

Limax Dei

The English Collections of Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, 2021. Unlike any other museum I had visited, there was no identifiable logic of its installation that I could perceive. Overstimulation with thousands of objects stacked to the ceiling made my brain burn. On the verge of evacuating the building, one object finally provided me with a moment of visual silence. As a painter obsessed with Abrahamic myths, I was stopped in my increasingly maddening tracks by a slug impaled on a thorn. It was preserved in a glass jar as a wet specimen. Originally with a different shade of color, the animal had been bleached by years of immersion in formaldehyde.

For the museum, this piece with the transfixed mollusc represents one in a long line of cures for warts. It was loaned to the museum in May 1906 following the death of a British ornithologist. It is the English version of a cure used in several parts of Central and Northern Europe. The label on the jar at the museum read:

"Charm for Warts. Go out alone and find a large black slug. Secretly rub the underside on the warts and impale the slug on a thorn. As the slug dies and dries out, the warts will go."

This was an example from non-Christian animistic practices. A "transfer magic," where illness or unwanted conditions are symbolically transferred to an object or animal, to remove ailment.

I was hypnotised by this item and by its associations with the Crucifixion of the Messiah. I began thinking about the many other animals with which Jesus has been symbolised throughout history. While I was trying to find an alternative name to this one in my head, — "Limax Dei, Tanrı'nın Böceği,..." — I sensed someone gradually appearing on the far edge of my vision. "Allah'ın Sümüklüsü!"

When I had a little grin on my face, the figure bent over while staring at the jar and levelled their head next to mine. My face went blank. I kept my head locked toward the *Slug of God*, but my eyes slid toward this person now beside me. They said in one breath: "The strangest thing is that it was actually not black. In fact, it was not even a species one could find in Eurasia." I immediately stood upright and looked at his face. He continued: "It was later identified as a type of slug native to Oceania. A manuscript discovered among the belongings of the ornithologist from whom this piece originated later confirmed this information."

I asked him whether the letter was also held in the museum. It was not. However, as he turned out to be a knowledgeable member of the museum staff, I was grateful for his lead. With his help, I eventually found the manuscript in a digital database belonging to collections associated with the Natural History Museums in the United Kingdom.

It was a letter addressed to Henry Baker Tristram, a British cleric, ornithologist, and explorer of the Levant in the late nineteenth century. At the other end of the correspondence was the Swiss naturalist Eduard Heinrich Graeffe, after whom the red triangle slug, *Triboniophorus graeffei*, is named, in recognition of his collecting work in Samoa.

The letter, however, was dated 14 December 1890; long after both naturalists had retired and settled far from the lands they had once wandered with their imperially sharp gaze. At the time of writing, Tristram was serving as a cleric at Durham (duh-rum) Cathedral, where he also kept contacts in ornithological circles from afar. Graeffe was living in Trieste (Tree-est) as the inspector of the Imperial-Royal Zoological Station at the Villa Gialuzzi, within the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.

So yes! The slug was a *Triboniophorus graeffei* — the Red Triangle Slug “of Graeffe.” Red Triangle Slugs are terrestrial slugs native to Eastern Australia and the islands of Oceania, marked by a bright red triangular sign on their backs. *Triboniophorus graeffei*, like most terrestrial slugs, is hermaphroditic. Each individual possesses both male and female reproductive organs. During mating, two slugs intertwine their bodies, exchanging sperm while both retain the possibility of fertilising and laying eggs. For such slow-moving creatures, every encounter becomes a potential union. *Triboniophorus*, from Greek, means rubbing, wearing down, and carrying, making it something like “the one that bears.”

Strikingly, the letter reports that the younger successors of Graeffe in Samoa had found several other versions of the same slug, bearing, this time, red squares on their backs. Out of respect, these field collectors sent one of their colleagues, whose name is not mentioned in the letter, with a Wardian Case containing several examples of this new type of *Triboniophorus graeffei* to their, now retired, predecessor.

Wardian Cases were developed at the time for the careful collection and transportation of plants and animals requiring specific environments. They maintained humidity through ventilation. The unnamed naturalist carrying them on his long journey would have needed to tend to the slugs daily, keeping their moist moss fresh and the slugs fed throughout the voyage.

Mysteriously, we have no other record about this scientifically significant incident with a novel mutation of the slug, nor any report of a similar specimen found again in the region ever since. However, this was not the only strange thing reported in the letter.

The manuscript continues mentioning that Graeffe and Tristram had briefly become acquainted at the First International Congress of Zoology in Paris in 1889. They must have heard each other’s names for decades, and, at last, had the opportunity to meet in person. During a short conversation, Tristram recounted parts of his research conducted in the territory of former Ottoman Syria. At some point he was also compelled to explain why he kept his gloves on, as it was considered impolite to shake hands with them uncovered. Tristram had been suffering from a skin condition involving warts ever since his time in Palestine, most likely the human papillomavirus, or second-type of herpesvirus.

With little detail, the most extraordinary passage of the letter is where Graeffe recounts Tristram’s bizarre account of an oral legend from the Greek Orthodox tradition of Cyprus. It describes a saintly figure of pagan virtue from the early Christian era of the island, possessing a hermaphroditic nature and revelatory visions. Her divine insights foretold the

emergence of a future prophet — “a false prophet” as Tristram most probably framed it — and the sign of his future arrival communicated with a blood-marked veil resembling the Veil of Veronica, or, as we say in Cyprus, Hagion Mandylion. One could also think of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Islamic artistic practice, in which depictions of the Prophet Muhammad show his face veiled in many Ottoman, and Persian miniatures.

Tristram's obsession with Christianity, alongside his deep loathing of Islam, is evident in his books, such as *The Land of Israel*, in which he described Palestine and its people quite detestably.

At the centre of these visions was a red square out of blood appearing on a piece of cloth during repetitive episodes of unconsciousness, most likely epileptic in nature. Lead water pipes had by then become Empire-wide in their reach, and lead poisoning was common enough to explain such neurological symptoms among adolescents in third-century Roman Cyprus.

Now, there is no historical record of Henry Baker Tristram ever visiting Cyprus, although he is known as the collector and describer of the *Cyprus warbler*, a bird he had shot in Palestine without yet knowing its true breeding ground was the island itself.

So we do not know how Henry Baker Tristram came to learn this oral legend from Cyprus. Like the mysterious slug, which was never heard of again, there is no trace of such a spiritual narrative in today's Cyprus either. Could his ethno-religious fanaticism have given rise to the story? And if so, how did it come to influence another naturalist, and further feed his imagination? We will never know.

This legend — or rather, this personal mythology — inspired me to create *The Veil*, a work I completed in 2023. In it, I transformed Tristram's, anti-Mohammedan account of the bloody veil into another narrative. With this one, two Abrahamic religions and their Prophets delicately and affectionately was mirroring one another — until only to be cruelly interrupted by this bloody veil separating the Messiah from the Messenger. In doing so, I reclaimed the hermaphroditic saint not as a vessel for an anti-Islamic prophecy, but as a revelatory figure warning of the continuous conflict and dichotomy that will be fabricated between Islam and Christianity that haunts us all today. I have chosen to retell, and interpret her dreams, as they were spiritual and scientific unconscious of these two naturalists, differently.

Despite being a rational and less spiritual man, perhaps under the influence of Canon Tristram, Graeffe interprets all of this with a measure of doubt as a divine sign in his letter. He sends a pair of slugs to Tristram for both scientific and spiritual reasons, rooted in the European folk belief that certain molluscs could cure persistent warts, dispatching them alongside the young field collector, letter in hand, to the United Kingdom.

The jar at the Pitt Rivers Museum is the result of these events. Tristram uses the slugs for the cure and preserves them as a souvenir of this transgenerational, transcontinental imperial delusion.

When historians analysed the thorny branch onto which the slug had been impaled, they found it came from *Crataegus orientalis*, a tree endemic to the Mediterranean region. In Cyprus we call this plant *alıç* or *mosfilia*. Similar trees do exist in Northern Europe and the Great Britain, but it is most likely that Tristram obtained this branch from the

botanical gardens in Manchester. It is striking how loyal he was, even in this small ritual act, to the local environment of the Levant to execute the charm with an association to the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Finally, my curiosity led me on a small journey through the grounds of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, in search of further evidence from Graeffe's end of the story. As Graeffe had early affiliations with institutions in Germany, I began my inquiry at the Museum für Naturkunde in Berlin.

It was almost effortless to find letters from Graeffe's hand, written in German and in the Kurrent script, then common across the former Deutsches Reich. It became immediately clear that Graeffe had arranged someone to translate and transcribe the letter into English with the Victorian cursive.

Following Tristram's death, his papers were scattered across different archives and museums. Given that neither the Austro-Hungarian Empire nor the Imperial-Royal Zoological Station exists today, I suspected the same would be true of Graeffe's materials as well. After writing to numerous archives and museums across the territory of the former Empire, I found a lead: a portion of the Swiss naturalist's research materials had entered the archive of Slovenia's Natural History Museum in Ljubljana (Lublijana).

I requested scientific research access to study the vast majority of their collections that are not on display. I submitted a formal research proposal to the museum and was granted access after one rejection and a longer explanation of my position.

Expecting to be welcomed by an old classical building with nerdy-looking staff members, I found myself standing in front of a cold postmodern building in a large commercial district on the eastern side of Ljubljana(Lublijana). This was the Blagovno Transportni Center City Depo.

It functions as the primary research repository for the Slovenian Museum of Natural History, storing over ninety percent of the national collections inside a climate-controlled former public warehouse. The vast facility houses a massive vertebrate and taxidermy archive containing over 18,000 specimens. It is dominated by mammals such as small rodents, bats, and insectivores, alongside skulls and fragile entomological cabinets filled with centuries-old historical boxes of beetles and butterflies.

Finally, I arrived at the storage for wet-preserved invertebrates, amphibians and a dedicated documentation station where curators actively process original field diaries.

The staff member had no more words than a cold "hi" and a bodily gesture to follow her into the building. She knew well where to go and brought me in front of unassuming drawers made from the mass-produced of everyday kitchen furniture. Was something discarded waiting there for me to uncover, ever since it was stored? As I can barely read German in Kurrent style, I was only photographing the documents quickly, to find someone who could read them for me later. Then I found a large box, the full size of the drawer, that was not easy to open. The top lid had only a few scratches compared to the stiffness of the drawer. It was filled with technical drawings and plaster casts of little

critters, none larger than the palm of a hand. With excitement hovering over the box, a moment arrived that froze me for five seconds. The same visual silence. I could not believe my eyes. I had assumed any further evidence would be written, a document, daily journal, or another letter. Instead this was preserved in three-dimensional form. Two artistic and anatomical constructions were lying, there, before my eyes. They were the now-lost taxonomic note describing the rare morphological variation of *Triboniophorus graeffei* observed in Western Queensland, marked by a peculiar red square-shaped dermal pattern.

So, dear audience,

can this be still considered delusional, when it was shared between two people deeply engaged with the scientific professions of the late nineteenth century?

Or: can Enlightenment hubris lose its grip on the nature of things to the point where delusion becomes contagious?

I leave these questions with you, to be reflected upon while observing and experiencing the world we live in today.

Thank you, and enjoy the rest of the exhibition.