

Dear Professor Palmer,

I write in reply to the request for comments on the disposition of human remains in England. Let me introduce myself. I work privately in Biological Anthropology and Archaeology and have experience as a museum curator responsible for human remains and as a research fellow in a research institute. I am president of the Australian Archaeological Association, although this letter is not intended to convey the opinion of the organization. It is rather a personal statement by someone who has studied human skeletons in Australia and England. I have written on return and reburial of skeletal remains, mainly in the context of indigenous Australia. I have participated in negotiations over return of remains, returned skeletons and occasionally assisted in the reburial of skeletons back where they had come from.

My comments are made in part from my experience in Australia, where the discussion of human skeletal remains was complicated by the question of ownership and the 'relations of power' between Aboriginal people and other Australians. There had been widespread antagonism over remains having been dug up and put on display in museums, stored in collections and studied by researchers. And those researchers were mainly representatives of the invaders.

These comments are also made from my observations of the situation in England on two separate occasions (1998 and 2001) when I was collecting data on British skeletons. My main research interest is in short-term human evolution - less than 10,000 years, let us say. I have been examining gene flow and its effects on populations as well as conducting research into the prehistory of some of the river systems in southeastern Australia. The reason for studying British remains was in part for comparative purposes, in order to examine the underlying evolutionary processes rather than analyses of particular populations. Strangely though, and in response to having worked so long with Indigenous people on their ancestors' bones, I wished to study my ancestors. Aboriginal colleagues and friends are at once amazed and intrigued that I study my ancestors' bones.

During my trips I have measured and made observations on more than 1,000 skeletons, mainly crania from 18 samples covering the Neolithic to late Medieval times. I look for patterns of change and similarity, through time and across the island using multivariate methods. I have collected data in 8 museums and two universities.

Let me now make those comments.

2. To examine the powers of museums and galleries governed by statute to deaccession, or to otherwise release from their possession, human remains within their collections and to consider the desirability and possible forms of legislative change in this area. A dispute between a museum and an external group over possession of human remains would be resolved by some form of arbitration, perhaps finally ending up in courts. I don't, of course, know the governing powers of particular museums. There is a point that I would like to make however, on de-accessioning collections of ancient human skeletons. Management at a museum may dislike complaints about sensitive issues and consider that 1 in 100,000 was too many (I take the point from experience at an English museum). They may then judge issues like display of human remains, not on the interest of a very large number of people, but on the potential complaint of a few individuals. If museums are able to decide without outside reference on the retention of collections, then these institutions may decide to remove problematic collections.

3. To consider the circumstances in which material other than, but

associated with, human remains might properly be included within any proposed legislative change in respect of human remains.

While at a museum, I took the line that grave goods were more important than the skeleton. Each of us is buried with our skeleton, but any grave goods are put there purposefully by relatives and friends. If one were to take a sentimental view, then the importance of the grave goods could not be denied. I found most archaeologists to be horrified by the notion that I would be willing to ever return items of material culture. At times I would remind them of the number of times researchers came to museums to study stone artefacts (never, well, almost never) compared with human skeletons (more than 10 a year where I was). Having said that, I don't think the dead have rights. The descendants have rights that can be asserted and judged. In those cases, the material culture might be negotiated separately and from a position of ownership. For foreign remains, you would be dealing with 'someone else's property' in the same way that you would be dealing with 'someone else's ancestral remains'.

5. Consider the desirability of a Statement of Principles (and supporting guidance) relating to the care and safe keeping of human remains and to the handling of requests for return. If the Panel considers appropriate, to draw up the terms of such a Statement and guidance.

During my time studying and measuring in museums in England and elsewhere, I have seen few cases where remains were not well curated. Some storage conditions are better than others, but that generally relates to budget and research impetus. Display of skeletons was in all cases most respectful.

I found that there was no one procedure to be followed in dealing with the social intricacies, from determination of who should speak and be responsible, to how remains were to be packed for return. As someone who studies biological anthropology using human skeletons within an archaeological framework, it is clear to me how much information about our past is held in those bones. The reburial of human remains in Australia ultimately means that the story of humanity has been lessened. I hope the same does not happen in England. I am well aware of social and religious considerations, and how practice in England (from my distant vantage) comes to agreement between interested parties. Yet, I feel it is important to put across my view of the importance of study and therefore retention of human remains, with the greatest access possible for their continued study.

I have written this in some haste, as I am just back from a lengthy fieldwork session and am now off to the annual archaeology conference (in which we have for the second year running a session on biological anthropology in archaeology, so all is not completely doom and gloom). I also attach a paper published in 1992 or so on the reburial.

With best wishes,

Dr Colin Pardoe

Colin Pardoe Bio-Anthropology & Archaeology
3 Rose St.,
Gilberton SA 5081
phone 08 8269 2798
mobile 0428 69 2798