

Zeitschrift: Archives des sciences et compte rendu des séances de la Société
Herausgeber: Société de Physique et d'Histoire Naturelle de Genève
Band: 44 (1991)
Heft: 1: Archives des Sciences

Artikel: Pallas' theory of the earth in German (1778) : translation and reevaluation : reaction by a contemporary : H.-B. de Saussure
Autor: Carozzi, Albert V. / Carozzi, Marguerite
Vorwort: Introduction
Autor: Carozzi, Albert V. / Carozzi, Marguerite
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-740194>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 08.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

INTRODUCTION

Peter Simon Pallas belongs to that brand of naturalists who advanced geological knowledge in the eighteenth century by precise descriptions of various kinds of rocks visible at the surface of the Earth. He traveled extensively between 1768 and 1774 through a large part of Russia but drew a geological map of the Ural Mountains only, giving symbols for rocks as well as for minerals in mining districts. In 1777 he was asked to give a talk at the Academy of Sciences at St. Petersburg in which he included his observations and a theory of the Earth. Today, his fame rests not on his precise geological observations but on the statement given in his theory of a central chain of primitive mountains (granite and schists) in the Urals, accompanied on both sides by limestone mountains, and finally by layers of marls, sandstones, and clays.

Pallas' contemporary, H.-B. de Saussure's, carefully analysed both Pallas' theory as well as his geological observations, being well aware that those observations served as basis for his theory (see Chapter IV). However, today, Pallas' geological observations are forgotten and his once famous theory "On the nature of mountains and on changes that have occurred on the globe" (first published in French by the Academy of Sciences of St. Petersburg in 1777) is generally cited by historians in a few lines. Only Arthur Stössner presented in his doctoral thesis (1900) a thorough investigation of all of Pallas' geological investigations rather than describing merely Pallas' theory of the Earth. However an analysis of Pallas' geology of the Urals is missing (see Chapter V). Folkwart Wendland (1986) gave a detailed account of Pallas' German theory published in 1778 to which he added a biography and some comments on Pallas' geological interpretations (Chapter V). Nevertheless, though Wendland noticed that Pallas made a distinction between the eastern and western side of the Urals, he treated Pallas' geological knowledge of these mountains according to their classification into mountains of first, second, and third order, giving neither a hint about the locations where Pallas found these various rocks nor how they fit into the modern interpretation of the Ural Mountains.

This paper includes first a translation of Pallas' German theory of 1778 which has not been published in English. It remains a marvelous and very readable piece of eighteenth-century scholarship. Pallas gave not only a description of the nature of mountains and possible reasons for the great changes that have occurred on Earth, but he also talked about the origin of the black race; the first settlements of humans; their first civilization; the various climates of Siberia; the animals and plants native to Central Asia; the belief that the natives of Tibet were the descendants of apes;

and the many recorded floods of the Neva at St. Petersburg. These ideas, often unrelated to geology, are mostly in footnotes some of which were omitted in the French edition of 1777.

Pallas wrote a German edition a year later perhaps because he felt that the French paper was not entirely representative of his own ideas. Read in French at the Academy of St. Petersburg for a guest of distinction (the King of Sweden), Pallas' talk was actually meant to show the European scientific public what the Academy of Sciences at St. Petersburg was capable of doing. Those who have read the St. Petersburg version, or any later French version, are missing the original thoughts of Pallas because many views in the French edition differ from the German and are at times even contradictory. We believe therefore, that a faithful translation of Pallas' German essay of 1778, including all his footnotes, would please those readers who are not conversant in that language, and perhaps also those who have never read Pallas at all.

Second, we are giving here an explanation of Pallas' description of geological features as he recorded them during his 1768-1774 expedition and drew them on his map. On the basis of a reconstruction of this map, these observations are compared with the modern geology of the Urals as well as with his theory of 1778. With this reevaluation of Pallas' contribution, we are hoping to fill one more gap in the history of geology of the eighteenth century.

With respect to footnotes and pagination, either by Pallas or the translators, the following standards were adopted: Pallas' footnotes are given at the end of his theory (Chapter III). Pallas' original pagination and footnote numbers are given in parentheses both in the theory and in Pallas' footnotes (plain text). Our footnotes and references are marked by superscript numbers (**bold**) in the translation. They include bibliographical references, explanations about some of Pallas' terms, and clarifications of Pallas' geological observations; they point also to discrepancies between the French and the German text. Minor complementary information by the authors is in square brackets. References follow all chapters with the exception of III and VIII; Pallas' publications follow a short biography in chapter I. The spelling of Russian rivers and cities has been modernized with the exception of names not found on any modern map.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are very grateful to Martin Guntau for sending us the latest review of Pallas by Folkwart Wendland and the doctoral thesis of Arthur Stössner which was very difficult to find. We also wish to thank J. K. Newman for his help in the interpretation of Latin terms. Jessie Knox is thanked for his fine drafting of the figures.

