A Note on Carl Ritter, 1779-1859

Fritz L. Kramer


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0016-7428%28195907%2949%3A3%3C406%3AANOCR1%3E2.0.CO%3B2-K

*Geographical Review* is currently published by American Geographical Society.
A NOTE ON CARL RITTER, 1779-1859
FRITZ L. KRAMER

A CENTURY ago two "giants" of geography died in the same year. They left their impress strongly on succeeding generations. It is of historical interest to look back at their lives and works at this time, but to do so at any time leads to a better understanding of the heritage we have received from them.

Much has been written about these two men, Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Ritter, the "founders of modern geography," and their contributions have often been compared. The contrast between their works is readily apparent: Von Humboldt has given us firsthand observations and measurements; Ritter has left us methodological concepts. There is much literature concerned with Von Humboldt's travels, but to my knowledge nothing has been written on Ritter's travels. Ritter's magnum opus, the "Erdkunde," now rarely read, deals with areas he had never seen. To discover something about Carl Ritter the traveler and field observer, we must turn to his minor works, those dealing with Europe, the only continent he knew from his own observations.

At the age of 25 he published the first part of what we might call a textbook, "Europa: Ein geographisch-historisch-statistisches Gemälde," dealing with Russia, Sweden, Denmark, and Prussia. A second part appeared later, on Hungary, Turkey, and the British Isles. Among these states there is only one in which he may have traveled—Prussia.

The other two publications on Europe are the collection of lectures given at the University of Berlin, edited by a former student, H. A. Daniel, and published after Ritter's death, in 1863, and his letters, published as the second volume of his biography by G. Kramer in 1875. These two books are the only basis on which Ritter's qualities as a scientific observer may be judged. Their nature and time of publication, however, seriously limit their value for a critical evaluation of this kind, and these limitations have to be borne in mind.

Daniel's edition of the lectures was compiled from Ritter's lecture notes. In the preface the editor states that "the same passage often appears in three or more forms. Rarely were two lectures about the same theme alike: this or that part was expanded, this or that contracted, especially interesting questions elaborated upon." The editor admittedly has taken liberties with the material. This leads one to believe that possible parenthetical remarks, bearing on personal observations by the professor, may have been omitted by the scrupulous student because they were not in the notes.

Upon close scrutiny the reader may find traces of firsthand observation. Probably the best example is a paragraph in the discussion of Greece:

---
2 Frankfurt am Main, 1804 (Part 1) and 1807 (Part 2).

DR. KRAMER is assistant professor of geography in the Mackay School of Mines, University of Nevada, Reno.
The Hymettos, separated by a valley from the Pentelikon, lies east of Athens, whence it is a 3 ½ hours' climb to the summit. The panoramic view from the summit of the Hymettos is superb and most instructive for the knowledge of Attica and environs. The view reaches far into the mountains of Parnassus in the north, and over the island groups of the archipelago and over the Peloponnesos in the south. The ridge of the Hymettos is covered with aromatic heath and low shrubs. On its slopes in the beautiful canyons, on all spurs, and everywhere on the base of the mountain lie the ruins of old settlements, temples, edifices, with inscriptions, sculptures, and ornaments of all kinds. The most important of these places are occupied, since the Christian centuries, by four to five monasteries, the churches standing on the sites of the temples, the attached dairies and villages on the ruins of Attic farm settlements. [p. 296]

But these passages referring to direct observation are readily discernible only to one who knows where Ritter traveled and thus knows where to look for them. Elsewhere, in the description of areas he had never visited, the same approach is used. Ritter never set foot in Spain, though he was at the border in the Pyrenees in 1854. Yet a surprisingly large amount of space is given to the Iberian Peninsula. In the section on Old Castile is the following paragraph:

Toward the northwest, toward Portugal, the same Spanish landscape continues, only with greater diversity. This is due to the deeper Duero Valley. The river is first crossed by boat at Zamora. From there it descends in cataracts from rock to rock; near Miranda, on the Portuguese boundary, its course winds between vertical rock walls. The Duero retains the nature of a wild mountain torrent. Only after the Tua and Tamega, two affluents from the right, join it, does the valley widen a little. But the river becomes navigable for larger vessels only below Oporto. . . . [p. 347]

Another part of Europe that is given much space is the East and Northeast bordering on Asia. This is understandable when one bears in mind Ritter’s preoccupation with the larger continent during the last 30 years of his life. This part of Europe, also, he never saw. There seems, however, little difference in character between his descriptions of the Hymettus and the northern Urals:

The chain of mountains is always besieged by low-hanging clouds, brought by the moist west winds and the icy north winds, therefore always abounding in moisture. The foot, covered in the main by swamps and moors, is accessible only in winter. Near Obdorsk [Salekhard] are summits of more than 4000 feet, elsewhere only lower ones. At the heights are only dwarfed forests, shrub, and peat among large blocks of rock and talus. The east and west slopes are covered with dense forests of low firs, pines, and larch; of deciduous trees, only birch and Prunus padus reach that far north. The tributary streams are not steep enough to relieve the forest swamps of their water surplus. The rivers are too dangerous to navigate because of the many rocks. No European has been able to penetrate northward of Sosva. Access is made very difficult by many rafts, bridges, and long passages over fallen logs. Trees collapse and rot, and forest fires in summer add to the chaotic wilderness of this jungle. In it bears, wolves, and elk find their refuge. Numerous swarms of squirrels constitute the greatest part of the wildlife. Reindeer roam over the open peats and moors. Russian Lapps on the west side, Samoyeds on the east side, wander about with their domesticated reindeer. Only in summer do Russian hunting parties roam through this wilderness northward from the sources of the Pechora to the Ob and to the Vaigach Islands [sic], to hunt, fish, and catch seal. . . . [pp. 122-123]
By contrast, an area close to home and seen by Ritter fails to come to life:

Only 14 hours from Lake Constance are the sources of the Danube on the east slope of the Black Forest: two springs form the river, Brigach from the north, Brege from the south (both are Celtic for a spring brook). The Brigach flows to Donaueschingen, both brooks unite and receive many tributary springs. . . . Here the stream receives the name Danube. These sources of the Danube are located more than 2000 feet above sea level, the town of Villingen 2145 feet, Donaueschingen 2047 feet. About two hours below Donaueschingen the Danube flows around a low basalt mountain, the Wartenberg. At Geisingen it changes its normal direction and breaks through the limestone benches of the Rauhe Alp to Sigmaringen in a rocky canyon. Remarkable is the group of the basalt cones of the Hegan with eight—ten cones between Lake Constance and the Danube. [p. 191]

France and England, countries in which Ritter traveled rather extensively, are remarkably neglected in the lectures. Time and again it appears that the regions which are elaborated upon in greater detail are those which were of interest to him because of their historic significance with relation to classical antiquity, and because of his interest in Asia. His literary investigations are given preference over his direct observations.

The travel letters also may serve only as limited witnesses in the judgment of Ritter as a field geographer. They are not directed to fellow workers but are written to members of his family, who were more concerned with his well-being than with his work. There is a temptation to compare Ritter’s travel letters with those of a compatriot of a generation earlier, an artist and an acute observer, Goethe. A gap of 61 years separates the Italian travel letters of the two great men.

Ritter to his brother, September 19, 1847

. . . I hurried then to Verona, and from there to Vicenza. Here again beautiful weather, and my lucky star brought me to the Albergo reale at the same moment at which our Majesty arrived there for dinner. I was received with great jubilation and had to sit down right away in my travel clothes at the table between Count Stolberg and our Prussian Consul in Venice, Signor Treves. The Delegato Marchese Carlotti, the Podestà Constantini, Count Brühl, and others, also Reumont, were there. Immediately after dinner the great attractions of Vicenza were viewed, the charming landscape, the architecture of Palladio, etc., etc. I was in heaven, had to sit with the King in his carriage, next to Count Stolberg and the Delegato. The King’s charm, his enjoyment of the great beauties of nature and art, his deep appreciation, his fine tact, his enthusiasm cannot be described. He won the interest of all the notables around him, down to the smallest seminarist at the convent of Sta. Maria del Monte, who, just returning from a good meal, was asked how he had enjoyed it. It became evening, and the King sped to Verona. I took the train to Venice. . . . [Vol. 2, p. 234]

J. W. v. Goethe to Frau v. Stein, September 19, 1786

The way from Verona to here [Vicenza] is very pleasant; one travels northeasterly along the mountains, the foothills of limestone, sandstone, clay, and marl always at the left, with villages, castles, houses on the hills, and then the wide plain in which the road lies. The straight, well-kept, wide road goes through fertile lands; grapevines are trained on rows of trees, from which they hang like branches. One gets the impression of garlands. The grapes are ripe and hang heavy from the vine. The road is full of people of all walks of life and trades. Especially did I enjoy the carts, pulled by four oxen, carrying great vats in which the grapes were brought from the fields; the driver usually stood in the vats, and it all looked like a Bacchic triumphal procession. Between the rows of vines are planted
all kinds of local grains, especially Turkish corn and sorgo. Upon approaching Vicenza, the hills again have a trend from north to south: they are volcanic, and Vicenza lies at their foot, in what may be termed a bay.5

The difference is typical: in Ritter’s letters people are more important than landscapes. But Ritter’s people are those who have rank and name, not those who have left their mark on the land. One cannot help feeling that he was impressed by nobility; indeed, he often went out of his way to call on persons of royal or noble rank.

He did not feel at home among the “little” people of foreign lands; he was indifferent to their way of life and their “curious” customs; often he was appalled by the poverty and filth of nations, yet he did not inquire into the causes. Nor did he feel at home in the suave and sophisticated metropolises. He speaks of the “Einsamkeit des Wiener Weltgewühls”; he says of Paris, “I could never feel at home here as I can in good old Berlin. . . . Paris can never attract us. All my compatriots agree in that, that is all those who have not become ‘naturalized’ like Humboldt, who is an exception.” One gets the impression that Ritter did not like to go abroad but felt compelled to do so by his position. He complains much and writes often of the trials and tribulations of travel in his time. He always seeks the company of compatriots abroad. He never became a citizen of the world, like Von Humboldt, which, as a scientist, he might well have become.

There is little in his letters that affords opportunity to judge him as an observer. He gives the names of the places he had traveled through, of the historic sites, buildings, and monuments he had seen, of notables he had met, of the inns he had stopped at. His letters rarely rise above the quality of those of an educated traveler. Yet, occasionally and unexpectedly, especially in the later letters, one comes on little gems of descriptive geography. One of the best is contained in his long letter from Clermont-Ferrand, dated July 6, 1845, in which the mountain country of the Auvergne joyfully comes to life.

The “founder” who attempted to show the way and who bade his disciples proceed from observation to observation appears to have been little of an observer himself. He used the eyes of others much more than his own. Yet he lived in an era when science had just begun to find its eyes.

5 Goethes Tagebuch der italienischen Reise für Frau von Stein, 1786/87 (Munich, 1927), pp. 74–75.