

Vom Forschungsziel zur Sammelpraxis – Die Australienreise und die völkerkundliche Sammlung Hermann Klaatschs im Lichte neuer Quellen

English Abstract:

Was Australia the homeland of the first human beings? Did the human race in fact originate „down under“? Following important hominid findings in Europe and Indonesia (Java) at the end of the 19th century, the German physical anthropologist Hermann Klaatsch went to Australia in 1904 to find evidence for this theory of his friend and colleague Otto Schoetensack. Klaatsch eventually spent 3 years in Australia, travelling widely. Apart from his theoretical research interest, however, he was also confronted with quite practical questions, such as how to get in touch with Aboriginal people, how to deal with missionaries, politicians, journalists, and the established scientific community, and, primarily, how to organize financial support for his 3-year stay. This immediate need to finance his journey corresponded with the era of the founding of new museums of ethnology in Germany, which in turn were always interested in obtaining new ethnographic artefacts for their incipient collections. First the museum in Leipzig, then the museum in Hamburg, and in May 1906 the newly built Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum of Ethnology in Cologne asked Klaatsch to collect ethnographic objects for them; they promised to send him money for his travel expenses and ethnographic purchases. Upon Klaatsch's return to Germany in 1907, his whole collection of more than 2000 artefacts was displayed at the first special exhibition at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne before it was eventually split up between the three above-mentioned institutions. A selection of up to 400 items Klaatsch took with him to Breslau University (now Poland), where he became Professor of Anthropology in 1907.

On the basis of new scientific and personal documents now available for research, we can draw a very interesting and clear picture of Hermann Klaatsch's time in Australia, his methods of collecting ethnographic artefacts, his negotiations with the museums in Germany and his view of the material and spiritual world of the Australian Aborigines. This article gives first insights into a 3-year research project currently conducted at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum of Ethnology and financed by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation in Cologne.