Untraceable

Lost objects and old catalogues

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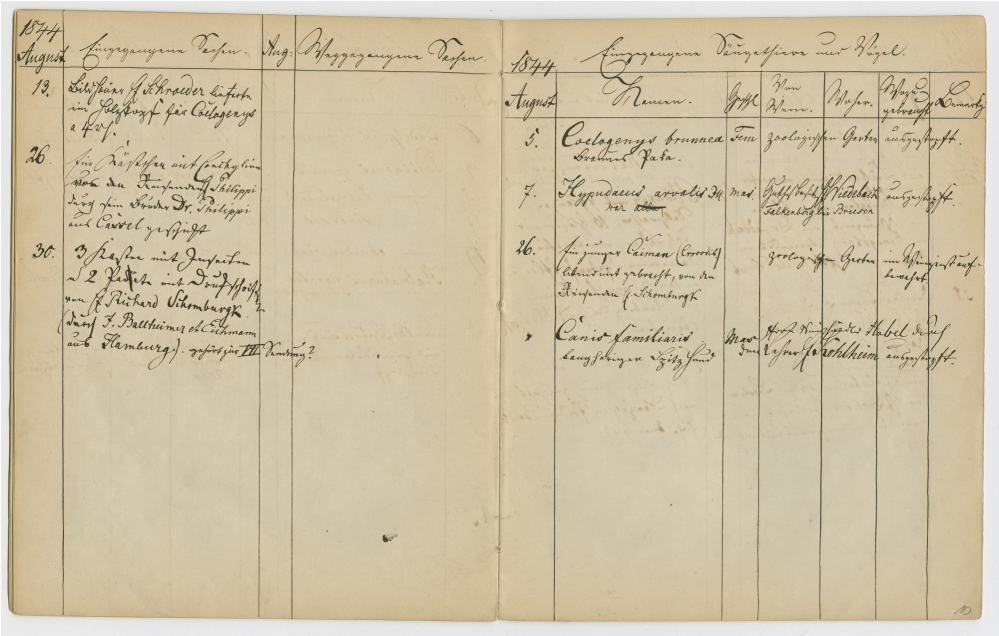


Entry from 26 August 1844: "A young caiman (crocodile) brought back alive by the traveller Mr Schomburgk (preserved in aqueous ethyl alcohol)." (MfN, HBSB, ZM S I Verwaltungsakten, Tagebuch Beyer, 1844. All rights reserved.)

I am at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, in the Amphibian and Reptile Collection, on the hunt for a 'young caiman' preserved in alcohol. In 1844, botanist Moritz Richard Schomburgk (1811-1891) brought the animal back alive together with a great number of (boxes) filled with natural history objects from what was then the British colony of Guiana. After a brief stay in the Zoological Garden, the caiman is supposed to have made its way into the Herpetological Collection of the Zoological Museum Berlin (ZMB, today's Museum für Naturkunde Berlin) after its death. I find this information in the (notes) made by one of the museum preparators at the time, Friedrich Beyer.

Frank Tillack, Amphibian and Reptile Collection manager, accompanies me to the wet Amphibian Collection. My quest turns out to be more difficult than I had thought. How come? Even though nowhere near all the collection holdings have been entered into digital databases, there are old 'entry books' or accession registers and (inventory books) that have served as tools for finding and ordering objects since the 19th century and that record most of the animals that have arrived at the museum. But why does the search for (historical specimens) sometimes fail? Why are catalogues not always able to help us, and what are the challenges that they present?

One of the difficulties has to do with historical cataloguing practices. The accession registers of the Royal Zoological Museum almost stretch back to when the university was founded in 1810.[1] Back then, a general entry book was set up, keeping records of most of the objects arriving in the museum, although information about the number and identity of the delivered objects was often missing.[2] In these cases – especially when collectors like Schomburgk were sending in multiple boxes at a time – it is still unclear how many specimens a delivery actually contained. Moreover, most curators created special catalogues for their respective animal groups early on, including the Amphibian and Reptile Collection.[3] Here, as in other sub-collections, there were two catalogue types: accession catalogue and inventory book.[4]

In the mid-19th century, at the (time of Schomburgk), animals made their way to the museum in myriad ways: as acquisitions, donations, objects of exchange, or as the result of collecting expeditions organised and/or financed by the museum. This meant that all kinds of actors were involved in collecting animals in the field and sending them back – not just scientists on expeditions, (colonial) traders, private collectors, colonial officials, and missionaries, but also numerous local actors – local guides and hunters, interpreters, messengers, servants, and up to 60 porters were involved in Schomburgk's expeditions alone.[5] None of them have been entered in the collection catalogues, which generally (only name (European) collectors). Another source of objects for the museum opened up in 1844 when a [zoological garden] was founded in Berlin and began sending animals to the Zoological Museum after their deaths. Smaller consignments and individual objects that arrived at the museum from near or far were often inventoried and mounted immediately, without being recorded in the accession catalogue beforehand, although most larger deliveries were recorded. Due to a lack of money, staff, and time, years or even decades often went by before the animals were actually viewed by collection staff, described scientifically, or categorised within the collection.

When this happened, they were entered in the inventory catalogue, which kept a record of a collection's holdings. However, a specimen's number in the inventory book only seldom matched that in the accession catalogue, as the numbers there were assigned chronologically by the date of arrival, while the inventory catalogue only recorded specimens once they had actually been processed in the collection and had therefore become part of the collection's 'inventory'. In the inventory catalogue, the specimens received the number that was next in line when they were being entered in the catalogue. This was at least how it was in theory – but this was by no means consistently the case in practice.

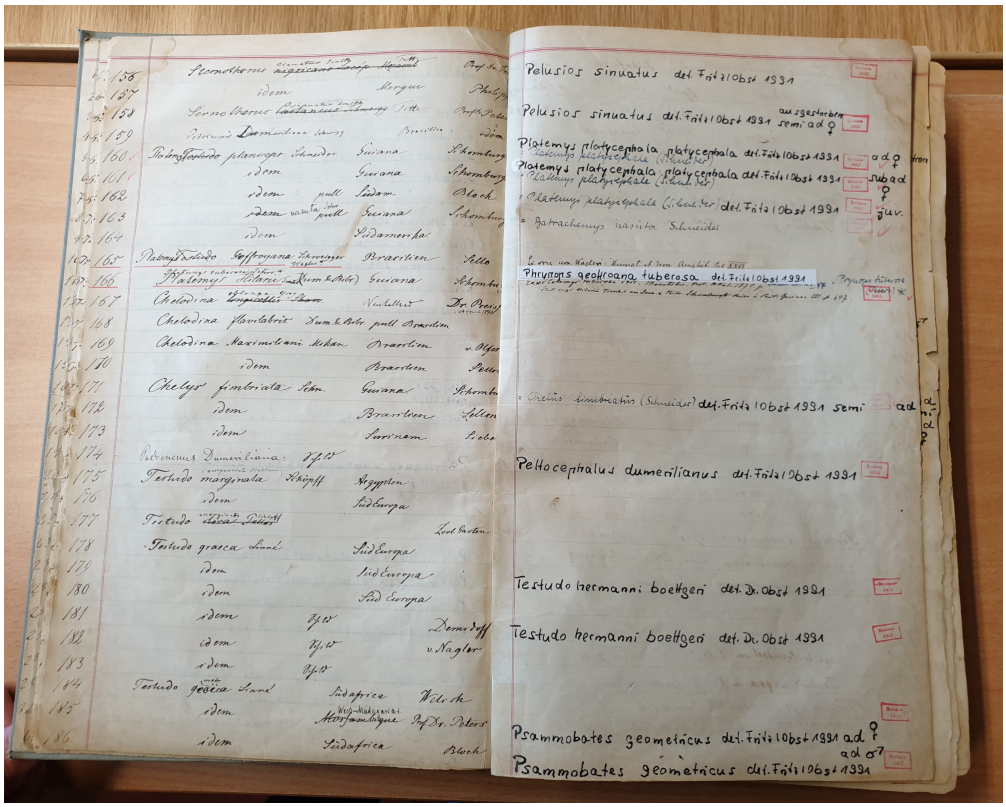
As more and more natural history objects entered the museum, particularly during the colonial period, a number of specimens that arrived simultaneously, that were classified as belonging to the same species and that had been found in the same place were registered under one inventory number in what was referred to as a 'lot' – and frequently preserved together in one jar of alcohol. This practice later became a problem that staff in the Herpetological Collection (and in other sub-collections) are still dealing with today. In 2021, there were still thousands of jars in the collection that had been assigned a single inventory number but contained up to one hundred individual animals. Collection staff are still trying to untangle these lots and to assign individual inventory numbers to

the specimens they contain. This demonstrates how difficult it is to obtain precise information about the number of objects in a collection, especially if, as in this case, the holdings contain a large number of historical specimens. Former practices of collecting and keeping records like the use of lots are some of the reasons why it will only be possible to guess how many items there are in a sub-collection until all the specimens have been individualised and simultaneously digitalised. At the same time, this clearly illustrates the consequences of accumulating enormous amounts of objects, particularly during the colonial period, for the practice of collecting and for science. The goal of gathering up to two specimens of each species did not just lead to "a large part of the often very costly overseas natural history consignments arriving in a highly corrupt and often completely unusable state",[6] as preparator Philipp Leopold Martin wrote in 1886. The downright flood of natural history arrivals also had an impact on cataloguing practice that continues to present us with problems today, not to mention the ecological, social, and political impact of local 'Ecological' or 'Green Imperialism' – consequences that are still being felt in the present.[7] If more was collected and accumulated than collections were even able to record in a timely manner, it illustrates what is meant by the contemporary critiques of 'collecting mania' (Sammelwut), which seems to have managed to create one thing above all: confusion. There are numerous examples of this – on the Tendaguru expedition (1909-1912) alone, the largest palaeontological excavation of the early 20th century organised by the Natural History Museum in Berlin, so many boxes arrived at the museum over a period of five years (800 boxes in total) that the objects completely blocked up work rooms and collection spaces, creating physical barriers and scientific obstacles.[8]

Schomburgk's objects also raise the following questions: Did the animals that he sent to the museum from Guiana ever even arrive? And are the animals that Friedrich Beyer's notes say made their way to the museum via the zoo still there today? In order to answer these questions, we still have to rely on the catalogues. But where is the 'young caiman' – has it been entered in the catalogue as one of the animals that was collected and given to the museum by Schomburgk, or as one of the animals send from the Zoological Garden? There is another difficulty when it comes to Schomburgk as a collector: the entries for his Guiana trip have by no means been entered consecutively in the inventory catalogue. This is not just because the boxes with the natural history objects arrived successively (and the animals that were intended for the zoo did not enter the museum until months after the trip had been concluded) but also because the animals were not processed until some time later. Some of the entries from Schomburgk's collecting expedition are spread throughout several inventory catalogues, depending on when an animal was identified and processed. It is likely that months or even years elapsed between the arrival of the objects and their inventory. It therefore takes a lot of time and effort to research individual objects today and to use the catalogues to get an overview of all the material that Schomburgk sent in.

The caiman, at any rate, is untraceable. And there could, in turn, be a number of reasons for this that do not just have to do with cataloguing but also with the material culture of natural history, with taxonomic revisions, and with the restructurings that took place within the collection. Over time, inventories of the collection were taken again and again. Animals were reclassified and changed their names or their places within the collection when they were assigned to a

new species or genus (this also applied to other collections). Here, this was compounded by the fact that the preparator did not assign the animal a scientific name. In fact, the animals from the zoo that subsequently arrived at the Zoological Museum only seldom had their (provenance documented) with information about their origins, who had collected them, and where they had been found. Moreover, jars in the collection broke, and collection items were (moved), (destroyed) by bombs, sold, or exchanged. And some items are simply missing their (label). Information like this is often recorded in the catalogues under 'comments' in the form of strike-throughs, new names, and 'revision' stamps.



Catalogue entries like the ones on this page in volume 1 of the numerical inventory catalogue in Berlin Zoological Museum's Amphibian and Reptile Collection (entry no. 1-11331), which was started in the 19th century and also contains objects from Schomburgk's expedition, make it clear that record-keeping and revision work took place on an ongoing basis. (Image: Frank Tillack/MfN. All rights reserved.)

Several temporal layers thus overlap in one catalogue – as do various people's handwriting. Different people have worked with the same catalogue over time, writing in their own hand, and sometimes in different codes, abbreviations, and systems of annotation. Finding one's way through old collection catalogues thus requires a very special kind of knowledge. For example, the Herpetological Collection lists a young *Alligator niger* (today's *Melanosuchus niger*) under 'ZMB 252', which was collected by Richard Schomburgk in Guiana. But the *Alligator niger* was classified as belonging to the genus 'Caiman', meaning that it is certainly possible that 'ZMB 252' is in fact the specimen that I am looking for. The search for a historical specimen thus requires specialist knowledge of [scientific taxonomy] and nomenclature. It also frequently takes experience, sometimes even implicit knowledge, to use the old catalogues. Collection manager Frank Tillack can guess the approximate age of some items in the collection by their old catalogue numbers. At least until the period around 1900, it is possible to use the ascending numbers to roughly estimate the period in

which the item arrived (dates were not entered in the catalogue back then). But, from that point on, it is no longer possible to draw any conclusions about the arrival date from the accession numbers because, from 1900 onwards, historical collections were revised and given new numbers – and it is important to know about this, as one might otherwise arrive at the wrong interpretation.

The ‘young caiman’ whose whereabouts remain unknown will stay one of the collection’s lost objects for now. However, searching for it and finding nothing but its absence has taught me new things, even though they are different to what I thought I would learn. My perspective has changed, shifting from the history of the animal to the history of natural history cataloguing and the practice of working in a (museum collection). This raises the question of what impact gaps in the history that has been passed down have when it comes to working with collections today, and how the knowledge about cataloguing systems can be saved and passed on. It also directs our attention to the issue of how we can write the history of absent objects and make them visible as part of a collection’s history. How many lost and (as of yet) unrecorded animals are being kept in museum collections? This question poses itself above all in light of the massive collecting activities undertaken during the colonial period. It is difficult to name concrete numbers for a collection when nowhere near all the animals have been recorded, and this makes it difficult to get a comprehensive picture of their holdings, where they came from, and how they were collected, transported, and utilised in Berlin. Natural history museums in many places are currently beginning to examine their own (colonial collection holdings). This also means to mobilise resources in order to compile inventories and to conduct historical research, which can be used to process the history of acquisition, the circumstances of collecting, and the genealogies of collections. In this way, animals like the ‘young caiman’ that perhaps never even reached the museum, or have not (yet) been described, or which were lost in the collection in one way or another, will gain significance within the history of colonial collections and become visible.

Footnotes

1. The Zoological Museum, which forms the basis of today’s Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, was part of Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin.↩
2. The first non-numerical inventory catalogue of the Zoological Museum, which was still ordered taxonomically, was set up between 1824 and 1830 (probably by the museum’s director at the time, Lichtenstein). Lichtenstein began the first numerical inventory catalogue around 1856, which was continued by Wilhelm Peters shortly after.↩
3. The earlier museum catalogues were initially structured taxonomically for the most part instead of numerically; sometimes they were supplemented with (often very general) information about an item’s origins or donor. In the mid-1850s, numerical catalogues were introduced to the collections, like the one for herpetology. Cf. Sylke Frahnert. “Katalogisieren: Ein Praxisbericht”. In *Sammlungsökonomien*. Nils Güttler and Ina Heumann (eds.). Berlin: Kadmos, 2016: 95-108.↩
4. The first (non-numerical) catalogue of the herpetological collection, *Nomenclator Reptilium et Amphibiorum*, edited by Lichtenstein and von Martens, was published in 1856.↩
5. Cf. MfN, HBSB, ZM-S-II-Schomburgk-R-59-r; Richard Schomburgk. *Reisen in Britisch-Guiana in den Jahren 1840-1844: Nebst einer Fauna und Flora Guiana’s nach Vorlagen von Johannes Müller, Ehrenberg, Erichson, Klotzsch, Troschel, Cabanis und Andern*, vol. 1 and 2. Leipzig: J. J. Weber, 1847-1848 .↩
6. Philipp Leopold Martin. *Die Praxis der Naturgeschichte: Ein vollständiges Lehrbuch; Teil 1, Taxidermie oder die Lehre vom Präparieren, Konservieren und Ausstopfen der Tiere und ihrer Teile; Vom Naturaliensammeln auf Reisen und dem Naturalienhandel*. Weimar: B.F. Voigt, 1886: 1.↩
7. The ecological consequences of imperialism and colonialism were being examined as far back as in the 1980s. Cf. William Cronon. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983; Alfred W. Crosby. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; Richard Grove. *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.↩
8. On the Tendaguru expeditions with regard to this problematic, see Mareike Vennen. “Dinosaurier in Berlin: Transformationen im Berliner Museum für Naturkunde, 1909-1937”. In *Dinosaurierfragmente: Zur Geschichte der Tendaguru-Expedition und ihrer Objekte, 1906-2018*. Ina Heumann, Holger Stoecker, Marco Tamborini, and Mareike Vennen (eds.). Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018: 166-191.↩