

# The British Museum and the Abyssinian Campaign, 1867–8

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## Abstract

In 1867–8, the British Museum sent a staff member on the Abyssinian Campaign. Richard Holmes, an assistant in the Manuscript Department, was embedded in the military invasion and looted important and sacred objects and manuscripts from the fortress of Emperor Tewodros II at Maqdala. This is one of the most significant examples of a museum colluding in colonial violence to gain objects for its collection. The article re-examines the case of Holmes, drawing on new research in the British Museum's archive and with important primary documents that have not yet received scholarly attention. The analysis focuses on the museum's objectives for the Campaign, the planning process and the actions of Holmes. I argue that while the museum was complicit in the violence perpetrated at Maqdala, its relationship with the military was complex. Multiple competing agendas became increasingly apparent as the actions of Holmes were progressively militarised. The article also examines the wider institutional links to the Abyssinian Campaign, including close political relationships that are important for understanding the trajectory of events and history of the British Museum's collections. More broadly, it sheds new light on the relationship between museums and colonial-military interventions in nineteenth-century Africa, demonstrating the tensions that were inherent in these projects.

In 1867, the British Museum appointed Richard Rivington Holmes, an assistant in the Manuscript Department, to accompany a military expedition against the Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> This invasion—generally known in Britain as the Abyssinian Campaign—was the first in a series of major British conflicts in Africa in the nineteenth century. These include the Third and Fourth Anglo-Ashanti wars (1874 and 1896), Benin (1897) and the Sudan Campaigns (1896–8). All these conflicts involved large-scale looting and destruction, resulting in significant items of African cultural heritage being taken to British museums and private collections, most frequently through sales and donations. However, the Abyssinian Campaign is unique as it offers the only example of a museum staff member being embedded within an invading army with an explicit mandate to collect.

The Campaign—which garnered huge public interest and was one of the most expensive British military expeditions of all time—was ostensibly the result of a

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of the campaign, see Volker Matthies, *The Siege of Maqdala: The British Empire Against the Emperor of Ethiopia*. (Princeton, 2011). The Manuscript Department at the British Museum was transferred to the British Library (hereafter BL) when it was established as a separate institution in 1973.

breakdown of British diplomatic relationships with Emperor Tewodros II. This unstable situation had developed since 1863 when Tewodros' letter to Queen Victoria asking for help in his internal military campaigns went unanswered.<sup>2</sup> Tewodros was seeking to re-unify Ethiopia, which was itself a violent process, and he saw Britain as an ally. When help did not come, Tewodros began taking high-profile European hostages.<sup>3</sup> The decision was made in London to rescue the hostages through military invasion. Although represented as a humanitarian mission, this invasion was deeply bound up with British imperial interests (particularly the supply route to India, naval bases located along the nearby Red Sea coast and control of Egypt) and the desire to be seen as a forceful power.<sup>4</sup> Organised through the India Office, it was led by Robert Napier of the Royal Engineers (whose experience included the Anglo-Sikh wars and the India Mutiny of 1857) with the close involvement of Stafford Northcote who became Secretary of State for India in 1867.

Over 13,000 British and Indian soldiers arrived on the coast of what is now Eritrea and began marching 400 miles inland to Tewodros' stronghold at Maqdala. After a bloody battle at Arogee, in which at least 700 Ethiopian soldiers were killed, the advance culminated in a large-scale assault on Maqdala. The royal household, treasury and a church were looted and then destroyed by the invading army, and Tewodros took his own life. Richard Holmes participated in the looting of Maqdala and purchased objects at the military auction of loot, held a few days after the destruction of the fortress. As a direct result, some of the most important and sacred objects and manuscripts were taken to the British Museum.<sup>5</sup>

As will be demonstrated, from the beginning, there was unease regarding the consequences of this campaign. Much attention has centred on the cultural significance of some of the looted objects. These include processional crosses, censers, chalices, textiles, shields, weapons, jewellery and around 350 historically significant manuscripts, many of which are richly illuminated.<sup>6</sup> Particularly contested are a group of consecrated altar tablets called *tabots*, taken from the church store. These are highly sacred objects in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which—so religious rules insist—are to be seen or handled by no one except priests. Also notorious is the plight of Tewodros' son Alemayehu, who was taken to England after the death of his parents by Captain Speedy (the British interpreter on the campaign). Alemayehu died of lung disease and his remains were interred in Windsor Castle. For decades, there have been many high-profile calls (in both Britain and Ethiopia) to return the looted objects and Alemayehu's remains to Ethiopia. Some objects taken from Maqdala have been returned by the British royal family.<sup>7</sup> Since early 2004, the British Museum has had an agreement to provide access to the *tabots* only to Ethiopian Orthodox clergy with

<sup>2</sup> On responsibility for the loss of Tewodros' letter, see Nini Rodgers, 'The Abyssinian Expedition of 1867-1868: Disraeli's imperialism or James Murray's war?' *The Historical Journal*, 27/1 (1984), pp. 129–49.

<sup>3</sup> For a list of hostages, see Matthies, *The Siege*, 19–25.

<sup>4</sup> On the imperial nature of this campaign, see Freda Harcourt, 'Disraeli's imperialism, 1866–1868: a question of timing', *The Historical Journal*, 23/1 (1980), pp. 87–109; on internal policy struggles, see Rogers, 'The Abyssinia Expedition' and on informal control of the Red Sea, see Matthies, *The Siege*, pp. 27–37.

<sup>5</sup> Beyond the British Museum, the loot from Maqdala was dispersed into museums and private collections, mainly in the United Kingdom, including a significant assemblage at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in South Kensington. For a working list, see Andrew Heavens, *The Prince and the Plunder: How Britain Took One Small Boy and Hundreds of Treasures from Ethiopia* (London, 2023). There may be currently unrecognised material in India; at least one processional cross, presented by Napier, was in the collections of the Royal Asiatic Society in Mumbai/Bombay in 1887. See BL, Napier Papers, Mss Eur F114/103. Items from private collections periodically appear in British auction houses.

<sup>6</sup> The Maqdala manuscripts are now housed at the BL.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Tewodros' successor Emperor Yohannes wrote to Queen Victoria in 1872 to ask for the return of some of the looted material (included a painting that was in Holmes' personal possession, this will be discussed in a later part of the article). King George V returned a crown to Ras Tafari Makonnen in 1924, see Richard Pankhurst,

the approval of the Patriarch. Discussion around their future role and access is widely seen as an important test case in current restitution debates.<sup>8</sup>

Research into the history of contested collections has an important role to play in informing wider cultural property debates. The Abyssinian Campaign (and Holmes's role in it) offers a valuable case study for understanding the relationship between military looting and museums in British imperial contexts. It now goes without saying that there are close links between museums and the Empire. Nineteenth-century museums have been described as a 'tool of empire', as they provided a place to store and display new artefacts, even a rationale for expansion and 'discovery'.<sup>9</sup> The work of classification and display of objects was central to developing the ideas of race, colonial hierarchy and British identities.<sup>10</sup> Founded in 1753, the British Museum's collections are deeply bound up in the history and networks of empire, enslavement and colonialism.<sup>11</sup> The institution has been seen as 'a bastion of colonialism', struggling to come to terms with its imperial past.<sup>12</sup> The museum's unique involvement in the Abyssinian Campaign allows us, however, to shed a clearer light on this part of its institutional history and to unpick the complex links between the museum and imperial politics and conflicts.

In wider terms, there is a pressing need to examine historical links between museums and the military. Many colonial-era museum collections, especially those from Africa, were removed in the context of military invasions and regular 'small wars' (or in scientific missions and explorations, often with military backing).<sup>13</sup> Studies have begun to explore the cultures of collecting among soldiers and the often-extreme acts of violence that facilitated the removal of objects to museums.<sup>14</sup> But while our understanding of military cultures of collecting in the British Empire is growing, we still know relatively little about how relationships with the military were developed from the perspective of the museum. European museums courted relationships with colonial military invasions, but the internal decision-making and

<sup>8</sup> 'The Napier Expedition and the loot from Maqdala', *Présence Africaine*, 133–4 (1985), pp. 233–40. The MP Bernie Grant and Ras Seymore McClean led campaigns for the return of Maqdala material in the 1980s and 1990s: see Giulia Bonacci and Aleema Gray, 'The book liberator: Rastafari and the return of Maqdala's artefacts to Ethiopia', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 251–2 (2023), pp. 835–58. The organisation AFROMET was founded in 1999 to lobby for the return of Maqdala materials. It appears to have disbanded but an Ethiopian restitution committee continues this work. For a recent book on Alemayehu's life and legacy, see Heavens, *The Prince*.

<sup>9</sup> For more information and the British Museum's position see their online statement at <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/maqdala-collection>> [accessed 19 May 2024].

<sup>10</sup> John MacKenzie, *Museums and Empire: Natural History, Human Cultures and Colonial Identities* (Manchester, 2009), p. 7. For recent discussions, see Sarah Longair and John McAleer, *Curating Empire: Museums and the British Imperial Experience* (Manchester, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Annie E. Coombes, 'Museums and the formation of national and cultural identities', *Oxford Art Journal*, 11/2 (1988), pp. 57–68.

<sup>12</sup> See 'Collecting History', *The British Museum*, <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/collecting-histories#:~:text=The%20British%20Museum%27s%20collection%20has,collection%20of%20over%2080%2C000%20items>> [accessed 19 May 2024].

<sup>13</sup> Stuart Frost, "'A bastion of colonialism": public perceptions of the British Museum and its relationship to empire', *Third Text*, 33/4–5 (2019), pp. 487–99.

<sup>14</sup> On the significance of 'small wars' (to which many museum collections are connected), see Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (Oxford, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Sela Adjei and Yann LeGall, *Fifteen Colonial Thefts: A Guide to Looted African Heritage in Museums* (London, 2024); Nicole Hartwell, 'A repository of virtue? The United Service Museum, collecting, and the professionalization of the British Armed Forces, 1829–1864', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 31/1 (2019), pp. 77–91; Katrina Hill, 'Collecting on campaign: British soldiers in China during the Opium Wars', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 25/2 (2013), pp. 227–52; Dan Hicks, *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London, 2020); Henrietta Lidchi and Stuart Allen (eds), *Dividing the Spoils: Perspectives on Military Collections and the British Empire* (Manchester, 2020); Patrick Watt, "'Ashantee loot is unique": British military culture and the taking of objects in the Third Anglo-Asante War, 1873–1874', *British Journal for Military History*, 9/3 (2023), pp. 21–40.

priorities surrounding these requests are often much harder to access from the historical record.<sup>15</sup> This is what I set out to do here, thanks to the rich, but still underexploited archive of the British Museum, where the deployment of Holmes has left a considerable paper trail—in the correspondence and papers of the Principal Librarian (equivalent to the position of Director), the Trustees' minutes, internal reports, departmental correspondence and the letters Holmes sent to the museum from the campaign.<sup>16</sup>

This article adds to our understanding of the relationship between museums and colonial conflicts in two main ways. First, it presents new evidence about the contested role of the British Museum in the Abyssinian Campaign and particularly the actions of Holmes. While this overall story is already relatively well known, Holmes' presence at Maqdala was reported in the contemporary press and has subsequently been mentioned in many accounts of the campaign, these accounts often cite the same handful of sources.<sup>17</sup> I will present previously overlooked primary sources at the British Museum to provide a newly detailed perspective on Holmes' actions in the invasion. This includes crucial practical information, including Holmes' financial accounts—how much he spent and on what—the instructions he was given by the museum and the content of his personal letters.<sup>18</sup>

Second, and beyond the individual figure of Holmes, the internal bureaucracy at the British Museum sheds light onto how a relationship between the largest museum in Britain and a military intervention emerged and functioned in the late nineteenth century and how this relationship in turn shaped collecting practices and the collection itself. To demonstrate this, the article will focus on the 'museum perspective'—tracing what curators and Trustees wanted to achieve through the Abyssinian Campaign, highlighting the tensions and blind spots and examining their reactions to events as they unfolded. Importantly, we see that, while there was collusion between the museum and the colonial-military enterprise, this was punctuated by significantly competing agendas. These were most overt in the clash between the military objectives of the campaign and the museum's desire to search for and acquire archaeological and 'antiquarian' materials—and—perhaps most explicitly, over the cash value of loot. The link between empire and collecting remains undeniable, but I am challenging the idea that military activity and museum collecting necessarily went easily together.

This material is presented broadly chronologically and in a narrative that has been made possible by many new details uncovered during my research. I begin with the initial proposals to send a staff member on the campaign (which came from the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities) and how these plans developed

<sup>15</sup> Another important example is the relationship between the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde and the German military. Extensive correspondence between Felix von Luschan (Director of the Africa and Oceania Department) and political and military actors are preserved in the archives of the Museum, see Andrew Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago, 2001), pp. 153–61.

<sup>16</sup> A list of over 200 documents consulted for this article is available in 'Collection File Afl868,1001.1-32' in the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, The British Museum.

<sup>17</sup> For contemporary press, see Henry Morton Stanley, *Coomassie and Magdala: The Story of Two British Campaigns in Africa* (London, 1874) and *Illustrated London News* 20 June 1868, p. 609. Details of Holmes's 'archaeological mission' was reported in T.J. Holland, and M.H. Hozier, *Record of the Expedition to Abyssinia, vol 2* (London, 1870), pp. 371–2. These sources are the basis for most other descriptions of Holmes on the Campaign: see Rita Pankhurst, 'The library of Emperor Tewodros II at Mäqdäla (Magdala)', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 36/1 (1973), pp. 15–42; Lucia Patrizio Gunning and Debbie Challis, 'Planned plunder, the British Museum, and the 1868 Maqdala Expedition', *The Historical Journal*, 66/3 (2023), pp. 550–72.

<sup>18</sup> A small number of these documents have been discussed in other publications, see David Wilson, *The British Museum: A History* (London, 2002), pp. 173–4; Philip Harris, *A History of the British Museum Library, 1753–1973* (London, 1998), pp. 269–70; Pankhurst 'The Loot'; Stuart Munro-Hay, 'The British Museum excavations at Adulis, 1868', *The Antiquaries Journal* 69/1 (1989), pp. 43–52.

both in response to particular institutional constraints and as a result of some naïve assumptions about working with the military and about Ethiopian history. The attention then shifts to the actions of Holmes on the ground, showing what he did, how his actions were shaped by the military invasion, and how he came to be so heavily implicated (more so than has previously been appreciated) in the looting of Maqdala. The final part looks at how two of the most important objects taken from Maqdala—an eighteenth-century crown and chalice made in Gondar—were contested in Britain and how the resulting rivalries exposed tensions in the relationship between the museum and the Army Prize Committee and ultimately led to the involvement of Parliament and the prime minister.

From the course of these events, I draw out several recurring themes and insights, which complicate any simple idea of the collaboration between the museum and the military. We see that the British Museum's governance by Trustees and its status as an 'arm's length' government institution were important factors. The political connections of many Trustees (who included some of the most active and influential politicians of the day: Benjamin Disraeli, William Gladstone, numerous MPs, as well as the leaders of learned societies and even the Archbishop of Canterbury) and the way that museum staff had to instrumentalise these often-unstable political networks to generate support for their work had decisive impacts. These networks also exemplify the impossibility of separating museum decisions from wider political decision-making. It underscores the reality that many important decisions about the collection were ultimately political as much as they were curatorial.

This evidence also calls into question the idea of a neatly symbiotic relationship between museum and empire. In important respects, the relationship between the British Museum and the British government was contingent and ultimately fickle. As other scholars have pointed out, the British Museum's strategy for the Abyssinian Campaign did not 'go to plan',<sup>19</sup> and this would have important implications, most notably on what they could acquire and on how the trajectory of loot was contested. The backdrop to this was a context in which the British Museum was attempting to become the rightful home for new 'national' collections and trophies of conquest being brought back from colonial wars in Africa, but it was far from clear how that should be achieved. This article is a first step towards putting this new evidence together and joining the dots between the British Museum, the military and the political connections that underpinned British cultural institutions in the nineteenth century.

### **Planning the British Museum's involvement in the campaign**

The archival trail at the British Museum starts in the summer of 1867, when the Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities, Charles Newton, received a letter from the Arctic explorer and naval officer Captain Sherard Osborn proposing to use the expedition to Abyssinia (at that point widely anticipated but not confirmed) as an opportunity to excavate the ancient city of Berenice on the Red Sea coast of Egypt.<sup>20</sup> Newton, who had re-joined the museum after a period as a British consul in the Aegean, had been Keeper since 1861. He was extensively networked into the London intelligentsia and had already done much to expand the museum's collection,

<sup>19</sup> Gunning and Challis, 'Planned plunder', p. 550.

<sup>20</sup> British Museum Central Archive, Original Papers (Hereafter BMCA OP), vol. 92, October–December 1867, Letter from Osborn to Newton, 7 August 1867, attached to a letter from Newton to Jones, 9 October 1867, no. 9904. Berenice was later excavated with important results.

including through diplomatic channels.<sup>21</sup> He discussed the idea of an excavation with Samuel Birch, the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities, who often worked closely with Newton on archaeological matters.<sup>22</sup> But Birch was not in support. He did not think excavations at Berenice would complement the existing collection.<sup>23</sup> The Principal Librarian, John Winter Jones, was also concerned that—as the museum was already involved in excavations at Ialysos (Rhodes), Ephesos and Sardis (both in Ottoman Turkey)—the Trustees would not want to take on another.<sup>24</sup>

The Berenice plan was not put to the Trustees, but Newton developed a new proposal that involved sending a staff member on the campaign to find historical material in Abyssinia itself. This may have been inspired by a public call on 16 September by Stafford Northcote (the Secretary of State for India) for ‘scientific men’ to accompany the expedition.<sup>25</sup> The museum would be part of a wider scientific deployment including the Royal Geographical Society, the Zoological Society of England, a meteorologist and the Geological Society of India.<sup>26</sup> The proposal was put to the Trustees on 12 October.<sup>27</sup> Newton’s first interest was in Classical Mediterranean inscriptions of the region. He already knew of those that had been copied by the sixth-century CE traveller Cosmas Indicopleustes at Adulis, near Massawa where the expedition was due to land. Known as the *Monumentum Adulitanum*, this group of texts (which have never been rediscovered and are only known through Cosmas’ copies) related to military campaigns by the Macedonian King of Egypt Ptolemy III (r. 246–21 BCE) and the expansion of the ancient Aksumite Kingdom.<sup>28</sup> Newton knew of another ancient inscription, copied by a nineteenth-century British consul and Egyptologist Henry Salt at Aksum.<sup>29</sup> These inscriptions were thought to be the best evidence of the history of the region (and its relationships with the wider ancient world). What is more, Newton wrote that these sites were conveniently located, ‘on the line of march by which the invading army would naturally advance from Massawah’.<sup>30</sup> In support of Newton, William Vaux (the Keeper of Coins and Medals) speculated that there was significant potential for discovery of new inscriptions in ‘Greek, Ethiopic [...] and Himyaritic characters’.<sup>31</sup> The circumstances of the campaign presented a unique opportunity to make investigations. As Jones wrote in a letter to Stafford Northcote, ‘the presence of British troops in these places would afford peculiar facilities for rapid excavations and for the removal of any monument of antiquity that might be discovered’.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Lucia Patrizio Gunning, *The British Consular Service in the Aegean and the Collection of Antiquities for the British Museum* (London, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Kiely, ‘Charles Newton and the archaeology of Cyprus’, *Cahiers du Centre d’Etudes Chypriotes*, 40 (2010), p. 233. ‘Oriental’ at this time described Egyptian Antiquities.

<sup>23</sup> BM Greece and Rome Departmental Archive, Newton Letters 1861–68, Birch to Newton, 18 August 1867.

<sup>24</sup> British Museum Central Archive, Officers Reports (hereafter BMCA OR), vol. 77, Jones to Trustees, 11 October 1867, no 10017.

<sup>25</sup> Holland and Hozier, *Record*, II, 370.

<sup>26</sup> Overlaps between science and the military were a feature of the British Empire. For discussion and an example of collecting in another military context, see Lachlan Fleetwood, ‘Science and war at the limit of empire: William Griffith with the Army of the Indus’, *Royal Society Notes and Records*, 75/3 (2021), pp. 285–310. On such connections during the Abyssinian Campaign, see James Ryan, ‘Photography, Geography and Empire, 1840–1914’ (PhD thesis, University of London, 1994), pp. 86–104.

<sup>27</sup> BMCA Trustees Minutes, 12 October 1867, 11318–20.

<sup>28</sup> Glen Bowerstock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford, 2013). For latest research see Elizabeth O’Connell, ‘Aksumites and their port city, Adulis’ in Sue Brunning et al., *Silk Roads* (London, 2024).

<sup>29</sup> Henry Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia and Travels in the Interior of the Country: executed under the orders of the British Government in the years 1809 and 1810* (London, 1814).

<sup>30</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 92, Newton to Jones, 9 October 1867, no. 9904.

<sup>31</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 92, Vaux to Jones, 9 October 1867, no. 9906.

<sup>32</sup> British Museum Central Archive, Outgoing Letters (hereafter BMCA OL) Letter book 16, Jones to Northcote, 15 October 1867, no. 4964.

A second curatorial interest was manuscripts and material related to early Christianity. The museum's Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts, Charles Rieu, described Abyssinia as 'one of the oldest Christian Churches' and as a place where Christianity had been preserved in a uniquely untouched form.<sup>33</sup> Newton speculated 'that the churches there would contain records dating from the earliest centuries of Christianity'. Ethiopia was perceived, in the words of Augustus Franks (then Keeper of Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography) as a 'fossil church'.<sup>34</sup> Rieu and Vaux enthused that any early manuscripts that might be found had the potential to make the museum into a major centre of manuscripts studies and philology.<sup>35</sup> As well as other collecting opportunities—for coins and ethnography—Newton also saw the museum's role as a provider of cultural protection, to prevent valuable historical material from being destroyed by the invading forces. His proposal referenced the looting in Crimea (1854–6) and of the Yuanmingyuan (Old Summer) Palace (1860) noting: 'destruction...is too common in war, but it seems to me that it is worthy of an enlightened government to make some effort to prevent it by sending an archaeologist with military expeditions when circumstances permit'.<sup>36</sup> He positioned the museum as a benevolent protector, whose presence would ensure the recognition of material that might otherwise be destroyed.

This proposal, which carried support from Keepers (heads) of several departments, was also well received by the Trustees. At a series of meetings in late 1867, they agreed to take the proposal forward.<sup>37</sup> Governance by Trustees was an important dynamic in the campaign preparations. The museum was governed through a large group of Trustees drawn from across the political spectrum, learned societies and from hereditary appointments. It was not a government department and did not take directives, but there were close links to the government (and the wider political and intellectual establishment). These were mediated through highly personal (and sometimes competing) relationships. The networks and influence of Trustees were crucial, and it was under their authority and direction that negotiations took place with the Treasury and India Office. Their influence is exemplified by the group of active and influential Trustees who were called together to make a final decision on the museum's involvement. They included Roderick Murchison (Geologist and from 1862 President of the Royal Geographical Society), Charles Longley (the Archbishop of Canterbury), Philip Henry (the Earl of Stanhope and President of the Society of Antiquaries), Edward Sabine (not only president of the Royal Society but also explorer and soldier), William Gladstone (the leader of the opposition), Spencer Horatio Walpole (the conservative politician who had resigned as Home Secretary in May 1867 and was serving as a Cabinet minister without portfolio) and Benjamin Disraeli (who was chancellor of the exchequer from 1866 and became prime minister in February 1868, during the campaign).<sup>38</sup> The Trustees on the subcommittee for

<sup>33</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 92 Rieu to Jones, 9 October 1867, no. 9906.

<sup>34</sup> BMCA OR, vol. 77 Franks to Trustees, 10 October 1867, no. 9984.

<sup>35</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 92 Vaux to Jones, 9 October 1867, no. 9906; and Rieu to Jones, 9 October 1867, no. 9906.

<sup>36</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 92 Newton to Jones, 9 October 1867, no. 9904.

<sup>37</sup> These meetings were on 12 October, 9 November, 23 November, 7 December and 14 December. Minutes can be found in BMCA. They were not attended by all Trustees. Attendees in this period were Edward Sabine, Charles Townley, George Grote, the Dean of St Pauls, Roderick Murchison, the Speaker of the House of Commons, Philip Henry, William Gladstone, Spencer Horace Walpole and Robert Lowe. Others were aware of the discussion. For example, Disraeli mentions not being able to make it to the meeting on 9 November in M.W Pharand (ed.), *Benjamin Disraeli Letters. Volume nine, 1865–1867* (Toronto, 2013), no. 4596.

<sup>38</sup> For a full list, see BMCA OL, Letter-book 16, Jones to various, 3 December 1867, nos. 5821–5839.

Printed Books and Manuscripts (Holmes' department) included Disraeli, Walpole and the Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>39</sup>

We know that leveraging these connections was important for getting things done at the museum because, before his proposal was even put to the board, Newton had contacted some Trustees for support. One was Henry Hart Milman, historian and dean of St Paul's Cathedral.<sup>40</sup> Newton also wrote to Roderick Murchison on 3 October, informing him he was going to put a proposal to the Trustees and asking him for help in presenting the museum's case to Stafford Northcote.<sup>41</sup> Murchison was already in close contact with Northcote and was helping him to organise the scientific deployments of the invasion.<sup>42</sup> Through Murchison, Clements Markham, then secretary of the Royal Geographical Society who was working with the India Office, was brought into the conversation. Markham wrote to Newton on 9 October to encourage him to move quickly to secure the museum's place. He warned that Northcote was 'getting nervous about overloading the boat' and promised to help gain his interest on behalf of the museum.<sup>43</sup>

Financial support was another major hurdle. The museum could not pay out of its existing budget to send someone on the campaign and therefore needed an additional grant. Jones was instructed to first approach the India Office (who, as noted above, were running the campaign) and then secure a grant from the Treasury. The sheer volume of correspondence (over 60 outgoing letters) to representatives of the India Office (including Stafford Northcote as the Secretary of State for India) and the Treasury demonstrates the detailed planning. Jones's first letter to Northcote explained the museum's interest in Abyssinia and requested that Northcote 'give the necessary authority' for a staff member to accompany the army.<sup>44</sup> One of the Trustees, Edward Sabine, advised Jones how much to request from the Treasury to cover the costs of outfit, passage and a daily allowance.<sup>45</sup> The treasury initially offered £600, but this was not considered enough to cover research and excavations, and the museum nearly pulled out, but the Treasury increased their funds to £1000 to cover all costs.<sup>46</sup>

The planning was not entirely smooth. The appointment of the staff member to the campaign—and Richard Holmes's entry into the story—revealed some struggles within the museum and between Trustees. The first person identified for the job (and named in Newton's proposal) was Emmanuel Deutsch, a Semitic languages specialist in the Department of Printed Books. He was a well-regarded scholar of Hebrew, Arabic and Phoenician and experienced in 'Eastern palaeography'.<sup>47</sup> However, Deutsch declined the invitation to join the campaign on 7 December, just a month before he was supposed to leave. It has generally been understood that he

<sup>39</sup> For a full list of Trustees and subcommittees see British Museum, 'List of the Trustees, of the Standing Committee and Sub-Committees' (London, 1872).

<sup>40</sup> This letter is mentioned in the Trustees' minutes but could not be found in the archive.

<sup>41</sup> BL, Murchison Papers, vol. 3 MS 46,127, Newton to Murchison, 3 October 1867, 271–3. According to Gunning and Challis, 'Planned plunder', p. 560, this letter was an attempt by Newton to involve the wider intellectual establishment in the campaign. But Murchison was already heavily involved, and the letter clearly asks for his support as a Trustee. On Murchison's involvement see Robert Stafford, *Scientist of Empire: Sir Roderick Murchison, Scientific Exploration and Victorian Imperialism* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 182–6.

<sup>42</sup> BL, Murchison Papers, vol. 3 MS 46,127, Northcote to Murchison, Northcote to Murchison, 8 August 1867, 277–8.

<sup>43</sup> BM Greece and Rome archive, Newton Letters 1861–1868, Markham to Newton, 9 October 1867.

<sup>44</sup> BMCA OL, Letter-book 16, Jones to Northcote 15 October 1867, no. 4964.

<sup>45</sup> BMCA OL, Letter-book 16, Jones to Sabine, 11 November 1867, no. 5455.

<sup>46</sup> BMCA Trustees Minutes, 7 December 1867, 11230–393. £1000 in 1868 is around £62,600 in 2017 money. All my historical currency conversions are calculated using the National Archives historical currency converter at <<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter>> [accessed 2 December 2024].

<sup>47</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 92, Vaux to Jones, 9 October 1867, no. 9906.

withdrew because of ill health (he died of cancer a few years later).<sup>48</sup> However, there was more at play. Disraeli was against Deutsch's deployment and apparently wanted him to stay in London to head a department of Semitic studies and continue his scholarly work on the Talmud. Disraeli consulted Grote and Walpole (two of the closest Trustees to the arrangements), who advised him that if Deutsch pulled out, the museum would have to abandon the entire plan.<sup>49</sup>

But the museum did not abandon its plan, and five people put themselves forward as replacements for Deutsch. Mr Corkian (his first name was not recorded) from the Department of Coins and Medals, William Henry Coxe from Oriental Antiquities and Robert Kennaway Douglas from Manuscripts were either considered too inexperienced or unfit for travel. A frontrunner was Charles Bruce, professor of Sanskrit at Kings College (and former British Museum librarian) and a relative of James Bruce, an explorer who had travelled to Ethiopia in the eighteenth century. Bruce was extremely keen (and an experienced traveller with knowledge of the Arabic language) and even had references sent directly to Northcote.<sup>50</sup> Ultimately, it was another museum staff member, Richard Rivington Holmes, who was selected following a glowing recommendation from Jones.<sup>51</sup> Holmes had been apprenticed in the Department of Manuscripts under his father, John Holmes, who was Assistant Keeper of Manuscripts until his death in 1854, after which Richard Holmes became an assistant in his place. On his mother's side, the Rivingtons were a major London publishing family.

Holmes' original application letter to join the Abyssinian Campaign is preserved in the museum's archive. In it, he argued his suitability for the role saying he had all-around 'antiquarian' knowledge, that having worked for fourteen years in the Department of Manuscripts, he could 'form a fair opinion of the value and antiquity of writings both Oriental and European' and that as he was familiar with collections from the different departments, he could 'recognise the value of any specimen of antiquity' while having a special interest in classical scholarship. He also stressed his technical skills (drawing), knowledge of photography and his physical fitness.<sup>52</sup> Yet Holmes was essentially a second choice after Deutsch. He did not have any relevant language skills (spoken or written) or any practical experience of such expeditions that would recommend him—apart from an interest in the military (he joined the Berkshire regiment as a reserve).<sup>53</sup> In hindsight, we can see that whoever was selected would have always been extremely dependant on military support, even for basics like interpretation and movement. Vaux, for example, had expected (quite unrealistically) that Deutsch would be able to communicate in Amharic and Tigrinya (widely spoken languages of the Ethiopian highlands), as he thought they 'are but dialects of Hebrew'.<sup>54</sup> This was one of many significant blind spots for the museum.

The planning went deep into the details of acquisitions. It has not previously been appreciated just how closely the museum and the military conspired in plans to remove manuscripts from Ethiopia. A letter from the India Office to Jones on

<sup>48</sup> Wilson, *The British Museum*, p. 174.

<sup>49</sup> Pharand, *Disraeli Letters* 9, p. 4566. Bodleian Library, Disraeli papers, Layard to Disraeli, 27 November 1867, B/XIV/A/49 224-226. Disraeli was interested in Deutsch's career. Newton would later write to him suggesting Deutsch for the job of Royal Librarian. This job also went to Richard Holmes. Newton to Disraeli 16 October 1869, B/XIV/A/54 17-20.

<sup>50</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 92 letters Bruce to Jones, 11 December 1867 and 'Lefroy to Northcote, 13 December 1867.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 92, Holmes to Jones, 4 December 1867, no. 12274.

<sup>53</sup> An auction of Holmes' medals states he was appointed a Lieutenant in the 2nd corps of the Berkshire Rifles volunteers in 1871. See <<https://www.spink.com/lot/21002000072>> [accessed 2 December 2024].

<sup>54</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 92 Vaux to Jones, 9 October 1867, no. 9906.

28 November 1867 forwarded a copy of a military despatch from Bombay stating that ‘all manuscripts of value’ were to be ‘safely packed, as far as possible in water-tight packages and transmitted to England from time to time as safe opportunities offer, to the authorities of the British Museum’ and that the governor general in Bombay would ‘gladly sanction any reasonable outlay’ for this purpose.<sup>55</sup> Plans for military involvement in collecting went even further: When there was doubt whether the Treasury would fund the museum representative, Jones wrote to Robert Napier (as Commander in Chief of the Campaign) to ask if he would personally acquire objects for the museum. Napier was even sent a copy of the museum’s priorities for collecting.<sup>56</sup> It is a clear indication that the Trustees could promote their interests at the highest levels of military leadership and that Napier had been directly informed of the museum’s objectives prior to the invasion. As we shall see, he went on to play an instrumental role in acquiring both objects and manuscripts for the museum.

Nevertheless, this was a complicated situation for the museum. Despite the support offered by the India Office and Napier, this was first and foremost a military campaign. While there would be special privileges, there would also be constraints. Another military despatch from Bombay (forwarded to Jones by the India Office) explicitly stated that ‘[Holmes]’ movements must be entirely subject to the control and sanction of the Commander in Chief’.<sup>57</sup> A letter from an official in the Treasury to the Trustees on 29 November underlined this: ‘I am to add that it must be fully understood that [the museum’s representative] is to consider himself as under the orders of Mr Napier’ and that ‘he is on no account to deviate from the line of march, or engage in any excavations unless with the concurrence of [Napier]’.<sup>58</sup> This put Holmes under the command of Napier and would have a great influence on what he was able to do.

### The British Museum collecting on campaign

Only one month after his place on the Abyssinian Campaign had been agreed, with a tent lent to him by the British Museum, Richard Holmes left London for Cairo and then to ‘Annesley Bay’ (in what is now Eritrea) to join the military advance.<sup>59</sup> On his way, he met soldiers from England travelling to join the expedition, and his early letters exude a sense of excitement and camaraderie. He purchased a horse for the long march in Cairo.<sup>60</sup> But as soon as Holmes arrived in Zoulla on the coast of Eritrea, it became clear that his assignment from the museum was in tension with the military advance; and that his mission was going to present significant challenges. We see in Holmes’ letters evidence of increasingly blurred lines of responsibility and ‘mission creep’ of different kinds, as the plans laid out by Jones and the Trustees were tested by the realities of the Campaign.

Holmes immediately set about trying to investigate the ruins of Adulis and identify the inscriptions recorded by Cosmas Indicoplestus. However, he found that there were no men available to help with excavations. He wrote to Jones: ‘it was evident from the great strain on all the Departments at Zoulla that it would be quite impossible to obtain any labour for excavations at Adulis’.<sup>61</sup> Instead, Holmes accepted an invitation

<sup>55</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 92, India Office to Jones, 28 November 1867, no. 11827.

<sup>56</sup> BMCA OL, Letter-book 16, Jones to Napier, 12 November 1867, no. 5489.

<sup>57</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 92 Peul, India Office to Jones on 18 November 1867, no. 11425, including ‘Extract military despatch of the Government of Bombay, no 146, 15 November 1867.

<sup>58</sup> BMCA OP vol. 92, 29 November 1867, Treasury to Trustees, 11834. A similar instruction for the museum staff member to ‘report himself to the Commander in Chief and conform in all things’ was also given in an earlier letter, see BMCA OP, vol. 92, Treasury to Trustees, 30 October 1868, no. 10718.

<sup>59</sup> On the tent see BMCA OL, Letter-book 18, Butler to Holmes, 24 August 1868, p. 328, no. 4146.

<sup>60</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 93, Holmes to Jones, Hotel Suez, 15 January 1868, no. 1401.

<sup>61</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes to Jones, London, 20 July 1868, no. 7629.

to join the march inland, hoping to get to Adwa and Aksum.<sup>62</sup> Almost immediately he was embedded within the military force.

The march did prove important in terms of relationship building. Holmes became close to Napier, who tried to help him to acquire manuscripts and objects. On 31 January, Holmes writes ‘this morning I have seen the Commander in Chief. I am extremely happy to inform you that he takes the very greatest interest in the mission which the Trustees have entrusted to me’.<sup>63</sup> Napier had been briefed by Jones on the museum’s interests and received the despatches from the governor general in Bombay about helping the museum. And it appears that he did take a special interest in Holmes. Their relationship was strong enough that by the end of the campaign, Napier asked Holmes to personally accompany him on the journey back to England.<sup>64</sup> Holmes travelled in Napier’s company until the commander went to the front of the march, at which point he travelled with Charles Staveley, who was second in command.<sup>65</sup>

However, at this stage, high-level support was not matched with significant acquisitions. One of Holmes’ frustrations was not being able to find anything sufficiently ‘antique’. At the church at Cheleqot, he found manuscripts but nothing he deemed suitable: ‘I saw here a fine copy of the gospels bound in silver gilt about 70 years old but of antiquities there is nothing’.<sup>66</sup> The church at Adigerat he described as ‘hardly a fortune of interest to the antiquary... [as it] could hardly be more than half a century old’.<sup>67</sup> In other churches he visited, there was ‘nothing of interest’.<sup>68</sup> He reported ‘along the line of march there was an almost absolute dearth of anything of antiquity in the country’.<sup>69</sup>

Holmes was unable to leave the line of march because of concerns about antagonising local relationships or delaying progress towards Maqdala. He also believed that staying close to the military command was his best chance of making important discoveries because he had access to military intelligence.<sup>70</sup> This was a double bind, as although he had access to information, he could not reach sites where he could acquire the ‘right’ kind of object. His experience trying to make a visit to the church of ‘Gounda Gounda’ (Gunda Gunde Monastery in Tigray) illustrates the dilemma. Holmes wanted to visit this monastery, where he had been told there were many important manuscripts.<sup>71</sup> However, Napier feared sending a party there might jeopardise his relationships with a key local ally:

I was summoned by [Napier] to a conference with the High Priest or Bishop of the Church of Gounda Gounda, twenty-five miles to the east of Adigerat in which are said to be many Ethiopic books and some in other languages. I expressed a great desire to visit this place and at first thought I should be able to do so—as [Napier] asked Major Grant to accompany me with an interpreter. But on further conversation it appeared that the march would have to be made on foot through the territory of a chief in rebellion against the Prince of Tigre, and as it was deemed undesirable that any officer should deviate for any distance from the line of march, the intended visit had to be abandoned.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 93, Holmes to Jones, Camp Senafe, 31 January 1868, no. 2034.

<sup>64</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes to Jones, London, 20 July 1868, no. 7629, p. 14.

<sup>65</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes to Jones, Camp Meshak, 14 March 1868, no. 3750.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 93, Holmes to Jones, Camp Adabaga, 22 February 1868, no. 3186.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes to Jones, London, 20 July 1868, no. 7629, p. 6.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> He was correct about this, the Gunda Gunde monastery houses a renowned library.

<sup>72</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 93, Holmes to Jones, Camp Adabaga, 22 February 1868, no. 3186. Gunda Gunde is to the south of Adigerat, but this must be Holmes’s error.

Instead of making the journey himself, Napier suggested that Holmes give the ‘High Priest’ ten dollars to make a list of the manuscripts in their library and bring him one manuscript. This was done, and Holmes purchased the manuscript for three dollars. An on-the-spot translation by Captain Speedy (who had accompanied the Campaign as ‘interpreter’ to Napier) identified it as a ‘dictionary of Tigre and Arabic’.<sup>73</sup>

Another strategy Holmes used was to work with Clements Markham, who was also part of the Campaign’s scientific deployment, working as a geographer. Markham had already travelled to parts of the Ethiopian highlands with the reconnaissance party in late 1867. Together they visited a church in a village he calls ‘Baraka’ (Baraknaha in Eritrea) near Senafe.<sup>74</sup> Here, Holmes bought a chalice he believed was associated with a fifth-century Christian saint.<sup>75</sup> He wrote, ‘For a small sum I bought here an old bronze chalice which the priest affirmed to be the same in which the saint was used to consecrate the sacramental wine’.<sup>76</sup> If true, this would have been an extremely early Christian artefact to find. It is more likely that Holmes misunderstood the priest or was taken in by an apocryphal story. This was the only object he purchased for the museum on the advance to Maqdala.

Before long, Holmes saw so little to do for the museum that he made himself available for military service. He wrote: ‘As there is little of antiquities business for me to transmit I have thought it proper to offer my services to the military secretary at any time when he or his department are want of assistance’.<sup>77</sup> He would retain close relationships with the military leadership, who continued to see Holmes as their main point of contact with the museum, many years after the campaign had finished. Increasingly, Holmes came to believe that the reason he was unable to find suitable objects in the churches he visited was because Tewodros had taken them to Maqdala. He assumed that he would be able to access these things after the fall of the fortress. He also hoped the return march might offer better collecting opportunities.<sup>78</sup> His attention became focused on Maqdala, and his letters do not disguise his intentions (or the hypocrisy in attitudes towards loot): ‘I know that the plunder of many churches is among the treasures now with Theodore at Magdala so that in common with the troops I am looking forward to the sack of that fortress’.<sup>79</sup>

Napier’s troops arrived at Maqdala in the middle of April 1868. After a significant battle at nearby Arogee, with at least 700 Ethiopian casualties, Maqdala fell relatively quickly. Tewodros, on seeing that he was going to be overpowered militarily, took his own life. British accounts suggest around 3000 people (‘women, children, prisoners’) were living in Maqdala when it was attacked, and around sixty of Tewodros’ soldiers were killed during the capture of the fortress.<sup>80</sup> After Tewodros’ death, the fortress was looted by Napier’s troops.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>73</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 93, Holmes to Jones, Camp Adabaga, 22 February 1868, no. 3186. The list was translated by Capt. Speedy. I have not located this manuscript.

<sup>74</sup> For a description of the Church see Antonio Mordini, ‘La chiesa di Baraknaha, nello Scimezana’, *Annales d’Ethiopie*, 4 (1961), pp. 131–8.

<sup>75</sup> This is AOA Af1868,1001.12.

<sup>76</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes to Jones, London, 20 July 1868, no. 7629.

<sup>77</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes to Jones, Camp Meshak, 14 March 1868, no. 3750.

<sup>78</sup> This proved not to be the case, as Napier was equally eager to make an order exit. See BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes to Jones, Camp Antalo, 13 May 1868, no. 6186.

<sup>79</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 93, Holmes to Jones, 22 February 1868, no. 3188.

<sup>80</sup> Clements Markham, *A History of the Abyssinian Expedition* (London, 1869), p. 345; Stanley, *Coomsie and Magdala*, p. 460.

<sup>81</sup> For a summary of different accounts of the looting, see Pankhurst, ‘The library of Emperor Tewodros II’, pp. 17–19.

This was the opportunity to acquire objects that Holmes had been waiting for. Part of the reason there was such an important assemblage of historical, cultural and sacred material was that Tewodros had himself been gathering materials during his own military campaigns with the intention of establishing Maqdala as a seat of learning and to consecrate a new church near to the fortress. Markham describes what was seen in the small huts that made up the church treasury: ‘ecclesiastical crowns, chalices, silver and bronze crosses, censers, silks, velvets and carpets, besides tons of Ge’ez and Amharic manuscript books. There were also arms of every description—spears and swords, gold and silver shields, silver kettledrums...’.<sup>82</sup> The journalist Henry Morton Stanley (who was embedded in the invasion and whose published account is a much-cited source of the looting) describes a cosmopolitan array of material: ‘Staffordshire pottery, wine of Champagne, Burgundy, Greece, Spain and Jerusalem... chests full of ornamental frippery; tents of rose, purple, lilac and white silk; carpets of Persia’.<sup>83</sup>

Napier ordered all the loot to be handed over and sold for the benefit of the troops. The principle was for the officers and wealthier members of the expedition to bid (using regimental or personal funds) and generate proceeds that were split between the ordinary soldiers. This was a standard British military practice at the time: an attempt to regularise and convert ‘loot’ into ‘prize [money]’.<sup>84</sup> A similar practice was used in the third Anglo-Ashanti war in 1873–4 and at the Yuanmingyaun (Summer) Palace in China in 1860.<sup>85</sup> At Maqdala, an Army Prize Committee was set up, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Milward, to oversee the auction and distribute the profits.<sup>86</sup>

An auction was held on the Delanta Plain on 20–21 April. One frequently cited scale of this auction is Stanley’s description of the fifteen elephants and 200 mules that were needed to carry the loot down from Maqdala.<sup>87</sup> Other descriptions are more reserved. Another journalist wrote: ‘I do not imagine that the amount returned will be large. All the spoil taken, with the arms, &c., will be sold by auction in a day or two’.<sup>88</sup> There is no record of what was auctioned, although we can piece together a general picture. According to one report: ‘the bulk of the proceeds of the auction will be derived from church property’.<sup>89</sup> In addition, ‘high prices were realised for native produce. Shields of buffalo hide, ornamented with broad silver plates, fetched 15l. a piece, silver crosses 20l., brass ditto’.<sup>90</sup> There was great interest in anything personally connected to Tewodros himself—and many fragments reported to be pieces of his clothes, tents, even locks of hair were taken.<sup>91</sup> Some of the items on sale were the supplies of the fortress. Milward wrote that as well as a cross, he brought ‘4lbs of powder... for barter lower down on the march’.<sup>92</sup> A group of objects was set aside for

<sup>82</sup> Markham, *A History*, pp. 357–8.

<sup>83</sup> Stanley, *Coomasie and Magdala*, pp. 454–9.

<sup>84</sup> Edward Spears, ‘Spoils of war: custom and practice’ in Lidchi and Allan (eds), *Dividing the Spoils*, p. 20.

<sup>85</sup> Watt, ‘Ashanti loot’, p. 31.

<sup>86</sup> S. Chojnacki and I. Marshall (eds), ‘Colonel Milward’s Abyssinian Journal, 2 December 1867 to 13 June 1868’, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 12/1 (1969), pp. 81–118.

<sup>87</sup> Stanley, *Coomasie and Magdala*, p. 467.

<sup>88</sup> G.A Henty, *The March to Magdala* (London, 1868), p. 405.

<sup>89</sup> *The Daily News*, 26 May 1868.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> A lock of his hair was return by the National Army Museum in 2019, see ‘UK’s National Army Museum to Hand over Locks of Hair Belonging to Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia’, *National Army Museum* website, <<https://www.nam.ac.uk/press/uks-national-army-museum-hand-over-locks-hair-belonging-emperor-tewodros-ii-ethiopia>> [accessed 19 February 2024].

<sup>92</sup> Chojnacki and Marshall, ‘Colonel Milward’, p. 108.

Queen Victoria.<sup>93</sup> The total raised by the auction came to £3000.<sup>94</sup> Napier himself was disappointed with what had been found—he had hoped for cash or gold to distribute to the troops: ‘No money was found, and no property of any value except the crown of Theodore and the crown and chalice of the aboona’ [sic. Abuna].<sup>95</sup> His private letters to Northcote reveal that the distribution of loot was not an easy process. In what now seems like an indication of further tensions to come, he complained of the difficulties managing relationships and claims over loot and prize, writing: ‘I wish the whole lot had been burnt in Magdala, I detest the whole question of booty which has the most injurious effect on the troops and on anyone who may let his hands touch it’.<sup>96</sup>

## What was taken

Holmes returned to the United Kingdom in Napier’s company with the objects he had acquired boxed up on the HMS *Urgent*, arriving at the British Museum on 16 July 1868.<sup>97</sup> They were unpacked by Franks who wrote a positive report for the Trustees, impressing on them that ‘no time should be lost exhibiting’ the collection.<sup>98</sup> He was ordered to put them on display as soon as possible.<sup>99</sup>

Holmes brought thirty-two objects from the campaign to the British Museum. Until now, it has widely been assumed that these were all purchased at the sale of loot.<sup>100</sup> There is no doubt that Holmes was an important buyer at the auction: Napier gave him first choice of what to bid on, allowing him to acquire some of the most culturally and art-historically significant material.<sup>101</sup> Yet Stanley’s description (often cited) that ‘Mr Holmes...was in his full glory. Armed with ample funds, he outdid all in most things’ gives a potentially misleading picture of the scale of his purchases.<sup>102</sup> A list of what he purchased, which I identified in the British Museum’s archive for the first time during my research, contains only thirteen objects. It also gives the prices he paid (in rupees, with Holmes’ conversion to pounds), which range from 230 rupees for a diptych in a silver gilt case and seven rupees for a *tabot*. His total spend was £113.4).<sup>103</sup>

If less than half were purchased at the auction of loot, where did the other objects Holmes brought to the museum come from? Holmes’s letters to Jones show that he was more personally implicated in the looting of Maqdala than has previously been thought. We know that Holmes was one of the first civilians to enter the fortress. He wrote to Jones: ‘I made it my duty to follow as closely as I could and enter

<sup>93</sup> These include a crown and seal belonging to Tewodros that were returned by Queen Elizabeth on a state visit in 1965 (see Andrew Heavens, ‘The Emperor’s Great Seal’, *The Princes and the Plunder* website, <<https://www.theprinceandthep plunder.com/tag/returned-plunder/>>) [accessed 4 December 2024] and the revolver (RCIN 61616) allegedly used by Tewodros, which is still in the Royal Collection (‘Percussion Revolver’, *Royal Collection Trust* website, <<https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/1/collection/61616/percussion-revolver>>) [accessed 4 December 2024]. A selection of the illustrated manuscripts sent to the British Museum were presented to Queen Victoria see BMCA Trustees Minutes, 10 October 1868, p. 11536.

<sup>94</sup> *The Daily News*, 26 May 1868.

<sup>95</sup> BL Iddesleigh papers, MS 50029, Napier to Northcote, 19 May 1868, Camp Adabaga, 192–5.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes, 16 July 1868, no. 7260.

<sup>98</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 95, Franks to Jones, 23 July 1868, no. 7564.

<sup>99</sup> BMCA Trustees Minutes, 25 July 1868, pp. 11525–6.

<sup>100</sup> For example, Pankhurst infers that Holmes spent £1000 at the auction, ‘The library of Emperor Tewodros II’, p. 20.

<sup>101</sup> Henty reports Holmes was given first selection of objects to be auctioned by Napier: Henty, *March*, p. 407.

<sup>102</sup> Stanley, *Coomasie and Magdala*, p. 470.

<sup>103</sup> BMCA OP, vol 94, ‘List from Sale of plunder’, filed after letter on 22 April 1868 (Camp Delanta Plain), no. 5376. The objects on this list have been identified in the collection and the details (including amounts paid and Holmes’ descriptions) are available on the British Museum’s public database. £113.4 is approximately £7087 in 2017 purchasing power.

the captured fortress as soon after [the soldiers] as possible'.<sup>104</sup> He was present in Tewodros' chambers moments after his death. His sketch of Tewodros' dead body was presented (with others he made on the campaign) to the Trustees on his return to London.<sup>105</sup> We can now conclude that most of the other objects brought to the museum were personally looted by Holmes. AP letter to Jones indeed mentions other (unspecified) 'prizes' he took from Maqdala. These Napier allowed him to keep for the museum (rather than give up to the Prize Committee).<sup>106</sup> It also mentions a shield purchased from a soldier in the camp and the gold crown and chalice of the Abuna purchased from a soldier during the looting. The crown and chalice he was ordered to give over to the prize committee, and we shall return to them below.

Subsequently, it has emerged that Holmes also made a private collection for himself. My research confirms that this was a break with the terms of his deployment, as the instructions given to him by Jones were explicit: 'all objects obtained by you in the course of your researches are to be forwarded to the Museum'.<sup>107</sup> The only hint of this private collection in the British Museum archive is a mention of a 'common Abyssinian shield' that Holmes told Franks that he wished to keep.<sup>108</sup> The most important item he is known to have taken is the *Kwer'ata Re'esu* icon (Ge'ez: 'Christ with the crown of thorns'). This European (Flemish or Portuguese) painting was imported to Ethiopia in the seventeenth century and took on enormous political and cultural importance.<sup>109</sup> It is unlikely that Holmes realised the significance in Ethiopia of the icon in 1868 (although he might have read about it in James Bruce's 1790 book *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*).<sup>110</sup> But he kept its possession very quiet until 1905, when he chose to publicise its presence in London in an anonymous article (presumably written by Holmes himself or with his close input) in the Burlington Magazine which named Holmes as the owner.<sup>111</sup>

Further important conclusions can be drawn about what Holmes did *not* do. Another new insight is that despite his job in the Manuscript Department, Holmes was much less involved in acquiring the manuscripts than had previously been thought. Manuscripts were a prominent part of the museum's desiderata from Abyssinia. Napier's forces found an important collection (likely the most significant in Ethiopia at the time) assembled by Tewodros.<sup>112</sup> About 350 were brought to the British Museum.<sup>113</sup> Until recently, the museum's own statement on the collection recorded that Holmes purchased these for the museum at the auction of loot. Holmes' letters tell a different story. He first saw the manuscripts during the looting of Maqdala, but he did not investigate them.<sup>114</sup> Instead, it was the Swiss Consul of

<sup>104</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes to Jones, Camp Magdala, 16 April 1868, no. 5184.

<sup>105</sup> See British Museum '1972, U.592' <[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1972-U-592](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1972-U-592)> [accessed 6 January 2025].

<sup>106</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Letter from Holmes to Jones, 22 April 1868 (Camp Delanta Plain), no. 5376.

<sup>107</sup> BMCA OL, Letter-book 17, Jones to Holmes, 19 December 1867, no. 6285.

<sup>108</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 95, Franks to Jones, 25 July 1868, no. 7564.

<sup>109</sup> Richard Pankhurst, 'The History of the Kwer'ata Re'esu: An Ethiopian Icon', *African Affairs*, 81/322 (1982), pp. 117–25.

<sup>110</sup> Bruce describes the painting in James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, vols II and III*. (Edinburgh, 1790), vol. II, pp. 620 and 640; vol. III, p. 21.

<sup>111</sup> Anon, 'A Flemish picture from Abyssinia', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 7/29 (1905), pp. 394–5. For the latest news, see Martin Bailey, 'Exclusive: First colour photographs shed fresh light on Ethiopia's most treasured icon and its looting by an agent of the British Museum', *The Art Newspaper*, 25 September 2023.

<sup>112</sup> It is thought he had been intending to establish an important library: Pankhurst, 'The library of Emperor Tewodros II'.

<sup>113</sup> Around 600 Mss were left in Ethiopia. Napier stated these were given to the monastery at Cheleqot, but they have not all been identified there. See Pankhurst, 'The library of Emperor Tewodros II', pp. 20–5; Stephane Ancel and Denis Nosnitsin 'On the history of the library of Maqdala: new findings', *Aethiopia* 17 (2014), pp. 90–5.

<sup>114</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes to Jones, Camp Magdala, 16 April 1868, no. 5184.

Massawa, Werner Munzinger (who read Ge'ez and who had accompanied the Army to Maqdala) who surveyed the manuscripts and compiled a list of their contents for the British Army.<sup>115</sup> The manuscripts were not auctioned; Napier sent them directly to the British Museum. In Holmes' letters, he distanced himself, writing that (among the manuscripts) 'I failed to discover anything of importance as far as regards antiquity'.<sup>116</sup> In common with his frustrations on the march, he did not believe the manuscripts were important because they were not old enough.

Despite being described as the official 'archaeologist' to the campaign—and excavations at Adulis being a major priority for the museum—Holmes was involved in no excavations. After the capture of Maqdala and the release of the hostages, the military focus was on orderly withdrawal. Holmes had failed to find men to help with the excavations. By the time Holmes arrived at the coast, Captain Goodfellow (second in command of the Royal Engineers) had already begun excavating at Adulis under Napier's instruction (using Indian soldiers as labour). Holmes spent his time at Adulis (unsuccessfully) looking for inscriptions. Of these, he wrote:

The course of the river seems to have altered at various times and all traces of the Greek inscriptions mentioned by Cosmas Indicopleustes appear to be lost. A native burial ground covers much of the site of the ruins and the whole is overgrown with thick scrub so that investigation is difficult.<sup>117</sup>

The only record of the excavation is Goodfellow's report, which was sent to the Trustees and later published in the Official Account of the expeditions.<sup>118</sup> The archaeological fragments he unearthed were sent to the museum through the India Office.

Holmes's were not the only objects the museum received from the campaign. Three substantial donations came from the India Office. These included the Maqdala manuscripts, a shipment of boxes containing archaeological fragments from Adulis and a group of *tabots*, and a third made up of a collection of ecclesiastical and ethnographic objects 'purchased in Abyssinia by Lord Napier of Magdala'.<sup>119</sup> In fact, overall, the museum received more material from the India Office than was presented by Holmes. Holmes was just one facet of the relationship between the British Museum, the India Office and the army. It was this relationship in its broadest sense that enabled the museum to acquire the collections. After the donations had arrived, Jones wrote to Northcote, expressing the Trustees' thanks for the 'great interest' Northcote had shown in the museum and added that 'the museum collection of Ethiopic manuscripts is rendered the first in Europe'.<sup>120</sup>

The material was different from what the museum had anticipated. There were no inscriptions and little 'ancient'. The large haul of manuscripts, although hugely significant (and recognised as being so), were later in date than what had originally been hoped. Newton—who had been so instrumental in proposing the museum's involvement wrote only a short note on the finds from Adulis: 'the architectural fragments discovered by Goodfellow at Adulis appear to be those of

<sup>115</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes to Jones, London, 20 July 1868, no. 7629, p. 9.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>117</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes to Jones, London, 20 July 1868, no. 7629, p. 13.

<sup>118</sup> Holland and Hozier, *Record*, II, pp. 398–9. Also see copy of letter from Goodfellow, 9 June 1868, Camp Zoulla, in BMCA OP, vol. 95, 9 June 1868.

<sup>119</sup> BMCA Trustees Minutes, 9 January 1869. Napier acquired and distributed a large range of objects from Maqdala. Some were those presented to the British Museum, other objects include a necklace given to Disraeli (National Trust, Hughenden Hall) and a silk flag (National Army Museum).

<sup>120</sup> BL, Idlesleigh papers, MS 50037, Jones to Northcote, 21 December 1868, 682.

an early Christian church'.<sup>121</sup> Franks' report on these fragments also suggests some ambivalence over the perceived significance:

These objects are not of great archaeological value, but considering the distant spot on which they were found and the light which they throw of the state of decorative arts in Abyssinia in early times, they are well worthy of a place in the Museum.<sup>122</sup>

Yet much praise was given to Holmes, especially by Jones, who asked the Trustees to award him a bonus. When all the accounts were settled, it was confirmed that Holmes had only spent £600, leaving a surplus of £400 from the £1000 issued by the Treasury. Half of the surplus (£200) was given to Holmes as 'acknowledgement... for the services he has rendered'.<sup>123</sup> This was a significant reward, almost double the sum he spent at the auction of loot.<sup>124</sup> The case made for Holmes's bonus also tells us how he was seen to have achieved 'success' for the museum in the context of a military campaign (and how 'success' was redefined in response to events). It was not only that he had brought back objects of interest for the museum, but that he had 'conciliated the favour of the Commander in Chief [Napier] and his officers and contrived to keep the interests of the Trustees prominent'.<sup>125</sup> As well as his own acquisitions, he had ensured the museum would receive more objects from the India Office.

### Contesting loot

One of the most significant tensions between the museum and the military surfaced in the aftermath of the campaign. It concerned the fate of what was considered the most valuable objects taken from Maqdala: a gold crown and chalice both given to the Church of Our Lady of Qwesqwan near Gondar by King Iyyasu II (ruled 1730–55) and his mother Empress Mentewab.<sup>126</sup> Napier considered these the only objects of monetary value found at Maqdala.<sup>127</sup> These were stored in the British Museum between 1868 and 1871 but were never accessioned and are now in the collection of the V&A.<sup>128</sup> Their story is a complicated one and shows the Trustees coming into direct conflict with the army (and the government of the day) over their ownership.

The crux of the dispute was that the museum wanted the best objects for its collection, but the Prize Committee wanted money for the soldiers and saw these objects as a source of cash. The government's decision to buy them was ultimately taken to appease the army and can be seen as a culmination of some of the tensions that had defined the museum's involvement in the campaign. The dispute also shows how closely people outside of the museum (in government) could be in making decisions over its collections. These political decisions were directly linked to contemporary questions over the role of museums in receiving objects taken in colonial wars.

The crown and chalice had originally come into Holmes' hands. He had, almost by luck, managed to purchase them during the looting of Maqdala for just £4 from

<sup>121</sup> BMCA OR, vol. 82, 1868, Newton to Jones, 10 December 1868, no. 12457.

<sup>122</sup> BMCA OR, vol. 81, Franks to Trustees, 25 September 1868, no. 9599.

<sup>123</sup> BMCA Trustee Minutes, 12 December 1868, p. 11570. £200 is approximately £12,521 in 2017 purchasing power.

<sup>124</sup> BMCA OR, vol. 82, Jones to Trustees, 7 November 1868, no. 11160.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> See 'Crown', <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O108443/crown-unknown/> [accessed 24 February 2024]; and 'Chalice', <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O107777/chalice-giyorgis-walda/> [accessed 24 February 2024]. The crown was erroneously referred to as the crown of the 'Abuna' (the head of the Ethiopian Coptic church), but there is no evidence for this association.

<sup>127</sup> BL Iddesleigh papers, MS 50029, Napier to Northcote 19 May 1868 Camp Adabaga, 192–5.

<sup>128</sup> Alexandra Jones, 'Ethiopian Objects at the Victoria and Albert Museum', *African Research & Documentation* 135 (2019), pp. 8–24.

a soldier.<sup>129</sup> It was initially thought that these objects were made of copper gilt, and it was only subsequently realised they were pure gold (which explains why Holmes could pay a low price initially).<sup>130</sup> Soon after, they were given a new value of £2000, the equivalent to over half the profits of the auction. Napier ordered Holmes to give them up to the Prize Committee, although they were to be offered first to the Trustees. On the march back from Maqdala, Holmes was petitioning the Trustees against this price. He estimated their worth at only £500. He added that if the Trustees declined the purchase, the Prize Committee planned to put them up for auction at Christie's, where 'perhaps they will find their opinion [of the value] open to corrections'.<sup>131</sup> Nevertheless, he wanted them to be acquired by the museum: 'I yet hope that on my return I may find them ornamenting the cases of the gold ornament room in Great Russell Street'.<sup>132</sup>

The Trustees tried to buy the crown and chalice through an additional grant, but the Treasury did not respond to their requests. Milward (head of the Army Prize Committee) wrote repeatedly to the museum, asking them to confirm the purchase, but the Trustees' hands were tied without support from the Treasury.<sup>133</sup> The decision was finally subject to a debate in parliament, after which it was decided that the Treasury would purchase them for the nation and place them on loan to the South Kensington Museum (later the V&A).<sup>134</sup>

One of the factors that contributed to this decision was the discomfort on the part of Gladstone (by then the prime minister) with the actions of Holmes. In the parliamentary debate, Gladstone stated that he did not believe the crown and chalice should have been taken from Ethiopia, and that they should one day be returned.<sup>135</sup> Gladstone's position is more complex than it first appears. He was one of the Trustees who had approved the plan to send Holmes on the Abyssinian Campaign in the first place. But his issue was that Holmes had not done what the Trustees had intended. As Gladstone put it, Holmes' mandate had been to acquire 'ancient remains' and not 'to accumulate records of remarkable events of the present'. Gladstone objected not to the principle of loot, but to the fact this was church property: 'we were never at war with the people and Churches of Abyssinia, we were at war with Theodore'. Or as another speaker put it, this was all 'very near to robbing a Church'.<sup>136</sup>

Part of what was being debated was what *should* happen to objects taken in colonial-military expeditions. The chancellor of the exchequer said that the British Museum was not 'a temporary storehouse of the barbaric spoils of war', to which Stafford Northcote replied that the British Museum was 'a collection of works interesting to the nation for a variety of reasons' and that since Holmes had been deployed to secure objects 'for national purposes', the crown and chalice should remain there as items of national importance. Major-General William Arbuthnot (who had been present at Maqdala) also supported the idea they should be in the British Museum's collection because they 'possessed an historical value and interest' by virtue of their connection to the Abyssinian Campaign. In the end, the big

<sup>129</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes to Jones, Camp Magdala, 16 April 1868, no. 5184.

<sup>130</sup> BL Iddesleigh papers, MS 50029, Napier to Northcote 19 May 1868 Camp Adabaga. 192–5.

<sup>131</sup> BMCA OP, vol. 94, Holmes to Jones, Camp Antalo, 13 May 1868, no. 6186. There was also suggestion at the parliamentary debate that these objects had been 'overvalued' by the Army Prize Committee.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> Discussed in Trustees' Meetings on 10 July 1869, 8 January 1870, 12 February 1870, 26 March 1870, 25 June 1870, 25 February 1871 and 15 April 1871.

<sup>134</sup> Jones, 'Ethiopian objects', pp. 13–14.

<sup>135</sup> All quotations until the end of this section are from Hansard Papers, House of Commons debate, 30 June 1871 vol 207 cc939–52.

<sup>136</sup> A similar criticism of Holmes taking 'from Christian churches' featured in Edward Edwards, *Lives of the Founders of the British Museum, 1570–1870* (London, 1870), p. 706.

decisions were not made in the museum but in the House of Commons and by many of the same people who had previously acted as, or in support of, the Trustees.

## Conclusion

The British Museum's involvement in the Abyssinian Campaign throws important light on the relationship between museums and colonial-military enterprise on the eve of colonial expansion in Africa.<sup>137</sup> New material presented here has shown that the deployment of Holmes was part of a close relationship between the museum, the military and the British establishment. However, the outcomes of this association were not straightforward, and the relationship was contingent and conflicted in decisive ways. Curators and Trustees had initially anticipated that the campaign would be an opportunity to seek out 'antiquities', through excavation and excursion to sites such as Aksum that, they believed, could be easily accessed by taking advantage of military activity. But Holmes' experience shows how being embedded within a military force was more constrained. Any hopes to excavate and reach key historical sites were secondary to the military outcomes. We see that, while the museum was happy—indeed eager—to profit from imperial plunder, the key movers were naïve about what that would entail and did not foresee the difficulties of slotting their aims into the machinery of an invading force.

The British Museum's position as an 'arm's length' institution is important for understanding these dynamics. It was not a government department, but it was strongly linked to the state, with very close relations between the Trustees and the governing establishment, and significant overlaps between the two. During the planning of the Abyssinian Campaign, Trustees included Disraeli and Gladstone—who would both serve as prime ministers during and after the campaign. Yet the support of the Trustees, across the political spectrum, for the ambitions of the museum staff, could never be taken for granted and was always conditional. As we see the government (under Gladstone) opposed the museum's acquisition of the crown and chalice.

Ethiopia was the first in a series of major nineteenth-century British military campaigns that led to the removal of significant items of African cultural heritage to the British Museum (and other museums, primarily in England and Scotland). But the museum never again sent a staff member on an African campaign. Further research remains to be done to piece together curatorial and wider connections between these campaigns, each of which has its own political and appropriative landscape. However, there are several observations about the impact of the Abyssinian Campaign on the museum's involvement in later colonial wars.

Despite his apparent prominence and much-reported role, Holmes was, in important respects, strikingly unsuccessful in fulfilling his mission for the museum. Of course, the museum did end up profiting from the spoils of the Campaign. But large (and significant) collections came directly from the India Office and Napier. Manuscripts are the clearest example of this—although Holmes' personal relationships may have helped strengthen the connection, the 'deal' to acquire the manuscripts was agreed by the Principal Librarian and India office in late 1867. Similarly, the archaeological fragments from Adulis—Newton's key area of interest—were excavated by the Royal Engineers under Napier's order, not by Holmes. This must have cast doubt on the idea that a staff member on the ground was the most effective

<sup>137</sup> For a discussion of current work in this area, see Suryer Bower et al 'State of the (future) field: the history of collecting and its institutions', *History: The Journal of the History Association*, Early View access, 22 November 2024, < <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.13434>>.

way to make acquisitions. Yet while the precise method was not repeated, links between colonialism, the military and archaeology were embedded in the museum's collecting practice (both before and after the campaign).<sup>138</sup>

Curatorial attitudes to later campaigns (and ideas about 'Africa') were not the same across the continent. We can see this by looking back to Newton's original proposal. Although their views about the history of Ethiopia and Eritrea were narrow, Newton et al. did think the region had an important role to play in antiquity and the history of Christianity. This was very different from other, more dismissive Victorian perceptions towards West African art and history, which were not challenged until the display of looted artworks of exceptional artistic virtuosity from Benin City.<sup>139</sup> For the British Museum, the ancient and Christian history of 'Abyssinia' was important in shaping their engagement. For others (most prominently Gladstone) these Christian traditions also shaped views of the moral limits of loot and the boundary of 'acceptable' plunder. It made a difference that the works acquired on this campaign were a part of the history of the Christian church. This is an important reminder that the events at Maqdala have always been contested, including by those who were implicated in them. Even within the military, Napier was frustrated by the 'injurious effects' of loot. The removal of sacred materials was a tool of military conquest, but it also planted seeds of anxiety.<sup>140</sup> These concerns have not gone away. Indeed, their sacred status is still at the heart of debates about the future of looted objects from Maqdala in museum collections.

<sup>138</sup> For examples, see the British Museum's *Collecting and Empire* trail <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/object-trails/collecting-and-empire-trail>> [accessed 6 December 2024].

<sup>139</sup> Annie E Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination* (New Haven, 1994), pp. 59–62.

<sup>140</sup> Emanuel Admassu and Eyob Derillo, 'Degodding Maqdala', in Seyi and LeGall (eds), *Fifteen Colonial Thefts*, pp. 151–60.