

## CHAPTER 10

# Gustaf Nordenskiöld and the Mesa Verde

## Settler Colonial Disconnects and Finnish Colonial Legacies<sup>1</sup>

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Suddenly the forest thins, and in a moment, the most grand and peculiar sight spreads itself before the eyes of the rider. We stand at the edge of a precipice. In the cañon wall directly facing us on the other side, in the depths of a high-vaulted grotto, a confusion of towers and walls rise up out of gravel piles. This is “Cliff Palace”.<sup>2</sup>

Revealing his penchant for the dramatic, this is how Gustaf Nordenskiöld, a young and aspiring Swedish-Finnish scientist, narrates his arrival on the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde, Colorado, in early July 1891 (Figure 10.1).

Reaching these old Puebloan (often referred to as Anasazi) ruins in southern Colorado, Nordenskiöld sees an opportunity for scientific discovery and potential fame. And he grasps it. He stops his world tour and sets up an excavation process for the summer, canvasses the area

### **How to cite this book chapter:**

Lahti, Janne. “Gustaf Nordenskiöld and the Mesa Verde: Settler Colonial Disconnects and Finnish Colonial Legacies.” In *Finnish Settler Colonialism in North America: Rethinking Finnish Experiences in Transnational Spaces*, edited by Rani-Henrik Andersson and Janne Lahti, 259–283. AHEAD: Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/AHEAD-2-11>.



**Figure 10.1:** Cliff Palace, Mesa Verde, Colorado. Photo by Gustaf Nordenskiöld, 1891. Finnish Heritage Agency, VKK420:1. Released under CC BY 4.0. <https://www.finna.fi/Record/museovirasto.1E8D48A435C25E4B9B2D6EEDBE14ABE8>.

for more discoveries, and starts writing of his adventures and findings. Moving fast, Nordenskiöld hires workers to dig and prepares items for shipments to Sweden amid controversy and strife, as local settlers start questioning his actions.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the year, Nordenskiöld had over 600 Indigenous artefacts and human remains removed overseas to Northern Europe. Most of those items remain in Finland today, in the collections of the National Museum. The museum did return approximately 10% of the articles to the Pueblo peoples in the US Southwest in September 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Son of the famous polar explorer Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld, Gustaf was a Swedish citizen with Finnish parentage as both of his parents had been born on the lands that had become the Grand Duchy of Finland in the Russian Empire. His father had earned his doctorate at the Imperial Alexander University (present-day University of

Helsinki), before his anti-tsarist views made him a political refugee, forced to flee Finland to Sweden.<sup>5</sup> Growing up in Sweden, Gustaf often visited his maternal grandparents, the prominent Mannerheim family, at Louhisaari, in the vicinity of Turku. By 1889, Gustaf had earned a bachelor's degree in mineralogy and chemistry at Uppsala University and was keen to follow in his father's footsteps. Both he and Adolf Erik wanted this. Gustaf prepared to start his doctoral studies and explored Spitsbergen in 1890, while his father eyed funding and government support for an expedition to Antarctica, with Gustaf in the lead. Gustaf was a mere 22-year-old with a bright future, but he was also battling tuberculosis. Seeking the popular travel cure in healthier climates for his illness, Gustaf embarked on a world tour, or what was supposed to be a world tour but was cut short by Mesa Verde. Unaware of what awaited him, Gustaf went for tourist look-see, a small detour from Denver on his way to San Francisco and Yokohama, Japan. But at Cliff Palace he made his tour into a scientific expedition. He studied and excavated Mesa Verde ruins for several months, writing and publishing of his findings and exploits in newspapers and scientific publications. He saw a void in the scientific and exploratory record and sought to fill it.

Gustaf Nordenskiöld was a transient outsider with seemingly no direct role in the settlement of the US Southwest and the dispossession of its Indigenous peoples. He was unconnected with the settlers or the Indigenous peoples on a personal level. Yet, his decision to excavate, build a scientific collection of Indigenous artefacts and human remains, ship it abroad to Northern Europe, and publish on his exploits globally did not exist outside the processes of settler colonial conquest and replacement. Indeed, Nordenskiöld tied in with settler colonialism in several ways, albeit his experiences and narratives showcase disconnects as much as connections. Importantly, his actions and the fate of his collection created a lasting connection for Finland with US settler colonialism. Yet, this is generally overlooked in Finnish discussions as Finland has sought to disconnect itself from being implicated in any kind of colonialism. In 2019, when the repatriation process was announced, media comments hurried to claim that Finland had nothing to apologize for as Nordenskiöld did not break any laws and had only acted as was customary at the time. In this manner the 21st-century Finland created distance from Nordenskiöld and the colonialism associated with his actions.<sup>6</sup>

Arguably, the 19th-century US settler conquest and takeover provided Nordenskiöld with access to these Ute, Pueblo, Navajo, and Jicarilla Apache lands. Mesa Verde is located on what used to be an overlapping borderlands zone of Indigenous sovereignty, but by 1891 the area was subordinated to US rule, with Indigenous peoples pushed to reservations and subject to forced assimilation.<sup>7</sup> Settler colonialism thus made the lands available for Nordenskiöld's perusal. In other words, settler expansion had "tamed" the Natives so that European science could make sense of the region's past. Moreover, Nordenskiöld's excavation and knowledge production, in turn, was one of the many practices of settler colonialism, showcasing a form of Indigenous elimination. When writing about his exploits, the Indigenous past, and settler colonial present of the US Southwest, Nordenskiöld advanced conceptual displacement, the substitution of Indigenous pasts and knowledge with linear and modern settler histories. His excavations and writings propagated a disconnect of dead civilizations, vanishing Indigenous presents, and empty lands, ripe for settler colonialism to "discover" and make sense of. For Nordenskiöld, the settlers were greedy exploiters, eternal outsiders whose right to the Mesa Verde site was unfounded. Those who had once inhabited the Mesa Verde, Nordenskiöld viewed as static objects belonging in a dead past. While encountering contemporary Native peoples, such as Navajos, Utes and Hopis, or when identifying the latter (whom he called Mokis) as descendants of the Mesa Verde people, Nordenskiöld saw cultural deterioration and regression, severed connections, and vanishing relics of the past. In short, while writing of the Mesa Verde, he distanced from each other the contemporary Indigenous peoples, the history of the site and those who once occupied it, as well as the local white settlers. He also distanced himself, or actually put himself above all these others as a man of knowledge, a scholar operating on a global canvas of exploration and science.

This chapter tracks settler colonialism as a structure shaping individual experiences and mindsets as well as individual engagement with those settler colonial framings. It looks at disconnects and connections at various points in these settler colonial histories Nordenskiöld funneled and promulgated; in his narrations of Indigenous past and presents, in his views of local settlers, and between the processes of colonial looting and their ongoing connections. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section briefly outlines the transimperial world

of empires, where Gustaf operated as a man of science and exploration. The second and third sections focus on Gustaf's experiences and writings in the American West. I will address his movement in the Southwest and his views of local white settlers and Indigenous peoples, those narrations of discovery, and the ruptures shaping Nordenskiöld's taking and exporting of Indigenous artefacts in the name of science. The final section brings the story to the present day, on colonial amnesia, durabilities, and legacies, to the questions of repatriation and Finnish self-perceptions of historical colonial involvement and complicity.

### Transimperial Lives of Discovery

By the 1890s exploration had become an obsession in the Western world. Used for national aims, it stood as a fiercely competitive enterprise used to measure the civilizational capacity and energy of nations and peoples.<sup>8</sup> Exploration and science closely linked with national prestige and honor on the one hand and on personal narratives of adventure and danger on the other. The era's heroes were made by empire. They lived, breathed, and wrote empire. Older explorers like Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama assumed mythic status in the European mind, "serving," historian Dane Kennedy notes, "as the harbinger of Europe's triumphal entry onto the world stage."<sup>9</sup> Each nation sought and produced their own explorers to honor and celebrate in books, monuments, and other commemorations. The British hailed James Cook, Richard Francis Burton, or David Livingstone, the Germans Alexander von Humboldt, and Americans began to revere Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Explorers harbored iconic importance to the countries that claimed them as their own.

Coexisting with this ethos stressing competition between nations was the fact that explorers lived extremely transimperial lives. Their lived experience transcended the space of any single empire or nation, and they actively partook in interimperial circulations of peoples and commodities and transfers of knowledge production. They in fact functioned as mobile transmitters of knowledge. As they regularly crossed imperial boundaries they collected and distributed artefacts and wrote to global audiences. In this process, they were preoccupied, immersed, and contributing to what historians Christoph Kamissek and Jonas Kreienbaum have called the "imperial cloud." This "cloud" was a global shared reservoir of knowledge, practices, and norms that

was not bound to a single empire, and which drew from multiple professions, nationalities, and classes of peoples on the move in the world made of entangled, competing, and cooperating empires.<sup>10</sup>

Navigating this global order were people like Gustaf Nordenskiöld and his family, who aspired to personal, national, and global fame through discovery and scientific knowledge. Gustaf's motivation to utilize Mesa Verde stemmed from his aspiration to live up to his family reputation, expectations that must have been considerable as his father, Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld, was still basking in a global spotlight. Adolf had gained fame with his successful maiden voyage of discovery through the fabled Northeast Passage in 1879–1880 and the subsequent world tour on his return to Sweden. This dramatic voyage, during which ten months was spent stuck in ice in the Bering Strait, was followed intensively in Sweden, in Finland, and around the world. It captured the attention and the imagination of peoples of different classes. The elder Nordenskiöld was considered a national hero, both Swedes and Finns making claims on his achievements. The king of Sweden made him a baron in 1880, while the following year he dined as an honored guest of the Russian tsar at St. Petersburg. He received numerous decorations and honorary memberships in international scientific societies, and in 1893 Adolf was appointed into the Swedish Academy.<sup>11</sup>

Being an explorer and a man of science meant publishing an assortment of texts. It was what one did to build a reputation as a scientist as well as a public hero. All the famous explorers did so in the Victorian world. For example, the British explorer Richard Francis Burton put out as many writings as a small publishing house. His famed exploits to Mecca disguised as a Muslim pilgrim and his search for the source of the Nile resulted in thick volumes of texts.<sup>12</sup> Following his Congo expedition, Henry Morton Stanley also immediately released a volume of his exploits that was quickly translated into numerous languages, even in Finnish.<sup>13</sup> Disseminating information and techniques of representation to global audiences was also Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld's book on the discovery of the Northeast Passage. Published in 1881, *Vegas färd kring Asien och Europe* (The Voyage of the Vega round Asia and Europe) became a bestseller, with translated editions released in several countries. Testifying to the practical value of exploratory publications, during his US trip Gustaf repeatedly asked his father to send copies of the *Vega* book to people who aided him in his Mesa Verde

excavations. Gustaf used his father's book as currency, as a gesture of appreciation and good will toward those helpful and useful to his own interests.

While the elder Nordenskiöld published extensively on his exploits, he instilled these ideas on his son too. Gustaf had already written a scientific report on his exploits to Spitsbergen right after his return from the Arctic islands in 1890. He knew that if he were to follow in his father's footsteps he needed to take advantage of any opportunities that presented themselves, even if by accident as in Mesa Verde. These ruins would ideally serve as vehicles for advancing his career, for making claims as a respectable scientist and as a Victorian man of knowledge and an explorer. They would be a stepping-stone for further exploits, a beginning for making a name for oneself and building a reputation in the world of exploration.

Gustaf took full advantage of his Mesa Verde excavations. He wrote different kinds of publications, serving different ends and catering to different audiences. Some of his personal letters were published in the newspaper *Stockholms Dagblad*,<sup>14</sup> while his scientific articles were released in Swedish journals in 1892. His travel memoir *Från Fjärran Västern: Minnen från Amerika* by G. Nordenskiöld was also released the same year by a Stockholm publisher.<sup>15</sup> It narrated day-to-day adventures in an exotic land of the American West, featuring Colorado and the Grand Canyon country of northern Arizona. It depicted Gustaf's personal encounters with nature and the Indigenous inhabitants of the area. A prolific writer, Gustaf wasted no time in releasing his major scientific opus in Swedish and in English in 1893, *The Cliff Dwellers of the Mesa Verde, Southwestern Colorado. Their Pottery and Implements*. Here Gustaf had come up with a meticulous, highly detailed, and well-illustrated monograph on the subject of his excavations that became the authoritative reference on the Mesa Verde cultures and remains much cited even today.<sup>16</sup>

In his writings, Nordenskiöld grasped for scientific authority and also tried to brand himself as an adventurer, entering a fabled destination wrapped in mystery. Gustaf's writings and the publicity surrounding his excavations installed Mesa Verde as a stop in the "imperial adventure circuit," to borrow terminology from historian Andrew Offenburger, that covered plenty of ground from African safaris and Egyptian pyramids, to lost treasures in Latin America.<sup>17</sup>





**Figure 10.2:** Gustaf Nordenskiöld, in Stockholm, 1887. Finnish Heritage Agency, HK19701231x:30. Released under CC BY 4.0. <https://www.finna.fi/Record/museovirasto.611A5362264B8C873F12F6B0F42A049A>.

Further participating in the global imperial culture of exploration, and promoting his findings and career, in 1892 Gustaf, together with his father, partook in the Columbian Historical Exposition in Madrid. Honoring the 400th anniversary of Columbus and his discovery of America, the exposition presented a massive collection of Americana, with over 250,000 pieces from dozens of nations showcased by their leading scholars. Gustaf went with his Mesa Verde materials: the photographs he had taken, artefacts, and the models he had built of the cliff dwellings. He left with a gold medal and a rising international reputation. Next year, the Chicago Columbian Exposition featured some of Nordenskiöld's Mesa Verde photographs and numerous items from the site, as well as miniature replicas of some of the houses. Nordenskiöld, however, did not attend.<sup>18</sup> He had continued pursuing a PhD in mineralogy, devoting his time to research. He also got married in 1893 and started a family. All was cut short, however, by the return of



tuberculosis symptoms in 1894. Gustaf Nordenskiöld died on June 6, 1895, just shy of his 27th birthday.<sup>19</sup>

## Discovery in the Wilderness

“It was my intention to spend about one week in Mancos Cañon. That week has now gone by, and I have decided to extend my stay to one or two months.” This is how Gustaf Nordenskiöld informed his father on July 2, 1891, of his changed plans. He wrote of having made a wonderful discovery of old abandoned dwellings “on a high cliff shelf,” upon which “I decided to excavate.” After spending two days “digging,” his findings were such that Gustaf changed all his travel plans in an instant. He hurriedly informed his father and asked for more money to hire a crew of diggers and buy equipment. He had decided to put together a world-class Mesa Verde collection of his own.<sup>20</sup>

Upon entering the US Southwest, Gustaf Nordenskiöld positioned himself as an outsider. A temporary visitor, he was one of many who came to the Southwest for his health. Travel cure was common for tuberculosis at the time, promoting the healing effect of a change in climate. Whether it was the dry mountain air of Colorado, the high deserts of northern Arizona and New Mexico, or the oceanic warmth of California, all ranked high in the travel itinerary of tubercular patients. Traversing the Southwest on his way to San Francisco seemed like a logical choice for Gustaf’s health. But Mesa Verde was not part of his initial plans. Writing to his father on March 7, 1891, from Italy, Gustaf confirmed that he intended to head to Chicago, Denver, Yellowstone National Park, and San Francisco before embarking for Yokohama, Shanghai, Canton, and British India, and then heading home via Suez.<sup>21</sup> When penning this, Gustaf was already on the road in Europe, seeking a cure first in Berlin, then in Rome. Next up were Naples, Marseille, Paris, and Antwerp, before sailing to New York.

Yet, there was another side to Nordenskiöld’s trip all along. Arriving to the US in May 1891, he expressed a keen interest in phosphate mining with an intent both to collect some samples and to write of his findings in South Carolina, Florida, and Kentucky (Mammoth Cave). Thus, excavation, collecting, and writing/publishing were part of Gustaf’s journey all along, reflecting his exploratory mindset and readiness. Mesa Verde simply magnified the scope of those possibilities. Leaving Chicago, Gustaf reached Denver in late June. He visited librar-

ies and museums, witnessing a Mesa Verde collection on display at the local historical society. Gustaf got interested, especially after talking with Alice Eastwood, a local teacher and future famed botanist, who had visited Mesa Verde. She also knew the local experts, the Wetherill family, from whose efforts the collection in Denver originated.<sup>22</sup> The Wetherills were ranchers who had carved a side-business of escorting people to the Mesa Verde ruins and of gathering artefacts into collections. They had the indispensable local knowledge Gustaf could not do without. And they had the willingness to guide and provide labor that Gustaf's endeavor needed. As Gustaf departed Denver for Mesa Verde on June 30, he wrote to his father in Sweden that he went to look for "crania and artifacts."<sup>23</sup>

Since the late 1880s, the Wetherills had dug at Mesa Verde, escorted people there, and worried that tourists would destroy the site. They had written several letters trying to interest the Smithsonian Institution in excavating the ruins and of turning the area into a national park, which would have made it one of the earliest national parks in the country. But their writings worked to little avail, possibly because of a lack of available funds.<sup>24</sup> Mesa Verde had already reached some public notice in the 1870s as members of Ferdinand V. Hayden's survey party visited some of the cliff dwellings.<sup>25</sup> The publicity that resulted from their writings, however, did not lead to increased scientific or government interest. Acknowledging previous efforts, while highlighting the unprecedented scientific caliber of his own engagement, Gustaf wrote to his father how these earlier scientists in the 1870s "noted the existence of some ruins, and that was about all," with only a few items being collected and some pictures taken. In all, those who had visited the ruins before him had come up with "a rather incomplete knowledge of the appearance and extent of these remarkable ruins," in Gustaf's estimation. For the most part, he continued, the collecting had been "handled only by cowboys and dilettantes." While the former had put together an impressive collection on display in Denver, Norden-skiöld further stressed the unprecedented nature of his diggings when stating that neither "the Smithsonian nor any museum in Europe has any collection from the cliff ruins of Colorado." He also emphasized that the earlier findings "have not been described in writing." Museums and writings, two hallmarks of public and scientific engagement with the past, were missing from Mesa Verde. Gustaf sought to stress the unused scientific potential of the ruins and wanted to make the

most of it when marketing his plans to his father. He also stressed that he would not sell any of the items he collected in the US, but would bring them home to Europe, for the honor of the scientific community there.<sup>26</sup> His was the kind of science that took from other people's lands, without permission or moral squabbles, and used it to the benefit of his personal and national aims. In short, it was very much what colonial science did.

Eager to move fast, Gustaf asked his father to hurry with sending more money so he could hire people and equipment to start the diggings in earnest. As he planned his moves, Gustaf's thinking connected a number of important "firsts": of scientific excavation, major collection in a major museum in Europe, and proper published academic studies. Starting the diggings in July 1891, he downplayed the recent visit to the ruins by the American author, traveler, mountaineer, and self-trained archeologist Frederick H. Chapin. Chapin had already published a popular article on the Mesa Verde in the *American Antiquarian* in 1890. By the time he wrote his main publication *The Land of the Cliff-Dwellers*, published in 1892, Gustaf certainly knew of Chapin and called one plateau of the ruins "Chapin's Mesa." Yet, he also referred to Chapin's earlier contribution as "a short paper," although the first to publish "any description of the more important ruins of the Mesa Verde."<sup>27</sup> So, while Nordenskiöld recognized Chapin, he did not consider his work to be of the same scientific pedigree as his own. Gustaf seemed determined in highlighting the uniqueness and superiority of his own efforts.

Gustaf Nordenskiöld went to work methodologically. He made site plans, penned voluminous notes, and organized the objects by numbering and naming them. His crew of diggers worked meticulously when going through the different cliff houses they were investigating (Figure 10.3). As Gustaf made sketches of the architecture and artefacts, his workers vigilantly excavated, in search of submerged treasures. Also, once having secured a camera, Gustaf took over 240 photographs of his findings, the excavation process, and the area.<sup>28</sup>

As a scientist and adventurer, Nordenskiöld sought to find value and meaning in Mesa Verde as a treasure trove lost to time and disconnected from the surrounding settler society and its civilization. He narrates a discovery, a forgotten mysterious place, an out-of-the-way corner of the United States. The Mesa Verde ruins "lie in the wilderness, quite far from settlements of white men."<sup>29</sup> The place was dif-



**Figure 10.3:** Nordenskiöld's crew members, Alfred and John Wetherill, taking a break from excavation at Chapin's Mesa. Photo by Gustaf Nordenskiöld. Finnish Heritage Agency, VKK420:8. Released under CC BY 4.0. <https://www.finna.fi/Record/museovirasto.475104C583D82F7A729213401F127153>.

ficult to reach and out of the usually traversed paths. Gustaf further stressed the aspects of discovery. “There was no railway to the west from Durango,” he added, traversing by horseback and in a buggy, leaving behind several settlements and “their patches of cultivated ground.” In all, he, as a true explorer, had entered a massive abyss of canyons and plateaus, and extensive plains.<sup>30</sup> Evidently Gustaf felt the pull of a free and mobile life, of being out in the wilds and conducting explorations in these—he noted—“desolate places of the Far West.”<sup>31</sup> He applied a similar rhetoric to the broader Southwest. Before heading

home to Sweden, Gustaf traversed to the Grand Canyon, narrating to his readers how he took a long trip on horseback “through this wilderness, only seldom visited by the white man.”<sup>32</sup>

## Vanishing Natives and Disruptive Settlers

“Nordenskiöld Imprisoned in America. A telegram from Colorado to New York Herald tells that the naturalist, candidate Kustaa Nordenskiöld, the son of the famed traveler, who is currently exploring the cave-dwellings on Indian lands in Utah, has been imprisoned for the theft of ancient artefacts.”<sup>33</sup> This is how a local newspaper in eastern Finland reported on October 9, 1891, as Gustaf and his Mesa Verde exploits quickly became global news.

Nordenskiöld entered the US Southwest just as the region was emerging from decades-long wars against independent Ute, Navajo, and Apache groups. The US had conquered the area through destructive campaigns targeting whole societies and their livelihoods. But by 1891 sovereign Indigenous groups no longer existed as all were forced to live in a state of US occupation.<sup>34</sup> Not only was Gustaf aware of these histories of violence around him; these notions of past adventure and mayhem shaped his views of the region and his own mission. He, for one, played with the idea of ongoing potential Indigenous savagery when writing half-seriously to his cousin that on his upcoming trip to the Indian country of Arizona in November, “I will be accompanied by a party of 5 men, so that my scalp remains relatively secure. For safety’s sake, I have gotten my hair cut quite short, so that the value of my scalp will be more problematic.”<sup>35</sup> Gustaf’s appearance on this trip reflected much the same. “Bright brass cartridges wrapped around our waists like belts, and large-caliber revolvers hung from our sides. Winchester repeater rifles slung by the saddles completed our weaponry.”<sup>36</sup> Exactly whom he thought he was up against is a mystery. Perhaps the Wetherills made their European quest more amusing by allowing Gustaf to live out his western fantasies.

When Gustaf saw contemporary Native Americans as dangerous savages, he made their present irrelevant, as people who only have meaning and importance in relation to past violence and wars. In this way, Gustaf excluded the Indigenous peoples of the area from the modern world. Their presence and futures hardly matter. In short, Gustaf did what most Hollywood films ended up doing some decades later:

keeping the Indians locked in the past. In the process, Gustaf painted them as a threat now ceased due to civilized efforts and men like himself. For example, as Nordenskiöld narrated stories of past violent clashes between Indigenous peoples and whites he gave the hostility of the local Indians as one of the reasons why no previous excavations had been conducted at Mesa Verde. He told his father that luckily “now they [the Indians] are quite docile,” as this allows him to dig at Mesa Verde.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, while at once exaggerating the dangers for the sake of thrills, Nordenskiöld also acknowledged that settler colonial expansion had created suitable conditions for his scientific endeavors. Settler expansion had already quelled the purportedly wild Natives so that European science could make sense of the region’s past.

While the United States sought to contain Native peoples in reservations within the federal system, the settler project typically depicted Natives as backward and timeless peoples, stuck in a premodern condition and destined to either vanish in the face of settler civilization or to assimilate with the help of the whites.<sup>38</sup> Writing in this framing, Nordenskiöld marginalized Indigenous voices and ontologies of place and space and replaced them with an authoritative settler voice, the voice of a European scientist. He saw contemporary Indians eventually disappearing, for example, when noting that “Like most of the North American tribes the Ute Indians are rapidly dying out, and form but the last remnant of a once great and powerful nation.”<sup>39</sup> While Gustaf painted the Indigenous peoples he met as ubiquitous others destined to vanish, he expressed typical settler colonial narratives built around the elimination of Natives and their replacement with settlers.<sup>40</sup>

The trope of the vanishing Native was coupled with ideas of cultural deterioration, a fundamental disconnect between the peoples who had once lived at the Mesa Verde houses, before they were abandoned hundreds of years prior to Nordenskiöld’s arrival, and those Natives who now occupied the surrounding areas. Gustaf advanced the notion that the Hopis (whom he calls Mokis, a variant of the then popular term Moqui used by outsiders) were the descendants of those who had once lived at Mesa Verde, although he saw the condition of the Indians as a sign of regression. Like those at Mesa Verde, the Hopis had stone houses, albeit considerably poorer ones, in Nordenskiöld’s estimation. And they also showed skills in pottery, as had the residents of Mesa Verde all those centuries ago. But here too the Hopis were no match for their predecessors, Nordenskiöld rated.<sup>41</sup> The notion of disconnect



is embodied in this deterioration. The Natives of Nordenskiöld's day proved far inferior to those who came before them at Mesa Verde, the connections between them being lost. This is also how settler colonialism works in practice. It not only claims the Natives will vanish, but belittles the "tamed" Native in the present in order to explain the substitution of the Native with the settler.

As Nordenskiöld made contemporary Indigenous people appear irrelevant and detached from their Mesa Verde heritage, it was the white settlers who proved to be his biggest irritation and obstacles. By summer's end, Gustaf had packed his first findings in crates and barrels and hauled them by wagon to Durango for shipment east and then overseas to Sweden. In September, Gustaf returned to Durango with another load of materials. Yet, now he heard that the first shipment had been impounded by local authorities and that the railroad refused to send this new batch. Next, he was arrested.<sup>42</sup> The strife boiled down to the location of his diggings, removal of items abroad, and the question of human remains.

Trouble had brewed since August, when the federal Indian Agent for the Southern Utes had issued posters that called for a \$1000 fine for foreigners entering the reservation without a permit. Yet, Nordenskiöld quickly obtained a permit from a local army garrison, but it carried "the inconvenient addendum that 'this pass do not include any right of making excavations on the ruins,'" as Gustaf admitted to his father. Yet, Gustaf basically chose to ignore this stipulation restricting his activities and continued the excavations. He also became much more evasive. Gustaf explained to his father somewhat confusingly the exact times when he had been inside the reservation and when not, and what exactly he had permission to do there. Moreover, he assured his father that he had been promised by an "influential acquaintance" that he would not be bothered as long as "no ruins were destroyed."<sup>43</sup>

Rushing to take as much as he could, Nordenskiöld continued to be ambiguous on locations of his excavation sites. In a letter to his mother before all the troubles began with the locals, he acknowledged that the site he was then digging "lies within an Indian reservation."<sup>44</sup> In reality, the reservation boundaries remained rather contested. The large Southern Ute reservation had been cut and reduced by settler gold rushes and treaties in the 1870s, with further land losses to settlers, allotments, and disputes active by the time of Gustaf's visit.

Meanwhile, locals fumed that Nordenskiöld was destroying the famous ruins, stealing as much as he could and taking it abroad. The settlers wanted him stopped. Gustaf wrote how locals “have begun to oppose my excavation” in ways “that makes it desirable for me to soon leave this area.” He scorned that settlers would rather let the local cowboys and miners, meaning amateurs in search of profit, dig as they pleased than have foreign scientists and explorers take anything.<sup>45</sup> In a letter to his cousin, Gustaf went as far as suggesting that some of the locals contemplated lynching him for stealing the ruins.<sup>46</sup>

With hostile settlers closing in, Nordenskiöld painted his work as that of removing precious artefacts to safety from the pawns of the greedy and ignorant locals. With the help of powerful friends and diplomatic aid, Gustaf was swiftly released from jail, and by early October his case was dismissed in the local court. He had broken no laws as taking artefacts out of the country was not illegal.<sup>47</sup> Yet, his actions continued to irritate local settlers, especially as there was still the open question of human remains. When acquitted by the courts, some officials understood that Gustaf was not to keep any human remains for himself and to take them from the country. The Ute agent stated that there had been complaints on the matter from the Indigenous peoples too. Human remains proved the most sensitive matter, and Gustaf knew he was taking away the remains of the ancestors of those Pueblo Indians who continued to live in the area. Much earlier, the Wetherills and Chapin had already also witnessed Ute protests over the excavating of human remains from Mesa Verde.<sup>48</sup>

Based on his actions and correspondence, Nordenskiöld chose to ignore these criticisms. He was determined to finish quickly and get his precious items “away from the claws of the Yankees,” as he wrote.<sup>49</sup> Gustaf’s inventory to his father from October 22 shows the presence of several skeletons and bones in his shipments, and he openly discussed gravesites and the well-preserved skeletons in his article published in 1892. His *Cliff Dwellers* book even had a whole appendix on the human remains he had excavated, with illustrations and all.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, when Gustaf was already back in Stockholm, the Wetherills apparently mailed him more human remains from Mesa Verde.<sup>51</sup>

In all, Gustaf Nordenskiöld took to Sweden an estimated 600–800 Mesa Verde items, sending out, in his own calculations, some 1,400 pounds of materials.<sup>52</sup> On October 23, he expressed his satisfaction

with what he had pulled off: “My collections will travel ever so calmly home to Sweden, and everything is once again in the best of order.”<sup>53</sup>

## Colonial Heritage

“After more than 100 years in a museum in Finland, the ancestral remains of Native American tribes that once called the cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde National Park home are coming back to Southwest Colorado.” Thus announced the local southern Colorado newspaper in October 2019, celebrating the homecoming of these remains precious to the Pueblo peoples. “The news has been lauded by Native American tribes, who can finally put to rest their ancestors who were disturbed all those years ago. And, it sends a message of hope that other remains out there, scattered across the globe, can one day return,” the paper continued.<sup>54</sup> A week earlier, on October 2, 2019, the US and Finnish governments had announced the return of Indigenous ancestral remains and artefacts from the Mesa Verde Collection at the National Museum of Finland. The announcement accompanied a presidential meeting between Donald Trump of the United States and Sauli Niinistö of Finland. It took close to 130 years for the return to happen, and even now actually only some 10% of the whole collection has been given back. This meant about 60 items, of which 22 were human remains.

Once back in Stockholm by New Year’s Day 1892, Gustaf Nordenskiöld used his Mesa Verde collection for preparing his publications and for the exhibition in Madrid. He wanted to place the items in a Scandinavian Museum, but no museum was interested in the purchase. So Gustaf faced a dilemma, especially as his trip had proven very costly and those debts needed to be paid. Herman Fritjof Antell, a wealthy Finnish physician, a collector, and friend of the Nordenskiöld family came to the rescue. He offered to provide funds with Gustaf’s collection as collateral. As Antell died soon thereafter in 1893 and had no offspring, the collection was left to the Finnish people, ending up with the predecessor of today’s National Museum (Finland was not independent until 1917).<sup>55</sup> There the collection stood for decades, usually in storage and only seldom on display. In 1991, the Finnish National Museum loaned some artefacts and photographs for the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Nordenskiöld at the Mesa Verde National Park.

Much earlier than this, the actions of Gustaf Nordenskiöld had motivated the local white residents living in the Mesa Verde region to petition for a national park to preserve the site. Not only was the park established in 1906, as the seventh national park in the US, but during the same year the Antiquities Act became the earliest US legislation to regulate the removal of cultural heritage. Here too Gustaf Nordenskiöld had played a sizable role as a dangerous precedent on what could happen if sites remained unregulated. However, it would take until 1990 and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act for Native American tribes to have any legal rights regarding their own heritage and ancestral remains.<sup>56</sup>

Sonja Salminiitty discusses how members of the Hopi tribe had begun the Mesa Verde repatriation claim process unofficially in 2015, but how communications halted as the Hopi contact, who was not an official representative of the tribe, grew impatient with the process, and the Finnish government advised the National Museum to stop communications. The matter was back on the table when the US government became active. As Salminiitty explains, after Presidents Trump and Niinistö agreed over the issue, meetings began in November 2019 between the US embassy people and curators from the National Museum.<sup>57</sup> Eventually, after some confusion and communication problems, human remains and burial items were returned to the Hopi-led Pueblo delegation, who buried them accordingly. This was the first formal case where Finland agreed to return human remains back to another country. It would not be the last. In 2021, the National Museum returned thousands of artefacts to the Sami peoples in the Arctic North, and one precious stone ruler symbol taken by Finnish missionaries from German Southwest Africa is due to head back to Namibia soon (two other stones have already been sent back earlier by the Finnish Missionary Society). Yet, the National Museum still has multiple collections originating from colonial expansions and times, from Russian Alaska, German Southwest Africa, the North American Plains, and the Belgian Congo, among other places. The colonial heritage of Finland as exemplified by these collections and the historical and present-day connections they carry remain unresolved.<sup>58</sup>

Today the question of repatriation and reconciliation has become a global question, a matter of heated debate as more and more former colonized peoples demand the return of their heritage and history from the museums in the Western world.<sup>59</sup> This has also raised ques-

tions concerning colonialism and colonial complicity in Finland and other Nordic countries, where traditionally there have existed strong claims of Nordic exceptionalism, that colonialism was something that happened far away and proved insignificant for Nordic histories. There has been a kind of awakening from colonial amnesia, recognition that participation in or association with colonial practices of cultural looting and collection also involved Nordic peoples, including Finns and Finnish institutions. Adding a Nordic dimension to the understandings and discussions of global colonialism shows how colonial histories, heritage, and legacies are anything but uniquely national stories that only concern traditional great powers, such as Britain or France.<sup>60</sup>

In many ways, the Nordenskiöld case has set the precedence and tenor for Finland. Yet, the public discourse surrounding the return of Mesa Verde items often looked the other way—noting how Nordenskiöld was a man of this times, did nothing illegal, that Finland is not guilty of anything, there is nothing to apologize for, that it was not really colonialism, or that at least Nordenskiöld was in fact a Swede not a Finn.<sup>61</sup> While these are all complicated issues, with many nuances and viewpoints, denial does not help in understanding them.

## Conclusion

“One of the most important goals,” writes the Indigenous historian Amy Lonetree, is “to assist communities in their efforts to address the legacies of historical unresolved grief by speaking the hard truths of colonialism and thereby creating space for healing and understanding.”<sup>62</sup> While Lonetree is referring to the role of tribal museums in the US, her words carry an important message to the general debate on repatriation and decolonizing museums ongoing globally. We need to look hard at the difficult histories of colonialism, to comprehend the complex legacies stemming from past interactions of unequal power, and machination of hierarchies. We need to look at the historical processes of how different artefacts ended up in the Western museums. How did they get here? For what kind of purposes and under what kind of specific conditions of power?

Gustaf Nordenskiöld’s experiences and narrations both reflected and functioned in the kind of recalibration of geographical spaces that the settler invasion caused. The ruins provided him a lens to an exotic wilderness and to mythic past civilizations, as a canvas where he could

play out his fantasies of adventure and his scientific aspirations. When looking at how Nordenskiöld represented the land and its peoples and positioned himself in it as a white civilized explorer, we can see how he commented on and interacted with the settler colonial realities of the Southwest as he saw them. He positioned himself above it all, displaying a disconnect from both the settlers and the Native Americans when embracing Mesa Verde as a dead past. He depicted the contemporary Native Americans as dying relics of a more glorious past, a deteriorated form of Indigeneity when compared to those who preceded them at Mesa Verde. He also represented the local settlers as avaricious exploiters who did not value scientific efforts or understand Mesa Verde, who had no connection to it. A close reading of Nordenskiöld's writings shows one way that explorers and adventurers who entered a settler colonial terrain, and who were basically outsiders to the settler project, without a national stake or a personal intent on taking the land, nevertheless actively engaged with the settler colonial space, made claims to it, and reaped personal benefits from it. And they also left lasting legacies because of their engagement and actions. They did that because they wanted authority over some aspect of the land and its history.

## Notes

- 1 This research was supported by the funding from Academy of Finland.
- 2 Nordenskiöld, "On Some Remarkable Ruins," 73. Pages 69–81 contain the reprint of this Nordenskiöld article, originally published in *Ymer: Journal of Svenska Sällskapet för Antropologi och Geografi* in 1892 (pages 3–11).
- 3 Unlike in Gustaf's times, today the ruins of Mesa Verde are a protected site as a national park, managed by the US federal government. See <https://www.nps.gov/meve/index.htm>.
- 4 For the Finnish government memo, see Ministry of Education and Culture, "Kansallismuseon Mesa Verde –kokoelmiin sisältyvien ihmisjäänteiden ja hautaesineiden luovuttaminen," August 7, 2020, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/paatokset/paatos?decisionId=0900908f806cfd84>. On the return of these items in Finnish newsmedia, see Jukka Huusko, "Viimeinen matka Mesa Verdeen," *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.hs.fi/ulkomaat/art-2000006647282.html>; Mikko Marttinen, "Donald Trump veti Suomen kansallismuseon historiallisen eleen osaksi vaalikampanjaansa," *Ilta-Sanomat*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.is.fi/ulkomaat/art-2000006639546.html>.
- 5 Blåfield, *Nordenskiöld*, especially 59–72, 145–60; Kalleinen, *Kuninkaan ja keisarin Nordenskiöldit*, 133–38.
- 6 See, for example, Veirto, "Suomi palauttaa 20 intiaanin jäänteet Yhdysvaltoihin."



- 7 On the Indigenous and colonial histories of this region, see Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land*; Brooks, *Captives & Cousins*; Jones, *Being and Becoming Ute*; Decker, *The Utes Must Go!*; Jacobs, *Engendered Encounters*; Montoya, *Translating Property*.
- 8 On exploration and empire, see Kennedy, *Last Blank Spaces*; Kennedy, *Reinterpreting Exploration*; Driver, *Geography Militant*; Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire*.
- 9 Kennedy, "Introduction," 1.
- 10 Kamissek and Kreienbaum, "Imperial Cloud," 166; Lahti, *German and United States Colonialism*.
- 11 On Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld, see Wråkberg, "A. E. Nordenskiöld in Swedish Memory"; Kalleinen, *Kuninkaan ja keisarin Nordenskiöldit*, 191–94; Blåfield, *Nordenskiöld*, 367–430.
- 12 Kennedy, *Highly Civilized Man*. On the vast volume of Burton's writings, see <https://burtoniana.org>.
- 13 Stanley, *Kongo, uusi vapaavaltio mustien maanosassa*.
- 14 Reynolds and Reynolds, *Nordenskiöld of Mesa Verde*, 61.
- 15 The first full English edition did not appear until 2010 (Nordenskiöld, *From the Far West*).
- 16 The original in Swedish *Ruiner af Klippboningar i Mesa Verde's Canons* came out in February 1893, with the English edition released a few months later.
- 17 Offenburger, *Frontiers in the Gilded Age*, 25.
- 18 Reynolds and Reynolds, *Nordenskiöld of Mesa Verde*, 117–19.
- 19 Reynolds and Reynolds, *Nordenskiöld of Mesa Verde*, 126–39.
- 20 Letter No. 15, Gustaf to his Father, Mancos, Colorado, July 2, 1891, in *Letters*, 29.
- 21 Gustaf to Adolf Erik, March 7, 1891, excerpts reprinted in Reynolds and Reynolds, *Nordenskiöld of Mesa Verde*, 41.
- 22 Soon after meeting Gustaf, Alice Eastwood departed to California where she made a career that included over 300 published articles and building the botanical collection at the California Academy of Sciences, in San Francisco.
- 23 Letter No. 14, Gustaf to his Father, Denver, Colorado, June 30, 1891, in *Letters*, 28.
- 24 Harrell, "We Contacted Smithsonian"; McNitt, *Richard Wetherill*, 36; Wetherill, *Wetherills of the Mesa Verde*, 128; Smith, *Mesa Verde National Park*, Chapter 2 [https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/smith/chap2.htm](https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/smith/chap2.htm).
- 25 McPherson and Neel, *Mapping the Four Corners*.
- 26 Letter No. 15, Gustaf to his Father, Mancos, Colorado, July 2, 1891, in *Letters*, 30; Letter No. 16, Gustaf to his Father, Mancos Valley, July 3, 1891, in *Letters*, 32; Letter No. 19, Gustaf to his Father, Durango, Colorado, July 29, 1891, in *Letters*, 37.
- 27 Nordenskiöld, *Cliff Dwellers*, 12, 49–50. The "short paper" refers to Frederick H. Chapin, "The Cliff Dwellings of the Mancos Canons," *The American Antiquarian* (July 1890). See also Chapin, *Land of the Cliff-Dwellers*.
- 28 Some of these photos have later been published as Gustaf Nordenskiöld, *Mesa Verde as Captured by the Camera of Gustaf Nordenskiöld* (Mesa Verde National Park, 1984).
- 29 Nordenskiöld, *From the Far West*, 3.
- 30 Nordenskiöld, *Cliff Dwellers*, 1–2.

- 31 Nordenskiöld, *From the Far West*, 3.
- 32 Nordenskiöld, *From the Far West*, 5.
- 33 *Savo-Karjala*, October 9, 1891, 4.
- 34 On US military conquest of the Southwest, see Lahti, *Wars for Empire*; Kiser, *Coast-to-Coast Empire*; Wooster, *American Military Frontiers*.
- 35 Letter No. 40, Gustaf to his cousin Karl, Mancos, October 23, 1891, in *Letters*, 63.
- 36 Nordenskiöld, *From the Far West*, 6.
- 37 Letter No. 15, Gustaf to his Father, Mancos, Colorado, July 2, 1891, in *Letters*, 30.
- 38 The literature here is voluminous. See Hoxie, *Final Promise*; Genetin-Pilawa, *Crooked Paths to Allotment*; Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race*; Adams, *Education for Extinction*.
- 39 Nordenskiöld, *Cliff Dwellers*, 3.
- 40 In this Gustaf expressed similar views as did those Finns who came as actual settlers in North America. See also Chapters 2 and 6 in this volume.
- 41 Nordenskiöld, "On Some Remarkable Ruins," 80–81.
- 42 Reynolds and Reynolds, *Nordenskiöld of Mesa Verde*, 69–72. See also Letter No. 29, Gustaf to his Father, Mancos, September 9, 1891, in *Letters*, 51.
- 43 Letter No. 24, Gustaf to his Father, Navajo Canon, August 23, 1891, in *Letters*, 45–46; Letter No. 33, Gustaf to his Father, Durango, September 27, 1891, in *Letters*, 54–55. See also Lister, *Trowelling through Time*.
- 44 Letter No. 17, Gustaf to his Mother, Mancos, Colorado, July 15, 1891, in *Letters*, 33.
- 45 Letter No. 32, Gustaf to his Father, Mancos, September 19, 1891, in *Letters*, 53.
- 46 Letter No. 40, Gustaf to his cousin Karl, Mancos, October 23, 1891, in *Letters*, 63.
- 47 See Reynolds and Reynolds, *Nordenskiöld of Mesa Verde*, especially 72–81, for the official correspondence and maneuvering concerning Nordenskiöld's arrest and release.
- 48 Salminiitty, "Question of Repatriation," 40; Lister, *Trowelling Through Time*, 24–25; Smith, *Mesa Verde*, Ch. 2.
- 49 Letter No. 34, Gustaf to his Father, Durango, September 30, 1891, in *Letters*, 56.
- 50 Letter No. 38, Gustaf to his Father, Durango, October 22, 1891, in *Letters*, 61; Nordenskiöld, "On Some Remarkable Ruins," 78–79; Nordenskiöld, *Cliff Dwellers*, Appendix.
- 51 Reynolds and Reynolds, *Nordenskiöld of Mesa Verde*, 116.
- 52 Letter No. 41, Gustaf to his Father, Mancos, November 1, 1891, in *Letters*, 65.
- 53 Letter No. 40, Gustaf to his cousin Karl, Mancos, October 23, 1891, in *Letters*, 63.
- 54 Jonathan Romeo, "Artifacts Taken from Mesa Verde Are Coming Home," *The Journal*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.the-journal.com/articles/artifacts-taken-from-mesa-verde-are-coming-home>. See also Kevin Simpson, "More than a Century Ago, a European Visitor Took More than 600 Native American Remains and Artifacts from Colorado's Mesa Verde," *Colorado Sun*, October 10, 2019, <https://coloradosun.com/2019/10/10/mesa-verde-remains-nordenskiold>.
- 55 Reynolds and Reynolds, *Nordenskiöld of Mesa Verde*, 155–56; Koivunen, *Eksootiset esineet*, 139–41.
- 56 Mihesuah, *Repatriation Reader*; McKeown, *In the Smaller Scope*.
- 57 Salminiitty, "The Question of Repatriation," 42–44.

- 58 Maria Tolsa, "Suomi palautti Namibiaan pyhiä kiviä, mutta Kansallismuseossa on yhä arvokas kokoelma siirtomaa-ajoilta – 'Suomessa on tahto luovuttaa niitä,'" December 1, 2021, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-12210842>.
- 59 Hicks, *Brutish Museums*; Procter, *Whole Picture*; Colwell, *Plundered Skulls*; Mihesuah, *Repatriation Reader*.
- 60 On current discussion, see Höglund and Andersson Burnett, "Nordic Colonialisms and Scandinavian Studies"; Keskinen, "Intra-Nordic Differences"; Koi-vunen and Rastas, "Suomalaisen historian tutkimuksen uusi käänne?"; Kullaa and Lahti, "Kolonialismin monikasvoisuus."
- 61 Ulla Veirto, "Miksi 23-vuotias suomalainen tyhjensi Mesa Verden intiaanien haudat – Miten vainajat päätyivät Suomeen ja tehtiinkö siinä rikos?" February 29, 2020, <https://www.apu.fi/artikkelit/miksi-23-vuotias-suomalainen-tyhjensi-mesa-verden-intiaanien-haudat-miten-vainajat-paatyivat-suomeen>; Huusko, "Viimeisen matka."
- 62 Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 5.

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