

# THE FIFTH THULE EXPEDITION'S SIBERIAN LEGACY

**Daria Morgounova Schwalbe**

University of Southern Denmark, Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense M, Denmark; dschwalbe@sdu.dk

**Anne Lisbeth Schmidt**

National Museum of Denmark, I. C. Modewegsvej, 2800 Kongens Lyngby, Denmark; anne.lisbeth.schmidt@natmus.dk

**Kristoffer Schmidt**

Museum Nordsjælland, Sdr. Jagtvej 2, 2970 Hørsholm, Denmark; ksc@museumns.dk

## ABSTRACT

This article casts light on the last segment of Knud Rasmussen's "grand expedition," his trip to Chukotka, in the Russian Far East, in September 1924. He spent somewhere between 18 and 48 hours in Chukotka before he was deported back to Alaska, and it is doubtful that he was able to bring any significant local objects back with him. Yet the Fifth Thule Expedition's Siberian Collection at the National Museum of Denmark includes about 1,000 items. Most of these objects were purchased by Rasmussen after his return and donated to the museum as an extension of the Fifth Thule work. The article discusses the significance of Rasmussen's trip to Chukotka and the origin of the expedition's Siberian collection. It is also an attempt to challenge our traditional understanding of an "expedition" as a purposeful journey with a definitive beginning and end.

## INTRODUCTION

*It is a comfort for any researcher [to know], that even the most comprehensive expedition never ends, but it is precisely through these investigations that new possibilities open up.*

—Knud Rasmussen, *Slæderejserne* (1979:IV 293)

The Fifth Thule Expedition of 1921–1924 (FTE) "was a deliberate attempt to close the 'Inuit circle' by supplementing Greenlandic cultural history with an investigation of Inuit groups in Northern Canada, Alaska, and Siberia" (Pedersen 2003:33). Designed to address the question of the origin of the "Eskimo race," the expedition traveled 18,000 km from Greenland to the Pacific Ocean, first to eastern Arctic Canada, then all the way to the city of Nome in Alaska. From there Rasmussen continued to East Cape (Cape Dezhnev) in Chukotka, Russia (then the Soviet Union, see Shokarev, *this issue*), Rasmussen's planned destination. He believed that there, and nowhere else, was where the expedition should end (Rasmussen 2020:813).

Yet the final act of Rasmussen's dramatic expedition—his journey to Chukotka—is one of the most poorly

known. His trip there ended in a different way than he had originally envisioned and lasted no more than a couple of days, culminating in a return rush across the Bering Strait. It included nerve-racking negotiations with the Soviet authorities regarding an entry permit, Rasmussen's deportation from Chukotka, and only momentary contact with local people from the Siberian Yupiget (Yupik) community of Naukan (*Nuvuqaq*) at East Cape.

In his popular account of the expedition, *Fra Grønland til Stillehavet* (first published 1925–1926), Rasmussen claimed that "the expedition was now complete" (Rasmussen 2020:836). Yet to him, apparently, it remained open-ended, as he continued to arrange for the collection of Siberian items even after his return to

Copenhagen, and his efforts to continue work across Bering Strait did not stop until his death in 1933.

The purpose of this article is twofold. It seeks first to shed light on Rasmussen's brief but remarkable journey to Chukotka in September 1924, and second to trace the origin of the FTE's Siberian collection at the National Museum of Denmark (Nationalmuseet, NMD) in Copenhagen. It is also an attempt to challenge our traditional understanding of an expedition as a purposeful journey with a beginning and an end. For Rasmussen himself, as for his followers, the end of the FTE was indeed just the beginning of another journey.

### RASMUSSEN'S PLANS TO VISIT EAST CAPE

The central aim of the FTE was to explore "the central part of the North American Polar Archipelago, which forms a natural bridge between Greenland and North America... which belonged to the world's most unknown" (Rasmussen 1921:59; see Michelsen, *this issue*), and to collect ethnographic and archeological material about Inuit culture (Rasmussen 1921:57–58, 2020:26–31).

Rasmussen saw his travel to the northeastern edge of Siberia as an important element of the FTE. Following the key logic of other early-twentieth-century scientific expeditions (i.e., that "in-depth understanding only was to be obtained when you have all the 'material' collected and laid out in front of you in [a museum]" (Pedersen 2003:37–39), Rasmussen believed that he could only obtain a complete understanding of the Inuit language and culture through comparative studies of many Inuit groups (Thalbitzer 1927), possibly all of them. He moved westward across North America toward Chukotka looking for cultural origins and connections along the Arctic Circle, in an attempt:

to complete an archeological and anthropological survey of the "rest" of the extinct and existing Inuit cultures... So to speak, to finish the Eskimo Circle by investigating the non-Greenlandic Inuit, and "a last chance possible" to document the not yet civilized Inuit groups who might bear a key to the past, and to shed light on a long history of human adaptation to the Polar regions. (Pedersen 2003:36; see also Gruber 1970)

In *Den Store Sladerejse*, Rasmussen (1932:63) claimed:

It is my task during the next one and a half years to visit all those Eskimo tribes that live along the coast of the Arctic Ocean...and the whole of

America's northern coast... The distant target to the far west was East Cape, Alaska's naked next-door neighbors on the other side of the Bering Strait, where Asia ends.<sup>1</sup>

It is also here, on the hills overlooking the Chukchi village of Uelen (Wahlen, in Rasmussen's text), that he felt an overwhelming joy and satisfaction because the landscape and people "mean, to me, that I am in Siberia, west of the last Eskimo tribe, and that the Expedition has now been carried to its close" (Rasmussen 1979:IV 6).

Nonetheless, it is difficult to say whether Cape Dezhnev was indeed part of Rasmussen's original expedition plans (see Michelsen, *this issue*). A map attached to the final itinerary of the expedition (Rasmussen 1921:58) did not show any detour to Russia. As we know now, plans regarding Rasmussen's "grand journey" constantly changed, and as he himself pointed out, "It is difficult to say when the actual plan was born in my head, as it grew up on me and with me" (Rasmussen 2020:25). In a letter addressed to the chairman of the Thule Committee, Marius Ib Nyeboe, on July 29, 1921—that is, after the expedition had already started and the committee would be hard-pressed to object to the plan—Rasmussen expressed his intention to go to Cape Dezhnev, but from Cape Prince of Wales rather than Nome.

In a letter Rasmussen asked Nyeboe to apply for entrance permission to the United States (Alaska) and to Russia. To this, Nyeboe replied in his telegram of May 23, 1923: "That you in addition want to have a Russian authorization paper in Siberia, there is indeed no one in Siberia who would want to harm you—they all would be happy to greet you" (Knud Rasmussen's Archive 1923). At this point Rasmussen and his two Inughuit companions, Qaavigarsuaq and Arnarulunnguaq, had already begun their journey.

Whether it was because of this unwarranted optimism or because plans for the expedition were not finalized, Nyeboe procrastinated on approaching the Danish Foreign Ministry regarding Rasmussen's request. On August 9, 1924, while in Kotzebue (just a month prior to his first attempt to cross the Bering Strait), Rasmussen sent a telegram to the Danish Science Committee: "Completing observation inlanders gathered Kotzebue Sound, summer trading across Bering Straits for east coast Asia. Plan return Denmark via Seattle early November after survey Yukon delta and Bristol Bay Eskimos. Will arrive Nome few days" (Rusk and Fitzhugh 2005:9). Not

a single word in that telegram referred to Rasmussen's plan to cross the Bering Strait.

It seems that the closer Rasmussen got to Nome, the more determined he became to visit Cape Dezhnev. It was the summer trading season based on the well-established trade routes and connections between Indigenous peoples of Alaska and Chukotka. While at Cape Prince of Wales, Rasmussen encountered some Siberian Yupigut visitors, who were on their way home from a trading trip to Teller on the Seward Peninsula: "a little gathering of fantastically-looking skin boats that were jumping over Bering Straits choppy waves" and that "flew through the open water waves as basking seabirds" (Rasmussen 2020:813). "Our meeting with these daring sailors was brief and adventurous," Rasmussen wrote, "[and] I was now even more determined to get to know them in their country. In Siberia's outermost corner towards the East the outermost western Eskimos live, and here and no other place should the Expedition end" (Rasmussen 2020:813).

As soon as he arrived in Nome, Rasmussen hired Captain Joseph-Fidèle (Joe) Bernard (1880–1972), a friend of Canadian polar explorer Vilhjálmur Stefánsson and "a man worthy of notice," to sail him to Chukotka. Bernard was the owner and captain of the trading schooner *Teddy Bear*, "a 15-ton auxiliary schooner, 54 feet long with a 14-foot beam and drawing 6½ feet" (Barratt 1977:342–343). It was fitted with an auxiliary gasoline-fueled engine and was one of the few schooners that "carefully, and regularly, sustained operations between Nome, Anadyr, Uelen (in Chukotka) and the Arctic settlements in the years after the proclamation of the Soviet rule in Chukotka in 1921" (Barratt 1977:341).

Rasmussen was probably aware that the political situation in Soviet Russia was unstable. By 1922–1923, the Soviet government managed to put down the last armed resistance in the Russian Far East and was now trying to exert its firm control over commercial trade across the Bering Sea (Bockstoce 2018). Difficult relations with the United States were exacerbated by the many small trading companies that were operating in the Bering Strait region under the American flag while neglecting to pay for trade licenses required by the newly established Soviet government (Rasmussen 2020:814). When in Nome, Rasmussen had certainly heard about the Soviet officials' unjust treatment of traders and local Native people (Rasmussen 2020:818). He therefore sent another telegram to Copenhagen asking for an entrance permit to Russia (USSR).

Rasmussen waited in Nome for three weeks but received no answer. He was planning to spend about a month in the Yupigut community of Naukan at the East Cape, and he felt he was running out of time since he had to complete the trip while the weather still allowed it (Rasmussen 2020:814). In fear that he would have to give up the trip because of losing the weather window, he decided to take the risk and travel to Russia without the necessary papers. On September 11, he sent another telegram to Copenhagen from Nome, informing the committee that he would attempt to cross Bering Strait and try to obtain entry permission once in Chukotka (Knud Rasmussen's Archive 1924b). "My interest in the project was so great that I had a hard time imagining why anyone would not be convinced of its legitimacy," Rasmussen (2020:813–814) would later write.

### SHORT CHRONOLOGY OF RASMUSSEN'S TRIP TO CHUKOTKA

The most detailed description of Rasmussen's journey to Chukotka is contained in the posthumous account based on his notes and diaries (Ostermann 1941; Ostermann and Holtved 1952:81–96; see also Nielsen 2007). Altogether the trip lasted about a week, but he spent less than 48 hours in Chukotka (18 hours on land, according to his account), and he encountered difficulties from the start.

Rasmussen and Bernard set off from Nome on September 8, 1924, but were caught by a storm and had to shelter near Sledge Island, approximately 50 km west of Nome. After three days, the ship returned to Nome. On September 12, the captain made another attempt to cross Bering Strait. Again the ship was caught in a storm, and the crew had to anchor for four days near Teller, approximately 115 km (70 miles) northwest of Nome. Following these two unsuccessful attempts, on September 16, Captain Bernard was finally able to leave Teller. That same evening the vessel passed Cape Prince of Wales, the westernmost point of mainland Alaska, then Little Diomedé Island. At dawn on September 17, the *Teddy Bear* reached Big Diomedé Island and set a course toward Cape Dezhnev (Fig. 1).

At around midday, Rasmussen and Bernard arrived at Dezhnev (also Dezhnevo, *Kengisqun*), which Rasmussen called "Emmatown," a small trading post several miles south of Naukan, Rasmussen's planned destination (see Shokarev, *this issue*). When they arrived, Rasmussen was



Figure 1: Knud Rasmussen (right) and Captain Joe Bernard (left) onboard the schooner *Teddy Bear* on the way to Chukotka from Nome, Sept. 1924. Photographer not identified. Courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark (NMD #5\_thuleb\_0125.tif).

immediately taken into custody by a Russian border guard; since he did not have an entrance permit, he was escorted across the Chukchi Peninsula to Uelen to see the local governor and apply for one. Rasmussen traveled 15 km from Dezhnev to Uelen by dogsled, through terrain consisting of barren marshy tundra, under heavy rain as he vividly described in his account (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:87; Rasmussen 2020:817–818).

By nightfall of September 17, after three to four hours of travel, he finally reached Uelen, a small Native town with approximately 250 inhabitants. Uelen was an important commercial center and, until 1940, had the status of a regional hub. In his diary, Rasmussen (1921–1924) illustrated his first impression of Uelen with a small sketch, supplemented by an 1881 illustration by Aurel and Arthur Krause, who had visited the same area 43 years prior (Krause and Krause 1993:60; Nielsen 2007). Upon his arrival in Uelen, Rasmussen was escorted to Governor Nikolaus Losseff's house, where he was questioned by the chief of police. It was a long and nerve-racking negotiation, which he documented in his diary (Rasmussen 1921–1924). Afterwards he was invited to stay for dinner

with the governor and his wife and a young teacher from Irkutsk. As a matter of fact, he wrote:

They all treated me with the utmost politeness—so different from what I had expected of the new Soviet type; it seemed quite refreshing—after the excessive Canadian and American formlessness—to see a man politely bow when introducing himself. (Rasmussen 2020:821).

Despite this courtesy, Rasmussen was not granted a permit to stay. Before the end of the dinner, he was informed that he could stay in Uelen overnight but had to return to Dezhnev, then go aboard immediately and leave the next day (Rasmussen 1921–1924, 2020:823; see also Nielsen 2007:91). The following afternoon Rasmussen was duly escorted back to Dezhnev, where Bernard was waiting on the *Teddy Bear*, and the next day they sailed back to Alaska. As the *Teddy Bear* was brought close to the cliffs of Cape Dezhnev, Rasmussen was greeted by some Yupigiet residents from Naukan:

Young men and children ran out on ice-pans and reached the ship. Some of them came aboard and stayed with us for about an hour; they knew I

had been deported; . . . they regretted, as much as I regretted, that we were never to get a chance to get to know each other better. (Rasmussen 2020:832)

In his diary he wrote about this encounter and “how benevolent it was to understand him [a man from Naukan] and to be understood” (Rasmussen 1921–1924).

It is unclear when Rasmussen arrived in Nome, but the rest of the story is well-known. As the *Teddy Bear* approached shore, Rasmussen

saw a man with a piece of white paper in his hand, running up and down the beach. It was a telegram . . . from the Danish Foreign Ministry and it contained a laconic message, saying that the Soviet Republic’s permit to [his] land entrance at East Cape [Cape Dezhnev] was now granted. (Rasmussen 2020:832)

On August 16, 1924, Nyeboe had finally contacted the Foreign Ministry of Denmark in Copenhagen, asking to approach the authorities in Moscow to seek permission for Rasmussen’s landing at East Cape. Five days later, the Danish Foreign Ministry sent a letter to the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs in Moscow and on September 12, 1924, just a day after Rasmussen set off without a permit, Moscow granted the request (Knud Rasmussen’s Archive 1924a, 1924b).

### NARRATIVE ACCOUNT

Rasmussen’s narrative account of the trip to Chukotka (Rasmussen 2020:813–832), although short and limited in ethnographic substance, is vivid and exhilarating. Rasmussen provided descriptions of the places he visited, the landscape, the political regime, and ways of life at the beginning of the new Soviet era. He described his encounters with the Russian authorities, local traders, and the Chukchi and Naukan people. He listed details of local housing and clothing (women’s in particular), described weather conditions, outlined the yearly hunting cycles of the Inuit and Chukchi, and told about a place near the Chukchi settlement of Putun (Pouten/*Pu’uten*—ed.), where “hundreds of walrus go up on land,” and where it is “strictly forbidden by the natives’ chief to use guns” (Rasmussen 2020:830). He ventured into the origin of the Chukchi people and their relations and warfare with the Iñupiat of Big Diomed Island, alcohol abuse during the trading season, and Japanese “headhunting” of walrus to acquire the tusks (Rasmussen 2020:826–831).

Rasmussen’s account culminated with a brief but momentous encounter with the people of Naukan (Rasmussen 1921–1924), “whose dialect he understood and with whom he could converse” (Ostermann 1941:10). Rasmussen named the dialect “The East Cape Dialect” (Ostermann 1941:8). Along with a collection of words in the local dialect, this statement supported his major claim that all “Eskimo” vernaculars spoken across the Arctic, from Greenland to Alaska and Siberia, were mutually comprehensible dialects rather than isolated languages.

Although he vividly described his experiences in Russia, most of his information on the Siberian “Eskimos” was picked from local stories and legends while he was in Uelen, or were collected in Nome, where Rasmussen spent a considerable amount of time after his short trip to Chukotka. Notably, he never acknowledged or properly documented his sources—whether in Chukotka or in Nome [where he most certainly collected parts of his story]—no names of Native Chukotkans are cited (see Krupnik’s comment to Bronshtein, *this issue*). Some of the information could even have been gleaned from the available photographic evidence, as explained below.<sup>2</sup>

## THE FIFTH THULE EXPEDITION CHUKOTKAN COLLECTION

### PHOTOGRAPHS

Rasmussen’s collection of photographs from Cape Dezhnev is housed at NMD. It contains 54 photos, including 29 that document his time in Chukotka. Copies of some photos are also held at the Danish Arctic Institute Archives in Copenhagen (Nielsen 2007, *this issue*). The collection contains a series of portrait photos of Rasmussen and Bernard on the *Teddy Bear*, probably taken by photographer Earl Rossmann’s assistant Roy before Rasmussen’s departure from Nome (cf. Rasmussen’s letter to Leo Hansen, the Danish Arctic Institute Archives: A 075, package 1; Nielsen 2007, *this issue*); a series of landscape photos; a photo of Dezhnev; a single photograph of Russian border guard Allayeff (Fig. 2), whom Rasmussen encountered in Dezhnev (Rasmussen 2020:815–816); and a series of photographs of the local people approaching the *Teddy Bear* off Naukan. Despite Rasmussen’s claim that some of the Cape Dezhnev residents “came aboard and stayed with us for about an hour” (Rasmussen 2020:832), there is no photographic evidence of it, apart from a single photograph of men in a skin boat approaching the ship. In fact, as Bent



*Figure 2: The Russian border guard Allayeff, who took Rasmussen into custody in Dezhnev (East Cape) (Rasmussen 1925–1926; [1927] 1999:372). September 1924. Photographer unknown. National Museum of Denmark photo collection.*

Nielsen (2007:245), director of the Danish Arctic Institute Archives, has pointed out, all of Rasmussen’s photos of Naukan and its people were taken from a distance.

In an earlier Danish publication (Rasmussen 1925–1926:II), there were additional photos portraying the East

Cape people. Two of these photos (Rasmussen 1925–1926:II 378 and 397) were taken by Ralph Lomen, one of four Lomen brothers (Carl, Harry, Alfred, and Ralph) who were renowned entrepreneurs and commercial photographers in Nome (Fig. 3). The Lomen brothers, originally from Norway, were involved in the reindeer meat trade (see Pratt, *this issue*), and Rasmussen met with them later in New York (Knud Michelsen, pers. comm., 24 February 2019). Ralph Lomen also provided a series of photos from Alaska that were used as illustrations in the Danish publication of Rasmussen’s journey (Rasmussen 1925–1926). Other photographs show a Chukchi woman wearing a combination suit (Rasmussen 1925–1926:II 384), a



*Figure 3: A young Naukan Yupik man. Rasmussen wrote, “The East Cape Eskimos have adopted the Chukchi tradition to cut hair so that there are only two thin rings left” (Rasmussen 1925–1926:397). Photo: Ralph Lomen, courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark (NMD #5\_thuleb\_0574.tif).*

Chukchi boy with a harpoon (Rasmussen 1925–1926:II 384), a *yaranga* (traditional Chukchi tent), a dog team (probably the one that brought Rasmussen from Dezhnev to Uelen) (Rasmussen 1925–1926:II, 384), and a single photograph of walruses, taken by Joe Bernard (Rasmussen 1925–1926:II 384). In a later Danish version, a photograph by Leo Hansen of a Siberian Yupiget woman in front of a tent was added (Rasmussen 1934–1935:II 400–401; 2020:816). A few additional photos from Chukotka are featured in Ostermann and Holtved's (1952) English edition. Thus, the photos were spread across different publications, often without attribution to the photographer.

It is noteworthy that in Rasmussen's photographs from Chukotka, there is not a single image from Uelen, although he spent a night there and communicated with local traders and elders. A simple explanation is that he was not permitted to take pictures. Another explanation is that he often left photography to others (Nielsen 2007:240), and that he made his land journey to Uelen and back by himself, leaving his cameraman behind. To a certain extent, the absence of photographs from Uelen supports Rasmussen's claim that he was not accompanied by anyone else to Chukotka but Captain Bernard. Nonetheless, it is contradicted by unconfirmed Russian reports. Russian journalist Nikolai Galkin, who visited Chukotka in 1924–1925 and who also stayed in Uelen and in Dezhnev, wrote about his meeting with "American" ethnographer Knud Rasmussen on September 18, 1924, in Uelen. Galkin mentioned that Rasmussen did not travel to Chukotka alone but was accompanied by a Greenlandic Inuit who was a cameraman and who could speak freely with the Naukan people (Galkin 1931; Shokarev, *this issue*). If so, most of Rasmussen's photos in Chukotka might have been taken either by Rasmussen's Inuit companion Qaavigarsuaq (Miteq)<sup>3</sup> or by Rossmann's "young Eskimo" assistant Roy (see Nielsen, *this issue*), something Rasmussen never acknowledged.

#### ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLECTION

Apparently, during his short stay off East Cape (Cape Dezhnev), Rasmussen was able to obtain by trade or purchase some archaeological items excavated by local Yupiget residents. The collection of 168 specimens includes harpoon heads, stone harpoon blades, fish hooks, sinkers, a bladder mouthpiece, a drag-line handle, a bracer, sinew twisters, a needle case, a small ivory doll without arms or face, bird and bear figures, a toy ice pick, and other small

objects made out of ivory, antler, and baleen. Most of these items were described by Mathiassen (1927, 1930), lead archaeologist on the FTE. We have no other accounts of contemporary archaeological work in the area nor any specific information regarding the sites that had been dug up by local people. There is not even definitive proof that the objects were obtained in Chukotka rather than purchased in Nome, Teller, Little Diomedé, or Cape Prince of Wales during Rasmussen's contacts with the "Siberian Eskimo."

#### ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTION AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DENMARK

As of today, the NMD collection database displays no ethnographic items registered as "originated in Chukotka" and/or acquired from Rasmussen's collection "from Chukotka." This does not literally mean that there are no items from Chukotka, only that they are not registered as such. Nonetheless, the NMD Fifth Thule ethnographic collection contains some interesting Siberian items, including two engraved walrus tusks (K.816 and K.817) and a model of a dogsled. These were donated by Rasmussen's wife, Dagmar Rasmussen, in 1934. One of the tusks is depicted in Rasmussen (1934–1935:II) and is currently on display in the museum exhibit hall (see Bronshtein, *this issue*).

Although we cannot say with certainty that Rasmussen returned from his short trip to Chukotka empty-handed,<sup>4</sup> it seems unlikely that he brought with him a substantial number of ethnographic items directly from the area. In his travel account, he stated that he refrained from trading, as "it would be wise not to give reason to a conflict, taking the present conditions into account" (Rasmussen 2020:818). It is evident that Rasmussen purchased at least some of his Siberian objects in Alaska, most probably in Nome or Teller. The origins of the engraved walrus tusks (Fig. 4), including those that remain in the ownership of the family and have not been shown to the public, remain unknown. One more tusk that recently surfaced in another family collection could be direct evidence that he brought at least some items back with him from Siberia (Bronshtein, *this issue*). The tusk was most certainly produced in Uelen, where Rasmussen spent most of his time while in Chukotka (Igor Krupnik, pers. comm.).

An outstanding example of intercultural connections in the Bering Strait area is the woman's parka (P32.1) from the NMD Alaskan collection (P32, Fifth





Figure 4: Decorated walrus tusk that Rasmussen brought from Chukotka. Currently on display at the Danish National Museum (NMD #K.817). Photo by Søren Greve, National Museum of Denmark.

Thule Expedition) (Fig. 5b). The parka was worn by Arnarulunnguaq (Fig. 5a), Rasmussen’s female Inuit companion.<sup>5</sup> It was made of white-mottled skins from domestic reindeer, which were highly valued among Alaskan Inuit. Supposedly, the reindeer skins were bought from the Chukchi and later sewn together in Alaska (Schmidt 2014; Schmidt et al. 2013; see also the NMD skin clothing online catalog at <https://skinddragter.natmus.dk/>). The design of the parka may have been influenced by Christian missionaries, in that the length and evenly cut lower line (instead of the normal side vents) served to hide the woman’s thighs. White walrus tusk-like insertions of fat-cured caribou skin were inserted on both sides of the parka’s hood.

Nevertheless, most items listed under the FTE’s Siberian collection were acquired after the expedition returned to Denmark. In 1927, the NMD obtained an additional series of Chukotkan items from the Moscow Ethnographic Central-Museum (*Tsentral’nyi muzei narodov*), including a Chukchi women’s combination suit made of reindeer skin (K.607), described by Rasmussen during his journey to Chukotka (Fig. 6); a man’s parka (K.606) (Fig. 7); and man’s boots (K.608ab) (Fig. 8). Today, the Chukchi collection at the NMD features 43 items, though only a few might be connected to Rasmussen and his 1924 visit (Table 1, search made on June 5, 2020).

### “EUGEN ALEXANDER’S COLLECTION”: A NEW DIMENSION TO THE FIFTH THULE EXPEDITION LEGACY

#### THE EUGEN ALEXANDER SIBERIAN COLLECTION AT NMD

Whereas there are no “Chukotkan” ethnographic items in the NMD electronic catalog registered under Knud Rasmussen, his name is featured in connection with the so-called “Eugen Alexander’s Siberian collections” (K.1, K.2, and K.3). This is probably the most intriguing and the least-known aspect of Rasmussen’s ethnographic contribution to the NMD from Siberia. We know that he acquired these collections in 1927, three years after his return to Denmark, from Friederike Alexander, widow of German-born philanthropist and antique dealer Eugen Alexander, who resided for most of his life in St. Petersburg, Russia. Rasmussen purchased the objects with money he borrowed from the Carlsberg Foundation, and then donated the collection to the NMD as an “extension” of his FTE accessions.

The Eugen Alexander Siberian collections at NMD come from three major Indigenous groups: Gilyak (today’s Nivkh) (K.1), Yakut (Sakha) (K.2), and Samoyed (Nenets) (K.3). Altogether, they total 1,061 objects (Table 2). Of these, 136 items are men’s, women’s, and children’s clothing. It should be noted that paired objects (e.g., footwear and mittens) are counted as separate items. The clothing is made of tanned fish skin (from trout and salmon, mainly





*Figure 5a: Arnarulunnguaq in the Alaskan Inupiaq parka (NMD #P32.1). Photo by Leo Hansen, National Museum of Denmark (katnr03\_5\_thuleb\_008a).*

the Nivkh objects) and fur-bearing animals (reindeer, dog, wolverine, and others, mainly the Sakha and Nenets objects), as well as commercially produced textiles. Among the clothing there is a full Sakha male shaman's outfit, consisting of a skin coat with metal adornments, skin trousers and boots, a drum, and a drumstick. From the Nenets collection comes a woman's reindeer coat of reindeer skin, with insertions of dog skin and dyed woolen textile (Fig. 9), and a full set of female shaman's clothing, consisting of skin headgear, skin and textile coat, skin boots, and a drum and drumstick. The items can be studied, together with additional skin clothing in the NMD collection from other Siberian Indigenous people, Inuit



*Figure 5b: Inupiaq woman's parka made of reindeer skins, worn by Inughuit Fifth Thule Expedition member Arnarulunnguaq in the National Museum of Denmark collection (NMD P32.1). Photo by Roberto Fortuna, National Museum of Denmark.*

from Greenland, North America and Alaska, and Sámi from North Scandinavia, via a special website (<http://skinddragter.natmus.dk/>).

Besides the relatively few clothing items, most of the collections consist of items connected to household life and transportation, hunting, and crafts. Other items are categorized as personal adornments and bags, toys, amulets, and material samples (Table 2). The Nivkh collection includes tools for fishing (net, trap, hook, etc.) and hunting (dog harness, etc.), a textile tent, furniture, and vessels. A drum is counted as part of the amulets, and among the toys are small figures of dogs and a kayak. The Sakha collection includes saddles and other equestrian equipment, clothing patterns made of birch bark, and sewing tools, plus a substantial number of hand tools, a pair of skis, and food such as cakes and cheese. Among the amulets are so-called "shaman birds." The Nenets nomadic tent life is represented by pair of skis and a sled, tent poles, and furniture, as well as bags made of reindeer skin and textile. The Nenets collection also includes toys, among them some 60 duck-beak dolls with extra clothing (Fig. 10).



*Figure 6: Chukchi woman's combination suit of reindeer skin. National Museum of Denmark collection (NMD #K.607). Photo by Roberto Fortuna, National Museum of Denmark.*

#### ORIGIN OF THE EUGEN ALEXANDER COLLECTIONS

Although the collections bear the name of Eugen Alexander, it is evident that Alexander did not collect any of these items himself. They were reportedly acquired by a Russian researcher named Nikolas Vasilyev who worked at the Ethnographic Department of the Emperor Alexander III's Museum, today's Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (MAE) in St. Petersburg. Apparently, Alexander financed Vasilyev's travels, along with several other expeditions by the Russian Academy of Science (Jacobi 1925).

In 1907, Alexander reached an agreement with the MAE director, Vasili Radlov, that he would financially support the MAE operations and field expeditions in exchange for a portion of the ethnographic artifacts, especially from Siberia and Asiatic Russia, which were in high demand on the European art market (Korsun 2015; Soboleva 2008, 2013). Reportedly, Alexander was given collections from almost all Siberian ethnic groups between the Ural Mountains and Sakhalin Island, including (in German) Samojedon (today's Nenets), Wogulen (Mansi), Sojoten (Soyot), Karagassen (Karagas), Mongolen (Mongol), Burjaten (Buryat), Jenisseher (Ket), Jakuten



*Figure 7: Coastal Chukchi man's parka made of reindeer skin, National Museum of Denmark collection (NMD #K.606). Photo by Roberto Fortuna, National Museum of Denmark.*

(Sakha), Golde (Nanai), Giljaken (Nivkh), and Oroken (Orok) (Jacobi 1925), which he then tried to sell on the European art market.

The arrangement worked well until one of the MAE's scientific field collectors, Andrei V. Zhuravski, learned that his objects had been mislabeled as part of the Alexander collections and subsequently used for exchanges with other museums, resulting in a public scandal (Teryukov 2008).<sup>6</sup> Alexander reportedly tried to sell the collections in large blocks, but only two museums bought parts of them following an exhibition in Leipzig in 1909 (cf. Martin Schulz, Igor Krupnik, pers. comm., 10 June 2020). After Alexander's death in 1913, his widow, Friederike Alexander, finally gave a large part of the collections to the Dresden Museum.

Altogether, it seems that Alexander took with him to Europe more than 2,000 ethnographic items from various Siberian aboriginal groups. Today, traces of these collections can be found in European museums in Leipzig, Hamburg, Dresden ("a few hundred"), and Basel (around 250 Nenets objects) (Krupnik and Schultz 2019:24), as well as in the Peabody Museum at Harvard University in the United States and at the NMD in Copenhagen.

Apparently, after his return from the FTE, Rasmussen visited Friederike Alexander and negotiated to buy approximately 1,000 Siberian items for 8,000 Danish kroner (equivalent to about 284,000 Danish Kroner, or US\$46,000, today). After long negotiations, the Carlsberg Foundation agreed to grant Rasmussen a loan, which he had to pay back with a yearly amount of





*Figure 8: Pair of coastal Chukchi man's boots of sealskin, National Museum of Denmark collection (NMD #K.608a and 608b). Photo by Roberto Fortuna, National Museum of Denmark.*

720 Danish kroner. He managed to repay almost the entire loan before he passed away in 1933 (cf. note from the NMD, Inge Damm, pers. comm., 20 February 2019).

#### RASMUSSEN'S REASONS FOR PURCHASING THE EUGEN ALEXANDER COLLECTION

It is not entirely clear why Rasmussen pursued the Siberian ethnographic objects in the aftermath of the FTE. Perhaps he was motivated by his failure to spend more time in Russia and displeasure with the way the Russian authorities prevented him from studying Siberian connections with the North American and Greenlandic Inuit groups (cf. Fitzhugh et al. 2005:42). In fact, years later, Rasmussen was still trying to promote archaeological and anthropological research around Bering Strait. In his address to the Fifth Pacific Science Congress, written in 1933, the year of his death, he proposed an international archaeological project in Siberia and Alaska to investigate intercontinental cultural connections (Rasmussen 1934; see also Rusk and Fitzhugh 2005:10).

Rasmussen was certainly aware of, and might have been influenced by, the groundbreaking work of Danish

archaeologist and cultural geographer Aage Gudmund Hatt (1884–1960), who undertook a study of traditional Saami skin dress in Lapland that paved the way for his seminal doctoral thesis on the typology of Arctic skin clothing in Eurasia and North America (Hatt 1914, 1969). Perhaps, inspired by Hatt, Rasmussen was seeking further evidence to support his vision of cultural and linguistic connections across the circumpolar region. However, as Hans Christian Gulløv pointed out (pers. comm., 19 June 2020), Rasmussen was most interested in Inuit language and spiritual culture, and relied on Birket-Smith's advice when it came to ethnographic collecting. Birket-Smith, in turn, was influenced by Hatt, his fellow student under their mentor, Hans Peter Steensby (Høiris 1986:153–238, 384–386). Hence, Rasmussen could have sought Alexander's Siberian collection upon Birket-Smith's advice, with the aim of making it available for further study of Hatt's ideas about stylistic variations in circumpolar clothing.

Indeed, a substantial component of the ethnographic collections acquired as a result of the FTE consists of clothing. Cumulatively, items of clothing from the North American Inuit make up about 20% of the total collection (3,093 items; cf. Mathiassen 1945:110), whereas Siberian items from the Alexander collection comprise about 12%. However, the North American material was collected with precise information about provenance and cultural context, whereas far less information—especially regarding provenance—is available for Siberian objects in the Alexander collection, which therefore had less research potential.

According to Gulløv, Rasmussen's acquisition of Alexander's collections may rather be viewed as a compensational purchase, since he was unable to fulfill his dream of traveling across Arctic Siberia (Gulløv, pers. commun., 2019; Gulløv 2016). Rolf Gilberg, the former NMD curator of the Siberian collection, confirmed to us that Rasmussen's long-held intention was to continue the FTE across the northern edge of Siberia to study local Indigenous groups and to collect ethnographic items. When this plan became impossible, purchasing Siberian objects from Alexander was a way to fulfill his obligation to the National Museum (Gilberg, pers. comm., 2019). The collections purchased from Alexander thus served as a material "substitute" for fieldwork that was never done, due to the political impossibility of traveling in Russia. The actual content of such a substitute collection was of less significance; Rasmussen simply acquired what was then available on the market.

*Table 1: Ethnographic collection from Chukotka at the National Museum of Denmark (the “Chukchi collection”)*

Year	Accession	Name or institution, connected to accession	Classification of objects	Number
1845	?	T. Branth	Narcotics and stimulants	1
1883	Exchange	Adolf Erik Nordenskjöld	Hunting and trapping	4
			Utensils	2
			Three-dimensional art	3
1883	Exchange	Erland Nordenskjöld	Hunting and trapping	1
1911	Purchase from Vega Expedition	Hovgaard	Hunting and trapping	6
1911	Donation	Ole Olufsen	Garments	3
			Hunting and trapping	2
1913	Purchase	I. F. Umlauff	Hunting and trapping	3
1926	Purchase	Victor Jacobsen	Narcotics and stimulants	1
1927	Exchange	Moscow Ethnographic Central Museum	Garments	10
			Three-dimensional art	2
			Utensils	3
1934	Donation	Dagmar Rasmussen	Three-dimensional art	2

All numbers according to the National Museum of Denmark registration system Genreg (as of June 5, 2020). Garments are listed as two when a pair of boots is counted.

*Table 2: Eugen Alexander’s Siberian collections at the National Museum of Denmark*

People /OWC code	Inventory numbers	Total number of items	Clothing items	Household items, hand and hunting tools, personal decorations, transport items, toys, material samples, amulets etc.
Gilyak (Nivkh) / RX2	K.1-1 to K.1-191	220	33 items: 7 clothing for upper body (coats) 13 footwear (7 pairs) 13 minor clothing (3 pairs mitten, arm protection)	187 items: 58 household items 28 hunting tools 34 hand tools 13 toys 39 amulets, figures, and ornaments 15 material samples
Yakut (Sakha) / RV2	K.2-1 to K.2-408	478	67 items: 12 clothing for upper body (coats, shirts) 5 clothing for lower body 21 footwear (11 pairs) 29 minor clothing	411 items: 28 personal adornments, and bags 105 household items 14 hunting tools 94 hand tools 31 transport items 32 toys 22 amulets, religious items, and pipes 30 clothing patterns 55 material samples
Samoyed (Nenets) / RU4	K.3-1 to K.3-325	363	56 items: 11 clothing for upper body (parkas, coats, shirt, apron) 34 footwear (17 pairs) 11 minor clothing	307 items: 43 personal adornments, and bags 17 household items 23 hunting tools 27 hand tools 90 transport items 80 toys 2 amulets 25 material samples

Note: The calculation and categorization of objects was done using the NMD registration system, Genreg, by A. L. Schmidt (June 20, 2020). In the database, the Alexander collections number a total of 1,061 items. It should be noted that a few items that were not identified by the recent return registration are included in the count. Numbers are thus approximate and may not indicate the actual number of items present.



*Figure 9: Front (left) and rear (right) views of Nenets (Samoyed) woman's coat with sewn-on mittens in the Rasmussen/Eugen Alexander collection at the National Museum of Denmark (NMD # K.3-6). Reindeer skin, dog skin, and red, yellow, and black woolen textile. Photo by Roberto Fortuna, National Museum of Denmark.*



*Figure 10: Nenets (Samoyed) "duck-beak doll" dressed in full woman's winter coat (Rasmussen/Alexander collection, NMD #K.3-165a). Photo by Martin Appelt, NMD.*

## CONCLUSION: CLOSING THE INUIT CIRCLE

In Rasmussen's popular account of his journey across Arctic North America, which begins with a famous description of him standing on the slope of Cape Dezhnev, he writes that at that moment he was overwhelmed with joy because the expedition was complete (Rasmussen 2020:836). Yet Rasmussen was obviously not really satisfied with the results. As this article reveals, his search for intercontinental connections did not end after his return to Denmark. Rather, his trip to the East Cape and brief encounter with the local people of the Chukchi Peninsula in 1924 opened a new dimension of his study—cultural and linguistic connections across Bering Strait and, farther to the west, across the Russian Arctic.

This assumption challenges our traditional view of an expedition as a journey to a particular place, made for specific purposes, exploratory or scientific. In that sense, an expedition is a journey with a beginning and an end, and with a lifetime of its own, from the moment of departure until the expedition team returns home. Evidently, Rasmussen saw it differently. For him, the FTE and the work of exploration did not end upon his return to Denmark. Rather, it created new opportunities and continued via the collection of ethnographic objects. As he pointed out, "It is a comfort for any researcher [to know] that even the most comprehensive expedition never ends, but it is precisely through these investigations that new possibilities open up" (Rasmussen 1979:IV 293). Indeed, as with the Jesup North Pacific Expedition of 1897–1902 (Krupnik and Fitzhugh 2001), work on the collections and publications from the FTE continued over many years and contributed significantly to the Danish and European imagining of the North and the Inuit people. Although Rasmussen was unable to perform extensive anthropological studies in Chukotka and collected few relevant artifacts in situ, he managed to expand his study through the purchase of ethnographic collections relevant to the expedition's goals.

There is no doubt that what made the FTE exceptional, at least at the level of public awareness, was Rasmussen's captivating travel account, which introduced strange and remote places and peoples to a large European and American audience. Another factor was Rasmussen's pioneering work on collecting disappearing cultural forms (material and spiritual) related to the Inuit people. Although the collection of ethnographic and archaeologi-

cal objects during the FTE was mainly carried out by Kaj Birket-Smith and Therkel Mathiassen, Rasmussen also placed great emphasis on collecting, particularly from areas that Birket-Smith and Mathiassen did not visit—such as among the Netsilik Inuit (*Netsilingmiut*) (where he collected important amulets), in the land of the Inuinnait (see Griebel et al., *this issue*), the Mackenzie River delta, and farther west into Alaska and Chukotka (Hastrup 2010:259–261).

Following the pattern of Boasian scientific ethnographic collecting that prevailed in his era, Rasmussen endeavored "to document all facets of life as it appeared and was used by the people" (Rasmussen 1921:59; 1925–1926:II 56–61), which included collecting everything from needles to kayaks. An expedition like the FTE, as he argued, would give the NMD "an absolute[ly] unique collection among the world's Arctic museums, [and] a position, it deserves, due to Denmark's position within Arctic research" (Rasmussen 1921:60). Indeed, the considerable collection of Arctic ethnographic objects at NMD (over 15,000 items), primarily amassed under Rasmussen's leadership, together with archaeological objects from the North American Arctic, has supported further research on Inuit cultures in Greenland (Larsen 2007:28ff) and the Canadian Arctic (see Griebel et al., *this issue*). Together with texts, word lists, language recordings, songs, and photographs, it provides an important record of Arctic peoples' historical, linguistic and cultural ties, their spiritual and social life, and their cultural adaptations.

To this day, the legacy of the FTE continues to serve not only as a key contribution to Arctic cultural studies but also—by supporting Inuit connections around the Arctic Circle—as an important foundation for international cooperation in science.

## NOTES

1. In the Danish original: "*Det fjerne Maal yderst mod Vest var East Cape, Alaskas nogle Genbo paa den anden Side Bering Strædet, hvor Asien begynder*" (Rasmussen 1932:63). Translated by Daria Schwalbe. All translations from Danish are made by the authors.
2. During the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle, several tinted lithographic postcard photos taken by Nome photographer Frank H. Nowell were sold, including a few featuring Siberian Yupigiet people of Chukotka. Rasmussen most certainly



knew of them and could have used them for his description of Siberian Native clothing styles; we are grateful to one of our reviewers for this comment.

3. The question of whether Rasmussen was accompanied to Chukotka by Qaavigarsuaq has been somewhat controversial. Rasmussen never stated that he took Qaavigarsuaq with him to Siberia. Yet, given that Galkin (1931) describes the cameraman as “Greenlandic,” one would assume that Qaavigarsuaq was there and took the photos (see Kleist, *this issue*).
4. The archaeological collection from the East Cape at the NMD suggests that Rasmussen might have returned with at least some archaeological items, plus five decorated walrus tusks (Bronshstein, *this issue*). We also know from his account that he met with local traders and Chukchi elders while in Uelen. In his travel account he acknowledged, “for the most part the [Soviet] police did not put obstacles in my way, so I was able to go where I pleased and speak with whomever I wished, for the roughly 18 hours, I spent on land” (Rasmussen 2020:823).
5. We do not know whether Arnarulunnguaq owned the parka, but she is depicted wearing it in a photograph from Nome (Fig. 5). The introductory note to this part of the collection at the NMD states:

Items from Northern Alaska and the Asian Eskimos (East Cape). (“Collected by Knud Rasmussen 1924. All items, the provenance of which is not specifically stated, with the exception of nos. 1–4, originate from a purchased collection; by the nature of the items, from the northern part of Alaska”). P32.1. Female fur of white, speckled reindeer skin with the hair side out etc. (Danish National Museum’s archives, Items from Northern Alaska and the Asian Eskimos [East Cape], P32)

6. Andrei V. Zhuravski collected primarily among the Nenets, Komi, and Russian Old Believers in the northeastern part of European Russia (Pechora River and Bolshezemelskaya tundra), but also among the Khanty (Ostyak) and Nenets of the Tobolsk region. Alexander took a significant portion of Zhuravski’s collection to Germany in 1909 for an exhibition at the Ethnographic Museum in Leipzig and later offered it for sale. Some of the items were later repurchased by the Ethnographic Department of the Russian Museum (today’s Russian Ethnographic Museum), which led to the discovery that part of the collection was actually

made by Zhuravsky, provoking the scandal (Korsun 2015:235–238; Teryukov 2008:96–97).

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