

## The attar casket of Tipu Sultan<sup>1</sup>

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The attar casket, 1904,1006.1.a-I, British Museum

This intricately-decorated filigree casket is currently on display in the Addis Gallery of Islamic Art, located by the north entrance of the [British Museum](http://www.britishmuseum.org). Inside are six small bottles, a ladle and a funnel which bears a minute Persian inscription on the rim. Two documents written by one-time owners of the casket – one an undated letter; the other an incomplete note – give tantalising and fragmentary references to the casket's provenance from the palace of Tipu Sultan (c.1750-1799) in Seringapatam (present-day Srirangapatna).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search\\_the\\_collection\\_database/search\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectid=249650&partid=1&searchText=1904%2c1006.1.a&fromADBC=ad&toADBC=ad&numpages=10&orig=%2fresearch](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?objectid=249650&partid=1&searchText=1904%2c1006.1.a&fromADBC=ad&toADBC=ad&numpages=10&orig=%2fresearch)

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Document 1:

At the taking of Seringapatam in 1799 my Uncle Mr Fraser was present and afterwards appointed Prize Agent to the treasures, jewels, etc there found. This silver coffer was in Tipoo's own room and with a silken carpet and coral chaplet was sent by HF to his mother at Mt Capper and were by her given to her youngest daughter Charlotte Catherine, From whom the boxe was given to her son J M Heath who wished his youngest cousin H Fraser to have it as a family relic. His surviving sister Isabella A Heath now transfers it to HF as d...

August 11th 1846

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Document 2:

Woodfield Cottage, Wells Road, Bath, Oct 18

Dear Henry

I believe you are the discoverer of Hyder's name on the casket, & of course to an outsider who did not know its history it increases its value as a genuine historic relic. There was an article in a recent no. of 'The World' on Mr Lowe, there they spoke of two of the few relics of Tipoo's time preserved at his house, got by someone who had them at the seige of Seringapatam, one was a small drinking horn or flask of Rhinoceros horn found in his private apartments and both highly valued by their possessors.

With love ever your affect. cousin

Isabella A Heath

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These various pieces of material and documentary evidence allow us to track how the casket changed hands several times before its donation by Col. Henry Fraser to the Museum in 1904.

Many aspects of this object and its history piqued our interest: the enduring significance of Tipu Sultan, the particular attention paid by family members to transfer the casket between generations both in India and England as well as how material culture represented the legacy of East India Company family histories. This last aspect particularly reflects other family case studies in the East India Company at Home project.

The Persian inscription believed by the Frasers to refer to Hyder 'Ali<sup>3</sup>, Tipu Sultan's father (c.1722-1782) brought our attention to how this object might represent collections and connoisseurship as a means of establishing dynastic legitimacy not only by East India Company families, but also within the court of Mysore.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore its placement in the Islamic gallery alongside objects related to Mughal India prompted questions about the interpretation and representation of imperial stories within the British Museum.

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[%2fsearch\\_the\\_collection\\_database.aspx&currentPage=1](#) Accessed 10 May 2013. The casket's British Museum number is 1904,1006.1.a-i.

<sup>3</sup> Accepted spellings include 'Haidar', 'Haider', 'Hayday' and 'Hayder'. For consistency 'Hyder' will be used as on the letter attached to the casket.

<sup>4</sup> Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Conquest and Collecting in the East 1750 – 1850* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), p. 184.

### The casket's origins in eighteenth century India



The attar casket of Tipu Sultan, British Museum

The casket, which measures 13cm long, 9cm high and 8.5cm deep, is made entirely of fine, openwork silver and silver gilt filigree. The filigree consists of scrolling foliage, which on the sides of the casket is contained in repeated arched panels around a central stylised flower, highlighted by the use of flattened, gilded wire. The scrolling foliage continues across the hinged bevelled lid in smaller panels and bands. On the top of the lid is a central six-petal flower surrounded by a scalloped diamond in gilded, flattened wire which develops into a trefoil design. This design is mirrored on the base of the casket. The casket is raised up on four feet and would have been closed using the loop and palmette-shaped hinged lock, although almost no evidence is visible (wear or scratching) on the casket, which suggests it was not repeatedly locked shut. Both the feet and the hinged lock are decorated with scrolling foliage.

Inside the casket is an inserted panel with eight circular holes which separate and hold six silver bottles. Two smaller holes in the panel hold the silver funnel and ladle which accompany the bottles. The bottles, ladle and funnel are all made of highly polished silver, whilst the inserted panel is decorated with the same scrolling foliage seen on the exterior of the casket, indicating that the interior insert was made at the same time as the casket and was not a later addition.



Interior view of the Attar Casket

Most likely made in the eighteenth century, the casket is a combination of both European and Indian motifs and designs. The shape of the casket is typical of European filigree and silver work and is also seen in Mughal and Persian examples, whilst the scrolling decoration is common to Indian-made articles of this type. During the eighteenth century, with the growing engagement between the East and the West, artistic exchanges increasingly took place, not just in metal work but also painting, sculpture and architecture. Filigree production flourished in various centres in the Indian subcontinent during the eighteenth century, including cities such as Goa and Karimnagar in the Deccan. Susan Stronge suggests that the casket possibly comes from the Deccan, although the shape bears a strong resemblance to boxes and caskets known to have been produced in Goa and the decorative motif of the scrolling foliage is also found on filigree examples produced in southern and eastern India.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Stronge, *Tipu's Tigers* (London: V&A Publishing, 2009), p. 50, fig 50.

The use of silver filigree throughout the construction of the casket, including the base, which in other examples was more commonly made of solid silver sheets, makes the casket lightweight and easy to handle and transport. Caskets such as these are often referred to as ‘attardans’ or scent holders, and would have been used to store perfumed oils and water. This then explains the presence of the funnel and the ladle which would have been used to decant liquids into and out of the silver bottles. Perfumed oils and waters, such as rose water were typically used during festivals, dinners and social events to create a luxurious and fragrant atmosphere as well as having a more intimate use such as perfuming the body and clothes. The intended use of the casket as a holder of perfumed liquids, used mainly by the elite, and the inclusion of a hinged lock, indicates that the casket was most likely regarded as a luxury item both within the court of Mysore and European society.

We know from the documents which accompany the casket that Henry Fraser identified a minute stamp on the silver funnel, translating the Persian inscription as ‘Hyder’ which he read as a reference to Hyder ‘Ali, Tipu Sultan’s father, reinforcing the Frasers’ belief in the connection between the casket and the family of Tipu Sultan. Interestingly a reappraisal of the inscription has highlighted that what Fraser read as ‘Hyder’ can also be translated as ‘Haider’ or more importantly ‘Haydar’.<sup>6</sup> Haydar can be both a personal name, meaning lion, or as Stronge states, ‘Haydar’ is the title given to the Prophet’s son-in-law ‘Ali (the first Shi’ite Imam).<sup>7</sup> Stronge argues that in instances where ‘Haydar’ (حيدر) or an ‘H’ (ح) are written, stamped or inlaid onto items from Tipu Sultan’s court, Tipu was referring to Haydar the Prophet’s son-in-law rather than his father.<sup>8</sup> The ‘Haydar’ is surrounded by a bubri or babri pattern, a stylised tiger stripe which appeared on numerous objects associated with Tipu, including guns, textiles, swords, painting and architectural decoration.<sup>9</sup>



The casket’s funnel, with inscription

The tiger became so closely associated with Tipu Sultan that he was and still is often referred to as the ‘Tiger of Mysore’. This use of the tiger as a symbol was not just a reference to the Islamic and Iranian belief in the tiger and lion being interchangeable symbols of power and religion, but also reflected Hindu traditions in which [Shiva is often shown seated on or wearing a tiger skin](#) in reference to his ascetic nature. Although Tipu Sultan and Hyder ‘Ali were both Muslims, the kingdom which they ruled was predominantly Hindu and the use of the tiger, an animal and motif connected to one of the most well-known and popular Hindu deities, may have produced a positive association with the local populace towards these new rulers. In this regard, the use of ‘Haydar’ within the tiger stripe produced multiple allusions and associations on both a local and

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<sup>6</sup> The authors are grateful to Dr. Vesta Curtis and Paramdip Khara, Coins and Medals department, British Museum, for assisting in the reviewing of the stamp’s translation.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Imam’ is a title used for Islamic religious leaders and most commonly refers to those who lead prayers in mosques. ‘Ali was the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. Shi’ites, members of the Shi’a branch of Islam, believe that ‘Ali was the first Imam of Islam and the heir of Muhammad.

<sup>8</sup> Stronge, *Tipu’s Tigers*, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Another example of this stamp being used on items from Tipu’s court can be found in a jewelled Navratna pendant which went to auction at Bonhams on the 28<sup>th</sup> September 2011. <http://www.bonhams.com/auctions/19576/lot/163N/> Accessed 13 May 2013.

global level. These varied meanings not only allied Tipu Sultan and his kingdom to the local population and so helped to maintain a stable populace, but also demonstrated Tipu's religious devotion. This is also mirrored somewhat in the 'Haydar' stamp: when translated by Henry Fraser, he took it to mean 'Hyder 'Ali' and so confirmed devotion to a family dynasty, not only for the Fraser family in their acquisition of the object but also as suggested by Tipu's inheritance of the casket from his father. Although Henry Fraser most probably missed the religious association of the stamp which Stronge argues was its genuine meaning, the fact that he was researching and studying this casket shows an attempt to understand the object in his possession, not just as a decorative item but also its history and the inference of its inscription.

### Material culture from Seringapatam

Tipu Sultan, born on 20 November 1750 to Hyder 'Ali's second wife, Fatima, or Fakr-un-Nissa, was well-known during his lifetime as one of the most formidable opponents of the East India Company and his reputation endured throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Both his and his father's resistance to European expansion effectively kept the Company at bay for decades through their command of large and well-resourced armed forces in battle. The fall of Mysore and Tipu's death at the battle of Seringapatam in 1799 became symbolic of East India Company domination in the subcontinent, all the more potent as Tipu was a respected leader who had resisted for so long and died heroically defending his city.



Portrait of Tipu Sultan by anonymous Indian artist, c. 1790, V&A IS.266-1952,  
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O16909/tipu-sultan-painting-unknown/>

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<sup>10</sup> Anne Buddle, 'The Tiger and the Thistle', in *The Tiger and the Thistle: Tipu Sultan and the Scots in India, 1760-1800*, ed. Anne Buddle (Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 1999), p. 10.



*The finding the body of Tippoo Sultaun*, etching after Robert Ker Porter, the British Museum: 1872,1008.2812

Beyond the inevitable political shifts which occurred in the wake of the defeat of ‘the Tiger of Mysore’, the impact of the battle was transmitted tangibly to Britain by the dissemination of images and the material legacy of the encounter. Artists in Britain were inspired by the dramatic events, imagining key moments in the battle and depicting these in paintings and in prints which were popular and circulated widely.<sup>11</sup> Robert Ker Porter created one of the most spectacular renditions of Seringapatam in the form of a 21 foot high and 120 foot long semi-circular painted panorama, first displayed in the Lyceum in London which then toured Britain and the US.<sup>12</sup>

The seizure of material from the palace and city by the East India Company army had an even wider impact. The extent of the looting and plunder of the palace was vast and unprecedented. According to Moienuddin: “The manner in which Tipu’s palace was pillaged for his priceless possessions, handkerchiefs and footwear included, has no parallel in Indian history.”<sup>13</sup> The Prize Committee, officially charged with the task of allocating Tipu’s possessions and the contents of his treasury, noted that: “There was everything that power could command or money could purchase.”<sup>14</sup> The most celebrated of these objects is of course the so-called [Tipu’s Tiger](#) – the mechanical organ which when wound creates a roaring sound as the wooden tiger mauls an English soldier. This object, along with several others, was donated to the East India Museum and displayed in its galleries in Leadenhall Street, reportedly causing women to faint at

<sup>11</sup> Pauline Rohatgi, ‘From Pencil to Panorama: Tipu in Pictorial Perspective’, in *The Tiger and the Thistle: Tipu Sultan and the Scots in India, 1760-1800*, ed. Anne Buddle (Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 1999), p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51–52.

<sup>13</sup> Mohammad Moienuddin, *Sunset at Srirangapatam: After the Death of Tipu Sultan* (Hyderabad, India: Orient Longman, 2000), p. xii.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Buddle, ‘The Tiger and the Thistle’, p. 37.

the sound of the tiger's growl.<sup>15</sup> In 1880, when objects from the renamed India Museum were dispersed after its closure, the tiger was moved to the South Kensington Museum, later the V&A, where it remains on display.

The vast majority of the material from the siege and the Prize sales, however, was not presented to the Company but remained in private hands. As Anne Buddle writes, 'Any Seringapatam souvenir was carefully preserved.'<sup>16</sup> Moienuddin attempted in 2000 to trace as many of these objects as possible and notes not only the quantity in museums across Europe and the US but also the large number which remain still within the private collections of the descendants of army officers present at Seringapatam.<sup>17</sup> In this context, material culture represented family connections to India and such associations, as this project seeks to demonstrate, became incorporated into familial identities. Spectacular pieces included the [tent of Tipu Sultan](#) which was installed in Powis Castle, the home of Lord and Lady Clive, the latter travelling to Seringapatam in 1800 where she 'collected obsessively.'<sup>18</sup> A large number of smaller pieces were taken. Two such objects – [a sword and a ring](#) – typical of this type of material which purportedly belonged to Tipu Sultan are in the British Museum collections and currently on display in the Enlightenment gallery. Manuscripts, jewellery, armour, cabinets, silverware, porcelain and weaponry were amassed in Britain, many of which were described as the personal property of Tipu Sultan.<sup>19</sup> As Jasanoff writes: "To judge from all the objects in collections today that are said to have been found on Tipu's body, the king had staggered into battle swaddled in turbans, padded jackets, helmets and sashes; slung around with pistols, muskets, daggers, and sabers; and packed up with a baffling assortment of trinkets and bibelots – from a folding wooden telescope to a gold European pocket watch."<sup>20</sup> She highlights the importance of direct connection to Tipu's body to objects gaining specific value as relics. The careful preservation of these objects in many families, evidence of which can be seen in the exhaustive work of Moienuddin, indicates how attachment to Tipu remains significant to this day. These myths which located the provenance of the pieces as personal possessions of Tipu Sultan, whether established by the soldiers who seized them or later embellished within family folklore, indicate the particular significance of proximity to the great ruler and the family's direct involvement in the iconic battle. Such myths can be seen as a form of self-affirmation by EIC families which became part of their communal memory – the object providing authenticity to the narrative of acquisition. They also ensured that Tipu's legendary status endured – it was vital that he was seen as a powerful foe in order to maintain the significance of the British victory. Interestingly, Moienuddin notes that Wellesley ordered all Tipu's personal belongings to be returned to England to prevent them "from being distributed as 'sacred relics of Tipu Sultan the Martyr', lest they be used to mobilise the people against the expansionist policy of the British".<sup>21</sup> By returning them to Britain they became relics of a different kind – from the palace in Mysore to British domestic settings, they reinforced the importance of family service to the expanding Empire.

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<sup>15</sup> See also Stronge, *Tipu's Tigers* and Sadiya Qureshi, 'Tipu's Tiger and Images of India, 1799-2010', in *Curating Empire: Museums and the British Imperial Experience*, ed. John McAleer and Sarah Longair (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 207–224.

<sup>16</sup> Anne Buddle, 'Myths, Melodrama and the Twentieth Century', in *The Tiger and the Thistle: Tipu Sultan and the Scots in India, 1760-1800*, ed. Anne Buddle (Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 1999), p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> Moienuddin, *Sunset at Srirangapatam*, p. xii.

<sup>18</sup> Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire*, pp. 187, 186–196. See also Nancy K. Shields, *Birds of Passage: Henrietta Clive's Travels in South India 1798-1801* (London: Eland, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Buddle, 'Myths, Melodrama and the Twentieth Century', p. 65.

<sup>20</sup> Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire*, p. 182.

<sup>21</sup> Moienuddin, *Sunset at Srirangapatam*, p. 33.

Examples of such objects are referred to in the second of the documents which accompany the casket, where Isabella Heath commented on “an article in a recent no. of ‘The World’ on Mr Lowe”. This refers to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Robert Lowe, later Viscount Sherbrooke. Lowe’s distant cousin, Sir John Coape Sherbrooke, who rose to become Governor-General of British North America in 1816, had earlier in his career led one of the battalions at Seringapatam. Throughout his life he retained “the curved sword of Tippoo Sultaun, with its blade inlaid with mother-of-pearl; and his rhinoceros-horn drinking-cup, known as the ‘poison cup,’ a short, flat bottle, which he exclusively used to avert being poisoned. Also Tippoo’s bridle, saddle, and holsters.”<sup>22</sup> These items evidently passed to Lowe, who had as a boy had referred to Sir John as ‘Uncle’.<sup>23</sup> The reference to the ‘poison cup’ draws attention to contemporary British perceptions of ‘Oriental’ courts as dens of intrigue and danger.

### **The Fraser family: living between Britain and India**

The casket was donated to the British Museum by Col. Henry Fraser in 1904 and the references in the documents allow us to trace its journey from Seringapatam to the Museum via various members of the Fraser family. The ‘Uncle Fraser’ to whom the first note refers and who acquired the casket is General Hastings Fraser, mentioned by Major Alexander Allan in his account of the battle.<sup>24</sup> Fraser was one of ten children of Captain Charles Fraser and Isabella Hook. Charles Fraser had previously served in the Marines and joined the East India Company in 1762 taking his first post in Madras.<sup>25</sup> He returned on leave in 1768 when he and Hook married and they returned together to Madras the following year. Their eldest child, born in 1771 at Vellore, was named Hastings “in acknowledgement of several acts of kindness rendered to the father by Warren Hastings”, then member of the Council at Madras.<sup>26</sup> The future Governor-General wrote to the parents thanking them for this honour offering the gift of a shawl. Charles died in 1795 while acting as General of Division of the Company Army. His widow Isabella lived for a further twenty-six years, dying at Mount Capper, Cuddalore in 1821.

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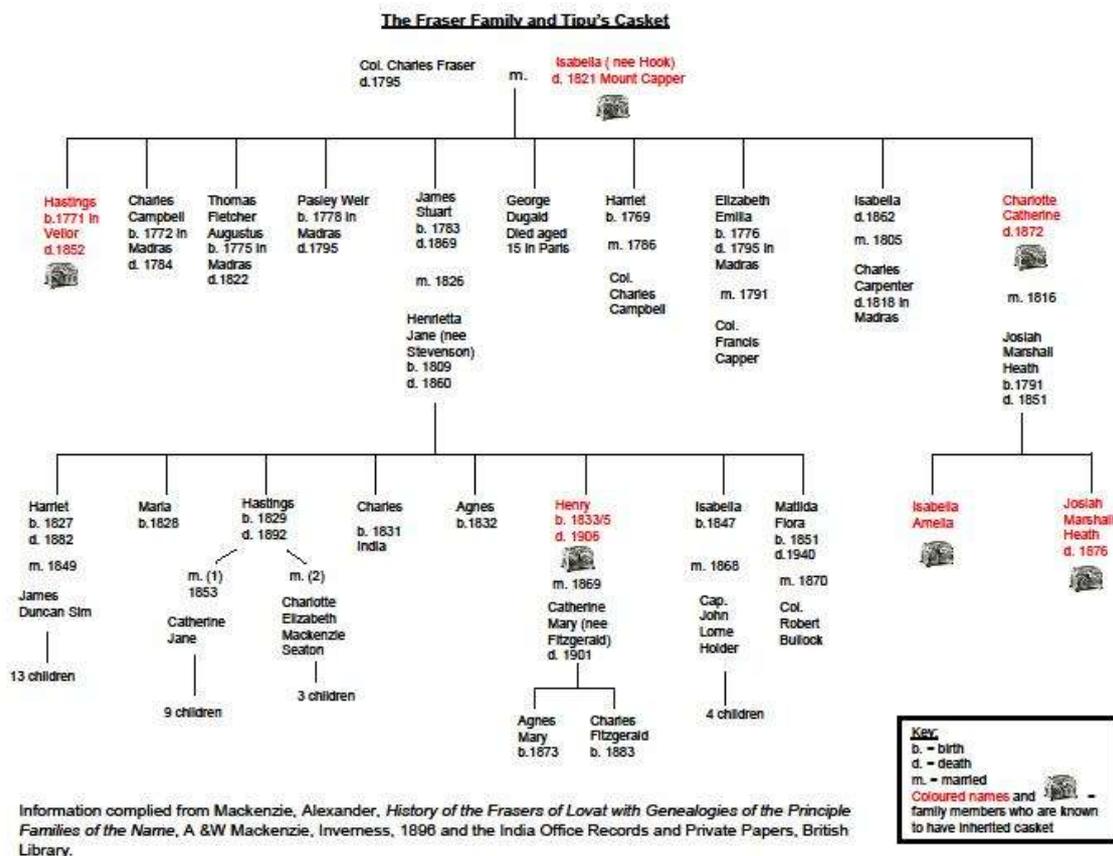
<sup>22</sup> A. Patchett Martin, *Life and letters of the Right Honourable Robert Lowe, Viscount Sherbrooke, with a memoir of Sir John Coape Sherbrooke*, (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1893), pp. 596 – 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 539.

<sup>24</sup> Major Allan's *Account of his Interview with the Princes in the Palace of Seringapatam, and of finding the Body of the late Tippoo Sultaun* in Beatson, A. *A View of the Origin and Conduct of the War with Tippoo Sultaun; comprising a narrative of the operations of the army under the command of Lieutenant-General George Harris, and of the siege of Seringapatam* (London: G. & W. Nichol, 1800). Appendix No. XLII pp. cxxvii-cxxxii.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Frasers of Lovat with Genealogies of the Principal Families of the Name: To Which Is Added Those of Dunballoch and Phopachy* (Inverness: Mackenzie, 1896), p. 656.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 657.



Of their ten children, three died before reaching adulthood – one, Pasley Weir, drowning on the way to join his father as a cadet in India. Their eighth child, Elizabeth Fraser, aged only 15, married Colonel Francis Capper in 1791. Although Elizabeth died without issue in 1795 the families appear to have remained closely connected.<sup>27</sup> Francis Capper commissioned the Capper House to be built around 1800 at Cuddalore.<sup>28</sup> It was the heart of the army campus and the first residency constructed on the beachfront north of St Thomé.<sup>29</sup> The reference within the first document accompanying the casket suggests that Isabella Fraser moved into the house during her widowhood.



Photograph of old Capper House from *The Hindu* in 2007 which describes how after becoming part of Queen Mary's College, it fell into disrepair and was gradually dismantled:

<http://www.hindu.com/mp/2007/10/22/stories/2007102250230500.htm> Accessed 11 May 2012.

The house at Mount Capper seems to have been the centre of family activity. Charles and Isabella's ninth daughter, also named Isabella, married there in 1805 to Charles Carpenter (brother of Charlotte Carpenter who in 1797 married the novelist Walter Scott, who himself admired Tipu Sultan, remarking that he possessed greater resolve and “dogged spirit of resolution” than Napoleon, dying “manfully upon the breach of his capital city with his sabre clenched in his hand”.)<sup>30</sup> Their youngest

<sup>27</sup> According to *the Hindu* article, Francis Capper was also a noted geographer.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Davis Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras, 1640 – 1800* (London: John Murray, 1913), pp. 70-1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>30</sup> Written in 1814 at the time of Napoleon's abdication, quoted in Iain Gordon Brown, 'Griffins, Nabobs and a Seasoning of Curry Powder: Walter Scott and the Indian Theme in Life and Literature', in *The Tiger and the Thistle: Tipu Sultan and the Scots in India, 1760-1800*, ed. Anne Buddle (Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 1999), p. 79. See also p. 76-7 for details of Scott's interaction with the Carpenter family.

daughter, Charlotte Catherine, also married at Capper House in 1816 to Marshall Heath – also referred to in the first document.<sup>31</sup>

Hastings Fraser, the original acquirer of the casket, distinguished himself within the army after joining in 1788, rising to a high rank before 1799. In 1797 he sailed to Penang on the abandoned Manilla expedition and became a captain later that year. He was only 28 when he led his regiment against Tipu Sultan in 1799. As mentioned in the document with the casket, he was nominated as one of the Prize Agents who were tasked with distributing the treasury of Tipu Sultan. The note records that, of the items he himself received, he sent this “silver coffer ... from Tipoo’s own room”, a silk carpet and a string of coral beads (the ‘chaplet’) to his mother at Capper house.

Hastings Fraser’s fine leadership at the taking of the Island of Bourbon (Réunion Island) in 1810 was recognised by his own corps, who presented him with a valuable sword, and the so-called native regiments, who gave him a silver plate. These were the first items mentioned in his will where Hastings Fraser bequeathed them to his brother James with instructions that they were to be passed on to his nephew (James’s son) and namesake.<sup>32</sup> He died after receiving several military offices in 1852 in London, aged 83, unmarried.<sup>33</sup>

Charles and Isabella Fraser’s fifth son, James Stuart, who inherited the estate on Hastings’s death, was also a distinguished East India Company officer, who at one stage was responsible for transporting the Princes of Mysore (the descendants of Hyder ‘Ali and Tipu Sultan whose household, as Margot Finn has shown, was a complicated and expensive undertaking for the Company) to Bengal in 1807. Rising to the position of British Resident at the Court of the Nizam of Hyderabad in 1839, he remained in India until 1853 after resigning the previous year due to a disagreement with the Marquis of Dalhousie over the Company policy of expansion into Berar. His marriage to Henrietta Stevenson, daughter of another significant Company family, had also taken place at Cuddalore. Of their eight children, Hastings was the eldest, named after his uncle discussed above. It was their third son Henry who finally received the casket.<sup>34</sup> Their fourth daughter Harriet, one of their five daughters, had thirteen children – several of whom served in imperial territories.

Before the casket came into Henry Fraser’s hands, the document indicates that Marshall and Charlotte Heath’s son, Josiah Marshall Heath received the casket from Charlotte. Josiah spent his early years in India and was notable for his attempt to establish iron and steel manufacturing plants in the Madras Presidency.<sup>35</sup> It was Josiah who felt it appropriate that Henry Fraser receive that casket, which we learn from the document was undertaken by his sister Isabella Heath. This Isabella is the author of the second of the documents accompanying the casket. Her document, though undated, notes the intriguing detail that it was Henry Fraser who observed the ‘Hyder ‘Ali’ stamp. As discussed earlier, this stamp is minute and would have required a magnifying glass and expertise in reading in Persian script to decipher. We can then infer that the object was not only a ‘family relic’ with anecdotal history attached, but also one which was subject to close

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<sup>31</sup> *The Edinburgh Annual Register for 1816, Vol. 9* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable Co., 1820) p. ccccxvi

<sup>32</sup> The National Archives: PROB 11/1082/388 ‘Will of Hugh Fraser, Commander of the Ship Hastings in the Honourable East India Companies Service’.

<sup>33</sup> Hastings Fraser’s grave is in Kensal Green cemetery in London. <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=pv&GRid=71385081&PIpi=43951669> accessed 15 April 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Hastings was notable for his service in Hyderabad and his attention to improving living conditions for local people: Mackenzie, *History of the Frasers of Lovat with Genealogies of the Principal Families of the Name*, p. 669.

<sup>35</sup> Shyam Rungta, *The Rise of Business Corporations in India, 1851-1900* (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), p. 276. See also Thomas Webster, *The Case of Josiah Marshall Heath, the Inventor and Introducer of the Manufacture of Welding Cast Steel from British Iron* (London: W Benning & Co, 1856).

scrutiny by its new owner, a source of fascination and perhaps pride, beyond being an exquisite piece of craftsmanship. Its enduring association with the celebrated Indian rulers and its particular passage between different family members – both male and female – suggests that it came in some respects to symbolise the family's multiple connections with the empire in India. Isabella Heath's letter implies that 'relics' from Seringapatam retained their emotive power to their British owners well into the late nineteenth century.

Henry Fraser did not donate any other objects to the BM and within the scope of this research, we have found no other references to objects donated by him to other institutions. In the absence of further evidence, we must be wary of drawing more than tentative conclusions. However, certain elements stand out. The fact that the casket was not simply passed down from one generation to another - in fact it was passed specifically to cousins to whom it was deemed of interest or relevance – suggests that it had heightened importance. Unlike a sword which might have automatically been passed between male relatives, this object was given first from son to mother, then mother to daughter, to her son, to his sister and finally to their male cousin. The enthusiasm by Lady Clive to acquire objects after Seringapatam suggests that collecting this material was taken up by men and women alike. The casket seems not to have acquired a specifically gendered meaning – a delicate and exquisite piece of craftsmanship designed to hold scented oils, bound up with a narrative of battle, bloodshed and empire-building.

### **The casket in the British Museum**

From the Acquisition Registers of the British Museum, which record all donations, purchases and bequests which enter the Museum from other institutions and private individuals, we can trace the casket's continued journey. As already mentioned, it was donated to the Museum by Henry Fraser in 1904 and the register records that on the 6 October 1904, Col Henry Fraser gave an 'attar khana, taken at siege of Seringapatam 1799, the native forces being under Tipoo Sultan, whose father's name (Hyder 'Ali) is on the silver funnel'.<sup>36</sup> The brief reference in the Acquisition Register and the fact that this was the only known object given by Fraser, whose family had had extensive ties to India over the previous century, shows that even when the casket was donated, its intended use, as a holder of perfumes and, most importantly, its historical connection to Tipu Sultan and his father, was intrinsic to its value to the Museum and possibly the reason for its donation.

At the time of the casket's donation, the Museum was divided into five collection departments: Coins and Medals, Prints and Drawings, Greek and Roman Antiquities, Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities and British and Mediaeval Antiquities. It was into this latter department that the casket was stored. The British and Mediaeval Antiquities department at this time housed vast amounts of material from across Asia alongside other material which did not fit neatly within the remaining four collection departments. The casket remained within the British and Medieval department until 1933 when the Oriental Antiquities department was formed. This department was renamed as the Asia department in 2003.

According to the Museum archives, the casket was first put on public display in 2002 in the Addis Gallery of Islamic Art and has remained on exhibition there since. Housed in a cabinet containing Mughal-era objects, its positioning in this display and in this context poses interesting questions regarding later Indian history and how it is explored within the Museum. The label which accompanies the casket briefly refers to its link to Tipu Sultan and the siege of Seringapatam, but does not elaborate on either Tipu Sultan or his father's place within South

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<sup>36</sup> British Museum Acquisition registers, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1904.

Asian history or on the casket's production or style. Although Hyder 'Ali and Tipu Sultan maintained correspondence with the Mughal rulers during the eighteenth century and had a mutual enemy in the British East India Company, both father and son acted and ruled their kingdom independent of the Mughal empire. Both maintained their own armies and issued their own coinage. The casket's positioning in a case dedicated to the Mughal period in India in which the casket is the only object not identified as made either for or connected to the Mughal courts, and the display of other Tipu related items held by the Museum in the Enlightenment gallery suggests that these objects and their associated object histories defy easy definition and placement.

### **Conclusion: shifting meanings**

The Fraser family shared many characteristics with other East India company families – the large numbers of children, some of whom perished young, others who led transient lives between Britain and the subcontinent, relocating for education, marriage and career prospects. Multiple generations maintained close connections – the Capper house in Cuddalore seems to have been a focal point for many of the Frasers and perhaps can be considered a 'home from home'. The casket was prized within this household as well as on its return to Britain. Further research into this house might reveal interesting commonalities and differences in domestic display strategies with those constructed by East India Company families on their return to Britain – the focus of the East India Company at Home project.

We have seen how even late into the nineteenth century, associations with the earlier successes of the East India Company retained their significance within individual families. The reference in Isabella Heath's letter to Mr Lowe suggests a kind of 'imagined community' of those families who shared an East India Company heritage with material culture providing evidence of these historic connections.

We do not know whether the casket continued to be used by the Frasers to store perfumed oils – it is quite possible that it shifted from being an object used for storage to an ornament. Henry Fraser evidently knew or found out its original use although again we do not know whether this knowledge came with the object or how much he researched himself. It is the layered meanings entailed within the casket which make it so beguiling. Moienuddin states that all objects from Tipu's palace "define very clearly the personality of Tipu and his tolerant religious perceptions and practices".<sup>37</sup> This casket is no exception as the derivation of the stamp design indicates. Recognising these many symbols demonstrates how a single object, and the shifting meaning and value associated with it in different continents and contexts, provides a view into cultural encounters and appropriation in India and Britain.

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<sup>37</sup> Moienuddin, *Sunset at Srirangapatam*, p. xii.