

Summary of a news article - HPHP4018
Nat Geo - When Is It Okay To Dig Up The Dead?

When is it okay to dig up the dead? That is the question asked in an article written by Mark Strauss and published by National Geographic in April 2016. The treatment of human remains has been a topical subject for Archaeologists as well as certain cultural groups for millennia. Religion, culture, tradition and science have all been used to justify and to stop the excavation of remains across the world. The article covers ideas such as the use of skeletal DNA and testing to inform decisions on future epidemics, the inability to acquire unbiased information from historic texts and the cultural beliefs of different communities around the world.



Excavations of four burials at the 1608 Jamestown Church site. Archaeologists were able to identify the men by studying their skeletons.

Photograph by Donald E. Hurlbert

The article begins with an exchange between a marine archaeologist and his university students. The archaeologist in question, Dan Davis, is clearly excited to discover bones in a video of a shipwreck found at the bottom of the Black Sea. Since specialising in ancient Greek and Roman shipwrecks, whose boats are often open decked and don't trap bodies on board, he is not used to encountering human remains. The excitement is fuelled by the possibility of scientific and DNA testing that would tell us more about "these people who are virtually historically invisible" (Strauss, M. 2016). His students, on the other hand, reject the notion of testing on the remains and believe the bodies should be left to rest.

Davis got to thinking about what his students said and went on to research the beliefs of the ancient Greeks on the matter. He discovers that in Athens and in other ancient cities, interfering with human remains was deemed a crime. So, if skeletons are found to be from these ancient cities, should we disturb them? Does it matter what the religious and cultural beliefs of the people were and are we expected to respect their beliefs now?



! A funeral procession for King Richard III in 2015. Archaeologists were allowed to exhume the late ruler's remains, with the understanding that he would be reburied once they completed their research.

Photograph by Christopher Furlong, Getty Images

One of the main topics in the article is the repatriation of the ancestors of Native Americans. Due to the nature of acquiring Native pieces and their spiritual and cultural beliefs towards the dead, Natives have been calling for the repatriation of remains as well stolen items for decades. In the 19th and early 20th Century, many anthropologists justified the collection of Native remains to preserve evidence of what they falsely believed was an extinct race of 'Moundbuilders'. After discovering that their theory was false, they continued to excavate gravesites under a different racist justification, that Native Americans were inferior due to their skull size. These remains, which total to more than 110,000, are held by universities, museums and federal agencies in the United States (Jaffe, L. 2023). In the 1990's, Congress passed the 'Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act' (NAGPRA), which directs how Native remains and cultural items can be reclaimed (Colwell, C. 2023). What Strauss fails to mention in the article is that there are grey areas that come with this act. NAGPRA only includes a small section which instructs museums to 'expeditiously return' requested items unless the items are 'indispensable for completion of a specific scientific study, the outcome of which would be of major benefit to the United States' (Colwell, C. 2023). In other words, the repatriation of remains and items is under the control of the institutions that hold them. Although institutions are meant to consider cultural, geographical, biological and archaeological links, many have interpreted the definition of 'cultural affiliation' so narrowly that they have been able to dismiss tribes' connections to ancestors and keep funerary objects and remains (Jaffe, L. et al. 2023).

Although Strauss doesn't fully discuss the implications of repatriation in his article, he does cover how some bioarchaeologists are opposed to the return of bones into the ground after excavation. Simon Mays explains that the reinterment of skeletons speeds up the destruction of the bones. Bones that have been undisturbed, reach an equilibrium with the soil around them and therefore the deterioration slows down. When reburied somewhere else, the deterioration restarts and important information such as DNA can be lost (Strauss, M. 2016). Sharon DeWitte, a bioarchaeologist, believes it's imperative to study skeletal remains. DeWitte states that her studies on victims of the Black Death has helped suggest ways to target any future epidemics we may encounter. While studying a collection of skeletons from a mass grave, she was keeping an eye out for 'non-specific stress markers' such as excess bone growth on the tibia or shinbone, which is a sign of illness and malnutrition (Strauss, M. 2016). Although the general consensus was that the Black Death killed indiscriminately, her studies proved that poor health, age and social factors all affected the likelihood of death. The argument is that this information would not have been discovered if it wasn't for the study of the bodies of plague victims. She also states that the bias

of written records should be taken into consideration. Due to records often being biased towards wealthy individuals, especially men and especially in the medieval ages, we can not know what lives were like for the poor, women or children. The only way to know is by looking at skeletal data and that is only possible through the excavation of remains.



Researching the bones of those who succumbed to the Black Death centuries ago has yielded valuable information for dealing with present-day epidemics.

Illustration by Giovanni Boccaccio, Corbis

Although DeWitte makes a strong case for the study of human bodies, a statement by Larry Zimmerman squashes her argument:

“Their concern sometimes have to come first, even if it’s a matter of sacrifice from the scientific community”

That is ultimately the article’s main argument for the repatriation of remains and cultural items. That it’s not worth upsetting and unsettling a whole community of people for the sake of scientific research. That the lives of people here today are more important than the lives of people in the past. Although the article does make a case against repatriation, even DeWitte states that we should be giving greater weight to the wishes of groups that have been and continue to be marginalised (Strauss, M. 2016). The overarching feeling from the article is that we should be respectful of people’s beliefs and traditions, even if it means sacrificing scientific study. Many scholars would disagree with this outlook but with a generally more understanding approach to different cultures and the continuous development of non-intrusive archaeological tools, there might come a time when digging up the dead will be a thing of the past.

REFERENCES

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