

History of the Māori ancestral remains returning from the American Museum of Natural History

The 46 *kōiwi tangata* (Māori skeletal remains) being returned from the American Museum of Natural History in New York originate from a variety of locations in the North Island of New Zealand.

The vast majority of the remains are from the private collection of Felix von Luschan, an Austrian born pioneer of modern anthropology and Germany's leading physical anthropologist.

From 1885 he was the curator, then director, of the Museum für Volkerkunde, and became the Professor of Anthropology at the University of Berlin from 1909 to 1922. Von Luschan is most notoriously known for the lengths he went to obtain human skulls and skeletons for his anthropological collections.

Von Luschan did not come to New Zealand, though he did plan to as he was invited by the Government to “study the Maoris” in the belief that his research would be of great value. However with the outbreak of WWI, this invitation was revoked.

Research has found that seven *kōiwi tangata* originated from the areas of Lake Taupō, Kaipara, and parts of *Te Tai Tokerau* (Northland) and were collected by the infamous Austrian collector and naturalist Andreas Reischek (1845–1902). Reischek was a taxidermist, explorer, hunter, and collector. He spent 12 years in New Zealand from 1877 to 1889 and during this time was employed as a taxidermist at the Canterbury and Auckland museums.

During his travels throughout the country he collected a large number of Māori human remains, most of which became part of the collections of the Imperial Museum in Vienna, Austria. Some also became part of other collections, including that of Dr Felix von Luschan.

Other collectors include T E Donne, a well-known collector of Māori artefacts who was at the time working for the New Zealand High Commission in London. In 1908 Donne donated three skulls from Auckland and in 1913 sold a further two skulls.

One skull was purchased in 1896 and attributed to the Gifford Brothers, who were formally circus performers, and the other skull had been purchased in 1904 from Marston Abbott Fraser, a taxidermist and dealer in Naturalist's supplies and specimens.