

1937: The Abyssinia Affair

Handouts



***COPS: OHIO STATE
PROF MISSING
FROM HOME***

APPLETON (Licking Co.), Sept. 11— State police investigated an apparent abduction of a prominent Ohio State University professor from his home in rural Appleton. Professor Caleb Wildsmith, 49, a member of the College of Arts and Sciences faculty went missing from the family home on Friday evening. According to police, the Professor's daughter returned home from an evening in Columbus to find her father missing. Sheriff John Hough reported that there was no sign of violence and nothing of value was stolen. He also indicated that this appears to be an isolated incident and that there is no threat to the public in this peaceful county. Anyone with information related to Prof. Wildsmith's disappearance is directed to contact Agent Riley Buckingham with the Columbus office of the FBI.

THE BLACK SHIELD OF ABYSSINIA

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We describe the nature of the “Black Shield” of Abyssinia, a substantial artefact of the 2nd century Axumite civilization, and part of the Napier collection at the British Museum (Af.1811). Examination of the physical nature of the artefact reveals its distinctive craftsmanship was informed by classical concepts of war and power. We place this analysis in the context of non-conformist Abyssinian Christian practice today, illustrating the long-term inheritance of ritual to motivate the exercise of military power.

Our study combines the efforts of a classical Archeologist (N.I. e.M.) and an Anthropologist (C.W.). We describe physical analysis of the artefact by reference to other known Axumite works and the broader artisanship of the African Horn to place the Shield’s construction no later than the 2nd century. This dating was supported by the metallurgical analysis of M.C. Gibbs. The placement of large precious yellow zircons creates unusual optical properties in sunlight.

The location of the Ge’ez letter *ግ* on the front of the shield combined with the pre-Christian era date and military nature of the object strongly suggest that the artefact was associated with the Axumite war-god Mahrem. Sources in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and native Abyssinian authorities indicated that the Shield was called *Mika’ēli Gasha* (Michael’s Shield) in the 19th century Amhara region. Therefore, it appears that the Shield was associated with the martial power of Archangel Michael at some time after the Axumite conversion to Christianity in the 4th century. Further consultation with local authorities led us to the Abbanai monastery north of Gondar, where the artefact was housed in the early 19th century. The elder of the Abbanai monks, Aleqa Mekonnen, provided detail on the oral tradition of rituals associated with the Shield. According to tradition, the expanding Christian Axumite Empire used the Shield in warfare, performing rituals that would harness the power of the sun to defeat their enemies.

CLASS OF SERVICE	SYMBOL
Telegram	
Day Letter	Blue
Night Message	NIt
Night Letter	N L

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FROM: EL MENKA LONDON
TO: S WILDSMITH APPLETON OH

BAD NEWS ABOUT PROF STOP
ABYSSINIA STOP
COME NOW STOP
BERTHS QMARY NYC STOP

BREAK-IN AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

A daring robbery on Monday resulted in the theft of several items from the two African saloons on the second floor of the British Museum. Most valuable among the stolen antiquities is the priceless Black Shield of Abyssinia from its display case in the second African saloon. According to the museum spokeswoman Gina Stuer, the artefact, which has been in the collection for over 65 years, was lifted by clever thieves who were able to gain entry to the museum. Neither Mrs. Stuer, nor Inspector Cole Griffiths of Scotland Yard would elaborate on the method of the thieves. Inspector Griffiths emphasized that recovery of the valuable antiquities was a priority for authorities and that they are following all leads.

Professor Nasir el Menka of the Institute for Archaeology described the Black Shield as an important religious artefact, treasured by the Amhara Christians of Abyssinia. The professor notes that the Black Shield is known as Michael's Shield in Abyssinia where tradition holds that it can channel the Biblical Archangel's power to defeat the enemies of Christianity. He added that his research, in collaboration with Professor C. Wildsmith of the USA, argues that Shield was manufactured in the 2nd century AD when it was probably associated with the ancient Aksumite God of War, Mehram. The Shield has been part of the museum collection since Sir Robert Napier's expedition to Abyssinia in 1868.

Museum officials are conducting a complete review of security, in consultation with Scotland Yard.