



## UNIVERSALITAS & PERVASIVITAS

IL COSTITUIRSI E DIFFONDERSI DELLA S.J. E SUOI ECHI (1540 - 1773)  
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Contesto teologico e filosofico

### Johann Friedrich Blumenbach

Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (11 May 1752 – 22 January 1840) was a German physician, physiologist and anthropologist, one of the first to explore the study of mankind as an aspect of natural history, whose teachings in comparative anatomy were applied to classification of what he called human races, of which he determined five.

#### Biography

Johann Friedrich Blumenbach was born at Gotha, studied medicine at Jena and then Göttingen, graduating from the latter 1775 with his M.D. thesis *De generis humani varietate nativa* (On the Natural Variety of Mankind, University of Göttingen, first published in 1775, re-issued with changings of the title-page in 1776), which is considered one of the most influential works in the development of subsequent concepts of "human races." [1][2]

He was appointed extraordinary professor of medicine and inspector of the museum of natural history in Göttingen in 1776 and ordinary professor in 1778. His later works included *Institutiones Physiologicae* (1787), and *Handbuch der vergleichenden Anatomie* (1805). In 1812 he was appointed secretary to the Royal Society of Sciences at Göttingen, in 1816 became Obermedizinalrat, in 1821 was made a knight-commander of the Guelphic Order, and in 1831 was elected a member of the Academy of Sciences at Paris. In celebration of his doctoral jubilee (1825) traveling scholarships were founded to assist talented young physicians and naturalists. In 1813, he was elected a foreign member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. In 1835 he retired. Blumenbach died in Göttingen in 1840. [2]



#### Blumenbach's racial classification system

Blumenbach divided the human species into five races in 1779, later founded on crania research (description of human skulls), and called them (1793/1795):

- \* the Caucasian race or white race
- \* the Mongolian or yellow race
- \* the Malayan or brown race
- \* the Ethiopian, or black race
- \* the American or red race.

His classification of Mongolian race included all East Asians and some Central Asians. Blumenbach excluded peoples of Southeast Asian islands and Pacific Islanders from his definition



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in 1779, as he considered them to be part of the Malay race. He considered American Indians to be part of the American (Indigenous peoples) race. He did not think they were inferior to the Caucasian race, and were potentially good members of society. He included the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa in the Negro or black race.

Blumenbach argued that physical characteristics like skin color, cranial profile, etc., were depended on geography and nutrition and custom.

Blumenbach's work included his description of sixty human crania (skulls) published originally in fascicules as *Decas craniorum* (Göttingen, 1790–1828). This was a founding work for other scientists in the field of craniometry.

Blumenbach encountered in Switzerland in 1783 "eine zum Verlieben schöne Négresse" ('a negro woman so beautiful to fall in love with'). Further "anatomical study" led him to the conclusion that 'individual Africans differ as much, or even more, from other individual Africans as Europeans differ from Europeans'. Furthermore he concluded that Africans were not inferior to the rest of mankind 'concerning healthy faculties of understanding, excellent natural talents and mental capacities'.[3]

"Finally, I am of opinion that after all these numerous instances I have brought together of negroes of capacity, it would not be difficult to mention entire well-known provinces of Europe, from out of which you would not easily expect to obtain off-hand such good authors, poets, philosophers, and correspondents of the Paris Academy; and on the other hand, there is no so-called savage nation known under the sun which has so much distinguished itself by such examples of perfectibility and original capacity for scientific culture, and thereby attached itself so closely to the most civilized nations of the earth, as the Negro."[4]

These ideas were far less influential. His ideas were adopted by other researchers and encouraged scientific racism.[5] Blumenbach's work was used by many biologists and comparative anatomists in the nineteenth century who were interested in the origin of races: Wells, Lawrence, Prichard, Huxley and William Flower are good examples of his influence on human biology.

### **Blumenbach and the Platypus**

Blumenbach was also one of the first scientists to study the anatomy of the platypus. He gave the scientific name *Ornithorhynchus paradoxus* to the animal not knowing that George Shaw had given it the name *Platypus anatinus*. However, *Platypus* had already been shown to be used for the scientific name for a genus of *Ambrosia* beetles so Blumenbach's scientific name for the genus was used.[6]

### **Blumenbach and Natural History**

Blumenbach wrote a manual of natural history entitled *Handbuch der Naturgeschichte*; 12 editions and some translations. It was published first in Göttingen by J. C. Dieterich in 1779/1780.

### **Blumenbach and the Chimpanzee**

In his dissertation Blumenbach mentioned a name *Simia troglodytes* with a short description for the Common Chimpanzee. This dissertation was printed and appeared in September 1775, but only for internal use in the University of Göttingen and not for providing a public record. The public print of his dissertation appeared in 1776.[7] Blumenbach knew that Linnaeus had already established a name *Homo troglodytes* for a badly known primate, and in 1779 he discussed this Linnean name



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and concluded correctly that Linnaeus had been dealing with two species, a human and an orangutan, none of them was a chimpanzee, and that by consequence the name *Homo troglodytes* could not be used. Blumenbach was one of the first scientists to understand the identities of the different species of primates, which were, excluding humans, orangutans and chimpanzees (gorillas were not known to Europeans at this time). In Opinion 1368 the ICZN Commission decided in 1985 that Blumenbach's view should be followed, and that his *Simia troglodytes* as published by Blumenbach in 1779 shall be the type species of the genus *Pan* and, since it was the oldest available name for the Common Chimpanzee, be used for this species.[8] However, the Commission did not know that Blumenbach had already mentioned this name in his dissertation. Following the rules of the ICZN Code the scientific name of one of the most well-known African animals, currently known as *Pan troglodytes*, must carry Blumenbach's name comined with the date 1776.[9]

### References

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### Notes

1. ^ Biographical details are in Charles Coulston Gillispie, *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, 1970:203f s.v. "Johann Friederich Blumenbach".
2. ^ a b "Blumenbach, Johann Friedrich". *Encyclopedia Americana*. 1920.
3. ^ Jack Hitt, "Mighty White of You: Racial Preferences Color America's Oldest Skulls and Bones," *Harper's*, July 2005, pp. 39-55
4. ^ The anthropological treatises of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach
5. ^ Fredrickson, George M. *Racism: A Short History*, p.57, Princeton University Press (2002), ISBN 0-691-00899-X
6. ^ *Platypus* by Ann Moyal, pages 8 and 9
7. ^ Blumenbach, J. F. 1776. *De generis hvmani varietate nativa liber. Cvm figvrnis aeri incis.* - pp. [1], 1-100, [1], Tab. I-II [= 1-2]. Goettingae. (Vandenhoeck).
8. ^ p. 303 in ICZN 1987. *Official lists and indexes of names and works in zoology.* - pp. 1-366. London. (The International Commission of Zoological Nomenclature).
9. ^ <http://www.iczn.org/iczn/index.jsp> ICZN Code Art. 8.1.1



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