### Display and Displacement: The Bronze Head of Augustus from Meroë



Facsimile of the Meroë Head of Augustus on display at the Sudan National Museum. Photo by Marc Bundi, under international Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license.

The Sudan National Museum in the Sudanese capital Khartoum houses an extensive collection of artefacts and architectural elements, mostly related to the International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia (1960–1980), but also artefacts brought in from other parts of the country. In addition, there are some individual objects of various origins and times such as a bronze head of Augustus which is the subject of this essay.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on 2 September 2022, the Sudan's National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) decided to close down the museum and focus on the preparations for a previously announced comprehensive rehabilitation project. Since 15 April 2023, a war between the regular army and paramilitary forces has been ravaging Sudan. In Khartoum, the intense fighting has trapped civilians in a humanitarian crisis and displaced tens of thousands. The rumours of destruction and looting of the Sudan National Museum have not been confirmed so far. However, Sudan's museums and millennia of heritage are caught in the crossfire.

Visitors who had the opportunity to visit the museum before its closure may have noticed that in the permanent exhibition objects of Christian art are far better represented than objects of Islamic art. The Christian gallery on the second floor features a unique collection of medieval wall paintings discovered during the Nubian campaign in the early 1960s in five churches in Lower Nubia. They were brought to Khartoum for restoration and eventually, in 1971, were placed by the secular government in power in the newly built museum. Their toleration by the successive Islamist regimes bears witness to the contradictions of Islamic conservatism. The same applies to the display of statues. While Yusuf al-Qaradawi, influential Egyptian Islamic scholar and author of a compendium on what is allowed and forbidden in Islam, was fundamentally opposed to statues because of the high risk that they could be worshipped, Hassan al-Turabi – at the time Sudan's leading Islamic ideologist and influential Islamic cleric - advocated a more

pragmatic approach, which aimed to encourage all kinds of artistic expression as long as they were meant to enhance the religious experience. This may explain why the monumental statues of Kushite sovereigns on display on the ground floor of the Sudan National Museum have hitherto remained unharmed, although their destruction was seriously contemplated by militant Islamists in the late 1980s.

Overshadowed by the monumental statues, in a dim corner of the museum, an object was on display that one would not expect to find in this place, far beyond the southern boundaries of the former Roman Empire. It is an over-life-sized Roman bronze head, broken through the neck, representing Rome's first emperor, Augustus (who ruled 27 BC-AD 14), in the main, Prima Porta portrait type (Fig. 1). Despite its beauty, it did not capture the attention of many who visited, and the object label in Arabic and English only provided the most basic information. The text explained that the bronze head of the Roman emperor Augustus was found beneath the threshold of a temple in the royal city of Meroë; that it probably formed part of the plunder taken by the Kushites during their raids on the Egyptian frontier; that this head is a facsimile and that the original is in the British Museum. Indeed, there, a much-noticed and highly acclaimed *Head of* Augustus – also referred to as the Meroë Head – is registered under museum number 1911,0901.1 and displayed at eye level in a glass case in the Wolfson Gallery (Room 70), a section of the museum dedicated to the Roman Empire (Fig. 2). The label for the head and the additional information on the museum's website reveal that the head of the Roman emperor Augustus, with inset eyes of glass and stone, is from an over-life-sized statue of Augustus, very likely erected in an Egyptian town near the first cataract of the Nile at Aswan to mark the presence of the emperor on the edges of the Roman Empire, and looted by an invading Kushite army in 25 BC.

The head, torn from the statue, was later buried under the threshold of a small temple dedicated to victory in the Kushite capital

Meroë, so that it would be permanently below the feet of its Meroitic captors. Ironically, it is precisely this act of ritual humiliation that preserved the head which was excavated in 1910 by John Garstang (1876–1956), then Professor of Methods and Practice of Archaeology at the University of Liverpool, and donated in 1911 by the Sudan Excavation Committee to the British Museum.

The available literature on the *Meroë Head* provides insightful information on the history of the discovery of the head and on the circumstances of its transfer to England. The "Roman bronze portrait head of heroic size", as it was described by its discoverer, was unearthed by John Garstang's team in December 1910 in the course of excavations carried out for the Sudan Excavation Committee in Meroë from November 1910 to February 1911. The news of the unexpected discovery of the superb specimen of Roman art spread quickly and attracted prominent visitors, such as Lord Kitchener, who had been touring Sudan, and the then Governor General, Sir Francis Reginald Wingate, with his wife. By the end of the excavation season, in mid-February 1911, 37 crates of archaeological finds, including the *Meroë Head*, were shipped from Port Sudan to England.

It must be stressed here, that, following the promulgation of the first Sudanese Antiquities Ordinance in 1905, antiquities could no longer be taken out of the country without a written licence from the Conservator of Antiquities. However, although not explicitly mentioned, the ordinance covered the division of finds between the institutions sponsoring archaeological excavations and the Sudan Government and it was not infrequent for the most prestigious objects to be allocated to museums affiliated to foreign missions. The shipment of the *Meroë Head* was covered by a provisional agreement arranged between Garstang and Peter Drummond, then Acting Conservator of Antiquities.

As unpublished documents from the archives of Sudan's National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums show, by shipping the Meroë Head to England, Garstang had created a fait accompli that would be difficult to reverse. In reaction to a telegram from Governor General Reginald F. Wingate, on 22 February 1911 in a letter addressed to James Currie, then Director of Education in Sudan, Garstang acknowledged that the "great bronze head" was not to be regarded, pending final negotiations, as the property of the expedition under his charge. In the same letter, Garstang noted that he was entitled to publicly exhibit the head but that the terms of agreement arranged provisionally between him and Peter Drummond might be cancelled or modified.

In a second letter dated 23 February 1911, entitled "The Bronze Head and Antiquities of Meroé" and addressed to the Governor General of the Sudan, Garstang intimated compliance with the stipulations laid down by Wingate in his telegram and acknowledged that he had given written assurance that he held himself responsible for the safe custody of the head, pending settlement as to its final destiny. In a second part of the letter, "in order to shorten correspondence, to avoid misunderstanding, and to facilitate ... at the same time [Wingate's] own deliberations", Garstang expressed his "personal feelings" on the matter:

The basis of my own opinion is an assumption (still to be verified) that the bronze head in question is an example of Graeco-Roman Art (probably of the age of Augustus), that its presence in the Sudan is accidental, the result of individual caprice which might as well have sent it to the Roman Frontiers in Britain or in Syria. It does not seem to me to recall, or to have been intended to refer to, any special historical incident or period peculiar to Meroë or the Sudan. At the same time it is a striking piece of work, a fine example of art, worthy of study and worthy of a place where all may see it. It is certainly the best single object that I have had the pleasure of finding during the twelve years devoted to active excavation, and I have had to stifle my own desire to retain it in Liverpool.

After these "personal" considerations with reference to the interpretation and the artistic quality of the *Meroë Head*, Garstang drew the following conclusion:

The more I think of it dispassionately the more I realize that under the circumstances there is only one place fit and appropriate to receive it. Namely the British Museum. There it would have a permanent security, it would be the focus of our Empire, the whole world could see it without a serious detour. In Liverpool its usefulness would be less: in Khartoum it would be accessible only to the few, and in course of time it would be more exposed to danger of destruction in times of disturbance or at the hands of the fanatic.

In a last part of the letter, Garstang suggested the next steps to be taken:

My final steps then, after arrival of the head in England, would be to ascertain by consultation and comparison whether my first assumption is correct, and to inform your Excellency of any different opinion. Then I would make provisional overtures to the British Museum, and I would ask for obvious reasons that these negotiations should be left in my hands. We should require an equivalent in value, to include a number of exact facsimiles for ourselves and Khartoum.

At the end of the same letter, Garstang expressed his awareness "that there will be some outcry in Khartoum and in Liverpool, on the part of those whose enthusiasm overcomes their better judgement" and concluded, convinced, that this would however not affect the issue.

Once in England, in May 1911 the *Meroë Head* was put on temporary display at the Liverpool Museum. In July of the same year,

prior to a division of the finds between the members of the Sudan Excavation Committee, the head was displayed with the other objects that had been allowed to leave Sudan in an exhibition under the patronage of Lord Kitchener in the rooms of the Society of Antiquaries at Burlington House in London.

While Garstang was determined to have the *Meroë Head* at the British Museum, a member of the University of Liverpool Institute of Archaeology's prominently staffed Sudan Excavation Committee proposed that the head should be auctioned among the committee members. However, the proposal was defeated when Garstang made the questionable assertion that the Sudan Government had only allowed the head to leave the country on condition that it should be placed in the British Museum.

The *Meroë Head* was eventually acquired by the British Museum through the liberality of the Sudan Excavation Committee, owing to a contribution by the National Art Collections Fund towards further excavations. Additionally, a number of casts of the *Meroë Head* were made for members of the Sudan Excavation Committee. In all likelihood, the facsimile designated for Khartoum mentioned in Garstang's letter and a facsimile on display at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford belong to the same set of bronze casts.

Its beauty and remarkable preservation, as well as the fascinating story of its rediscovery, made the *Meroë Head* instantly famous. Photographs taken upon the discovery in Meroë greatly contributed to this fame. For the photo shoot, the head was placed on an improvised tripod, while a bed sheet was used as a backdrop (*Fig. 3*). Following its acquisition by the British Museum, the head was widely publicized and translated into different commodities. In 1911, three photographs providing frontal and lateral views of the *Meroë Head* were published by the Sudan Excavation Committee on a printed cover at a nominal price. On 12 August 1911 these photographs appeared in the *Illustrated London News* and were later published in 1912 by Robert C. Bosanquet in the *Annals of* 





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- <sup>2</sup> The Meroë Head of Augustus on display at the British Museum. Photo courtesy of the British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum.
- 3 "Site 292: Augustus Head". In the background, Robin Horsfall – who volunteered his services to John Garstang – holding a backcloth. Meroë, 1911. The photograph was most likely taken by Horst Schliephack, Garstang's Chief Assistant and photographer of the expedition. Photo courtesy of the Garstang Museum of Archaeology, University of Liverpool.
- <sup>4</sup> Toppled head of the statue of Emperor Augustus at the British Museum. Photo courtesy and copyright of Alecsandra Drăgoi, London.

Archaeology and Anthropology. The photograph showing the left lateral portrait was included in the 1912 edition of J. C. Stobart's *The Grandeur that was Rome*. The publication of the photographs in illustrated magazines, scientific publications and popular books contributed to the growing popularity of the artefact. The *Meroë Head* is a British Museum "highlight". It was selected as the thirty-fifth object in the *A History of the World in 100 Objects* series written and narrated by then British Museum director Neil MacGregor and broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 2010. The book accompanying the series was published in the same year. In 2014, as a part of the British Museum's "Object in Focus" range, the British Museum published an introductory guide to the *Meroë Head of Augustus*.

In the context of the 2004–2005 Sudan: Ancient Treasures exhibition devoted to Nubian and Sudanese antiquities, Neil MacGregor, then director of the British Museum, organized public debates around key objects from Sudan in the British Museum collection in order to put the genocidal events happening at the time in Darfur and other issues facing Sudan into a different and wider context. The Meroë Head was at the centre of one of these debates which set out, among other things, to banish the notion that Sudan had always been in the shadow of Egypt. The intention was, according to MacGregor, rather to remind that "the Sudanese, the Kushites, were the people who had invaded Egypt under the pharaohs and conquered the Romans and captured the statue of Augustus" and to allow the Sudanese diaspora "to reappropriate their own history, their own culture, in a way that ... is impossible to do in Sudan". In my opinion, this use of archaeology to restore Sudanese pride is problematic since it risks inflaming nationalist sentiments. The equating of the Sudanese with the Kushites is likewise problematic, because it implies a form of essentialism and ignores the broad Sudanese ethnic spectrum. Finally, also the claim that the exhibition allowed the Sudanese to regain possession of their own history and their culture is problematic.

At the end of 2014, beginning of 2015, the *Meroë Head* was briefly presented in a new display in Room 3 of the British Museum together with the story of its discovery. The temporary exhibition curated by Thorsten Opper was entitled *The Meroë Head of Augustus: Africa defies Rome*. The exhibition aimed to show how this potent symbol of Rome's authority became a symbol of African resistance.

In the first half of 2018, on loan from the British Museum, the *Meroë Head* returned as a part of the *BBC Civilisation Festival* for temporary display in the Victoria Gallery and Museum in Liverpool, where it had been briefly exhibited more than a century before. The exhibition was accompanied by a public symposium aiming to bring the object and its era to life. On the University of Liverpool website announcing the symposium, the *Meroë Head* was presented as a symbol of power and defiance: "It was meant to be a potent symbol of the power of Rome. Instead, the Meroë Head of Augustus ... became an emblem of defiance and resistance to Roman rule".

Upon its return to the British Museum, the head was included in the British Museum exhibition *I Object: Ian Hislop's Search for Dissent*, showcasing 100 objects that challenge the official version of events and defy the established narratives. The head was displayed laying down on its side, thus harking back to the state in which it was originally discovered and serving as an emblem of mocked power. Contrary to the approach, adopted by Neil MacGregor, of using a glorious past to camouflage a dramatic present, Ian Hislop, editor of the British satirical magazine *Private Eye*, selected the *Head of Augustus from Meroë* as an object which particularly challenges and defies such narratives (*Fig. 4*).

The *Meroë Head*, very likely crafted in Egypt around 27–25 BC, based on a standardized mould created in Rome, is, as British archaeologist Anna L. Boozer has convincingly argued elsewhere, emblematic of imperial and colonial relationships. Originally

erected on Rome's most southerly frontier as a potent symbol of power to mark Roman dominion over the edge of the empire, the emperor's image was ritually decapitated and the head carried to the Kushite capital, Meroë, where it was buried beneath the steps of a victory monument, so it would be symbolically trampled on by the worshipers. Brought to the colonial metropole under dubious circumstances and under the pretext of saving it from the danger of destruction, it first became a display of the glory of the British Empire. Then, it was reinterpreted as a symbol of the power of the Kushite sovereigns, allegedly to flatter the pride of the Sudanese and to help them regain possession of their own history. Eventually, the *Meroë Head* became an emblem of defiance and resistance to Roman rule and, more generally, an emblem of mocked power.

What does the *Meroë Head* actually mean to the Sudanese? Only the few who have the chance to visit the head in the British Museum can answer this question. Those who visited the Sudan National Museum had to make do with the facsimile, which lacks the aura of the original but nevertheless conveys a powerful aesthetic experience. The ongoing war in the Sudan raises the fear that the Sudanese will continue to be deprived of this experience for the near future or, at worst, forever. However, it is to be hoped that the Sudanese will have the opportunity to challenge established narratives and to continue working on their own interpretations of "their" *Head of Augustus*, whose dramatic and piercing eyes "won't look at you" – as Neil MacGregor aptly observed – but "past you, beyond you, to something much more important: his future".

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# Visual

## Reflections

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When not the object of study in art history or cultural history, pictorial and material sources often lead something of a marginal existence in academic discourse. The importance of these documents for research in the field of connected histories remains underrated. This does them an injustice and prevents new academic insights. Whether everyday objects, sophisticated artefacts or the works of famous artists, as creations and tangible products of the skills and abilities, knowledge, experience and emotional entanglements of human beings through space and time, pictorial and material sources may all be considered essential repositories of memory, traditions and identities. As such, whatever the medium – drawing or print, map, letter or book, measuring instrument, textile or glass object, mask, painting or film, sculpture or photograph – these sources are to be thought of not as passive entities but as dynamic and many-layered social actors, invested with meaning and an agency resulting from their interaction with people. To the editors of this collection of 45 'visual reflections' it seemed that this unique agency of the visual could be an appropriate, accessible and vivid means to convey many of the themes that the COST Action "People in Motion: Entangled Histories of Displacement across the Mediterranean (1492–1923)", or "PIMo" for short, is about.

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### Visual

### Reflections

across

the

Mediterranean

Sea

- 7 Foreword
  Natalie Fritz and Paola von Wyss-Giacosa
- 12 A Molecular Mediterranean and Metaphysical Shipwrecks *Iain Chambers*

### I Things in Motion

- 20 Display and Displacement: The Bronze Head of Augustus from Meroë Marc Bundi
- 32 Trade Wars and Counterfeiting in the Mediterranean: The Zecchino of Venice and the Imitations and Counterfeits Issued by the Republic's Rivals in a Ruthless Trade War Giorgio Giacosa
- 40 The "Second Life" of the Mensa Isiaca: The Circulation of Ancient Gods in Modern History Sergio Botta
- 52 Ottoman Flags Reused as Ex-Votos in the Marca Anconitana Mattia Guidetti
- 60 The "Lemon" of Arnstadt: The Story of a Persistent Cultural Misunderstanding Annette C. Cremer
- 70 Woodcut of a Mesoamerican Mosaic-Encrusted Mask from Aldrovandi's Musaeum metallicum Davide Domenici
- 78 Francis Harwood, Emigrant Sculptor, and the Portrait of a Dignified Slave Cristiano Giometti
- 86 Early Modern Luxury Timekeeping Giulia Iannuzzi
- 94 Where Have All the Tulips Gone? Claudia Jarzebowski
- 104 The Yatagan: A Blade between East and West Achim Weihrauch
- II4 Marco Polo on the Pearl River Delta: The Venetian Middle Ages and Italy's Colony in China Lucas Burkart

#### II Ideas in Motion

- 126 Where Europe Begins and Where It Ends? Nasser Rabbat
- 134 Tripoli Città di Barbaria (ca 1560): The History of a Fake News Map Giovanni Tarantino
- 144 Islamic Variations on Christian Themes: Visual Reflections on the Nature of Muhammad and Jesus Axel Langer
- 156 Johann Fischer von Erlach, the Mediterranean and Persepolis Emanuele Giusti
- 166 Istanbul's Vanishing Memory: The Tangible Heritage of Galata Luca Orlandi and Velika Ivkovska
- 174 Movement of Ideas: Giovanni Francesco Abela of Malta and his Collection Chiara Cecalupo
- 180 Depths and Wonders of the Sea: Coral from Collection to Allegory Sara Petrella
- 190 "Provence africaine": Natural Science and Ideology of the Mediterranean Rolando Minuti
- 196 Vives Escudero and the Rising Interest in Phoenicio-Punic Archeology in Spain Chiara M. Mauro
- 204 Between Imaginary and Reality: Ethnicity and Cooks in the Colonial Space of Cuba Ilaria Berti
- 214 Nausicaa's Cloth Henning Trüper

### III Paper in Motion

- 226 Water/Marked Georgina Wilson
- 232 A Wrong Date, an Indecipherable Pen Scribble and a Historiographic Controversy: The Michelangelo Sheet from Venice Mauro Mussolin
- 244 Piety and Pawnbroking: Decorated Account Books Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli

- 252 How to do Things with Paper in King Lear José María Pérez Fernández
- 264 Perceiving Others: Representing the Different in Baroque Europe Loredana Lorizzo
- 274 Preparing for the Immigration of New Subjects: An Early Seventeenth-Century Map of the Zadar Hinterland Dana Caciur
- 280 Mapping Catholic Communities in Early Modern Ottoman Albania Silvia Notarfonso
- 286 A Venetian Edition of Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde Paola von Wyss-Giacosa
- 298 Keeping up Appearances: The Indian Sedan Chair, or *Palanquin*, through the Eyes of an Eighteenth-Century Livornese Seaman *Matteo Calcagni*
- 308 Wandering Images: A Dervish and his Garb Andreas Isler
- 316 Fake Miniatures of Islamic Science Nir Shafir

### IV People in Motion

- 326 "A Lamp in the Holy City": Sephardic Exile, Family Ties and the Messianic Jerusalem. The Ladino Version of the *Passover Haggadah* (Venice, 1624) *Ignacio Chuecas Saldías*
- 336 From Exile to Revenge: The Return of the Waldensians of Piedmont to their Valleys in a Seventeenth-Century Map Marco Fratini
- 344 Forbidden Object: An African Woman and her Drawing of Santa Marta Claudia Stella Valeria Geremia
- 350 Algiers on the Amstel: Portraying Thomas Hees's Diplomatic Success in North Africa Arvi Wattel
- 360 Art History and Social History: Muslims in Early Modern Central European Cities David Do Paço

- 370 Legacies of Exile: The Stuarts in Rome Katie Barclay
- 378 The Mediterranean Space through South Indian Eyes: Visual and Material Elements in the *Varttamānappustakam Philippe Bornet*
- 388 The Mediterranean Seen by a Young Nineteenth-Century Syrian Arab Tourist: The Map of Salim Bustrus's Itinerary Joanna Musiatewicz
- 394 Love, Gender, and Migration across the Sea: The Myth of Hero and Leander Ida Caiazza
- 404 The Ile Sainte Marguerite: Geographies of Repression and Incarceration in the Colonial Mediterranean Dönal Hassett
- 414 All that Glitters Is Not Gold Natalie Fritz

423 Notes on Contributors