

Annex to the press release

The 8 funded institutions (for long-term research projects) are, in detail, as follows:

- The University of Göttingen, the Department of Historical Anthropology and Human Ecology of the Institute of Zoology and Anthropology
- Leibniz University Hannover - University of Potsdam / Trier University - Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
- Museum Burg Mylau (Stadt Reichenbach / futurum vogtland e.V.)
- The Saxony-Anhalt Museum Association / Landkreis Saalekreis, Museum Burg Querfurt / Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography - Übersee-Museum Bremen
- Upper Hessian Museum in Gießen/ Ethnographische Sammlung der Philipps-Universität Marburg

New projects:

The University of Göttingen, the Department of Historical Anthropology and Human Ecology of the Institute of Zoology and Anthropology / Institute Anthropological Collections; Project: “Methodological development for non-invasive DNA extraction from human skulls for provenance research”

The research project aims to develop methods to extract human DNA from skulls and bones without using previously known invasive procedures. This would, for example, render it possible to identify human remains without violating the integrity of the bones – an important concern for societies of origin. The DNA is to be extracted by the ultrasound-guided flushing of cellular material from natural cavities in the human skull; the method is being developed exclusively on European skulls. Through a form of collaboration with the research project “Sensitive Provenances – Human Remains from Colonial Contexts in the Collections of the University of Göttingen”, experts from Oceania and Africa have been brought on board.

Leibniz University Hannover: Project: “Ethnographic and Anthropological Spoils of War from Military Expeditions in German-occupied East Africa as Collection Items for German Museums”

The research project will examine the spoils of war from so-called “punitive expeditions” in German-occupied East Africa, among other things. The project involves fundamental research on the looting of ethnographic objects and human remains using a representative sample of military expeditions. Due to indications that looted objects also found their way into the collection of the Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK), Hamburg, the holdings there are to be subjected to exemplary scrutiny and examination.

University of Potsdam / Trier University: Project: “Berlin’s Australian Archive: Addressing the Colonial Legacies of Natural History”

As part of the project, representatives from Berlin institutions will be working with (Indigenous) Australian museum staff, curators, and community representatives to critically examine the collections of 19th century German-speaking natural scientists who were active in the Australian colonies. One area of focus is on four Prussian natural scientists. One of the aims of the project is to establish a detailed understanding of the objects accessible in Australia and also to place natural history collections in a broader colonial context. Led by indigenous Australian communities, the role of indigenous stakeholders and their expertise will be reconstructed from the scattered records, and the collections will be reactivated. A concept for presentation in an online exhibition is also being developed. The results will be incorporated into a practical guide for working on Australian natural history collections in Berlin.

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin: Project: “Provenances of ‘Colonial Duplicates’: Stakeholder Networks and Infrastructures of Accumulation in Colonial East Africa (1880-1939)”

The project aims to reconstruct the main colonial networks, structures, and underlying contexts of acquisition

behind ethnographic objects in colonial East and Central Africa based on the four colonial officials and collectors Franz Stuhlmann, Kurt Johannes, Moritz Merker, and Richard Kandt. The objects sent by the collectors to the Ethnological Museum in Berlin ended up as so-called “duplicates” in other museums and collections. The original provenance of the objects was thus obscured, which is why an analysis of the collector structures and the exchange of “duplicates” could provide key insight for provenance research.

Museum Burg Mylau (Stadt Reichenbach / futurum vogtland e.V.), Project: “Provenance and History of the Ethnological Collection Mylau/Reichenbach”

Within the project’s framework, the “Mylau/Reichenbach” Ethnological Collection, which is now housed in two institutions, is to be researched on the basis of objects from the former German colonies in Africa. The focus is on the objects’ provenance research, in order to identify possible contexts of injustice.

Museumsverband Sachsen-Anhalt e.V. (Principal applicant) / District of Saalekreis, Museum Burg Querfurt / Leibniz-Institut für Länderkunde, Leipzig; Project: “The African Traveler Hans Schomburgk – Collect and Exhibit. Acquisition Contexts behind Ethnological Objects in the first half of the 20th Century”

The project is dedicated to ethnological objects in four collections of Hans Schomburgk (1880-1967). The contexts of Schomburgk’s acquisition in various regions of Africa between 1897 and 1958 will be explored for the first time. Among them is a range of everyday objects, but several items also suggest contexts of injustice or ethically questionable collection activities.

Extended projects (already started in 2019 or 2020, respectively)

Übersee-Museum in Bremen: Project: “Ancestral and Trophy Skulls from former German New Guinea. Approaching Provenance and Acquisition of a Collection of Culturally Sensitive Objects in the Holdings of the Übersee-Museum Bremen”

The project on 125 skulls from the former “German New Guinea,” which began in late 2019, has identified most of the consignors behind these human remains. With the help of these findings, the plan is now to inquire about contributions made by the same “collectors” in other institutions, thus reconstructing corresponding networks. A New Guinean ethnologist will establish research collaborations via fieldwork at the river Sepik, and an anthropologist has already examined a number of skulls externally. Local knowledge and anthropological expertise on the circumstances of the individuals’ lives and deaths will help determine provenance.

Upper Hessian Museum in Gießen/ Ethnographische Sammlung der Philipps-Universität Marburg, Project: “Provenances of Ethnographic Objects from Colonial Contexts in Central Hesse”

In the project, selected objects from the Giessen and Marburg collections will be jointly examined for their colonial contexts. The focus for both collections is on objects geographically assigned to “Cameroon” and “East Africa” (especially Tanzania), as well as on the Collector Leonhard Schultze-Jena. In the course of the project so far, suspicions have been able to be corroborated, and it became apparent that there is a need for further research on the underlying contexts of acquisition. Besides the research in archives and the process of exchange with national museums, cooperation with experts from Cameroon and Tanzania is central.