

Purchased from a Caravan

Animal skulls tell a story



Row of *Alcelaphus lichtensteinii* specimens from the Skull Collection of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. (Image: Catarina Madruga/MfN. All rights reserved)

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Inscriptions in China ink cover the top front of nine skulls in the Mammals Collection of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. They provide information on the classification of the animals according to taxonomic systematics, and on the provenance of the specimen. The specimens, among them the one with the catalogue number ‘MfN-Mam-049330’, male and female skulls of the African hartebeest antelope species. This was named by the Berlin museum’s director Wilhelm Peters (1815-1883) in honour of his predecessor, Martin Lichtenstein (1780-1857), *Sigmoceros lichtensteinii* in 1849 (today, the valid name is *Alcelaphus lichtensteinii*).¹ As for the provenance, the inscription states that the individuals were purchased in Zanzibar, “from a passing caravan coming from the hinterland of Lindi”.²

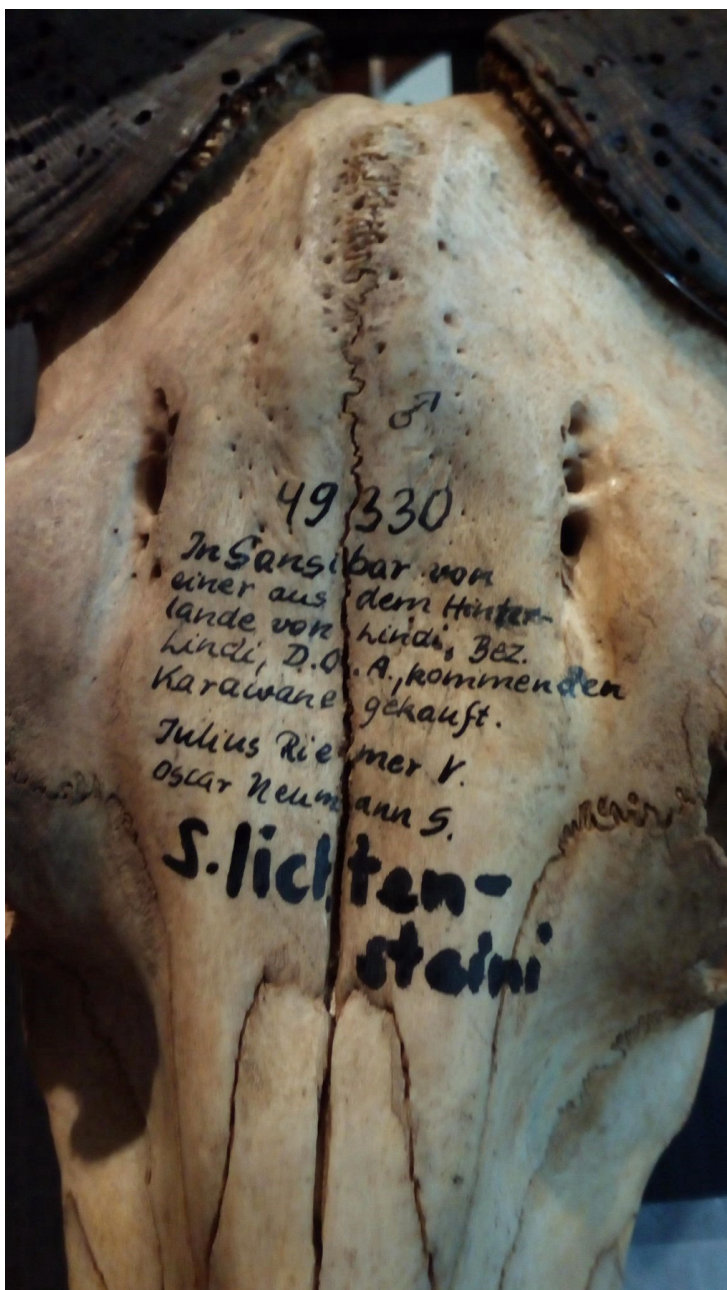


Image detail of the specimen 'ZMB-Mam-049330' showing the inscription on the skull. (Image: Catarina Madruga/MfN. All rights reserved).

Geographical location is a crucial data point for any mineralogical, botanical, or zoological specimen. Yet, despite its verbosity, here, the description does not provide information on the actual place where the animals were caught, where they were killed, nor where their skulls were prepared. Instead, it offers the name of the place where the specimens were purchased – Zanzibar, the island off the coast of Dar es Salaam – and an indication of the seller's route, through Lindi, a larger region in the southeast of Tanzania. Thus, the particular origin and distribution of these specimens remain unknown. This has to do with historical reasons, more specifically with historical practices of record-keeping that differ from today's. Whereas in the 18th century, the origin of collection objects was often described with broad categories such as 'Africa', today's contemporary research on evolution and biogeography works with GPS coordinates which can be migrated into databases. Therefore, historical inscriptions like 'from a passing caravan coming from the hinterland of Lindi' pose challenges to biological research and to collection curators, especially in view of the locality that needs

to be logged in the catalogue. In this case, the locality entered in the catalogue for each of these skull specimens is the Lindi district, an extension of over 60,000 square kilometres. Nevertheless, these objects can still be successfully used as resources to answer contemporary research questions regarding, for instance, extinction or endangerment of animal populations.³

On top of that, the inscription offers important *historical* insights into practices of collecting and record-keeping during colonial times. In this case, it informs about the custodial chain that brought this object to Berlin. The materiality of the skulls themselves provides written evidence of their background story, of their own provenance. In fact, the inscription tells us that the objects were accessioned via ‘Julius Reimer V.’ and ‘Oscar Neumann S.’ This means that the skulls were purchased (‘V’ stands for ‘Verkauft’, meaning ‘sold’) from the German trader Julius Reimer (1880-1958), and had previously been acquired, presumably in Zanzibar, by the prominent collector (‘S’ stands for ‘Sammlung’, meaning ‘collection’) and collaborator of the Zoological Museum in Berlin, Oscar Neumann (1867-1946). Both Reimer and Neumann are mentioned by name, while the ‘caravan’ is just as vague as the ‘Lindi district’. This reflects the bias in the colonial archive towards the role of European actors and the erasure of local agents, like local hunters and traders, who nevertheless had a crucial role in the growth of European collections.

Inscriptions such as these thus offer insights into the colonial context of acquisition. They provide us with information that goes beyond taxonomical classification. In order to reconstruct the travels of these skulls before they arrived in Berlin, we need to cross-reference the information in the objects and catalogues with other historical sources of the colonial archive, as well as with other material sources. In order to better understand natural history collections, then, provenance research is key.

Footnotes

1. For more on nomenclatural practices, see Michael Ohl. *The Art of Naming*. Cambridge: MIT Press 2018. [↗](#)
2. The inscription reads: “In Sansibar von einer aus dem Hinterlande von Lindi, Bez[irk] Lindi, D.O.A. [Deutsch Ost Afrika], kommenden Karawane gekauft. / Julius Reimer V. / Oscar Neumann S. / S[igmoceros] lichtensteinii” [↗](#)
3. Several research groups compare between materials from the fossil record as well as historical collections to draw more precise ideas on animal population distribution and its history, as an example see: Elisabeth Hempel et al. “Diversity and Paleodemography of the Addax (Addax nasomaculatus): A Saharan Antelope on the Verge of Extinction”. *Genes* 12, no. 8 (2021): 1236. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genes12081236> [↗](#)