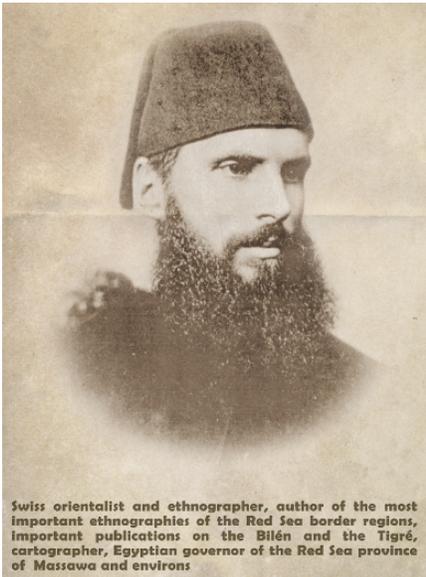


Werner Munzinger Pascha: Swiss ethnographer



Werner Munzinger is one of the most important ethnographers and early ethnologists of northeast Africa. Despite his scientific pre-eminence, recognized early on in his time by the first major ethnographers of Africa, such as Heinrich Barth, as early as the late 19th century he had already been widely forgotten about, even within the scientific community. He remained known only among downright specialists. Munzinger, son of Switzerland's prominent finance minister and later president, set out his career in the classic fashion, by studying Oriental languages in Paris. To consolidate his language skills he then spent some time in Egypt. Unlike his brother, who had embarked upon an academic career in Switzerland, however, he began to work as a trader on the "Abyssinian" coast, in order to fund his linguistic and ethnological studies. His reports from Massawa and Keren began to be published in the mid

1850s. It is situated in what is today Eritrea, in the then Ethiopian border area, a buffer area between Ethiopia and the imperialistically expanding Egyptian empire. His linguistic studies and his research into the local legal system of the Bilén people earned him recognition as an exceptionally well-informed researcher early on. He settled down in Keren, took up a traditional office among the Bilén people, married a woman from a leading Bilén family and adopted her son, Kiflu. His reputation as a researcher earned him various research assignments. Munzinger's major work, *The Northeast African Studies* (1862), as well as detailed ethnographical and socio-political maps emerged from these. Just like his father, however, he endeavoured to go into politics, which overshadowed his scholarly fame: he first became consul in Massawa and as representative of France supported an unostentatious semi-colonial penetration of the border regions. Soon he also became English consul and as such member of the 'Intelligence Unit' of the English invading army, which ousted the Ethiopian Emperor Tewodros II in 1868. In the end he became a powerful Egyptian regional governor, serving the Egyptian Empire, created a modernising governorate on the coast (in what was later the Italian colony of Eritrea), and was killed a few years later during a large-scale Egyptian campaign of conquest against Ethiopia (1875). What remained of his scientific works mostly disappeared in archives, and a large portion of it burned in Cairo in 2002. His failure as regional politician, in the service of an imperial power, also led to his shunning in the Ethiopian tradition, in which he appears as a servant of imperialism. New documents, however, show completely contrary aspects of his personality, which lead to a partial re-interpretation of this view: he died exactly when he secretly tried to change sides between Egypt and Shewa. He hoped to be able to utilise his linguistic and cultural knowledge to the benefit of an ascent of the Central-Ethiopian kingdom of Shewa against outside intruders.

Text: Wolbert Smidt



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