

Wilhelm Schimper: German botanist and cartographer in Tigray



German botanist in Tigray, diplomatic advisor to dejjazmach Wubé, governor of a Tigrayan sub-province (until 1855), writer on landscape and politics of Ethiopia, cartographer

Wilhelm Schimper hailed from a well-known southern German family of scholars, and had aristocratic relations on his mother's side, which led him to sometimes refer to himself, possibly fraudulently, as 'Schimper von Furtenbach'. Financing his journeys through a series of research projects, Schimper travelled to the Orient at a young age, hereby becoming part of the phenomenon of so-called explorers, which had been growing steadily since the 18th century. These explorers were to become pioneers of the geographic, scientific and ethnographic investigation of different African regions. However, he did not manage to return: equipped with ever dwindling research funds, while simultaneously experiencing growing

fame mainly as a botanist, Schimper stepped out of his as of yet mainly European context and took up employment with the Duke of the small, then independent Kingdom of Tigray-Simén, which loosely belonged to the Ethiopian Confederation. He was made Governor of a small province, became its agricultural reformer, married the illegitimate half-sister of the Duke and thus ascended into the local Ethiopian aristocracy. At the same time he continued to strive for contact with Europeans. The Catholic mission was gaining influence at the time and he supported it readily, but after it had been expelled, he began to support the Protestant mission instead, which had benefitted from its competitors' expulsion. Schimper had his Ethiopian son enter into a Swiss pietistic mission school. Among his works, his cartography of the region especially gained significance from a cultural historic point of view. Moreover, some of the ethnographic and historic comments and annotations in the reports he continually sent to Europe are meaningful. Some of them are still extant, while scarcely attracting attention, in the archives. In 1878, Schimper died at an old age in Adwa, Tigray. One of his sons-in-law became an Ethiopian rebel and pretender to the throne, another son-in-law was a discharged Protestant missionary; one son became Ethiopian court architect, later aide of the Italian colonialists and Eritrean road constructor, and finally diplomatic interpreter of the Ethiopian Emperor Menilek II at the time the latter entered into constant diplomatic relations with the German Empire in the early twentieth century.

Text: Wolbert Smidt



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