Preservation of Human Remains

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Are human remains artifacts or something sacred and beyond object?

This note, written at the request of the Editor, is meant to serve as a short introduction to the topic of human remains and to our current project, an edited volume entitled *Human Remains: A Guide for Museums and Academic Institutions*, which has been supported by a Kress/FAIC Publication Fellowship. As editors, we have worked together for several years and felt it was time to put pen to paper. Even though the project is still under development, we thought we would share some thoughts to initiate interest and hopefully generate feedback and ideas for the volume while the form is still somewhat malleable.

The topic of human remains is by its very nature controversial for a number of reasons. First, it is not clear where human remains fit into the field of conservation, nor how museums should handle them. Human remains are not always considered rare or priceless, since they are easily purchased from distributors (Quigley 2001). Yet some individuals are considered spiritually, politically, and scientifically priceless, as in the example of Kennewick Man (Downey 2000 and Thomas 2000). Often an anonymous human remain is treated differently from those that can be named (e.g. Rameses the II from the 13th century B.C. or Truganini, "the Last Tasmanian" who died in 1876), or those that have a link to the present through descendents (e.g. the Inca Ice Maiden mummy found on the top of a mountain in Peru).

In academic institutions, anonymous human remains are essential teaching tools for training in medical schools and for programs in physical and medical anthropology. Such collections are more common than one might guess, though there have not been surveys made in the United States. In England, however, the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) Working Group on Human Remains set out to "map the broad scope of human remains held in English museums" and they published their survey in October 2003 online (http://www.culture.gov.uk/global/publications/archive_2003/wgur_report2003.htm). Of a total of 159 institutions, 148 responded to the survey including academic institutions, and 132 institutions or 89% hold human remains, and this represents at least 61,000 individuals.

A similar survey would be useful here in the US. We surely have many more institutionalized human remains than in England due to the greater number of museums in this country and the larger number of academic institutions teaching subjects where human remains are used. For instance, it can be assumed that most universities and colleges that teach physical anthropology in the US would have human remains study collections, as would medical schools. According to the website for the American Association of Physical anthropologists thirty three graduate schools offer advanced degrees in physical anthropology and there are approximately 700 museums of anthropology, natural history, and science in the US.

Institutionalized skeletalized human remains have been regularly subject to labeling directly with India ink and overcrowding in acidic boxes. Due to the ambiguity of status as artifact/object versus individual/ancestor they have often been ignored in terms of collection management and rarely have they received formal policies associated with their care or use. It was not until the last 20 years that NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) and other similar legislation around the world challenged the status of institutionalized human remains. Now a new generation of anthropologists is eager to embrace a more respectful and culturally interactive professional stance, but where are the resources they need? They are few and often outdated.

The volume we are producing will be an attempt to integrate and apply the research and experiences of the different disciplines involved in the preservation or curation of human remains. Conservators, physical anthropologists, archaeologists, and museologists have been tapped for their expertise. In this volume, we want to develop a philosophy of respect and have the contributors provide curation suggestions with the hope of improving current practices for human remains housed in institutions. We do not pretend to advocate for the permanent maintenance of currently held human remains collections, nor wholesale reburial. Despite the controversy surrounding this topic, we do hope to complement curation and management information already in use, so that human remains currently housed in institutions, whatever their fate, may receive better care.

If you have had any positive experiences working with collection management strategies or practical housing issues for human remains, we would like to hear from you. (cassmanv@unlv.nevada.edu).

References:

Quigley, Christine (2001) *Skulls and Skeletons: Human Bone Collections and Accumulations*. McFarland & Co. Inc. Jefferson, North Carolina, pp. 186-191.

Thomas, David Hurst (2000) *Skull Wars*. Basic Books.

Downey, Roger (2000) *Riddle of the Bones*. Copernicus.

For more information on the treatment of Tuganini's remains see for instance the European Network for Indigenous Australian Rights website at http://www.eniar.org/news/Truganini.html.

For more information on the Inca Ice Maiden controversy see for instance the Yachay Wasi website at http://www.yachaywasi-ngo.org/inkach3.htm.

For the official website for the American Association of Physical Anthropologists see http://www.physanth.org/.