

**Regarding the Dead:  
Human Remains in  
the British Museum**  
Edited by Alexandra  
Fletcher, Daniel Antoine  
and JD Hill

**Published with the generous support of**

**THE FLOW FOUNDATION**

**Publishers**

The British Museum  
Great Russell Street  
London WC1B 3DG

**Series editor**

Sarah Faulks

**Distributors**

The British Museum Press  
38 Russell Square  
London WC1B 3QQ

*Regarding the Dead: Human Remains in the British Museum*

Edited by Alexandra Fletcher, Daniel Antoine and JD Hill

ISBN 978 086159 197 8

ISSN 1747 3640

© The Trustees of the British Museum 2014

Front cover: Detail of a mummy of a Greek youth named Artemidorus in a cartonnage body-case, 2nd century AD. British Museum, London (EA 21810)

Printed and bound in the UK by 4edge Ltd, Hockley

Papers used in this book by The British Museum Press are of FSC Mixed Credit, elemental chlorine free (ECF) fibre sourced from well-managed forests

All British Museum images illustrated in this book are

© The Trustees of the British Museum

Further information about the Museum and its collection can be found at [britishmuseum.org](http://britishmuseum.org)

# Contents

---

<b>Preface</b>	<b>v</b>
<i>JD Hill</i>	

---

**Part One – Holding and Displaying Human Remains**

---

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Simon Mays</i>	

---

<b>1. Curating Human Remains in Museum Collections: Broader Considerations and a British Museum Perspective</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>Daniel Antoine</i>	

---

<b>2. Looking Death in the Face: Different Attitudes towards Bog Bodies and their Display with a Focus on Lindow Man</b>	<b>10</b>
<i>Jody Joy</i>	

---

<b>3. The Scientific Analysis of Human Remains from the British Museum Collection: Research Potential and Examples from the Nile Valley</b>	<b>20</b>
<i>Daniel Antoine and Janet Ambers</i>	

---

**Part Two – Caring For, Conserving and Storing Human Remains**

---

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>31</b>
<i>Gaye Sculthorpe</i>	

---

<b>4. Ancestral Remains from Oceania: Histories and Relationships in the Collection of the British Museum</b>	<b>34</b>
<i>Natasha McKinney</i>	

---

<b>5. Collection Care: Handling, Storing and Transporting Human Remains</b>	<b>43</b>
<i>Daniel Antoine and Emily Taylor</i>	

---

<b>6. Conservation of Human Remains from Archaeological Contexts</b>	<b>49</b>
<i>Barbara Wills, Clare Ward and Vanessa Sáiz Gómez with contributions by Capucine Korenberg and Julianne Phippard</i>	

---

**Part Three – Researching the British Museum Collection**

---

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>75</b>
<i>Clark Spencer Larsen</i>	

---

<b>7. Old Bones Overturned: New Evidence for Funerary Practices from the Sasanian Empire</b>	<b>77</b>
<i>St John Simpson and Theya Molleson</i>	

---

<b>8. Beneath the Surface: Imaging Techniques and the Jericho Skull</b>	<b>91</b>
<i>Alexandra Fletcher, Jessica Pearson, Theya Molleson, Richard Abel, Janet Ambers and Crispin Wiles</i>	

---

<b>9. The Collection of Egyptian Mummies in the British Museum: Overview and Potential for Study</b>	<b>103</b>
<i>John H. Taylor</i>	
<hr/>	
<b>10. The Human Remains from Tell es-Sa'idiyeh: International Custodianship, Respect and Research</b>	<b>115</b>
<i>Jonathan Tubb and Caroline Cartwright</i>	
<hr/>	
<b>11. The Bioarchaeology of Amara West in Nubia: Investigating the Impacts of Political, Cultural and Environmental Change on Health and Diet</b>	<b>123</b>
<i>Michaela Binder and Neal Spencer</i>	
<hr/>	
<b>Contributors</b>	<b>137</b>
<hr/>	
<b>Index</b>	<b>139</b>

# Preface

JD Hill

Human remains in museum collections can be a charged focus amidst the contested debates surrounding the legacies of colonialism and empire, the different purposes of a museum's existence and the changing understanding of the human body. The assumed primacy of western scientific research over the concerns of indigenous populations has also been a point of contention. This collection of essays offers a particular set of perspectives on these issues as seen through the lens of one major international museum. The aim of the book is to show that there are many more aspects to the collections of human remains in museums than just issues of repatriation and display. The authors are predominantly British Museum staff or those who have engaged in different ways with the human remains in the British Museum's care. None of the authors would claim that the collection seeks to offer a definitive account of the complex and broad range of questions that surround the care, display and research of human remains in museum collections, nor would they wish this volume to be read as an official statement of the British Museum's position on these subjects. While many of the authors are employed by the British Museum, this does not mean that they share the same opinions on issues such as the repatriation, display, care or research of human remains in the collection.

The motivation for publishing this book is to emphasize that for a museum of any size, it is impossible to separate out issues of repatriation or display from those of conservation, documentation and research in relation to human remains. The contributors to this volume seek to cover as far as possible the breadth of concerns related to the care of human remains. To hold a collection of any kind in trust for future generations, particularly one that includes human remains, means that those responsible for them have to consider all aspects of what that duty of care entails. Across three sections discussing the holding, conserving and researching of human remains, the chapters cover both practical and ethical issues from the relative humidity levels required for the storage of human remains to the use and publication of images. The book also reviews the claims that the British Museum's Trustees have considered in relation to the de-accession and return of some human remains in the collection. Many of the chapters highlight particular case studies that focus on one group of human remains or even the remains of one individual, such as Lindow Man. A number of authors discuss the processes and results of some areas of research on human remains in the collection, stressing the active contribution that such remains have in furthering our understanding of past societies, even if they have been in the museum's care for many years.

This book is one outcome of a continuing process of reflection and discussion concerning how the British Museum should look after the human remains in its collection. The British Museum has held human remains since its foundation in 1753 when the original museum contained biological and geological materials alongside artefacts, books, prints and drawings. In the 19th century, many of the human remains in the British Museum passed into the care of the Natural History Museum which was created out of the biological and geological collections of the

original British Museum. The human remains in the Museum's care today are relatively few in comparison to the overall size of the collection. While skeletons, cremated remains and mummies from archaeological investigations form a significant proportion of the collection, there is a relatively large number of objects from the last 200 years made in part or, more rarely, in whole from human hair, teeth or bone.

The diversity of the range of human remains within the Museum's care is the key challenge in the curation, display and research of the collection. For example, different forms of human remains require different methods of storage and handling. The variety of the collection is a product of the cultures, both ancient and recent, from which they originate with different attitudes to death, human remains and mortuary practices. This divergence is also reflected in the variation of ways in which the human remains have arrived at the Museum. A significant proportion of the archaeological collections were excavated in the course of Museum projects over the last 30 years, but other remains, including many of the mummies, arrived at the Museum through gift or purchase in the 19th and 20th centuries. This also incorporates a large number of the most recent examples of human remains in the collection, and close research of the specific circumstances through which these human remains were collected often reveal complex and nuanced relationships and circumstances of their original gift or collection, before subsequently coming to the Museum at a later date.

There have been significant changes in the last 20 years as to how the British Museum cares for, displays and researches human remains, some of which have been driven

by changes in legislation and governmental guidance. However, most of the developments reflect how attitudes, practices and policies have been altered by Trustees and staff following movements and debates in the fields of museum studies, archaeology and physical anthropology, in addition to the larger shifts in public attitudes to death and the display of human remains. As discussed in several chapters, the British Museum's care of human remains falls within the legislative framework of the Human Tissue Act 2004 and the British Museum Act 1963 and is led by guidance issued by the UK government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport. These policies in particular instruct how the Museum can act when human remains are subject to repatriation requests or how the Museum should care for human remains less than 100 years old. However, wider aspects of the care of human remains have developed out of in-depth discussions with staff across the Museum over the last ten years. One result of this consultation process was a review of all the human remains on display in the Museum and an evaluation of what in practice was meant by displaying human remains with care and respect. As a consequence of this review, it was agreed that some human remains should be removed from display. These discussions have also resulted in the creation of the British Museum Policy on Human Remains, which offers guidance on all aspects of the care, conservation, documentation and study of the human remains in the British Museum collection. These changes reflect how in practice each generation of British Museum Trustees and staff seek to understand what it means for a museum to care for a collection that includes human remains 'in trust': in trust not for the present, but for the future.