



Carl Hermann Berendt, M. D.

MEMOIR OF DR. C. H. BERENDT.

BY D. G. BRINTON.

A MAN who gives up a lucrative profession and even the pleasures of family life to devote himself to science, deserves more than a passing notice when death overtakes him. Such a man was Dr. Karl Hermann Berendt. To his enthusiasm he joined a most sound judgment, which kept him clear of those hobbies and fancies which have done so much to destroy the usefulness of many eminent workers in his special branches.

He came of a family of physicians and naturalists long resident in Danzig. Dr. Nathaniel Berendt, his grandfather, was also a collector and student, especially of organic remains in amber. This collection descended to his son, Dr. George Karl Berendt, for years president of the *Naturforschende Gesellschaft* of Danzig, who increased it so much that at his death (1850) it was the largest in the world. It is now in the Berlin Museum, where it is known as the "Berendt Collection."

Dr. Berendt's personal life was one of constant change. His birth took place at Danzig, November 12, 1817. His professional studies were made at the University of Königsberg, where he received his medical diploma in 1842. The year following he began practice in Breslau, where he was also *Privat-dozent* in the University in the branches of surgery and obstetrics.

When the political troubles of 1848-49 arose, Dr. Berendt took an active part on the constitutional side and

attended the parliament at Frankfort as a deputy. This led to a severance of his connection with the University of Breslau and to his removal to Graudentz, and later, in 1851, to America. Landing at New York, he proceeded to Nicaragua, where he remained for two years, becoming deeply interested in the ethnology, geography and natural history of that portion of the continent. Two years later he moved to Orizaba, Mexico, and again after two years to Vera Cruz, where he made his home from 1855 to 1862.

From the time of his departure from Orizaba he placed the practice of medicine subordinate to the study of his favorite science. Much of his time was passed in journeys to the southern provinces, Tabasco, Chiapas and Yucatan. These prolonged absences, together with the unhealthy character of the climate of Vera Cruz, led to the return of the remaining members of his family to Germany. Dr. Berendt himself suffered no less than four attacks of yellow fever, and they no doubt undermined his naturally vigorous constitution.

From Vera Cruz he went to Tabasco, whence in 1863 he departed for the United States, and passed most of 1864 in Providence, R. I., copying manuscripts in the John Carter Brown Library. In 1866, at the request of the Smithsonian Institution, he undertook a journey to Peten, Yucatan, returning the following year. Again in February and March, 1869, we find him exploring the vast ruins of the ancient city of Centla, in the fever-haunted plains of Tabasco, ruins which he was the first to discover and identify with the populous and civilized capital described by Juan de Grijalva in 1518.

The greater part of 1871 and 1872 he lived in New York, and it was during this period that my acquaintance with him began. His habits of work were peculiar. Once I made an appointment at three o'clock in the afternoon, which he punctually kept, but told me I must consider it a particular compliment, as it was too early an hour for

him to get up! It was quite a usual matter for him to go to bed at seven in the morning. At that time he had with him a young Maya Indian, José Sabino Uc, whom he had adopted, and hoped to inspire with a love of study; but I have heard that the experiment turned out a failure, as is usually the case. As he was a great smoker, and detested the cold so much that he never aired his room, it is not surprising that a northern winter tried his constitution severely.

His genial disposition, unaffected enthusiasm, and clear mind rendered his conversation peculiarly attractive. While severely critical in his estimates of literary productions, he was not so in the sense of fault-finding, and, moreover, submitted everything he himself did to the same unsparring tests. This, in fact, was his weak point as a scientific worker. He placed his ideal so high, demanded such absolute accuracy and entire completeness for everything which appeared in print, that he was never satisfied with what others had done, nor with what he himself could do. Hence of the considerable number of larger works he began, he never finished one.

In 1874 he settled in Coban, Vera Paz, partly to study the dialects of the Maya spoken in that district, and partly to improve his income by raising coffee. This was interrupted in the summer of 1876 by a visit to the United States, when I saw him for the last time, in Philadelphia. His principal purpose was to examine the manuscripts in Central American languages in the library of the American Philosophical Society, a description of which I had published some years before and given him.

On his return he was asked by the Berlin Museum to obtain and forward the celebrated series of sculptured slabs at Santa Lucia de Cozumaljualpa, Guatemala. To this commission he devoted much time in the winter of 1877-78, and in the spring of the latter year was seized with a severe attack of fever. He returned to Coban, but his illness reached a fatal termination on May 12, 1878.

Dr. Berendt married in 1848, Miss Anna Beck, daughter of the celebrated pathologist in Freiburg, Prof. Beck. He left two children, both educated with their mother in Germany. Of these but one survives, Mr. Max Berendt, now a consulting marine engineer in Hamburg.

As I have hinted, Dr. Berendt's published works are in no degree commensurate with his profound studies and intimate acquaintance with Central American subjects. Perhaps a certain restlessness, indicated by his unsettled life, interfered with the completion of any long work. He began many, but ended none. What he actually printed were only letters, short articles or addresses. They are in the German, Spanish or English languages, all of which he wrote and spoke with entire facility. The following is probably but a partial list¹:

- 1862-63. Numerous Notes on Mexico in Petermann's *Geographische Mittheilungen*.
1869. An Analytical Alphabet for the Mexican and Central American Languages. Published by the American Ethnological Society.
1871. Los Trabajos Linguisticos de Don Pio Perez. pp. 6. Published in Mexico.
1871. Cartilla en Lengua Maya. Merida, pp. 14.
1873. On a Grammar and Dictionary of the Karif or Carib Language. pp. 2. Smithsonian Report.
1873. Die Indianer des Isthmus von Tehuantepec. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*.
1874. The Darien Language. *American Historical Record*.
1874. (?) El Ramié. Tratado del Cultivo y noticias de esta Planta.
1876. Remarks on the Centres of Ancient Civilization in Central America and their Geographical Distribution. *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*.

Besides what are mentioned in this list he contributed a number of articles to the *Deutsch-Amerikanisches Conversations-Lexikon*, to the *Correspondenzblatt für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*, the *Revista de Merida*, etc. He also edited the last part of Pio Perez's *Diccionario de la Lengua Maya*, and did much cartographical work on maps of Mexico, Yucatan and Central America. At the time of his death he was engaged upon

¹ See, also, Proceedings of this Society, New Series, vol. I., p. 113.—PUB. COM.

the following work, which appears to have been left incomplete :

Los Indigenas de la America Central y sus Idiomas, Roseña Etnografica, compilado de los Escritos y Apuntes del Doctor C. Hermann Berendt, por Edwin Rockstroh. Edicion de la Sociedad Economica, Guatemala. Imprenta del Progreso, 1878.

So far as I can learn, only the first form, 16 pp., of this work was completed.

The special field in which Dr. Berendt took most delight and to which he devoted his most willing labor, was "the ethnology and linguistics of the great Maya family." Many years of study and travel in Mexico and Central America, had led him toward the opinion that the problems of ancient American civilization would be most profitably approached by an exhaustive examination of everything accessible with regard to this numerous and prominent stock. With this in view he made four visits to Yucatan, visiting the ruins, copying manuscripts, collecting antiquities and books, and studying the Maya language as a living tongue. For the same purpose he spent nearly a year in Providence, R. I., copying and annotating the only known manuscript of an ancient Maya dictionary; visited Guatemala to search the libraries there for documents in the Kiche and Cakchiquel dialects; Coban, to obtain specimens of Pocomchi and Kekchi writings; and so on. By this means he had gathered together a mass of materials in these dialects far exceeding in number and value any previous collection, and such as it is not probable any single individual will again acquire. The whole number of works in his library in or upon this linguistic family exceeds one hundred, while the next largest—that which was gathered by the late Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg—counted less than eighty.

Dr. Berendt's collection was, moreover, particularly designed for the scientific study of these tongues. It is especially rich in dictionaries and grammars, and in works written by natives. In this respect it is much superior

to that of the Abbé, most of whose rarities were theological tracts by Spanish priests. The three unpublished manuscript dictionaries of the Maya, the grammars of Buena-ventura and Beltran, and the curious "Books of Chilan Balam," form in themselves a body of material for the appreciation of this idiom in its original form scarcely surpassed by that in any American language. Besides these, there is a complete set of the works of Father Ruz, the only one I believe in existence, as not even in Yucatan is another to be found.

Outside of the Maya group, the languages of all the natives in and between the isthmuses of Tehuantepec and Panamá are excellently represented in the collection he formed, the number of titles of grammars, vocabularies, etc., reaching to 175. Some of these were original MSS., others copied with scrupulous fidelity and much beauty of penmanship from originals.

Ethnology and linguistics were, however, not the only subjects which occupied Dr. Berendt's attention. The geography, natural and civil history, and general literature of Central America, all came within the scope of his researches, and he left among his books and papers, much material bearing on these questions.

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