



On 15 November 2021, the following email appeared in the author's inbox: Subject: Kunstammer object “Good morning, here is the label for the ‘monkey hand’: Mammuthus indet, BROOKES 1828, tooth fragment, MB.Ma.52916.”

With this message from the management of the Fossil Vertebrates Collection, not only was a previously unclassified object at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin correctly identified, but at the same time the centuries-long transformation of a mythological object into a specimen of natural science was also completed. The so-called “monkey hand” (fig. 1), which is actually an eight-centimetre-long fragment of a mammoth tooth, had found a new home in the collection of fossil vertebrates.

An Extraordinary Object Biography in the Museum

The tooth fragment came to the collection in a roundabout way. Because it arrived without a label or any other documentation, its survival in the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin was primarily due to former head curator Stephan Schultka's interest in cultural history. Surprisingly, it was initially kept in the Palaeobotanical Collection that Schultka himself directed.¹ How it made its way into this collection is unclear, but the fact that it survived was a stroke of luck, since an object without designations or descriptions and with no information about its place of discovery has only limited scientific value.² To a certain extent, an object of natural history such as a mineral, stone, or fossil is tied to its parergon, the label that describes it [◆ Cases, Boxes]. Without this narrative accessory, an object cannot be incorporated into catalogues and lists and will often be eliminated from a collection.³

The proper term for this procedure, which is practiced in all museum collections, is “deaccession” (from the Latin *de*, “away from”, and *accedere*, “to accrue or grow”).⁴ An object may be deaccessioned not only if it has no reference points – as in this case – or has been irreparably damaged [◆ Intact and Damaged], but also if a collection concept changes or if an object is determined to be a double – that is, if there are multiple specimens deemed to be of equal value. Such an object can be given away, exchanged, or even sold for a profit. For modern museums, there are guidelines and recommendations for action from various museum associations for evaluating such a far-reaching decision from all points of view.⁵ Up to the twentieth century, objects were often discarded according to the individual perspective of the respective curator or collector. Deaccessioning is one of the reasons why many Kunstammer objects are no longer present in modern-day Berlin museums [■ Justus Bertram]. For example, numerous doubles in the Zoological Museum at the University of Berlin – where a portion of the Kunstammer naturalia were sent in 1810 [■ Golden

◀ 1 | Mammuthus indet, BROOKES 1828, tooth fragment, Museum für Naturkunde Berlin.

- 1 I would like to thank Stephan Schultka, retired senior curator, for providing information about the monkey hand and valuable references to the history of the collections in the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. I would also like to thank Melanie Diebert, Catrin Puffert, and Heike Straebel for their organization and implementation of the cataloguing of this object.
- 2 See Hermannstädter/Heumann/Pannhorst 2021, here the introduction, pp. 13–15.
- 3 On the concept of the parergon in connection with labels, see Grave 2015, here p. 152; and in natural history contexts, see Ruhland 2018.
- 4 Schiele 2016.
- 5 In German-speaking Europe, the relevant sources are Verband der Museen der Schweiz 2018; ICOM Österreich 2016; and Deutscher Museumsbund 2011.
- 6 See Kretschmann 2006, pp. 139–70; see also Ina Heumann's contribution “The Trouble with Doubles” in Hermannstädter/Heumann/Pannhorst 2021, pp. 64–7.
- 7 This collection cabinet is from the Berlin Royal Mineralogical Cabinet; see Dolezel 2019.
- 8 Inventar 1685/1688, fol. 113r; Inventar 1694, p. 7; Verzeichnis 1735, fol. 6r.

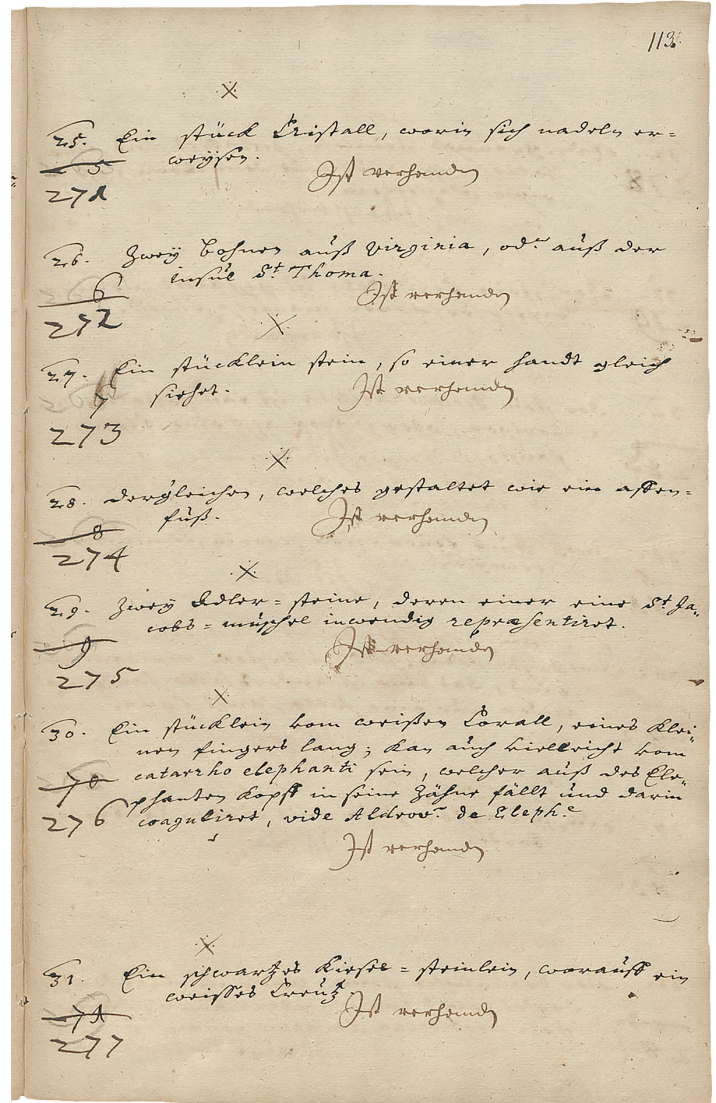
9 See Abel 1939; Thenius/Vávra 1996, especially pp. 17–54; Engmann 2012; on the formation, occurrence, and kinds of fossils, see especially Thenius/Vávra 1996, pp. 8–17; on the field of palaeontological research oriented to cultural history, see Vávra 2008, p. 83–4. An overview with images of real fossils and their ascriptions and colloquial names from popular belief can also be found in Dieterich 2010.

2 | Collection cabinet from the holdings of the former Royal Mineralogical Cabinet. The cabinet is now located in the Palaeontological Collection of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin.

3 | Page from the Kunstkammer Inventory of 1685/1688, with entries for a "handt" (hand) (no. 273) and an "affenfuß" (monkey foot) (no. 274).

Plover] – were exchanged or sold beginning in the 1820s, and presumably some of these were objects from the Kunstkammer.⁶

The preserved tooth fragment, however, had been stored by Schultka in a special collection cabinet (fig. 2) that contained several historically valuable objects and was shown on tours as a curiosity and an example of the complexity of older collections and their significance for cultural history.⁷ This kind of curatorial practice – which lives from narratives centred on the preserved objects – indicates a continuity of museological concepts since the early modern era [■ Shattered Die]. In the course of research on existing Kunstkammer objects, Schultka pointed to this piece because there were entries for naturalia in the Kunstkammer inventories of 1685/1688, 1694, and 1735 such as: “a small piece of stone that looks like a hand” and “the same thing which is shaped like a monkey foot” (fig. 3).⁸ Although there is not sufficient evidence to prove that the surviving monkey hand actually came from the context of the Berlin Kunstkammer, the object is nevertheless symbolic of a development in the history of science that concerns many objects in palaeontological and geoscientific collections: their comprehensive change in meaning since the early modern era.

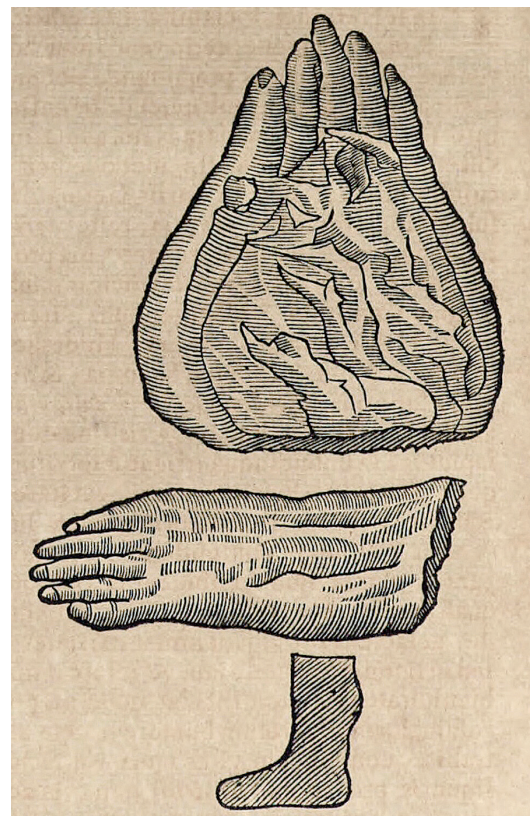


Fossils in Popular Belief and in the Early Sciences

Humans were long unable to explain the origins and forms of fossils, that is, the remains and traces of prehistoric plants and animals. Beginning in the Middle Ages, many fantastic narratives arose in Europe to interpret fossils.⁹ The fascination with fossils in the form of burial objects and trinkets can be traced back to the Stone Age. In popular belief they have been ascribed powers of healing and magic, and they were used by apothecaries for medical applications until well into the eighteenth century [■ Bezoars] or were worn as amulets and talismans.¹⁰ With their conspicuous variety of shapes, fossils were and continue to be cultic and artistic objects as well as desired collectibles.

Many of the colloquial names for fossils that are no longer familiar today refer to earlier interpretations and ascribed qualities, such as “eaglestones” or “rattle stones” (flint with fossilized siliceous sponges) that were worn as amulets against miscarriages; “star-stones” or “astroites” (five-pointed sea-lily arms, sometimes also corals) that were supposed to help against the plague and other diseases; or “thunderbolts” (belemnites) that were used as medicine against constipation, toothache, sexually transmitted diseases, and sterility or were supposed to protect their owners from lightning. “Snake tongues” or “snake stones”, often called *glossopetrae* (Greek *glosso* = tongue, *petra* = stone), were supposed to draw enemies’ poison from wine or help against evil eyes;¹¹ in reality, they were shark teeth that resembled tongues. The teeth and bones of fossil vertebrates were frequently connected to the idea of dragons, giants, and other fabulous creatures such as unicorns.¹² The monkey hand, for example, derived its colloquial name from the fact that when mammoth molars become brittle from weathering, they often disintegrate into individual lamellae of dentin and enamel. The roots of such lamellae branch in ways that resemble fingers.¹³ Depending on their size, these fossil remains were interpreted as the hands of monkeys, giants, or humans. In the early modern era, they were also frequently called “chirites” or “hand stones”.¹⁴

These kinds of associations had been critically examined already in the seventeenth century, for example by the universal scholar and Jesuit Athanasius Kircher in his *Mundus Subterraneus* (1644).¹⁵ In this work, Kircher formulated his own geological theories based on years of research, using objects in the museum collection that he tended. While many collections of the time were oriented around the pure display of such objects as curiosities, the collection of the Kircherian Museum in Rome was used for scientific and experimental purposes, and objects there such as hand stones served as research material for Kircher’s studies.¹⁶ In the second part of *Mundus Subterraneum*, Kircher examined in detail the origin of bones found in the ground and depicted three fossil objects, one of which strikingly resembles the surviving tooth fragment in the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin (fig. 4). Kircher rejected the interpretation of such fossils as the hands of giants, arguing instead that hand stones were fossils of inorganic origin, which from a present-day perspective is also incorrect.¹⁷



4 | *Monkey Hand*, illustration from Athanasius Kircher, *Mundus Subterraneus*, 1665.

- 10 Thenius/Vávra 1996, especially pp. 55–76. On fossils in amulets and talismans, see Hansmann/Kriss-Rettenbeck 1966; Volz-Kinzler 1969.
- 11 See Dieterich 2010, as well as Thenius/Vávra 1996, especially pp. 17–76 on the meanings of the fossils.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 17 as well as pp. 23–36.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19; Vávra 1987, pp. 202–3.
- 14 The term “chirite” does not mean a “hand stone” in the mineralogical sense, that is, as it is used in mining to designate a particularly beautiful piece of ore or mineral.
- 15 On the scientific investigation of fossils in the early modern era, see the contributions in Gärtig/Veltmann 2020, in particular Slotta/Veltmann 2020 on the beginnings of the geosciences in the seventeenth century.
- 16 On the Kircherian Museum, see Asmussen/Burkart/Röbler 2013.
- 17 Kircher 1665, part 2, pp. 60–1.

Kircher made significant contributions to the study of geological history. He recognized that a number of fossils were the remains of animals, but declared others to be human contrivances or offered explanations, as in the case of hand stones, that have subsequently been refuted. He concluded from the investigation of elephant fossils that giants must have once existed¹⁸ and regarded many fossils as specially shaped artworks of nature (*ludi naturae*) that did not necessarily originate from animals. Other scholars such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who also designated such phenomena in his writings as “whims of nature”,¹⁹ referred to these theories. Danish scientist Nicolas Steno, in contrast, writing almost contemporaneously with Kircher, observed the following from his investigations of a shark: the “bodies resembling parts of animals that are dug from the ground can be considered to be parts of animals, since the shape of tongue stones resemble the teeth of a shark as one egg resembles another.” He concluded “that those who assert that large tongue stones are the teeth of a shark are not far from the truth.”²⁰ Steno’s geological conclusions were ultimately adopted by Leibniz. In his own investigations, Leibniz argued in 1692 on the basis of a tooth – a fossil similar to the monkey hand discussed here – that a skeleton found in a quarry was not the remains of a giant, but rather that of a mammoth or a sea elephant.²¹ Swiss scientist Johann Jakob Scheuchzer interpreted fossils geologically as the remains of the Flood and thus engaged in an initial “historicization of objects”, albeit one still obligated to biblical history, and this interpretation was presented in a museum exhibition at the Dresden Zwinger around 1740.²² Nevertheless, despite scientific knowledge and theories about the origin and explanation of fossils, mythical notions continued to exist parallel to this in popular beliefs. In 1737, Johann Christian Kundmann, a physician and naturalist in Breslau, felt compelled in a publication on his own naturalia collection to identify and categorically refute traditional explanations and the alleged effects and qualities of fossils that many people still believed.²³ Even today, the belief in the healing power of stones and fossils continues to be popular.

Geoscientific Objects in the Kunstkammer

Numerous objects in the early registers of the Berlin Kunstkammer around 1700 would today be classified as geoscientific, as is also the case for other early modern collections. At the time, the term fossil (from the Latin *fodere* = to dig up), or alternatively petrification, encompassed anything that had been dug from the ground, including certain minerals and pseudo-fossils such as dendrites as well as artefacts such as bifaces.²⁴ Approximately half of the naturalia holdings of the Kunstkammer, which in 1694 encompassed 155 entries in the inventory, were such so-called petrifications.²⁵ There is no evidence that these objects in the Berlin Kunstkammer were used for research or experiments in natural history, in contrast to several similar royal collections.²⁶ The petrifications, however, were mentioned in reports by visitors to the Berlin Kunstkammer as special attractions of the collection. In a travel report from 1713, for example, Wolff Bernhard von Tschirnhaus named as exhibits worth seeing not only a “petrified snipe head”, but also a “so-called thunderbolt in a pebble stone” and “a human bone in a stone”.²⁷ The warden of the Kunstkammer in the late seventeenth century was quite aware of what these objects were. In 1688, administrator Christoph Ungelter wrote in the entry register of the Kunstkammer that Electoral Prince Friedrich III “was given a stone as an authentic thunderbolt”²⁸ – a formulation which indicates that Ungelter, who was both royal mint and mining master and thus an expert, was able to correctly assess the object as a petrification.²⁹ In his inventories and

18 Thenius/Vávra 1996, p. 19.

19 See Bredekamp 2020b, especially pp. 120–32, here pp. 120–2. On *ludi naturae* as a specific concept of nature from the early modern period to the present, see Adamowski/Felfe/Böhme 2010.

20 In *Canis Carchariae Dissectum Caput* (1667), quoted in Kardell Maquet 2012, p. 170.

21 See Hirsch 2000, p. 275.

22 Dolezel 2017a, p. 212. On Scheuchzer and the theory of the Flood, see also Kempe 2003.

23 See Kundmann 1737, especially part 1, *Untersuchung verschiedener unterirdischer Seltenheiten und sonderbar figurirten Steine*, col. 11–368.

24 See Thenius/Vávra 1996, p. 9.

25 Inventar 1694, pp. 1–12.

26 See e.g. Vávra 1987, pp. 242–3; Felfe 2020, p. 70; Valter 2000.

27 Tschirnhaus 1727, p. 286; similarly, see Anonymus A, fol. 40r.

28 Eingangsbuch 1688/1692b, fol. 4r.

29 On Ungelter, see Ledebur 1831, pp. 17–20.

30 Inventar 1685/1688, fol. 114r; see also 1694, p. 5; Verzeichnis 1735, fol. 4v.

31 Thenius/Vávra 1996, pp. 16–17.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

33 Inventar 1685/1688, fol. 112v; Inventar 1694, p. 7; Verzeichnis 1735, fol. 6r; Verzeichnis Naturalien 1793, p. 301.

34 On the worked and unworked amber in the Royal Kunstkammer, see Hinrichs 2007, especially pp. 234–44.



those of his successors, the descriptions of fossils were often formulated in a similar manner: “a star-stone, called an astroite” or “a stone called glossopetra”.³⁰ Although the demystification of these objects had long since begun in the scholarly world, they continued to be eagerly collected as rare curiosities.³¹ The cognitive dissonance arising from this contradiction between knowledge and belief was apparently resolved by collection administrators such as Ungelter on the level of inventory practices.

Amber stones also belonged to the category of fossils to which magical qualities were attributed and there were numerous amber specimens in the Berlin Kunstkammer. Amber – which today is scientifically important due to inclusions (of prehistoric plants and animals) – was considered a multifaceted remedy and was worn as amulets against toothaches and evil eyes and as a symbol of fertility.³² Most of the amber in the Berlin Kunstkammer contained inclusions, especially of insects and molluscs, and had evidently come to the Kunstkammer on the basis of its special appearance. These objects were briefly described in the inventories, for example, “a piece of amber shaped like a mussel.”³³ In the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, there are a number of such amber objects from the early modern era, several of which have been polished as amulet pendants. However, they cannot be identified as Kunstkammer objects since corresponding references to provenance are absent (fig. 5). In any case, unworked amber constitutes a relatively large section of the naturalia collection, which is certainly due in part to the origin of this material in the Baltic Sea area [◆ Changing Focuses].³⁴

5 | Amber with inclusions and label, Old Cabinet Collection, Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. On the modern label, the collection is noted as “alte Cabinet” (Old Cabinet).

35 See the entries in *Eingangsbuch 1688/1692b*, fols. 5r and 7v; *Inventar 1694*, pp. 9 and 11; *Verzeichnis 1735*, fols. 7v and 8v.
 36 See Anonym 1798, pp. 64–5.
 37 Lothar 1820, p. 92.
 38 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
 39 Anonymus B, fol. 11r: item no. 168 is the broken ring of Friedrich III/II's first wife; item no. 169 is the ring with the snake crown. The younger Grimm brother appears to have confused these two objects.
 40 *Ibid.*; Küster 1756, pp. 549–50, adopts this formulation.
 41 Anonymus B, fol. 11r. On Conrad Christoph Neuburg, see Ledebur 1831, p. 25.



6 | Sketches of a pendant and ring with snake crown, illustration from the pictorial inventory of the collection of Duke August Wilhelm of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, eighteenth century, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig.

been preserved from the ducal collection (fig. 6). A Berlin snake crown set in a ring was even mentioned in a collection of fairy tales: Ferdinand Philipp, a younger brother of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, published his collection *Volkssagen und Märchen der Deutschen und Ausländer* in 1820 under the pseudonym Lothar. The book included the legend of the Berlin snake crown as an addendum to the fable “The Broken Ring”:

At the Kunstkammer in the Berlin Palace, there is a large golden ring whose settings include a snake crown. According to the old folk tale, it is said that the Brandenburg House will do well as long as this ring is not lost.³⁷

The legend of the broken ring revolves around Brandenburg Elector Friedrich III, who promised his dying first wife that he would remain unmarried. According to the legend, when he did remarry, the golden engagement ring from his first marriage broke.³⁸ Why Grimm included the addendum to the ring with the snake crown here is unclear, especially since written sources confirm that there was in fact a broken ring in the Kunstkammer, but it was not the same as the one with the snake crown.³⁹

In the early inventories that have survived, there is no mention of a ring used as a setting in the entries about snake crowns. It was visitors to the Kunstkammer in the eighteenth century who first reported a “large golden ring that according to legend has been set with a snake crown and that has the appearance of a tooth with the roots standing upwards.” Concerning the legend itself they reported: “According to the tale, it was said the Brandenburg House would do well as long as this ring is there.”⁴⁰ The explanation of this exhibit was tied anecdotally to the ruling house of Brandenburg-Prussia – a connection that was made with other objects in the Berlin Kunstkammer as well [■ Pearls / ■ Shattered Die]. The reports also indicate that the ring with the snake crown was one of the most valuable objects in the collection: “It is shown very rarely, and is entrusted to his Highness Court Councillor Neuburg [warden of the collection from 1735 to 1756] as a great treasure.”⁴¹ The ring with the snake crown was kept in the Naturalia Cabinet and thus continued, as a composite object [■ Nautilus], to be considered more a part of the naturalia collection, although it was presented as an artefact. Unfortunately neither the ring nor one of the snake crowns from the Berlin Kunstkammer has been preserved. However, a ring with a snake crown has survived in the Ducal Gotha Kunstkammer, along with a historical black case that indicates the previous value of the object; a similar case is also documented for one of the specimens in the Berlin

42 Eingangsbuch 1688/1692b, fol. 7v: “A snake crown, in gilt silver and outside a black leather case.”
 43 I would like to thank Carsten Eckert (Geological Collections of the Stiftung Schloss Friedenstein Gotha) for his informative comments about the context of the snake crown in Gotha and other Kunstkammer objects. See Eckert 2019, as well as Dettmann/Strehlau 2021 on the existing objects from the Kunstkammer in Gotha.
 44 See Hoppe 1998, here p. 9.
 45 See Inventar 1694, pp. 25–39.
 46 See Inventar 1685/1688, fols. 108–20 (identical in Verzeichnis 1688a); Inventar 1694, pp. 1–12.
 47 Verzeichnis 1735. This is a copy of the naturalia register of the Kunstkammer inventory.
 48 The chronology of the entries can be traced by means of the dates, some of which have been included. In the forty years between 1694 and 1735, objects entries increased by 251.
 49 On Leibniz’s idea of a “theatre of nature and art” built on collection objects, see Bredekamp 2020b, specifically on the efforts in Berlin, pp. 174–8. On the history of the academy during this time, see the still fundamental work by Harnack 1900, vol. 1.

collection (fig. 7).⁴² In Gotha this very rare piece was preserved in an extraordinary way. It was found in the mineralogical collection during the course of historical research on the Gotha Kunstkammer – a further indication of a once much broader definition of geoscientific collections, in which many rather unprepossessing objects that previously held greater significance on the basis of ascribed qualities can still be found.⁴³

In the inventory of the Berlin Kunstkammer of the seventeenth century, all of these objects were listed, together with the preserved animal specimens, in the “Inventory of Naturalia” – and not, for instance, in the separate “Inventory of Minerals”, as would be expected today for a number of the petrifications.⁴⁴ The Berlin inventory was organized according to materials, as were most of the royal cabinets of art and curiosities at the time; there was no natural-historical systematization in the narrower sense. In accord with the alchemical order, the 1694 “Inventory of Minerals” consisted exclusively of metals and ores, for example, gold and silver ore [■ Crystalline Gold], but also iron, copper, tin, and lead, as well as minerals containing mercury and arsenic.⁴⁵ The sequence of objects in the “Inventory of Naturalia”, in contrast, was derived from a spatial ordering of the display cases and drawers [● 1685/1688].⁴⁶ This traditional ordering did not change, at least on the level of the registers, into the eighteenth century, as is evident in a “Inventory of Naturalia” from 1735.⁴⁷ Here the objects entered after 1694 were not systematized in terms of natural history, but simply noted continuously according to their date of entry onto a list.⁴⁸ Additions to the collection, however, once again included numerous petrifications, which appears to demonstrate a continuing interest in such objects as curiosities.

Change in Meaning

In 1701, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz convinced Prussian ruler Friedrich III/I to establish a scholarly society modelled on European scientific associations such as the Royal Society of London.⁴⁹ However, contrary to his own order of 1701, the king did not then provide the society with funds to allow for the establishment of a scientific collection on a larger scale. It was his successor Friedrich Wilhelm I who decided, after years of complaints from academy members, to turn the naturalia of the Kunstkammer over to the academy.⁵⁰ In 1735, he had almost all of the objects in the Naturalia Cabinet transferred to the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences in order to expand the collection there and enable a scientific investigation of collection objects. Of the 406 entries in the naturalia inventory of the Kunstkammer from 1735, a total of 336 were given to the academy, including all of the petrifications.⁵¹ Only a fraction of the natural history objects remained in the Kunstkammer, for instance, the amber which continued to be displayed there as a special attraction from Prussia [◆ Changing Focuses / ■ Crab Automaton]. Friedrich Wilhelm also selected particular objects to remain in the collection, including hunting trophies, several horns and antlers [■ Antlers], and preserved wild boars from hunts as well as several less typical Kunstkammer objects such as an elephant’s tooth, a walrus penis [■ Priapus / ◆ Canon and Transformation], specimens of non-European animals, and other individual rarities.⁵² The royal interest in petrifications, however, had evidently dissipated. Overall, the Brandenburg-Prussian Kunstkammer no



7 | Snake Crown, the primary tooth of a pig with a case, early eighteenth century, Stiftung Schloss Friedenstein, Gotha.

50 The order is documented in the files of the academy; see A BBAW, PAW (1700–1811), I–XV–19, fols. 72r–73r. See also Ledebur 1831, p. 25.

51 See Verzeichnis 1735. In accord with the order, objects that were to remain in the Kunstkammer were marked with an x in the register. The file A BBAW, PAW (1700–1811), I–XV–19, fols. 72r–79r provides detailed insight into the delivery of the objects, which occurred over a two-year period. This transfer of objects has been precisely traced in the Digital Research Environment of the Berlin Kunstkammer.

52 See the respective markings in Inventar 1735.

53 Inventar 1793. This inventory cannot be regarded as an absolutely reliable source, since other inventory groups are also listed incompletely or are not included in it.

54 See the detailed discussion in Dolezel 2019, pp. 74–87 and pp. 203–38.

55 A BBAW, PAW (1700–1811), I–XV–22, fol. 4r. The catalogue (fols. 9r–17r) begins with Mammalia and then breaks off. Also preserved is the academy’s scientifically organized conch catalogue, *Catalogus Systematicus Marinorum in Museo Academico Regio Berolinensi reperiundorum continens descriptiones* (ibid., fols. 34r–199r).

56 Nicolai 1769, pp. 353–5, here p. 354.



8 | Collection cabinet with an open drawer and objects from the Old Cabinet Collection, Museum für Naturkunde Berlin.

longer played a significant role in the realm of natural history collecting in the eighteenth century. By 1793, the section on naturalia had been reduced to around seventy objects.⁵³ This changed only after 1798, when the newly appointed *Kunstammer* administrator Jean Henry once again purchased larger numbers of naturalia for the collection and objects of natural history were also returned to the *Kunstammer* from the Academy of Sciences [● Around 1800].⁵⁴

After the deaccession of 1735, two approaches to naturalia in the royal collections can be identified simultaneously in the surviving registers. Whereas the naturalia inventories of the *Kunstammer* of 1735 and 1793 are simply lists of holdings that accorded with the state of knowledge about natural history around 1700, the Linnaean system had been introduced into the Academy of Sciences and other natural history collections. This is evident, for example, in the *Catalogus Rerum Naturalium et Artificialium quae servantur in Museo Academiae Regiae Scientiarum Berolinensis*, initiated by botanist Johann Gottlieb Gleditsch in 1770. In this catalogue, there is a scientific systematization of objects with Latin descriptions ordered by classes, thereby organizing the collection according to a “proper” system.⁵⁵ The previous origins of *Kunstammer* objects were not recorded in the catalogue and the monkey hand did not even appear in it because the catalogue did not include petrifications. In the academy, these objects were assigned to the realm of mineralogy and were now used for geological research. In his publication of 1769 on the Berlin collections, Friedrich Nicolai reported on this apparently well-stocked section of the academy’s Naturalia Cab-

57 According to the files, in 1770 the minerals still did not have a register and had not yet been identified. See A BBAW, PAW (1700–1811), I–XV–22, fol. 6r.

58 On the history of the geoscientific collections in Berlin as a precursor to the Museum für Naturkunde, see Hoppe 1998. However, Böhme/Böhme 2004, p. 66, presume that the designation “Old Cabinet Collection” referred instead to the historical collection of the Berlin Society of Friends of Natural Science.

inet: “The mineralogist will view with pleasure the ores, stones, and petrifications found here.”⁵⁶ No catalogue of this section, however, has survived,⁵⁷ and thus the subsequent path of these petrifications from the *Kunstkammer* can no longer be traced. Around 1810, all of the naturalia of the royal collections were turned over to the newly established university collections and were registered there according to categories of natural science [■ Golden Plover / ■ Adams Mammoth]. A number of objects from historical geoscientific collections prior to 1800 are still stored separately today in the *Museum für Naturkunde* under the label “Old Cabinet Collection”. This designation refers perhaps to the Royal Mineral Cabinet, which became the Mineralogical Museum of the Berlin University in 1810, although this remains uncertain due to a lack of surviving sources.⁵⁸

It appears as if objects such as the monkey hand and the snake crown lost the particular aura they had possessed in the *Kunstkammer* when they entered the special collections of the natural sciences. Countless specimens have been kept and examined at the *Museum für Naturkunde* Berlin. Overall there are more than 30 million objects in the museum today. In the taxonomically ordered drawers, the cultural-historical significance of these objects often remains hidden (fig. 8). Their old magic becomes visible only when they function as artefacts, for example when fossilized shark teeth are presented in the form of a so-called *Natternbaum* or tree of serpents (fig. 9). However, it is no longer only natural scientists interested in cultural history such as Schultka who include information on museum tours about the provenance and ties to collection history that objects of natural history such as the monkey hand possess. For decades now, researchers have investigated the theories, practices, and protagonists of natural history collecting. In the course of this research, museums of natural history have become increasingly open to historical approaches and have participated in successful exhibitions on cabinets of art and curiosities [■ *Nautilus*].⁵⁹ New links have been developed to other systems of knowledge that are pertinent to natural history museums, not least of all in terms of marketing. The curatorial concept of the very successful recent exhibition at the Natural History Museum in London, *Fantastic Beasts: The Wonder of Nature* (2020–22), for example, combined the fascination with magical creatures and objects from the world of Harry Potter and older tales with scientific knowledge about similar plants and animals, both recent and fossilized, and demonstrated how fiction is based on the fascinating biodiversity of nature.⁶⁰ This shows that unspectacular, almost forgotten objects such as the monkey hand might at any time become the impetus for further research and new narratives. For this reason, it is important that museums, when considering whether to keep or eliminate objects that no longer seem relevant, always bear in mind the archival function of museums for future generations.

Translated by Tom Lampert



9 | *Serpents' Tongues* credenza, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Credenzas with sharks' teeth were placed near the dining table to indicate or even neutralize poisons in food and drink.

59 For discussion of the history of science especially in regard to collection objects in the *Museum für Naturkunde* Berlin, see e.g. Damaschun 2010; Hermannstädter/Heumann/Pannhorst 2021.

60 See the introduction by Louis Buckley, “Fantastic Beasts: The Wonder of Nature”, in *Fantastic Beasts 2020*, pp. 8–21, as well as the chapter by Helen Scales, “Myth and Legend” (*ibid.*, pp. 22–53). See also the website of the exhibition at the Natural History Museum, <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/visit/exhibitions/fantastic-beasts-the-wonder-of-nature.html> (accessed 21 November 2021).