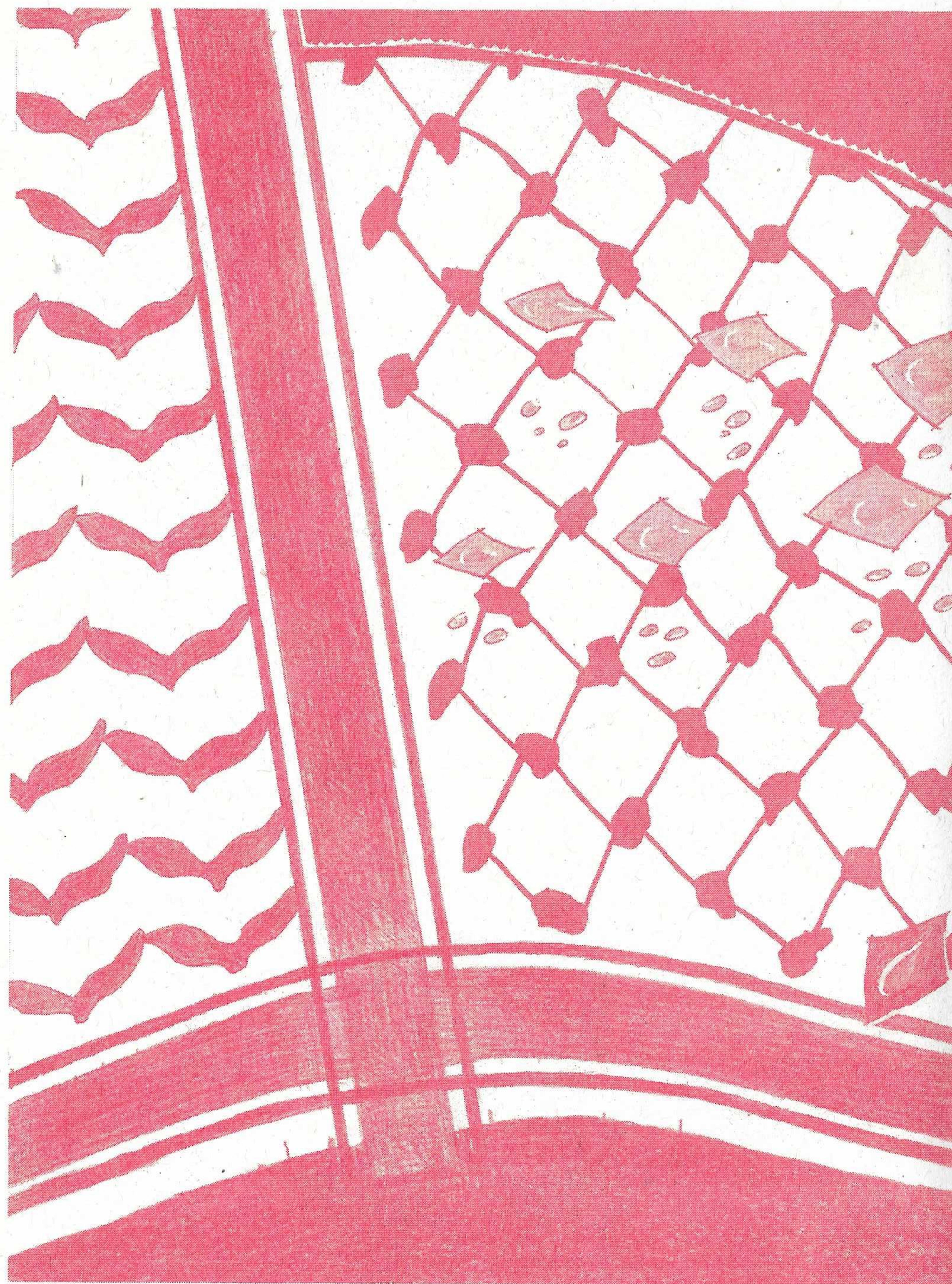


**BP AND THE BRITISH MUSEUM
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

BRITISH
COUNCIL
GENOVA

SPONSORED BY BP



Introduction

Energy Embargo for Palestine (EEFP) is an anti-imperialist organisation based in Britain fighting for an energy embargo from below. EEFP began in response to a call from Palestinian trade unions to disrupt energy flow to and from Israel. Our campaigns target British Petroleum (BP), an energy corporation supplying oil to the Zionist project, including throughout its genocide. In 2023, the British Museum (BM) announced it would not renew its 27-year sponsorship deal with BP. Yet, a few months later, the BM and BP re-entered their partnership with a 10-year £50 million funding deal. Corporate partnerships with cultural institutions portray themselves as integral to British social and cultural life, providing companies with the cultural cover required to operate.

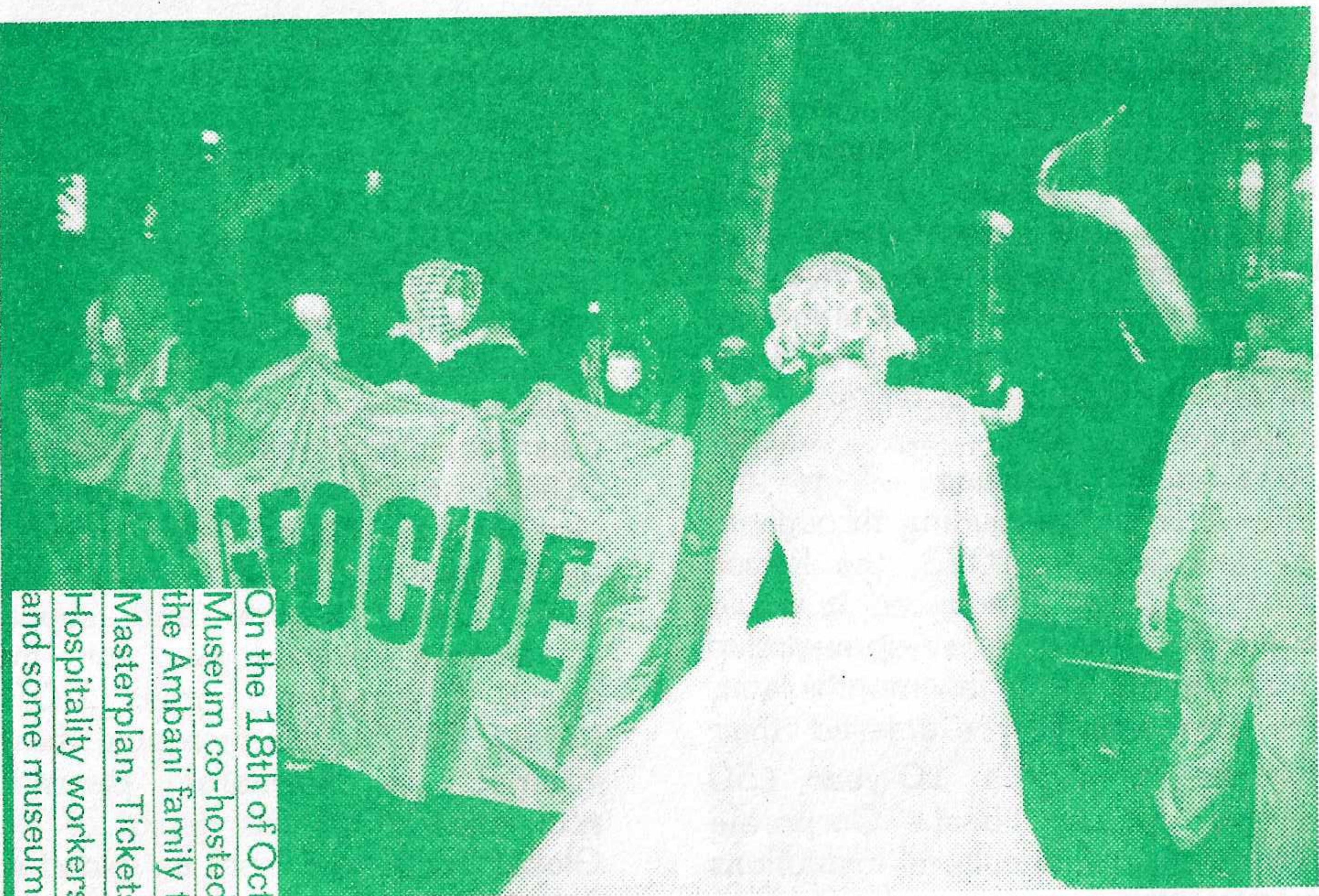
Our *British Museum, Drop BP!* campaign demands the British Museum: **1) SEVER ALL TIES TO BP**, including ending the £50m sponsorship deal and any other sub-contracts. **2) NO FUTURE FOSSIL FUEL FUNDING** and issue a public statement to commit. **3) RENAME BP LECTURE THEATRE** to deplatform BP from the museum. **4) LET WORKERS DECIDE** and oversee future funding opportunities, partnerships, and political events hosted at the museum.

The histories of BP and the BM are rooted in colonial extraction and intimately tied with British state interests. The colonial drive continues today, and BP exploits oilfields

worldwide while fuelling the genocidal Zionist regime. The BM meanwhile refuses to repatriate looted objects and remains a propaganda arm of the British state and corporate interests. In May 2025, the BM hosted the Israeli Independence 'genocide gala', organised by Tzipi Hotovely, Israel's ambassador to Britain who has celebrated the genocide, along with other far right figures (The New Arab, 2025). In October 2025 the BM also hosted a met gala style ball with the Ambani family, who prop up the fascist Modi regime and supply surveillance technologies for the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) (Greig, 2025). We disrupted these attempts to normalise parasitic accumulation off the backs of the Global South, and from the blood of Palestinians murdered by the Zionist regime.

The essays in this zine - The British Museum as a Tool of Empire (p. 4), The History of BP is The History of Imperialism (p. 8), Who Owns the British Museum? (p. 15), Their Future (p. 18), and Our Future (p. 21) - explore the museum's past, present, and future, and explain how the histories of BP and the BM are one and the same: colonial looting and extractivism for the profit of a select few. But the future of our cultural institutions, of Palestine, and of our climate, is continually being shaped. **We're taking back what's ours.**





On the 18th of October 2025, the British Museum co-hosted a met gala style ball with the Ambani Family to raise money for the BM Masterplan. Tickets were £2,000 each. Hospitality workers were paid £13 an hour, and some museum staff were asked to work at



The British Museum as a Tool of Empire

Colonial Collecting

The British Museum (BM) was established by an Act of Parliament in 1753. Throughout its history, the BM has operated as a key tool of the British state, acquiring colonial objects and manufacturing consent for British imperialism.

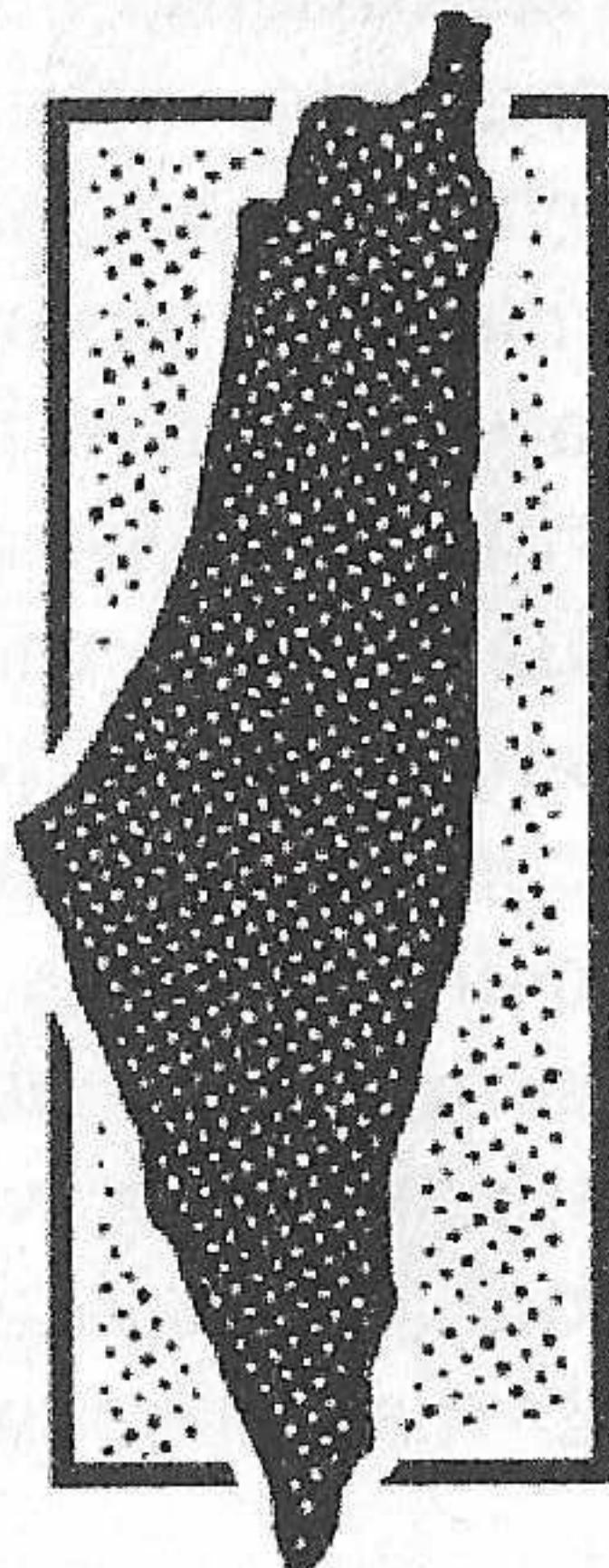
The museum's core collection *itself* is rooted in British imperialism. It belonged to Sir Hans Sloane, whose collecting activities were mainly funded by his wife's sugar plantation in Jamaica. Among 71,000 objects, botanical specimens gathered by people his family enslaved would go on to form the basis of the museum's first collections. In the centuries that followed, the BM benefitted from global British imperial presence, networks and infrastructure to rapidly grow its collection. The museum fuelled demand for colonial objects, buying artifacts at auctions, funding archaeological digs, and sending memos to colonial officers with collecting instructions (Layard, 1853).

A significant amount of the museum's objects were looted during brutal imperial military campaigns framed as 'punitive expeditions' made to punish anti-colonial resistance. In 1867, the museum sent staff member Richard Holmes as an archaeologist with the explicit mandate "to collect" during the Abyssinian Campaign, a military invasion of an Ethiopian

fortress that resulted in mass death. Holmes participated directly in looting and plundering the site, collecting thirty-two objects that were to be "put on display as soon as possible" (cited in; Cormack, 2025, p. 8).

Cultural genocide

Looting was an explicit policy during British colonial military expeditions, often involving sacred objects that were crucial to identity and culture. These expeditions were part of broader projects of physical and cultural genocide. The same tactics are being used in Palestine today, as the Zionist army has damaged, destroyed, and looted over 195 heritage sites in Gaza since 7 October 2023. These include Gaza's oldest mosque, the Great Omari Mosque (7th century), and its oldest church, the Church of Saint Porphyrius (AD 425). The IOF also looted homes, stealing over \$25 million in cash, gold, and valuables within the first three months of the genocide.



Looting also serves economic purposes. Stealing wealth and symbols of rule worked to diminish local political power while enriching looters - often British soldiers - who sold objects to museums or private markets. Looting at the frontiers of empire integrated colonies into the global capitalist system for further exploitation. In fact, military expeditions were frequently supported by colonial trading companies that benefited from the opening of new markets.

The myth of the objective display

After collection, the museum served as a tool of propaganda through its exhibitions and displays. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the BM served the explicit purpose of showcasing the Empire and manufacturing the consent of the British public. The museum's glass case displayed sanitised colonial violence, while important cultural objects were portrayed as 'curiosities' in opposition to European 'modernity'. Museum narratives celebrated European adventurism, expansion, and extraction. Simultaneously, they portrayed colonised peoples as stuck in history, in need of civilising, and unable to care for their own cultural heritage. Colonial attitudes remain an issue at the museum. In 2017, in response to a question regarding the accessibility of labels, the BM's official social media account tweeted: "Sometimes Asian names can be confusing, so we have to be careful about using too many" (@britishmuseum, 2017).

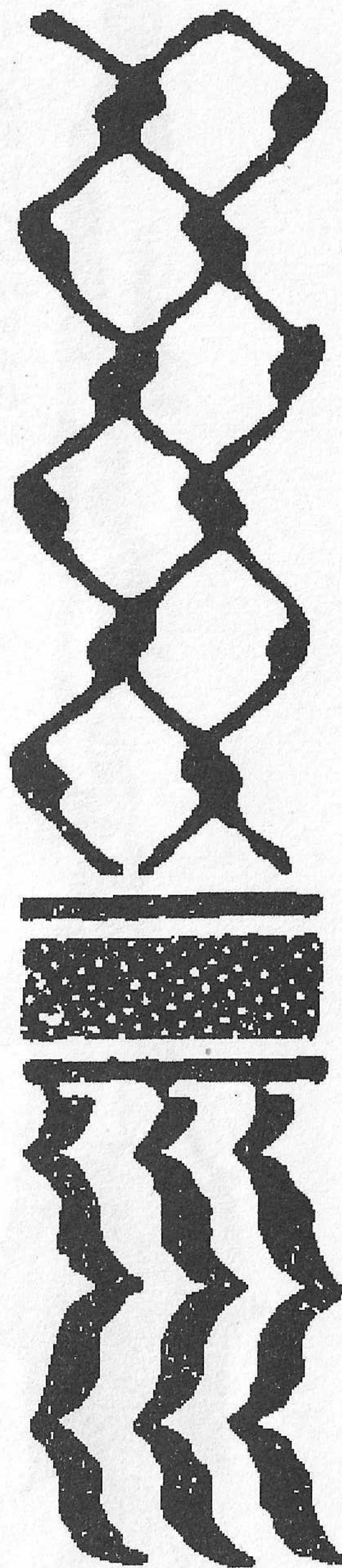
Efforts to step towards engaging with the museum's colonial history has been met with threats to defund the museum, as was the case in 2020 when then-Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden sent a letter to national museums prompting them to "be consistent with the Government's position" on "contested heritage." "As publicly funded bodies," he wrote, "you should not be taking actions motivated by activism or politics." Dowden threatened that museums should act "impartially" to not bring their publicly funded status "into question," as "all government spending will rightly be scrutinised" (Dowden, 2020).

The official narrative of museums insists they are objective or impartial. This lends museums a veneer of expertise and credibility. However, it obscures the fact that museums are not - and never have been - neutral. The BM is currently funded by a number of corporate sponsors, including banks, insurance companies, consulting firms, and fossil fuel companies. It has always been a site of imperial power, knowledge production, and propaganda.

No future without facing history

The British Museum Act of 1963 prohibits the museum from repatriating objects unless it is a duplicate, physically damaged or "unfit to be retained in the collection", or no longer of public interest. This wording is continually weaponised by trustees to deny repatriation requests. However, subsequent

policies passed have provided avenues for repatriation, indicating that the museum's decisions are often discretionary. For instance, the 2004 Human Tissue Act allows trustees to repatriate human remains, while the 2009 Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act allows for the repatriation of artworks looted during the Nazi era. This means that repatriation, or the lack thereof, as well as collecting and displaying, is an active decision. In this context, the BM's partnership with BP is consistent with the institution's history of manufacturing consent for the violence of empire. This makes it vital to unveil their propaganda, force them to end their relationship with corporate violence, and support repatriation demands from source communities.

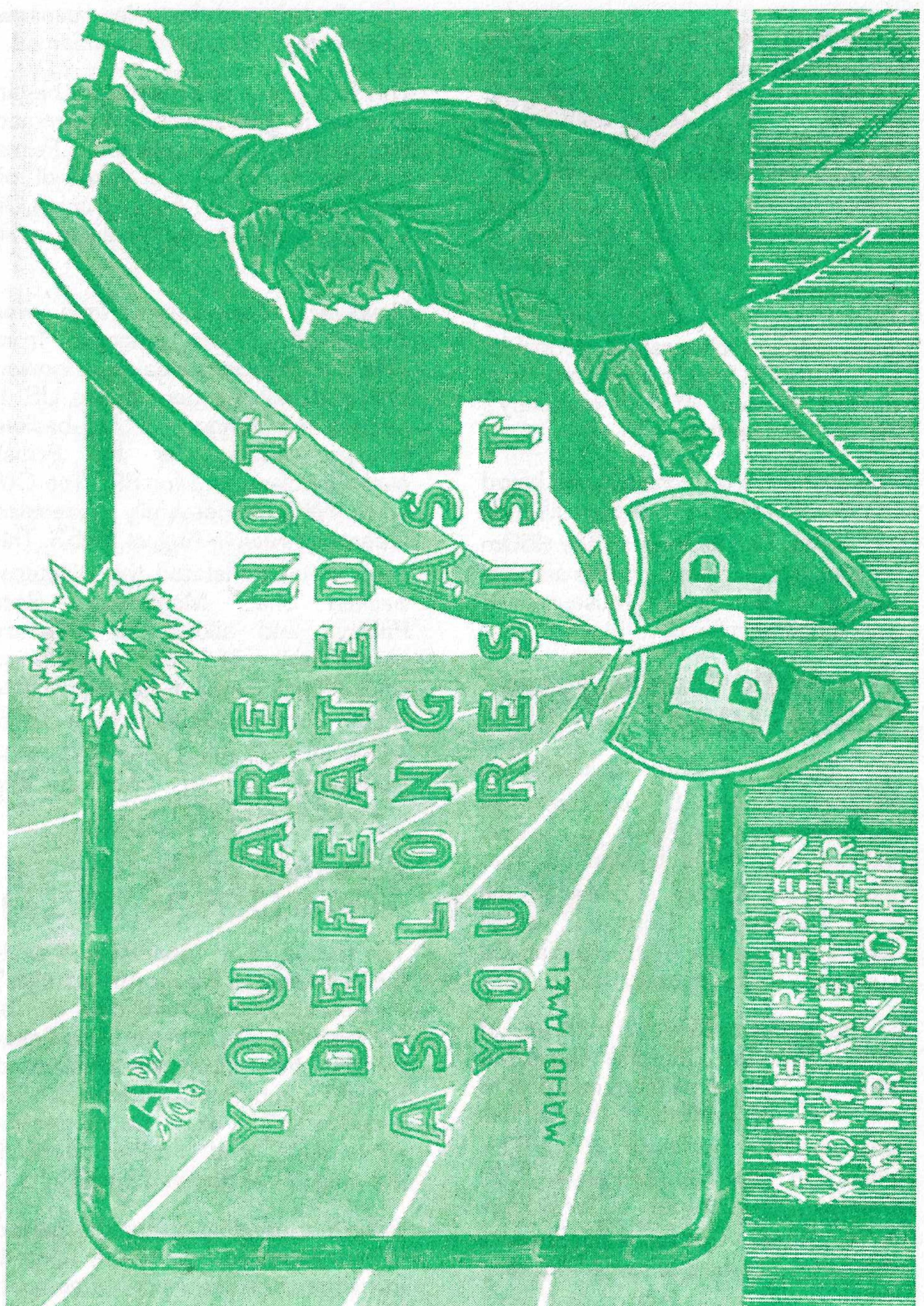




Censer. Incense plays a vital role within the Ethiopian Church. Used in church services and prayers, it is seen as an offering to God. This object may have been purchased at the sale of loot on the Delanta Plain (20-21 April 1868), or it may have been looted by Holmes from Maqdala on 13 April 1868. Holmes recorded purchasing one censer at the sale of loot, though he did not describe it in detail: '1 brass censer. 8 Rupees.'



These types of anklets (*Yigir Ambar*) were worn exclusively by high ranking Christian women. Gold or gilded silver could only be worn with the permission of the Emperor. This one was looted by Richard Holmes during the Abyssinian Campaign. After the military assault on Maqdala, official orders were given for all loot to be handed over to the Army Prize Committee. However, Holmes was given permission by Sir Robert Napier (Commander in Chief of the Abyssinian Expedition) to retain some objects (described as 'prizes').



The History of BP is The History of British Imperialism

British Petroleum / 'Beyond' Petroleum (BP) has worked in partnership with every British government of the past 116 years. The consequences of this pact include wars, coups, dictatorships, genocide, and ecocide, spanning the four distinct periods of the company's history, outlined below.

This history is drenched in the blood of the colonised and the poor all over the world. For as long as the £50m partnership is in place, this is also the history of the British Museum - a public platform for BP.

The Anglo-Iranian years (1901-1954)

In 1901, British businessman William Knox D'Arcy secured exclusive 60-year rights to explore, extract, and refine Iranian oil. Two years later, D'Arcy established the First Exploitation Company, which would become the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and eventually, BP.

In the weeks before the outbreak of WWI, Winston Churchill converted all Royal Navy ships from coal fuel to oil, and orchestrated the British government's purchase of a 51% stake in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company to guarantee oil for Britain. In the decades that followed, Britain's industrial standard of living, including

cars, buses, and factories, became inextricably tied to cheap Iranian oil.

This first phase of BP's history began to close in 1951 when Mohammad Mossadegh was elected Prime Minister of Iran on a ticket of oil nationalisation. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company would be nationalised in the same year.

However, Mossadegh's time was short-lived. Britain emerged from WWII a financially weakened power, with accumulated debt to the US. It needed to conduct a US-backed salvage mission for the British capitalist class, and for BP. The CIA and MI6 successfully executed Operation Ajax in August 1953. This coup d'état reinstated the Western-backed Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and allowed a Western consortium of oil companies (including a newly renamed BP) to regain control. BP secured 40% of Iran's oil until the 1979 Revolution (Bamberg, 2009; Marriott and Macalister, 2021).

A bastion of the faltering empire (1950s-1970s)

The period from Operation Ajax to the beginning of Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal counter-revolution can be summarised by three interlinked trends: the continued decline of British imperial authority, the ascendancy of decolonisation movements, and the exponentially growing global demand for oil.

Despite expanding during this period, BP continued to rely heavily upon its investments in the Middle East, with

oil primarily transported via the Suez Canal, in which the British government had held a 44 per cent shareholding since 1875. The nationalisation of the canal by Egyptian leader Gamel Abdel Nasser in 1956 provoked a major crisis, as a new power could now control the supply of Middle Eastern oil to the West, creating a deficit in Britain's economy.

In response, British officials drastically limited loans to the colonies, redirected capital exports, and ended the policy of providing protection for colonial finance. The Suez Crisis highlights the centrality of BP to the finances of the British state under 'normal' conditions (Galpern, 2009).

Decolonisation movements continued to challenge BP and the British state throughout the 1960's and 1970's. Most notably, Harold Wilson's Labour government secretly provided large quantities of arms to the Nigerian federal government for them to crush the country's eastern region of Biafra's attempt at independence. Biafra was Nigeria's largest producer of oil, with BP and Shell's joint venture holding £200 million worth of investments there. The British-backed war and blockade on Biafra resulted in three million deaths, with starvation used systematically as a weapon of war (Curtis, 2020).

Neoliberal Rebirth (1979-2010)

The third phase in BP's history is marked by the withdrawal of any semblance of state control at home,

combined with continued corporate paramilitarism abroad. Between 1979 and 1987, the British government sold all 51 per cent of its equity interest in BP, with the proceeds from privatisation and North Sea oil wealth providing an essential cushion for Thatcher's neoliberal counter-revolution (Marriott and Macalister, 2021).

BP's first major imperialist victory in this period was the 1994 foundational agreement for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which continues to supply oil to the zionist entity. Notably, MI6 appears to have laid the groundwork for this deal, with coups occurring in the oil-rich country in 1992 and 1993 (Energy Embargo for Palestine, 2024).

Another major imperialist victory for BP in this phase was Iraq. The Bush-Blair-led 2003 invasion resulted in an estimated 655,000 Iraqis killed in its first three years. BP returned to Iraq in 2009 after a 35-year absence and was awarded a significant stake in Iraq's largest oil field near British-occupied Basra. Between 2011 and 2022, BP subsequently extracted 262 million barrels of Iraqi oil (Kennard, 2023). In 2000, BP adopted the name 'Beyond Petroleum' attempting a rebrand with a new 'sunburst' logo to signify solar power. The rebrand was shortly followed by a series of disasters that destroyed the lives of its own workers as well as the earth's limited resources. In 2005, the Texas City refinery explosion led to 15 worker deaths and 180 injuries. The following year, the Prudhoe Bay oil spill became the largest on Alaska's

north slope to date. In 2010, the Deepwater Horizon disaster leaked four million barrels of oil into the ocean basin. Following the disaster, then-London Mayor Boris Johnson defended BP, claiming that attacks on the company were “anti-British,” making clear the symbiotic relationship between BP and the British state (Koram, 2022).

Late-capitalist death drive (2011–present)

With the stakes of climate breakdown increasingly apparent, and geopolitical conflicts building to the crescendo of the present, BP has pursued a path of barbarism since Deepwater Horizon – and the world has allowed it. Despite temporary commitments to renewables under former-CEO Bernard Looney in 2020, the company quickly reversed any underserved public goodwill by fully committing to myopic, investor-driven fossil fuel extraction that directly fuels the genocide in Palestine.

The fusion between BP and the British state has continued to the present day. BP reported profits of £5.6 billion in 2018, yet still received tax credits from the British state, meaning taxpayers effectively paid the company an additional bonus of up to £134 million (Koram, 2022). Fossil capital continues to dominate British society to this day.





On the 13th of May 2025 the British Museum hosted a so-called 'Israeli Independence Day' event, two days before Nakba Day. The event was attended by Nigel Farage and other far right figures, and the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry (Maria Eagle) delivered a speech praising British involvement in the genocide. The protest against the gala was met with heavy police repression.



1753
BRITISH MUSEUM ESTABLISHED

1801

Parthenon Marbles taken

1867

British Museum send Richard Holmes to Abyssinian campaign

1897

Benin City Looting

A
COMPAN

1996

BP - BM RELATIONS

This was the largest oil spill in history, causing around four million barrels of oil to leak into the ocean basin.

BP returns to Iraq

The Deepwater Horizon Disaster

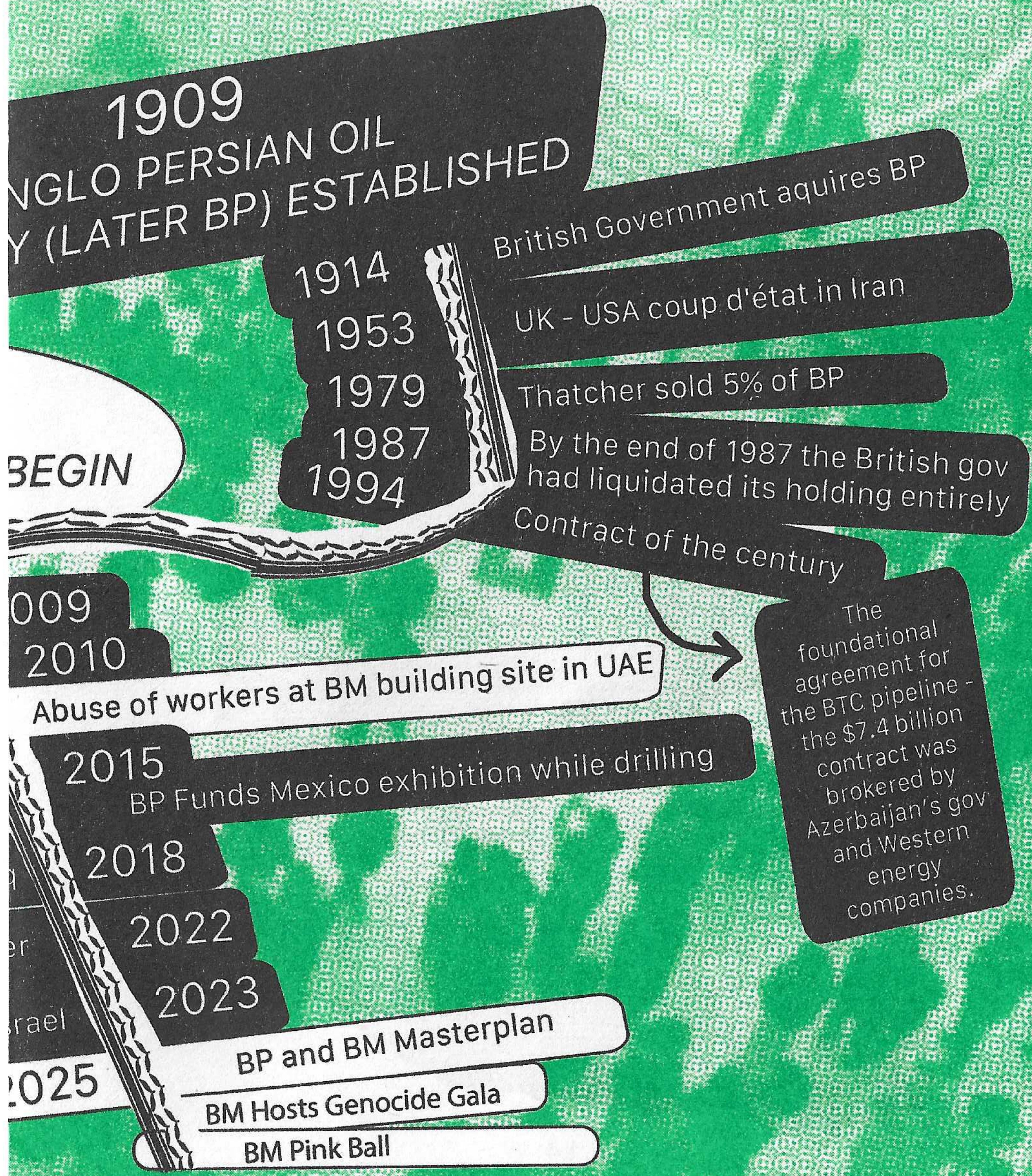
2014

BP Funds Australia exhibition while pushing to drill

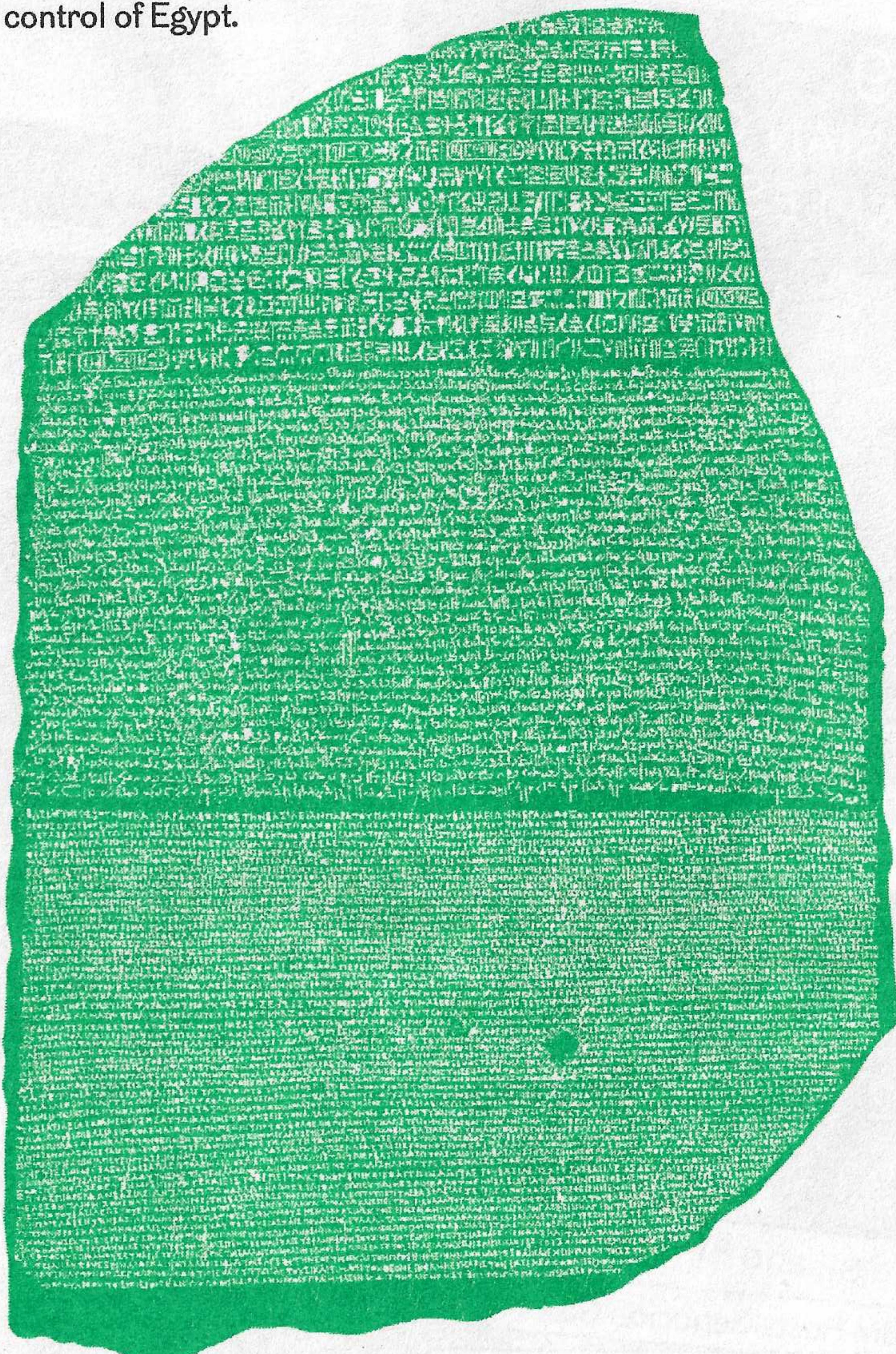
BP sponsors Assyria exhibition while extracting from Iraq

BP reports highest profits ev

BP accepts gas exploration licence from I



The Rosetta Stone is inscribed with a trilingual decree from the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt from 196 BC, and has been essential for translating ancient Egyptian scripts. It was uncovered accidentally in 1799 by French soldiers while preparing the ground to battle British forces for colonial control of Egypt.



Who owns the British Museum?

The BM is a “public” institution and an “arm’s length body” of the British state, two qualities of its status which it prides itself on. However, scrutinising its funding structure and its governing body (the board of trustees) reveal no sign of true public ownership or accountability.

The BM is a non-departmental public body, funded by the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), in addition to income from commercial, fundraising, sponsored and charging activities. The BM prides itself on being a “genuinely public museum”, claiming that its mission, governance and funding adheres to transparency, political neutrality and impartiality. However, the museum continues to be a key tool used by the state to manufacture consent for imperialism.

The BM uses its arm’s length status to claim both distance from, and obligation to, the British state (British Museum, 2025b). When workers expressed their disgust and outrage at the ‘Israeli Independent Day’ event in May, the BM management insisted that due to its arm’s length status it could not ‘deviate from UK foreign policy’ (Hearst, 2025b). However, an FOI later revealed there was no legal advice or institutional policy to support their claim of subordination to government positions, meaning the museum was not *obliged* to host the event, but the management chose to according to political and vested interests (Hearst, 2025a).

The board of trustees

The trustees are responsible for ensuring the museum is run in compliance with the British Museum Act, the Charity Act, and other relevant legislation. The trustees are tasked with ensuring that the museum is guided by “a plurality of opinions and ideas” (Trustees of the British Museum, 2025). However, at the time of his appointment to Chair of Trustees in 2021, former Chancellor George Osborne worked for the investment bank Robey Warshaw, where BP was counted as a major client. Prior to this, Osborne worked at BlackRock, an asset management monopoly holding around 10% of shares in BP. The current Vice Chairman of BlackRock, Philipp Hildebrand, is also a BM trustee. Other trustees include board members and senior management of UnitedHealth, Amazon, and private equity and wealth management firms. The governance of the BM epitomises how interests of capital infiltrate our ‘public’ institutions.

In March of this year, right wing raconteur Peter Franklin proudly praised the BM’s new board of trustees as “a promising sign that Britain’s museums and galleries are no longer under the yoke of cultural custodians who militantly hate the country’s history” (Franklin, 2025). The new trustees to join the ranks alongside Osborne include, Conservative peer Daniel Finkelstein, and Tiffany Jenkins, author of *Keeping Their Marbles: How Treasures of the Past Ended Up in Museums and Why They Should Stay There* (Franklin, 2025; Trustees of the British

Museum, 2025). Osbourne, speaking after the appointment of the trustees, said “this isn’t just about governance; it’s about bringing in people who can help us tell our story better – especially now” (Artlyst, 2025). The BM was intended to be the world’s first free and ‘public’ museum to display colonial wealth extracted from the Global South. The story which Osbourne wishes to tell is no different from that of its genesis. It is a propagandistic tale of empire funded by genocide.

Funding structure

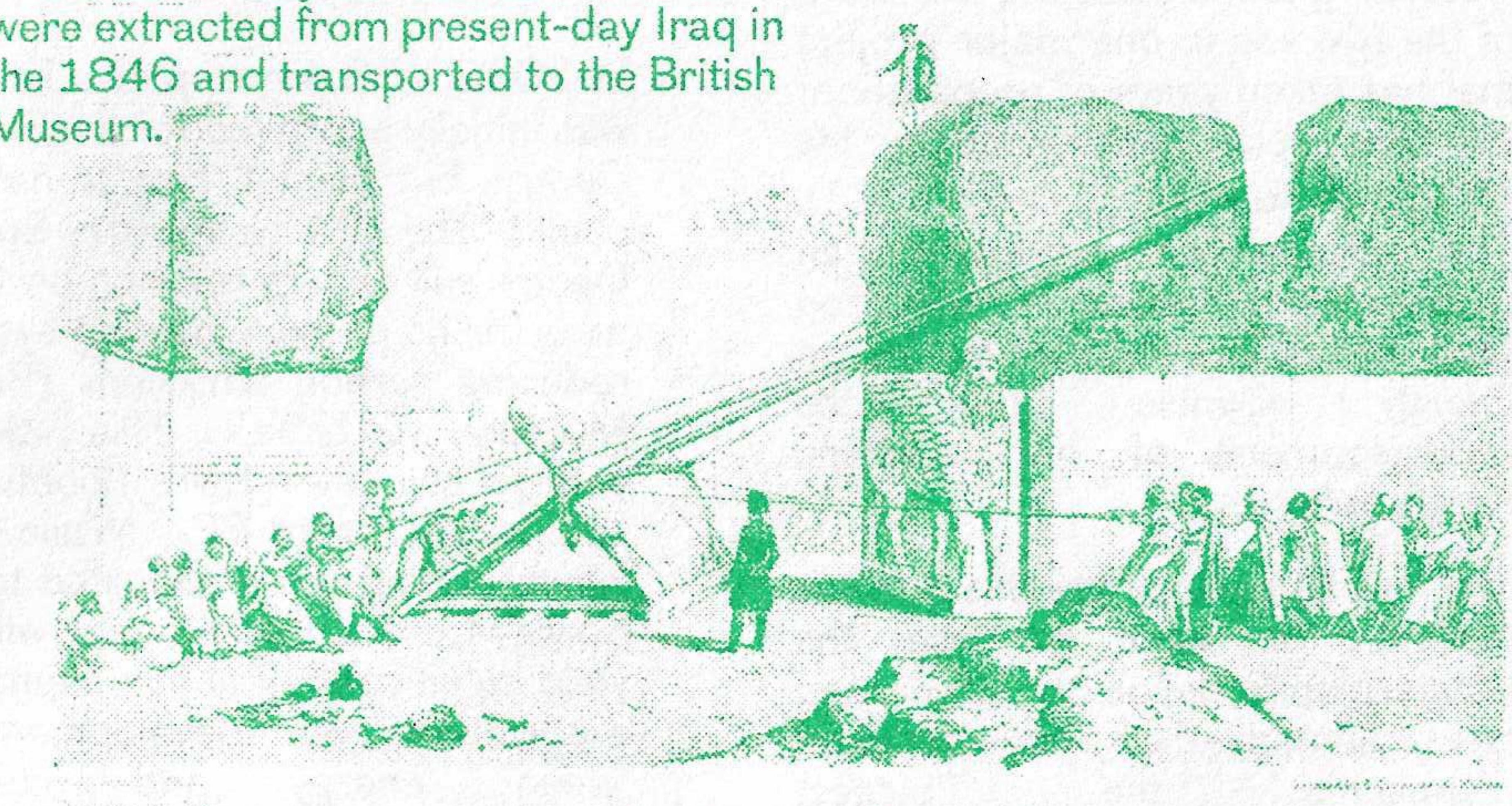
Cultural institutions do face significant funding challenges. The DCMS funding per capita has fallen by a third since 2010. However, the austerity regime was architectured by Osbourne him while Chancellor. The BM needs to draw significant resources to maintain itself as a free museum of empire. A culture sector wrecked by austerity cuts produces valuable opportunities for disgraced corporations to step in and cultivate a sanitised and philanthropic image. This is an example of perfect collusion between the state and private interests.

As a public body, all money spent by the museum is classified as public money, but the public, and staff, have little to no say over where that money comes from and how it is spent. In June 2023, after years long campaigning efforts, the BM ended its 27-year deal with BP. However, in a matter of months, the BM announced a new £50M sponsorship deal with BP. Osbourne, not only entered the

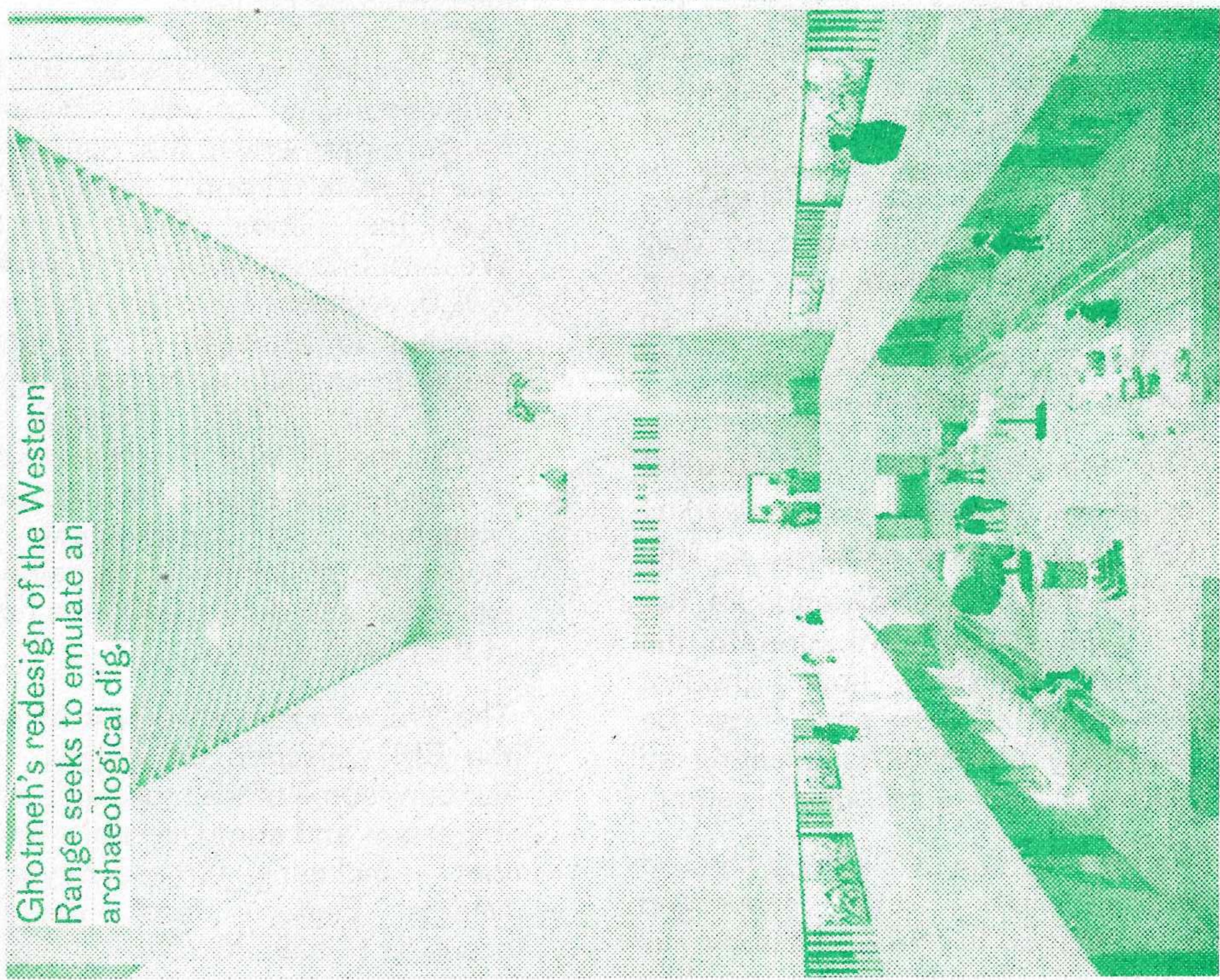
museum with a conflict of interest in BP, as previously outlined, but as Chancellor he outwardly claimed he did not “want the UK to be at forefront of tackling climate change” (cited in; The Guardian, 2013). Instead, in 2013 he offered one of the world’s most generous tax breaks to the fracking industry, setting a 30% rate for shale gas producers. Other museums including the Royal Opera House, National Portrait Gallery and Tate galleries have cut ties with BP. Meanwhile, the BM continues to take money from BP, despite obvious public resistance demonstrated by years of mass campaigning

The BM’s loyalty to its corporate sponsors, of which BP is just one, is unwavering. Others include Bank of America, which was part of a \$500m loan deal with a consortium of lenders, into Elbit Systems Ltd, the Israeli weapons manufacturer (Paling, 2023). Sponsors Bloomberg, and Morgan Stanley also hold over \$3bn in Raytheon stock, a 2.1% ownership share of the weapons company. The museum leverages its ‘public’ status to justify its corporate sponsorship deals claiming they “ensure that the magnificent collection stays on display to the public for centuries to come” (cited in; Gooch, 2025). However, many of these deals have been taken strictly in opposition to public opinion. The BM is less concerned with asking what a genuinely public institution, that includes public ownership of assets, governance and ideas, might look like, than it is with protecting its imperial project.

The ancient Assyrian Lamassu statues were extracted from present-day Iraq in the 1846 and transported to the British Museum.



Ghotmeh's redesign of the Western Range seeks to emulate an archaeological dig.



Their future

According to the museum, the future of the BM lies in one major project that has taken years of preparation: the Masterplan, kickstarted by the £50m BP funding (Bailey, 2023). This includes the construction of an archaeological research collection (BM_ARC), a new visitor centre, an Energy Centre and the redevelopment of the Western Range galleries.

The new Director of the BM, Nicolas Cullinan, is keen to use the Masterplan to define his career, and has claimed the redevelopment represents the “biggest transformation of any museum in the world – not just physically, but intellectually” (cited in; Heathcote, 2025). Cullinan has also ruled out restitution and set an agenda to depoliticise the museum (Adams, 2025). This position seeks not only continued paternalistic guardianship of the collections, but also an enduring normalisation of blood money in the museum.

The ten-year Masterplan project could cost as much as £1bn, meaning BP’s funding could comprise as little as 5% of the overall expenditure, but will gain strong attribution to the project. This shows how a modest investment of BP’s profits can be extremely powerful for creating an illusion of fuelling the cultural sector.

An investigation by DeSmog showed internal memos at BP encouraged sponsorships to protect the company from the threats posed by ‘the politics of climate change’, and other

companies viewed sponsorships to tackle “low credibility and trust” (cited in; John, 2025).

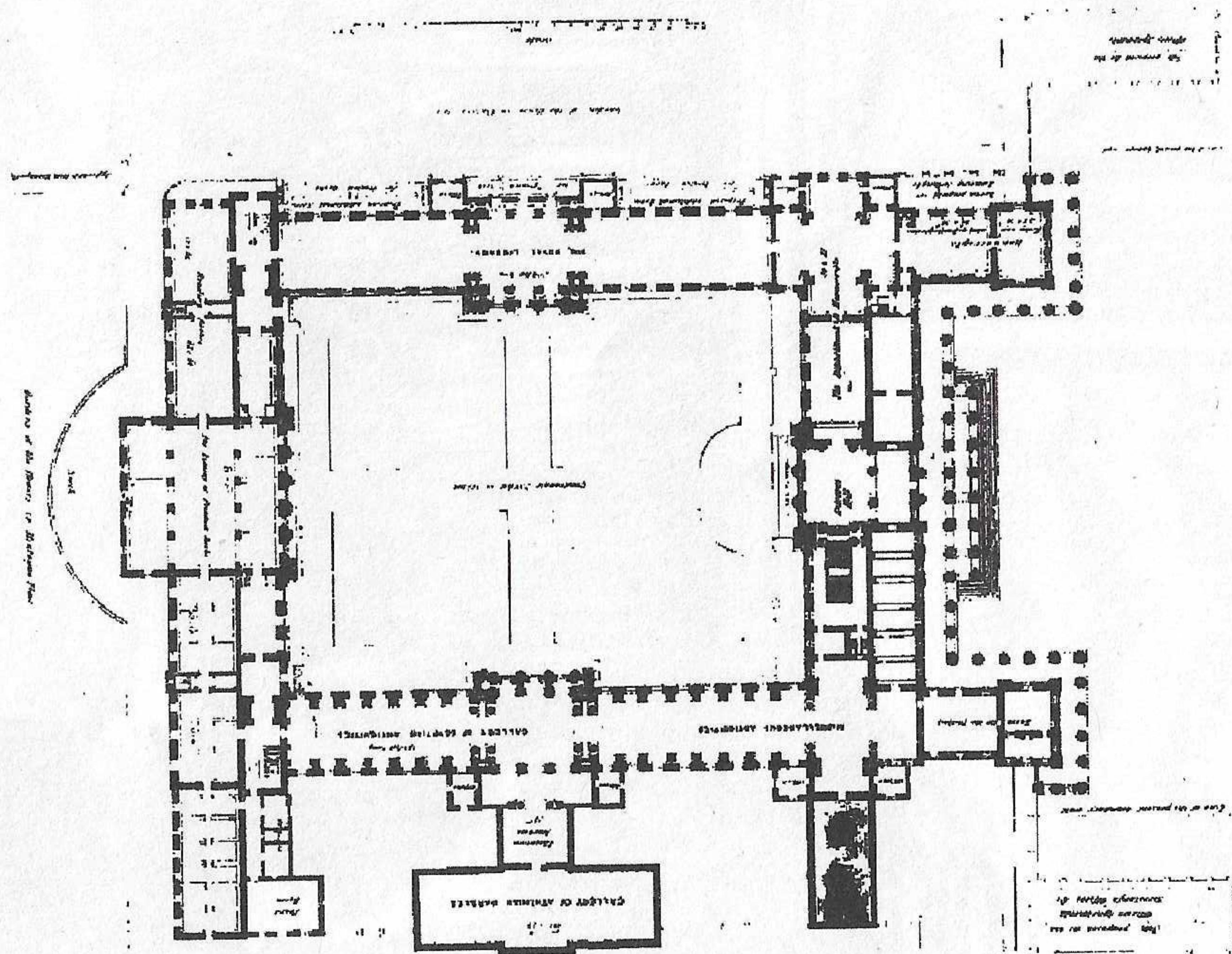
In 2023, £53.4m of public funding was initially approved for the Energy Centre, but the full cost is not yet public. The BM claims the Energy Centre will end its reliance on fossil fuels for its primary heating system, reducing carbon emissions (British Museum, 2025a). This clearly contradicts the BM’s continued sponsorship from BP. While BP’s latest funding is not allocated to the Energy Centre, the company will still yield significant symbolic capital by association with development of ‘clean’ energy and cultural infrastructure projects.

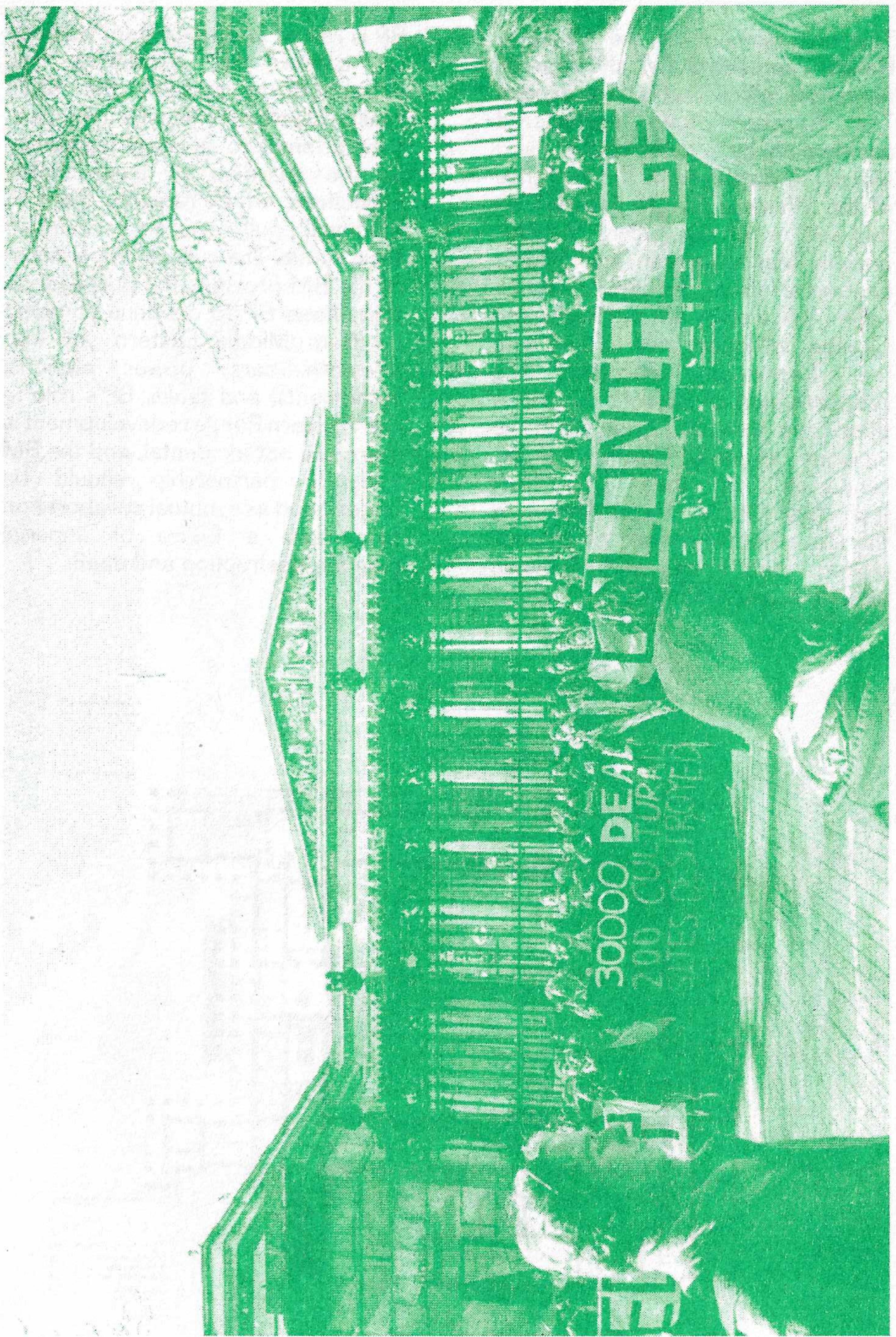
BP’s funding is allocated to the redevelopment of the Western Range, a partnership that reveals the flow of material and cultural power from the Global South to the Western Imperial Core. In February 2025, architect Lina Ghotmeh was selected to redesign the Western Range to emulate an archaeological dig (Gent, 2025). Through its design, the BM visitors will be invited to imagine themselves the excavator, collector and intellectual of thousands of years of humanity – extracted and displayed in the heart of the British empire.

The Western Range holds a third of the BM collection on display, and contains some of the museum’s most important and controversial colonial loot – including Greek, Egyptian, Middle Eastern, and Assyrian artefacts (Ghali, 2025).

The arrangement of the Western Range represents British imperial narratives of civilisational progress. The Rosetta Stone (uncovered accidentally by colonial soldiers and looted) is displayed at the entrance of the Western Range gallery. The mid-section of the gallery includes ancient Mesopotamian and Middle Eastern artefacts, including Assyrian reliefs, followed by ancient Rome and Greece collection, and ending with the Parthenon marbles. The rationalisation of objects separates them from their true origins and the violence of their journey there, rendering them truly incomprehensible. The collection is therefore both evidence of colonial violence and a site of hegemonic cultural reproduction.

BP is reliant on British state violence to create the conditions for extraction. In parallel, the BM's Masterplan for the Western Range is their attempt to reassert legitimacy as the guardian of these stolen collections, which requires them to continually pull resources to maintain their status. The cultural imperialism of the BM provides the propaganda that allows BP to continue pumping oil from Middle Eastern soil into Western cars, power stations, settlements, and tanks. BP's role in the Western Range redevelopment is therefore not incidental, and the BM and BP partnership should be understood as a mutual collaboration to ensure a future of imperial plunder, destruction and death.





Our Future

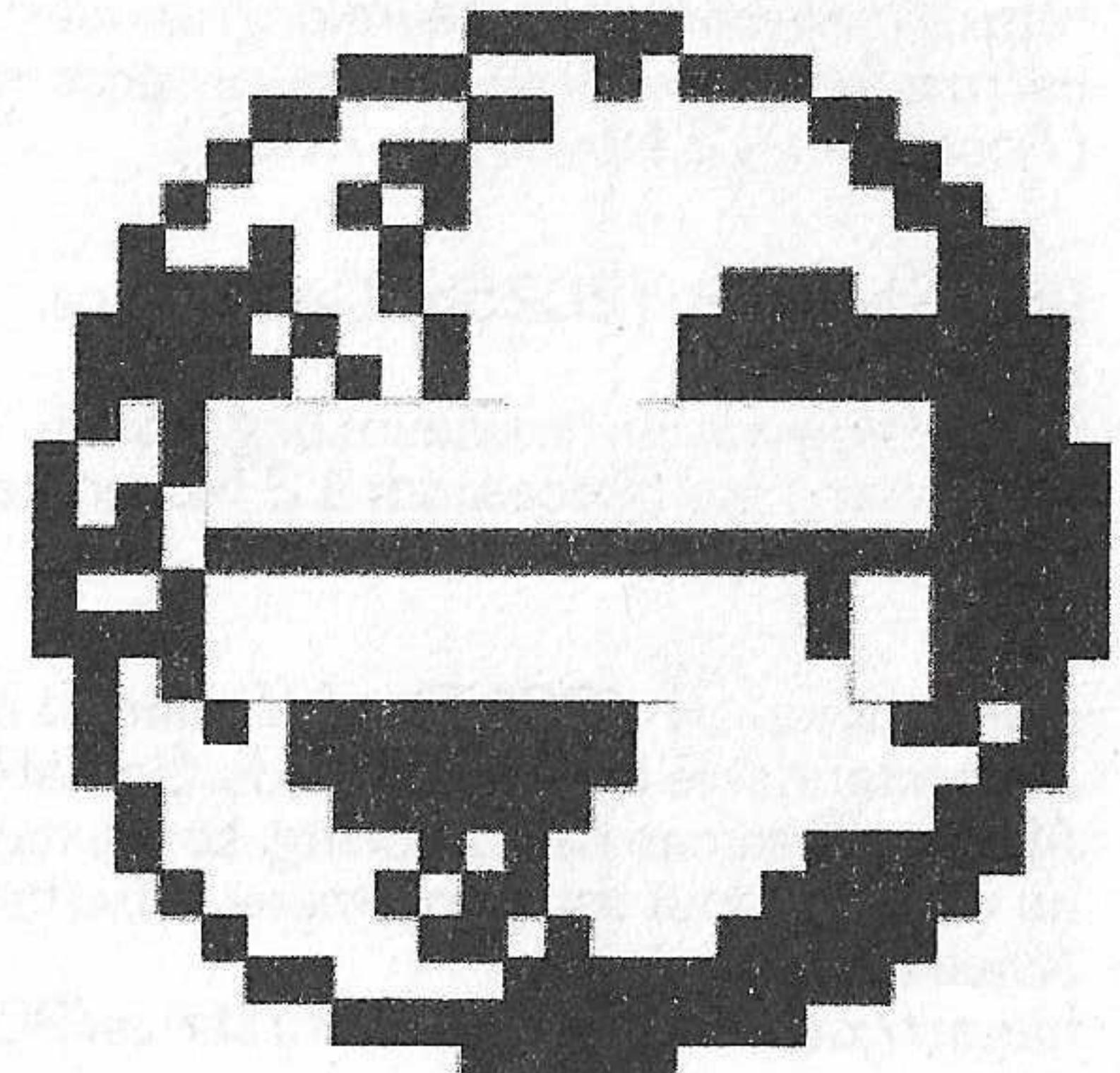
The BM must be fundamentally and structurally transformed. This is no small feat. It must begin with a shift of power away from the trustees, who hold close relationships with state and corporate power. As long as finance capital is allowed to infiltrate cultural institutions, the museum will continue to draw in more resources from imperialist companies such as BP, lending them social licenses to operate, while using those resources to fund undemocratic ambitions for the expansion of its colonial displays.

It is for these reasons that we demand a structural transformation of the museum, to build a truly public cultural institution. The museum, like the British empire itself, lives beyond its means - dependent on the labour of underpaid, exploited workers who have no say in the source or destination of the millions of pounds sunk into its lavish colonial projects. Nicholas Cullinan's new annual BM ball, intended to help pay for the Masterplan, was extremely unpopular. The ball turned the

museum into a playground for billionaires and corporate oligarchs, dining amidst stolen artefacts. It was opposed by staff members and was even disrupted by a museum waitress (Greig, 2025). We demand a museum in which workers have a say in the funding structure, in political events, and in the future of the institution. Real worker control of the museum will be the first step to its permanent transformation.

The BM is a protagonist in the story of the British empire, and in British imperialism today, through its BP deal. The task is monumental, but we will not rest until our demands are met.

ENERGY
EMBARGO
FOR
PALESTINE



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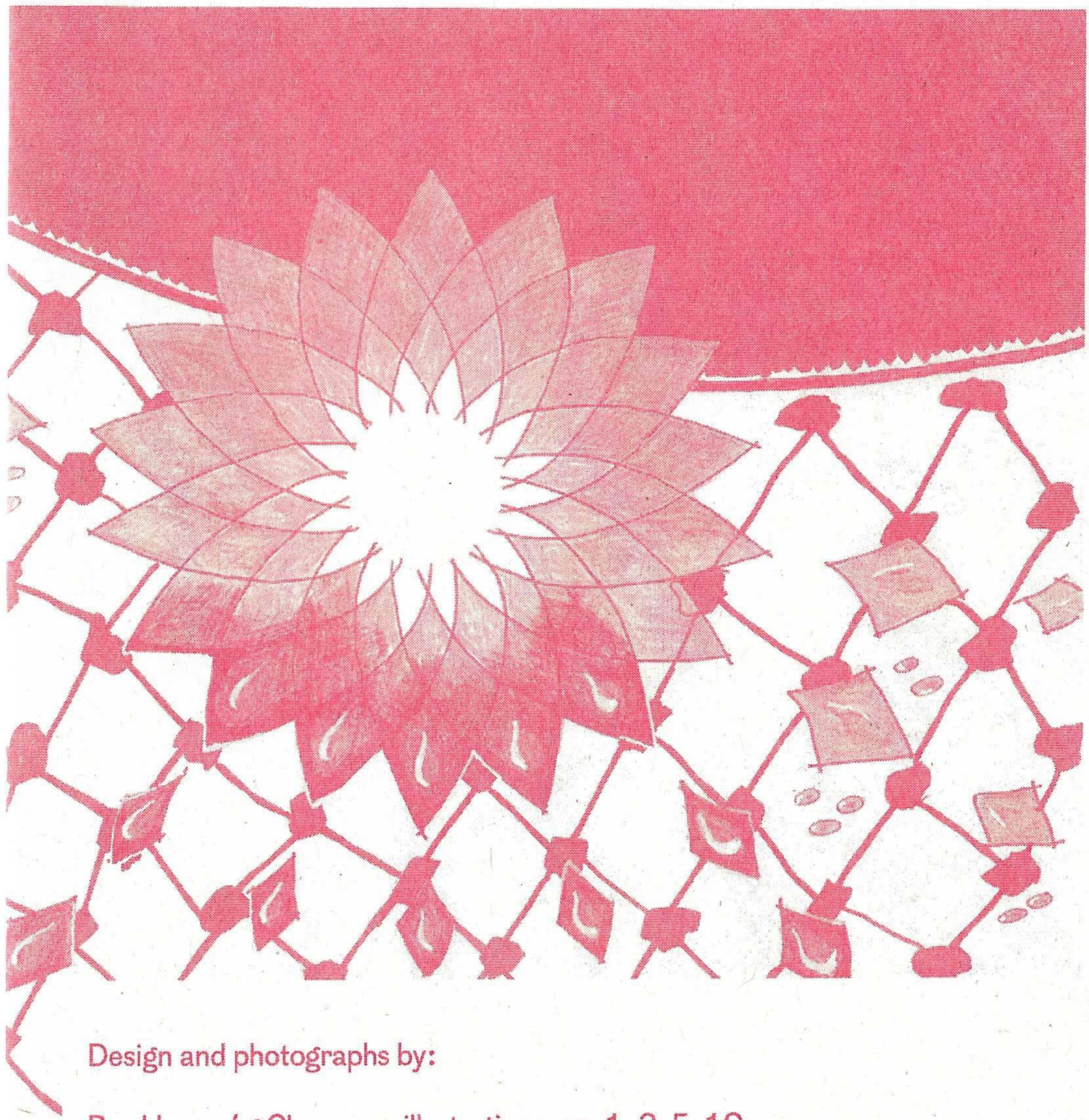
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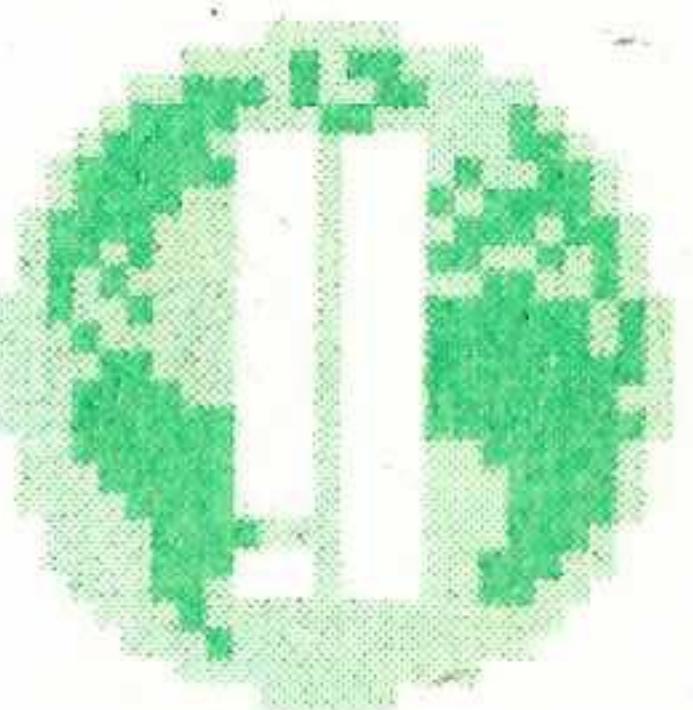
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