Moritz Wagner, Philipp Franz von Siebold and the Institutionalisation of Ethnology in Munich

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(Translated by Klaus Peter Steffen)

On 23rd April 1862 the Bavarian King Maximilian II Joseph (1811-1864, gov. 1848-1864) appointed traveller and natural scientist Moritz Wagner to be the first conservator of the ethnographic collection in Munich. This royal enactment is considered as the birth of the National Ethnology Museum Munich. For many years Moritz Wagner remained almost forgotten as a man of museum. A few knew him as a geographer and a biologist. Only individual research works in recent years have made Moritz Wagner better known as a man of the museum. With him, the history of ethnology institutionalised as a museum began in Munich. With advocacy and assistance from him and others the Franz von Siebolds collection came to Munich in 1866 and was finally acquired for the museum in 1874.

1. Moritz Wagner as travel writer and journalist
Moritz Wagner was born in Bayreuth on 3rd October 1813. His father Lorenz Heinrich Wagner was a grammar school teacher, a highly educated man who occasionally had problems because of his liberal political orientation and was transferred to Augsburg in 1820 as a result. His mother Julie Christina Wagner is characterized as an energetic and active woman. The family lived in poor financial circumstances.

In his early youth Moritz Wagner acquired knowledge on zoology and botany, established collections and observed animals and plants. He also showed a certain literary talent early. Differences between his father and the school authorities and trouble that the schoolboy had with a teacher resulted in Moritz having to leave the school at the age of 15 and to complete an apprenticeship as a banker. At the same time he extended his botanical and zoological knowledge and published literary and political articles in newspapers and magazines.

While he was working in Marseille as a commercial clerk in 1835, he briefly visited Algiers, which was conquered by the French five years before, and conducted natural historic studies. Later, he decided to undertake a longer journey to North Africa in order to make natural historic and political observations. With the support of his brother Rudolf Wagner (1805-1864) who was a professor of zoology in Erlangen, Wagner prepared himself intensively for the journey through natural historic studies in Munich and Erlangen. He also successfully become a member of a scientific commission for the exploration of Algeria that was assigned to French troops.
Wagner wrote numerous articles for German newspapers, and his contributions raised great interest as he proved to be a good observer and narrator. The royalties supported his travels and he was able to remain in Algeria until 1838.

After returning to Germany he composed a three-volume literary work on Algeria. Wagner was the first scientific traveller who attempted to cover the country as a whole with natural, geographical and ethnical aspects.

Subsequently, Moritz Wagner joined the editorial department of the “Allgemeine Zeitung,” for which he had reported from Algeria. At the same time he extended his knowledge of natural sciences and obtained an honorary doctorate from the University of Erlangen.

In 1840 he followed his brother Rudolf to Göttingen and began to devote himself solely to natural history. He studied geology, and during this time became acquainted with Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), the outstanding scholar of his time and the scientific “godfather” of his generation who became Wagner’s ideal for his entire life.

In 1843 and 1844 a second major journey led Moritz Wagner to South Russia, the Caucasus, Armenia and western Persia. Again he devoted himself to botanical, zoological and geological issues and discovered the source of the western Euphrates during this journey. He published the results of this journey in a four-volume travelogue.

During the following revolutionary years 1847 till 1850 he was on the move in Switzerland, Baden, Frankfurt and Vienna as a correspondent for the “Allgemeine Zeitung” and experienced the war events very closely, often at the risk of his life. The collapse of the revolution disappointed him like many other intellectuals and he turned his attention towards North America. He travelled to North America together with his Austrian friend Karl von Scherzer (1821-1903) in 1852. The goal of the planned three-year journey was to do scientific research in the so-called North American Free States (USA) and in Central America. In Middle America Wagner devoted himself solely to natural historic studies and was fascinated by the tropical vegetation. In 1855 they both returned to Europe and published their findings. They also brought extensive natural historic collections from this journey. Among them there were 40,000 kinds of invertebrates, approximately 300 of which had been still unknown.

In 1855 Wagner settled in Munich, where he devoted himself to the arrangement of the collections that he had brought with him. The Bavarian King Maximilian II Joseph became aware of the well-travelled man. The king was anxious to make Bayern an intellectual and cultural Great Power in Europe and to promote the sciences. The monarch enacted a promotional program in 1855 and established a scientific committee. The king was also interested in the issues of emigration and colonisation. (Colonisation here does not mean establishing colonies in the imperial sense but the settling of emigrants in foreign countries.) Since his first journeys, Moritz Wagner was also interested in this issue and he visited the settlements of German emigrants and immigrants from other countries and reported about them. At the request of the monarch, Wagner was appointed to be a consultant and produced two memoranda concerning that topic in January 1856. However, the project to send Wagner on several journeys to countries that could become destinations for German emigrants in the future was not realised.

On the other hand, Wagner was at this time barely interested in making long-distance journeys. Instead, he hoped to be able to finally make scientific evaluations of his earlier journeys. For that purpose he was granted financial support. Already at the first meeting of the aforementioned scientific committee the establishment of an “Ethno-Geographic Institute,” i.e. an
appropriate museum, was discussed but rejected for the time being.

Austria was planning a circumnavigation in 1857 with the research vessel Novara. Karl von Scherzer, Wagner’s friend, was given a leading role. Scherzer recommended Wagner as a companion and the Bavarian King made efforts for Wagner’s and a second Bavarian scholar’s participation. This was, however, rejected by the Austrian side.

Instead, the King granted Moritz Wagner a new journey to Middle America. Wagner travelled to Panama, Ecuador and Costa Rica. He again made natural historic and geological observations, conducted research on the Indians and investigated the situation of emigrants. Moreover, in Panama he conducted archaeological excavations. After surveying the Isthmus of Panama geologically and topographically, he described the ideal course for a canal. In 1881 and 1941 the Panama Canal was built based on this survey. Through this and his earlier journey to America, Wagner became the best expert of Middle America of his time. With signs of illness and without financial resources, Wagner returned to Europe in 1859 in the hope of receiving recognition of his achievements.

2. Moritz Wagner as conservator

However, this hope for recognition was not fulfilled and he fell into financial difficulties. He put himself into the running for possible employment as a conservator or an assistant conservator at “one of Munich’s museums of natural history.”

There was an intention to establish a position for a conservator of the ethnographical collections for 1861 and 1862, and Moritz Wagner was recommended for the post. After his last journey to America, Wagner was known as a geographer rather than as an ethnographer. But it was agreed that the ethnographic collections urgently needed to be professionally taken care of and it was obvious to call on the well-travelled Wagner, because ethnology was at that time still considered to be a part of the geography, being called “Geography and Ethnology” (“Länder- und Völkerkunde”). On 23rd April 1862 by the order of the king he was appointed to be the first conservator of the ethnographic collection in Munich and on 2nd May 1862 he was appointed as an honorary professor at the faculty of philosophy of the Ludwig-Maximilian-University. Soon after that he became a member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

The plan to establish a museum of ethnology in Munich had existed since 1835 when Philipp Franz von Siebold proposed this project by letter to King Ludwig I. For unknown reasons, this project was not realised then. A true ethnographic collection did not exist in Munich at that time. However, there were a number of scattered individual collections. Wagner devoted himself to merging the different ethnographic collections that were in the possession of the Wittelsbacher family or were purchased at their order into one coherent collection separate from the other scientific collections and art-collections. This was achieved only after 1867, when one of the favorite projects of King Maximilian II was realised posthumously: the foundation of the Bavarian National Museum. To this end, the existing collections units were dissolved and the parts chosen for the national museum were separated. Wagner consolidated the ethnographic collections in rooms that became vacant in the northern gallery building near Hofgarten and combined them with the Siebold collection that was exhibited there since 1866. A new museum with the name “Ethnographische Sammlung im Galeriegebäude” (“Ethnographic Collection in the Gallery Building”) was opened in September 1868 – the Museum of Ethnology Munich was born.
The Japan-collection of Siebold constituted a focal point of the new museum. After Siebold had offered his collection while he had an audience with King Maximilian II Joseph during his visit to Bad Kissingen in 1863, the monarch was not averse to such a purchase. More so especially after the king also visited Siebolds Japanese Museum in Leyden and other ethnographic collections during a trip to the Netherlands in 1864 and had commented very praisingly on them. After the sudden death of Maximilian II on 10th March 1864, Siebold directed a letter to his successor Ludwig II (1845-1886, gov. 1864-1886) on November 1st 1864 in which he again proposed that his collection to be purchased by the state. The king appointed counsellor and general secretary von Bezold and the honorary professor and conservator Moritz Wagner to Wurzburg to examine the collection. Their report turned out very favourably and after a few negotiations Philipp Franz von Siebold brought his collection to Munich and set it up in the rooms of the gallery building—albeit for the time being at his own cost. After the death of Siebold, Moritz Wagner advocated vehemently in contributions for the “Allgemeine Zeitung,” just as the president of the academy Justus von Liebig (1803-1873)did, for acquisition of the Siebold collection. One of Wagner’s contributions to the newspaper was submitted as a memorandum to the members of the state parliament. In 1874, the Bavarian state parliament finally agreed to the acquisition of the collection for the museum.

After the opening of the new museum, Moritz Wagner made efforts to expand these collections. The sons of Philipp Franz von Siebold, Alexander and Heinrich, donated several objects from Japan. However, the donation of an extensive collection of Heinrich von Siebold against the grant of a title of nobility failed and that collection went to Vienna. Karl von Scherzer arranged for the museum of his friend in Munich to be given pieces from collection of the Novara-expedition. From his journey 1869 to Siam, China and Japan he sent further objects from Siam and China to Munich. In 1880, Munich received valuable additions from the collection of the Schlagintweit brothers, who had conducted research from 1854 till 1857 on the Indian subcontinent and in West Tibet. Further collections of objects from the Middle East, from India, China, from Africa and the East Indies (today’s Indonesia) found their way into the young museum, thanks to many various relationships of Wagner, despite his small budget.
The museum also accommodated prehistoric objects from Europe. On behalf of the academy, Moritz Wagner conducted excavations of prehistoric installations on the Roseninsel in Lake Starnberg.

Despite the commitment of its conservator, especially in the early years, the museum seems to have found little recognition in public and professional circles. This was the result of the miserable situation of rooms and the bad accommodations. During the winter months it was almost impossible to work in the unheated rooms. Furthermore, ethnology did not attract significant interest in Munich in the second half of the 19th Century. This was caused by the absence of associations, scientific societies and dedicated personalities, among other factors, but also by the indifferent position of the university. Also Moritz Wagner himself, who was an honorary professor of geography and ethnology at the university, conducted only a few lectures and in which the ethnography and collections of the museum played only a marginal role. On the other hand, Moritz Wagner, who was more attracted to botany, geography and zoology, addressed himself decreasingly to the ethnographic work, but devoted himself more to the discussion of Darwin’s doctrines and the development of the theory of migration. He had only roughly categorized the ethnographic collection according to regions, no further systematic work was carried out with the objects.

Moritz Wagner was enthusiastic about the writings of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and his theory of evolution. He was one of the first followers and communicated with Darwin. But he increasingly modified Darwin’s thesis of natural selection and added his own theory of migration (theory of separation) for which he had already collected proof during his journey to Algeria. He was, however, able to formulate his theory only with the influence of Darwin’s doctrines. It states that reproduction through natural selection would only be possible “if an areal separation of single individuals from the original habitat had taken place previously” (Smolka 1994:112).

Within this context it would carry matters too far to go more detailed into this theory: Those who are interested should refer to Wagner’s posthumously published work “Die Entstehung der Arten durch räumliche Sonderung” (Basel 1889) as well as to Philipp Wagner’s summary (2008: 25-27). This theory might indeed be the true legacy of Wagner to posterity: “His theory was taken up again by the German-American biologist Ernst Mayr (1904-2005), who often is called the ‘Darwin of the 20th Century’, and is known today as the allopatric or geographic speciation” (Appel 2012: 17).²

Moritz Wagner had already been ill when he returned from his last journey to Munich. He was increasingly impaired by the condition of his eye and, additionally with age, by laryngitis and lung diseases, neuralgia and bladder trouble. However, a decisive turning point of his life was a plunge from a railway car in Munich’s railway station on 3rd October 1870. On that occasion he suffered a fracture of the femoral neck. After that he could move only with difficulty on crutches. His mind was also increasingly affected: He cloistered himself more and more and grew lonely. In the morning of 31st May 1887 he killed himself with his pistol. Due to the destruction during the World War II, his grave on the old northern cemetery in Munich did not survive. In 2013, a stone monument was undraped in its place as reminder of Moritz Wagner.

Fig. 5 In 2013 the memorial plaque for Moritz Wagner was unveiled on the Old Northern Cemetery in Munich. (Photo: Richtsfeld)
Literatur
Appel, Michaela; Christine Stelzig (Hg.): Netzwerk Exotik. 150 Jahre Völkerkundemuseum München. Die Anfänge des Münchner Völkerkundemuseums unter Moritz Wagner 1862-1887. München 2012. (text by Michaela Appel, because of this quoted as „Appel“.)
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Notes
1 The following lecture is not based on my own archive research, but it is an aggregation of the statements of the works that I have listed in the bibliography.
2 For a critical examination of Wagner’s theory of migration and the anthropogeography of Friedrich Ratzel, which is based on it, see Jakob, R.; L. Trepl o.J.

(Five Continents Museum [State Museum of Ethnology], Munich)