

Ethical Issues: the study and display of human remains

Are there ethical guidelines, principles of right conduct, that should relate to the study and display of human remains on archaeological sites and in museums? If so, on what should they be based? If such principles differ from culture to culture, and change over time, can there be consensus about the moral correctness of how the dead from antiquity should be treated? In some countries such as the US, Canada and Australia, the study and display of human remains is highly contentious because indigenous peoples, claiming affinity, have protested against the study and display of human remains of their group and sought repatriation of bones. **Are the human remains from Pompeii and Herculaneum different because of the distance in time from us and the lack of a modern group claiming family, cultural or ethnic affinity with them? Or should there be general rules and standards of conduct governing how any human remains are treated?** Might these principles derive from a general sense of respect for human beings? These are issues that everyone ultimately decides for themselves and museums and research institutions are increasingly aware that they may offend the sensibilities of visitors by displaying human remains.

Researchers undertaking studies of human remains are required by institutions and museums to abide by a professional code of ethics. What is considered 'good' or 'ethical' behaviour is specified by the institution or professional body. In general such codes of 'professional conduct' require that human remains be 'treated with respect' and 'handled with care' and the guidelines derive from the assertion that each and every human being has value in his or her self. There is some commonality between these standards of conduct and those required by university anatomy departments which may specify that anatomical examinations be conducted in an 'orderly', 'quiet' or 'respectful' manner. Only those studying the remains are permitted to have access. In anatomy departments it is respect for the deceased donor and their family that is stressed, but in archaeological contexts it is a more generalized humanistic sense of 'respect' that is invoked. There is a requirement in museum practice that if there is an ethnic, cultural or religious group that claims affinity with the human remains then that group should be consulted and their wishes ascertained.

It would be considered **unethical to store bones in inappropriate conditions that might damage them** causing valuable scientific information to be lost. It would be considered unethical if skeletal remains were not made equally available to all qualified scholars **so that replication of one scholar's tests could be done by another.** It would be considered unethical to not supervise and regulate tests that were destructive of bones. The codes of ethics developed by archaeological associations also stress the need for the accurate recording of results and the timely publication of a scholar's research findings. **It is expected that the research findings of others are also both accurately reported and their work fairly acknowledged.**

The display of human remains is a highly contested area in museum practice, particularly in the UK, North America and Australia where there has been great pressure from indigenous groups for the removal of certain inappropriate displays of human remains and repatriation of bodies. As a consequence of this controversy many museums have developed codes of ethics governing their display of all human remains. In a code of ethics developed in 2006, the ICOM, **the International Council of Museums, established a number of guidelines for the collection, study and display of human remains by museums. It mandated that if human remains are displayed, 'they must be presented with great tact and respect for the feelings of human dignity of all peoples' (Ethics 4.3).** The Museum of London, the British Museum and the Manchester Museum have all confronted the issue and considered carefully whether their displays of any human remains are to be deemed appropriate. The museums, in public statements, have all

stressed that they handle and display human remains with the utmost respect. Signs outside alert visitors if the museum display will include human remains and call for respectful behaviour. These are also designed to alert those orthodox Jews, Muslims and members of other faiths, who may have cultural concerns about their proximity to human remains.

The display of human remains has been justified by some museums on the grounds of 'authenticity', but the British Ministry of Culture guidelines for museums stresses that they should seriously consider alternatives and only display the actual remains if there is a particularly compelling reason to do so. Museums in the UK and USA displaying human remains increasingly seek to avoid any macabre sensationalism in their presentation. In Italy there is no real public debate about the appropriateness of displaying ancient Roman bodies. It is not really a controversial issue and at Pompeii the casts of the bodies on display are thronged by noisy crowds of sightseers.

Elsewhere, in Europe, North America and Australia, an educational purpose is sometimes advanced by museums as their justification for the display of human remains. Displays of human remains are not a form of entertainment, but are designed to be informative and educational. In line with this **didactic justification** museum information boards and notices teach the visitor about the results of the scientific studies that have been done on the human remains or explain the techniques of forensic physical anthropology. What is stressed is **educational and contextual information** – the age, sex and general health of the subjects and what the remains teach us about life and death in historical times.

There are a number of alternatives to the display of the actual remains themselves: casts, replicas, holograms and computer models. Some museums choose not to display the human remains themselves. This is not the case in Italy where ancient human remains are often encountered in museum displays reconstructing ancient tombs, for example. **On site at Pompeii casts of the bodies are displayed without any concern for the ICOM code of ethics** although when the casts are displayed in international travelling exhibitions great care is shown by foreign museums to demonstrate their professional compliance. **At Pompeii casts are generally displayed out of context without an interpretive or educational framework of any kind.** The physical conditions in which the casts are displayed are not conducive to the preservation of the specimens from further deterioration. Some casts are displayed to the public with stacks of artefacts and unrelated 'finds' in a way that clearly does not show 'respect for the feelings of human dignity held by all people'. **At Herculaneum there is more sensitivity – the human remains of the people killed in the boatchambers during the eruption are not displayed in public. They are represented by a display of casts showing the position of the bodies in the boatchambers.** Normally the displays may only be viewed from a distance.

Further Reading

British Museum Policy on Human Remains, 2006 see the electronic document [http:// www.britishmuseum.org/PDF/Human%20Remains%206%20Oct%202006.pdf](http://www.britishmuseum.org/PDF/Human%20Remains%206%20Oct%202006.pdf).

International Council of Museums Code of Ethics: [http:// icom.museum/the-vision/code-of-ethics](http://icom.museum/the-vision/code-of-ethics)

J.Lohman and K. Goodnow (eds.), *Human Remains and Museum Practice*, London: UNESCO, 2006.

Ministry of Culture, UK: Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums, 2005 electronic document :http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/publications/3720.aspx