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PRESS RELEASE

Ethnologisches Museum Returns Objects to Alaska Natives

Today, the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (SPK, Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation) has returned nine objects from the collection of the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum) of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) to the Chugach Alaska Corporation. Hermann Parzinger, president of SPK, handed them over to the Vice President of the Chugach Alaska Corporation, John Johnson. Representatives of the American Embassy and the German Foreign Office were present at the ceremony.

The items concerned are goods from the graves of indigenous peoples from southwestern Alaska. They were among the objects brought to Berlin by Johan Adrian Jacobsen, who traveled along the American northwest coast and in Alaska between 1882 and 1884 on behalf of the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde (Royal Museum of Ethnology), which was the forerunner of the Ethnologisches Museum. All the indications are that the objects were obtained through grave robbery and not by an approved archaeological excavation. In view of these facts, in December 2017 it was decided to repatriate the objects, in line with SPK's general approach to its non-European collections and the research into their provenances

Hermann Parzinger, SPK's President, stated: "At the time, these objects were taken without the consent of the Alaska Natives and were therefore removed unlawfully from the graves of their deceased, so they do not belong in our museums. I am particularly pleased that this repatriation does not stand at the end of a collaboration, but that quite on the contrary we will intensify the exchange with the Chugach Alaska Corporation in a co-operation."

John F.C. Johnson, Vice President of Cultural Resources, Chugach Alaska Corporation, said: "Many museums have feared that repatriation of cultural items was a loss of knowledge. However it became clear that these actions resulted in greater understanding of the objects and a better working relationship with cultures that they are trying to preserve. The Chugach people are very excited and honored to work with the Staatliche Museum in Berlin on various cultural exchanges in the future. I am proud and very grateful for all the efforts that were made to help make this dream a reality."

DER PRÄSIDENT
MEDIEN UND KOMMUNIKATION

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The objects restituted today will be presented in the Chugach Community in the future, not least in the annual Chugach Spirit Camp, which is designed to raise awareness of the origin and history of the people in the Prince William Sound and to heighten awareness of their history and culture. In the course of John Johnson's current stay in Berlin, a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ethnological Museum has been drafted. Both parties aim to design together an exhibition for the Humboldt Forum which can then travel in Alaska.

Grave Goods of the Chugach People

The objects are grave goods from Chenega Island and a place named as Sanradna (Soonroodna) in Kachemak Bay, whose precise location is no longer known. Among them are two broken masks and a child's cradle, as well as a wooden idol. Masks were usually burned after use or laid in graves, which is why not many masks of the Chugach people exist today. The red color on these ones indicates a funereal context. The wooden idol is probably a shamanic figure, meant to protect people from danger and death. Altogether, the Ethnologisches Museum of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin has about 200 Chugach objects in its collections.

The Chugach region of Southwestern Alaska has been inhabited for thousands of years by people who refer to themselves as Sugpiaq or Alutiiq, formerly known as Pacific Eskimos. About 1,000 to 1,500 years ago, athabaskic-speaking groups of Indians immigrated, today's Dena'ina (formerly known as Tanaina). Today, the Alaskan Natives, who call themselves Chugach, live around the Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet. They live in seven communities: Chenega, Eyak, Nanwalek, Port Graham, Seward, Tatilek and Valdez. Regular contacts with Europe existed since the time of Tsar Peter the Great.

The Chugach Alaska Corporation (www.chugach-ak.com), created in 1972, is an organization representing the interests of the indigenous peoples of the Chugach region of Alaska. Among other activities, it works to preserve the cultural heritage of these groups.

Repatriation

In November 2015, a delegation from the Chugach Alaska Corporation visited the Ethnologisches Museum with the aim of initiating cooperation on future projects. One of the reasons for this was the project *Llangakllu-*



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ku Llucilerpet Cuumi: Becoming Aware of Our Beginnings, which aims at creating a virtual presentation of all the Chugach objects around the world. Following the visit, the Corporation asked the Ethnologisches Museum for assistance in repatriating any grave goods that had come from the region. The US federal government presented a diplomatic note in support of the request for return.

The SPK diligently investigated the original context of the grave goods identified in the Ethnologisches Museum, doing so in accordance with its general policy on dealing with its non-European collections and on research into their provenance. In the present case, all the indications are that the objects were obtained through grave robbery and not by an approved archaeological excavation. From Adrian Jacobsen's travel journals, it is clear that the graves were opened solely for the purpose of removing their contents. There were no government or local authority permits to do so, nor was there any documentation to show that consent had been granted by the community of origin. In view of these facts, it was decided to return the objects.

General policy of the SPK on dealing with its non-European collections and researching their provenances: www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/newsroom/mediathek/dokumente/dokument-detail/news/2015/06/09/grundpositionen-der-spk-zum-umgang-mit-ihren-aussereuropaeischen-sammlungen-und-zur-erforschung-der-pr.html

Johan Adrian Jacobsen traveled along the American northwest coast and in Alaska at the end of the nineteenth century. He did so on behalf of the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde (Royal Museum of Ethnology) in Berlin. The director of the museum at the time, Adolf Bastian, had commissioned him to collect objects that were as "original" as possible, untainted by European culture, with the aim of building up a collection. Jacobsen returned to Berlin with around three thousand objects from the northwest coast and around four thousand objects from Alaska. His account of the journey is an impressive historical document. It is characterized, however, less by accurate ethnographic observations than by tales of derring-do, told by a hard-nosed adventurer. With this in mind, the travels of the self-proclaimed "captain" will also be at the center of an exhibition module in the Humboldt Forum, serving as a critical examination of the history of the collection from today's perspective.

Press photos: www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/newsroom/presse/pressebilder.html