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PRESS RELEASE

Ethnologisches Museum Returns Objects to Alaska Natives

The Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation) is going to return 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. The Foundation Board approved a proposal to this effect from the President today.

The items concerned are grave goods 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.

Hermann Parzinger, the 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. We will now be returning them to the Chugach Alaska Corporation, with whom we have been working to re-examine our collection since 2015."

The objects are grave goods from Chenega Island and a place named as Sanradna, whose 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.

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 their interest in 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 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

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INGOLF KERN
DR. STEFANIE HEINLEIN (Stv.)

Von-der-Heydt-Straße 16–18
10785 Berlin

Telefon: +49 30 266-41 14 40
Telefax: +49 30 266-41 28 21

pressestelle@hv.spk-berlin.de
www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de



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cultural heritage of these groups. 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.