

BYWAYS IN OXFORD ANTHROPOLOGY

SOME PROBLEMS WITH PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES:

THE CASE OF C.W.DAMMANN

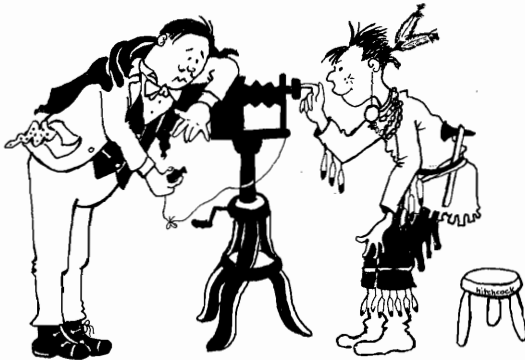
This short piece is not intended to be an exhaustive discussion of the general problems besetting large collections of archival photographs or of the problems of using such collections, but rather a few thoughts on the matter as they relate to one collection in the Pitt Rivers Museum, that of C.W.Dammann, a Hamburg photographer.

To dismiss the growing interest in archival photographs as mere nostalgia is mistaken for there has been a parallel development in the scholarly field. Over the past ten to fifteen years much attention has been paid to the techniques and value of visual anthropology but recently increasing attention has been directed towards early material. Problems are not restricted only to the actual interpretation of the content of the photograph; its source and context are equally important. If a photograph is to be recognised as valid anthropological and ethno-historical evidence it must be correctly provenanced and preferably dated, attributed and documented. Few early photographs have survived with all this information. As demands on collections such as that at the Pitt Rivers Museum grow and the application of photographic evidence diversifies, so more accurate information on the sources of photographs is required. However, to provide this information in retrospect is a mammoth task, and, as the Dammann collection illustrates, very complex.

The mass production of photographs was developing apace by the late 1850s. The reproduction of images on a large scale was made possible by the introduction of wet collodion glass negatives and albumen-coated printing papers. However, given the vast increase in the availability of photographs, anthropological material from the 1850s and 1860s is relatively limited, with field photographs being particularly rare. Very few of the photographers appear to have had any anthropological knowledge. Furthermore, many photographs of this period were taken to satisfy the curiosity of tourists and white settlers in various parts of the world. Consequently many images represent nineteenth-century stereotypes of the 'non-civilised', portraying subjects as the noble savage in a misty and romantic setting or as the barbarous primitive. This sounds dismissive but against such shortcomings can be cited some

excellent ethnographic work, for example, Rouseau in Paris, Eichtal in St. Petersburg, Brady in Washington or Forbes-Watson's monumental work *The People of India* (1868-1873).

The Pitt Rivers Museum has approximately 35,000 photographs, almost half pre-dating 1914 and many of those with little or no documentation. Amongst these is a substantial collection of over 1500 anthropological photographs of races from all over the world from C.W.Dammann. The collection was purchased by the Museum in 1901 through the offices of Professor E.B.Tylor and Henry Balfour from the estate of the photographer's brother, Frederick. It is interesting to look at this collection which at first sight appeared to have been satisfactorily identified and attributed as the work of C.W.Dammann--however, on investigation all is not what it seemed.



Little is known of Dammann's life. He was born in Mecklenburg in 1819 and moved to Hamburg in the late 1860s, establishing a photographic studio at 4, Grosse Johannisstrasse. He died in Hamburg in April 1874. It is not known whether he had any earlier interest in anthropology but in 1870-1871 he was commissioned by the Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte to photograph the Arab and African crew of a ship belonging to the Sultan of Zanzibar. At about the same time he photographed a troop of visiting Japanese acrobats. Both sets of photographs are of good quality and straightforward in their approach. It appears that there was considerable demand for these photographs from learned societies, museums and universities. This prompted the expansion of the project to provide a good and comprehensive collection of photographs for the scientific study of anthropology. Under the auspices of the Berliner Gesellschaft Dammann started to collect and copy photographs belonging to the society and its members, whether their own work or that purchased from commercial photographers. There were appeals to members at meetings in Berlin to loan rare material of anthropological interest to the project. The resulting collection was published in Berlin between 1873 and

1876 as *Anthropologisch-Ethnologisches Album in Photographien...* Herausgegeben mit Unterstützung aus den Sammlungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte.

Dammann's brother Frederick, a teacher of German at Huddersfield Technical College in Yorkshire, completed the work after 1874 but does not appear to have added more than about 100 photographs to the collection.

The *Album* is a collection of over 600 albumen prints, arranged by geographical region, mounted in groups of 6 to 18 on 50 folio-size plates with short captions (some of which are of dubious accuracy). To the best of my knowledge the only complete copy of the *Album* is in the British Library. The Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin has 18 of the 50 plates, the Museum of Mankind has 9. There was also a popular version, *The Races of Man*, produced by Frederick Dammann which is slightly less rare. The Pitt Rivers Museum's holding of Dammann material comprises loose and mounted prints from the Dammann studio, many of which appear in the *Album* and *The Races of Man*, as well as several hundred images copied by Dammann which do not appear in either publication. The prints are mostly *carte de visite* format (108x63mm). Although there are field photographs, notably of Borneo and South America, a majority are portraits, the emphasis being on physical type rather than cultural context. Indeed in some of the field photographs the background has been deliberately blacked out. Certainly Dammann did this himself in some cases, for a photograph of a group from the American Northwest Coast which has had the background painted out in the *Album* appears in the Pitt Rivers Dammann collection untouched, with the group standing in front of a log cabin. The quality of the work in general is variable, doubtless reflecting that of the original, but it seems that many images have lost definition in the copying process. On the other hand, some are so good that one is tempted to assume that he was printing from the original negative.

Although it is clear that Dammann photographed some of the subjects himself (for example, the Arab crewmen), his anthropological work was primarily that of a copyist for the Berliner Gesellschaft. However, this does not diminish the value of his output. The collection contains many excellent and important photographs, many of which would have been lost but for the Berliner Gesellschaft-Dammann project. Although clearly the Berliner Gesellschaft had influence on and provided much impetus for the project, it appears that Dammann had a considerable degree of independence and was not merely working on instructions. The work is thoroughly scientific in its approach; there is no attempt at the sensational. It was the first attempt to produce a comparative physical anthropology in photographs. Professor Tylor described the *Album* as 'one of the most important contributions ever made to the science of man' and continued 'they [the photographs] will do more than any quantity of written criticism to check the rash generalization as to race so common in ethnological systems' (*Nature*, Jan.6, 1876, p.184). The value of the *Album* was also acknowledged at the Vienna World Exhibition in 1873 with the award of a bronze medal.

This is all very well, but we may ask how are these photo-

graphs in the *Album* and the Pitt Rivers Museum collection to be useful other than as a curiosity in the history of anthropological study? The majority of Dammann's output is completely without documentation but the collection's scholarly value would be greatly enhanced if the sources of the photographs could be established. Sadly the magnificent collection of the Berliner Gesellschaft has been lost or dispersed; nor is any catalogue of it known. It is possible that some of the original material copied by Dammann may be located in the future but until then one has to be content to piece together what one can. Some images can be identified as the work of some of the leading ethnological photographers of the period such as Vannerson and McClees in Washington, Whitney and Zimmerman in Minnesota and Albert Fritsch and Alberto Henschel in South America. Some of the Australian material is attributed by some, dubiously I think, to J.Lindt.

The correct attribution of photographs is a perennial problem. *Carte de visite* photographs were widely circulated and openly plagiarized. The sources of some of those used by Dammann can be recognized quite simply because they are copies of images identified and attributed elsewhere (e.g. in the collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, in the National Anthropological Archive, Washington, or the Museum of Mankind, London). Others have been identified through studio fittings (such as backdrops, carpets or even elaborate skirting boards!). For example a photograph of two Plains (?) Indians in a studio has been identified as that of Hamilton and Hoyt of Sioux City, Iowa, in this way. Studio props are also useful in identifying the work of a studio. Many photographs were taken using whatever vaguely suitable props the studio happened to have. Consequently the same props tend to crop up in numerous photographs taken by that studio. Some photographs are ridiculously cluttered with a strange assortment of objects (rather like a Victorian drawing room), obviously an attempt to encapsulate a complete cross-section of a culture in one image. This, incidentally, only stresses the importance to modern users of knowing the context in which a photograph was taken. However, it is only as research on early photographers in general progresses that attributions can be made with any certainty.

What of the rest of the photographs in the *Album* and the Pitt Rivers Museum's holding? The meagre captions in the *Album* give some clues because some of the photographs are acknowledged. Some of them appear to come from members of the German expatriate community in Indonesia, Africa, Australia and the United States. However it is not clear whether these men were the photographers or merely the suppliers. In some cases it is implied that they were the photographers, for example photographs of South Africa acknowledged to a Dr. Schetelig, but it is by no means clear. Photographs of Egypt are similarly acknowledged to Herr. O.Schoeffft, who is known to have been a photographer in Cairo, but at present there is no more information on him. On the other hand photographs of the Sioux acknowledged to a Herr Meineke can almost certainly be attributed to Whitney of St. Paul, Minnesota. Clearly more work must be done before these acknowledgements can be usefully interpreted.

The *Verhandlungen* of the Berliner Gesellschaft is full of

references to photographs being donated to the society or being shown at meetings by members. It appears that many of them received photographs from contacts around the world (are these the men in the acknowledgements?). It is very likely that these photographs found their way into Dammann's studio, as there are certainly groups of photographs mentioned in the *Verhandlungen* which *could* be those in the Pitt Rivers Museum or the *Album*, but as yet there is no evidence beyond the circumstantial to link them.

Clearly a great deal of work has still to be done on the Dammann collection, but it well illustrates the difficulty of providing accurate retrospective documentation. The present photographic detective work grew out of 'routine investigations' whilst gathering information to catalogue photographs of North America mounted on cards with the Dammann studio imprint. The Dammann material is only one of a number of collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum with problems of identification and attribution, but it is probably the most complex and is important because it records so many early photographs. There is, at present, a lively exchange of information amongst institutions working on their photograph collections. The outcome is of immense value to scholars, for the more accurate the information that can be made available to those wishing to use archival photographs as a reliable source the better for all.

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LETTER TO THE EDITORS

Dear JASO,

A question for the ASA's forthcoming Decennial Year:

Why was the first recognizable contribution to the modern social anthropology of women made by a *man*? I refer of course to Edwin Ardener's 'Belief and the Problem of Women', published in 1972.

Suggestions invited.

Yours etc.,
Roy Willis
Edinburgh