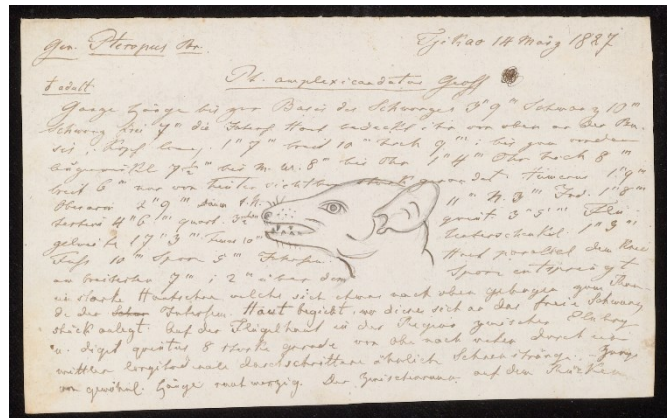


# Natural historical archives as digital challenge and opportunity

**Dr Andreas Weber**: Assistant Professor, University of Twente (MB-STePS)

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Indonesian Archipelago witnessed various attempts to describe, classify and manage local natural resources. Next to a large number of detailed reports on the cultivation of cash crops and the improvement of industries, this resulted in unique biodiversity heritage collections documenting the area's rich and variegated flora and fauna. Over the last decade, many of these handwritten manuscripts, drawings and specimens have been digitized and are now stored on servers of natural historical museums in the Netherlands, Germany, England and France. However, owing to their heterogeneous character and complex structure, such collections have never been fully disclosed, interlinked, and contextualized.

In order to address this challenge, the collaborative digital heritage project *Making Sense of Illustrated Handwritten Archives* develops a user-friendly and technologically advanced digital environment which is meant to facilitate the work of historians, biologists and curators interested in digitized natural historical and other illustrated handwritten heritage.



Example of an illustrated field note by the German naturalist Heinrich Boie (1797-1827). Collection Naturalis Biodiversity Center, NNM001001061\_020. Image free of known restrictions under copyright law (Public Domain Mark 1.0).

Core use case of the *Making Sense* project is the archive of the Committee of Natural History of the Netherlands Indies, a large scale collecting endeavour financed by the Dutch king Willem I. From 1820 to 1850, members of the Committee made extensive tours through the Indonesian Archipelago and brought together a unique set of handwritten documents, specimens and visuals. Next to a project overview, my lecture discusses opportunities, pitfalls, and wider implications which the application of an (word) image recognition system and other digital techniques in the context of digitized illustrated handwritten collections entail.

Example of an hand-drawn bat. Collection Naturalis Biodiversity Center, NNM001000762\_003. Image free of known restrictions under copyright law (Public Domain Mark 1.0).



Specimen of a Sunda Fruit Bat (*Acerdon macklotii*), collected by H. Boie and H.C. Macklot on Timor (1828/29). Photograph created by Henk Caspers (@ Naturalis Biodiversity Center), licensed under CC-BY-SA 4.0.