

Volker Matthies (2012), *The Siege of Magdala: The British Empire Against the Emperor of Ethiopia*, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, ISBN 9781558765528 (paperback), ISBN 9781558765515 (hardcover), xviv + 209 pp. + maps and illustrations

In 1863, Ethiopian Emperor Tewodros wrote a letter to Queen Victoria asking her to provide protection for his envoys from Muslim persecution along the Red Sea coast and in the Nile Valley. Tewodros entrusted the letter to Her Majesty's consul, Captain Charles Duncan Cameron. When Cameron returned to Ethiopia without an answer, Tewodros felt rebuffed and took Cameron and other Europeans who were in the country hostage. Later, Tewodros also took as a hostage British diplomat Hormuzd Rassam, who had been sent by the Foreign Office to plead for the amicable release of the other hostages.

For three and a half years (1864–1867), the British tried to resolve the issue without going to war. Communications between the two countries were quite intense, in spite of the fact that it took several months for letters to reach their destinations. Tewodros was adamant; he expected Britain to supply him with weapons and artisans because he was a Christian waging war against the Muslims inside his country, and against the Turks threatening him and the Christian world.

The incident demonstrates the political innocence of African leaders. Emperor Tewodros could not imagine that Great Britain, as a Christian state, would view him on the same level as the hated Muslims and Turks. He was also completely unaware that his initial letter represented an invitation for British intervention into Ethiopian affairs. A couple of decades later, the letters of Tewodros would have amply sufficed for Great Britain to declare Tewodros and his empire “under protection”. If that had occurred, Queen Victoria would have ended up being the Empress of Ethiopia.

*The Siege of Magdala* is a brilliantly written account of British policy in the Horn of Africa in the 1860s – just a couple of decades before the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 and the “scramble for Africa”.

The queen's decision to send an expeditionary force to release the hostages was taken on August 1867. *The Siege of Magdala* is the story of that expedition. The amount of planning put into the British expedition against Tewodros was so detailed that the nearest parallel one could draw would be to the Allies' invasion of Normandy during World War II. Britain spent a staggering 9 million pounds to free its hostages, more than the Prussians spent on conquering and defeating Denmark.

In thirteen neatly constructed chapters, *The Siege of Magdala* reconstructs the expedition from its inception until its successful conclusion. Although

the British expedition took place just before the “scramble for Africa”, the military, political and ideological aspects of the plan reveal the sophistication of warfare that we have become accustomed to only in the last 30 years. One of the most striking aspects of the expedition was the presence of a huge number of embedded journalists and military attachés from several European countries.

Henry Morton Stanley (“Dr. Livingstone, I presume”), who was one of the embedded journalists, described the British military action to free the hostages as a small war, but a splendid expedition. *The Siege of Magdala* guides the reader through the history step by step. Matthies describes the relations between Tewodros and Queen Victoria (Chapter 2) much more clearly than any other (mostly British) authors have done. The inclusion of the original correspondence between Tewodros and the British Empire allows the author to paint a vivid picture of the quality of a well-executed documentary. In Chapter 3, the identities of the hostages and their interactions with their captors are brilliantly described. The greatest value of this book is the use of letters that the hostages wrote to their relatives back home.

The military preparation and execution and the long march from the Red Sea coast into the Ethiopian Highlands (some 800 kilometres) have been the focus of most literature on the subject. The British had assembled an army of 13,000 troops, supported by an auxiliary force of nearly 40,000. The logistics of transporting, feeding and arming an expeditionary force of 62,000 men fascinated those who witnessed it (the embedded journalists, members of the various scientific communities, and military attachés). In addition to 44 elephants carrying the heavy armaments, the British were equipped with the latest weapons. *The Siege of Magdala* deals with all aspects of the expedition from the perspectives of the embedded journalists and recent Ethiopia scholars.

On their way into the Ethiopian interior, the British were given all the support they requested (for which they paid in cash and in weapons) by virtually all the regional rulers of Ethiopia. Emperor Tewodros was an isolated ruler, abandoned by those regional rulers whom he once subjugated: He was an emperor only in name. The further the British expeditionary force moved inland, the more they realised that they were dealing with an isolated leader who had barricaded himself in one of the most inaccessible mountain fortresses of Magdala. The details of these realisations and manoeuvres are all vividly narrated and documented in Chapters 7 through 9. Finally, the elaborate expedition ended in the conquest of a single mountain fortress that was defended by no more than a few thousand soldiers.

The accounts presented in *The Siege of Magdala* differ from those of existing research in many ways. The book raises the issue of the massacre of

Ethiopian forces by the heavily armed British forces, as well as the looting of Ethiopian cultural treasures. *The Siege of Magdala* is also distinct in that it makes use of the information gathered by the German-speaking military attachés. The general outline of the military action is similar to that found in the literature, but there are nuances that only *The Siege of Magdala* captures. Moreover, Matthies incorporates recent research by scholars such as Sven Rubenson, Bahru Zewde and Wolbert Smidt.

*The Siege of Magdala* will probably not be the last work on the subject. It is a story of an expedition destined to succeed. In terms of its planning, financing and execution, it remains one of the most colourful expeditions of the nineteenth century. *The Siege of Magdala* is far clearer for the reader to follow than Darrell Bates' 1979 study of the subject.

*The Siege of Magdala* could, however, have benefitted from more stringent proofreading: Gondar was the capital city of the Ethiopian Empire for 200 years, not for two years (4); it was Ras Mekonnen and not Ras Tafari who was in London in 1902; the use of the word "Amharan" (42, 48) instead of either "Amharic" or "Amarigna" as the language spoken by Tewodros is not explained. However, in sum, *The Siege of Magdala* has the potential to inspire interest on the nineteenth century as well as on the intricate (colonial/racist) relations between Africa and Europe.

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