

Peter Forsskål and Goettingen

(C) Gabriele Schrey-Vasara

Let me begin by naming the person, without whom the unveiling of the memorial plaque for Peter Forsskål would not have happened. As one of the two vice presidents of the Academy of Sciences in Goettingen I received in the beginning of the year 2013 an e-mail from David Goldberg, who introduced himself as a “retired academic lawyer and member of the Peter Forsskål Project” and informed me that this is the 250th anniversary of Peter Forsskål’s death, who in 1756 became a corresponding member of the “Royal Society of Sciences in Goettingen”, our present Academy. I have to confess that as a theoretical physicist I had never heard of Forsskål. Since our Academy has much more corresponding than ordinary members, my first thought was that we cannot celebrate every jubilee of all our corresponding members. But David Goldberg convinced me in many additional e-mails of Forsskål’s exceptional rank and of his close relationship to Goettingen. Therefore we invited Goldberg to our plenary meeting on December 13th, 2013, to present a lecture on Forsskål’s life and work and especially on his relations to Goettingen. To this meeting we also invited members of the Lichtenberg-Kolleg as experts on the subject of the Enlightenment.

After David Goldberg’s visit to Goettingen followed his next strike: He proposed a memorial plaque for Forsskål. At that point, no-one knew where Forsskål had resided. Only the period of his stay in Goettingen was known: from 1753 to 1756.

But now, let me give you a short description of Forsskål’s life:

He was born on January 11th 1732 in Helsinki, the son of pastor Johan Forsskål and his wife. At the early age of 10 years he began his studies at Uppsala University. He studied languages, theology and natural science and was especially interested in botany. He was a student of Carl Linnaeus (later Carl von Linné), whose “binary nomenclature” for plants (family and species), e. g. “*Anemone nemorosa*” (the wind-plant), is known to everyone who loves plants.

In October 1753, with a Swedish grant, Forsskål arrived at the Georg-August-University in Goettingen. Here, he studied modern philosophy, oriental languages – especially Arabic – and theology. His most important teachers were two regular members of our Academy, Johann David Michaelis, professor of oriental studies, and Samuel Christian Hollmann, who taught physics and philosophy.

Forsskål stayed until June 1756. By then he had achieved the doctorate for his philosophical thesis “*Dubia de Principiis Philosophiae Recentioris*” (Doubts on the principles of recent philosophies). In this book, he critically examines recent developments in philosophy, especially the philosophical work of Christian Wolff (1679-1754).

As mentioned, shortly after his graduation Forsskål became a corresponding member of our Academy.

Forsskål returned to Uppsala and to Linnaeus but stayed in correspondence with Michaelis. The next important event to be mentioned took place on November 13th, 1759, when he published his pamphlet *Tankar om Borgerliga Friheten* (Thoughts on Civil Liberty), which showed him as an early radical representative of the Enlightenment. The first of 21 paragraphs begins:

“The more a man may live according to his own inclinations, the more he is free. Therefore, next to life itself, nothing could be more dear to man than freedom...”

The pamphlet was banned the same day.

The last event to be mentioned is the expedition to Arabia planned by Michaelis and financed by the king of Denmark. This expedition has already been presented at the unveiling of the memorial plate for Carsten Niebuhr. Niebuhr was the only survivor of the expedition. As students in Goettingen, Forsskål and Niebuhr did not meet, because Niebuhr began his studies one year after Forsskål had left. On a recommendation by Michaelis Forsskål joined the expedition as a scientist and made many botanical discoveries e. g. in Yemen, where he died of malaria in July 1763, aged 31. Thanks to Carsten Niebuhr's return several years later, parts of Forsskål's achievements were preserved for posterity.

Forsskål was a young man who consequently questioned everything and did not easily accept any dogma. In this, he went so far that even his teachers sometimes lost their patience. The nettle *Forskålea tenacissima* (most clinging) was named after Forsskål by Linné. Rumour has it that in Linné's opinion getting engaged in a conversation with Forsskål was as dangerous as touching this plant. On the other hand, this quite unpretending plant does not even have stinging hairs, and “tenax” also means “tough” or “persistent”.

Before I come to the end of my presentation, I would like to mention David Goldberg's final strike, his continuous insistence that we in Goettingen should translate Forsskål's thesis “Dubia...” from Latin. The chairman of the Historical-Philological section of our Academy, Vice President Thomas Kaufmann, referred me to our member Fidel Rädle, who had indeed already translated the first pages, but proposed that the translation should rather be done by a colleague with a philosophical background. He proposed Dan Nikolaus Hasse at the University of Wuerzburg. Hasse in turn recommended Bernd Roling of the FU Berlin. And a few days before the unveiling of the memorial plate for Forsskål, I was informed that the German translation, which he had worked on with his graduate student Benjamin Hübbe, has been completed.

The memorial plaque was ready to be unveiled, almost two years after my first letter to the city archives. This is good for Goettingen, and David Goldberg has more than one reason to be happy.