

Part 2

Caring For, Conserving and Storing Human Remains

Introduction

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My perspective on the care of human remains in the British Museum is influenced by two interrelated factors. The first derives from my unique position as a curator at the British Museum who is also a descendant of peoples (Tasmanian Aborigines) whose ancestral remains were once held in the Museum until they were recently repatriated (see Chapter Four, this volume). Secondly, having only recently arrived in the museum world of the United Kingdom from Australia, I am aware of some of the different issues at play in both countries when caring for human remains in museum collections.

The curation and conservation of human remains in the British Museum occurs within the legislative frameworks of the Human Tissue Act 2004, the British Museum Act 1963, guidelines from the UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport as well as internal Museum policy and practices (see Chapter One, this volume) which has been discussed in the preceding section. This part of the book explores in more detail some specific aspects of the curation, care and conservation of remains. Curation involves decisions about what to collect or remove from the collection, as well as undertaking documentation, research and exhibitions. Caring for remains involves decisions from the moment of excavation or acquisition about packing, transport, storage, conservation and display and includes overall attitudes to care. These papers deal with issues relating to caring for human remains which have been in the museum for many years as well as newly excavated materials, and in all cases contemporary standards of care must be maintained.

Unlike in Australia and New Zealand where museums collected human remains of indigenous minorities from largely within their own country, a distinctive feature of the British Museum collection is the range of countries, cultures and time periods from which human remains derive. However, remains come not only from a number of foreign countries, but many remains – indeed the majority – come from within the United Kingdom and most are from archaeological contexts. Although the legislation governing their management is the same, and museum policies cover all remains held, the practice of curation and care differs in some aspects across museum departments due to the context of collection, whether the remains were used in cultural contexts not intended for mortuary disposal and whether or not there are contemporary groups with particular cultural interests in the remains.

For some indigenous peoples, the most contentious issue relating to the care of human remains is whether or not a museum should continue to hold such material. For the British Museum, this is particularly the case with human remains from Australia, New Zealand and the Hawaiian Islands. Representatives of Aboriginal Australian communities first made requests for the repatriation of human remains from the British Museum in the 1980s as part of a broader ongoing campaign to return ancestral remains from museums and other institutions around the world.

As the United Kingdom was the colonizing force in Australia, in the 19th century human remains and sometimes heads of known individuals were taken back to the United Kingdom as 'trophies', curiosities or in the purported interest of science or medicine. Over many

decades, Indigenous Australians have been making concerted efforts to document, track down and repatriate such remains with some success. Human remains have been located in various museums and institutions as well as in unmarked graves in public cemeteries.¹ Repatriation of these remains is of high importance to the originating communities and is evidence of strong ongoing cultural beliefs in having the remains of the dead treated in a culturally appropriate manner, including mortuary disposal of remains in the area of origin.

In Chapter Four, Natasha McKinney discusses both the nature of human remains from Oceania in the Museum's collection and the varying levels of documentation detailing their original cultural context and collection. While most remains in the Oceanic collections are in the form of skeletal remains, some of the remains have been modified for cultural purposes including for certain kinds of display and exchange in their originating communities. These include decorated skulls from Papua New Guinea, preserved heads from Papua New Guinea and West Papua, *rambaramp* figures from Vanuatu and various objects made from modified or unmodified human remains such as bone flutes from New Zealand or feather sceptres from Hawaii.

Human remains from Oceania in the British Museum collection are not numerous, but are generally of high cultural importance to representatives of those living cultures from which they derive. Most of these remains were collected in various colonial contexts rather than excavated from archaeological deposits as is the case in other museum departments. McKinney notes how some exchanges of material may have been influenced by new colonial interactions which may complicate considerations of their cultural significance. Furthermore, unlike in some other departments of the Museum, human remains are no longer actively collected in the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas. In regard to human remains from Oceania, there is scope for improving documentation of these collections, but there is no active internal research programme at present.

Since the introduction of the Human Tissue Act 2004 (see Chapter One, this volume), repatriation of human remains from the British Museum can now be considered in very specific circumstances, which are outlined elsewhere in this volume. The second part of McKinney's paper considers in detail recent repatriation requests for human remains from Oceania. McKinney outlines the particular circumstances in each case and discusses the particular reasons whereby some requests have been successful (human burial bundles from Tasmania and skeletal remains from New Zealand) and others unsuccessful (tattooed heads from New Zealand and preserved heads from the Torres Strait). Her chapter highlights some of the difficulties Trustees have in dealing with repatriation requests when there is a paucity of original documentation about the circumstances of collection or the customary mortuary processes involved.

As McKinney notes, the Museum Trustees have the responsibility for making any decisions about repatriation in accordance with current legislation and the policies they develop. The decision-making process involves close consideration of information from various sources including

advice from staff, external experts commissioned to write reports and at times, face-to-face discussions with representatives of those communities requesting the return of ancestral remains. Unlike many other museums, correspondence, reports and extracts of minutes of Trustee meetings considering these requests are made available publicly on the Museum's website offering a degree of transparency to the decision making process. Issues of repatriation will no doubt continue to arise from time to time and will often be contentious or difficult due to the issues outlined above.

With all human remains in the Museum, it is the aim of conservation work to extend the 'life' of remains so that the physical attributes and associated information retain their integrity. However, conserving human remains for the future requires not only attention to the intrinsic physical attributes of the remains, but also to particular storage and collection management techniques. In Chapter Five, Daniel Antoine and Emily Taylor discuss the practical aspects of handling, storing and transporting human remains. Importantly, they note the risks associated in working with human remains, such as the possible existence of pathogenic bacteria and the presence of heavy metals such as lead which necessitates careful preparation and thought before moving or transport. Remains may need to be removed from their original site to another country for study, therefore an awareness of relevant legislative and customs requirements is essential and they highlight the important role of the museum courier, the carrier as well as liaison and agreement with any lenders.

Significantly, Antoine and Taylor also note that the greatest potential hazard to the physical state of remains is internal to the museum: that of prior pesticide treatments which may not be recorded in museum documentation. Therefore, an integrated approach to care is required that involves not only curators, but conservators, physical anthropologists and scientists to understand the residues involved and to protect staff from possible contamination. The chapter also outlines how storage and collection management techniques affect the recording of museum registration numbers, the labelling of remains and boxes, the physical layout of bones within storage and the types of storage materials that can usefully and appropriately be employed.

In Chapter Six, Barbara Wills and her co-authors illustrate the range of factors that are considered in assessing the appropriate approaches to the conservation of remains which are applicable to remains in any museum. These include an understanding of the rituals of deposition, the burial environment, health and safety concerns such as those surrounding lead coffins, past reconstructions and whether the remains will be stored, displayed or made available for loan, for example in exhibitions that include Egyptian mummies.

In a number of case studies, the Museum conservators detail the specific treatment methods chosen and the rationale behind those decisions. They highlight the differences involved when dealing with the preparation of objects for display (using an example of remains from the Paleolithic era), naturally preserved remains (such as a bog

body), purposefully preserved remains (Egyptian mummies), spontaneously preserved remains (such as examples from the Nile valley) and when improving storage of remains (in this case a mummified hand from western China) which have associated fibres, textile fragments, other tissues and loose soil. While each case has unique circumstances that need to be considered, Wills *et al.* also note the need to follow international and national protocols, discuss approaches with curators and physical anthropologists and to always take a minimalist approach to any physical intervention.

A key overarching requirement for care in a museum environment is the need to maintain stable environmental conditions and having appropriate storage materials and systems. Wills *et al.* usefully include a table outlining both desirable and acceptable environmental conditions for the storage and display of ancient Egyptian mummies, bog bodies and skeletal material. They also provide useful technical information relating to cleaning, dealing with past reconstructions, removing old museum registration numbers and details of materials that can be usefully employed in the treatment, packing, transport and storage of human remains.

Chapters Five and Six highlight two common elements: the need for vigilance through regular survey of the remains in the collection and the need to give attention to the psychological issues involved. Working with human remains is both a privilege and a responsibility, and those engaging in this work need to be psychologically prepared and supported in carrying out their duties. Training needs to take into account both professional and emotional aspects of caring for such materials.

Across the world, each cultural group has its own attitude to the treatment of the dead and human remains which

differs widely across space and through time. There may be cultural beliefs and practices that could at times sit uncomfortably within museum policy in continuing to hold some remains. Museum staff have expert knowledge in the conservation and practical aspects of care, handling, transport and storage which they apply to human remains. Yet, by the nature of the diverse communities and associated beliefs from which remains originate, they cannot be fully cognisant of all contemporary cultural sensitivities and beliefs associated with those remains. An open dialogue with relevant communities is an important opportunity for the Museum to engage with and learn from other cultures rather than be regarded as a source of knowledge about those cultures. Such dialogue may lead to increased documentation and understanding of the remains concerned and how they should be cared for in the broadest cultural sense. The British Museum seeks where possible and appropriate to accommodate these concerns while the remains are in its care.

Within the legal requirements of the United Kingdom and policy decisions made by the Trustees, the British Museum continues to acquire and hold certain human remains as part of research directed towards an increased understanding of the ancient and modern world. It aims for the highest standards of physical care and also transparency in information when dealings with all remains. For a small number of human remains, dialogues about whether the Museum should continue to hold certain remains are likely to be ongoing.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, C. Forde 'How a tribal chief got buried in Liverpool', *The Times Higher Education*, 10 June 1997.