

Cultural Ownership vs. Scientific Necessity of the Manitou Stone in Alberta

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Introduction: The Manitou Stone is the colloquial term for the Iron Creek Meteorite. This 175 Kg meteorite had been, until 1866, in possession of Indigenous groups, before being taken by an Anglican clergyman. The meteorite earned the name “Manitou Stone” due to the perceived image of a face on the stone that some consider the face of the creator. After the Anglican clergyman took the meteorite, it has jumped from museum to museum until finding its way to the stewardship of the Royal Alberta Museum in the early 1970s, where it resides to this day [1]. To this day, there has been a debate challenging the ownership of the meteorite and how it should be handled.

The Issues and Implications: The Iron Hills meteorite in question is estimated to be 4.5 billion years old. Therefore, it has the potential for scientific significance, as it may provide details into the formation of the solar system. However, unlike the meteorites found in Antarctica, the Manitou Stone crosses the realm of science into the religious and cultural spheres. For Indigenous groups in Canada, the meteorite was an object to be venerated, should they pass through the region before 1866. In a Western understanding, the meteorite is, regarding conceptual understanding, on the same level as high relics such as the Piece of the True Cross, or the Shroud of Turin. Thus, it is a complicated issue. On the one hand, there is the scientific need for such an object, and on the other, a sacred cultural object. In the middle of this issue is the Royal Alberta Museum.

As the museum has recently been moving locations, the issue of ownership has arisen once again. However, it has only been made more complicated. One reason is that some Indigenous groups agree that the meteorite is not the sole property of one group, but that it belongs to all [2]. This claim poses logistical problems, such as where the meteorite should then be put, and who would maintain the object. More than that, the very issue of it being stolen again is not to be downplayed.

Therefore, the museum has taken the position of steward. That is, they do not lay any claim to the object, but are responsible for its protection, and accessibility. In better terms, the museum has found a middle ground, which has been agreed upon by many Indigenous groups for the time being. More specifically, the museum designed a room built for smudging ceremonies, among other rituals of which the meteorite is at the centre, and it is also free of charge to anyone. However, some groups still desire the repatriation of the meteorite entirely [3]. As for the scientific community, the Canadian Space Agency, while understanding the scientific value of the meteorite, has taken the position that it should be publicly available but that no invasive analysis should be conducted [1].

Conclusion: While the scientific community and the Indigenous community have come to a state of equilibrium over the meteorite, with the efforts of the Royal Alberta Museum, it is only a temporary solution. The scientific potential of the meteorite still stands and will remain unknown without invasive testing, while the Indigenous cultural and religious claims to the meteorite are unresolved. In short, this equilibrium only raises more questions about what to do with the meteorite, and also how scientific objects that are also culturally and religiously significant should be dealt with in policy and practice.

References: [1] Gerson, J. (2012). First Nations college calls for return of sacred meteorite from Alberta museum. National Post. [2] Alberta meteorite sparks battle for sacred rock. (2012). CBC. [3] Hampshire, G. (2017). Indigenous history prominent at new Royal Alberta Museum. CBC.