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### The manuscript collections of Europe: a mirror of migration, separation, and reunification as seen in the Alexander von Humboldt Collection in Berlin

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#### **Abstract:**

*Manuscripts and their creators are subject to the conditions of history. The history of the Alexander von Humboldt Collection in Berlin is a history of the migration of manuscripts, the separation of parts of the collection, and their reunification. This leads to some more general observations. What if the original location of a manuscript is not a safe one? How can we guarantee safe preservation of the manuscript in another location? There are good reasons to build an alliance of institutions willing to cooperate with respect to these questions. Since we cannot turn back the wheels of history, we must act together now and in the future.*

Habent sua fata libelli. Manuscripts and their creators are subject to the dictates of time. Their fates are not predictable, yet they reflect the deeds and misdeeds of history.

The manuscript collections formed in mediaeval monasteries and the migration of monks from one country to another brought wisdom and concrete texts from one monastery to another - all too well known to be retold here. The history of European post-mediaeval culture owes much, if not all, to those whose “profession” it was to separate manuscripts from one collection and integrate them into another. Learning and teaching, the exchange of ideas and texts, are acts of cultural education due, in part, to the migration of handwritten texts.

Our most famous European manuscript collections were created when secular power succeeded to the spiritual and intellectual reign of monastic communities. Emperors, kings, and princes attracted scholars to their courts for the conservation of knowledge of the past. After the migration of mediaeval manuscripts from one monastery to another, there was an intense movement of men and books. The invention of printing and the growing interest of the middle class in knowledge and education soon caused a worldwide exchange of ideas, which continues to this day. The nineteenth-century inquiring mind, the opening of borders and new means of transport; in the twentieth century, two world wars, and tyranny and expulsion caused migration to an extent not previously known. All this is reflected in the manuscript collections of libraries and archives worldwide.

The life of Alexander von Humboldt is also a story of migration. Born on 14 September 1769 in Berlin, Humboldt started his lifelong travels in 1789 when he was registered as student at Göttingen University. From Göttingen, he traveled to Lüttich, Brussels, Gent, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, the Isle of Helgoland, Berlin, and on to Saxony where at the Freiberg Bergakademie, he continued his studies. Almost every day of the next few years took him yet to another place: as Oberbergmeister, he visited all the small villages of Frankonia. This was followed by a trip to Italy:

“Ich bereite mich jetzt ernsthaft zu einer großen Reise außerhalb Europas.”

(Letter to A.G. Werner, 21 December 1796.) After the idea of sailing from Marseille to the northern parts of Africa failed, Humboldt finally received permission from the Spanish king, Charles IV, to go on an expedition to the Spanish colonies. On 5 June 1799, he and his companion Aimé Bonpland boarded a ship in La Coruña, and on 16 July, they arrived in Cumaná, Venezuela. During the next four years, Humboldt explored Venezuela by way of the Orinoco river and also traveled to Cuba, Colombia, Peru, and Mexico.

In Mexico he learned about the confiscated Boturini collection of illustrated manuscripts that would hold his interest for a long time: “Der größte Teil von Boturinis Handschriften ... ist von Personen, welche den Wert derselben gar nicht kannten, zerrissen, gestohlen und zerstreut worden, und das, was noch heutzutage im Palast des Vizekönigs davon übrig ist, besteht bloß in drei zusammengebundenen Päckchen. ... Man wird ganz unwillig, wenn man die Verlassenheit sieht, in welcher sich diese kostbaren Überreste einer Sammlung befinden, die soviel Sorgen und Mühe gekostet hat, und die der unglückliche Boturini mit dem allen unternehmenden Menschen eigenen Enthusiasmus in der Vorrede zu seinem “Historischen Versuch” “das einzige Gut” nennt, welches er in Indien besitze und das er nicht gegen alles Gold und alles Silber der Neuen Welt vertauschen möchte.” (Alexander von Humboldt, in: *Vue des Cordillères*)

It is well established that the manuscripts Humboldt bought at the auction of papers of the scholar Antonio León y Gama, which took place in Mexico in 1803, had been part of the famous Boturini Collection. The collection had been gathered between 1736 and 1742 by the Italian historian and archaeologist Cavaliere Lorenzo Boturini. The collection, which comprised some 500 paintings and manuscripts, included older items gathered by Alva Ixtlilxochtli and Següenza y Góngora. The collection was

destroyed by the viceroy's administration in 1742, and Boturini was imprisoned, since foreigners were not allowed to possess manuscripts concerning the history of New Spain. Today, forty-two of these manuscripts are preserved at the Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) in Mexico City. In 1828, Friedrich Wilken, director of the Royal Library in Berlin, wrote in his history of the library that, in January 1806, a curious collection acquired in the kingdom of New Spain in the year 1803 was presented to the library by the baron Alexander von Humboldt. Wilken documents thirteen Aztec fragments written in hieroglyphics on paper produced from the fibers of the *Agava Mexicana* and a codex written in similar hieroglyphics.

With this reference to Humboldt's manuscripts that migrated with him to Europe, we shall have a look at the literary remnants, manuscripts, documents, books, and objects, as well as the manuscripts of his scholarly work, correspondence, diaries, and reports that constitute the Alexander von Humboldt Collection preserved at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. The complete collection comprises more than 100,000 documents and manuscripts. Among these are manuscripts Humboldt found, bought, or collected during his travels to South America, Russia, and Siberia, and which he brought back or sent to Berlin. Many institutions in the countries he visited still preserve documents that testify to his presence there. His letters are likewise preserved in institutions all over the world.

The Humboldt collection at the Staatsbibliothek comprises:

- Fourteen boxes containing the manuscripts, different notes, and correspondence concerning the "Kosmos," and three boxes containing the correspondence of Alexander von Humboldt (about 11,000 sheets, which form the "Nachlaß Alexander von Humboldt," purchased by the Staatsbibliothek in 1932)
- Fifteen boxes containing the papers of Humboldt (purchased between 1868 and 1893), now preserved in Krakow
- Fourteen Aztec illustrated manuscripts (purchased in 1805)
- Some Armenian and Chinese prints and manuscripts, and 21 Javanese manuscripts (purchased between 1829 and 1843)
- Selected books of his private library (purchased between 1860 and 1866)
- Eight diaries of his journeys and other manuscripts (on deposit, private possession)

The Humboldt collection contains an array of books, manuscripts, letters, documents, and special items that were once part of other collections before he acquired them. They travelled around the world until they reached Berlin, where they were preserved in Humboldt's private library. This is very nicely described in a letter of Humboldt, addressed to the "Oberpostdirektor zur Hofen in Aachen", 1851, which the Staatsbibliothek was able to buy some weeks ago:

"...Es liegt mir sehr am Herzen, die wichtigen Manuskripte meiner amerikanischen Reise, die grossen Theils von Bonplands Hand sind, recht sicher nach Paris befördern zu lassen, weil sie bis zu Bonplands Tode in Verwahrung der Professoren des Jardin des Plantes bleiben sollen. Ich habe sie in ein blechernes Kästchen gepackt ..."

Along with his other papers, they eventually became part of the Humboldt Collection of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin.

Since almost all books and special collections of the Staatsbibliothek were evacuated from Berlin during World War II, the Humboldt Collection was also dispersed for safekeeping in different parts of the country. One part of the collection was brought to Marburg and stored in the university library; it was eventually returned to Berlin after the war, once a new building for the Staatsbibliothek was constructed in West Berlin. Another part was taken to Silesia and stored in the monastery of Grüssau; sometime after the war, it was transported to the university library of Krakow, where it remains today. The documents still owned by the Humboldt family were taken to Russia after the war and preserved in the Lenin Library; they were returned to East Berlin in 1957.

Taking into account that both parts of the collection, which were separated in the eastern and the western parts of Berlin after the war, were reunited only when the manuscript collections from the east were rejoined with those in the west in the new building of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin in 1997. The Humboldt Collection is a particularly fascinating example of migration, separation, and reunification of manuscripts. *Habent sua fata libelli.*

Why do libraries and archives collect and preserve the papers of famous persons? The history of culture and science cannot be written without knowledge of such letters and manuscripts, and intellectual life will not be possible were we to stop collecting these remnants of former times. To preserve the content of the papers for a broader public, the scholarly community started preparing critical editions of famous peoples' complete works spanning several hundred years. Scholars from every discipline have been working on their favourite authors; publication of an edition of their literary texts is the *conditio sine qua non* of an author's publicity.

What is the special importance of the edition of the works of Alexander von Humboldt? I would like to come back to the beginning of my paper and to Humboldt's colourful way of life: In their attempt to find out the reasons for what Humboldt did, where he went, what he saw, and what he thought, scholars began to draw a more complete picture of his life. The Alexander von Humboldt edition, published by the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften since 1959, has presented interesting and new views on his work and how it influenced later scholars' work. The fact that Humboldt's papers are preserved in such a complete state provides a detailed background for this editorial work, something that is not always available.

The Humboldt papers on the other hand are very fine examples of the migration of manuscripts in modern times. There are several reasons why manuscripts may change location:

1. first, there is the acquisition of a collection by an institution or a private person
2. if the collection is acquired by a private person, then it may eventually be sold by this private person to an institution
3. once in public ownership, the collection may be moved from one building to another or from one town to another, which is normally a problem only for those who were used to having the collection at hand, together with the necessary reference works

4. but moving a collection from one institution to another should not occur. Libraries and archives are obliged to preserve their collections forever, which is why those who want their private papers preserved in public institutions do so. There must be a very special reason for moving a collection from one institution to another: institutions should not let this become a normal occurrence.

There are also other relevant questions when talking about the migration of manuscripts. At a time when art objects reach incredibly high prices when sold at auction, manuscripts can also become objects of desire, which creates the following problems. Manuscripts are unique objects, which are very closely connected to the persons who created them, received them (e.g., letters), or inherited them:

1. the value of a collection or of a single manuscript might be regarded as one of a very normal merchandising object: whoever pays the highest price can own it
2. manuscripts may be acquired by a person or an institution with the best connections
3. the manuscript's content, which should be of primary value, recedes behind its superficial market value and might eventually become lost

These and other reasons may be clear enough to demonstrate that migration, separation, and reunification of manuscripts need to be observed today more closely even than in the past.

When a mediaeval monk took a manuscript to another monastery to instruct his fellow monks, discuss what he learned from that manuscript, or allow its text to be copied, little damage occurred to the actual manuscript. But even though its contents became more widespread, its knowledge remained within the typical scholarly community of the monks.

During the Renaissance non-monastic scholars found Greek and Roman manuscripts in monasteries copied by mediaeval monks and took it upon themselves to publish their content for dissemination to a broader public. They often took those manuscripts to their private library and kept them there. Many of them were destroyed, but some wound up as part of a public collection. Nonetheless, the scholarly intention of acquiring knowledge from these manuscripts was the reason for collecting and preserving them in the first place.

In modern times, when scholars like Lorenzo Boturini or Alexander von Humboldt went to another part of the world to collect manuscripts that were by no means known in their own countries, we can point out a difference to what we said before: a person coming from another society tries to instill his own knowledge and his own cultural background onto a foreign culture. This might not, in all instances, be detrimental for the manuscripts, since some of them might only survive because a person took them out of an unsafe surrounding at a particular moment; but in every instance, the manuscript left a place for which it was created and to which it normally belongs.

But what happens when this original location is not secure, when the collection where the manuscript belonged to is destroyed and when even worse conditions are expected to come? Who can really judge the worse action: the person who was not able to prevent the destruction of a collection, or the person who tried to save what

could be saved? And what does it mean “to save”? Saving it for the near future in a country where at that moment the conditions seem to be more stable than in the country from which the manuscript was taken? And how could these persons or institutions guarantee secure preservation of the manuscript in the new place? All these are valid questions, but it is not what I want to discuss now any further. Times change, and the knowledge of what has to be done for the good of a manuscript also changes or (hopefully) ameliorates during that time.

What happens during and after a war, when manuscripts are removed from a building or a town to a safer place, which in fact turns out to be not safe enough and from where a new separation of the collection starts? Or when a collection after the war remains in the new location and the former owners do not have any lawful means to get the collection back? Or, when a collection is scattered all over the world and no information exists about its former content?

These are all common questions regarding the European manuscript collections. They are very difficult questions, and they will become even harder to answer in the near future. Though we might not be able to find solutions to the problems of former times, we must explore every means to prevent them from happening again.

But allow me to come to the last reason for the migration of manuscripts: The sale of manuscripts is an event that is well known since the early nineteenth century. We learned that Alexander von Humboldt bought the Aztec manuscripts at an auction. Who bids the highest receives the lot. But who bought the other manuscripts? Are they still extant? Where are they to be found?

After speaking about the migration and separation of manuscripts, let us now come to the reunification of manuscripts: Buying as many manuscripts as possible cannot be the only reason for our work, as I stated above. It also cannot be our only interest to demonstrate our might when acquiring manuscripts, which by history, content, and context do not belong to our institutions. At a time when personal and financial resources are reduced, and when the growing technical networks allow for different forms of cooperation, it should be possible to avoid the mistakes of our predecessors, which we have complained about ever since. There is also another reason why it is high time now to act more responsibly: The production of handwritten texts, of manuscripts, seems to be coming to an end very soon. I don't know whether our grandchildren will still learn to write by hand and whether they will learn to read handwritten texts.

Before I end my talk, I would like to invite you to help build an alliance of institutions that prefers to cooperate in regards to the above questions than outdo one another in purchasing. We cannot turn back the wheels of history, nor would it be wise to try to do so. There are so many unresolved problems, and we would become very unhappy trying to deal with all of them. But we can act together in the future. There are several conditions that tend to guarantee the success of this enterprise:

1. Technical conditions for the exchange of information are better than ever
2. Standards of cataloguing have begun to be accepted widely by many institutions
3. Security in our institutions is becoming standard
4. Information about our collections is being standardized

5. Search engines and networks provide easy access to information about our collections
6. Digitized images of our manuscripts can be accessed all over the world
7. The common use of authority data makes our collections easily searchable
8. Communication between institutions is better than ever
9. Readers can communicate their interests and questions directly by e-mail or telephone and receive prompt replies to their information requests.

Why not take advantage of some of the by-products of the information society? History is ruthless concerning people and books, but people can follow the tracks of books and, with technical support, make virtually visible today what has been separated in the past.

The most important work of libraries all over the world is to communicate the understanding of history and the knowledge of scientific work. In the future, when we become even more successful at eliminating borders, when we cooperate on projects that show our common cultural heritage, when we make this visible to each and everyone, then we will be useful not only to those whose profession drives them to use our documents, but also to those countries and institutions whose names easily escape our own field of vision. The knowledge of what is kept in libraries of far-away countries is diminishing proportionately to the degree of their distance. Let us use the opportunity of this meeting with colleagues from all over the world to start a new beginning. Let us look together to other continents, whose books and manuscripts are preserved by us but are no longer known in the countries from which they came. And vice versa. Be curious to learn what the other cultural tradition has made of "your" manuscripts, and let us show our treasures to one another.

It is a bold desire to prevent or undo the migration and separation of cultural heritage material. A transparent demonstration of what is kept in our libraries in cooperative databases or networks is a good basis for further cooperation. What we need is a program that will enable us to use the same standards of description of the material in question and a tool that brings together virtually all those collections that have been separated worldwide. I do believe that such a tool, be it a network or a combination of networks, will help us to overcome virtually the separation of collections and will lead us to their reunification. Coming from a part of the world where reunification on the basis of mutual understanding is part of our day-to-day work, I am confident that such action can be highly successful in our sector.

In this respect, the motto of this IFLA congress is highly relevant: Using our resources to make our manuscript collections "Tools for Education and Development" is not simply an invitation to find new ideas through global cooperation but a promise that we owe our colleagues worldwide.