

Joint press release

by the Conference of Cultural Ministers of the *Länder*,
the German Federal Foreign Office,
the Federal Government Commissioners for Culture and the Media
and the municipal umbrella organisations

Survey on human remains from colonial contexts in the collections of museums and universities in Germany

For the first time, the findings of a Germany-wide survey are providing an overview of human remains from colonial contexts present in museums and university collections.

The survey was conducted by the German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts (Contact Point) and commissioned by the Federal Government, the *Länder* and the municipal umbrella organisations. 33 institutions that hold relevant human remains in their collections, which were associated with the fields of anthropology, anatomy, medical history, ethnology and palaeontology, participated in the survey. A particular focus was placed on collections established from approximately 1750 onwards.

The evaluation of the data provided gives the following overview: Approximately 17,000 human remains from colonial contexts are held by the surveyed institutions. Nearly half of these remains (about 46%) cannot currently be geographically identified. The majority of the geographically identifiable human remains come from Africa and Oceania, accounting for 71%. However, human remains from all continents exist in these institutions.

Additionally, around 38% of the reported figures are aggregate estimates, representing approximate numbers. Thus, the actual number of human remains from colonial contexts could exceed these estimates. Human remains have been inventoried at 68% of the institutions. However, at present, only 48% of the identified human remains have been documented digitally.

The question of how to handle human remains from colonial contexts is a delicate matter. The significance of and care for the deceased are intricately embedded in the ethical values and world-views of their communities of origin. Treating the descendants with respect and mindfulness is of utmost importance.

Falko Mohrs, Chairman of the Conference of Cultural Ministers of the *Länder* in 2023 and Minister for Science and Culture in Lower Saxony: “Museums and collections bear a special responsibility arising from Germany’s colonial history, a responsibility they must face. In the past, the handling of human remains from colonial contexts in Germany has often been questionable. We now have the chance to do better. Wherever possible, transparency must be established and repatriations made possible with the utmost sensitivity. This now available survey lays the groundwork for continued efforts in this area.”

Prof. Markus Hilgert, Secretary-General of the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States: “This report provides figures regarding human remains in

selected museums and collections in Germany for the first time. On the one hand, the report makes an important contribution to addressing one of the darkest chapters in German scientific and institutional history. On the other hand, the results strikingly illustrate the enormous challenges faced by many of the institutions involved, their sponsors and those responsible for cultural policy in Germany. For the descendants of those whose remains were forcibly brought to German institutions, may this report be seen as a modest first step on the road to the long overdue return of their ancestors.”

Helmut Dedy, Managing Director of the Association of German Cities; Prof. Hans-Günter Henneke, Managing Director of the Association of German Counties and Dr. Gerd Landsberg, Managing Director of the Association of German Cities and Municipalities: “The municipalities are aware of the distinct challenges and the distinct responsibility posed by coming to grips with the colonial past in the cultural sector. This report is an important step. It establishes greater transparency and enables further provenance research. It will be a long journey until as many human remains as possible can be returned from museums and collections to their countries of origin. It is therefore all the more important that this process is set in motion and that the dialogue about the next steps takes place in close cooperation between the Federal Government, the *Länder* and municipalities.”

Katja Keul, Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office: “In numerous discussions abroad – whether with descendants of resistance fighters against German colonial power or with families who were never able to bury their ancestors – we encounter a desire for greater transparency and information about the whereabouts of their ancestors, and specifically, the desire to be able to bury their ancestors in their native country. The results of this survey can help to build trust: trust in our promise to confront our colonial past and to do everything we can to facilitate the return of human remains. We are now also seeking close dialogue on this with the affected countries of origin.”

Claudia Roth, Federal Commissioner for Culture: “Human remains from colonial contexts do not belong in our museums and collections. Part of addressing German colonial history includes finding an appropriate approach to handling them and developing measures for returning them their countries of origin. The survey lays a very important foundation for this. It indicates that the origins of human remains in German collections are unclear in many cases. Provenance research, in particular, can contribute to further clarification. The German Lost Art Foundation supports the institutions with the task of researching human remains.”

The findings of the survey and the necessary conclusions will be discussed with experts, especially from the countries of origin.

The Federal Foreign Office will provide the results of the survey to the affected countries in the framework of bilateral contacts with the governments of the countries of origin.

The Contact Point has been assigned the task of developing a concept for the future handling of human remains from colonial contexts. The concept will cover, but not be limited to, the following topics:

- What steps need to be taken in the collections to “re-humanise” the human remains and thus restore to them the dignity and respect they deserve? What might ethical standards for appropriate storage look like?
- The origins of the human remains in German collections are unclear in many cases. What possibilities do existing analytical methods offer, and what difficulties arise in practice? What opportunities and limitations are presented by provenance research? How can experts from the countries of origin be involved?
- How can greater transparency be established in regard to the responsible handling of human remains?
- Given current methods and constraints, it is unlikely that the origins of all human remains can be fully resolved, and repatriation may not be universally possible. What steps should be taken in these instances?

Background information

On 13 March 2019, in the “Framework Principles for Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts” (Framework Principles), the Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, the Cultural Affairs Ministers of the *Länder* and the municipal umbrella organisations agreed that the treatment of human remains takes priority in the process of dealing with collections from colonial contexts. To obtain an overview of the human remains that have not yet been processed and the status of how they are dealt with in German museums and university collections, the Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts worked together with the Cultural Goods and Collections from Colonial Contexts department of the German Lost Art Foundation to develop a concept for a Germany-wide survey regarding human remains.

The report on the survey and its findings will be published in German, English, French and Spanish on the websites of the Contact Point and the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States.

The report can be found here:

https://www.cp3c.de/umgang_mit_menschlichen_ueberresten/ (German)

https://www.cp3c.org/dealing_with_human_remains/ (English)

(The French and Spanish versions of the report are available on the German and English websites of the Contact Point.)