HUGO OBERMAIER, REGENSBURG 1877–FRIBOURG 1946

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ABSTRACT

Hugo Obermaier was born in Regensburg in 1877. After his ordination as a catholic priest in 1900 he went to Vienna to study prehistory from 1901–1904. In 1911 Obermaier and his friend Henri Breuil were appointed professors of the “Institut de Paléontologie Humaine” (IPH) in Paris. Between 1911 and 1914, both conducted extraordinarily successful research into the Palaeolithic archaeology and cave art of Western Europe. In 1914, during excavations in the Castillo Cave, Obermaier was surprised by the outbreak of World War I. He could not return to France and stayed until 1936 in Spain. He was appointed Professor, as the new chair of “Human Prehistory”, at the Universidad Central in Madrid in 1922. During a congress in Oslo 1936, he was again surprised, this time by the Spanish Civil War, and again could not return, this time to Spain. After further difficult years he became Professor at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) from 1938/39 until his death in 1946. His academic legacy is still highly regarded in Spain.


Keywords: Hugo Obermaier, Henri Breuil, Palaeolithic research, Castillo cave, Altamira cave

INTRODUCTION

This biography of Hugo Obermaier is compiled mainly on the basis of personal documents and manuscripts kept in the archives of Erlangen, Regensburg (Germany) and Fribourg (Switzerland). Additional information is taken from previous biographies and bibliographies. For detail cf. Züchner 1997 and the Archive of the Hugo Obermaier-Gesellschaft at Erlangen: http://www.uf.phil.uni-erlangen.de/obermaier/hogarchiv.html.

Hugo Maximilian Joseph Obermaier was born in Regensburg, Germany, on January 29th, 1877, the son of the teacher and librarian Johann Anton Obermaier and his second wife, Josepha, née Grad. In the fall of 1882 he started school at the Catholic primary school in his hometown. From 1886–1895 he attended the Königliche Alte Gymnasium, and graduated on July 14th 1895 with very good and good grades. Afterwards he studied philology in Regensburg from 1895 to 1896, and Catholic theology starting in 1896. In 1900 he was ordained priest (Figure 1).

Obermaier’s interest in the prehistory of his home country had already started to develop during his time at school and university. In 1897 he assisted J. Fraunholz in the excavation in the Kaslthäng cave, an important Magdalenian site in Southern Bavaria. The two men then jointly published their findings in 1911.

Around 1900 Obermaier met Professor
Ferdinand Birkner from Munich. His influence induced him to dedicate his life to the early history of man. From 1901 to 1904 he studied prehistoric archaeology, geography, geology, paleontology, ethnology, German philology and human anatomy in Vienna, Austria. Among his teachers were the prehistorian M. Hoernes, the geologist A. Penck and the anatomist K. Toldt. During the semester, Obermaier also worked regularly at the K.K. Naturhistorisches Hofmuseum (Imperial Royal Natural History Court Museum), which was managed by I. Szombathy and M. Hoernes. Within the scope of his studies he traveled to Southern Germany, Austria, Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary, Switzerland, Upper Italy and Croatia.

On July 19th 1904 Obermaier completed his doctor’s degree in Vienna with his dissertation Die Verbreitung des Menschen während des Eiszeitalters in Mitteleuropa (Man’s Habitat during the Ice Age in Central Europe). In the fall of 1904 he traveled to Paris, where he met M. Boule and H. Breuil (see also Davies, this volume). The acquaintance with Abbé Henri Breuil (1877–1961) was at first strained by the fact that both had applied for a lectureship at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. When Obermaier withdrew in favor of Breuil, the encounter turned into a close, lifelong friendship.

Between 1904 and 1905 Obermaier studied in particular the Quaternary and the diluvian people of Western Europe. During his long journeys, some of them undertaken together with H. Breuil, Obermaier traveled to the Dordogne for the first time in early 1905, where he visited the recently discovered sites of Ice Age art. From the end of July until the beginning of October he stayed in the Pyrenees to study the Quaternary geology, paleontology and archeology of the Garonne basin near Toulouse and the Neste and Adour basins. In December 1905 Obermaier returned to Regensburg. In February 1906 he obtained from his bishop the permission to qualify as a Professor at the University of Vienna.

In April 1906 Breuil and Obermaier were elected secretaries of the 13th Congrès International d'Anthropologie et d'Archéologie Préhistoriques in Monaco. On this occasion, Obermaier was introduced to Albert I, Prince of Monaco (1848–1922). This encounter developed into a friendship that would be decisive for Obermaier’s future.

After the congress Obermaier returned to Vienna to continue working on his postdoctoral thesis. Henri Breuil visited him in August to study the Central European Palaeolithic sites and artifacts together with his friend and colleague.

In 1907 Obermaier left for his second, long expedition to the foothills of the Pyrenees. In 1908 he obtained his postdoctoral degree in Vienna with the thesis Die Steingeräte des
Soon afterwards, Obermaier and his teacher, A. Penck, became estranged because when Obermaier was supposed to be made a private lecturer at the University of Vienna in September 1909, Penck heavily opposed the appointment. Obermaier was forced to look for another job.

In the same year, 1909, Prince Albert I of Monaco planned a trip to Altamira (Figure 2), on which he was to be accompanied by the two friends, Breuil and Obermaier. During his stay in Northern Spain, Obermaier met Don Hermilio Alcalde del Río — the discoverer of numerous caves in which rock paintings had been found — in Torrelavega. After initial animosities, the three men became friends, which was reflected in their joint publication on the paintings of La Pasiega. The travelers visited various caves, made a test excavation in Hornos de la Peña and finally started working in the entrance hall of Castillo in July 1909. The Prince of Monaco funded the excavation until the outbreak of World War I. Over the years, numerous well-known academics participated in the excavations: the Alsatian Paul Wernert, a faithful companion of Obermaier, the Italian Alberto Blanc, the French philosopher and prehistorian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the American Miles C. Burkitt, the Englishman Nils C. Nelson, and the German Ferdinand Birkner from Munich.
It was probably this successful trip to Spain that made the Prince of Monaco take the decision to found an international institute for studies of the early history of man. The “Institut de Paléontologie Humaine” (IPH) was founded in Paris in 1910, with the anthropologist Marcelin Boule (1861–1942) as its director. Obermaier was appointed Professor of the Quaternary Geology Department of the Institute on January 25th 1911. He left Vienna for good and moved to Paris.

Between 1911 and 1914 Obermaier and Breuil did extraordinarily successful research in Southwest Europe. In 1911 and 1912 they traveled through Spain down to the province of Málaga and documented numerous glacial and postglacial rock art sites. The summer months were reserved for the excavations in Castillo. The meters-high sequence of stone-age cultures turned out to be an essential element in the sequence of Upper Paleolithic cultures still valid today, which Breuil presented at the 14th Congrès International d’Anthropologie et d’Archéologie Préhistoriques in Geneva in 1912. In 1912 the first edition of his book Der Mensch der Vorzeit (Prehistoric Man), which summarized the knowledge of that time about the Ice Age and early humans, was published. It is still one of the most important books on prehistory and documents Obermaier’s extraordinary ability to present complex phenomena as a whole.

Despite all these activities and projects, Obermaier always kept close ties with his home country: In September and October 1912 and in September 1913, he participated in the excavations in the Klausen caves in the valley of the river Altmühl in Bavaria. Due to the outbreak of World War I and the events in the years following it, the results have, unfortunately, never been published appropriately.

The years from 1911 until early 1914 were a successful period of travels and research, and also of honors for the young academic. Numerous academic societies admitted him as a member.

In March 1914, Obermaier and Paul Wernert were back in Puente Viesgo to continue their excavations in Castillo. There the two friends were surprised by the outbreak of World War I. As a German, Obermaier could no longer return to France. M. Boule and other colleagues turned against him because he belonged to the hostile nation. His library and private collection were confiscated in Paris. Faithful friends would later buy some of his possessions and send them to his new home in Madrid. Nevertheless Obermaier suffered considerable material and non-material losses. He temporarily considered joining the military as an army chaplain or paramedic but he was not allowed to leave Spain. The Prince of Monaco would still have been willing to support him financially despite the turmoil of war, but when M. Boule in his function as director of the IHP tried to control the work in Castillo in spite of the events in Paris, Obermaier declined to accept the prince’s generous offer.

Without the payments from Monaco and Paris, the circumstances of their lives became financially difficult. According to Gómez-Tabanera (1985), Obermaier and P. Wernert were at first offered accommodation and support by the geologist and prehistorian Father Jesús Carballo. Through him they met the Duque de Estrada, VII. Conde de la Vega de Sella, who was excavating the Magdalenian station of La Paloma with Ed. Hernández-Pacheco and E. Bolívar at that time. The Conde de la Vega placed his house in Nueva near Llanes generously at their disposal. The gentlemen also arranged for the friends to be admitted to the Comisión de Investigaciones Paleontológicas y Prehistóricas (CIPP), which was founded at the Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales (National Museum of Natural Sciences) in Madrid in 1912. Obermaier was employed as an associate professor, Wernert as extraordinary assistant of this institution so that both of them earned at least a modest
living. Obermaier found accommodation in the Colegio de Prima/ Segunda Enseñanza of the Marianists (Society of Mary) around Father Chaminade. He was paid a small salary for saying Mass at the Colegio del Pilar of the Barrio de Salamanca every day. Obermaier continued to do this until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, long after he had become Professor at the University of Madrid.

In the course of time, Obermaier met numerous important people, such as the Duke of Alba, whose confessor he became. He was admitted to the court of King Alfonso XIII and became the confessor of Queen Victoria. He was friends with the intelligentsia of his time: with José Ortega y Gasset, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Manuel Gómez Moreno, Elías Tormo and many more. As a member of the CIPP, Obermaier was able to pursue several study projects, of which his and P. Wernert’s documentation of the rock paintings of the Valltorta gorge, and the publication on the Quaternary of Cantabria are of special importance. In 1916, the first edition of his major publication, El Hombre Fósil (Fossil Man), was published. A new improved edition followed in 1925. A reprint of the second edition with contributions of J.M. Gómez-Tabanera, H.G. Bandi and E. Aguirre was published in 1985.

In the years after 1914, Obermaier went on long journeys again and became a member of several academic societies. Despite, or maybe because of these successes, tensions started to arise among his Spanish CIPP colleagues, which culminated in the dismissal of Obermaier and Wernert in 1919. Obermaier now subsisted on the small salary he received for saying Mass at the Colegio del Pilar. He was lucky, though, for at the beginning of the 1920s, his fate would take a decisive turn for the better. In 1921 the chair of “Contemporary Literature in Neolatin Language” in Madrid became vacant after the death of Doña Emilia Pardo Bazán. Thanks to interested, influential circles around the Duke of Alba, the chair was changed into an associate professorship of “Human Prehistory” at the Faculty of Arts of the Universidad Central in 1922, and as of August 11th 1922 Obermaier held this chair. His employment and salary certificate documents an annual salary of 7,500 pesetas. In 1924 (Figure 3) he became a Spanish citizen and was now a recognized, full member of Spanish society.

In 1996 Moure Romanillo comprehensively described the circumstances leading to the establishment of the chair in Madrid and of Obermaier’s importance for the study of the Quaternary period in Spain, so this article only gives a summary of this period of Obermaier’s life. The professorship kept Obermaier very busy in the following years but he also continued to render great services to the prehistory and Quaternary geology of his new home. His achievements were honored worldwide. They are documented in mostly large-format diplomas that are kept in the archive of the Hugo Obermaier Society in Erlangen, Germany. His career reached a peak in 1926, when Obermaier became a member of the honorable Real Academia de la Historia (Royal Academy of History) in Madrid, which meant that he was finally recognized as a Spanish academic.

Between 1922 and 1936, Obermaier traveled to numerous countries in the New and Old World, sometimes in an official capacity. The biographical data that Obermaier himself, and maybe also his sister, Emma Dantscher, wrote down based on their collection of postcards includes a list of “extended travels and study visits” (unfortunately undated, however): Germany, Austria, Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary, Switzerland, France, Belgium, England, Argentina, Brazil, North America, North Africa, and the eastern Mediterranean. The postcard collection was burned, presumably on July 12th 1944, during a bomb attack on Munich, during which Emma’s husband, Kaspar Dantscher, was also killed.

A multitude of publications on Quaternary geology and the prehistory of Spain date from the same years. Worth mentioning are the excavations in Altamira in 1924 and

C. Züchner: Hugo Obermaier
Figure 3: Hugo Obermaier in Pamplona (Spain), 1924. [© Archive of Hugo Obermaier-Society at Erlangen]
1925. In 1935 they resulted in a new monograph by Breuil and Obermaier, which was considerably better than the one from 1906, and remained the standard publication on this cave for many years. A major focus was on the studies of the eastern Spanish rock paintings and the petroglyphs of Galicia. Arising from his participation in Leo Frobenius’ monumental publication Hádschra Maktuba he published a comprehensive contribution on the rock art of “Kleinafrika” (“Africa Minor”, Algeria: Figure 4) in 1925, and a number of other essays on the rock art of North and South Africa in the following years. Besides many other commitments, in 1927 Obermaier took on the publication of the international monthly Investigación y Progreso (Investigation and Progress), in which he and his students reported regularly on their activities. Slowly this led to the development of a “Madrid school” that competed with the “School of Barcelona”, based around the famous Pedro Bosch-Gimpera.

As of January 31st 1928, the chair in Madrid
was changed into a full professorship and Obermaier’s annual salary raised to 12,000 pesetas, which can certainly be seen as a result of his recognition as an academic and teacher at the Universidad Central. The proclamation of the Second Republic on April 14th 1931 and the emigration of the Spanish royal family were a cause of great concern to Obermaier, who was quite attached to them. He was nevertheless able to keep his position and attract numerous students, some of whom would later perform important functions, for example Martín Almagro Basch as the director of the Museo Arqueológico Nacional (National Archaeological Museum) in Madrid, and Julio Martínez Santaolalla, who inherited Obermaier’s chair in Madrid during Franco’s rule. In 1932 he was also appointed head of the Department of Prehistory at the Museum of Anthropology in Madrid, after his predecessor, Ed. Hamández-Pacheco was made director of the Geology Department of the Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales. He received a salary of 2,000 pesetas for this task.

On June 9th 1932 the Prussian Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Volksbildung (Ministry of Science, Art and Education) invited Obermaier to take over the honorable position of Max Ebert in Berlin, starting on October 1st 1932. To keep him in Madrid, the local Faculty of Arts was prepared to raise his annual salary from its own funds by 8,000 pesetas to 20,000 pesetas. After long hesitation, he finally declined the call to Berlin on November 5th 1932; not least because he anticipated the imminent dangers of Nazi Germany. Due to his integrity, the organizers of the International Anthropology Congress in Stockholm in 1934 asked him expressly to make the closing speech, in which he condemned the restrictions imposed on research in Germany.

Obermaier’s life now finally seemed to take a quieter and ordinary course. But the military coup d’état of July 18th 1936 destroyed his existence again: in August 1936 he was representing the Universidad Central at the second Congrès International des Sciences Préhistorique et Protohistorique in Oslo. There he was surprised by the outbreak of the civil war during which he would again lose a major part of his research material and library to looting and pillaging. Obermaier listed the events from 1936 to 1939 and the negotiations about his return to Madrid in a Curriculum Vita kept in the Obermaier-Archiv in Erlangen. He reported immediately to the Spanish embassy in Oslo which, however, was already resigning, to confirm his association with General Franco’s party. Then he traveled to Rome via Berlin, where he introduced himself to the Spanish ambassador, Mr. Agramonte. On November 16th 1936 he visited the Spanish ambassador at the Vatican, Admiral Mazaz, to express his congratulations for Italy’s recognition of the Franco administration. In the following year of 1937, he continued to make every effort to prove his loyalty to the government of Burgos, i.e. Franco’s supporters. On June 2nd 1937, for example, he gave a lecture on “Spain in Prehistory” in Berlin, which had been organized by the “German–Spanish Society” under the patronage of the Spanish ambassador, “of course under apologetic aspects for the nationalist Spain”, as he states in a paper kept in Erlangen.

Since the summer or fall of 1937, Obermaier had now been living in Fribourg (Switzerland). From there he also went on various journeys and participated in the excavations in the Romanelli cave (Italy) in 1938. From Fribourg Obermaier corresponded intensively with his friend and patron, the Duke of Alba, who urged him time and again to return to his former chair as soon as the circumstances would permit it, and who gave him advice on how to proceed further with the Spanish authorities and the Real Academia de la Historia; A. Moure Romanillo describes the details of these discussions based on Spanish archive material in the biography of 1996. Obermaier hesitated a long time but when he was assured safe conduct, he traveled to his beloved Spain for the last time in June 1939.
(Figure 5) — first to Vitoria to take his constitutional oath, and then to Madrid, where he found his former place of work destroyed — but then had to hurry back to Switzerland because of a severe gastroenteric influenza. The doctors strongly advised him against moving to Spain, so that in May or June he finally decided to stay in Switzerland. As he explained to the Duke of Alba, he took this decision because his old-age pension was not ensured in Spain and because his student, Santaolalla, had betrayed him by publicly demanding his chair in Madrid for himself; it was beneath his dignity to compete with his student. Despite this decision, he assured his friends and colleagues that he would always remain close to his home and was interested in all news. He was nevertheless deprived of his regular membership of the Real Academia de la Historia, which had meant so much to him.

![Figure 5: Hugo Obermaier and Henri Breuil in Abbeville (France), 1939. © Archive of Hugo Obermaier-Society at Erlangen](image)

Between 1939 and 1944, Obermaier corresponded with his friend, Eduardo Foertsch from Nuremberg, who had come to San Sebastián and later to Madrid as a correspondent of Ullstein in about 1922 and who worked for the press office of the German embassy after the civil war, albeit without any official function because his wife was Jewish. Obermaier gave him his archaeological and ethnological collection as a gift; Foertsch in turn helped him sell the possessions he had left in Madrid and assisted him in acquiring new Spanish publications.

In the winter of 1938/1939, Obermaier held courses at the University of Fribourg as a “professor with a teaching assignment”. On July 4th 1939 he was made a full professor as of October 1st 1939. However the repeated destructions of his existence, the outbreak of World War II and the difficult times soon started to affect his health. He developed severe diabetes. Despite this illness he was able to give a number of public lectures during his years in Fribourg, and to produce several papers on the Quaternary history of Switzerland and the prehistory of man. In particular, he completed the third edition of his publication El hombre prehistórico y las orígenes de la humanidad (Prehistoric Man and the Origins of Mankind) in 1943. Again, he attracted numerous friends and students who remembered their teacher with great admiration. His last two students, Hans-Georg Bandi and Johannes Maringer, dedicated themselves to his academic legacy immediately after he died.

Obermaier continued to give lectures until Christmas 1945. On New Year’s Eve 1945, when he was already seriously ill, he suffered a stroke that left him almost completely unable to speak. Before this he had already found accommodation in the Salesianum Theological Seminary, where he was devotedly taken care of until he died. When his old friends, the Duke of Alba and Henri Breuil, visited him one last time, he was visibly happy and thankful although he was hardly able anymore to communicate with them.

On November 12th 1946 Obermaier died at the age of almost 70 after severe illness. A large mourning ceremony was held in his honor on
November 16th 1946 at the Church of Saint Peter. It would take more than a year however — probably due to the difficult times and unresolved questions of inheritance — before, in 1948, the university finally placed an order for a gravestone with an inscription.

Not even in his grave would the great academic find his final rest, however. For when H.G. Bandi invited the Hugo Obermaier Society to Fribourg for its annual conference in 1986, he found that the grave no longer existed and the gravestone had disappeared without a trace. Nobody remembered the grave or the name and importance of the deceased so that today, only the commemorative plaques on the house where he was born in the Gesandtenstraße in Regensburg and in the University of Fribourg pay tribute to an academic who played such an essential role in the study of early man.

Translation: Andrea Züchner

ARCHIVES

Erlangen: Archive of the Hugo Obermaier-Society. c/o Institut für Ur- und Frühgeschichte der Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg. For documents of Obermaier’s life see: www.uf.phil.uni-erlangen.de/obermaier/hogarchiv.html.

Fribourg: Archive of the University Miséricorde.


MAJOR BIOGRAPHIES & BIBLIOGRAPHIES


