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Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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OCTOBER ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH **ATHABASCAN DAGGER AND SHEATH**

A recent acquisition to the museum's collection is the featured artifact for October. In January of this year, the opportunity to bid on a single volute (scrolled end) Athabascan dagger with beaded sheath came up through an auction. With support from the Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, the dagger and sheath were purchased for the Sheldon Jackson Museum. Although a double volute dagger has been in the collection for many years, the museum did not have any of this type of volute dagger in the collection.

The dagger is made from a single piece of metal, possibly from a file or other steel product. It is characteristic of those made by the Dene (Athabascan) in the late 1800s to early 1900s. Prior to contact with Euro-Americans, the Athabascan people made their edged weapons from Native copper. According to researchers John Witthoft and Frances Eyman (*Metallurgy of the Tlingit, Dene and Eskimo, Expedition Magazine, 1969*), the Athabascan used both "heat treatment and stress hardening as methods for controlling strength and edge-hardness." The authors state that the Dene "were operating in full Chalcolithic (using copper instead of stone) technology."

The unique handles with single or double volute motif may have been influenced by the eastern Algonkian people or may have older roots from the people of northern China or Siberia. According to the researchers mentioned above, this design shows up in North America only with the Athabascan and with a type of hair ornament used in Tlingit culture.

The Athabascan used these knives in a utilitarian manner. Some were attached to long staffs and used in hunting bear or were used to wound a moose or caribou driven into the water where a hunter could paddle near the animal and stab it with his dagger. On reaching shore, the wounded animal would be dispatched with bows and arrows or other weapons.

The dagger and sheath can be seen at the museum gallery October 1 through October 31. Winter hours at the Sheldon Jackson Museum are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Winter admission is \$3. Visitors 18 and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, and those with passes are admitted free of charge. The dagger and sheath can also be viewed online at http://www.museums.state.ak.us/sheldon_jackson/artifact_of_month.html.

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