

## More notes on the Verreaux brothers

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We do not know if the person we call El Negro listened to his mother's advice while he was living in the 19th century somewhere under the Tropic of Capricorn. 'Don't mix with bad company', no doubt she told him as they experienced 'skirmishes with neighbouring Kora and others in the running wars of the 1820s known as Difaqane'<sup>1</sup>. But almost two centuries later, we can be sure that he did not escape bad company while dead.

'Bad company' would be a fitting description of the Verreaux brothers who stole the corpse of El Negro from his grave, stuffing it and putting it on display in Paris—though it would inadequately describe their whole part in the story. The brothers devoted their lives mainly to the trade in stuffed animals and, apart from the El Negro affair, we have no documentary proof that they were involved in other episodes of scientific racism—unlike other people associated with the *Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle* in Paris at that time. It is only fair to put Jules and Edouard Verreaux in the context of XIXth century European science. In such context what they did to El Negro was only one of the many cases which have been described as 'ethnological show business'. Even the Spanish veterinarian and taxidermist who bought the body in the 1880s, Francesc Darder, should be judged as a victim of his time and of the scientific mainstream which associated certain ethnic groups in Africa with the Missing Link. Another man alternated his work as the director of the first Barcelona Zoo with that of a specialist in the preservation—through taxidermy or mummification—of corpses<sup>2</sup>.

What is much more difficult to forgive is the fact that the body of El Negro was on display until 1997 in a public museum of a democratic country, and it would probably be still at the Darder Museum if Dr. Alphonse Arcelin had not started his campaigning in the early 90s.

This paper is not a complete work on the Verreaux brothers. There is plenty of information about them to be consulted on-line in the web-page of the History Department in the University of Botswana <<http://ubh.tripod.com>>. This paper just brings some more notes about this chapter of the dark side of science, and adds new information related to the El Negro case.

### **Global company**

The Maison Verreaux was the premier provider of taxidermy collections for museums of natural history<sup>3</sup>. Specimens collected and sold by the Verreaux brothers are still on display in institutions as the British Museum in London, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, the *Museu Zoològic de Barcelona* or the *Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle* in Paris.

The Maison Verreaux, established in 1803 at the Place des Vosges in Paris, is the earliest merchant dealing in natural history objects. It played an important role during the golden age of natural history collecting, with a catalog offering thousands of species of birds, eggs and nests, as well as mammals, shells, reptiles, amphibians, insects, etc. In addition to this commercial reputation, this establishment was known by naturalists from throughout the world as a meeting place. A veritable 'Academy of Sciences', the Maison Verreaux promoted and financed expeditions to all the continents<sup>4</sup>.

The Maison Verreaux was both a very successful business and an institution devoted to the advancement of science. Some of the stuffed animals and skeletons sent from their expeditions at the Cape of Good Hope were the first of their kind ever seen by scientists in Paris—notably the celebrated zoologist Georges Cuvier (director of the Paris Musuem) and Professor Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. As the provider of new specimens, Jules Verreaux played a small but significant part in Cuvier's zoological classifications. Thus, Jules Verreaux played his part in the 'discovery' of the whale shark:

The first whale shark known to scientists was a specimen captured in Table Bay on the Cape of Good Hope in 1828. This is right at the southern limit of their distribution where the warm Mozambique current brings warm tropical water down the east coast of Africa. The small shark, a mere 460 cm. long, was caught with a harpoon. Andrew Smith recording that 'when approached it manifested no great degree of fear, and it was not before a harpoon was lodged in its body that it altered its course and quickened its pace'. The specimen was purchased for 6 sterling pounds by a Mr. J. Verreaux, who organised to have it preserved and sent to the Paris Museum. A description of it featured in Smith's account of the Natural History of South Africa in 1929. This is the original holotype specimen used to define the species. It is remarkable that this original 1828 specimen still exists today in the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, although it is currently not on display<sup>5</sup>.

Another example: Jules Verreaux was only 11 year-old when he accompanied his uncle and famous explorer-naturalist Pierre Antoine Delalande to the Cape. They stayed there from 1818 until 1820. On one of their expeditions they came across 'the remains of a hippopotamus which provided a complete skeleton, the first to reach the Paris Museum'<sup>6</sup>.

According to Verreaux descendants interviewed by Piotr Daszkiewicz (a Polish historian of science who works for the Paris Muséum), the Maison Verreaux remained active until 1899—26 years after Jules Verreaux's death in 1873. This suggests that Francesc Darder could have bought the body of El Negro from the Maison Verreaux itself, rather than in an auction or from the executor or new owner of the Jules Verreaux collection. Alternatively, Daszkiewicz points out that many Verreaux specimens were listed in an auction organized in 1880 by the Deyrolle family, owners of a rival taxidermy shop founded in 1831. And Darder is thought to have bought the stuffed man around 1880. (Jules Verreaux also sold off 'a substantial portion' of his collection even before his death. One of his most renowned dioramas, the 'Arab Courier Attacked by Lions'—now in the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, U.S.A—was first purchased by the American Museum of Natural History in 1869.<sup>7</sup>)

### **(Almost) no human factor**

Jules Verreaux's main claim to fame was as an ornithologist, but his taxidermy skills were applied to every kind of animal life. We have no evidence of the Verreaux family dealing with other human bodies after 1830-31, which is a remarkable fact given the number of human remains displayed in and around the Paris Muséum. But Jules Verreaux had had experience of dealing in human remains before 1830-31 with Delalande at the Cape when he was 11-13 years old:

The collection which was brought home consisted of a staggering 131,405 specimens, most of which were plants. Other items included 288 mammals, 2,205 birds, 322 reptiles, 265 fish, 3,875 shellfish, human skulls of Hottentots, Namaquas and Bushmen, and nearly two dozen skeletons unearthed from an old Cape Town cemetery and from the Grahamstown battlefield of 1819. The botanical success was reduced by the decay of many of the plants and it was mainly the seeds that proved of lasting value<sup>8</sup>.

At that age, Jules Verreaux can hardly be responsible for this macabre shipment. But it seems that Jules' uncle Delalande (whose sister Joséphine was mother of Jules, Edouard and Alexis Verreaux) was already working for the family firm, Maison Verreaux.

Almost forty years after he turned El Negro's corpse into a museum freak, Jules Verreaux French created his masterpiece: 'Arab Courier Attacked by Lions'. This diorama shows two stuffed lions attacking a man riding a stuffed camel. The courier, who is wearing a 'combination of Tuareg and Arab garb common in the North African region'<sup>9</sup>, is, however, today an entirely artificial mannequin. This display was first exhibited at the Paris Exposition of 1867:

In Paris, Jules Verreaux, who aspired to be Charles Lucien Bonaparte's successor in ornithology but spent most of his career as a taxidermist, caught the public's imagination at the 1867 Exposition Universelle with his 'Arab Courier Attacked by Lions'. The American Museum of Natural History in New York later purchased this exhibit, which ultimately made its way to the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh. Since the last century the exhibit has inspired thousands of schoolchildren with a sense of excitement for the exotic<sup>10</sup>.

According to Stephen P. Rogers of the Carnegie Museum, the diorama made its way from New York to Pittsburgh in 1898 because it 'It was considered gauche by the upscale New York crowd'. He confirms that the courier on display in Pittsburgh is a plaster mannequin, but adds an intriguing rider: 'Our Arab Courier is not a human mount as El Negro...though it may have been real prior to 1899 when it was refurbished by Frederick Webster'.<sup>11</sup>

### **Despite bad company**

The galleries of the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris (an institution strongly linked to the Maison Verreaux) were somewhat insalubrious places in the 19th century. There were other human remains including preserved bodies and body parts besides the remains of Sarah Baartman:

- \* The skull of Charlotte Corday, Marat's killer, was exhibited at the Muséum at the same time that those of some Algerian rebels murdered by the French security forces.
- \* Georges Cuvier's archives tell of the preserved and exhibited body of the Egyptian murderer of General Kleber.
- \* During the Paris Universal Exposition of 1878, skeletons from Tasmania, Australia and Asia and 1,400 different skulls were exhibited.

We may therefore find hardly surprising the story posted by Ana L. Valdés, a Uruguayan journalist and anthropologist, on an Internet forum in 1997:

Some of the last Uruguayan indians, called Charruas, were sold to a circus owner who took them to Paris in order to exhibit them, in the same way Buffalo Bill did. But these poor Charruas could not resist the cold weather in Paris and died because of lung diseases only a few months after their arrival. The businessman thought he had been cheated, because he had paid a lot of money to buy these six indians (three of them were named Guyunusa, Zapican and Tacuabe). After they died, he took the bodies to a taxidermist and got them preserved. After this, he sold them to the Paris Muséum, which kept them on display until just a few years ago. They were removed from the exhibition rooms thanks to the claims of some organizations working for the indians. Then, they were removed to the room called 'Objects divers', where you only may be allowed to see them if you get a permit from the museum director and if you show a paper by the university you are researching for.

Georges Cuvier taught Jules Verreaux anatomy. He was also linked to Dr. Robert Knox, the disgraced Edinburgh scientist involved in macabre case of pseudo-science. Born in Edinburgh in 1793, Dr. Knox became an anatomist under Alexander Monro at the

university in his home city. After experience as a British army surgeon, 'he made his way to the Cape of Good Hope, where his anatomical investigations took him into anthropological and sociological fields.' And 'it is clear that it was the work he undertook then which laid the foundations of the racial theories with which he later became associated'. The historian Owen Dudley Edwards adds:

After his African experience Knox studied in Paris where he advanced his investigations in ethnology and placed his anatomical expertise on a footing with the latest advances and most progressive theories. In fact he eclipsed his master, adding the inductions of Cuvier, then crowning his career in the making of palaeontology, and the revolutionary and as yet widely ignored anatomical theories of Geoffrey St. Hilaire, to the excellent foundation Barclay had established in comparative anatomy. Knox's student intake [as lecturer in anatomy at Edinburgh University] broke all previous records. They came because he was so brilliant, and expounded his subject so well; but it was also vital that there be no shortage of subjects and this, in a year such as 1828-29 when he had 504 pupils, was a daunting task.<sup>12</sup>

However, in 1829 an Irish immigrant named William Burke was hanged in Edinburgh for his part in murdering sixteen wretched victims. His partner in crime, William Hare, was given legal immunity for testifying against Burke and got off free. Both of them had committed murders as a moneymaking enterprise to supply the anatomists' tables of Dr. Knox and his students. Knox, who shared Jules Verreaux's background both at the Cape and in the Paris Muséum, was suspected of complicity in and encouragement of the crime—but was never brought to trial. His reputation was, however, ruined and he took his vengeance on the scientific establishment as a peripatetic popular lecturer propagating the single idea that race explained all human behaviour.

### **In search of the unknown**

The name Verreaux is also linked the search for extinct and mythological animals. Briefly, two examples of it:

Bruno Faidutti<sup>13</sup> puts Jules Verreaux on the track of the unicorn. Along with Delalande and the British traveller Francis Galton, Verreaux is quoted as following the reports of 'Boers and Hottentots' and placing the unicorn in the area of the Cape Colony. Bernard Heuvelmans<sup>14</sup> links Jules Verreaux to the search of the Vouronpatra, originally described in 1658 by Admiral Etienne de Flacourt (in his *Histoire de la Grande Isle de Madagascar*) as: 'a large bird which haunts the Ampatres and lays eggs like the ostrich's; so that the people of these places may not take it, it seeks the most lonely places.' In 1832,

the French naturalist Victor Sganzin actually saw an enormous half-eggshell in Madagascar. The natives were using it as a bowl. They would not sell it to him, so he drew a sketch of it, and in 1840 sent it to a renowned ornithologist from Paris, Jules Verreaux, then in Cape Town<sup>15</sup>

Jules Verreaux met with no success in this research on mythological or already extinct animals. Anyway, what he really did was to contribute to the extinction of other species. Verreaux's working on two specimens of the Barbary Lion for his diorama of the Arab Courier probably coincided with its extinction as a species. Other extinct species must surely have featured in the figure of about 400,000 specimens obtained by the Maison Verreaux up to 1866<sup>16</sup>

### **The letter**

A key document on the origin of El Negro is an article published in the French newspaper *Le Constitutionnel* on 15 November 1831:

Two young people, Messieurs the Verreaux brothers, have recently arrived from a voyage to the ends of Africa, to the land of the Cape of Good-Hope. One of these interesting naturalists is barely eighteen years old, but he has already spent twenty months in the wild country north of the land of the Hottentots, between the latitudes of Natal [Port Natal 30 degrees South] and the top of St Helena Bay [33 degrees South]. How can one possibly imagine what deprivations he had to endure? Our young compatriots had to face the dangers of living in the midst of the natives of this zone of Africa, who are ferocious as well as black, as well as the fawn-coloured wild animals among which they live, about which we do not need to tell. We want to speak only about the triumphs of their collecting, and do not know which to admire more, their intrepidity or their perseverance. Humans, quadrupeds, birds, fish, plants, minerals, shells—all of these they have studied. Their hunting has given them tigers, lions, hyenas, an admirable lualaba, a crimson antelope of rare elegance, a host of other small members of the same family, two giraffes, monkeys, long pitchforks, very-curious rats, ostriches, birds of prey which have never been described before, a great quantity of other birds of all sizes, colours and species. They also have a collection of nests, which could be the object of a charming descriptive essay; roots like onions, and other plants of remarkable shape and extraordinary size, snakes, a cachalot and a crocodile of a type previously unknown.

But their greatest curiosity is an individual of the nation of the Betjouanas. This man is preserved by the means by which naturalists prepare their specimens and reconstitute their form and, so to speak, their inert life. He is of small stature, black of skin, his head covered by short woolly and curly hair, armed with arrows and a lance, clothes in antelope skin, made of bush-pig, full of small glass-beads, seeds, and of small bones. Another thing that we are rather embarrassed to find a suitable term to characterise, is the very special accessory of modest clothing worn by the Betjouanas, which we find most striking.

Messieurs Verreaux have deposited their scientific riches at the stores of Monsieur Delessert, rue Saint-Fiacre, n.3. There they are generously put on display for the public, without charge. It would be well if the Jardin des Plantes took this opportunity to extend its collections, already so beautiful, to become even more desirable—and to use the skills which they do not already possess of Messieurs Verreaux with the time, the talent, and the energy necessary to go out Africa to catch nature in the act<sup>17</sup>.

Here we should add that it was not until 1991—when Jacinto Antón, a journalist on the Spanish newspaper *El País*, started research in Paris and found the article above—that we knew the antiquity of El Negro as a museum mummy and of his status as a 'Betchouana'. But this is not the only document which can help us to fix by whom, when and how—unfortunately, not 'where'—the body was stolen.

On 12 May 1831 Jules Verreaux, at the Cape, wrote a letter to the great Georges Cuvier—the Paris Muséum director who was to die exactly one year and a day later—telling him about the large collection of specimens his brother was bringing back to Paris. Among the specimens was the preserved body of a 'Bouchouana', for which Jules Verreaux had risked his life in digging it up, because the grave was guarded:

*Un objet qui n'est pas le moins intéressant de notre collection, est un bouchouana préparé et fort bien conservé et qui failli m'a coûté la vie, étant obligé pour les obtenir d'aller les déterrer la nuit dans les lieux gardé par leurs semblables.*

The letter, now in the Institute de France in Paris, is in bad shape and contains incoherent sentences. A translation of the passage above into English would be:

An object which is not the least interesting in our collection is a stuffed 'bouchouana' which is very well preserved and which was about to cause my death, because in order to get it I was obliged to disinter it at night in places guarded by his fellows.

Piotr Daszkiewicz's opinion is that Jules Verreaux's letter was trying to sell the collection, including *Le Bouchouana*, to the Paris Natural History Museum. These are some of Daszkiewicz's answers to my questions after I read the letter:

*Why did the Muséum not buy the body?*

*Daszkiewicz:* 'I do not know why. Of course there was no ethical reason. It is possible that Cuvier's successors were simply not interested in it. It is also possible that Verreaux's price was too expensive: the high price asked by the Verreaux brothers for their specimens was a problem the Muséum often confronted. Or possibly the Muséum already had human remains from the same region. But these ones are only hypotheses, because the documentation we have is very incomplete.'

*What happened the body between 1831, when it was exhibited in the Baron Delessert's galleries, and 1888, when it shows up in Barcelona?*

*Daszkiewicz:* 'I have no information about the 'betchouana' in that period. It is possible that it remained in the Verreaux shop, which could keep objects in stock for many years waiting for better opportunities. The Salon of Baron Delessert—who was an important patron of the natural sciences, and particularly of botany—was for used by the Verreaux only occasionally for expositions.'

*Did the Maison Verreaux sell other human remains?*

*Daszkiewicz:* 'I think El Negro was the only human body in the Verreaux's business. I have not found information about other cases. As I have already said in writing, this was not because they had any ethical problems at the time, but for reasons of commercial specialisation. The Maison Verreaux sold all kind of natural history specimens, particularly specialising in birds and 'groups of economic interest' as, for instance, molluscs. They were not interested in human anthropology.'

Comparison of Jules Verreaux's letter to Cuvier in 1831 with Francesc Darder 1888 catalogue of exhibits, shows that Darder—who first travelled from Barcelona to Paris four years after Jules's death—was able to gather detailed information about the original desecration of the grave of the 'Bouchouana' or 'Betchouana'. What sources were available to Darder?

What this all confirms is that it was young Jules Verreaux himself who desecrated the grave. In his letter to Cuvier he uses the first person singular when describing the act. It took place at night, but there is no mention of his brother. Was he alone when he did the deed?

Last year, while collecting information about the origins of El Negro, in order to write an article for my newspaper in Barcelona, *La Vanguardia*<sup>19</sup>, Neil Parsons sent me an e-mail telling me about a seminar at the University of Botswana:

As one person at the seminar pointed out, the greatest horror of all is that some witches might come and steal the body, digging it up at midnight to use its parts for some evil medicine. The Verreaux brothers were of course witches, and there will have to be plenty of purification accompanying the re-burial of El Negro.

Those who live near the Tsholofelo Park, where El Negro is now buried in Gaborone, should protect our man from witches, especially if they come disguised as honest European ornithologists.

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