

November 26, 2001

Professor Norman Palmer, Chairman
Working Group on Human Remains
Cultural Property Unit, Department for Culture, Media and Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street London SW1Y 5DH
United Kingdom

Dear Dr. Palmer:

Thank you for soliciting comments from the American Association of Physical Anthropologists (AAPA) concerning in the subject of human remains and their treatment in publicly funded museums and galleries in the United Kingdom. The AAPA is the largest professional group for physical anthropologists. We are an international organization with more than 1800 members, a substantial number of who live in the UK. The research interests of our members encompass all areas of human biology, including the study of human skeletal remains spanning the entire history of humankind in all areas of the world.

The members of the AAPA have had a longstanding interest in repatriation issues such as those your working group is now addressing. We were part of the coalition of Native American and scientific organizations that worked for the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the United States. The goal of this act is to ensure that clearly documented descendant groups are allowed to make decisions regarding the disposition of their ancestral remains.

Through working on repatriation issues, the AAPA Committee on Repatriation has gained considerable experience in dealing with the same issues your working group is currently addressing. We are well aware of the difficulty of the undertaking you face in attempting to develop recommendations concerning the legal status, care, safekeeping, and repatriation of human remains. The AAPA Task Force on Repatriation is eager to assist you in any way that might be useful in facilitating your deliberations concerning these important issues.

We would also be happy to provide you with names and contact information for physical anthropologists, including those working with skeletal collections in the UK, who could answer any questions you have concerning the research value of skeletal collections, the curation of collections, and the issues that arise when attempts are made to affiliate them with extant groups. The British Association of Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology (BABAO) is a key professional organization whose members have an enormous amount of knowledge concerning the sources of British skeletal collections and their research value. Fully integrating a BABAO representative into the Working Group on Human Remains would be highly desirable. In this way, you could insure that your deliberations are well informed and accurately reflect the perspectives of scientists actively involved in research on the skeletal collections whose care and disposition you are considering.

In dealing with the ethical issues surrounding the maintenance of collections of human remains for scientific research, the AAPA Task Force on Repatriation has adopted several basic principles that we believe your working group might find useful in organizing your deliberations. First, any assessment of the scientific value of a skeletal collection should be informed by a clear understanding of the types of information that can be obtained through skeletal research. We provide a brief overview of this issue here, but also urge you to consult with researchers directly involved in skeletal studies as part of your deliberations.

Skeletal biologists focus their research on ancient human skeletal remains because they realize that the information contained within the skeletons of our ancestors is of great value to modern people. Human remains are a unique source of information on the genetic and physiological responses earlier humans made to the challenges posed by past natural and sociocultural environments. Skeletal studies provide data on the demography, diet, diseases, and living conditions of our ancestors that is available from no other source. Consequently, they offer an extremely valuable adaptive perspective on the history of our species that is impossible to obtain through studies of cultural artifacts such as utilitarian objects or works of art. Human remains constitute the biological “material memory” of the people who preceded us and thus provide a direct means through which we may come to know our ancestors.

The findings of skeletal studies have important implications for basic and applied research in the social and natural sciences, medicine, and forensic work. For example, the broad temporal and spatial perspective provided by skeletal studies has proven valuable in helping us to unravel the environmental and genetic causes of diseases such as cancer and osteoporosis. These studies also contribute to our ability to estimate age and sex from skeletal remains, among other biological characteristics, which are critical to the longstanding collaboration physical anthropologists have had with law enforcement agencies.

From a worldwide perspective, the skeletal collections in the United Kingdom’s museums are of immense scientific significance. Much has been learned about the history of earlier human populations, both historic and prehistoric, through work on British collections at institutions such as the University of Bradford, the University of Durham, and the Museum of Natural History. These studies have provided us with a unique perspective on the development of modern urban societies.

Any policies developed for the deaccession collections of human skeletal remains should be designed in a way that insures that scientific values such as those discussed above are fully explored and evenhandedly balanced against the strength of the ancestral-descendant relationship that exists between those remains and a claimant group. When the remains of close relatives are involved (for example, in cases involving the historically documented remains of known individuals) it is clear that the desires of documented descendants should override any scientific interests in the remains. On the other hand, when a direct ancestor-descendant relationship is not clear, the value of the information on the history of our species provided by the continued availability of skeletal collections for scientific research will often outweigh any concerns remotely related modern individuals have over the disposition of those remains.

A final point that you should be aware of concerns the intimate symbolic connection that exists in the minds of many people between human remains and the art objects and artifacts interred with those same individuals as burial offerings. The policies you develop concerning the deaccession of human remains will have, at least in the minds of the members of many descendant groups, important implications for the status of the burial associated artifacts. Although it is possible from an administrative standpoint to establish completely different standards for the repatriation of human remains and burial associated artifacts, we have found from our experience in the United States that maintaining such a double standard is very difficult from both a legal and political perspective. The recommendations your working group makes concerning the repatriation of human remains may well have major implications for the future disposition of artifacts derived from mortuary contexts that are now displayed in Britain's museums and cultural institutions.

We hope that you find this summary of the principals we have used our attempts to develop a balanced approach to the issues surrounding the curation and repatriation of human remains useful. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions. The AAPA Task Force on Repatriation is eager to assist you in any way possible.

Sincerely,

Phillip L. Walker, Professor
AAPA Vice President and Repatriation Committee Chair