

# The History of the KWER'ATA RE'ESU ICON

by Dr Richard Pankhurst

One of the most important icons in Ethiopia's political, military and ecclesiastical history was the Kwer'ata re'esu, literally “**the striking of his head**”. The name referred to the scourging of Christ immediately prior to the Crucifixion, as reported in St Matthew XXV11 39, “**they... smote him on the head,**” but was applied by extension to representations of Christ with the Crown of Thorns.



Paintings on this theme are mentioned in Ethiopian records from as early as the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The first mention of this particular icon dates, however, from **1572**. The Ethiopian chronicle for that year states that the army of **Emperor Yohannes 1**, the second of the rulers of Gondar, was preceded on campaign by the picture, and that the monarch later exhorted his men, in the name of the Kwer'ata re'esu, to fight bravely against the enemy.

The icon played a major role throughout the next century or so. One chronicle tells of the citizens of the then capital, Gondar, swearing by the painting to die if necessary on behalf of the monarch of the day; another tells how at the end of a victorious campaign the inhabitants of the metropolis received the picture with “**great honour**” singing hymns and psalms as for the arrival of a king, after which the icon was placed in the private apartment of the then ruler **Emperor Bakaffa**.

A generation or so later disasters struck the Ethiopian army during a campaign in the Sudan in **1744**.

**The army of Emperor Iyasu 2nd** was put to flight, and, to the general consternation, the Kwer'ata re'esu was abandoned, and fell into the hands of the enemy.

The king thereupon resorted to diplomacy, and eventually succeeded in retrieving the much much-prizes painting.

The subsequent Scottish traveler, James Bruce, who, who believed that this was “no doubt” effected “for a valuable consideration” states that when the icon was finally brought back to the Ethiopian capital “**the priests made processions from church to church singing hallelujahs and songs of thanksgiving.... All Gondar**” he adds “**was drunk with joy**”.

**The icon** was later placed for safe keeping on one of the islands of **Lake Tana**, but was apparently considered so necessary for the army that it was soon brought back to the mainland. The practice of taking the painting on campaign was then resumed, and continued throughout the rest of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



The last Ethiopian ruler to possess the Kwer'ata re'esu was **Emperor Tewodros 2nd** who carried it with him on his expeditions and at other times kept it hanging above his bed as his predecessors had done. **The icon was thus in his apartment at the mountain fortress of Magdala when that citadel was attacked by a British expeditionary force, on 13 April 1868.**

On that day Tewodros committed suicide to avoid falling into the hands of his enemies.

**British troops immediately afterwards ransacked his palace and treasury as well as the nearby church of Medhane Alem, and its eqabet, or store-house.**

**One of the witnesses to the pillage was an employee of the British Museum, Richard (later Sir Richard) Holmes who had been appointed “archaeologist” to that expedition”.**

He recalls that, knowing that **“the soldiery would quickly appropriate or destroy many objects of interest and value”** he made it his “duty” to follow the troops “as closely” as he could, and thus succeeded in entering the citadel within “not much more than ten minutes” of the troops.

**The loot** seized by the soldiers was collected by the British who then transported it on **15 elephants and 200 mules** to the Dalanta plain where it was auctioned to raise prize money for the soldiers. Holmes, acting on behalf of the British Museum, was one of the principal purchasers.

**The British Museum and the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum) between them thus acquired crowns of the Emperor and Patriarch, a number of large Ethiopian processional crosses, ten Tabots, or alter slabs, much church paraphernalia, and over 300 fine manuscripts, many of them beautifully illuminated. But there was no sign of the Kwer'ata re'esu.**

The question of the paintings disappearance arose a few years later in **1872** when **Emperor Yohannes 1V** wrote to **Queen Victoria** and the **British Foreign Secretary, Earl Granville,**

**requesting the return of the icon as well as one of the manuscript seized at Magdala, This was a copy of the Kebra Nagast, or Glory of Kings, containing land charters relating to the ancient Ethiopian city of Aksum.**



The British Government, responding favorably to this request, arranged for the British Museum to send back the manuscript, which is to this day safely preserved in Addis Ababa, but the icon could not be discovered.

Earl Granville accordingly wrote to Yohannes, that though “much trouble” had

been spent searching for the painting “nothing” could be heard of it. **Queen Victoria** was even more emphatic. **“Of the picture “ she wrote “we can discover no trace whatsoever, and we do not think it can have been brought to England. We regret that we are therefore unable to assist you in its restoration”.**

**Despite Queen Victoria's statement, the icon, it later transpired, had in fact been taken to England. It was actually in the possession of none other than Sir Richard Holmes, who, two years after the battle of Magdala, had by a curious coincidence actually become the Queen's Librarian at Windsor Castle.**

He refrained, however, from revealing, his ownership of the icon until **1890** the year after the death of **Emperor Yohannes**, and did not publish a photograph of it until **1905, four years after the demise of Queen Victoria.**

Sir Richard then arranged for the Burlington Magazine, a journal with which he was connected, to reproduce the picture with the title: **“Head of Christ formely in the possession of King Theodore of Abyssinia, now in the possession of Sir Richard Holmes, K.C.V.O.”**

Holmes, who was not well-off in his post-retirement years, **died in 1911.** His widow, Lady Evelyn, who was left in straitened circumstances, **arranged for the icon to be auctioned at Christies in 1917.** It was purchased anonymously, and disappeared from public attention until 1941 when a Portuguese art historian Professor Luiz Reis Santos wrote an article about it for Burlington Magazine.

**The icon was later again auctioned at Christies, in 1950**, on behalf of the heir of the earlier purchaser. The forthcoming sale attracted the attention of the then Keeper of Prints and Drawings at Windsor Castle, Miss A Scott-Eliott, who arranged for the London firm of Colnaghi to attempt to purchase the icon on her behalf, and at the same time informed the Ethiopian Embassy in England in case it wished to secure it for Ethiopia. She was, however, outbid by an anonymous purchaser.

The then Ethiopian ambassador tried to intervene but arrived too late. Miss Scott-Eliott, desolate at the loss of the painting, was later to write in a private letter: There is no doubt it would be a good thing if it could find its way back to Ethiopia”.

The successful purchaser, it soon transpired, was Professor Reis Santos, who took a not dissimilar view as to the value of restitution. **Some years after his acquisition of the icon he proposed to the Salazar Government in Portugal that it should purchase the painting from him in order to present it to the then Ethiopian Emperor.**

Negotiations between the Professor and the Government, however failed. Reis Santos died in **1967** and the icon was inherited by his widow, Isobel, who it is believed, later disposed of it.



**The Kwer'ata re'esu so important in Ethiopian history, at that point disappeared from view, and its whereabouts today is still a mystery.**

Efforts are, however, currently in hand to find the icon, and to achieve, if possible, its restitution to Ethiopia. **This would be in accordance with the policy of UNESCO which advocates the return to the Third World of all articles of historic or cultural importance looted during the colonial period.**

Copied by Seymour Mclean, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2009 for the Birthday of Marcus Garvey. seymour31@hotmail.co.uk,