

Visualising history and space in the Basel Mission Archives

Research on historical images and their interdependencies has been well under way for almost three decades. Distinct aspects of the materiality and the relational character of images continue to surface as the role of archives as repositories for these delicate materials is profoundly put to the test.¹ Images, both historical and more recently in digital form, find themselves in a tremendous, perhaps second phase of the pictorial turn, and relevant research is in the eye of the storm. The role of historical, but also modern digitised and born-digital images, has brought about a want for access to, and understanding of, the image as a key icon of cultural heritage.

Guy Thomas & Anke Schürer-Ries



1 (Above): Chinese Christian family, Hong Kong, 1892. (BMA A-30.01.035)

2 (Below): Medical Mission Station Honyen, 1909. (BMA A-31.5,5a)

The earliest images of the Hakka-speaking people in the collection date back to 1897 and most of them show architectural features, landscapes and everyday life. Images of Hakka-speaking Christians depict either people working their fields in traditional dress, or set in European photographic compositions of the time. Moreover, they reflect both European and Chinese hierarchies, and the extent to which indigenous Christians influenced the outcome of the photographic encounter.⁶ Consequently, these images do not merely evoke the standards and attitudes of the missionaries but also various levels of discourse and exchange between the two cultures.

IN THE LIGHT OF sustained discoveries of, and new perspectives on, historical images, the team of the Archives of the Basel Mission has undertaken initial efforts to preserve, and increase accessibility of, the vast image collections in its holdings. The cataloguing and preservation project was initiated in the early 1990s and also included the systematic arrangement and digitisation of a selection of the historical images in the archives with an emphasis on visual sources pre-dating 1914. The overall aim was to reach out both to specialised researchers and a more broadly interested audience worldwide. After a c. 10-year running period of the project involving over 50,000 images with a principle focus on Ghana, Cameroon, South India (mainly Karnataka and Kerala), South China (mainly Hakka-speaking parts of Guangdong Province and Hong Kong) and Kalimantan, some 28,000 items were made available online in 2002.² The online collection was integrated into the International Mission Photography Archives (IMPA) hosted by the University of Southern California Digital Library in 2008. The success of the project fostered awareness of the need to improve accessibility of other sections of the Archives of the Basel Mission. As a result, a five year comprehensive cataloguing and digitisation project, involving the archival finding aids, various databases and the collection of maps, sketches and site plans in the Archives of the Basel Mission commenced in 2007 and is about to be completed and launched online in November 2012.³

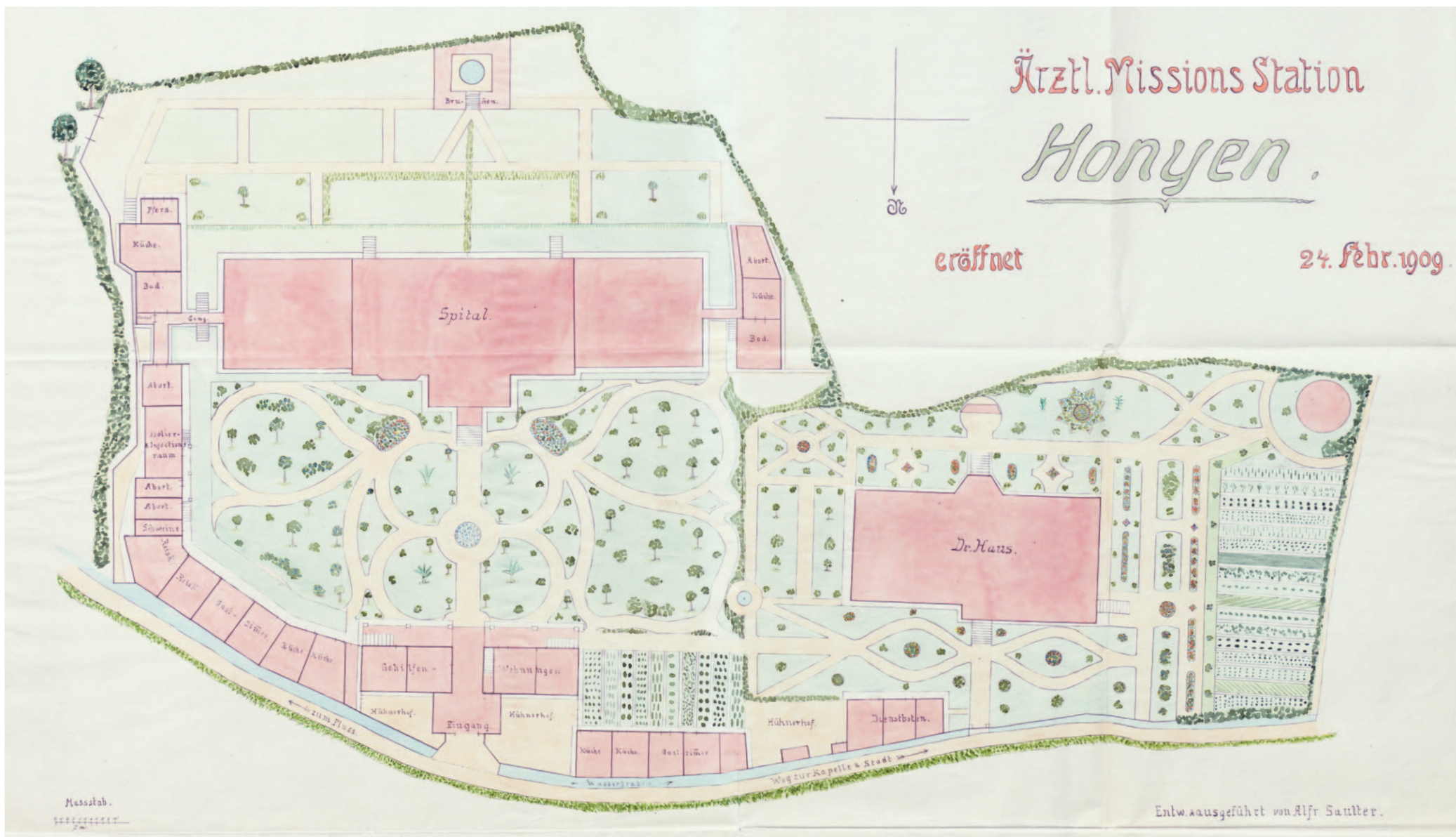
The Basel Mission in China

Historical images have become part of a cultural and social experience in China. Based on the quest for visual mnemonics, the images have been allocated a new status, not only because of their materiality as remnants of technical advancement, but also as objects of cultural heritage that form a bridge between mental and physical worlds.⁴

The historical images of the Basel Mission in China increasingly assist and replenish representations of cultures and histories of the country. They express both the dialogue between the missionary as the photographer and/or cartographer, and the mission field in which he was destined to spread the word of God. The main focus of missionary activity by missionaries of the Basel Mission in China was directed to the Hakka in the Guangdong Province, southern China. Missionary Theodor Hamberg began working there in 1846 and was catapulted from the patriarchal structures of education and Pietist values in the mission house in Basel into the unknown realms of one of the mission fields, an experience that gradually brought about the transcultural character of the Basel Mission.⁵ The collision of these multiple sets of values, although not entirely different, created tensions between missionaries and indigenous Christians. European missionaries allegedly remained strictly separated from indigenous Christians, though by contrast numerous images in our collections reflect the reciprocal trends of acculturation between indigenous interlocutors and Western missionaries.

Figure 1 shows the amalgamation of Eurocentric photographic practices and a sample of Chinese adaptation hereof. It is a striking articulation of the traditional European portrayal of the family, reflecting the innate identification of the indigenous Christian family with its own Asian background by wearing traditional clothing. It also constitutes the successful implementation of missionary family values in the Hakka community. The carpet and the setting confirm the constructed contemporary family photograph as was the case for depictions of all missionary families. It is, however, not without tension, as the family's stance allegedly reflects an attempt to incorporate Chinese hierarchies by postulating its own standing in its congregation.⁷ By virtue of the continuous negotiation between Christian and indigenous values, these practices were extended to the congregational spaces such as the mission station.

Continued on page 30 >



Basel Mission Archives *continued*

> Continued from page 29

Mission station plans are another fine example for the entangled relations of mission and the mission field. They are, on the one hand, representations of Christian faith brought to China and mirror the influence of Pietist values. A mission station should be an iconographic marker of the values inherent to the missionaries, and maintain centres of education, dispensaries, orphanages, and other social facilities for the neighbouring communities.

The plan of the Honyen Medical Mission Station (Figure 2) follows the holistic understanding of missionary work by implementing order and structure, thus improving life circumstances for the community in which it was embedded. It is depicted as a station with a specific task: medical care in the shape of a hospital with extensive outbuildings, a recreational area featuring a landscaped garden and lodgings for guests and assistants. The mission doctor is an important figure, and his house lies in a central location with a separate garden and is slightly secluded by shrubs.

The layout of the station displays attention to detail by the architect in a colourful manner, which is otherwise only to be found in other mission station maps of China or of mission stations in India. It also depicts important facilities and cultivation areas that supported the compound community's self-sufficiency and the development of a mission station, starting with the mission house, including a prayer hall and a few outbuildings. Further, the adaptation of the customary mission station layout to cater for a self-contained community is stressed by the sheer expanse of the compound, including facilities for medical care and staff.

The visual representation of mission work on maps is equally important as it strengthened their belief in the progress of their work and underlined all efforts that had been, and still had to be, made to assist those that had not found their way to God. They often supplemented sketches by missionaries who had enjoyed some basic training in cartography. The sketches and small maps were affixed to their quarterly and annual reports to the Superintendent and supported their accounts of basic everyday issues.

Figure 3 is a sketch submitted as a supplement to the minutes of the committee in 1909, during which the geographical location and accessibility of the mission house in Hong Kong were discussed. Without much further information we can clearly identify an island and a peninsula with transport routes, by road, rail or ferry. It also shows basic geographic information such as cardinal directions and the sea route to central ports such as Singapore, Macao and Canton. Furthermore, it depicts important points of reference for the mission in China, such as the mission

Reinserting images into the original settings where they were taken has thus become – and will remain – a prime target of the Archives of the Basel Mission.

stations Hongheu (marked by a small symbol for 'church'), Hong Kong or Tukawan, and places that had been established by, or with the support of, the mission – for example, the *Blindenheim* (home for the blind) or the *Erholungsheim* (convalescent home). By putting all these places on the map in addition to important topographical features and transport routes, the person involved attempted to make his case quite clear: the mission house in Hong Kong lies at the end of a string of sites and closely connected institutions, and should have been located at the centre of the peninsula. This image contains more information than usually given on sketches, including the number of minutes submitted in the year concerned. It also states the key issue that needed to be examined more closely in relevant written supplements.

Basel Mission Tile Factories in India

1 March 2009: It was a foggy morning in Thrikaipetta, a sprawling conglomeration of village wards in the District of Wyanad, northern Kerala, on the lower slopes of the Western Ghats in India. My guide Daniel and his wife Reena were taking me around their house and premises. Having stepped into one of the annexes to the main part of their home, my gaze turned upwards to the inside of the roof where the following inscription was just vaguely discernible on one of the tiles in the dim light: "Basel Mission. The Commonwealth Trust Limited". At the bat of an eyelid, traces of the Basel Mission's history in this region of South-west India were brought back to life. It is a chapter of history that covers 50 years from 1864-1914 at which time numerous Basel Mission trade and manufacturing sites were confiscated after the outbreak of the First World War and later placed under the Commonwealth Trust.

A sample of the roof tiles produced in India has been preserved in the Archives of the Basel Mission for many decades. It is an object of remarkable symbolic value, bearing the year 1862 and embodying a high-quality industrial trademark of the emerging Basel Mission tile factories in Jeppu (close to Mangalore) from 1865 and in Aracalla (next to Khozikode) from 1874.⁸ Other tile factories were to be opened up prior to the First World War. The thriving industry, regional dissemination and export of tiles is revealed both in the production figures and in a series of images depicting distinct facets and overviews of the growing number of tile factory sites along the south-west Indian coast, as well as the Indian labour force that was recruited from within Basel Mission circles or ostensibly harnessed to Protestant work ethics in the prevailing spirit of southern German Pietism. A visit to one of the Calicut tile factories, following the stop-over in Thrikaipetta in March 2009, suggested that the core of the underlying historic zeal had survived right up to the present day, albeit in an industrial branch that has been condemned to become entirely covered by the dust of the past.

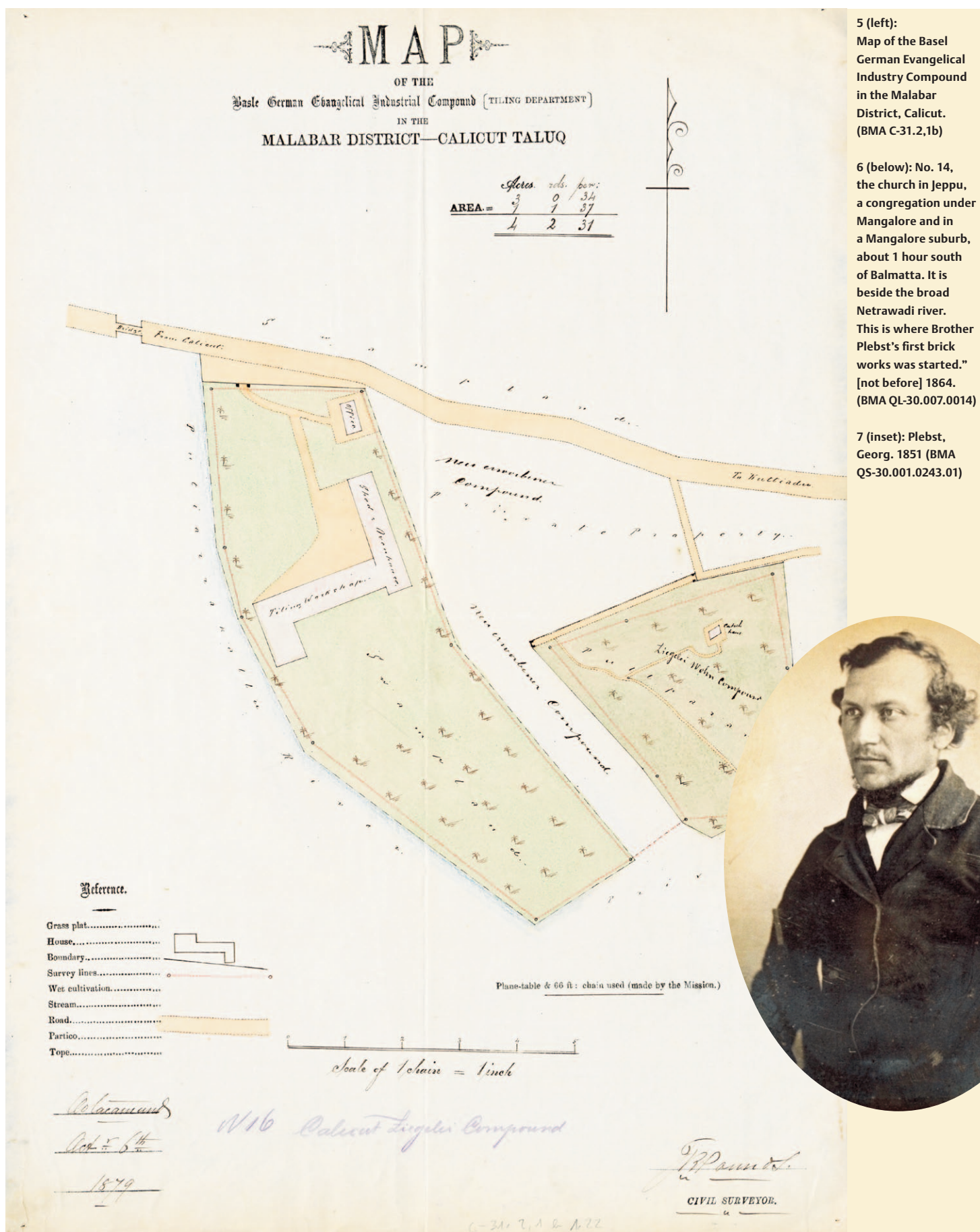
Indeed, the Indian Basel Mission tile factories provide a useful point of departure for further investigations into social and economic effects of the history of technology, in conjunction with labour policies, practices and codes of ethics, within the broader realm of Christian missionary presence and activity on local communities, as well as society at large, in south-west India. The significant question arises here as to how the Basel Mission's manufacturing and commercial initiatives altogether influenced industrial development in this region of the Indian sub-continent.⁹ Visual historic representations of relevant tile factory sites, both photographs and site plans, offer useful insights about building techniques and material, means of transport, spatial order and social organisation and hierarchy in the factory compounds, many of which have succumbed to an inevitable process of decay and now often stand out as mere industrial relics. As such, they are reminders of an extraordinary series of impressively large industrial monuments – hubs for the training of skilled and semi-skilled labour and hallmarks of economic transition. And it is notably from the detailed layouts of site plans that the division and use of space, as well as from the distinct buildings featured, that a clear picture of the exclusiveness, organisation, supervision and control of industrial work space, as a unit of combined discipline and spiritual commitment, can be discerned.

A historical milestone in the course of the emerging tile industry in south-west India was the reassertion of the Basel Mission's Industrial Committee (constituted in 1846) in 1852, following an extensive inspection trip by the Superintendent of the Basel Mission, Josef Josenhans. Promoting merchandise also implied considering the establishment of a mission trading company, a decision implemented in 1859 when the *Basler Missions-Handlungs-Gesellschaft* (BMHG) was founded. The report of Josenhans' inspection trip, along with subsequent minutes and annual reports of the Industrial Committee and the BMHG, and the pioneering decision by the Basel Mission to institute a social welfare system for Indian labourers, provide the bulk of written evidence for the task of reconstructing this chapter of the history of Basel Mission.¹⁰

3 (above): Sketch as a supplement to the answer to the committee minutes §1448, 1909. (BMA A-31.5.4t)

4 (right): Roof tile in Thrikaipetta, Wyanad District, Kerala, India. Photo Guy Thomas (1 March 2009).





5 (left): Map of the Basle German Evangelical Industrial Compound in the Malabar District, Calicut. (BMA C-31.2,1b)

6 (below): No. 14, the church in Jeppu, a congregation under Mangalore and in a Mangalore suburb, about 1 hour south of Balmatta. It is beside the broad Netrawadi river. This is where Brother Plebst's first brick works was started." [not before] 1864. (BMA QL-30.007.0014)

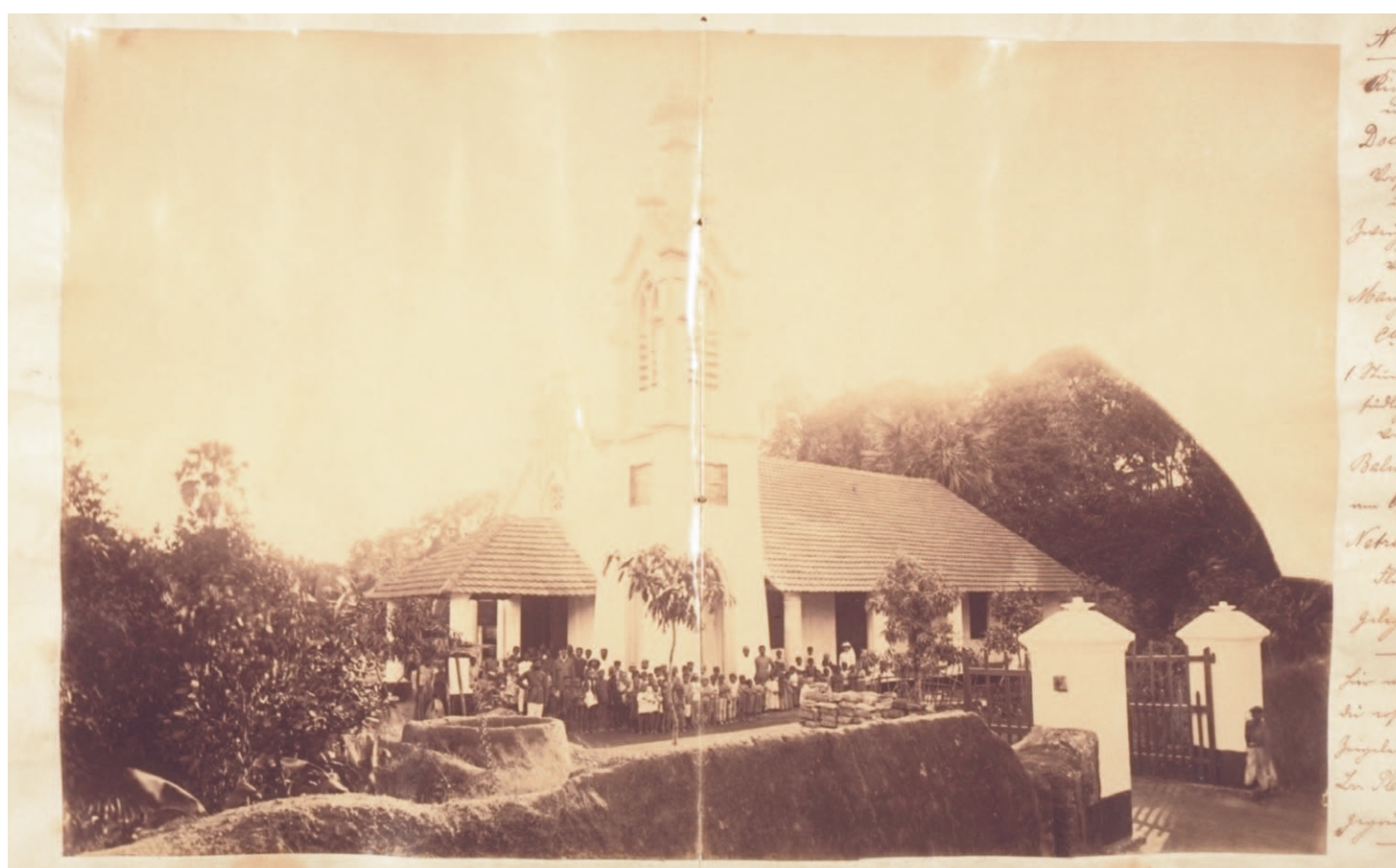
7 (inset): Plebst, Georg. 1851 (BMA QS-30.001.0243.01)

One of the key people involved in setting the Basel Mission tile industry in India in motion was the German missionary Georg Plebst (1823-1888).¹¹ He originally specialised as a mechanic before undergoing four years of training at the Basel Mission's home-based seminary. He arrived in India in 1851 and was put in charge of reforming the printing techniques employed by his predecessors. He was thus chiefly responsible for forging two well-functioning Basel Mission printing presses for the Kannada and Malayalam languages, in the modern Indian states of Karnataka and Kerala respectively. Whilst on home leave from 1861-1863 Plebst acquired prolific skills in firing and glazing clay. Meanwhile, several European factories had conducted experiments with clay samples from the surroundings of Mangalore. Upon his return to India, this experience inspired Plebst to apply his techniques to the manufacturing of tiles. He recorded his initial successful attempts in 1864 and thus laid the foundation for a flourishing new industry.¹² We are reminded of this pioneering step by a faded photograph of the church (fig. 6), standing where Plebst started his tile manufacturing activity. It is an image that equally helps us understand interconnections between mission stations, outstations and industrial sites, as well as the intricate degree of interconnectedness between such symbols of missionary presence and the local populace, which constituted the core of the labour force and of the mission church congregations.

Admiration and respect

We must shift our gaze to the mutually complementary nature of visual – photographic and cartographic – sources and the available written, oral and material records. While it is fairly obvious that both the chronological and narrative strands etched into the abundant written archive cover a wide range of interests deriving from a primarily central European audience, we are just as obviously confronted with a very distinct side of history when we glean snippets of oral tradition surrounding the achievements and *longue durée* of the Basel Mission in south-west India, both as an institution and a medley of extraordinary individuals. Much as critical views are not to be overheard, notably with regard to theological debates and mission hierarchy, considerable admiration and respect come to the fore with regard to individual missionary know-how and inputs. Besides the tile factories and printing presses, many Basel Mission churches, schools and training centres, now under the auspices of the Indian successor church, the Church of South India (CSI), are reminiscent of their origins by the mark of omnipresent tributes to missionaries. This link between the past and the present is repeatedly articulated in the urge among Indian colleagues to obtain access to, and more detailed information about, images and cartographic material in the collections of historical photographs and maps in the Archives of the Basel Mission. Reinserting images into the original settings where they were taken has thus become – and will remain – a prime target of the Archives of the Basel Mission. By exposing single images or series of images to joint readings of, and reflections on, their content will help us move beyond our narrower archival delimitations into 'the field', where a wealth of indigenous knowledge and mnemonic devices is waiting to engage with the meaningful re-contextualisation of visual articulation.

Guy Thomas is the Head of Archives and Library of Basel Mission / Mission 21, and Lecturer in African History at the University of Basel (guy.thomas@mission-21.org) Anke Schürer-Ries is a Research Assistant Special Collections at the Archives and Library of Basel Mission /Mission 21 (anke.schuerer@mission-21.org)



Notes

- 1 Edwards, Elizabeth. 2004. 'Thinking Materiality/ Thinking Relationality', in Albrecht, M. & V. Arlt (eds.) *Getting Pictures Right*, Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag. (p. 12)
- 2 www.bmpix.org
- 3 www.bmarchives.org
- 4 Edwards. 2004. (p. 17)
- 5 Klein, Thoralf. 2004. 'The Basel Mission as a transcultural organization: photographs of Chinese Christians and the problem of agency', in Albrecht, M. & V. Arlt (eds.) *Getting Pictures Right*, Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag. (p. 41)
- 6 *ibid*, p. 43
- 7 *ibid*, p. 41
- 8 Wanner, Gustav. 1959. *Die Basler Handels-Gesellschaft A.G.*, Basel: Die Basler Handels-Gesellschaft A.G. (pp. 269ff)
- 9 For example, Raghaviah, Jaiprakash. 1990. *Basel Mission Industries in Malabar and South Canara (1834-1914)*. New Delhi: Gian Publishing House. (p. 69)
- 10 Jahresbericht der evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft zu Basel, 1852ff. (Annual Report of the Basel Mission).
- 11 Archives of the Basel Mission, personal file of Georg Plebst, BV 335.
- 12 Der Evangelische Heidenbote, 1865, p. 94.