

Georg Schweinfurth's collection of plant remains from Ancient Egypt revisited and (re-)contextualised

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The plant remains from ancient Egyptian tombs (dating from 3000 BCE to 700 CE) collected by Baltic-German botanist, geographer, and ethnographer Georg Schweinfurth (1836–1925), constituted the focus and basis for the workshop held in the villa which had served as the home of Adolf Engler, the Berlin Botanic Garden's director from 1889 to 1921. The principal objective of the meeting was to re-contextualise the collection, addressing the many and varying aspects of its archaeological, historical, and social background. Additional contributions dealt with medicinal properties of plants and their cultural-historical importance in ancient Egypt, while yet others presented different archival and museological contexts, providing data for ongoing research on the scholarly biography of Schweinfurth in the broader context of 'Life Writing' and history of knowledge production.

A significant additional aim of the workshop was consideration of the ethical implications of a future showcasing of the Berlin holdings of the Botanical Museum – particularly with regard to markedly differing sensitive issues, such as the exhibition of human remains as well as objects deriving from a burial.

At the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, Georg Schweinfurth collected numerous plant specimens in Egypt from graves and tombs where they had belonged to burial equipment. These he distributed among various European institutions. What was probably one of the largest consignments went to the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum in Berlin, where the holdings from this donation nowadays number approximately 400 items. Among them, the floral garlands from the mummies of pharaohs Ahmose, Amenhotep I, and Ramses II merit special mention. Until recently, the Botanical Museum included a selection of the collection in its permanent exhibition, in the artful display originating with Schweinfurth himself. Despite an archaeobotanical focus, that exhibition lacked both historical and cultural contexts, at odds with the standards of current museum didactics. The Botanical Museum has decided to delay mounting a new permanent exhibition until those contexts have

been further explored and issues such as object biography and provenance research, as well as the imperialist setting of colonial knowledge production, but also the cultural historical background and contexts have been thoroughly researched.

The workshop brought together experts in various disciplines from Egypt, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Switzerland, and the United States of America to consider the potential of Schweinfurth's remarkable collection and its cultural-historical and archaeobotanical significance, within transdisciplinary and international discourse. The goal was to enhance exchange without borders and to establish the basis for a multi-perspective installation of the collection, both in the museum and eventually online.

After the opening address of Thomas Borsch, director of the Botanic Garden, as well as those of Jochem Kahl and Sebastian Richter for the Institute of Egyptology, Susanne Feldmann provided pertinent information on the background and genesis of the workshop. Norbert Kilian then introduced Schweinfurth to the audience and his relationship to the Botanic Garden, contextualizing his place in contemporaneous colonialist discourses. Thomas Gertzen discussed the conceptual framework of the workshop, scrutinizing terminology and providing some historiographic framework, exemplified by the case study of 19th century Egypt.

Panel 1 – Schweinfurth's Collections, undertook a multidisciplinary survey of the Berlin collection's holdings at the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin. Marina Heilmeyer presented the range of plant specimens from the Botanic Garden's Schweinfurth collection, its genesis and design, with a particular focus on floral garlands from royal mummies and their cultural-historical importance. Juraj Paule and Katharina Rabe delved further into Schweinfurth's career as a botanist and plant-collector, his *modus operandi*, and his dealings with the Botanic Garden. Vinca Michaelis explored the potential for re-contextualizing plant remains from burial contexts in Egypt, highlighting practical challenges and limitations, but also prospective research objectives, combining archaeology with botany and utilizing the findings from the Theban tombs of Qent, Ani, and Amenhotep as case studies. Flora Andreozzi linked the ancient plant remains acquired by Schweinfurth, to their modern variants, showing that the collection actually comprises similar bio-diversity while the

usage of plants in pharaonic times offers some insights into the dynamic interplay between culture and agri-culture.

Panel 2 – Schweinfurth’s Collections: Beyond, widened the perspective to the international scope of his collections, with Mark Nesbitt’s overview of the holdings at Kew, donated in 1883 – history, present state of curatorial treatment, and plans for future research. Alexander Kocyan discussed the scientific value of the Schweinfurth plant collection at Zurich University’s Botanical Collections of the Natural History Museum, beyond the focus on ‘pharaonic garlands’ and looked into the professional relationship between Schweinfurth and his Zurich colleague Hans Schinz. Dora Goldsmith subsequently gave an introduction to the important cultural-historical role of the ‘blue lotus’ in ancient Egypt, its religious meaning, its use in perfume and medicine, but also in the context of magic and witchcraft. Based on this general introduction, she later elaborated in a separate workshop on experimental archaeology, with the application of herbal remedies for headaches to the brow of two volunteers and serving wine-based potions as liver-recovery for all participants (actually, the only alcohol served that day).

Panel 3 – Museological Perspectives opened the second day of the workshop with presentations by Robert Kuhn and Marius Gerhardt from the Egyptian Museum in Berlin and Meliné Pehlivanian from the Orient-Department of the Berlin State Library, representing a joint research group of various institutions of the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, including the State Museum departments for Byzantine Art and Prehistory. The trio offered a glimpse into the manifold contributions of Schweinfurth not only to botany, but also to papyrology and Egyptian prehistory (adding numerous flint tools to the museum’s collection). The State Library shared its ongoing documentary responsibility for Schweinfurth’s personal papers, the bulk of which following World War II are in Kraków. Johannes Auenmüller offered an exciting presentation of current endeavours by the curatorial team of Turin’s Museo Egizio to create ‘Egyptian Gardens’ in Italy, integrating wood- and plant-specimens into the permanent exhibition. His colleague, Enrico Ferraris added an overview with discussion of research from the TT8 Project, analysing the botanical remains from the tomb of Kha at Thebes. At the conclusion of this segment of the program, Susan Kamel considered various issues arising from current museum- and exhibition politics

which provided the members of the audience with an opportunity to draw attention to some practical challenges resulting from the confrontational dialogue between society, scholarship, and ongoing efforts to deal with them.

Panel 5 – Archival Contexts tackled the question of how G. Schweinfurth utilized personal networks. Isolde Lehnert discussed the teacher-disciple relationship between the former and Ludwig Keimer, the botanist *cum* universal scholar in Cairo, utilizing the latter's personal papers held by the Cairo branch of the German Archaeological Institute. Patrizia Piacentini then presented some of the riches among the archival holdings of the Egyptological Library at the University of Milan, limiting herself to the fruitful exchange between Schweinfurth and French Egyptologist Victor Loret. Elvira D'Amicone was not in person in Berlin but her paper could be read by Thomas Gertzen. The text summarised and synthesized much biographical information on Schweinfurth and his personal networks.

Panel 6 – Science & Egyptology highlighted the potential, not only of scientific analysis of Schweinfurth's botanical collections, but also of the fruitful collaboration in general between Egyptology and the natural sciences. Sabine Karg reported on biometrical studies, conducted by an international research group comprising participants (from Canada and Denmark, among others) of flax-samples, collected one and a half centuries ago which still provide relevant information today. In this connection – she also recognized the invaluable contribution of the late technician Monika Lüchow at the Botanic Garden Berlin. Adel Moustafa's lecture stressed the importance of local knowledge and ancient traditions for research into the agricultural and horticultural history of Egypt while Mennat Allah El-Dorry offered an 'Egyptian Perspective' on Schweinfurth and the (re)presentation of archaeobotany in museums, concentrating on archaeobotanical research in Egypt nowadays, an overview of relevant collections in the country, and, furthermore, highlighting the cultural continuities and tradition of plant offerings in Egyptian cemeteries.

Panel 7 addressed the **Colonial Contexts** in which Schweinfurth lived, worked, and acquired his collections. Matthew Unangst pointed out Schweinfurth's prominent role as a 'public intellectual', who actively played an ambivalent role in colonial debates over time. On the one hand, he was initially inspired by humanistic ideals not

dissimilar to some aims of today's development aid programs, while, on the other hand, he later adopted a more authoritarian stance, due in part to his frustration with colonial reality. Anna Simon-Stickley further contextualized and synthesized Schweinfurth's role, writing agricultural history, in both scientific and Egyptological research.

A reception with liquid refreshments (well-suited, thanks to an ancient Egyptian prescription!) provided participants with a welcome, if brief respite. Proceedings resumed with Konrad Vanja's presentation about the design and production of the sometimes intricate and very elaborate design of the small boxes made of cardboard which Schweinfurth used to store and preserve his plant-specimens, several of which he showed to the audience.

On the last day of the workshop, **Panel 8** brought Schweinfurth into **Present Contexts**, with Sira Renée Lengert discussing the ethical implications of exhibiting human remains and material deriving from burial contexts. As she demonstrated, these questions are still (and probably always will be) subject to ongoing debates and highly subjective, if nonetheless noteworthy sensitivities. Then Moustafa Abdalla posed questions about the effects of archaeological and cultural-historical research on local populations and the ways, for example, local communities might better share in the benefits of cultural tourism. In partial response Ilona Regulski provided insights from her own personal experiences at the Middle Egyptian site of Asyut where she has been engaged in a heritage management project, integrating local communities, working with school children, and recording local oral traditions deriving from the site's more recent history.

During the concluding discussion, many participants voiced positive responses about the point of the workshop and its discussions, expressing the plea that interdisciplinary exchange – bringing archivists, botanists, archaeologists, Egyptologists, and many more disciplines and perspectives into dialogue – be perpetuated beyond this event. Furthermore, there was interest in establishing a permanent digital exchange platform. The organizers were pleased to agree readily with such wishes, also pointing to the planned proceedings volume (to be published in the Botanic Garden's ENGLERA-series) and creating a mailing list of participants

and interested parties, who might be motivated in future to join the ongoing efforts towards 'Contextualizing Georg Schweinfurth'. Indeed, some had already joined the workshop remotely.

After the Workshop, the Botanical Museum extended an invitation to a guided tour through its Herbarium. A similar introduction was offered to the permanent exhibition of the Egyptian Museum Berlin, where a special exhibition on Schweinfurth is planned for 2025.

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Thomas L. Gertzen