

II. The Correspondence of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach

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A critical edition of the complete correspondence of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840) is being prepared through the support and encouragement of the Niedersächsischen Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek (Göttingen). The correspondence spans Blumenbach's life at Göttingen from his days as a young student of medicine (1773) through his long career as Professor of medicine and natural history. Blumenbach was truly one of those astounding polymaths of the classical age of the natural sciences, and the correspondence reflects his importance and international reputation in many fields of scientific endeavour: medicine, natural history, geology, paleontology, and even Egyptology. However, the study of man dominated all others; it might indeed be said that "anthropology", as Blumenbach understood it, was the architectonic (in the Aristotelean sense of the term), the science to whose ends all others were subordinated. And for this study of mankind, it was necessary not only to sift critically through the facts from the long history of over-seas travels, but also to collect oneself. In his insatiable thirst for knowledge of all the nations and peoples of the earth, Blumenbach read and made excerpts from every voyage-description that was to be found in the library (Marx 1840:25). The Blumenbach papers include thousands of excerpts on scrap paper, sorted under the different headings for Blumenbach's use, as well as five manuscript volumes in Blumenbach's handwriting, "Litteratur der Reisebeschreibungen," systematically organized by continent. (Cod. MS. Hist. lit., 178).

As curator of the Academical Museum in Göttingen, Blumenbach had the rare occasion to use the reputation and fame of the Göttingen University to enhance the collections, as well as building his own. Because of the Personal Union of Hannover to Great Britain through the personage of the King, the University of Göttingen was able to share in the wealth of materials and discoveries of British expeditions. Blumenbach's zeal induced him to write--in the very baroque style of the period--to the British government of George the III on behalf of the University Museum, in order to procure "something of the abundance of foreign natural curiosities" that had been brought back from the last voyage of Captain James Cook. Through Blumenbach's efforts the largest collection from the Cook expeditions to be assembled in one single location is still preserved today in the Volkerkundlichen Sammlung of the Göttingen University.

Although this is a fine example of the institutionalization of science at the end of the eighteenth century, most scientific exchange was conducted through personal relationships through the medium of the letter. A study of this epistolary commerce gives

a vivid insight not only into the communication of scientific information and the exchange of wares, but also into the way artifacts were collected, the circumstances surrounding their acquisition and even the reasons for finding each particular item of value. As the Baron von Asch sends Blumenbach a skull from Oczakow he relates how its peculiar oblique and misshaped form was caused by the practice of binding the head with bandages after birth, in order to attempt to form the head "ad imaginem Dei (Moses Ebenbild Gottes)"; he continues by commenting that that which the ancients did to their dead, as the mummies teach us, so do "we" Europeans do to new born children (MS Blum., III, f. 16 r^o).

As affidavits bearing witness to the authenticity, provenance and circumstances surrounding each item, Blumenbach kept many of the letters pertaining to the objects sent for his "Golgotha," as he called his collection of the skulls of different nations, and also for his collections of mummies, portraits, artifacts, etc. These letters contain a wealth of information for the history of anthropology in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Dutch physician A. L. Jassoy sent curiosities from Batavia, Lucan Alaman from Mexico, G. J. van Angelbeek, the last Dutch governor of Ceylon, from Kutchheim, Caldcleugh from Valparaiso de Chili. Among the "administrators" of science who fostered organization and communication in a more institutional form, many of the more influential were of great service to Blumenbach. Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society, who had been naturalist on Cook's first voyage round the world, was responsible for communicating many curiosities from the South Seas and Australia, as well as from the Caribbean and Arctic regions of the earth. Not only were skulls furnished; literature, drawings, watercolors pertaining to foreign lands and peoples were sent from London, although the route was sometimes tortuous due to the French blockade during the Napoleonic wars. Lady Banks offered Blumenbach a colored miniature of Omai, the elegant Tahitian who had made a great impression of London society in the 1770s and who was even Sir Joshua Reynolds's subject for a well-known portrait. Banks himself was so generous to Blumenbach's anthropological pursuits that he had oil portraits of two Eskimos sent, today on display in Göttingen's Völkerkundlichen Museum. Friedrich Heinrich Alexander, Freiherrn von Humboldt, presented his former professor with the skull of "Atvri Orinoccani." From Martinus van Marum, director of the cabinet of natural curiosities and secretary of the Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen in Haarlem, Blumenbach not only received the skulls, bones, and teeth of all sorts of living and fossil animals, but also the prized skull of an Orang-outang.

Because of the ties between Hannover and Great Britain, Göttingen attracted many English-speaking students, including quite a few Americans. Since Blumenbach's courses in natural history provided useful knowledge for other disciplines (especially for careers in medicine, theology and law) and because his simple, articulate German and his lectures were more

easily understood, many foreign students were attracted to his classroom. George Greenough, later to become president of the Geological Society of London, wrote in an autobiographical note:

My taste for nat. hist. was first called forth at Göttingen and the person to whom I am indebted for it was Prof Blumenbach. Sent from College to that University for the purpose of studying the Civil law to which I was brought up as the profession followed by my father & recommended by my Grandfather I found it necessary as a preparatory step to learn the language & was advised to attend the lectures of Blumenbach as his subject was entertaining his language perspicuous, his delivery easy & his gesticulation combined with the visible objects drawings & specimens tended to make one understand his meaning pantomimically. (University College, London: Greenough Press 1981)

A warm hospitality was especially extended to foreign students, and many references to personally guided tours of the academical museum and to pleasant evenings spent with the Blumenbach family have been left in letters and diaries.

In fond memory of their German professor, these students were anxious to furnish material, each from his home land, for his collections. Edward Everett of Boston, who matriculated with George Ticknor on August 11, 1815 and spent two years in Göttingen, never forgot his student days in Germany. In 1835 he sent a phrenological cast in plaster of the skull of the famous preacher, Whitefield, who had introduced the Methodist sect into America, and continued in a letter to Blumenbach:

The Skull of Whitefield was thought, by the Phrenologists, to present Matter of very curious observation, it being wholly deficient in the organ of religious Sentiment. This discovery, however, has been deemed reconcilable with their Science, though somewhat at the expense of Whitefield's religious character;- & has been thought to furnish phrenological confirmation of the charges brought, by his enemies, against him, of worldliness & avarice. (MS. Nachlass Blum. VI,2 f.26 v^o)

George Ticknor delivered Blumenbach accounts of "Bearded Indians," "Prince Saunders, a Negro," and "Paul Cuffy, a Negro," from personal information and acquaintance (MS Nachlass Blum. IXc, ff. 3-9). To Philip Tidyman Blumenbach related his most obliging thanks "for the friendly attention with which You intended to procure me by the care of Mr Drayton [John Drayton, Governor of South Carolina] a skull of the Catabaw Indians & [I] recommend my Golgotha to Your further kind remembrance." (Am. Phil. Soc., Misc. MS coll., f. 2 r^o).

The University had been founded as a showcase of modern, "aufgeklärten" science, and there is Blumenbach material in other repositories that reflects this cosmopolitan flair. Blumenbach

corresponded with the crown-prince of Denmark, Frederik Christian, especially concerning the mineralogy of Denmark and its dominions, but also regarding the crown prince's gift of the skull of the "bosen Dirne von Umanak" ('naughty lass from Umanak'), which clearly showed the transition from the Mongolian to the American race (Christian VIII, Kongehusarkivet, Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen, 126, Nr. 8, f. 1 r^o). Nationalism had no place in matters of science; the Republique de lettres crossed all borders, even amidst political upheavals, in particular during the period of the French revolution. While on a diplomatic mission to Paris to rescue the University of Göttingen from being closed under the Napoleonic government of Westphalia, Blumenbach had met Georges Cuvier; their correspondence is preserved in the Bibliotheque Mazarin de l'Institut de France, Paris. This type of science was carried out on a much more personal level, and this of course implied exchange. Blumenbach repaid the kindness of his collaborators with the latest German scientific literature as well as with specimens of natural history from the surrounding provinces (especially minerals and petrifacts). This "reflex" system of scientific communication, by means of the letter, is perhaps the most interesting general characteristic of the Briefwechsel.

CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

Hocart and Cambridge: Complaints of a Colonial Commissioner in Ceylon

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Among those who apparently expressed interest in competing for the first appointment to the William Wyse Chair in social anthropology at the University of Cambridge in 1932 were two ex-colonial civil servants. Beyond sharing this modicum of professional identity, however, the careers and scholarly inclinations of these two candidates were about as different as can be imagined. The successful candidate, Thomas Callan Hodson (1871-1953), had already been appointed Reader in succession to Alfred Cort Haddon (1855-1940) in 1926--against Haddon's wishes. The other "ex-colonial" was Arthur Maurice Hocart (1883-1939) who had, three years earlier in 1929, been pensioned off as medically unfit for further service in the colonial government of Ceylon, where he had been serving since 1921 as Commissioner of Archaeology. In his recent book on Cambridge anthropology between 1898 and 1931, Ian Langham quotes one of Hocart's letters to Haddon, written from Oxford sometime in the 1920s, about squabbles over Rockefeller money for British anthropology.¹ Several other Hocart letters, sent to Haddon from Ceylon during that decade, provide an interesting footnote on Hocart as an administrator caught up in nationalist unrest and the inter-