

Professor Norman Palmer,
c/o Cultural Property Unit,
Department for Culture, Media and Sport,
2-4 Cockspur Street,
London
SW1Y 5DH

15th May 2002

Dear Professor Palmer,

Re: Working Party on Human Remains

Following the recent request from DCMS to make a submission to the above Working Party, I am pleased to submit three papers which will be of relevance to the deliberations of the working group.

1. A statement on the humans remains in the collections of the National Museums & Galleries of Wales.
2. A copy of the National Museum of Wales' Policy on the Management of Human Remains and Return to Country of Origin, adopted by our Council in 1995.
3. A statement on NMGW's policy on access and use of its collections, including human remains.

I hope that these will assist the work and contribute to the debate. If you require further details, please contact Richard Brewer, Keeper of Archaeology & Numismatics, 029 2057 3247 (email richard.brewer@nmgw.ac.uk) or Dr Mark Redknap, 029 2057 3223 (email mark.redknap@nmgw.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely,

Anna Southall,
Director,
National Museums & Galleries of Wales

HUMAN REMAINS IN THE COLLECTIONS OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUMS & GALLERIES OF WALES

The human remains held by the National Museums & Galleries of Wales (NMGW) form a very small percentage of the overall collections, and their care over the last 10 years has been centralised within the Department of Archaeology & Numismatics. The collections fall into several categories:

1. Old Stock (mainly from 19th-century collections but much with uncertain provenance and date)
2. Human remains from excavations in Wales (Palaeolithic and Mesolithic material from cave sites, including the earliest human remains from Pontnewydd Cave; Neolithic and Bronze Age burials; early medieval cemeteries in south Wales)
3. Material from the rest of Britain (small comparative collection)
4. Foreign material (very small; where provenance can be established, the material can, under current policy, be repatriated)

The Department of Archaeology & Numismatics will now only consider accepting human remains found in Wales. A prior condition is that we have received detailed reports from the palaeopathologists and osteoarchaeologists specifying which human remains merit permanent retention on scientific grounds. Consideration is given to the eventual reburial of human remains which have not been recommended for curation by the Museum.

Attempts are being made to establish a definite provenance and date for all human remains in the collection. When this can be achieved for foreign human remains, the museum will discuss the return of such remains to their place of origin.

Human remains are stored in a sensitive manner, and the aspiration is for storage in a discrete area designated for such remains within the Department of Archaeology's Store. The public display of human remains, if appropriate, is also undertaken in a respectful gallery environment, such as in the current exhibition 'Re-creations: Visualizing Our Past' (see additional papers).

Some recently accepted collections, such as that from the early medieval cemetery at Llandough and Atlantic Trading Estate, Barry, are of international importance by virtue of their size, date, degree of preservation and rarity, and on the basis of the scientific grounds presented to the Museum all of the bone has been retained.

Existing research programmes may focus on specific issues such as the anthropological assessment, health and socio-economic status of individuals, and will not necessarily satisfy the future research potential of such collections.

It is not always possible to anticipate future multi-disciplinary research agendas. These could include the following, provided the human remains are available for examination: facial reconstructions, demographic data on the early populations of Wales, comparisons with data on assemblages from beyond Wales, stable isotope analysis to reconstruct diet, DNA analysis and genetic characteristics, the study of the transfer of pathogens between animals and humans, and the study of childhood

infections.

While the Museum has in the past considered selective retention of only complete skeletons, we now believe in the light of the preceding comments that for certain sites disarticulated remains should also be retained.

The reburial of human remains, such as those from the early medieval cemetery at Caerwent (Monmouthshire), and partial, selective retention of cemetery groups may be regretted in the future. The Hereford Cathedral ('Mappa Mundi') excavations resulted in a decision to retain the whole assemblage, with the exception of the charnel remains which had already been reburied. This Hereford group is considered very important for being on the Welsh border, and will form an important comparable group to Llandough.

Mark Redknap
16.5.02