

## TO MAKE DEAD BODIES TALK: Bio-archaeological heritage – historical human remains and their academic, social and religious contexts

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*The Department of Anthropology at the Hungarian Natural History Museum hosts the largest collection of historical human remains, including the find material of the University of Szeged. Tens of thousands of burials have been excavated from the Migration Period and the Age of the Hungarian Landtaking in the course of the last two hundred years. Therefore, it is of major importance that the research project, whose aim is to cast light upon the complex problems emerging at the investigation of human remains, started in Hungary.*

At the core of human existence, bio-archaeological heritage in the form of historical human remains can be considered a repository of knowledge about the ways people interact with both the natural and socially constructed world. The dead make their presence felt in a variety of academic, religious, ethical and social contexts, all of which have their justifications and contradictions. Human bodies and the manner in which they were treated during life and after death yield the source material of physical anthropology, as well as a challenge for scholars and the societies they operate in. Physical anthropological research and policies toward the bio-archaeological heritage have a variety of social and religious implications. Information gleaned about the human condition from our dead ancestors must be weighed against serious nonacademic factors in a changing world. Modern concepts of respect for the dead impact both the research practices of scholars and the management of heritage institutions.

Despite the importance of these issues, a critical over-review of physical anthropology has never been attempted, not even in light of more recent developments in the field (such as DNA and heavy isotope sampling). The impact of such results on long-held traditional historical interpretations is also a major issue. The rigorous interpretation of such biological data within its cultural-historical context can sometimes be made only at the expense of dear and long-held beliefs. Thus the aim of the interdisciplinary research project is to compare the policy and heritage issues arising when the search for knowledge sits uncomfortably with what society regards as right and good. The project is based on a network of physical anthropologists, bioethics experts, religious studies scholars and heritage specialists. Its goals include the assessment and compilation of results from academic research, policy protocols, legal regulations, research protocols and guidelines to develop a repository for working out best-practice reference materials.

Since the 1950s, archaeological excavations in cemeteries, and therefore, of human remains has become more and more common in Europe and beyond. As a consequence, methods for studying human bones have become increasingly sophisticated, particularly in the last decade with the introduction of isotope and DNA analyses. These methods offer great potential for a better understanding of issues such as diet, nutrition, diseases, mortality patterns, kinship and migration<sup>1</sup>. In addition, laws regulating the excavation, the handling and the preservation of human remains have become politically significant. Religious and tribal groups have had their say in this process since they feel it directly involves their people<sup>2</sup>. As a result, lively debates are on-going, and in different countries (such as USA and UK) the reburial of bones some time after the excavation (two years) is imposed by law. In this way, the dead body is preserved in its religious integrity, but human bones as a significant source for studying the past are destroyed, because reburial in a

<sup>1</sup> J. E. Buikstra, L.A. Beck, *Bioarchaeology: the contextual analyses of human remains* (Amsterdam, London and New York: Elsevier, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Brothwell, 2011

new environment accelerates decomposition, whereas museum curation and conservation inhibits further decay. It has been said that these regulations and recent debates arose out of the lack of communication on the side of physical anthropologists and, more generally, gaps in the educational system resulting in a failure to explain to the public at large the values of studying such sources<sup>3</sup>.

Different countries within and outside Europe display varied attitudes towards ancient human remains. These variable legal and ethical attitudes towards human bones are determined by the diverse legal, religious and cultural traditions found in different regions<sup>4</sup>. They reflect disparate approaches towards the dead, the past and cultural heritage. It is only very recently that, in some countries, debates over the nature of ancient human bones and their meaning in reconstructing the past have been raised. The international debate is still in its infancy. Moreover, research methods applied to the study of human bones vary from region to region even within Europe. The numerous disciplines involved (such as physical anthropology, genetics, chemistry, demographic studies etc.) have just begun to consider each other's results, and become familiar with their methodological differences.

The project aims at acknowledging various attitudes towards human remains in different countries in Europe (understood as a geographical entity) and around the Mediterranean Sea, chosen as sample areas. Trends noticed here are also compared more generally with the situation in the USA and Asia. The goal is to understand how three particular aspects: *culture and religion, secularization and legal systems, science, academia and cultural heritage* interact in shaping different attitudes towards skeletal data. In particular, various *religions and cultural* background brought different attitudes towards the dead after the end of the Roman world. Jewish, Muslim<sup>5</sup> and Christian approaches significantly differ in the way dead bodies should be treated, and this influences the ways ancient human bodies are to be handled in the present day. Besides, different secularization processes in modern states mean different kinds of interaction between *legal systems, and religious and cultural traditions*. This has resulted in a variety of regulations regarding burial, exhumation, and the treatment of dead bodies within a legal framework. But, because human skeletal remains are unique sources for studying past populations, particularly now that new and sophisticated methods of analyses are widely available, *scientists* approach past remains differently from the public at large, and also from legal experts and



<sup>3</sup> M.K. Nickels, "Science Education and Physical anthropology," in: *A Companion to Biological Anthropology*, ed. C.S. Larsen (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 547–561.

<sup>4</sup> N. Marquez-Grant and L. Fibiger (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Archaeological Human Remains and Legislation: An International Guide to Laws and Practice in the Excavation and Treatment of Archaeological Human Remains* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> L- Halevi, *Muhammad's grave: death rites and the making of Islamic society* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2007).

religious authorities, and this can prove a source of conflict, as shown by the recent debates in the USA concerning reburial of Native American skeletons. The terrain of interaction between the three dimensions of culture, religion, secularization and legal system described above is *Cultural Heritage*<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, this field will be taken into account by the project, because the strategies of cultural heritage protection derive from the national legal systems, but they are also influenced by the actual scientific communities, together with their cultural and religious backgrounds.

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<sup>6</sup> C. Barbanti, M. Cammelli, G. Sciullo, *Il diritto dei beni culturali* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2006), S. Troilo, *La patria e la memoria. Tutela e patrimonio culturale nell'Italia unita* (Milano: Mondadori Electa, 2005).