



Small ivory carvings from the Vega collection: bird. 1880.04.0855-7, Photo: Rose-Marie Westling

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Dispersal and Reunion – The Saga of the “Vega” Expedition Chukchi Collection, 1878–2020

Igor Krupnik and Martin Schultz

Abstract

In 1878–1879, the Swedish polar expedition under Adolf Nordenskiöld on board the *Vega* wintered off the arctic shore of the Chukchi Peninsula in Northeast Russia. One of many outcomes of that journey was a massive ethnographic collection of almost 1,000 objects acquired among the local Chukchi people now housed at the Etnografiska museet in Stockholm. It is the largest historical collection of its kind in Western Europe and the fourth largest from this part of the world. This paper tells the story of a pilot project aimed to explore the history of the *Vega* Chukchi collection over its 140-year life at various museums and to virtually ‘reunite’ via an online database with the descendants of Indigenous people who once interacted with the *Vega* crew. Reconnecting historical museum collections with Indigenous experts and communities of origin is an increasingly popular path to move objects from museum drawers and to start their new life as a source of heritage knowledge, cultural pride, public education, and community empowerment. As our pilot effort revealed, it may open the way to connect major Chukchi collections in other museums via shared electronic access under the new vision of reciprocal networks (alliances), to include heritage professionals, home communities and other interested audiences.

The “Vega” Collection

In 1878–1879, a Swedish polar voyage led by (Nils) Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld (1832–1901) accomplished the first-ever navigation via the Northeast Passage along the Arctic shoreline of Eurasia, from northern Scandinavia to the Bering Strait. Known as the “Vega Expedition” after its vessel, the *Vega*, the two-year journey was a model scholarly venture of its time. It included extensive research in hydrography, navigation, meteorology, geology, botany, zoology, and other fields conducted by a small team of trained scientists and navy officers. Though none of the Vega Expedition participants had a background in anthropology, the team collected a massive stock of data related to Indigenous peoples living along its route, including ethnographic objects, photographs, written

observations, census and ethnographic data (Nordqvist 1880, 1883), archaeological specimens, and materials on local ethnobotanical (Kjellman 1882) and ethno-ornithological knowledge (Palmén 1887). The bulk of the Vega Expedition anthropological records came from the Chukchi people of Northeast Siberia as a result of the *Vega's* ten-month wintering along the Arctic shore of the Chukchi Peninsula from September 1878 to July 1879. Smaller collections originated from short encounters with the Nenets and Khanty people of Northern Russia, the Inupiat Eskimo at Port Clarence, the Yupik people of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, and during a stay in Yokohama and other cities in Japan on the way back to Sweden.

This paper explores for the first time the story of the Chukchi ethnographic collections of the Vega Expedition by using two sets of lenses that we call *dispersal* and *reunion*. It illuminates both the initial loss and the recent potentials for new historical and cultural knowledge associated with the collection. Such 'loss-revival' trajectory has occurred often with ethnographic specimens when, detached from their original users and with the memory of the collecting event fading away, they start a new life as museum objects. They continue to live in a special universe of museum storage rooms, databases, and exhibition displays – until they take on a 'second life.'

The restoration even increase of knowledge associated with the *Vega* Chukchi collection is possible today but requires a complementary set of actions. The first is a *physical* (or virtual) *reunion* of the original, now dispersed stock of objects brought by the expedition. The second is a *cultural reunion*, that is, a re-connection of objects with Indigenous knowledge holders from the home area. The third is placing the collection in a proper cultural context via systematic comparison of the *Vega* specimens with major Chukchi ethnographic holdings in other museums.

Dispersal: Objects, 1880–2020

The Vega Expedition's massive collections covering many fields of natural sciences, as well as ethnography and archaeology were brought to Sweden in April 1880. Nordenskiöld, the expedition leader, also trained geologist and mineralogist, acted swiftly to publish expedition scholarly achievements in a series of science articles, a two-volume popular account aimed at general readers (Nordenskiöld 1880–1881; soon translated into major European languages (Nordenskiöld 1881), English, Russian; 1882, German; 1885, French, etc.), and in five volumes of scholarly 'proceedings' under his general editorship (Nordenskiöld 1882–1887). He also used the collections from the expedition to promote its results, secure additional funding, and seek favors from the Swedish Royal family, the nation's intellectual elite, and general public. Even if inadvertently the process of *dispersal* began as



Figs. 1–2 Photos from the original display of the “Vega” Expedition collection at the King’s Palace in Stockholm, 1880 (Photographer unknown, Etnografiska museet, Stockholm, Inv.No. 0006.0006 and 0006.0007)

objects were publicly displayed, often without cataloging, separated according to the professional disciplinary categories of the era, deposited in different museums, exchanged with foreign institutions, given as gifts, and partly held as personal or family possessions by expedition participants.

The dispersal of the *Vega* ethnographic collection started even earlier, when the objects collected on the first segment of the journey among the Nenets (Samoyed) and Khanty people of Northern Russia were shipped back via a cargo vessel returning to Sweden from the mouth of the Yenisey River in summer 1878. They were registered at the Swedish Royal Museum of Natural History (Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet) in Stockholm in late 1878.

Upon the return of the expedition to Stockholm, the main portion of its ethnographic collection from Northeast Siberia and Alaska was officially donated by Nordenskiöld to the Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet. This was part of a much larger collection of the Expedition that also included thousands of natural history specimens – bird skins and eggs, plants, rocks, fossils, fish, invertebrates, and much more. It is an open question whether *all* of the *Vega* collections went directly to the Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet, for soon after, almost 300 objects, including 79 ethnographic specimens from the Chukchi and the Alaskan Inupiat appeared as part of ‘Mr. Oscar Dickson’s Swedish Collection’ displayed at the International Fisheries Exhibition in Edinburgh in 1882. Oscar Dickson (1823–1897), a rich Swedish industrialist and banker, financially supported many of Nordenskiöld’s enterprises, including the *Vega* voyage, and he could have received a portion of the collection as a personal gift from Nordenskiöld.

Although Nordenskiöld aspired to take control of all collections from the *Vega*

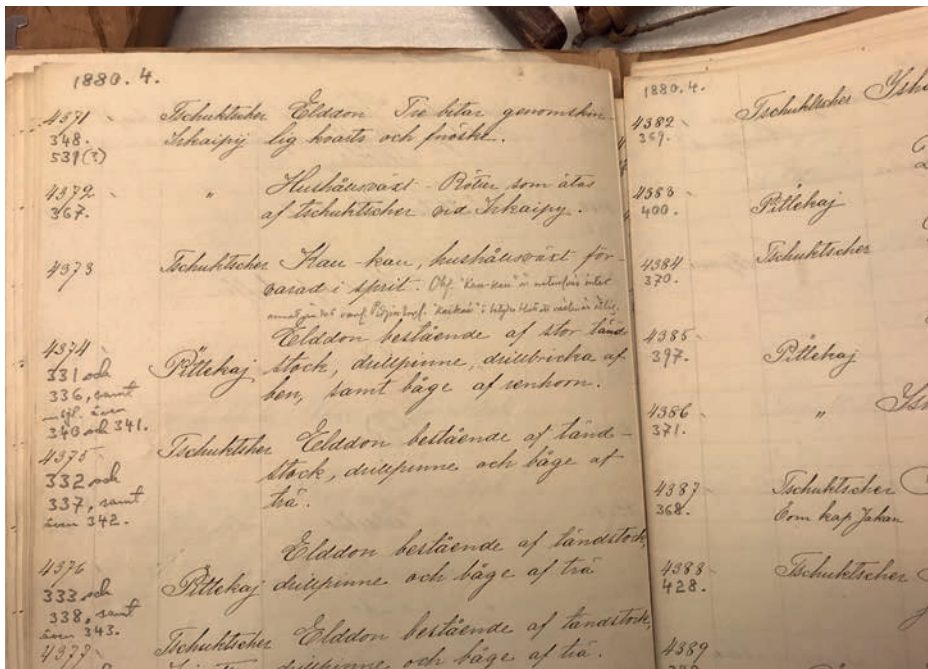


Fig. 3 Page from the original collection ledger (catalog) of the Swedish National Museum featuring Chukchi objects from the "Vega" Expedition

journey, we cannot not exclude the possibility that its participants were disposing (selling, donating) their personal small holdings as they wished. Some objects almost certainly ended as gifts to members of the extended Nordenskiöld family (pers. comm., Claes Nordenskiöld, September 2019).

The bulk of the *Vega* collections was soon displayed in a massive exhibit staged in July 1880 at the Royal Palace in Stockholm. Historical photographs from that exhibit (Figs. 1, 2) feature arrangements of mannequins dressed in Chukchi and Inupiat clothing placed against wall displays of harpoons, lances, bows and arrows, paddles, and other objects interspersed with marine mammal skeletons, stuffed birds, fish in jars, algae, rocks, and other natural history specimens laid on tables or on the floor. We could not locate any documentation pertaining to that exhibit other than the photographs; but it is safe to assume that some list was prepared by Nordenskiöld in advance if not during the expedition. It is unclear whether additional *dispersal* occurred during exhibit preparation, opening, royal visitations, and other activities.

Following the exhibit, most of the objects ended up at the Riksmuseet, where they were soon separated by fields or themes, the bird skin and egg specimens to the bird division, rocks to minerals, fish to fishes, and the like. The ethnographic portion was assigned to the museum Department of Vertebrates with one curator on staff, Fredrik Adam Smitt (1839–1904). He hired a young female

registrar, Kornelia Pålman (1850–1886), his sister-in-law, to process the objects, assign catalog numbers, and provide short descriptions for the museum ledger book (Fig. 3).

That first initial cataloguing by Pålman was evidently done with the minimal involvement of Nordenskiöld or other *Vega* scientific team members, since most object descriptions were rudimentary and often based on guess-work. Nonetheless, a few place names of the Chukchi sites visited by the expedition, such as Pitlekaj, Jinretlen, Jirkajpij (in Swedish transliteration), made their way in some catalog entries. The attention given to the objects was quite uneven: some were catalogued with dimensions while many more were not. Small ivory carvings (Swedish *bensnideri*) usually received extended descriptions with details on size, form, and ornamentation. Most of the hunting and fishing gear was recorded only briefly. Some objects referenced as ‘grave finds’ (*Graffynd*) were catalogued as archaeological specimens from the ancient site at Jirkajpij (modern spelling Ryrkaipyi) that was explored by the *Vega* crew in September 1878 (Nordenskiöld 1881, 443–446). They entered museum records as a special accession (1880.07).

In the absence of a full roster of the expedition’s ethnological and archaeological objects brought to Stockholm in 1880, it is hard to follow the fate of the estimated 1,100 pieces from the Chukchi Peninsula, then the world’s largest collection of its kind and still one of the largest Chukchi ethnographic holdings outside of Russia (see below).

After the International Fisheries Exposition in Edinburgh in 1882 and, later, in London in 1883, the showcases used there were bought by Dickson and donated to the Riksmuseet to be used there to show parts of the Chukchi collections as a permanent exhibition. In 1892, a portion of the *Vega* ethnographic collection was displayed in Madrid at the “Historical American Exposition” honoring the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ first voyage to America. A series of historical photos were taken at the exhibit (the originals being kept at the Spanish National Library, with copies in Stockholm), and a list of objects that went to Spain and returned to Stockholm was compiled by archaeologist Hjalmar Stolpe (1841–1905), the co-founder, together with Nordenskiöld, of the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography (SSAG)¹.

Even before that, a small set of 11 objects was exchanged with the U.S. National Museum of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., today’s National Museum of Natural History, NMNH (Mason 1885:112). Some objects in today’s NMNH collection still preserve the original Swedish tags, with place names ‘Kap Nord,’ ‘Jirkajpij,’ ‘Pitlakaj,’ and catalog numbers from ‘Royal Museum, Sweden’ (Fig. 4). Following the widespread practice of the era for object ‘trade’ or exchanges among the museums, other small sets of *Vega* objects might have been given to other institutions, like the two collections at the Världskulturmuseet in Gothenburg, formerly the Ethnographic Museum of the city of Gothenburg.



Fig. 4 An object at the NMNH-Smithsonian ethnographic collection, originally from the "Vega" Expedition, with the preserved hand-written tag from the Swedish National Museum saying 'Pitlekaj, Vega.', Photo: Igor Krupnik, June 2019

One was donated by Oscar Dickson, the other by Hjalmar Wijk, whose mother was born a Dickson. The majority of the almost 70 objects come from Japan while 19 pieces are attributed to Siberia².

In 1900, when the Museum of Ethnography (*Etnografiska museet*) was established in Stockholm, most of the *Vega* ethnographic collections were transferred to the new museum. Based on the Riksmuseet reports, a yet-unknown portion remained in the museum, mostly, objects associated with bird hunting, fishing, and plant collecting. Permanent displays at the new ethnographic museum first

showed parts of the *Vega* material organized thematically by the first museum director, Hjalmar Stolpe. After his death in 1905, Carl Vilhelm Hartman (1862–1941) became the new director in 1908 and changes began. Hartmann, a trained biologist embarked on a journey to the United States in 1913 to acquire new collections for the museum. The change in museum displays and focus combined with the fast-growing collection led to marginalization of many older collections³. By the end of the 1920s all *Vega* objects were taken off display. In 1930 the museum moved to its current location on the eastern fringe of Stockholm city center, to the former military buildings now used to show exhibits and store collections.

Until the 1950s, the Etnografiska Museet still used the old catalog numbers assigned by the Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet. A small sample of *Vega* objects had been exhibited in 1959–1960 at the Etnografiska Museet for the first time since 1892 at the temporary (11-month) display of 'North Asian' collections (Montell 1961). Two full-size kayaks—one with intact skin cover and another just a wooden frame—were the only objects from the *Vega* Chukchi collection that have been researched and published (Luukkanen and Fitzhugh 2020:160; Zimmerly 1986), being the only examples of Chukchi marine kayaks preserved in any museum⁴.

When the museum staff finally assigned its own catalog numbers in the 1950s, many objects were already listed as 'lost' or 'misplaced.' A few were added due to misidentification⁵. The original National Museum ledger listed 804 objects under 'Tschuktscher' (Chukchi), not counting archaeological specimens; whereas the Etnografiska Museet electronic database produced in 1999 and available online since 2001 listed only 660 objects. In addition, some 130 archaeological objects from house and grave excavations at Ryrkaipyi (Jirkajpij) are reported in a separate hand-written catalog produced in 1951 by Ivar Paulson, professor at the University of Stockholm who collaborated with the Etnografiska Museet. They received a separate accession number (1880.07), from the one used for the *Vega* ethnographic collection (1880.04).

Two other types of objects belonged to the original *Vega* holdings: some 25–30 drawings made by Chukchi visitors to the expedition wintering site and later used as illustrations to publications related to the *Vega* journey (e.g. Nordenskiöld 1881; 1936), and over 70 photographs from the voyage, including 34 portrait images of the local Chukchi people and six photos of the Inupiat from Port Clarence, Alaska. All these photographs were reportedly taken by *Vega* captain, Louis Palander (1842–1920). Some of these photos are now displayed in a public exhibit at the Etnografiska Museet and are accessible from the museum online collection database <http://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-em/web>, but the original glass plate negatives are at the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in Stockholm.

Apart from objects and photographs, archival materials related to the *Vega*



expedition can be similarly found in various institutions, such as the Etnografiska Museet, the Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet, and the Sjöhistoriska Museet (Maritime Museum) in Stockholm. The latter holds the archival material and photographs from the private collections of Capt. Palander, besides those kept at the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters (with copies at the Etnografiska Museet).

In the late 1970's the old Etnografiska Museet buildings were demolished and in 1980 the current venue opened. The changing times also led to a shift in exhibit practices, away from material and techniques and more towards social and political issues. Today, the collections are largely used to present the diversity of world cultures, the history of museum collecting, and as illustrations of parti-



Fig. 5a–d
Chukchi objects from the “Vega”
Expedition on today’s display at
the Etnografiska museet –

5a and 5b – the “Vega” Expedition;

5c – Siberian people (“Sibirien”);

5d – Shamanism,
Photos: Martin Schultzholtz, 1880
(Photographer unknown,
Etnografiska museet, Stockholm,
Inv.No. 0006.0006 and 0006.0007



cular themes or topics. Several dozen objects and photographs from the *Vega* expedition are again on public display but in *four* separate arrangements – two on the first floor, “Vega’s Treasures” featuring the Expedition and Nordenskiöld’s legacy, including photographs and objects from Northeast Asia and Alaska (Figs. 5a, b) and “The Storage” featuring single objects amongst all kinds of objects worldwide; and on the second floor in two thematic displays, “The Arctic” featuring Chukchi culture proper (“Sibirien” – Fig. 5c), and “Shamanism” and “Climate Change,” interspersed with the shamanistic paraphernalia from Northern Indigenous peoples, including Sámi, Greenland Inuit, Khanty, and South Siberian groups (Fig. 5d).

Objects kept in storage are scattered across various sections of the museum storage space, often mixed with pieces from other world cultures. There is neither a dedicated 'Arctic' storage space, nor a 'Chukchi' or a *Vega* collection space to easily locate the objects from the expedition. Even in designated storage areas, objects are not kept together by area, collection, or material. Today the objects can be tracked via database catalog numbers and the electronic storage locator. It is a helpful improvement compared to earlier times, like when anthropologist James VanStone worked on the Inupiat portion of the *Vega* collection in the 1980s. Then about 10% of the objects listed in the paper catalog could not be retrieved and were presumed "lost" (VanStone 1990:6). Yet the digitization and electronic coding is unfinished, and numerous objects are still waiting to be processed so they can be tracked in their many storage spaces. Collaborations with the places of origin and the people who created the objects are rare, and none ever taken place with the groups visited by the *Vega* expedition – the Chukchi, Alaskan Inupiat, Nenets, and others.

Dispersal: People

The change that befell the local people is rarely a part of a usual 'collection history'; but it is the part that we cannot ignore. None of the members of the *Vega* crew ever returned to the 1878–79 wintering site on the Chukchi Peninsula or had later contacts with its people. In the following decades, the area was occasionally visited by Russian explorers, passing travelers, census takers, and inspecting officials. The names of small Chukchi camps from the pages of Nordenskiöld's *Vega* report, Jinretlen, Pitlekaj, Rirajtinup, Irgunnuk, Najtskaj, and Tjapka (Fig. 6 – *Vega* map) were cited in many later sources, usually recorded closer to their Chukchi originals (Yinretlin, Pilhin, Velkaltenuup, Irgunnup, Nesqan, Tepqan, etc. – Bogoras 1904/1975:31; Patkanov 1912).

Beginning with Oscar Nordqvist's Russian paper based on his *Vega* surveys of 1878–79 (Nordqvist 1880), we have population or house counts for most of these small settlements, including from Russian censuses of 1897, 1926, and 1939, with numbers of houses and families. Judging from these counts, over the next 60–70 years the area residents continued to be spread across a dozen small coastal settlements, generally of 5–6 houses or 30–40 people and a few larger communities. Overall, the Chukchi population in the area surveyed by the *Vega* crew, from the Kolyuchin Bay to Cape Serzde Kamen remained stable at around 400–450 people. In the 1920s, the Soviet administration organized it into four 'village councils' named Kolyuchin (ca. 150 people), Toygunen (180), Neshkan (250), and Enurmin (300 people), after the respective largest settlements. The area directly adjacent to the *Vega* wintering site was made the Toygunen 'council' and included small

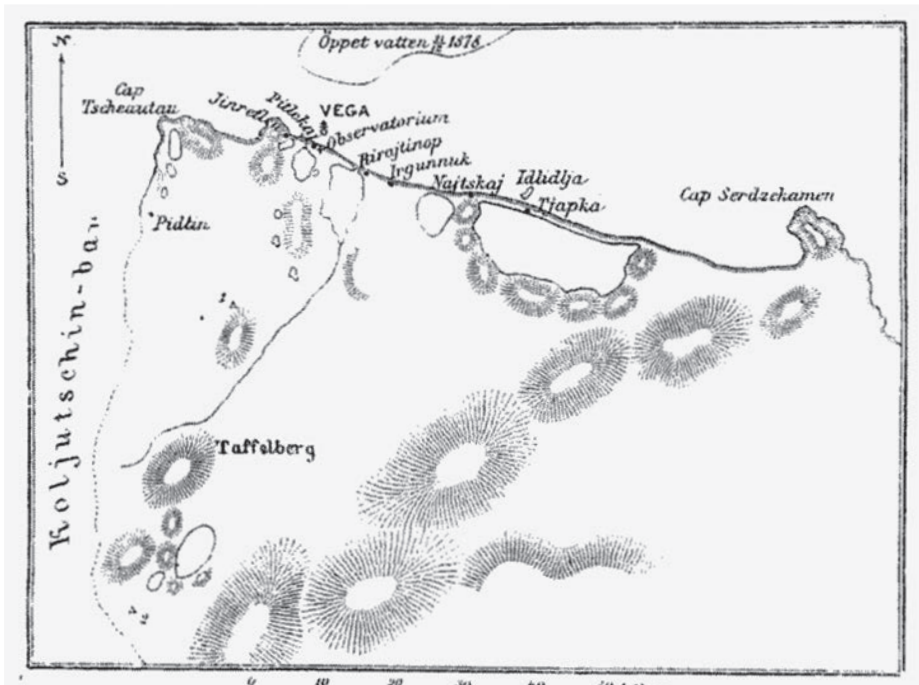


Fig. 6 Fragment of the "Vega" wintering map, with an insert showing its location in the Russian Arctic/Alaska/Bering Sea region

settlements of Pitlekay/Pilkhekai, Yinretlen, Walkaltenup, and Yirgunnuk, each with 2–4 families, almost as they had existed during the *Vega* time.

In the 1930s, under the Soviet policy of collectivization, a network of small production 'partnerships' was established in the area, as was common across the Russian North. The "Toygunen" partnership created in 1938 incorporated small coastal camps around the *Vega* site location; the rest of the population to the east and west belonged to the "Neshkan" (established in 1940), "Nutepelmen" (1933) and "Kolyuchin" (1939) partnerships (Selitrennik 1965).

The era of 'big change' arrived in the 1950s with the launch of the new Soviet policy of 'economic concentration.' It ushered in the disbanding of small village councils and eventual resettlement of residents of coastal and nomadic camps into larger community hubs (Krupnik, Chlenov 2013). For the area explored by the *Vega* crew, only three such hubs were selected – Nutepelmen on the western side of the Kolyuchin Bay, Neshkan (*Najtskaj*, in *Vega* reports), 15 miles east of the *Vega* site, and Enurmino at Cape Serdze Kamen. New housing construction was started at each site to accommodate families relocated from their traditional areas. Eventually, the three communities grew into small towns of 300–500 residents each, with schoolhouses, small grocery and convenience stores, local repair shops, power-plants, and landing strips.

Even if the Soviet-era policy was officially aimed at ‘uniting’ Indigenous people, it was a great act of dispersal. Families were uprooted and forced to move, often dozens of miles away. The descendants of those who once interacted with the *Vega* crew ended up mainly in the town of Neshkan, population 700 (Russian Census of 2010). Most of the area is still used for subsistence hunting, reindeer herding, and winter traveling, but memories of the past life in small camps are maintained only among the dwindling number of the elderly people.

The Beginning of ‘Reunion’: Objects

In 2019, the authors, both Arctic/North American ethnology curators at their respective museums, decided to revisit the *Vega* Chukchi collection and research its history after 1880. We called our project “Dispersal and Reunion” to illustrate a peculiar trajectory of the collection over 140 years. In preparation for this work, we explored a small subset of the *Vega* collection at the NMNH in Washington D.C. and reports on other major Chukchi collections from that era held at different museums (Beffa and Delaby 1999; Bogoras 1901; Gorbacheva 1992; Rousselot 2002; Vukvukai 2011). Originally, we aimed to follow in the footsteps of VanStone’s survey of the smaller Alaskan Inupiat portion of the *Vega* collection (ca. 350 objects) conducted more than 30 years ago (VanStone 1990). However, VanStone was focused exclusively on studying the objects and comparing them with other Inupiat ethnographic collections from the same area (VanStone 1976, 1980). He had little interest in the history of the collection *after* 1879 and did not seek to reconnect it with today’s residents of its home area, something we wanted to achieve.

As we met at the Etnografiska Museet in September 2019 (Krupnik and Schultz 2020), our process began with the mundane re-assembling of the objects in one physical space (Fig. 7), so that we could first cross-check the items kept in museum storage and exhibit displays against collection electronic database. That preliminary examination (continued by MS for a full year) revealed that the museum database is indeed a good starting source for assessing today’s collection. Nonetheless, early ledger records from the 1880s and historical photographs from the *Vega* exhibit at the Royal Palace in 1880 revealed a somewhat larger set of objects was needed to access the rate of *dispersal*. For example, the 1880 photographs featured 14 mattocks and hacks (picks) arranged in two wall displays, whereas the current database lists 10 such objects; one other may now be a part of the Smithsonian NMNH collection.

In addition, many composite items displayed in 1880 in their entirety, such as harpoons, bow drills, fireboards, etc., have been disassembled over the years, and their constituent pieces needed to be reunited (Fig. 8). Some objects that had

lost their catalog numbers can be identified as part of the *Vega* collection; yet their inventory number is uncertain, and they received temporary numbers until their identity could be established. In some cases, as parts of composite objects they never had numbers of their own. In other cases, we found objects that obviously had missing parts, but cannot assess if these parts were collected by the expedition and were lost on its way to Stockholm or later in museum storage. One example is a missing paddle from a kayak model with a hunter (1880.04.471). Wooden pegs clearly indicate he was once holding a paddle.



Fig. 7 The "Vega" Chukchi objects are assembled at the collection space of the Etnografiska museet, Photo: Igor Krupnik, September 2019



Fig. 8 Re-uniting disjoint pieces of the fireboard sets from the Vega collection (from the museum database 1120.0147, Photo: Johan Jeppsson

At the beginning of our survey, about 660 objects were identified as 'Chukchi' and attributed to the *Vega* collection in the museum database. As of this writing, the number is close to 1080, thanks to the addition of several formerly 'unassociated' objects and some 130+ archaeological specimens excavated by the crew at the old site of Ryrkaipyi (Jirkajpij)⁶. More items from the original *Vega* stock of 1878–79, including pencil drawings, photographs, archival documents, and other cultural resources will be added to the database from both the Etnografiska Museet and other Swedish and foreign institutions that received portions of the collection, like the NMNH in Washington DC. Also, in late 2019 a full list of Capt. Palander's photographs taken during the expedition became available, featuring 9 dry plate and 76 wet plate photographs, often with short descriptions of the image subject, names of the individuals, and place names where photos were taken. This list is currently in the archives of the Sjöhistoriska museet (Maritime Museum) in Stockholm (Inv. No. 1968:715).

Reunion: People

During our work in Stockholm in September 2019, we contacted Eduard Zdor, Chukchi environmental activist from Chukotka, Russia, now a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Zdor grew up in the community of Neshkan, barely 30 km (18 mi) east of the *Vega* wintering site. His and his wife's, Lilia Tlecheivyn'e, relatives still live there. According to Zdor, the town of Neshkan (population 700, in Nordenskiöld Swedish transliteration, Najtskaj) is home to most of the descendants from small camps that once existed in the area. These people constitute a direct 'descendant community' for the objects, historical photographs, and ethnographic descriptions generated by the *Vega* expedition.

Local people never had access to any of these records originated from their home area. Though the name "*Vega*" is familiar in Chukotka and recent reprints of the Russian translation of Nordenskiöld's account of the *Vega* voyage are available, few people could relate to the 140-year old description of their ancestors' life. Modern Russian reprints of the original *Vega* account (Nordenskiöld 1936, 2014) are also hard to use, due to the lack of contemporary explanatory notes and old transliteration of local Chukchi place names that makes many of them almost unrecognizable⁷. Several photographs of the Chukchi people taken by Palander have been posted online with Russian captions (<https://humus.livejournal.com/3279964.html>), although their availability, and even knowledge about their existence, is hard to assess.

In spring 2020, scores of images from the museum online database, <http://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-em/web> were shared with Eduard and Lilya Zdor, and through them, with several local Chukchi experts residing in Neshkan (see



Fig. 9 Fireboard (*milghyn*), 1880.04.0332, Photo: Johan Jeppsson

Acknowledgements). As comments from people started to flow back, Lilya Zdor organized them, with the Chukchi terms added for constituent elements, as follows (translated from Russian notes by IK):

1880.04.0332 – Fireboard – *milghyn* (Fig. 9).

This object was used for lighting the fire or family heath. Based on its condition, it was barely used [because of its light color – IK]. Often the family has several fireboards in its daily use. Unlike the family sacred [ritual] fireboards called *gyrgyr* (Bogoras 1904, 232,350–351), this object does not have a roughly carved human head at its end. The ritual fireboards are always of dark-brown color covered in soot and grease from multiple ‘feeding’ ceremonies. During such feeding ceremony the board is rubbed with a combination of bone marrow and blubber [fat], usually at the place where the mouth would be on a human head. According to Nina Kyttagin, not all sacred fireboards have carved mouth, eyes or nose.

Each family commonly had its own fireboard and only members of that family could use it. It is forbidden to share fire from the family heath with other dwellings in the camp.

The fireboard set usually includes several objects, besides the fireboard (*milghyn*):

- 1) *Ngileq* – a round wooden drill;
- 2) *Tinguchgyn* – a small bow made of reindeer antler (other name *gyrilgyn*) with a bowstring of bearded seal hide that is threaded through the holes at its ends and fixed with two knots;
- 3) Drill socket piece (‘arm protector’ – *gyrgychychochyn*) made of reindeer antler, kneecap, or any piece of large animal bone or walrus ivory.

[These elements are shown as a single set in the 1880 exhibit photos, though today they are disassembled and listed under separate numbers – IK, MS]

Making a fire with the fireboard requires skill and patience. The bowstring is wound once around the wooden drill (*ngyleq*) and then is placed in an indentation on the fireboard (*milghyn*). The upper end of the drill is

inserted into the socket piece (*gyrgychychochyn*). Then one presses hard with one arm on the socket piece while using another arm moves the bow (*tinguchgyn*) back and forth. Friction from the rotating drill causes the wood dust to start smoldering. Often people add pieces of charcoal from an old fire into the hole to speed up the ignition process.

Certain family fireboards eventually become sacred objects and are kept in special secluded places. During family ceremonies the boards are 'fed' together with other family sacred objects. For ritual feeding of family objects, people use a mixture of bone marrow from reindeer front legs (*qymlat*) and marrow from crushed reindeer bones with added seal blubber (*ypalgyn* or *palgyn*).

This description is based on phone interviews with the Neshkan residents Irina Nutetgivev (46), Nina Kyttagin (68), and Nikolai Etytne (56), in April 2020.

Of the five fireboards listed in the *Vega* Chukchi collection (nos. 04.0331–04.0335), only one (no. 04.0334) has a carved human head, but it is a newly made model of a family ritual fireboard, with no traces of prior use and no signs of a carved mouth for feeding. The rest are common household fireboards, also with minimal use or produced specially for collectors.

These and similar comments illustrate the continuous intimate knowledge of certain objects that has been retained in the home community for over 140 years. Such information can add to enriching the museum collection records with specific information on object use, making, symbolism, etc., information not gathered by either the *Vega* crew in 1878–1880 or later generations of registrars and curators. Expanding knowledge about ethnographic collections by inviting Indigenous elders and experts to museums, engaging them in joint documentation projects and shared stewardship is an increasingly popular practice in today's museum work (e.g. Appelt et al. 2018; Chan 2013; Clifford 2004; Crowell 2020; Crowell et al. 2010; Fienup-Riordan 1998; 2005; Jørgensen et al. 2020; Lincoln et al. 2010; Loring et al. 2010; Margaris and Ahtuanguaruak 2020). Yet each example of such 'newly added knowledge', thanks to Native experts' insight is something short of a miracle. Even if it takes place many decades later, it increases our understanding of the objects and reverses generations of knowledge loss. Such virtual *reunion* may be slow and painful, as details of former cultural expertise have been lost and not every object can be recognized by today's experts 140 years after the initial collecting.

The Vega Collection within the Chukchi Museum ‘Universe’

We estimate the total number of Chukchi ethnographic objects held in various museum collections worldwide to be at least 7,000–8,000, not counting archaeological specimens, photographs, and Indigenous drawings. This is a rough preliminary figure to assess the size of the ‘Chukchi museum universe.’ Of this number, almost 50% belong to the *three* largest collections: the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York (about 1,300 objects, Waldemar Bogoras, 1900–1901), the Russian Ethnographic Museum (REM) in St. Petersburg, Russia (at least 1,300 objects, Nikolai Sokolnikov, 1901–1909), and Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) in St. Petersburg (over 1,000 objects, Nikolai L. Gondatti, 1894–1897). This makes the present *Vega* Chukchi collection of about 1,000 pieces strong and counting the world’s fourth largest.

Smaller, but also significant collections are held by the Arseniev Museum in Vladivostok (ca. 250, Chukchi and Yupik combined), the “Chukotka Heritage” Museum Center in Anadyr (about 500, plus a similar number of pieces of Native souvenir art and carved ivories), the Magadan Regional Museum (ca. 160), and in certain museums in Western Europe, like Museum Fünf Kontinente in Munich (330 – Roussellot 2002), Musée du Quai Branly in Paris (over 300 – Beffa and Delaby 1999; Delaby and Beffa, s.a.) and Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna (ca. 250). On top, there is a 1,500 piece collection at the Sergiev-Posad Museum near Moscow, Russia, made exclusively of Chukchi and Yupik carved and ornamented ivories from the 20th century. These numbers illustrate the significance of the *Vega* Chukchi collection, Europe’s largest.

It is also the *earliest* major holding of its size and kind. Even though individual Chukchi objects and small sets of cultural specimens entered European, Russian, and later U.S. museums since at least Capt. Cook’s voyage of 1778 (Hand 2011; Kaepler 2011), none was a result of systematic collecting covering major elements of Indigenous culture. Though Nordenskiöld’s team was only partly successful in its pursuit (see below), the *Vega* objects generally preceded similar items in other major collections by 16–30 years, a full generation, even more.

Although we lack the documentation on when and where individual objects were obtained, as well as from whom (likewise we do not know who produced them), all were procured at the *Vega* wintering site between October 1878 and July 1879 from people visiting the ship and also on the crew’s visits to nearby Chukchi camps. Some notes in the ledger book and on old museum tags preserve the place names of such camps, all within 50–60 km from the wintering site. We assume that Nordenskiöld, a geologist with a prior experience in ethnographic collecting from his earlier voyages to Greenland and Arctic Russia (Nordenskiöld 1881:438) was the prime collector, although we cannot exclude other crew members.





Fig. 10a–e Small ivory carvings from the Vega collection: 10a – female figurine, 1880.04.0563-3; 10b – two-headed torso, 1880.040578; 10c – seal, 1880.04.0640-3; 10d – bird, 1880.04.0855-7; 10e – polar bear, 1880.0407007-3, Photos: Rose-Marie Westling

According to Nordenskiöld's own writing (1881: 438–441), his main collecting strategy was bartering with his Chukchi visitors, primarily for small objects, in exchange for European goods. Money was of no value and Nordenskiöld was short of many of the usual trade objects (knives, needles, tools, firearms, metal buttons, etc.), and even tobacco, except for two boxes of Dutch clay pipes that he used as gifts or 'souvenirs,' in addition to his stock of Swedish silver coins. This explains why the *Vega* collection contains so many small ivory carvings (Figs. 10a–e) but does not account for the presence of truly large objects – from the full-size Chukchi kayaks to fur clothing, hunting tools, and house utensils. The collection also includes several models of objects that were clearly ordered and made by the local people for the expedition (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11 Kayak model (wood), 1880.04.0471, Photo: Martin Schultz



*Fig. 12a, b "Spin" (Swedish, snurra), most probably used as sinew twisting stand, though its little worn and elaborately decorated base may indicate an object made for collectors 1880.04.0959.
Photo: Johan Jeppsson*

The composition of Nordenskiöld's Chukchi collection when organized by major object groups (categories – see Table 1) reveals its substantial focus on 'equipment' (17.3%), particularly maritime hunting and fishing tools (10%), clothing and clothing tools (11.7%), 'weapons and ammunition' (18.4%), including

Table 1: STRUCTURE OF THE VEGA CHUKCHI COLLECTION

Culture categories*	Nos. (/%%)	Sub-categories	Major object types
EQUIPMENT	152 (17.3)	Hunting – 59 Fishing – 29 Reindeer herding – 3 Transportation – 18 Tools and instruments – 43	harpoon and elements – 25, sling -10, snare -9, ice scraper – 4, hooks – 11, sinkers -5, rods -7, net – 5, floater -1 lasso – 3 dog sled – 2, show shoes, skis – 4, boats hammer – 7, hack – 6, snow beater – 7,
FURNISHING, HOUSE LIFE	72 (8.2)	Food preparation – 18 House objects – 38 Tobacco use – 8 Other – 18	
COSTUME	117 (13.3)	Men – 15; Women – 1 Footwear – 9; Headgear – 9 Gutskin – 5 Sewing tools – 12 Ornamentation, jewelry – 22 Other – 44	parka – 4, upper parka -7, pants – 4 Belts, buckles – 21, pouch – 10, skin - 10
RECREATIONAL ARTIFACTS	9 (1.0)	Toys and games – 5 Musical instruments – 4**	
WEAPONS & AMMUNITION	162 (18.4)		armor – 2 arrows, arrow points, shafts - 106 bow -15 lance – 3 quiver – 10 other – 26
SPIRITUAL OBJECTS	19 (2.2)		fireboard – 5 drum – 3 drill stem, bow – 11 amulet – (?)***
ARTS & CRAFTS***	349 (39.6)		carvings, figurines – 340 raw pieces (ivory, etc. - 9

* Names of ‘categories’ are taken mainly from the Anthropology collection database of the American Museum of Natural History <https://anthro.amnh.org/collections>

** Instruments other than drums

*** All small ivory carvings are listed in the museum database as ‘amulets’ (amulet) or ‘sculpture’ (skulptur) with no proper way to distinguish between the two. We tentatively include them into the ‘Arts & crafts’ category, though some obviously could serve as protective amulets (belt or clothing pendants). Numerous small bird figures probably belong to the ‘toys and games’ category.

over 100 arrows, arrow points and shafts, several bows and quivers; but first and foremost, the huge number of small ivory figurines often listed as ‘amulets’ (over 340 pieces, 38%). There are remarkably few objects related to children and child life and smaller number of objects related to women’s life (clothing, sewing, housekeeping) than to men’s domain (hunting, toolmaking, war). Such gender skewing is generally typical for early collecting, primarily by male researchers and travelers. An additional factor could have been the Chukchi strategy to protect (prevent?) women and children from interaction with the *Vega* crew.

Table 2: VEGA COLLECTION STRUCTURE IN COMPARISON WITH OTHER MAJOR HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS*

Object category**	Object type	<i>Vega/Nordenskiöld, 1878–79 N=880</i>	<i>Bogoras, 1900–1901 AMNH, N= 1322</i>	<i>Sokolnikov 1901–1907 REM, N=794</i>
EQUIPMENT	TOTAL	152 (17.3%)	336 (28.5%)	179 (22.5%)
	Hunting and Fishing	88	73	70
	Reindeer herding	3	26	16
	Transportation	18		63
	Tools, instruments	43		30
HOUSE LIFE	TOTAL Containers	72 (8.2%) (...)	135	95 (11.9%)
COSTUME	TOTAL	103 (11.7%)	219 (18.3%)	114 (14.4%)
	Men, clothing	15	41	25
	Women, clothing	1	12	9
	Children, clothing	-	9	1
CONTAINERS	TOTAL	(-)	150 (12.6%)	22 (2.8%)
RECREATION	TOTAL	9 (1.0%)	64 (5.4%)	22 (2.8%)
	Toys	5	56	22
WAR	TOTAL	162 (18.4%)	62 (5.2%)	178 (22.4%)
	Bows, quivers	25	20	23
	Arrows (incl. a-heads, shafts)	106	63	127
SPIRITUAL OBJECTS	TOTAL	19 (2.2%)	64 (5.4%)	49 (6.2%)
	Fireboard	5	12	6
	Amulet**	-	44	31
	Drum	3	7	2
ARTS & CRAFTS***	TOTAL	349 (39.6)		135 (17.0%)
	Carvings, figurines	340	269	125
	Models	10	85	7

* *Vega* collection – see Table 1; Bogoras collection – from AMNH online database; Sokolnikov collection – numbers provided by N. Kosyak

** General categories modified from the AMNH Anthropology collections online database <https://anthro.amnh.org/collections>

*** In the *Vega* collection all small ivory carvings are listed in the museum database as ‘amulets’ (amulet) or ‘sculpture’ (skulptur) with no proper way to distinguish between the two.

The specific cultural ‘profile’ of the *Vega* collection may be properly understood only in comparison with other major early Chukchi collections, even if from slightly later time. Table 2 presents major object groups from *Vega* compared with the Waldemar Bogoras collection at AMNH in New York and the main portion of the Nikolai Sokolnikov collection at the Russian Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg⁸. The comparison supported our preliminary findings that: 1) Nordenskiöld had indeed secured a remarkably strong collection of Chukchi ivory carvings, though carved and decorated ivory pieces were very popular with other collectors; 2) Nordenskiöld’s share of women’s and particularly children’s objects



Fig. 13 Wassili Menka, head of the reindeer Chukchi, on board the Vega. "He was a little dark man, with a pretty worn appearance, clad in a white variegated 'pesk' of reindeer skin, under which a blue flannel shirt was visible." Photo Adolf A. L. Palander, probably October 1878. Etnografiska museet, Inv.No. 0005.0024

is clearly smaller than in other major collections; 3) 'Weapons and ammunition' category was popular among all early collectors, which accounts for large number of arrows, bows, and quivers that were then going out of use due to the introduction of firearms; 4) Nordenskiöld obviously tried to collect objects that reflected *all* sides of Chukchi daily life; but he was less successful in that compared to other collectors, such as Bogoras, Sokolnikov, and Nikolai Gondatti, perhaps due to the latter's lengthy interactions with the Chukchi, fluency in their language, and less formalized interaction while traveling through Chukchi camps.

Nordenskiöld's collecting shortcomings are particularly visible in the low share (2.2%) of *spiritual* and symbolic objects. Certain types of objects of this kind are quite common in many museum collections, like ritual fireboards (Chukchi *gyrgyrti*, see above), family wooden guardians (*tain'ykvyt*), commonly made as strings of small objects; shaman drums (*yarar*) and amulets; carved wooden figurines and dishes (*enanentytko'olgyt*) for family ceremonies; hereditary family lances (*poigyn*); and others (Bogoras 1901; Kolomiets et al. 2020; Kuznetsova 1957; Rousselot 2002; Vdovin 1977). Such objects are rare or absent in the *Vega* collection, like family guardians, *tain'ykvyt* and ritual dishes; when present, they are mainly new objects produced for sale. As mentioned above, of the five fireboards in the *Vega* collection (nos. 1880.04.0331–1880.04.0335), four are common household items, with little or no traces of prior use, and only one is of the ritual kind, although with no trace of use and no carved mouth for feeding; evidently it was a model

made for collectors. To the contrary, Waldemar Bogoras' much larger collection at AMNH contains 11 fireboards, of which only two were for regular daily use (with no heads); two were newly made models of sacred boards with no prior use, whereas three have clear traces of grease over their mouth area, thus having been used as sacred objects⁹.

Nevertheless, the *Vega* Chukchi collection revealed that the practice of making object models for sale (or barter), such as those of boats, fireboards, hunting tools, sleds, even skin tents (*yanan'y*), was well established among the Chukchi by 1878. Nordenskiöld, the first reported collector in the area, skillfully relied on this practice to expand the coverage of indigenous culture (Figs. 12a, b), particularly when people were reluctant to part with their family objects.

Potentials

At the time of this writing, our *Vega* work is still in its initial stage. The Etnografiska museet continues to populate the collection site at <http://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-em/web> and more objects are being recovered in storage and 'reunited' with the core collection. We secured detailed input on about a half dozen objects from the Chukchi experts in Neshkan, thanks to our partnership with Eduard and Lilia Zdor. Ethnographic objects in the *Vega* collection have been organized in major categories (see Tables 1 and 2) to assess the structure of Nordenskiöld's assemblage and his collecting strategy. We were able to compare it with those of Waldemar Bogoras in 1900–1901 and Nikolai Sokolnikov in 1901–1907, based on similar assessment of their respective Chukchi collections at AMNH and REM. This work is certain to continue.

Nevertheless, as our project unfolded, we realized that more effort is needed to reunite the elements of the *Vega* collection—objects, photographs, drawings, written and published records—with its diverse prospective audiences and, necessarily, in several languages. The sheer size of the collection, its level of documentation (still to be fully processed), and its respectable age of over 140 years makes it a true 'heritage treasure' to its host institution (the museum), to the Native people in the collection's home area, and to museum specialists worldwide.

We see four major *potentials* to expand the impact of the collection to each of these audiences as well as to the general public interested in Indigenous cultures and peoples of the Arctic. First, the collection has to be fully reassembled, even if virtually (electronically), so that we may assess the scope of Nordenskiöld's collecting effort. This requires completion of the electronic database at the Etnografiska museet and adding other types of resources such as photographs and glass plates, pencil drawings, archival documents, etc., from other Swedish institutions. It is still unknown what portion of the original *Vega* collection was left



Fig. 14 The „Vega“ in winter quarters off the coast of the Chukchi Peninsula. Photo Adolf A. L. Palander, spring 1879. Etnografiska museet, Inv.No. 0005.0005

at the Riksmuseet after 1900 and whether other foreign museums have objects from the *Vega* expedition via early exchange (like the U.S. National Museum, now the Smithsonian NMNH).

A separate task will be to check the objects on the photographs from the 1880 exhibit at the Royal Library against today's museum collection database. If our prediction is correct, the 1880 photographs may reveal *more* objects yet to be counted and would illustrate the rate of dispersal of the original collection since its arrival to Stockholm in 1880.

Second, no effort should be spared to help 'reunite' the objects in Stockholm with the descendants of people who interacted with the *Vega* crew in 1878–1879. Even if no memories of these interactions are preserved today, after 140+ years, the objects carry enormous cultural and heritage value to local people. Chukchi names for objects and cultural explanations may be secured; in return, the objects would revive people's interest in their heritage, strengthen cultural pride, and inspire restoration of certain practices based on preserved museum specimens from 140 years. It is now an established practice to open museum collections to Indigenous people and to partner with home communities anxious to connect to cultural treasures of their ancestors (Bell et al. 2013; Crowell et al. 2010; McChesney and Isaac 2018; Swan and Jordan 2015).

Third, as the *Vega* online collection database is filled with data and images from museum records *and* the added information from Chukchi knowledge experts, it has a great potential to become an international heritage treasure. Today, it functions with the Swedish-language interface only, whereas its main audience in the home area in Northeast Russia needs search and reading options in Russian

and Chukchi, plus an English interface for international users. As the database becomes multi-lingual and more user-oriented, it will open the path to specialized bi/multilingual websites, a collection-driven portal, and an online display (exhibit) featuring the *Vega* objects. Again, moving into a fully digital domain to reach out to diverse multilingual audiences is an increasingly popular practice to advance cultural education, 'digital return,' and respect for Indigenous and minority cultures (Crowell 2020; Gowlland and Ween 2018; Hennessy et al. 2013; Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait, s.a; Wold and Ween 2018). We believe that the *Vega* collection has a great potential to serve as a model in 'digital reunification,' akin to efforts undertaken by other large museums in Oslo, Copenhagen, and Helsinki using their objects from the Arctic areas (Appelt et al. 2018; Jorgensen et al. 2020; Keith et al. 2019; Wang 2018)

Fourth, the *Vega* collection—thanks to its size and early age—could serve as a starting point and a driver to reunite the Chukchi collection 'universe' of some 7,000+ ethnographic objects dispersed across many museums in Russia, Western Europe, and North America. Our pilot study inspired some initial steps to compare, if not to align, three major holdings of Chukchi heritage objects in Stockholm, at AMNH in New York, and at REM in St. Petersburg. More could be achieved when other museums open their Chukchi collections for a common online access, perhaps in the footsteps of the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN), an online museum alliance built around the First Nations Northwest Coast ethnographic collections (Rowley 2013; <https://www.rrncommunity.org/>) or an earlier venture by the Japanese Ainu specialists, "The Overseas Ainu Collections," who painstakingly surveyed and inventoried the Ainu collections in North America, Europe, and Russian, creating a 'world catalog of Ainu collections' (Kotani 1999). It may create an online platform and a meeting place for Chukchi heritage experts and museum professionals with knowledge of Chukchi culture. Their insight would be crucial to our understanding of objects collected by the *Vega* crew some 140 years ago, but even more so to the preservation and strengthening of today's cultural resources on Arctic Indigenous people and for Indigenous users, themselves.

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Endnotes

- 1 Sweden sent portions of the *Vega* material from the Bovallius Collection from Central America and objects from Gustaf Nordenskiöld's (Adolf Erik's son) excavations at Mesa Verde in Colorado to Madrid. The Swedish display won a gold medal during the "Historical American Exposition", the document now being part of the archives at Etnografiska, the medal probably remains at Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet.
- 2 With the merger of Världskulturmuseet in Gothenburg with the Stockholm based Etnografiska museet, and two other museums in 1999 under the Statens museum för världskultur (National Museums of World Culture), they were reunited in one organization.
- 3 Hartman had an active exchange with Russian anthropologist Lev Sternberg (1861–1927) from the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (MAE-Kunstammer) in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, Russia, leading to the acquisition of large collections from the Nanai and other Siberian Indigenous people.
- 4 The smaller Alaskan Inupiat portion of the *Vega* collection of 350+ objects was researched in the late 1980s by anthropologist James VanStone (VanStone 1990).
- 5 Often, all it took was to have an old collection tag fall off to make the identity of the object unrecognizable. The small ivory carving of an Aleut hunter that was separated from his ivory kayak (Inv. No. 1906.21.0023, Otto Reinhold Nordenskiöld Collection) was identified as being a part of a harpoon collected during the *Vega* Expedition.
- 6 A few Chukchi objects entered the museum collection from other sources. In 1900, two quivers were transferred to the museum by the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography. In course of later cataloging, at least one of these quivers got mixed with the *Vega* objects and has recently been reunited with its original source group. They were collected by Swedish painter Carl Peter Lehmann (1794–1876), who travelled to Russia during the first half of the 19th century and might have acquired the quivers in St. Petersburg.
- 7 The name of today's town of Neshkan is spelled as 'Naitskai' (Найцкай), from its 1878 Swedish original, *Najtskaj*.
- 8 For the former, all numbers were taken and calculated from the AMNH Anthropology collections website – <https://anthro.amnh.org/collections>. For the latter, we are grateful to REM Siberian collection manager, Natalya Kosyak for providing the data on individual and object category numbers in the Nikolai Sokolnikov Chukchi collection (*see Acknowledgement*). The REM Siberian/Arctic collections are not accessible online.
- 9 The remaining four items might have been also sacred boards with limited or no prior use, as judged from the object photographs.

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