Among planters and merchants. How the Tikal Lintels became "scientific objects"

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SUMARIO: 1.—Introduction. 2.—The City of Tikal and its Material Culture. 3.—Coffee, Rubber and the Tikal Lintels. 4.—Finding its place in a changing museum landscape. 5.—Conclusion.

ABSTRACT: This article follows the trajectory of the so-called Tikal lintels from the former Mayan city of Tikal to the Natural History Museum in Basel. Focusing on a network of plantation owners and merchants in Guatemala, the article highlights the crucial role of economic networks for the production and circulation of the Mesoamerican material culture in and from Central America in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this way, plantations can be studied as important places of encounter and curiosity where the meaning and material shape of Guatemala's Mesoamerican material culture was transformed in a significant way.

KEYWORDS: collecting practices, Tikal, history of archaeology, museums, plantations.

1. Introduction

On its second floor the *Museum der Kulturen* in Basel exhibits parts of its Americas collection, which contains many objects from the time before the Spanish conquest. Near the entrance, visitors come across a large *khipu* that came to Basel from the Andean highlands. In a display case not far away lies the *Mapa de Tecamachalco*, which was fabricated during the early colonial period in the viceroyalty of New Spain. This map is part of the collection that Lukas Vischer, an artist from Basel, put together during his stay in Mexico from 1828 to 1837[1]. Next to this map hangs a large wooden relief on the

1. For Lukas Fischer and his collections see: Ulf Bankmann and Gerhard Baer, "Lukas Vischer (1780-1840) und seine Sammlungen: Americana in Basel," *Basler Stadtbuch* (1990): 129-133; in reference

museum wall, which until 1877 formed part of the ceiling structure in one of the buildings of the former Mayan city of Tikal. The aim of this article is to examine the trajectory of these wooden reliefs, which are nowadays known as the Tikal lintels. By following the lintels' trajectory, it becomes evident that not just the meaning but also the material shape of these Mesoamerican objects changed significantly during the last quarter of the 19th century.

While it might seem obvious for the contemporary museum visitor to find such Mesoamerican objects in a museum with archaeological and anthropological collections, this was not a foregone conclusion. New approaches in the history of knowledge and collecting emphasize that the meaning of such objects always have been and still are highly contested. Neither the museum collections, nor the objects they contain can be regarded as "fixed ontological entities" as Miruna Achim, Susan Deans-Smith and Sandra Rozental recently argued in the introduction to their edited volume *Museum Matters*[2]. The Tikal lintels do not possess any intrinsic meaning that automatically renders them 'scientific' objects belonging to a certain institutional framework like a museum or university. It is only under specific, historically contingent circumstances that such meanings are attributed to them and—sometimes— consolidated[3]. The article, therefore, asks how the Tikal lintels ended up as 'scientific objects' in the collections of what was at the end of the 19th century the Natural History Museum in Basel.

The trajectory of the Tikal lintels has received little attention so far since most of the research did focus on the content of the reliefs and the decipherment of the glyphs depicted on them[4]. One exception are the texts written by Valerie Meyer-Holdampf on the Tikal lintels and Carl Gustav Bernoulli, the Swiss physician and plantation owner who had the lintels

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to the collector, the map was also given the name "Lienzo Vischer I", which is still widely used today despite its Eurocentric connotation.

2. Miruna Achim, Susan Deans-Smith, and Sandra Rozental, "Introduction. A Mecixan Cabiet of Unlikely Things," in *Museum Matters. Making and Unmaking Mexico's National Collections*, ed. Miruna Achim, Susan Deans-Smith, and Sandra Rozental (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021): 17.
3. Lorraine Daston, "Introduction. The Coming into Being of Scientific Objects," in *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, ed. Lorraine Daston (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2000): 1.
4. See, for example: Simonetta Morselli Barbieri, *El Dintel 3 del Templo IV de Tikal. Historia y Contenido de un Monumento Maya Prehispánico* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2019); See also: Alexander Brust, and Claudia Geissmann, "Holzreliefs der Maya. Die drei Tikal-Tafeln im Museum der Kulturen Basel," http://www.alexandria.admin.ch/bv001497215.pdf.

transported to Basel between 1877 and 1878[5]. While she seems to have collected an impressive amount of source material on the history of the Tikal lintels, Bernoulli is portrayed as a kind of heroic figure, leaving his hometown of Basel to devote his life to science in a faraway land. Thereby, it appears as if the Tikal lintels were just waiting for someone like Bernoulli to pick them up and finally put them to their intended use. As mentioned before, more recent publications in the history of knowledge and collecting fundamentally question such narratives and critically revaluate the roles of collectors like Carl Gustav Bernoulli.

By studying the trajectory of the Tikal lintels, this paper follows these methodological approaches as described by Lorraine Daston in her edited volume *Biographies of Scientific Objects*[6]. In her introduction, she convincingly argues that a 'thing' never possesses a reality as a 'scientific object' in itself, but only acquires this meaning under certain historical conditions and can accordingly lose it again. This means "that reality is a matter of degree, and that phenomena that are indisputably real in the colloquial sense that they exist may become more or less intensely real, depending on how densely they are woven into scientific thought and practice"[7]. In this sense, a unicorn, for example, was a very real 'thing' in an early modern *Wunderkammer* and the scientific discourse of the time. The unicorn, however, lost its realness at the latest in the 19th century and became an object of fantasy and fiction. At the same time, other 'things' became very real[8]. Among them an increasing number of 'Mesoamerican Civilizations' which were usually studied through and represented by material objects like the Tikal lintels[9]. Scholars in the

5. Valerie Meyer-Holdampf, *Tikal-Abenteuer und Entdeckung. Auf den Spuren der alten Mayavölker* (Egelsbach and New York: Fouqué Literaturverlag, 2000); Valerie Meyer-Holdampf: "Carl Gustav Bernoulli und Tikal in Guatemala," *Schweizerische Amerikanisten-Gesellschaft Bulletin* 66-67 (2003): 71-76.
6. Daston, "Introduction."
7. Daston, "Introduction," 1.
8. *Les mots et les choses* by Michel Foucault is one of the most influential texts on the fundamental change of museum collections on which many of the more recent publications refer to: Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les Chose. Une Archéologie des Sciences Humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966). See also: Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, *Nature and Culture. Objects, Disciplines and the Manchester Museum* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); James Delbourgo, *Collecting the World. The Life and Curiosity of Hans Sloane* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).
9. On how "ruins" became evidence in the 19th century, see: Irina Podgorny, "The Reliability of the Ruins," *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2007): 213-233. For the Americas in general, see: Stefanie Gänger, Philip Kohl, and Irina Podgorny, "Introduction: Nature in the Making of Archaeology in the Americas," in *Nature and Antiquity. The Making of Archaeology in the Americas*,

history of archaeology have convincingly shown how the Mesoamerican material culture in Mexico and Central America in this way became 'scientific objects' or, as Irina Podgorny phrased it: "were taught to speak the language of archaeology"[10]. Further studies additionally highlighted that not just the objects themselves but also a rapidly growing material and immaterial culture surrounding them were crucial in consolidating the meaning of the Mesoamerican material culture as 'scientific objects.' Plaster casts helped to increase the size of many collections and photographs as well as paintings published in books and journals circulated even faster[11].

Scientific institutions like museums and universities are usually regarded as the center for the study, production and circulation of these Mesoamerican objects and their reproductions. It is, therefore, no surprise that most of the recent historiography did focus on these sites of knowledge production. While the crucial role of these institutions is hardly disputable, it is nevertheless worth taking a look beyond the museum and university collections to examine how objects like the lintels from Tikal became 'scientific objects.' Then, these lintels significantly changed their shape as well as their meaning long before they entered the collection of the Natural History Museum in Basel. In this case, it was the infrastructure of an expanding plantation economy and a dense network among the coffee planters and merchants, which enabled Carl Gustav Bernoulli to have the lintels removed from their material surroundings and subsequently transported to Basel. It is this earlier history of the lintels' removal, production and transport before they arrived in the museum collection that is the focus of this paper. This allows to study the equally important role of planters and the plantation economy in the production and circulation of 'scientific objects.'

By shifting the focus from the museum to what is often considered as the 'field', the complex entanglements between the economy, politics and

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ed. Philip Kohl, Irina Podgorny, and Stefanie Gänger (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014): 3-20.

10. Irina Podgorny, "Silent and Alone": How the Ruins of Palenque were Taught to Speak the Language of Archaeology," *Comparative Archaeologies. A Sociological View of the Science of the Past*, ed. Ludomir R. Lozny (New York: Springer, 2011): 527-553. See also Miruna Achim, *From Idols to Antiquity. Forging the National Museum of Mexico* (Lincoln/London: Nebraska University Press, 2017).
11. Miruna Achim, and Stefanie Gänger: "Pas Encore Classiques. La Fabrique des Antiquités Américaines au XIXe siècle," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 76, no. 2 (2021): 346.

the production of knowledge can be studied[12]. In two recently published papers on the mapping of the Brazilian mining regions of Ouro Preto, Tomás Bartoletti has highlighted how crucial these entanglements were for the production and circulation of knowledge in the 19th century[13]. In the region of Ouro Preto as well as in Western Guatemala and in many other regions of the newly independent Latin American states, 'commodity frontiers' were expanding[14]. Quite like these expanding 'commodity frontiers,' the ambitious scientific expeditions of the second half of the 19th century relied increasingly, as Andrew Bell has convincingly argued, "on the movement and mobilization of people, goods, ideas, and capital across the globe"[15]. In this way, a large number of people from wealthy planters, regional politicians to indigenous labourers were engaged and contributed to the production and circulation of knowledge. This involvement, however, took place under the highly unequal power relations characteristic for the post-colonial spaces in many regions in Latin America.

Hanging on a blank museum wall surrounded by other fascinating Mesoamerican objects, these entanglements are often obscured. Neither the museum visitor nor the scholars did think much about the expansion of the coffee plantation economy in Guatemala while gazing at and studying the Tikal lintels. But, as this paper will show, the meaning and shape the Tikal lintels

12. For the entanglement between Archaeology and Foreign Politics in the case of the US see: Andrew Bell, "Archaeologists and American Foreign Relations in a World of Empire, 1879-1945" (PhD diss., Boston University, 2020).
13. Tomás Bartoletti, "Cartography in Translation between Ouro Preto and Gotha, c.1850-1860," *Imago Mundi* 71, no. 1 (2022): 68-81; Tomás Bartoletti, "Global Territorialization and Mining Frontiers in Nineteenth-Century Brazil. Capitalist Anxieties and the Circulation of Knowledge between British and Habsburgian Imperial Spaces, ca. 1820-1850, *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 65, no. 1 (2023): 81-114.
14. On the socio-economic and socio-ecological transformations in Guatemala during the 19th century, see: David McCreery, *Rural Guatemala, 1760-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Julio Castellanos Cambranes, *Café y Campesinos. Los Orígenes de la Economía de Plantación Moderna en Guatemala, 1853-1897* (Madrid: Catriel, 1996); Regina Wagner, *Los Alemanes en Guatemala 1828-1944* (Guatemala: self-published, 1996); René Reeves, *Ladinos with Ladinos, Indians with Indians. Land, Labor, and Regional Ethnic Conflict in the Making of Guatemala* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Stefania Gallini, *Una Historia Ambiental del Café en Guatemala. La Costa Cuca entre 1830 y 1902* (Guatemala City: Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala, 2009); Matilde González-Iza, *Modernización Capitalista, Racismo y Violencia. Guatemala (1750-1930)* (Mexico: Colegio de Mexico, 2014); Arturo Taracena Arriola, "Caficultura y Regiones en Guatemala. La Boca Costa, 1852-1902," *Ariadna Histórica. Lenguajes, Conceptos, Metáforas* 11 (2022): 89-120.
15. Bell, "Archaeologists and Foreign Relations," 13.

have today resulted to some extent from these socio-economic processes. In trying to shed light on the complex history of these Mesoamerican objects, this paper is divided into three parts. The first part briefly illuminates the long history of the wooden objects in relief before the 19th century and the many different meanings the Mesoamerican material culture had during the colonial and early post-colonial period.

In the second part, I will discuss how Guatemala underwent a fundamental socio-ecological transformation due to the expansion of the coffee plantation economy in the second half of the 19th century. As part of this transformation, an increasingly powerful network of planters and merchants did not just claim ownership of ever larger parts of the fertile land, but also of the Mesoamerican material culture they encountered on and beyond their estates. While the meaning of this material culture remained contested, it was the increasing power of the planter oligarchy, which enabled a handful of Creole, European and US American planters and merchants to control the circulation and consolidate the meaning of these objects. When the lintels finally arrived in a changing museum landscape in the small city of Basel, as the final part will show, their apparently consolidated meaning as 'scientific objects' became once again ambivalent. On the one hand, photographs, paintings and casts of the reliefs depicted on the lintels "wove[…]" them deeply "into scientific thought and practice"[16]. On the other hand, the museum curators had great difficulty integrating these large objects into their already crowded exhibition rooms.

2. The City of Tikal and its Material Culture

For almost 800 years until 900 CE, the city of Tikal constituted one of the main urban centres of the Mayan lowland region[17]. Recent estimates suggest that the city counted approximately 280'000 inhabitants at its peak[18]. These inhabitants left behind a rich material culture, including the so-called Tikal lintels. In the first decades of the 8th century after two major military victories

16. Daston, "Introduction," 1.
17. Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens. Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).
18. David Lentz and Brian Hockaday, "Tikal Timbers and Temples. Ancient Maya Agroforestry and the End of Time," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 36 (2009): 1342.

against the rivalling city of Calakmul, the K'uhul Ajaws Jasaw Chan K'awiil and his son Yik'in Chan K'awiil erected two of the largest buildings of the city[19]. Today, these structures are referred to by archaeologists as temple I and temple IV. The ceiling structures of the two buildings consisted of massive wooden beams in relief. As it is still visible on the Tikal lintels, these reliefs narrate the victory ceremonies of the two aforementioned K'uhul Ajaws[20]. In this way, the history of the Mayan city and especially, of its leaders, was materialised in an impressive urban architecture.

The material remains further reveal, how the population of Tikal engaged with the environment surrounding the city. Apart from stone materials, wood was a key resource in constructing the impressive and ever larger buildings. David Lentz and Brian Hockaday found in their study on Mayan agroforestry that timber from the *Manilkara zapota* tree constituted the most common wooden construction material[21]. The beams made form *Manilkara zapota* are more resistant against insect infestation and more weather-resistant than other types of hardwood[22]. It is, therefore, no surprise that the massive wooden beams in the so-called temples I, II and IV —to which the Tikal lintels belong— were also made from this timber. In the temples V and VI, erected some years later, the constructors, however, increasingly started to use other types of wood like *Haematoxylon campechianum* and the little number of beams from *Manilkara zapota* were made from much smaller logs[23]. This is why Lentz and Hockaday assume that the intensive construction activities under Jasaw and Yik'in Chan K'awiil have considerably accelerated the deforestation of certain tree species[24].

Deforestation and the depletion of natural resources in general are seen as one of the causes that may have triggered the 'demise' of Mayan urban societies in the lowland region[25]. While construction activities in Tikal did indeed came to an abrupt end in the 9th century, the idea of a 'demise' or even 'downfall' of the Mayan societies is, nevertheless, misleading. This idea led to the very common assumption that the contemporary Mayan societies

19. Brust and Geissmann, "Holzreliefs der Maya," 76.
20. Brust and Geissmann, "Holzreliefs der Maya," 76.
21. Lentz and Hockaday, "Tikal Timbers and Temples," 1345.
22. Lentz and Hockaday, "Tikal Timbers and Temples," 1348.
23. Lentz and Hockaday, "Tikal Timbers and Temples," 1348.
24. Lentz and Hockaday, "Tikal Timbers and Temples," 1349-50.
25. Justin M. Shaw, "Climate Change and Deforestation. Implications for the Maya Collapse," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 14 (2003): 157-167.

have nothing to do with the people who built the large cities in the lowland regions[26]. A view that more recent studies have rejected. Instead of a 'downfall', these studies examined the fundamental transformations the Mayan societies underwent[27]. In this sense, Arthur Demarest argued that what ended in the 9th century was the cult around the Kuhul Ajaw who concentrated a great deal of power and economic resources on themselves and their elaborate public and ceremonial infrastructure[28]. At the same time, traditions like the veneration of ancestors as well as some social and economic structures like the regional trade networks and the hierarchical structures of many rural Mayan societies continued to exist and were adapted to the new situation[29]. Demarest, therefore, concludes: "[A] civilization is a complex configuration of institutions built upon a foundation of shared religious, political, and economic ideas and concepts. Even after major catastrophes, traumas, and declines, these elements can continue and be transformed into subsequent new configurations"[30].

To acknowledge the complex history of the Mayan societies is crucial when studying the changing meaning of its Mesoamerican material culture. The Mayan societies, unlike what is often assumed, continued to engage with this material culture after the fundamental transformations in the 9th century and the colonial period. Archaeologists have pointed out that members of the Mayan communities frequently visited the former urban centres to burn incense in front of the temples, stelae and altars. Unfortunately, there are hardly any further sources to study these processes in great depth. More sources are available regarding the engagement of Europeans with the Mesoamerican material culture they encountered in the 'New World.' During the colonial period, administrators and missionaries dedicated themselves to the study of what they regarded as 'idols'[31]. They perceived these 'idols' to be the material basis of indigenous beliefs, which had to be destroyed in order to successfully and definitively convert the Mayas to Christianity[32].

26. This view is still very present in the texts by William Coe, for example: William R. Coe, *Tikal. A Handbook of the Ancient Maya Ruins* (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1980).
27. Arthur Demarest, *Ancient Maya. The Rise and Fall of a Rainforest Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
28. Demarest, *Ancient Maya*, 275-76.
29. Demarest, *Ancient Maya*, 277-86.
30. Demarest, *Ancient Maya*, 275.
31. Achim, *From Idols to Antiquity*, 10.
32. Achim, *From Idols to Antiquity*, 10.

While this view remained widespread among the colonial administration, it was the military engineers in particular, who came to Central America in the course of the Bourbon reforms, who attributed a different meaning to this material culture[33]. Influenced by the 'discoveries' of Herculaneum and Pompei in Europe, the engineers interpreted the material culture they came across in Palenque and other former Mayan cities as the remains of a seemingly forgotten antiquity[34]. Thus, under the eyes, feathers and technical devices of the engineers, the 'idols' of the missionaries and colonial administrators increasingly became what Irina Podgorny called a "modern scientific archaeological object"[35].

However, this transition did not take place overnight. As the example of the Coatlicue in Mexico City at the end of the colonial period exemplifies, different meanings of the Mesoamerican material culture often coexisted at the same time[36]. At the end of the 18th century the viceroy of New Spain, Revillagigedo, had the statue of the goddess exhibited in the yard of the Royal University[37]. After the viceroy observed that indigenous people started to offer sacrifices to the Coatlicue he had it immediately reburied[38]. Revillagigedo seems to have been afraid of the 'idol' undermining the colonial rule in the Capital of the viceroyalty. Before the end of the colonial period, the statue was dug up again for a very short time to show it to Alexander von Humboldt when he visited Mexico City in 1803[39]. For the illustrious circle who glanced at the Coatlicue together with the German visitor, the statue represented a 'scientific object' through which they studied the allegedly ancient past[40]. Yet, since they were apparently not able to consolidate this particular meaning, the statue was instantly buried again after Humboldt left the city[41].

Unfortunately, there are not as many examples for the region of Petén in North-eastern Guatemala. But a report on an expedition to the former Mayan

33. Podgorny, "The Reliability of the Ruins."
34. Podgorny, "The Reliability of the Ruins."
35. Podgorny, "The Reliability of the Ruins," 214.
36. Susan Deans-Smith, "'A History Worthy of the Grandeur of the Spanish Nation.' Collecting Mexican Antiquity in the Viceroyalty of New Spain," in *Museum Matters. Making and Unmaking Mexico's National Collections*, ed. Miruna Achim, Susan Deans-Smith, and Sandra Rozental (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021): 41-2.
37. Deans-Smith, "'A History Worthy of the Grandeur,'" 41-2.
38. Deans-Smith, "'A History Worthy of the Grandeur,'" 42.
39. Deans-Smith, "'A History Worthy of the Grandeur,'" 42.
40. Deans-Smith, "'A History Worthy of the Grandeur,'" 42.
41. Deans-Smith, "'A History Worthy of the Grandeur,'" 42.

city of Tikal in 1848 paints a very similar picture[42]. In this year, two military and political leaders of the department of Petén visited and described the 'ruins' of Tikal. Thereby, they did not just encounter "figuras de piedra [...] con letras" but also some figurines and glyphs "en la madera." They further noticed that they were not the only ones who did care for this material culture[43]. The authors of the report assumed that "los Caribes robaron los ídolos"[44]. Why they 'robbed' some of the objects, as the report framed it, and what meaning they attributed to them does not become clear in the report. It reveals in more detail, however, how members of the expedition saw these objects —to which the Tikal lintels belonged. They regarded them as a national property in need of protection, in this case, from the 'robbery' of the local communities. Thus, for them, these objects "son cosas de mucha estimación p[or] su antigüedad y por q[ue] de ellos se adquieren datos para la historia del país"[45].

As it was a common practice of many of the independent states in Central and South America, this report shows the intention of the Guatemalan government to control the Mesoamerican material culture on its territory. This was linked to the intention of gaining sovereignty over the interpretation of the past, where Mesoamerican objects became the material 'evidence' of a glorious antiquity[46]. At the same time, the contemporary indigenous population was largely excluded from these nation-state-building processes. However, as ambitious as these projects might have been, they were far from all encompassing. As Jaclyn Sumner and other scholars emphasize, these efforts were "still highly contested and negotiated"[47]. This is especially true

42. Letter to the Minister of the Interior from the member of the commission, 05. 03.1848, Expediente 47, Legajo 28541, B, Archivo General de Centro América.
43. Letter to the Minister of the Interior from the member of the commission, 05. 03.1848, Expediente 47, Legajo 28541, B, Archivo General de Centro América.
44. Letter to the Minister of the Interior from the member of the commission, 05. 03.1848, Expediente 47, Legajo 28541, B, Archivo General de Centro América.
45. Letter to the Minister of the Interior from the member of the commission, 05. 03.1848, Expediente 47, Legajo 28541, B, Archivo General de Centro América; spelling and puntuation has been modernised by the author.
46. Christina Bueno, "Forjando Patrimonio. The Making of Archaeological Patrimony in Porfirian Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (2010): 215-245. On how the Mesoamerican material culture became a form of material 'evidence', see: Gänger, Kohl, and Podgorny, "Introduction."
47. Jaclyn Ann Sumner, "The Indigenous Governor of Tlaxcala and Acceptable Indigenousness in the Porfirian Regime," *Mexican Studies* 35, no. 1 (2019): 70.

in the case of Guatemala[48]. Here, state-sponsored expeditions were only one of many ways of dealing with the Mesoamerican material culture. Many examples of local communities placing Mesoamerican objects in churches or on bridges, taking them into their homes, worshipping or selling them are known from travellers' reports[49]. As the example of the Tikal lintels —some of the "figuras [...] en la madera"— will show, it was only in the second half of the 19th century that a politically and economically influential planter community began to increasingly control both the meaning and the circulation of the Mesoamerican material culture.

3. Coffee, Rubber and the Tikal Lintels

In the 1850s, the first coffee trees were planted as commercial crops in Western Guatemala. Thereafter, coffee cultivation spread rapidly, and by 1862, more than one million coffee plants were flowering on 86 plantations in the department of Suchitepéquez alone[50]. As the historian Arturo Taracena Arriola recently pointed out, it were mainly the *ladino* farmers who were responsible for the steep rise in the first phase of coffee cultivation[51]. These early *ladino* planters were soon accompanied by usually wealthy and well-educated young migrants from the United States and Europe, who were looking for business opportunities in Central America and then contributed considerably to the expansion of the coffee plantation economy[52]. The conservative government of Rafael Carrera supported this expansion, often in the face of resistance from local, mainly indigenous communities trying

48. See: Marta Elena Casaús Arzú, "Museo Nacional y Museos Privados en Guatemala: Patrimonio y Patrimonialización. Un Siglo de Intentos y Frustraciones," in *Revista de Indias* 72/254 (2012): 93-130; Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos, "Just and Patriotic. Creating a National Museum in Guatemala (1831-1930)," *Museum History Journal* 9, no. 1 (2016): 60-76.
49. Carl Gustav Bernoulli: "Reise in der Republik Guatemala, 1870," Petermann's Geografischen Mitteilungen 21 (1875): 325.
50. Taracena Arriola, "Caficultura y Regiones en Guatemala," 95.
51. Taracena Arriola, "Caficultura y Regiones en Guatemala," 95; *ladino* farmer, in this case, refers to people from European or mixed European and indigenous descent who were not legally part of an indigenous community or town but increasingly rented, purchased or otherwise occupied their land.
52. Most of the studies hitherto focused on the role of these migrants, especially the ones from the German states: Castellanos Cambranes, *Café y Campesinos*; Wagner, *Los Alemanes en Guatemala*.

to defend their shrinking communal lands[53]. The liberal government that came to power in 1871 definitively consolidated not only the economic but also the political power of this emerging planter society[54].

One of these planters was the Swiss physician Carl Gustav Bernoulli from the small town of Basel. He came to Guatemala in 1858, where he initially worked as a doctor in Guatemala City and later, probably in the 1860s, acquired the coffee plantation Chojajá. Bernoulli's plantation was not far from the K'iche' villages of San Sebastian, San Martín Zapotitlán and San Felipe, where tensions between the planters and indigenous communities increased considerably in the early 1860s[55]. In 1864, the local governor suppressed an alleged uprising by indigenous villagers before it even broke out[56]. The power of the planters was thus consolidated early on in this region. This consolidation was not only of economic importance for Bernoulli, but also supported his ambitious collecting activities in a significant way.

Mainly interested in botany, Bernoulli embarked on an extensive collecting expedition in 1877 to complete his *Herbarium Guatemalense*[57]. However, as he told his friend Fritz Müller, who worked at the Natural History Museum in Basel, in a letter shortly before his departure, he also intended to collect zoological and 'ethnographic' objects[58]. These objectives influenced the route that Bernoulli and his assistant Richard Cario took. They first followed the Usumacinta river, a region that was underrepresented in most herbariums, until they reached the Mesoamerican city of Palenque. At this point, the importance of the plantation economy for the collecting activities already becomes evident. In the department of Suchitepéquez, Bernoulli did not seem to have any difficulties in recruiting indigenous workers to accompany him on his expedition. As it was common practice for plantation

53. Other then often stated in the historiography, René Reeves, for example, convincingly showed that not just the liberal government after 1871, but also its conservative predecessors actively supported the planters: Reeves, *Ladinos with Ladinos*, 63-69; see also Taracena Arriola, "Caficultura y Regiones en Guatemala," 98.
54. Taracena Arriola, "Caficultura y Regiones en Guatemala."
55. Reeves, *Ladinos with Ladinos*, 63-69.
56. McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 165; see also: Reeves, *Ladinos with Ladinos*, 66-7.
57. The Herbarium Guatemalense is stored today in the Herbarium collection of the "Herbarien Basel," University of Heidelberg, accessed February 22, 2024, https://herbarium.unibas.ch/de/sammlungen/.
58. Letter from Carl Gustav Bernoulli to Fritz Müller, dated 17.05.1877, Library Natural History Museum of Basel.

owners, Bernoulli wrote a letter to the *Jefe Político* asking him to provide the required labour force[59].

However, after leaving the so-called "coffee belt" in western Guatemala towards the Usumacinta river, Bernoulli's control over the indigenous workers seems to have waned. They refused to cross the state border and were no longer willing to accompany Bernoulli on his expedition[60]. By threatening them with his rifle, the Swiss planter and collector forced the indigenous labourers to continue their way[61]. The relationship remained tense throughout the journey and it becomes clear how heavily Bernoulli depended not only on the labour but also on the knowledge of his indigenous companions[62]. After Bernoulli briefly visited Palenque in Southern Mexico, he returned to Guatemala through the department of Petén where he wanted to obtain some zoological specimen. Unlike in Suchitepéquez, in this region neither the priests nor the *Jefe Politico* were willing to cooperate with the Swiss collector and did not comply with his request to send out indigenous hunters[63]. Depending on their knowledge as well as their skills but at the same time lacking any power to force them to work for him, Bernoulli did not succeed in extending his collection[64]. Interestingly, this failure was supposedly the reason why he decided to visit the former Mayan city of Tikal, which was not far from where he tried to obtain the zoological specimen[65].

According to his letters, Bernoulli encountered in Tikal some of the wooden beams still installed in the ceiling structures in some of the buildings[66]. Astonished by the glyphs and figurines depicted in the

59. Letter from Carl Gustav Bernoulli to Fritz Müller, dated 17.05.1877, Library Natural History Museum of Basel; the *Jefe Politíco* replaced the colonial office of the *corregidor* and usually occupied the highest political office on departmental or provincial levels appointed directly by the president or national government.
60. Oscar Drude, "Reise der Herren Dr. Bernoulli und R. Cario von Retaluleu in Guatemala nach Comitan in Süd-Mexiko, im Sommer 1877," *Petermann's Geografischen Mitteilungen* 24 (1878): 412.
61. Drude, "Reise der Herren Dr. Bernoulli," 412.
62. Drude, "Reise der Herren Dr. Bernoulli," 412.
63. Letter from Carl Gustav Bernoulli to Fritz Müller, dated 17.10.1877, Library Natural History Museum of Basel.
64. Letter from Carl Gustav Bernoulli to Fritz Müller, dated 17.10.1877, Library Natural History Museum of Basel.
65. Letter from Carl Gustav Bernoulli to Fritz Müller, dated 17.10.1877, Library Natural History Museum of Basel.
66. Letter from Carl Gustav Bernoulli to Fritz Müller, dated 17.10.1877, Library Natural History Museum of Basel.

reliefs, the wooden beams immediately sparked his interest[67]. His gaze was probably further trained by his familiarity with the anthropological and archaeological debates of the time. In one letter, for example, Bernoulli asked his correspondent in Basel to send him the new volumes of the Journal of Ethnology (*Zeitschrift* für *Ethnologie*) published by Adolf Bastian, who later became director of the museum of ethnology (*Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde*) in Berlin[68]. Bernoulli, therefore, knew very well what was considered as interesting in these scholarly circles and the glyphs and figurative depictions on the beams doubtlessly were regarded as such. Yet, as with his zoological collections, the Swiss collector lacked the necessary labour force and skills to transport the heavy objects over long distances[69]. So, he left Tikal and travelled southwards to Cobán, where he visited his acquaintance, the merchant and plantation owner Franz Sarg[70].

Sarg, a German engineer, came to Guatemala to reopen a mine for an English company[71]. After realizing that the mine was hardly economically viable, he was one of the first German migrants to settle in Cobán, in the department of Alta Verapaz[72]. There, Sarg quickly became one of the most economically and politically influential actors. He not only maintained close relations with local political leaders, but was himself appointed a US consular agent in 1875[73]. A position that he transferred to his brother a few years later, while he himself took up the post of German consul for Cobán[74]. When Bernoulli arrived in Cobán in 1878, his acquaintance Franz Sarg undoubtedly

67. Letter from Carl Gustav Bernoulli to Fritz Müller, dated 17.10.1877, Library Natural History Museum of Basel.
68. Letter from Carl Gustav Bernoulli to Fritz Müller, dated 05.02.1873, Library Natural History Museum of Basel.
69. Letter from Carl Gustav Bernoulli to Fritz Müller, dated 03.01.1878, Library Natural History Museum of Basel; Franz Sarg, *Alte Erinnerungen an die Alta Verapaz* (Frankfurt: unpublished manuscript, 1917): 41.
70. Sarg, *Alte Erinnerungen*, 41.
71. Sarg, *Alte Erinnerungen*, 1.
72. On German planters in Alta Verapaz see also: Julie Gibbings: "'Their Debts Follow Them into the Afterlife.' German Settlers, Ethnographic Knowledge, and the Forging of Coffee Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Guatemala," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 62, no. 2 (2020): 389-420.
73. Sarg, *Alte Erinnerungen*, 32.
74. Letter from Carl Anton Sarg to Willam Friedman, dated 03.09.1879; Vol. 66, Notes from Consular Agents; United States Consular Records for Guatemala City, Guatemala, 1825-1935; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, MD.

held a key position in the region. A position that he not only used to expand his economic activities. Sarg, himself an avid collector, willingly supported travellers and researchers who pursued their collecting activities in the departments of Alta Verapaz and Petén. "During his residence in Cobán, any expeditionary traveller heading north to Petén tended to consult him and borrow or hire the necessary equipment"[75]. Apart from the equipment, the German merchant and planter also provided his visitors with the necessary labour force. Sarg regularly hired "members of a Ladino family named López as hunters, collectors and guides"[76]. One member of this family, Gorgonio López, became one of the main companions of Alfred Maudslay when he visited Petén in 1881[77].

It is, therefore, no surprise that Sarg was also willing and able to support his fellow planter Carl Gustav Bernoulli. Leaving Sarg in charge, Bernoulli left Cobán with the intention to return to Europe, where he never arrived. The Swiss physician died on his way back in 1878 in San Francisco. Despite Bernoulli's sudden death, Sarg continued with his task to remove and transport the beams from Tikal[78]. To do so, Sarg put together an expedition team, which he then sent to the neighbouring department of Petén. There, they should remove the beams from their material surrounding and considerably reduce them in seize. It is very likely that the German merchant and planter hired rubber tappers (*chicleros*) or indigenous labourers for this arduous work[79]. As mentioned in the chapter before, the Tikal lintels were fabricated from the wood of the *Manilkara zapota* tree. Handling this hard and resistant type of wood required experience, skills and knowledge. Skills that the *chicleros* as well as many indigenous labourers undoubtedly possessed, as the trees from which they extracted rubber were made of precisely this wood.

Teobert Maler apparently observed some indigenous labourers removing some beams from the ceiling structures in Tikal. He describes the process

75. Ian Graham: *Alfred Maudslay and the Maya. A Biography* (London: British Museum Press, 2002): 86.
76. Graham, *Alfred Maudslay and the Maya*, 87.
77. Graham, *Alfred Maudslay and the Maya*, 87.
78. Sarg, *Alte Erinnerungen*, 41.
79. Teobert Maler, "Explorations in the Department of Peten Guatemala Tikal. Report of Explorations for the Museum," *Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University* 5, no. 1 (1911): 17 and 44. On rubber tapping in the department of Petén, see also: Norma B. Schwartz, *Forest Society. A Social History of Peten, Guatemala* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

in detail in a report he published in 1911: "The Indians [...] when they pulled out the carved beams from the temples of Tikal [...] adopted the reprehensible method of burning off both ends [...]" and to finally reduce its weight, "the backs of the beams have also been cut away"[80]. As a result, the once massive beams became relatively thin plates, which were easy to transport. The Tikal lintels also arrived as such plates in Cobán where Sarg had them transported to the port in Livingston. There they were loaded on a ship of the Hockmeyer & Co. shipping company heading for Hamburg[81]. This shipping company significantly expanded its shipping lines to Guatemala due to the rise of coffee exports[82]. In 1878, Hockmeyer & Co. did not just ship coffee but also the Tikal lintels and some stone figurines from Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa[83]. Unfortunately, the sources are not very clear on who exactly removed and transported the wooden beams to Cobán, neither do we know from the sources, if the beams were still part of the ceiling structure in the former Mayan city as Bernoulli stated in one of his letters[84]. The French Mayanist Léon de Rosny, for example, wrote in a report on the Tikal lintels that Bernoulli encountered them "in an Indian's hut"[85]. This is quite possible because, according to Teobert Maler, the indigenous inhabitants of the region often removed parts of the Mesoamerican material culture[86].

The European travellers, planters and merchants did not approve of this engagement with the Mesoamerican material culture by the local, mainly indigenous communities. Teobert Maler expressed this explicitly when he criticised the Guatemalan government: "to permit this group of fugitives to settle close to the ruins of Tikal, for owing to the well known ruthless character of those rude and ignorant people, it could only result in the destruction of

80. Maler, "Explorations in the Department of Peten," 43.
81. Rudolf Virchow, "Sitzung am 20. Juli 1878," *Verhandlungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* (1878): 281.
82. On the coffee trade between Hamburg and Guatemala, see: Katharina Trümper, *Kaffee und Kaufleute. Guatemala und der Hamburger Handel 1871-1914* (Hamburg: Lit-Verlag, 1996).
83. Thomas W. Baumann, and Beatrice Häsler, *Tropenfrucht. Ein Streifzug durch eine Finca in Costa Rica zum 150. Geburtstag von Henri Pittier (1857-1950)* (Furlingen: Villacoffea, 2007): 136.
84. Letter from Carl Gustav Bernoulli to Fritz Müller, dated 17.10.1877, Library Natural History Museum of Basel.
85. Léon de Rosny, "Les Documents Écrits de l'Antiquité Américaine. Compte-Rendu d'un Mission Scientifique en Espagne et en Portugal," *Memoires de la Société d'Ethnographie* 3 (1880): 41.
86. Maler, "Explorations in the Department of Peten," 33.

the magnificent monuments of ancient day"[87]. Similarly, the English traveller Boddam-Whetham, who came to Petén some years before Bernoulli and had some lintels from Tikal transported to the British Museum, asks in his travelogue the typical questions of the Maya research of his time: "[W]hy did they laboriously stone up their houses when they left them? why, too, did they leave them? and where did they go?"[88] As for Maler, for Boddam Whetham, the contemporary indigenous population and their engagement with the Mesoamerican culture could not answer these questions. He states in his travelogue: "The present race of Indians can throw no light on the subject, and look with superstitious reverence on the deserted buildings"[89]. Instead, the material culture should be collected and studied as 'scientific objects' by wealthy, educated (usually white) men. In this way, Maler and Boddam-Whetham but also Sarg and Bernoulli expressed in their letters, reports, memoirs and travelogues what Susan M. Pearce calls the "modernist belief [...] that the physical process of material observation and measurement by a rational man could result in objective knowledge and truth"[90].

As the last expedition of Bernoulli in 1877/78 made evident, it was not easy for the European travellers, merchants and planters to consolidate the meaning of Guatemala's material culture as 'scientific objects.' Neither did Bernoulli always succeed, when he tried to obtain botanical and zoological specimen, nor could he remove the Tikal lintels on his own. Collecting was an arduous activity that depended on the labour and skills of a large number of people. Ambitious collecting expeditions were therefore only possible if labour could be coordinated and the means of transportation and its routes controlled. While this was difficult along the Usumacinta river and large parts of Petén, the planters in western Guatemala and in Alta Verapaz increasingly had a dense, economically and politically influential network at their disposal and controlled large parts of the transport infrastructure constructed to export increasing amounts of coffee. It was in this specific context that the Tikal lintels became 'scientific objects' and were given the material shape they still have today.

87. Maler, "Explorations in the Department of Peten," 33.
88. John Whetham Boddam-Whetham, *Across Central America* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1877): 302.
89. Boddam-Whetham, *Across Central America*, 302.
90. Susan M. Pearce, *On Collecting. An Investigation into Collection in the European Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1995): 124.

4. Finding its Place in a changing museum landscape

When the Tikal lintels arrived in Basel in 1878, they found themselves in a dynamic and changing museum landscape[91]. Only thirty years earlier, the city of Basel inaugurated its new Natural History Museum. The opening of this museum marked both continuity and change. On the one hand, the museum reassembled many objects from the various private collections that already existed in Basel with its rich collecting tradition[92]. On the other hand, the Natural History Museum embodied new collecting and exhibition practices following the international standards of the time[93]. The 'scientific objects' in the new museum collection had to be comparable, clearly categorized and systematically classified[94]. The aim of such collections and exhibitions was "to display a generalized regularity"[95]. All the "curious and strange objects[...]", which were valued in the early modern cabinets precisely because they could not be clearly classified, no longer found a place in these 'scientific collections'[96]. The question therefore arises as to the place assigned to the Tikal lintels in the collections of the Natural History Museum.

The short answer to this question is: no place at all. When the Tikal lintels arrived in Basel in 1878 there was only a small collection of Mesoamerican objects in the Natural History Museum[97]. This collection consisted mainly of the "Mexican antiquities" collected by Lukas Vischer during the time he spent in Mexico. The arrival of the Tikal lintels presented the curators with a common challenge. As Samuel J.M.M. Alberti observed in his study on the history of the Manchester Museum: "[S]ome specimen were so singular —either in their acquisition route, their characteristics, or their associations

91. On the history of the changing museum landscape in Basel between 1735 and 1850, see: Flavio Häner, *Dinge Sammeln, Wissen Schaffen. Die Geschichte der Naturhistorischen Sammlungen in Basel, 1735-1850* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017).
92. Häner, *Dinge Sammeln, Wissen Schaffen*, chapter 3.
93. Häner, *Dinge Sammeln, Wissen Schaffen*, chapter 3.
94. Samuel J.M.M. Alberti, "Museum Nature," in *Worlds of Natural History*, ed. H.A. Curry *et al*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018): 349-362.
95. Anita Guerrini, "The Material Turn in the History of Life Sciences," *Literature Compass* 13, no. 7 (2016): 476.
96. Häner, *Dinge Sammeln, Wissen Schaffen*, 54; See also: Alberti, *Nature and Culture*, 261.
97. Nikolaus Meier, "Identität und Differenz. Zum 150. Jahrestag der Eröffnung des Museums an der Augustinergasse in Basel," *Basler Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 100 (2000): 157-159.

that they remained distinct from the rest of the collection"[98]. This was also the challenge regarding the Tikal lintels. Consisting, apart from the *Mapa de Tecamachalco*, mainly of stone vessels and sculptures from Mexico, the wooden objects from Guatemala did not fit into the existing collection, neither geographically nor materially[99]. In addition, most of the exhibition rooms were already overcrowded and the need to reorganize the museum landscape became increasingly apparent. Until then, the Tikal lintels had to stay outside. Thus, to his great surprise, the French Mayanist Léon de Rosny found them exposed to changing weather conditions in the courtyard of the museum[100].

A first significant reorganisation occurred when the so-called 'antiquarian' collection moved to the newly established History Museum. In addition to the objects from the Middle Ages, for the two commissions of the respective museums, the "Greek, Roman, Celtic and Germanic antiquities" were also part of this 'antiquarian' collection[101]. The Tikal lintels and the "Mexican antiquities" from the Vischer collection remained in the Natural History Museum as part of the 'ethnographic' collection. The commission of the Natural History Museum considered the objects in this collection as "evidence of the level at which the culturally poor peoples [*die culturarmen Völker*] still stand today"[102]. As such, the objects were classified and catalogued, using the classification system of the ethnological museum in Berlin as a standard[103]. In the catalogues of these collections published in 1894 and 1895 almost every object is described in some detail, usually accompanied by references[104]. The Tikal lintels, however, are just mentioned very briefly. The authors of the

98. Alberti, *Nature and Culture*, 16.
99. Meier, "Identität und Differenz," 157-159 and 167.
100. Rosny, *Les Documents* Écrits, 41.
101. Bericht an E.E. Regenz über die ethnographische Sammlung für das Jahr 1893, 1, Museum der Kulturen Basel.
102. Bericht an E.E. Regenz über die ethnographische Sammlung für das Jahr 1893, 2, Museum der Kulturen Basel.
103. H. Glenn Penny states in his book on ethnology and ethnographic museums in Imperial Germany that it was a typical practice for museums in the German-speaking area to follow the classification system of the museum in Berlin, see: H. Glenn Penny, *Objects of Culture. Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press): 35.
104. As an example, see: Leopold Rütimeyer, "Katalog der Abteilung für Nordost-Afrika," *Bericht* über *die ethnographische Sammlung der Universität Basel* 1 (1894): 83-159.

catalogues simply state that they form part of the "valuable Mesoamerican objects" and that they had "repeatedly been visited by learned travellers"[105].

While the wooden lintels thus led a rather marginalized and precarious existence in Basel, they attracted much more attention from a 'scientific community' that was increasingly interested in the Mesoamerican material culture of the Maya. Among the first to visit the newly arrived lintels was the aforementioned French Mayanist Léon de Rosny[106]. He dedicated himself especially to the systematic study and decipherment of the Mayan glyphs[107]. Therefore, de Rosny travelled to various collections in Europe and published photographs of the glyphs he encountered there[108]. To this end, the French Mayanist also published the photographs of the Tikal lintels in his report on *Les Documents Écrits de l'Antiquité Américaine* in 1882[109]. Only three years later, another famous French scholar, Desirée Charnay, studied the iconographic details on the Tikal lintels to support his hypotheses about the spread of Mesoamerican cultures in Central America[110]. In this sense, he used the Tikal lintels in his book *Les Anciennes Ville du Nouveau Monde* "to classify the town and reconstruct its history"[111]. Additionally, he made plaster casts of the wooden lintels, which soon circulated in the 'scientific community'[112].

After all, not only French scholars were interested in the lintels from Guatemala. With their arrival in Europe, the director of the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin, Adolf Bastian, tried to claim the Tikal lintels for his collection[113]. The discussion between Berlin and Basel went on for

105. Julius Kollmann and Leopold Rütimeyer, "Übersicht über den gegenwärtigen Bestand der ethnografischen Sammlung," *Bericht* über *die ethnographische Sammlung der Universität Basel* 1 (1894): 6.
106. Rosny, *Les Documents Écrits*, 41.
107. On Léon de Rosny, see: Nadia Prévost Urkidi, "Émergence de l'Américanisme Scientifique. Où Léon de Rosny joue un rôle essentiel," in *Léon de Rosny 1837-1914. De l'Orient á l'Amérique*, ed. Bénédicte Fabre-Muller, Pierre Leboulleux, and Philippe Rothstein (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2014).
108. Rosny, *Les Documents Écrits*, 41.
109. De Rosny describes the lintels in the last chapter, see: Rosny, *Les Documents Écrits*, 39-44. The photographs are depicted in the Appendix.
110. Désiré Charnay, *Les Anciennes Villes du Nouveau Monde. Voyage d'Explorations au Mexique et dans l'Amérique Centrale* (Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie., 1885): 411.
111. Charnay, *Les Anciennes Villes du Nouveau Monde*, 406.
112. Kollmann and Rütimeyer, "Übersicht," 7.
113. Letter from Adolf Bastian to Johann Jakob Bernoulli, dated 04.09.1880, Museum der Kulturen Basel.

some months, when they finally decided that the objects would remain in Switzerland. In return, the German institution received plaster casts of the objects from Guatemala. With these casts and the photographs taken by Léon de Rosny, the German Maya scholar, Eduard Seler, studied the Tikal lintels and published his results in the article *Die Cedrela-Holzplatten von Tikal im Museum zu Basel*[114]. This article contains a great number of paintings, which highlight especially the glyphs on the wooden lintels in great detail. Like the French Mayanist de Rosny, Seler was mainly interested in deciphering the Mayan script[115]. As 'scientific objects', the Tikal lintels formed an indispensable empirical basis for all these scholars. Incorporated into scientific debates and reproduced as plaster casts and photographs, the panels circulated in the 'scientific community' and beyond. In this sense, as Daston put it, the reality of the Tikal lintels as 'scientific objects' was once again consolidated.

Finally, they also received more attention in Basel, where the city decided to separate the ethnographic collection from the Natural History Museum and establish a separate museum for the rapidly growing collection[116]. There, the Tikal lintels were integrated into the geographically organised Americas collections[117]. A description of the exhibition published in 1917 in the course of the inauguration of the Museum of Ethnology (*Museum für Völkerkunde*) allows reconstructing its organisation. The objects from North America were followed by those from South America "in the following order: Guyana, Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay and finally Tierra del Fuego"[118]. In addition "The civilizations from the time before the discovery of America", including "burial finds from ancient Peru" and the "rich holdings from ancient Mexico" concluded the Americas division[119]. As far as the lintels from Tikal

114. Eduard Seler, "Die Cedrela-Holzplatten von Tikal im Museum zu Basel," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 33 (1901): 101-126.
115. Rosny, *Les Documents* Écrits, 42.
116. On the inauguration of the new museum, see: Fritz Sarasin, "Ansprache gehalten bei Anlass des hundertjährigen Jubiläums der Naturforschenden Gesellschaft in Basel und der Eröffnung des Museums für Völkerkunde am 23. Juni 1917 in der Martinskirche," *Separatdruck aus den Verhandlungen der Naturforschenden Gesellschaft in Basel* 28, no. 1 (1917): 193-206.
117. Bericht über das Basler Museum für Völkerkunde für das Jahr 1917, p. 21, Museum der Kulturen Basel.
118. Bericht über das Basler Museum für Völkerkunde für das Jahr 1917, p. 21, Museum der Kulturen Basel.
119. Bericht über das Basler Museum für Völkerkunde für das Jahr 1917, p. 21, Museum der Kulturen Basel.

are concerned, however, the curators of the new exhibition still had some difficulties integrating them properly[120]. As a result, the wooden lintels were apparently placed outside the neatly structured geographical order and installed "well-illuminated" on the museum wall[121]. To some extent still at odds with the rest of the collection, the Tikal lintels seemed to function as a kind of 'curiosity' to attract visitors.

5. Conclusion

At the beginning of the 19th century, the meaning of the Mesoamerican material culture was highly contested in Mexico and Central America. While missionaries and (former) colonial administrators still regarded some of these objects as suspicious 'idols,' the independent governments soon reinterpreted them as some form of 'national heritage.' At the same time, local, mainly indigenous communities avidly engaged with the Mesoamerican material culture that surrounded their towns and villages, incorporating it into their homes, churches, and infrastructure. As the first part of this article has shown, this is also true for the region of the former Mayan city of Tikal. It is therefore by no means self-evident how, in the course of the 19th century, the Tikal lintels and a growing part of the Mesoamerican material culture came to be seen as 'scientific objects' and ended up in large numbers in museums in Europe and the United States.

As argued in the second part, it is worthwhile looking beyond the scientific institutions like museums and universities in order to answer this question. In Guatemala, it were not these scientific institutions but rather an increasingly powerful network of plantation owners who managed to consolidate the meaning and control the circulation of the Mesoamerican material culture. While Carl Gustav Bernoulli, for example, had great difficulty collecting botanical and zoological specimens in regions that were hardly penetrated by this network, he succeeded in bringing the Tikal lintels to Basel. In the second case, he could rely on his fellow plantation owner, Franz Sarg, who was able to recruit labourers to remove the heavy objects from its

120. Bericht über das Basler Museum für Völkerkunde für das Jahr 1917, p. 21-22, Museum der Kulturen Basel.
121. Bericht über das Basler Museum für Völkerkunde für das Jahr 1917, p. 21-22, Museum der Kulturen Basel.

material surroundings. He further had direct access to the regional transport infrastructure in order to transport them over long distances and ship them together with the coffee beans to Europe. Thus, this clearly illustrates that collecting activities were not individual undertakings. Rather, quite like the plantation economy, they were arduous, collective endeavours that were based on the effective control of labor, capital and transport infrastructure.

Interestingly, once the wooden objects from Tikal arrived in the Natural History Museum in Basel in 1878, their meaning became again rather ambivalent. The curators of the museum struggled to integrate the large objects into the dynamic museum and collection landscape of the Swiss city. Until 1917, the Tikal lintels were apparently never part of an exhibition and for a while, they were literally left outside in the rain. At the same time, scholars from France and Germany were highly interested in the reliefs depicted on the objects from Tikal. Several of them travelled to the Natural History Museum in Basel, where they photographed and fabricated plaster casts of the lintels. By creating this rich material and immaterial culture around the objects from Guatemala, they embedded them deeply into the scientific discourse and further consolidated their meaning as 'scientific objects.'

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