

Werner Munzinger Pascha

An Orientalist and Ethnographer-Turned-Politician in the Ethiopian–Egyptian Borderlands¹

Wolbert G.C. SMIDT

Any research history of northeastern Africa, and even any history of social anthropological research across the wider African continent, would be incomplete without discussing the exceptional contribution made by the Swiss ethnographer Werner Munzinger. This son of a prominent family arrived in northern Africa in 1852 to start linguistic and ethnographic research with the aim of making a career as an orientalist. Instead, he settled in Africa, merging deeply into the local cultures, languages and power circles, and never returned. It is probably his ambiguous role as a researcher who later became a leading Egyptian politician that has led to his marginalization in research history. Research history, at least the traditional narrative, usually looks for founding fathers, positive role models whose lives ended in fame and recognition and who had pupils to follow in their footsteps. Those people who forged new paths and produced notable research in their time but who got stuck somewhere, failed, got betrayed or betrayed themselves, got lost in dreams, intrigues or in simple personal tragedies, or who opened paths that nobody followed, are erased from memory. These ‘lost’ scholars and explorers reveal too much of the reality of research history – a series of revered and broken traditions, failures, errors, fulfilled and unfulfilled hopes and dreams, in short, a permanent establishment and re-establishment of some kind of order in the midst of chaos, followed by the re-emergence of doubt and chaos, which would again produce new insights, but also new errors. But a research history that ignores its multiple paths to success and failure is less history than heroic storytelling. Munzinger’s life ended in dramatic failure in 1875 and he was killed in a war for which he was held responsible by



Fig. 1: Portrait of Werner Munzinger before departing to Egypt, 1852



Fig. 2: Munzinger around his establishment in Egypt and Massawa

the great regional powers. This political catastrophe overshadowed his exceptional early life as a researcher. Today's Horn of Africa would, in all probability, look different had it not been for Munzinger's involvement in the region about 150 years ago but our ethnohistorical knowledge about its complex and ancient people would also be much poorer.

A modern re-reading of Munzinger's *oeuvre* shows that he was a first-ranking, well informed pioneering ethnographer of the nineteenth

century. He was among the very first long-term field researchers, preceding the pioneers of modern social anthropology. He documented unknown local legal traditions, giving insights into the local cultures and socio-political complexities of widely unknown border peoples. He also collected linguistic material and described the ethnic groups he visited or lived with over decades. What makes him exceptional, along with Heinrich Barth and only a few others, is his profoundly non-racist approach, documenting the cultural, geographical and linguistic complexities as he found them and finally even becoming part of them. In addition, there is his role as a politician in problematic times. Some people claim that Munzinger was the real founder of Eritrea (see e.g. Muse 1992). That is, at first glance, a surprising idea since it is generally accepted that Eritrea was created by Italy in 1890, during the scramble for Africa. However, the area had a complex history before that, with the northern Ethiopian borderlands and the Egyptian Red Sea coast being involved in diverse expansionist and imperialist projects. Eritrea did not just come into existence out of nothing and while it is certainly exaggerated to call Munzinger – who died fifteen years before the proclamation of the Colonia Eritrea – the founder of Eritrea, if we look closely at the details the idea is closer to the actual events than it would at first appear.

His early life and career as a researcher

Werner Munzinger was born in Olten in 1832, the son of the well-known Swiss finance minister Joseph Munzinger, one time president of the then newly formed Swiss Confederacy. Impressed by the travels of Johann Ludwig Burckhardt from Basel (also known as Scheich Ibrahim), Munzinger showed a strong interest in the oriental world and, at an early age, developed the ambition to make a name as an explorer. He studied oriental languages in Paris, learnt Arabic and finally, in 1852, decided to leave for Egypt to deepen his linguistic skills. In order to make a living, he entered into the services of a Swiss trading firm. From then on, the path of his life led him further and further away from home, and deeper and deeper into a region virtually unknown to researchers at that time.

In August 1853 he had the opportunity to move to Massawa (in today's Eritrea), a southern Red Sea port under Ottoman administration. This port had been known since ancient times for its trade in gold, ivory and slaves, but Munzinger looked for opportunities to trade in more modern products, such as gum arabic, which was in great demand in the developing industries of Europe. At the same time, he aimed to establish himself as an orientalist in the academic world. Unlike most other researchers, he chose not to explore 'his' region in a pompous short-lived expedition or, even worse, just study reports while at home. Instead he chose to live there and get involved in daily life. He soon published his first reports on the southern Red Sea in geographic journals² and his name became known in the relevant circles. Letters in Gotha show that Heinrich Barth, regarded as an important, highly professional ethnographer quite different to other rather adventurous explorers, recommended Munzinger. Munzinger was among the first to report on the Tigré language,³ a remnant of the ancient Ethiopian liturgical language Ge'ez, which was known only from manuscripts. He was also among the first to report on the Bilén people (or 'Bogos' as they were usually called in that period), peasants and semi-pastoralists living in the adjacent highlands. When he published a book on traditional Bilén law⁴, his reputation as a researcher was assured. The mostly Christian Bilén were living around the caravan town of Keren which connected inner Sudan, the Tigrayan highlands and the Red Sea, at the boundaries of re-emerging Ethiopia and expanding Egypt in the recently occupied Sudanese regions. The Bilén⁵, a very small population speaking an ancient Cushitic language, found themselves squeezed between these great regional powers, and began to actively use available resources. They established contacts with the outside world through Munzinger and the Catholic missionaries who arrived around the same time.⁶ In addition to his work on the Bilén, Munzinger also produced important reports on the Afar, Saho, Tigré groups, Nara, Kunama, Illiit, the Ethiopian highlanders, Beja, and others.

While Munzinger became known as an ethnographer and geographer, his private life took a decisive turn; instead of seeing the people in the region just as objects for study or as neighbours, he got personally involved. In Keren, where he established his second trading post, he met



Fig. 3: Borders of northern Ethiopia in the time when Munzinger settled in Keren (before 1872)

the young widow Naffa'. She was a Christian Bilén with connections to the Hamasén highlands within the Ethiopian power sphere and well networked with important families. They married in 1854 and Munzinger became a member of the local community. His reports on Bilén law and stories linked with it are based on very personal experience. As an outsider, without clan alliances, feuds or pressing obligations, he was a strong candidate to act as a mediator and became a judge among the Bilén.

A new turn: His double role as European diplomat and local politician

This was the first phase of his life as a researcher and orientalist. His amazingly detailed knowledge of this border region and its languages, of the political events in emerging Ethiopia under its warrior-like emperor, Tewodros II, his networks and relations, opened doors for him. The



Fig. 4: The Mogareh plain of Keren, where Munzinger settled (with his house and the Catholic mission in the centre, and the settlement of Keren in the background), in the 1850s

then centre of geographical research in the German-speaking countries, Gotha, hired him for the 1861/62 German Africa Expedition to the sultanate of Wadai (in today's Tchad). The German public richly funded the expedition, which officially was set up to search for the explorer Dr. Vogel, who had disappeared several years before in Wada. Unofficially, the expedition was supposed to explore unknown parts of inner Africa, from the border regions of Ethiopia to inner Sudan and Darfur to Wadai, thus filling the gaps on European maps of Africa. Its results included the first reports on the Nilo-Saharan Kunama and Illiit people in the Ethiopian-Sudanese borderlands⁷, till then virtually unknown to outside researchers, together with detailed information on the Abyssinian border princes and amazingly rich and detailed maps with settlement names and other ethnonyms and toponyms, which remain among the best material we have on these regions.⁸ At that time, the border region of the coast and the adjacent highlands of Keren started to attract the interest not only of Ethiopia – who had ancient claims on it – and expanding imperialist Egypt, but also the greater European powers, who had been competing for influence in the Red Sea even before the opening of the Suez Channel. In 1864 Munzinger became the acting British Vice-Consul in Massawa, and only shortly thereafter, in 1865, got hired as the Vice-Consul of France, too. He took residence in the French consulate in Massawa. His detailed reports in English and French can be found in the archives in London and Paris. Most interestingly, Munzinger now continued his already deep involvement in Bilén affairs and subsequently made them the subject of growing internal interest and involvement. Traumatizing experiences of slave raiding from the adjacent Barka lowlands and Sudanese borderlands made many Bilén leaders look for international alliances in order to receive better protection. The French consul Munzinger, together with Bilén elders, managed to extend the influence of France over these border areas, establishing an unofficial protectorate under his own office that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris insisted on keeping hidden from the international community. France in that period claimed an ancient right of protection of ‘the Christians of the Orient’, as they called them, and was still in a preliminary phase of political penetration of northeastern Africa. Locally,

the effect was that numerous Bilén converted to Catholicism and slave raiding stopped due to international pressure. This was Munzinger the local cultural expert's first step into international politics.

In 1867–68 Munzinger's involvement was the crucial factor in the success of the British-Indian army's intervention in Ethiopia against the emperor, Tewodros II.⁹ Following a diplomatic quarrel with Great Britain, the emperor had taken captive a number of European craftsmen working for British missionary societies. Since Great Britain's control of its colonial empire was to some extent grounded in its image as an untouchable power, it could not allow any non-European ruler to show such contempt and had to react at any cost. Munzinger was to prepare the way for Britain's response to Tewodros' aggression. He was to explore the valleys of Abyssinia (as the highland state of Ethiopia was called by Europeans), establish contacts with those warlords who were rebelling against Tewodros II, as well as negotiate, make offers, and finally act as interpreter and member of the intelligence section of the army. In the end, the British ‘invasion’ was exceedingly successful. Munzinger managed to negotiate alliances with the leading princes of Ethiopia. All Ethiopian leaders openly sided with the British, or were at least neutral, on condition that the British would leave the country. The Europeans were freed in Easter 1868 and Tewodros II, deserted by almost all of his followers, killed himself. The British army retreated and Munzinger went back to his old position as French Vice-Consul in Massawa. Now, however, he was more deeply involved in the imperialist project than ever before.

He was the prototype of an enterprising, optimistic modernizer of the nineteenth century. While being a researcher on the one hand, producing maps, collecting meteorological and ethnographic data, learning languages, documenting local clan histories and customary laws, he also entered into politics and set up plans for the reform and territorial consolidation of the Bilén region. By then, the majority of the Bilén had converted to Catholicism under the influence of the French Lazarist mission. Unlikely to gain the support of Orthodox Christian Ethiopia, which local elders feared would only ask for tribute, and victimized by slave raiding parties from the adjacent Muslim territories of the Egyptian Sudan, influential Bilén elders decided to ‘become French’.

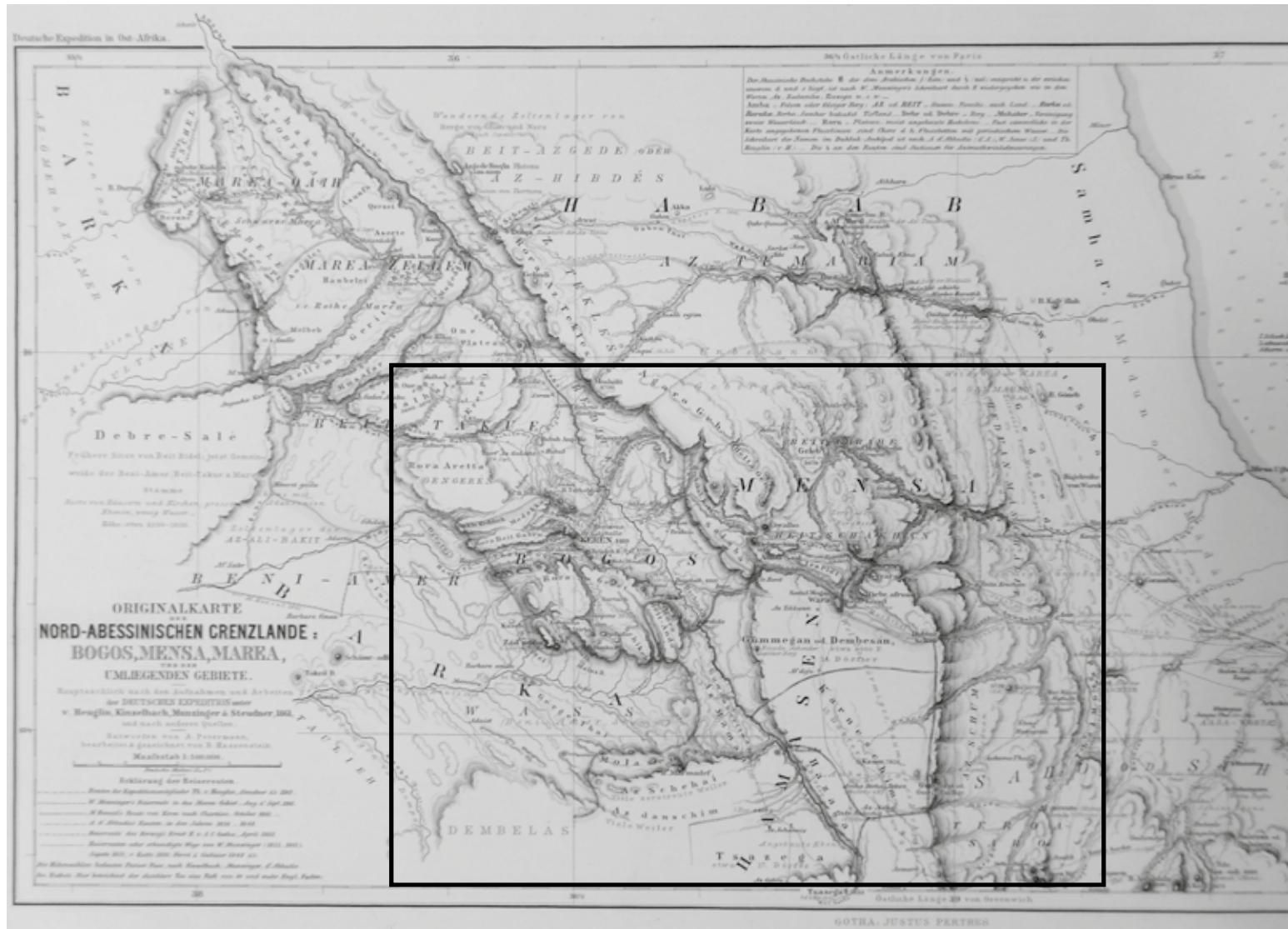


Fig. 5: Detail map of the Bogos region based on the cartographic and geographic reports of Munzinger and von Heuglin of 1861, published in 1864 in Gotha



Fig. 6: Extract from the same map: The area around Keren, where Munzinger lived



Fig. 7: The Christian Ethiopian state and the sultanate of Wadai, which was the aim of the Heuglin Munzinger expedition of 1861–62 (map at a later date, at the beginning of colonisation, ca. 1887)

Munzinger's reports show that a number of Bilén elders, representing at least an important part of the population, invited the French state to establish a protectorate. France was hesitant. As mentioned above, France did not wish to cause any international trouble by openly declaring the region a protectorate and hoped that things would develop naturally in a way that would favour an increasing French presence. The solution was highly original; Bogos became a protectorate, not of France but of the French Vice-Consulate. The neighboring Hamasén suzerain did not oppose the protectorate, having his own interest in keeping good relations with France, but at the same time he needed to, at least loosely, maintain his ancient claim over Keren as tributary territory. He too found an interesting solution; he made a local French worker who had settled in Keren, governor of Bilén under Hamasén overrule. Thus, Bogos was now both somehow under France while remaining under Hamasén. This Solomonic solution satisfied everyone in a situation where a lack of clarity was rather an advantage. The Bilén enjoyed their traditional autonomy while simultaneously being under France (in the form of a symbolic French governor and under the protection of the Consul) and under Hamasén, which in turn was tributary to the Ethiopian emperor who was so far away that the traditional local autonomies were not hampered.

Another turn: Changing sides? Munzinger's involvement in the Egyptian expansion

However, after the French-Prussian war of 1870–71, Munzinger's position became politically fragile. France was suddenly out of the game, Egypt was aggressively pushing forward and Munzinger made a move, which later generations labeled 'mercenary'. He changed sides and entered into Egyptian service in Massawa. Egypt made him governor of Massawa and the adjacent lands and appointed him Bey. By July 1872, with the consent of some, but certainly not all, important clans of the Bilén, Munzinger's troops annexed Keren. From the outside, Munzinger indeed looked like a mercenary. First a young researcher in the Arabic world, then among local ethnic groups, he changed allegiance from the French to the British, back to the French, to the Egyptians –

who was to follow next? However, if we look into his private life and allegiances, the perspective changes. Whatever he wrote was marked by a deep sympathy for the Bilén people and their hilly land in the buffer zone between expanding powers. His decisions, seen from a very local Bilén perspective, seem logical and I argue that Munzinger, as a deeply enrooted researcher with his closest family now being in Keren, should be seen in this local context. As a local Bilén notable, he sought the best international partners for the Bilén to provide protection, help guard their boundaries, avoid bloodshed and make trade possible. This suggests that Munzinger did not betray France in 1871, but rather that France became too weak to do what was needed in the region and another alliance had become necessary.

The coming years showed Munzinger at the peak of his power. In 1872 Munzinger became Pasha, the port city Sawakin was added to the province and he created the Egyptian 'Governorate-General of Eastern Sudan and the Red Sea Coasts' (known in Arabic as Bahr al-Ahmar and called by some geographers 'Erythräa' after the old name for the Red Sea). In 1873 Munzinger became the first Governor-General of this new Egyptian territory, he built telegraph lines and created huge cotton schemes in the northern Sudanese lowlands and his stepson, Kifle Bey, became an important local commander in Egyptian service. Through his local spying and intelligence service and negotiations with neighbouring peoples, such as the Mensa' or Afar-groups in the lowlands, Munzinger managed to further expand Egyptian territory and encroach on traditional Ethiopian borderlands.¹⁰ In 1873 he presented his province and its products at the International Exhibition (today's Expo) in Vienna. By then, Keren had developed from an endangered border town into the second seat of the governor of a huge, newly created modernizing province.

Munzinger's success culminated, however, in an unforeseen catastrophe. Thirsty Egypt, wishing to control the Red Sea and the entire Nile River, entered into war with Ethiopia. Munzinger was commanded to move to the southern port of Tadjoura and then onto the Afar Sultanate of Awsa. There he was to negotiate an alliance with Egypt before moving on to the autonomous Ethiopian kingdom of Shewa, under the rebellious niger Menilek II, in order to attack the Ethiopian emperor from



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Fig. 8: The rock-hewn church of Wuqro in Tigray, first described by Munzinger there. But the overly optimistic Egyptian ruler miscalculated everything. In November 1875, almost all the Egyptian armies, which were invading Ethiopia from different directions, were destroyed. The one moving towards Ethiopia from Massawa, under the Egyptian governor Arakel Bey Dabroyan, was annihilated in the battle of Gundet at the Mereb River, with almost no survivors. The expedition led by Munzinger in Awsa also failed dramatically. The independent Afar king of Awsa seems to have been informed about the wider Egyptian plan; he knew that Egypt wasn't really seeking friendly collaboration and negotiation, as implied by Munzinger, but annexation. Awsa was, however, not interested in losing its independence to any power. In the night of 15 November 1875, Munzinger's whole party, including his wife Naffa', was killed near Lake Udumma. Munzinger's secretary from Solothurn, Konrad Haggenmacher, escaped without any water or food and survived crossing the desert only to die of exhaustion on reaching Tadjoura.



Fig. 9: Original photograph of Munzinger as a member of the British group negotiating with Kasa Mirch'a of Tigray about his support for the British-Indian troops under Napier, against *atsé* Tewodros II, 1867 (persons on the picture, from left to right, first row: Captain Tristram Speedy, *lige mek'as* Alema, the cousin of Kasa, Werner Munzinger, Grant, the Tigrayan envoy Mirch'a, priest Gerenki'él, with other unnamed dignitaries)

Munzinger's end deeply influenced what was later narrated about him. Local oral traditions, still told today by elders in Keren, remember him positively as a local leader, modernizer, and protector of religion, law and trade.¹¹ People still remember 'Misnjir Bashay' and the family of his stepson, Kifle Bey, remained influential for several generations.¹² France would label him as an unfaithful political servant, Switzerland would remember him mainly for his scientific explorations, while Egypt blamed him for losing the war and virtually represented him as an incarnation of the devil.¹³ Historically incorrect, but a useful exculpation strategy for the rulers, his death meant that both Egypt and Ethiopia could blame him for the war and this would allow them to not look for other root causes of the war and, crucially, not blame each other for what went

wrong. Both leaders were interested, in the midst of a cold war, to look for ways out. Munzinger the researcher became lost in these competing visions of his life. However, we know from reports dating from 1876 that he never stopped his work as a dedicated researcher – even if we have no publications from this later period.¹⁴ One Egyptian report mentions an important manuscript that he produced on the different populations of his Governorate. This manuscript survived in one copy in Massawa and was given by the Swiss–Egyptian official Dor Bey to the Société khédiviale de géographie in Cairo in late 1876.¹⁵ Following a restructuring of the society in 2002, however, all nineteenth century manuscripts written in non-Arabic languages were removed from the then disordered archives and burnt. All efforts to find another copy of Munzinger's manuscript, which would have been the most complete ethnography of the northern Sudanese-Ethiopian-Eritrean borderlands, have so far been in vain. A second copy may never have existed since, after 1876, Egypt wanted to forget everything linked with its fruitless Abyssinian adventures.

Some insights into Munzinger's private connections

Throughout those years, Munzinger lived with his official wife Naffa', whom we know as 'Frau Munzinger' from European correspondence.¹⁶ For decades we find her at his side, whether in her hometown, Keren, in the highlands or in hot Massawa, staying with him during all the stages of his colourful career. But the history of Munzinger would not be complete without the story of his concubine (or second wife) and his 'black' son. Until quite recently, no publication¹⁷ ever mentioned Munzinger's second family, kept secret in order to protect his good name in Europe. However, with today's knowledge of cultural and personal contexts, Munzinger's story would be incomplete without understanding this very personal side of his history. The story adds complexity to our understanding of his personality and also to our understanding of the specific situation he was living in. When he was an Egyptian governor of Massawa, it seems that his lack of a son became a burning issue. His wife seemed to be barren and local tradition – not only Muslim, but also Christian – in such cases not only allowed but



Fig. 10: After the successful campaign of 1867–68: The European officers with Prince Alemayehu Tewodros (centre right), April 1868

even expected the man to take another wife. To satisfy Christian tradition he could take a concubine or separate from the first wife and marry again. Muslim tradition allowed him to simply take a second wife. Munzinger decided not to separate from his wife, to whom he was deeply attached, but followed the local pattern of a side-relation, which in fact had its own legal basis both in customary law and in official Egyptian law.

Massawa was full of young female slaves, liberated by Munzinger and his sub-governor Arakel. Under Munzinger, an increasing number of slaves were liberated¹⁸ from Arab slave-traders who brought them from far south, often from Oromo territories south of Ethiopia, to sell them to Red Sea traders since 'Habshi' slaves were popular in all regions from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, to Iran and even India. The liberated male slaves often became soldiers in the Egyptian army. Fe-

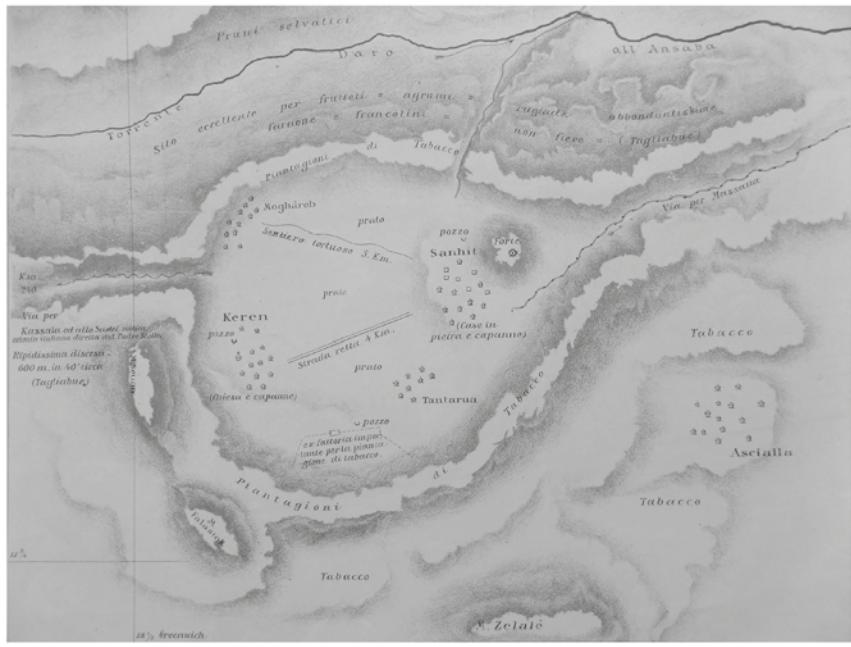


Fig. 11: Plan of Keren by E. Tagliabue in the years of Egyptian occupation, showing the fortress ('forte') built by Munzinger

male slaves were sometimes married to them, became workers in local households or entered into the households of families in Egypt. One of these freed slaves was Trungo bint-Arakil (she probably took the name of her liberator), an Oromo woman living as a housemaid in service in the Gudik family in Cairo. As Munzinger's friend Gottlieb Wild noted in a poem included in a private letter today kept in the Perthes archives in Gotha: 'Flourishing in her youth / like a creature descending from heaven / ... he saw Trungo standing in front of him.'¹⁹

She became Munzinger's second wife in 1874 and soon bore him a son. This son was called Joseph Munzinger after his famous grandfather. He took his father's family name (as we know from Gottlieb Wild's letters kept in the municipal archives of Olten), as was dictated by the local tradition of Massawa and the Ethiopian regions, and ac-

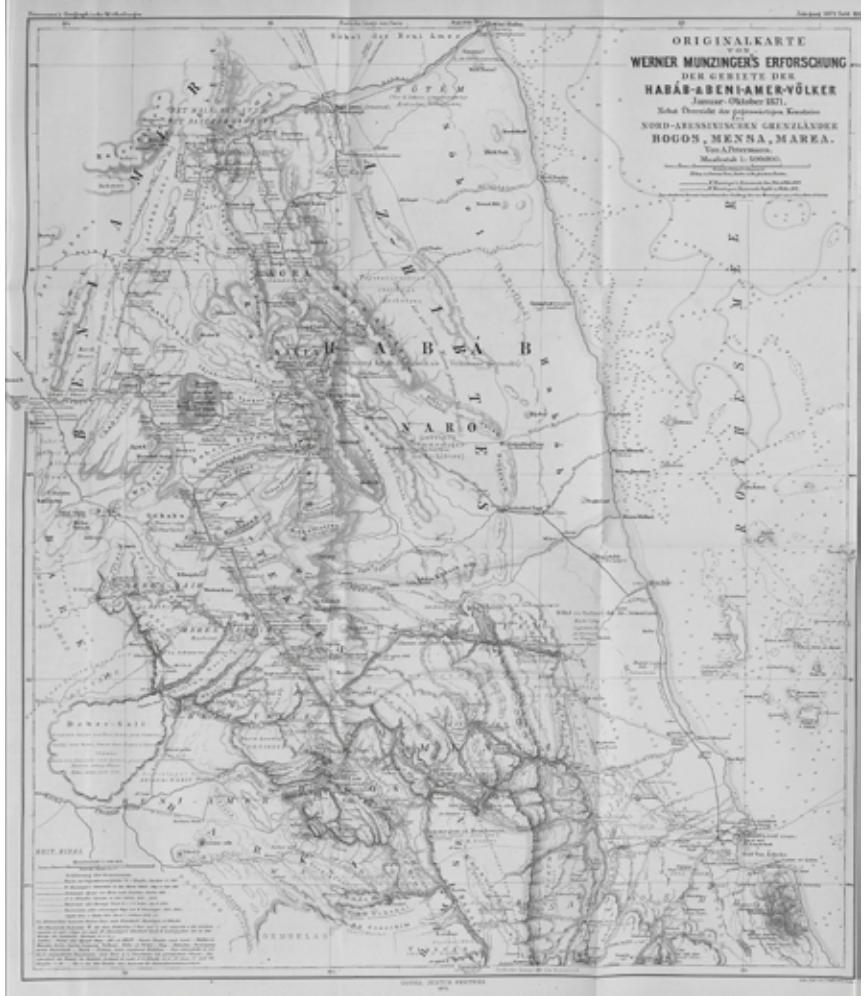


Fig. 12: Munzinger's map of the Habab, Mensa and Bogos regions published in 1872 in Gotha

cording to the laws of Egypt. However, the fate of mother and son, which looked promising for a time, radically changed with Munzing-er's death. Joseph lived with his mother Tirungo without support in

Cairo, helpless refugees. The Egyptian officials did not care about them even though, according to Egyptian law, Joseph was a legitimate son. The catastrophe of Egypt's failed war with Ethiopia was too devastating for Egypt and the authorities preferred to ignore Munzinger's family for quite a time, refusing to pay them any pension. Suddenly, there was no 'Joseph Munzinger' any more. Swiss papers from that period,²⁰ show a re-interpretation of his origin and name; he was now called 'Joseph Tirungo' after his mother and regarded as illegitimate, although local Abyssinians would continue to call him 'Yoséf Misinjir Bashay' after his father. Only after complicated deliberations, travels and legal procedures was an older sister of Munzinger able to adopt Joseph.²¹ He became Joseph Munzinger again and was brought to Switzerland. He studied there, living in Olten and Lausanne, but the cold winters were unbearable. Finally, Joseph, the son of this exceptional researcher and failed politician, died of tuberculosis at the age of just twenty-one.

Forgotten details from archives

I have found detailed documents, including letters and sometimes bulky reports, written in Munzinger's tiny handwriting in two continents and almost a dozen countries (including Switzerland, France, Germany, England, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea) along with secondary works on him in libraries and archives in Italy, Sweden, Djibouti, Sudan. Small archives such as the private letter collection of Antoine d'Abbadie, kept in a castle in the Basque country and the recently opened archives of Perthes in the Gotha castle of Friedenstein, contain fascinating documents written by Munzinger. The municipal archives of his hometown, Olten, contain touching details on his life and death. The richest collections of his unpublished works are found in the Cairo archives of the Sudanese administration of Egypt and in the foreign ministries of England and France.

Perhaps it is not without value to add some minor observations from other documents not known so far. The Gotha archives contain some juicy details that add to what we know about the big international schemes and powers behind the great Egyptian invasion of Ethiopia in 1875. As is the case so often, the details reveal to us the personal rela-

tions and motives, often no less influential or important for the course of events than grand political convictions and projects. International politics is the result not just of great planning, but often the arbitrary result of very personal decisions made by individuals who were, by chance, at the right (or wrong) place at the right (or wrong) moment. Munzinger's post-mortem image as an aggressor against Ethiopia, pursuing a foolish dream of becoming king of northeastern Africa, is linked to such very local and personal events, so far unknown to historians of Egypt's imperialist expansion and Ethiopia's resistance.

During the one or two years before his death, Munzinger had become one of the most influential people in Egypt. When Munzinger became Governor-General in 1873, the sub-province of Massawa was in need of a new governor. Munzinger was interested in appointing an energetic young person with whom he could build up a relationship of trust and communicate with quickly and easily. He recommended the Armenian-Austrian Arakel, whom he knew from Cairo. Arakel belonged to one of the richest and most powerful Armenian families in Egypt. His uncle was the long-serving foreign minister of Egypt, and at times prime minister, Nubar Nubarian from Izmir. Arakel himself had received a German education having been born in the Austrian port of Trieste (in today's Italy) to an Armenian merchant from the Dabroyan (Abroyan) family and his Austrian wife, née Armbruster. He also had the connections and outlook Munzinger wanted, being well-rooted in the Egyptian networks,



Fig. 13: Munzinger as Egyptian governor of Massawa, ca 1872

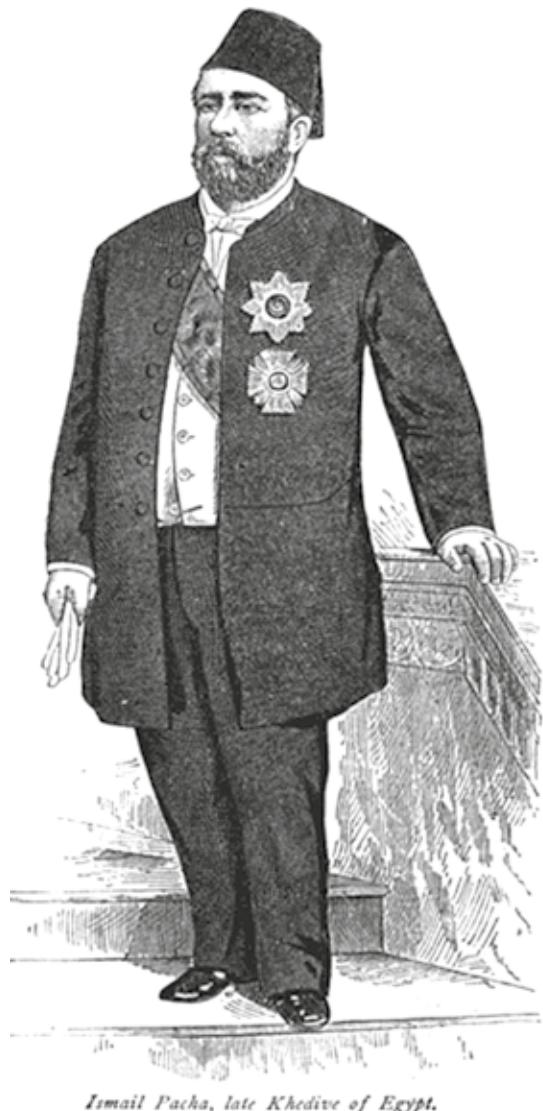


Fig. 14: The Egyptian viceroy Ismail Pasha

familiar with European ideas of modernisation, energetic and ambitious. Arakel, however, had managed to acquire a dubious reputation in Cairo; he was rumoured to be leading a life with ‘amoral’ partners. For him, the position in Massawa was a way out. We know from the records that Arakel – now with the rank of a ‘Bey’ – continued to modernise Massawa under Munzinger’s guidance. Both corresponded actively (in German) on ongoing projects such as the telegraph lines, the abolishment of the slave trade, taxation and jurisdiction. The construction of the splendid governor’s palace, where Munzinger resided when in Massawa, was finalized and things seemed to be going rather well. But something happened.

Documents in the archives of Cairo suggest, as do some publications, that Arakel pushed his superiors into war against Ethiopia, promising an easy victory, and started an intrigue against Munzinger. He reported that Munzinger had conspired to remove key people in the Egyptian leadership in order to assume an even higher rank in the Egyptian state. Munzinger was, in fact, so successful that it became probable that he would further move up in rank in Egypt. Arakel’s aim was clear; he wanted to remove Munzinger, further expand his own territory and finally become famous through a victory over Ethiopia. The story, however, went deeper. Recent archive discoveries reveal some very personal aspects to the history, which may have influenced the war. A private letter by the merchant Gottlieb Wild, Munzinger’s friend in Cairo, from 1875²² reports that Arakel Bey continued to enjoy life in a quite free way and had intimate relationships with numerous young men or boys from Massawa. Munzinger seems to have kept this secret from the public, but in private told Arakel to desist. From the papers, we get the impression that Arakel chose to remove Munzinger from his position in order to protect his own position. Our understanding of Arakel’s move into an international war and his conflict with Munzinger, in spite of such a good start, is supplemented by such personal details. Arakel changed the course of events in a situation of stress as Munzinger threatened his personal life and career. But which story is correct? Which one is important? It is not easy to untangle the narratives and we cannot exclude the possibility that Wild himself was motivated by a desire to put the blame on Arakel. In any case, this detail from the archives gives us an impres-

sion of the degree to which personal relations, rivalries and interests can contribute to the course of wars.

A methodological outlook: The multiplicity of possible interpretations

As it is impossible to give an even approximately complete overview of Munzinger's life, this article has focused on selected aspects and stories, told from documents and complemented by local oral traditions. None of this documentation is known well enough to come to any final conclusions. The case of Munzinger illustrates one often underestimated phenomenon of historiography – how judgments and opinions formed on the basis of one set of documents, which seems complete and coherent, can be totally revised after the discovery of other documents from the same period, but written in another context. To refer to just one example, one interpretation of events could be that Munzinger showed a thirst for conflict and expansion, as illustrated by the aggressive letters he sent to the Ethiopian emperor, Yohannes IV. Here, he appears as one of the fathers of the war and his mission to Awsa was clearly part of aggressive Egyptian expansion. Munzinger was, therefore, at the forefront of imperialism. But a further look through the diverse archives leads to a revision of this impression. Some of his letters contain serious warnings about the wisdom of a war against Ethiopia. And in his last private letters, sent just before his departure,²³ Munzinger told a totally different story. While he was officially still helping in Egypt's expansion, he said that he knew that it was already decided in Egypt that he should fail and die on the way. Munzinger had made his own plan should he survive and hoped to enter into the service of the king of Shewa, who was at that period looking for foreign advisors. The Shewan king had sent one of his highest-ranking nobles, Ras Birru, to accompany Munzinger's group through Awsa to Shewa. This would have been his last surprising change of allegiance. Even while officially leading Egypt's aggression against Ethiopia, Munzinger had already negotiated a peaceful settlement for himself and was preparing to become an Ethiopian state counselor.²⁴

Munzinger is such a rich figure in the history of exploration, geography and the study of the oriental world, languages and peoples, and in



Fig. 15: Original manuscript map drawn by Munzinger, of the Tigré areas north of the Bilén (Bogos) of Keren, March 1871

the history of international intrigue, that he has attracted the notice of several novel writers and biographers.²⁵ And it is probably not wrong to believe that in the future he will again be re-discovered by writers. His life as a researcher and politician is so full of contradictions and puzzling and obscure details that several books could be written on him, each of them revealing entirely new aspects. The ambiguity of his life and career make him particularly interesting for research history, but also difficult to grasp. He was a representative of an exploring and optimistic period, which believed in high-speed progress both through technological advance and military might. All aspects of his personality fit into this pattern. He was a creative and innovative researcher, a modernizer of a huge newly created province. One of the protagonists of imperialism, he was involved in ambitious projects to change the world. His role in history is blackened by his participation in Egyptian



Fig. 16: The Afar port of Tadjoura, where Munzinger stayed in 1875

expansionism yet he also defied the usual patterns of his time. As a researcher, he became particularly close to the people he studied and, diverging from the leading discourses and practices of his time, identified with them. He thus became one of the forerunners of modern field research, in which one has to give up cultural distance. As a politician, he tried to use economic modernization and imperialism to integrate the interests of local populations, in whose political and cultural networks he had immersed himself. He seems, however, to have underestimated the destructive power of imperialism. While trying to use it for his own purposes, he was used by it and destroyed. His last move was characteristic of his life. While he was, in the eyes of the world, about to become a great leader of Egyptian expansionism, he had already decided to desert Egypt – preparing secretly a new life, back in the local cultural context, with which he was so well acquainted. He was way too optimistic.

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Photo credits

- Fig. 1: Portrait of Werner Munzinger before departing to Egypt, 1852
- Fig. 2: Munzinger around his establishment in Egypt and Massawa, from the HMO Bilarchiv, Bern
- Fig. 3: Borders of northern Ethiopia in the time when Munzinger settled in Keren (before 1872), map from the Perthes Collection, Forschungsbibliothek Friedenstein Gotha

- Fig. 4: The Mogareh plain of Keren, where Munzinger settled (with his house and the Catholic mission in the centre, and the settlement of Keren in the background), in the 1850s, from Heuglin 1864, frontispiz
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- Fig. 7: The Christian Ethiopian state and the sultanate of Wadai, which was the aim of the Heuglin Munzinger expedition of 1861–62 (map at a later date, at the beginning of colonisation, ca. 1887), from the collection of the author
- Fig. 8: The rock-hewn church of Wuqro in Tigray, first described by Munzinger, photo by the author, 2011
- Fig. 9: Original photograph of Munzinger as a member of the British group negotiating with Kasa Mirch'a of Tigray about his support for the British-Indian troops under Napier, against *atsé* Tewodros II, 1867 (persons on the picture, from left to right, first row: Captain Tristram Speedy, *lige mek'wās* Alema, the cousin of Kasa, Werner Munzinger, Grant, the Tigrayan envoy Mirch'a, priest Gerenki'él, with other unnamed dignitaries), kept in the collections of the Agfa Fotorama Köln
- Fig. 10: After the successful campaign of 1867–68: The European officers with Prince Alemayehu Tewodros (centre right), April 1868, etching from the collection of the author
- Fig. 11: Plan of Keren by E. Tagliabue in the years of Egyptian occupation, showing the fortress ('forte') built by Munzinger, map from L'Esplorazione Anno 2 Carta N 6 Fasc. 10 (Perthes Collection, Forschungsbibliothek Friedenstein Gotha)
- Fig. 12: Munzinger's map of the Habab, Mensa and Bogos regions (1872, Gotha)
- Fig. 13: Munzinger as Egyptian governor of Massawa, ca 1872, from the collections of the Schweizerische Landesbibliothek Bern
- Fig. 14: The Egyptian **viceroy** Ismail Pasha, from William W. Loring, *A Confederate Soldier in Egypt*, New York 1884
- Fig. 15: Original manuscript map drawn by Munzinger, of the Tigré areas north of the Bilén (Bogos) of Keren, March 1871, map from the Perthes Collection, Forschungsbibliothek Friedenstein Gotha
- Fig. 16: The Afar port of Tadjoura, where Munzinger stayed in 1875, photo by the author

Endnotes

- 1 In February 2014 I got the chance to travel to Gotha and use the Perthes archives of the Forschungsbibliothek Gotha at Friedenstein Castle, thanks to the generous support of the Herzog-Ernst-Stipendium and a travel grant by the Forschungszentrum Gotha. This made it possible to enrich my previous research on Munzinger with new details and insights since Munzinger – like almost every researcher active in northeastern Africa in the nineteenth century – was actively linked with the geographers of Gotha, the then leading centre of geographical research. I especially thank Alex Capus in Olten, who supported my research on Munzinger with his own collections, the municipal archive of Olten, and the archivists in London, Paris, Berlin, Bern and Cairo. I presented the first results of my research in 2003: Wolbert Smidt: A Swiss in Africa: Munzinger Pasha, Paper presented at the Conference ‘Imperial Culture in Countries without Colonies’, Basel University, October 2003. For a short version of this text see Smidt (2014) and for further details see the biographical article Smidt and Müller (2007).
- 2 Munzinger’s initial publications (1956, 1957, 1958a, 1958b, 1959a, 1959b, 1959c) were followed by numerous others. His geographical research immediately gained international attention, with articles appearing in Germanic countries, France, England etc. (e.g. de Saint Martin 1859). Over the coming years, Munzinger became so prominent that travellers would publish articles on their visits to him, e.g. von Maltzan (1871).
- 3 See Munzinger (1865, also printed as an annex to August Dillmann: *Lexicon Linguæ Aethiopicæ, cum indice Latino. Adiectum est vocabularium Tigre dialecti septentrionalis compilatum a Werner Munzinger.* Lipsiæ 1865; reprinted New York 1955) and Munzinger (1884).
- 4 See 1859d (Italian transl.: *Dei costumi e del diritto dei Bogos.* Roma 1891). At the beginning of the colonisation of Eritrea by Italy, some of Munzinger’s works were translated into Italian, also due to their importance for the colonisers interested in studying the populations of their colony.
- 5 In European literature also known as ‘Bilin’, due to some older spelling traditions based on local informants who did not know their exact name in Bilén language.
- 6 See ‘Kärän’ (Smidt 2007:342b–345a), ‘Bilin: ethnography’ (Id. 2003:585b–586b) and ‘Bilin: history’ (Id. 2003:586b–588b) in the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*.
- 7 See on this first report on them: Wolbert Smidt: ‘Ilit and Sokodas ethnography’, in: Siegbert Uhlig (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2007, vol. 3: He–N, 123f.; Gianni Dore: ‘Kunama: ethnography’, *ibid.*, 453–55.

8 Werner Munzinger’s *Bericht an den Schweizer Bundesrat vom 27. März 1863.* Bern 1863, 20 pp.; Werner Munzinger: *Ostafrikanische Studien.* Schaffhausen 1864 (second edition: Basel 1883, Italian translation: *Studi sull’Africa Orientale.* Roma 1890, extracts see in: ‘Vermischte Notizen aus Munzinger’s Ostafrikanischen Studien’, *Das Ausland* 37, 1864, 1150–51); Theodor von Heuglin – Theodor Kinzelbach – Werner Munzinger - Hermann Steudner: *Die Deutsche Expedition in Ost-Afrika 1861 und 1862. Zusammenstellung der astronomischen, hypsometrischen und meteorologischen Beobachtungen, und der trigonometrischen und itinerarischen Aufnahmen im ost-ägyptischen Sudan und der nord-abessinischen Grenzlanden. Nebst einem allgemeinem Bericht von Werner Munzinger über den Verlauf und seine Beteiligung an der Deutschen Expedition von Massua bis Kordofan, 1861 und 1862,* Gotha 1864 (Petermann’s Geographische Mittheilungen, Ergänzungsheft 13), containing: ‘Werner Munzinger’s Bericht über seine Reise von Massua nach Kordofan’, in: *ibid.*, 1–13; ‘Werner Munzinger’s und Th. von Heuglin’s Itinerare und Winkelmessungen zwischen Massaua, dem Gebiet der Marea’, Adua und Kassala, 1861 und 1862, in: *ibid.*, 13–24; Werner Munzinger: ‘Abessinien. Eine Studie’, in: *ibid.*, 397–413; ‘Werner Munzinger’s Bericht über seine und Th. Kinzelbach’s Reise nach El Obed 1862’, in: *Petermanns geographische Mitteilungen* 1863.

- 9 For a good overview of this early military intervention, see Volker Matthies: *The Siege of Magdala. The British Empire against the Emperor of Ethiopia,* Princeton 2012 (Volker Matthies: *Unternehmen Magdala: Strafexpedition in Äthiopien = Schlaglichter der Kolonialgeschichte* 11, Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2010). - See also the contemporary works: Henry Montague Hozier: *The British Expedition to Abyssinia.* London: Macmillan and Co 1869; Clements Robert Markham: *A History of the Abyssinian Expedition.* London: Macmillan and Co. 1869; Trevenen James Holland and Henry Montague Hozier: *Record of the Expedition to Abyssinia,* London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office 1870; Fredrick Myatt: *The March to Magdala. The Abyssinian War of 1868,* London 1870. Slightly exaggerating Munzinger’s role, see: ‘Magdala. Der große Sieg der Engländer – ein Werk des Schweizers Werner Munzinger-Pascha’, in: *Oltner Tagblatt. Freisinnig-demokratisches Organ des Kantons Solothurn*, Jg. 57, no. 239, 14. Oktober 1935, 1–2; *ibid.*, Jg. 57, no. 241, 16. Oktober 1935, 1–2. [Identical with: Dr. M.G.: Munzinger Pascha, in: *Zürcher Illustrierte*, Jg. XI, no. 48, 24. November 1935, 1516–1518].
- 10 This was done through his Swiss secretary Konrad Hagenmacher, who had started to make his name as a geographer, but now became the intel-

- ligence officer of Munzinger's governorate and documented the claimed borders of the newly acquired Egyptian territories. See: Joh. Val. Keller-Zschokke: Adolf Haggenmacher. *Sein Leben und Wirken*. Aarau 1903; Wolbert Smidt: 'Haggenmacher, Konrad', in: Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, Vol. 2: *D-Ha*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2005: 968.
- 11 See for an early reference to oral traditions among the neighbouring Tigre: J. J. Hess: 'Munzinger Pascha im Liede der Tigrêstämme', in: *Solothurner Tagblatt*, 9. III. 1916. See also a documentation of Tigré oral traditions from the collection of Enno Littmann: Maria Höfner: 'Überlieferungen bei Tigre-Stämmen (I), 'Ad Šek', *Annales d'Ethiopie* vol. 4, 1961, 181–203, here 196f.
 - 12 I thank his descendants, today migrants in Uppsala in Sweden, for the detailed genealogical information on the adoptive descendants of Munzinger in Keren. Kifle Bey's young son was recognized as Munzinger's closest relative in Keren and inherited part of Munzinger's property, as the archive files in Olten show.
 - 13 See for a detailed historical account: Sven Rubenson: *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*. London, Addis Ababa 1978.
 - 14 Among the last were Werner Munzinger: 'Die nördliche Fortsetzung des Abessinischen Hochlandes (Neue Forschungen 1871)', in: *Petermanns geographische Mitteilungen* vol. 18, 1872; Id.: 'Narrative of a Journey through the Afar Country', *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* vol. 39, 1869.
 - 15 See Séance du 5 janvier 1877, in: *Bulletin de la Société Khédiviale de Géographie*, vol. 1, fasc. 4, 1877, 399. See also: Eduard Dor-Bey: *Für die Familie Munzinger*. Cairo, 5 December 1873, 6 pp. (Report on Werner Munzinger's death, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Basel).
 - 16 See the reports by Munzinger's friend Gottlieb WILD: *Von Kairo nach Massaua. Eine Erinnerung an Werner Munzinger. Mit einem Vorwort über das Leben Munzingers von Peter Dietschi*. Olten 1879.
 - 17 See Tino Kaiser: 'Werner Munzinger-Pascha im Spiegel von Familienbriefen', in: *Jahrbuch für solothurnische Geschichte* 63, 1990, 5–85.
 - 18 See details in Jonathan Miran: *Red Sea Citizens, Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, Bloomington, Indianapolis, 2009.
 - 19 'Als dann im Jahr 1874 Munzinger nach Kairo kam, besuchte er auch die Familie Gudik und – herrlich in der Jugend prangen / wie ein Gebilde aus Himmelshöh'n, / mit züchtigen, verschämten Wangen / sah er die Trungo vor sich steh'n.' Letter by G. Wild to Petermann, written in Kairo, 6 April 1877 (SPA ARCH PGM 322 Wild, Gottlieb, Forschungsbibliothek Gotha).
 - 20 Kept in the municipal archives of Olten, file 'Werner Munzinger'.
 - 21 See Tino Kaiser: 'Werner Munzinger-Pascha im Spiegel von Familienbriefen', *Jahrbuch für solothurnische Geschichte* 63, 1990, 5–85.
 - 22 SPA ARCH PGM 322 Wild, Gottlieb, Forschungsbibliothek Gotha.
 - 23 Tino Kaiser: 'Werner Munzinger-Pascha im Spiegel von Familienbriefen', *Jahrbuch für solothurnische Geschichte* 63, 1990, 5–85.
 - 24 Only two years later, in 1877, the king of Shewa, Menilek II, found another Swiss. Alfred Ilg, from Zürich became his chief advisor and minister and helped Menilek II place Ethiopia on the international scene, in the midst of colonial threats and imperialistic expansion – a task that was originally meant for Munzinger as Shewan political advisor and possibly chief-minister.
 - 25 See the three biographical books: Joh. Val. Keller-Zschokke: *Werner Munzinger-Pascha. Sein Leben und Wirken*. Aarau 1891; Lee van Dovski [pseudonym of Herbert Lewandowski]: *Ein Leben für Afrika. Das abenteuerliche Schicksal von Werner Munzinger-Pascha*. Zürich 1954; Alex Capus: *Munzinger Pascha*. Roman. Zürich: Diogenes 1997. See also some smaller biographical works, with especially nationalistic interpretations dating from the 1930s: 'Munzinger-Bey', *Berner Volkszeitung*, 8. Dezember 1875; Peter Dietschi: *Werner Munzinger-Pascha. Rede bei der Gedächtnisfeier in Olten, Dienstag den 21. Dezember 1875*. Olten 1876 (Sonderdruck des 'Volksblatt von Jura'); Peter Dietschi and anonymous: 'Werner Munzinger und die letzten Ereignisse in Abessinien', *Illustrierte Zeitung*, Leipzig, no. 1700, 29. Januar 1876, 87–89; 'Werner Munzinger Pascha', *Mittheilungen aus Justus Perthes' geographischer Anstalt* 22, Gotha, 1876, 107–08; Eduard Dor-Bey [Inspecteur général des écoles en Egypte]: 'Werner Munzinger-Pacha. Notice Biographique', *Bulletin de la Société Khédiviale de Géographie*, vol. 1, fasc. 1, Le Caire, 1876, 121–127; 'Der Afrika-Reisende Werner Munzinger', *Aus allen Welttheilen* 9, 1877, 269–97; Friedrich Ratzel: 'Munzinger', *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*. Vol. 23, Berlin 1886, 50–51; Joh. Val. Keller-Zschokke: Betätigung Werner Munzingers von Solothurn bei der Aufsuchung des in Wadai verschollenen Dr Ed. Vogel von Krefeld. Solothurn 1912. (Separatum des 'Neuen Solothurner Monatsblatts'); Hugo Dietschi: 'Werner Munzinger Pascha. Ein Schweizer Pionier im abessinischen Grenzland', *Sonntagspost, Basler Nachrichten*, 22. September 1935; 'Ein Mann verspielt das Schwarze Kaiserreich', *Der Angriff*, 27. November 1935; 'Werner Munzinger aus Olten – Generalgouverneur des Sudans und des Roten Meeres (1832–1875)', *Schweizer Radio-Illustrierte*, 30. November 1935; Hugo Dietschi: 'Werner

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