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Natural History, Racial Classification and Anthropology in J.F. Blumenbach's Work and Reception

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The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious as well as terrible.
God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man
(Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*)

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The present paper examines Blumenbach's contribution to physical and philosophical anthropology by critically discussing the theoretical, methodological and conceptual fundamentals of both his racial classification and related visualisations¹. In section 1, I sketch a short intellectual profile of Blumenbach

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to provide a general frame for the subsequent argumentation as well as to highlight ambivalences and problematic questions which condition Blumenbach's work and reception. In this context, I analyse some influential visualizations of Blumenbach's legacy produced in his lifetime and today. In section 2, I describe the theoretical and methodological presuppositions and the constant evolution of Blumenbach's racial anthropology, focusing on the theory of natural and human mutability, Blumenbach's definition of human being, and his original use of the image of the book of nature. In sections 3 and 4, I highlight conceptual difficulties and methodological problems concerning both the systematics of Blumenbach's anthropological doctrine and classification and in particular his conception and definition of the 'Caucasian race'.

1. ON BLUMENBACH'S LIFE, LEGACY AND ICONOGRAPHY: SOME ISSUES AT STAKE

Johann Friedrich Blumenbach enjoyed distinguished origins and a very long, comfortable life. Born in 1752 in Gotha into a good bourgeois family (his father was a teacher, his mother was the daughter of an important jurist and vice-chancellor of the city), Blumenbach studied first in Jena and then in Göttingen, where in 1775 he obtained the academic title of doctor of medicine with a dissertation containing the first, still quadripartite version of his racial classification. Shortly after, he was nominated curator of the academic museum and professor at the local university, thus commencing long-term research activity characterized by fundamental connections between scientific collections and university teaching. Blumenbach could intensify such connections thanks to the following intertwined factors: 1) the international prestige and authority he soon gained with his spectacular efforts. 2) The fact that Göttingen was at that time under the British Crown, which afforded greater freedom of thought, easier contact with a leading political and scientific community such as that of the British Empire,

update, revise, enrich, and supplement some sections of my article. The main goal of this article is to introduce the English-speaking public to some results of the research I conducted for the introductory essay to the Italian edition of Blumenbach's *Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte*, which I edited (CSN). New, compared to the Italian text, is the critical reference to gender studies and studies in the history of ideas regarding the notion of Caucasian race, on the one hand, and the expansion of the documentary base to include the apparatuses of images concerning the vertical norm and the so-called 'exemplary heads' of the five main races on the other hand. A further version of this study, currently in progress, will bring together for the German-speaking public these updates with the ones made between my introduction to the first modern reprint of the *Beyträge* (BN) and the Italian edition. Finally, I owe special gratitude to Cinzia Ferrini for valuable editorial suggestions and Prof. Kenneth Westphal for polishing my prose.

and above all a direct and privileged access to the naturalist and ethnological materials coming from the British colonies and from Cook's travels. Blumenbach never left for long periods his adoptive city. The one significant exception was his trip to Great Britain in the early 1790s, which quickly became legendary. In Göttingen he led the rest of his life as an increasingly comfortable and revered teacher and scholar at the center of a great network of international exchanges. He died there in 1840, far advanced in years.

Blumenbach's name is still universally linked to physical and racial anthropology for four main reasons: 1) His famous private collection of more than 200 skulls (which by the end of his life was probably the widest and most complete worldwide, now conserved at the University of Göttingen). 2) The so-called *norma verticalis*, which was a decisive innovation in the method of skull measurement, by viewing the skull from above². 3) The division of Mankind in five principal racial groups, which was – and still is – regarded as the first modern racial classification. 4) Establishing in the anthropological vocabulary the term 'Caucasian' for the type including Europeans³. Therefore, it is no coincidence that 25 years ago such an authority as the biologist-historian Stephen J. Gould summed up Blumenbach's work under the heading of "The Geometer of Race"⁴.

Blumenbach's personal iconography widely confirms how predominant and – one may say – inescapable is reference to his craniological studies and racial classification. His most popular portrait [Figure 1] – drawn by Ludwig Emil Grimm, the youngest and least known of the Grimm Brothers – shows Blumenbach sitting at home near the skull of "Richard Bruce King of Scotland". According to a true story hilariously told by Blumenbach himself in 1823 during an afternoon tea at his home in the presence of the etcher and some ladies (including his own wife), the popular superstition had assigned to Richard's skull extraordinary powers able to make the person who owned it a strong and brave conqueror. Under the impression of this legend, George IV, King of Great Britain, commanded the skull

² Blumenbach elaborated this method in a close critical discussion with the measurement and classification methodology developed by his Dutch friend and colleague Peter Camper. The latter methodology was based on the so-called facial angle criterion (a lateral view of the head measured and classified according to successive degrees of increasing approximation to a degree of angulation modeled on Greek statuary and considered ideally perfect) and had immediately become very popular among anatomists and scholars. In the third edition of his *De generis humani varietate nativa*, Blumenbach systematically exposes the limits of the codification and use of Camper's criterion as well as the self-perceived strengths of his own criterion (GH 1795, § 60: 200-203).

³ As Bruce Baum pointed out (Baum 2006, 73, 84-89, 59), the term was first introduced by Christoph Meiners in an explicit and harshly racist context, then adopted and newly defined by Blumenbach after Meiners abandoned it. It is still in use with some differentiations – just to give a couple of examples – by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services and for the controversial racial profiling in the criminal justice system.

⁴ Gould 2002.

be brought to him, yet after some time he did not really know what to do with such a fateful piece, so he decided to give it as a present to Blumenbach, who surely could have profited more from it. This anecdote reveals Blumenbach's irony in distancing himself from the Romantic trends of his time, in approaching his work and his objects of inquiry, as well as, in some way, his awareness of the newly achieved autonomy and authority of the physical anthropology he practiced.

Two years later a solemn ceremony for the 50th anniversary of Blumenbach's dissertation took place in Göttingen. The commemorative medal [Figure 2] was financed by an enormous number of subscribers – around 1500, mostly scholars and Blumenbach's correspondents, colleagues, former students from Europe and the rest of the world. The first professor of anatomy and physiology at the University of Berlin, Karl Asmund Rudolphi, coordinated the project. The Latin inscriptions on both sides of the medal state, on the front, *I. Fr. Blumenbach nato Gothae d. 11. Maii 1752 doct. creato Gottingae*, and on the reverse, *d. 19. Sept. 1775 naturae interpreti ossa loqui iubenti physiosophili germanici*. On the face of the medal, one sees an official profile portrait of Blumenbach wearing elegant clothes and decorations of the Hanoverian Order of Chivalry; on the reverse, a triangle, whose vertices are skulls representing three of the five racial types (the Caucasian, the Mongolian and the Ethiopic).

It is worth remarking that the facing image is somewhat problematic, as it does not express Blumenbach's style, nor the attitudes and values of his life⁵. However, the foremost issue concerns the image on the reverse, which represents an equivocal, simplifying and distorting interpretation of ambivalent passages of Blumenbach's work. Blumenbach never spoke of only *three* principal race groups (*Haupttrassen*); he constantly spoke of four and – from the beginning of the 1780s – of five, but he equally defined the American and Malaysian types as “transitions” (*Übergänge*) between the Caucasian race – the primordial one – on the one side and the Ethiopian and Mongolian, respectively (HN 1821, 70). When Blumenbach himself arranges the last three skulls in a unique figure, [Figure 3] his aim is *not* to exhibit any racial classification – thus being consistent with the general assumption of five main races –, but to exemplify the validity of the *norma verticalis* (GH 1795, 204) – hence showing the three skulls as viewed from above. In both illustrations – that of the classification and that of the vertical norm – the skulls are placed at the same level side by side. Oddly, the reverse image of the medal consists exclusively of frontal or lateral views, hierarchically combined in a way suggesting the superiority of the Caucasian race: thus it is difficult to claim that

⁵ See *Die Blumenbach-Medaille von 1825* in <http://www.blumenbach-online.de/Einzelseiten/Medaille1825.php>. Accessed 26 August 2019.

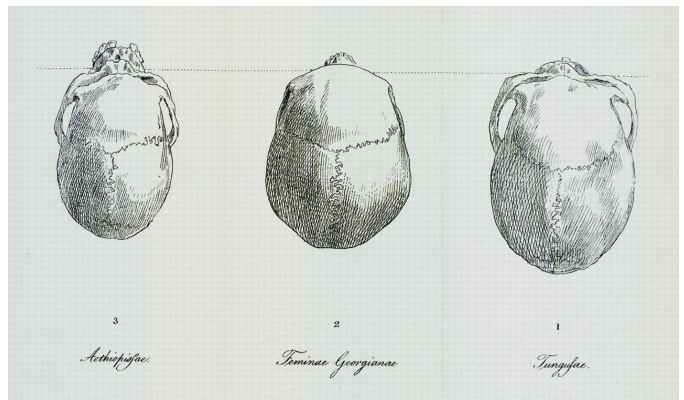
FIGURE 1
Johann Friedrich
Blumenbach.
Portrait by L. E. Grimm
1823



FIGURE 2
Commemorative Medal
1825



FIGURE 3
J. F. Blumenbach:
*DE generis humani
varietate nativa*
(1795): Tab. I



such an image faithfully represents Blumenbach's methodology or doctrine. If Blumenbach interpreted nature "by letting the bones speak", Rudolphi and his colleagues visualized such a 'speech' by representing its message in a distorted and simplified way. One of the aims of the present essay is to explain how and to what extent Blumenbach's writings made this reading possible: I have already mentioned the passage concerning *Haupttrassen* and *Übergänge*, later I return to Blumenbach's understanding of the Caucasian Race.

The last images I would like to mention are the banners elaborated for the homepage of the great German digitalization project of all Blumenbach's writings and collections. In the older one [Figure 4] (2010), Blumenbach's signature joins his face in Grimm's portrait to the lateral sections of a skull; but now the skull serves as bookend for a row of books. In other words, Blumenbach remains universally associated with his interest for the skulls. However, the contemporary approach to Blumenbach's work and personality regards his cranium research more as an object of historical interest than of current scientific validity: the project does not aim to put forward once again his physical anthropology. The new one [Figure 5] (2018) has no longer ironical or dialectical approach to cranial anthropology: a pre-ordered sequence of images is linked to corresponding digitalized objects, nevertheless, the starting image of the banner is always the synoptic view of both faces of the medal of 1825. The message seems to be in this case that the modern technical innovation of digitalization makes possible an academic re-appropriation, a sort of re-institutionalization, of Blumenbach's legacy in 'his' Göttingen and – thanks to the Web – from 'his' Göttingen into the wide world. But there is no warning on the website that the now 'reloaded' old, official, academic image of Blumenbach transmitted a partial, equivocal and ideologically questionable interpretation of Blumenbach's anthropology. By contextualizing these images I have shown in a striking way how ambivalent the reception and interpretation of Blumenbach's legacy can be. Indeed, one and the same digitalization project, in 2010 and 2018 has elaborated two images – which are divergent and at the same time deeply immersed in the history of science and in Blumenbach's personal iconography – apparently endorsing a problematic interpretation of his racial classification, presented as representative for all his anthropology⁶.

⁶ See for a further, astonishing evidence the controversy between Thomas Junker and Stephen J. Gould on the visualization of Blumenbach's racial classification in Gould's essay on Blumenbach (Junker 1998 and Gould 1998).



FIGURE 4 – www.blumenbach-online.de: Banner 2010

BLUMENBACH – ONLINE

Blumenbach Werke Sammlungen Projekt

Medaille zu Blumenbachs Promotionsjubiläum 1825, - Abb. zum Vergrößern anklicken.

Johann Friedrich Blumenbach – online

Das Projekt „Johann Friedrich Blumenbach – online“ bearbeitet die Publikationen und die naturhistorischen Sammlungen des Göttinger Naturforschers Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840). Ziel ist eine digitale Ausgabe seiner Werke und der erhaltenen Sammlungsobjekte.

„Johann Friedrich Blumenbach – online“ ist ein Langzeitprojekt im Rahmen des Akademienprogramms der [Union der deutschen Akademien der Wissenschaften](#), angesiedelt bei der [Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen](#).

Die Internetseite www.blumenbach-online.de informiert über J. F. Blumenbach und über online-Ressourcen für die Blumenbach-Forschung, stellt die bisher erarbeiteten Materialien in einer vorläufigen Form zur Verfügung und präsentiert das Projekt.

Startseite Übersicht Impressum Datenschutzerklärung Kontakt

FIGURE 5 – www.blumenbach-online.de: Banner 2018

2. ANTHROPOLOGY AS A PART OF NATURAL HISTORY: MUTABILITY OF NATURE AND THE STUDY OF HUMAN NATURE AND VARIETIES

If a synthetic definition of Blumenbach's concept of natural history is needed, then likely it is this: a science of natural mutability. According to Blumenbach, all nature is subject to change: earth, rocks, plants, animals. The sheer diversity of human beings is first and foremost an expression of such mutability, and therefore of its being a natural phenomenon, even if not all causes of human diversity are directly natural (some are effects of the technical-cultural transformations by which nature is subjected to human activity). To define this vast phenomenon of production of races and intra-specific varieties, Blumenbach adopts a term, typical of the coeval natural history, though at that time it was not necessarily connected with theories of degradation, literally indicating varieties (e.g. created by grafting in agriculture or breeding in zootechny) di-verging from or de-veloping out of a standard original kind: he speaks of "degeneration" (*Degeneration* or *Ausartung*)⁷. The complexity of this phenomenon and the interactions of all the many factors concurring within it, afford no general systematic account of the action of these many factors, neither in mechanical terms nor as a two-way causality. Nevertheless, Blumenbach believes that is plausible 1) to consider a plurality of principal causes, and 2) to prove their impact on specific objects of inquiry⁸. Regarding the first point, Blumenbach – like Georges Buffon – identifies these causes in climate, nutrition and forms of life. Regarding the second, he focuses on domesticated animals, especially on pigs. He does so for epistemological reasons and as an argumentative and theoretical strategy. Thanks to its genealogical traits (unanimously accepted by scientists), its omnivorous character, and its widespread presence on planet Earth, not to mention its being the closest to man among the domesticated animals, the pig appears to provide the most meaningful and pertinent object to investigate "degeneration" and its causes⁹.

Such an association between human being and pig induced the author of the most quoted history of anthropology in German academia, Wilhelm Emil Mühlmann, to praise Blumenbach as a "precursor" to Eugen Fischer's theory of domestication. For Mühlmann, a student of Fischer, "the domestication thesis was [...] in and for itself older [...], Posidon, Blumenbach and Lawrence had cultivated similar thoughts [...]. But Fischer founded it according to genetic theory" (Mühlmann 1968, 59, 188-189). Wondering to what extent Blumenbach

⁷ See for example BN 1790, 33-49.

⁸ BN 1790, 35; BN 1806, 29.

⁹ BN 1790, 37-39, 47-48, 54; BN 1806, 33-35, 38, 46-47.

could be interpreted in such a way, in his comprehensive and unparalleled history of science and culture at the University of Göttingen from Enlightenment to Romanticism, Luigi Marino gave two skeptical answers (L. Marino 1975, 120). On a philological level, he stated how difficult it was to solve the problem with the very few available data offered by Blumenbach. On a theoretical level, he added that Blumenbach seemed much more interested in the classification of races. In my view, neither Mühlmann nor L. Marino got the point right.

Mühlmann's interpretation is grounded on a reconstruction of Blumenbach's path of thought: Blumenbach would have first (1779) interpreted racial differences along the lines of the traditional doctrine of 'environment' (climate, nutrition, etc.), while only later (from 1789 on) he would have associated the diversity of human races with the "degeneration" of domestic animals. However, in fact none of Blumenbach's writings present human racial marks in perfect parallelism with marks of domestic animals. This is only a negative and indirect argument against Mühlmann's reconstruction, but a direct source, the *Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte*, attests that Blumenbach's research on domestic animals was not meant to replace that of degeneration. On the contrary, the former became a confirmation of the latter precisely because the "degeneration" of domestic animals helped to prove the force of the principal causes of degeneration.

Most decisive, the *Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte* proves that Blumenbach limits the assimilation of man to domestic animals the very moment he affirms it. When Blumenbach defines the human being as the most perfect among domestic animals, he also points out that only the human animal can be called truly domestic, essentially and primarily (BN 1790, 48). In contrast to all non-human animals that humans domesticate (and in contrast to what is presumed by any theory of domestication), the human being does not originate from an isolated and savage state of nature¹⁰. Against a contemporaneous background,

¹⁰ As to the direct and immediate historical context of Blumenbach's assumption, to claim, after Rousseau, that society was the proper original naturally domestic state of mankind, implies at least reference to Voltaire, *La philosophie de l'histoire* [1765], Chap. 7: "Entendez-vous par sauvages des animaux à deux pieds, marchant sur les mains dans le besoin, isolés, errant dans les forêts, *Salvatici*, *Selvagi*, s'accouplant à l'aventure, oubliant les femelles auxquelles ils se sont joints, ne connaissant ni leurs fils ni leurs pères; vivant en brutes, sans avoir ni l'instinct ni les ressources des brutes? On a écrit que cet état est le véritable état de l'homme, et que nous n'avons fait que dégénérer misérablement depuis que nous l'avons quitté. Je ne crois pas que cette vie solitaire, attribuée à nos premiers pères, soit dans la nature humaine. Nous sommes, si je ne me trompe, au premier rang (s'il est permis de le dire) des animaux qui vivent en troupe, comme les abeilles, les fourmis, les castors, les oies, les poules, les moutons, etc. Si on rencontre une abeille errant, devra-t-on conclure que cette abeille est dans l'état de pure nature, et que celles qui travaillent dans la ruche ont dégénéré? [...] Ne voyons-nous pas en effet que tous les animaux, ainsi que tous les autres êtres, exécutent invariablement la loi que la nature donne à leur espèce? L'oiseau fait son nid, comme les astres fournissent leur course, par un principe qui ne change jamais. Comment l'homme seul aurait-il changé? S'il eût été destiné à vivre solitaire comme les autres animaux carnassiers, aurait-il pu contredire la loi de la nature

since Blumenbach claims that the original condition of human beings is nothing but a social and cultural one; he thus stands in continuity with both the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauß (who accordingly quotes the corresponding passage from the *Beyträge* in his pioneering study of the elementary structure of kinship: Lévi-Strauss 1969, 5) and the Philosophical Anthropology of Arnold Gehlen (who maintained that for natural reasons the human being is a cultural being)¹¹. In fact, Blumenbach's definition of the human animal underlines the peculiar place, or better the unique specificity, of man within the animal kingdom. Ultimately, the true meaning of the definition lies in the fact that man, physiologically speaking¹², is the most plastic and open to the world of all animals, the least dependent on or determined by nature's surroundings, the most open to the greatest differentiations.

To identify and classify these differentiations objectively, Blumenbach elaborates a method based on three rules¹³. The first rule requires always considering the general physiology of organized bodies: man is one living organism among others, and the understanding of man must be based on comparing it to the structures of other species' organism¹⁴. The second rule elaborates the first: it rejects direct comparisons between extreme cases, because differences blend into each other between one case and the next, so that, if intermediate states are overlooked, the extremes become too great to be accounted for within the same interval¹⁵. Many elements constituting the

jusqu'à vivre en société? et s'il était fait pour vivre en troupe, comme les animaux de basse-cour, eût-il pu d'abord pervertir sa destinée jusqu'à vivre pendant des siècles en solitaire? Il est perfectible; et de là on a conclu qu'il s'est perverti. Mais pourquoi n'en pas conclure qu'il s'est perfectionné jusqu'au point où la nature a marqué les limites de sa perfection?" (<https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/toutvoltaire/navigate/703/1/8/>, 111). See also Montesquieu, *Lettres Persanes* [1721] XCIV and THN [1739], 234: "In all creatures, that prey not upon others, and are not agitated with violent passions, there appears a remarkable desire of company, which associates them together, without any advantages they can ever propose to reap from their union. This is still more conspicuous in man, as being the creature of the universe, who has the most ardent desire of society, and is fitted for it by the most advantages". *Ed. note*.

¹¹ See Gehlen 1983a, b and 2004. Gehlen explicitly refutes the hypothesis of a wild natural state of human being for anthropological, sociological and political reasons in Gehlen 1983c, 130-133.

¹² BN 1790, 50-55, especially 54-55.

¹³ BN 1790, 59-61; BN 1806, 51-54.

¹⁴ John Locke had already developed this comparative approach to the *principium individuationis* of the human being. The identity of the same man "is nothing but a participation of the same continued life by constantly fleeting particles of matter in succession vitally united to the same organized body" (*Essay*, Book II, Chap. XXVII, § 6) and as such does not differ from the identity of animals and vegetables (*ivi*, §§ 4 and 5); moreover, it implies reference to the sensed aspect of the human organism, that is, its figure. *Ed. note*.

¹⁵ See furthermore the observation in BN 1806, 69, which is insofar important, as it states that, in the study of the differences between the dissimilar varieties, one must consider the characters as a whole

theoretical basis of this rule are obviously reminiscent of Buffon's nominalistic and anti-metaphysical paradigm, revisited and expanded by Herder and Forster against Kant – although Herder and Forster expanded and generalized Buffon's paradigm to include all of nature¹⁶. These elements are: 1) the use of the term *Nüance* (*shade*); 2) the very idea that the human species, as any other species, comparatively consists of a gradual series of internal differentiations; 3) the idea that the separations among such intraspecific differentiations are in reality “nothing more than very arbitrary boundaries among the varieties” (*keine andere als sehr willkürliche Grenzen zwischen diesen Spielarten*: BN 1790, 81). Incidentally, these elements are crucial to defining the status of classification as inherently different from the mirror of nature. The third rule recommends building an anthropological collection, an empirical data base, that should be as strong, comprehensive and focused as possible, because our knowledge of natural history rests on “intuitions”, which means here a *sensible*, sensory notion. In this context, Blumenbach recalls in his own original way Galileo's image of the book of nature: this point is of such a tremendous historical and methodological relevance that it deserves closer consideration.

and not just some of them – not only the skin color, for example, and another couple of things, but the whole, because the organism, writes Blumenbach, is a system, a natural system (“*natürliches System*”). See also BN 1806, 77, where the comparison between an ugly specimen of Negro and the aesthetic ideal of classical Greece is disputed, here with reference to the shape of the face: this procedure would indeed contradict the rule in question, to which Blumenbach refers here, and would therefore not be scientific. As it will happen with regard to the beauty of the Caucasian race, which I will discuss later, here too Blumenbach relativizes the belief that blacks would be ugly while whites would be beautiful – that is, he relativizes the idea of a racial exclusivity of aesthetic values.

¹⁶ It is worth noting that in the 1752 Preface to the second volume of the German translation of Buffon's *Historie der Natur* (published separately in a French Translation in 1751) Haller criticizes Buffon's theory of an organic active (nutritive, generative) homeomeric and non-teleological matter, universally diffused within all animal and vegetal substances, equally suitable to become a man, animal or plant. At first, Haller acknowledges that Buffon's opinion: “derives its greatest probability from the universal conformity of Nature as a whole. [...] From salts to snowflakes, to the trees of Diana, to the feathery plumes of ice, there extends an uninterrupted chain of organisations, which without any other artistry (*art*) are produced by the force of attraction alone” (Lyon & Sloan 1981, 315). Nevertheless, he remarks that Buffon cannot explain the ‘right’ order followed by organized particles which correctly join separated parts of a body *according to an unvariable plan*, stressing that he needs a force which has foresight, can make a choice, has a goal, and that against the laws of blind combination always and unfailingly brings about the same end (*ivi*, 320). As regards organic formations, Haller emphasizes (in a passage also quoted in Herder's *Ideen*, Book 7, §1) the infinite diversity within individuals of the same species, which makes it “almost impossible to provide a description”. Distinctive singular empirical appearances cannot be composed in a unique picture without the help of a hypothetical leading thread (*Leitfaden*) bringing order into observed peculiarities and filling the blanks of truth. As Haller had stated in his Preface to the first volume of Buffon's *Historie der Natur*: “All the parts of human science would become nothing but fragments (*Fragmenten*) and individual shreds without connection and unification (*einzelne Bruchstücke ohne Zusammenhang und ohne Verbindung*), if we did not fill in the missing parts with probabilities (*mit dem Wahrscheinlichen*), and construct a building instead of a ruin” (Lyon & Sloan 1981, 301). *Ed. note.*

3. THE BOOK OF NATURE AND THE END OF NATURAL HISTORY: ON DIRECT AND INDIRECT KNOWLEDGE OF NATURE

Blumenbach's variation on the image of the book of nature, taken from the first part of the *Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte*, where it appears in contexts and wordings which were modified between the first and second editions, abundantly illustrates the epistemological and cultural turning point that Wolf Lepenies would call, two hundred years later, the end of natural history (Lepenies 1980) – which is to say the transition, occurring swiftly in the last decades of the eighteenth century, from natural history as description of nature to natural history as the historicity, temporality, and mutability of nature through time. Lepenies, however, neglects not only the *Beyträge*, but all Blumenbach's work: he cites Blumenbach very rarely, and mostly in relation to Kant. This is all the more incomprehensible since Blumenbach was *the* most famous and widely read historian of nature at that time. What is more, in the *Beyträge* Lepenies would have found not only countless examples of Blumenbach's great contribution to establishing the method representative of the new natural history, but also splendid corroboration of the value of his own thesis, according to which the end of natural history coincides with the transition from nature, understood and read as a body of texts, to nature as the book of nature – a field of observations and experimentation. In the first edition of the first part of the *Beyträge*, the book of nature is recalled in part of Chapter 11, which responds word by word to Meiners' critique of the comparative study of skulls of different populations (BN 1790, 62-78). Although this chapter was removed from the second edition, the section that interests us, together with a couple further significant passages, is incorporated into Chapter 10, now titled "On anthropological collections" (BN 1806, 55-66). The elimination of the previous Chapter 11 should not be interpreted as symptomatic of a reconsideration, nor as an admission of defeat, by Blumenbach. Instead, because the key issue in his controversy with Meiners is defining the correct method of anthropology, it appears much more likely that Blumenbach, reassured by the consensus now achieved by his anthropology, believes his exposition can simply omit polemics addressing his old opponent.

Meiners had questioned Blumenbach's assessment of entire populations based on the shape of a single bodily part, and of this same bodily part on the basis of single bones. Lastly, as one reads a bit later in his critique, Meiners succinctly questioned Blumenbach's pretension to classify the human species on the basis of single physical traits. Against such an alleged generalization of a single anthropological-physical criterion, Meiners indicated other criteria, for instance historic-geographical ones. Blumenbach shares Meiners' doubts, but he argues that Meiners' objections do not pertain to his own methods, because he

does not stretch the natural method beyond reliability, control and experience¹⁷. Regarding the limits of intuitive knowledge, and its necessary integration with reliable information and others' experiences, Blumenbach fully agrees with Meiners: This praxis is adopted by all scholars of natural history. Blumenbach's point is that the scholar of natural history must not renounce direct experience and intuitive knowledge – that is, in this case, the comparative and direct study of skulls – merely because such experience will never be complete. It is the scholar's "mandatory obligation" (*unabbittliche Verpflichtung*) – Blumenbach dictates – "to do anything in their power to acquire first of all as much personal experience as possible" (BN 1790, 69).

This idea of expanding the field of possible direct experience while remaining within the limits of experience itself shows some analogies to Kant's tenets in the First *Critique*, in particular with reference to the crucial emphasis on direct experience, whereas the idea of critically recurring to indirect experience when direct experience no longer helps – i.e., a critical stance towards indirect sources – seems closer to Herder's and Forster's approaches. Precisely regarding the relations among direct experience of nature, indirect experience of nature, and knowledge of nature, in the first edition of the first part of the *Beyträge* Blumenbach introduces the image of the great book of nature (BN 1790, 69-70).

In the second edition, the scenario changes; Blumenbach limits himself to expounding the three rules of his method, using the image of the book of nature to explain the third rule, which calls for preparing an anthropological collection as broad and as diverse as possible. Here he distinguishes between the direct, intuitive knowledge that the observer draws from nature, and

¹⁷ In particular, on the one hand, his research would be based on findings of different provenance and nature (including the indirect ones, of "reliable observers"), which are evaluated and cross-checked: in this regard, Blumenbach's thesis is that certain congruities among the data cannot be reasonably explained as pure accidents when the origins, ages, and types of converging findings are so different. On the other hand, he explains that he uses the findings for the purposes for which they are suitable, providing then some examples: craniology would not be suitable for determining the diet adopted by various peoples, but it would be very useful when it comes to the question of the "national formation of human varieties" (BN 1790, 68). Generally Blumenbach states that "there is no more fervent friend of the natural method in natural history, and particularly in that section of natural history that concerns the human stock, than myself; since so often, and precisely in relation to the society in question, I have warned against judgments based on the formation of a single body part; nor have I in general, however, used a piece of my collection for the history of man other than for what this was good" (BN 1790, 67). Blumenbach takes the opportunity to separate himself – and his discipline – from the summarizing and generic spirit of those writers who simply put together information from travel reports. Here the great importance of the *anschauliche Kenntnis* is reiterated, which in the case of physical anthropology is obtained through the direct analysis of the physical structure of the human being, compared with that of other animals and, when it is not possible to directly experience such structure, with the data provided by other observers deemed reliable with good reason.

indirect knowledge – i.e., information gathered from other people: he speaks of the former as the “revealed book of nature” (in the first edition, he had written instead of “the word revealed in the book of nature”)¹⁸, and of the latter as “a sort of symbolic books”.

To my knowledge, the only scholar to quote and highlight this passage is Bruce Baum, who claims that it indicates that at the beginning of the nineteenth century Blumenbach “reflected on the ‘symbolic’ character of any reading of nature” (Baum 2006, 91). In my view, Baum misinterpreted the passage, likely misled by Bendyshe’s nineteenth-century English translation of the *Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte*, Part one, second edition. Bendyshe did not understand what Blumenbach meant by the expression *symbolische Bücher*, but, since he had to translate it, he opted for “a kind of symbolical writing” (AT 298), thus completely obscuring its meaning. The original expression has, in fact, a precise theological meaning with which Blumenbach plays. Already extant in the Patristic tradition, in the Protestant theology of the end of the seventeenth century the expression “symbolic books” designates those texts that various Christian denominations considered exclusively their own (e.g., the various catechisms of the Protestant Churches). During the eighteenth century, the authority attributed to such symbolic books by orthodox Protestant theologians was problematized first by the Pietists and then questioned even more by the Neologists (Beutel 2009, 113). If one considers the enormous importance given to experience and sensation within the Neological milieu, it cannot be by chance that Blumenbach adopted that very image to question the pretense of indirect knowledge to subordinate direct knowledge to itself. Therefore, the meaning of the analogy between the relation of the believer to the Bible and to those symbolic books, and of the natural scientist to the knowledge of nature, is that, as the believer seeking God must stick to the Bible upon which the truth value of the various catechisms depends, so the

¹⁸ This, however, is one of the two noteworthy changes to this paragraph made between the first and the second edition; the other concerns the way of dealing with indirect sources and their validity. The latter modification emphasizes the need for a critical attitude toward indirect sources and further warns against the identification or total interchangeability of indirect sources with intuitable reality. The former highlights the distance from a theistic and traditional idea of God’s relationship with creation, that is, the disambiguation of natural history and theology. See BN 1790, 69-70: “Alle die Nachrichten von noch so fähigen und glaubwürdigen Zeugen, sind im Grunde doch für den Wahrheitssuchenden Naturforscher nichts mehr und nichts weniger als eine Art symbolischer Bücher, die er mit guten [*sic*] Gewissen nie anders als quatenus unterschreiben kan [*sic*], in so fern sie nemlich mit dem geoffenbarten Wort im Buch der Natur übereinstimmen”) and BN 1806, 53: “Denn to die Nachrichten die man darüber, wenn auch mit möglichst critischer Vorsicht aus andern schöpft, sind im Grunde doch für den wahrheitssuchenden Natureshoppers nichts mehr nichts weiter als eine Art symbolischer Bücher, die er mit gutem Gewissen nicht anders als quatenus unterschreiben kann, in so fern sie nämlich mit dem geoffenbarten Buch der Natur übereinstimmen [...]”. The remainder of the text coincides.

reader of the book of nature seeking truth must gather as much direct, sensible knowledge as possible to be able to read and understand such a book – nature – and to grasp the truth; only knowledge found in *this* book can be endorsed, received, and accepted. The reference text has now become, permanently, nature, to which statements of the other books – those of men – must conform.

4. THE EVOLUTION OF BLUMENBACH'S CLASSIFICATION: MAIN TENDENCIES AND PROBLEMS

On these premises Blumenbach founds and develops the process of defining and revising the classification of human intra-specific varieties which had interested him from the beginning and which covers almost half a century. We can uncover the guidelines, the turning points or the contradictions of such process by comparing the numerous editions of *De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa*, *Handbuch der Naturgeschichte*, *Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte* and *Abbildungen naturhistorischer Gegenstände*.

The first tendency to be noted here is terminological: The word 'race' had been very controversial in the mid '80s¹⁹. Herder had rejected it as ignoble, while Kant had tried to elaborate a conceptually rigorous definition of the term²⁰. Blumenbach, who initially preferred the expression 'variety' (*Varietät* or *Spielart*), was persuaded by Kant's definition and adopted the word *Rasse* explicitly and systematically from the 1795 onward (HN 1797, 23). Most likely, he had theoretical reasons to do so, though he may also have been motivated by strategic considerations. On the one hand, Kant, whose philosophy was the most successful in Germany in the '90s, had favorably accepted Blumenbach's doctrine of the organized living organism and by so doing had given Blumenbach's research the philosophical legitimacy it needed²¹. On the other hand, Kant's

¹⁹ See M. Marino 2010.

²⁰ On Alexander von Humboldt's attitude (e.g. in *Kosmos*, 1845) towards the belief in the existence of nobler and lower races of men see *supra* Proß' contribution to the present volume (Chap. 1, § 4). *Ed. note*.

²¹ Consider Kant's favouring Blumenbach's "inscrutable principle of an original organization" (i.e. the hypothesis of a *Bildungstrieb*), as *rationally* representing things initially as possible only in accord with the causality of ends (*Kritik der Urtheilskraft* §81, A.A. V, 424); or Kant's unifying theory of the origin of all the racial diversity of humankind, not from the authoritative assertion of the empirical "fact" of one original couple, but from the (rational) *idea* of one original *Menschenstamm*, in view of the full development of all our potentialities as a specie (*Über den Gebrauch teleologischer Principien in der Philosophie* (1788), A.A. VIII, 178, Anm.). Already in the *Bestimmung des Begriffs einer Menschenrasse* (1785) Kant had contrasted the inward rational necessity of hypotheses about natural reproduction which unify teleology and mechanism (*à la* Blumenbach) to the hypothesis of the archaeologist of nature, inspired by comparative anatomy, to account for a coherent kinship

writings on the concept of race between 1777 and 1788 rigorously restricted the definition of the term to the hereditary transmission of physical, and only physical properties, thus nurturing the illusion of protecting human reason and liberty from the threat of naturalism and biological reductionism. Blumenbach was certainly a humanist and mobilized his entire anthropology against the enslavement and marginalization of people and social groups, as his stand in favor of the equal human, intellectual, and moral dignity of the so-called Negro incontrovertible demonstrates²².

We may, however, hypothesize the existence of a further theoretical reason, even more general, at the heart of Blumenbach's decision to replace *Varietät* and *Spielart* with *Rasse*. Expressions such as *Varietät* and *Spielart* have the dual feature of not being specific enough and of underscoring especially the superficial, accidental, casual, uncertain, and arbitrary aspect of observed phenomena, almost as if nature played with its manifestations. These expressions somehow suggest that the object of study was inessential, secondary, and either completely or in part irreducible to a rational explanation. However, Kant's definition of the concept of race, based on the assumption of a constant and cohesive set of physical features, presumes an identifiable, objective content which can be subjected to verifiable knowledge. In this way, Kant's definition contributes to shifting the conversation on nature and its diversity into the camp of natural sciences, and to developing an adequate, corresponding categorical repertoire. Because of that definition, the terminology and conceptuality of anthropology reached a crossroads, and Blumenbach, who had been active in that research field for years, would eventually have to take one or the other. Since his work was clearly headed towards founding anthropology as an empirical science of nature, at some point the choice to adopt Kant's expression must have appeared to him entirely natural and understandable.

of all organic beings as natural ends in terms of the Earth's production of organic beings. In that context Kant had declared his fundamental principle: to deny the validity of any such *corrupting influence of the power of imagination* on [any valid account of] the reproductive work of Nature (A.A. VIII, 97) criticizing on this basis both Herder's and Forster's idea of the generation of organic beings from the womb of one single, universal Mother. In a footnote to §80 of the third *Critique*, famous for its lasting influence upon Goethe, Kant regards the unifying hypothesis of the *Urmutter* as a risky, "daring adventure" (*gewagtes Abenteuer*) of reason. Indeed, conceptually speaking, to regard the Earth as *Urmutter* is nothing but to forge, through imagination, an ideal object of cognition which *apparently* conforms to the rational standards of architectonic completeness and organic relation between whole and parts. For Kant, this ideal object executes reason's demand for completeness of principles to systematise and to unify empirical knowledge, but *only in terms of a subjective kind of judgment*. Moreover, this theory cannot unify teleology and the mechanical production of the multifarious species (as Blumenbach's principle does) and the archaeologist cannot pretend to have made the production of the animal and plant kingdoms independent of the condition of final causes. *Ed.'s note.*

²² See therefore BN 84-118.

A second tendency is a gradual shift from a simple, unorganized list of anatomical traits to a more regular and systematic one (skin color, hair color, typology of hair, facial and cranial traits). Parallel to this, the third tendency is toward increasing concentration on physical data, anatomical as well as geographical, to the exclusion of cultural and theological characteristics – such as the language of some populations or the identification of Adam as progenitor of humans – which had initially been accepted and included²³. Notwithstanding, one statement is explicitly grounded on cultural values and remains constant in the *Handbuch*: “according to the European concepts of beauty”, the Caucasian race has the most beautiful form of skull and face²⁴.

Why did Blumenbach not exclude this factor as well? If the scientific legitimacy and validity of his classification depends on a methodology as objective and as physically oriented as possible, then this datum weakens the entire theoretical foundation of his system of classification. In my view, the reason is that for him the Caucasian cranium was indeed the best proportioned physically, which means that the cultural statement concerning Caucasian beauty has in Blumenbach’s eyes a physical, objective, that is, geometrical reference – a reference of decisive conceptual and systematic importance for Blumenbach’s anthropology. Against the backdrop of the theory of climate and temperaments, on the one hand, and on the basis of considerations pertaining physiology, on the other, Blumenbach in fact tends to believe that populations living in temperate climates are more proportionately formed, that the change in skin tone from white to black is easier than vice versa, and that temperate climates are more welcoming to the primordial human species. Craniological researches based on the criterion of *norma verticalis* confirm this picture through the discovery of three ideal shapes corresponding to three of the main racial groups: the extremely symmetrical and nearly round or spherical shape (Caucasian); one that developed in width, flattened and roughly square, narrow and squeezed on the sides (Mongolian); and one that developed in length (Ethiopian).

To sum up, on the one hand, Blumenbach was aware that equating harmony of proportions with beauty is a cultural heritage of the European tradition, particularly of the Greek tradition. On the other, he was not totally aware of how culturally and theoretically conditioned were both his own assumptions that the Georgian cranium could be seen as a model of the Caucasian cranium in general, and that, due to the (presumed) objectivity and perfection of its proportions,

²³ Cf. HN 1788, 60-61, and HN 1791, 54-55.

²⁴ HN 1797, 61 (as well as HN 1830, 56). In earlier editions of the *Handbuch*, Blumenbach affirms more in general that the conformation of the Caucasians is the “best” one according to the above mentioned parameters of beauty (cf. for instance HN 1788, 61).

the Georgian skull helped to classify the Caucasian race as the primordial and intermediate one among all races (*Stamm-Rasse, Mittel-Rasse*).

It is important to keep in mind that such a conceptual pair was not a point of departure, but a point of arrival for Blumenbach's anthropology. When in the first edition of the *Handbuch* he introduces the race which he would later call "Caucasian", which included all Europeans, he speaks of this race as the "largest" and the "original" one, with no assumptions, however, about any genealogical implications between this and all the other units of his classification (HN 1779, 63). When in the fourth edition of the *Handbuch*, the human race's ancestor is no longer Adam, but much more prosaically, a common and primal race, such a progenitor-race is not identified with any of the five units of the classification, and the initial attributes of "largest" and "original" disappear for good from any descriptions of the first unit (HN 1788, 60; 1791, 54). Only after 1795, that is, after the third edition of the dissertation, does the *Handbuch* offer the first, though temporary, definition of the Caucasian race as the "median" or "progenitor-like" race (HN 1797, 63). From 1799 on, the definition is basically final, although the formulation significantly remains somewhat uncertain and equivocal ("the so-called", "or"): "the Caucasian race has to be assumed as the so-called progenitor or intermediate race" (HN 1799, 64).

It is noteworthy that the concept of progenitor race defines the Caucasian race in terms of descent, namely in fundamentally genealogical terms, while the concept of *Mittel-Rasse* defines it in morphological and comparative terms. Blumenbach likely deemed these two approaches to converge and, therefore, to be equivalent; however, in the theoretical horizon laid down by his idea of nature (which was still rooted in eighteenth century thought), this equivalence cannot persist without generating contradictions or calling into question the general theoretical framework. If, indeed, nature is a continuum of shades, against which every distinction is arbitrary (BN 1790, 81), then every classification – even more so, that of the most plastic species, which is the most prone to degeneration – does not count as mirror of nature, but only as a modelling based on the perception and typification of some particularly significant instances. This is also what Blumenbach maintains in his own classification in the context of his own natural history. However, when a component of the classification is not only an intermediate model between two extremes, but is also, because of its intermediate position, the concrete, historical, and natural point of departure of the equally concrete, historical, and natural process of 'degeneration' of the human species, then one may well wonder whether the continuum of history has not been made to be discrete and the classification is still only typological – which is to ask whether or to what extent the relation between typology and genealogy is still solidly grounded theoretically and methodologically. This issue

signals not only a theoretical and methodological difficulty, but also an historical transition between two eras and between two different ways of understanding and practicing natural history.

5. SKULLS, NATURAL-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS AND EXEMPLARITIES: ON THE WAYS OF ILLUSTRATING HUMAN VARIETY

The illustrations of the preceding section indicate how Blumenbach and his scientific enterprise were seen and represented during his life and in the history of anthropology: references to his craniological studies are dominant. Now I would like to conclude with other images concerning anthropological data taken from Blumenbach's writings. Among those illustrations, the Table II of the *Dissertation* in the third edition of 1795 [Figure 6] is probably the most famous and most frequently cited: it is a strictly typological and purely physical representation, consisting of only osteological objects, extracted from the anatomical context. We clearly see the status of the Caucasian race as the intermediate race by virtue of the harmony of proportions. This table commonly stands for the whole classification and anthropology of Blumenbach, but actually it aimed to illustrate not the five human varieties as such, but the five varieties of skulls which are the most enlightening research objects in the study of human variety (GH 1795, 198).

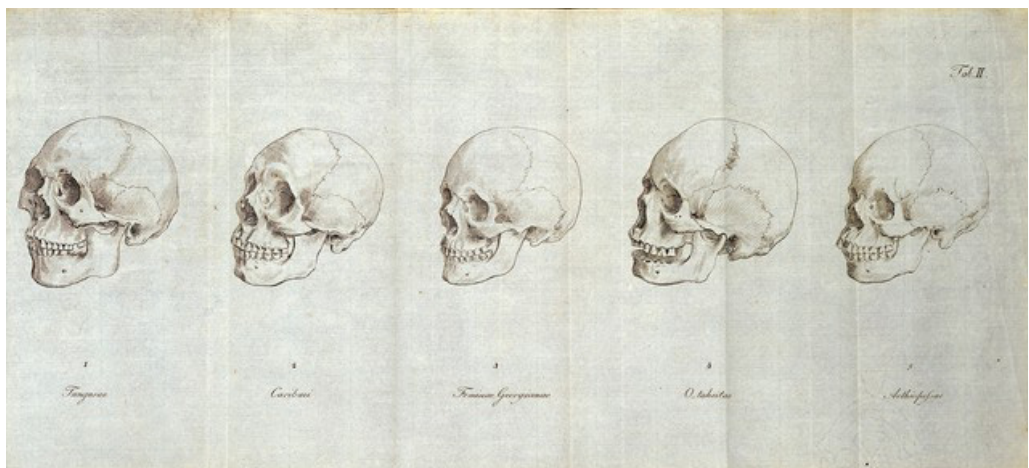


FIGURE 6 – J. F. Blumenbach: *De generis humani varietate nativa* (1795): Tab. II

Blumenbach's writings contain a further, far less known, yet more comprehensive image, in which craniological data are considered and included in the representation, though becoming altogether secondary: this image aims to illustrate the five principal varieties of mankind; it is the sequence of five vignettes in Part One of the *Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte* [Figs. 7.1-7.5]²⁵. Here the prototype of each single race is presented as a whole in its physical entirety as well as in its social dimension, defined essentially by its own natural and cultural context. Conditioned by today's predominant cultural paradigm of natural sciences, one might suppose that only the table has scientific value, while the vignettes are meant to be mere decorative illustrations. This assumption would be utterly false. Who commissioned these vignettes and why?

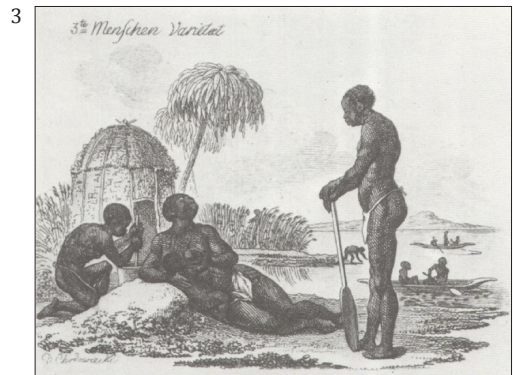
The epistolary of Blumenbach with his friend Dieterich, future editor of the *Beyträge*, and with Daniel Nikolaus Chodowiecki, the author of the vignettes, allows us to establish that Blumenbach conceived them as an essential part of his anthropological project, and that he took care of them in every detail, giving accurate instructions on the basis of this project. Indeed, on 17 December 1781, Blumenbach writes to Chodowiecki, showing a deference suggesting the prestige of the artist he approaches as well as attesting the esteem he wished to convey:

Most illustrious, allow me to beg the help of your skillful hand, not for the mere beautification, but rather eminently for the explanation and clarification of a text that I publish with the publishing house of our Mr. Dietrich [*sic*] on the Natural History of the Human Race. I wish, in fact, to see drawn by you, most illustrious, in as many vignettes, the five main races or varieties into which I have divided the entire human race²⁶.

²⁵ Neither Schiebinger 2004² nor Bindman 2002, who are to my knowledge the only scholars aware of and commenting upon this sequence, could provide the reader with a correct interpretation of the vignettes.

²⁶ BC 1, Nr. 176 (Blumenbach to Chodowiecki, Göttingen 17 December 1781), 289-290. Indeed, Blumenbach was not the only one at that time who believed that, in such circumstances – which is to say when the illustration was an eminent part of the intellectual project pursued by the author with his work – Chodowiecki was unique and irreplaceable. In a letter to Chodowiecki from Hamburg, dated September 18, 1779 (valuable also because it indicates the fame surrounding Chodowiecki as a “painter of the soul”), Joachim Heinrich Campe declares to be “about to get into print a *little psychology for children*, which would however still need his skillful hand to become what it must be. All that psychological knowledge, which children must already have before they can be taught religion and morals, I am in fact trying to make it so sensible and so intuitive that an eight-year-old child with normal abilities can grasp it. Images will be a means to their sensible rendering. But these images (if they really have to conform to the purpose) can be done, as far as I know, only by you, because what matters is that every feeling, every impulse, every passion that I describe, is expressed in the faces and positions of the figures so as to be recognizable to the point that, even if there were no text, they would be unmistakable” (Chodowiecki 1919, letter No. 359, pp. 260-263, here pp. 260-261).

FIGURE 7 (1.2.3.4.5)
 J. F. Blumenbach:
Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte.
Erster Theil (1790):
 Vignettes of the five human varieties
 by D. Chodowiecki



When sending to Dieterich the letter to forward to Chodowiecki, Blumenbach is even more adamant and categorical:

The vignettes – he cuts short to avoid misunderstanding – are not a mere ornament to the book; rather, they are *essential* and *necessary* [*wesentlich notwendig*] and could not be satisfactorily drawn by either Ender or Meil, but only by Chodow[iecki]²⁷.

²⁷ BC 1, Nr. 177 (Blumenbach to Dieterich, Göttingen, 17 December 1781), 293.

The order in which these names are mentioned mirrors an ascendant order of esthetical values and professional prestige consistently confirmed by later critics, in this case perfectly in accord with the perception of those artists in their own time. Indeed, Johann August Roßmäsler (1752-1783), who died prematurely a year later, was a youngster already active on the market yet devoid of his own style, who took Chodowiecki as his model without having been his disciple²⁸. In contrast, Georg Gustav Endtner (1754-1824) had a more solid professional profile, despite being a mediocre artist²⁹. Endtner had already had ongoing collaborations with various publishing houses (among them Breitkopf), and had just been nominated teaching assistant to the Chair of Drawing at the Leipzig Academy where he had studied. For his commissioned works, academic standing, and cultural impact, Johann Wilhelm Meil (1733-1805) was a more highly regarded artist, and Blumenbach had already commissioned him for the frontispiece of *Über den Bildungstrieb*. At the time, he was well connected and well known in the Frederician political, academic, and cultural environment, as one can infer from his collaborations with the royal porcelain factory, the Prussian court theater, and the artists involved in decorating the new castle of Sans-souci on the one hand, and with several writers on the other. Meil, who today is considered the main codifier of Prussian Anacreontic and the “appropriate book illustrator of Frederician Enlightenment”, made a contribution that was “crucial to the establishment of the drawing style inspired by the French tradition, without however arriving at the popular-bourgeois realism of a [...] Chodowiecki”³⁰. Meil was nominated Rector of the drawing class at the Berlin Academy of Fine arts in 1783, and then became the Academy’s director at Chodowiecki’s death, in 1801. Compared with Chodowiecki, to whom he had taught the art of engraving, Meil was however less original and innovative: in addition to remaining tied to the stylistic conventions of French ornamentation, he worked with an allegorical “limited group of elements”, selecting “according to the baroque principle of the emblem books, single elements full of symbolic significance”, that he then, “put together” in continuous variations³¹.

²⁸ See the entry “Roßmäsler” in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* 1889, Vol. 29, Rodde-v.Ruesch, pp. 267-268.

²⁹ To evaluate his distance from Chodowiecki, see Kirves 2012, 570. Comparing Chodowiecki’s 1779 *Kunst Kenner* original with the copy made by Endtner, Kirves points out the latter’s lack of creativity and the woodenness and inexpressiveness of his execution in light of the mastery and effectiveness exhibited by Chodowiecki, “painter of the soul” (*ibid.*) in his expressive rendering of the moods and psychological situations of the characters.

³⁰ See Deuter 1990, 653, which also provides a synthetic formulation of Meil’s aesthetic parable in the various phases of his artistic production.

³¹ Schumann 1999, 65-88, particularly 69-72.

At this point, outlining in detail the life and work of a much more complex and famous author such as Chodowiecki – who has been the subject of so many partial studies and monographies regarding his technique and aesthetics, as well as about the sociology and history of art and culture – would occupy too much space and would become somewhat superfluous³². The son of a Polish merchant of noble ancestry and a Swiss Huguenot, a man perfectly integrated into the French Protestant community and the French-derived Masonic community of Berlin, Chodowiecki had served an apprenticeship in commerce and had a non-academic artistic education, reaching success as an engraver in a sudden and sensational way at the end of the 1760s. From that moment, his fame and business steadily increased and consolidated, among other reasons due to the series on *Minna von Barnhelm*³³, with which he had renewed the calendar illustration of his times (he was also “principal illustrator” (Busch 1997, 77) of the *Göttinger Taschencaender* of Lichtenberg, published by Dietrich) through the representation of dramatic and contemporary subjects, and thanks to his collaboration to two cultural enterprises extremely representative of that historical moment: Lavater’s physiognomy, for whom he illustrated the *Physiognomische Fragmente*³⁴, and Basedow’s pedagogy, for whom he edited the *Elementarwerk*³⁵.

When Blumenbach approaches him, Chodowiecki is certainly the most sought after, acclaimed and lucrative engraver in Germany³⁶. However, the reason Blumenbach wants him and no other is theoretical. Chodowiecki dedicated his art to the principle of imitation of nature, and was acclaimed for his ability to show the interaction between the individual, corporeal expressiveness and the natural or social context of action. Thus he could provide Blumenbach the greatest guarantee of intellectual and aesthetic affinity. The vignettes for the *Beyträge* were commissioned precisely to illustrate the doctrine of human varieties as products of the interaction between the natural and the cultural, between specific natural traits (as shown by physical anthropology and geography) and specific cultural and social traits as identified by the new emerging science, ethnology.

Unfortunately, the *Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte* have not been much studied by the scholars of Blumenbach. Thus, no one has ever examined properly the

³² As a first introduction, see Bernt 2013.

³³ It is the focus of Kirves 2012.

³⁴ See in this regard at least Kirchner 1997.

³⁵ Schmitt 2007 and Schäfer 2013.

³⁶ See Selwyn 1997, 15: “in his requests for a fee, Chodowiecki always had a real self-awareness; in particular, one could not overlook the economic value of his illustrations [...]. That [...] they were more than favorable to the sale of the books and calendars that they embellished is demonstrated by numerous letters from authors and publishers who were willing to pay almost any price for them, and were very eager to pay half of his requested fee as an advance.”

relations between the sequence of the *Beyträge* and the Tables of the dissertation. Two answers are possible: either the Tables move beyond the vignettes and replace them, or the tables and vignettes are two faces of the same coin, two complementary ways to work on the same object. It seems to me for several reasons that the second answer is correct: first – from a philological point of view – when Blumenbach edits the first section of the *Beyträge* for the second edition, he corrects and updates his work in different ways (e.g., the origin of basalt, teleology, methodology, the classification itself), but feels no need to eliminate the vignettes. Second – and this is a theoretical remark – the tables and vignettes exemplify two essentially different types of approach to anthropology: one focuses on the causes of ‘degeneration’, the other is based on craniological investigation.

In Blumenbach these two types of approach coexist; a third sequence of images reinforces this assumption [Figs. 8-12]. The text from which it is taken, the *Abbildungen naturhistorischer Gegenstände* of 1796, is undoubtedly a publication having a scientific character and purpose; this is corroborated by Blumenbach’s mentions of it in his academic text *par excellence*, the *Handbuch der Naturgeschichte*, where the *Abbildungen* are referred to as an apparatus

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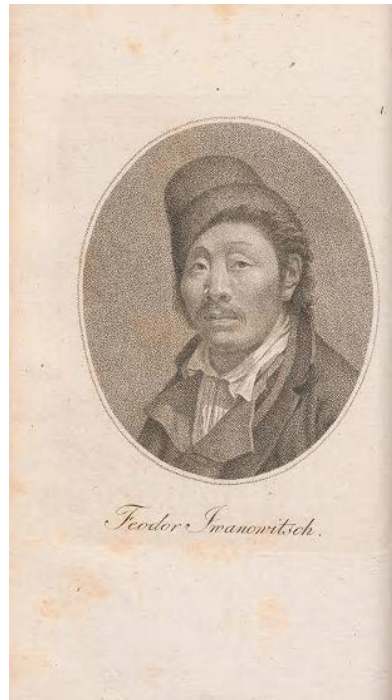
FIGURE 8 – J. F. Blumenbach: *Abbildungen naturhistorischer Gegenstände*, 1796-1810-1830. Feodor Iwanowitsch. Head representing the Mongolian race

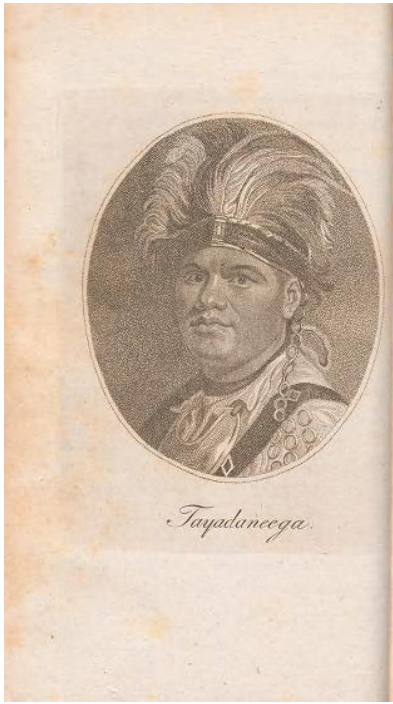
FIGURE 9 – J. F. Blumenbach, *Abbildungen naturhistorischer Gegenstände*, 1796-1810-1830. Tayadaneega. Head representing the American race

FIGURE 10 – J. F. Blumenbach, *Abbildungen naturhistorischer Gegenstände*, 1810-1830². Mahommed Jumla. Head representing the Caucasian race

FIGURE 11 – J. F. Blumenbach, *Abbildungen naturhistorischer Gegenstände*, 1796-1810-1830. Omai. Head representing the Malaysian race

FIGURE 12 – J. F. Blumenbach, *Abbildungen naturhistorischer Gegenstände*, 1796-1810-1830. Jaco[bus] Eliza [Elisa] Jo[hannes] Capitein. Head representing the Ethiopian race





Tayalanecga.

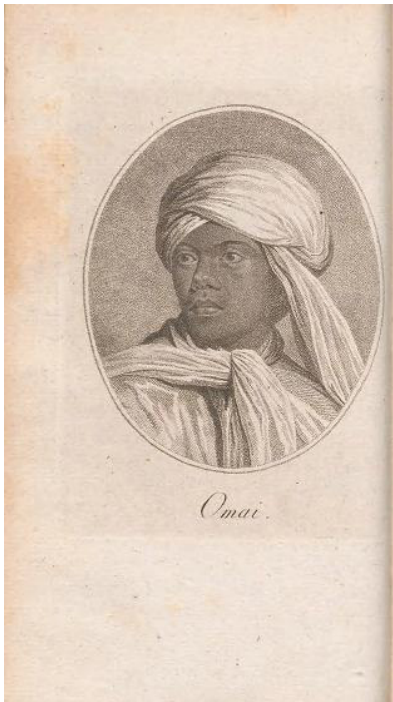
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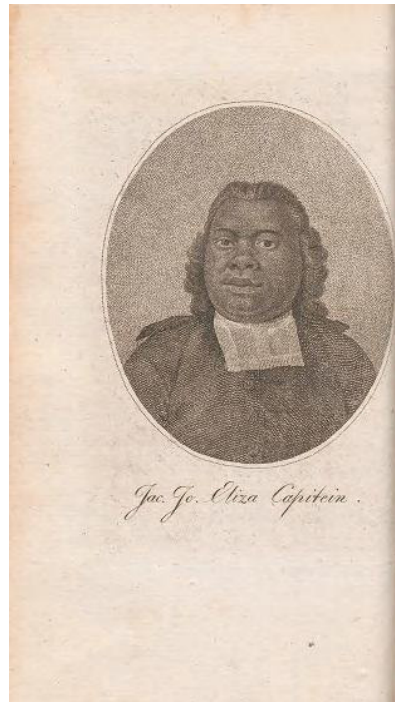
Mahommed Jumla.

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Omai.



Jac. Jo. Oiza Capitain.

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of scientific sources³⁷. What is more, the Preface to the *Abbildungen* itself directly attests to this, since the book is clearly presented here as a repertoire of epistemic objects set in continuity with the doctrine of the relation between direct and indirect knowledge³⁸, which we know from the image of the book of nature and the symbolic books. In this capacity, the *Abbildungen* serve both as a text complementing the natural history handbook, and supporting generally research activities within the naturalistic field. In particular, the epistemic objects of anthropological value in the *Abbildungen* – that is to say the so-called “model heads representative and characteristics of the five main races” – constitute a convergence of: 1) physical foundations of classification (the shape of the face and of the skull); 2) cultural variables of the so-called human degeneration or mutability (represented here, excepting only the so-called Negro, by the clothing and stylization of the face of the populations included within the racial types); and 3) humanistic principles of Blumenbach’s physical anthropology (equal dignity and potential of all five human varieties, expressed through the choice of representing the five main races through models of virtues and talents, and figures of great men of art: painters, lifestyle: gentlemen, science: theologians, and politics: diplomats, army commanders). The correspondence between these real life models and the craniological models depicted in the tables of the dissertation is explicitly stated³⁹. Failing to show the natural environmental variable of degeneration, which could not be divorced from the *Beyträge* vignettes, does not mean omitting climate as a cause of ‘degeneration’ – being rather a direct consequence of the will to faithfully reproduce the epistemic object, which is here a pre-existing portrait from the outset. Blumenbach’s focus on combining physical and cultural data is however apparent and can lead to restrictive interpretations.

To conclude, it seems to me that Blumenbach didn’t resolve all the ambivalent aspects of his doctrine – the inclusion of the category of beauty as a defining trait of the Caucasian race, the lack of a clear distinction between history as description and history as genealogy, or the opposition between nominal and genealogical classification. But ’800 racism cleared all these contradictions by unilaterally developing only certain aspects of his doctrine. As paradigmatically attested by Lawrence’s lectures on natural history – a classical text of nineteenth century British anthropology written by a translator and admirer of Blumenbach – Blumenbach’s theoretical lacks and ambivalence in defining the status and properties of the Caucasian race favored a unilateral, radically racist interpretation

³⁷ See for instance HN 1807, xii, 67-69, 73-74.

³⁸ AG (*Vorbericht*, unnumbered pages).

³⁹ AG (*Charakteristische Musterköpfe von Männern aus den 5 Hauptrassen im Menschengeschlecht*, unnumbered pages).

of his racial classification and anthropology (Lawrence 1822, 290-292). Lawrence integrally naturalizes the notion of Caucasian beauty and by analogical inferences he categorically deduces moral and spiritual properties from physical data. Physical beauty as physical perfection now is made into an objective – physical and indisputable – foundation for absolute moral and spiritual superiority. This grounds a racial hierarchy and justifies imperial and colonial forms of domination and exploitation. All races can now be consequently derived from the Caucasian one according to a principle of decadence.

References

ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Blumenbach:

AG

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BC 1

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