

Part 3

Researching the British Museum Collection

Introduction

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In the opening paragraph to Chapter Nine in this volume, John Taylor notes that ‘a consistent research strategy for this important collection is ... needed’. Be they bones or mummies collected in the 19th century by amateur archaeologists or by leading professionals in the 20th and 21st centuries, the human remains housed in the British Museum’s vast collection represents an important resource for documenting life conditions in past societies. The remains discussed in the following five chapters underscore the critical importance of the long-term curation of an irreplaceable resource in telling the story of humankind.

Some of the Museum’s best-represented collections and those with the longest history of acquisition, curation and study are from the Middle East, arguably one of the most interesting regions of the globe as pertaining to major adaptive transitions (e.g. foraging-to-farming) and significant social and political developments involving the rise and fall of complex societies. These five chapters reflect the wealth of data from a wide range of settings and collection circumstances. St John Simpson and Theya Molleson provide a preliminary, yet fascinating overview of largely unstudied mortuary sites from the Sasanian Empire, a vast landscape extending from Syria to Central Asia and Azerbaijan to the Persian Gulf, which encompassed many cultures, religions and lifeways spanning four centuries from the early 3rd century AD onwards. Simpson and Molleson acknowledge the difficulty of studying such a complex cultural landscape, but nonetheless make the argument that the mortuary context and human remains provides an important perspective on body treatment. The case studies for two settings, Bushehr (Iran) and Merv (Turkmenistan), show the complexity of mortuary treatments, including evidence of purposeful defleshing prior to interment and placement in specially prepared burial containers. While preliminary, the paper provides a framework for future studies in an understudied region.

Among the most famous archaeological discoveries of the 20th century are the seven plastered human skulls recovered by Kathleen Kenyon in her 1953 excavations of Jericho, dating to the Middle Pre-pottery Neolithic B. In the years since the discovery, there has been an ongoing discussion of the origin of the skulls, who they represent and why they received such special treatment. The fascinating results of the study of the single skull in the British Museum collection by Alexandra Fletcher and collaborators reveal important information about a single person. Owing to the fact that much of the cranium is covered in dense plaster, basic details about the person are initially inaccessible. However, through the use of computerized tomographic (CT) scanning technology, new details about the person are revealed, including age (mature adult), sex (likely male), health (worn and diseased teeth), rare genetic conditions (agenesis of teeth) and body treatment in life (artificial cranial deformation). In addition, this new research shows that key steps were taken to prepare the skull prior to the creation of the plaster face, including filling the skull and eye orbits with soil. This study makes clear the benefits of long-term curation, namely that new technology provides fresh avenues of investigation for addressing old questions.

Like many of my colleagues in the field of anthropology, I was attracted to the discipline as a course of study and professional career in no small part by the accounts in the mainstream media of mummies from Egypt and elsewhere. One of the most famous collections in the world pertaining to ancient Egypt is in the British Museum. Indeed, an Egyptian mummy was part of Hans Sloane's personal collection of artefacts donated for the founding of the institution in the mid-18th century. The chapter by John Taylor provides a concise history of acquisitions and the Museum's collection of mummies, which now numbers some 87 bodies and various parts of bodies, including their provenance and chronology (4,000 years from approximately mid-4th millennium BC to 2nd century AD). This is an important public record of an amazing collection. The scientific importance of the collection, while limited by poor dating and provenance for most mummies, especially those collected in the 18th and 19th centuries, continues to the present day. In the last several decades, CT scanning technology has provided a new understanding of the health, age and sex of the mummies in addition to mummification procedures. Among the most important discoveries are some of the earliest records of health conditions that still affect humans in Egypt and elsewhere today, including schistosomiasis, tuberculosis, eczema and head-lice infestation.

The British Museum's bioarchaeology programme is far more than just the curation of remains collected long ago. Rather, it is a vibrant community of collaborating scholars and scientists intent on understanding significant settings in world history and prehistory. In this vein, Jonathan Tubb and Caroline Cartwright in Chapter Ten describe their research and curation goals for the human remains recovered from the biblical city of Zarethan, known to archaeologists today as Tell es-Sa'idiyeh, located in the central Jordan Valley. This setting witnessed a sequence of Egyptian control and loss of control. Spanning the history of the site is a rich and diverse mortuary record and its archaeological and historical contexts, which have been studied by a team of human bioarchaeologists, archaeobotanists, archaeozoologists and students. The study of the human remains in particular provides the opportunity to document changing patterns of demography and health in relation to gender, status and society in the Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age transitions. The great underlying story about the project is the collaboration between professional archaeologists and the local community, through the training of local teams of workmen and the sharing of information about their discipline.

Like the Jordan Valley during the Bronze Age, much of the Nile valley in Sudanese Nubia was under the control of Egypt during its New Kingdom period (c. 1550–1070 BC) and then reverted to local control. Bioarchaeology of the town of Amara West, founded on an island in the Nile River around 1300 BC at the height of Egyptian control, provides a record of human impacts involving Egyptian–Nubian interactions and increasing climatic instability during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Like the project at Tell es-Sa'idiyeh, this investigation is emblematic of modern archaeology, which involves a comprehensive study of context (foods eaten, settlement and environment) in order to develop a broader picture of health and lifestyle in a highly dynamic period. Testing the hypothesis that sociopolitical and environmental circumstances led to changes in living conditions, Michaela Binder and Neal Spencer document patterns of health from their diachronic study of the human remains from Amara West. Per their hypothesis, the skeletal records strongly suggest a setting involving a deteriorating quality of life, including increases in *cribra orbitalia* (pathology representing iron deficiency anaemia) and elevated levels of infection, scurvy, dental disease, growth stress and trauma, especially during the post-colonial era.

In addition to providing details about the collection and its history, this set of chapters underscores the centrality and continuing potential of the British Museum's human remains collection in the study of the past. Certainly, it is the more recent collections with their enhanced context that provide some of the more detailed findings. However, the chapters also make clear that collections going back to the 18th century provide important details, in part owing to the development of new methods and technologies for addressing age-old questions about human history. The chapters present a kind of microcosm of changing patterns of museum practice, from acquisition of bones and mummies by amateurs in the 18th, 19th and into the 20th centuries to the full scientific excavation and study involving interdisciplinary teams of collaborators and specialists working in the 21st century, all focused on addressing questions and hypotheses about past societies. The chapters in this section are testimony to the fact that the ancient remains housed in the British Museum provide a fundamental record of life conditions among past societies. They also make clear that this record of skeletons and bodies is not an unlimited resource. It is the mission of the Museum to continue to make strides in the long-term curation and protection of their physical integrity and to develop the kinds of strong research programmes that are so eloquently presented in the following chapters.