In my talk I would like to present not a totally unknown part of mission history. The Catholic mission enterprise in the southern Sudan region is treated by several more or less scholarly studies dealing with the missionaries’ work among Dinka and other people of the upper White Nile in the second half of the nineteenth century until the very violent expulsion and massacre during the Mahdist Wars beginning with 1881.\(^1\) Furthermore, some studies give insight into some astonishing intentions of Austrian private men and societies, of a few officials in Africa and Vienna, to make the southern parts of Sudan an Austrian colonial dominion, by defending trade interests and considering the Danubian monarchy in competition with the British and French colonial interests in this reason. I intent to merge both accounts – Austrian catholic mission starting from 1846 that was intrinsically linked with some imperial phantasies.

My intention by reiterating this issue is to reveal the several imperial layers this story encompasses – these layers are the Austrian imperial history in Central Europe of mid-nineteenth century, European imperialism in Africa and missionary colonialism.

First, I would like to introduce you very shortly to the mission enterprise around 1850 to its End of the Mahdist Wars, which was the most violent rebellion against British

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imperial domination until than. The classical account of the mission enterprise is, that in 1846 a mission enterprise, approved by Pope Gregory XVI departed from Trieste. The Polish Jesuit and rector of the Collegio Urbano – this is the Vatican's central school for educating future missionaries or priests of non-European origin – Maksymilian Stanislaw Ryłło, supposed to become the first apostle Vicar of Central Africa, headed the group. Some other missionaries were the Italo-Austrian Angelo Vinco and the Slovenian-Austrian (Dr.) Ignacij Knoblehar. Many studies insist upon the spiritual character of this mission enterprise – an aspect I do not want to deepen.²

Maksymilian Ryłło died at Khartoum. He was succeeded by Ignacij Knoblehar, who died in 1853. Two other important missionaries who lead the enterprise were German-Austrian Mitterutzner and the Italian Daniele Comboni from Verona (so he was for some time also an Austrian subject).

I use the term Austrian, whilst being misleading, because it encompasses all these countries that stood under the reign of the Emperor in Vienna. Nevertheless, this history, you might have noticed already, is of multi-national character, as Polish, Italians, Slovenians, and Germans appear on the side of the missionaries, and Dinka, Nuer and Bari (for mentioning only a few) are actors of the African side.

Rather and in order to reveal the imperial character of this enterprise by not repeating the classical account, I will consider the broader framework of the early history of that mission enterprise to southern Sudan:

A first imperial layer of this history is that in this mission enterprise, backed by the Propaganda Fide at Rome, several missionaries of Slovenian and Polish origin were involved. We know from the Jesuit mission history that a good number of missionaries from the so-called German provinces were of Polish and Czech origin.³ The history of the Austro-Slavic-Italian mission⁴ in southern Sudan is part of the internal imperial histories of the Austro Empire, as the mission did not exclusively depend only on the organization of the Propaganda Fide but furthermore on funding.

² Den D. Akol Ruay (1994). The Politics of Two Sudans. The South and the North, 1821-1969. Upsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, p. 25. “The ideals of the missionaries, however, were […] they ‘sought for souls to bring them God and lead them to God, to offer them comfort, health, learning, self-respect and peace’ (Baroni: 8)”


from Austrian public and private institutions. Zmago Šmitek, Aleksandra-Sanja Lazarević and Djurdjica Petrović in 1993 did a more systematic research on explorers considered to be of Slavic-Austrian origin. Among these they listed Ignaz Knoblecher, who with his Slovenian name is called Ignacij Knoblehar. From my perspective of a historian of non-European colonialism and a non-expert of Central and Eastern European histories, the “Germanization” of names and claiming that persons were Austrians is obviously an act of imperial conduct that should be reconsidered. Of course, from a perspective of a Habsburg imperial history, the “sub pluribus unum” might soften the colonial habitus behind such labelling, as it takes the edge off the historical asymmetries inside the Danubian monarchy. Viewed from this angle, the fact that one actor was of a national minority should be of less importance. In contrast to these two common judgments about Austrian history, I would like to stress, nevertheless, the national identity of people like Knoblehar and other fellow missionaries. Although I do not share political national ideas at all, I assume that these historical actors directly or indirectly carried to the African field of missions their experience of submission to an imperial identity. I will come back to this point and the hierarchical order of nations in the Danubian Empire later, when it comes to analyse the writings of Knoblehar about African tribes and individuals in the mission framework. We find here a strange mix of political nationalism, ultramontane

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7 This holds true also for Jesuit missionaries in the eighteens and nineteenth centuries coming from different countries and communities of the Habsburg monarchy (see Hausberger, Bio-Bibliographie).


10 Solomon Wank (Some Reflections on the Habsburg Empire and Its Legacy in the Nationalities Question. In: Austrian History Yearbook 28 (1997): 131–146.) has pointed out the changes in historiographic judgment, from dismissing the Austrian Empire as a „Völkerkerker“ to a more positive image in the 1990’s. He states: “The point here is that positive economic and social achievements are not always synonymous with political success. Indeed, one of the chief conclusions drawn from my ruminations is that the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy was, more than anything else, the result of the political failure of its imperial structure (Wank 1997: 133).”
Catholicism as a way to evade Austrian boundaries and, third, inner-Austrian Catholic solidarity when it comes to fund the mission project.\(^\text{11}\)

A second aspect of the imperial history is international politics, which in the middle of the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century always had imperial implications. For example, the Propaganda Fide and the Jesuits supported the Austro-Slavic-Italian mission initiative against the French Lazarists, who kept already a mission house in Khartoum. 1848, the year of the emanation of the Polish-Belarusian Jesuit Maksymilian Stanislaw Ryłł (who had worked in Syria, among other) and some other Austrian subjects, some important revolts shook the Habsburg Empire and the surrounding territories. There were the different revolutionary movements that, besides in France and the German countries, were very strong in all territories of the Habsburg countries. Several cities of the monarchy were shattered by revolts. In the Italian territories under Austrian dominion, the Five Days of Milan challenged Franz Joseph of Austria, a revolt the General Radetzky eventually put an end to. In the same year, the Italian national revolutionary republican movement (Risorgimento) furthermore shattered the pontifical power in Rome.\(^\text{12}\)

Egypt also envisaged political instability. In 1848, the power passed from Ibrahim to Abbas I. Egypt had obtained a certain independence from the Ottoman Empire, since Mehmet Ali Pasha and Ibrahim Pasha governed the Nile-Provinces and conquered the Sudan in the early 1820s. For the Catholic missionaries Egypt was important as they needed the Pasha’s permission to establish a mission station and they had to pass through Egypt for their voyage to Sudan. When the political situation in the Egypt-Sudan region became instable, the new Pasha refused the missionaries’ entrance into his territory. Furthermore, the French Catholic Lazarists intended to boycott the Austro-Italian enterprise.

In terms of colonial competition, the Austrian Emperor insisted upon his status of being the protector of Catholics in Egypt and Sudan against French interventions.\(^\text{13}\)

This inter-imperial struggle that, in comparison to the French-British competition in

\(^{11}\) This point is still difficult to formulate and to frame with historiography, as often „Catholicism“ is understood to be a unique and homogenous entity. Christoph Weber (Papsttum und Adel im 19. Jahrhundert. In: Les noblesse européennes au XIXe siècle. Actes du colloque de Rome, 21-23 novembre 1985. Rome : École Française de Rome, 1988. pp. 607-657. (Publications de l’École française de Rome, 107)) has shown on a European scale how Catholicism in the fields of political and social organization was heterogeneous. This should be taken into account for studying Catholicism in the Austrian monarchy.


this region of later decades, was of rather secondary importance, is nevertheless related to some forces in the Austrian politics intending to persuade the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph to undertake a colonial enterprise in the southern Sudan region (Médard 1997). Because officially this Austrian colonial movement was much less offensive compared to the British or French, the diplomatic relations between Vienna, the Sublime Porte and Cairo/Alexandria were rather benign to an Austrian mission enterprise. Ryllo even obtained an audience with Ibrāhīm Pasha, showing the good relationships between the two monarchies.

The mission project experienced a serious setback, when Ryllo passed away during the voyage. As his successor, Knoblehar was appointed the new leader of the mission party. His efforts could benefit from the establishment of an Austrian Vice-Consulate at Khartoum and from some high ranked nobleman engaging into an association called the *Marienverein* (Society of St. Mary) that politically intervened at the mission's favour and financially funded the project.

Hans Fenske, who like Marius Gritsch and a few more Austrian historians did some good, even though often unpublished works on Austrian imperial-colonial politics in eastern Africa, depicts a climate of geopolitical and geo-commercial initiatives pleading for a serious colonial engagement of Austria at the eastern coast of Africa, in Ethiopia, Abyssinia and Sudan. Gritsch (1975 unpublished) underlines how commercial interests and political intentions merged together, when the installation of

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19 Cf. Tafla (1994, p. 410.)
a Consul in Khartoum was agreed in 1846. In this very same context, Médard points to the connections between the Austrian-Sudanese trade relations and the Austro-Catholic missionaries who in a first period engaged in commerce in order to gain the support of Europeans living in that region and of Bari chiefs and headmen. Ships navigated on the Nile under the flag of the Danubian monarchy because the Sultan had granted them free circulation. Most of commercial enterprises of different European countrymen changed colours in order to achieve Austrian protection in this period, and to reach towns and posts of trade farther south. This situation was helpful to the missionaries from the Austrian monarchy. As a part of the imperial competition with other imperial forces, when the intermingling of very different branches – as commerce, territorial access and mission – was rather frequent in order to expand positions, also the acting of the missionaries shows the straight entanglement of the political, the commercial and the spiritual processes.

Only, in the second half of the 1850s the mission politics radically changed and the priests detached themselves from the trade with ivory and other goods. In this time, they obtained the support of the chief Basilio Ladu Lutweri, one of the first baptized in the mission of Gondokoro (Médard 1997, p. 46).

The imperial character, I emphasize in this talk, is depicted furthermore by a report redacted for the Austrian Geological Society, written in 1857 by Freiherr von Reden. We find in this report several aspects of imperialism. The well-known German-Prussian Friedrich Wilhelm von Reden reported that thanks to the missionaries the Austrian flag could be placed only 3 degrees north of the Equator. Another imperialistic part of his account is the metallic ship, equipped with two canons, bought by Knoblehar in order to gain the White Nile from Cairo. This is colonial attitude at its best – at least in the eyes of von Reden – to use modern devices of a coal driven steamboat to master the voyage. Otherwise, this voyage of some 4,000 km had to rely either on local sailing boat shipping or on caravanning. Von Reden, who was a Protestant from Hannover, praised the Catholic mission enterprise for starting with Christianization a civilizing process among the Sudanese population:

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20 Elias Toniolo and Richard Hill (The Opening of the Nile Basin. Writings by Members of the Catholic Mission to Central Africa on the Geography and Ethnography of the Sudan 1842–1881. London: C. Hurst, p. 5) write the vice-consulate was established only in 1851.

“The Austrian flag has gained influence there; under this umbrella Christendom and civilization will slowly but certainly develop, if the mother country supports powerfully her sons in the distant Orient.”

Furthermore, von Reden in his report to the Geographical Society of Vienna, underlined the importance of this mission for the Society he wrote for: He suggested to offer the Marienverein, who mainly funded the mission, to carry out some scientific works that would support the efforts of the missionaries. Also as part of the scientific mission, he suggested to found a Nubian Museum as a part of the ethnographical collections of the Imperial Geographical Society.  

The researcher of the Slovenian Museum of Ethnography, Marko Frelih points out that Knoblehar, who at this time became an honorary member of the Austrian Geographical Society himself collected ethnographica and sent them to Europe. Today some 200 objects of this collection are preserved in Bratislava and some 60 more in Vienna. To collect and to furnish European collections with exotic material was a typical imperial conduct.

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23 See the notice of Knoblehar’s dead in Mittheilung 1858.

The entanglement of this mission enterprise and collecting of scientific knowledge was more intensive. In the first voyage of Knoblehar, two famous scientists were part of the travel-party from Cairo to Khartoum: Johann Wilhelm Baron von Müller (1824–1866) and Alfred Brehm (you might know from his later publications entitled Brehm’s Tierleben). Both did ornithological and zoological studies along the Nile. In the first voyage of Knoblehar, two famous scientists were part of the travel-party from Cairo to Khartoum: Johann Wilhelm Baron von Müller (1824–1866) and Alfred Brehm (you might know from his later publications entitled Brehm’s Tierleben). Both did ornithological and zoological studies along the Nile. Brehm met the missionaries and mission workers in Cairo and especially Ryllo and Knoblehar made a very good impression on him, despite the fact that Ryllo was a Jesuit:

“The mission’s soul was Ignaz Knoblecher from Laibach. Later I had the opportunity to admire this individual. He was as loveable as he was erudite; [...] He knew very good some rare languages and was well-versed in some other sciences [...] he kept as well a very excellent scientific and very accurate diary.”

In 1850, the Baron von Müller became Austria’s General-Consul at Khartoum, an appointment that conflicted with the mission opposing slave trade. Müller, who published his African experience with the Journal of the Royale Geographical Society of London (1850), as well with the Austrian Academy of Science, endorsed the slave trade from the southern Sudan territories to the Egyptian north. He was replaced from his official post only one year later, after he had suggested to the Austrian government to found a penal colony in southern Sudan. Müller returned to Austria. Another ornithologist and friend of Müller, Theodor von Heuglin became 1852 his successor as Austrian consul at Khartoum.

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Another imperial character of this mission enterprise appears in nearly every account about Knoblehar. Knoblehar is said to have ascended a mountain called Logvek (next to the White Nile and some 25 km south of the main mission station at Gondokoro, south of the only 1922 founded town of Juba), from which he could consider the whole landscape. In the words of Deng Akol Ruay Knoblehar’s impressions were:

“They reached Gondokoro on January 9th, 1850. Knoblecher made a brief visit to Rejaf where he climbed a small mountain to obtain a better view of the surrounding country. From the summit he saw the undulating plain occupied by isolated homes and villages. Knoblecher was greatly impressed by so much natural beauty and by the good-nature Negroes’ and consequently he decided to build a church there.”

This imperial panorama, reminding the scene Mary-Louise Pratt in her book *Imperial Eyes* has called “the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene”, when British adventurers as Richard Burton or David Livingstone climbed mountains in order to gain an all-encompassing overview, is a core-motive of any account of this imperial explorative genre and a key-scene of taking into possession of territories that now laid down to the explorer’s feet.

“Analysing Victorian discovery rhetoric, I have found it useful to identify three conventional means which create qualitative and quantitative value for the explorer’s achievement. [...] First, and most obvious the landscape is *esthetized*. [...] Second, *density of meaning* in the passage is sought. The landscape is represented as extremely rich in material and semantic substance. [...] The third strategy at work is the relation of *mastery* predicated between the seer and the seen.”

Although the missionary enterprise was not of territorial domination (besides the ownership of a plot of land where to build a mission station on), it nevertheless was inclined considering the accessible terrains a sphere of influence, to be ordered in a the missionary aims serving way. Regarding from this mountain, Knoblehar observed – by no means innocently – a lovely landscape, with nice villages and houses. This impression might be translated from this colonial-mission language as a peaceable

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situation but with still rather dispersed settlings troubling the formation of a more concentrated mission settlement.

Mission enterprises meant to merge into native societies, to detect its weak points and groups of people and to attract them by some sorts of privileges. One of these privileges was to permit sons visiting the newly established schools, giving young men and women some paid occupation in a country where money in this increasingly colonizing situation became a matter of high rank status. Another privilege was to resemble all people interested in the new Christian faith in one settlement and to end the situation of dispersion. Knoblehar on the top of the Logvek-mountain, thus, rendered understandable in the eyes of his readership the imperial mission's task that was part of the enterprise he was leading.

Finally, there is of course the imperial character of the mission work itself, the treatment of the Africans, I would like to illustrate with some examples of how Knoblehar, who is said the natives named him Abuna Suleiman in Arab, depicted the children who were staying with him. In a report written in 1855 to the Cardinal Giacomo Filippo Franzoni, who was the head of the Propaganda Fide in Rome, Knoblehar gives not only insights in daily live and tasks. He also reveals his vision of how the mission enterprise should evolve:

“These poor boys and girls of between five to fifteen years of age are now instructed in the principia of the Holy Faith. Furthermore, they are occupied in how maintaining a house, how to garden and to take care of the small livestock of the station with some other works according to their young age. They stay in their present residence until the right moment will be found to recondit them in their native land, where they won't fail to bring the precious seed of faith to their families, who will not hesitate to receive them.”

The imperial character is firstly a very paternalistic one. It were the European missionaries teaching young Africans from different regions some Catholic doctrines.

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Questi poveretti ragazzi e ragazze nell’età da cinque fin a quindici anni si istruiscono ora nei principi della S. fede, e si occupano inoltre in quanto è possibile col maneggio di casa, al pascolare ed attendere al piccolo gregge della stazione con altri lavori adatti alla loro tenera età. Essi rimarranno nel loro attuale asilo fin tanto che si troverà il momento propizio per ricondurli nel loro paese nativo, ove non mancieranno di portare la preziosa semenza della fede ai loro parenti i quali non tarderanno a riceverla anch’essi.
and some working ethics. More than the working alone, the missionaries considered this teaching of being healthy to the children’s moral conduct. And, besides the seed of faith, these could bring to their families, another grain was planted, which maybe could be related to the personalities of Slavic-Austrian missionaries: that is the embryonic national identity that Knoblehar and his colleagues intended to develop within the group of pupils they lived with in Gondoroko.

We find this subtle and subversive strategy that took a long time to germ and bear some fruits in different fields of mission activities around the world. But seldom, the missionaries themselves were of a national minority struggling for more autonomy in their home-countries. Thus, the missionaries aimed to foster the pupils' qualification and their development of talent in order to become independent members of an autonomous Catholic church organization in Africa. Nevertheless, Knoblehar knew that this would be a long way to go. First, he had to convince his superiors at the Propaganda Fide that the spreading of the Catholic faith required cultural brokers, translators and assistants. These assistants had the task to communicate the Christian faith to the Africans, to translate the gospel, songs and liturgical texts into the vernacular languages. With a loyal conduct they were promised a privileged position within the so called society of mission and a greater independence from the white hierarchies of Church organization. Knoblehar wrote in his “Relazione della missione dell’Africa Centrale” that he expected that the cultural boundaries between the different ethnic and lingual groups of southern Sudan and with the whites would advance the formation of national societies.35

In order to pursue this goal, it was important that the candidates for bearing this responsibility were recruited at a quite early age. This missionary politics encompassed therefore also a very controversial part that was the buying of young African slaves from Arabic slaveholders, who than were sent to Italy and Austria in order to live for some years in monasteries. Once they had learned Catholic doctrine and ways of living, this was the plan that Daniele Comboni described after Knoblehar’s dead, they should return to Africa and disseminate Catholicism among their ethnic fellows. On this behalf, the missionaries received money collected in


Ignaz Knoblecher, Relazione della missione dell’Africa Centrale, Wien, November 1850. APF SC Africa Centrale Etiopia Arabia 5, S. 392v.
Europe (mostly in Vienna by the Marienverein and another Catholic association in Cologne).  

The young man or boy the missionary had elected to become a responsible person in an “African” church organization had to pass a long curriculum, in particular if he was expected to occupy one of the higher ranks possible to an African as catechist or even a priest. The status of an elected person committed the young man to live within a heavily regulated structure. The missionary’s ordered and controlled the apprentice’s behaviour, clothes and living. More than any other member of the society of mission, he had to suspend personal contacts to his former non-Christian environment or had to reduce these relations to exclusively professional reasons.

The assistant-apprentice had numerous duties and tasks: he reduced the deficits the missionaries had regarding linguistic capacities and local customs. The young men could help in establishing social relations and took care of the missionary’s household. In the house-community the missionary had the possibility of controlling the assistant and to teach him at any hour what he was expected to learn. Over years, a mutual fruitful relation could arise that experienced serious backsets, in case a missionary died or was moved to another mission station. In these situations the boy’s attachment to the mission was put to a risk and either his career as a catechist or even his living as a Christian came to an abrupt end.

The aim was to establish a native clergy in Africa who shared equally the morality and severity and worked with the same zeal as the European priests were supposed to labor. One strategy to teach young Africans this conduct was to send them to Europe. Missionaries, priests and laymen in Europe believed that only in Europe, where the spirit of a centuries-old Christianity reigned, the young converts were free from all perils of a heathen environment. Only in Europe, they thought, these could learn and experience a Christian living and its doctrines.

39 Ignaz Knoblecher, an Giacomo Filippo Fransoni, Karthoum, 23.11.1852. APF SC Africa Centrale Etiopia Arabia 5, S. 538v–539.
40 Ignaz Knoblecher, an Giacomo Filippo Fransoni, Karthoum, 15.10.1855. APF SC Africa Centrale Etiopia Arabia 5, S. 980.
In the mission field these candidates had a twofold position. On the one hand, they were pupils and subordinated to the missionary. On the other hand, they often were in charge of a certain task, taught younger pupils or organized communal works. Missionaries, as Ignacij Knoblehar included accounts about these assistant-apprentices in their official reports that were sent to Europe. Knoblehar often wrote to the associations that supported the Sudan mission financially. He included these accounts in order to show the advancement he and his colleagues had made in the mission field. He could assure the benefactors that the investments had brought first fruits and further funding was founded on good hopes of a successful future of the enterprise.

With this last imperial layer I will conclude my paper. The relationship between mission station, individuals in the mission field – be it missionaries or converts – and benefactors in Europe is a still under-studied field of imperial history. The Catholic mission in southern Sudan among the Bari and Dinka, shouldered by Austrian subjects of Slovenian, Polish or Italian nationality, was – despite its peacefulness – an imperial enterprise. It is this an example of how to bring closer to each other imperial histories in- and outside Europe. By defining imperial layers of the history of the Austrian-Slavic-Italian mission in southern Sudan we can bridge the gap that we find in most new global history – that is between the European expanding powers on the one side and the conquered non-European territories on the other side. In common historiographic accounts, colonial and imperial history mostly plays in non-European parts of the world, and does reflect Europe only when it comes to identify “imperial culture” in the imperial states in Europe. What we should have in mind is that most of the European states, which were more or less active in the colonial-imperial expansion in Africa and Asia, were also internally and externally expanding states in Europe, controlling colonized subjects. I argue for considering these imperial layers very closely related to the non-European colonial history.

41 Ignaz Knoblecher, an Giacomo Filippo Fransoni, Karthoum, 23.11.1852. APF SC Africa Centrale Etiopia Arabia 5, S. 538v–539.