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St. Petersburg Customs Officers Block Attempt to Smuggle Rare Meteorite Fragment

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A customs inspector examines a rock later identified as a meteorite fragment. **customs.gov.ru**

Russia's Federal Customs Service said Thursday that it thwarted an attempt to smuggle a large meteorite fragment out of the country.

The fragment, weighing 2.5 metric tons, was discovered at a port in St. Petersburg inside a shipping container destined for the United Kingdom.

A video released showed customs officials prying open a wooden crate to reveal a gray, jagged rock.

Russia's Federal Customs Service said it had been declared as a garden sculpture, but a closer inspection uncovered discrepancies in its stated origin and value.

A forensic examination later confirmed that the fragment came from the Aletai meteorite and has an estimated value of 323 million rubles ($4.2 million).

Discovered in 1898 in China's northwestern Xinjiang region, the Aletai meteorite is believed to be at least 4.5 billion years old. It has a recovered mass exceeding 74 metric tons, making it one of the largest iron meteorites ever found.

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Customs officials said the fragment had been brought into Russia from an unnamed country belonging to the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union, whose members include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

The Federal Customs Service did not disclose the identities of the exporter or the intended buyer, nor did it say how the meteorite fragment entered Russia.

The agency said it opened a criminal investigation into the smuggling of strategically important goods or cultural valuables, an offense that carries a maximum penalty of three years in prison.

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