January 2000

The Daniel Garrison Brinton Collection

John M. Weeks
University of Pennsylvania, weeksj@pobox.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/library_papers

Recommended Citation


This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/library_papers/18
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
The Daniel Garrison Brinton Collection

Comments

This book chapter is available at ScholarlyCommons: https://repository.upenn.edu/library_papers/18
The birth of American anthropology took place during the period between 1860 and 1890. In 1859, a single publication, Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life* completely transformed the scientific thinking of the nineteenth century. Natural phenomena that had puzzled previous generations suddenly became explicable according to the natural laws of evolution. The formation of the solar system represented stages in the evolution of the universe. In geology, the relative placement and the contents of the earth’s strata allowed the dating of these strata. In archaeology, the Stone, Bronze, and Iron Ages were identified, documented, and described. Even in philology, evolutionism became the basis for linguistic theory and methodology in the study of historical linguistics.

The theories and findings of the many evolution-based sciences provided a new context for the study of humankind. With each new finding in geology, archaeology, and biology, the beginning of the universe receded ever more distantly into the past. Biblical chronology could no longer contain the time required for the slow transformations that took place in the history of the earth. Increasingly thinkers concluded that the universe had been operating under uniform laws of constant change throughout time. The natural laws of the universe, accepted so uncritically in the eighteenth century, retained their uniformity and stability, but the timeless world of their operation was exchanged for a dynamic one best comprehended through evolutionary hypotheses.

Such thinking had profound implications for the study of human societies and cultures during the last half of the nineteenth century. The theory and method of evolutionism, which made possible the rapid advances in the natural sciences, seemed to offer the same rewards to the social sciences as they emerged as intellectual, and later, academic disciplines. The history of humankind came to be seen as a series of steps in a developmental sequence. Societies and cultures were portrayed as the slow accumulation of custom and belief obeying laws both natural and evolutionary. If Darwin had demonstrated that human beings were the end
product of a long evolutionary process, could not the institutions and customs of civilization have developed from savagery according to the same basic laws? The French mathematician Auguste Comte, German socialist Karl Marx, and English social theorist Herbert Spencer were among the many social philosophers who accepted this challenge.

Evolutionism became the framework for the new anthropology. In the hands of scholars such as Edward Tylor and John Lubbock in England, and Lewis Henry Morgan in the United States, anthropology gained new authority for its analysis of human culture and societies. There was now a trend to utilize more and better authenticated data, but the basic assumptions remained unchanged: the uniformity of human mental characteristics over time and space; universal similarities of developmental stages in the course of the evolution of specific cultures; and the use of European standards as the ideal of progress to measure the direction and degree of development. The classic expression of these assumptions as the basis for the dominant academic theory of the period can be seen in the introduction to *Primitive Culture* (1871), by Edward Tylor, the scholar usually considered to be the founder of modern anthropology.¹ Tylor and other anthropologists of the period transformed the eighteenth-century conceptual and logical relationships of a classificatory scheme embracing all existing and ancient peoples into the sequential relationship of a time series by analogy to the development of organic growth.

Anthropological research during the last quarter of the nineteenth century emphasized the systematic description of indigenous languages and cultures, their archaeological remains, and the classification of these data into formal typologies. Publication of well-documented classificatory and descriptive works increased at the expense of the more speculative, although the latter did not disappear entirely. At the same time there was a growing specialization of the American academic and professional worlds. In 1879, the Bureau of American Ethnology was formed, as were new departments of anthropology in museums at the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard University. These institutions devoted their efforts to recording and collecting the ethnographic information and materials of vanishing peoples, especially the North American Indians. Although much of the research of these new professional anthropologists was framed according to the evolutionary assumptions of the late nineteenth century, their findings increasingly tended to question the evolutionary

approach to their field. Thus by the early decades of the twentieth century the older evolutionary anthropology was being successfully challenged by the modern conception of cultural pluralism and relativism.

Daniel Garrison Brinton

Daniel Garrison Brinton was born in Chester County on May 13, 1837. Like many other late nineteenth century anthropologists, Brinton was an amateur whose independent means allowed him to pursue personal scholarly interests. He received his B.A. degree in 1858 from Yale University, where he developed literary and bibliophilic interests. After preparing for a career as a physician at Jefferson Medical College (1858-1860), Brinton practiced medicine in West Chester. He entered the Union Army in August, 1862, as acting assistant surgeon and the following year was commissioned as a surgeon in the United States Volunteers. As surgeon-in-chief of the Second Division, Eleventh Corps of the Army of the Potomac, he saw action at Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Lookout Mountain, and Missionary Ridge. In August, 1865, he was breveted Lieutenant Colonel and discharged, and returned to his medical practice. Brinton retired from the active practice of medicine in 1874 to become editor of the weekly Medical and Surgical Reporter, which soon rose to a place of leadership in medical science. In 1887, at the age of fifty, he retired to devote himself to anthropology.

Even as he embarked on a career as a distinguished physician, his fascination for Native American anthropology vied with his interest in medicine. Ultimately it became the field which claimed his entire attention. To it he devoted years of research, and from the publication of his first book, Notes on the Floridian Peninsula, Its Literary History, Indian Tribes and Antiquities, until his death in 1899, his publications included twenty-three books and more than two hundred articles and essays. These works considered a wide range of subjects, including mythology and folklore, the ethnography and linguistics of American Indians from South America to the Arctic, the prehistory and physical anthropology of native North America, indigenous American literature and writing systems, among others.

Brinton was one of the early academic figures in American anthropology. He was appointed Professor of Ethnology and Archaeology at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia.


in 1884, and Professor of Archaeology and Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania in 1886, the second American university to create a chair in anthropology. He was, with Albert Gallatin and Lewis Henry Morgan, one of the founders of the modern ethnological study of the American Indians. In the field of linguistics he showed an ability for mastering and classifying Indian languages. Brinton displayed considerable polemical power in contesting the theory of the Asiatic origin of American Indian civilizations, seeking to prove, on the basis of studies of morphological traits, that the American Indian languages constituted one of the great speech families of the world. His *The American Race: A Linguistic Classification and Ethnographic Description of the Native Tribes of North and South America*[^4] was a pioneer work.

But Brinton’s most important contribution was in the field of religion and mythology. He collected, translated, and annotated

native texts of indigenous mythology and folklore for his *Library of Aboriginal American Literature*. Brinton himself edited most of the volumes in this series, including a publication of the first importance, *The Maya Chronicles*. In addition to gathering source materials, Brinton carried thorough analyses and synthetic interpretations, beginning with *The Myths of the New World: A Treatise on the Symbolism and Mythology of the Red Race in America* (1868), and ending with his *Religions of Primitive People*. The assumption of the psychic unity of mankind underlies all his work in the field of comparative religion and impelled him to argue for the spontaneous origin of religious parallelisms.

Brinton’s investigations were based almost entirely on archival or library research rather than on primary fieldwork. He assembled a personal library, monumental in scale, that reflects the background materials used in most of his research.

Today the Daniel Garrison Brinton Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Museum Library remains the only existing intact research library of a scholar prominent in the development of late nineteenth-century American anthropology. A few months before his death on October 27, 1899, Brinton formalized the bequest of his library to the University of Pennsylvania. The *American Anthropologist* reported that Brinton’s library covered

---

5 Philadelphia, 1882-90, 8 vols.

6 New York: George P. Putnam, 1897.
“the whole American field” and was gathered to facilitate “comparative study.”

Brinton’s interests emphasized Mexico and Central America because these groups “achieved a higher grade of culture than those of the regions to the north” and because of “a much larger body of literature upon them.” Brinton’s extensive scholarly network allowed him to obtain most published works, especially many small and arcane articles, issued during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The collection grew through personal acquisitions, as well as the purchase of parts of other collections, including the French Mayanist Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, Alphonse Pinart, and the German physician Karl Hermann Berendt. Brinton also paid a scribe to copy certain manuscripts he was unable to purchase.

The Brinton Collection today consists of over 4,000 volumes. One hundred sixty-two of these are bound volumes of more than two thousand pamphlets or offprints of professional journal articles. The Collection occupies approximately one hundred-eighty feet of shelf space. Other than an abbreviated shelf-list inventory maintained at the Museum Library, there is no single catalog yet available for the entire Brinton Collection. A list of manuscripts assembled by Berendt was published posthumously by Brinton, and a comprehensive catalog of the entire Brinton Collection is currently being prepared.

The Brinton Collection includes early travel narratives, colonial histories, Indian captivity tales, missionary reports, and translations of the Bible into numerous indigenous languages of North and Central America. Materials written in Spanish, French, Italian, and German are well represented. Periodical subscriptions include materials from leading antiquarian and anthropological journals, as well as issues from local historical societies. In addition, publications from most of the major European learned societies are included. Linguistic philology is an area in which Brinton’s holdings were exhaustive.


7 Obituary on Brinton, American Anthropologist (1899), vol. 1, p. 598.

Antonio de Ciudad Real, “Diccionario de Motul; diccionario de la lengua maya de Yucatán.” Manuscript (1580-1617) with emendations and additions by Berendt. Rare Book & Manuscript Library.
The scope of the collection reflects Brinton’s intellectual depth and wide-ranging curiosity. He attempted to keep current in all areas of ethnography and linguistics. While he avoided extreme specialization, he also dealt with many subjects about which he knew comparatively little. At the end of his life the image of the ideal scholar was changing. It was becoming more highly respected to know a great deal about a small field. With the information explosion of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the new professionalization and specialized disciplinary training made the intellectual style of Brinton seem increasingly alien and anachronistic.

In several areas Brinton was at a transition point in the history of American anthropology. Fieldwork was becoming a methodological standard for serious professional students of anthropology. Academic teaching of anthropology became important both for providing institutional support for the discipline and for training a new generation of practitioners. And the effort to achieve terminological consensus reflected the increasing need for professional identity and solidarity among anthropologists.

**Karl Hermann Berendt**

Whereas Brinton visited the urban centers of scholarship in the United States and Europe, Berendt devoted several decades to the first-hand investigation of indigenous populations and archaeological ruins in southern Mexico and Central America.

Karl Hermann Berendt was born in Danzig (Gdansk) on November 12, 1817, and studied at various German universities before receiving his medical degree at the University of Königsberg (Kaliningrad) in 1842. In 1843 he began a medical practice in Breslau (Wroclaw) and served as *privat-docent* in surgery and obstetrics at the University of Breslau. In 1848 he was a member of the *Vor-Parlament* at Frankfurt-am-Main where his liberal political views resulted in dismissal from the University and his removal to Graudenz (Grudziadz) and, in 1851, to the Americas. Berendt, like so many other Europeans at this time, probably saw in the free institutions of America a democratic model which suited his political philosophy. He proceeded from New York to Nicaragua, where he spent two years conducting natural historical and anthropological investigations. Two years later he moved to Orizaba, Mexico, and then to Vera Cruz, where he remained from 1855 to 1862.
He soon abandoned the practice of medicine and devoted himself to natural science, linguistics, and ethnology. Much of his time was spent traveling throughout the southern Mexican states of Chiapas, Tabasco, and Yucatán, collecting natural history specimens for the Smithsonian Institution. Part of 1864 was spent at the library of John Carter Brown in Providence, Rhode Island, transcribing two important Maya vocabularies compiled during the colonial period: Antonio Ciudad Real’s sixteenth-century *Diccionario de Motul*, and the *Compendio de nombres en lengua cakchiquel*, by the Franciscan Pantaleón de Guzmán.

On December 2, 1865, he left the United States on the bark *Pallas* for Belize City in the Crown Colony of British Honduras (Belize). With scientific instruments furnished by the Smithsonian Institution and with the financial support of several interested individuals and learned societies in Chicago and Philadelphia, Berendt planned to conduct geographical and anthropological studies within a transect extending from the Caribbean Sea, through Belize, the Petén region of northern Guatemala, the state of Chiapas in southwestern Mexico, to the Pacific Ocean.

While in Belize City he met with various Crown officials and obtained copies of several ancient manuscript maps of the Colony surveyed by the Crown engineer. He also made the acquaintance of Alexander Henderson, a Baptist missionary himself compiling a Yucatec Maya dictionary from the Bacalar region of western Belize. Copies of many of Henderson’s rare tracts in the Maya language are now in the Brinton Collection.

Berendt left Belize City on January 12, 1866, traveling by large dugout canoe on the Belize River, and after thirteen days, reached San Pedro Buenavista, a few kilometers above the confluence of the Belize River with the Macal River. Specimens collected along the way included species of pine and oak, land and fresh water mollusks, and birds. He made measurements of the river, and collected names of settlements, mostly logging operations, existing along it. Travel was difficult, and when logging camps could not be reached, he camped in the forest using the leaves of the *corozo* palm for shelter and protection.

Berendt waited for about a month at San Pedro Buenavista for mules and muleteers to be sent from Guatemala. For smaller articles he used Indian carriers from local villages. He then traveled on the main road from the frontier settlements on the banks of the Belize River to the Petén region of northern Guatemala; he noted that rest stations where water, food, and palms for camp building were available stood at twenty-kilometer intervals along the way.


He departed the main trail at one of these stations for another road recently opened to Lake Macanché, and then to El Remate, an abandoned hamlet on the northern part of Lake Petén. Here Berendt was met by four canoes and then paddled for twelve hours along the northern shore of the lake, around Punta Nima, to Flores. Berendt noted the existence of several archaeological sites on the peninsula which separates the lake. He describes Flores at that time as consisting of “about 900 inhabitants, who live, crowded together, in miserable huts built of sticks covered with mud and roofed with palm leaves.” Berendt spent a month at Flores collecting specimens and examining archaeological ruins.

Because of difficulty in canoe travel, Berendt relocated to Sacluc, a logging settlement located thirty kilometers southwest
of Flores in a large savanna midway between Lake Petén and the Río Pasion. From Sacluc excursions were made along the Río Pasion and its tributaries and lagoons, where Berendt continued ethnographic and linguistic studies among the Lacandon Maya and, during occasional chance meetings, with Kekché Maya from the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala. While in Lacandon country he apparently adopted an orphaned Yucatec boy named Jose Sabino Uc.

By October of 1866, Berendt’s movement further west was postponed by a Maya insurrection resulting in the abandonment of settlements and cutting off of all communications between Belize and the Petén region. Berendt waited for several months in Sacluc to reestablish communication with settlements located
on the Gulf of Mexico and coastal Belize. Unable to locate mules or Indian bearers to transport his collections, he left Sacluc in April, 1867, for Tenosique and San Juan Bautista, the capital of Tabasco. Here Berendt revised and completed surveys of the Río Usumacinta, and its tributaries, and followed its course some twenty-five kilometers upriver from Tenosique to the so-called large cataract. On his return he visited the famous Classic Maya ruins at Palenque, and was able to complete a map of the department, and collect vocabularies of several indigenous languages.

While in Tabasco, “private business rendered a visit to the United States of importance to my personal interests.” In December, 1867, Berendt returned to Central America in order to bring back his collections being stored in the Peten. Berendt’s researches were now subsidized by the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University rather than the Smithsonian Institution. This trip appears to have been reasonably successful since, by 1871, the Museum had received eight crates, containing approximately 200 antiquities, human remains, and other objects of archaeological or ethnographic value. Some of these objects are described in the *Seventh Annual Report of the Peabody Museum*.

By 1869 he had explored the ruins of Centla, located at the drainage of the Río Grijalva and Río Usumacinta on the Gulf of Mexico, where Hernán Cortés defeated a large force of Maya Indians in 1519. He visited the United States several times between 1869 and 1876, the year of his last visit. By the late 1860s Berendt was experiencing financial difficulties and most of the monographs in his personal library, together with a collection formed by Augustin Fischer, chaplain to the Emperor Maximilian of Mexico, were sold at auction in London.11 Most of 1871 and 1872 was spent in New York, accompanied by his adopted son.

In 1874 he settled at Cobán, the center of the German coffee plantations in the Verapaz region of northern Guatemala. He purchased land with coffee groves, acquired the first printing press in Cobán, and co-founded the local newspaper, *El Quetzal*. He visited Philadelphia during the summer of 1876 in order to examine the manuscripts in Central American indigenous languages at the American Philosophical Society. At this time he probably finalized arrangements with Daniel G. Brinton to purchase his valuable collection of manuscripts. The winter of 1877–1878 was spent securing and shipping to Germany several prehispanic monumental sculptures at Santa Lucia Cotzumalhuapa on the Pacific coastal piedmont of Guatemala, until an attack of

---

11 *Bibliotheca Mejicana: Books and Manuscripts Almost Wholly Relating to the History and Literature of North and South America, Particularly Mexico* (London, 1869).
fever terminated his work. He returned to Cobán where he died on May 12, 1878.

Although clearly not a scholar of Brinton’s stature, Berendt contributed many articles in English, German, and Spanish to such works as *Petermanns Geographische Mitteilungen*, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, *Revista de Mérida*, and the *Deutsch-Amerikanisches Conversations-Lexikon*. Unfortunately few of Berendt’s investigations resulted in publication, and most of his manuscripts and transcriptions were eventually deposited in the University Museum Library as part of the Brinton bequest. Some manuscripts were also acquired by the Bureau of American Ethnology, and are now in the National Anthropological Archives in Washington, D.C.
Berendt made his greatest contribution with his transcriptions of important manuscripts in indigenous languages. After national independence and the suppression of the monastic orders, vast amounts of documentation previously accumulated in municipal, departmental, and ecclesiastical libraries throughout Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras, became the property of local governments and were transferred to official libraries and archives in national as well as regional capitals. Berendt spent a month in 1875 visiting various archives in Guatemala City, including the national archives of Guatemala, the archives of the Audiencia of Guatemala, various municipal archives, the library of the Universidad de San Carlos, and the library of the Sociedad Económica. In his “Collections of Historical Documents in Guatemala,” published by the Smithsonian Institution in 1877, Berendt expressed his appreciation of the scholarly value of early manuscripts for modern ethnohistorical research:

it is safe to say that [archives and libraries in Guatemala City] contain many rare and unique documents whose study would considerably extend our knowledge of the history of this continent, particularly regarding the periods of the conquest and of the Spanish domination, and also of the condition of the country and people before the conquest.  

Berendt suggested that inventories and transcripts of selected documents in various archives would make the contents available to other scholars and, perhaps more importantly, preserve valuable sources of information threatened by poor preservation, sale, or theft.

Berendt’s transcriptions were made available early to other contemporary scholars, as demonstrated by citations to the collection in the works of the prominent Swiss linguist Otto Stoll and others. In 1885 James Constantine Pilling published his massive *Proof-Sheets of a Bibliography of the Indian Languages of North America* (1885) which identifies most of the Berendt manuscripts in Brinton’s possession. In the early decades of the twentieth century Charles P. Bowditch, a figure instrumental in the development of Mayanist studies at Harvard’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, assembled his personal notes on the Berendt material at the University of Pennsylvania in his “Collection of Volumes in Berendt’s Linguistic Collection.”

The Berendt Collection, now in the Library of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, comprises 183 entries pertaining to

---


more than forty indigenous Central American languages and covers the period from the middle sixteenth through the late eighteenth centuries. It includes forty original manuscripts, forty-three transcriptions of original manuscripts, thirty-four published monographs, six transcriptions, either complete or partial, of published monographs, and some sixty unpublished manuscript notes by Berendt. There are also numerous miscellaneous notes, correspondence, and other items of ephemera pasted or inserted in many volumes. Many of these languages are now moribund or extinct, making the collection one of the most important of its kind.①

Daniel G. Brinton and Karl Hermann Berendt were remarkable men, each utterly unique in his own way and unusually interesting. It is pointless to argue whether the subject attracts curious personalities or visa versa. Both men did enjoy a common condition: the scholarly freedom both to choose the problems they wished to investigate and to determine the method of approaching those problems. Brinton was the old-school Philadelphian. He resisted the evils of specialization and attempted to reduce elaborate factual data to satisfactory explanations. Good judgment, a disciplined mind, and a superior intellect guided him through an extremely productive scholarly career. Berendt, by contrast, was a loner, an expatriate by choice who led a singular life devoted to the investigation of the indigenous languages and cultures of southern Mesoamerica. No domestic ties held him to one place. Of the enormous body of information he assembled, only a small portion was published during his lifetime. However, Berendt appreciated early the scholarly value of manuscripts in indigenous languages and provided the documentary foundation for future generations of Mesoamerican scholars.

The Brinton Collection and the Museum Library

The Brinton Collection was housed in Furness Hall until the opening in 1898 of the present Lombardy Renaissance-style University Museum building. The collection was then relocated to the Elkins Library Room, where for more than 40 years the library shared the quarters with the Museum’s numismatics collections, pieces of sculpture, and a few portraits. During that time the library collection developed rather unsystematically through curatorial donations of their own publications, exchange arrangements made with colleagues or institutions around the world, and gifts. Until 1942 there was one part-time

① See Weeks, “Karl Hermann Berendt.”
librarian, and library use was restricted to Museum staff and a few scholars.

Cynthia Griffin was appointed as the first full-time Museum Librarian in 1942. At the time of her appointment the collection contained approximately 16,000 volumes, mostly uncataloged, and circulation, limited only within the Museum, was approximately 1,000 volumes annually. Griffin reorganized the library, opened it to student use, planned for growing collections, and expanded exchange relationships throughout the world. The Museum Library now entered a period of rapid and systematic growth. The holdings increased in size from 18,922 volumes in 1945, to more than 50,000 volumes in 1971 when she retired. Two full-time assistants were added to the staff, and circulation increased to over 14,000 volumes a year. The collection was now completely cataloged, although stack growth over the years had reduced reading space to only two tables with seating limited to 16 patrons.

In 1971 the library moved to its present quarters, occupying 12,000 square feet on three levels in the new Academic Wing of the University Museum. Jean Shaw Adelman succeeded Griffin as Museum Librarian. Adelman continued to expand the resources and mission of the library as it became part of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries.

As the Museum Library became integrated into the larger university library system, it never lost its unique character, and continues to serve specialists especially in the areas of its greatest strength: Mesoamerican indigenous cultures and Egyptology, both early and ongoing foci of research for the museum. From its inception the library has benefited from generous gifts, not only of books and money, but also from the ability to exchange publications of the University Museum for foreign publications. John and Ada H. H. Lewis contributed generously to building and furnishing the library when the new wing of the Museum was built. The George Clapp Vaillant Fund, named for the former director of the University Museum between 1941 and 1945, and other major bequests have made it possible for the library to continue to acquire special materials it would not otherwise be able to afford.

The scope of the library collection has always emphasized anthropology, including prehistoric, Classical, and Near Eastern and South Asian archaeology, cultural and social anthropology, biological and physical anthropology, and anthropological linguistics, as well as related fields such as museology. Special
attention has always been given to the curricular and research requirements of the faculty in the Department of Anthropology and the curatorial staff of the University Museum. Several recent appointments to the Department of Anthropology have stimulated efforts to enhance subject areas not historically acquired by the Library. These include the archaeology and ethnography of Central Asia, Andean and lowland South America, and the Paleolithic cultures of Western Europe.

The Museum Library presently possesses over 115,000 volumes with an annual circulation of about 15,000 items, and maintains 550 active journal subscriptions as well as 290 exchange partners around the world. It has a seating capacity for 154 scholars and students, in addition to three seminar rooms and a photographic studio.

Through the generous bequest of Daniel G. Brinton and the visionary efforts of its professional librarians, in little more than a single century the Museum Library has developed from a few cabinets in Furness Hall into one of the most important anthropology and archaeology libraries in the world.