

# Part 1

## Holding and Displaying Human Remains

### Introduction

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The last 20 years have seen advances in scientific techniques which have greatly increased the amount of information that can be obtained from the study of human remains. There has also been an explosion in the number of university higher degree courses in human osteology. Consequently, there has been a greater demand for access to collections of human remains from researchers. Furthermore, archaeology has become a favourite topic of television documentaries and news features in print and other media, with stories highlighting results of research on human remains attracting particular public interest. A corollary of this is that the public increasingly wishes, and indeed expects, to see displays featuring archaeological human remains when they visit museums. All of these developments mean that museum collections of human remains from archaeological sites are now under pressure as never before and this section deals with some of the challenges that this poses for those who curate them.

In the first chapter, Daniel Antoine discusses some of the measures taken at the British Museum to ensure the well being of its collection. Documentation of the collection is available online and is regularly updated to record destructive sampling and other aspects of the condition of the material so that changes over time can be monitored. It is intended that the amount of online information will increase, meaning that not only will researchers be able to determine more precisely in advance which burials they need to study, but in some cases they may be able to use online data directly, reducing the need to examine the material itself. This will help minimize handling damage and hence assist to safeguard the collection. The issue of whether and how human remains should be displayed in museums continues to be debated in academia, but opinion polls show that the British public is highly supportive of the display of human remains. The British Museum, in common with most other major archaeological museums in Britain, uses human remains in its public galleries to help inform visitors about the past. Human remains on display include not only bones, but mummified remains and bog bodies as well.

The topic of bog bodies is picked up in Jody Joy's contribution in Chapter Two. He discusses the display at the British Museum of Lindow Man, the Iron Age–Romano-British bog body recovered from Lindow Moss in Cheshire. Joy's main focus is on the ethical issues. The preservation of soft tissue, including facial features, means that bog bodies have the unique potential to provide visitors with an immediate connection to a particular person from long ago which helps to individualize and populate a past that may otherwise seem rather remote and impersonal. This is assisted by the presentation of the results of scientific studies which can yield detailed information about the person concerned, such as their last meal, manner of death and so forth. The importance of bog bodies for informing visitors about the past and stimulating their curiosity provides a strong ethical imperative towards their display, and they are invariably popular with the public. These considerations led the British Museum to continue displaying Lindow Man, even at a time when some other human remains were being removed from the same gallery.

Joy also provides a brief review of display issues connected with other bog bodies. When Tollund Man was recovered in Denmark in 1950, the National Museum of Denmark initially felt that the body might be too ‘macabre’ for public view. When the remains were finally placed on display, this assessment proved spectacularly out of tune with public attitudes with 18,000 people visiting the exhibition in ten days. This disconnect between academic discourse and attitudes of the museum-going public all too often persists today. When Lindow Man was loaned to Manchester Museum in 2008, the museum assumed that the public was becoming increasingly ‘sensitive’ to displays of human remains, and they attempted to use the body, and their other displays of human remains, as an opportunity to promote debate over the treatment of human remains in museums. The issue failed to gain much traction with the public, and their attempt in the exhibit to provide views of Lindow Man from different perspectives (including from an archaeologist, someone from the local community and a druid) left many visitors baffled. Public concern over the display of Lindow Man has, in reality, centred not upon whether or how his remains should be displayed, but where. Following his discovery in the 1980s, there was a local, public campaign for the ‘repatriation’ of the remains for display at a museum in the north-west rather than keeping them in London. Lindow Man still ended up at the British Museum, but as a compromise the remains have been loaned to Manchester Museum and other museums as part of a scheme to make exhibits more accessible around the country. Joy gives an account of the issues this raises, and emphasizes that curators should continue to consult and listen to the public regarding the display of human remains.

In the final contribution to this section, Daniel Antoine and Janet Ambers discuss some of the scientific work that has recently been carried out on the internationally important collection of human remains from the Nile valley held at the British Museum. This collection includes material from the unique late Pleistocene cemetery at Jebel Sahaba, as well as a large series of burials, some with mummified soft tissue, ranging in date from the Neolithic to the medieval period

from the Fourth Nile Cataract region. The Jebel Sahaba material was excavated nearly 50 years ago and ongoing work, including application of previously unavailable methods such as radiocarbon dating of the apatite fraction of bone, illustrate the fact that old collections continue to yield new data. CT scanning is increasing the knowledge that can be gained through the non-invasive study of mummified remains. Gebelein Man, a naturally desiccated pre-Dynastic mummy, has been in the Museum collection for over 100 years, but it was only with the recent application of high-resolution CT scanning that the likely cause of death, a penetrating wound to the back, was identified. This research directly informs the visitor experience. The mummified remains, which are displayed in the public galleries, can be autopsied virtually by visitors using a touch screen, allowing the visualization of preserved internal organs.

The chapters in this section vividly illustrate why it is important to retain long-term collections of human remains in museums for both research and display purposes. Many research techniques involve the destruction of small samples of tissue, and even when remains are examined using non-destructive techniques, handling damage accumulates over time. Therefore, there is tension between the ethical requirement to preserve collections in ways which safeguard them for future generations and an imperative to allow them to be used to generate new knowledge. This tension lies at the heart of the decision-making process concerning requests for research access to human remains. A further issue, the value of human remains for enthusing and informing visitors about the past versus the need to treat remains with sensitivity and respect, lies at the heart of decisions concerning the display of human remains. This section illustrates the dilemmas that these considerations pose. It also reminds us of the importance of museums retaining expert scientific staff who are actively engaged in research. This not only helps to ensure the best curatorial decision-making concerning research access to collections, but also that displays in public galleries communicate results of research to museum visitors in an appropriate and engaging way.