

Collecting Classifying Ordering

Things (Part 2)¹

1.

The shark was supposed to have been of immense size. A spectacular catch, also because of the colour of the giant predator. A white shark. Two dauntless fishermen are said to have landed it in 1666 from the Tyrrhenian Sea off Livorno, tied it to a tree and clubbed it to death. Thereupon its severed head alone was taken to the Medici court in Florence. Its flesh had already begun to stink when the order arrived from the capital for the removal of the fish. The huge cadaver was thrown back into the sea. The head went in a cart to Florence. It must have been a strange parade which escorted the monstrous thing the many kilometres up the Arno Valley. Although an otherwise insignificant episode, were it not possible to see it as one of the many occurrences which heralded a new view of the earth's history.

1 This text is a continuation of 'THINGS', in *Kim Nekarda. Marlène et Hélène*, Berlin 2009, pp. 55-57.

2.

The task of dissecting the shark's head fell to a young Dane who had only recently arrived in Florence as the personal physician to the grand duke of Tuscany, Ferdinando II de' Medici. Niels Stensen, doctor and anatomist, member of one of the first societies for scientific experimentation, the Florentine Accademia del Cimento, examined the shark's eyes, ears and jaws. He noticed that the form and structure of its teeth were remarkably similar to certain fossils, namely the *glossopetrae* or 'tongue stones' preserved by the thousand in Europe's chambers of art and curiosity. Such fossils, Stensen concluded, could be none other than sharks' teeth. A deeply unsettling finding. So outrageous that scientists who had reached the same conclusion in previous decades had been unable to assert it, as it provoked a question for which contemporary knowledge could not provide an answer: how was it possible for fossilised sharks' teeth to be found in such large quantities so far away from the sea?

Digression:

A Forgotten Remedy and Charm

Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historiae* states that the objects identified as sharks' teeth by Stensen were not of earthly origin, but fell from the heavens during eclipses of the moon. In the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, natural scientists interpreted fossils of all kinds as products of the earth, as the fruit of certain types of soil and rock; a further speculation was that nature had a fancy to produce things which wholly or partially imitated living creatures. Regarding the tongue stones, for a long time legend had it that Saint Peter had turned the tongues of the snakes on the island of Malta into stone. This pious tale matched a belief in the wondrous power of these frequently found fossils, also known in German as *Natternzungen* [adders' tongues], which were said to

be able to indicate and neutralise poison. For this reason, tongue stones were traded as remedies and charms² well into the early modern era. The Maltese stones had the reputation of being the most effective.

3.

Niels Stensen was familiar with tongue stones; he had seen the ones from the island of Malta in the fossil collection of his teacher Thomas Bartholin, and they must have been included in the curiosity cabinet he put together for Ferdinando II de' Medici. The famous Ambras Collection, set up by the Tyrolean archduke Ferdinand II,³ which like all pre-modern collections was a chamber of art and curiosity in one, contains a number of such tongue stones – that is, samples of the fossilised teeth of the megalodon (*Carcharocles megalodon*) – which were exported from Malta to all the countries of Europe. The largest shark in the history of the earth, up to sixteen metres long, according to what we know today, the megalodon became extinct around one-and-a-half million years ago and was an ancestor of the great white shark.

After publishing his conclusion, in his paper *Canis carchariae dissectum caput* (1667), that the wondrous tongue stones were in fact sharks' teeth, Niels Stenson set about answering the question as to how fossilised sharks' teeth could have ended up in inland regions. In the book based on his subsequent research, *De solido intra solidum naturaliter contento* (1669), he developed hypotheses about the genesis of fossils, and elaborated his *stratigraphic principle*, which provided the basis for a branch of science that was only later to be established – geology. If, following Wilhelm von Humboldt, we acknowledge Stensen as the father of this science, he is to a certain extent the forebear of the geologist Heinrich Drendorf from Adalbert Stifter's inimitable novel *Der Nachsommer* [Indian Summer] (1857). Heinrich was to become “a describer of things, or an artist

who creates things from materials for which he thus feels a sympathy, or at least a scholar, who examines the characteristics and properties of things". The judgemental tone that can be heard here – in the expression "at least a scholar" – arises from the strict separation, since Stensen's time, of art and science and the differentiation of their various disciplines. The reordering of things associated with this takes on physical form in the home of Baron Risach, in which Heinrich acquires the greater part of his knowledge. Here, in the so-called Rosenhaus, the natural and art objects of the old baron's varied collections are preserved, strictly separated according to the individual arts and sciences, which each have a room of their own. In the meticulous spatial ordering of the Rosenhaus, Stifter reflects the modern concept of collecting, which discriminates between art, nature and technology, and separates the archive from the library. This also suggests a counter-model to the pre-modern collection, which is characterised by a mixture of objects. The chambers of art and curiosity of the early modern era allowed natural objects to enter into a visual dialogue with works of art and technology.⁴ Yet Stifter does not eliminate this interchange, but relocates it in the figure of Heinrich Drendorf, or to be more exact in his relationship to things: Drendorf learns how to embrace all the natural, technical and art objects in their material, functional and/or aesthetic qualities. This occurs through denomination and description, as well as through drawing and painting. Over many hundreds of pages Stifter ascribes the utmost importance to the often repeated observation of things. In this novel, speaking is primarily a speaking about things, that is, about natural objects and works of art in equal measure. And the narrative itself is essentially a description of things and their contemplation. One might pursue the question as to whether Stifter's spatial ordering of things in the Rosenhaus is not undermined by his visually oriented narration; whether *Der Nachsommer* restores a pre-modern concept of collection and/or presages a future one.

- 2 The princely fear of poisoned food and drink necessitated a tasting ceremony prior to dining, and diverse apotropaic objects were placed on the high table: certain precious stones, corals and tongue stones were worked into splendid ornamental centrepieces. The essential element of these objects being Natternzungen, which sweated heavily or changed colour in the presence of poison, these now obsolete items of tableware were known as Natternzungenkredenzen (tongue-stone credenza). Worked in silver and gilt, or consisting of a branch of coral, their tree-like form served as a fastening for gold- or silver-mounted tongue stones, which were detached and dipped in the wine, for example, in order to neutralise any poison it might contain. One of the few of such objects to have been preserved comes from the estate of Archduke Ferdinand II and is held today in the Kunthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Another example, today also in Vienna, consists of a gilded silver base and a branch of red coral from which mounted tongue stones depend. This piece unites the tongue stones with coral, which – as a natural object, depicted in works of art, worked into objects – was present in all pre-modern collections. For further reading: Horst Bredekamp, *Darwins Korallen. Frühe Evolutionsmodelle und die Tradition der Naturgeschichte*, Berlin 2005.
- 3 See footnote 2.
- 4 See Horst Bredekamp, *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine The Kunstammer and the Evolution of Nature, Art, and Technology* [1993], Princeton 1995 (particularly the ‘Afterword on the Present’).