

Edward Burne-Jones, Edgar Boehm and *The Battle of Flodden Field*

MARK STOCKER



1 *The Battle of Flodden Field* by Edgar Boehm (1834-90), Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98), 1880-86. Painted gesso, 86.5 x 193 cm. Naworth Castle, Cumbria. Photo: author

If ever my eyes grow dim...I will give up painting and take to sculpture.¹ Although Sir Edward Burne-Jones's eyesight remained sharp enough to spare him from having to honour this resolution made to Elizabeth, Lady Lewis, his involvement with – and influence upon – late nineteenth-century sculpture has received considerable if long overdue attention in recent years.² However, there remains much to be said about his most important collaboration with a sculptor. This was the painted gesso relief of *The Battle of Flodden Field* of 1880-86 (Fig. 1), which was executed for Naworth Castle in Cumbria by Burne-Jones and Sir Joseph Edgar Boehm, and is the focus of this article.

Both regarded as leading figures in their respective mediums, Burne-Jones and Boehm were almost exact contemporaries and relatively close neighbours; both exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery, and both were honoured by baronetcies. Their friendship was touchingly recalled when, after Boehm's death, Burne-Jones

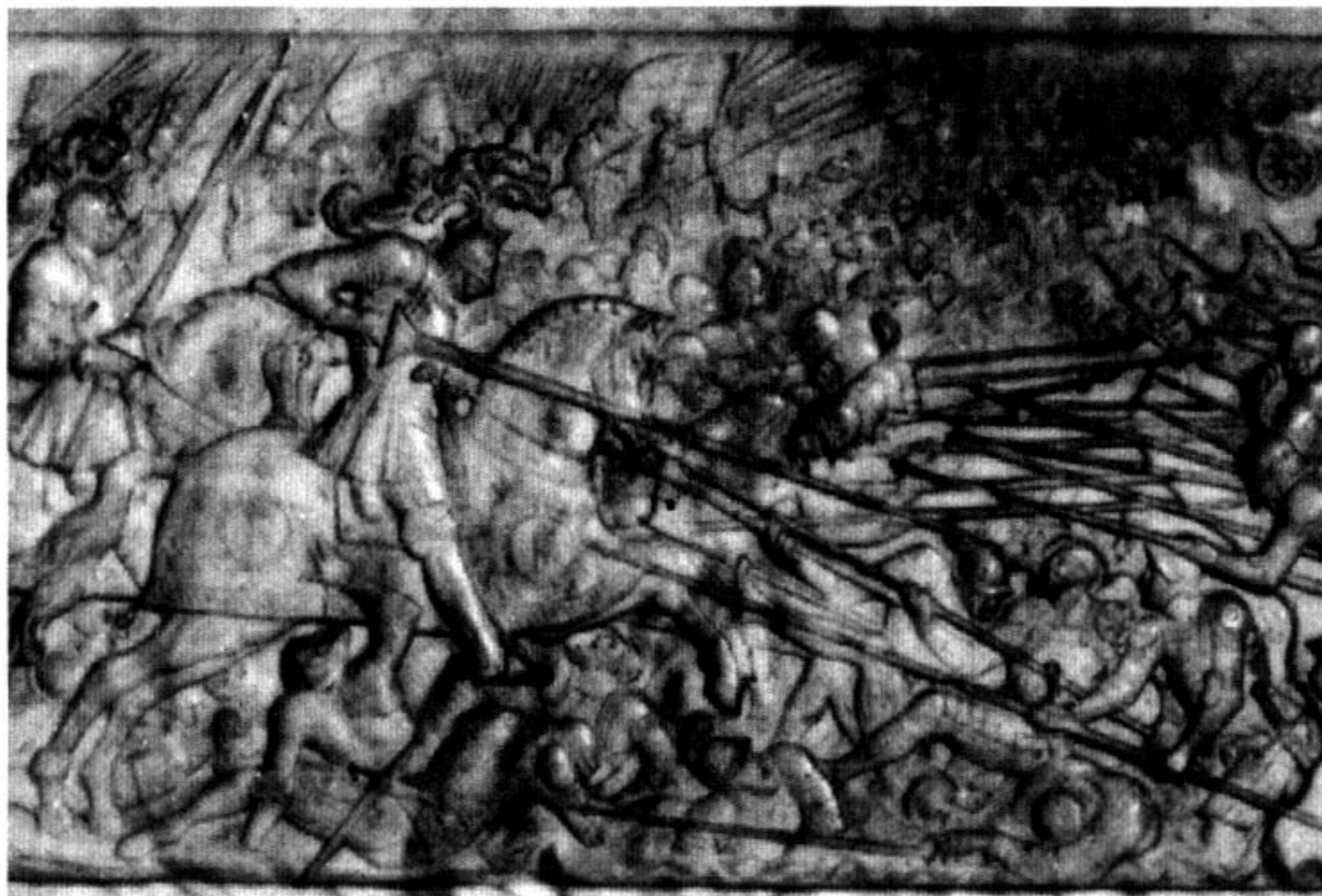
stated: 'Boehm I did heartily like...and could have loved if we had been thrown together...I loved to meet him in the world, which was about six times in our life. I never did a niceish picture without a letter from him, warm-hearted and unstinted in praise.'³ In her biography of her husband, Georgiana Burne-Jones tellingly excised the following description of Boehm: 'he was manly and noble and it sickened him to let the life go by and be so little of what he could have been as an artist, for no one knew more than he what splendid work was or felt more humbled at all he had made of it.'⁴ Burne-Jones was almost certainly alluding to Boehm's constricting role as Queen Victoria's Sculptor-in-Ordinary. The welter of royal and official portraiture and memorial commissions that Boehm felt obliged to undertake in this capacity 'embittered his life', according to the critic M.H. Spielmann, and prevented him 'from attacking a work that demanded the highest power.'⁵ The temperamental gulf between the 'establishment' figure of

Boehm and the 'aesthetic' Burne-Jones was revealed when the former enthusiastically supported the latter's candidature for Associate Membership of the Royal Academy in 1885. Burne-Jones succumbed to persuasion, but soon regretted it, exhibited there only once, and resigned in 1893.⁶

Boehm and Burne-Jones collaborated on two occasions, and in both instances their patron was the same man: their friend and fellow artist, George Howard, the 9th Earl of Carlisle (1843-1911).⁷ The first commission was a monument dating from 1879-81 to Howard's parents, the Hon. Charles Howard and Mary Parke, located in Lanercost Priory, Cumbria, close to the family seat of Naworth Castle (Fig. 5). Howard's father had recently died, whereas his mother had died in childbirth many years earlier. Philip Webb was responsible for the overall design of the monument and its frame; Burne-Jones for the designs of the two lower relief panels depicting the *Nativity* and the *Entombment*; and Boehm for

modelling and casting them in bronze and also for designing, modelling and casting the portrait medallions of Charles and Mary Howard at the top. This relatively straightforward commission went well, with Burne-Jones producing his gouache and watercolour studies with uncharacteristic speed in the final months of 1879.⁸ In connection with Boehm's contribution, Webb remarked to Howard that he had 'caught your father's expression very well indeed.'⁹ By late 1880, the bronze medallions and panels were cast and ready for chasing, which Boehm hoped Howard would not mind him doing 'at leisure & con amore.'¹⁰ Installed the following year, the monument bears witness to Boehm's 'amore'. The up-to-date realism of his portraiture, the whirling draperies of Burne-Jones's renaissance-inspired scenes and Webb's tactful design, framing the monument in Purbeck marble, combine to form an ensemble which no less an authority than Nikolaus Pevsner described as 'excellent'. George Howard's satisfaction with his parents' monument led him to commission another collaborative effort from Boehm and Burne-Jones, *The Battle of Flodden Field* (Fig. 1), but this proved to be far a more problematic undertaking.

Flodden Field commemorates the military leadership of Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey and later 2nd Duke of Norfolk, an ancestor of George Howard. In September 1513, Howard's army annihilated the Scots at what historians today term simply the Battle of Flodden, fought on the English side of the border between the two kingdoms. The Scottish king, James IV, was killed together with almost half of the Scottish peerage and some ten thousand men. The battle inspired a rich body of literature, and most memorably Walter Scott's *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field* (1808). Traditionally, James has been regarded as an impetuous commander who, 'sharing the risks of his men... risked the fortunes of his own kingdom', although the historical revisionism of some recent scholarship has disputed this verdict.¹¹ It is undeniable, however, that the defeat had a disastrous and long-lasting impact on Scottish morale, reducing the kingdom to the status of a pawn in international politics. The relief is inevitably a romanticised and idealised reconstruction of the battle, which was fought on the slopes of Branxton Hill, rather than on level ground as depicted. Surrey, an arthritic seventy-year-old, dominates the composition, and is por-



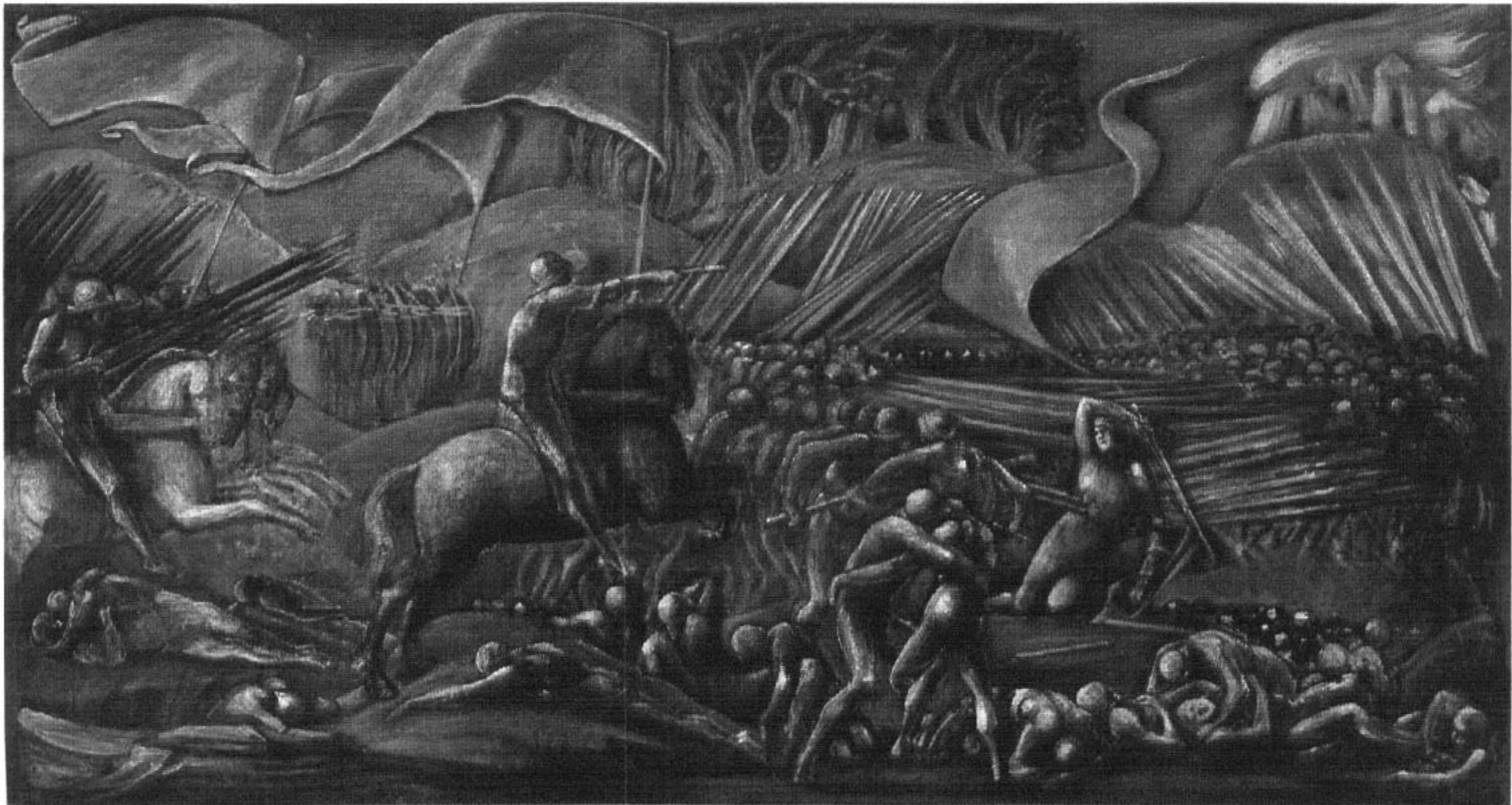
2 *The Battle of Marignano*, detail from *Monument to François I*, by Pierre Bontemps (c. 1512-c. 1570), c. 1553. Marble, Abbey of St Denis, Paris

trayed as a dashing hero mounted on a charging white horse, holding his baton of command. To his left are the horsemen of Lord Dacre – another of Howard's forebears – and in the background are seen Lord Stanley's archers. To the right is the Scottish army, with James IV falling mortally wounded. His proximity to Surrey is not altogether inaccurate: James came within a spear's length of the Earl before he was killed, although this was not apparently recognised by the English at the time.¹²

The first reference to the work dates from November 1880, when Boehm mentioned to Howard 'the relievo...for the chimney', corresponding to its eventual setting over a fireplace in the library at Naworth.¹³ This refutes the assertion made in the catalogue of the Burne-Jones centenary exhibition that the relief was commissioned in the knowledge that the 645 cm-wide painting, *The Sleep of Arthur in Avalon*, also intended for the Naworth library and begun in 1881, was never likely to be completed.¹⁴ In the same letter, Boehm told Howard that he had 'an excellent Photo of the Paris Relievo'. This almost certainly referred to one of Pierre Bontemps's reliefs celebrating François I's military triumphs on the latter's tomb at the Abbey of St Denis, which date from around 1553 (Fig. 2). Bontemps's reliefs are a more convincing prototype for Flodden Field than the 'celebrated battle scenes of Uccello and Michelangelo', that have been suggested as precedents.¹⁵ The parts illustrating the Battle of Marignano

bear a close resemblance to *Flodden Field* in the depth of the relief, the forest of lances and, even in the somewhat naively rendered landscape. The chronological proximity of the battles of Flodden (1513) and Marignano (1515) would, moreover, have made Bontemps's sculpture an entirely appropriate source both historically and artistically.

Boehm and Burne-Jones shared the work in the following fashion: Burne-Jones made the original design, which was sent to Boehm, who modelled it in relief form; the relief was then returned to Burne-Jones who coloured it. The history of the commission was, however, considerably more complex than this would lead one to suppose. Burne-Jones's gouache and watercolour rendition of *Flodden Field* was acquired by the Musée d'Orsay in Paris in 1996 (Fig. 3).¹⁶ Its semi-finished state and near monochrome, cold blue tonality indicate that it is a surviving design for the relief. The almost Blakean, symbolist qualities of the design were inevitably lost in the translation to the colourful finished product. Burne-Jones was well aware of this when he informed Howard: 'It looks a funny childish thing... but surely that was our earnest desire, wasn't it?'¹⁷ Frustratingly, Burne-Jones's study is undated. The date of 1882 generally assigned to it appears improbable. That would be too late for a preliminary design, but is certainly too early for the several documented drawings that Burne-Jones executed after Boehm had finished his share of the



3 *The Battle of Flodden Field* by Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98), c. 1880.
Gouache, watercolour and gold and silver paint, 52 x 100 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux

early for the several documented drawings that Burne-Jones executed after Boehm had finished his share of the work, during which period Burne-Jones was secretly having alterations made to the relief by a studio 'ghost'.

By December 1881, the translation of the original design into relief was under way, with Boehm complaining that 'It is a desperately difficult thing all these lances & suggested warriors.' However, he admired Burne-Jones's design for being 'divided into the space so ingeniously and with such a feeling for the right Relievo laws, that I have no doubt of a good result...particularly if Burne Jones will colour it as suggested which would be most interesting.'¹⁸ At first, Boehm had thought that terracotta would be a suitable material for the relief, but by this time he had become convinced that *gesso duro*, where the plaster and size were hardened with lime and marble dust, was more appropriate. In June 1882, he told Howard that his *formatore*, L. Finili, had 'a very good receipt' for making *gesso duro*. By then Boehm expected that he would soon finish 'the Relievo in toto'.¹⁹ It is not recorded when he did so, but Boehm's share of the work was certainly complete by February 1884 when he wrote to Howard requesting his fee of two hundred guineas. There appear to be

no surviving casts of the work in the state that it left Boehm's hands, although an undated gilded gesso relief, somewhat larger than the final version, is in the Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle (Fig. 4).²⁰ Formally, this is a less refined and successful design than its counterpart at Naworth, in which the whole composition was made narrower and more compact. In the final version, the gaping area to the right of the Scottish banner was reduced in size and details of the vegetation were introduced, making the work resemble a Burne-Jones painting more closely. In some respects, however, the Tullie House relief is closer to the Naworth Castle version than it is to Burne-Jones's study. This is the case, for instance, when it comes to the arrangement of the English banners and the hand-to-hand combatants between the figures of Surrey and James.

The relief was in Burne-Jones's studio for nearly two years after Boehm had completed his share of the work. When it was still with Boehm, Burne-Jones had expressed some satisfaction: 'Saw the model - liked it - thought it much improved - it looks interesting and would be fun to paint.'²¹ A letter marked '1884', when the relief was with Burne-Jones, tells another story, however: 'Flodden prospering - Weeks has worked most

days for the past month on it - and I go in every other day and obliterate it...I think Flodden will be finished in about another fortnight - but there are some curses in it - the truth is it was never meant by the modeller that the eye should ever detect his shortcomings & the tinting has brought up his crimes in broad daylight.'²² 'Weeks' was the modeller Osmund Weeks, who specialised in gesso decoration, and who had assisted Walter Crane at Combe Bank, near Sevenoaks from 1879 to 1881.²³ Boehm was certainly unaware of Weeks's role in modifying his work.

By October 1884, Burne-Jones was assuring Howard that he would have *Flodden Field* 'up in its place by Christmas.'²⁴ January 1885 saw Burne-Jones requesting more money for Weeks's fees and saying that the work 'slowly grows hopeful', but a letter dated 15 January laments that 'it seems I cannot do anything but finish - and the trick of simple work is past for me.' Perhaps appealing to Howard's own, far from negligible, abilities as an amateur artist, Burne-Jones added: 'I also want you very much to finish Flodden with me.'²⁵ Five days later Burne-Jones wrote: 'We must put off Flodden for a week.' Subsequent letters, probably dating from early 1885, contain similarly procrastinating refer-



4 *The Battle of Flodden Field* by Edgar Boehm (1834-90), Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98), c. 1881-83. Gilded plaster, 84 x 187.5 cm. Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle. Photo: Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle

Howard scrawled 'This is for the 5th time July 9 1885.' A letter to Howard dated some ten days later gives an idea of the considerable changes that were being made to Boehm's modelling: 'Weeks is at it 3 or 4 days a week. He has carved new spear shafts. He has remodelled the King - I made new drawings for it - he has cut out the archers bodily and made a new relief of that part from a careful drawing I made - when he has finished I hope it will not take long to restore the look the [sic] the panel...Dear fellow I don't see why I should ever burden you with my business - I ought to do it better than I do.'²⁶

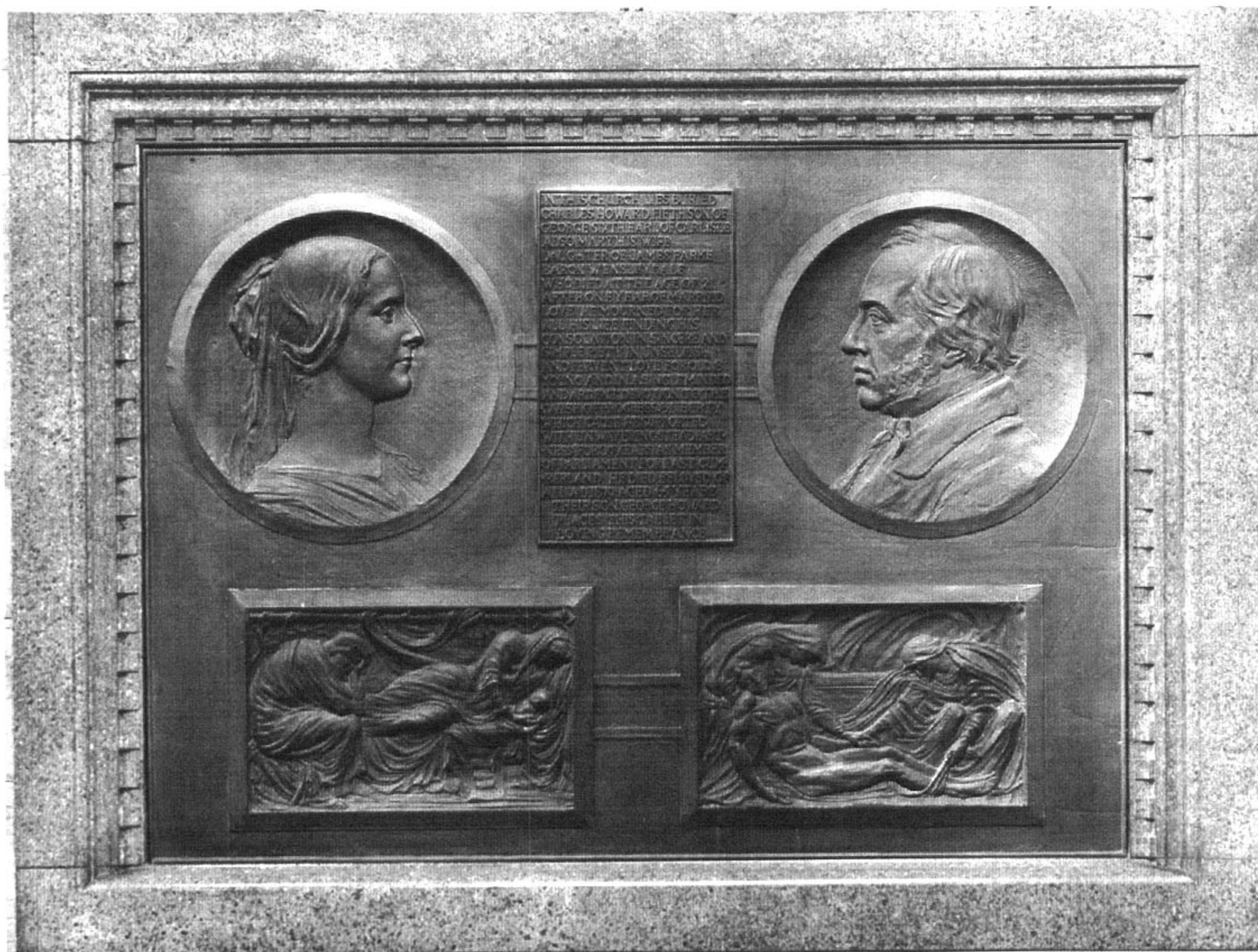
By late December 1885, Burne-Jones had at last reached the point of completion, but even then he admitted that 'Some things will be yet to be finished - faces & here & there an armament. I will do it when I go to see you at Naworth - & you might like to touch upon it.'²⁷ New problems now presented themselves. How, Burne-Jones asked, could the relief travel in safety from his studio in Fulham to Naworth? 'It would be dreadful for it to be broken after all this work & sorrow.' Burne-Jones advised Howard to ask Boehm - 'but ask him so that he may not want to see it else I shall have another enemy in life & so will you.'²⁸ Howard did so, but Boehm's curiosity, particularly after the relief had spent such a protracted period in Burne-Jones's studio, was understandably aroused: 'I should so

much like to see the Relievo now finished, I am sure [Burne-Jones] made a fine thing of it.'²⁹

Accordingly, Boehm called on Burne-Jones's residence, where Georgiana Burne-Jones told him that her husband was out; he therefore tried the studio, only to find it closed. Georgiana corroborated this when she assured Howard: 'I did not "foil" Mr Boehm about seeing it - his effort to do so took the form of calling here one Sunday afternoon when Ned was out.'³⁰ She suggested that Boehm made an appointment, but he had not done so by 11 January 1886 when the work finally left the studio for Naworth: Boehm had been successfully forestalled. Meanwhile, Howard paid Boehm a cheque for a further commission that he had just completed: the recently installed recumbent terracotta effigy of Lady Elizabeth Howard, his deceased baby daughter, at Lanercost Priory.³¹ Boehm was placated: 'I shall be delighted to see the Relievo... & hope this autumn D.V. to be able to make use of your kind invitation.'³² He does not appear to have done so: the absence of his signature from the visitors' book at Naworth would seem to indicate that he never saw the work *in situ*.³³ Thus, his friendship with Burne-Jones, who - as we have seen - wrote of Boehm in affectionate terms after his sudden and premature death in 1890, remained intact. The friendship between the patient Howard and Burne-Jones also

survived, and this despite the artist's chronic inability to complete *The Sleep of Arthur in Avalon*. As to *Flodden Field*, the long-suffering Howard had to complete the work, as Burne-Jones had earlier suggested, by colouring in the figures. When Howard died in April 1911, his body was transported to Naworth and rested overnight in the library, beneath *Flodden Field*, prior to his burial at Lanercost Priory.³⁴

Georgiana Burne-Jones's brief published reference to *Flodden Field* makes uncomfortably amusing reading when compared with her husband's agitated letters: 'Edward enjoyed designing it: the fight was closely imagined, and I remember how the long lines of level spears were used in contrast with the hurly-burly of the struggle. He also personally enjoyed being connected in the work with Boehm.'³⁵ More revealing of Burne-Jones's true feelings was his reluctance to collaborate with Alfred Gilbert, notwithstanding his considerable admiration of the sculptor, over a monument commemorating his devoted patron, William Graham. In a letter written shortly after Graham's death in July 1885, Burne-Jones, then in the midst of altering Boehm's modelling, wrote as follows: 'The difficulty lies here that if a man has no ideas he usually also executes the ideas of another very badly - and if I made a design for a bas relief I literally know no one who could faithfully copy it



5 Monument to Charles and Mary Howard, by Edgar Boehm (1834-90), Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98) and Philip Webb (1831-1915), 1879-81.

Bronze and Purbeck marble, 97.5 x 142.5 cm. Lanercost Priory, Cumbria.
Photo: Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art

and at the same time put any life into the execution.³⁶ Without actually identifying Boehm by name, this was nevertheless undoubtedly a pointed indictment on Burne-Jones's part of the dissatisfactions of their uneasy collaboration.

This article is an enlarged and updated version of my discussion of the theme in Mark Stocker, *Royalist and Realist: The Life and Work of Sir Joseph Edgar Boehm*, New York, 1988, especially pp. 293-99. I am grateful to Dr. Christopher Ridgway for reading this article and for granting permission to quote from the Castle Howard Archives

¹ Quoted by John Christian, 'Burne-Jones and Sculpture', in Benedict Read and Joanna Barnes (eds.), *Pre-Raphaelite Sculpture: Nature and Imagination in British Sculpture 1848-1914*, London, 1991, p. 77.

² See *ibid.*, and Stephen Wildman and John Christian (eds.), *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer*, ex. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1998, especially pp. 207-208, 233, 282-83.

³ Quoted in Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones, vol. II 1868-1898*, London, 1904, p. 120.

⁴ Quoted in Frances Horner, *Time Remembered*, London, 1933, p. 118.

⁵ *Magazine of Art*, 1891, p. 133.

⁶ Penelope Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones*, Stroud, 1997, pp. 211-12, 243-44.

⁷ Virginia Surtees, *The Artist and the Autocrat: George and Rosalind Howard Earl and Countess of Carlisle*, Salisbury, 1988. For Howard's friendship with Burne-Jones, see

Christopher Ridgway, 'A privileged insider: George Howard and Edward Burne-Jones', *British Art Journal*, vol. III, no. 3, 2002, pp. 4-18.

⁸ Two studies in gouache and watercolour are in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. See Read and Barnes, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-97; Wildman and Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

⁹ Castle Howard Archives, j22/64, Philip Webb to George Howard, 19 August 1880.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, j22/96/127, Edgar Boehm to George Howard, 29 November 1880.

¹¹ Ranald Nicholson, *Scotland: The Late Middle Ages*, Edinburgh, 1974, p. 603. See also Norman MacDougall, *James IV*, Edinburgh, 1989, pp. 273-76, 305-10.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 275.

¹³ Castle Howard Archives, j22/96/127, Edgar Boehm to George Howard, 29 November 1880.

¹⁴ Wildman and Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 283. *The sleep of Arthur in Avalon*, eventually finished by Burne-Jones's son, Philip, is in the Museo de Arte de Ponce, Puerto Rico. See *ibid.*, pp. 315-16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 282-83. See also Aymer Vallance, 'The Decorative Art of Sir Edward Burne-Jones', *The Easter Art Journal*, 1900, p. 26. Vallance describes the work as 'the original water-colour drawing for a bronze [sic] relief panel at Naworth Castle.' This would indicate a probable date of 1880.

¹⁷ Castle Howard Archives, j22/27, Edward Burne-Jones to George Howard, n.d.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, j22/96/128, Edgar Boehm to George Howard, 21 December 1881.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, j22/96/129, Edgar Boehm to George Howard, 29 June 1882.

²⁰ The relief was presented to the museum by George Howard in 1889 (I am grateful to Melanie Gardner,

Keeper of Fine and Decorative Art, Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle, for this information.)

²¹ Castle Howard Archives, j22/27, Edward Burne-Jones to George Howard, n.d.

²² *Ibid.*, n.d. (1884).

²³ Walter Crane, *An Artist's Reminiscences*, London, 1907, p. 190. A *cassone* designed by Burne-Jones (1888; Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery) has a gesso relief of *Hercules feeding the dragon in the Garden of the Hesperides*, which is attributed by John Christian to Weeks (see Read and Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 91). The *cassone* is reproduced in Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones*, London, 1989, p. 128.

²⁴ Castle Howard Archives, j22/27, Edward Burne-Jones to George Howard, 9 October 1884.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15 January 1885.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, n.d. (late July 1885).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, n.d. (December 1885).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, j22/96/135, Edgar Boehm to George Howard, 30 December 1885.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, j22/27, Georgiana Burne-Jones to George Howard, 11 January 1886.

³¹ For a discussion of this monument, see Stocker, *op. cit.*, pp. 186-87. The sarcophagus was designed by Philip Webb.

³² Castle Howard Archives, j22/96/136, Edgar Boehm to George Howard, 11 January 1886.

³³ 'The visitors' book was kindly shown to me by the late Lord Carlisle.

³⁴ Surtees, p. 167.

³⁵ Georgiana Burne-Jones, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 120.

³⁶ Quoted in Richard Dormant, *Alfred Gilbert*, New Haven and London, 1985, p. 88.

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