

Oba Akenzua II's restitution requests



Fig. 1: Throne stool attributed to the Oba Eresoy (approx. 1735-1750), Inv.-No. III C 20295 (height 40 cm, Ø 40.5 cm)

Restitution requests are currently being discussed in the meetings and publications of the ethnological museums. While these discussions lead in some cases to cooperation projects, implementing many of the ideas remains difficult. This can be seen from the following example. In the National Archives' in London there are documents (Foreign Office and Foreign & Commonwealth Office Records, 1935-1943), which provide evidence of an early and

very complex case from the year 1935.

It involves two throne stools from the kingdom of Benin that were taken out of the country as part of the war booty when it was overrun by a British punitive expedition in 1897 (*fig. 3*).

The two bronze stools (*fig. 1, 2*) are of similar sizes and constructed in almost the same way: the base and the seat are slightly rounded and held together by stylized snakes. Some motifs can be found on both stools, e.g. a frog and a grimacing face. But one of them (*fig. 1*) is more ornately decorated than the other. The snakes' bodies in the central area have scales and the symbols are depicted as reliefs or engravings on the lower and upper sides of the seats and the pedestals. In his 1981 study on the two objects, Irwin Tunis describes their material, origin and iconography in detail. Otto Werner (1970) also analysed the alloy used in the two throne stools (as well as 152 other bronze objects from Benin) in an article.

Oba Akenzua II and Lord Plymouth

The first documents in the archive (dated April 1935) refer to a meeting in February 1935, when Lord Plymouth, then Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, came to the kingdom of Benin during an official visit to the British colony of Southern Nigeria. The king, Akenzua II (1899-1978), known as the Oba, ruled from 1932 until his death. He asked Lord Plymouth if he could help him recover two throne stools, which had been confiscated during the British punitive expedition.

History of the throne stools

The two throne stools are attributed to Akenzua's predecessors Oba Eresoyen (approx. 1735-1750) and Oba Esigie (approx. 1504-1550) respectively². Under Oba Esigie, who spoke fluent Portuguese, there were regular trade relations with Portugal. The correspondence files of the National Archives mention that a throne stool was made by the Portuguese as a gift for a predecessor of the Oba. *"The Stool, which I understand is said to have been presented to one of the Oba's ancestors by the Portuguese, is one of those illustrated on page 112 of H. Ling Roth's book 'Great Benin: Its Customs, Art and Horrors'"*³ Read and Dalton (1899: 6) report on Esigie's reign: *"When the white men came, in the time when Esigie [sic] was king, a man named Abammangiwa came with them. He made*



Fig. 3: Throne stool (Inv. No. III C 20295) – one of the objects looted in the 1897 war



Fig. 2: Throne stool attributed to Oba Esigie (approx. 1504-1550), Inv.-No. III C 20296 (height 38.5 cm, Ø 40 cm)

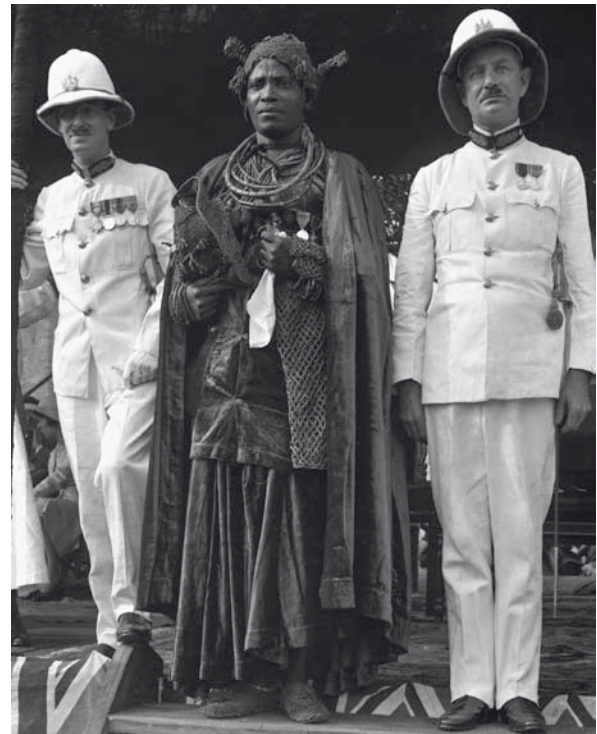


Fig. 4: Oba Akenzua (middle) and Lord Plymouth (right) around 1935 in Benin

brasswork and plaques for the king, he stayed a very long time—he had many wives but no children—the king gave him plenty of boys to teach. We can make brasswork now, but not as he made it, because he and all his boys are dead. Before King Esigie died he sent one man named Inoyen to the white man's country with some white men. He stayed long, and when he returned, he brought back with him that plain stool and a message of salutation from the king of the white men."

The art historian Barbara W. Blackmun writes that the throne (inventory number III C 20.296) is Esigie's throne, and the other (inventory number III C 20.295), which is Eresoyen's (2010: 444), is a copy of the former. And Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, also an art historian, writes regarding the latter throne stool that it was made around the time when Eresoyen came to the throne, between 1735 and 1737 (2010: 472).⁴

Little is known about how the throne stools were used. In Ling Roth's book, where photos of them are reproduced, at a time when they were still in the possession of Ralph Moor, there are the following explanations: *"Whether these were royal stools or not we cannot say, but the royal stool on which the king sat when he granted an interview to Lieut. King, was made of copper, about 18ins high. The Lieut. tells us that, every king on his accession to the throne has a new stool which is placed on his tomb. The shape of the stool varies according to the taste of the monarch. One of those which Mr. King saw on the tomb of a king was supported by copper serpents, of which the heads touched the ground forming the feet."*⁵

Ling Roth supplements King's remarks by a statement he had received from Cyril Punch (1857-1932), a businessman (trader) who regularly visited Benin City around 1890: *"Mr. Cyril Punch remembers very well seeing these articles. They were lying about in one of the compounds, and he writes me „one could not help being struck with their similarity to the Delphic Tripod in the Hippodrome of Constantinople. Probably this is only a coincidence. I do not put much importance on their having once been used as a stool. I tried hard to get from Aguramassi what they were made for, but he would only laugh and say they were for play."* (1968: 113).

The statements by the Nigerian artist and historian Sweet Ufumwen Ebeigbe about the wooden stools could also help to explain the symbols on the bronze throne stools: *"One key function of Benin royal stools that gives further insight into the nature of Benin narrative art is their use by past Benin Kings as communicative objects which they used to transmit coded cryptic messages that were interpreted pictorially. A fine example is a round stool (erhe) that is still in the custody of Benin National Museum in Nigeria that was carved for Oba Eweka II (1914-1933) for such a purpose. The archival record of the Museum describes this artifact as a 'telegraphic stool' and it reports that it is one of the several stools that Oba Eweka II (who ruled Benin from 1914 - 1933) commissioned to convey coded messages to his father, Oba Ovonramwen (who ruled Benin from 1888-1914)." (2015: 7).*

The search for the throne stools

Most of the documents mentioned here can be found in the appendix

Oba Akenzua II presented his request during a visit from Lord Plymouth in Benin City in February 1935 and Plymouth took the necessary steps after his return to London. A report to the West African Department on 9 April 1935 shows that the Oba had seen pictures of the throne stools⁷ which had been taken from his grandfather and knew that they were now in the possession of Ralph Moor. The Oba was very anxious to recover the two thrones, especially the smaller of the two. From a library and from the Estate Duty Office (tax office) it was ascertained that Moor had been High Commissioner for the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria and had died on 14 September 1909. Adrienne Burns, his wife and only heiress, died in 1919, a certain Nellie Newbury being legatee.

Further details regarding Ralph Benham Raymen Moor (1860-1909) are to be found in Robert Home's book *City of Blood: A new look at the Benin expedition of 1897*. He had a successful career during his approx. twelve-year stay in West Africa. Initially working in the British Consulate, he was ultimately High Commissioner of the Protectorate Council of Southern Nigeria, newly created between 1900 and 1903. In 1897 he was made Knight Commander of the Order of St. Michel and St. George for his part in the Benin punitive expedition. In 1903 he was pensioned off for health reasons (malaria, black water fever). Moor had hoped to pursue his career in England, but this was denied him. Home holds Moor's methods, which he describes as "unsound" (questionable), responsible for this set-back. During the night of 13-14 September 1909 Moor, aged 49, committed suicide with cyanide (1982: xi-xiv).

Contact with J.J. Edwards & Co.'s estate administrators was established by J.[ohn] Fletcher-Cooke [1911-1989?]. This led to the finding, a few weeks later, that there had been no throne stools in the estate at Lady Moor's death, whereupon Fletcher-Cooke turned to the British Museum's Ethnographical Department. They jointly ascertained that in 1909 three objects which had belonged to Moor had been auctioned at Sotheby's - unfortunately there were no throne stools among them. The next step, therefore, was to contact the auction house. The latter informed that the auction catalogs from that time were no longer held in their archive, but had been trans-

ferred to the British Museum. Since about 50 auctions had taken place at Sotheby's in 1909, the librarian of the museum requested a more precise date before searching further.⁸

From the months of May and June 1935, no communications have been preserved in the files. The correspondence begins again in July 1935 and it is clear from this that Captain A. R. A. Dickins, then Acting Resident in Benin City, also had dealings in Nigeria. The Oba had told him that he wanted to buy back the throne stools and was willing to pay a reasonable price.⁹ Dickins contacted Gerald [Hallen] Creasy (1897-1983), who had accompanied Lord Plymouth on his trip to West Africa¹⁰ in February 1935 and worked in the Colonial Office in Downing Street. This street in London's Westminster district was home to the Prime Minister and the Foreign Office. Creasy deduced from the research to that point and from information provided by British Museum staff¹¹ that Charles Gabriel Seligman (1873-1940), a collector, anthropologist and professor of ethnology at the University of London, had been involved in the auction at Sotheby's. Therefore he now asked an acquaintance, Hanns Vischer (1876-1945), the co-founder of the International Institute for African Languages and Cultures in London, to contact Seligman, and pointed out that the throne stools were discussed and reproduced in Ling Roth's book *Great Benin*. Furthermore, he writes, "*he [the Oba] is an extremely able and cultured man and the Government of Nigeria would, I know, be glad if his wishes over this stool could be met.*"¹² Vischer and Creasy learned from Seligman that Sotheby's had not sold all the pieces from the Moor Collection, and that Benin bronzes were to be found in numerous ethnographic museums, especially in Germany, i.e. in Berlin. The German museums had eagerly acquired a large number of these artistic masterpieces around 1900, whereas the British museums usually lacked the necessary funds.¹³ Seligman referred to a dealer, or former dealer, through whose hands many of West Africa's best pieces had passed, "*who really loves the stuff*", namely W.O. Oldman.

William Ockelford Oldman (1879-1949) is now known for his Polynesian collections and his sales catalogues (Waterfield, 2010: 65-76), but he had amassed a collection of metal, wood and ivory pieces from the Kingdom of Benin, of which about thirty can today be found in the British Museum.¹⁴ Oldman was able to provide key information. He had personally been present when Stevens' auctioneers (Covent Garden, London) had auctioned the two throne stools between 1910 and 1912 and recalled that they had been bought by the representative of a German museum, possibly in Berlin. He also pointed out that something had been published about them in the journal *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie* (Vol. XI, p. 241).¹⁵ Creasy then contacted Stevens' auctioneers but,

just as with Sotheby's, they could tell him nothing about the whereabouts of the stools.¹⁶

In a letter of 19 October 1935 to Lord Plymouth, Creasy summarizes the key steps taken in the previous months and comes to the conclusion that *"All these enquiries led to a dead end"*. However, thanks to Oldman it was clear that the throne stools had been acquired by a German museum. Creasy also mentions that Captain Dickins was informed and would inform the Oba on his return to Nigeria in early October. Probably as a result of these messages, Lord Plymouth wrote a very personal letter to Akenzua II dated 28 October 1935: *"My good friend, [...] I am very sorry that the results we have achieved so far have been so small, but I will try to find some other lines on which to make further enquiries, though I fear it must be doubtful as to whether we are likely to make much progress."*¹⁷

"There, I am afraid, the matter rests and I really don't know what more we can do." - G. Creasy

The next document in the file, a postcard of 5 February 1936, is from Eckart von Sydow (1885-1942), a German art historian and ethnologist, replying to a letter from H. Vischer¹⁸. It provided the decisive clue: *"In Luschan's Altertümer von Benin (1919) [...] there are references and illustrations [...]. Do these not refer to the two beautiful bronze seats in Berlin, reproduced in Luschan?"* Shortly after receiving this information Creasy hurried to the library of the Royal Anthropological Institute, where he finally discovered the illustrations of the throne stools and that they were in the Berlin Ethnological Museum.¹⁹

Political and administrative negotiations

The search was thus completed and another phase, at least as difficult as the previous one, began. This was to involve political players in Britain and in Nazi Germany: on the British side, alongside the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office, the British Embassy in Berlin as well as the German Foreign Office in Berlin. Lord Plymouth wanted the Foreign Office's private opinion as to how the museum management in Berlin might stand on a possible return, before an official inquiry were addressed to the German government. For this reason, Creasy prepared a letter, which Frederick J.[ohnson] Pedler (1908-1991), another colleague at the Colonial Office, sent to his counterpart in the Foreign Office, a certain E.E. Crowe, to explain the situation to him (see footnote 21). This letter once again stated the Oba's wish, which he had already expressed to Lord Plymouth, if at all possible to retrieve both throne stools. If only one could be returned,

he would prefer the one with inventory number III C 20.296. If necessary, the Oba would pay not only the purchase price, but also all costs incurred. On the other hand, he was not sure which price would be correct.²¹ Creasy pointed out that the German authorities would certainly have first contacted von Sydow in the event of an official restitution request. The latter had encountered some difficulties with the government in Nigeria regarding his travel preparations. Eckart von Sydow was at that time planning a research trip, which he then carried out in the summer of 1936 - supported financially by the Internationales Institut für Afrikanische Sprachen und Kulturen (co-founded by Hanns Vischer) and a German patron, Baron von der Heydt.²² The second Difficulty, according to Creasy, was the political situation. He asked whether the time were not perhaps unsuitable for requesting the restoration of British colonial works of art from Germany (see footnote 19).

In response to Pedler's letter to Crowe of March 3 1936, Stephen Gaselee (1882-1943), an employee of the Foreign Office, forwarded comments made by the British Ambassador in Berlin in a letter dated 11 May 1936. He wanted to know how the Berlin Museum had acquired the throne stools. If these had been legally acquired at an auction in England, the Embassy could do no more than enquire cautiously. But if the pieces had been given to the museum directly, or through a German buyer, the Embassy would be in a much stronger position. Furthermore, the purchase price at that time could give an indication of what the current market value might be.²³ Since Stevens' auctioneers had not given any further details, Creasy turned to Vischer again. The latter replied on 18 May that the throne stools had certainly been legally acquired through the museum or an agent and that Oldman could provide more information on the original purchase price.²⁴ From his letter of 22 May 1936 we learn that this was difficult to estimate because they were unique pieces. Nevertheless, Oldman cautiously suggested a price range of £500 to £1,000. However, he doubted that the Berlin Museum would release even one of the pieces and therefore proposed that they make a galvanised plastic copy.²⁵

On September 29, 1936, Pedler received an answer from Berlin: the General Director of State Museums was not prepared to give back or sell chairs of such high cultural value. On the other hand, the proposal to make copies of the throne stools for the Oba was acceptable if the latter were to bear the costs of this work.²⁶ Creasy then wanted to determine how much such reproductions would cost and Oldmann suggested asking the Berlin museum whether a German company could possibly do the work.²⁷ Pedler then sent a formal request to Gaselee on 15 October 1936. At the end of the letter he added: *"Lord Plymouth, to whom the Oba originally made his*

request, feels very strongly both on personal and on political grounds that we should do our best to please the Oba on this matter.”²⁸

Throne Replicas for the Oba

The Directorate-General of the Staatliche Museen in Berlin's offer of 25 January 1937²⁹ was sent to Pedler on 27 February and the English translation was forwarded to J.A. Maybin (Chief Secretary's Office, Lagos) on 18 March³⁰. The latter forwarded the Oba's reply four months later, on July 23rd, that he needed photographs of the throne stools in order to be able to make his decision. These were duly sent to Maybin on 17 November 1937³¹ and on 23 April 1938 G.C. Whiteley (Chief Commissioner, Nigerian Secretariat, Lagos) informed J.B. Sidebotham (Colonial Office) that the Oba wished to commission the reproduction of the two thrones by Hermann Noack³² for the sum of 1,492 Reichsmarks, with the following inscriptions under their respective bases:

III C 20.296: “Oba Akenzua II. Replica of Oba Esigie's Stool. 1897 Benin Expedition war trophy now in the State Museum in Berlin”.

III C 20.295: “Oba Akenzua II. Replica of Oba Eresoyen's Stool. 1897 Benin Expedition war trophy now in the State Museum in Berlin”.³³

On 23[?] May Sidebotham communicated the Oba's decision to Stephen Gaselee, who replied on 1 June 1938 that the wishes of the Oba were now in the hands of the English Ambassador in Berlin.³⁴ On 28 July 1938, Whiteley was able to confirm to Sidebotham that “*he [the Oba] will bear the whole of the expenses involved in the production of replicas of the two stools.*”³⁵ And on 4 November Sidebotham received the news that the throne replicas were ready. The Crown Agents were informed on 10 December that the replicas had left the port of Hamburg on the 6th of the month on board the ship Daru and that on 6 January 1939 they would reach Lagos (See footnote 34). On 5 January 1939, Gaselee informed Sidebotham that the British Embassy in Berlin had paid a total of 1,582 Reichsmarks to the State Museums, of which 90 RM were for the inscriptions which the Oba wanted.³⁶

That is all there is in the files, so it is not known whether Oba Akenzua II was satisfied with the quality of the throne replicas. In any case, we know that the saga of his return request did not end there.

A second restitution request

On 17 June 1943 Philip Guedalla (1889-1944), a Squadron Leader of the Royal Air Force temporarily in Nigeria, wrote to a certain N. Sabine (Colonial Office) that he had visited Benin in May of that same year and had had a conversation with the Resident. “*It appears that the Germans have come by two metal seats of peculiar sanctity in some irregular fashion, and they are now lodged in a Berlin museum.*”³⁷ The Oba would never have voluntarily given these up and Benin paid £130 for two throne replicas. Guedalla suggested that the Colonial Office should include these ‘sacred objects’ in a list of works of art to be returned by the Germans after the war. Since the Resident also liked this proposal, he had presented the idea to the Oba the following day, and the latter had replied that the return of the two throne stools would make him very happy. The Oba had granted Guedalla the right to “*make a longer and more thorough inspection of the Oba's residence and historic treasures than has hitherto been made either by the Resident or any other official in Nigeria to whom I [Guedalla] spoke*” (see footnote 37). Finally, Guedalla noted that the aesthetic needs in Berlin could surely also be satisfied by the replicas.

The Colonial Office's answer, dated 12 July, stated that the Oba had already requested the return of the throne stools. It was also made clear that the Secretary of State was very keen to fulfil this wish, but that the objects were not in the same category as others which had been stolen by the Germans during the course of the war. The only possibility would perhaps be to buy the throne stools, but that a high price would have to be paid for them and that the Berlin museum would probably not be prepared to change its stance of 1936. The Colonial Office therefore recommended waiting till the end of the war. The letter finished with the words “*Everything possible will be done when the time comes*”.³⁸ In his reply of 17 July 1943 Guedalla endorsed Sabine's assessment. These documents are the last in the files.³⁹

Reference: Kult. W 1931

Estimates of the cost of making replicas of the Bronze Stools.

1. Casts of the bronze stools including a cast by the Plaster-Casting Department of the State Museums.		
	RM.	RM.
1. For plain stool III C 20 296	= 160	
painted to resemble bronze	= 15	= 175
2. For richly-ornamented stool III C 20 295	= 180	
painted to resemble bronze	= 15	= 195
Crate, including packing of both stools		<u>24</u>
		294
II. Reproduction in copper precipitate by the Württembergische Metallwarenfabrik, Werkstätten für Plastik und Kirchenschmuck, Geislingen an der Steige.		
	RM.	RM.
1a) For plain stool III C 20 296	=	
hollow-cast, including patination	= 564	
White plaster cast as model	= 160	= 724
b) For richly-ornamented stool III C 20 295, hollow-cast, including patination	= 654	
White plaster cast as model	= 180	= 834
Crate, including packing of both casts		48
Carriage on both plaster casts to Geislingen		20
		<u>1626</u>
	/ 2a)	

2a) For plain stool III C 20 296, heavily overlaid, including patination = 654

White plaster cast as model = 160 = 814

b) For richly ornamented stool III C 20 295, heavily overlaid, including patination = 744

White plaster cast as model = 180 = 924

Crate, including packing of both casts = 48

Carriage on 2 plaster casts to Geislingen = 20

1806

III. Bronze reproduction by the Bildgiesserei Hermann Noack, 8 Fehlerstrasse, Berlin-Friedenau.

1a) For plain stool III C 20 296, bronze, hollow-cast = 456

White plaster cast as model = 160 = 616

b) For richly-ornamented stool III C 20 295, bronze, hollow-cast = 552

White plaster cast as model = 180 = 732

Crate, including packing of both casts = 48

1396

2a) For plain stool III C 20 296, solid bronze = 504

White plaster cast as model = 160 = 664

b) For richly-ornamented stool III C 20 295, solid bronze = 600

White plaster cast as model = 180 = 780

Crate, including packing of both casts = 48

1492

Am Lustgarten, Berlin, C.2.,
25th January, 1937

The Superintendent,
Plaster-casting Department of
the State Museum.

(Sd.) Verwaltungsinspektor.

Fig. 5a+b: Estimates of the cost of making replicas of the Bronze Stools. (25.1.1937 - CO 583/219)

Conclusions

The aforementioned letter of 12 July 1943, from Sabine to Guedalla, states that “these stools had been purchased perfectly legitimately by the Berlin State Museum at an open sale in London in 1910”. On the other hand, the inventory of the Ethnological Museum shows that the Stevens auction took place in 1905. This is also confirmed by Tunis, who cites a letter of 13 November 1905 from the auction house to the then Berlin Völkerkundemuseum, in which the auctioning of the throne stools was announced for 21 November (1981:1). Theodor Glücksmann, a Breslau merchant, bought the two throne stools as well as five other bronze works (III C 20.297-301) and donated them to the museum in 1906.⁴⁰

It is clear that Oba Akenzua II's requests for restitution were not met because the originals of the throne stools are still in Berlin. His efforts to preserve the history of the Kingdom of Benin are also confirmed by various photographs from that time. From 1933 onwards Court Photographer Solomon Osagie Alonge documented important events in Benin City. Among other things, one of his pictures, taken around 1935, shows the Oba together

with Lord Plymouth (Fig. 4).⁴¹ In this photo Akenzua II is wearing red coral ornaments, which are supposed to have belonged to Oba Ovonramwen and which had been returned by the British Museum (Plankensteiner, 2016:139f).

The question of restitution claims is as up-to-date as ever. It will be interesting to see how the present Berlin Ethnological Museum and the future Humboldt Forum, which is set to open in 2019, will deal with this matter in the exhibition rooms in connection with the throne stools.

Text: Audrey Peraldi (mail@audreyperaldi.com)

Transcription and translation from French and English: Audrey Peraldi, Andreas Schlotbauer

Translation from German: Dr. Tom Hawes

PHOTOS: Dietrich Graf © Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Fig. 1, 2); The Trustees of the British Museum, London. Af.A79.13 (Fig. 3); Chief S. O. Alonge © Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington. EEPA 2009-007-0038 (Fig. 4); © National Archives, London (Fig. 5)

NOTES

- 1 The existing correspondence, partly written by hand and partly on typewriters, allows us to reconstruct the events.
- 2 The dates in brackets denote the duration of the respective reigns.
- 3 Letters from Creasy to Vischer of 11 August 1935 (CO 583/204/21) and from Creasy to Oldman of 13 August 1935 (CO 583/204/21).
- 4 See W. Fagg, „Bildwerke aus Nigeria“ (1990), p.28 and the text for Fig. 26: one of the two throne stools was made for Oba Eresoyen.
- 5 The book was published in 1903. The new edition of 1968 was used here. Roth refers to the following publication: Lt. John King (1822) *Extrait de la relation inédite d'un voyage fait en 1820 aux royaumes de Benin et de Waree*, in *Journal des voyages, découvertes et navigations modernes*, Vol. 13, Paris.
- 6 Letter to W. A. D. (West African Department) of 9 April 1935 (CO 583/204/21).
- 7 Probably in Ling Roth (1968: 112).
- 8 Letter to W. A. D. (West African Department) of 9 April 1935 (CO 583/204/21) and Letter from Creasy to Dickens of 2 July 1935 (CO 583/204/21), as well as Creasy's report of 2 July 1935 (CO 583/204/21).
- 9 Creasy's report of 2 July 1935 (CO 583/204/21).
- 10 Letter from Creasy to Oldman of 13 August 1935 (CO 583/204/21).
- 11 At that time Thomas Athol Joyce (1878-1942) and Herrmann Justus Braunnholtz (1888-1963) worked in the Department of Oriental Antiquities and Ethnography at the British Museum. The two names (Joyce, Braunnholtz) are also written by hand on the letter from Creasy to Dickens of 2 July 1935.
- 12 Letter from Creasy to Vischer of 11 July 1935 (CO 583/204/21).
- 13 "Thus began a price inflating hunt the likes of which have never been seen in the history of ethnographic museums and which will probably never be repeated. [...] So money is now lacking in London not only for acquiring and developing ethnographic collections, but also for the harmonious co-operation of the colonial administration with the scientific institutes, which in Berlin, for one, produces such beautiful and important results" (Luschan 1901: 3).
- 14 The British Museum. Online collection: 'Oldman Benin' www.britishmuseum.org
- 15 Letter from Oldman to Creasy of 15 August 1935 (CO 583/204/21).
- 16 Letter from Creasy to Lord Plymouth of 19 October 1935 (CO 583/204/21).
- 17 Letter from Lord Plymouth to Oba Akenzua II of 28 October 1935 (CO 583/204/21).
- 18 The letter from Vischer is not in the files. Postcard from Sydow to Vischer of 5 February 1936 (CO 583/204/21).
- 19 Report by Creasy of 21 February 1936 (CO 583/204/21).
- 20 In Suke Wolton's book, „Lord Hailey, the Colonial Office and Politics of Race and Empire in the Second World War“ (New York 2000), Creasy and Pedler are mentioned several times.
- 21 Letter from Pedler to Crowe of 3 March 1936 (CO 583/204/21).
- 22 See von Sydow 1938:55 and von Sydow 1943:145, as well as the dedication in the photo album, which von Sydow made to von der Heydt in 1937: "These photographs of Benin are dedicated to Baron v. d. Heydt, Zandvoort, who financially supported his trip to West Africa, in gratitude & honour. Eckart v. Sydow, Feb. 1937". Although Sydow had also met Oba Akenzua II in Benin during this trip, he did not mention any talks about the question of restitution in his 1943 book. In his reply of 24 February 1936 Hanns Vischer writes to Creasy [by hand]: "If the Govt of Nigeria cannot help E. von Sydow [sic] by supplying traveling facilities, could not the Oba invite the learned doctor to be his guest and have him fetched at arrival at Lagos. He, the Oba, could not prepare the ground for a return of the stool better."
- 23 Letter from Gaselee to Pedler of 11 May 1936 (CO 583/211/10).
- 24 Letter from Vischer to Creasy of 18 May 1936 (CO 583/211/10).
- 25 Letter from Oldman to Creasy of 22 May 1936 (CO 583/211/10).
- 26 Letter from Gaselee to Pedler of 28 September 1936, receipt of 29 September 1936 (CO 583/211/10).
- 27 Letter from Oldman to Creasy of 12 October 1936 (CO 583/211/10).
- 28 Letter from Pedler to Gaselee of 15 October 1936 (CO 583/211/10).
- 29 English translation of the proposition from the Casting Department of the Berlin State Museums of 25 January 1937 (CO 583/219).
- 30 Letter to J. A. Maybin of 18 March 1937 (CO 583/219).
- 31 Letter from Sidebotham to Maybin of 17 November 1937 (CO 583/219).
- 32 The Noack foundry was founded in 1897 and was located, in 1937, at Fehlerstrasse 8 in Berlin-Friedenau. Since 2009 the address has been: Am Spreebord 9, 10589 Berlin.
- 33 Letter from Whiteley to Sidebotham of 23 April 1938 (CO 583/219).
- 34 Various letters in file CO 583/228.
- 35 Letter from Whiteley to Sidebotham of 28 July 1938 (CO 583/228).
- 36 Letter from Gaselee to Sidebotham of 5 January 1939 (CO 583/258/4).
- 37 Letter from Guedalla to Sabine of 17 June 1943 (CO 583/258/4).
- 38 Letter from Sabine to Guedalla of 12 July 1943 (CO 583/258/4).
- 39 Letter from Sabine to Guedalla of 17 July 1943 (CO 583/258/4).
- 40 Inventory Book, Volume 7 Africa (III C 18352 to 20845): "20295 a-d; II / 83/06; Bronze chair, resting on two serpents, very richly decorated on all surfaces, height 40 cm, Ø 40.5 cm, Benin; 2176/05 [Stevens], Th. Glücksmann, gift." "20296; Chair made of bronze, resting on two snakes, similar to III C 20295, but not so richly decorated, height 38.5 cm, Ø 40 cm. Benin; do." Another detail mentioned in the inventory book is that the throne stool III C 20.295 consists of four parts ("a-d"). When writing the article, the files in the archive of the Ethnological Museum were not accessible, as these are partially contaminated and are currently being restored. In addition to the work record 2176 / [19] 05, other files are relevant. File E 324/1906 states "Donation from the businessman Theodor Glücksmann, Breslau" and E 63/1908 states "Crown certificate of purchase IV CL. F. Th. Glücksmann, Breslau."
- 41 Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. Chief S.O. Alonge: Photographer to the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria. <http://africa.si.edu>. Another interesting photo from 1956 shows the Oba meeting the British Queen Elizabeth II during a state visit to Nigeria.

LITERATUR

- Ben-Amos Girshick, Paula: *Rundhocker von Oba Eresoyen*, in: Plankensteiner, Barbara: *Benin Könige und Rituale. Höfische Kunst aus Nigeria*. Paris-Berlin-Wien 2007, S. 472-474
- Blackmun, Barbara W.: *Rundhocker von Oba Esigie*, in: Plankensteiner, Barbara: *Benin Könige und Rituale. Höfische Kunst aus Nigeria*. Paris-Berlin-Wien 2007, S. 444
- Ebeigbe, Sweet Ufumwen: *Practical Assessment of the Modes of Visual Narratives in the Art of Benin in Nigeria*, in: *Studies in Visual Arts and Communication: an international journal* Vol 2, No 1, 2015 (online), S. 7
- Fagg, William: *Bildwerke aus Nigeria*. München 1963, S. 28.
- Home, Robert: *City of Blood revisited. A new look at the Benin Expedition of 1897*. London 1982, S. xi-xv
- King, Lt. John: *Extrait de la relation inédite d'un voyage fait en 1820 aux royaumes de Benin et de Waree*, in: *Journal des voyages, découvertes et navigations modernes*, Vol. 13. Paris 1822
- Luschan, Felix von: *Die Karl Knorrsche Sammlung von Benin-Altartümern im Museum für Länder- und Völkerkunde in Stuttgart*. Stuttgart 1901
- *Die Altartümer von Benin*. Berlin 1919
- Read, Charles H. und Ormonde M. Dalton: *Antiquities from the city of Benin and from other parts of West Africa in the British Museum*. London 1899
- Plankensteiner, Barbara: *The B treasures. Difficult legacy and contested heritage*, in: Hausen-Schäublin, Brgitta und Lyndel V. Prott: *Cultural property and contested ownership. The trafficking of artifacts and the quest for restitution*. London-New York 2016
- Staples, A.J. Kaplan F.E.S., Freyer B.M. *Fragile Legacies: The Photographs of Solomon Osagie Alonge*. London 2017.
- Roth, H. Ling: *Great Benin. Its Customs, Art and Horrors*. London 1968
- *Notes on Benin Customs*, in: Schmeltz, J. D. E. (Hrsg.): *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*, Band XI, Leiden 1898, S. 235-242.
- Sydow, Eckart von: *Ancient and Modern Art in Benin City*, in: *Africa Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol 11 No. 1, Cambridge 1938
- *Im Reiche gottähnlicher Herrscher*. Braunschweig 1943
- Tunis, Irwin L.: *A Study of two cire-perdue cast copper-alloy Stools found in Benin City, Nigeria*, in: *Baessler-Archiv* Band XXIX, Berlin 1981, S. 1-66
- Waterfield, Hermine: *Provenance. Twelve collectors of ethnographic art in England 1760-1990*. London 2010
- Werner, Otto: *Metallurgische Untersuchungen der Benin-Bronzen des Museums für Völkerkunde Berlin, Teil 1. Beitrag zur Systematik der Benin-Legierungen*, in: *Baessler-Archiv* XVIII, Berlin 1970, S. 71-153.
- Wolton, Suke: *Lord Hailey, the Colonial Office and Politics of Race and Empire in the Second World War*. New York 2000

ARCHIV ETHNOLOGISCHES MUSEUM BERLIN

- Inventarbuch „Band 7 Afrika“ (III C 18352 bis 20845)
- Erwerbsakte 2176/[19]05
- Akte E 324/1906 „Schenkung des Kaufmanns Theodor Glücksmann, Breslau“
- Akte E 63/1908 „Besitzurkunde über Kronenorden IV Cl. F. Th. Glücksmann in Breslau“.

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES LONDON

- Foreign Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office records from 1782. Stools of the Oba of Benin. (Besuch am 05.10.2016)
- CO 583/204/21: Enquiry into missing stools belonging to the Oba of Benin. 1935-1936
- CO 583/211/10: Recovery of stools from Berlin Museum belonging to the Oba of Benin. 1936
- CO 583/219: Nigeria. Original correspondence. 1936-1938
- CO 583/228: Colonial Office: Nigeria Original Correspondence. 1931-1938
- CO 583/258/4: Enquiry into the missing stools belonging to the Oba of Benin. 1939-1943

ARCHIV RIETBERG MUSEUM ZÜRICH

- Sydow, Eckart von: Fotoalbum. Geschenk von Sydow an von der Heydt 1937.

INTERNET

- Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz: Nr. 9 Vischer, Hanns. www.hls-dhs-dss.ch
- The British Museum. Collection online. Search „Oldman Benin“ www.britishmuseum.org
- Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. Chief S.O. Alonge: Photographer to the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria. <http://africa.si.edu>.

Transcription of a selection of documents in the National Archives, London.

[CO 583/204/21]

T. W. Davies -> W. A. D. (West African Department), 9. 4. 1935

When Lord Plymouth saw the Oba of Benin during his visit to Nigeria, the Oba expressed some concern at the loss of two Stools. These Stools had apparently been taken away from his grandfather at the time he was deposed, and the Oba had seen in some illustrated book that they were now in the possession of Sir Ralph Moor. The Oba was anxious to recover these Stools, particularly the smaller of the two, if it were possible, and Lord Plymouth promised to make enquiries as to their whereabouts.

Library tell me that Sir Ralph Moor, who was apparently High Commissioner for the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, died on September 14th, 1909.

Do you think there is any possibility of getting into touch with his representatives, or whoever now has possession of the Stools, and ascertaining whether there is any chance of their returning them to the Oba?

Possibly of course, even though it were practicable, it would not be advisable to return the Stools to the Oba.

Lord Plymouth made no promise of any sort to the Oba, but he would like to find out where the stools now are.

T. W. Davies : 9/4

[...] I have made various enquiries about Sir Ralph Moor, chiefly through the Estate Duty Office. I have managed to get hold of the following informations : -

Full Name: Ralph Benham Rayment Moor

Date of Birth: 1860

Date of Death: September 14th, 1909.

Date of Marriage: 1898 to Adrienne Burns.

It appears that Lady Moor was Sir Ralph's sole executrix and that the estate passed to her on his death. She died in 1919 and her executrix was Nellie Newbury, 103, Melrose Avenue, Wimbledon Park. I have been in touch with the solicitors who dealt with the estate on the death of Lady Moor. The address is - J. J. Edwards & Co., / Solicitors, / 28, Sackville Street, W.1. / (Tel. No. Regent 6833). They have promised to try and find out to whom the estate passed on the death of Lady Moor and it was arranged that someone from this Department should ring them up next week, by which time they should have some information for us.[...]

J. Fletcher-Cooke, 27.4.35

[CO 583/204/21]

G. Creasy -> A. R. A. Dickins, 2. 7. 1935

Downing Street, 2nd July 1935

Dear Dickins,

I have today got hold of Fletcher-Cooke who made preliminary inquiries about the Oba's Stools, and the following is what he has told me.

The Solicitors for Sir Ralph and Lady Moor got hold of Miss or Mrs. Nellie Newbury, who, you may remember, was Lady Moor's executrix and found out from her that in the property which passed to her on Lady Moor's death no Stools or anything of that kind were included, and the estate was, in fact, very small. Fletcher-Cooke then turned to the British Museum and got hold of the Head of the Ethnographical Department, who told him that the British Museum had sent a representative to attend a sale of some part of Sir Ralph Moor's estate which took place at Sotheby's in 1909, and that the British Museum had, in fact, bought three pieces at the sale, but, unfortunately, neither of the Stools was among them.

The next inquiry was made from Sotheby's in order to find out whether they had a catalogue of Sir Ralph Moor's effects which were sold in 1909. Unfortunately, Sotheby's themselves did not have a catalogue, but they said that all their printed catalogues went to the British Museum. Fletcher-Cooke then went back on the telephone to the British Museum, and found out from the Keeper of the Printed Books (or whatever his title is) that they did have all Sotheby's catalogues, but they were bound in annual volumes, and, as there were fifty sales in 1909, it would be something of a job to go through them to find the items in question. It is a nuisance that we cannot find out the exact date in 1909 when this particular sale took place. There the matter rests at present. Before we think of searching all Sotheby's catalogues in the British Museum, I think the first thing is to find out from Sotheby's whether, if we can track down the particular sale and find the Stools included in it, they would be able to inform us who in fact, bought the Stools. As they did not, apparently, even keep copies of their old catalogues, I am rather doubtful whether they will be able to help, and, in that case, it is not much use searching catalogues, but I will try and look in one day this week at

Sotheby's on my way to the Office, and let you know what they say.

I am sorry to say that the only address the Crown Agents have for B - S is the one in Dumbartonshire.

Yours sincerely,

(Sgd.) G. Creasy

[CO 583/204/21]

G. Creasy, 2. 7. 1935

Captain A. R. A. Dickins, who was Acting Resident at Benin during his last tour, is now on leave, and has promised the Oba to do what he can to track down the Stools which the Oba wishes to have returned to him, if possible. I saw Captain Dickins yesterday and told him of the preliminary inquiries made here, and I have written to him today giving him certain further information that I find Mr. Fletcher-Cooke has accumulated. Captain Dickins tells me that the Oba has authorized him to offer, if necessary, a reasonable price for the stools, if they can be traced.[...]

[CO 583/204/21]

G. Creasy -> H. Vischer 11. 7. 1935

Downing Street, 11th July 1935

My dear Vischer,

I wonder if you could help me in the following matter.

When Lord Plymouth was in Benin in February last the Oba asked whether anything could be done to discover and restore to him a Stool which was taken away from Benin by Sir Ralph Moor at the time of the 1897 Expedition. The Stool, which I understand is said to have been presented to one of the Oba's ancestors by the Portuguese, is one of those illustrated on page 112 of H. Ling Roth's book „Great Benin; its Customs, Art and Horrors“ which was published by F. King and Sons, Limited, of Halifax in 1903.

It was arranged that Captain Dickins, who was Acting Resident at Benin during his last tour and is now on leave, should make what enquiries he could about this Stool and he and I have been trying to find out what we can about its fate.

Sir Ralph Moor died in September 1909 and his estate passed to his widow. Lady Moor died in 1919 and her estate, we find, passed to a Mrs. or Miss Newbury. The solicitors who dealt with the estate have been in touch with this lady and it was confirmed from her that in the property which passed to her on Lady Moor's death no Stools or anything of that kind were included.

Enquiries were then made of the British Museum and we heard from the Head of the Ethnographical Department there that some part of Sir Ralph Moor's effects had been sold by Sotheby's after his death and that the British Museum is in possession of three pieces then sold - unfortunately no Stool was among them.

We have also been in touch with Sotheby's but I am sorry to say that we have not yet been able to trace the exact date of the sale or to find out what was in fact included in it. On further enquiry we learnt from the British Museum that one at least of their pieces from the sale (an ivory box) had been bought in the first instance by Professor Seligman, who is thought to have attended the sale in person. I am afraid I have never had the honour of meeting Professor Seligman myself but I understand that you know him well, and I wonder whether you would find an opportunity to ask him whether by any chance he remembers any details about the sale of Sir Ralph Moor's things by Sotheby's, i.e. the approximate date, the kind of things included in it, etc. He may also be in a position to suggest the names of museums where the Oba's Stool might now be. There are, I believe, some Benin pieces in the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, for instance.

Captain Dickins has told me that the Oba has authorized him, if necessary, to pay a reasonable price for buying the Stool back but if it can be traced it would of course be nice to have it restored free. I don't know whether you have yourself met the present Oba; he is an extremely able and cultured man and the Government of Nigeria would, I know, be glad if his wishes over this Stool could be met.

Yours ever,

(Sgd.) Creasy

MAJOR HANNIS VISCHER (...)

[CO 583/204/21]

C. G. Seligman -> H. Vischer, 16. 7. 1935

[...]

My dear Vischer,

I am sorry to say I don't know anything about the stool that your colleague of the West African Department asks about. As for the rest of his letter, there are some inaccuracies which perhaps I can correct. In the first place, it is certain that Lady Moor did not sell all her husband's Benin specimens through Sotheby's.

Old Sparks, the porcelain dealer, wrote me that he had four wonderful ivory carvings from Africa which he thought must betoken Egyptian influence, and would I come and look at them. I found four magnificent pieces of Benin carving, two heads and two bracelets. He only asked £50 for the lot, and I told him to send them to me. I wanted one piece, which I kept, the British Museum taking the other three.

I have never had an ivory box, and I cannot remember that I have ever bought an African specimen at Sotheby's. Spark's son, the present head of the firm, writes me that he feels fairly confident that the Benin stool did not pass through his father's hands. There are of course Benin specimens in every ethnographical museum of any size, but you must remember that the Germans, especially Berlin, were extremely keen on West African art, and bought up many of the best specimens that came to this country, which our museums could not afford. There is a dealer, or ex-dealer (I don't know which he is now), who has handled a great deal of the best West African material and really loves the stuff, to whom Creasy might perhaps write, namely, W. O. Oldman, who years ago lived at 77 Brixton Hill, S.E. Sorry I cannot be of more use to you.

With best regards,
Yours sincerely,
(Sd.) C.G. Seligman

[CO 583/204/21]

G. Creasy -> W. O. Oldman, 13. 8. 1935

Downing Street, 13th August, 1935

Dear Sir,

Professor C.G. Seligman has suggested that I should write to you and ask if you would give me some help on the following matter.

When Lord Plymouth, the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, was in Benin in February last, the Oba asked whether anything could be done to discover and restore to him a Stool which was taken away from Benin by Sir Ralph Moor at the time of the 1897 expedition. The Stool, which I understand is said to have been presented to one of the Oba's ancestors by the Portuguese, is a copper polished Stool with applique work, and is one of those illustrated on page 112 of H. Ling Roth's book „Great Benin; its Customs, Art and Horrors“ which was published by F. King and Sons, Limited, of Halifax in 1903.

I was with Lord Plymouth in West Africa and since our return I have been making what enquiries I can about this Stool, and the Acting Resident, who is now on leave, has also been seeing whether he can find out anything about it. So far, however, we have had no success. We thought at one time that we might have got on the track of the Stool through Sotheby's by whom we understood certain possessions of Sir Ralph Moor had been sold on his death in 1909. We have not been able to trace any sale of this kind by Sotheby's, however, and Professor Seligman now tells me that even if that firm sold some of the things it is quite certain that they did not sell all of them.

I asked Professor Seligman whether by any chance he had ever heard of the Stool and could suggest any likely place, museums, etc. where it might now be. [...]

W.O. Oldman, ESQ.

[CO 583/204/21]

W. O. Oldman -> G. Creasy, 15.8.1935

[...]

Dear Sir,

In reply to your enquiry of the 13th just about the Benin Stools. I can well remember them being sold at Messrs Stevens Auction Rooms, Covent Garden and bought on commission for one of the German Museums, (Berlin?). Possibly Messrs Stevens could give you further information. I do not remember the date but about 1910-12.

The two stools are illustrated in Vol XI of „Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie“ P 241.

I retired when I left Brixton Hill some eight years ago and I am a private collector of Benin (and Polynesian) specimens.

I have a few unique pieces including the Carved Drum of Benin City brought over by the late Mr G. W. Neville + the Ancient Execution Sword with carved ivory hilt which I am told belonged to the Kings of Benin from the collection of Admiral Seymour E. Erskine.

If you would be interested to see my collection I would be happy to show it to you at any time by appointment.

Trusting you will be able to trace the two stools.

I am Sir your faithfully

W. O. Oldman

To Gerald Creasy E.

Downing St.

[CO 583/204/21]

G. Creasy -> Lord Plymouth, 19. 10. 1935

Lord Plymouth

You will remember that we started enquiries here as regards that Stool which the Oba of Benin wanted to have returned to him.

In the course of our enquiries we approached the Solicitors who deals with the estates of Sir Ralph and Lady Moor; the British Museum; and Sotheby's, who were said to have sold some of the Moor possessions some years ago. All these enquiries led to a dead end, and then through Professor Seligman I got on to a Mr. Oldman, who is an ex-dealer and has quite a good collection himself of Benin pieces. Mr. Oldman told us that he well remembered the Oba's Stool, or rather Stools as there were two of them, being sold by some Covent Garden auctioneers some time between 1910 and 1912, and he said that they had been bought for one of the German Museums. Our enquiries of the auctioneers, however, were fruitless, as with the information at their disposal they could not trace the sale of the Stools.

There, I am afraid, the matter rests and I really don't know what more we can do. We told Captain Dickins the negative result of our enquiries and he was going to let the Oba know when he got back to Nigeria at the beginning of this month.

It seems fairly certain that the stool is in Germany.

G. Creasy

[CO 583/204/21]

Lord Plymouth -> Oba Akenzua II, 28. 10. 1935

28th October, 1935

My Good Friend,

When I had the pleasure of visiting you at Benin earlier this year, you spoke to me about two stools which had been in the possession of your grandfather and which had been taken away to England.

You will no doubt have already heard from Captain Dickins that the enquiries we have made here with a view to finding them have unfortunately not been successful, and that from such information as we have been able to obtain it appears probable that one of the stools at any rate is in a museum in Germany.

I am very sorry that the results we have achieved so far have been so small, but I will try to find some other lines on which to make further enquiries, though I fear it must be doubtful as to whether we are likely to make much progress.

With all good wishes,
I remain,
Your Good Friend,
(signed) Plymouth

[CO 583/204/21]

E. v. Sydow -> H. Vischer 5. 2. 1936

Sehr geehrter Herr Vischer!

Ich erhielt Ihre Anfrage bezüglich 2 Benin-Sitze. Ich will mich gern danach umsehen. Erbitten aber vorher die Mitteilung, ob es sich um hölzerne oder Bronze-Stücke handelt. In Luschan's „Altertümer von Benin“ (1919) Text-Band, S.479ff. finden Sie Hinweise und Abbildungen S. 480 Anm. führt deutsche Museen auf, die Holz-Sitze aus Benin haben. Handelt es sich nicht überhaupt um die beiden schönen Bronze-Sitze Berlins, die sich bei Luschan reproduziert finden? Ich warte also zunächst nähere Angaben ab. Mit verbindlichster Empfehlung Ihr s. ergebener

E. v. Sydow

[CO 583/204/21]

Creasy 21. 2. 1936

[...] Eventually, I asked Major Vischer to see if he could get any help from Professor von Sydow who is a great authority on Benin art, and the Professor's reply has last enable me to find where the Stools are. He referred to a book by von Luschan and I went up one day recently and looked at this book at the headquarters of the Royal Anthropological Institute. The Stools are illustrated in this book and are definitely reported to be in the Berlin State Museum, confirming what we had already surmised - that the Stools has found their way to Germany.

I think the next step now is to get some advice from the Foreign Office on the question whether there is any chance of the German authorities being willing to restore one or both of these Stools to the Oba, and I submit a draft letter which Mr. Pedler might send to his opposite number at the Foreign Office.

There are, however, two points which I had better mention.

(a) If the time should come for a definite request to be made to the German authorities in connection with these Stools it is almost certain, I understand, that those authorities will first of all consult Professor von Sydow, and I am afraid that the professor may not be too kindly inclined towards Nigeria at the present moment as the Nigerian Govt. has not seen its way to provide him with free travelling facilities for a visit which he proposes to

make to Benin; vide 8, 14 and 15 in 47007/35 Africa. however, I do not contemplate that any request should be made to the German authorities at present and perhaps we can leave this point over. (b) I do not know whether the present would be a particularly favourable time for any requests to be made for the return by Germany of works of art originally belonging to British Colonies. But perhaps we can leave the Foreign Office to take up this point, if necessary. Meanwhile I am sending the draft through the General Department.

G. Creasy

[CO 583/204/21]

F.J. Pedler -> E. E. Crowe 3. 3. 1936

[...] Before he lets the Oba know that the Stools have now been traced. Lord Plymouth would be most grateful for any advice that the Foreign Office can give him on the point whether, if a definite request were made officially or otherwise, there would be any chance of the Museum authorities in Berlin being prepared to return one or both of these Stools to the Oba. If it was a question of only one of them being returned the Oba would prefer to have the second one, i.e. that catalogued as No. 20296. Lord Plymouth understands that the Oba would, if necessary, be willing to pay for the Stool or Stools, apart from the cost of transport, etc., but do not know what their market value would be. [...]

[CO 583/211/10]

S. Gaselee -> F. J. Pedler 11. 5. 1936

FOREIGN Office, S.W. 1.
11th May, 1936

Dear Pedler,

We have now received a reply to the letter which we addressed to our Embassy at Berlin (vide my „compliments“ letter to you of the 24th ultimo and your letter to Crowe of 3rd March last) regarding the question of the recovery of two stools taken away from Berlin at the time of the 1897 Expedition and now in the Berlin State Museum.

Our Embassy note that the stools were for some time in the possession of the late Sir Ralph Moor, and point out that it would be of assistance to them if we could let them know how the Berlin Museum obtained the stools. If the Museum bought them at Christie's our Embassy would have to make a careful approach, since it is doubtful whether the Museum would readily entertain the suggestion that they should part with objects which they had legitimately purchased in this country. If, on the other hand, the stools were given either direct to the Museum or to a German who subsequently gave them to the Museum, our Embassy would be in a much stronger position. Moreover, if the Museum bought the stools - which seems the most likely hypothesis - the purchase price would give our Embassy an indication of their market value.

If you could furnish me with any additional information on the subject, I should be most grateful.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Gaselee

[CO 583/211/10]

H. Vischer -> G. Creasy 18. 5. 1936.

I think there can be no doubt that the Stools were bought in this country quite legitimately either by the Museum or an agent. As to the present value I think you should ask Mr. Oldman.

Hanns Vischer, 18.5.

[CO 583/211/10]

W. O. Oldman -> G. Creasy 22. 5. 1936

Dear Sir,

I reply to yours of the 19th ulti. The question of value of the Benin bronze Stools is a very difficult one as I believe they are unique. £500 to £1000 could be a moderate approximate value to place on them: I would willingly give £500 myself now. I doubt very much if Berlin would consider parting with either.

Would not some form of Galvanoplastic metal exact reproduction meet the case? - Providing the Museum would agree.

Yours faithfully,

W. O. Oldman

[CO 583/211/10]

S. Gaselee -> F. J. Pedler 28.9.1936

28th September 1936

Dear Pedler,

With reference to your letter of 25th May last and to connected correspondence regarding the two Benin stools, our Embassy at Berlin have now ascertained that the German Museum authorities are unwilling to give away or even sell the stools, which they regard

as of great cultural value.

They would, however, be prepared to have replicas made - either as casts or by other practicable means - in Berlin, if the Oba of Benin would defray the expenses involved.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Gaselee

[CO 583/211/10]

W. O. Oldman -> G. Creasy 12. 10. 1936

12. Oct. 36

Dear Sir,

I regret delay in answering your letter of the 3th ulti. having been away from home.

I regret I am unable to give you such an approximate estimate of cost of making reproduction of the Benin bronze Stools.

I would suggest that the Berlin Museum Authorities could put you in touch with a firm in Germany who would make first class reproduction and give you an estimate direct.

The Galvanoplastic pieces I mentioned were made by a firm in Athens and were wonderful reproduction of Mycenaean Armes, Masks, Bowls, Vases, etc; Some were on view at the British Museum, I have a silver bowl myself.

I am your faithfully

W.O. Oldman

[CO 583/211/10]

F. J. Pedler -> S. Gaselee 15.10.1936

Dear Sir Stephen,

Thank you for your letter L 6255/1447/405, of the 26th of September, about the two Benin stools. Our West African Department here would be glad if you would be good enough to convey their thanks through the proper channels to the German Museums authorities for their kind offer to have replicas made in Berlin.

We feel here that before we write to the Oba we should be able to give him some idea of how much it will cost to make a reproduction of the stools. We have been in touch with a man in London who is an authority on galvanoplastic reproduction and he advises that it would be quite impossible for anyone in London to give even an approximate estimate of what the cost of reproducing the stools in Berlin would be.

In these circumstances, would it be possible for you to get an estimate for us from the Berlin Museum authorities, if possible giving separate figures for the two stools?

I am afraid this means a lot of trouble for you, but as I think you are aware, Lord Plymouth, to whom the Oba originally made his request, feels very strongly both on personal and on political grounds that we should do our best to please the Oba on this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Pedler

[CO 583/219]

?? -> J.A. Maybin 18.3.1937

Dear Maybin,

[...] It took us a long time to get on the track of these Stools, and we had to make many enquiries before we found out for certain that they are now in the State Museum in Berlin, the authorities of which apparently purchased them at a sale in London some time between 1910 and 1912. We then asked the Foreign Office to find out ascertain for us whether there was any possibility of the German authorities being prepared to restore one or both of Stools to the Oba, but, as we rather expected, the Museum will not part with them and [...] it is not practicable to press them to do so. It occurred to us then that the Oba might like to have replicas of the Stools in default of the originals and we again approached the Foreign Office and asked them if they could find out from Berlin what would be the cost of having copies made.

I now enclose a translation of the detailed estimates which have been received from our Embassy in Berlin. [...]

I shall be grateful if you will let me know whether the Oba wishes steps taken to have replicas made of one or both of the Stools in question and, if so, which of the alternative methods of reproduction he would prefer.

I may add that Creasy mentioned this matter to Whiteley in his letter of the 25th of May last regarding the visit to Benin of Dr. von Sydow.

[CO 583/219]

J. B. Sidebotham -> J. A. Maybin 17. 11. 1937

Dear Maybin,

I am sending to you the photographs of the Benin Stools in the Berlin State Museum for which you asked in your letter *to Williams* of the 23rd July.

You will doubtless let us know in due course whether the Oba decides that he would like to have replicas made of the Stools.

We are expecting to hear later from the Foreign Office how much it cost to have the photographs made.

Your sincerely,

J. B. Sidebotham

[CO 583/228]

G. C. Whiteley -> J. B. Sidebotham 23. 4. 1938

Nigeria Secretariat, Lagos Nigeria. 23 April, 1938

Dear Sidebotham,

In reply to your letter to Maybin of the 17th of November last (reference No. 30134/37) the Oba wants to have replicas of the two stools and wishes them to be reproduced in bronze in the second of the two methods described in paragraph III of the estimates forwarded with Dowie's letter of the 18th of March, 1937, viz. [...] The Oba would be grateful if the inscriptions set out below, together with the dates on which the replicas were completed, could be engraved underneath the stools so that they may be out of sight when the stools are standing upright.

(i) On the first stool, viz. No. III C 20 296 : -

„Oba Akenzua II. Replica of Oba Esigie's Stool. 1897 Benin Expedition war trophy now in the State Museum in Berlin.“

(ii) On the second stool, viz. No. III C 20 295 : -

„Oba Akenzua II. Replica of Oba Eresoyen's Stool. 1897 Benin Expedition war trophy now in the State Museum in Berlin.“

I am sorry it has taken so long to ascertain his wishes.

Your sincerely, G. C. Whiteley

[CO 583/228]

G. C. Whiteley -> J. B. Sidebotham 28.7.1938

*Nigerian Secretariat, Lagos Nigeria, 28 July, 1938**Dear Sidebotham,*

Referring to your letter of the 24th of May (reference No. 30134/38) the Oba of Benin confirms that he will bear the whole of the expenses involved in the production of replicas of the two stools. Many thanks for all the trouble you have taken in the matter.

Yours sincerely,

G. C. Whiteley

[CO 583/228]

R. Bloore -> J. B. Sidebotham 4.11.1938

Foreign Office, S.W.1., 4th November, 1938

Dear Sidebotham,

With reference to your letter No. 30134/38 of the 10th June last to Sir Stephen Gaselee who is at present on leave, regarding the stools for the Oba of Benin, the German Ministry for Foreign Affairs have informed our Embassy at Berlin that the stools are now ready and that the Crown Agents for the Colonies should write regarding shipment to the Generaldirektion der Staatlichen Museen, Berlin, mentioning that the matter has been the subject of correspondence between the Embassy and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

The Embassy have asked the Ministry to send them the bill for making the replicas, and presume that the Crown Agents will themselves settle the costs of packing and shipping.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Bloore

[CO 583/258/4]

S. Gaselee -> J. B. Sidebotham 5. 1. 1939

Foreign Office, S.W.1., 5th January, 1939

Dear Sidebotham,

With reference to Bloore's letter No. L 7491/3525/405 of the 4th November regarding the replicas of stools for the Oba of Benin, we are now informed by our Embassy at Berlin that they have paid to the State Museum the sum of 1582.00 marks, which included the cost of packing. This sum represents, in addition to the total of 1492 marks given in your letter No. 30134/38 of the 13th May last, 90 marks for the inscriptions desired by the Oba.

The sterling equivalent of 1582 marks will be recovered from the colonial Office in due course in the usual way.

The Embassy added that the Museum had written direct to the Crown Agents regarding the transport of the stools.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Gaselee

[CO 583/258/4]

P. Guedalla -> N. Sabine 17. 6. 1943

The Laundry, Easton Park, Dunmow, Essex.

N. Sabine, Esq, Colonial Office, 17th. June 1943

My dear Sabine,

I mentioned to the S.[ecretary] of S.[tate] yesterday a matter which arose during my visit to Benin last month. It appears that the Germans have come by two metal seats of peculiar sanctity in some irregular fashion, and they are now lodged in a Berlin museum. The irregularity of their acquisition may be inferred from the fact that their religious significance is such that Benin subsequently paid a sum or no less than £130 for replicas, and it is reasonable to conclude that the Oba would never have parted with them knowingly.

When I was told this by the Resident, I suggested that the C.O. might well ask for the inclusion of these sacred objects in any list of works of art to be returned by the Germans after the war. We agreed that the idea was a sound one, and that we should ask the Oba how such a proceeding would be viewed by his people. When I saw him on the following day, I put the matter to him; and his reply indicated that the return of the seats would give the greatest satisfaction. I informed him that I would make the suggestion to the C.O., emphasizing my wholly unofficial status; and some indication of the effect of this small measure on our fellow-subjects in Benin is afforded by the fact that the Resident and I were there-upon privileged to make a longer and more thorough inspection of the Oba's residence and historic treasures than has hitherto been made either by the Resident or any other official in Nigeria to whom I spoke.

I trust, therefore, that an effort may be made to afford this measure of satisfaction to our fellow-subjects at Benin in relation to two objects to which they attach a deep religious significance. The latter consideration should, I think, avail to differentiate them from mere works of art; and it may be possible to gratify the aesthetic sensibilities of Berlin by exchanging them for the replicas. I should be glad if you would let Mr. Summer at Benin know that I have discharged my duty in this matter; and if the C. O. takes any further steps in the matter, I have no doubt that the Oba would receive the news of it with gratitude.

Yours vers sincerely,

Phillip Guedalla

[CO 583/258/4]

N. Sabine -> P. Guedalla 12. 7. 1943

Qto. for Mr. Sabine's signature, Downing street, 12. July, 1943

I am sorry not to have replied before to your letter of the 17th June about the Benin Stools. I have had to look into our records, and I find that the Oba has already made representations for their return on a previous occasion, when Lord Plymouth was very anxious to do what he could to get the stools back, and the matter was thoroughly gone into at that time. It was then discovered that this stools had been purchased perfectly legitimately by the Berlin State Museum at an open sale in London in 1910. It seems that they were included in the estate of Sir Ralph Moor, former High Commissioner for the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, who presumably „acquired“ them on the occasion of the deposition of the present Oba's grandfather in 1897.

The Secretary of State is naturally anxious that we should do what we can to get the stools back to Benin. But I think you will agree that they cannot be regarded as being in the same category as the art treasures pillaged by the Germans during the present war, and that the only way to recover them would be by repurchase. From the previous correspondence it looks as though they might be expensive and that the State Museum might be unwilling to resell. They refused to do so when approached in 1936, although they did afford facilities for the making of the replicas which the Oba now has in his possession. I don't think that anything can be done about these stools until after the war, but the Secretary of State has given instructions that the matter should then be taken up and that every effort should be made to get the stools back for the Oba.

We will arrange for the position to be explained to Summer at Benin, so that he will be able to tell the Oba that everything possible will be done when the time comes.

Yours sincerely,

... N. Sabine

[CO 583/258/4]

N. Sabine -> P. Guedalla 17. 7. 1943

17th. July 1943

Dear Sabine,

Many thanks for your letter of 12th. July about the Benin Stools. I fully understand the position as you state it, and agree that the course you suggest is the sole practicable one.

Yours sincerely,

Phillip Guedalla