

Chapter 31

Ill-Gotten Gains

As we saw in Chapter 17, it was well known among surviving members of the monastic community and their successors that Fascist soldiers looted the monastery during and after the massacre of Debre Libanos. In an affidavit sworn for the war crimes trials, Lij Haile Maryam Gazmu, who was in the company of Colonel Garelli at the monastery on 20th and 21st May, 1937, was to report that after taking the captives from Debre Libanos to Debre Birhan, General Maletti returned to Debre Libanos, where, he testified,

“...his soldiers plundered the property and wealth of the church. Also as this church was the burial place of many nobles and dignitaries, the Italian soldiers broke open the tombs, hoping to find gold... This church was one of the wealthiest of all the churches and monasteries of Ethiopia, and the Italian armies plundered the property of this church without leaving anything intact; they took even the oldest books”.1

So what exactly was stolen from Debre Libanos? The items may be broken down into Church property and personal property. The available data comes from both Italian records (albeit somewhat limited), and from Ethiopians who are, or were, familiar with the monastery property as it was before and after the Occupation.

Church Property

Italian Sources of Information

General Maletti’s Commission

Beginning with the Italian records, we find Graziani informing Rome by telegramme on 21st May 1937 that the monastery has been closed “after a commission had made an inventory of objects of any value found in the monastery”, and promising to “send

1 MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, 1950, Doc 14, p. 11.
further particulars”. He did not, however, suggest that any of the items had been removed.

In his report of the massacre written on 22nd May, General Maletti named the three members of the commission:

- Major Massimo Taggi, N. E. Sector Command, (President);
- Captain Inigi Romerio from Debre Birhan (Member);
- Captain Spartaco Montuori, 52nd Colonial Battalion (Member and Secretary).

The list of objects was appended to Maletti’s report and sent to Rome. The French scholar, M. Perret published in 1984 a brief summary of the items reportedly taken to two unidentified churches in Debre Birhan:

To the first church in Debre Birhan:
- 21 Persian carpets;
- 22 sacred books
- Ecclesiastical ornaments of high quality
- Gold crosses
- 4,000 Maria Theresa thalers [silver coins traditionally used in Ethiopia]

To the second church in Debre Birhan:
- 6 Persian carpets;
- 60 books
- Religious ornaments

Unfortunately, in this abbreviated list, no artefacts of particular value are identified, and none of the ecclesiastical ornaments of high quality, nor the religious ornaments, are itemised.

Funds for the Imperial Archive

Another Italian source is Graziani’s telegramme to Rome of 22 June 1907, in which he states that in January 1937, General Tracchia gave the monastery 1,000 thalers for the imperial archive that

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3 MALETTI, P., 1937, p. 3.
4 PERRET, M., 1984, p.72, note 5.
5 Telegramme, Graziani to Lessona, 22 June 1937, USNA, Captured Italian Documents, T-821, roll 468, frames 422-4.
Emperor Haile Selassie had deposited with the monastery for safekeeping. This might have meant that the money was for safeguarding the archive at the monastery, but more likely, it meant that the monks handed over the archive to the General.

**Ethiopian Sources of Information**

**Abba Gebre-Giyorgis**

As we have seen, almost all of the priests, monks and deacons of Debre Libanos died in the massacre. The only survivors from the pre-Occupation period were a few who happened to be absent at the time of the executions. One such person was Abba Gebre-Giyorgis, who, it will be recalled, was born in the last decade of the 19th century. He joined the monastery in 1923, left in early 1937, and returned briefly in 1944, living the life of an itinerant monk. In 1992 the aging anchorite could still recall some of the items removed from the monastery during the looting by the Italians. In his words, the stolen items included:

- A large drum, of which the body was made of, or decorated with, gold;
- A large, golden cross given to the church by Gebre Mesqel;
- A gold censer;
- Twelve gold-embroidered clerical gowns given to the church by Emperor Fasiladas [r. 1632-67];
- A large prayer-book given to the church by Emperor Galawdewos [r. 1540-59], which required several men to carry;
- Innumerable other prayer books and manuscripts.

**Ato Tebebe Kassa**

As the reader will recall, 12-year old Tebebe Kassa was not a member of the clergy, although it is understood that he became a monk later in life. He was, however, caught up in the events leading up to the massacre, was imprisoned by the Fascists with those executed shortly afterwards at Laga Welde, was in the convoy sent

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7 At the time of Emperor Fasiladas the monastery was operating at Azezo, near Gondar, then the seat of the sovereign.
to Debre Birhan, and was imprisoned with the deacons and other captives until some time after their execution at Ingécha.

Tebebe testified that while at the Chagal transit camp, he saw the Italians taking away the possessions of the monks and priests who were to be shot at Laga Welde, including hundreds of handcrosses (which were retained by Italian officers), manuscripts, vestments and prayer-sticks, which were then taken to Debre Birhan. However, he did not know what became of these artefacts.

He said that after the Occupation, he was told that Italian soldiers had stolen from Debre Libanos golden crowns belonging to Emperors Yohannis IV, Menelik II and Haile Selassie I, together with other items including crosses, vestments and carpets.

Tebebe further reported that General Maletti was known by the local people to have had carried his camp in Fiché two items donated to the church by Haile Selassie:

- An old, large golden drum, and
- A large Ge’ez manuscript decorated with gold.

According to Tebebe, the post-Occupation Debre Libanos community believed that these items were taken to Italy.

*The Records of Abba Welde-Maryam Iseté*

On 24th October 1992, the present author attended a meeting at Béta Marfak, the prayer-house at Debre Libanos built among trees and grassy paths in the shadow of Menelik’s Mesqel Bét. Béta Marfak, as we have seen, is the official meeting place for the council of twelve patriarchs who manage the affairs of the monastery. At that meeting, the principal topic of discussion among the elderly monks was the desecration and looting of the monastery by the Italians 65 years before. It was an unusual meeting. A special guest was Professor Richard Pankhurst, a campaigner for the return to Ethiopia of looted treasures, and whose mother Sylvia was known to the dignitaries present to have led the international lobby against Mussolini in support of Ethiopia during the Occupation.8

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8 Sylvia Pankhurst was the daughter of the well-known British suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst. Feeling that Ethiopia had been badly let down by the League of Nations, Sylvia championed the cause of Ethiopia throughout the world, and particularly
One of the monks chose the occasion to make a historic declaration. Memhir Tibebu Welde-Maryam solemnly rose to his feet and announced that he wished to reveal something that he had kept to himself for the last forty years.

The Memhir began his story. On the day of the arrival of General Maletti’s forces at the monastery (18th May, 1937), one of the monks, named Abba Welde-Maryam Isheté, had gone to take besso (barley flour) to a fellow-monk who had been imprisoned in Addis Ababa. Hearing about the trouble at the monastery, he had remained in Addis Ababa, and returned to the monastery only when it was safe to do so. He was one of the very few pre-Occupation monks of Debre Libanos to survive the massacre and resume life at the monastery.

In 1952, knowing he did not have long to live, the Abba confided in his godson, Tibebu Welde-Maryam – the present speaker - and gave him a list of the most important items looted by the Italians. Had it been known during the Occupation that Abba Welde-Maryam possessed such records, it could have led to his execution. So he had long ago decided to remain silent. However, not wishing to take this important information to the grave, the old man had passed it on to his godson Tibebu. Now, Tibebu believed, the time had come for him, as a senior member of the monastic community, to pass on the information to those who needed to know.

The chairman nodded silently at Memhir Tibebu, who, consulting an old, tattered piece of paper, explained that the Italians looted the monastery and took a lot of the artefacts to Wusha Gedel while the monks were locked up in the Church of St Tekle Haymanot. He read, in a quiet but clear voice, a brief list of the most notable items that had been taken:

- A large, gold crown of Emperor Yohannis IV;
- A large, gold crown of Emperor Menelik II;
- A large drum decorated with gold;

through the *New Times and Ethiopian News*, which she founded, and published at her home in England. Syvia Pankhurst died on 27 Sept. 1960 and was buried in the presence of the Emperor at the Sillassé, or Holy Trinity, Cathedral in Addis Ababa, in a plot allotted for the most distinguished of Ethiopian patriots. See DUGAN, J. AND LAFORE, L., 1973, pp. 342-4. For a more detailed account of her campaign, see PANKHURST, R., 2003, pp. 45-78.
Golden crosses and a golden dish;
Vestments presented to the monastery by Emperor Fasiladas;
A gold-bound “bible”;
Many illustrated religious manuscripts;

After a brief silence, the monks exchanged glances, and began to murmur approval that such an important declaration had been made. They clearly regarded the occasion as auspicious, perhaps in the hope that Professor Pankhurst might use his influence to get the artefacts recovered. Speeches were made, and all present resolved to address the issue of the looted treasures. The monks agreed to draw up a more complete list of the stolen items, some of which they believed were now in the Vatican. According to what was said at the meeting, the only missing item to have ever been recovered was one manuscript.

Birhanu Denqé

As we saw in Chapter 16, Birhanu Denqé’s brief account of the activities of Shumbash Abriha has the Shumbash stealing two holy vessels (a tsalihun and a tsuwa) and a carpet from the meqdes of the Church of St. Tekle Haymanot. He reportedly kept the carpet, and from the vessels had earrings and a necklace with a cross made for his wife. The material from which the vessels were made is not identified.

It is clear that all three local informants (Abba Gebre-Giyorgis, Abba Tebebe Kassa and Memhir Tibebu Welde-Maryam) may be regarded as reliable witnesses. Apart from being well-established and highly regarded by their peers, they were articulate and consistent in their recall. Moreover, Abba Gebre-Giyorgis was vouched for by Degife Gebre-Tsadiq, Abba Tebebe Kassa was well-known at Debre Libanos and was vouched for by Fitawrari Nebiyye-Li’ul, and Memhir Tibebu was a high official of the monastery. Memhir Tibebu’s list is particularly important, having been written long before his meeting with the author (rather than having been prepared for the occasion), and having been presented formally at Béta Marfak. Birhanu Denqé’ was an educated, distinguished and reliable writer, although he provides no source for his report about Shumbash Abriha.
Furthermore, we note that the Ethiopian lists are all broadly consistent with the Italian “inventory”, with the notable exception that none of the larger, more valuable artefacts were mentioned by the Italians.

Some comments may be usefully made on the artefacts identified. Firstly, it must be said that despite its age and importance, the monastery church of Tekle Haymanot at Debre Libanos did not possess a rich heritage from before the 16th century, compared with some of Ethiopia’s other royal churches and monasteries. This was principally because of the pillage and destruction by the forces of Ahmed Gragn, and because at the end of that century, the monks abandoned their site in northern Shewa to migrate to the Lake Tana area. They were not to return in force to the Siga Wedem Gorge until the late 19th century. Furthermore, while in the Lake Tana area, the church was attacked and some of its manuscripts burned by the Dervishes. Thus neither the monastery nor the church retained as many ancient treasures as might have been expected for an institution as ancient and prestigious as Debre Libanos.

Indeed, the majority of its surviving treasures would have been associated with Emperors Yohannis IV, Menelik II and Haile Selassie, each of whom (particularly Yohannis IV and Menelik II) carried out reconstruction work at the monastery and endowed it generously. It is then logical that any royal crowns in the church treasury would most likely have been those of these three monarchs. Indeed, given Ethiopian traditions, it would be surprising if a church of the prominence and status of St Tekle Haymanot at Debre Libanos were not to be in possession of crowns of these three monarchs.

Any valuable artefacts surviving from before the 19th century would most likely have been associated with Emperor Galawdewos, who restored and endowed the church after the depravations of Gragn, and Emperor Fasiladas, who granted the monks their new site at Azezo near Lake Tana, and constructed the first church of St Tekle Haymanot there. The other artefacts mentioned as having been looted by the Italians, including carpets donated by royalty (sometimes given to them by foreign potentates, or dignitaries who had acquired them from traders), ornamental drums, gold (or, more likely, gilt or gold-plated) censers and chalices, and ecclesiastical ornaments such as icons and paintings, are items typically to be found in Ethiopian churches of any stature, and certainly at monastery churches of the importance of Debre Libanos.

Regarding looted manuscripts, traditional Christian Ethiopian manuscripts are books written on parchment (ie. animal skin) and bound
in the manner employed by European bookbinders in mediæval times. The number of such books stolen by the Fascists from the church library is not known with any certainty. In 1843, while the monks of Debre Libanos were still located at Azezo, the traveller, Théophile Lefebvre, found a church functioning at the old monastery site in the Siga Wedem gorge, although at nothing like the level of activity which it was to enjoy by the end of the 19th century under Menelik II. However, even then, Lefevbre encountered some 500 volumes, representing one of Ethiopia’s largest monastic libraries.\(^9\) Assuming that the monks returning from Azezo at the time of Menelik II supplemented the collection with manuscripts they brought with them, the library at Menelik’s newly constructed Church of St Tekle Haymanot during the early part of the 20th century must have been even larger than it was at Lefevbre’s time. Yet in the 1990s, even after it had been partially replenished during the restoration period under the Duke of Aosta, the library was considerably smaller than that recorded by Lefevbre. The conclusion to be drawn is that the 82 books listed by the Italians as having been removed from the church probably represents considerable under-reporting.

The only imponderable among the items reported stolen by the Italians is the large “golden” cross allegedly given to the church by a certain Gebre Mesqel. It is not doubted that there was such a cross at the church, but the name Gebre Mesqel is common to several kings and important ecclesiastical figures in Ethiopian history, and therefore tells us little about its possible age and historical value. Despite frequently being referred to as “gold”, or “golden”, such crosses are often actually gilt; even gold-plated crosses are rare in Ethiopia, and crosses made of solid gold are very few. Nonetheless, the tradition is that this particular cross dated from a very early period. This might mean that it was old enough to have survived the Gragn jihad of 1529, but that is far from certain.

In summary, we can be confident that by the time of the Occupation, the Church of St Tekle Haymanot at Debre Libanos possessed a substantial number of moveable items of cultural heritage, including a large manuscript library, old carpets of quality, and a rich collection in its treasury, consisting primarily of imperial crowns, other high-value 19th-century artefacts, and some items dating from the reigns of Emperors Galawdewos and Fasiladas, as well as paintings and icons. This is precisely the sort of collection described by the local sources reviewed\(^9\) Lefebvre, T., 1845-8, p. 274.
Thus the final aggregate list of missing items in Table (iii)— albeit doubtless incomplete - is considered credible.

Table (iii): Artefacts Reportedly Looted from the Church of St Tekle Haymanot at Debre Libanos in May, 1937

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Artefact1</th>
<th>Source of Information</th>
<th>Italian Sources</th>
<th>Abba Gebre-Giyorgis</th>
<th>Abba Tebebe Kassa</th>
<th>Abba Welde-Maryam Ischeté</th>
<th>Birhanu Denqé</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carpets2</td>
<td></td>
<td>27 Persian carpets</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books of exceptional quality</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>A very large prayer-book given by Emperor Galawdewos</td>
<td>A very large Ge’ez manuscript decorated with gold</td>
<td>A gold-bound ‘bible’</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other sacred books</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>“Innumerable” prayer-books and manuscripts</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Many illustrated religious manuscripts</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drums</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>A large drum embellished with gold</td>
<td>An old, large golden drum</td>
<td>A large drum decorated with gold</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowns</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>A crown of Yohannis IV, a crown of Menelik II, and a crown of Haile Selassie</td>
<td>A large, gold crown of Yohannis IV, and a large, gold crown of Menelik II</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecclesiastical objects of quality</td>
<td>“Ecclesiastical ornaments of high quality”</td>
<td>A gold censer</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>A golden dish</td>
<td>Two vessels of precious metal</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesser ornaments and artefacts</td>
<td>“Religious ornaments”</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crosses</td>
<td>Gold crosses</td>
<td>A large golden cross given by Gebre Mesqel</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Golden crosses</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vestments</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12 gold-embroidered gowns given by Emperor Fasiladas</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Gowns presented by Emperor Fasiladas</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money3</td>
<td>4,000 Maria Theresa thalers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: 1. “-” indicates such items are not mentioned.
2. Given the general lack of knowledge in Ethiopia of the value of old carpets, the clergy would not be expected to mention the disappearance of such items.
3. The presence of money at the monastery, and its possible removal, would not be common knowledge among the ordinary clergy.
Personal Property

For obvious reasons there is very little information available on the question of looted personal property. Nonetheless, the various reports of large numbers of personal items such as silver hand-crosses, prayer-books and prayer-sticks being taken from the massacre victims are consistent, and undoubtedly correct. In particular, Tebebe Kassa reported not only that the Italians removed hundreds of personal hand-crosses, manuscripts, vestments and prayer-sticks from the victims before execution at Laga Welde, but also that he travelled to Debre Birhan in an Italian military truck in which many of these artefacts were being carried.

However, the present author has been unable to find out what became of these personal artefacts. It is worth noting that despite being taken to Debre Birhan, they are not included in the list of items purportedly handed over by the Italians to churches there. Since an estimated 1,300 – 1,700 of the victims executed at the two sites of Laga Welde and Ingécha were monks, priests, or deacons, and since a large proportion were adults wearing ecclesiastical vestments, many of whom would have been carrying at least one cross or manuscript (and in some cases one of each), it may be estimated that the total number of such items unaccounted for runs into the thousands.

Items Restored to Debre Libanos

In his comments to the present author, Tebebe Kassa was under the impression that some of the crowns might have been returned to the monastery. However, investigations conducted jointly by the author and priests of the Church of St Tekle Haymanot in 1992 revealed that the church now possesses no royal crowns. Neither does it possess any of the treasures listed by the monks as having been stolen by the Fascists. So far as could be ascertained, the only crowns now in the treasury are simple, ecclesiastical crowns made of brass and of inferior quality, which were probably taken to the monastery when it was revived and re-populated under the Duke of Aosta.

That leaves the one manuscript reported by the Monastery Council to have been returned, which actually has something of a history attached to it. The manuscript referred to is a gold-bound Gospel book in which Emperor Haile Selassie wrote an inscription dedicating it to the Monastery of Debre Libanos. It went missing during the Fascist massacre, and circulated between a number of Ethiopians, finally ending
up with Abune Abraham. The Holy Father retained the manuscript, and on his deathbed passed it to his son, Seifa Sillassé, with the request that he return it to the Emperor “when he returns home”.

Having resumed the throne in 1941, the Emperor was presented with the Gospel, which he again inscribed:

“You are the God who defeated the power of Mussolini and his army, and protected humiliated Ethiopia which put faith in your justice. Praise be to you only. I faithfully promise to maintain the freedom of Your great country, Ethiopia. I am merely a helpless guest, as my fathers were. August 12th, 1941, Haile Selassie I, King of Kings.”

Artefacts taken to Italy

Having established that a large number of artefacts were looted from Debre Libanos and have never been returned, what became of them? Were they taken to Rome, as claimed by the monks?

The evidence is circumstantial, but compelling. Firstly, it is well attested that the Fascist leaders usually removed substantial amounts of Ethiopia’s material cultural heritage when they left the country. Pietro Badoglio, the first Italian viceroy, appropriated half of the 1.7 million Maria Theresa thalers in the Bank of Abyssinia, which enabled him to build a villa in Rome, in which he reportedly installed the astonishing number of 300 crates of booty flown from Ethiopia by the Regia Aeronautica. Attilio Teruzzi, the Minister of Italian Africa, took away four truckloads of artefacts after a single, brief visit in 1939.

As for Graziani, he returned to Italy on 9th May, 1939 with no less than 79 crates of artefacts, and a few months later a substantial number of Ethiopian treasures, including a number of crowns, coronets, lion’s-mane headgear and other artefacts appeared on display in Rome for the official opening of the Museo Coloniale, the museum of the Ministero dell’Africa Italiana. Mussolini, who donated the collection to the Museum, was reported by the Fascist authorities to have been given the collection by Graziani. Indeed, the room housing items from this collection was named The Graziani Room.

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10 **ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH**, c. 1969.
Figure 65: Display cases in The Graziani Room, Museo Coloniale, Rome, in May, 1939. The lower photograph shows the display case shown in the background of the upper photograph.
The display case in the left foreground in the photograph shown here of The Graziani Room (Fig. 65 upper, and Fig. 66), published by the Italian government in 1939, contained various artefacts of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, a ras’s crown, a broad-brimmed hat such as the type favoured by Emperor Menelik, and various other exhibits.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Figure 66}: The display case on the left contains at least one ras’s crown, lion’s-mane headgear and what could be one of Emperor Menelik’s hats.

However, it is the case in the back of the room (Fig. 65, lower) that is of particular interest. Containing what was described by the Italians as “the precious crowns of the last four Ethiopian emperors”, this case, which did indeed contain four elaborate Ethiopian royal crowns together with what appears to be a fine ecclesiastical crown, formed the \textit{pièce de resistance} of the newly created Graziani Room.

All four royal crowns are in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century style, and could well have belonged, as the Italian sources indicated, to the most recent Ethiopian emperors.\textsuperscript{13}

These five crowns are likely to be those stolen from the church of St Tekle Haymanot at Debre Libanos. The question is: What happened to them? We know that they did not remain for long in the Graziani room at the Museo Coloniale, for the contents of that museum were dispersed not

\textsuperscript{12} The Graziani Room collection was illustrated in Anno II, No. 2 of \textit{Gli Annali Dell’Africa Italiana} of July 1939, between pp 702 -3; see MONDADORI, A., ed., 1939, between pp. 702-3.

\textsuperscript{13} It should be noted that Ethiopian sovereigns traditionally had a number of similar crowns made, which were kept in the treasury of important churches in various locations.
long afterwards. Professor Pankhurst suggested that they may have turned up in Mussolini’s personal possession when he and his mistress were attempting to flee to Switzerland, from the Italian Partisans, in April, 1945. When he was caught and executed at Dongo, Northern Italy, not far from the Swiss border, Il Duce was reported as having been in possession of over sixty kilogrammes of gold, several thousand pounds sterling in various currencies, letters from world leaders such as Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill, and a number of Ethiopian royal crowns. It is apparent that these artefacts were being carried for their resale value, suggesting that the Ethiopian crowns were thought to be made of gold.  

After Mussolini’s execution, Partisan leaders General Raffaele Cadorna, and Colonel ‘Valerio’, or Walter, Audisio, who personally shot the dictator, were photographed with the crowns concerned. We are fortunate to have access to that photograph, from which it can be seen that the crowns in their possession are undoubtedly Ethiopian.

![Partisan leaders General Raffaele Codorna (left) and Colonel Valerio Audisio (who executed Mussolini) pose beside a display of Ethiopian crowns they found in the dictator’s possession at Dongo.](image)

PANKHURST, R.K., 1993; PANKHURST, R.K., 1999A.
Furthermore, upon closer inspection, it is possible to match the crowns found at Dongo (Fig. 67, 68) with those displayed in the Museo Coloniale Fig. 69). Firstly, we note that the left-hand crown in the ‘Dongo’ photograph with the large medallion corresponds to (b) in the ‘Museo Coloniale photograph.

This particular design of crown was unique to Haile Selassie; he wore one of similar design at his coronation. The medallion depicts the patron saint of Ethiopian sovereigns, St George, killing the dragon. The large and very ornate two-tier crown with ear-pieces in typical ‘Menelik’ style, second from the left, is almost certainly (c) in the Museo Coloniale collection, and the third prominent crown at Dongo is the fine, bejewelled ecclesiastical crown (e) in the Museo display.
At the far right in the Dongo group, in the background and partly hidden by the ecclesiastical crown, is a two-tier crown that appears to be (a) in the Museo collection, although the surmounting cross or finial is not visible in the Dongo photograph. Finally, in the background, between the ‘Menelik’ crown and the ecclesiastical crown in the Dongo photograph can be seen part of a dome-topped crown corresponding to (d) in the Museo Coloniale display.

Thus it appears that the Ethiopian crowns seized from Il Duce at Dongo as he was fleeing towards the Swiss border in 1945 are the same crowns that were displayed in the Museo Coloniale in 1939; indeed at least two of them even seem to have retained their museum stands and display cards.

Furthermore, as Professor Pankhurst suggests, they were most probably looted from Debre Libanos during the massacre by General Maletti’s troops in May, 1937. At this point, however, the trail goes cold. A relatively short time elapsed between the recovery of the Ethiopian crowns at Dongo in 1945 and the first sessions of the Paris Peace Conference in the early summer of 1946, at which the Ethiopians pressed for, and gained, agreement for restitution of the items of Ethiopian cultural heritage in Italian hands. However, during that period much of that cultural heritage – including the Debre Libanos crowns – disappeared from view.

So what happened to these crowns, described by the Italians as the “most valuable part of the Dongo treasure”\(^{15}\), in the short interlude between the Partisans’ proudly displaying them, and their return being requested by the Ethiopian government? Given the considerable importance and value

\(^{15}\) For an account of Mussolini’s capture at Dongo and his demise shortly thereafter, including the description of the crowns as the most valuable part of the Dongo treasure, see LAZZERO, R., p. 48.
evidently attributed to these artefacts not only by the Fascists but also by the Partisans, it is difficult to imagine that the new Italian government, which included several of the Partisan leaders, were unaware of their existence and location at the time of the peace conference.

According to the Peace Treaty finally signed in 1947, all of these artefacts should have been restored to Ethiopia:

"The question of loot taken from Ethiopia during the Fascist occupation (as well as the tragic fate of the monks and deacons of Debre Libanos) was raised by the Ethiopian Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference of 1946. The Italian government was forced under Ethiopian pressure to agree in Article 37 of the peace treaty of 1947 that: “Within eighteen months... Italy shall restore all works of art, religious objects, archives and objects of historical value belonging to Ethiopia or its nationals and removed from Ethiopia to Italy since October 3, 1935,” ie., the date of the fascist invasion.”

However, sixty-four years later, Ethiopians are still waiting for the Italian government to abide by the terms of the 1947 Peace Treaty. None of the ecclesiastical or state treasures of Debre Libanos have been restored to the monastery. So far as can be ascertained, the government has not yet taken even the most preliminary steps to trace these artefacts, or even to write a report on the subject. As for the Emperor’s archive that General Tracchia reportedly removed from the monastery, its fate likewise remains unknown.