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Herrn David Dellenback  
San Agustin / Kolumbien

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### **Stone sculptures from San Agustín (Dep. Huila, Colombia)**

Dear Mr Dellenback,

first of all thank you for your detailed statements, the last one dating from March 18, 2013. Please let me explain the stance taken by the Prussian Heritage Foundation (Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz) towards issues pertaining to the stone sculptures from San Agustín.

In his function as curator at the Americas department of the Royal Museum of Ethnology Berlin (Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde zu Berlin) and on behalf of that museum, Konrad Theodor Preuss undertook an expedition to Colombia in 1913-1919. This journey, which was originally planned as just a one-year stay, became extended due to the outbreak of World War I. The primary research objective of that expedition was of a religio-historical nature: the interpretation of the images and stone sculptures of the “monolithic culture” of San Agustín in southern Colombia. Hence, Preuss’ fieldwork was an attempt to describe that culture as comprehensively as possible.

During his stay, Konrad Theodor Preuss was able to add 74 more stone sculptures to the 34 relieved stone slabs and sculptures already recorded and described by the Italian geographer Agustin Codazzi. In addition, in 1929 he published a two-volume catalogue entitled “Monumentale vorgeschichtliche Kunst – Ausgrabungen im Quellgebiet des Magdalena in Kolumbien und ihre Ausstrahlungen in Amerika” (“Monumental prehistoric art – Excavations at the headwaters of the Magdalena River in Colombia and their implications for America”; Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht). This catalogue was intended to serve as the basis for an interpretation of the “monolithic culture” with the help of the myths of the Uitoto Indian tribe.

In his search for the sculptures, Konrad Theodor Preuss was guided by information which would sometimes lead him through rough terrain for weeks. On location – and

with the permission of the respective landowners – he excavated the monolithic statues, which measure up to two meters, took photographs of them and made copies using special paper.

The petition of 12 December 2012, submitted to the Colombian Minister of Culture (Mariana Garcés) via the director of the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia (ICANH) (Fabian Sanabria Sánchez), refers to the removal of about 21 stone sculptures and an indefinite number of pottery objects and other archaeological objects from San Agustín. In addition, it describes 14 more statues collected and removed by Preuss at the locations of Briceño and Iscandoy. In 1919, after the end of World War I, Preuss exported the 21 statues from San Agustín and the 14 statues from the Department of Nariño. Preuss brought a total of 35 stone statues to Germany. However, while these help to vividly illustrate the importance of that regional culture at the Ethnological Museum Berlin, they are not unique main works of the important archaeological evidence left by the San Agustín culture.

The objects exported by Preuss were inventoried in Berlin and presented in the permanent exhibition of today's Ethnological Museum (Ethnologisches Museum; formerly: Museum für Völkerkunde), as well as occasionally in special exhibitions, for example in Köln in 1962 and in Bad Godesberg in 1986. The special exhibitions were regularly under the auspices of the then-current Colombian ambassadors. Representatives of the Colombian government did not call for repatriation on any of these occasions; in fact, the sculptures kept in Berlin have always been regarded as "cultural ambassadors of Colombia in Germany", and are still regarded as such today. Currently three sculptures from San Agustín are still on exhibit; all others are, as before, in the study collection of the Ethnological Museum Berlin where they can be accessed if necessary.


The fact that the stone sculptures are kept in Berlin has been general knowledge for decades. The 21 stone sculptures in Berlin have been published in the work "Monumentale vorgeschichtliche Kunst", which mentions San Agustín as their place of provenience. There is also a Spanish edition of the catalogue, which was published in 1931 and last reprinted in 1974. The 14 statues from Nariño, however, have not yet been published; they will soon be accessible online via the electronic portal "smb-digital". With this, too, the Prussian Heritage Foundation has made a substantial, internationally perceptible contribution to the study of an archaeological culture in Colombia.

Apart from the publications of the Prussian Heritage Foundation, there is a list compiled by yourself of the existing stone sculptures in the Ethnological Museum (then still called Museum für Völkerkunde) in 1992. In 2008, you published that complete list of the sculpture holdings in the form of a publication which is also accessible on the Internet.

2013 is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of Konrad Theodor Preuss' expedition in 1913, and the fact that issues related to the whereabouts of the sculptures from San Agustín is once again addressed strikes a very responsive chord with the Prussian Heritage Foundation. However, a basis for downright repatriation does scarcely exist, given the lapse of time and the fact that the Colombian government has obviously known about the sculptures' whereabouts in Berlin without having submitted any concrete claim for repatriation to the German government.

Nevertheless, we would be pleased to stay in contact with you about any type of cooperation with regard to the sculptures from San Agustín kept in Berlin.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'H. Parzinger', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Prof. Dr. Hermann Parzinger  
President, Prussian Heritage Foundation