museum states that it recognizes the unquantifiable significance of the moai to Rapanui culture and acknowledges that their removal from the island has had a negative impact on the community. While the museum has thus far given no indication that it is seriously considering the

permanent repatriation of the moai to Rapa Nui, and is instead favoring collaborative engagement and research projects that keep the moai in the museum, it does seem that it is grappling with how to approach the statues as objects that straddle the boundary between the material and the spiritual, the human and the non-human, the living and the dead. This is evident in the way the museum's description of the moai in their display labels and on their online webpage oscillates between referring to them with 'he/him' pronouns, suggesting a recognition of their identities as persons and using 'it' instead, reaffirming that the museum ultimately considers them to be objects, albeit sacred ones. Perhaps the museum's apparent indecisiveness is not only a concern about the ethics of labeling, but also reflects a concern about the practical implications of deciding one way or another. Whether the Rapanui perspective on the living nature of the moai or the museum perspective on their inanimate objecthood is given priority may have a direct effect on how the museum is expected to treat and respect them. Indeed, the argument has already been put forward by experts in international law that it would be more appropriate to approach the moai as human remains than as inanimate statues. One legal practitioner, Paz Zarate, has been cited as describing the relationship between the moai and the Rapanui people in these terms, arguing that 'for them, this is not an object or a statue…this is family for them and it helps explain their emotional reaction. This case should be treated like we are dealing with human remains, not just a statue' (Lyons 2018). A similar sentiment was expressed by Felipe Ward, Chile's National Treasures Minister at the time, who claimed that Hoa Hakananai'a is 'so much more than an object' (Holland 2018). The sacred value of the moai thus stems from the conviction that they are not mere representations of the ancestors, but actually possess and embody the spirits of the ancestors – their sacredness is entangled with their personification, which makes it impossible to fully respect them as sacred without also respecting them as human. What this case shows is that the imperative to afford 'culturally sensitive material' with its due respect is fraught with conflicts over the essentialized distinction between objects and persons that underlies the work of museums. It furthermore highlights that there is ambiguity surrounding whether it is the things themselves that are being respected in their own right, or whether it is actually the communities from which they came that are the subjects of museums' respect.

This question becomes particularly relevant when it comes to exploring how respect for sacred objects and/or human remains is shown in practice. Paine (2012) identifies five components to showing respect for these types of objects in museums: handling, seeing, storing, treating, and active honoring. Handling an object with respect may mean accepting restrictions on who is allowed to touch it or respecting requirements for how to touch it. In some cases, respect can also mandate that only certain categories of people can view the object, or that it can only be viewed at particular times of the day, a part of the year, or during specific ritual practices. Respectful storage can refer to storing the objects such that they always face one direction or are never brought below a certain height, or even ensuring that they do not come into close proximity with other categories of objects. The practice of treating an object respectfully is primarily related to conservation and can involve avoiding the use of materials that can have a harmful physical or spiritual effect on the object. Lastly, respect might not necessitate that the object be subject to these types of special rules, but instead might require creating space for the source community to engage with the object in religious ceremonies or rituals. Alison Brown and Laura Peers (2003) discuss respectful museum practice within the framework of relational ethics, arguing that the demonstration of genuine respect through museum protocols is intrinsically linked to the establishment of relationships of trust between institutions and communities. Here, respect is understood as the outcome of a curatorial praxis that actively seeks collaboration and consultation with source communities, establishing relationships that enable curators to learn directly from source communities about how to show respect for cultural artifacts rather than relying on blanket gestures derived from internally determined policy and guidance. But would a museum professional caring for or researching a sacred object feel obliged to comply with any of these standards if there was no one around to assert the need for them? If there is no recognized community for whom an object is considered sacred, but such a community once existed, is it acceptable to approach the object in the same way as one would approach, for instance, a non-religious historical artifact? Or would doing so constitute what James Young (2005) calls a ‘profound’ offense, which is an insult that targets core values and identity and which is offensive whether or not it is known/witnessed. The answers to these questions say a lot about how the responsibility to respect culturally sensitive material is fulfilled, or perceived to be

fulfilled, in museum spaces. Indeed, the fact that this responsibility has evolved in tandem with museums' recently established roles as promoters of good community relations highlights the close relationship between respect for objects and respect for communities – it certainly was not always the case that sacred objects from non-Western communities were granted any kind of exceptional status within museums (Watson 2007). It is only in direct proportion to increased recognition of the rights of source communities (especially those of indigenous peoples) to control over their cultural heritage, an extension of their right to exist and thrive in the world, that museums have been compelled to take such culturally significant objects seriously. While it is neither possible nor productive to generalize about how culturally sensitive material, and specifically sacred material, should be handled, it is clear that there are issues at stake in these debates that have to do with where the power to define this category is located and who has the final say in determining what qualifies as sufficiently respectful practice. In an expanded analysis of this dynamic, it would certainly be worthwhile to explore how curators in different institutions navigate these questions, and it would not be necessary for all the artifacts to be the subject of restitution claims – indeed, it would make an interesting comparison to consider the trajectories and treatments of sacred objects whose demands for respect appear adequately met within a museum space. For now, it is sufficient to acknowledge that the matter of the nature of respect for sacred objects in these institutions, especially as it reflects evolving relationships between museums and communities, is far from settled.

6.3 Spirituality in Secular Spaces

The aim of this section is not to critique the secular displays of any and all religious artifacts in large art and anthropological museums like the British Museums, nor to suggest that such museums are obligated to abandon their secular identities in order to accommodate religious artifacts. Rather, the role of this section is to introduce an exploration of the dynamics that come to the fore when the secular, conservation-oriented prerogatives of these museums intersect with the desire to express spirituality and engage with sacredness in ways that may challenge institutional frameworks of respect. In doing so, we establish the foundation for understanding how and why sacredness may be invoked to call attention to

discrepancies between museum practice and community demands. Though the calls from communities of indigenous and formerly colonized peoples to show sacred objects their due respect have helped to create a new landscape of expectations for how museums approach these materials, it is not entirely new for museums to handle such objects differently from others in their collections. In 1955, for example, the British Museum found sacred relics of various saints in the golden reliquary head of St Eustace in its collection, which it had purchased in 1850, and decided to return them to a Catholic church in Basel, Switzerland from which the head-shrine originated. In this case the museum recognized that respecting the sacredness of the relics required returning them to a place of worship where their value could be fully realized. This, of course, occurred prior to the British Museum Act of 1963 which now prohibits the museum from deaccessioning any artifacts in its collection unless they qualify for 'disposal' under a limited set of conditions or consist of human remains that are subject to the Human Tissue Act of 2004. Note that here, the exemption for human remains has been legally disconnected from the moral link between human remains and sacred objects formed by the category of 'culturally sensitive materials' promoted by ICOM that I discussed above, and operates under a highly limiting and extremely Western, biomedical view of what counts as human. There are no legal parallels to this act that concern artifacts classified as non-human sacred objects, which would allow for similar exceptional treatment. Consequently, even the most sacred of objects in the British Museum is legally bound to remain there unless the museum recognizes and demonstrates that it is unfit for the purpose of the museum – that is, that it is definitively unfit for either display or for research. It was presumably this act that discouraged the museum from undertaking a similar course of action to that taken in the case of the St Eustace reliquary head relics when, in 2009, curators found 39 more relics in a 12th century portable altar. As Catholic relics typically consist of the physical remains of saints (usually bone, though sometimes articles of clothing worn by and thus sanctified by a saint), the museum would have been well within their rights under the Human Tissue Act to deaccession and return the relics to a church. This time, however, the museum defended its retention of both the relics and the altar, with the curator of medieval antiquities at the time, James Robinson, claiming that they were being treated not as artworks but as sacred, devotional objects with which visitors would be allowed to

engage spiritually. In an article in the Church Times that declared that visitors would be able to pray in front of the altar, Mr. Robinson was quoted as saying that 'these items are still part of a functioning belief system. We are very sympathetic to this as long as it does not endanger the public and as long as it is personal and not flamboyant' (Bowder 2009). So, Catholic visitors to the museum would be welcome to engage in the type of quiet, internalized spirituality favored by Western society that does not intrude too much on secular space.

But not all religious or spiritual traditions practice worship or prayer in the same way, and it is not always confined to private interiority. Amanda Hughes and Carolyn Wood (2009) recount how a visitor to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art would, upon entering the South Asian galleries, insist on touching the statue of a sacred bull, called Nandi, that belonged to the Hindu deity Shiva and praying with it. Touching the statue is meant to bring good fortune, and the fact that the visitor continued to do so indicated that they did not perceive its power differently due to its being in a museum. Further, touching an object on display in a museum without explicit permission to do so violates one of the most ubiquitous principles of art and anthropology museums: look but do not touch. While many museums do offer special programs that allow visitors to handle objects from specific collections (under supervision and with objects that have been pre-approved by curators), it is generally understood that touching is strictly prohibited without prior authorization. Fiona Candlin (2020) argues that the now widely-accepted prohibition of tactile engagement in museums (outside of limited supervised and sanctioned educational programs) evolved in relation to shifts in the class makeup of museum visitors in the 19th century. She shows that when museum audiences were mostly comprised of members of the upper and elite classes, visitors were allowed and even encouraged to touch objects in the collections. But institutional changes in museums that made these spaces more open and accessible to the working classes, and which increasingly enabled visitors to explore the space without professional guides, raised concerns that allowing such ordinary people to touch the objects would be damaging. These anxieties about the conservation of collections and the greater integration of social classes in museums meant that it would have been more difficult for museums to separate groups of visitors and delineate who was and was not allowed to touch and handle the collections. In response to the

fears that the perceived uncleanliness or roughness of the working class posed a risk to the objects and artworks, museums eventually imposed barriers between visitors and collections that mandated a primarily visual form of engagement. Of course, such restrictions were not applied to the work of curators, who were expected to handle objects behind the scenes. They were considered to possess the intellectual qualifications and skills to do so, which most members of the public did not have. Thus, the exclusion of touch from the experience of learning in the museum was not only historically contingent, as demonstrated by Constance Classen and David Howes (2006), but also socially contingent.

I would add to Candlin's analysis of the role of class that this dynamic is even more pronounced in the latter half of the 20th century when museum audiences become more racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse. As members of the communities that originally produced and used many of the objects in museums encountered them in these spaces, particularly in the postcolonial context, controlling the terms of access and maintaining physical distance between visitors and collections functioned to uphold the authority of the institution over that of source communities. With regards to the exhibition of religious or sacred artifacts, this boundary also helped to reinforce the image of the museum as a secular space in which ritual behaviors were not appropriate. Through these developments, we arrive at the scenario in which the visitor to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is asked by a guard not to touch the statue of Nandi because this type of worship and tactile engagement is no longer welcome in the museum space. This is not to argue that museums should not be secular spaces or that museums must strive to re-orient themselves such that they are able to activate their religious objects in a spiritual setting, but rather to illustrate that their identity as a secular space can and does come into conflict with the continued relevance of the demand to respect that which is considered spiritually sacred. As Gretchen Buggeln (2015) describes, the visitor's actions 'highlight the persistent sacred power of religious artifacts in museums, as well as the changes that might be coming as a Western secularized notion of public space is challenged by immigrant groups and practices' (p.41). Rather than having the final say in how to respect sacred objects, museums may now be confronted with community expectations and demands that are not compatible with long-standing institutional norms and practices. This rupture can become even more pronounced where there is

disagreement over what constitutes sufficient levels of respect or whether a museum space is capable of accommodating the mode of respect that is claimed. As will be shown in the following chapter, the debates surrounding the fate of the altar tabots that were taken from Ethiopia during the Maqdala Expedition are closely related to these issues of sacredness and respect within heritage institutions. Furthermore, they show that the category of the 'sacred' is still very much relevant and poignant in supposedly secular spaces, and that the idea of sacrilege can have a powerful impact on perceptions of return requests even in non-religious contexts.

Chapter 7: Debates on the Restitution of the Altar Tabots

7.1 The Altar Tabots of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church is one of the oldest Christian state churches in the world, second only to that of Armenia, being dated as far back as 330 when Christianity is recorded as having been formally adopted by the Kingdom of Aksum (Miller 2017). Notably, it belongs to a very small group of Christian churches in sub-Saharan Africa that were established prior to the incursion of European colonialism and therefore its development and traditions have been of great interest to religious scholars and historians. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church considers Ethiopians to be the successors to the Jews as God's chosen people, a belief which is grounded in Jewish biblical tradition and the legend that the Ark of the Covenant was transferred from Jerusalem to Aksum. This ideology of closeness is textually based on the *Kebra Nagast* ('The Glory of Kings'), which recounts the narrative of an Ethiopian Queen of Sheba called Makeda who travels to Jerusalem and conceives a son by King Solomon. This son, first called Bainalehekem and later Menelik, grows up to return to Jerusalem and is anointed David, King of Ethiopia by King Solomon, thereby establishing the Solomonic dynasty of kings in Ethiopia. However, not only is the *Kebra Nagast* believed to document the foundation of the Ethiopian monarchy and confirm its legitimacy, but it also entrenches the idea of Ethiopians as the new chosen people by claiming that, while Bainalehekem was in Jerusalem, an angel of God appeared to say that God was angry with Israel and wished to have His Ark taken from them. This ark refers to the Ark of the Covenant, the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments presented to Moses were written. According to the *Kebra Nagast*, Bainalehekem (now King David) consequently took the Ark and was guided back to Ethiopia by Saint Michael, who enabled him to cover the distance in only one night. Upon his return, he was received by his mother as the new sovereign of Ethiopia and took the name Menelik, and the Ark was placed in a church in the Queen's capital city. The modern Ethiopian church identifies this site as the Church of Mary of Zion in Aksum, which is unique in its claim to actually possess the Ark of the Covenant (Munro-Hay 2007). The accuracy of this narrative has not been confirmed by archeological or historical research, which has not found substantial

evidence of the existence of a queen or king by these names, nor historical accounts that would explain the emergence of the *Kebra Nagast* itself. Nevertheless, this ambiguity has not prevented this text from shaping the evolution of Ethiopian Christianity or from having a significant impact on Ethiopian conceptions of national identity (Marzagora 2017).

One of the most significant ways in which the story of the *Kebra Nagast* has become integrated into the traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox church is through the persistent importance of the Ark of the Covenant in the church's religious practice. This importance is reflected in the central role of the tabot in Ethiopian Orthodox worship, particularly as the focal point of the liturgy. Tabots, which are typically made of stone, marble, or wood, are replicas of the tablets on which the ten commandments were written and are believed by Ethiopian Christians to be the dwelling place of God on Earth. It is the presence of the tabot which consecrates the church, and so every church must have at least one tabot, which is often dedicated to Mary, but can also be dedicated to an angel or saint. Without its tabot, a church is reduced to being merely a building rather than a place of worship. As such, tabots are of the highest sacred significance and are handled and cared for according to a strict set of standards. Once consecrated, the tabot is kept in a special part of the church (known as the Qeddest Qeddusan, or 'Holy of Holies') where only members of the clergy may enter and is only brought out for ceremonial or celebratory purposes. Though it is an essential part of the church both literally, in terms of its required physical presence, and spiritually, in terms of the power it possesses for practitioners, the privilege to view the actual tabot itself is restricted to the clergy. However, this does not prevent the tabot from having rich interactions with the wider Ethiopian Orthodox community – tabots may be brought out to celebrate special holidays or in times when it is felt that divine intervention is needed. At these times, the tabot will be brought out from behind the curtain separating the Qeddest Qeddusan from the rest of the church, held on the head of a priest and draped with ornate, colorful cloths to protect it from view. In addition to the priest who carries the tabot, others walk beside him carrying processional crosses and the ritual silk umbrellas that are held over the tabot as a mark of respect. There is traditional music, drumming, and chanting that accompanies the procession of the tabot around the church, with multiple elder members of the community having a role to play. It is a highly interactive, colorful, and

emotive event, as members of the congregation will follow the procession and participate by clapping, singing, chanting, or dancing. Worshiping the tabot is therefore an expressive and communal experience rather than an individual, quiet, or contemplative one. There have been some documented instances in which Ethiopian rulers took tabots out of their churches: once, when Emperor Menelik II took the tabot from the Church of St Georges to bring him good fortune at the battle of Adwa, where he famously defeated the Italian would-be colonizers, and another when Emperor Haile Selassie I brought the Tabot of Medhane Alam with him to England so that he could continue to worship it in the liturgy while in exile. Under normal circumstances, however, the unsanctioned or forceful removal of a tabot from its church constitutes an act of sacrilege.

7.2 Maqdala 1868 as Sacrilege

The ability of the tabot to energize and uplift the Ethiopian Orthodox community is especially evident in cases when tabots taken from Ethiopia during military conflicts or occupation have been returned to the country, as occurred in 2002 after a tabot was discovered in a cabinet in Edinburgh and returned to Ethiopia. In 2001, a minister found the tabot stored away in one of the cupboards inside Edinburgh's St John's Episcopal Church. Reverend John McLuckie had lived in Ethiopia and was therefore able to quickly recognize it for the sacred artifact it was. Research into the provenance of the tabot revealed that it had been gifted to the church 130 years prior to its discovery by a soldier who participated in the Maqdala Expedition. By all accounts and reports at the time, the decision regarding what to do with the tabot was quite an easy one: Reverend McLuckie and the church swiftly began making arrangements for its return to Ethiopia. Unlike in the case of the British Museum, to which I will turn later in this chapter, the church did not express any hesitance in restituting the tabot nor any concern for what kind of precedent such an action would set. On the contrary, Reverend McLuckie released a statement in 2002 in which he expressed the hope that the return of the tabot to 'Christian brothers and sisters from another tradition' would demonstrate solidarity with the Ethiopian nation and be part of forming the foundation of a relationship based on partnership rather than domination (St John's Episcopal Church 2002). He also went on to describe the looting of Maqdala

and the taking of so many important religious artifacts as 'an act of desecration committed in the name of our nation,' implying that the violent taking of the Maqdala materials was not only immoral and unjust, but was also a profound violation of the Ethiopian people's spirituality and culture (St John's Episcopal Church 2002). Being unhindered by either legislation or doubt, there appeared to be none of the extensive debates that we have come to expect when the question is raised as to how to deal with a looted object – Ethiopia did not even have to put forward a request for the return of the tabot for St John's to come to the conclusion that repatriation was the course of action it wished to pursue, and the events that followed were not characterized by the anger, indignation, or defensiveness that are so often present in the current debates. The Ethiopian Embassy released a press statement expressing their thanks and appreciation to St John's, and a ceremony was organized in which the tabot would be formally returned to members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, who would oversee its eventual return to Ethiopia. The ceremony took place in Edinburgh on the 27th of January 2002 and was attended by a delegation of Ethiopian priests, diplomats, representatives of the Ethiopian World Federation, and members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in addition to representatives from St John's Church. It was presided over by Archbishop Bitsu Abune Isaias, who led the attendees in a eucharist and celebration to commemorate the tabot's return. He then took the tabot with him to London, where a second celebratory church service was held, before finally escorting it back to Addis Ababa. The day of its repatriation was felt to be so significant that the Government of Ethiopia declared the day a national holiday, and thousands of Ethiopians are reported to have lined the streets from the airport to the city to welcome the tabot home (McNaught 2019).

This enormous communal celebration of the tabot's restitution stands in stark contrast to the tabot's treatment in England, where it was unceremoniously tucked away and forgotten for more than a century. This discrepancy highlights that for the soldier who brought it to Scotland, the tabot was merely an interesting souvenir of the expedition, an object of curiosity easily disregarded, while for the Ethiopian Orthodox community, it held a significance that could never be diminished with time, distance, or loss of interest. One attendee of the ceremony in Edinburgh, who was affiliated with St John's Church, described the event as having an incredible feeling of joy on both sides – he said that everyone present at the event

seemed to be having a positive experience of the return, as if 'everyone stood to gain and no one stood to lose' by reuniting the sacred tabot with the community in which its full value could be realized. The church's decision to restitute the tabot was an act that recognized the indescribable and unquantifiable value of such a sacred object as well as, implicitly, an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the living community of practitioners for whom it is sacred. Though the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church and the Episcopal Church both exist under the umbrella of Christianity, broadly speaking, and thus have some beliefs in common, there are also enough differences between them to mark them as distinctly separate religious communities with their own unique traditions and practices. Notably, the tabots, despite having the root of their sacredness in the legend of the Ten Commandments that holds significance for both groups, are not sacred to the Episcopal Church. St John's Church's perceived responsibility to respect their sacredness therefore did not come from an intrinsic quality of the object itself, but rather from the desire to show respect to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which it recognized as a living faith community. St John's didn't need to feel the sacred connection to the altar tabot specifically to be able to understand and appreciate its importance to Ethiopians – the fact that it was clearly sacred to another existing religion was enough to warrant special treatment. Furthermore, St John's was sympathetic to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church due to the belief that the sacredness of the tabots had been violated when it was looted, and that this violation was ongoing so long as it was separated from its meaningful religious context. Though they did not feel the same distress felt by devout Ethiopian Christians at the treatment of the tabot because of a connection to the tabot itself, they were genuinely uncomfortable by the idea of anything that would potentially prolong this desecration. The return of the tabot to Ethiopia was experienced as a mutually beneficial process not only because the context of its taking was considered morally wrong, but because the act of looting in this case was elevated to an act of sacrilege. St John's perceived their identity as a sacred space of religious worship as being incompatible with the ongoing violation of the tabot's sanctity, and so the tabot's restitution effectively served to cleanse their conscience by lifting the weight of sacrilege from their shoulders. To be clear, this is absolutely not to say that the actions of St John's were entirely self-serving, but rather to show how viewing the tabot's taking and presence in the church as sacrilegious made its

restitution necessary on a spiritual level in a way that is not necessarily the case with other types of violence. While there may still be disagreement surrounding whether looting during military expeditions was morally wrong, labeling something sacrilegious removes much of this ethical uncertainty.[7] The restitution of this tabot therefore added another layer of meaning to the Maqdala 1868 expedition by discursively transforming it into an act of sacrilege and responding to it as such – bringing it under the auspices of an entirely different moral framework from that introduced by the framework of decolonization.

Though the case of the Edinburgh tabot restitution appears to be the first in which Maqdala 1868 was explicitly responded to as a sacrilegious event, it wasn't the first instance of it being described as such. In a statement written on behalf of the Association For the Return of the Maqdala Ethiopian Treasures (AFROMET), and addressed to the House of Commons on the 20th of July 2002, Rita and Richard Pankhurst argued that the looting of sacred and religious objects belonging to the church at Maqdala was not only an issue of military plunder but was also an act of sacrilege. They felt that it was on these grounds that the looting was most morally condemnable and thus that this understanding presented an obvious rationale for the restitution of these artifacts. And this was certainly not the last time the word 'sacrilege' has been used to describe the treatment of the sacred tabots looted from Maqdala that are in the UK. The same Reverend John McLuckie who discovered the tabot in Edinburgh was quoted in a Guardian article in 2019 as saying that 'sacrilege would not be too strong a word' with regards to both the circumstances of their taking and their confinement in institutions in the UK. This time, he was referring to a tabot that is held in Westminster Abbey, which is inlaid into the back of an altar and was once visible to anyone who visited the chapel. It was eventually covered following persistent attempts at intervention by the Ethiopian Government and the

[7] Tiffany Jenkins (2016), for example, argues that military looting was historically a commonly accepted practice and thus that it is inappropriate to judge it by current moral standards that view it negatively. This is a common theme in anti-restitution discourse, which maintains that it is unfair to hold contemporary institutions, and, more broadly, contemporary society, accountable for the negative acts of Empire. See, for example, Nigel Biggar (2023) and Adam Kuper (2023). However, Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Kevin White (2006) demonstrate that even in multicultural secular societies, attacks on that which is sacred are considered sacrilegious and are viewed as unethical. I also observed this during my interviews with museum visitors, which were discussed in greater detail in earlier chapters, where participants overwhelmingly condemned attacks on churches and mistreatment of sacred objects as unjustifiable.

Ethiopian Church, however, the Abbey has declined both requests for its return and for Ethiopian Orthodox priests to be allowed to pray with it. Lewis McNaught (2022), former curator in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum and author of the blog 'Returning Heritage,' has also described the looting of the tabots from Maqdala as 'a naked act of sacrilege' in arguing for the deaccessioning and return of 11 tabots currently held by the British Museum. Mr. McNaught believes that this fact on its own should be enough to justify the repatriation of the tabots, let alone the other issues surrounding the circumstances of their acquisition. Even when the words 'sacrilege' or 'desecration' are not explicitly cited as rationales for pursuing the restitution of Maqdala artifacts, the same discomfort is often invoked by other religious figures or institutions that are sympathetic to the impact of the expedition on the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Representatives of St Anne's Church in Lewes expressed sentiments to me that were similar to those expressed by St John's Church in 2002 regarding an Ethiopian cross that is in their possession that was donated to them by a parish member who brought it back to England from the Maqdala expedition. While the parish used to bring out the cross on festival days, research undertaken in recent years by the church on the cross's provenance has made the current leadership "uneasy" about keeping it. When I discussed the expedition with one of the church's reverends, she spoke about how the parish was exploring options to loan the cross to an Ethiopian Orthodox congregation in the UK because the events in its history conflicted with the church's values – namely respect, inclusivity, and the importance of a welcoming community. They were bound by parish rules regarding changes of ownership concerning church property, but they were uncomfortable with the idea of keeping it at St Anne's. Though the cross itself is not a sacred object in the same way as the tabots, its association with the plunder of a church was the primary source of their discontent. The reverend felt that retaining a cross that carried the weight of this history was incompatible with the church's ethos because they did not want to do anything that would suggest they condoned the violence towards another Christian place of worship. Even without using the word 'sacrilege' to describe the Maqdala expedition, she emphasized that it was the treatment of religious objects and sacred space that bothered her the most, and she associated this with her own identity as a self-described person

of faith. The reverend believed that holding onto an artifact that had been taken in such a context was actually offensive to her own religious beliefs in addition to being disrespectful to members of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith – her lack of any doubt about where it belonged (with an Ethiopian Church) stemmed from her certainty in the wrongness of the looting of a church. Interestingly, she did not make reference to any other moral issues relating to the expedition during our conversation, nor did she characterize the church's position as having anything to do with decolonizing or reckoning with negative history. Instead, it felt much more to me as if the cross's history introduced a negative energy into the church space that the administration was eager to cleanse – as if it was polluting the church and dampening its own ability to function as a sacred place. The presence of the cross as a product of sacrilege extended the violation both spatially and temporally to St. Anne's, which encouraged them to act to remedy this violation for the sake of both the Christian Ethiopian community and for the sake of protecting their own space.

The cross itself is not an especially valuable example of a religious artifact from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church – similar objects can be found in most churches – and it is also not sacred to the community in the way that a tabot is. Though a cross as a symbol, image, and object is generally treated with respect due to its role in Ethiopian Orthodox spiritual life and ceremonies, it is also used in more informal ways, such as in clothing and décor, that would be unthinkable for a tabot. However, sacredness was clearly still an issue underlying St. Anne's discomfort with the cross because it represented what they described as the "violation of a sacred space." Thus, it wasn't an inherent value or quality that the leadership at St. Anne's saw in the cross that motivated their desire to return it to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, nor was it to do with the legacies of imperialism. It was about their capacity for recognizing a sacred space even if it wasn't their own. For them, the most important thing was not that British imperial forces took advantage of a military expedition to acquire and loot Ethiopian objects, but that the treatment of the church at Maqdala unquestionably constituted a sacrilegious act that they felt morally obligated to denounce by belatedly rejecting this cross. Furthermore, they were concerned that the presence of an object with this history constituted a desecration of their own church, and that it was therefore necessary to restore the cross to its rightful community in order to restore the sacredness of St. Anne's. This concern was evident in the way

one representative, when discussing their motivations for pursuing a restitution of the cross, repeatedly referred to the cross in terms of "its weight" or "being weighed down," suggesting that the act of sacrilege was not just a singular event in an object's life but a burden that it carried unless and until that burden could be lifted.

The position of St Anne's with regard to the processional cross in their possession, an object that, while religiously significant, does not have a sacred status comparable to that of the tabots, stands in stark contrast to the position of Westminster Abbey with regard to the tabot in their chapel. In 2007, the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church submitted a formal request in writing to Westminster Abbey for the return of the tabot. The Abbey declined the request and replied that they were not considering a return. Almost a decade later, in 2018, a group of Ethiopian priests asked the Abbey if they could organize a viewing and prayer session with the tabot during the visit of an Ethiopian archbishop to London. This request was also denied. One of the Ethiopian priests who made the request published some of the email exchanges between himself and the head of communications for Westminster Abbey, showing the Abbey's dismissal of their requests. In the Abbey's response, they wrote 'I must stress that the dean and chapter is acutely aware of the sensitive nature of the tabot…Because of the sensitive nature…steps were taken to ensure that the tabot, which is in a very sacred place, was properly covered and could not be seen by anyone. We have no plans to change these arrangements' (quoted in Alberge 2019). When pressed further to explain the Abbey's stance, the priest involved in the exchange claims that he received no additional response other than to say that the Abbey would not be providing any additional information on their position. Despite the Abbey's awareness of the enormously sacred significance of the tabot, they see no contradiction in their own role as a religious institution and the ethical concerns surrounding the tabot's acquisition. In fact, far from expressing any doubt about whether the tabot belongs in Westminster Abbey, when several Ethiopian priests revived this issue again in 2019, this time in the public sphere, Westminster defended its retention of the tabot by claiming that the Abbey being a holy site justified keeping the tabot there. The dean of Westminster Abbey at the time, John Hall, the same reverend to whom the return request of 2007 was addressed, denied on Twitter that Westminster Abbey had ever received a request from the Ethiopian

Orthodox Church for the return of the tabot. He also reiterated the same belief as that expressed by the communications office that the fact that the Abbey is itself a holy Christian site means that there is no problem with its being located in a chapel there. He then went even further to say that, even if the Abbey were to consider returning the tabots, they did not believe that they would be able to identify the 'rightful guardians' since it was given to the Abbey 'for its safety and protection' 150 years ago (@deanwestminster, June 2, 2019). Thus, he implicitly suggested that the Abbey did not feel that it viewed an Ethiopian Orthodox institution as a suitable guardian for tabot and implied that it was kept more safely in the Abbey than it could be in an Ethiopian church – ironic considering that its indescribably sacred value to Ethiopian Christianity means it would be more revered in an Ethiopian church than it ever could be tucked away and separated from the Ethiopian community in the Abbey.

The position expressed by the dean of Westminster Abbey in reaction to critiques about the tabot's placement in the Abbey's chapel incited numerous frustrated responses within the Ethiopian Orthodox community as well as online from members of the public. One user described the response as being 'shameful and shockingly dismissive' (@incunabula, June 6, 2019). Almost all of them specifically directed their critiques at the Abbey as a religious institution and emphasized the sacred nature of the tabot – it was these factors that appeared to be the driving forces behind the favorable opinion toward return. The Ethiopian priest who had initiated the discussion with the Abbey's communications was disappointed by the Abbey's refusal to even consider the return request, but he was even more critical of their decision to shut out Ethiopian priests from praying with the tabot. He claimed that if the retention of the tabot was a shameful decision, one seemingly marked by a preference for avoidance and an unwillingness to engage with the issues of the tabot's provenance, then actively barricading the doors to prayer was even more outrageous and unfathomable. In an interview published in the Guardian, he asked 'as a Christian, how do you have this view? How are you not able to open the doors?' and described Westminster Abbey's refusal to allow Ethiopian priests to visit and pray with the tabot as 'an additional layer of disappointment' (quoted in Alberge 2019). The idea of a Christian preventing another Christian from practicing their faith was understandably both confusing and insulting – not the least because it implied that the Abbey's leadership

and administration did not consider the Ethiopian priests to be members of the Christian community on equal standing with themselves. Ultimately, on the Ethiopian side the conflict boiled down to a question of why the representatives of Westminster Abbey felt entitled to control, and, more importantly, restrict, Ethiopian access to a sacred object central to the practice of their religion, a faith the Ethiopian delegation presumed was shared between both sides. To suggest that the Ethiopian priests, including the figurehead of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, were somehow unworthy of being given permission to pray in the chapel shook this belief and made it clear that the Abbey saw the request as an unwelcome encroachment on their space rather than as an opportunity to foster a more positive relationship between two faith groups.

However, when their insistence on remaining gatekeepers to the tabot was made known to a wider audience through news articles and social media, it was met with incredulity by members of the public who felt that the Abbey's position was unnecessarily stubborn and disrespectful. Few of these responses actually focused on the status of the tabot as a looted object and instead expressed concern over its treatment as a religious and sacred object. When the looting was mentioned, it was to provide further context to the ways the tabot had been violated – theft from a church being viewed as especially disrespectful – rather than to lay the groundwork for arguments in favor of its return to Ethiopia. In other words, overwhelmingly the negative opinions on the tabot's presence in Westminster Abbey stemmed not from a decolonial critique or disapproval of military looting, but from the apparent conviction that it was unethical for one religious institution to interfere with or impede another's ability to worship and that the special connection between a religious community and its sacred objects should not be violated. Furthermore, several people expressed confusion about why a Christian institution that did not consider the tabot sacred to its own practice would believe it necessary to withhold it from the people who valued it the most. For example, one Twitter user asked 'might it be a good and holy thing spontaneously to return this hidden artifact to its rightful guardians? The gaining of what we never see would give far more joy to our brethren than our losing it could possibly cost us' (@WealandsBell). For this user, the clearest rationale for returning the tabot had to do not with making amends for imperial violence or decolonizing Westminster Abbey but rather involved Christian ideals of charity and generosity. Setting aside any debates about British colonial history, this discourse

argues that the Abbey should return the tabot simply as an act of good faith. Another user put forward a similar claim, writing that 'but allowing a highly reputable delegation to pray there, compromises nothing, and would be, well, at least, generous' (@Nothingunspoken). These users indicated that they believed that the Abbey had a moral responsibility as a religious site to uphold high standards of respect towards other faith communities. Despite there being relatively few reactions when compared with responses to other more highly publicized cases, it is significant that the tone of these online responses was not particularly one of anger, but rather of bewilderment. The fact that most people expressed surprise and confusion that the Abbey wasn't even allowing Ethiopian priests access to the tabot, much less considering returning it, said much about the different assumptions and expectations surrounding this particular debate. Notably, I could not find any responses online that argued in favor of Westminster Abbey's choice and there did not appear to be any of the typical defenses of the legality of the Abbey's acquisition of the tabot that emerge so frequently in discussions of the return of looted objects from Africa.

While the average responses by members of the online public characterized the Abbey as being unnecessarily stubborn, former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey has taken the criticism a step further and accused the Abbey of being malicious and cruel in denying Ethiopian priests what he believes to be their right to venerate the tabot. Lord Carey has been an active advocate for the return of any tabots taken from Ethiopia during the Maqdala expedition, an issue he believes is, at its core, one of faith. While Lord Carey believes that any tabots held by UK institutions should be returned to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as a matter of principle, including the 11 tabots held by the British Museum that I will explore later, he considers it especially disrespectful, having held a leadership role within the Anglican community himself, that the leadership of Westminster Abbey is unreceptive to this cause. Over the course of several interviews, I conducted with Lord Carey, he repeatedly emphasized that access to tabots is essential to worship in the Ethiopian Church – thus, he sees providing access to and returning the tabot as not merely symbolic gestures of goodwill but as the lifting of barriers that have impeded the Ethiopian Orthodox community to freely and fully practice their religion. Depriving the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of access to even one tabot means that this community of devotees does not have the ability to unconditionally fulfill

their need (indeed, their religious obligation) to worship. Within this framework, Lord Carey believes that the Abbey's refusal to consider return does not constitute a passive position (i.e. an unwillingness to take action) but rather is a form of active interference in the spiritual lives of Ethiopian Christians that causes pain and discontentment. This belief stems from the acknowledgment of the tabot's irreplaceable role within the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition where its physical presence is necessary to sanctify the act of prayer – it is neither ornamental nor auxiliary and without it, certain rituals, traditions, and celebrations cannot be complete or satisfying. It is for this reason that Lord Carey is comfortable labeling the Abbey's retention of the tabot as an action that implicates them in ongoing sacrilegious harm towards the Ethiopian Orthodox community. He described it as an "act of cruelty" to restrict "people of faith" from having access to objects that are essential to their ability to worship. For him, it is not an argument about rightful or wrongful ownership (he is certain that a sacred object cannot truly belong to anyone except for those for whom it is sacred), nor is it really about the wider debate about how so many African objects came to be in the UK (though he acknowledges that this debate inevitably shadows all of these conversations). It is instead about an institution that has both more legal freedom to return this object[8] and, in his view, an even higher moral responsibility than other institutions to do so allowing political concerns to cloud their judgment. Here, he explicitly referred to the wider political context regarding the restitution of African material culture in UK institutions as negatively impacting the Abbey's stance on the tabot. When I asked if he thought that the Abbey would be more inclined towards returning the tabot if the question of Ethiopian material heritage taken during the Maqdala 1868 expedition wasn't linked to narratives about decolonization and reparations, he responded that while it would be impossible to answer with any certainty, he suspected that the Abbey was indeed motivated by fear of the connotations and expectations that would be associated with returning a Maqdala 1868 object. He speculated that, were the Abbey not to feel threatened by growing demands for

[8] Westminster Abbey is a 'Royal Peculiar,' which means that it is directly under the jurisdiction of the monarch. Unlike institutions like the British Museum that are restricted by the National Heritage Act from deaccessioning objects from their collections without an act of Parliament, a Royal Peculiar requires only the permission of the ruling monarch to do so.

UK institutions to acknowledge and repair their relationships to British imperial history, they might not be quite so fearful of the consequences of returning the tabot.

When pressed further about what kinds of consequences he thought the Abbey might be attempting to avoid in their approach to the requests for the tabot's return, Lord Carey elaborated that returning the tabots in the current political climate would be closely associated with admitting guilt for their wrongful presence in the Abbey in the first place. Though he felt personally that keeping the tabot made the Abbey more guilty than returning it would imply about their guilt in accepting it 150 years ago, and he felt sure that they were making the wrong decision, he did believe that he understood the Abbey's concerns even if he could not sympathize with them. I asked him if he thought that, having such a close relationship to the monarchy, it would be appropriate for the Abbey to be included in calls for the decolonization of British institutions, but he responded that he didn't feel that "this" was about "that issue." His conviction that the Abbey should be ashamed of its treatment of the tabots, and of the Ethiopian religious and political representatives who have reached out to the Abbey on their behalf, was based exclusively on his mortification that the Christian community to which he belonged would inflict such suffering on other Christians, knowing that they felt harmed by the Abbey's withholding the tabot from them. He agreed with others' assessments that the looting of the tabots was a wrong that needed to be made right through apology and action, but not with the idea that returning the tabots was necessary due to any association with the British Empire. Without saying it in so many words, Lord Carey clearly considered this case to stand apart from other debates about the return of looted objects because he thought the Ethiopian Orthodox community was being treated poorly as fellow Christians – this was evident in his repetition of the theme that the case of the tabots was a matter of faith rather than one of politics. He was more than willing to describe the looting that took place during the Maqdala 1868 expedition in unambiguously harsh terms, decrying the taking of religious and sacred objects as a sacrilegious act, and even willing to state that the British Government bears some of the responsibility to ensure that this harm is remedied because of their role in sponsoring the expedition, but he appeared very careful and deliberate to avoid any suggestions that this same logic would extend to other cases of looted cultural artifacts. In fact, when asked what his opinions

were on any other claims that he was aware of for the return of objects taken during British military expeditions, Lord Carey indicated that he would need "all of the facts" and additional information to inform his position on whether those things should go back to the places from which they were taken. While he viewed those cases as more ethically complex, he viewed the case of the tabots as having no such moral ambiguity. The unspoken opinion throughout this conversation was therefore that Westminster Abbey should return the tabot to Ethiopia because the looting of sacred Christian objects, and then the retention of those objects in the face of requests for their return, was a form of sacrilege incompatible with holy Christian spaces – not because of any associations with British imperial violence.

7.3 'Low-Hanging Fruit:' The Scheherazade Foundation and the Restitution of the Altar Tabots

Ethiopian altar tabots, given their preeminent spiritual role in the Orthodox Church, are made specifically to be housed within churches – the significance and power of an altar tabot is inextricable from this space and from the rituals associated with it. For this reason, they belong to the first of two classes of inalienable possessions as defined by Annette Weiner (1985): those that should never circulate, and which therefore are defined as having a heightened quality of sacredness. As Weiner describes, it is the act of keeping such objects within the group or community that is an essential element in the creation of their value and that enables this value to exist independently of the specific social and political demands of the current moment. For the tabots, it is the act of physically shielding them from all but a designated class of individuals and strictly controlling their movement into and out of the church space that upholds their sacredness. The violation of these boundaries does not negate this sacred quality, which is not contingent on the rules remaining unbroken. Once consecrated, a tabot is sacred unless and until it is significantly damaged, whether or not it has been removed from a church or viewed by an unauthorized person. For that reason, a tabot being held in conditions that do not protect its sacredness according to Ethiopian Orthodox religious doctrine causes what one priest described to me as a distinct sense of "emotional distress." He described feeling an intense personal sadness on the rare occasion of being allowed to visit the tabots in the British Museum, saying that seeing them locked away alone was "like visiting a relative or a loved one in

prison," knowing that they are alive but being dismayed that they are unable to be their full self and realize a more fulfilling purpose. As discussed above, in normal spiritual life the tabots are surrounded by color, joy, and music, none of which is present in storage at the British Museum. For this priest, the British Museum is not a neutral or safe space for the tabots – though they are not themselves necessarily coming to any physical harm, the suppression of their spiritual essence or liveliness is painful for a practitioner of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith to witness or even think about. Though the British Museum has infrequently granted access to the tabots to select groups of Ethiopian Orthodox priests, who are then able to pray with the tabots, they are not allowed to be removed from the premises and as such cannot be used as part of the communal celebrations and holidays that were described earlier. In addition to being an opportunity for prayer and spiritual expression, this practice is an essential method of showing respect to the tabots and ensures that their sacred status in the church is fully appreciated. Without the opportunity to be treated in the appropriately reverential manner dictated by custom and tradition, in the view of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church the tabots are simply not being respected. This constitutes an irreconcilable difference of opinion between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the British Museum, should they insist on retaining the tabots, as the museum considers it sufficiently respectful to keep the tabots off display and restricted from view for all but Orthodox priests. For the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, however, having them there at all constitutes an act of disrespect.

So, even when they are held by a museum, as in the case of the eleven tabots that are currently in the possession of the British Museum, they do not, and indeed *cannot*, function as museum objects. This is not something that is really even up for debate, as the few cultural institutions that have a tabot have agreed to keep it separated, off display, and concealed from being viewed by anyone but the appropriate members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. For those who are invested in the restitution of the Maqdala Collection, the altar tabots, and particularly those housed in the British Museum, have seemed like an obvious place to start. If they cannot serve a purpose in the museum that is related to research and/or display, then what is to be gained from retaining them? As it turns out, the embroilment of the Maqdala Collection in the larger movement to deaccession and repatriate objects from museums as reparations for the harmful legacies of

Empire has added another layer of complexity to the case of the altar tabots. While campaigns for the repatriation of the tabots have explicitly focused on their religious significance and uniqueness (deliberately setting them apart from other looted objects, even those that were also taken during the Maqdala Expedition), the connotations of return requests in the current controversial and polarizing climate surrounding museum collections acquired in imperial contexts have helped to foster an unrelentingly defensive position in some institutional circles. As one organization quickly discovered, the fate of the altar tabots in the British Museum therefore does not only rest on demonstrating that they could legally be deaccessioned and returned, but potentially requires a convincing redefinition of what such a return would signify and communicate on a larger scale.

The special character of the altar tabots has attracted the attention of multiple groups and individuals who are moved by their story. This includes the Scheherazade Foundation, which has worked in extensive collaboration with Lord Carey and Lewis McNaught, a former British Museum curator who now runs the 'Returning Heritage' site. The Scheherazade Foundation first became involved with the Maqdala Collection through its founder, Tahir Shah. When a South African church discovered that they had a cross looted from Maqdala in their collection, they reached out to Mr. Shah because they knew that he had connections in Ethiopia to help facilitate its restitution. Since then, the foundation has engaged actively with the campaign to return Maqdala artifacts to Ethiopia, even going so far as to use foundation funds to purchase items that come up for sale in small auctions around the United Kingdom in order to return them. Through this practice, they have been able to return quite a few Maqdala objects that were held in private collections for relatively little money. While the government of Ethiopia could theoretically use this strategy themselves, doing so would be damaging to national pride and dignity – buying objects that were looted from their own country could be seen as legitimizing the ownership of the other party, or even humiliating. By acquiring the objects on Ethiopia's behalf, the Scheherazade Foundation is able to act as a middleman for these transactions so that this process can be viewed as a positive intervention or a form of heritage activism rather than as a potentially embarrassing act. However, they have only employed this strategy for items of significantly less significance than the tabots that have come up for sale on the art and

antiquities market independently. Most of the tabots whose whereabouts are known are in institutions like Westminster Abbey and the British Museum, and thus deliberate negotiation is required to change these circumstances. Because one of the foundation's main areas of focus is ‘bridging cultures,’ they see the case of the tabots in the British Museum as an opportunity to foster better relationships between the UK and Ethiopia - and from their point of view this should be a relatively easy decision for the museum because they believe that the tabots are obviously unfit for purpose in the museum setting, but are also quite unique in the sense that this would not necessarily set a precedent for any other collections in its possession. Furthermore, the foundation's view is that the ground is shifting with regard to the question of restitution (even if slowly) with the court of public opinion increasingly siding in favor of return. In order for the museum to be “on the right side of history," then, as they put it, it needs to demonstrate a willingness to engage productively in these debates or it risks losing much of its positive reputation. So, the foundation's intention is to accomplish the restitution of the tabots in a way that is mutually beneficial to all the parties involved - Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are reunited with the sacred tabots, and the British Museum gains a more positive public image. By hiring a barrister to write a legal opinion detailing why the tabots could be returned legally, the foundation was not attempting to force the museum's hand in this matter, but rather intended to demonstrate that the museum could accomplish this goal at what the foundation believed would be virtually no cost to themselves - and in fact, could stand to gain from such an act.

However, they received what they felt to be an “extremely cold” response from the museum's governance indicating what they described as “a stubborn unwillingness” to even engage with the foundation on this issue at all. In one conversation, a representative of the organization speculated to me that there are issues of national identity at play here that maybe don’t apply quite so intensely to other museums (such as the V&A) - he cited, for example, the backlash directed at the National Trust when they announced their intention to be more open about the histories of slavery and colonialism at their properties and suggested that the driving force in the decision to resist restitution is emotion rather than reason. "The hint is in the name," he said - the British Museum is closely tied to the sense of "Britishness" and people

have strong reactions to anything that appears threatening to their national identity. He agreed with representatives of the Ethiopian Government and Church that there is an irrational inconsistency in the museum's acceptance of the sacred nature of the tabots such that they keep them off display and respect that they cannot be viewed, while simultaneously refusing to return them to the people for whom they are sacred. The emotional motivation to retain ownership over them potentially explains some of this contradiction. As he considers it clear that the morally right thing to do in this case is to return them to the Ethiopian Church, he was surprised at the response of the museum - the foundation seems to have believed that, given a logical and legal path to return, the museum would take advantage of the opportunity to do so. The fact that they refused to engage seems to suggest that it is not only legality that is the issue but also the fact that the museum doesn't appear to agree that restitution, in this case, is morally justified either. This creates a whole other set of issues (and is potentially linked to why other groups are taking a more forceful approach to the issue of the museum's contested collections), because, as another representative of the foundation put it to me, "it is one thing to prove that something can be accomplished legally, but quite another to convince someone that it is morally right." The foundation continues to push the issue while still attempting to maintain the cooperative approach, but they made it clear that they are increasingly willing to incorporate the court of public opinion into their argument. This became an even higher-stakes campaign when the foundation was able, through its connections and work on the tabots in the British Museum, to locate another tabot and arrange for its official return, alongside a set of other artifacts from the Maqdala Expedition, to Ethiopia in a ceremony held on the 21st of September 2023. As the Foundation generously invited me to be in attendance at the return ceremony, I was able to witness firsthand how the narratives of the Maqdala Expedition emerged throughout the process of restitution itself, including in a religious service at an Ethiopian Orthodox Congregation in London that complimented the political restitution of these artifacts.

There were technically three ceremonies or formal processes of return that took place in association with the restitution of a selection of artifacts organized by the Scheherazade Foundation. First, there was a private ceremony between the scholar who identified the tabot being sold at an auction, representatives of

the Ethiopian Government, and representatives of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This event was strictly limited out of respect for the tabot's sacredness, suggesting that it would have been considered inappropriate to incorporate the tabot, even covered, into a secular restitution ceremony. The second event occurred later on the same day, at an invitation-only evening of celebration and ceremony hosted by the Scheherazade Foundation at the Athenaeum Club in London. This event is explored in detail in the next chapter. Finally, the third event took place the following week at the church of St Mary of Debre Tsion in Battersea, which saw the tabot formally reconsecrated and repatriated in an emotional service dedicated to its restoration. Notably, while I was made aware of and invited to attend this event by Alula Pankhurst and Jacopo Gnisci, the scholar responsible for securing the tabot, the church ceremony was open to the public and was primarily attended by regular churchgoers and members of the Ethiopian Orthodox community in London who came to worship and celebrate the tabot's return. Thus, it was the least exclusive of the three events that together formed the restitution of these objects, and it was also the most community-centered, providing a glimpse into what this process meant for the wider Ethiopian community through the experiences of the Ethiopian Orthodox diaspora in London. Where the political ceremony was more deeply rooted in the idea of restitution as a negotiation of diplomatic relationships, particularly as they have been shaped by the legacies of Empire and mediated through elite institutions, it primarily emphasized the political and symbolic significance as a tool for addressing historical wrongs on a national or international stage, with artifacts functioning as tokens of reconciliation. By contrast, the religious ceremony represented the restitution of the tabot as a deeply communal and spiritual act, one that enables Ethiopian Orthodox communities to redefine their relationships to these artifacts on their own terms. Unburdened by the constraints of imperial narratives, this process of restitution restored the tabot not merely as an object of historical significance but as a sacred entity integral to the living practices and beliefs of the community. This divergence reveals how restitution, when framed as a spiritual rather than political process, can offer the possibility of re-centering the agency and voices of those most directly affected by the loss, allowing for a transformative and localized reclamation of cultural heritage. The religious ceremony with its focus on reconsecration embodies the narratives of sacredness and sacrilege that have been mobilized in the debates about the restitution of the

altar tabots; by restoring the tabot to its intended sacred role within the church, it affirms its spiritual significance over its status as a contested cultural object and frames their return as a renewal of the dynamic relationship between the sacred tabots and their community rather than as symbols of political redress.

As soon as I arrived at the church on the 24th of September 2023, I could practically feel the buzz of an electric current of excitement in the air. Surrounded by churchgoers dressed in white garments that symbolize modesty and reverence, the stone walls echoed with murmurs of anticipation as attendees settled into the crowded space. The church was soon filled with Ethiopian clergy and members of the church community, with only a few guests like myself who stood out amongst the traditionally attired worshipers. The air was thick with the smell of incense and the civil flag of Ethiopia was draped amongst the stone columns, plain green, yellow, and red horizontal stripes which hold an abundance of meanings – not the least of which is its outlawing in Ethiopia by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front in 2009. These colors have historically been used by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church prior to being adopted as the official colors of the state, reflecting the entanglement of the Church and the nation, and were adopted by multiple other African countries during the period of decolonization as a tribute to Ethiopia's status as a symbol of resistance and independence (Castro and Tefera 2016). Still today it evokes the complex politics of identity, religion, and history that continue to shape Ethiopian society and its diasporic communities today. As young kids gleefully ran up and down the aisle, perhaps feeding off of the joyous atmosphere, I settled myself into a spot at the back of the church where I had a clear view of the proceedings but where I was not in the way of anyone who was there as a member of the church community. It felt important that I not inadvertently block someone who was there to worship, that I did not become a barrier between them and the spiritual power of the tabot. As the service began with a tribute to the loss of the tabot through plunder and transitioned into a series of special prayers, one aspect of this ceremony that I had not anticipated (but should have) became immediately clear: it would not be conducted in English but in Ge'ez, the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Ge'ez holds a profound religious and historical significance within the church's spiritual framework, linking contemporary worshippers to centuries of tradition and heritage and emphasizing the tabot's sacred continuity within this context. Being conducted

in Ge'ez within the practice of an Ethiopian Orthodox Church enabled this restitution ceremony to exist outside of the social and political categories imposed by the decolonization narrative and instead within a framework that prioritizes the Ethiopian Orthodox community's faith, agency, and cultural sovereignty. This linguistic divergence from the restitution ceremony conducted in English at the Athenaeum Club also challenged the broader Eurocentric and secular frameworks that often dominate restitution debates, where objects are valued primarily as historical artifacts or symbols of national identity. The ceremony in Ge'ez served as an important reminder that the Church's role here was not only in facilitating the tabot's return to its community but also in re-asserting that its significance lies in its sacred function rather than in its history as loot or its potential as a diplomatic token. In this way, the ceremony reflected the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's assertion of sovereignty over the spiritual and historical narrative of the tabots, ensuring that their return is defined not by the imperatives of imperial histories but by the lived traditions and values of the community from which their sacredness is drawn.

The priests, clad in intricate ceremonial robes of red and gold, move around the church with deliberate gestures steeped in tradition, bearing elaborate processional crosses and adorned staffs. At the heart of the ceremony, the tabot finally emerges, the sacred object being restored today. Wrapped in a layer of silk, it is carried solemnly by a high-ranking priest under a richly embroidered umbrella. Accompanied by the sound of rhythmic drumming, the members of the congregation bow deeply as the tabot is processed around the church, with many reaching out for the priests to bless them with a processional cross, which the priests oblige by pressing the cross gently into the face of the worshiper. A mix of tears and joyful ululations continuously breaks out amongst the crowd as the tabot makes its way back to the *Qeddest Qeddusam* or the 'Holiest of Holies,' the special sanctuary in the church where the tabot will be securely stored. Unlike other restitution ceremonies that might occur in museums, embassy halls, or private institutions, this restitution unfolds entirely within the spiritual context that the tabot demands. Services of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are known for lasting for hours, and this event is no exception; the prayers and processions go on for over five hours, much longer than the previous event at the Athenaeum Club. Though there are a few enthusiastic members of the audience with their phones out to record portions of

the event or capture particularly significant moments, the priests do not acknowledge the cameras or indeed make any references to the value of this event for the public debates about the restitution of the Maqdala Collection. Instead, the ceremony centers exclusively on the tabot's sanctity and its return to a sacred liturgical role. In this process, the Ethiopian community here are not merely spectators or witnesses to the process, but active participants in the tabot's restitution; it is their participation in the worship of the tabot that renews its spiritual value. When the ceremony had concluded, members of the church reached out to hug one another in an expression of the emotional nature of the event, reflecting the sense of communal elation that was palpable throughout the day. As the attendees filed out of the church and into the courtyard with a jubilance that echoed the atmosphere of relief and accomplishment that I might associate with a graduation, I found that they were eager to share their experience of the event. One woman that I spoke to breathlessly lauded the return of the tabot as a testament to the enduring spirit of Ethiopia and said that it speaks to Ethiopians' determination to continue and preserve their cultural legacy. Another told me she hopes this marks the beginning of the return of more tabots, explaining that "if more people see the overwhelming joy we experience today in witnessing the return of our heritage, they will see how sacred it is to us and they will understand why our heritage should be returned without any argument or questions asked." She elaborated that "for so long we have struggled with the awareness that our sacred heritage has been in exile but we have prayed for generations for its return. To see our prayers answered and witness the tabot's return to its rightful place within the church is a blessing that reminds us of the endurance and resilience of our faith and our traditions." A man who had attended with his family said that he felt particularly happy that he had been able to bring his children so that "they could see the importance of our faith and the value of working to preserve it. Being here today reminds us that we are connected to our ancestors and our future generations by our commitment to our faith. If twenty years from now there is still more that has not been returned, I hope they will remember this day and feel assured that so long as we remain faithful the wounds inflicted by the violation of our sacred heritage will be healed." When I asked about the conditions under which the tabots had been violated in the first place and how that had created the wounds he referenced, he said "to me, it doesn't matter who took it or why it was taken. What matters

is the act itself. To remove the tabot from its holy place was a desecration not just against the church but against our faith. This to me is bigger than politics, it is not about assigning blame but it is about respecting what is holy and untouchable. It is not for us to decide if these violations can be undone, but today we honor that such sacred things must be respected and protected." In none of the conversations did the concepts of loot, plunder, or imperialism come up; attendees did not bring up the Maqdala Expedition and when I asked about it, they quickly brushed it aside, clearly indicating that it was the tabot's relationship to the church, to their faith, that was important to them today, not its connection to the military expedition. I thought about the Scheherazade Foundation's commitment to pushing for the return of the tabots in the British Museum and their stated willingness to go to 'the court of public opinion.' How would the narratives that restitution was revealing here, a story of sacrilege and spiritual healing, resonate outside of this space in a secular institution where returns continue to be entangled in the frameworks of decolonization and reckoning? Could they indeed work to set aside the tabots as warranting special treatment, as the woman I spoke to earlier seemed to believe, or were the narratives of Empire and decolonization too firmly entrenched to extricate the tabots from them?

The remarks of the attendees at the event revealed how deeply the logic of the tabot's sacredness underpins their approach to the debates about restitution, particularly in how the community's response to the restitution of the sacred altar tabot was more closely aligned with their perception of its removal as a sacrilegious act rather than as an act of imperial violence. A common thread throughout this event was that the tabot was not an artifact but a living, sacred entity that embodied a divine presence and whose removal therefore constituted a spiritual transgression. By centering the sacredness of the tabot, the attendees were effectively rejecting the political framework of decolonization and instead embracing the narrative of its theft as an incident of sacrilege. While the dominant restitution debates typically rely on the idea of decolonization to frame restitution as a political and historical corrective to the structural harms caused by imperialism, this conception shifts the focus from the broader structures of imperial power to the ethical philosophies that guide our responses to the desecration of sacred objects. In this narrative, the British Empire is decentered as the primary lens through which to understand the significance of the theft, and the

tabots are thus not defined by their history as imperial loot, but rather by their spiritual value to the living community of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This shift enables restitution to be grounded in principles of respect for their sacredness which are distinct from the geopolitical and cultural paradigms of decolonization and postcolonial theory. By approaching the theft of the tabot as an act of sacrilege, the spiritual restitution of the tabot is equipped to address its place within the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition as a divine presence, making its removal not only a cultural loss but a disruption of its ability to perform its intrinsic purpose. The narrative of sacrilege thus prioritizes the restitution of the tabot to its sacred role – its spiritual significance takes precedence over its political or historical value. This approach challenges the dominant narratives of restitution that seek to incorporate such artifacts into the framework of decolonization by virtue of their histories of unethical acquisition rather than the innate properties with which they are imbued by their communities of origin, including inviolability or inalienability. While decolonization frames restitution as an acknowledgment of the systemic injustices of Empire, the narrative of sacrilege reframes the return as a process that fulfills ethical responsibilities that transcend the imperial context. The focus is therefore not on the dynamics of acquisition but on the moral standards that should govern the treatment of sacred objects such as reverence and respect. This movement away from the centering of Empire privileges the values and practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox community over the diplomatic concerns that characterize restitution debates. In this way, the response of the church members to the restitution of the tabot contributed to a narrative of the Maqdala that opened the pathway for the pursuit of restitution beyond the constraints of the decolonial framework, offering a vision for restitution that is less focused on reckoning with the past and more about restoring spiritual continuity for the communities that cherish these artifacts.

This chapter has examined the salient concepts that form the core of the debates about the sacred Ethiopian altar tabots that were taken during the Maqdala Expedition through ethnographic research with the wide variety of people who are involved in these debates. The members of this eclectic ‘community’ are widely dispersed, yet all contribute to the overall conversation surrounding the past, present, and future of the altar tabots that are in the UK as a result of the Maqdala Expedition. The status of the tabots as sacred,

rather than as imperial loot, is the focal point of arguments in favor of their restitution to Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which is shown to make a particular set of demands regarding their treatment by religious and cultural institutions. In particular, promoting the restitution of the tabots on the grounds of their sacredness introduces questions regarding the nature of respect for religious objects and highlights the continued relevance and poignance of the idea of sacrilege as it relates to debates on cultural restitution. Furthermore, these lines of argument come into contact with, and sometimes conflict with, the wider debates about imperial legacies and decolonization that affect how requests for restitution are perceived, which has motivated some actors to try to introduce alternative narratives that shift the focus away from the dominant discourse. In this way, the debates surrounding the altar tabots have reshaped the meaning of the Maqdala Expedition in this context from being defined by imperial violence to being defined by sacrilege and violence against religion. This reshaping demonstrates one way that restitution debates have intervened in the writing of the Maqdala Expedition's history, rather than just responding to existing representations. In having the opportunity to witness the spiritual restitution of the altar tabot and hear from members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, I was able to see how these narratives affect how the Ethiopian community, specifically the Orthodox Christian community, perceive the value of restitution. In the next chapter, we will build on this understanding about the debates surrounding the altar tabots as we explore the narratives that framed the political restitution ceremony that took place for the non-sacred artifacts that were restituted alongside the altar tabot.

Chapter 8: Restitution in Action

8.1 At the Athenaeum Club: A Who's Who of Ethiopian Restitution

As I have explored throughout this thesis, there are a variety of spaces and contexts in which the narratives of the Maqdala Expedition have been written, shaped, and modified through the debates about the restitution of the artifacts that were taken during this event. These debates have contributed to the production of discourses about the histories of Maqdala that are directly related to the wider social and political landscape, and that are often invoked in relation to specific agendas. An anthropological approach to these discourses therefore necessitates engagement with the diverse community of people who are involved in this process in different capacities, from museum professionals who curate contested collections to political figures who maintain the momentum of the debate in government, to the journalists and academics who write about these issues, to the members of the public whose opinions (both in-person and online) can become a driving force behind institutional approaches to restitution. Often, it can seem as though progress, if we consider progress to mean material or discursive changes to the treatment/status of the objects that are the targets of these debates, is either extremely slow or non-existent for long stretches of time; during these periods, the conversation always remains ongoing even as interest levels ebb and flow in line with the current of events and developments in this arena. For example, a wave of attention can be triggered, almost accidentally, by something even as seemingly trivial as an interaction on a social media platform, as we will see later in a discussion of Westminster Abbey's response to criticism of its retention of a sacred Ethiopian altar tabot. Or, attention might come on the heels of an intentionally publicized and apparently momentous occasion, such as in 2017 when French President Emmanuel Macron announced in a speech in Ouagadougou that he had commissioned a report on restitution by scholars Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr – the report, released in 2018, which recommended the large-scale return to the continent of African works of art from French museums, consequently ignited a significant increase in pressure on museums around the world from the media and the public to confront their colonial histories and respond to calls for the repatriation of looted African artifacts. Yet all of these small and large moments together

make up the landscape of cultural restitution debates and offer opportunities to analyze the shifts in or contestations over the representations of histories, as well as to think critically and reflectively about who the figures are who give voice to these narratives and the network of relationships that define their positionalities within these debates.

The unpredictability inherent in cultural restitution means that it is not always clear when one of these moments will arise where it is possible to observe the way they unfold first-hand. Furthermore, the ability to do so is dependent on building and maintaining a breadth of connections within that wider community of people from various corners of the restitution debate in order to increase the likelihood of having access to key events – and even with a good network, that access is still far from guaranteed. This is one of the challenges of conducting an ethnography of a debate that is in a constant state of fluctuation and which has been unfolding for over a century and a half, as it is impossible to know exactly where and when these pivotal moments will take place, if they do take place during the course of the research period at all. However, due to the relationships that I developed during my fieldwork and fortunate timing, I had the opportunity to be present for a significant development in the debate about the restitution of Maqdala-related artifacts: a ceremonial and celebratory event during which several items (including locks of hair belonging to Prince Alemayehu and Captain Speedy, a silver horn cup, and a sacred altar tabot) were formally returned to Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in an act of cultural restitution. The host of the event was the Scheherazade Foundation, a private nonprofit organization that has become committed to the campaign for the return of artifacts taken from Maqdala to Ethiopia, especially the altar tabots that are held in the British Museum, as part of their goal to 'bridge cultures.' Through their work in this area, the Scheherazade Foundation was able to facilitate the acquisition of some Ethiopian artifacts from auctions for the purpose of repatriating them, and also coordinated the repatriation process for two private families who wished to return objects in their possession to Ethiopia. The invitation-only event took place on the 21st of September 2023 at the Athenaeum Club in London and was attended by some of the most prominent and vocal figures in Ethiopian politics, history, and cultural heritage, as well as those who are invested in the cause of cultural restitution more generally. While these attendees participated in the event as

individuals, they also functioned as representatives of the wider arguments about the Maqdala 1868 Expedition, as will be shown below. In their casual and official remarks that were made throughout the evening, these guests revealed their roles as authors of the narratives of Maqdala and highlighted some of the primary ways that figures in different positions contribute to, and often challenge, these narratives and histories.

On the surface, it was an evening of mingling, networking, speeches, awards, champagne, and congratulations, all meticulously filmed and photographed so that it could be documented, packaged, and presented to the public as evidence of the moral righteousness of restitution. There was very little subtlety in the pointed remarks made by multiple speakers about the British Museum (who had no representatives in attendance, despite being a tangible presence in the room), and praise was showered on the individuals who were responsible for returning objects. However, there were also unspoken tensions that lurked in the background, particularly relating to the process of reshaping the representation of the objects that were being repatriated by two private families. As these objects entered a period of transition and transformation and were prepared to begin new lives upon their return to Ethiopia, the shifts in their identities were directly related to a renegotiation of the significance of the Maqdala Expedition according to the agenda of cultural restitution. The repatriation process illuminated the ways in which these objects were about to undergo a process of museumification that would not only affect their current status, treatment, and function, but would alter their histories as well. More specifically, they were stripped of their identities as family heirlooms in order to be re-cast in the framework of loot and plunder, categories which were apparently, in this case, mutually exclusive – indeed, it became clear during the ceremonies that whether or not they had ever actually been legitimate family heirlooms, or if this had just been a veil obscuring their 'true' identities as looted artifacts all along, was a matter that was not yet resolved. While many attendees accepted and encouraged this characterization, some resisted the implication that their histories were told best or most accurately/truthfully through the lens of violence by countering with their own, often personal, histories. Additionally, the separate yet related process of restituting the sacred altar tabot by returning it to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which took place in several stages beginning with an official, private meeting

in the morning on the day of the event and in a public religious ceremony at a church in London on the following Sunday as discussed in the previous chapter, raised questions about how sacred artifacts make additional demands on the restitution process.

On a rainy Thursday evening in London, black town cars pulled up outside the Athenaeum Club and formally-dressed men and women shook their umbrellas before entering the elegant lobby. Names were checked off of a list at the door, followed by directions to the Smoking Room where catering staff were ready with flutes of champagne in hand. Attendees stood chatting in small groups, filling the room with a low buzz of conversation and clinking glass. It was an interesting mix of people, many of whom did not know each other personally but were nevertheless aware that they were somehow connected by the small selection of objects ceremoniously set out on a table at the end of the room. With the rain clearing, guests were drifting on and off the balconies, exchanging the warm dense air inside for a breath of the crisp, cool Autumn breeze. The room itself was much longer than it was wide, with thick golden curtains draped over the windows and pale blue sofas lining the walls that no one was sitting on. It was unclear if this was the normal configuration of the room or if the sofas had been pushed aside to create more space for mingling and greater ease of movement. The rich dark wood, ornate ceilings, chandeliers, portraits, and plush crimson carpet reminded me of some familiar common rooms in Oxford, though they could have easily belonged to 10 Downing Street or an estate in the countryside. At least from my admittedly limited experience with the genre, it felt like classic upper-class British décor, with an air of tradition and exclusivity that aligned quite well with what I had expected to find in a historic members-only club in London. It managed to balance being cozy and comfortable while also ensuring that the black-tie attire of the guests blended seamlessly into the surroundings. Without knowing the actual reason that we were all there, one could easily have assumed a number of different motivations for holding this event – to the unknowing outsider, it could have been the intimate reception for book launch by a well-known author, pre-/post-theater cocktails, or a social evening for members. Though the general demeanor in the room was friendly and conversational, it was not quite loud or relaxed enough for me to suspect that someone would automatically assume that the event was of a celebratory nature. I wondered if this was what the people I had spoken to throughout my fieldwork

about restitution imagined that an event for the return of significant cultural artifacts would look like. Would they have expected it to be even grander, a black-tie banquet with music and speeches given from a stage? Or would they have pictured something with much less pomp, a simple but careful packing of objects into boxes labelled 'fragile' to be shipped with utmost care to the relevant government department or institution? Or perhaps at long wooden tables where representatives negotiated over name placards, glasses of water, and mini-flags denoting their national allegiances. And given that the opportunities to be present for this kind of ceremony were few and far between, I wondered how long it would be until I had something to compare it to. As it so happens, however, this event was only one part of a multi-stage process of restitution that would be continued in a religious ceremony for the tabot at an Ethiopian Orthodox Church in London just a few days after the Athenaeum Club reception. The juxtaposition of these two separate yet related restitution ceremonies has enabled me to better see how each responds to the history of Maqdala 1868, and fits differently within the context about the debates for the return of Ethiopia's cultural and religious artifacts taken during the expedition.

As I accepted a glass of champagne, while looking around the room for a familiar face or an entry point into an introduction, I was greeted by Tahir Shah, the founder of the Scheherazade Foundation and our host for the evening. Having only communicated by email until now, we exchanged the glances of uncertain recognition typical between people who have only seen each other in profile pictures on LinkedIn. He welcomed me to the event and asked a question that would, in several variations, become a staple of interactions throughout the evening: "so what is your connection to…?" with a hand gesture that swept around the room. Leaving the end of the question hanging in the air, as if unsure exactly how to categorize the nature of the event, he could have meant a range of different things. He could have filled the gap with broad subjects like 'Ethiopia or 'repatriation,' more specific ones like 'Maqdala,' or the vague 'all of this' chosen by several guests, but it was clear that what he was really asking was 'why are you here?' Who was I to have garnered an invitation to this event, what was the nature of my interest in being there – was my connection of the personal variety, or was I there in some sort of professional capacity as a political attaché or a journalist? I introduced myself as a PhD student at Oxford studying "the history of the debates about

the Maqdala Collection," a tagline I ended up using frequently in the hopes that it was clear, digestible and easily identifiable. I suppose that this put me somewhere in between the personal and the professional in that special gray zone occupied by academia, suggesting that I was a little bit of both. "Oh of course," he responded, and made reference to my connection with Jason Webster, the director of the Scheherazade Foundation and the main reason I had secured an invitation. But before we were able to continue our conversation, I saw his face light up with recognition at something over my shoulder, someone coming through the entrance behind me. "Please excuse me," he said quickly, "but I must go greet the Ethiopian ambassador" and he had departed with a smile before I could finish saying "yes of course."

I hovered in my spot and watched as Mr. Shah hurried over to shake the hand of Mr. Teferi Melesse, the current Ethiopian ambassador to the UK, who had entered the room accompanied by a small entourage of men. I noticed that one of these men was holding up a phone quite close to the ambassador, and realized that he was filming the interaction. The constant presence of a raised smartphone in the background would eventually prove to be a defining feature of the evening, creating a noticeable contrast between the exclusive, invitation-only atmosphere and the apparent desire to assiduously document all the stages of the event for what I assumed was public dissemination rather than private reminiscence. This was confirmed in the days that followed, as photos and videos quickly popped up on the Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn pages of many of the attendees. While I too was recording observations, and was on some level reassured that I was not the only one interested in producing a record of the event, I also felt slightly unsettled by my awareness of the cameras. As I introduced myself to the ambassador and shook his hand, I found that my eyes darted back and forth between making eye contact with him and making contact with the lens of the iPhone that was positioned directly adjacent to his head. Self-consciously, I made a concerted effort to keep my gaze focused on the ambassador while expressing my gratitude that the embassy in London had been a welcoming and open source of discussion throughout the earlier stages of my fieldwork. I hoped to continue this conversation for a few moments longer, as the room was not yet nearly as full as I anticipated it becoming based on the length of the guest list I had seen at the door, at least long enough to perhaps allow the ambassador to elaborate on his response that he was "very glad to hear it." But instead, he was quickly

whisked away to speak to someone else, cameraman in tow. I, of course, have never been a celebrity at a red-carpet event, but I imagine that what I was experiencing was a scaled-down, but similar, hyper-awareness of one's facial expressions, body positioning, and language that comes from being recorded by multiple sources with only limited, very general information about how such recordings will be used. The overall effect was that the reception was somewhere between a celebration and a performance of a celebration, with all of us there to demonstrate our support for this restitution on the basis of our connection to the subject, but also to play a part in constructing an image of the event that could be presented to a wider-audience. I recalled from my interviews with members of the Scheherazade Foundation that they were prepared to take their agenda about the altar tabots in the British Museum into the court of public opinion and couldn't help but wonder about how the documentation of this event, the displays of joy and celebration captured on camera, might eventually function as evidence in a trial-by-media campaign. Were we all, knowingly or not, testifying in that future trial through our presence at the Athenaeum Club this evening? Later in the evening, the speeches made by several of the more central attendees certainly felt like statements that could have been made in a court of law.

The other dynamic that almost immediately stood out in my brief encounter with the Ethiopian ambassador at the start of the event was the fact that, while we had all been issued an invitation on the grounds of our work or our relationships with other attendees, there was nevertheless some sort of hierarchy among the guests. This hierarchy, which was in some instances explicitly articulated (for example, in the singling out of certain guests of honor) and in others more implicit, always managed to make itself obvious in both the length of interactions that one was able to have with certain guests before they moved on and the speed with which an interaction could be interrupted in favor of someone of higher standing. This may seem like the same thing, but the subtle difference has to do with the agent who determined how long an interaction could last for. On the one hand, the person to whom I was speaking could easily move on of their own accord if they preferred or felt obligated to speak with someone else, as happened with the Ethiopian ambassador. On the other hand, someone external to the conversation could feel entitled to intervene in a conversation in order to encourage the person to whom I was speaking to speak with someone

else. While I exited conversations primarily in an attempt to speak to as many guests as possible within the relatively short time frame I had available, I noticed that I was often interrupted in order for my companion to be pulled away but that only once was I myself pulled into a new conversation. To be clear, this was not a pattern that was necessarily rude (at least, it did not have to be and was, in most cases, done with a polite "excuse me"), but rather one that reflected the complex network of relationships that connected everyone in the room and the different social and professional demands that those relationships elicited. One's position in the hierarchy could apparently be determined by several factors, though it was by no means rigidly defined with a definitive top and bottom. In fact, it might be more appropriate to describe it as a web where some guests were closer to the core (those whose presence was essential to the event) and others were closer to the periphery (those who made a contribution but whose absence would have been excusable). It would also be fair to say that the positions are flexible rather than absolute, and do not exist independently of the other people and institutions within it. In other words, the structure of the web of restitution is highly relational and context-dependent. For this reason, deconstructing these relationships can do more than just describe the people who are involved in the debates on restitution, as it can also shed light on the ways that restitution functions as an arena to establish and spread certain narratives, arguments, and goals relating to the representation of the history of Maqdala 1868.

There were the guests whose status at the center of the web stemmed from being directly linked to the reason we were all there: the restitution of several Maqdala-related objects, including a sacred altar tabot and locks of hair belonging to Prince Alemayehu and Captain Speedy. Guests in this category included, for example, Tahir Shah as the founder of the Scheherazade Foundation who had coordinated the return, Dr. Jacopo Gnisci, who was responsible for initiating the restitution of the sacred altar tabot, the family of Captain Speedy who were returning the locks of hair, and the private individual returning a horn cup that he found among his father's belongings, and Dr. Alula Pankhurst, who, as a member of the Ethiopian Heritage Restitution Committee, was also there to help facilitate the handing over of these objects to their respective recipients (the Ethiopian State and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church). Dr. Pankhurst was following in the footsteps of his parents, Richard and Rita Pankhurst, who wrote extensively about the

Maqdala 1868 Expedition and consistently advocated for the return of the artifacts taken from Maqdala – including through the establishment of the Association for the Return of the Magdala Ethiopian Treasures (AFROMET), which was discussed earlier in this thesis. Notably, Dr. Pankhurst was the only attendee who represented a sector of the Ethiopian state and culture who was not himself of Ethiopian descent, though he lives and works in Addis Ababa. Yet he seamlessly carried the legacy of his parents and spoke at length on behalf of the Ethiopian people about the significance of the Maqdala Expedition and the importance of the repatriation of these objects. Though Dr. Pankhurst's research does not relate to the history of Maqdala or restitution, like his parents, Dr. Pankhurst has played an important role in the debates about the artifacts related to the Maqdala Expedition, as a sort of academic ambassador himself between the UK and Ethiopia. More so than simply being a well-connected scholar with a personal interest in the subject, Dr. Pankhurst embodies the instrumental part played by European scholars of Ethiopian culture and history in elevating the arguments regarding the Maqdala artifacts in both the political and academic landscapes. This is a complex positionality to occupy as it raises questions about who is empowered to write the histories of these kinds of events and why certain ones come to be viewed as more serious or legitimate than others. Without diminishing Dr. Pankhurst's personal and genuine passion for cultural restitution, we can also acknowledge that much of his authority on the subject derives from the reputation of his parents and their academic and political work. The Pankhursts' commitment to pursuing the restitution of the Maqdala Collection has had a lasting impact on this collection's status as a focal point of ongoing restitution debates, not the least because they mediated this conversation in both the UK and Ethiopia.

This is certainly not to say that the Maqdala Expedition wouldn't have acquired this status without the work of the Pankhursts, but rather to draw attention to the importance of reflecting on the ways that the representation of the Maqdala Expedition in the UK continues to be dominated by a Eurocentric lens – even when that lens casts the British Empire in a negative light. Someone who was not present at the event who I might have expected to see was Eyob Derillo, the first curator for the Ethiopian collection at the British Library, a position that has recently been cut so that his new title is 'reference specialist for the Asian and African collection.' According to Eyob, he is not aware of any other curators in British cultural institutions

who are responsible for Ethiopian collections and who are themselves Ethiopian. This means that even though special exhibitions, like the one discussed previously at the V&A, may consult members of the Ethiopian community, the final say in the representation of the Maqdala Expedition throughout these institutions is made from a non-Ethiopian perspective. As I have explored previously, there has not always been agreement between the narratives created about Maqdala outside of Ethiopia, predominantly by European scholars, politicians, and activists, and those that have been created in Ethiopia, where Maqdala 1868 has often been represented in different terms. Especially in the context of restitution debates, we have seen how the sociopolitical landscape of widespread demands for the return of cultural artifacts and human remains has motivated the retelling of the Maqdala Expedition's history within the current framework of anti-colonialism and decolonization. This framework seeks to represent Maqdala 1868 in a similar way to Benin 1897, as a violent punitive expedition, in order to establish a pattern of imperial harm that supports the return of artifacts taken during these events to their respective countries. Understandable as this is given some of the parallels between the two expeditions, as I have shown there are complications in propagating this narrative due to the ways it privileges the British perspective on the expedition despite the fact that it condemns the British actions, which in and of itself manages to actually repeat problematic and Eurocentric colonial paradigms regarding non-European history. Observing the central role played by Dr. Pankhurst at this restitution event, as a figure whose position encapsulated the interplay between the narratives of Maqdala 1868 inside and outside of Ethiopia, evoked the complex positionalities from which these representations originate and gain influence.

In addition to distinguished individuals like Dr. Pankhurst, there were the guests whose political connections defined their status for the evening, such as the Ethiopian ambassador, the Deputy Head of Mission, the former UK ambassador to Ethiopia, and members of parliament. The Ethiopian ambassador, in particular, was there to represent the Ethiopian state and participate directly in the ceremony as the representative recipient of the non-religious objects. There was, of course, the religious delegation from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church, comprised of high-ranking priests based in both the UK and Ethiopia who, notably, were only at the event in a symbolic capacity – as will be discussed in further detail

in the next chapter, the restitution of the altar tabot did not actually take place in this ceremony but rather in a private meeting that happened earlier in the day and in a reconsecration ceremony at the Church of St Mary in London the following Sunday. These were the attendees around whom the rest of us seemed to orbit, who were generally the most difficult to speak to for more than a few minutes if, like me, you hovered on the outskirts of the web. Their time and attention were in extremely high demand, and it seemed that they managed to speak to nearly everyone in the room at some point, if not always for very long. They were the ones whom nobody had to ask "so what is your connection to…?" because we all simply understood why they were all present and there was no need for further explanation or justification; their identities spoke for themselves. This spoke to our collective expectations about the restitution process and what is it 'supposed' to look like, as there was no obvious challenge to the status of any of these figures and the unspoken hierarchy of the evening felt natural – of course the representatives of the Ethiopian state were among the most important people in the room because, while both museums and states are often conceived of as 'returners,' states are the most commonly accepted 'receivers.' This dynamic is apparent in the fact that most demands relating to the African continent call for the return of artifacts or collections from specific institutions to the modern state from which they originated, sometimes leading to discord when other actors become involved (such as in the case of Germany's recent restitution of Benin Bronzes, which I will discuss as an example below). In this way, the web of relationships during this event not only highlighted what kinds of figures are involved in writing the histories of Maqdala 1868 through the debates on restitution, but also reflected the assumptions about the processes of restitution from which some of their power and status derives.

Those who were not at the center of the web came from a variety of different backgrounds, bringing a medley of perspectives to the conversations throughout the evening. Some were more well-known than others because they were relatively public-facing figures in the broader debates about Maqdala. This included journalist Andrew Heavens, the author of the book *The Prince and the Plunder,* signed copies of which he gifted to the family members of Captain Speedy at the event. Andrew's self-stated motivations for being involved in these debates include the desire to tell a previously 'untold' history of Prince

Alemayehu's life after Maqdala, to support the requests for the repatriation of his remains to Ethiopia, and to raise awareness of the status of objects around the world that were taken from Ethiopia during or as a result of the Maqdala Expedition. As part of this third goal, he has been compiling and maintaining a database of objects on his website, organized according to type and current location, entitled 'the treasures' and he encourages his audience to actively seek out new objects to be added. Some are obvious – holdings easily found in the online catalogues of the British Museum and the V&A – while others required deeper digging into the sales records of auction houses like Christies and Bonhams. I remember that the first time I spoke to Andrew, in a video call arranged by a mutual contact due to our shared interest in the history of the Maqdala Expedition, one of the first things he asked me after we exchanged pleasantries was "what I had found" since I'd begun my PhD research. I was a bit surprised at first, though I actually had spent some time looking in the archives for Maqdala-related artifacts outside of the usual places, and had in fact found several. But Andrew's style leans more towards investigative journalism, the snappy presentation of information in a neat, compelling narrative accompanied by the uncovering of new 'evidence,' than towards structured historical analysis, which he freely admits is not his approach. To this end, he also runs an account on Twitter under the handle @lootandplunder where almost every day he shares snippets about Maqdala from the archives designed to quickly grab and pique the interest of scrollers, intermingled with promotions for his recently-published book in case they wish to explore the subject further. He prefers to stay away from the disciplinary jargon and reliance on theory that characterizes academia, and so I believe he was initially disappointed to find that my approach to the history of the debates about Maqdala was, in his eyes, less practical in nature than his own explorations.

Andrew is driven by an undoubtedly sincere passion for Ethiopian culture and history based on his previous experiences reporting in the country, but he is also notable for his current role as (re)writer of the history of Maqdala according to the current landscape of cultural restitution. I'm not sure that Andrew would describe himself this way, and would prefer instead to think of himself as an advocate for the repatriation of Alemayehu's remains and the rest of the Maqdala Collection who uses storytelling as his mode of activism, but he has become an important and connected figure in the loosely-defined community

of those concerned with cultural restitution and the ongoing campaigns to return Maqdala-related objects to Ethiopia. While I have already discussed *The Prince and the Plunder* and the narrative it constructs in greater detail earlier in this thesis, I mention Andrew now because his attendance at the restitution event demonstrates how 'involvement' in the debates about Maqdala does not have to mean that one does so in a strictly political or academic capacity. Andrew exemplifies the role of the scholar-activist in these debates as a figure who intentionally uses his historical research as a tool in the pursuit of a specific agenda – in his case, the restitution of the Maqdala Collection, and, in particular, the repatriation of the remains of Prince Alemayehu. In contrast to the so-called 'ivory tower,' which refers critically to the supposed insulation of academic research from communities outside of academia, the scholar-activist sees themselves as someone who rejects this separation and actively strives to make an impact in a community or help accomplish a goal through their work. There are certainly many scholars who hope that their research can contribute to positive changes and who might consider themselves activists, and this is not to suggest that their advocacy is less significant. Rather, this designation refers specifically to the way that certain figures perceive themselves as transcending the imagined boundary between academia and activism to become public-facing spokesmen for a cause, which, in the field of cultural restitution, often means attaching themselves to a particular case or collection. While Richard and Rita Pankhurst were also scholars who advocated for the return of the Maqdala Collection to Ethiopia, Andrew's mode of scholar-activism follows more closely in the footsteps of academics like Dr. Dan Hicks, who has played an enormous role (though certainly not one without criticism) in shaping the 'pro-return' argument for the Benin Bronzes through his writing and public personality. Crucially, the distinct role of these types of scholar-activists in restitution debates is that they write narratives that are crafted with a wider audience outside of academia in mind. They cultivate online followings to promote these narratives, curate personal reputations that are defined by their work on these events, and package their arguments in ways that can engage a diverse and widespread community of interested people – book talks at major booksellers open to the public rather than (or in addition to) papers given at specialized academic conferences. Aside from the active participants in the ceremony this evening, who spoke and shook hands in front of all the attendees and the cameras, Andrew was one of the most

sought-after individuals in the room with whom many of the attendees wanted to speak. This was in no small part because he has had great success in turning himself into one of the loudest and most prominent voices contributing to a diverse public audience's understanding of the history of the Maqdala Expedition alongside the narratives presented to them by heritage institutions. His presence throughout the evening, bolstered by his handing out of business cards adorned on the front with the cover of his book, was a constant reminder that the exclusive feel of this event did not reflect a similarly limited community of people who cared about, or were at least interested in, the fate of cultural artifacts taken during military expeditions.

In his self-appointed capacity as narrator of the life of the 'prince' and the fate of the 'plunder,' Andrew also represented the audience that made his book successful enough to warrant an international tour across Europe – beginning, not coincidentally, in Athens, home to an even more high-profile restitution debate surrounding the infamous case of the 'Elgin Marbles.' When I did manage to catch him for a few moments of conversation, Andrew confirmed that Athens was chosen intentionally for this reason, to promote a direct link between the debates about the marbles and those about the Maqdala Collection, citing the "common cause" between the people of Greece and the aims of his book. In this way, he is actively trying to shape the perception of the Maqdala Expedition by fostering its association with the Parthenon Sculptures. Considering that the marbles debates are significantly more familiar to the British public than the debates about Maqdala, strengthening the connection between these two cases could have the effect of increasing awareness of the Maqdala Collection among a wider audience. As far as Andrew is concerned, this is not merely a convenient tactic for selling book copies, but rather a deliberate strategy of representing Maqdala in way that is consistent with an existing frame of reference so that it automatically invokes certain sentiments – he wants to help turn Maqdala into a rallying point for restitution that holds the same weight as the 'Elgin Marbles' and the 'Benin Bronzes.' It was as though, just as the Ethiopian ambassador was there as the representative of the Ethiopian state and the Ethiopian people, accepting the returned objects on their behalf, Andrew was serving as the (self-appointed) ambassador of the elusive 'public' who engages with content on this subject online and reads popular history books like *The Prince and the Plunder* but

doesn't necessarily themselves have a clear connection to these issues beyond personal interest in the debate. In other words, Andrew's obvious importance and status at the event had the effect of demonstrating that what was going on inside this room was as much for people outside of it (who were not necessarily Ethiopian, members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, or scholars of Ethiopian history, culture, and politics), as it was for the people present. Again, I was reminded of the Scheherazade Foundation's supplementary motivations in hosting this event to apply pressure to the British Museum to take action on the sacred tabots they retain. The 'public' that they refer to when describing their willingness to engage with this matter in the 'court of public opinion' is very much the same public that is Andrew's target audience. The actual process of returning cultural objects may often still take place in private, elite spaces behind closed doors where social and professional hierarchies are clear, but there was an awareness that its occurrence would resonate with, and be judged by, a far-reaching, undefinable public. This public, that is more invested in this process than ever before, loomed in the background of the event like a shadow.

8.2 Restitution and Museumification: The New Lives of Repatriated Objects

While still in the process of mingling and attempting to gain an initial understanding of the dynamics in the room, I moved away from the entrance and towards the table at the end of the room, upon which sat the objects to be ceremoniously returned later that evening (besides, for obvious reasons, the tabot). Throughout my research, I have often had the privilege of being granted permission to explore objects related to Maqdala without the physical barriers typically imposed by cultural institutions, such as glass display cases or small engraved signs reading 'do not touch.' I have, for example, spent ample time documenting the manuscripts held by the Bodleian Library that are linked to the Maqdala Expedition, and had the opportunity to produce content for the Pitt Rivers Museum on several of their Maqdala-related objects that are not on display. But something about being encouraged to hold and examine the items on the table in front of me this evening felt quite different from those experiences, which had always involved engaging with the objects in my capacity as 'researcher.' In my experience, that identity, particularly given that it is connected to an institution like Oxford, has often come with a rather generous assumption of

authority and legitimacy that opened the doors to the holdings of museums and libraries. Tonight, however, the opportunity to freely admire the soon-to-be-repatriated objects came not from my academic credentials, but from a seemingly unspoken agreement that all of the guests in the room had been given this opportunity alongside their invitations, which served as an automatic endorsement of their relationship to the objects; if you were present at the event, you had already been deemed worthy regardless of your background. In fact, there were only a couple of other guests in attendance who were primarily there in an academic capacity, and we were all in some way connected to each other. There was Alexandra Watson Jones, a PhD candidate at St Andrews who I had suggested should be invited because of her research on the history of British collecting in Ethiopia and because she curated the commemorative *Maqdala 1868* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2018. And then there was Jacques Schumacher, the current Senior Provenance Research Coordinator at the V&A, with whom I had spoken a number of times while researching the history of the museum's Maqdala Collection and who had originally introduced me to Alex. Together, the three of us formed the majority of an unexpectedly small contingent of attendees who actually worked museum spaces, which I found surprising given the number of references made to museums in the various statements made during the course of the evening. It was clear that museums, especially British museums that had Maqdala artifacts, were on the forefront of everyone's minds. This was further demonstrated by the many allusions to the intention of eventually displaying the objects on the table upon their return to Ethiopia. Yet where one might have therefore expected there to be a clear presence of museum professionals and scholars, there was instead just our little group who were there mainly to observe and celebrate alongside the rest of the guests – and we certainly weren't anywhere near the center of the web of relationships. There were not even any representatives of the institutions that may become the new caretakers of these objects, such as the Ethnological Museum of Addis Ababa University or the Ethiopian National Museum, both located in the Ethiopian capital city. Though this event was in many ways the product of decades of restitution debates oriented around museums and their collections, and was indeed trying to send a message to museums with Maqdala holdings, it was not conceived as a space for engaging directly with those institutions. This reinforced the sense that while heritage institutions are often at the

core of restitution debates, and are in many cases treated as the 'end goal' or 'destination' of campaigns for the return of cultural artifacts, restitution also happens in spaces that exist largely outside of those frameworks.

Any of the objects on the table could have easily already been in a museum, and it felt as though it were merely by random chance that they had evaded that classification until now. There is a shield on display in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford that is of somewhat uncertain provenance, but that is speculated to possibly have been taken from a soldier at Maqdala; like the shield on the table before me, it spent most of its life outside of Ethiopia in private hands, before it was eventually donated to the Pitt Rivers. While the two shields may have shared a similar trajectory at one point, being brought back to the UK as souvenirs of a military expedition before their paths eventually diverged, their roles could have easily been reversed. The locks of hair belonging to Prince Alemayehu and Captain Speedy could have accompanied the lock of hair belonging to Emperor Tewodros that had until a few years ago been in the National Army Museum, and the family returning the horn cup had considered gifting it to a regimental museum before learning more about the requests for the return of Maqdala objects and deciding instead to repatriate it. From statements made throughout the evening, it seems that these objects very likely are in the process of becoming museum objects, as it appears that the Ethiopian Government intends to eventually deposit them into a cultural institution for display. But for the moment they were in a bit of a state of limbo, a transitional period in which their fate was still uncertain. It was strange to think that tonight, by simple virtue of my invitation to this event, I could freely handle the silver-mounted horn cup and gently trace my fingers over the inscription *Taken at Maqdala*, but in a matter of several weeks or months it would very likely be on display and thus require going through numerous complex institutional channels to be granted the same permission. The cup itself wouldn't change, nor would its history, but it would soon be undergoing a process of museumification that would, as Igor Kopytoff (1986) explored in his foundational work, usher in a completely new chapter of its life and add yet another layer of meaning and value for it to carry, as well as a new set of rules governing its treatment. While I was holding it, however, the next renegotiation of its identity was not yet complete. Crispin Paine (2013) describes museumification as a stage in the life of an

object wherein it acquires a 'new personality which more or less completely overlays its previous one' (p.2). Upon accession into a museum, the object is effectively removed from more mundane modes of circulation, such as the processes of buying and selling that characterize auctions or the formal passing down of treasures within families through inheritance, and becomes elevated to a status that has an air of finality. We know that objects can in certain circumstances be de-accessioned from museums and that even within the space of the museum objects undergo processes of transformation and re-semanticization, as discussed earlier in relation to the crown and chalice that are currently on display in the V&A. Yet Christina Kreps (2006) identifies that there remains a distinct set of 'broader practices and assumptions' shared among museums, especially in the context of Western museums, among which is included the belief being a part of a museum collection is the highest peak an object can reach in its lifetime (p.458). While, as she discusses, this perspective diminishes the other social and cultural contexts in which an object may be valued more highly despite existing outside of Western museological norms of conservation and preservation, and neglects the possibility discussed by Theodor Adorno (1967) that objects in a museum are actually 'in the process of dying,' it is nevertheless a pervasive idea in Western museum practice (p.175). One anecdote John shared in his speech was that his wife, Hannah, had a pet hobby of polishing silver and that, as a result of her enthusiastic pursuit of caring for it, the horn cup had almost certainly lost several grams of silver since it had been under their guardianship. This image of the cup's outer silver layer gradually and subtly wearing away over the years, almost as if it was aging along with its well-meaning caretakers, served as a sharp juxtaposition to the picture I imagined of its future, where I expected that curators and professional art conservationists would go to lengths to freeze the cup as it is and use industry-backed methods to preserve its current state as closely as possible – a used rag and commercial silver polish on a slow rainy day to be replaced by gloved hands, conservation-grade solutions, and lint-free cloths deployed only when deemed absolutely necessary.

Adorno (1967), however, considers that objects which undergo museumification 'owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present' (p.175). As I considered the objects on the table in front of me, stationary for now yet clearly in transit, as if waiting in an intermediary airport

during a stopover, it seemed that their museumification through restitution was very much connected to the needs of the present. In addition to their pending museumification, some of the items were also grappling with the weight of other new layers of meaning directly related to the current social and political context in which they were undergoing this transition. The inscribed horn cup which I had been holding had, from the 1960s until this moment, belonged to man named John and his wife Hannah. John had inherited the cup from his father in the 1960s, who had apparently acquired it from his stepsister some years before that; they were unsure of the exact nature of the relationship between their family and the cup, knowing only that it had been taken, presumably by a soldier, at Maqdala and that it had been passed between family members ever since. The catalyst for the cup's journey back to Ethiopia was ironically that it had recently been hidden in an attic in an attempt to protect it from a string of home burglaries in the neighborhood. Upon eventually going to retrieve it when it appeared that the environment was again safe enough to bring it out of hiding, John and Hannah saw the significance of the cup in a new light. The experience of having this family heirloom potentially endangered enabled them to see the cup as having value outside of and separate from their home and family. This realization prompted them to consider how best to respond to that value, initially focusing on a decision between its financial value (should they try to sell the cup?) and its historical and cultural value (should they find a regimental museum to which they could donate it because of a mutual connection to Maqdala?). It was in the course of investigating these potential avenues that they came upon the third option: repatriate the cup to Ethiopia. When John explained this process of exploring their options in a brief statement to the room, he described their consideration of a regimental museum in a tone that, while not exactly embarrassed, conveyed an "ignorance" (as he himself described it) or certain naïveté, as if he anticipated being judged for thinking those were valid choices. He then reassured us that he and Hannah were "further up the learning curve" now, suggesting that they agreed that pursuing their other options would have been misguided. This sentiment was affirmed in Dr. Pankhurst's response to John's statement, in which he praised John and Hannah for choosing to "do the right thing" and recognizing that the cup "belongs to Ethiopia and means so much more in a museum in Ethiopia than in a regiment museum, or in a private home, or sold in an auction." In other contexts – to a different audience in the same room on

any other night – the other options that John and Hannah considered could have easily been considered equally legitimate choices, and have indeed been chosen by others in the same situation.

Though the consensus in the room was clearly that repatriating the cup was indeed the 'right' (i.e., moral) thing for John and Hannah to do as they learned more about its history, it was mainly because we had all tacitly agreed, through our attendance at the event, that the Maqdala Expedition belonged to that category of historical events which demanded a particular ethical response As demonstrated by further statements made by other attendees, which spoke the cup's new status into existence as much as the ceremony itself, the cup's association with Maqdala turned it into not merely a family treasure, but a piece of loot. Now, the cup may have always been loot even if it wasn't thought of or spoken about as such throughout its life if we believe that it has carried the history of the plunder of Maqdala with it as an intrinsic quality regardless of this quality being recognized. But I would argue that in the decision to pursue its repatriation and in the unfolding events of this evening, the cup was discursively transformed into loot in a way that derived its meaning from the current sociopolitical landscape of cultural restitution – and that consequently invoked context-specific responses and frameworks of ethical respect and responsibility. As Charlotte Joy (2020) has discussed in detail, the debates about repatriation coalesce around a grammar of global justice that is bound up in issues of intergenerational responsibility, reparations for past harms, and the renegotiation of political relationships and subjectivities. Far from being disconnected from the 'needs of the present,' as Adorno (1967) described, the horn cup was being deliberately thrust into the present to fulfill an ambition that, while continuing a historical legacy, was also future-oriented. As expressed by Dr. Pankhurst, the repatriation of the horn cup and its ultimate museumification were conceived as both a contemporary act of justice and a hope that this process would set an example for others to follow in the future. Others here referred not only to private individuals, but also to the 27 different museums in the UK identified by Andrew Heavens that hold items related to the Maqdala Expedition. Rather than merely being used to reflect a neutral historical reality, the frequent references to the objects on the table as 'looted' and 'plundered' functioned to invoke an ongoing discourse about the moral imperative to return objects in these categories to their countries or communities of origin. To become loot in the context of the current political

climate surrounding museum collections, the legacies of historical injustices, and the debates about cultural restitution is to become something that exists in quite a different mode from, for example, a family heirloom. As scholars such as Simone Abram and Marianne Elisabeth Lien (2023) have explored, the practice of passing material things between family members is a central component of 'kinning,' or reaffirming kinship relations and sense of place within the family structure. An heirloom, as the horn cup had been for decades, derives its value from the way that ownership of it signifies belonging to the family and one's connection to past and previous generation. Heirlooms are themselves often considered to be inalienable by the kin group to which they belong, as their meaning is both constituted in and constitutive of the identity of the family (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004); the loss of the heirloom may be seen as threatening to the family structure or evidence of the degeneration of bonds within the group.

With their decision to return the horn cup to Ethiopia, John and Hannah were, intentionally or not, replacing its previous status as family heirloom with its new status as looted cultural artifact. In doing so, they effectively reversed the inalienability of the cup: rather than being unable to be given away because of its bond with their family, it became instead something that *must* be given away. As family heirloom, its value was inseparable from belonging to the family, but as loot its value could only be fully appreciated if it was returned to the place from which it originated. Notably, both 'family heirloom' and 'looted cultural artifact' ascribe meaning to an object on the grounds that the possession of the object is central to the identity of a group, the difference in this case being that one group was formed on the basis of small-scale family ties while the other was based on the national-scale (or even international-scale, including the diaspora) collective identity of Ethiopians. However, the logic of its restitution as expressed in the statements given at the ceremony seemed to suggest that, ultimately, only one of these groups had a legitimate claim regarding their relationship to the cup. To be clear, none of this is to say that the category of family heirloom and the category of loot are always mutually exclusive – we need only look to the many examples of objects governed by the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art (1998) to see that family heirlooms, when looted, can exist in both capacities and make the moral demands that are characteristic of each. A family heirloom looted in violent circumstances can demand to be returned in

order for its value to be restored, while the memory of it can be passed between family members in its absence to maintain its bond to the family. By contrast, something that is looted or stolen may become a family heirloom temporarily, but upon its return it must be stripped of that status in order to avoid competing claims of ownership, even if only symbolic in nature. Furthermore, the sense that, once John and Hannah had learned more about the cup's provenance and the conditions under which it came to (temporarily) become a family heirloom, keeping it would have created a feeling of discomfort and unease is reminiscent of Simon Harrison's (2012) work on modern war trophies that have been brought back from service by military personnel. While Harrison was talking specifically about human remains such as skulls, bones, and teeth, he demonstrated how things that have been brought back from conflict often become family heirlooms in the short-term, but cannot necessarily be assimilated into this role in the long-term (Harrison 2012, p.183). In many cases, eventually the violent histories of these objects become uncomfortable burdens that must be removed from the home for the family to be at peace, which families often attempt to do (though not always successfully) through repatriation.

In the way that John spoke about the horn cup and the process of learning about its history that culminated in its restitution through the Scheherazade Foundation, it was as though, in addition to beginning a new phase of its life, the cup was shedding a costume it had been given to wear for the past century and a half. But as it prepared to undertake its new role, it seemed that the source of the cup's value now was more closely intertwined with present dynamics than with the intrinsic value of the materials or a particularly notable function. It is unknown where it was made, or who it belonged to before it was taken from Maqdala and brought to England to eventually become a part of John's family. As was humorously stated in the ceremony, to light chuckling in the audience, it is "just a cup." But in its repatriation to Ethiopia by John and Hannah, it was rendered extremely valuable, perhaps even priceless, by virtue of its connection to the Maqdala Expedition and what the return of an object with this history signifies and communicates in the current climate of restitution debates. It became loot (or maybe it was revealed to be loot) and it became a testament to and product of the moral righteousness of returning Maqdala-related artifacts to Ethiopia. As John himself referenced, this was made possible because of the propagation of the Maqdala narrative as an

infamous case of imperial plunder. Restitution in this sense was thus not merely a response to or recognition of cultural and historical value, but an act that created value through the reconfiguration of the political meaning of the Maqdala Expedition in relation to the contemporary zeitgeist of restitution. Even if it was once just a cup.

8.3 "From One Loving Family to Another:" Entangled Histories and Uncertain Futures

Though the event overall felt joyous and celebratory, with a distinct sense that we were all on the same side and had secured some sort of victory, the transformation that the objects were making through this restitution was not entirely without contestation. After briefly being able to hold the cup and appreciate the other objects on the table, I turned away to give other guests the chance to engage with them (which felt strangely similar to the process of paying one's respects to the guests of honor or the host, as if giving my attention to the objects fulfilled a customary duty). I was quickly greeted by a couple of attendees, who initiated conversation with the question I had now come to expect: "so what is your connection to all of this?" The woman who spoke's tone was excited in the way that one who has been anticipating an event finds themselves a bit thrilled when the event actually materializes. When I introduced myself as a PhD student studying the history of the debates about the objects from the Maqdala Expedition, I was surprised to see her eyes light up, as well as her partner's, at the word 'history.' I carried on and decided to deviate from the script to see how it might elicit a different kind of response, and asked what brought them to the Athenaeum Club that night. Enthusiastically, they introduced themselves as Simon and Marianne and shared that they were family members of Leonie, the woman who was repatriating the locks of hair from Prince Alemayehu and Captain Speedy. Simon and Leonie were cousins and had thus grown up together hearing many stories of "Uncle Charlie's" (Captain Speedy's) travels and "adventures." They had come with her to London all the way from New Zealand to support her in the repatriation of the locks of hair, and also on their own private quest to locate Uncle Charlie's grave. Simon spoke of spending summers in the family beach house in New Zealand, where photos of Captain Speedy and Prince Alemayehu adorned the walls with the rest of their family memorabilia, of no less importance or sentimentality than the other family

portraits. For Simon and his cousin growing up, alongside their siblings and relatives, and for later additions to the family like Marianne, Uncle Charlie and Prince Alemayehu were characters who featured prominently in the stories of their "family history," which were told and re-told throughout the generations. It was not until much, much later in their lives that they began to learn how these stories also resonated 9,000 miles away in Ethiopia but to very different effect. Where the family stories of Uncle Charlie and Prince Alemayehu (whom Leonie described as "our" Uncle Charlie and "your" Prince Alemayehu, presumably addressed to the Ethiopians in the room) had been suitable for her to use them as fun bedtime tales while raising her own three children, the version known within Ethiopia and re-told in detail by Andrew Heavens would likely be more frightening and confusing than playful and adventurous. As the relatives of Captain Speedy, Simon and Leonie had been regaled with stories of a larger-than-life explorer who travelled all over the world and formed an unlikely bond with a young Ethiopian prince, which must have, for a young child, felt like to being related to Indiana Jones. The fond and heartwarming narrative they were familiar with stands in stark contrast to the way that relationship has been described in other accounts, where Prince Alemayehu was wrenched from his country, practically held hostage by the British forces, and where Captain Speedy's interest in him is viewed with suspicion. While speaking with Simon and Marianne, I wondered if they'd met Andrew yet or read his book, and what they thought of the title that described Prince Alemayehu as 'stolen.'

As we talked, Simon spoke frankly about how they had only recently begun to view the family stories of the Captain and the Prince with a slightly more critical, though no less nostalgic, eye as a result of the discovery of the locks of hair among Leonie's father's possessions. He admitted that beyond the legends that had been passed down within the family, they hadn't been particularly familiar with the historical context of the Maqdala Expedition and had only really heard it mentioned in passing as the setting for the origin of Captain Speedy and Prince Alemayehu's relationship. That they had arrived at this event on the basis of this limited and extremely personal understanding of the history on which the evening was based meant that they brought a rather unique perspective to the conversation – one that I soon noticed didn't completely line up with the discourses that defined the larger narrative arc of the event. Where many

of the attendees had clearly arrived with a set of preconceived beliefs about the history of the Maqdala Expedition and agreed on the terms of the restitution(s) that we were all there to witness, Simon and Marianne were keen to learn more about both the expedition itself and its many consequences but also appeared wary of some of the general characterizations that were being made throughout the evening. In particular, references to the objects being returned as "loot" or "plunder" were frequent in the official remarks made by the speakers as well as in the more informal conversations. However, whereas John and Hannah had embraced the horned cup's transformation from family heirloom to 'returned loot,' as discussed above, Simon and Marianne were distinctly more resistant to the application of this label to the locks of hair. They explicitly expressed their concern that some of the statements being made and the written materials that had been/were being produced for the evening did not distinguish clearly enough between objects like the horn cup and the shield, which they accepted as being/becoming loot, and the locks of hair, which they felt should be set apart from the other objects as "not looted." Simon said that they had already spoken to Tahir about their feelings regarding the separation of the locks of hair from this other category and explained that they felt the repatriation was not about returning something that had been stolen, but about "one loving family" making a gesture to another. Even as they were learning more about history of the Maqdala Expedition, the different discourses surrounding its significance, and the ongoing restitution debates, they were not convinced about how their family histories and related objects were being represented in this context. They had asked that the locks of hair not be described as 'looted' and 'plundered,' specifically in the case of the hair belonging to Prince Alemayehu, because it was labeled as having been taken during a haircut when he was 9 years old – since he was already living in England at this time, they believed that it had been a caring and sentimental act and worried that labeling it 'loot' would strip it of any positive associations and replace them with violent ones. Though they still felt secure in the decision to return the locks of hair to Ethiopia, their obvious anxiety about how both this act and the locks of hair would be represented and perceived in the future raised some important questions about the nature of restitution.

One of the key principles that defines cultural restitution as a mode of making amends for historical wrongs is the understanding that the individuals, institutions, or states who are returning the objects relinquish not only their ownership of these objects, but also control over their futures. While this principle is not always easily accepted, especially as those who work within the heritage industry may feel that certain ways of handling material culture are more 'correct' than others, it is essential to the logic of restitution; seeking to dictate how an object is used or represented upon its return to its place or community of origin simply perpetuates the process of 'physical and semantic imprisonment' described by Felwine Sarr and Benedicte Savoy in their landmark report from 2018. This issue was exemplified in the response to Germany's return of a selection of Benin Bronzes to Nigeria in early 2023, after which controversy erupted following the Nigerian president's announcement that the returned bronzes would be passed on to the Oba of Benin. German curators expressed discontent with the idea the bronzes wouldn't remain in the hands of the Nigerian Government, and some states in Germany paused the process of making returns, wanting to wait until it became clear that the bronzes would still be available for public display in suitable institutions. However German political officials such as the foreign ministry spokesman and the Culture Minister re-affirmed that the return of the bronzes was unconditional, and that while they agreed that displaying them was important, what to do with them was ultimately the decision of the sovereign state of Nigeria (Agence France-Presse 2023). If the return of wrongfully taken cultural artifacts is to be a step towards repairing the 'history of degradations' described by Achille Mbembe (2019) that have systematically prevented African nations and societies from retaining agency over their endeavors, then it cannot come with a set of instructions. At the Athenaeum Club on the 21st of September, Simon and Marianne were being forced to confront these difficulties head-on, as the transfer of the locks of hair to Ethiopia revealed that it was not only the locks of hair that were being given to Ethiopia, but also some of the control over the narratives surrounding these objects. Whereas John and Hannah had indicated their acceptance of this lack of control, asking only that the cup be "looked after," Simon and Marianne seemed more distraught at the prospect. It was clear in the ways that they continued to reiterate the phrase "from one loving family to another" that they weren't entirely comfortable with the uncertainty over how these narratives might change in the hands

of the Ethiopian Government. I surmised that they would not be entirely pleased with the way that the narrative surrounding Prince Alemayehu has become increasingly defined by terms like 'kidnapped' and 'stolen,' as this by consequence would mean that Uncle Charlie was implicated in what some people might understand to have essentially been a 19th-century child abduction. What they saw as a tragic, but ultimately heartwarming, bedtime story about a bond between a British explorer and an orphaned Ethiopian prince was, to others, yet another example of British imperial arrogance and the degrading treatment of people believed to be from culturally inferior societies.

The dilemma that this raised for Simon and Marianne was related to what Charlotte Joy (2020) has described as the issue of 'entanglement as moral abdication,' wherein the invocation of entanglement[9] is used to create a sense of moral ambiguity in order to avoid making a clear judgment about what happened, to whom, and under what conditions. She gives the example of Nazi-looted art as a context in which entanglement is generally not applied to repatriation requests because the narrative of the Holocaust is fixed, and thus the moral approach is clear and uncontested. By contrast, the narratives that surround repatriation requests that come from the African continent and that are related to imperial/colonial encounters are still fluid, which creates uncertainty and dispute about the ethics of cultural restitution. Within this sphere of uncertainty, the figure of the European colonizer is also ambiguous; while to some this figure may be as clearly a villain as a Nazi, for others 'the colonizer' does not automatically evoke good or bad connotations. It is precisely this ambiguity that Simon and Marianne were grappling with, as the image that they had of Captain Speedy as Uncle Charlie did not entirely line up with the narrative that they were hearing about loot, theft, and violence. Thus, the repatriation of the locks of hair was not only a process in which new narratives and representations were replacing old ones, but also one in which different histories were coming into direct conflict with each other. During her prepared statement about returning the locks of hair to Ethiopia, Leonie, the great-great niece of Captain Speedy, had a section in which she discussed the

[9] 'Entanglement' here is a reference to Nicholas Thomas's (1991) theory in which he challenged the notion of a fixed dichotomy of victim and perpetrator in colonial encounters and argued instead that there were complex, 'entangled' forms of agency present in these encounters.

relationship between Captain Speedy and Prince Alemayehu. After describing her experience of finding the locks of hair in a seemingly empty envelope among her father's possessions, and the way that this discovery caused the memories of the family stories to come flooding back to her, Leonie went on to say that she found herself feeling emotional at the thought that "they were still together after all of these years" and that it felt only fitting that, given their connection, the lock of Captain Speedy's hair should accompany that of Prince Alemayehu back to Ethiopia. This sentiment was reiterated by Dr. Pankhurst, who agreed with Leonie about how special it was that Captain Speedy and Prince Alemayehu should be "found together, travel together, and remain together." This image of Captain Speedy as a loving companion to Alemayehu is quite different from the portrait painted in *The Prince and the Plunder,* where Andrew Heavens portrays him as a stern, somewhat frightening figure who did not have much parental instinct to speak of and was unprepared to properly address the trauma of a young, recently orphaned boy thrust into a foreign environment. Considering the underlying agenda of the evening to promote further restitution in the future, I couldn't help but suspect that Andrew's narrative would be more likely to accompany the locks of hair in their new home, as it aligned better with this secondary motivation. Dr. Pankhurst also added to his comment that it was known that Queen Victoria, being reportedly fond of Prince Alemayehu, had also requested a lock of his hair, suggesting that somewhere amongst the royal possessions there may be another box or envelope containing a small remnant of the prince. This was clearly an allusion to the pressure on the royal family to repatriate the remains of Prince Alemayehu, which are buried in St George's Chapel in Windsor. In this way, the narratives being created and elevated through this restitution were both products of and essential to the ongoing development of the restitution debates related to the Maqdala Expedition.

This chapter has explored in detail the ideas that emerged through observations I made during the restitution ceremony and celebration that was coordinated by the Scheherazade Foundation, the Ethiopian Embassy in London, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. I have discussed the atmosphere of the event with particular attention to the narratives about the Maqdala 1868 Expedition that were formed and repeated throughout the evening by principal contributors to the restitution debates about the artifacts related to this expedition – in both formal and informal remarks. In doing so, I demonstrated that while everyone who

was present witnessed and/or participated in the event as an individual, many attendees can also be viewed as figures who represent the different arguments and positions that coalesce around Maqdala and the artifacts that were taken from Ethiopia as a result of the expedition. In other words, in different capacities, they are the voices at the core of the restitution debates through which the representations of Maqdala are shaped and disseminated in accordance with the constituencies that they stand for. I also showed how this event shed light on the relationships between the various agents who participate in these debates and how these relationships help to define their roles, configuring who has agency, power, and influence in this arena. Furthermore, I noted the absences – figures from institutions and spaces that one might have expected to be involved in an event like this but who were not – in order to consider the nature and goals of the event that went beyond the act of return, and the reasons why certain narratives of Maqdala might have been more dominant or tenacious than others. I also discussed the role of the objects themselves and the ways that their transformation through this restitution not only reflected their own new statuses and significances but was also essential to the process of constructing and representing a particular history of the Maqdala Expedition. In particular, I focused on the objects that were being repatriated that had until this point been considered family heirlooms and showed how the current climate of restitution debates, which represent the expedition and the related objects in certain terms, can impact the relationship between a family and an heirloom object – sometimes in a way that leads to its repatriation. But, significantly, I have highlighted that the meaning of the return and the new identities that are acquired by these objects in this process are not always perceived in the same ways by all the parties involved, which can lead to discomfort as conflicting histories come into contact with each other.

Conclusion: Is Maqdala 1868 the Next Benin 1897?

Even in just the four years spent researching and writing this thesis, it has been a challenge to keep up with the pace of the developments in the cultural restitution debates taking place in the UK related to the Maqdala 1868 Expedition, which have proven to be a dynamic and rapidly evolving landscape. Since I began this project, Andrew Heavens has published and done a book tour for *The Prince and the Plunder*, artifacts from Maqdala have been identified and pulled from private auctions to be repatriated, Westminster Abbey has, for the first time, shifted towards acknowledgment that the tabot in its possession should be returned, display labels have been re-written in museums, and some of the Maqdala artifacts have gone on display that have never been exhibited before. There are still upcoming events that will undoubtedly contribute to the discourse as these debates continue to unfold; Mr. Heavens promises to reveal 'revelations' about Prince Alemayehu in a talk this month and Alula Pankhurst continues to raise awareness of Maqdala artifacts being offered by private auctions. Thus, it is essentially impossible for me to offer more than a snapshot of the narratives that currently dominate the conversations about the Maqdala Expedition and the Maqdala artifacts, which are always subject to renegotiation and contestation, and it would be unproductive for me to attempt to propose a definitive characterization of the significance of the Maqdala Collection here. For this reason, it has never been the aim of this thesis to become *The Brutish Museums* (2020) for the Maqdala Expedition or to be the 'plunder' complement to *The Prince and the Plunder* (2023); my contribution is not intended to be read as revealing a 'true' or 'decolonized' history of the Maqdala Expedition as a justification for the collection's restitution, nor do I make a claim to define the Ethiopian community's relationship to this collection. As explored in the second section, my analyses of the details and figures that have become defining features of the narratives of the Maqdala Expedition illustrate how the discourses of restitution and decolonization work to create historical 'truths' or 'facts,' rather than being an attempt to refute specific representations. At the core of this thesis is the role of the discursive power of restitution debates in ensuring that the question of whether 'Maqdala 1868' is the next 'Benin 1897' became not only a possibility but an inevitability.

The central puzzle here is why it makes sense to ask how a military expedition that took place thirty years earlier has found its way into the mainstream through the lens of the Benin Bronzes, an exploration of which reveals how historical narratives are constructed, reinterpreted, and strategically mobilized in this sociopolitical context. This comparison simultaneously acknowledges the selective attention of cultural restitution movements and illustrates how past events are imbued with new politics, salience, and relevance in different historical moments and in light of current ideological frameworks. In this sense, Benin 1897 functions as a discursive template – a benchmark of cultural and ethical reckoning – against which Maqdala is now measured. The rise of the Maqdala Collection as a restitution case reflects a larger dynamic: how discourses of restitution function as political devices that transcend the immediate contexts of their origins. The heightened visibility of the contested objects from the Maqdala collection has been facilitated not solely by their intrinsic cultural, religious, or historical values but by their alignment with the narratives and moral imperatives sharpened in the wake of the sensation and spectacle that has characterized the acceleration of the Benin Bronzes dialogues. These discourses have demonstrated themselves to be both agile and consuming in their capability to frame disparate historical moments within a shared vocabulary of loss, injustice, and reparations. In doing so, they produce new hierarchies of significance in which some cases can become emblematic while others remain marginal. This dynamic is furthermore visible in the practices of museums and in the artistic interventions they either host or provoke, which increasingly engage in forms of curatorial praxis that are grounded in the dominant frameworks of restitution. Curatorial and artistic responses to the Maqdala Collection's growing reputation reinforce and expand on these narratives, often adopting the same assumptions about ownership, cultural identity, and historical redress. These alignments do not merely reflect the discourses of restitution debates but actively reproduce their core categories and ideological structures.

For 150 years, the artifacts of the Maqdala Collection existed largely unremarked in British institutions, where their histories of imperial violence were subsumed under illustrations of cultural and spiritual traditions. Recent years, however, have seen a renewed focus on their status as loot, specifically through the lens of the decolonization of British cultural institutions, which has radically reshaped their

representation. I argue that this shift in significance was neither spontaneous nor unexpected; rather, it has emerged from the discursive landscape of cultural restitution debates, which have transformed such contested collections into symbols of historical injustice and platforms for contemporary ethical reckoning. Reflecting on how Maqdala 1868 can be understood through the prism of Benin 1897 enables us to consider the mechanisms by which specific cases of restitution come into being as discursive outcomes. The Benin Bronzes controversy has functioned as a paradigmatic case within the global heritage sector and has consequently established the categories and frameworks that other cases must negotiate in order to gain recognition in these conversations. The Maqdala Collection's rise to prominence is therefore a reflection not only of its own significance but of its compatibility with the narratives shaped by the Benin debates. The idea of Maqdala as 'the next Benin' provides a platform to understand how restitution discourses do not uncover objective historical truths but actively produce them, entangling the past with the prerogatives of the present. At the same time, deconstructing this process reveals the tensions that are inherent in cultural restitution debates – while Maqdala 1868 has found celebrity by aligning itself with the patterns established by the narratives that have circulated around Benin 1897, this synergy risks obscuring the specificity of the case of the Maqdala Expedition. The desire – and, indeed, demand – to fit within the established frameworks often results in a degree of standardization that can reduce complex and multifaceted histories to narratives that are legible within the agenda of cultural restitution. Exploring this tension between the impetus for conformity and the need to honor the unique histories of individual cases leads us to a greater understanding of the slipperiness of this process, where the exchanges between various stakeholders and moments of resistance create opportunities to challenge the status quo. The question then is not really whether Maqdala 1868 is the next Benin 1897, but rather what this framing prompts us to understand about the power of discourse in shaping the significance of the past. In tracing the progress of Maqdala's rise to a case of restitution that has been made to fit, we are able to see how cultural restitution debates actively construct history by representing contested collections within narratives that resonate with the normative and ideological frameworks of the present.

Ultimately, the interplay between specific cases and the wider context of heritage politics, as illustrated through the Maqdala Collection's ongoing transformation, reinforces the need to critically examine the role of restitution debates as discursive spaces that produce the terms and categories with which histories are established, remembered, and negotiated. It is furthermore important to acknowledge that this process is far from complete. As the ongoing debates surrounding Maqdala and other contested collections demonstrate, these frameworks are self-reinforcing in their demand that future cases conform to the same logic that elevated cases like Benin 1897 to prominence. Throughout this thesis, we have explored the ways in which the narratives that emerge as products of restitution debates operate to maintain coherence and legitimacy within the larger discourses of cultural heritage, decolonization, and the legacy of Empire. The unfolding developments in institutions like the British Museum further demonstrate how the hallmarks of this cultural and historical moment are visible in the emerging representations of the Maqdala Expedition. In the final few months before submission of this thesis, a special exhibition opened at the British Museum entitled *Hew Locke: What Have We Here?* which is the result of a two-year collaboration between the museum and the artist Hew Locke. The exhibition, displaying artifacts from South Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe alongside some of Locke's own works of contemporary art, seeks to explore the legacy of British imperialism and describes itself as challenging the viewer to ask questions about the stories we tell about the past, how these stories relate to the present, and how we can approach these stories with a critical eye. The exhibition opened on the 17th of October 2024 and will run until the 9th of February 2025, and when I learned that there would be objects connected to the Maqdala Expedition on display, some for the first time, I decided it would be worthwhile to go and see this latest stage in their biographies. Adrian Searle's (2024) review of the exhibition opens with the description that it is 'part history lesson, part crime scene,' which refers to the fact that loot and theft are core frameworks of the exhibition and also pays homage to the bright yellow notes with Locke's commentary that are scattered amongst the more traditional object labels – as one might use document observations when piecing together a crime. In an interview with British Vogue, Locke explicitly positioned the exhibition in the framework of decolonizing cultural institutions, and explained that he sees it as being a step forward in addressing the issue of cultural

restitution, suggesting that critically re-evaluating and adjusting how these histories are told in museums is an integral part of the process (Eshun 2024). In the same interview, Locke claimed that, ultimately, the exhibition served as an exercise in reframing history from 'the perspective of the colonized, not the colonizer' (Eshun 204). I wondered what that would mean for the display of the Maqdala artifacts, remembering what I had learned in the V&A about how Ethiopian visitors had responded to references to colonialism in the *Maqdala 1868* temporary exhibition. Can museums really challenge the harmful legacies of imperial narratives when such challenges continue to rely on imperial categories to define people's relationships to the past, to their heritage, and to the idea of restitution?

I booked a timed entry slot to visit the exhibition around lunchtime on a chilly Thursday in early November, hoping that the museum would be slightly less crowded in the middle of the week during what should be an off-peak month for tourism. This proved to be a rather optimistic strategy, as the British Museum is apparently always teeming with visitors; while there may have been slightly fewer tourists than during the summer months, there were plenty of school groups that made up for it, and the grand atrium felt as loud and full as any other day I had spent there during my research period. I needn't have worried, however, that I would struggle to take in the displays. The Hew Locke special exhibition is located in a gallery right behind the circular former Reading Room that stands at the center of the Great Court, with an entrance that would be nearly impossible to stumble upon if you didn't know exactly where to go. The need to book tickets and the timed entry together ensure that the dimly-lit gallery is a quiet sanctuary away from the echoey hustle and bustle just outside, with visitors keeping their voices low to enable others to hear the recorded commentary from Locke that plays softly on a loop in the background. The displays are roughly grouped by theme – slavery, war, trade, British royalty – and by geographic connection, and there are four that feature artifacts connected to Maqdala. There is one dedicated to the story of Prince Alemayehu's journey and short life in England, one that features artifacts and photographs connected to Captain Tristram Speedy, one with an armlet and cup that are situated among other objects of prestige and sovereignty, and one that is dedicated to the 'British Expedition to Abyssinia.' Aside from the special temporary exhibition *Maqdala 1868* that was curated at the Victoria and Albert Museum, which was discussed in Chapter 4, this

was the only other substantial display of Maqdala artifacts that I was aware of that explicitly focused on their significance through the lens of their acquisition as loot and their relationship to Empire. As a whole, these displays emphasized the ethical issues raised by the presence of these artifacts and histories in the British Museum and reflected an explicit effort to incorporate the Maqdala case further into a decolonial approach that centers on historical narratives of imperial violence against both peoples and cultures.

The Hew Locke representation of the Maqdala Expedition is grounded in two main themes that emerge in these displays: the language of imperial narratives and theft. The display that specifically focuses on the expedition features a processional cross purchased from the auction by Lord Napier, a drawing of the expeditionary force by Richard Holmes, an image of the *Kwer'ata Re'esu* icon that Holmes took for his personal collection and which is today owned by a private collector, and an acrylic painting by Hew Locke on an antique share certificate from the Ethiopian Railways company founded in France in 1894 under a royal charter from Emperor Menelik II. The label that introduces the display follows a familiar timeline: the British government launched a large-scale military expedition to free the British representatives who had been taken hostage by Emperor Tewodros, the British troops overwhelmed the Ethiopian forces, Emperor Tewodros committed suicide rather than surrender, and the troops subsequently looted the fortress, royal household, church, and treasury. This description of the expedition, is largely consistent with that presented by the Victoria and Albert Museum, if less detailed. Where it adds to this narrative is in the commentary by Locke, who is quoted as describing the word 'expedition' as 'a perverse term…like you're not going to go and kill people and perhaps take it over. No, no, we're going for an expedition.' This statement draws attention to a perceived disjunction between the word 'expedition' and the reality of the nature of the operation, which resulted in the loss of Ethiopian lives, destruction, and looting. Presumably, Locke views the term 'expedition' as being manipulatively evocative of a sense of adventure, exploration, or even scientific inquiry, which would conjure images of discovery rather than destruction. In quoting Locke here, the label seeks to point out the rhetorical strategies that have historically sought to neutralize imperial violence, which invites visitors to reflect on the language used to describe the histories of Empire and how this language shapes our perceptions of these histories. The exhibition is thus seeking to reframe

the military campaign in Maqdala explicitly as an act of imperial aggression rather than as a neutral or defensive military operation, which is closely tied to the idea that such interventions are integral parts of the broader decolonial effort to expose the realities of Empire. A similar strategy is evident in the exhibition's frequent use of the word 'loot' to describe artifacts. Yet, as we've explored, such expositions do not necessarily escape the pitfalls of imperial logics, particularly when the complexity of the history of Maqdala becomes subsumed by a generalized critique of colonialism. Of course, it is true that seemingly innocuous terms like expedition can mask the violent intentions and consequences of such events, and it is important to acknowledge their function in legitimizing such acts of aggression. The critique of this language is consistent with a decolonial approach that seeks to dismantle these narrative structures and re-center the suffering of those who were harmed by imperial systems. However, reflecting on this strategy in relation to the history of the Maqdala Expedition illustrates how, in focusing on dismantling euphemisms like 'expedition,' decolonial frameworks may inadvertently remain tethered to the structures they purport to disrupt by prioritizing the undoing of imperial narratives over the creation of new paradigms for interpreting and addressing the legacies of these historical injustices. Here, the exhibition's assertion that the term 'expedition' sanitizes imperial ambitions perpetuates the assumption that such ambitions were focused on colonization or territorial control. As we explored in the third chapter of this thesis, there are multiple directions from which we can approach the Maqdala Expedition as a colonial moment in Ethiopian history that do not depend on the assumption that imperial objectives were necessarily tied to territorial colonization. While exposing the discursive violence and deception that can burden terms like 'expedition' in this context, the label also reveals how the decolonial framework limits its ability to explore this complexity when it remains anchored to the language of colonialism. This analysis in a display about the Maqdala Expedition can be traced to the ways that restitution debates have shaped how the expedition is represented, often emphasizing the violent colonial ambitions of conquest, which are perhaps the forms of imperial injustice that resonate most strongly in arguments for restitution, over other forms of imperial logic, such as the importance of reputation, power projection, and punitive spectacle.

Another label in this display, one of the yellow notes that have been sprinkled throughout the exhibition to evoke the image of Hew Locke putting notes with his observations next to his findings as he explored the museum archives, highlights a dimension of the Maqdala Expedition that has been discussed in this thesis: the religious nature of many of the artifacts that were looted from Maqdala and the perception of Ethiopia as a Christian nation. In this note, Locke states that 'part of the reason why the invasion of Maqdala was so scandalous at the time was because Abyssinia was a Christian country, and they were essentially looting religious items from a church. Britain is generally a Christian country, and yet that didn't stop them from looting Christian items.' In addition to juxtaposing Locke's choice of the word 'invasion' with 'expedition,' as is used on the traditional label, this label suggests that the theft of Christian artifacts reflected a hypocritical logic on the part of the British Empire, wherein Britain's own self-identification as a Christian nation clashed with its actions against another Christian Kingdom, demonstrating the moral contradictions of imperialism. This commentary taps into a broader narrative of hypocrisy that is often found in decolonial arguments that emphasize how imperial powers violated the supposedly 'civilized' values they claimed to promote, including the presumption that they were better guardians of cultural heritage than the communities that had produced the artifacts while directly facilitating their damage and destruction – a line of argument that remains relevant today as we continue to see how many institutions criticize African countries' ability to manage their cultural heritage while themselves neglecting the security of their collections.[10] This spotlight on the idea of Christianity and hypocrisy invokes an emerging narrative within the restitution debates related to this collection that frames the plunder of Maqdala as a sacrilegious act – as it was described by Richard and Rita Pankhurst in the AFROMET statement from 2000. By highlighting the religious significance of the looted artifacts as well as the shared Christian heritage of Britain and Ethiopia, this framing seeks to intensify the moral failings of the British soldiers and institutions involved in the plunder. The logic here is that moral outrage over the looting of Christian artifacts by a self-identified Christian nation will resonate with audiences by challenging the counterargument to restitution

[10] See the recently-revealed scandal that one of the British Museum's own curators was involved in the theft of more than 2000 artifacts from the museum's collections over the course of 15 years (Pietroni 2024).

that the theft of cultural artifacts was compatible with British cultural values at the time and thus should not be judged by contemporary standards. It also draws on recent developments in the restitution discourse, as discussed in the third section of this thesis, where appeals to the sacredness of the tabots have been deployed as a key strategy to promote claims for their return. However, this label does not address the specific dynamics that have led to the pivot towards sacrilege and sacredness in debates about the tabot which relate to the challenges posed by restitution politics. As explored in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, the narrative of sacrilege surrounding the tabots has emerged primarily as a counter-narrative to the colonial framing of the Maqdala Collection. This counter-narrative seeks to set the tabots apart from the rest of the looted artifacts by emphasizing their inalienability and their continued spiritual significance for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Characterizing the tabots as primarily sacred objects rather than as looted objects enables some of the advocates for their restitution to sidestep contentious issues around decolonization and attempt to avoid entangling the tabots in 'culture war' disputes about the legitimacy of British institutions confronting their imperial pasts. In the Hew Locke display, the decision to highlight Ethiopia's Christian heritage portrays the looting of Maqdala not only as an act of imperial violence but as a betrayal of shared religious values – a clear orientation towards justifying the restitution of these artifacts.

The representation of the Maqdala Expedition in the Hew Locke exhibition, with its focus on themes of theft and colonial terminology, reflects not only the influence of cultural restitution debates on how imperial histories are being told and remembered, but also on which histories are considered significant in this context. Locke's decision to feature these artifacts in the framework of narratives of imperial violence speaks to the way that Maqdala is rapidly being molded into a paradigmatic case of cultural restitution. The transformation of the Maqdala Expedition into such a case is indicative of the ways that these conversations are shaping its historical narrative into an archetype of narratives of cultural dispossession and the injustices of Empire. Centering themes of theft and moral failure enable Maqdala to function as an exemplar of the moral imperatives of restitution, streamlining its narrative to support the larger restitution agenda. After seeing how this dynamic was unfolding in the Hew Locke exhibition, I decided to go upstairs and re-visit the displays in the Christian Egypt and Ethiopia gallery, where I had done the bulk of my research in the

British Museum and which I remembered as having no discussion of the Maqdala Expedition at all, much less an acknowledgment that any of the artifacts on display had been looted. I exited the cool and quiet space of the Hew Locke gallery and made my way through throngs of visitors and school groups clustered around the displays of ancient Egyptian artifacts to reach the bright corridor that houses the permanent Ethiopia display. Upon entering, the first thing I noticed was that the benches that used to line the middle of the room were gone, and I wondered if that affected how visitors engaged with this gallery now that they might not use it to rest and regroup. When I turned towards the Ethiopia display, however, I was shocked to find a large panel titled in bold 'The looting of Maqdala' right there next to the display case. I looked over at the objects in the case and found that they were all familiar – the yellow painting of the tabot that had served as my stepping stone into conversations about the tabots from Maqdala, processional crosses, the diptych, and a silver censure. So, there were not any new objects on display here, no artifacts that had been found in storage and that had motivated a re-orientation of the display; the objects themselves had not changed, and their history as loot has always been known, but clearly, something had changed within the museum to warrant reconsideration of their role in this space. Of course, it is routine practice for museums to adjust displays in response to new research or new institutional priorities, and this process is integral to the museum's function as a dynamic space of knowledge production. Previously, the Ethiopia display only offered subtle clues about the Maqdala artifacts' looted artifacts, hidden in dates and references to figures involved in the expedition, which left this context accessible primarily to informed or particularly curious visitors. What I saw here was an identifiable shift in how the museum valued the artifacts connected to the Maqdala Expedition that can be directly linked to the ongoing debates about their restitution.

This reorientation is not about unveiling a previously hidden or unknown history, as scholars, heritage professionals, activists, and members of the Ethiopian community have long been aware of the collection's provenance from the plunder at Maqdala. Instead, it marks a deliberate reconsideration of the significance of this history in light of restitution debates. The new descriptive panel is very similar to the one in the Hew Locke exhibition, noting that the expedition was launched in response to the hostage-taking and that there was significant loss of life on the Ethiopian side, including the suicide of Emperor Tewodros.

It describes how ‘the army destroyed his fortress at Maqdala. They looted the royal household, church and treasury, taking manuscripts, sacred objects and *tabots* (consecrated altar tablets).’ In this way, the display moves away from focusing on the cultural and aesthetic values of the artifacts and towards an approach that centers a narrative of their provenance that explains their presence in the museum. The description goes on to explain that ‘Richard Rivington Holmes, an official representative of the British Museum, participated in the looting of Maqdala and also purchased objects at auction. The Museum later received more objects seized from Maqdala as a gift from the India Office.’ By placing Holmes’s participation front and center in the narrative, the display now continues the tradition of spotlighting his role in facilitating the acquisition of looted objects by cultural institutions. As discussed in Chapter 5, this focus on Holmes in the narrative of the Maqdala Expedition is closely related to the imperative of cultural restitution debates to establish the direct complicity of institutions like the British Museum in the theft of cultural heritage. Highlighting Holmes in this way serves to represent him as a bridge between the imperial violence of the expedition and the institutionalization of plunder; though we know that Holmes was not actually responsible for most of the artifacts that were brought back to the UK, and not even most of the objects that ended up in the British Museum, his presence is used to symbolize the active role of cultural institutions as not merely passive recipients of looted heritage but as participants in and beneficiaries of these instances of violence, which further sharpens the critique of their continued retention of these artifacts. Finally, the panel acknowledges that ‘the Maqdala Collection, including some objects in the case to the left, is the focus of a repatriation request from Ethiopia. The Museum is actively engaged in dialogue with state, church, and community stakeholders around this collection.’ Under the panel is a QR code which, when scanned with a device, takes visitors to the ‘contested objects from the collection’ page for the Maqdala artifacts on the British Museum’s website. The explicit situating of the Maqdala artifacts within the context of an active repatriation request illustrates how these historical narratives have been leveraged to elevate this case as a symbol of broader patterns of imperial theft. This re-framing signals how the construction of historical narratives that emphasize the looted origins of such collections play a crucial role in shaping both public and institutional recognition of these cases, as well as perceptions of their relationship to restitution. The

Maqdala case, thus contextualized, becomes emblematic of the broader need to reckon with imperial legacies and pursue redress for the historical injustices perpetuated within cultural heritage institutions.

Representing Maqdala within the now familiar framework of imperial injustice and restitution debates further entrenches the patterns and categories that have come to dominate public understanding of these issues. By situating the Maqdala Expedition within the narrative of imperial exploitation, the display reinforces widely recognizable assumptions about the moral agendas of restitution and the systematic nature of cultural dispossession. As I watched visitors passing through the galleries, many of whom stopped at the panel about the looting in the brief time I was there, I wondered about how this framing would affect or change how they perceived the history of Maqdala and its role in restitution debates now that the display encourages them to interpret its significance through the lens of imperial critique and the ethics of ownership. It was apparent that the museum was responding to the accelerating momentum for and public awareness of restitution debates, even as they remain highly contentious. The decision to change the Ethiopia display means that this narrative of the Maqdala Expedition is now a prominent lens through which British Museum visitors will come to understand not only the significance of this expedition specifically, but also more generally Ethiopia's historical relationship to the British Empire. In this shift we can see how restitution debates further establish and entrench frameworks that prioritize certain patterns of historical injustice, especially imperial plunder, over others, determining what aspects of these events become salient. Embedding Maqdala within this increasingly standardized narrative of Empire and cultural restitution contributes to a discourse that not only highlights restitution as an issue of ethical museum practice, but also defines – and perhaps narrows – the interpretive possibilities for understanding these histories beyond their value for contemporary restitution debates. This selective lens might risk reducing complex historical events to templates of loss and redress, privileging restitution as the central narrative device while sidelining other dimensions, such as the significance of the expedition within Ethiopian historiography or the nuances of historical agency and resistance that these artifacts could represent. When visitors are guided to perceive these histories primarily through the categories and assumptions constructed by the restitution discourse, it undoubtedly reinforces its dominance in shaping how imperial legacies are remembered and represented.

The conversations that the gallery assistants told me about that were happening downstairs in the Africa gallery might just start making their way upstairs into the Christian Egypt and Ethiopia gallery.

There is something profoundly fitting about concluding this project with a visit to the British Museum to find that, in the short time since I conducted research there, the representation of the Maqdala Expedition has already been transformed. It is precisely these kinds of rapid developments in the way the history of the Maqdala Expedition is represented in cultural institutions like the British Museum, in increasingly prominent spaces and with the spotlight on the idea of loot, that has prompted this exploration into the role of restitution debates in shaping the narratives that come to define these collections as 'cases,' and which frames this question about the future of the Maqdala Expedition's history. The prospect of 'Maqdala 1868' becoming the next 'Benin 1897' as a touchstone case for ongoing cultural restitution debates, particularly those which circulate prominently in the UK about the legacy of the British Empire, has important implications for both the debate itself and the ways the histories of imperial violence and cultural extraction are written and represented. 'Maqdala 1868' here refers to the British military expedition to the Ethiopian fortress of Maqdala, and specifically to the plunder that occurred after the defeat and suicide of Emperor Tewodros, which resulted in the dispersal of spiritual manuscripts, royal regalia, and religious artifacts to various British institutions. While many of these objects have long been quietly tucked away in storage or in displays that did not acknowledge the circumstances of their acquisition, the increasingly public profile of this collection within the debates about restitution and the decolonization of cultural institutions has been accompanied by the curation of new displays that explicitly feature their history as loot. Much like the Benin Bronzes that were looted during the later expedition in 1897 and whose case has become a lens through which other cases of restitution are evaluated, the Maqdala Collection can be understood as a symbol for the intertwining of Empire, cultural destruction, and the appropriation of heritage and history for the benefit of imperial powers. If the Maqdala Collection is set to become as central to these debates as the Benin Bronzes, it could potentially mark a shift in both public and institutional acknowledgments of Ethiopia's demand for recognition of its history within the context of the restitution mainstream. But while the prominence of the restitution claims regarding the Benin Bronzes has helped

elevate conversations about the ethics of cultural heritage policies and the imperial legacies of museums, it has also set a precedent that other cases, like Maqdala, must meet to gain equivalent attention. This involves mobilizing moral and political arguments about the historical significance of this collection and its centrality to narratives of the British Empire. Uncritically applying this same lens to the Maqdala Expedition or ignoring the ways that this expedition is understood outside of the British imperial narrative risks flattening this history within the historical binaries of colonizer and colonized.

None of this is to suggest that the Maqdala Expedition or Ethiopia more broadly are exceptional in these debates or completely transcend these binaries. Indeed, the dynamics of military looting and systematic plunder that are evident in the Maqdala Expedition's history resonate with broader patterns of imperial violence across various contexts, including in the Kingdom of Benin in 1897 and in Sudan in 1898. Rather, this analysis demonstrates that narratives of loot and restitution that are shaped by decolonial assumptions are not inherently more honest or accountable to these histories. They too are shaped by specific social, cultural, and political logics that affect our understanding of historical events and their afterlives. In their reliance on decolonial frameworks as default interpretive tools when it comes to the cultural restitution of African artifacts, these narratives may universalize colonial paradigms in ways that suppress the particularities of different historical contexts and the multiplicity of meanings held by looted artifacts. Unpacking these dynamics reveals the ways that restitution debates embed assumptions about the relationship between decolonization and restitution through representations of the histories they act upon. For example, by situating the Maqdala Collection within the standards set by cases like the Benin Bronzes, there is a tendency to cast restitution as primarily a corrective to colonial structures. Doing so, however, can inadvertently perpetuate the imposition of imperial categories, such as the idea that the restitution of cultural artifacts holds meaning primarily in terms of nation-state sovereignty or museum ethics as defined by Western institutions. These narratives often reify the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle and reduce historical complexity to simplified models of imperial exploitation and victimhood. This may unintentionally erase the wider range of meanings that the diverse objects from the Maqdala Collection have held throughout their lives, and can hold in their futures, including their spiritual significance, and the

ways these meanings resonate beyond postcolonial identity politics. Critically examining how restitution narratives are constructed through these debates opens up space to imagine alternative frameworks that can fulfill the moral imperatives of restitution without being bound by the paradigms of postcolonialism and decolonization. Instead of framing restitution solely or primarily as a response to imperial violence, we might find frameworks that prioritize justice, dialogue, and ethical accountability without reliance on colonizer/colonized dichotomies.

While this thesis centers on the Maqdala Collection, and makes comparisons to the Benin Bronzes, it does so not to reinforce the prevailing emphasis on a small number of emblematic restitution narratives but rather to critically examine the dynamics through which certain claims are elevated to such paradigmatic status. The growing recognition of Maqdala 1868 and the ways that this recognition has shaped its significance within the wider conversation on cultural restitution reflects how established narrative frameworks, media visibility, and institutional receptiveness work together to shape the prominence for particular cases within the global restitution debates. It is essential to acknowledge that for every claim that achieves this status, there are many more that are also long-standing and significant but that have not been able to do so despite profound cultural and spiritual relevance – the case of the *Ngadji* drum of the Pokomo people is just one example. The roster of cases that dominate the debates about cultural restitution does not denote the claims that have the most inherent value but instead is the consequence of a complex interplay of representation, influence, and authority. The marginalization of certain claims is not due to their lack of legitimacy but rather to their misalignment with dominant discourses. In spotlighting Maqdala here, this thesis has aimed not to replicate the narrowing effects of the focus on popular cases but to expose and problematize the mechanisms that enable certain claims to enter the international spotlight while others remain on the periphery of institutional and public consciousness. In doing so, this thesis has offered a critical framework for understanding how certain restitution claims are legitimized, politicized, and made visible within the global restitution debates while others remain marginal. Building from this foundation, future research could move beyond the confines of high-profile cases and interrogate how visibility is distributed or even withheld across different contexts of cultural loss and dispossession. The understanding

developed in this work can help reveal the layers of framing, media resonance, spiritual legibility, and geopolitical interest that shape whether a claim gains traction. Applying this lens to less publicized claims can help shift restitution debates towards a more pluralistic approach to these issues.

The question that I have introduced here, about whether 'Maqdala 1868' is poised to become the next 'Benin 1897,' is not about asking if this case can and should achieve the status or international recognition that the Benin Bronzes have reached within the wider conversation on the cultural restitution of African artifacts acquired under imperial (or imperial-adjacent) conditions. That is, it is not a question of whether or not the Maqdala Expedition is as important or as interesting as the expedition to Benin almost 30 years later. To pose the question of whether 'Maqdala 1868' could become the next 'Benin 1897' is to acknowledge the powerful ways in which restitution debates do not merely respond to historical events but actively shape the narratives and meanings we ascribe to them. As we have seen throughout this thesis, the process of writing the history of the Maqdala Expedition has not been a linear process of unraveling or discovering details waiting to be uncovered that restitution debates can then act upon by advocating for the repatriation of artifacts. Rather, it has been a dynamic and multifaceted, and often contested, process of creation where restitution debates are actively involved in the interpretation, establishment, and propagation of historical narratives that are inseparable from the discourses and categories that dominate these debates. This question invites us to reflect on how certain cases gain prominence and become emblematic of broader issues, transforming from isolated episodes into enduring and interconnected symbols of imperial violence and historical injustices. It furthermore highlights the performative and constructive nature of restitution debates where historical events are constantly being revisited, recontextualized, and re-imagined in ways that shape their social, political, and moral significance. In doing so, the process of restitution becomes a form of historical intervention, one that redefines the meaning of these cases and brings their imperial entanglements to the forefront of conversations about identity, history, and the role of the past in mediating present and future relationships. Asking this question motivates us to consider how the legacy of the Maqdala Expedition might evolve under the spotlight of public discourse and how such attention will shape its place within the wider narrative of British imperialism and Ethiopian development. Understanding how

restitution debates, encompassing the discourses of restitution as well as restitution in practice, shape historical narratives provides necessary insight into the evolving social and political significance of Maqdala 1868. This exploration has not only revealed how these dialogues write this history, but has also brought the case of the Maqdala Expedition and the Maqdala Collection more fully into the conversations surrounding the meaning of restitution and the enduring legacies of Empire.

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