

Honouring the Ancient Dead

ensuring respect for ancient pagan remains

Value of Human Remains Conference, Museum of London

3-4 March 07

This conference was organised by Hedley Swain, a senior curator at the Museum of London who was chair of the UK government's drafting group for the DCMS *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums*. In many ways, it appeared to be a retrenchment exercise for the scientific side of the museums and archaeology community, following the change in the law allowing national museums to repatriate human remains overseas and the rising tide of debate about who has authority over human remains. By the end, I wasn't convinced, if that had been the purpose, that it had succeeded, for there were very strong voices raised questioning the scientific inflexibility.

The following notes I took throughout the course of the event. They are not wholly objective, but give some measure of my own response to the speakers and discussion..

The conference was introduced by director of the Museum of London Group, **Jack Lohman**, with an anecdote about a recent visit to Greenland. There the debate centres around ten female mummified figures. Dating from before the Danish conquest, local people are calling for their return from Copenhagen, where researchers are not wanting to let them go. Welcoming the delegates to the conference, Jack called for a balance to be struck between the scientific perspective and the cultural/religious when considering human remains.

Baroness Helena Kennedy then took the podium to give the opening address. She has been involved in the human remains debate essentially in her capacity as a human rights lawyer. In 2000, Tony Blair promised the Australian prime minister, John Howard, that he would set in motion what was necessary to enable the return of Australian aboriginal human remains from British museums. This alarmed British museums: as Kennedy said, the Egyptians might start asking for the mummies back! It was the first moment of the conference when I was struck with bewilderment, for it hadn't occurred to me that such a notion would not be justified.

Kennedy continued by explaining the laws of Trust used by those giving objects to museums. Such laws now need to be debated, protected or altered. She posed what circumstances would justify interfering with Trust law. In the case of repatriation, the challenge must begin by questioning whether the person donating had a right to do so.

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From her perspective as a lawyer, the debate about repatriation or retention of human remains is one that can be measured by the 'public benefit test' versus the 'human rights test'. The former argues for retention of human remains, regardless of provenance, because the data collected from them is for the public benefit. This is, she said, 'obvious to scholars'. Her tone implied an assumption that most of the audience would agree with. Human remains, even those acquired through imperialism, she stated, are seen to be a resource rescued for scholarship in the developed world. Again her tone made me uncomfortable, as if by the words 'scholars' and 'developed' she was referring to an educated and civilized society able to make more rational decisions about morality and value. She acknowledged, however, that the way we treat human remains clearly reflects the moral codes and culture of that body of 'scholars'.

However, to the obvious relief of many present, she went on to say that, regardless of this potential public benefit, the human rights issue is 'absolute'. It should in fact trump public benefit. That doesn't make the fight any easier; she concluded that dialogue and consent were the keys that must be used, and more so than they currently are.

The first three papers were then given under the heading, **Policy Context Update**.

Hedley Swain followed the baroness with a paper that laid out progress. Over the past three years, three important resources have been created. The first is the English Heritage / Church of England document (the *Guidance for best practice of treatment of human remains excavated from Christian burial grounds in England*). Of all the human remains kept in museums' collections in Britain, 75% are of British Christian provenance. The second is the Human Tissue Act that became law in 2004, Section 47 of which deals with the deaccession of human remains (coming into play in 2006) allowing for repatriation overseas from national museums.

The third is the DCMS *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums*. The Working Group report was released in 2003, but the old establishment museums felt it too liberal in terms of ethics and inclusion; the *Care of Historic Human Remains* document came out the following year pulling in the reins. After a period of consultation (to which HAD contributed, albeit gently - early days), the *Guidance* itself came out in 2005, and is currently under review. Essentially driven by the need to address the political issue of repatriation overseas, it covers legal and ethical issues, the curation, care and use of human remains, how to deal with claims and transparency within museums' processes with reference to human remains. Importantly, it encourages museums to recognise the existence of different and perhaps competing world views. No doubt because of its initially limited remit, it has, however, no functionality when it comes to British issues, whether those are requests for reburial or involvement in consultation put forward by local communities or spiritual and religious groups.

Hedley continued by describing the four advisory bodies that now exist to consider human remains. The first is the Advisory Panel on Archaeology of Christian Burial in England (APACBE), which came out as a result of the EH / CoE document. Although

Hedley didn't mention it, this is more of a network of individuals dealing with issues by email than a body that meets to discuss the problems face to face.

The DCMS Advisory Service was set up to back their published *Guidance*. Only one situation has been brought to them, and this Hedley dismissed as not being appropriate for them to deal with. This is because the issue is one of a British village community asking for the reburial of Pagan Saxon remains exhumed by a local archaeological unit in their parish. The DCMS *Guidance* has no clear guidelines on human remains of British provenance or British claims, and as a result this one request for advice has led the Advisory Service into a crisis of disagreement that has paralysed them, leaving the small village community waiting, bewildered, for over two years.

The Human Remains Subject Specialist Network is a mutual support group of curators from the museums who hold human remains. The fourth is the Museums Association Ethics Committee.

The future, Hedley suggested, was going to see the review of the DCMS *Guidance*. Lessons, I hope, will be learned from the Australian repatriations, and in particular the current Tasmanian legal issues: having agreed to return ancestral remains to Tasmanian Aboriginal claimants, the Natural History Museum placed a condition that they would retain them for three months for further research, at which the Tasmanians indicted the NHM of mutilation of their ancestors and brought a legal injunction on the museum; Hedley shared news that there was now hope the situation could be resolved through mediation. (I noted from conversations during the course of the weekend that the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre had wanted to send a speaker to talk at the conference, but this clearly was not seen to be appropriate.)

In terms of the future, Hedley admitted that British claims would need to be addressed more carefully, realising that there is no comprehensive framework for these in place. He pointed out that reburial of human remains of little scientific interest is happening more quickly after excavation than before. Further, the debate over how human remains are displayed will continue, although he commented that the art world seems more interested in using human remains. The debate will become broader.

Doug Owsley was the next speaker, an anthropologist and osteologist from the Smithsonian Museum in the US, and he was both fascinating and horrifying to listen to. Briefly he spoke of the 32 000 human remains kept in American museums, 18 000 of which are understood to be Native American. Since 1991 when NAGPRA found its feet, 3600 have been repatriated, with 1800 more currently being processed through the system.

Doug was obviously not happy about this. He explained how new scientific techniques were revealing new information about bones, and how reference collections are essential. Returned human remains are nearly always 'lost'; Helena Kennedy had earlier emphasised that it was not the place of the returning organisation to question what the claimants would do with their ancestors, evoking a

vivid picture of scientists crying out at what seemed the travesty of native peoples reburying what to them has value *only* if out of the ground (and in their control).

Doug did point out that different tribes have different levels of interest. Some claim through genetics, and, demanding scientific proof, are very keen not to have given to them the remains of peoples with whom their ancestors were at war. Others claim on the basis of geography: if human remains are found in what is or was tribal land, they feel those ancestors to be their responsibility. Some tribes currently have no interest or resources to deal with repatriation.

Doug's main point, however, was in what he obviously felt to be a defining case, that of Kennewick Man. This is a fellow whose bones were found on government (military) land in eastern Washington state. The remains were clearly old and the military were keen to give them into the keeping of the local native tribe. However, testing showed that the individual was not only some 9200 years old, but had a physiology (skull shape) that showed him as possibly not of Native American descent, but of an older people, perhaps one of those who crossed the Bering Straits long before the significant migrations that began in around 13 000 BCE. The NAGPRA agreement validates claims on proven (a) genetic or (b) cultural connection. NAGPRA, Doug declared triumphantly, therefore did not apply. Without DNA testing as a possibility, NAGPRA would still not have applied if the only connection to modern Native tribes was his exhumation on their land. The scientists (from the white European migrations that began just 500 years ago) won absolute custody of the bones.

I was left at the end of his talk thankful that I did not live in the United States of his America. Indeed, I overheard another delegate commenting that his paper had been like listening to a declaration of American foreign policy.

Brett Galt-Smith, from the Australian government, took the floor after Doug and the contrast was profound. As he sorted his notes before beginning, he commented on Doug's powerpoint presentation: he had no comparable series of slides to show the conference, for it is 'hard to put images to beliefs'.

Giving the impression of being a gentle and warm family man, it was Brett's considerable skill in relationship and negotiation that set into motion a catalogue of Aboriginal repatriations starting in 2006, both within indigenous communities in Australia and through visiting British museums. In fact, for the first time that day I found myself taking few notes, and thus have not much evidence in my sketchbook as to what he did speak of. Both Helena and Doug had overrun hopelessly, and Brett, aware that time was limited, didn't want to exacerbate the problem himself¹.

There are, he said, still registered some 680 human remains of Australian Aboriginal provenance in British museums; there may be more. Following the agreement

¹ Brett Galt-Smith, in response to reading this report, suggested my words here are 'over-generous' and asked that I make it clear that his work was built upon the foundation of many decades of work by Indigenous people before he came onto the scene. Recent successful repatriations have, furthermore, been the result of the contributions of a range of other officers of the Australian Government.

between Blair and Howard seven years ago, repatriation is now in process. With the Australian government funding repatriation as a part of the ongoing reconciliation process with the Aboriginal peoples, most interesting perhaps was the acknowledgement Brett relayed, that respect and responsibility towards the remains of our dead is a 'universal norm'. Once again I was aware that both words, respect and responsibility, needed not so much defining in their own right, but were meaningless unless stated in relation to a clear definition of value.

The next four talks were given under the title, **Value of Human Remains for Research**.

After a tea break, **Mike Parker Pearson** was next at the podium. An archaeologist, he is one of those currently working on the Stonehenge Riverside project, looking at Durrington Walls and the connection of the temples to the nearby River Avon. As an archaeologist he began with a sound statement, and one that sits well within Paganism: 'Context is everything'.

However, he set the tone more appropriately when he continued, reminding the audience that in Britain there is no tradition of leaving the dead to 'rest in peace'. We are a culture that have routinely, he said, robbed and disturbed the graves and bones of the dead. For a moment I was reminded of Lara Croft and Indiana Jones: movies based on a complete absence of morality or cultural respect, that seethe with selfish European imperialism in the guise of 'adventure'.

His talk was filled with stories of ancient lives, each one based on evidence gleaned from modern research technologies. Just as not many decades ago, more tangible clues, such as pots and other small finds, allowed archaeologists to present ideas and interpretations as proven facts, so the subtler modern sources, like isotope analysis, are doing the same today.

And a part of me was intrigued; it is genuinely interesting to see how scientists trace patterns from tiny clues, recreating an individual's journey from isotopes in the teeth. He retold, for example, how the fellow known as the Amesbury Archer spent his early life in the region of (possibly) the Swiss Alps, travelling west over the course of his life to die in Wiltshire.

However, it was not his words but his underlying attitude that provoked in me discomfort. Each minute sliver of information carefully placed upon the desk can create a glimmer of a picture, but how closely that picture reflects reality is a matter of faith. I would not wish to dismiss the value of the research done, but I question the irrational and misleading aggrandizement of that value.

It is interesting, yes. But is it beneficial? I am intrigued by the workings of a jet engine, yet I am not convinced the apparent gain is greater than the obvious loss. Like any Pagan, stories are an important part of my religious culture. As such, it seemed to me that this is at the heart of the debate *within* Paganism: the stories of our ancestors are important too us, but what is the cost? What is lost? Our ancestors' remains have a religious, spiritual and cultural value that is not being

acknowledged by people picking at their teeth and bones. The visceral connection that many Pagans feel with the land, the rain, the wind, the dead, cries out with a significance that is incomparably richer.

Indeed, Mike's lack of respect was expressed clearly as he spoke of Stonehenge, describing it as the 'biggest cemetery of the third millennium BC' in all of Britain. In between slides, maps and sketches, he slipped in two photographs - one of the Ancient Druid Order in full ritual garb in what I suspect was the early 1980s, and one of myself at a Cor Gawr gorsedd in the mid 1990s - while dismissing modern Pagan and Druid religious traditions as reconstructed nonsense.

He seemed to me to be a man unable or unwilling to hear validity in any approach that differed from his own. A materialist through and through, his willingness to ridicule a spiritual or religious perspective was sad to witness.

Rebecca Gowland, a bioarchaeologist, followed Mike with a talk about the future potential value of human remains for archaeological research, given that research technology had improved so enormously in the past thirty years. Pre-1960, she said (a long time before she was born), archaeology had been based on little more than skeletal measurements and visible conditions, but the micro technologies available today can provide many more clues.

Context, she also declared, is of paramount importance. The archaeological context informs the skeletal interpretation, which feeds back to allow further archaeological interpretation of a site. As much of HAD's immediate work with regard to human remains is concerned with those we call the 'faceless', ie. those without sufficient documentation to provide a meaningful context, I was interested to hear how this word was emphasised.

Becky spoke of modern DNA techniques, initially developed in the 1980s when DNA was first successfully taken from mummies. Excited about its potential, especially referencing genetic and infectious diseases, and co-evolving pathogens, she admitted that the process is still both very slow and expensive, and therefore largely inaccessible. Furthermore, problems with contamination or preservation of human remains often negate the use of this technology. She used an interesting phrase: that it was often an 'act of faith and of scientific rigour'. I was interested to know how many human remains in museum collections are sufficiently well preserved and uncontaminated to allow for DNA research. Her answer would be, I feel sure, that *in the future* these problems will not be so limiting.

She then spoke of the technology of stable isotopes, which began in the 1970s. Teeth can be tested for isotopes of strontium, carbon, lead, oxygen and sulphur, relating to water and food sources, showing possible migratory characteristics. Links between these and gender, age and status can also be proffered. Briefly, she went into CT, SEM and MRI technologies, which allowed osteologists to understand deep lesions. But this too is expensive and not readily available. Her closing remarks were of optimism that technologies would not only improve but become cheaper to use.

A very young woman, her enthusiasm was clear, as were the blinkers of her perception. But, like Mike, she left me wondering about the effort put in for such small and insignificant shreds of information. There is negligible measurable benefit from this kind of work and, though it may be interesting, it references such a very small part of the wider value of human remains.

With talks having overrun, there was no time for questions or discussion before lunch.

Bill White, another bioarchaeologist, was the first speaker after lunch. Funded by the Wellcome Trust and working at the Museum of London, his talk was specifically about London collections: over 17 000 human remains, all over 150 years old, some as old as Romano-British, and mostly of very local provenance, the vast majority came to the museum during the 1980s building boom which cleared large areas of London for redevelopment.

Another scientist, his attitude was entirely held within his scientific materialist worldview and the enthusiasms of his limited field of work. The Museum of London does now have a policy that presumes human remains of limited scientific interest will be reburied, and thousands have been reinterred locally. My impression is that this is entirely motivated by space and funding.

Stella Mason then spoke, offering the medical context of human remains. She is more of a manager than a curator or archaeologist, working at the Royal College of Surgeons. Most of her work deals with human remains of less than a few hundred years old, so falling less under the remit of HAD, but her attitude was nonetheless hard to hear, firmly embedded within the bounds of her own fundamentalist secular and materialist worldview.

Before breaking for lunch, there was a short period for questions, and debate was begun with a point made by **Piotr Bienkowski**, HAD advisor, archaeologist and deputy director of the Manchester Museum. By this point, I was already enormously tired and was glad to hear him raise issues I would have myself. Addressing the panel made up of the four previous speakers, he questioned who has authority over human remains. Nobody, he said, has a greater claim than anyone else. The panel all appeared to agree, eager to affirm protection of their scientific resource from other communities' interests. Yet Piotr went on to point out that currently archaeologists and museums *do claim* ultimate authority, making the decisions about excavation, retention, display and reburial. Decision-making, he stated, must be taken out to a broader base.

Sociologist and member of the DCMS Advisory Committee on human remains, **Naomi Pfeffer** questioned the validity of the scientific perspective. Scientists claim to be the only people who can extract value from human remains, presenting their narrow finds to the public as if this were an unbiased education. The value of human remains, she said, is generated and maintained by social processes. Furthermore, to retain human remains for future technological innovation is a Rumsfeldian nonsense of *unknowns*.

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Tristram Besterman, former director of the Manchester Museum, now an independent advisor, continued the query as to whether public benefit can really be gleaned purely from the scientific notion of the value of human remains. Museums cannot have 'fealty to one interest group'. All those with special interest in human remains need to be heard.

John Jackson, the Science Policy Coordinator at the Natural History Museum, added that the challenge lay with museums. It wasn't necessary to sweep science aside, for this need not be a debate between science on the one side and social morality on the other. He called for scientists and museums to think 'outside the box' on this complex issue.

Vince Collison, a First Nations Canadian involved in repatriation to his own tribe, then stepped to the front of the room and spoke of how hard he had found the morning, watching the scientists talk about their collections of bones and what they were doing to them. This, he said, was not a part of this tradition or culture. Not enough 'indigenous voices' were being heard in this debate, he said, bringing their entirely different value system.

Perhaps his input gave me the courage to speak, though my intuition cried out to be quiet, sure that I was not strong enough to be articulate. But I did speak, first pointing out to Mike Parker Pearson that despite his speaking of Druidry, his profound lack of understanding meant that he had done himself a disservice, compromising the integrity of his talk. His response was to ask if I felt myself to be a direct descendent of 'Caesar's Druids', a remark so ludicrous and meaningless it was hard to respond, for evolution, adaptation and development are an integral part of all aspects of human nature. Setting aside the fact that Caesar's writings were Roman self-glorification, I make no claim to practising Druidry now as it was two thousand years ago, other than as a study and celebration of nature. He suggested that I was a 'spiritual imperialist', which baffled me briefly until I realized he was alluding to the apparent 'claim' for Pagan authority over ancient British human remains. Not only were his words rude, but expressed yet more misunderstanding. I responded through my bewilderment, laying aside this ridiculous notion of Pagans 'claiming' an interest over and above any other Briton, explaining again that HAD's position was based upon the religious perspective of deep connection with the land and its people. It is a spiritual and religious sensitivity, which requests simply to be heard - not a claim for authority.

I then asked Stella Mason why she thought there were no longer enough human bodies for medical dissection, needed - she had said - for educating doctors. I was curious about this notion of consent, that nowadays consent is required; not so long ago it was not. She had by this time obviously taken against me, misunderstanding my point and loading it with judgement. Neither her answer nor my response to it were articulate or useful. She avoided me utterly and impolitely for the rest of the conference.

There were a few more short questions and comments, but I was too busy scribbling in my sketchbook, seeking clarity about the exchange, and I missed what was said. A tea break gave us all much needed release.

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The last two talks of the day were given under the title, **Value of Human Remains for Public Education**.

The American, **Doug Owsley** from the Smithsonian, began the session on the subject of the value of human remains for public education - another talk which left me shocked. He began with the comment that forensic science was now more popular than ever, a social fact clearly proven by the popularity of television shows (he listed a number of American programmes like *CSI*), and it was this that justified his approach both to excavation and the display of human remains.

He did express a genuine enthusiasm about his work, albeit in his own businesslike way: the joy of discovering clues and piecing them together to create possible stories. But that was it. Although he did speak of getting people involved, it was this forensic process that inspired him. He spoke of the exhibition he is currently putting together, and it was clear that he was more focused upon the teaching of forensics than showing stories of the past; it will be a 'state of the art forensic anthropology laboratory', each one of the human remains lying in its own bare and brightly lit glass case.

Ken Arnold, a curator from the Wellcome Trust, gave the last talk of the day, beginning by acknowledging his role as an exhibition creator and suggesting that, should this kind of conference be held in the future, it would be useful to include far more voices from the non-scientific community. I got the feeling that he had been alarmed by Doug Owsley's perspective.

Ken gave a brief history of Henry Wellcome's collection, put together during the first third of the twentieth century, including some 500 human remains 'specimens', including a shrunken head from Ecuador, a lock of hair said to have been that of George III, and one of Henry II's teeth. He spoke with a respectful protective tone of the collections, and of always trying to bring in different voices when curating an exhibition, even those that questioned the presence of an item on display, the poetic and emotional as well as the didactic.

He spoke of the experience of repatriating human remains, and how a specimen becomes a 'spiritually charged entity'. This didn't inspire him to support repatriation unconditionally, but he felt the process had brought some of that energy back to the collection, enriching it as a whole. Human remains, he said, require us to think about what we hold as certain, and then to think again. I was left with the impression of a thoughtful and sensitive man, not so much questioning the morality of his work but willing to listen, eager to learn: questioning his own certainties.

Bringing the day to a close, there was a short period for questions. **Jane Wildgoose**, an artist currently working with the Natural History Museum, suggested that spiritual and religious beliefs were not being adequately acknowledged by those in museums and archaeology. This she felt was evident in the conference as a whole, and an issue that needed to be widely addressed.

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Ken Arnold, responding to a question posed by one of the audience about the need for emotion to be acknowledged within museum exhibitions, agreed that emotion is indeed as important as intellectual understanding. The use of human remains in art has been prevalent, he suggested, as a reaction to the sterility of human remains seen elsewhere. But, he wondered, how do we define 'respectful'? This seemed to me a key issue of the conference, about which very little had been (and would be) spoken; Ken appeared to be asking Doug, who sat beside him. At first, Ken said, was surely in the words used relating to a display, the lighting, whether bones are displayed alone or with others, and so on. Doug did not respond.

Brett Galt-Smith spoke, admitting that although Australia was way ahead of any other country in terms of dealing with human remains of its own indigenous people, its other museums existed somewhere outside of that awareness of respect. Australian museums, he said, were still reinforcing the notion of scientific custody of human remains, and he questioned what was obviously a declaration of authority on Doug's part. Questioned directly now, Doug defended his notion of respect with a few words that did no more than assert his own position of authority².

Tristram Besterman commented that Ken Arnold's paper had reflected an underlying ambivalence that too often slipped into the 'commodification' of human remains. He felt that Ken has presented himself in the role of using human remains as a resource for understanding *one aspect* of what it is to be human, yet pointed out how much was lost as a result. The words we use, he said, are enormously revealing: 'specimen', 'item', 'matter' or 'ancestor'. The person so easily disappears. It was the role of the museum to reflect the totality of what it is to be human - the intellectual, emotional and spiritual.

Ken's final comments were the last of the day: he affirmed that museums are indeed spiritual places, holding something precious. I was curious as to how he felt he might succeed in expressing that.

The day had been exhausting. I felt as if I, with a handful of others, had been protecting some essential quality of human nature, like the innocence of a child as yet unaware of brutality, while all around there were the screams and sirens of the worst of humanity. The image may sound melodramatic - the overly poetic language of the Bard - but I felt battered. That night was a long exploration of thoughts and emotions for me, further inspired by the total eclipse of the moon which was for a while visible

² I am happy here to clarify this with Brett's words, sent to me following his reading of this report. He says, 'I was adding (in a personal capacity) to a comment from the floor about there being other voices in the human remains' debate among the non-Indigenous community than just scientists and museums. I suggested that one of the elements that might reinforce the notion that Indigenous human remains are still a scientific curiosity or come naturally within the realm of research is that their management is still with museums rather than with, say, a health authority or whoever it is that ordinarily presides over issues to do with the deceased and burial/cremation (noting that the British Dept of Health administers the Human Tissues Act). I was not suggesting that Australian museums are actively reinforcing the notion of scientific custody, though some may, and I think this is the perceptual corollary of the situation. But I would suggest that there is a structural issue here that reinforces this perception. Of course there are issues of who has the best infrastructure to deal with returns and management of remains, but I do think this is an issue well worth discussion. I reinforce, this is a personal view and not one of the Australian Government.'

to me, even from my hotel room in the Docklands of East London. I looked out of the grey lines of the dirty city, and thought about Wordsworth, Blake and Thoreau, watching the Industrial Revolution so voraciously devour and destroy, sitting with its fattening backside upon the principles of the Enlightenment's new doctrines of scientific materialism. And I longed for the greenwoods of home, the song of the wind and the hum of the earth.

Sunday began with two talks continuing the theme of **Value of Human Remains for Public Education**.

The first was given by **Salima Ikraam**, a curator at the American University in Cairo. It was valuable to have her as a part of the conference, for the vast majority of human remains in European museums dating from the Roman period and before are, after all, Egyptian mummies. Furthermore, many of the general public immediately think of Egyptian mummies when they are asked about human remains. And Helena Kennedy's expression of outrage in her talk on Saturday morning - that new legislation allowing Aboriginal returns could leave British museums open to claims for Egyptian human remains - had left me wondering why such claims aren't being made.

A thoroughly British Egyptian, Salima's attitude was indeed fascinating, but not particularly easy to hear. She gave a brief summary of the history of exhuming mummies from the nineteenth century to the present day, including attitudes towards them and how they were displayed. Although notions of respect for the ancient dead have changed and continue to do so, she was clearly amused by stories of grinding the dead for medicine, using them as ballast in ships, or as fuel during times with little firewood. She spoke of Victorian 'unwrapping' parties and a nineteenth century Englishman who had experimented with mummification techniques on some late aristocratic eccentric, bemoaning that the latter's descendants would not agree to his exhumation so that his remains could be studied.

In 1928 mummies were taken off public display, as Egyptian nationalism began to seek its own identity, in a land now populated by the three Abrahamic religions, often expressed in their extremes. From the late 1940s until the 1970s they were put back on display, when political and Islamic issues motivated their removal once more. From the 1990s they have been returned to the display rooms, but this time, for the first time, with low lighting and other attempts to express respect. Salima admitted that the future is uncertain. 70% of the country's income is generated by tourism, but Islamic and Christian fundamentalism are once again increasing.

What was most important to this 1-2% of the ancient population that was mummified was that they would be remembered. The mummification process was not what assured their eternal life, but the retelling of their tales, their names spoken, and so on. Salima said that she was keen to understand their ancient religion that this might inform how the mummies be treated, but to a Pagan it was clear that she had very little knowledge or devotion. I have met Pagans who now honour the Egyptian gods and their soul is marked as such. Salima was, to my eyes, another secular curator.

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Tristram Besterman asked the question I wanted to ask: are there any claims from Egypt for these human remains? The question is really important. For according to the DCMS *Guidance*, which requires genetic or cultural continuity in order for a claim to be valid, any such request could not be dealt with using the current guidelines for legitimacy. An Egyptian claim would have to be entirely based upon geography: modern Egyptians would be asking for the return of the ancient dead from the land which they now live in. But could anyone politically justify denying the return? The second part of his question was whether there were any problems with how museums around the world displayed the mummies.

Salima replied to the second first, saying that as long as there is respect shown there is no problem. There are, after all, more than enough mummies in Egypt for scientists to study and to satisfy the tourist market. Return of artefacts is happening, but not mummies. Although there is clearly a financial issue, for storage and curation is expensive anywhere, I was left with a feeling of unease.

Thomas Schnalke, from the Charité Medical History Museum in Berlin, was the next speaker, talking about the 900 'wet and dry specimens' of human remains on display in his museum. These are a part of a massive collection of over 23 000 put together by the turn of the twentieth century which was decimated during the Second World War bombing of the city. The collection has slowly increased from nearly 2000 towards 10 000 parts of human bodies, mostly showing different kinds of pathology. Thomas spoke of the difficulty of justifying and displaying such a collection, interestingly speaking of the 'inner face' of humanity, that which is under the skin yet which so fully contributes to our identity.

The need for consent has not been in place for that many decades, and although no 'specimen' is now retained without consent, he argued that consent was implicit before that time, simply because that is how society worked. I disagree: the more hierarchical authoritarian world was accepted because it could not be changed. We know that in Victorian England there was a terror amongst those who could not afford a secure burial that their bodies would be used for scientific research. Thomas, however, felt that the only human remains he was obliged to bury with respect were those that had been acquired through criminal means (including through the work of the Third Reich).

He spoke of each jar's contents representing an 'historical patient'. Wording was crucial in displays to ensure clarity and respect, appropriate empathy through providing context. And although he used the terms 'object' and 'specimen' he was obviously expressing a sensitivity in the work he did. I came to the end of the talk with a strong sense of how bizarre society is, once again left wondering about whether this was really progress. Medicine is indeed better for some, but I have no sense of a happier world.

After a break, the final three talks given were under the title, **Community and Cultural Value of Human Remains**.

Vince Collison was the next to talk, and the only one who did not bring sheets of paper to read or a powerpoint presentation. He spoke directly and from the heart to the museums people, archaeologists, osteologists and anthropologists who filled the room: 'what you do affects us'. There are objects and human remains from his tribe, the Haida from islands off the west coast of Canada, in museums all over the world, but museums were not a part of his culture, they weren't something he wished to seek out, and I laughed, feeling just the same: how isolated and dead something feels, locked away behind glass, its spirit fading. What a long way from the animist's perspective.

Perhaps most interesting in his talk was how he spoke of the process of retrieval and reburial. 'There are no reburial rites in our tradition'. No, I thought, nor are they in ours, and that is given as a justification for Pagans not being involved in the spiritual side of reburial. The Haida, Vince said, packed the bones in cedar chips and traditional blankets to transport them home, where negotiations had to be done in order to decide where the reburials would be. Instead of using the old burial grounds which could not be kept secure, his people decided to use the new cemeteries of the tribe, and there they made up the rites, doing what they needed to do for their religious sensitivities: honouring the ancestors, singing the songs, telling the tales, making offerings. It was good to hear how much we do share. I had been told by those engaged with NAGPRA negotiations that HAD's work had so many similar elements, that my arguments were based upon many of the same spiritual cravings, but I had not witnessed how.

Also interesting was how Vince was talking with British museums about items in their collections that are from his tribe, which the museum is keeping - such as a totem pole at the British Museum. The BM has asked for his input in creating a new display of the item. It sounded as if this were preferable to Vince than him taking the totem pole back to his homeland, but that may have been simply a diplomatic compromise on his part.

Brett Galt-Smith spoke after Vince, this time giving an insight into the value of human remains in terms of cultural connection. His talk was entitled, The Worth of Things and The Cost, and his powerpoint slides were interplayed with quotes from Bob Dylan, allowing the poetry to express what he felt his own prose could not. Having worked in indigenous affairs for nearly two decades, it was clear how and why he was so successful: he had the ability to sound reasonable and non-confrontational even when saying something that was not likely to be acceptable, and he did so a few times during this talk.

The only sane way forward, he said, was through relationship and discussion. But it was clear that in Australia the motivations are quite different. The Australian government is so keen for repatriation because it is an integral part of its policy of reconciliation. As a result, museums in Australia consider all Aboriginal remains or artefacts to be essentially Aboriginal. Nothing can be done with them without Aboriginal consent, and every collection is being dismantled and repatriated, albeit at times painfully slowly. The cultural value of the human remains, in other words, absolutely and unconditionally supercedes any value the non-Native peoples might

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ascribe to them. As Brett said, compromise is not going to work. In Britain, Aboriginals face a totally different situation, which must feel to them like a great step back into the days of imperialism, where attitudes are still polarized between science and faith - as they appear to be for British Pagans as well.

In 2005, 20 British museums held (at least) 680 Australian Aboriginal human remains, about 450 of which were in the Natural History Museum. Repatriation of 93% of these is yet to be agreed; yet, as Brett said, the HTA legislation, the DCMS *Guidance* and Blair's promise all place the moral obligation on returning the remains, and to do so unconditionally (in other words, without demanding bone slivers or time for last minute scientific tampering). However, the museums' requirements that cultural or family groups, not governments, must apply, and meet the burden of proof in terms of genetic or cultural connection is too demanding, particularly on social groups that are still massively suffering under the stress of cultural defeat: alcohol, drugs, in-fighting, poverty and unemployment drag the native population down. Brett put it succinctly by saying that the Aboriginals' ancestors 'remain hostage to your history'.

Like any Pagan peoples, genealogy is very important, ancestral stories and songs are vivid, all providing a powerfully strong sense of continuity and connection to the dead and the land. It is within this web of connection that so much identity is invested. But the predominant stories are those of the victor, and identity continues to suffer: the effects of conquest persist, compromising any ability to recover ground or strength. He said, 'For every new technique of research, indigenous people feel that little bit more colonized and dispossessed.'

Brett ended with words of reassurance that, I suspect, went right over the heads of many in the conference audience: repatriation is not a one way street, for returning custody of the dead to those for whom that connection is so valuable can *enhance* scientific endeavour.

At the end of his talk, a question was posed as to whether a keeping house in Britain for all indigenous remains might be a compromise in terms of being one step closer to repatriation. Brett's reply was that this one step was not enough, returning to the assertion that compromise was not the way. Science must give up its claim, for its justification is morally flawed.

Susan Lêgene was the last speaker to take the floor, talking from a Dutch standpoint about the value of human remains to their post-colonial heirs. She began by making it clear that colonialism is not concluded history, but still an active force; the all-important context of human remains must also include what it means to the people to whom the remains are culturally and spiritually significant.

Her talk was based upon the stories of how her own museum in the Netherlands is recategorizing the human remains in their collection. Like most museums, they discovered much that they didn't know they had. In the process, policies are being drawn up about how human remains should be displayed. Her concerns were that the historicizing, medicalizing and aestheticizing of the remains was not adequately questioned or overt.

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As the conference drew to a close, there was only half an hour left for the final questions and discussion. A number of questions were asked and points made, and although I made a note of the majority of topics and speakers, I didn't catch all the associated comments.

The session was kicked off again by **Piotr Bienkowski** who challenged Salima's attitude towards the Egyptian mummies. He clarified the point that ancient Egyptian culture was not only animistic, but that deep connection to the land inherent within any animistic society was integral to the mummification process: the elite were wishing to live eternally *in Egypt*. This geographic connection, regardless of the genetic or cultural, needed to be acknowledged.

Not only did he feel that the ethical case for repatriation of ancient Egyptian mummies is very easy to make, he went on to compare this deep sustainable connection with the land, which he felt was entirely legitimate, to the 'ephemeral task-based and commodified interests of archaeologists, who nevertheless claim authority'. He declared that 'we really need to redress that balance'.

My comment next was questioning how much awareness there was of the power brought to a museum's collection by human remains. How much were human remains being used to add weight or gravitas to a museum display, where without the remains themselves the exhibition might be simply felt to be a collection of bits and pieces? This use of ancestors needed to be questioned.

Tristram Besterman reminded the conference that repatriation was about the transferring of authority for human remains to the source community. What could be more morally sound?

Brett Galt-Smith pointed out the danger of asserting authority over other peoples' sacred objects and human remains.

Doug Owsley then spoke, disputing Brett's earlier comment that return of human remains does not mean we necessarily lose anything of value; he believed that a great deal has been and would be lost. Indirectly he then dismissed Piotr's statement about the validity of geographic connection; he thought the fact that a land was populated by different peoples over the course of time entirely negated any possibility of a justified claim based on a geography: a 'tangible link is not possible to establish'. His words shocked a good many in the audience, for he appeared to have heard nothing of what was said from the non-scientific perspective about cultural and spiritual connections with the land.

The last comment was made by a woman whose name I didn't catch, but it beautifully summed up much of the conference. She requested that, should this conference be held again, a much broader base of input for discussion and involvement was needed.

Hedley Swain then tried to summarize. Human remains are valued 'by everyone - but they have different values'. When it comes to objects, it is often possible to find a general agreement about the value (and purpose), but this is clearly not the case with human remains. He reminded us of a phrase used by Becky Gowland (that I had missed); she had said that human remains were 'life memories': a nice Pagan-sounding phrase! In order for the debate to move forward constructively, we need to find common understanding, common human values and a common humanity. 'We need to put the human back into human remains'.

I quite agree. Having set up the conference with a tremendous bias in terms of speakers towards the secular and scientific, to end with this point felt to be a small glimmer of positivity. The talks are to be published, though, and the questions and discussions that too place in the limited time available between speakers, which revealed the strength of this very different view - of social, cultural and spiritual value - were not even recorded. I don't like to be sceptical, but I shall wait to see how this slow current continues its changes.