



Death is Forever?

Ancient writers, modern scientists, and the mummies themselves all help us better understand the Egyptian mummification process and the culture in which it existed. Much of what we know about the actual process is based on the writings of early historians such as Herodotus who carefully recorded the process during his travels to Egypt around 450 B.C. Present-day archaeologists and other specialists are adding to this knowledge. The development of x-rays now makes it possible to x-ray mummies without destroying the elaborate outer wrappings. By studying the x-rays or performing autopsies on unwrapped bodies, experts are learning more about diseases suffered by the Egyptians and their medical treatment. A better idea of average height and life span comes from studying the bones. By learning their age at death, the order and dates of the Egyptian kings becomes a little clearer. Even ties of kinship in the royal line can be suggested by the striking similarities or dissimilarities in the skulls of pharaohs that followed one another. Dead now for thousands of years, the mummy continues to speak to us.

Source: http://www.si.edu/Encyclopedia_SI/nmnh/mummies.htm

Museum Professionals: Hand Off Our Mummies!

Tiffany Jenkins

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Where have all the mummies gone? Visitors to Bristol City Museum & Art Gallery have been finding it difficult to find its celebrated collection of ancient human remains. The museum once presented its mummies in open coffins, but now keeps the coffins semi-closed because, curators say, that is more respectful. You can also view a photograph of an unwrapped mummy, but only if you press a button to light up the picture first. An accompanying interactive poll questions visitors on the ethics of such a display. Close to the mummy section is a rare skeleton of a young man who lived in Britain during the Bronze Age, 3,400 years ago. He is in a custom-built case on which a label warns: 'This display contains human remains'. This cautionary approach is taking place without public demand for it. In fact, museum-goers expect to see ancient bodies on display. They find it educational and kids love it. And yet professionals are increasingly uncomfortable about displaying human remains and are continually questioning its ethics, covering mummies and skeletons up, removing them altogether, or erecting warning signs.

Over the past 30 years, human remains have become the focus of various campaigns around the world. It was a contentious issue in North America and Australia in the 1980s, but since then has developed from a regional issue affecting local archaeologists, indigenous groups and museums to an international concern involving national museums and governments, too. Various indigenous groups, archaeologists and anthropologists have campaigned for the repatriation of human remains to culturally affiliated groups as a way of making reparations for historical wrongs.

In the late 1990s, a similar debate took place in Britain. After high-profile campaigns that were fiercely opposed by those who use human remains for important research, the Human Tissue Act 2004 was passed. This was an amendment to the 1963 British Museum Act, and it permitted and encouraged the removal of human remains from specific (and previously resistant) museums.

The decisions to repatriate are significant. Museums do not usually deaccession artefacts or human remains. There are legal barriers to, and a general presumption against, doing so. What is more, human remains are highly, and often uniquely, valuable research material. Scientists study them to chart human origins, population diversity and distribution as well as the past environments in which people lived. The removal of such important material puts the role of museums – to develop and diffuse knowledge – in question.

The emergence of the issue in Britain is different in two important respects. Firstly, there was significantly weaker external pressure on institutions here compared to Australasia, America and Canada, which responded to claims for repatriation from indigenous groups. A 2003 survey conducted by the Human Remains Working Group characterised claims from overseas indigenous groups on institutions as 'low' and found only 33 such requests on English institutions, seven of which had already been agreed to, and some of

which were repeat claims from the same group. Secondly, while elsewhere the focus of campaigns has been human remains associated with indigenous groups who suffered under colonisation, in Britain the scope of problem has been extended by professionals who argue that all human remains require special attention. Museums have often been sites of controversy. Debates over how to represent the past are predominantly understood among theorists as the result of tensions caused by challenges from external forces; in particular, social movements that make demands regarding the representation of their culture. Debates over human remains and cultural property have generally been understood as influenced by indigenous movements applying pressure on resistant professionals.

In Britain, however, high-profile contestation of museum policy, which has resulted in law changes and major repatriations, is not primarily due to pressure from overseas indigenous groups. Such claims-making has not, in fact, been significant here, while all human remains - even unclaimed ones - have become the focus for activism.

My own research suggests that there is an internal dynamic to changing policies around human remains in the UK that demands greater attention. Here, campaigns have been waged less often by social movements than by museum insiders. Senior curators, directors and policymakers have been instrumental in portraying the holding, display and treatment of human remains as a problem. These professionals were once gatekeepers, guarding and protecting collections. So why are campaigning museum professionals now dismantling collections from within? They are, in fact, revealing a crisis of cultural authority and are attempting to secure new legitimacy by distancing themselves from a discredited foundational remit.

Let's examine more closely the crisis of cultural authority, the motivations of the main claims-makers and the problematising of unclaimed human remains.

A crisis of cultural authority

Museums have always held cultural authority. They play a key role in affirming ideas about the pursuit and organisation of knowledge. While aspects of the museum can be traced back to the medieval Schatz, a treasury of goods collected by the Habsburg monarchy, or to private collecting in the Renaissance, it is the development of public collections in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that rationalised collections into a specific meaningful public context. The development of the museum and the rationale behind displaying artefacts were informed by Enlightenment ideas about the absolute character of knowledge. This knowledge was seen to be something discoverable through the methods of rationalism, which were regarded as universally applicable.

In the past 40 years, the foundational principles of museum institutions have undergone severe scrutiny and this has led to a crisis of cultural authority. In addition to the constraints and pressures arising from the operations of the market, the central tenets of the Enlightenment have been called into question. Whilst there was always hostility towards the principles of this period, a number of intellectual trends since the late 1960s have consolidated this critical outlook, challenging truth claims and the idea of the museum as a distinct realm apart from social and political forces.

Through postmodernism, cultural theory and post-colonial theory, the traditional justifications of the museum have been interrogated and challenged. Culture and science have come to be viewed, not as universal or objective, but as particular expressions of European prejudice. The debates over objective truth and relativism were rapidly assimilated into museology. The development of museums in Western societies, a wide group of museologists and practitioners has argued, occurred in specific historical circumstances and served the interests of the dominant classes.

Internal claims-makers

Anthropologists, archaeologists and museum professionals, initially from North America and Australia, have been key in framing the problems of keeping human remains in museum collections. It was at the inaugural World Archaeological Congress (WAC) in 1986 that concerns were first raised. The congress's national secretary, anthropologist Peter Ucko, had previously been a principal at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra. Along with indigenous activists and American and Australian academics and professionals, Ucko took the opportunity to express concerns regarding the treatment of human remains of indigenous groups. It then became a central issue for the WAC, which lobbied the museum community in Britain, arranging meetings for them with overseas claimant groups. Ucko and anthropologist Jane Hubert assumed ownership of the problem in Britain, acting as issue entrepreneurs.

Museum professionals were highly receptive to the campaign. In 1997, the British Museums Association commissioned the museologist and activist Moira Simpson to undertake two research projects to

determine its members' views about repatriation. Simpson found the vast majority of respondents accepted the notion. Only three out of 123 respondents were categorically opposed to it. However, only 17 institutions out of 164 had received enquiries about repatriation. This suggests a hospitable reaction to the concept of repatriation that was not stimulated by specific requests.

The main activists were professionals who have campaigned within museums. For one senior curator from a university museum, being an activist was more important to him than his area of studied expertise. As he explained to me: 'I am an archaeologist. My specialism is the Persian period. A big find has just happened and I should go, I am the expert in this area, but I would much rather stay and do this [campaign around repatriation]. This is more pressing and important for me now.'

This personal identification with the problem of human remains speaks to its symbolic nature. Many within the sector are searching for a new mission, and the old way – researching the past and presenting that research to the public – is no longer considered valuable. Indeed, it is seen as potentially damaging by many. Another campaigner I interviewed, a senior archaeologist at a university museum, argued that museums need to change, suggesting that they should play a different role today: 'Museums have to grow up... to be less concerned with where things are and less concerned with maybe issues around control and authority... just to make sure that artefacts or other material over which the museum has responsibility are in a position where they can do most good'.

Unclaimed human remains

The question of who owns human remains has become a lightning rod for a wider debate over the purpose of the museum. The increasing focus on human remains as past people as well as scientific objects signals a repositioning of the museum in terms of its social relevance. It is this that helps to explain the continued problematisation of the display of human remains.

An additional influence was the linking of the problem of human remains in museum collections with a major political controversy over the retention of children's body parts at UK hospitals, including at Alder Hey hospital in Liverpool. The high-profile Bristol Royal Infirmary Inquiry (2000) and the Royal Liverpool Children's Inquiry (2001) investigated the circumstances leading to the removal, retention and disposal of human tissue, including children's organs, and led to legislation on the issue of consent.

Campaigners suggested the two issues – retaining the remains of those who were long-since dead and the organs of recently deceased children – were equivalent. And by linking these two issues, and others, they tried to suggest that there was a general public outcry over the use of all body parts.

For example, writing in a submission to the Human Remains Working Group in 2001, archaeologist and repatriation campaigner Cressida Fforde argued: 'The Alder Hey scandal has further highlighted the inequitable treatment of human remains under the law in Britain. This scandal, as well as that which followed the discovery of the treatment of the bodies of those who had died in the Marchioness disaster, demonstrates that not only is concern for appropriate treatment of the dead not only an indigenous matter, but that there is a wide void between general public assumptions about how remains are treated and the reality of what sometimes actually takes place.'

With the conflation of these two separate issues – the treatment of the bodies of the recently deceased and the retention of the bodies of the long dead – the idea that holding any kind of human remains is problematic entered into museum policy and practice. Notably, this sensitivity is not shared by the public, despite activists' attempts to suggest so. Surveys demonstrate that most people expect and want to see human remains on show in museums. In fact, they are big crowd-pullers. Around 90 per cent of respondents to an opinion poll of 1,000 people commissioned by English Heritage said they were comfortable with keeping prehistoric human remains in museums.

This has not deterred activists within the profession from campaigning against the display of human remains. In May 2008, three Egyptian mummies at Manchester Museum were covered with a white sheet 'out of respect', without any request to do so by present-day Egyptians or the public. It was only after protests from local audiences and the media that the museum uncovered the mummies, but it stated that it still wished to continue the conversation about how to respect the human remains.

In a revealing study, Hugh Kilmister, a curator at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology in London, set out to investigate whether museums were becoming 'unduly sensitive' about the issues surrounding human remains. In 2003, Kilmister interviewed museum visitors about their attitudes to displays. He found that there was a 'very high proportion' — 82.5 per cent of visitors surveyed — who believed that the museums should be allowed to display human remains in 'whatever way they see fit'.

Kilmister still concluded that the display and treatment of human remains needs to change. As he put it: 'Although not as contentious as the display of Aboriginal or Native American remains, the public is generally positive about the display of ancient Egyptian remains, but we perhaps need to look at the future re-display of these remains.' In relation to the high level of public trust in professionals to decide the future of human remains, Kilmister commented, 'trust is perhaps not justified'.

Seventeen museums have since drafted policies on human remains, with most advocating that signs are erected to warn visitors in advance. The Royal Cornwall Museum in Truro does not show any images, other than wrapped mummies, in its online or publicity material. The Museum of London's policy states: 'As a general principle, skeletons will not be on "open display" but located in such a way as to provide them some "privacy".' It continues: 'The Museum will normally not allow its holdings of human remains to be photographed or filmed for external media purposes.'

The idea that all human remains should be treated differently has been internalised by sections of the museum profession without requests from claim-making groups. So professionals are taking it upon themselves to remove and hide their exhibits, which threatens research and public access. In doing so, they are also dismantling from within the purpose of the museum as an institution, which is to research and display important artefacts and human remains.

Next time you go to a museum, make sure to ask them where they keep their skeletons. Rather than being on show to you and me, they may well be in the closet.

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Grave Robbing or Archeology: Huffington Post

Chris Weignant

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Do human remains belong in museums? According to at least some of the families of 9/11 victims from the Twin Towers, they most certainly do not. This weekend, protesters [held up unequivocal signs](#) stating this belief: "Human remains don't belong in museums." The family members were protesting the move of the unidentified 9/11 remains from the medical examiner's office to the newly-constructed memorial and museum on the Twin Towers site. The remains will continue to be tested in the hopes of positively identifying them at some point, and they will not be stored anywhere in public view. While the museum will have a \$24 entrance fee, there will be a families-only "Reflection Room" which will not require paid admission for the families of the victims. As with virtually all actions surrounding the site, some of the 3,000 affected families agree with the decision and some — vociferously — do not.

Since I did not lose a family member on 9/11, though, I do not even feel qualified to take a personal position on the issue. I simply do not know how I would feel if those unidentified remains contained fragments of one of my own loved ones, to put this another way. So I do not write today to stake out a firm position on the movement of the 9/11 remains this weekend, just to be perfectly clear up front. I'd rather try to make a larger point on the shift in what is considered proper for museums to study and display.

Watching the protests and the heartfelt emotions displayed, I couldn't help wondering about this bigger picture. Because human remains are indeed fully and publicly displayed at many history museums. Beyond bones and skeletons, there are also many cultural artifacts on display in museums that were dug up from burial sites. Which made me wonder where, exactly, do we draw this line? Or, in much blunter language: What, exactly, is the difference between archaeology and grave robbing?

That's obviously a loaded question. "Grave robbing" usually means digging up a burial site and making off with anything saleable which can be found within. It implies wrongdoing, desecration, and profit. "Archaeology" is a scientific pursuit dedicated to discovering how previous humans lived their lives. The two, on first glance, might seem to be so disconnected that any attempted comparison between them would hold no validity whatsoever.

Let's back off from such loaded terminology, though, to examine the heart of the issue. Because while there are no hard and fast lines, it seems to boil down to two concrete questions. The first is how long human remains have to stay in the ground before they are considered valid subjects for archaeology, and the

second is the connection living people feel with the buried remains. Again, there are no bright dividing lines for the answers to these questions — they indeed shift, over time.

If a scientist knocked on your door and asked you for permission to dig up your grandmother's grave and then to publicly exhibit whatever he found there (human remains, artifacts, whatever...), after which he would publish a scientific paper on how the peoples of her generation possibly lived — what would be your response? Most people would not readily agree to this sort of thing, to put it mildly.

But what if the same scientist asked the same permission to exhume your great-great-great-great-great-grandmother? You can ask that sentence and vary the number of "greats" to see how intensely you would feel about your own ancestors. Your grandmother was quite possibly known to you and thus appears in your "living memory," while anyone further than great-grandmother would likely not have been personally known to you. This changes sentiments, obviously, but does it change them enough for you to grant the scientist permission to dig? And display whatever he found? How far back in your family tree would you stop having a personal connection and decide that scientific curiosity was justifiable to desecrate their final resting place?

You can look at it from the other end, if such questions are disturbing to contemplate. Very few people alive, after all, would argue that digging up fossils in [Olduvai Gorge](#) (think: "Lucy") is psychologically disturbing enough to forbid. We're talking about over a million years in time and ancestors that cannot even be accurately called "human." Archaeology wins this argument hands down, to put it another way. Moving forward, it's also hard to imagine anyone getting very upset over prehistoric or Paleolithic sites being dug up. Digging up Stone Age and Iron Age sites in Europe (and elsewhere) is far enough removed for no one alive to feel any familial connections. Therefore, archaeology wins again.

But even the dawn of recorded history isn't really a dividing line. [Mummies](#) of pharaohs (and others) from ancient Egypt actually did a lot to spur the origins of the scientific pursuit of archaeology, a few hundred years back. Such mummies were exhibited publicly pretty much everywhere at the time, from private collections to museums to traveling carnivals and freakshows. A corpse 4,000 years old was considered a curiosity, and no more. There was nothing sacred about it, especially considering that most religions practiced when the mummy was alive no longer exist, and most religions practiced today did not exist in the mummy's time. But was Howard Carter, discoverer of King Tut, really all that different from the tomb raiders of ancient Egypt? Carter didn't haul away everything in sight so he could sell it to the highest bidder, instead he hauled away everything in sight to display before the public. Is that a distinction with much difference? Tut's tomb is now empty, either way.

While mummification in Egypt was a religious rite performed by humans, there is another class of mummies which is also considered fair game for archaeology: [bog mummies](#). People who disappear into peat bogs are sometimes kept in perfect anaerobic conditions which preserve the remains to a startling degree. Bog mummies appear from time to time, and they date anywhere from thousands of years ago (older than some Egyptian mummies) to fairly recent specimens (a German who disappeared in 1828 and was found in 1979) — and everything in between. The bodies are so well preserved that it doesn't matter much how long they've been in the bog, to put it another way. Many of these were scientifically studied and ended up in museums (although some have since been reburied).

Since at least the Renaissance, Western civilization has been interested in systematically studying the cultures which have come before. An Italian historian created a guide to the ruins of ancient Rome as early as the 15th century. Europeans had plenty to examine in their own backyards, which led to interest in Stonehenge and other megaliths and monuments from pre-history. The towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum were buried by Mount Vesuvius in the year 79 and were subsequently excavated in 1748. By the 1800s, some scientific guidelines and principles began to be regularly used in the study of ancient sites. "Egyptology" became popular after Napoleon invaded Egypt, and the field spread when the British captured it from the French. But much of these early "antiquarians" were little more than grave robbers (at least, as seen in modern context), since they were most concerned with looting sites of anything valuable and then transporting the treasures back home. Sometimes such items would wind up in private hands (usually, the people who footed the bill for the expeditions), and sometimes they would wind up in museums where the public could at least view them. But scientific study of such sites took over a century to become standardized in any way, and many early "Egyptologists" were nothing short of treasure hunters.

Because of the interest in ancient artifacts (including, in Egypt, the mummies themselves), the local populations near ancient sites realized there was money to be made, which set off a wave of looting that continues to this day (the black market in antiquities has never really gone away). Owning something man-made that is really old — especially something old that is beautiful — was a much bigger motivating factor than any scientific study of the culture which created it. And, in the case of museums, the public's curiosity

was certainly more important (it was thought) than respect for ancient graves or even respect for keeping cultural treasures in the country they originated from.

Since Christianity has dominated Europe, human remains have been treated in various ways during various periods. By modern standards, the thought of digging up Christian graves from, say, the Middle Ages would be somewhat controversial. Digging up Christian graves for the sake of science might be considered acceptable if they are ancient enough, to put this another way, but the closer you get to modern times, the more controversial such research would become. Especially if it included digging up (and then publicly displaying) relics which had been buried in such graves. Where does the idea of “desecration” begin and the idea of “important scientific research” end?

The Catholic Church isn't much of a guide, considering its own penchant for [holy relics](#). During the Dark and Middle Ages, trade in saints' relics was lively indeed, until virtually every cathedral could boast of having “authentic” bone fragments of one saint or another. Since there was little to regulate such a trade, needless to say, forgeries abounded. Possessing the bones of a saint meant people would make pilgrimages to the cathedral, which did wonders to boost the local economy — which was why the relics were so valuable. Sometimes relics would only be displayed on certain holy days, but in some instances they were openly displayed in “reliquaries” (some of which appear [rather gruesome](#) today). The practice has not completely died out, however, as during the recent canonization of two former popes, their [official relics](#) were displayed: a piece of skin cut from Pope John XXIII (when he was exhumed, so his corpse could be [publicly displayed for veneration](#) in 2001), and a vial of blood from John Paul II.

The two relics from the new saints will not be displayed in a museum, but rather in a church. Contrary to the protest signs from the 9/11 families, however, human remains are indeed currently displayed in museums all over the world. From fossils to skeletons to Egyptian mummies to bog mummies, human remains are not only displayed publicly, they are (in the non-public areas) actually stockpiled in many museums, for scientific study. The only question is where the line is drawn, chronologically. It cannot be said to be drawn before written history, because ancient Egyptians certainly knew how to write. It cannot be said to be drawn on religious lines, since the Catholic Church exhumed a body a little over ten years ago and snipped off a small piece of it for continued veneration.

While drawing a line between grave robbing and archaeology is tough to do when you strip all the scientific rationale away, the question is mostly now answered by who gets offended. Digging up colonial graves in America would mean offending the descendants of the people buried there — who still exist, in many cases. Digging up graves on old farmsteads on the Great Plains or from Gold Rush camps in the Yukon would also likely raise some form of protest from the families involved. In either case, if the graves were accidentally discovered what would likely happen is scientists would have a short window to catalogue and record the contents of the graves, and then they would be reburied, most likely with the benefit of modern clergy. It would seem the only respectable thing to do.

Which, at long last, brings me to the point I set out to make. The United States Congress acted in both 1989 (with the passage of the [National Museum of the American Indian Act](#)) and in 1990 (with the [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act](#)) to start including Native Americans in the respect that would likely be given to any other historical American grave. The Smithsonian Institution at one time held the remains of around 20,000 Native Americans, for scientific study. This included the brain of a man scientists named “Ishi” (which only means “man” in his language, as his true name was sacred to him and never admitted). You may have [heard of him](#) described as the “last wild Indian,” or perhaps from the book *Ishi In Two Worlds* (which was compiled by Theodora Kroeber, the widow of museum director Alfred Kroeber, after her husband's death).

Ishi appeared out of the Northern California wilderness in 1911. He was starving. He was taken in by the Museum of Anthropology (part of the University of California system), and hired as a research assistant so he could live out his life in an apartment in the museum. He worked closely with both Thomas Waterman and Alfred Kroeber, who gained a wealth of information about the culture of Ishi's tribe (of whom he was considered the last surviving member). Ishi, however, had no immunity to Western diseases and was often sick, and he died of tuberculosis only five years after he arrived at the museum, in his early 50s. Over some objections, his body was autopsied and then cremated, although his brain was preserved. Kroeber sent Ishi's brain to the Smithsonian in 1917, where it remained until the year 2000, when it was sent back to his closest descendants (of the Yana people), in keeping with the spirit of both the National Museum of the American Indian Act and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

This newfound respect for human remains of Native Americans is not complete, though, even if Ishi's story has a positive ending. The laws only cover remains which can be linked to existing Native American

groups today, after all, and not the more broad description they prefer — that all Native American remains are linked to them through over 10,000 years of oral histories, and they should all be respectfully repatriated (rather than being studied in a museum). The courts are still deciding some cases in favor of the scientists and against repatriation, however, even with the new laws.

As I said, I am not going to offer any opinion on the families of the 9/11 victims in New York. That is for their own families to do, I feel. But America has moved from digging up Native American graves for profit (which was clearly nothing more than grave robbing, and started with the earliest European settlers), to scientifically examining human remains and artifacts from such sites, to finally realizing that the descendants of the bodies they are examining are offended by the bones of their ancestors being kept in museum storerooms. That is progress, of a sort. It is incomplete, but it is at least moving us in the right direction. Because what one person's (or "one scientist's") determination of "this grave is old enough to only be of scientific value or interest" is no longer the last word on the subject, when others feel differently. The line between scientific interest and considering graves sacred has never been a hard and fast one. What is considered proper to display or hold in museums has also changed, over time. And where that line should be drawn depends on who you ask.

Notes: