

Circulation and Site: Knowledge of Gundi Tobacco, 1850-1870

Alexander van Wickeren (University of Cologne)

Around the middle of the 19. century an inner-European production of cigars emerged that urged experts to reformulate their opinions on tobacco cultivation. Especially tobacco species and sorts were now investigated and single species were depicted as particularly useful for the production of cigars. In the Grand-Duchy of Baden agronomists and agricultural scientists propagated the so-called "Gundi" tobacco to be the new standard tobacco species for Baden's cultivation. Gundi was imagined to improve tobacco's quality and help the state change its role from an import country to one that exports high quality cigars to the rest of the world.

I want to combine approaches from the history of science and the Spatial Turn to analyze the transnational circulation that knowledge of Gundi underwent between 1850 and 1870. This ongoing research is a part of my PhD thesis that deals with the history of tobacco knowledge in the Southern Rhine region between 1800 and 1870. By following the object Gundi I want to investigate different "Scientific Sites" as well as spaces of circulation. By Scientific Sites I mean, taking up David N. Livingstone's and Charles W. J. Withers' definition, "not simply [...] locations but [...] social and epistemic venues." The concept of Site helps me "addressing how scientific ideas change their meaning when framed in regard to different geographical scales."¹ Secondly, I focus not solely on isolated Sites of knowledge, but on interconnections between these Sites that can be analyzed as spaces of circulation. In this respect I apply terms like "region", "border area exchange" or "national circulation" that give an impression of the spatial differences of communications about Gundi. By following the changing notions of a single tobacco species, it becomes possible to draw a textual map of sites and circulation spaces that coexisted in the middle of the 19. century. I have not made use of visualization technologies yet, but I would be thankful, if someone could suggest ways to map the following constellations:

Gundi Tobacco first appeared in the discussions of Baden's agronomical scientific community, the *Landwirtschaftlicher Verein für das Großherzogtum Baden*, in the beginning of the 1850s when it was defined and stabilized as a distinctive sort with certain properties. Much of Gundi's discovery was based on the book *Der Tabak und sein Anbau* (1852) written by August von Babo and Friedrich Hoffacker in which Gundi was botanically described for the first time. Babo and Hoffacker did not freely choose or create a botanical system, but made use of the regionally accepted system of Johann

¹ (Anonym), Sites and Scales, in: David N. Livingstone / Charles W. J. Withers (ed.), *Geographies of Nineteenth-Century Science*, Chicago / London 2011, p. 21-23, here p. 21.

Metzger that was designed in the 1830s by taking up the taxonomical systematic of Carl Linnaeus' famous binomial system created in the 18th century. For Babo and Hoffacker Gundi was a "variety" of the "Virginia Tabak (*Nicotiana tabacum*)", one of the three "main species" of tobacco, while the two others, the "Maryland Tabak (*Nicotiana macrophylla* Sp.)" and the "Veilchen Tabak (*Nicotiana rustica*)", had simply been neglected in their relevance as categories to order Gundi. Beside the botanical order of Gundi as a "variety" Baden's agronomists assigned certain properties to the species. For them, Gundi was a kind or sort that fulfilled the dreams of all groups benefiting from the production of cigar tobacco. In this rather idealized picture that Baden's tobacco experts created, Gundi fulfilled the needs of the farmer by being resistant to plant diseases and weather changes. Baden's manufacturers, who processed the raw tobacco, were supposed to like Gundi, because its leaves were described as easy to peel off from the stem of the plant. Finally, concerning the texts of Baden's tobacco experts, the consumer eventually would benefit, because taste and smell of Gundi suited the high demands of smokers familiar with Cuban or American cigars.

In the end of the 1850s, discussions on Gundi started to appear also in Alsace, Baden's French neighbor region on the other side of the Rhine, which represents my second Scientific Site. The border area circulation was accompanied by adjustments of the tobacco variety that were, although not remarkably strong, certainly enriching Gundi's attributes. In Alsace, Gundi was further stabilized as a distinctive botanical kind: One outcome of various field trials that Alsatian tobacco experts performed with farmers and Alsatian experts was the confirmation of Gundi's status as a "variety" – a proof that the Linnaean system of botanic classification had become widely accepted around 1850. However, beside this rather stable take overs from Baden one finds attempts to enrich the applicability of Gundi. Alsatian actors agreed with the idea that Gundi was perfectly appropriated for the cigar production, but they added that it was not just the production of the cigar cover leaf, as agronomists like Babo or Hoffacker had stressed, but also useful to produce the chopped tobacco necessary for the cigar filling known as "scaferlati".

While the circulation in the border area did not change the image of Gundi significantly, the tobacco kind experienced a rapid reinterpretation in the middle of the 1860s when it was circulated nationally from Alsace to Paris. In the Parisian Scientific Site the agricultural chemist of the central tobacco administration, Jean-Jacques Théophile Schloesing, saw Gundi, contrary to the understanding in Baden and Alsace, not as a stable "variety", but as a botanical "anomaly" that appeared hard to classify. According to Schloesing, Gundi could not really be distinguished from indigenous, traditional tobacco species from Alsace and therefore had to be encountered with suspicion. In his logic the Gundi as an abnormal form of Alsatian tobacco sorts might produce high quality tobacco for a certain period

of time, but would probably be prone to diseases in the long run. The central administration in Paris therefore hesitated to recommend the Gundi Tobacco. Such interpretation were strategic indeed. While testing Gundi in Paris, the tobacco administration was about to propose the "tabac de Havane" as a new standard tobacco species in the French Empire that counteracted the spread of other varieties not advocated by the central state's authority.