German Encounters Abroad: Christian Thran, *Diary* [*Africa Journey*] (1731–33)

Abstract

In 1731 Margrave Karl Wilhelm of Baden-Durlach (1679–1738) commissioned Christian Thran, his court gardener, to travel through northern Africa to collect plants and animals for his courtly gardens. Thran's journey lasted two years, and he kept a diary of his trip. The first excerpt mentions fortifications and other boundary markers between German and French lands that Thran saw on his way to Africa. The second excerpt recounts an encounter with four German doctors in Algiers; since Thran describes them as German, this aspect of their identities comes to the fore but is not developed further.

Source

Karlsruhe, Basel, Solothurn, Berne, Lausanne (1731)

November 14: With God as my escort and together with the company ordered by His Royal Polish Majesty and Electoral Serene Highness of Saxony to travel to the Barbary Coast, I departed at 9:00 am from Karlsruhe; the purpose of my journey with [unclear word] company was to reach Africa and beyond. Then, after having taken a look at the pretty, well-built Rastatt Castle, [we] arrived in the evening at the Hanau Count's town of Lychenau and stayed there overnight. In the morning, my journey continued from there to Strasbourg. This place was previously an imperial city but has now been in French hands for some forty years. The town has its boundaries not far from the banks of the Rhine and is built rather spread out but disordered. Its fortress workers are outstanding, as it is a border fortress toward Germany, and the garrison within is rather large. The cathedral is one of the oldest buildings in Strasbourg and, because of its old embellishment, is elegant and worth seeing. The German and French hospital is well-built, but since it last burned, it has been built in an even more splendid manner. The latter is so spacious that almost a thousand people fit in it, but it is only for soldiers. The inspector who oversaw it was Mr. Le Meer [Lemaire?]. Much is to be learned about anatomy and surgery from the erudite speech of Doctor [Heinrich Albert] Nicolai, Professor [Johann] Salzmann, and Professor of Physics [Johann Jacob] Sachs.

November 17: Went from Strasbourg to Orgelsheim.

November 18: From Orgelsheim to Hudersheim.

November 19: From there to Basel. On the way we passed through Alsace, a piece of land that is four to five miles wide. The land itself has a pleasant plane, fertile fields, and pleasant woods, but mountains on both sides. From a distance, the two fortresses, Alt-Breisach, which is called the key to Germany, and Neuf Breisach, which belongs to France, can be seen.

November 20: We finally arrived in Basel. This is the very best city of the Swiss. It is in a valley that ends between two mountains. The Rhine flows through the middle of the city with the strongest flow, because it tightly squeezes between the riverbanks, which are reinforced with stones to protect the city. The City Hall itself is a very old building and is embellished on the outside with the famous paintings by Holbein, which have already been restored twice. Furthermore, it is furnished well, and the chairs of the old and new councils are different. In the middle of the City Hall's courtyard stood a column with a statue, which had this plaque:

Honori et Virtuti L: Munatii L: F: L: N: L: P: R: O: N: Planei Cos. Imp. Her. VII Viri Epulonum qui triumph: es Retis Aedem Saturni F: ex Manu Agros divisit in Italia Beneventi In Gallia Colonias Ded: Lugdunum Divae Rauricu Civitas Basilensis ex Bellicosissima Gente Allemannorum in Rauricorum fines transducta Simulacrum hoc ex Senat Autoritate dicandum statuendumque curavit Anno Salutis Christi MCXXC.[1]

After that, we were shown the Plater Cabinet, which is notable because it was started by Thomas Plater and continued by Felix Plater.

Inside the City Hall, the outstanding piece, consisting of eight panels and representing the suffering of Christ, was displayed; the elector of Trier offered 30,000 guilders for it.

The library is worth seeing, because the oldest editions from the fifteenth century are to be found there. A certain book from the year 1459 can actually be seen there; its title is *Rationale Divinorum* [*Officiorum*] [published] by Johann Faust and Petrus Schaeffer [Schöffer]. Furthermore, numerous manuscripts can be found in this library, almost all of them mainly writings of the old Greek and Latin fathers written on parchment and paper. In addition, a Greek painting from about the fifth century was there; in it, there is an image in which an angel saws Arius apart and Christ hands him the saw from heaven. There is the heretic Macedonius, whom two devils pull along with them, and with an angel pushing him along from behind with a fork [Trans.: sentence incomplete.]. Copies of the Acts of the Council of Basel are found there; the originals are preserved in the archives. Beyond this, a cabinet filled with various paintings by Holbein and other artists is displayed. Several rarities from Erasmus are also found there, including his last will, his treatise *Laus stultitiae* [*In Praise of Folly*], in whose margins clean figures illustrating the materials were drawn with a pen by Holbein. Erasmus's ring, as well as the *Terminus nulli cedo* [Terminus (the Roman god), "I yield to none"; Erasmus's motto] are also conserved there. Furthermore, a small cabinet with old coins and statues, as well as a collection of portraits of high-ranking personages, some of them engraved and some embossed, can be seen there. In addition, two rare statues in bronze, the figures of Apollo and Venus drinking, are displayed. In the Baden-Durlach Palace itself, a collection of excellent pieces, partially oils, partially miniatures, and a lovely coin cabinet could be seen, as well as some collected natural curiosities which were found in Augst, including the figure of Jupiter in the form of a bull carrying off Juno. The *Hortus Medicus* [botanical garden] in Basel is of little importance; the city is spread out and has very old buildings but is not all that orderly. Merchants flourish there, and the residents seem to live quietly and peacefully but at the same time have good food. The religion is Reformed.

[....]

[Algiers]

March 3: We noticed that the residents here are very much afflicted with diseases, especially with tumors, nervous attacks, and venereal illnesses. Because they have no physicians among them, they avail themselves of the surgeons in captivity here, four of whom there at that time were Germans who had been captured on ships from Hamburg. These people are free of any work and have small shops in which they have their medications. In summer, they have to go along to sea because they must care for and cure all the sick people. The residents of this country are mostly robust but have a bad diet; in the morning, they eat soup, for lunch, olives and bread, and in the evening, rice cooked until thick, or meat cut into pieces and stuck on a skewer and roasted in an oven. Their beverage is usually "sorbet," which is water boiled with raisins, or lemon juice with sugar and water, or coffee without sugar. The coffee is often not boiled but is placed in a bowl, after which boiling water is poured over it. They use opium very heavily, especially at sea when they are fighting with the Christians.

[….]

NOTES

[1] The statue of the Roman general and consul Munatius Plancus was placed in the courtyard of the Basel City Hall in 1580. Translation: To the honorable and brave Lucius Munatius, son and grandson of Lucius, great grandson of Lucius Plancus, consul, general, member of the college of priests, banquet steward, who triumphed over the Rhaeti. He had a temple of Saturn built with his own funds. He divided up farmland in Benevento, Italy. In Gaul, he founded the colonies of Lyon and the divine Augst. He led the Basel citizenry from the warlike tribe of the Alemanni into the territory of the Rauracians. With the permission of the Senate, he allowed this statue to be dedicated and installed. In the year of the Salvation of Christ, 1180. […]

Source: *Eine Afrikareise im Auftrag des Stadtgründers: Das Tagebuch des Karlsruher Hofgärtners Christian Thran 1731 bis 1733.* Edited by Peter Pretsch and Volker Steck, with contributions by Helmut Carolus, Christian Dauber, et al. Publications of the Karlsruhe City Archives, 30. Karlsruhe: INFO Verlag, 2008, pp. 107–10, 138.

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