This slim work, the first biography of Felix von Luschan, is intended as a biographical sketch, and the author, Cornelia Essner, has many surprises in store for the reader (Essner 2023, Fig. 1). Aimed not only at experts, this book is the first to allow those without in-depth knowledge to get to know this polymath and the time he lived in. It is also intended as a guide for students studying Luschan and his work. While the book will certainly stimulate discussion among experts, it will also motivate others interested in further study of a period in Europe that was one of scientific awakening and social upheaval.

However, Europe is not the only setting for the book. Luschan is particularly depicted as a traveller. His research in non-European countries, especially the Ottoman Empire, is thus a focal point of the book. It is important to note here that the colonial era has only recently entered the public consciousness. At the same time, lurid portrayals and banalities in the media make it difficult to approach the subject appropriately. The author is therefore to be thanked for her differentiated presentation. She describes Luschan’s work knowledgeably and systematically in the context of his time. The picture she paints is quite different from the one presented in the recent film Der vermessene Mensch [tr. The measured person] (2023), in which Professor von Waldstätten (based on Luschan) is simply portrayed as a racist skull collector.

There seems to be a great deal of confusion among the public (and even among historians) about the motives behind this collecting activity. This is where Essner’s book has a truly illuminating effect: the central question of anthropological science around 1900 was not, as is commonly portrayed, the classification of ‘races’ or even the proof of a hierarchy of them, but rather the elucidation of the great questions of the descent/origin of humankind, its distribution in time and space and its prehistoric ways of life. The way to answer these questions was essentially through anatomy. It was an empirical path that would lead to insights through countless measurements.

Nevertheless, around 1900 anthropology failed for the time being. More recently, however, it has been able to fulfil many of the promises of the 19th century using methods that were unthinkable in Luschan’s time: DNA analysis, radiocarbon dating and stable isotope analysis are just some of the most popular examples. The author, as a historian, only touches on this subject. Her aim is to show the connections in the history of ideas and to make clear that the path to knowledge in physical anthropology was rocky and full of aberrations. This makes it all the more important to shed light on the history of the discipline, which was by no means one-sided and unambiguous. Just as Boas, for his dissertation, had studied how light is refracted through water, here I will assess how in his later studies, his thought is refracted through his local collaborators.

Luschan was particularly critical of the race theories of his day. In this context, Luschan’s active opposition to anti-Semitism is also distinctive. Among his students were a particularly large number of Jewish anthropolo-
Essner’s emphasis on this attitude of Luschan is also important against the background of her own research on National Socialism.

Around the turn of the century, a form of racism began to develop in Germany that did not focus on the devaluation of non-European peoples, but postulated European or German ‘races’, often with explicit evaluations. Luschan opposed the glorification of a ‘Nordic race’, which later became central to Nazi ideology.

Essner, therefore, rejects the question of the continuity of physical anthropology à la Luschan with the racial science of the Third Reich. However, she explicitly encourages research in this area, for which she proposes a collective biography. She herself used this method in 1985 to study German travellers to Africa in the 19th century. The author has been familiar with both subjects – the colonial period and the Nazi era – for decades.

Essner’s current book consists of the following four chapters:
1. Career, everyday life and contacts: The network of the scientist,
2. Excavations are unpredictable: The archaeologist in Sendschirli 1888-1891,
3. Collecting, measuring and guessing: The physical anthropologist,
4. Colonialist and eugenicist, but opponent of anti-Semitism and Nordic racial doctrine.

There is not enough space here to outline each chapter. However, the description of the excavation of the Aramaic city-state of Sam'al in the Ottoman Empire deserves special mention, as it describes the everyday life of excavation at that time. The very fact that a woman, Emma von Luschan, took part in the excavations was unusual. The external constraints, such as the nature of the funding, are illustrated, and the outbreak of cholera in the region is described as a further challenge. The financial backer was the Orient Committee, set up in Berlin specifically for this excavation, which received donations only when the ‘spoils’ were presented in Berlin. This, in turn, was fraught with major obstacles for Luschan. The background to this was the Turkish Antiquities Law, which determined the division of the excavated objects between the Ottoman Empire and the excavating institution. Luschan used his connections with the influential Hamdy Bey, the head of the museum administration in Constantinople, to speed up these bureaucratic processes.

There is also a description of how the Kurdish workers were paid. In this chapter, the author undoubtedly benefited from the knowledge gained in her dissertation German African Travellers in the 19th Century, submitted in 1985. There, too, she examined the funding structures, which was unusual at the time, as the emphasis had previously been on the explorers’ character as adventurers.

This overview shows the breadth and depth of the subject. Therefore, small errors, for example in current scientific methods, are forgivable. The author’s style is very entertaining. The fact that the work is based on letters also contributes to this. From an ethnological point of view, it may be regrettable that Luschan’s third science is somewhat neglected in favour of physical anthropology and archaeology. However, this can and should be seen as motivation for further research and publications!
References


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