

## **Book review: Dichter, Naturkundler und Welterforscher: Adelbert von Chamisso und die Suche nach der Nordostpassage**

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## Book review: Dichter, Naturkundler und Welterforscher: Adelbert von Chamisso und die Suche nach der Nordostpassage

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The year 2023 saw the long-overdue publication of Adelbert von Chamisso's manuscript diary (or rather notebook) kept in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin from his circumnavigation of the globe on the *Rurik* (Sproll & al. 2023a). This edition is complemented by an extremely valuable and detailed commentary (Sproll & al. 2023b). The book under review here is a comprehensive biography of Chamisso with a clear emphasis on this voyage, written by Matthias Glaubrecht, one of the co-editors of the manuscript diary. To put it briefly, this is a remarkable text and it merits a detailed review.

Writing this book must have been a particular challenge. Having contributed to the hard core of canonized poems written in German, Chamisso is a key figure for literary scholars who have studied his work for generations. In addition to his poetry, Chamisso produced *Der Schlemihl*, a famous fairy tale novella that had an outstanding impact on nineteenth century writing and was soon translated into several languages. As a consequence, a very considerable amount of secondary literature on Chamisso's productions exists. In addition to being a highly successful writer, he was also a scientist in his own right with a focus on biology and ethnology. Furthermore, Chamisso was, together with Diederich Franz Leonhard von Schlechtendal, the first curator of the Royal Botanic Garden in Schöneberg near Berlin. However, the central part of Chamisso's life was, as he himself underlines, his great voyage (1815–1818), which was followed by the publication of its results. It is easy to imagine that Glaubrecht had to digest a truly vast amount of pre-existing literature before starting to write this book, a fact that is reflected by an extensive bibliography (pp. 660–682).

A positive aspect of this book is that it may be called a balanced biography that considers all aspects of a remarkable life and refrains from focusing on a single aspect. Admittedly, more pages are dedicated to the voy-

age (pp. 129–429) than to the years before and after it, but this accurately reflects Chamisso's own approach – he also dedicated more pages of his writings to his travels than to his artistic productions. Within the field of biology, much more attention is given to zoology – Glaubrecht's speciality – and significantly less to botany, but other fields dealt with by Chamisso such as ecology, ethnology and linguistics are not omitted. Although the meagre emphasis on collecting and describing plants is understandable, it is nevertheless regrettable. Chamisso significantly contributed to the knowledge of the flora of several regions visited by the *Rurik*, e.g. Unalaska (then Russian Empire, now USA). A guide to the vascular plants of this Aleutian island (Godoloff 2003) lists a considerable number of species with names validated by Chamisso or based on specimens collected by him, which all stood the test of time. Among these we find *Antennaria monocephala* DC., *Arnica chamissonis* Less., *A. unalaschcensis* Less., *Campanula lasiocarpa* Cham., *Cerastium beeringianum* Cham. & Schltdl., *Gentiana aleutica* Cham. & Schltdl., *Parnassia kotzebuei* Cham. ex Spreng., *Pedicularis chamissonis* Steven, *Plantago macrocarpa* Cham. & Schltdl., *Romanzoffia unalaschcensis* Cham. and *Spiranthes romanzoffiana* Cham.; several of these species possess holarctic distribution patterns, which underline the relevance of Chamisso's plant collections. On a similar line is *Syagrus romanzoffiana* (Cham.) Glassman, a palm of wide neotropical distribution that was found by Chamisso in Santa Catarina in the Portuguese colony of Brazil. For many, *Eschscholzia californica* Cham., collected on the coast of the Pacific near what is now San Francisco, is Chamisso's most important contribution to the range of popular garden plants. Apparently it was first cultivated in the Royal Botanic Garden in Schöneberg. Only the discovery of the latter species is discussed by Glaubrecht.

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It is a well-known fact that the understanding of an expedition increases significantly with the number of sources available, and this also applies for the voyage of the *Rurik*. For good reasons Glaubrecht does not focus his attention solely on the writings of Chamisso, i.e. his miscellaneous letters, his manuscript diary noted down during the travels, his *Bemerkungen und Ansichten* (Chamisso 1821) and his *Reise um die Welt. Teil 1 Tagebuch* (Chamisso 1836). As a matter of fact, the latter book is quite the opposite of a diary: the author's reflections on his voyage written about seventeen years after his return to Berlin. In addition, a whole set of texts is taken into account by Glaubrecht, those written by the captain Otto von Kotzebue and by Chamisso's travel companions: the illustrator Louis York Choris, the physician on board Johann Friedrich von Eschscholtz and the naturalist Morten Wormskiold. These again range from letters, private recollections to official printed accounts, in particular Kotzebue's *Entdeckungs-Reise*. This impressive book in three volumes was published in German in Weimar (Kotzebue 1821a), in an English translation in London in the same year (Kotzebue 1821b) and, what is not mentioned in the bibliography, in a Russian translation in Saint Petersburg, in 1821–1823 (Kotzebu 1821–1823). Unsurprisingly, Glaubrecht reaches a remarkable depth of understanding for what happened on board and during the stops in the various harbours, among them Concepcion, Manila and Petropavlovskaja Gavan (now Petropavlovsk-Kamtchatski) and the excursions into their hinterlands. A good example of his insights are the discrepancies between Choris's account of women on board the *Rurik* when stopping at Hawaii as opposed to Kotzebue's sanitized report in the official travelogue. The special status of the expedition is nicely elucidated. Privately financed, the *Rurik* sailed under the flag of the Russian navy, and Russian was the language on board, no doubt a challenge for the francophone Chamisso. The numerous quotations make good reading, but there is a serious deficiency: only in some cases are references given in the endnotes. Considering the heterogeneity of the quoted materials (see above), it is very difficult even for the specialist to pinpoint the exact source.

Another positive aspect of this book is that Glaubrecht has not written a hagiography. Chamisso is seen with sympathy, e.g. when describing his early years as a refugee in Berlin having fled from revolutionary France and when mentioning the French intonation of his German many years after his arrival, but he is not seen uncritically. The tensions and conflicts on board the *Rurik* are not passed over in silence: Chamisso's belated captain-bashing in his *Tagebuch* is severely criticized and for good reason. Furthermore, Glaubrecht does not close his eyes from the fact that Chamisso fell victim of his own romanticism when reflecting on his months on the islands of the Pacific. Chamisso's amour fou with Helmina-Christina von Chézy during a stay in Paris and his later affair with Marianne Hertz in Hamburg are not censored.

The forte of this book, however, is the broader view of the voyage and the discoveries made en route: alternation of generations in Thaliacea off the coast of Portugal (Chamisso, Eschscholtz), permafrost in mainland Alaska (Eschscholtz) and genesis of coral islands (Chamisso) in the Pacific Ocean. Glaubrecht also sets the route taken by the *Rurik* into the context of Cook's third voyage on the *Resolution* and the *Adventure* and the first circumnavigation of the globe flying Russian colours in the *Nadezha* and the *Newa* headed by Adam Johann von Krusenstern, who was instrumental for Kotzebue in getting the command. An excellent piece of observation is also Glaubrecht's statement that in his *Tagebuch* Chamisso in a sense superseded Alexander von Humboldt's approach in the *Kosmos*, which Darwin appropriately described as "semi-meta-physico-poetico descriptions" (p. 560).

The number of errors is small: Carl Ludwig Willdenow was made director of the Royal Botanic Garden in Schöneberg in 1801, when this institution reported to the Académie des sciences et belles-lettres in Berlin, and not in 1810, when he was appointed full professor at the newly founded Berlin University (Wagenitz & Lack 2015). Chamisso did not meet Augustin-Pyramus de Candolle in Geneva in 1812, because at this time he lived as full professor at Montpellier University. The well-known herbarium of Jean-Jacques Rousseau previously kept in the Royal Botanic Museum in Berlin but destroyed in 1943 was not acquired by Chamisso in Paris but by Friedrich Wilhelm III, King of Prussia, via Sophie Alexandrina de Bohm, née de Girardin (Raabe in press), the daughter of Rousseau's host in Ermenonville. To call the instigator and financier of the voyage, Count Nicolai Petrovich Rumyantsev, chancellor of the Russian Empire and formerly minister of foreign affairs under Tsar Alexander I, a civil servant is at best debatable. It would also not have been inappropriate to mention that the alternation of generations is a universal biological phenomenon also occurring in organisms other than animals. The sharp criticism of the Komarov Botanical Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Saint Petersburg, where very many specimens collected by Chamisso are being conserved, is unfair. Admittedly only a proportion of the material is mounted and an even smaller percentage of the specimens is available for consultation online, but the collection is definitely not threatened in its existence as stated by Glaubrecht. For obvious reasons the text follows chronology, though not strictly so. This is not always convincing, e.g. when combining the events that happened during the two stays on Hawaii in the years 1816 and 1817 or on the islands of the Radak chain (now the Marshall Islands) in early and late 1817 into a single narrative.

The usability of a book of this kind is strongly influenced by the quality of the index, which regrettably is rather poor. Only the names of the key figures are listed in alphabetical order, surprisingly with their given names first, followed by their surnames and the biographical data. An index for the names of the numerous organisms

and localities mentioned in the text is totally missing as is a list of the books referred to.

Vivid in style and precise in the terminology used, Glaubrecht's prose is a joy to read. The present reviewer is not alone in this assessment. The Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung [German Academy for Language and Literature] has awarded the nicely funded Sigmund-Freud Prize for Academic Prose 2023 to Glaubrecht for his biography of Chamisso. The lists of gems is a long one: the demolition of the family's castle in Boncourt in consequence of the French Revolution as reflected in Chamisso's famous poem "Das Schloß Boncourt"; his stay as guest of the Itzenplitz family on their estate in Kunersdorf east of Berlin, where he wrote *Der Schlemihl*; the sailors throwing overboard the specimens of the giant brown alga *Durvillaea antarctica* (Cham.) Har., which Chamisso had collected and dried in the *Rurik*'s crow's nest, because they regarded them as irrelevant; his firm belief that the human societies he encountered on the Pacific Islands were soon to succumb to globalization, which was a very correct prophecy; Kotzebue's critical state of health due to pneumonia in July 1817 when forced to discontinue the further search for the Northeast Passage; the way that Chamisso, by applying from London to Rumanzev in Saint Petersburg, outmanoeuvred Kotzebue's claim on the scientific collections gathered during the circumnavigation, and how Chamisso subsequently managed to have them transferred to Berlin; his daily walk from home over the fields to the Royal Botanic Garden in Schöneberg; Chamisso and Schlechtendal sitting on opposite sides of their table in the Royal Herbarium in Berlin and describing together some of the specimens collected during the voyage; the death of Chamisso's wife Antonie Franziska née Piaste and his testament, which stipulated that his rich herbarium be sold to help finance the life of his seven underage children. Another gem is the epilogue subtitled "Das Ende der Idylle in der Südsee und die neue Arktis" [The end of the idyll in the South Seas and the new Arctic]. It reflects upon the consequences of globalization and climate change on the regions Chamisso had visited two centuries ago, among them severe depletion of the flora and fauna of oceanic islands, introduction of invasive plants and animals, massive changes in coral growth and the opening-up of regions for navigation previously inaccessible for most of the year because of solid ice. All this is so convincingly presented that the proposal is made that Glaubrecht's book be translated into English, now the lingua franca for the great voyages of exploration.

For the botanist, however, the fact remains that a comprehensive analysis of Chamisso's botanical work is still missing. An important step forward has been made with the commentary on his botanical notes in the manuscript diary (Kaiser 2023), but this information still has to be correlated with (1) the numerous plant descriptions (many of them protologues) published by Chamisso often in collaboration with Schlechtendal and by others in

*Linnaea* and (2) the rich herbarium record distributed widely. In addition, several other authors have validated plant names on the basis of Chamisso's collections, among them Augustin-Pyramus de Candolle in Geneva and Carl Bernhard von Trinius in Saint Petersburg, in a whole range of books and journals. The following repositories for plant specimens gathered by Chamisso have recently been listed (herbarium codes following Index herbariorum: <https://sweetgum.nybg.org/science/ih/>): B, BR, C, G, HAL, HBG, KIEL, L, LE, LY, LZ, M, MO, P, ROST and W (Maaß 2016). This material is supplemented by Eschscholtz's collections kept in B, BERN, BR, C, G, GH, GOET, HAL, HBG, KIEL, L, LE, LY, LZ, M, MO, P and W (Maaß 2016). In short, this is a truly vast amount of widely scattered material and information, including (e.g.) recent work on the *Melastomataceae* collected on the voyage of the *Rurik* conserved at LE (Imchanizkaja 1998). Therefore the book "Chamisso the botanist" has still to be written. The comprehensive account of the widely scattered herbarium specimens collected by the Forsters during the second circumnavigation of the globe headed by Captain Cook (Nicolson & Fosberg 2004) could act as model for such a project. For the prospective author, Glaubrecht's tome will be obligatory reading.

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