



Questioning the Ethics of Art Acquisition: The Case of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Holy Tabots

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Abstract

This paper explores the changing ideas around the legal acquisition of cultural artifacts, focusing on the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tabots taken during the 1868 Battle of Maqdala, now held in the British Museum. Taking art as wartime loot was widely accepted in the past, but today's evolving sense of morality calls these practices into question. By examining the British Museum's legal claims alongside the Ethiopian Church's requests to return these sacred tabots, this study demonstrates that the tabots are unique artifacts that can circumvent existing legal barriers to restitution. Their repatriation would help amend historical injustices, promote cross-cultural and religious sensitivity, and set a precedent for more artifacts to be returned in the future. It challenges the rigid legal frameworks, like the British Museum Act, that still prevent restitution and considers shifting attitudes toward repatriation, inspired by groups such as the Scheherazade Foundation. Ultimately, this paper argues that as our understanding of legal acquisition changes, so should our readiness to address past injustices, emphasizing that returning them is not just a matter of law but a step toward restoring justice and respect for cultural heritage. Furthermore, the return of the tabots could serve as a global precedent, encouraging institutions to re-evaluate their collections and fostering a new era of ethical stewardship of cultural heritage.

1. From Maqdala to Today: Background on the Tabots

Since its establishment in 1753, the British Museum has acquired artifacts from numerous countries, such as the Benin Bronzes from Nigeria and the Parthenon Marbles from Greece. In recent decades, many countries have called for artifacts to be returned to their countries of origin. The British Museum argues the artifacts in question were legally acquired as military spoils and should remain in the Museum's possession. The way such artifacts are acquired can vary, raising the question of what legal acquisition means. In the past, war was widely considered a customary way to gain legitimate possession of a defeated country's art and resources. It was expected that whoever won the war would loot the area. Against

the backdrop of 19th-century British imperial aggression, looted art was transported worldwide and eventually arrived at museums like the British Museum. In the case of the Battle of Maqdala between Great Britain and Ethiopia in 1868, a plethora of artifacts from an Abyssinian church treasury were looted by the British military. Most notably, some of the sacred tabots from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church were brought back to Britain.

The tabot is a sacred and holy plaque that is painted or carved and made of wood or stone. They symbolize the Ark of the Covenant and the Ten Commandments, representing God's earthly presence. A tabot is hidden from public view by a veil and is only to be seen by priests. The tabots hold immense religious significance and are integral to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Every

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church has a minimum of one tabot, but some will have several. For most of the year, they are kept in the inner circle of the church called the Holy of Holies.^{1,2} While not able to be viewed unveiled, they are ornately covered a few times a year and then paraded during religious festivals. In the past, they were also brought into battle for protection. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has repeatedly and formally requested the British Museum to oversee the restitution of the tabots back to the Church and the Ethiopian communities of which the tabot is a living part. Returning the tabots would not only be the right response but would also honor the ethical imperative to respect the spiritual and cultural integrity of the Ethiopian Orthodox community.

This research paper will support the rightful restitution of Ethiopian Orthodox Church tabots housed in the British Museum from the Battle of Maqdala in 1868. This paper will demonstrate that the tabots are unique artifacts that can work around existing laws to be restituted, helping to amend historical injustices, promote cross-cultural and religious sensitivity, and apply pressure for more artifacts to be restituted in the future. It will question the concept of rightful ownership and the current precedent set by the British Museum. It will explore the shift surrounding the meaning of legal acquisition in art and how that shift created conversations supporting the tabots' return. By examining the British Museum's practices and highlighting the broader ethical questions surrounding colonial acquisitions, the paper will demonstrate that restituting the tabots is not only just but also essential for amending historical injustices and promoting cross-cultural and religious sensitivity.

2. Introduction to Questioning the Ethics of Art Acquisition: Why Was the Original Acquisition of the Tabots at the Battle of Maqdala in 1868 Considered Legal?

To understand the original acquisition of the tabots, one must first understand the historical context behind the Battle of Maqdala. In the context of global British imperial expansion in 1862, relations between Ethiopia and Britain slowly became strained. At that time, Emperor Tewodros requested that Queen Victoria provide some military assistance to help with the encroaching Egyptians, but the Queen refused. This was the start of ongoing tension between the two sovereigns that grew until its breaking point in 1868. Emperor Tewodros, wanting Queen Victoria's attention, took a group of British citizens captive in Ethiopia. In Britain, there was a public outcry for releasing these captives. In response, the British launched an expedition to free the captives and punish Emperor Tewodros. With over 13,000 troops, a military campaign was launched in 1868, which led to the destruction of the Maqdala fortress. This attack caused the death of hundreds of Emperor Tewodros' troops, and thousands more were wounded. The British, however, had minimal losses.³ The British forces looted the local church, library, and imperial treasury to celebrate its victory. Emperor Tewodros committed suicide to avoid capture, but his son was taken captive. Over 400 artifacts were stolen during the battle, and around 80 now sit in the Maqdala collection in the British Museum.

The British Museum's Maqdala collection consists of the tabots along with ceremonial crosses, chalices, processional umbrella tops, weapons, textiles, jewelry, and other

¹ Lewis McNaught, Ethiopian Tabot returned by Edinburgh Church, August 28, 2021, [https://www.returningheritage.com/ethiopian-tabot-returned-by-edinburgh-church#:~:text=A%20tabot%20is%20a%](https://www.returningheritage.com/ethiopian-tabot-returned-by-edinburgh-church#:~:text=A%20tabot%20is%20a%20consecrated,sight%2C%20only%20seen%20by%20priests.)

² consecrated, sight%2C%20only%20seen%20by%20priests.

³ Known as the Qeddest Qeddusan.

³ "Maqdala Collection," The British Museum, accessed January 31, 2024, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/maqdala-collection>.

archaeological material.⁴ Some pieces are still on display and demonstrate how ornate the artifacts looted after the Battle of Maqdala were. Below is a gold diptych in a silver case, often used as an altarpiece. It has inscriptions in Ge'ez, the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. There are images of Jesus and his mother, Mary, on the right and Saint Abun Gabra Manfus Qeddus on the left (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Diptych contained in a silver gilt case—this object combines a 16th-century French enamel (left side) and a gilded engraving of the Ethiopian Saint Abun Gabra Manfus Qeddus (right side), c.19th century. Maqdala Collection, The British Museum.

Also, there is a censer made of silver engraved with images of angels. The censers are used as part of the church service as incense is placed inside, then the censer is swung from side to side to spread the smell of incense around the church (Figure 2). In their description of the artifacts, the British Museum recognizes that some are sacred while others represent artistic traditions and that there is a non-display agreement specifically for the tabots. However, the description does not go on much past that. Since the local church was looted, pieces that held immense cultural significance and spiritual sacredness now sit in the British Museum. The tabots, however, are the most sacred and significant artifacts. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has requested the restitution of the tabots in the Maqdala collection.

⁴ Ibid.

The Church's request has continued to raise the question of to whom the tabots belong. It must be understood that the 1868 loot following a war victory was considered a legal way to acquire art by European colonial powers. In that period, the British had every legal right after winning the war to do what they wanted with the city. One could argue it was customary to loot the defeated area to display Britain's strong imperial powers, especially in response to the British hostage situation.



Figure 2. Ethiopian church silver censer, engraved with angels, c. 18th century. Maqdala Collection, The British Museum.

For centuries, imperialists considered war a legal way to acquire not just art but a variety of personal belongings and property. As times have changed, looting following a victory in a war is seen through a different lens. The looting of the local church reflects ethical violations and cultural harm, which stripped communities of their heritage and spiritual identity. British ransacked Maqdala, bringing destruction and death to the site. The mindset of looting is full of problematic imperial values. In 2024, the British actions would no longer be considered appropriate and legitimate. As

times and social norms have changed, our ideas of legal ownership of art and the time parameters of legal acquisition have been challenged. Since the British legally and legitimately acquired the tabots according to 1868 customs, this raises questions about whether ownership has truly transferred to the present day. As societal ideals surrounding war and looting evolve, the meaning of "legal acquisition" has also shifted. This prompts reflection on whether the tabots should be returned to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, their rightful owners before 1868. Moreover, as critical reflection on colonialism and imperialism deepens, these evolving perspectives increasingly influence practices and policies surrounding museums and art.

The current situation, as defined by the British Museum, is that the tabots belong to the Museum and will stay there. Zoe Cormack, a curator for the British Museum, states, "The Museum fully acknowledges this collection history and is committed to working closely with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in London to ensure respectful care of the tabots."⁵ In this context, respectful care is shown by preserving the tabots in a way that aligns with their sacredness and cultural significance, including limiting their display to specific Church members and maintaining their integrity as holy objects. While acknowledging the history behind how the tabots were acquired, it is still clear the British Museum does not plan to return the tabots. By retaining the tabots, the British Museum also implies an unspoken statement that is less respectful. The Museum upholds the ancient and problematic values of colonialism and imperialism. It does not allow for the questioning of what legally acquired means. As one of the world's largest imperialists, the Museum defines legal acquisition within the frame of 19th-century values rooted in imperial

conquest and cultural dominance. It will continue implicitly to uphold that precedent until the tabots are restituted. The tabots were considered legally acquired at the time because these values justified their looting as a demonstration of power.

3. Sacredness and Setting: How Does the Narrative Surrounding the Tabots Change When They Are in the British Museum Instead of a Church?

Although the British Museum has taken steps to reconcile itself with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, there is still a huge power imbalance. The British Museum has complete ownership over the tabots and continues rejecting the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's pleas for restitution. There is a non-display agreement between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the British Museum. It says, "In line with earlier agreements with the church, and in light of their sacred nature, the tabots from Maqdala are not on public display. They are housed in a location specially set aside, created and maintained in close consultation with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church."⁶ The British Museum allows specific church members to see the tabots inside the boundaries of the British Museum. However, the narrative of the tabots remains completely shifted as the tabots are still out of their natural social and historical environment. In Ethiopia, Orthodox churches are not recognized as a church until they are given a tabot or Ark from a local bishop. The tabots are kept on the altar with a decorative covering, and only priests are allowed to touch them. On the feast day of the church's patron, there is an elaborate and festive procession around the church with joyful singing.⁷ This is not the case for

⁵ Sarah Shewaye to Zoe Cormack, Inquiry Regarding Ethiopian Tabots for Research Project, January 29, 2024.

⁶ "Maqdala Collection," The British Museum, accessed January 31, 2024, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/maqdala-collection>.

⁷ Habtamu Teshome, "Liturgical Worship: Unique Features of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church," Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Sunday School Department Mahibere Kidusan, January 16, 2023, <https://eotcmk.org/e/unique-features-of-ethiopian-orthodox-tewahedo-church/>.

the tabots in the British Museum. The tabots are hidden in an undisclosed room. Typically, the tabots are housed in the church's Holy of Holies. It signifies the presence of God within that place. Though a lay church member cannot go into the Holy of Holies, the presence of the tabots is known and revered. While this agreement addresses some ethical concerns, it is insufficient, and the Museum's approach still has issues.

The British Museum's non-display approach attempts to be sufficiently culturally and religiously sensitive. The non-display agreement is essential as the tabots cannot be displayed uncovered. However, the Museum's approach is lacking as church members are still meant to engage with the tabot at some level and be personally impacted by its sacredness. The sacredness surrounding it brings heightened importance to the celebrations where the tabots are paraded. There is a deep respect and spiritual reverence, which fosters a space for a deeper connection with God.

It can be challenging to understand the religious importance of an artifact if you are not a part of the community to which it is considered sacred. The non-display agreement is an important indication that the British Museum gives a partial recognition of the tabots sacredness. However, in an interview, Mekonen Shewaye, the son of the head priest of his local Ethiopian Orthodox Church, said: "To be out of its environment robs the meaning behind it."⁸ Shewaye signifies that the tabots lose not only their spiritual importance but also their functional and communal role when they are removed from their religious context. In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, tabots are not just physical objects but embody sacred traditions, rituals, and connections between God and the congregation. Robbed from their environment, these artifacts become static relics rather than living symbols of worship, reducing their sacredness. This cultural

dislocation underscores the need for restitution, as only within their proper setting can tabots fulfill their intended purpose. A recount of a church festival illustrates this connection: "the tabot or ark was brought out, wrapped in coloured cloths, carried on the head of a priest. As it appeared in the doorway the women raised the ilil, a prolonged and piercing cry of joy. When the tabot exits the Bete Mekdes, everyone goes down to the floor and says a prayer."⁹ This vivid description highlights the integral role tabots play in Ethiopian Orthodox traditions, where they serve as focal points of worship and community unity. The joy and reverence surrounding their presence reveal how vital the tabots are to the Church. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church's profound sacredness for the tabots heavily enhances its need for restitution. They are sacred objects created for a specific purpose in a particular setting. This setting is impossible to substitute in a museum.

Not restituting the tabots means not fully recognizing their sacredness and importance. It again reflects the lack of cultural and religious sensitivity continually demonstrated by the British Museum. Since the British Museum holds power, it gets to set the narrative surrounding the tabots. However, the true narrative and meaning behind the tabots are upheld in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church worldwide. There is a deep need for complete restitution, and regardless of the steps the British Museum takes, it will not be enough until the tabots once again sit in the Holy of Holies of an Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

4. Impossible or Unwilling: What Legal Barriers Exist for the Actual Restitution of the Tabots?

Amongst the many barriers to restitution, there are two significant ones currently at issue: the British Museum Act and the National Heritage Act. The British Museum Act of 1963 prohibits

⁸ Mekonen Shewaye in discussion with the author, *The Sacred Tabots*, personal conversation, February 10, 2024.

⁹ David Buxton, *The Abyssinians* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), p. 65.

permanently returning any artifacts from the British Museum to their place of origin. The act says, "It shall be the duty of the Trustees of the British Museum to keep the objects comprised in the collections of the Museum within the authorised repositories of the Museum."¹⁰ The artifacts can be lent for short periods, but unless under particular circumstances, the British Museum will not return artifacts to their home countries. In summary, what is inside the Museum is to stay inside the Museum or leave on an approved loan. The National Heritage Act of 1983 established select museums as independent public institutions overseen by a board of trustees. It outlines the boards of trustees' general functions and restricts them from the removal of objects from their collections.¹¹ This act has a very similar implementation in that objects from collections cannot permanently leave that collection, and a board should oversee the Museum.

In 2020, while defending retaining artifacts with contested heritage, Oliver Dowden, a spokesperson for Boris Johnson's government, supported a "retain and explain" policy, emphasizing the educational value of keeping such objects in British institutions. Dowden stated that "removing difficult and contentious parts of it risks harming our understanding of our collective past. Rather than erasing these objects, we should seek to contextualise or reinterpret them to enable the public to learn about them, however challenging this may be. We should use them to educate people about all aspects of Britain's complex past, both good and bad."¹²

Recently, arguments have even been made that the tabots could be restituted with the British Museum Act still in place because they are an exception. The tabots unique position creates an interesting argument for restitution. Returning

Heritage is a London-based not-for-profit group that advocates for cultural restoration of historical or cultural value objects. They seek to provide information about different ongoing restitution debates. Through the Freedom of Information Act, they requested information about the British Museum's Board of Trustees and the various conversations that have been going on surrounding the tabots. Some information also included the number of restitution requests and why the Trustees agreed to retain the tabots. In this, they found the British Museum unwilling to provide specific information about the current discussions of the restitution of the tabots. Returning Heritage has similar questions on why the British Museum keeps the tabots even though they cannot be displayed. It compares the tabots to two highly contested objects: the Benin bronzes and the Parthenon marbles. Returning Heritage brings in a new opinion that argues that since the tabots cannot be displayed, they're unfit to be retained and, therefore, are an exception to the British Museum Act.

Returning Heritage highlights that the tabots cannot be displayed, photographed, or studied, making them unfit to be retained under Section 5(1)(c) of the Act, which allows for the legal deaccessioning of objects that no longer serve the Museum's purpose. Unlike highly visible and contested artifacts such as the Parthenon marbles or Benin bronzes, which the Museum argues provide significant educational value, the tabots do not offer these benefits. They remain locked away, unseen and inaccessible to scholars, the public, or even Museum staff. The legal opinion prepared by Samantha Knights KC further proves this claim, showing that the tabots meet the criteria to be restituted without a change in the law.¹³

¹⁰ Expert Participation, "British Museum Act 1963," [Legislation.gov.uk](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1963/24), January 31, 1979, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1963/24>.

¹¹ Eren Waitzman, "Reviewing the National Heritage Act 1983," House of Lords Library, accessed February 13, 2024, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/reviewing-the-national->

[heritage-act-1983/](https://www.returningheritage.com/the-british-museum-heritage-act-1983/).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "The British Museum: Where Else Are We Not Getting the Full Story?," Returning Heritage, September 8, 2023, <https://www.returningheritage.com/the-british-museum-where-else-are-we-not-getting-the-full-and-complete-story>.

The unwillingness to return the tabots also sheds light on the tenacity of the Museum. The British Museum and the British government use the British Museum Act and the National Heritage Act as the end of the conversation surrounding the repatriation of the tabots, not considering ways around it. They issue apologies and statement after statement. Both institutions behave as if changing the act or finding an exception is impossible. By retaining the tabots, the British Museum continues to contradict its mission of advancing knowledge and education, as the tabots cannot fulfill these roles. The exact history they seek to “contextualize” and “explain” allows them to excuse their lack of effort to find a solution and retain the tabots. Apologizing for the contended history behind the tabots but continuing to uphold the precedent set by their acquisition contradicts the goals of public and cultural education. The British Museum and the British government could consider that returning the tabots may serve as an opportunity for public education. By doing so, they could highlight how the understanding of legal art acquisition has evolved since the Battle of Maqdala in 1868. A statement could also be issued to acknowledge the deep history and spiritual significance of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tabots, while outlining the steps the British government and the Museum take to address colonialist and imperialist legacies within their institutions. The attention an action like this would bring would be the ultimate example of dedication to public education. Demonstrating not only the commitment to the education of the public but also within their institutions. In search of a more equitable future, the British Museum and government should look introspectively and consider if the return of the tabots is impossible or if they are just unwilling.

5. The Case of the Privately Owned Tabot Purchased and Restituted by

the Scheherazade Foundation: What Precedent Does This Set for the Restitution of Other Tabots?

The Scheherazade Foundation purchased a privately owned tabot with intentions of returning it to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, creating a new precedent that challenges the British Museum. The Scheherazade Foundation is a non-profit focused on changing society through empowering women, bridging cultures, and harnessing the teaching power of stories.¹⁴ The restitution is a prime example of its mission to bridge cultures. Very little is known about who owned the tabot before, but it went for sale at some point, and the Scheherazade Foundation decided to purchase the tabot. It subsequently gave the tabot to the Ethiopian Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Great Britain, and Northern Ireland, with various representatives present. The Foundation’s return of the tabot sets an exciting precedent because it suggests that the Scheherazade Foundation has a different idea of legal versus rightful ownership than the British Museum. Legal ownership refers to the possession of an object as determined by law, often through purchase or acquisition, like military spoils. However, rightful ownership goes beyond legality and considers who is ethically, historically, and culturally entitled to an object. After the Scheherazade Foundation purchased the tabot per law, they could have done what they wanted with the tabot. The Foundation donated it, which speaks volumes about who they thought the rightful owners were. Also, it demonstrates to the British Museum that it is possible to change mindsets surrounding art ownership. Because of its sacred and cultural significance, the tabot can never rightfully belong to anyone other than the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Tabots are not merely artifacts but consecrated objects central to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Their purpose is

¹⁴ “About,” Scheherazade Foundation, August 10, 2022,

<https://scheherazadefoundation.org/about/>.

inherently tied to the Church; no price or policy can change that. As emphasized earlier, the rightful owners of the tabots are the Ethiopian Orthodox Church because they are the only ones who can preserve the tabots' spiritual and cultural significance.

There was an official restitution ceremony, and members of the Church and Embassy were present. The Ethiopian Embassy released a statement after the restitution, saying the actions of the Scheherazade Foundation "underlined the importance and implications of the returned artifacts and Holy Tabot to the Orthodox Church, history, and cultural development of the Ethiopian people."¹⁵ The Scheherazade Foundation demonstrated monumental cultural and religious sensitivity by returning the tabots. The Ethiopian people and church members benefit from the presence and parading of the tabots. Whether sitting in an unknown private collection or a hidden room in the British Museum, there is no option for developing and educating the Ethiopian Orthodox Church congregants. The Scheherazade Foundation describes its mission as bridging cultures in unusual ways. It acknowledges that historical injustices, even those dating back centuries, continue to shape the modern world. They create obstacles that should no longer exist. These "bumps in the road" stem from past events like the looting of Ethiopian treasures by British forces in 1868. Amid movements like Black Lives Matter and shifting global perspectives on justice, the Foundation is working to repatriate looted artifacts. This includes the 11 sacred altar tablets, or tabots, in collaboration with British barrister Samantha Knights QC. Their efforts have garnered international attention and grown goodwill between Ethiopia and the UK.¹⁶

In describing its commitment to addressing historical injustices, the Foundation discusses

bumps in the roads. This phrase refers to the lingering consequences of colonialism and imperialism that remain unresolved. These bumps represent the cultural and religious disruptions caused by exploitation and looting. For example, the removal of the tabots during British colonial expeditions brought harm upon the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its community. By returning looted objects, the Foundation works to repair these fractures, fostering reconciliation. The collection was purchased in 2021 through crowdfunding by the Scheherazade Foundation. However, the tabots were officially repatriated in September 2023 for various reasons. The Scheherazade Foundation's actions have put immense pressure on the British Museum and government to reconsider why they have yet to return the tabots.

The donation of the tabot demonstrates that the thought processes and attitudes surrounding art repatriation and its ethics have considerably changed. It addresses how the meaning of legal acquisition evolved as societal ideals surrounding war and looting progressed over time. Yes, the Foundation legally acquired the tabots, but it chose not to uphold the past standards surrounding art acquisition. We are no longer in 1868 and do not have to continue to follow the art acquisition precedents set then. The restitution of the tabots is such a significant statement on how the art world is changing. The British Museum and government should feel pressured because the Foundation is dismantling the barriers to the restitution of the tabots that the British Museum and government set. This event garnered much attention in art, reigniting efforts to return the tabots. It proved that the tabots could be returned, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was more than happy to receive them. It connects back to whether the British Museum is unwilling to return

¹⁵ "The Looted Artefacts during the Meqdala War in 1868 Were Handed over to Ethiopian Embassy in London," Embassy of Ethiopia, London, September 26, 2023, <https://www.ethioembassy.org.uk/the-looted-artefacts->

[during-the-meqdala-war-in-1868-were-handed-over-to-ethiopi-an-embassy-in-london/](https://www.ethioembassy.org.uk/the-looted-artefacts-).

¹⁶ "Projects," Scheherazade Foundation, May 4, 2023, <https://scheherazadefoundation.org/projects/#toggle-id-15>.

the tabots or if it is simply impossible. Despite the increasing calls for restitution, the British Museum has shown little initiative to examine its own practices. The Museum has consistently claimed legal barriers that prevent restitution, but the Foundation has proved the tabots can be returned when there are no legal barriers. Their complacency indicates a reluctance to disrupt the status quo and an unwillingness to address the larger implications of its colonial acquisitions. The actions of the Scheherazade Foundation challenge the British Museum to not use the Acts as an excuse to hide behind and reevaluate the evolving mindset around art ownership and ethics.

Other groups follow the Scheherazade Foundation's lead by restituting their tabots. Most recently, in February 2024, Westminster Abbey announced that it would return a tabot sealed inside an altar. This decision reflects the influence of the Scheherazade Foundation, whose actions have set a precedent and encouraged other institutions to address and right historical wrongs through restitution. The Westminster Abbey tabot is in the back of the altar of the Henry VII Lady Chapel, an ornately decorated chapel referred to as a wonder of the world that amazes visitors daily. The chapel represents late medieval architecture and features a spectacular fan-vaulted ceiling. Different queens and kings are buried in vaults within the chapel. Westminster Abbey could have argued that the tabot has a meaningful home in the chapel. However, Westminster Abbey chooses to return the tabot to its rightful owners.

While they are still working out the details, Westminster Abbey has said that in discussion with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, they have concluded that the tabot will be returned. Initially, the tabot was acquired by Captain George Arbuthnot during the Battle of Maqdala. He donated the tabot to the abbey upon his return to Britain. In 1870, Dean Arthur Stanley asked

architect George Gilbert Scott to design a new altar in the Henry VII Lady Chapel. He placed the tabot and two other sacred objects on the high altar of the Canterbury Cathedral and the prominent Greek Orthodox church in Damascus.¹⁷ Placing the tabot at the back of the altar suggests an attempt to recognize its sacredness, but such recognition is incomplete when the tabot's return is still refused. The tabot is in the back of the altar, so at no point was it overtly displayed, but it was partially visible. After 2010, a covering was hung so the tabot was not visible from all angles. The actions of Westminster Abbey undoubtedly "will put pressure on the British Museum, which holds 11 tabots, to reconsider its position."¹⁸ These actions demonstrate how institutions like Westminster Abbey are starting to confront the historical and ethical issues of retaining sacred objects. Beyond just acknowledging the tabot's importance, Westminster Abbey is actively addressing their rightful ownership.

After ongoing discussions with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Westminster Abbey changed its stance and decided to start the repatriation process. These actions demonstrate that one of England's highest and holiest organizations can begin to shift its perspective surrounding art restitution and rightful ownership. It shows a growing acknowledgment of the ethical responsibility to return looted artifacts to their rightful owners. Westminster Abbey's decision reflects a broader shift in how institutions approach restitution, setting an important example for others. The Scheherazade Foundation set a new precedent that other groups, such as Westminster Abbey, followed. The British Museum may begin to feel pressure from both groups and reconsider the restitution of the tabots. The decision highlights that precedents have evolved and demonstrates the potential for institutions like the Scheherazade Foundation and

¹⁷ Gareth Harris, "Westminster Abbey Decides 'in Principle' to Return Ethiopian Tabot," *The Art Newspaper - International art news and events*, February 13, 2024,

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/02/13/westminster-abbey-decides-in-principle-to-return-ethiopian-tabot>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Westminster Abbey to change with them, further advancing the global movement toward justice and accountability in art restitution.

6. Possible Repatriation: Why Does the Restitution of Tabots Vary from Other Looted Items? To Which Church Should They Be Returned?

The repatriation of the tabots is a unique situation compared to other contested artifacts, such as returning ancient Egyptian relics to modern Egypt. Unlike artifacts disconnected from their original context, tabots have a direct home within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, emphasizing adherence to Old Testament law and unchanging traditions. The Church has remained essentially the same in practice and significant membership since. Ethiopia is home to the largest Orthodox Christian population outside Europe, and Orthodox Christians there tend to be more deeply religious than Orthodox Christians in Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁹ The Church to which the tabots would be restituted would be very similar, if not the same, in nature to the one it was looted from. Restitution would allow the tabots to fulfill their sacred purpose in religious ceremonies and provide congregants with the spiritual connection and communal worship offered in 1868. The tabots are not foreign items disconnected from current people. The tabots remain profoundly relevant to the people of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

By returning the tabots, the British Museum would not lose monetary benefit because the tabots are not shown to the public and generate no revenue or public interest. They remain hidden in an undisclosed room, unseen and unused. In contrast, the tabots return to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church would restore their sacred purpose. Often, museums retain artifacts with the

justification that they are the best equipped to care for them. However, in this situation, no one other than the original owner is best equipped to care for the tabots. The tabots returning to their home means culturally sensitive care and reinstated purpose. The congregation would know the tabots were resting in the Holy of Holies and be enriched by their presence in the Church and during parades. The tabots would be used instead of hidden away in an undisclosed room in the British Museum.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church contains a vast number of individual churches, introducing the question of which specific church should receive the tabots. One possible solution is to restore the tabots to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in London.²⁰ In 2019, the British Museum stated its long-term goal was to lend the tabots to an Ethiopian Orthodox Church located in London. This is an option because the tabots already benefit church members in London. As previously mentioned, there is a non-display agreement of the tabots between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the British Museum. This agreement also allows certain church members to see the tabots within the British Museum. Since the priests engaging with them currently are from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in London, restituting the tabots to the London church would allow the same priests to continue to engage with the tabots. In 2019, an Ethiopian delegation led by Culture Minister Hirut Kassaw met with British Museum Director Hartwig Fischer to discuss the return of the 11 tabots and other artifacts taken from Maqdala. The delegation informally requested restitution, and the director planned to present the matter to the museum's trustees. A long-term loan was considered as a possible solution to the Ethiopian delegation's request. If facilitated by the Ethiopian government, the tabots would likely be

¹⁹ Jeff Diamant, "Ethiopia Is an Outlier in the Orthodox Christian World," Pew Research Center, November 28, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/11/28/ethiopia-is-an-outlier-in-the-orthodox-christian-world/>.

²⁰ I contacted the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in London for a statement on the possible restitution to their Church and I have yet to receive a response.

entrusted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which would decide their final location.²¹

The restitution of the tabots to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in London could allow the British public to be educated by the tabots remaining in London. It offers a unique opportunity for free public education, as one could attend a parade and be culturally enriched by the tabots' presence within their community. By restituting the tabots to the Church in London, the British Museum and Britain's government could demonstrate their dedication to public education and cultural enhancement. Furthermore, it eliminates more significant safety concerns, such as damaging the tabots when transporting the tabots thousands of miles away to Ethiopia. While there are a few discussions on returning the tabots to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in London, the discussions do not seem to be a priority of the British Museum. With no recent serious progress towards restitution to Ethiopia, perhaps the British Museum could explore returning the tabots to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in London as a middle-ground solution and continue the conversations from 2019.

7. Imperialism and Art: How Do the Tabots Reflect on the Effects of British Colonialism and Imperialism?

The tabots are not the only contested artifacts in the British Museum. Many countries are asking for different cultural artifacts to be restored. For example, Nigeria requested the restitution of the Benin Bronzes. The Benin Bronzes are a collection of plaques and sculptures from bronze and brass looted from the Kingdom of Benin. This looting

resulted from a lost war against the British invasion in 1897, and like the battle at Maqdala, the city was ransacked. The destruction of Benin City paved the way for British colonial rule, and the bronzes were distributed worldwide. While some museums have returned the bronzes to Nigeria, the British Museum has yet to do so. The British Museum retaining the Bronzes is "not just a record of colonial oppression and historic crimes but, to many, the thing itself perpetuated."²² The Benin Bronzes sit as a reminder of the massacre that happened in Benin City and how colonizers like the British undermined and destroyed thriving African communities.

Furthermore, another highly contested object is the Parthenon Marbles, a collection of marble sculptures and reliefs taken by Lord Elgin from Athens, Greece. The British Museum says that the marbles were obtained legally with permission from the Ottoman authorities. Greece contradicts this, saying that the marbles were stolen and requested restitution. The marbles are important cultural artifacts that were part of the Parthenon but are now separated between Athens and London. The Parthenon's narrative and the critical Greek history behind it are only fully realized when the collection is displayed as a whole. By comparing the tabots to the bronzes and marbles, it becomes clear that the contest surrounding these artifacts is not just about legal ownership. It is about the legacy of imperialism on a larger scale and how we reckon with it. A Guardian opinion article captures this idea, arguing that Britain's approach to the marbles reflects post-imperial arrogance. While former colonies have regained independence, they are still denied ownership of their cultural heritage. The article suggests that Greece is essentially being told it was too weak to prevent the Ottomans from giving away its artifacts and should now accept Britain's authority

²¹ Martin Bailey, "British Museum Considers Loan of 'invisible' Objects Back to Ethiopia," *The Art Newspaper - International art news and events*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/05/20/british-museum-considers-loan-of-invisible-objects-back-to-ethiopia>.

²² Martha Gill, "Being a Victim of Theft Might Help the British Museum Reflect on Returning Its Own Swag," *The Guardian*, September 2, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/sep/02/british-museum-should-give-back-loot-benin-bronzes>.

over them. The British Museum upholds this dynamic by insisting that Greece should be grateful to see its own artifacts displayed alongside treasures from Africa and Asia, reinforcing Britain's lingering imperial influence.²³

The Guardian's article simplifies the British Museum's rhetoric into clear and direct terms. Retaining highly contested cultural artifacts is a precise example of how Britain's history as a leading colonial and imperial power still benefits it today. Since the British Museum is in a position of power, no matter how many requests and cases for return are made, they can still refuse. Britain and the British Museum need to work to remove the barriers to equity and equality that they have set up. Though the past cannot be changed, new and more equitable precedents surrounding art history and acquisition can be set. The museum justifies its retention of the bronzes and marbles by citing economic benefits and public education. However, these justifications fall apart in the case of the tabots. The tabots provide no monetary value or public educational purpose in the museum's collection, leaving the British Museum without any legitimate reason to keep these sacred objects.

The British Museum argues that it can best care for the artifacts. This argument is insensitive, as it implies that the very people from whom the artifacts were looted are not equipped to care for them. The focus should not be on who can provide the best care but rather on making sure that the artifacts are returned to where they ethically belong. There are spaces for the contested objects in their home countries. The tabots, marbles, and bronzes may have been legally acquired in their historical contexts in the past. However, the British Museum should begin to challenge its ideas of how legally acquired is currently defined and how deeply imperialist values are instilled in its definition.

Returning the tabots would set a significant new precedent that could pave the way for other artifacts, such as the Benin Bronzes and Parthenon Marbles, to be eventually returned. In a practical sense, the tabots are much easier to transport as they are smaller and lighter than the Bronzes and Marbles. Additionally, the tabots could possibly be restituted without modifying the British Museum Act. It is a first step towards one of the largest museums in the world, full of looted items, recognizing the imperialism that runs through its core. This is just the beginning that could serve as a symbolic first step in a large movement for the restitution of cultural artifacts.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church tabots are just one example of artifacts that were legally acquired but did not rightfully belong to the British Museum. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has continually requested the restitution of the tabots, and it is time to honor their request. The only just and culturally correct solution for the situation is for the tabots to sit in the Holy of Holies once again. This paper demonstrated that restituting the tabots is a step towards working around and potentially changing the laws that prevent the restitution of artifacts while also amending historical injustices and promoting cross-cultural and religious sensitivity.

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²³ Simon Jenkins, "Return the Parthenon Marbles. The British Museum Has Too Much Stuff Anyway," *The Guardian*, November 29, 2023,

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/nov/29/part-henon-marbles-british-museum-european-culture>.

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