

Case Study 2

The Robert Forrer and Ludvig Müller correspondence

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PUZZLES IN A MUSEUM

Egyptian Fabrics from the 1st Millennium AD
at the National Museum of Denmark
(Online Exhibition)



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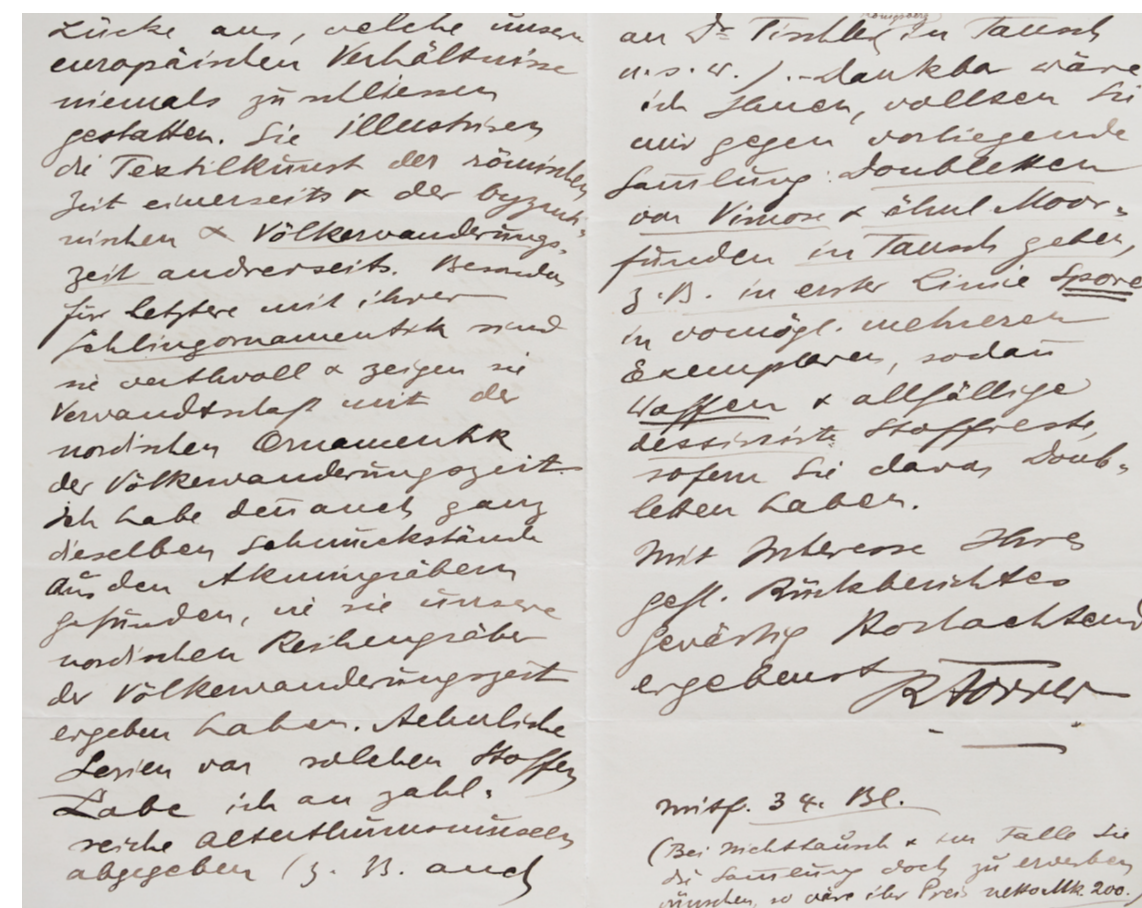
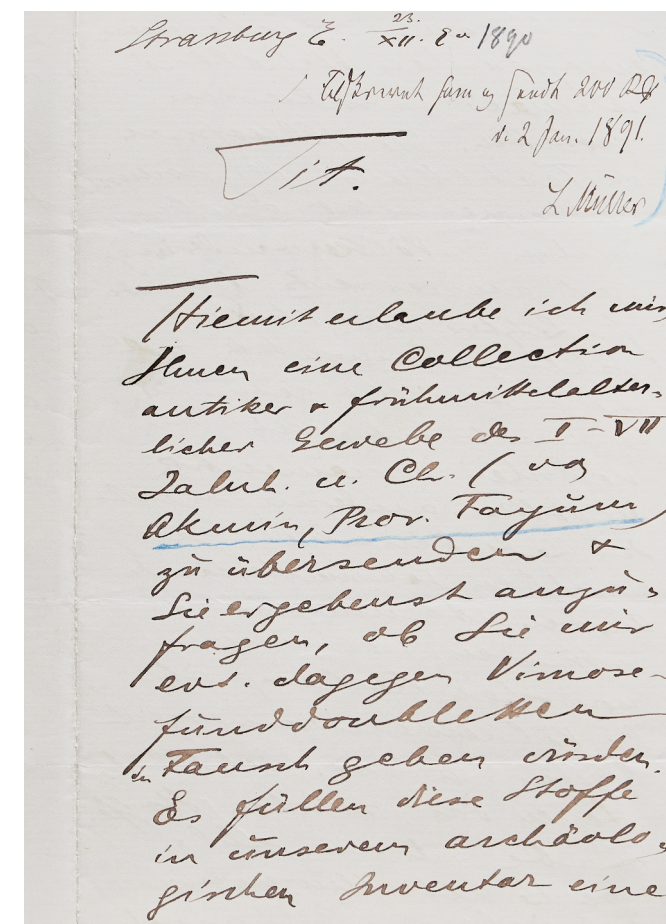
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At the very end of 1890, Robert Forrer first made himself known to staff at what would later become the National Museum of Denmark (official name from 1892 onwards). His first letter, written in German and dated Strasburg, 23rd December [18]90, was put in the hands of Ludvig Müller, who was Director of the Collection of Coins and the Collection of Antiquities.

Ultimately, this contact resulted in the purchase of 49 textile fragments, which are currently held in the Collection of Classical and Near Eastern Antiquities. Two of these textiles were placed on the same "leaf", a cardboard sheet, and so, in Forrer's notebook and all correspondence with the museum, it is counted as one fabric, making the total batch 48 textiles. Six letters from Forrer and three notes or drafts of letters from Müller are preserved in the NMD archives.

Alongside the first letter from Forrer was a parcel of 34 "leaves" of textiles. Based on Forrer's wording and Müller's reply, this parcel was sent without prior agreement. It seems that the practice of sending actual items to various institutions was an integral part of Forrer's business. Forrer's sending of textiles on a piece of paper or carton, often with a handwritten comment and number, is confirmed in other collections: cartons with textiles and Forrer's annotations went to a museum in Königsberg (now in the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte in Berlin), and cartons combined into a "book," but without annotations, were sent to the Jagiellonian University

1a, b. A letter from Robert Forrer to Ludvig Müller dated 23rd December [18]89? The year 1890 was added later in pencil. At the top of the first page one can also see a note from Müller (in Danish) made on 2nd January 1891, confirming the sending of 200 marks to Forrer. In his letter, Forrer proposes to supply Müller with "ancient and early medieval" fabrics from the 1st to 7th century AD originating "von Akmim, Prov. Fayum". Forrer wishes to obtain Vimose "doublets" in return. Archives of the National Museum of Denmark. Photo: Line Cecilie Eskerod Hansen © NMD



Museum in Cracow.

In the letter, Forrer explained that he had already facilitated the acquisition of textiles to "numerous museums of antiquities", citing contact with [Otto] Tischler in Königsberg. Forrer gives no details as to the provenance of the Egyptian textiles, save for the mention of "Akmim, Prov[ince] of Fayum", which creates ambiguity as to the origin, since Akhmim is in Upper Egypt and not in the Fayum Oasis.

In the same letter, Robert Forrer proposed exchanging the textiles for artefacts from Vimose, a sacrificial bog on the Island of Funen dating to the Scandinavian Iron Age. This site had, especially through the excavations of Conradus Engelhardt, yielded a great quantity of military equipment and other items. The results of the excavations were presented in Danish and French in 1867, and more extensively in 1869 (Danish only). Forrer argued for a kinship between the "antique and early medieval" textiles and personal ornaments which were found in Egypt and contemporary objects and motifs from northern Europe. He stated a particular interest in obtaining spurs, weapons and any duplicates of textile remains, preferably from Vimose, but also from other bogs. Finally, Forrer suggested a sum of 200 marks for the 34 textiles in case the exchange for Danish antiquities was not feasible.

There is no evidence that Müller addressed the question of exchanging the textiles with objects from Vimose. While Robert Forrer was most likely presenting his business proposal in a scholarly guise, he was, in fact, already involved in both. Besides his contributions on late antique textiles from 1889, he was also engaged in the study of prehistoric objects. In 1891,

Forrer wrote a volume on horse-riding spurs from an historical perspective, entitled *Der Sporn in seiner Form-Entwicklung*, co-authored with Richard Zschille.

On 5th January 1891 Forrer sent the museum a second batch. This time he offered 30 pieces for 200 marks, including a piece with "gladiators fighting animals", which he called one of the finest, and of which he possessed a "Pendant" in his own collection. This second piece is today in the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo (see **Catalogue, No. 5**). Forrer also drew attention to other fabrics on offer, such as some made of silk and an embroidered piece.

In a draft letter from Müller to Forrer, dated 22nd January 1891, Müller wished to know more about the provenance of the textiles - "when and by whom have they been excavated?" - and he directly addressed the contradictory information regarding the provenance given by Forrer in his letter of December 1890. Furthermore, Müller expressed an interest in obtaining Forrer's scholarly works.

Forrer's reply, and a third batch, came only a few days later, on 25th January 1891. Here he stated that the textiles were from Akhmim and delivered to him by his "Egyptian agents" (see **"Egyptology, Egyptomania, and Egyptian textiles"** in the *Introduction*). The confusion might be a simple error on Forrer's side, but it still indicates that he was not particularly well informed of the burial sites and geography of Egypt. In his reply, dated 4th February 1891, Müller selected only a few pieces from the third batch, and specifically asked Forrer not to send anymore.

Handwritten letter from Forrer to Müller, dated 1890. The text is in German and discusses the second batch of textiles. It mentions a price of 200 marks for 30 pieces, including a piece with "gladiators fighting animals". The letter is dated "København 1. 90." and signed "F.F."

2a, b. A letter from Forrer to Müller seemingly 18[90], but should be 91. This letter accompanied the shipment of a second batch to the museum, including a piece with "gladiators fighting animals". Archives of the National Museum of Denmark. Photo: Line Cecilie Eskerod Hansen © NMD

Handwritten letter from Müller to Forrer, dated 1891. The text is in German and discusses the provenance of the textiles. It mentions the "Pendant" in Forrer's collection and asks for more information about the textiles. The letter is dated "København 22. 91." and signed "Müller".

Forrer wrote Müller again on the 7th February 1891, forwarding a fourth batch, this time containing what he calls "Antiken". In the same letter Forrer proposed sending some "very rare" silks for Müller to choose from. A note by Müller on the letter states, "Nothing bought. Future batches denied".

A final letter from Forrer of 6th March 1891 was sent in an attempt to sell the museum some Roman and Frankish glass objects. Despite Forrer claiming these to be "very rare pieces" at a good price, it seems that Müller did not respond at all. Overall, Müller seems increasingly unresponsive to Forrer's advances.

Of the four batches, also recorded in the sales notebook, Forrer sold the entire first batch to the museum, while Müller selected ten out of 30 pieces from the second. The number of pieces sent in the third batch is not known, but here Müller only selected four pieces. The final batch was returned in its entirety.

The first batch of 34 pieces is not described by Forrer, but was later registered under NMD Inv. 3760. In the very brief description in the museum registry book it is noted that this batch consisted of two striped pieces, ten "border", 12 "bræmmer", possibly meaning respectively "outer edges" and "narrow strips" in Danish, while ten were "middle" pieces. However, in 1928, only 30 pieces were noted to belong to this inventory number.

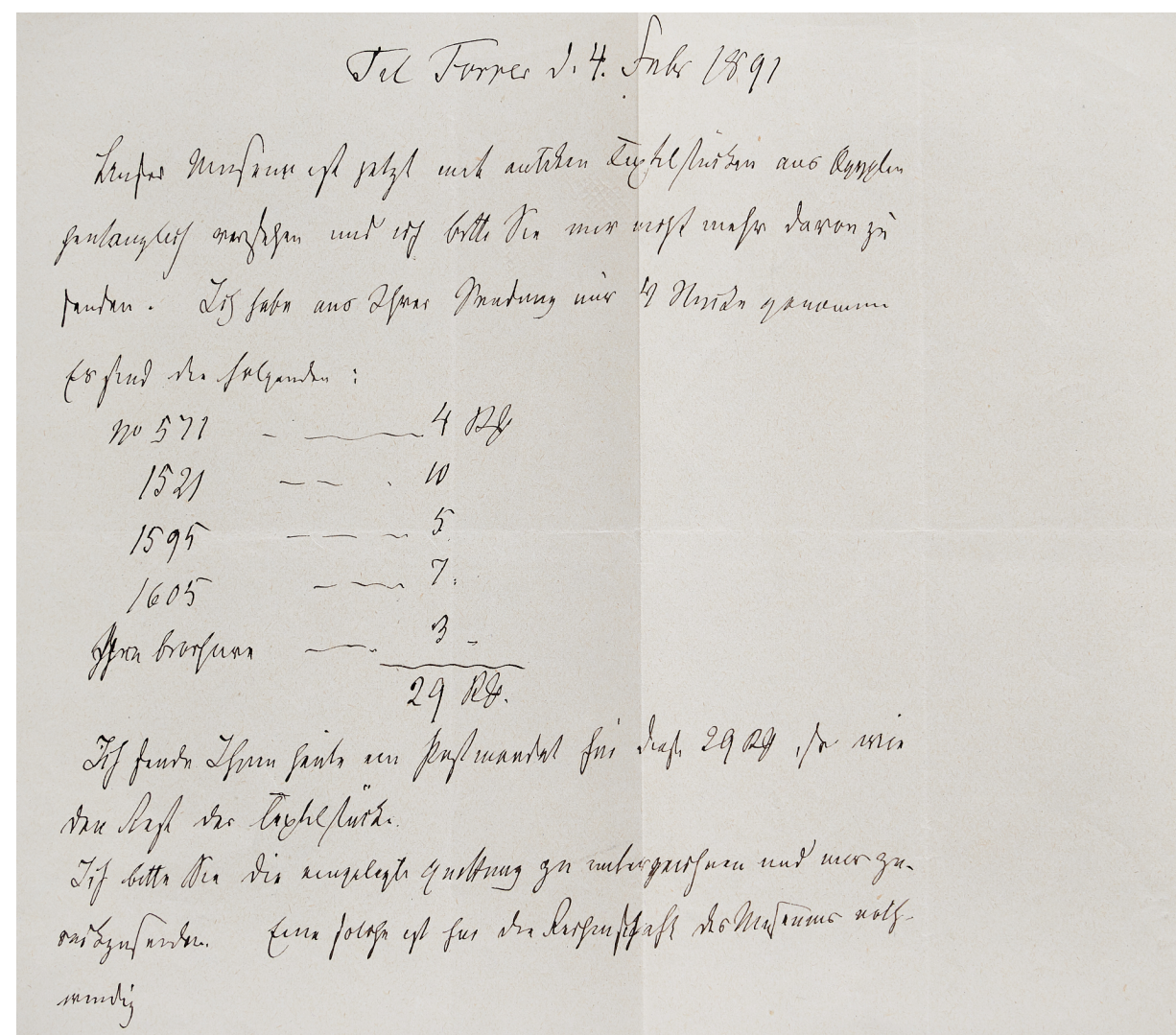
According to Forrer the second batch consisted of an embroidered piece (No. 548 in Forrer's classification indicated on the cards), two silks (Nos. 1631 and 1632), a piece with gladiators (No. 1588), and Nos. 1595 and 1687. Forrer's number 1537 (see **Catalogue, No. 8**) was seemingly also

a part of this group. The museum registry states 18 textiles under NMD Inv. 3761, but only mentions the piece with the gladiators and some pieces with animals or human figures. This corresponds to some of the pieces now assigned under NMD Inv. 3761, however, what might be the embroidered piece (labelled "Broderie" but with the number 6651/1462 on the card) and number 1537 are under NMD Inv. 3760. It seems like more work is needed in order to better understand these numbering systems, but unfortunately most of the textiles are, however, no longer attached to their original cards.

The third batch is simply described by Forrer as "a larger collection of duplicates". Here Müller selected numbers 571, 1521, 1595 and 1605. These cannot be identified, but are most likely also included in the group under NMD Inv. 3761.

It is not possible to establish the total number of textiles sent to the National Museum in the four batches. Forrer clearly tried to curate different batches for the museum to choose from, as Batch 1 and 2 have noticeable differences. The result, partly also curated by Müller's selecting of the pieces, is telling as to both the variety and quality available to Forrer.

The correspondence between Forrer and Müller never developed into a dialogue between kindred spirits, despite Forrer's attempt to establish himself as knowledgeable on Danish prehistory. His attempt may have failed simply because Müller was not responsible for these collections. Furthermore, Müller's own academic works were primarily on Classical subjects.



3. Draft of a letter from Müller to Forrer dated 4th February 1891. Müller states that the museum is now sufficiently supplied with Egyptian textiles and he asks Forrer not to send any more. Archives of the National Museum of Denmark. Photo: Line Cecilie Eskerod Hansen © NMD