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## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **SPK investigates the origin of human remains from East Africa – Gerda Henkel Foundation grants funds for the project**

At the beginning of October, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz will launch a pilot project to investigate the provenance of around a thousand human skulls originating in a former colony, German East Africa. The project is based at the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte (Museum of Prehistory and Early History) of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) and has been awarded a grant by the Gerda Henkel Foundation.

The skulls are part of the anthropological collections that SPK took over from the Charité in 2011. At the time, they were in an extremely bad state. In the years that followed, they were first painstakingly cleaned and then treated to ensure their preservation. In order to clarify their origin, the scientists involved set up a research database and carried out preliminary searches of archives in other countries.

The two-year project to research the provenance of the objects from former German East Africa is meant to serve as a model for future research into the provenance of the other human remains in the keeping of the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte. To this end, source material relating to the collections, which is scattered around the world, must be recorded and analyzed. Scientists from different disciplines will be working together on the project, as the tasks involved require knowledge not only of ethnology, but also of anthropology and colonial history. A further aim is to establish an international network of scientists from the countries of origin concerned (Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda) so as to ensure that the research takes an appropriate approach.

Hermann Parzinger, President of the SPK: "In order to be able to decide what to do next with the human remains, we need to know exactly where they came from and, especially, whether this background is one of injustice. Decisions concerning restitution are also contingent on the results of this research. Depending on the origin of the bones, we seek the most appropriate solution in each case. If we can assign them clearly to a society of origin, we will consult its representatives about how best to deal with them and discuss returning them."

Michael Hanssler, the Chair of the Executive Board of the Gerda Henkel Foundation, adds: "The project represents a great opportunity to set an

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example of how to work together with scientists from regions of origin to develop return concepts on an equal footing. From the Foundation's point of view, it would be desirable if this pilot project were to set standards for a – long overdue and fair – dialogue with partners from former colonies about the future treatment of their cultural heritage."

Since the primary documentation of the anthropological collections in the care of the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte no longer exists, a multitude of other sources must be consulted in order to investigate them. Of relevance, for example, are the notes made by collectors, some of which are in public archives while others are in private possession, both in Germany and abroad. Because the activity of collecting was often embedded in a colonial infrastructure, the files kept by commercial, military, and ecclesiastical bodies are also of interest. Supplementary (non-invasive) anthropological examination of the objects themselves can also provide important clues to their origin and acquisition.

More details in an interview with the project's leader, Bernhard Heeb:

<http://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/news-detail/news/2017/08/02/um-etwas-zurueckzugeben-muss-man-wissen-woher-es-stammt.html>.

The invitations to a **press conference** will be issued separately.

SPK's policy on **dealing with human remains** incorporates the guidelines issued by the Deutscher Museumsbund (German Museums Association) and the basic principles developed additionally by the SPK. These stipulate that provenance research must be carried out before any other kind of research. More at: <https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/en/priorities/provenance-research-and-issues-of-ownership/umgang-mit-menschlichen-ueberresten.html>

The **Gerda Henkel Foundation** was established by Mrs. Lisa Maskell in memory of her mother, Gerda Henkel, in June 1976. It is a private charitable organization with its seat in Dusseldorf. The sole purpose of the Foundation is the promotion of science, primarily in the field of the humanities. So far, it has made grants totaling around 160 million Euros in support of more than 6,600 research projects around the world. Since 2015, the Foundation has increased its focus on the preservation of cultural heritage, especially in crisis regions, through its "Patrimonies" funding initiative. The work it supports in sub-Saharan Africa includes projects to preserve oral memories in Cameroon and the Gambia, to digitize manuscripts in Mali and Mauritania, and to investigate archaeological remains in the Congo (DRC) and Ethiopia. ([www.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de](http://www.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de))