
‘My sole intention in that country is to obtain a giraffe’ – Science, patronage, and the local merits of an African expedition in Restoration Frankfurt am Main

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Abstract

”Session: Playing by their own rules: marginality and heterodoxy in modern science (Ayako Sakurai, Takashi Ito, Akinobu Takabayashi, Akihisa Setoguchi)”

Eduard Ruppell (1794-1884), son of a wealthy Frankfurt banker and merchant, undertook two expeditions to northwest Africa in the early nineteenth century to collect natural-historical specimens for the museum of his native town. The purpose of this paper is to set Ruppell’s enterprise against Frankfurt’s culture of civic patronage, and to show how a local scientific culture could affect the extent and reception of a scientific expedition.

The first part of the paper will focus on Ruppell’s first journey (1822-27), which took him through the upriver regions of Egypt to Sudan. Unusually successful in obtaining the assistance from the Egyptian army, which had just placed Sudan under their control, Ruppell managed to collect specimens in areas previously uncharted by Europeans, most importantly Kordofan, a region of central Sudan lying west of the White Nile. The second part will investigate the reception of Ruppell’s journeys at home. The rich spoils from the expedition, including the giraffes from Kordofan, were donated to the museum of the Senckenberg Society in Frankfurt, pushing the institution into the European limelight. By the mid-1830s, the Senckenberg Museum was regarded as one of the top five natural history collections in Europe. The paper will point out that a powerful ideology of patriotic contribution, guiding intellectual practices in contemporary Frankfurt, framed the reception of Ruppell’s enterprise. It will go on to suggest that the same ideology determined to a large extent the scope and objectives of the expedition, as well as the institutional strategy of the Senckenberg Museum.

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