

Anne Haslund Hansen, *Niebuhr's Museum. Artefacts from the Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia 1761-1767*. With photographs by Thorben Eskerod, Translated by Dan A. Marmorstein. Carsten Niebuhr Biblioteket Vol. 28. Copenhagen: Forlaget Vandkunsten KS, 2016. (257 pages) ISBN 978-87-7695-440-6

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Details of the lamentable fate of the Royal Danish expedition to Arabia were first made well-known to a wider audience through the book “Arabia Felix: The Danish Expedition 1761-1767” published in Danish in 1962 by the Danish novelist Thorkild Hansen (1927-1989), due to a fair number of translations of his first major success of many so-called documentary novels to follow. Its reader learns that six members of this expedition left Europe in 1761, traveled via Egypt and Yemen, and within the three years before it reached its furthest destination, Bombay, four expedition members had passed away from malaria with the fifth one to die at this place. Only the youngest member of the expedition and also its head, the German cartographer Carsten Niebuhr (1733-1815) was to survive and to travel by himself another three years via Persia and the Near East back to Copenhagen which he finally reached 1767. Therefore, it seems obvious when mentioning this expedition that one cannot really speak of a success story.

However, this can only be said at first glance. Dealing during the last 25 years more in detail with the expedition in its historical and cultural context as well as with its scientific outcome has proven otherwise, so that just some years ago *The Times of London* called the expedition “One of the most extraordinary journeys of all time.” To yield this new perspective was primarily built upon researching the impact publications from the expedition had and to what extent it contributed to Europe’s knowledge of the Orient through writings.

The newly published book under review is – and will be so for a long time to come – the first attempt to collect and research the realia which the expedition brought to Europe. These have been neglected until today due to the circumstances that it was generally a fairly well-known fact, e.g. by the above mentioned book by Thorkild Hansen, that the expedition lost most of what it gathered through destruction at the custom’s house in Yemen in April 1763. So fully understandably expectations set into a “Niebuhr’s collection” were very low indeed. That this was entirely wrong made the author Anne Haslund Hansen (to my knowledge not a sibling of T. Hansen) even dare to call her book “Niebuhr’s

Museum”. An Egyptologist by formation Hansen has in the meantime made a firm reputation as “collection historian” with a large number of titles publishing her fascinating research in this field, mainly using the collections of her proud employer, the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, as a departure point.

This is now also the case with her new study since the vast majority of objects which have been identified as deriving from Niebuhr’s expedition are nowadays housed in the Danish National Museum whence most of them came via the Royal Danish *Kunstkammer*. Many of them have been identified thanks to the illustrations in Niebuhr’s publication “*Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und anderen umliegenden Ländern*” (2 Vols.) 1774-1778. However, things are far more complex as the author explains in detail in her fascinating to read introduction (9-44) and in her chronological overview, which conveniently summarizes the different ways and detours the objects took before their final distribution to the collections where they are currently housed (44-49). At the end of this section we even learn that objects from the expedition are still with descendants of the Niebuhr family and kept in his estate housed today in the *Dithmarscher Landesmuseum* in the town of Meldorf, some 100 km Northwest of Hamburg, where Niebuhr was last employed, where he died on 26 April 1815 and was buried in the local *Dom*.

The major part of the book (50-245) is a catalogue of the identified objects. Each of them is fully discussed and illustrated in extraordinary colour photos (by Torben Eskerod), accompanied by reproductions of illustrations from older publications, especially those by Niebuhr himself. In this manner a total of 172 individual objects are presented in the book. Among those are thirty-nine samples of stones, e.g. one from the second pyramid of Giza and one from Persepolis (142-153). Thirty-nine coins in the book (154-171) represent what was once a total of 86 brought by Niebuhr and entering the *Kunstkammer*, ranging from Parthian and Sassanid times to contemporary pieces of the expedition’s sojourn in the countries passed. The eight pages (160-167) are lovely which nicely contrast the published engravings with photos of the still existing pieces. Thirty-one objects are “ethnological” and are now part of that department of the National Museum. Five pieces are Ancient Near Eastern. However, the majority of the antiquities are from Egypt (36) to which an exceedingly strange statue could be added which the author labels “An enigmatic statue” (172-175) – a fascinating piece which, with illustrated parallels of the eighteenth century may be either an imitation, though a rather “simple” one, of an Egyptian statue and maybe originating from a Roman collection, or maybe

having been brought from Smyrna ... many probabilities and therefore in any case a real mystery indeed and something open to discussion and further investigation.

It comes as quite a surprise that the very first object of the catalogue today cannot be seen in a Danish collection. It is a mummy nowadays kept in the department of “Historische Anthropologie und Humanökologie” of Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen. This mummy is one of two deriving from the former possessions of the anthropologist Professor Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840). Originally one of them – from Niebuhr’s collection – was given to the “Königliche Societät der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen” by King Christian VII of Denmark in 1781, and the other by the Duke of Sachsen Gotha. Blumenbach was quite active in examining Egyptian mummies of which six have later been made available to him by the British Museum for dissection – i.e. destruction. In Göttingen Niebuhr’s former mummy is still kept in Blumenbach’s original showcase and, following last year’s large exhibition “Mumien der Welt” (Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum, Hildesheim), has only earlier this year been fully investigated (<http://www.goettinger-tageblatt.de/Goettingen/Themen/Thema-des-Tages/Mumien-aus-der-Blumenbachschen-Sammlung>). It was also the university of Göttingen which actually initiated Niebuhr’s expedition, because a professor at this university, the theologian and specialist of oriental languages Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791) suggested as early as May 1756 an expedition to Arabia to his Hanoverian compatriot, the then Danish foreign minister Johann Hartwig Ernst Graf von Bernstorff. Finally, a student of oriental languages who studied with Michaelis in Göttingen, the Dane Frederik Christian von Haven, was to participate in the expedition and to research particular theologic questions which Michaelis wanted to be answered by such an expedition into the Orient.

Unlike the fairly well-preserved mummy from Niebuhr’s expedition in Göttingen, the human mummy kept in Copenhagen is by far not as well preserved, the former cartonnage of it remaining only in a few small pieces. Hence, more fascinating are two “child mummies” (84-87) which turned out to be “modern” fakes! That faked Egyptian mummies were not uncommon already in the eighteenth century has recently been reported also from other collections. It seems that the inhabitants of Egypt provided travellers with those self-made seemingly “child mummies” so that they did not inconveniently have to carry large full body size mummies, which indeed were available in enormous quantities in Egypt, but unfortunately very impractical as souvenirs. Small and

handy “child mummies”, however, were definitely rarely to be found in Egypt, and for this reason had to be produced artificially to make practical souvenirs!

It is sad to learn that one fairly important piece, due to lack of parallels and a nice hieroglyphic inscription, clearly identifiable as having been brought by Niebuhr, got lost only in 1966 due to a theft in the National Museum (112-113). Luckily at least a black and white photo exists, however, unfortunately its measurements are either unknown or have for some other reason not been mentioned in the catalogue.

Another fascinating result of Haslund Hansen’s research is presenting the six objects Niebuhr labels, “that I have brought back from Egypt” (124-133). They are illustrated in a fancy arrangement on a rather well-known plate concluding the chapter on “Antiquities in Egypt” in his “Reisebeschreibung” Vol I. (pl. XLII). Unfortunately, the central object of the illustration, a bronze statuette showing Isis and her son Horus on her lap, was not identifiable in the current holdings of the National Museum. However, all the other five are identifiable. Most excitingly two of them, two bronzes: a putto and a candle stick, can now be proven to be of European production! So, Niebuhr acquired them in Egypt and indeed “brought (them) back from Egypt (to Europe)”!

Haslund Hansen and the National Museum of Denmark can only be congratulated on such an exquisite publication researched deeply into even the most remote of possible provenance questions – a masterpiece of a “museum’s detective story” and a “must have” for everyone interested in early expeditions and the sometimes unbelievably strange history of collections.