



Universität
Basel

Research Project

The Berlin-Cape Nexus

Third-party funded project

Project title The Berlin-Cape Nexus

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Organisation / Research unit

Departement Geschichte

Departement Geschichte / Geschichte Afrikas (Harries)

Department

Project start 01.04.2014

Probable end 31.07.2016

Status Completed

This project will explore the networks of knowledge which emerged through the practice of collecting specimens of natural history in the colonial field and their subsequent study, categorisation, and display in European centres of natural scientific research. The Cape Colony of the first half of the nineteenth-century serves as a case study, a stage, as it was, to collectors and commercial traders of plant and animal specimens from all over Europe. Particular attention will be placed on German-speaking naturalist-traders, who provided a rich supply of specimens for some of Europe's most influential contemporary centres for natural scientific research, such as the Berlin Museum of Zoology. Making extensive use of little-studied archival documentation in South Africa and Germany, this project will be unique for its focus on the oft-neglected links between the German-speaking world and the early nineteenth century Cape Colony, a transcontinental context which will serve as a valuable case-study for exploring how knowledge travels through time and space and the manner in which it is influenced, altered, distorted, appropriated, and reconstituted in the process. It is to be expected that this will help to reveal that today's accepted scientific canon, often viewed as an objective and disembodied body of knowledge with invariably Western origins, was often co-constructed by Europeans and locals alike in a very particular temporal and spatial setting, namely in the era of European exploration and colonisation of the global South. It may, in so doing, be revealed in what way knowledge from and about southern Africa contributed to the shaping of the new academic and scientific (sub-)disciplines in German-speaking areas of Europe and the theories which would emerge therefrom into the speculative world of pre-Darwinian natural science.

Financed by

Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF)

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