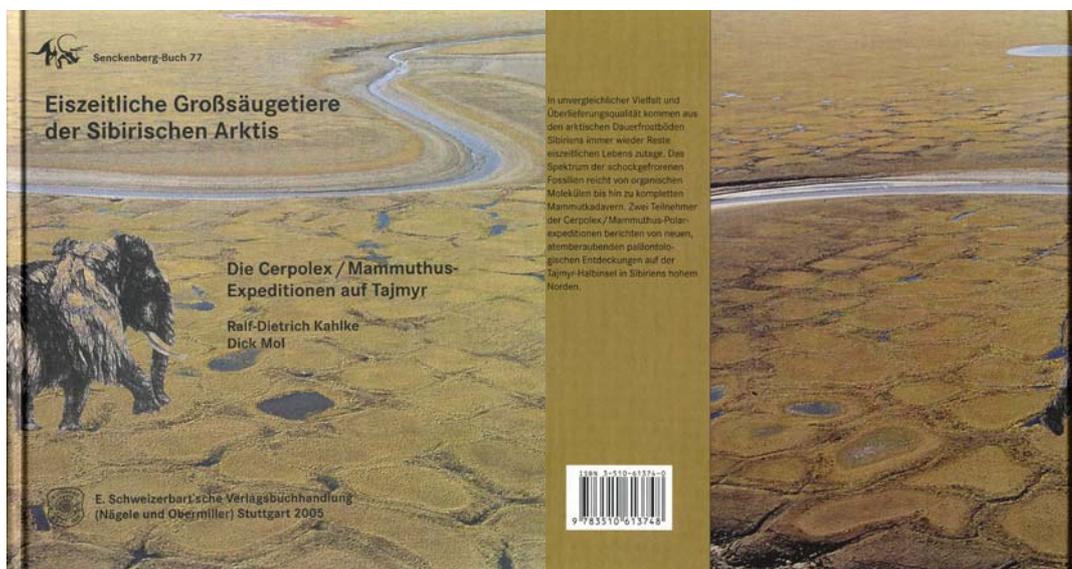


Kahlke R.–D. & D. Mol. 2005. Eiszeitliche Grossäugetiere der Sibirischen Arktis. Die Cerpoplex/Mammuthus–Expeditionen auf Tajmyr. – Stuttgart, E. Schweizerbart'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung (Nägele und Obermiller; Senckenberg–Buch 77)

Book review by J.W.F. Reumer



Cerpoplex was just a travel agency until halfway the 1990s. If you wanted to go to the northernmost Eurasian continental cape on the Taimyr peninsula, or to the North Pole itself, you could book your journey through this Paris-based agency. Cerpoplex (= Cercle Polaire Expéditions; or polar circle expeditions) then happened to stumble upon mammoth remains and on the people that discovered them. Its director, Mr. Bernard Buigues, became one of the most dedicated supporters of mammoth research after he met with a Dolgan family – the Jarkovs – that discovered a deep-frozen woolly proboscidian carcass. For a man who regularly ships tourists to the earth's summit, the retrieval of a frozen mammoth carcass was not just another business deal, it became a temptation. And when Buigues' sense for business came together with Dick Mol's love for the mammoth, a team was born that so far did more than anyone else to obtain mammoth material for scientific study. Mol, an amateur palaeontologist as well as a man who can do with only four hours of sleep, is the incarnation of mammothophilia. Buigues and Mol rescued the Jarkov mammoth, re-discovered the Fishhook mammoth, and collected thousands of other Pleistocene and Holocene megamammals from a region you and I would never choose as a holiday destination: the Siberian far north.

They successfully raised money and assembled a team of scientists from various countries to help them analyse the finds and to do research into Late Pleistocene ecology. One of these scientists, Dr. R.–D. Kahlke of the Senckenberg-connected Institute of Quaternary Paleontology in Weimar, Germany, wrote this handsome little book on the Siberian larger mammals together with Dick Mol. Even though written in German, and counting less than one hundred pages, the volume is full of highly readable information, it is scientifically interesting and packed with enough information to keep the layman and the scientist awake. It mixes stories of the far north and its climatic harshness with the latest information on Pleistocene palaeoecology. Beautiful photographs of the endless and lush Taimyr landscape make you wish to join the party, until you suddenly read the casual fact that the ambient temperature the scientists work in is below 40 degrees Celsius! The storehouse where the expedition keeps its finds is not just a normal cellar of the type found everywhere around the globe, it is a 'Lednik', a cave dug into the permafrost where temperatures below 20 degrees Celsius preserve the material from deterioration.

We read about the history of the genus *Mammuthus*; about the other mammals that accompanied the mammoth in its particular ecosystem (called the mammoth steppe) and the ones that surprisingly did not (the woolly rhinoceros had a rather more choosy habitat preference); about the vegetation that grew *in situ* and that was found in the frozen intestines of the carcasses; about the beauty and the harshness of the Taimyr landscape. Please note: the Taimyr peninsula may seem a rather insignificant spur extruding from the Russian continent, it is in fact two-and-a-half times the size of Germany! Travel does not go by car or by train as there are neither roads nor railways. Travel goes either by helicopter or by foot. Expedition crews eat frozen reindeer meat. And they rejoice when – after sometimes several weeks of walking and collecting and chewing *Rangifer* cutlets – they hear the sound of the MI8 chopping its way towards them through the frozen heavens.

Scientifically most interesting is the last chapter. The ultimate goal of the Cerpolex/Mammuthus expeditions is to increase knowledge of the Late Pleistocene ecosystem and of the reasons why the 'Mammuthus/Coelodonta faunal complex' (that is: the association of Late Pleistocene mammals living in the mammoth steppe ecosystem) became largely extinct. Reindeer, moose and musk-oxen have survived, but mammoths, woolly rhinos, giant elks, cave bears, cave lions, sabertooth tigers, steppe bisons, and others have perished. Why? Climate change? Human over-hunting? Lethal disease? The answer is not yet given, but it may comprise elements of each suggestion. We need expeditions like the Cerpolex/Mammuthus Expedition to obtain material for further study. We need people like Buigues and Mol to organise such undertakings. We need scientists like Kahlke and Mol to convey information to the general public. And we need books like this one to convince us of the usefulness of the work. Please do not feel reluctant because of the German language it is written in: there is so much information in this tome that it worth a buy anyway.

To end this review, I cannot ignore the most hilarious printing error I have ever seen. The first sentence of the text describes how the ice crystals on the walls of the frosty Lednik shine as a result of the illumination by a spotlight. A spotlight in German is 'Scheinwerfer'. The sentence, however, describes how the ice crystals shine in the light of a 'Schweinwerfer'. In English this literally translates as a pig-thrower. The simple erroneous addition of a 'w' creates a swine-throwing device to illuminate the remains of the Jarkov mammoth. A wonderful book.

Kahlke R.-D. & D. Mol. 2005. Eiszeitliche Grosssäugetiere der Sibirischen Arktis. Die Cerpolex/Mammuthus-Expeditionen auf Tajmyr. – Stuttgart, E. Schweizerbart'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung (Nägele und Obermiller; Senckenberg-Buch 77). 96 pp. ISBN 3-510-61374-0. Price € 19.80 (hardback).