

IV.

Transdisciplinary Provenance Research
on Objects from Colonial Contexts

Same Provenances in Different Disciplines

A Transdisciplinary Approach

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Abstract

It is precisely in multidisciplinary museums such as the *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg* that provenance research between shells, shields, spears and bird taxidermy renders the scope of collecting in colonial contexts particularly visible. When examining the acquisition and inventory records of such institutions, it is evident that the same collectors gave both ethnological objects and natural history material to the museum at the same time. Information on these shared provenances may, however, be lost due to historical or specific institutional circumstances. This chapter introduces a transdisciplinary approach to research on shared provenances which is, particularly in multidisciplinary museums, both an opportunity and an imperative.

Mêmes provenances dans différentes disciplines : une approche transdisciplinaire (Résumé)

C'est précisément dans les musées multidisciplinaires tels que le Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg que la recherche de provenances entre les coquilles, les boucliers, les lances et la taxidermie d'oiseaux révèle l'étendue de la collecte dans les contextes coloniaux. En analysant les registres d'acquisition et d'inventaire de ces institutions, il apparaît clairement que les mêmes collectionneurs ont donné en même temps au musée des objets ethnologiques et du matériel d'histoire naturelle. Les informations concernant ces mêmes provenances pourraient toutefois avoir disparu en raison de circonstances historiques ou institutionnelles spécifiques. Ce chapitre présente une approche transdisciplinaire de la recherche sur les mêmes provenances qui est, en particulier dans les musées multidisciplinaires, à la fois une opportunité et une nécessité.

Introduction

Collecting in colonial contexts is by no means a phenomenon that only relates to ethnological objects. Many of the collecting individuals and institutions had a much broader range of interests, as can be seen in various European museums today. This is particularly evident in multidisciplinary institutions such as the *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg*. Its holdings currently contain up to 7,000 ethnological objects,¹ a significant share of which stems from colonial contexts, mostly from former German colonies.² There are also natural history and archaeological collections of non-European origin (of a hitherto unknown magnitude), which can also be traced back in part to colonial contexts. Despite these inventories of non-European origin, the *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg* is by no means an ethnological museum. It was founded by the Grand Duke Paul Friedrich August of Oldenburg (1783–1853) in 1836, and from the very beginning has included several areas of collection and different departments.³ Today it is a multidisciplinary museum with a focus on the natural history and archaeology of northwestern Germany.

From 2018 to 2021, a subproject of the joint research project “Provenance Research in Non-European Collections and Ethnography in Lower Saxony” (PAESE), was established at the museum. Its focus was primarily on the

examination of acquisition and collection practices of the so-called “Langheld Collection”, a compilation of objects assembled by the brothers Wilhelm, Johannes and Friedrich Langheld between 1889 and 1900.⁴ The museum holds some 1,000 objects that can be connected to the Langheld brothers. The Oldenburg part of the collection consists mainly of everyday and utility objects as well as weapons, most of which come from the territory of present-day Tanzania.

When examining the acquisition and inventory records (Figure 1) for provenance research on the Langheld Collection, it became evident that the same collectors gave both ethnological objects and natural history material to the museum at the same time.⁵ This is primarily because the old inventories are mixed in nature, meaning that entries pertaining to natural history, archeology and ethnology were not recorded separately. As a result, searches for information about the origin of certain ethnological objects inevitably bring natural history (or archaeological) “by-catch” to the researcher’s attention.

Due to such circumstances as mixed records, common provenances seem to be easier to trace in multidisciplinary museums such as the *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg*, unlike in settings where collections were divided among specialised museums. However, even in multidisciplinary institutions, the various classes of objects were quickly separated from each other after their arrival, with the result that objects of possibly shared provenance are kept in different storerooms today, recorded in different databases, and looked after and researched by academics from different fields. The handling of the various types of objects and the documentation of their provenance may therefore differ significantly. Today, knowledge of these connections and the same provenances are mostly lost due to this separation in the past. This means that the common provenances and the collection background cannot be found in the museum database (or between the different parts of the collection in it). Using examples from the work at the *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg*, the following contribution aims to highlight a short selection of possible hurdles, problems, opportunities and challenges in provenance research on non-homogeneous colonial-era holdings and to suggest the use of a different – transdisciplinary – research approach.

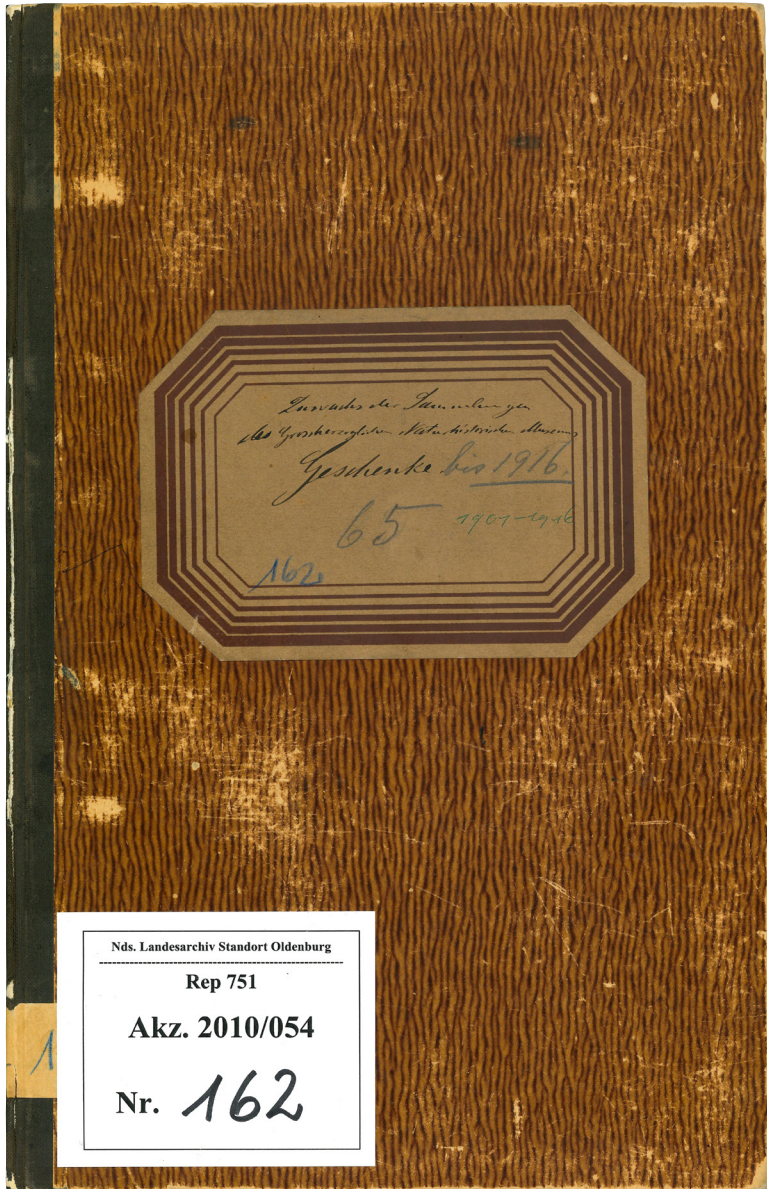


Figure 1 | Front cover of an entrance record of the *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg* "Increase in the Collections of the Grand Ducal Natural History Museum, Gifts up to 1916".
 © Lower Saxony State Archive, Dep. Oldenburg, NLA OL, Rep. 751, File No. 2010/054 No. 162.

Common Sources – Lost Connections

One example of lost connections comes from the record book titled *Increase in the Collections of the Grand Ducal Natural History Museum, Gifts up to 1916* (“Zuwachs der Sammlungen des Großherzoglichen Naturhistorischen Museums, Geschenke bis 1916”, Fig. 1). It is a mixed register listing every object or collection entering the museum in chronological order, regardless of its classification. In October 1901 the arrival of objects from Richard Deeken was recorded. Richard Deeken (1874–1914) may be familiar as a colonial official with a somewhat ruthless reputation in Samoa. He collected objects on his first trip to the region and gave some of them to the Oldenburg museum as he had family connections in the area.⁶ The entry of an “ethnographic collection” was recorded,⁷ as well as “shells, a tropicbird and a sandpiper from the South Sea Islands”.⁸ Today, however, only one object entry can be traced in the natural history database – the white-tailed tropicbird (*Phaethon lepturus dorotheae*), Inventory Number AVE749 – and 172 entries in the ethnology database.⁹ It was not known at the time that Richard Deeken was present in Oldenburg as a collector of ethnological as well as natural history objects, and the entries in the different databases differ from each other concerning information on the entry date.

A second example comes from the inventories of the so-called “Langheld-Collection”. The main collector, Wilhelm Langheld (1867–1917), is perhaps better known from his time in Cameroon after 1901. Before that, however, he was deployed in German East Africa in various military contexts including the “Wissmann Troop” (“*Wissmann-Truppe*”), the “German Anti-Slavery Committee” (“*Deutsches Antisklaverei-Komitee*”), and the so-called German “Protection” Forces (“*Schutztruppe*”), while gathering ethnological objects and natural history material. The holdings of the *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg* that can be connected to the Langheld brothers (except for two objects from Wilhelm Langheld’s time in Cameroon, which were received later) all came from former German East Africa and adjoining territories (see an object example in Figure 2.).

But as can be seen from the various indexes to the collection, Wilhelm Langheld contributed not only ethnological objects but also natural history items to the holdings.¹⁰ These cross-connections between the disciplines are



Figure 2 | Masai shield from the Langheld Collection, which came to Oldenburg "as a donation" among other items including natural history material in April 1897, *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg*, Inv. No. 1186. © *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg* (Photo: Martin Henze)

completely lost today since not a single dataset in natural history is associated with the name Langheld, although – according to the directories – hundreds of horns, shells and skins were apparently received.¹¹ Even if the objects were inventoried today, it is unlikely that a connection to the name Langheld could be established only in the context of a natural history inventarisation without insight from provenance research. The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that some objects from the Langheld Collection were destroyed during a fire at the museum in 1901,¹² among them an unknown number of natural history material as well as the flag from the “Emin Pascha Expedition”.¹³

A Transdisciplinary Approach

These findings from provenance research practice at the *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg*, consisting of “bycatch” and common (but lost) collection origins, suggests that a divergent and more transdisciplinary provenance research approach might be instructive. Only transdisciplinary provenance research (detached from a specific subject area) makes it possible to understand collection contexts and acquisition circumstances across disciplines without having to repeat work in each department. Connections become visible, and departments can benefit from this information across disciplines.¹⁴ Provenance research that is limited to one museum department or one discipline in the case of such a diversity of holdings and sources will inevitably not obtain the complete picture of the misappropriation of objects and materials by colonial actors. Moreover, research results then remain isolated and cannot find or form overarching points of connection.

Major obstacles in transdisciplinary provenance research, however, include increasing demands and requirements. This applies both to the person conducting the provenance research and to the institution in which such research is carried out. Shared (or at least synchronised) databases or recording systems for provenance-specific information would be necessary in order to conduct successful transdisciplinary research and to store the results sustainably at the end of the project.

Implications for Research Practice

A transdisciplinary provenance research approach must first overcome the various organisational, disciplinary and institutional hurdles of research practice. As could be seen from the example of Richard Deeken's collection entries from 1901, the holdings are now located in different databases and storerooms. In multidisciplinary museums, the division of collections into different departments and museum areas often results in specific organisational and administrative barriers. To work beyond one specific area, it is vital that new responsibilities need to be clarified, such as access to different databases, access to different storage spaces, and generally approvals and support from different staff members from the respective areas. Ideally, these aspects of access should be clarified at the beginning of a transdisciplinary provenance research project. In general, the whole institution has to be supportive of this approach in order for it to be successful. For instance, there might be certain limitations as to who (even within the institution) might access certain areas or databases, based on their education or position in the institution.

Further knowledge is also necessary for such transdisciplinary provenance research projects. For someone with a background in ethnology, this means acquiring knowledge of taxonomy and natural science classification systems and basic knowledge of scientific recording of natural science material. In addition to this, it must be possible to work on database systems that differ greatly from one another. The co-existence of multiple databases is not a phenomenon specific to the *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg* but occurs quite often multidisciplinary museums.¹⁵ The reasons for this lie in the very different interests and questions regarding the respective material, which result in varying database structures and database fields.

Hidden Information

These hurdles are particularly inhibiting to short-term research projects, the “bigger picture” concerning the collection circumstances possibly remaining hidden as a result. Especially concerning the different databases, a new approach to managing general information on provenances or collectors is necessary in order to render visible interconnections between the collections, databases and storerooms so that research beginning on either side will find the same vital information.¹⁶

The museum in Oldenburg also received ethnological and natural history objects classified as “doublets” from the Royal Ethnographic Museum (*Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde*) Berlin, the Natural History Museum



(*Museum für Naturkunde*) Berlin and the Berlin Botanical Gardens and Botanical Museum (*Botanischer Garten und Botanisches Museum*) around 1900.¹⁷ These objects are interesting for the research community because their exchanges illustrate the connections between the museums and resulted in collections being divided and distributed around Germany. The *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg* has shared every traceable ethnological object from this provenance in the database of the PAESE project in order to support research projects on the topic. One object classified as “naturalia” is also online (LMNM_2517),¹⁸ as it was inventoried in the ethnological database and placed in the respective storeroom (Figure 3). It is interesting to observe what was classified as “ethnological” or as “natural history” at the time, since the reasons for these categories are not always clear. From records we know that the Oldenburg museum also received natural history material, especially birds, from the Natural History Museum (*Museum für Naturkunde*) in Berlin.



Figure 3 | A “small elephant tooth”, formerly from the Royal Ethnographic Museum (*Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde*) Berlin, which was classified as “naturalia” but nevertheless included in the ethnological database, *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg*, Inv. No. 2517.

© *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg* (Photo: Martin Henze)

One of the few examples where a shared provenance remained visible beyond disciplinary borders is the collection of Ivan Antonovich Kuprejanov (1795–1857).¹⁹ Kuprejanov collected various objects and materials during his time as Governor of the Russian colonial possessions in North America (Russian America) between 1835 and 1840. During research on the ornithological collection of the *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg*, most likely due to old records of the collection referencing both ethnological objects and natural history material,²⁰ the range of collected material became clear. This is particularly interesting as parts such as beaks of the species collected by Kuprejanov might very likely have been used in/for ethnological objects he collected at the same time and are both now present at the different store-rooms in the Oldenburg Museum.

Conclusion

Only transdisciplinary provenance research broadens our view of the extent and diversity of objects from colonial contexts that are in museum collections today. Research results on the provenance of a specific object genre can thus, depending on the situation, also be transferred to other collection holdings, which creates valuable synergy effects. Access to collector information across disciplines and museums is also desirable in order to find evidence of networks beyond the disciplinary focus of the respective museum.

New approaches and ways of thinking can be another synergy effect of joint research and transdisciplinary work. For example, how can Indigenous, local knowledge also find its way into natural history datasets? How can ethnological datasets be refined by adding concrete species names of used materials? In cooperation with societies of origin, it is also important to make natural history collections transparent, as these can also be relevant (keywords: access- and benefit-sharing, research projects, restitution). In addition, natural history collections can also provide the impetus for future joint research projects or other collaborations.

- 1 Kloos, Evelyn (2004): "Die Sammlungsgeschichte der Völkerkunde", in: Fansa, Mamoun (Ed.): *Kostbarkeiten oder Krempel. Museumsobjekte zwischen Wirtschaftskrise und Museumsethik*, Oldenburg, pp. 18–24, p. 18.
- 2 As pointed out by Schienerl, Jutta (2001): "Speere, Trommeln, Melkgefäße. Die Ostafrika-Sammlung des Landesmuseums für Natur und Mensch Oldenburg", in: Waskönig, Doris (Ed.): *Tansania und die Massai*, Oldenburg, pp. 52–57, p. 52. In subsequent years, this connection was emphasised by Kloos (2004), *Sammlungsgeschichte*, and Becker, Peter-René/Ricci, Glenn Arthur (Ed.) (2015): *Böser Wilder, Friedlicher Wilder. Wie Museen das Bild anderer Kulturen prägen. Katalog zur Sonderausstellung vom 13. Juni bis 13. September 2015*, Oldenburg.
- 3 An overview of the history of the museum from its foundation to the recent past is best offered by Bengen, Etta (2001): "Vom Großherzoglichen Naturhistorischen Museum zum Landesmuseum für Natur und Mensch" in: *Oldenburger Jahrbuch*, Vol. 101, pp. 207–234.
- 4 The focus of the subproject is the author's doctoral project with the working title "Colonial Collecting Practices in Military Contexts – The Ethnological Collections of the *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg*", under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Dagmar Freist at the Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg, Institute of History. Information about research on the Langheld Collection and publications from the Oldenburg subproject can be found on the PAESE project website, see <https://www.postcolonial-provenance-research.com/paese/teilprojekte/sammelpraktiken-in-militaerischen-kontexten/?lang=en>, accessed 5 January 2023.
- 5 Most of the acquisition and inventory records concerning objects from colonial contexts are no longer in the *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg*, but in the Lower Saxony State Archive (*Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv*), department Oldenburg (NLA OL), on: <https://www.arcinsys.niedersachsen.de/arcinsys/start.action>, accessed 5 January 2022.
- 6 Jagfeld, Glorianna (2016): *Die unbekannte Ferne, das unbekannte Leben. Die Deekens in Samoa. Aufzeichnungen von Elisabeth Deeken*, Book on Demand, p. 7.
- 7 NLA OL, Rep. 751, File No. 2010/054 No. 162, p. 2.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 See also Müller, Sophie (2021): "Vom Strand in den Depotschrank. Auf den Spuren eines Weißschwanz-Tropikvogels am Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg", in: *Oldenburger Jahrbuch*, Vol. 121, pp. 255–270.
- 10 His extensive hunting and travelling activities can be read about in his "travel memoirs" published in 1909. See Langheld, Wilhelm (1909): *Zwanzig Jahre in Deutschen Kolonien*, Berlin.
- 11 Natural history objects were also explicitly referenced in corresponding letters, for example: "Because of the antlers, I notice that there are magnificent specimens among them [...]" NLA OL, Rep. 751, file no. 2010/054, No. 160, translated by the author.
- 12 "Only it is much to be lamented that the flag of the Emin Pascha Expedition has also been lost", see NLA OL, Rep. 751, File No. 2010/054, No. 15, translated by the author.
- 13 This refers to the so-called "Lakes Expedition" of Eduard Schnitzer (1840–1892), known as Emin Pascha, from 1890 to 1892. See: Kirchen, Christian (2014): *Emin Pascha. Arzt – Abenteurer – Afrika-forscher*. Paderborn, pp. 151–176.
- 14 See also Schilling, Christiane and others in: von Poser, Alexis; Baumann, Bianca (2016) (Eds): *Heikles Erbe. Koloniale Spuren bis in die Gegenwart*, Dresden 2016; Andratschke, Claudia; Müller, Lars (2021): "'Menschen, Tiere und leblose Gegenstände'. Die Alfelder Tierhändler Reiche und Ruhe als Ausstatter von Völkerschauen", in: Lars Frühsorge, Sonja Riehn, Michael Schütte (Eds): *Völkerschau-Objekte*, Luebeck 2021, pp. 131–143; Will, Maria: "Blümchen von Blume aus Übersee. Zur Bedeutung von Pflanzen in kolonialen Inszenierungen und Sammlungen", in: *ibid.*, pp. 155–163.
- 15 The databases have since been merged into one system.

- 16 The *Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch Oldenburg* is currently in the process of unifying its databases and using a common system.
- 17 See also Hoffmann, Beatrix (2012): *Das Museumsobjekt als Tausch- und Handelsgegenstand*, Berlin; Lang, Sabine; Nicklisch, Andrea (2021): *Den Sammlern auf der Spur. Provenienzforschung zu kolonialen Kontexten am Roemer- und Pelizaeus- Museum Hildesheim 2017/18*, Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net.
- 18 See https://www.postcolonial-provenance-research.com/exposition/lmmn_2517/, accessed 20 March 2023.
- 19 Fuhrmann, Kay; Ritzau, Carsten (2001): *Vögel – Die ornithologische Sammlung des Landesmuseums Natur und Mensch Oldenburg*, Oldenburg, p. 34.
- 20 Ibid.

