

Handle with care: thoughts on the return of human bone collections

Sebastian Payne¹

The repatriation of human remains (Editorial *Antiquity* 78: 5) is a matter in which two viewpoints, both equally valid, are confronted. Human skeletal remains are part of the record of our past. They tell about our shared past – about the story of human adaptive radiation and dispersion. Recent research using modern and ancient DNA evidence is adding considerably to this understanding, and puts our diversity into context by the finding that we share something like 99 per cent of our genetic makeup with all other human beings. Research on human skeletal remains tells us also about how our predecessors lived and died, and has considerable potential to contribute to medical research. Medieval skeletons from a deserted medieval village in Yorkshire, for instance, have showed that osteoporosis was just as common among medieval women as it is now, giving fresh insight into the causes of osteoporosis and calling into question ideas that blame our modern lifestyle. The techniques used in this study were not available when the remains were first excavated; this illustrates the value of long-term retention of skeletal material, which allows application of new techniques so that new information can be obtained from old collections.

Many people are interested in and not disturbed by the study of human remains. In Britain, television programmes like the BBC's "*Meet the Ancestors*" attract large audiences. Underlying this is a widely-shared belief in the value of knowledge and increased understanding of ourselves.

However, not all people share these views and beliefs. Some feel, in accordance with their religious belief and cultural values, that disturbing burials is always wrong, and disrespectful to the dead and to their relatives. People with these beliefs are – in Britain and probably worldwide – a minority. When new graves or church extensions disturb earlier unmarked burials in churchyards, established practice in this country is that bones are collected up, treated with dignity and reburied, but it is not felt that older burials must be left undisturbed once personal memory of individuals has gone and bodies have become skeletons. Similar pragmatic practices are widespread in other countries. But the beliefs of those who feel that disturbing burials is unacceptable are no less real and important than the views of those who believe in the value of finding out more about ourselves. The problem, therefore, is to find the best balance between these conflicting positions.

When we know who an individual was, or when it is clear what beliefs he or she held, or when close relatives still survive, it is clearly right that the beliefs of the individual and the family should have strong weight. When an individual has been buried by and in the care of a surviving religious group, theirs is another interest to be taken into account. But these individual interests have to be balanced against the interests of others – as they are for reasons

¹ Chief Scientist, English Heritage, 23 Savile Row, London W1S 2ET (Email: sebastian.payne@english-heritage.org.uk)

of public health and justice – and against the widespread belief that increased knowledge and understanding is a good thing.

For example, skeletons excavated some years ago from the Spitalfields crypt have given us important insights into life in London in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Because in many cases we know the name, age at death and cause of death, they have been very important in the contribution they have made to improving our methods for the study of human skeletons. But when the descendants of Louisa Courtauld, who died in 1807 at the age of 77, requested reburial, she was reburied in the churchyard by her great great great grandson and other family members. When medieval Jewish burials were excavated in York, after consultation with the Chief Rabbi's office they were reburied after a relatively brief period of study, because of the strength of feeling among Jews about the disturbance of Jewish burials. But few people would argue that living people in south-west Britain who share common DNA sequences with the so-called Red Lady of Paviland, a 30 000 year old male burial from South Wales, should decide what happens to the skeleton: the Red Lady is, more importantly, related to all of us, and important for our understanding of the early colonisation of this country by *Homo sapiens*. Moreover, his beliefs are unknown and, probably, unknowable.

A joint working group between English Heritage and the Church of England is currently considering these issues in relation to the disturbance and subsequent treatment of Christian human remains from England; their report and draft recommendations have recently been sent out for consultation and comment (see <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/archaeology/consultationdocuments>). The report suggests that where close relatives are known, their views, as in the Spitalfields case, should be given strong weight. When, however, as is usually the case for older cemeteries, personal identity is unknown, and when a group of skeletons is of sufficient research value to make it desirable to be able to apply new techniques in the future, it suggests that it is desirable to keep skeletons accessible rather than rebury them, and that crypts and redundant churches may provide ways to maintain research access while keeping skeletons on consecrated ground. The consultation period runs until the end of June; comments should be sent by email to simon.mays@english-heritage.org.uk.

Moving – with proper hesitation in view of past wrongs – to the repatriation issue, and trying to apply the same kind of approach, it seems to me that the recent repatriation to Tasmania of an individual whose identity was known, and who was killed less than 200 years ago, was almost certainly right; repatriation, if requested, should be the default for most recent remains. But that principle should not be extended unreasonably, as seems to have happened in the case of Kennewick man, a skeleton around 10 000 years old from North America. In that case, study of the burial is important for our understanding of the early human colonisation of America and I do not think any modern group can reasonably argue that they are so closely related as to over-ride this wider relationship and importance. I would argue, therefore, that each case needs to be considered on its merits. Broadly, the default should probably be in favour of repatriation for recent skeletal remains – say the past 5 to 10 generations; but against repatriation for older skeletal remains.