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The Rheinische Naturforschende Gesellschaft's thylacine

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Kurzfassung

Der Beutelwolf der Rheinischen Naturforschenden Gesellschaft

Im vorliegenden Artikel wird die Herkunft des Beutelwolfs, *Thylacinus cynocephalus* (HARRIS, 1808), in den Sammlungen der Rheinischen Naturforschenden Gesellschaft (RNG) geklärt, die heute Teil der Sammlungen des Naturhistorischen Museums Mainz / Landessammlung für Naturkunde Rheinland-Pfalz ist.

Der Original-Kaufbeleg des Beutelwolfs über 400 Mark, der auf das Jahr 1894 datiert, konnte im Stadtarchiv Mainz gefunden werden. Der Beutelwolf wurde von dem Naturalienhändler Gustav Adolph FRANK in London erworben. Frühere, vergebliche Bemühungen des RNG-Gründungsmitglieds Carl Friedrich BRUCH einen Beutelwolf zu erwerben werden ebenfalls dokumentiert.

Abstract

This article summarises the knowledge about the origin of the thylacine specimen, *Thylacinus cynocephalus* (HARRIS, 1808), in the collections of the "Rheinische Naturforschende Gesellschaft" (RNG), today part of the collections of the Mainz Natural History Museum / State Collection of Natural History of Rhineland-Palatinate.

The original invoice of 400 Marks, dated 1894, was found in the city archives of Mainz. The RNG purchased the thylacine from the natural history dealer Gustav Adolph FRANK in London. Earlier unavailing attempts by the RNG founding member Carl Friedrich BRUCH to obtain a thylacine are also documented.

Key words

Thylacine, *Thylacinus cynocephalus*, natural history collections, Rheinische Naturforschende Gesellschaft, extinct mammals

1. Introduction

The origin of the thylacine specimen (Plate 1) at the Mainz Natural History Museum / State Collection of Natural History of Rhineland-Palatinate (Naturhistorisches Museum Mainz, acronym MNHM) has been the subject of intensive investigations for many years. These investigations mainly focused on letters sent by natural history dealers to the Rheinische Naturforschende Gesellschaft (RNG). Most of these letters were written in Kurrent ('old German script') and had to be transcribed.

Until recently, it was assumed that the RNG purchased the thylacine specimen during the 1840s, after founding member Carl Friedrich BRUCH (1789-1857) published his "*Verzeichnis der im ehemaligen kurfürstlichen Schlosse zu Mainz aufgestellten Sammlungen der rheinischen naturforschenden Gesellschaft*" (Index of the Rheinische Naturforschende Gesellschaft's collection in the former electoral castle in Mainz) in 1843 without mentioning the thylacine (RNG NL 39/28/21). However, an article in the magazine *Lebendiges Rheinland-Pfalz* in 1984 celebrating the 150th anniversary of the RNG and the 75th anniversary of the Mainz Natural History Museum led the researchers to believe that the *Thylacinus cynocephalus* came to Mainz in the 1840s. According to the article "Geschichte des Naturhistorischen Museums und seiner Sammlungen" (History of the Natural History Museum and its Collections), written by Dr Franz-Otto NEUFFER, the MNHM's director from 1978 until 2003, the RNG bought the thylacine with financial support of the "Universitätsfonds" (university fund) between 1834 and 1848, a period in which the society's collection grew rapidly (NEUFFER 1984: 133). Unfortunately no sources can be found for this claim. Nevertheless, the article clearly shows the author's insight into the history of the RNG and the museum, so his statement was generally accepted to be right. However, we must assume that this was merely a hypothesis and he speculated that the thylacine was purchased in the same period as other precious exhibits such as the Javan Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*), the Quaggas (*Equus quagga quagga*), the Great Auk (*Pinguinus im-*

pennis) and the Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*), the latter two destroyed during the British air raid on 27 February 1945.

The first known paper mentioning the RNG's thylacine is the museum's guide published in the frame of the opening of the Mainz Natural History Museum in 1910 (ANONYMUS 1910), presumably written by Conservator Wilhelm von REICHENAU, chairman of the RNG at that time and the first head of the museum.

2. Searching for the thylacine's origin

The first effort to survey the specimen's origin started in 2010. The RNG's archive covering the timeframe from their beginning in 1834 until the 1930s is housed in the archives of the city of Mainz. Initially, the focus laid on letters and lists sent by natural history dealers in which they offered the RNG various specimens (RNG NL 39/33, 28, 173). The letters and lists are mostly from the 1830s until the 1850s, with a few from the 1860s. However, no thylacine offer appears in any of the letters. Even if one had appeared, it would have been difficult to conclude whether the society took up the offer since the society's replies are not present in the archives. The only mentioning of a thylacine from Van Diemensland, the former name for Tasmania, was found in a letter "*Die Mainzer Sammlungen gegenüber denen von Wiesbaden und Mannheim*" (The Mainz collections compared to the ones in Wiesbaden and Mannheim) (RNG NL 39/28/19). Unfortunately, it lacks its title page and at that time the final page could not be found, so that date, recipient and author were missing. Nonetheless, the detailed knowledge and description indicate that the author was very likely Carl Friedrich BRUCH. There are hints regarding the time frame during which it was authored. For instance, it refers to the purchase of the "*Quagga Hengst und Bergstute sammt Früllen und besonders präparierten Schädeln*" (Quagga stallion and the Burchzell's zebra mare including quagga foal and especially prepared skulls). Those were purchased in 1842 and 1843 (RAU 1981: 221-238). Furthermore, the author mentions a "*Versammlung*", likely referring to the 20th "



Plate 1: Thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) mounted specimen in the collection of the Mainz Natural History Museum (MNHM W 1980/579) (Fotos: Niels Torben BACK).

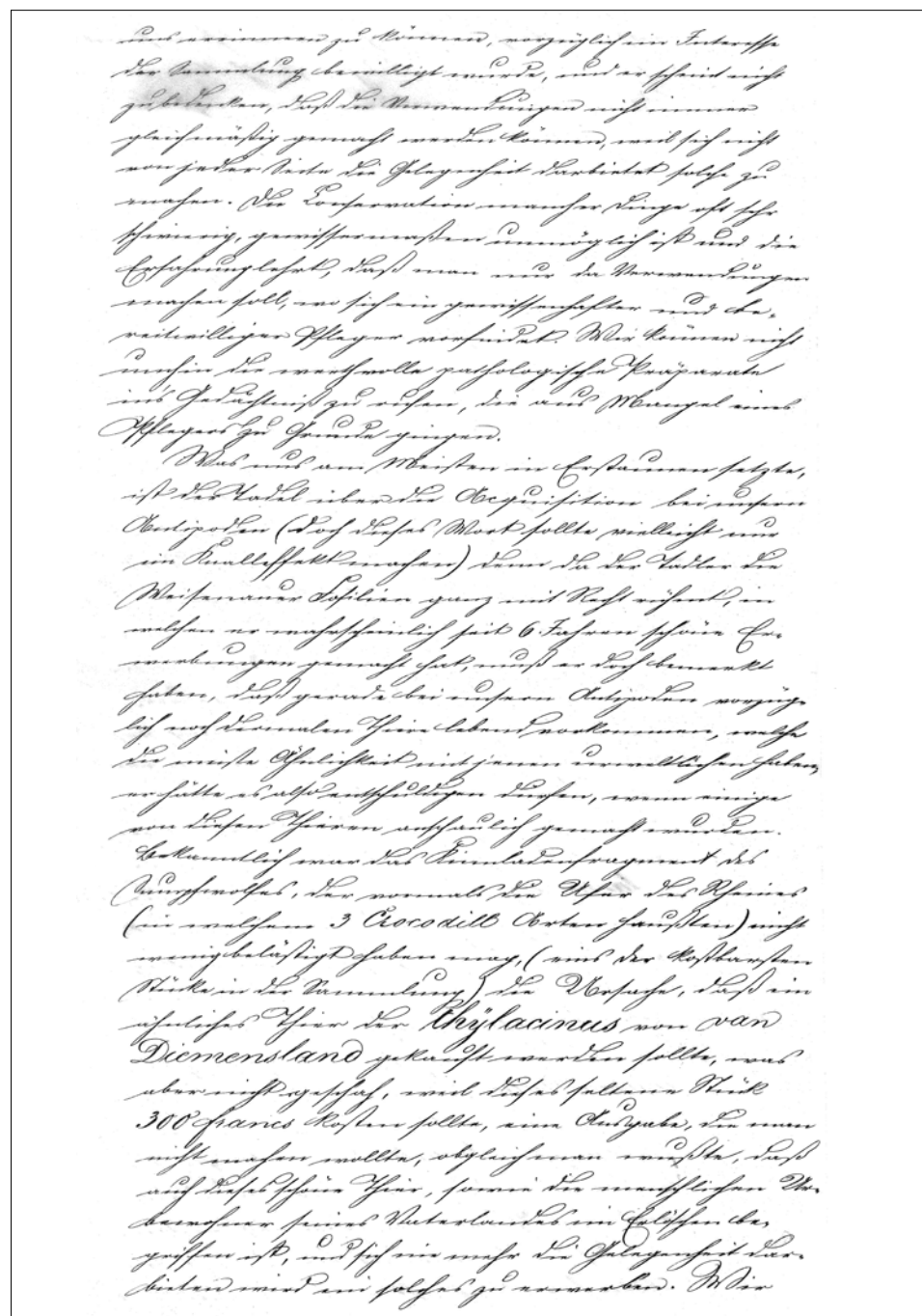


Fig. 1: Letter (page 3) "Die Mainzer Sammlungen gegenüber denen von Wiesbaden und Mannheim" written by Carl Friedrich BRUCH in the 1840s mentioning the "thylacine" (RNG NL 39/28/19).

Versammlung der Gesellschaft Deutscher Naturforscher und Ärzte" (Congress of the Society of German Natural Scientists and Physicians) which took place in Mainz in 1842 (WÜRZ 2009: 46).

In the meanwhile the final (fifth) page could be found. It confirms the author as Carl Friedrich BRUCH due to his signature at the end of the letter. In the letter BRUCH complained about the RNG's decision not to buy a thylacine due to the fact that the price of 300 Francs deterred the society. BRUCH criticised that decision, noting that it was unclear whether an opportunity like that would ever arise again due to the scarcity of the species: "... die Ursache, daß ein ähnliches Thier, der Thylacine von Van Diemensland gekauft werden sollte, was aber nicht geschah, weil dieses seltene Stück 300 Francs kosten sollte, eine Ausgabe, die man nicht machen wollte, obgleich man wußte, daß auch dieses schöne Thier, sowie die menschlichen Urbewohner seines Vaterlandes im Erlöschen begriffen ist, und sich nie mehr die Gelegenheit darbieten wird ein solches zu erwerben" (Fig. 1, RNG NL 39/28/19). This indicates that the society's leading figures such as Carl Friedrich BRUCH had an interest in acquiring a thylacine specimen when drafting the letter. Although the exact date of BRUCH's letter could not be found, it is most likely that it was written after BRUCH's stroke in May 1844 and before he left the board of the RNG in 1849 (cf. Würz 2009: 36, 49, Kunz 2009: 97). In 2017 a new attempt was started to shed light on the history of the thylacine, focusing on the examination of the society's account books (RNG NL 39/61 – 169), also available at the archives of the city of Mainz. Additionally to tracking which specimens the society bought from whom, they also list they gifts, making it easier to tell with certainty which specimens entered the RNG's collection.

Unfortunately, there were no annotations regarding the purchase of a thylacine when studying the initial time frame, and thus the examined period had to be extended. The Universitätsfond stopped its yearly financial support in 1848 indicating that there was a critical financial time due to the political situation and the German revolutions (NEUFFER 1984: 133).

An article, celebrating the 175th anniversary of the RNG and the 100th anniversary of the Museum in 2009, gives more answers concerning the question which period should be considered next. Additionally, it explains why the offer of a thylacine could not be taken up at that time. The 20th "Versammlung der Gesellschaft Deutscher Naturforscher und Ärzte" took place in 1842 in the Electoral Castle (Kurfürstliches Schloss) of Mainz. Due to that event, the castle had to be renovated and the collections were moved into the building. In 1846 the town administration decided that the collections of other societies, i.e. the city library, the "Münzkabinett" (Numismatic collection) and the collection of paintings also had to be stored within the castle. So there was more renovation to be done for a second move into another part of the building between 1846 and 1848. All this together caused major financial problems for the RNG in the 1840s, and the situation became even worse: Due to the political situation which provoked a lot of discord, numerous paying members left the RNG and their number dropped from 235 in 1845 to 76 in 1861 (WÜRZ 2009: 46-50). These difficult times are also reflected in the receipts which were found in great disorder from 1849 until 1859. NEUFFER mentioned in his article that from 1860 on the financial support by the Universitätsfond restarted (NEUFFER 1984: 133). Nevertheless, Medizinalrat Dr. Friedrich Ludwig FEIST, president of the RNG from 1861 to 1870, still complained about financial constraints in 1869 (WÜRZ 2009: 50). Considering all this, it is likely that the RNG would not have had enough funds to buy a rather scarce and thus expensive specimen such as a thylacine until the 1870s, when thanks to advertising measures the number of paying members increased by 212 new ones from 1874 until 1882 (WÜRZ 2009: 50). Thus, our research resumed with the RNG's account book of 1870. In the account book detailing the purchases of 1894 and 1895, we finally found a receipt according to which the RNG paid natural history dealer Gustav Adolph FRANK from London 400 Marks for a thylacine specimen. This sum included 21.33 Marks delivery charges (Fig. 2, RNG NL 39/143/43).

According to an accompanying letter dated 22 December 1894, Gustav Adolph FRANK initially asked for a total sum of 420 Marks; 400 Marks for the specimen and 20 Marks for the delivery. However, a blue handwritten note on this letter indicates that a delivery charge of 31.33 Marks was included in the price of 400 Marks, leaving a price of 378.67 Marks for the specimen itself (Fig. 3, RNG NL 39/143). A receipt called “Nota” from 15 January 1895 repeats this, proving that the RNG negotiated the lower price of 400 Marks in total (Fig. 4, RNG NL 39/143/55). This is again confirmed

in a letter from G. A. FRANK dated 16 January 1894 (most likely a mistake and instead meaning 1895) that he received 400 Marks (Fig. 5, RNG NL 39/143). The account book also contains proof for the delivery: a double page of a way-bill for an International Transport by train for a shipment with natural history goods from England to Mainz, signed with “Rotterdam 6.12.1894” (Fig. 6). Presumably on the next double page, there is a second way-bill with a stamp “Rotterdam Maas Duitenland” and a second stamp from the customs clearance in Mainz dated 11.12.1894 (Fig. 7). The RNG

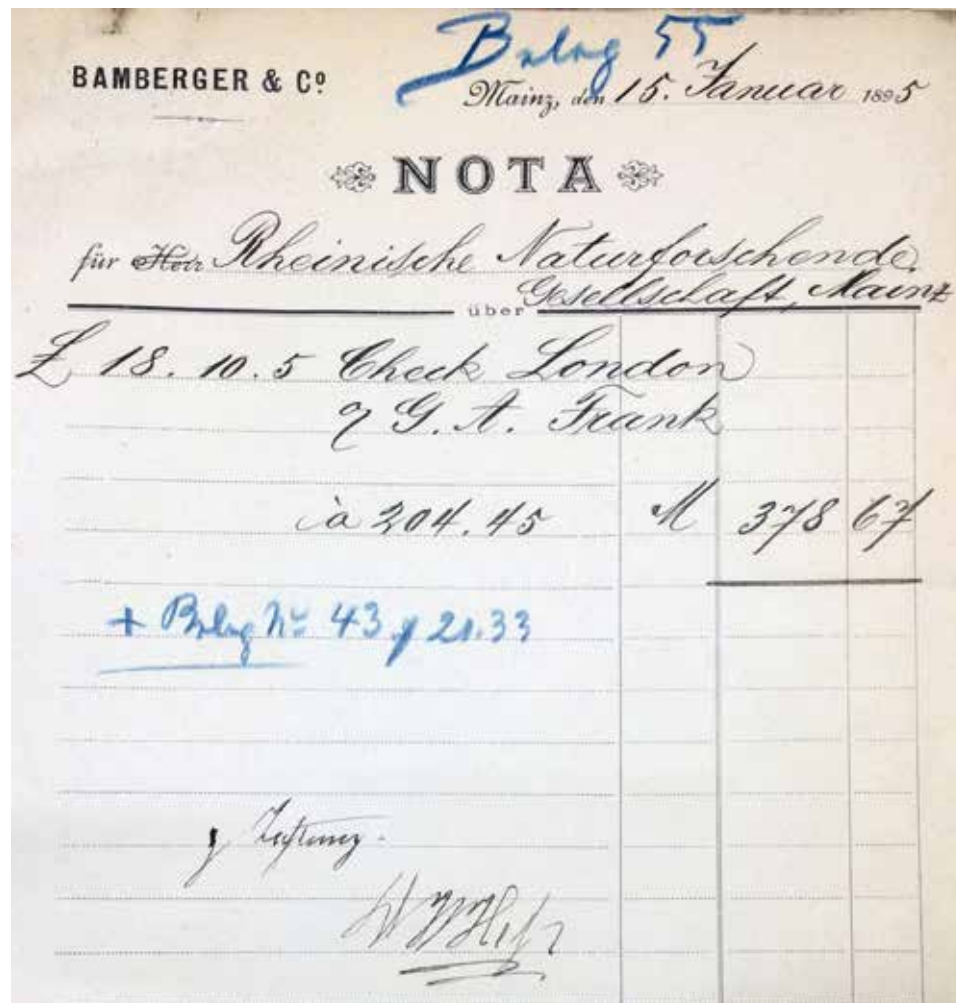


Fig. 4: Nota (receipt) of the Rheinische Naturforschende Gesellschaft dated 15 January 1895 (RNG NL 39/143/55).

was at that time under the leadership of Conservator Wilhelm von REICHENAU.

The next step was to gather information on Gustav Adolph FRANK in an attempt to learn more about the origins of the thylacine. Gustav Adolph FRANK, junior (1844-1900), who moved in 1867 from Amsterdam to London, came from a long line of natural history dealers, as pointed out by Justin JANSEN (2012), with both his father Gustav Adolph FRANK, senior (1808-1880) in Amsterdam and his grandfather Johann Heinrich FRANK (1772-1843) in Leipzig also working in that profession. Gustav Adolph FRANK, senior, too, supplied the RNG with specimens. The FRANK firm traded worldwide with animal material and supplied numerous museums. For example, they were the leading dealers of Great Auks and provided museums with 12 mounted specimens, which are 15 percent of today's stock, as well as with one egg. The two Great Auks the RNG bought in 1835 (nine years prior to the species's extinction in 1844) were purchased from G. A. FRANK senior (BLASIUS 1884: 95, FULLER 1999, JANSEN 2012). Unfortunately, one was exchanged in 1860 for a *Tapir indicus* through FRANK (RNG NL 39/28/18, BLASIUS 1884: 95) and is now in the Birmingham Museum; the second one was destroyed in the Second World War bombing on 27 February 1945 (JANSEN 2012, FULLER 1999).

Today, two sources are available to gather more information on thylacines and the trade

with the marsupials. One is The International Thylacine Specimen Data Base (ITSD) by Dr. Stephen SLEIGHTHOLME in form of CDs with updated releases. It holds information that FRANK sold thylacines to other museums as well: a specimen to Bremen in 1893, and a skull and skeleton to Leiden in 1895 (SLEIGHTHOLME 2005). However, their archives did not hold any sources detailing the specimen's provenance. Another specimen was sold to Bern, though it is not known when it entered the collection.

The other source is “The Thylacine Museum” by Cameron CAMPBELL's Natural World which is exclusively online, relying largely on the ITSD. It also reveals the network between traders, zoos and museums. There was a vivid trade with thylacines. London Zoo for example kept thylacines from 1850 until 1931 and was used as a transit zoo. Sadly, the hope that FRANK might have sold the body of one of these thylacines to the RNG remained unfulfilled. The thylacine that died closest to the date of the sale passed in 1893 and is kept as a complete specimen in alcohol in the Swedish Museum of Natural History in Stockholm. In fact, no thylacine died in any of the European zoos in late 1894, thus it is probable that FRANK, junior, bought it from a dealer in Australia, more specifically Tasmania (CAMPBELL 2017). However, this is mere speculation since it is unknown where Gustav Adolph FRANK's account

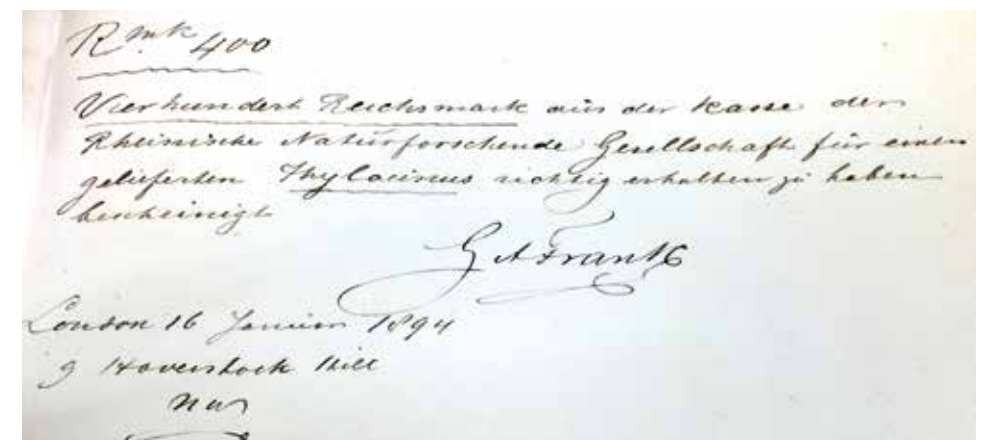


Fig. 5: Letter dated 16 January 1894, correctly 1895, from G. A. FRANK confirming that he received the 400 Marks (RNG NL 39/143).

Internationaler Eisenbahntransport
International par chemins de fer.

Frachtbrief
Gewöhnliche Vitesse.

Versandbahn
Chemin de fer expéditeur
Spoorweg waarop het vervoer aanvangt.

Empfangsbahn
Chemin de fer destinataire
Spoorweg waarop het vervoer eindigt.

Empfangsstation
Station destinataire
Station van bestemming.

ANGABE DER ANZUWENDENDEN TARIFE UND ROUTENVORSCHRIFT.
TARIFS ET ITINÉRAIRES RÉCLAMÉS.
TOE TE PASSEN TARIËVEN EN VOORSCHRIFTEN ONTKEKT DE TE VOLGEN ROUTE.

Mit bahnsseitig extrahiertem
Zollbegleitschein
auf

Frankfurt am Main

Rotterdam

6-12-94

Unterzeichnet und Adresse des Absenders
Signature et adresse de l'expéditeur
Handteekening en adres van de afzender

Fig. 6: Way-bill from England to Rotterdam dated 6 December 1894 (RNG NL 39/143).

Internationaler Eisenbahntransport
International par chemins de fer.

Frachtbrief
Gewöhnliche Vitesse.

Versandbahn
Chemin de fer expéditeur
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Fig. 7: Way-bill from Rotterdam to customs clearance in Mainz dated 11 December 1894 (RNG NL 39/143).

books, which might shed light on the origins of the RNG's thylacine specimen, are located. The lack of information is a great problem, meaning that the thylacine's origin, especially the location of capture, remains a mystery. The discovery of the account books not only resolve some questions regarding the purchase of the thylacine in Mainz, they also make it possible to gather information about other acquisitions of the RNG. They hold data detailing the society's expenditure between 1835 and 1922, making them an excellent source for any inquiries concerning the society's collection as well as its organisational structures. Furthermore, any information regarding the rare thylacine specimens is helpful since it can shed light on both the museum's history as well as the natural history of the animal and the human reactions to its extinction. This research displayed that about ninety years prior to its disappearance (the last specimen died in September 1936 in Beaumarais Zoo in Hobart, Tasmania), scientists were already aware of the threat and thus, prices were rather high – too high for the RNG. Additionally, it helps to understand the business in natural history objects. Some individuals, such as the members of the FRANK family, were part of an international network of traders and thus supplied European museums and collections with a large number of specimens.

3. Acknowledgements

Thank you to Melitta MARTIN, a volunteer at the Mainz Natural History Museum for many years who transcribed numerous letters from Kurrent script. Many thanks to Justin JANSEN at Naturalis Leiden for his information on the natural history businesses of the FRANK family. We also want to thank the archivists at the city archives of Mainz for their invaluable help.

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- RNG NL 39/79 Rechnungen und Belege (receipts) 1843 to RNG NL 39/96 Rechnungen 1848.
- RNG NL 39/119 Rechnungen 1870 to RNG NL 39/143 Rechnungen 1894/95.
- RNG NL 39/173 Briefe A - L.

Anschrift der Verfasserinnen

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