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Projekt

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## Summary

A major collection of human remains from large parts of the world was discovered in 1996 in the stores of Uppsala university in Sweden where they seem to have been hidden since the 1950s. The collection consists of craniums, other bones, plaster casts of human heads and also death-masques of plaster. A major part of the collection has been deposited (is now owned by) the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm.

A catalogue relating to the collection, somewhat difficult to read and partly fragmentary, "Museum Anatomicum", demonstrates that the collection was created from about 1850 and up to the Second world war and intended to form a museum. The collection activities relates to a scientific headhunt motivated by the need for source material for race research. Such research in Uppsala was first conducted at the Anatomical institute and later on at the infamous Institute of Race Biology of the Swedish State.

The collection is interesting since it represents an untouched example of the research collections for early 20<sup>th</sup> century race scientists, having been hidden and untouched since about 1950 rather than dispersed or incorporated into other collections.

Research in this project will first build a background of facts about the collection, its origins and use over time. It will then use this information in order to further the understanding of race research c. 1850-1950. Furthermore it will address a set of wider museological questions on the nature and dynamics of collecting. The project has three main purposes:

1. To map the basic facts about this collection as well as the nature, motives and contexts of the collection activities (the headhunt) and how this collection was used over time (what displays, what research).

2. To investigate how knowledge of these circumstances may complement the knowledge of race research c. 1850-1950 in Sweden and possibly northern Europe.

3. To analyze the collection in a museological perspective focusing what it represents and how it, in an Actor-Network perspective, may be seen and studied as a network of relations between a museum and a range of source communities in other parts of the world. What kind of relations? What embedded social dynamics? What future?

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Fredrik Svanberg

Huvudjägarna, Museum Anatomicum och samlandets sociala dynamik

## **The Headhunters, Museum Anatomicum and the Social Dynamics of Collecting**

### Problems and purposes

A major collection of several thousand human remains from large parts of the world was discovered in 1996 in the stores of Uppsala university in Sweden. The collection consists of a large number of human craniums, some other human bones, many plaster casts of human heads (mostly “race types”) and a number of human death masques, also in plaster. Information about the collection gathered so far indicates that it has belonged to the Anatomical institute in Uppsala and that it was collected in the late 19th – early 20th century. It seems to have been stored in about 1950. About 1 000 craniums as well as some plaster heads and death masques was deposited in the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm in 1997, while some 2 000 craniums and other objects remain in Uppsala (available for study).

Incomplete information about the collection has been possible to gain from preliminary studies of a catalogue, somewhat hard to read and currently held in the Institute of Molecular Cell Biology in Uppsala. Its title is ”Museum Anatomicum Upsaliense”. Information from this catalogue demonstrates that the craniums of the collection come from Lapponia (Sami), Egypt, Greece, Greenland, Indonesia, Italy, Micronesia, Hawaii, Norway, Peru, Poland, the Kola peninsula in Russia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan and probably several more countries. Of special interest are a number of craniums marked “the battle of Omdurman”, relating to one of the most infamous events in colonial history. Most of the collection, however, comes from Christian cemeteries in Uppsala itself and the Baltic island of Gotland.

The collection is especially interesting being an unaltered example of the research collections of early 20<sup>th</sup> century race scientists, having been hidden and untouched since about 1950 rather than dispersed or incorporated into other collections.

Information about collection circumstances in the catalogue studied so far indicate that the gathering of the collection was actually driven by a range of

motives, though the most important one seems to have been a goal-oriented scientific headhunt to get source material for the research on human biology in the racist variety. Such research was in Uppsala first conducted at the Anatomical institute by, among others, Gaston Backman and later on in the infamous Institute of Race Biology of the Swedish State in the same city. This line of research, its main actors and outcomes as well as its general history is well known through the works of Gunnar Broberg in which the written sources have been studied and analyzed (Broberg 1995, Broberg & Tydén 2005).

The surveying, general works of Broberg, however, leaves much room for further details and dimensions. The more specific contexts and certainly the relations with other institutes and researchers of pre World War II race research remains to be explored (cf. Ljungström 2004). And what may be revealed from the analysis of complementary sources such as the present collection and the information surrounding it? Already a preliminary reading of the catalogue certainly indicates the presence of a wider range of actors and practices, a more complex set of motives than straight-forward racism and also interesting developments over time that taken together may differ from and complement the image gained from the documentary sources. And what can the building, management and use of this collection as such say about race research?

Apart from research, the collection has also been used in teaching and for the public display of the findings of early 20<sup>th</sup> century race (and general anatomical) research. As stated in the catalogue, it was intended to form the basis for an “anatomical” museum. Such an intended museum is mentioned in the written sources regarding the Race Biological Institute (Broberg 1995, s. 64). The race biologist Hans Günther, well known as THE central figure in the developments of nazi race biology in Germany (widely known as “rassen-Günther”), taught race biology in an anatomical collection in Uppsala in 1924 (ibid, s. 15), probably this one. The plaster heads of the collection probably includes those that were lended by Gaston Backman to the nestor of Swedish race research, Herman Lundborg, for his racist “People Types Exhibition” that toured Sweden in 1919, was seen by hundreds of thousands of people and paved the way for the founding of the Institute of Race Biology a few years later (cf Broberg 1988, p. 219, note 24).

The human remains of the collection, consisting of some 3 000 craniums and also other parts of skeletons, will be the most important material in this suggested project, while the analysis of the use of the plaster heads (less than 100) is also interesting, as indicated above. The death masques may prove to be of complimentary value. What selection of people were casted, why were they collected and how were these collected objects used? Was it famous Uppsala academics or famous contemporary Swedes in general? Or maybe the succession of race specialists in Uppsala or some variety of imagined human types?

The research of the project will do three things. First of all it will find out and register a basis of facts concerning the collection in question, thus establishing a background and foundation for further research. The project will then, secondly, use this basis of facts in order to complement and further the understanding of race research c. 1850-1950 through an analysis of the material based on certain

questions. Thirdly, the project will address wider museological questions on the nature and social dynamics of collecting. These questions focus a variety of Actor-Network analysis. This threefold working structure of the project corresponds with three main purposes:

1. To map the basic facts about the collection and its contexts. This includes the building of a database of its c. 3 500 objects starting with the information possible to extract from the catalogue. It also includes research into (a) the collection circumstances (who, when, what motives, what source communities), in which complementary sources such as expedition journals must be used, and (b) how this collection was used over time (what displays, what research and what relations, if any, to the source communities) up until its hiding away in forgotten university store rooms in the 1950s.
2. To investigate how knowledge of the collection and its contexts may complement the knowledge of race research c. 1850-1950. This investigation will focus on the practices, contexts and relations of race research that may be deduced from the study of the collection. The investigation will centre on questions regarding (a) the range of actors relating to the collection, and (b) their motives and practices as well as change over time. The general nature, significance and consequences of what they did may also be discussed. Though Swedish actors will be focused, this investigation will have a bearing on north European scientific practices in a more general sense (the context of research of the Swedes) as well as on the understanding of (colonial) relations between Europe and other parts of the world during the studied period.
3. To analyze the collection in a museological perspective which focuses the social dynamics of collecting studying (a) how it, in an Actor-Network perspective, may be seen and studied as a network of socio-material relations between a museum and a range of source communities in other parts of the world. What kind of relations and what kind of over time changing social dynamics are embedded in the creation and administration of this collection (and such collections in general)? Further questions that may be discussed on the basis of this analysis are: What (b) does the making and administration of such a collection represent? What does it DO in society? How (c) should such collections be seen and handled in the future? Are they crucial sources for the understanding of a dark part of 20<sup>th</sup> century history or should they be “returned” to source communities claiming them, or what?

## Theory and methods

The theoretical foundation of the project lies within the so called new museology, a line of museological study that approaches museum collection with perspectives concerning the social contexts and consequences of collecting and collections management (Pearce 1995; Knell 2004; 2008; Svanberg 2009). It tends to focus collecting and collectors rather than collections as such, process rather than product and meaning rather than knowledge (Pearce 2004). Further examples are given below.

The examination of the collection studied here as a network of relations (purpose 3) will build upon Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as developed by Bruno Latour and others (Law & Hassard 1999; Law & Mol 2002; Latour 2005). Latour's ideas and methodological suggestions concerning the agency of objects, the nature of networks and concerning the so-called "third move" (how sites may be analytically connected), will be used (Latour 2005).

The discussion of the future of collections of this kind (one of the further questions of purpose 3) takes its starting point in the most recent theoretical and practical developments concerning the repatriation question. Recent perspectives have stressed more complex and for all parts profitable alternatives to simply "keeping it all" or "giving it all back" (papers in Gabriel & Dahl 2008 being good examples).

The methods of the project, as outlined in the previous section, consist of a threefold working structure in which an empirical foundation will first be established in order to enable further studies of how knowledge of the contexts of the collection may further knowledge of race research 1850–1950 as well as the museological understanding of a collection of this kind and of collection practices in a more general sense.

Purposes nr 1 (empirical foundation) and 2 (study to compliment knowledge of race research) will build upon a rather traditional and straight forward "historical" methodology in which a study material is constructed and analyzed using a range of questions, the result of which will be set in relation to earlier research and standpoints. The methodology of purpose nr 3 will be slightly more complicated. The locations from which the objects (skulls mainly) were collected, and the source communities there (Peers & Brown 2003), will be seen as nodes in a network, linked to the museum administrating the collection and the group of people (Swedes) administrating the museum. The links consist of the collected objects, thus acting as social mediators. The relations between the nodes, then, would first have been determined by the nature of the expeditions or other contexts in which the objects were acquired. These relations were maintained and mediated by the collected objects (thus having agency) and possibly effected by the ways in which the objects were used in different ways up until now. These relations of a social nature, as mediated by the collected objects, has always had a potential for being more manifestly activated as social exchanges between groups of people. The images of "others" constructed by using the collected objects (in exhibitions and books for example) may be seen as part of the making of relations. In some instances the social potential of the collected objects have recently been fully activated as some source communities are now claiming parts of the collection (the Sami and a first people of Hawaii), others predictably to follow.

The threefold working structure in studying and analysing the collection will include the building of text in the form of an scientific article to be published in an highly ranked international scientific journal as well as a monograph in English on the collection and the results of the project.

## Working plan

The project is planned as a three-year study for one senior researcher (Svanberg), working 40% during two years when the empirical foundation (purpose 1) will be accomplished and questions concerning race biology (purpose 2) studied. The museological analysis (purpose 3) will be started in year two and continued in year three, in which Svanberg will work 70%, also completing the article and the monograph which should be finished in manuscript by the end of the third year.

The senior curator and osteologist Leena Drenzel (bachelor of arts) at the Museum of National Antiquities, will function as a support during all three years. She will be able to work at least 10% with the project during this period (possibly more in the third year), which will be made possible through co-finance from the museum. The professor of the history of ideas Gunnar Broberg (Lund university), an accomplished scholar in the field of historiography of race research c. 1850–1950, has helped building this research program and will function as a reference person during its three years of study.

## Relation to the international front of research and the most important previous works in the area of research

I claim there are two things that make the present project especially interesting. First, it will study a newly discovered, “untouched” race research collection of the period 1850–1950 (while most such collections are now altered and dispersed) and, in this, the grip to investigate early 20<sup>th</sup> century race research based on its collections, collecting activities and collections management and use (rather than written sources) is rather innovative in the field of knowledge of race research (cf. Simon Knells study of British geology as revealed through its collecting, Knell 2000). Secondly, the character of the collection, being composed of a substantial (but not too numerous) number of objects gathered for a specific purpose (race research) at a certain location, and having been formed through collecting in many parts of the world, makes it particularly suited for a museological Actor-Network analysis as proposed by Latour (see above), but to my knowledge never applied to a museum collection in the way suggested here. This kind of study holds much promise for the development of a new understanding of museum objects as social agents/mediators in social relations.

More elaborate research perspectives and methods were indeed not applied to museum collecting until the 1990s (see Pearce 1995; 2004), and this is still a rather new field of research with many promises for the future and especially if “problematic” collections based on older collection principles are chosen as objects of study (such as the present one). In an international perspective it has been proved that studies of collecting in museum contexts, thanks to the wide range of social implications manifest in collections and collecting activities, can give valuable new insights into the development and character of modern society. Well known studies such as Bennett 1995 and 2004 as well as Pearce 1995 exemplify this. The museological institute in Leicester is world leading in this line of research (Knell 2004 and 2008 being recent, influential examples).

It took a long time before race research c. 1850-1950 became the object of scientific historiographical study. Early major works such as Kevles 1985 and Paul 1995 are still among the more important studies in this field. In general, research gained momentum first in the 1990s. The history of Swedish race research, though certainly of crucial importance in an international perspective, is still lacking major surveying works covering all of its aspects, which has been noted by Broberg and Tydén (2005, p. 219). Important works such as Broberg's study of the Institute of Race Biology of the Swedish State (1995) and Ljungströms survey of late 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropology in Sweden (2004) may be mentioned, but are actually just covering limited parts of the field. Close examinations, guided by research questions, of the source material collections of race research in order to investigate what they may say on the research context that produced them, such as the one proposed here, has not been done to any extent internationally – I have not been able to find similar examples. The research front concerning the historiography of race research c. 1850–1950 will be related to through the help of professor Broberg, who enjoys relations to leading international scientists in this field.

The chosen, limited approaches of the present project concerning the collection of human remains, focusing (a) what may be said about race research and (b) in an Actor-Network perspective must be emphasised, since the more general discussion and research on human remains in museum collections is a very wide and expanding field (Fforde 2004 is probably the latest main work). Hylland 2008 surveys this field with particular focus on the collection of heads.

The project starts with a very good knowledge background concerning international collection research, which was gained through the research survey made in Svanberg 2009. Svanberg took part in the international NaMu project (Making National Museums, a Marie Curie research initiative of the European Union) in 2008, resulting in close relations to the international research front in general and connections to the world leading Museological Institute in Leicester, Great Britain, in particular. A paper on the subject of the here proposed project has been accepted for the 2009 CRESC conference in Manchester on “What Matters, Technology, Value and Social Change”, focusing object-mediated relations and non-human agency (CRESC = Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change). The call for papers states that “(...) we ask, in the context of nearly two decades of diverse disciplinary approaches to these issues, what matters about objects? How are they inflecting our understandings of technology, of expertise, and of social change? How has a focus on objects reconfigured our understandings of how values inflect the ways in which people make relations, create social worlds, and construct conceptual categories? (...)”. I take this as an indication of the close relation to the research front that the proposed project represents (Though the paper was accepted, Svanberg may not be able to attend the conference due to other obligations).

The competence and merits for the project of the proposed researcher and present employment context

Svanberg has a long practical experience of museum work and collections management. Svanberg has accomplished a detailed research survey of the Swedish and international state of research concerning collecting (2009). Later papers reveal the competence in this field (Svanberg 2008; Hauptman Wahlgren & Svanberg 2008).

Svanberg participated in the international NaMu Project (see above) and started work on a paper for the final anthology of the project (supervised by professor Simon Knell in Leicester), which was not, however, possible to complete due to lack of research time in present employment conditions. Svanberg is currently employed as a coordinator of research and development at the National Historical museums of Stockholm, Sweden.

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