

9 UNFINISHED REUNION: A HALTED JOURNEY OF THE "VEGA" CHUKCHI COLLECTION PROJECT, 1878–2023

Igor Krupnik, Martin Schultz, Eduard Zdor, and Lilia Zdor

Introduction

In September 2019, two of the four co-authors, Igor Krupnik and Martin Schultz, both Arctic/North American ethnology curators at their respective museums, met at the Etnografiska Museet (ES) in Stockholm. Our goal was to examine an ethnographic collection at the ES assembled during the Swedish polar expedition of 1878–1880, under the leadership of (Niels) Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld. That voyage, known as the "Vega Expedition" after its vessel, the *Vega*, accomplished the first-ever navigation through the Northeast Passage along the Arctic shores of Eurasia, from northern Scandinavia to the Bering Strait. Adolf Nordenskiöld (1832–1901), the expedition leader, was an experienced polar explorer and a trained geologist and mineralogist and had some prior experience in ethnographic collecting during his earlier research in Greenland. His crew included a group of trained scientists and navy officers, who collected data on arctic hydrography, meteorology, geology, botany, zoology, and other fields.¹ Upon its return to Sweden, the expedition members published their data in a series of articles, a two-volume popular account for general readers (Nordenskiöld 1880–1881), and in five volumes of scholarly proceedings (Nordenskiöld 1882–1887).

The *Vega* team also assembled substantial records on Indigenous peoples living along its route, including ethnographic objects, photographs, population enumerations, archaeological specimens, and data on local ethnobotanical and ethno-ornithological knowledge (Nordenskiöld 1881; Kjellman 1882; Nordqvist 1880, 1883; Palmén 1887). The bulk of the *Vega* Expedition anthropological records originated from the Chukchi people of the Chukchi Peninsula (Chukotka) in Northeast Siberia, thanks to the *Vega*'s ten-month wintering off the Siberian Arctic shore in September 1878–July 1879. Smaller ethnographic collections and records came from the crew's short encounters with the Nenets and Khanty people of Northern Russia, the Inupiat at Port Clarence, Alaska (ca. 350 objects), the Yupik people of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, and from a short stay in Yokohama and other cities in Japan on the return journey to Sweden.

1 None of the *Vega* Expedition participants had any background in anthropology, which did not stop the *Vega* crew from collecting a massive stock of data related to Indigenous peoples, including even conducting coarse archaeological excavations of Chukchi underground dwellings at Cape Ryrkaipyi (today's Cape Schmidt) in September 1878.

As we poured over the objects laid out in the Etnografiska Museet basement, we realized that the collection has never been surveyed; that it consisted of several subsets of objects, photographs, and other records scattered across Swedish institutions and museums worldwide; and that it lacked any insight from Chukchi heritage experts or descendants of the local people who once communicated with the *Vega* crew. We called our effort *Dispersal and Reunion* (Krupnik and Schultz 2020a; 2020b), to highlight a peculiar trajectory of the collection over 140 years and the need to re-connect Indigenous people from the *Vega* wintering area to their heritage legacy at a distant museum.



Fig. 1 The “Vega” Chukchi objects are assembled at the collection space of the Etnografiska museet, September 2019.

Our actions undertaken in 2019–2020 are described elsewhere (Krupnik and Schultz 2020a, 2020b). This paper focuses on other, mostly *unsuccessful* elements of the *Vega* project initiated in 2020–2022. Sadly, many of the initial plans failed to materialize, first due to the Covid-19 pandemic and later, because of the collapse of international cooperation after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. These painful lessons are also worth sharing.

Studying the collection: September 2019 – Spring 2020

Our survey at the Etnografiska Museet in 2019 started with the re-assembling of the *Vega* objects in one physical space, so that we could cross-check items in museum storage and on exhibit displays against the museum collection database.² Originally,

2 <https://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-em/web> [accessed 5.07.2024]; keyword: “Vega”.

we planned to assess the collection by major constituent groups (e.g., clothing, transportation, hunting tools, etc.), following on an earlier survey of the much-smaller Alaskan Inupiat subset of the same collection (VanStone 1990). In the course of this first examination, continued by Schultz for several months, about 660 objects were identified as “Chukchi” and attributed to the *Vega* collection. By summer 2020, the number was close to 1080, including several formerly unassociated objects and some 130+ archaeological specimens excavated by the *Vega* crew at the old site of Ryrkaipyi (Jirkajpij, by Nordenskiöld), near today’s town of Ryrkaypiy at Cape Shmidt (Krupnik and Schultz 2020b:113).

Two other types of artefacts belonged to the original *Vega* collection: 25–30 drawings made by Chukchi visitors to the expedition wintering site and later used as illustrations to publications (e.g., Nordenskiöld 1881; 1936), and over 70 photographs from the voyage, reportedly taken by the *Vega* captain, Louis Palander (1842–1920).³ More items from the *Vega* journey, including pencil drawings, archival documents, and other resources are held by the Swedish and foreign institutions that received portions of the collection (see below).

During our initial work in Stockholm, several museum staff members visited us in the storage space. They pledged support to our plan to electronically ‘re-unite’ Indigenous people in Chukotka home communities with the objects in Stockholm. We also met with Claes Nordenskiöld, great-grandson of Adolf Nordenskiöld, who was introduced to the project. At that meeting, we discussed a possibility of a physical “reunion” between the descendants of the Nordenskiöld extended family and members of the home communities in Chukotka. Our original plan was to seek funds to bring Indigenous knowledge holders to Stockholm for such a meeting in 2021 or 2022, when the study of the *Vega* collection would be completed.

Perhaps the most important connection in September 2019 was with Eduard Zdor, then-Ph.D. anthropology candidate at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, Alaska and his wife, Lilia Tlecheivyne Zdor. Both grew up in the community of Neshkan in Chukotka, barely 30 km (18 mi) east of the *Vega* wintering site and have many relatives living there. According to the Zdors, their native town of Neshkan (*Najtskaj*, in Nordenskiöld’s Swedish transliteration), population 700, was the home place of the former residents of small camps mentioned by Nordenskiöld. These camps, from the *Vega* expedition reports —Jinretlen, Pitlekaj, Rirajtinup, Irgunnuk, Najtskaj, and

3 Some photos are now displayed in a public exhibit at the Etnografiska Museet and are accessible on the museum online collection database <http://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-em/web> [accessed 5.07.2024], but the original glass plate negatives are at the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in Stockholm. The full list of photographs taken by Capt. Palander, featuring nine dry plates and 76 wet plate photographs (including 34 portrait images of the local Chukchi people and six photos of the Inupiat from Port Clarence, Alaska), became available in late 2019, with short descriptions of the image subject, names of the individuals, and locations where photos were taken. This list is currently in the archives of the Sjöhistoriska museet (Maritime Museum) in Stockholm (Inv. No. 1968:715).

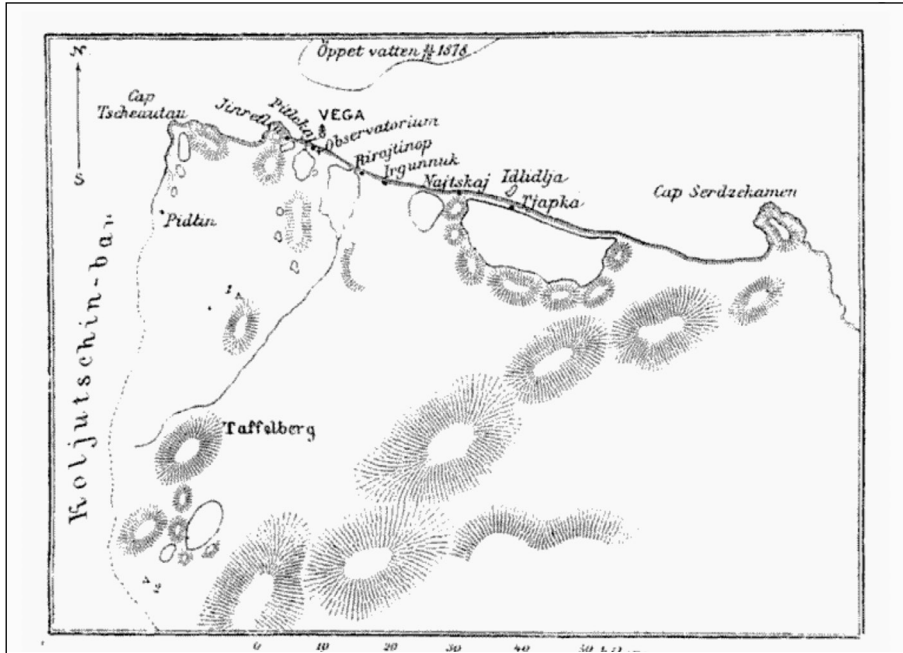


Fig. 2 Fragment of the “Vega” wintering map, with an insert showing its location in the Russian Arctic/Alaska/Bering Sea region.

Tjapka – were mentioned in later publications, usually under their original Chukchi names (Yinretlin, Pilhin, Velkaltenup, Irgunnup, Nesqan, and Tepqan – Bogoras 1904). During the late 1800s, the Chukchi population in the area surveyed by the *Vega* crew was about 400–450 people. In the 1930s the Soviet administration established a network of village councils and small production “partnerships” (cooperatives), a common practice across the Russian North. In the 1950s and 1960s, under a policy of settlement “concentration,” scores of smaller village councils were disbanded and the residents from coastal sites and nomadic camps were moved into a few hubs selected for modernization and housing construction (Krupnik and Chlenov 2013; Selitrennik 1965). Eventually, such hubs, including the town of Neshkan, grew into rural communities of 300–500 people, with schoolhouses, grocery and convenience stores, power-plants, and landing strips.

Therefore, the residents of Neshkan and of the nearby town of Enurmino at Cape Serdtze-Kamen’ (also visited by the *Vega* team) constitute a “descendant community” for objects, historical photographs, and other ethnographic materials from the *Vega* expedition. Local people never have had access to any of the *Vega* records from their home area. The name “Vega” is known in Chukotka; Russian reprints of Nor-

denskiöld’s translated account of the 1878–1880 expedition (Nordenskiöld 1936; 2014) may be available to the locals, yet few people can relate it to their ancestors’ life. The Russian reprints are also hard to use, due to the odd transliteration of the local Chukchi place names that makes many of them unrecognizable (as confirmed by local residents). Some historical photographs taken by Louis Palander have been posted online with Russian captions,⁴ but their availability, and even knowledge of their existence is hard to assess. The area around *Vega* wintering site of 1878–1879 is still being used for fishing, subsistence hunting, reindeer herding, and traveling, but memories of the past life in small camps are maintained only by a dwindling number of elderly residents (E. Zdor 2023).⁵

“Potentials”: A view from 2020

We produced an outline for future work on the *Vega* collection in Winter 2020, right before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (Krupnik and Schultz 2020a). Initially, the pandemic did not stop our project. Due to the Swedish no-quarantine policy, Schultz carried on his survey at the museum storage in Stockholm and added new objects to the *Vega* collection database. Krupnik continued exploring the collection via the online database and his 2019 notes. We prepared the second overview of the *Vega* collection in Summer 2020, at the peak of the pandemic (Krupnik and Schultz 2020b). By that time, many initial plans were put on hold.

The uncertainty created by the Covid-19 pandemic was ominous. We outlined four paths to expand the value of the *Vega* collection that we carefully named “potentials.” The first was a *re-constitution* of the original collection of 1878–1879, so that the scope of Nordenskiöld’s collecting effort and his relations with the Chukchi people became more obvious. We defined the second task as a *reconnection* of the *Vega* objects in Stockholm (and elsewhere) with the heritage communities in Chukotka, primarily the towns of Neshkan and Enurmino. We argued that the objects carry significant cultural and heritage value to the local people after 140+ years and that Chukchi names for the objects and associated cultural explanations of their former use could still be secured. Working with, and talking about, “old” objects might revive interest in Indigenous heritage, strengthen cultural roots, and inspire a restoration of certain activities based on museum specimens. Such approach would be in line with

4 See <https://humus.livejournal.com/3279964.html> [accessed 5.07.2024]

5 According to the *Vega* expedition reports, Neshkan (Najtskaj) was an outstanding place for winter fishing. It remained a favorite fishing ground throughout the 20th century. The Neshkan Lagoon has several species of local and transient fishes, such as tomcod, polar cod, smelt, herring, whitefish, flounder and gobies. During the famine-stricken 1990s, Lilia Zdor’s father, Notagirgin, had to decide every day whether to go hunting at sea and maybe (likely not) get a seal coveted for its meat and blubber, or to the lagoon where he was almost guaranteed to catch a couple dozen cod or smelt, providing the family with valuable food.

the growing practice of opening museum collections to Indigenous people (Bell et al. 2013; Crowell et al. 2010; Crowell 2022; Griebel and Keith 2021; Keith et al. 2019; McChesney and Isaac 2018; Swan and Jordan 2015).

Thirdly, we suggested that the *Vega* collection might serve as an international *heritage platform*, a “meeting space” for Indigenous users, museum and cultural specialists interested in strengthening cultural heritage of Arctic Indigenous peoples. To achieve such status, the online collection database should feature information added by Chukchi knowledge experts, alongside the data and images from museum records. We referred to some recent efforts in digital “reunification” undertaken by the museums in Oslo, Copenhagen, and Helsinki related to objects from their Arctic collections (Appelt et al. 2018; Jørgensen et al. 2020; Gowlland and Ween 2018; Wang 2018; Wold and Ween 2018)

Lastly, we argued that the *Vega* collection, thanks to its size and age, could serve as a driver to an electronic *unification* of what we called the “Chukchi collection universe” of 7,000+ historical ethnographic objects if matched with other Chukchi collections in Russian, European, and North American museums (cf. Beffa and Delaby 1999; Bogoras 1901; Gorbacheva 1992; Rousselot 2002; Vukvukai 2011). Such an electronic “meeting place” would create new opportunities for Chukchi heritage experts and museum specialists, but even more, for Indigenous users. In our paper of 2020, we compared Chukchi objects in Stockholm with those at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York, and the Russian Ethnographic Museum (REM) in St. Petersburg (Krupnik and Schultz 2020b).

Further efforts: 2020–2022

Following our initial assessment of winter 2020, we took several further steps to expand the scope of our project, which were only partly covered in prior publications.

Securing insight from Chukchi heritage experts (Spring 2020)

In Spring 2020, scores of images of objects from the *Vega* collection from the museum online database⁶ were transferred by Eduard and Lilia Zdor to local Chukchi heritage experts in the town of Neshkan (see *Acknowledgements*). It was an arduous communication, as local communities mostly lack reliable Internet access; thus images and messages had to go via numerous cell phone connections, often using multiple apps. With permission from the Stockholm museum, images of 18 objects from the *Vega* collection were chosen to seek people’s insights and to test how they might be integrated with the museum electronic database. We selected the objects that we

6 <http://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-em/web> [accessed 5.07.2024]

viewed as foundational for traditional Chukchi culture, both in its coastal (maritime) and interior (reindeer-herding) versions (cf. Kolomiets et al. 2020), and encouraged experts’ comments in any possible form.

As comments from Chukotka started to flow back, L. Zdor organized the information into more standardized narratives, with the Chukchi names added for object constituent elements or parts (translated from L. Zdor’s Russian notes by IK):

1880.04.0332 – fireboard – *milghyn*.

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 a 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* (other name *gyrilgyn*) – a small bow made of reindeer antler 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.]

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 Ettyne (56), in April 2020.



Fig. 3 Fireboard (*milghyn*), the Vega collection, 1880.04.0332, 2019.

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.

Altogether during this pilot phase, we received comments of substantial length for six objects from the Vega collection: a firedrill and board, man's winter fur coat (*gyrgochan'er'yn*), a woman's winter coat (*gyrgosan'er'yn*), woman's winter combination suite (*kerker*), skin-covered drum (*yarar*), and a gut-skin raincoat (*ukenchi*) (several specimens). These descriptions illustrated continuous intimate knowledge about certain objects that has been retained in the home communities for over 140 years.

Despite arduous communications, we considered this pilot effort a success, as such data, gathered by neither the *Vega* crew in 1878–1879 nor by generations of curators in Stockholm, could enrich both museum professionals and home communities about object use, making, symbolism, etc..



Fig. 4 “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, 2019.

Expanding knowledge about ethnographic collections by inviting Indigenous experts to museums and engaging them in object documentation and shared stewardship is an increasingly popular practice in museum work that we very much wanted to emulate in this project (cf., 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). A virtual *reunion* might be slow and painful, and not every object could be recognized by today’s experts 140+ years after the initial collecting, but the effort is always worth undertaking.

Reaching out to REM and MAE (Spring – Summer 2020)

As the team was gradually gaining local insight on the *Vega* objects, Krupnik reached out to colleagues at two Russian ethnographic museums that housed comparably large historical Chukchi collections. The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (MAE-Kunstkamera) in St. Petersburg is the home of a major ethnological collection assembled by Nikolai Gondatti, the head of Chukotka regional administration in

1894–1896. His collection of around 1,000 objects described more than a century ago by Waldemar Bogoras (1901) is not accessible at the MAE museum site and even its actual composition, besides Bogoras' rather flowing description, remains unknown. The Russian Ethnographic Museum (REM), also in St. Petersburg, houses several collections assembled by Nikolai Sokolnikov, another Chukotka administrator who replaced Gondatti in that position and donated his objects to the museum in the early 1900s. His 800+ objects were, similarly, not accessible online and remained poorly known, besides some general summaries (Gorbacheva 1992).

At first, Russian colleagues were enthusiastic about looking into their museum records and sharing summaries of the two collections. Yet we quickly ran out of luck. Due to the restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, museums were closed to the public and even staff access to collections was limited. Lacking electronic databases and online access, even home-based professionals could not make an adequate inventory of the collections under their supervision. We received no insight on Gondatti's collection at MAE; the overview of Nikolai Sokolnikov's collections at REM was finally made available in Summer 2020, so that we could compare it with the *Vega* objects in Stockholm (Krupnik and Schultz 2020b).

Eventually our interest triggered an effort by REM to digitize a portion of Sokolnikov's Chukchi collections. The work was started in 2021 and completed in Winter 2022, when images and descriptions of 229 objects from among 800+ associated with Sokolnikov in REM internal records were posted on museum public website.⁷

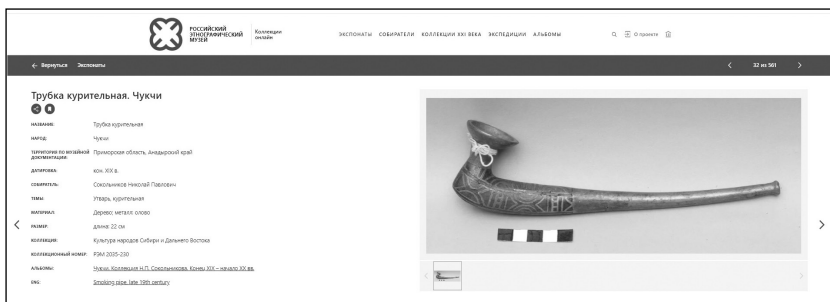


Fig. 5 Screenshot from the REM online database featuring an object from Nikolai Sokolnikov Chukchi collection, 2022.

This effort created an opening to match another major body of Chukchi ethnographic objects to those held in Western museums with open access online databases, like the *Vega* collection in Stockholm, Waldemar Bogoras' collection at the AMNH in New York (about 1,300 objects), and Nikolai Gondatti's collections at the Museum of Fünf Continente in Munich (ca. 310 objects, Rousselot 2002), and in the Musée Quai Branly in Paris (ca.330 objects).

7 <https://collection.ethnomuseum.ru/entity/OBJECT/402415?page=4&query=чукчи&index=165> [accessed 5.07.2024]

Looking for local recognition and funding in Chukotka (Fall 2020)

Despite initial enthusiasm in 2020 among heritage experts in the towns of Neshkan and Enurmino, the project still lacked official recognition and a source of local funding in Russia. The pressure created by the Russian Law of 2012 that outlined criteria by which any Russian NGO could be labeled a “foreign agent” if it received even partial funding from international sources, was mounting. We did not want to put our partners at risk; the best solution was, seemingly, to launch some officially recognized version of our project in Chukotka.

In September 2020, we produced a Russian announcement about a new initiative that we called “*Vega-Chukotka: New Paths to Support Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century*.” A one-page flyer in Russian, with five pasted images of the *Vega* objects provided a summary of the *Vega* expedition and of its ethnographic collection in Stockholm.

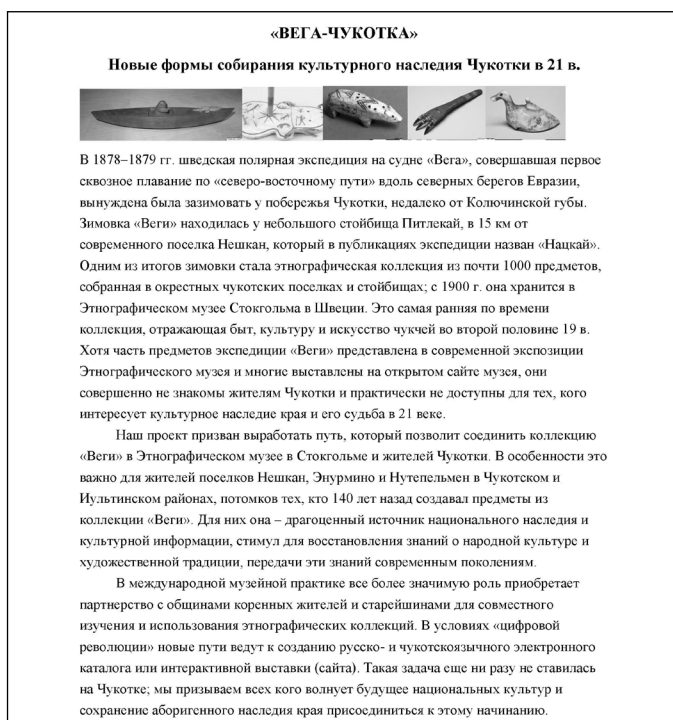


Fig. 6 Russian flyer for the “*Vega-Chukotka: New Paths to Support Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century*” announcement, October 2020.

The announcement argued that the best way to connect Indigenous people of Chukotka to their historical heritage preserved by the *Vega* collection would be via a bilingual electronic Russian-Chukchi catalog or interactive online exhibit featuring

the *Vega* collection. The announcement was posted on Chukotka social media resources; we also planned to get it published by some official online channels in Anadyr.

The ultimate goal of this effort was to apply for a grant from a local foundation called the *Kupol* (“Dome”), established in 2009 reportedly with the funding donated by local mining companies.⁸ In the 10+ years since its establishment, *Kupol* has supported over 200 small and medium-size projects in Chukotka heritage preservation, mostly publications and public events, as well as education, health, and small business initiatives. We envisioned a *Kupol* grant as a potential local source to support our activities, provide channels to transfer funds to partners in the communities, and to make the results of our efforts accessible to audiences in Chukotka. Among prospective options, we considered a printed catalog of the 100+ best objects with extensive captions, an electronic exhibit featuring some 50–60 objects or publicly accessible portal associated with one of the cultural institutions in Anadyr that had a record of participating in other heritage efforts involving foreign collaborators.

Yet applying for and receiving a *Kupol* grant required local partners, who would be willing to submit a grant proposal on behalf of the international team and then serve as local coordinator/s or PI. We were unsuccessful in finding such partners and missed the *Kupol* submission cycles in the Fall of 2020 and, again, in 2021. By the next cycle in Fall 2022, there was no chance of us receiving a Russian grant with listed co-PIs living in the United States.

Vega and other Chukchi objects in Oslo (Fall 2020–January 2024)

The dispersal of the *Vega* Expedition’s massive collections started soon after the objects were brought to Stockholm in 1880 (see Krupnik and Schultz 2020b:111–112). 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). Following the widespread practice of the era for object “trade” or exchanges among the museums, other small sets of the *Vega* objects might have been given to other institutions, such as the two collections at the Världskulturmuseet in Gothenburg, formerly the Ethnographic Museum of the city of Gothenburg.

In fall 2020, following our first published overview of the *Vega* collection (Krupnik and Schultz 2020a), we learned from Tom Svensson, retired curator at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, Norway, that his home museum had its own small subset of Chukchi objects associated with the *Vega* expedition. Reaching out to Svensson and his colleagues in Oslo, we soon received a list of 37 objects that originated from the *Vega* expedition. The objects were donated to the museum in 1911 by Mrs. Sophie Christiane Nielsen (Hovgaard), after the passing of her husband, Andreas Peter Hovgaard (1853–1910), a Danish Navy officer, who was a member of the *Vega* expedition

8 <http://kupolfoundation.ru/> [accessed 5.07.2024]

in charge of meteorological and geomagnetic observations. The objects he brought from Chukotka, primarily small ivory and bone carvings, were most certainly a part of his private collection.

In addition, the museum in Oslo has in its possession another historical ethnographic collection from Chukotka that originated from a later Norwegian expedition on the vessel *Maud*, under Roald Amundsen in 1918–1925. Amundsen, a highly acclaimed polar explorer, who conducted the first navigation along the arctic shores of North America (the “Northwest Passage”) in 1903–1906 and was the first to reach the South Pole in 1911, planned to get the *Maud* frozen in the pack ice and carried by the ice movement across the Arctic Ocean (Krupnik 2024). His journey via the “Northeast Passage” along the Arctic edge of Eurasia included two winterings off the shores of Chukotka and resulted in several sets of Chukchi and Even (Lamoot) ethnographic objects, about 360 total. These were later donated to the museum by Amundsen and by Harald Ulrik Sverdrup (1888–1957), the chief scientist on the *Maud* expedition.

This was yet another trove of historical ethnographic objects from Chukotka that had not been explored by Siberian museum specialists or ever seen by Chukchi heritage experts. As we got access to Amundsen’s and Sverdrup’s objects via the museum online database, it was obvious that the Oslo *Maud* collection(s) might similarly benefit from the insights of Indigenous knowledge keepers from Chukotka. For all practical reasons, a journey to Stockholm from Northeast Russia might have included a stopover in Oslo. Yet even with the full support of Oslo museum staff, such plans had to be put on hold – first, because of the Covid-19 travel and visiting restrictions and, later, due to the war in Ukraine and suspension of connections with Russia. The *Maud* collection, like the *Vega* collection in Stockholm had to wait until normal communications and professional relations would resume.⁹

“Shared Beringia Heritage” grant (2021)

In 2021, we made another attempt to secure funding for the *Vega* project from the “Shared Beringia Heritage Program” of the U.S. National Park Service. The program was created in 1991 to support joint research and public efforts involving U.S. and Russian scientists and, later, Indigenous organizations and communities on both sides of the Bering Strait;¹⁰ Spanning the Bering Strait 2011). In its 30+ years, it served as a key player supporting Indigenous heritage activities and in fostering collaboration and exchange among public groups, non-governmental organizations, and governmental agencies in the USA (Alaska) and Russia, mostly at the local level.

9 In October 2023, Lilia Zdor delivered a presentation about the *Vega* collection objects and her work with Chukotka heritage experts (Zdor et al. 2023) at the annual “Beringia Days” conference in Anchorage, Alaska, mainly to keep the memory of the project alive.

10 <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/beringia/about.htm> [accessed 5.07.2024]

In Spring 2021, Eduard and Lilia Zdor submitted a proposal to fund a joint project in heritage preservation titled “Chukotkan Communities 100 years after Bogoras: Increasing resilience by strengthening Indigenous cultures.” The proposal asked for about \$100,000 for two years of activities related to the *Vega* collection project, including collecting heritage interviews by local partners in the communities of Neshkan and Enurmino and building a traditional kayak and a 4-5-person skin boat replicating those collected by Nordenskiöld in 1878–1879. Neither of these boats now at the Etnografiska Museet in Stockholm have been in use in people’s memory; the kayak-type boats evidently were abandoned by the late 1800s. The project would have culminated in a visit of three Elders from Neshkan and Enurmino to the ethnographic museums in Stockholm and Oslo, to explore the *Vega* and the *Maud* historical collections. The latter component was ultimately dropped, because of the Covid-19 era restrictions on international travel.

If funded, the project would have been an obvious bridge between the heritage preserved by the *Vega* collection and today’s people in Chukotka. A few senior Chukchi hunters in Neshkan and Enurmino agreed to use their time and skills building and testing re-constructed “heritage” boats to help restore a long-lost tradition. Unfortunately, the proposal was not granted in 2021, and in 2022 it had no chances for approval, because of the breakdown in collaboration, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.¹¹

Conclusion: A journey “on hold” by a war

As of Winter 2024, after the initial advance, the *Vega* collection project remains in limbo. Connections with Russian partners are on hold, and planning for any joint activities seems all but impossible. Every element in the initial roadmap of 2020 required an input from, and a cross-border coordination with, many players. Neither is practical while the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the bans on collaboration on both ends continue. What once looked merely logistically “problematic”—transferring money to partners in Russia, seeking funding support in Chukotka or for the Chukotka-focused projects in the West, bringing Chukchi heritage experts to museums in Stockholm and Oslo—may now put Russian collaborators at risk. Connections with Swedish and Norwegian museums suffer from the same “freeze,” since institutions in both countries can neither communicate nor officially collaborate with counterparts in Russia because of the war.

11 In January 2024, I. Krupnik finally had a chance to survey the Chukchi collections at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo and produced a summary with the recommendations to how these collections may be enriched by Indigenous heritage experts, when such interactions become possible (Krupnik 2024).

On top of all this, over the past years our team suffered from personnel and heritage knowledge losses. Schultz has left the Etnografiska Museet in Stockholm; he now works at another museum. Several staff members in Stockholm who had enthusiastically supported our project in 2019 have left the museum as well. Even more harmful were losses in local knowledge, due to the passing of several senior heritage experts in Neshkan and Enurmino, like that of Nina Kyttagin in 2020. The longer our project remains suspended, the harder it will be to rally the interest and enthusiasm that it generated in 2019–2020.

In hindsight, many steps we envisioned in 2020 would have been very difficult, even from the pre-Covid/pre-war perspective. Bringing Indigenous experts from Arctic communities to large national museums to explore heritage collections has become a common practice at many Western institutions (Crowell 2022; Fienup-Riordan 1998; 2005; Griebel and Keith 2021; Hennessy et al. 2013; Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait, n.d.); but it is still unknown in Russia and would have been a novelty in Stockholm. The logistics and paperwork for an international trip from Neshkan to Stockholm and Oslo would have been staggering, even without Covid-19 and the war. Seeking funding support in Chukotka (and elsewhere in Russia) for an international project in Sweden or in the U.S. would have been problematic, because of the administrative and legal barriers. Transferring foreign funds to Russian collaborators was already all but impossible by 2020, due to the chilling impact of the “foreign agent” law; but it has been expanded since to target more organizations as well as individuals. Few Russian museums have open online collection databases, and those that do, like REM, have hardly explored partnering or sharing options with foreign institutions. Even in Europe and North America, such online museum ‘consortia’ (like the *Reciprocal Research Network* – Glass and Hennessy 2022; Rowley 2013; RRN n.d.) are still rare and mostly include institutions within one country (e.g., the *Carlotta* database in Sweden) or from a few neighboring nations. Creating an online platform linking collections across many nations, such as Sweden, Russia, USA, France, and Germany, would have required a monumental effort. These and other actions that we envisioned in 2020 will have to wait till a later date. Meantime, the barriers to cooperation have stiffened and losses keep mounting on both ends...

Nonetheless, the knowledge acquired during the unfinished *Vega* collection project will be of value, if it eventually resumes. The pressure to re-start it may grow, thanks to the rising impact of new museum concepts, like “shared stewardship” of collections with Indigenous home communities or “digital return” (“digital repatriation” – Bell et al. 2013). As communities across the world request access to museum collections, we will see more partnerships between large museums and Indigenous agencies and heritage groups (Glass and Hennessy 2022).

Another factor is the advance in technologies used by today’s museums – from more sophisticated online databases (Turner and Greene 2022) to heritage portals (Keith et al. 2019) to advances in computer 3D scanning and replication (Hollinger

2022). The *Vega* project already stimulated an effort at REM to digitize and put online its Chukchi collections, a pilot project that is certain to continue. The expanding practice of online *networks* connecting museums, large and small, and host communities in distant areas will make multi-lingual digital sharing feasible, therefore more common – of course, if Russian and Western museum online databases remain accessible from afar. If so, what today depends on personal links, past investments in digitization or a stroke of luck may soon be standard protocols in museum-community interactions.

We remain cautiously optimistic about the “second *Vega* collection journey” if we preserve its multi-national team, in spite of continuing war carnage, heritage loss, and connection breakdown. We need to keep its memory alive, while the *Vega* collection project, like the once famous ship, is stuck in the dock. To do so, it is crucial to safeguard the record – what was once planned, what worked, what broke down, and why.

Acknowledgement

Several people were instrumental in the initial phase of our project in 2019–2021. Martin Schultz would like to acknowledge his former colleagues at the Etnografiska Museet in Stockholm, Monika Sargren (archivist), Linda Wennbom (librarian), Johan Jeppsson (photographer), Magnus Johansson (database manager) and Tony Sandin (photographer). Eduard and Lilia Zdor are grateful to several heritage experts in the community of Neshkan, including Nina Kyttagin (1952–2020), Irina Nutetgivev, Alexandra Nutenny, Nikolai Ettyne, and Rodion Rinetegin, for kindly sharing their knowledge. Igor Krupnik would like to thank colleagues at the Russian Ethnographic Museum (REM) and at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology, both in St. Petersburg, as well as Arne Aleksej Perminow, Gro Birgit Ween, Tom G. Svenson, Anna Mossolova, and Sophie Crowe at the Museum of Cultural History (Kulturhistorisk Museum), University of Oslo in Oslo, Norway.

References

- Appelt, Martin, Anne Mette Jørgensen, Christian S. Pedersen, Pernille G. Feldt, and Jakob R. Wang 2018. Femte Thuleekspedition – mod nye fællesskaber. *Nordisk Museologi* 2–3: 60–72.
- Beffa, Marie-Lise and Laurence Delaby 1999. Festines d’âmes et robes d’esprits. Les objets chamaniques sibériens du Musée de l’Homme. *Mémoires du Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle* 181: 1–241. Paris.
- Bell Joshua, Kimberly Christen, and Mark Turin 2013. After the Return: Digital Repatriation and the Circulation of Indigenous Knowledge Workshop Report. *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 1: 195–203.

- Bogoras, Waldemar (Bogoraz, Vladimir G.) 1901. Ocherk material'nogo byta olennykh chukchei, sostavlennyy na osnovanii kolleksii N. L. Gondatti, nakhodiashchikhsia v Etnograficheskom muzee Imperatorskoi akademii nauk [The Description of the Reindeer Chukchi material culture based on Nikolai Gondatti's collection at the Ethnographic Museum of the Russian Academy of Sciences]. *Sbornik muzeiia antropologii i etnografii* 1(2): 1–67+xxv (illustration tables). St. Petersburg.
- 1904. The Chukchee. Material Culture. *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History* 11. Pt.1. Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill and G. E. Stechert.
- Chan, Amy E. 2013. Incorporating *Quluaqtuavut* (Our Stories): Bering Strait Voices in Recent Exhibitions. *Museum Anthropology* 36: 18–32.
- Clifford, James 2004. Looking Several Ways: Anthropology and Native Heritage in Alaska. *Current Anthropology* 45(1): 5–30.
- Crowell, Aron L. 2020. *Living Our Cultures, Sharing our Heritage: An Alaska Native Exhibition as Indigenous Knowledge Nexus*. *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* 18(1): 4–22.
- 2022. Indigenous Peoples, Museums, and Anthropology. In *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 1 (Introduction). I. Krupnik (ed.), 119–135. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press.
- Crowell, Aron L., Rosita Worl, Paul C. Ongtooguk, and Dawn D. Biddison (eds.) 2010. *Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska*. Smithsonian Books, Washington, DC.
- Fienup-Riordan, Ann 1998. Yup'ik Elders in Museums: Fieldwork Turned on its Head. *Arctic Anthropology* 35(2): 49–58.
- 2005 *Yup'ik Elders at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.
- Glass, Aaron and Kate Hennessey 2022. Emergent Digital Networks: Museum Collections and Indigenous Knowledge in the Digital Era. In *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 1 (Introduction). I. Krupnik (ed.), 165–181. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press.
- Gorbacheva, Valentina V. 1992. N. P. Sokolnikov – sobiratel' i issledovatel' kul'tury narodov severo-vostoka Sibiri [N. P. Sokolnikov – Collector and Explorer of Cultures of (Indigenous) People of Northeastern Siberia]. In *Iz istorii formirovaniia etnograficheskikh kolleksii v muzeiakh Rossii, 19–20th centuries*. I. Shangina (ed.), 75–83. St. Petersburg: Russian Museum of Ethnography.
- Gowlland, Geoffrey and Gro Ween 2018. Nuts and Bolts of Digital Heritage. Bringing the Past into the Virtual Present. *Nordisk Museologi* 2–3: 3–13.
- Griebel, Brendan and Darren Keith 2021. Mapping Inuinnaqtun: The Role of Digital Technology in the Revival of Traditional Inuit Knowledge Ecosystems. *International Journal of Geoinformatics* 10: 749. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijgi10110749>
- Hennessey Kate, Natasha Lyons, Stephen Loring, Charles Arnold, Mervin Joe, Albert Elias, and James Pokiak 2013. The Inuvialuit Living History Project: Digital

- Return as the Forging of Relationships Between Institutions, People, and Data. *Art Museum Anthropology Review* 7(1-2): 44–73.
- Hollinger, Eric 2022. 3D Digital Replication: Emerging Cultural Domain for Native American Communities. In *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 1 (Introduction). I. Krupnik (ed.), 182–195. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press.
- Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait n.d. *Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait: Inuvialuit Living History*. <http://www.inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca/about> [accessed 3.04.2024]
- Jørgensen Randrup, Anne Mette, Martin Appelt, Cecilia Hammarlund-Larsson, Martin Schultz, Pilvi Vainonen, Gro Birgit Ween and Taran V.R. Wold 2020. *Nordic National Museums Strengthening Arctic Heritage*. Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers.
- Keith, Darren, Brendan Griebel, Pamela Gross and Anna-Mette Jørgensen 2019. Digital Return of Inuit Ethnographic Collections using Nunaliit. *Modern Cartography Series*, 9: 297–316. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-444-64193-9.00017-8>
- Kjellman, Frans R. 1882. Om tschuktschernas hushållsväxter [On Chukchi domestic use of plants]. In *Vega-Expeditionens Vetenskapliga Iakttagelser*. A. E. Norden-skiöld (ed.) Vol. 1, 353–372. Stockholm: F. & G. Beijers förlag.
- Kolomiets, Oksana P., Vladislav N. Nuvano, Nadezhda I. Vukvukai, and Ekaterina A. Trserkovnikova 2020. Mir veshchei chukotskoi olenevodcheskoi kul'tury v povsednevnoi zhizni i v muzeinykh kolleksiakh Chukotki (The object universe of Reindeer Chukchi culture in everyday life and in museum collections in Chukotka). In *Prikladnaia etnologiya Chukotki*, O. P. Kolomiets and I. Krupnik (eds.), 165–186, Anadyr and Moscow: PressPass.
- Krupnik, Igor 2024. *From the Northeast Passage to Oslo: Ethnographic Collections from the Maud expedition, 1918–1925 at KHM*. Unpublished manuscript, 20 pp.
- Krupnik, Igor and Michael Chlenov 2013. *Yupik Transitions. Change and Survival at Bering Strait, 1900–1960*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press.
- Krupnik, Igor and Martin Schultz 2020a. Saga of the Vega Expedition Chukchi Collection, 1878–2020. *Arctic Studies Center Newsletter* 27: 51–55. Washington, DC.
- 2020b. Dispersal and Reunion –The Saga of the “Vega” Expedition Chukchi Collection, 1878–2020. *Archiv Weltmuseum Wien* 69: 106–137.
- Lincoln, Amber, with John Goodwin, Pearl Goodwin, Faye Ongtowsruk, Ron Senungetuk, Barbara Weyiouanna 2010. *Living With Old Things: Inupiaq Stories, Bering Strait Histories*. Anchorage: National Park Service. https://www.academia.edu/17434652/Living_with_Old_things_Inupiaq_stories_Bering_Strait_histories [accessed 9.11.2020]
- Loring, Stephen, Natasha Lyons, and Maia LePage 2010. Inuvialuit Encounter: Confronting the Past for the Future. An IPinCH Case Study. *Arctic Studies Center Newsletter* 17: 30–32.
- McChesney, Lea S., and Gwyneira Isaac 2018. Paying Back: The Hopi Oral History

- Project. In *Giving Back. Research and Reciprocity in Indigenous Settings*. R. D. K. Herman (ed.), 55–84. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press.
- Margaris, Amy V., and Rosemary Ahtuanguak 2020. Revitalizing a “dangling” ethnographic collection: Materiality, Arctic traditional knowledge, and the liberal arts. *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* 18(1): 71–85.
- Mason, Otis T. 1885. Department of Ethnology. In *Report of the United States National Museum, showing its progress and conditions, for the Year 1884*. Pt. II, 109–120. Washington DC: Government Printing Office.
- Nordenskiöld, Adolf Erik 1880–1881. *Vegas färd kring Asien och Europa jemte en historisk återblick på föregående resor längs gamla världens nordkust*. Vol. 1 (1880), Vol. 2 (1881). Stockholm: F. & G. Beijers Förlag.
- 1881. *The Voyage of the Vega Round Asia and Europe: With a Historical Review of Previous Journeys along the North Coast of the Old World*. Translated by Alexander Leslie. London: Macmillan.
- 1882–1887. *Vegaexpeditionens vetenskapliga iakttagelser bearbetade av deltagare i resan och andra forskare*. Nordenskiöld, A. E. (ed.) Vol. 1–5, Stockholm: F. & G. Beijers förlag.
- Nordenskiöld (Nordenskiöld), Adolf Erik 1936. *Plavanie na Vege* [The Voyage of the Vega]. Leningrad: Glavsevmorput.
- Nordqvist, Oscar A. 1880. *Zametki o chislennosti i nyneshnem polozenii chukchei zhivushchikh po peregu Ledovitogo okeana* [Notes on the Current Numbers and Status of the Chukchi Living along the Shores of the Arctic Ocean]. *Izvestiia Russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva* Vol. XVI (2): 95–105. St. Petersburg.
- 1883. *Bidrag till Kännedomen om Tschuktschern* [Contribution to the knowledge on the Chukchi]. In *Vega-Expeditionens Vetenskapliga Iakttagelser*. A. E. Nordenskiöld (ed.) Vol. 2, 227–246. Stockholm: F. & G. Beijers förlag.
- Palmén, J. A. 1887. *Bidrag till kännedomen om Sibirska Ishafskustens fogelfauna, enligt Vega-expeditionens iakttagelser och samlingar* [Contribution to the knowledge of the bird fauna of the Siberian arctic coast, according to the observations and collections of the Vega expedition]. In *Vega-Expeditionens Vetenskapliga Iakttagelser*. A. E. Nordenskiöld (ed.) Vol. 5, 241–511. Stockholm: F. & G. Beijers förlag.
- Reciprocal Research Network (RRN) n.d. <https://www.rrncommunity.org/> [accessed 3.04.2024]
- Rousselot, Jean-Loup 2002. The Munich Chukchi Collection. In *Anthropology, History, and American Indians: essays in Honor of William Curtis Sturtevant*. W. L. Merrill and I. Goddard (eds.), 295–301. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution. (Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology 44)
- Rowley, Susan 2013. The Reciprocal Research Network: The Development Process. *Museum Anthropology Review* 7 (1–2): 22–43.
- Selitrennik, Eduard E. 1965. *Nekotorye voprosy kolkhoznogo stroitel'stva v Chukotskom natsional'nom okruge* [Certain aspects of the Collective Farm formation in

- the Chukchi National Area]. *Sovetskaia etnografiia* 1: 13–27. Moscow.
- Spanning the Bering Strait 2011. Spanning the Bering Strait: Twenty years of collaborative research. Anchorage: National Park Service, Shared Beringia Heritage Program. https://www.north-slope.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Beringia_Program_20_years_Collaborative_Research_ENG-Project-Booklet-FINAL.pdf [accessed 3.4. 2024]
- Swan, Daniel C., and Michael P. Jordan 2015. Contingent Collaborations: Patterns of Reciprocity in Museum-Community Partnerships. *Journal of Folklore Research* 52(1): 39–84.
- Turner, Hannah and Candace Greene 2022. Access to Native Collections in Museums and Archives: History, Context, and Future Directions. In *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 1 (Introduction). I. Krupnik (ed.), 151–164. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press.
- VanStone, James W. 1990. The Nordenskiöld Collection of Eskimo Material Culture from Port Clarence, Alaska. *Fieldiana Anthropology*, n.s. 14: 1–56. Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History.
- Vukvukai, Nadezhda I. 2011. Odezhda chukchei v sobraniakh kraevedcheskikh muzeev Dal'nego Vostoka (Chukchi Clothing in the Collections of Far East Regional Museums). *Istoricheskie, filosofskie, politicheskie i yuridicheskie nauki, kulturologiia i iskusstvovedenie* 5(11): 51–61.
- Wang, Tone 2018. Working in the Digital Contact Zone. The Digital Sharing Portal for Roald Amundsen's Gjoa Haven Collection. *Nordisk Museologi* 2–3: 14–29.
- Wold, Taran and Gro B. Ween 2018. Digitale visjoner. En kartlegging. Identitet, tilgjengelighet, og digitalt demokrati. *Nordisk Museologi* 2–3: 90–106.
- Zdor, Eduard 2023. Chukchi Communities of the Bering Strait Region, a Hundred Years after Bogoras. Ph.D. dissertation. University of Alaska Fairbanks, Dept. of Anthropology.
- Zdor, Liliya, Irina Nutetgivev, Valeriia and Eduard Zdor 2023. Chukchi Collection of the Vega Expedition of 1878–1880: a Chukchi Interpretation 140 Years Later. Paper presented at the “Beringia Days 2023” conference. Anchorage, Alaska. October 23–25, 2023.

Figures

- 1 The “Vega” Chukchi objects are assembled at the collection space of the Etnografiska museet. Photo: Igor Krupnik, September 2019.
- 2 Fragment of the “Vega” wintering map, with an insert showing its location in the Russian Arctic/Alaska/Bering Sea region.
- 3 Fireboard (*milghyn*), the Vega collection, 1880.04.0332. Photo: Johan Jeppsson, 2019.

- 4 “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, 2019.
- 5 Screenshot from the REM online database featuring an object from Nikolai Sokol’nikov Chukchi collection. 2022.
- 6 Russian flyer for the “*Vega-Chukotka: New Paths to Support Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century*” announcement. October 2020.