



# HONOURING THE ANCIENT DEAD

ENSURING RESPECT FOR ANCIENT PAGAN ANCESTORS  
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## Guidance for Housing Ancestors

The following points are laid down as agreed guidelines compiled by Honouring the Ancient Dead (HAD), with consultative input from its base of volunteers, together with other members of the museums profession.

Terms used in this policy are in line with HAD's *Definitions* document, which should be read prior to this policy or referred to for clarity. In particular, the terms *ancestor* or *ancestral body* are used to denote what are commonly called human remains. These include the bones, ash, or any part of what was once a living human being, including hominin ancestors not classified as *Homo sapiens* with whom individuals may feel an ancient ancestral connection.

This document should also be read in conjunction with HAD's other guideline documents:

- ***Statement of Intent***
- ***Consultation Policy with respect to Ancestors of British Provenance***
- ***Guidance for the Display of Ancestors in Museums.***

Where reburial is an option, refer to HAD's ***Reburial Handbook***.

*The term pagan with a capital 'P', as Pagan, is used to refer to the modern religious and spiritual traditions in Britain and around the world. With a small 'p', as pagan, the term refers to the general religious and social culture of our pre-Christian ancestors.*

### 1. Introductory Remarks

Through its *Your Local Museum* (YLM) project, HAD has contacted many museums up and down the country for information about ancestors held within their collections. The information returned shows that the bodily evidence of tens of thousands of ancestors (commonly referred to as 'human remains') is retained within museum collections within the UK. HAD is further aware of more that are held by archaeological units, universities, historical societies and other heritage bodies. Indeed, no comprehensive, up to date or official records exist for exactly how many ancestors are stored nationally. Based on responses to HAD's survey, however, allowing for the fact that potentially only a third of museums holding ancestors in their collections are so far represented in the YLM database, and that no archaeological units or other organizations have been

surveyed, a reasonable extrapolation might be that there are potentially hundreds of thousands of ancestors kept in stores.

Following their exhumation, ancestors might originally have been retained in museum collections for a number of reasons, including intended future use for scientific analysis, academic research, education or display. Some may have come into collections as trophies, curiosities, or because they represent very real, tangible links with the past. Others may be intended for reburial. However, with a lack of resources very often the work is not prioritised, and as a result, significant amounts of ancestral bones and ash are retained in storerooms, amidst all kinds of other items of a collection, without any realistic prospect of their being addressed.

HAD's central premise concerns practical respect: it believes that our ancestors should be treated as human beings, not as resource material stored for a possible future use that might never happen. HAD's position on the validity of retention can be found in its ***Statement of Intent*** and other guideline documents. The focus of this document is how those ancestors who are still in store may be housed with greater respect.

The structure of the document is simple. The Principles of Best Practice section aims to capture HAD's fundamental thinking with regard to why ancestors should be housed in a certain way. The Recommendations section then sets out HAD's guidance for how to do that with respect.

## **2. Principles of Best Practice**

### **2.1** *The ancient dead should not be treated any differently from the recently deceased.*

The passing of time should not be seen to dilute the entitlement to respectful treatment. Consequently, those who died 2,000 years ago should be given no less consideration than those who died yesterday; a Saxon soldier should be ascribed the same value as an individual human being as a World War I soldier unearthed in Flanders' Fields. The practical needs may be different for the recently deceased, but the attitude and level of respect should be exactly the same.

### **2.2** *All people should be treated equally in death, without prejudice or favour, as they should be in life.*

It is generally accepted that we should not differentiate between the rights of individuals on any grounds in life. HAD asserts that this should equally be the case in death – regardless of religion, gender, economic or social status. An individual whose bones are exhumed, but whose name and life story are not known, has as much right to be reburied and rest in peace as a disinterred king.

### **2.3** *The 'personhood' of the individual continues beyond death and should be respected.*

Until such time as all their bodily material has dissolved back into the earth, and all their stories disappeared from memory, a human individual is still a person. To assert this not only acknowledges the ongoing individuality of that person, but

also the ongoing influence of that individual. Persons who have died, whether recently or long ago, remain members of our extended family or tribe, connected to us through blood, culture, geography or religion.

To deny someone's personhood is to remove their humanity. HAD believes this is done when ancestral bones or ash are treated as objects, whether under the spotlight of private study or public display, or simply through neglect.

For this reason, HAD recommends that use of the term 'material' (such as 'human remains material') should be avoided in order to minimize the risk of objectifying the dead. Personal pronouns that imply ownership, as in 'my material', should also be avoided. Even where the person studying the ancestor affirms their respect for the individual in their care, such words can only compromise and corrode that respect.

#### 2.4 *Where ancestors have been exhumed, there may be value in study.*

HAD recognises that some ancestors are of significant interest to the living, whether as named individuals or due to the circumstances of their death or exhumation, and thus HAD accepts that some will wish to study what physical evidence there is of these particular lives.

Furthermore, where it is not possible to complete such studies immediately, some may put forward proposals that such ancestors be retained for a time when greater funding or improved analytical techniques become available.

How the ancestor is housed in the interim becomes pertinent. This is particularly the case where a great many years may pass before study is resumed.

#### 2.5 *Access to ancestors should be freely available.*

Where ancestors are retained, the opportunities for engaging with them should be available more broadly than just to museum personnel, academics and scientists.

There are many different and equally valid interests in the ancestors: these may be from the perspective of local heritage or community, art and literature, spirituality or religion, among others. Although HAD questions the retention of ancestors, it recognises that, for example, sitting in quiet reflection with an ancestor who is still part of a collection may be of profound value. The opportunity to do so should be available to anyone who expresses an interest in doing so.

#### 2.6 *Information about ancestors should be made known.*

While HAD cannot support unnecessary exhumation, once exhumation has taken place any and all information that is gleaned of an ancestor's story (individually or collectively) should be available to the public.

There are ancestors in collections whose bones or ash is unprovenanced, having no details of where or when they were exhumed, and thus may be considered the 'faceless' dead. While these individuals may have no story to tell, they are no less ancestors, no less persons, and should be treated with equal respect. At a minimum, their presence should be catalogued and made available for today's communities.

### **3. Recommendations for Adapting or Improving Existing Storage**

The following recommendations are for situations where storage is already being undertaken and options for improving this are being considered. The care of all ancestors in store should at least meet the English accreditation standard for museums, a national scheme administered by Arts Council England.

#### **3.1 *Storage***

- Facilities for storing and preserving ancestors should be maintained at the level of 'state of the art' as far as possible. Where there is a lack of funding, there is no less serious a duty of care, and with consideration solutions can be found that adequately meet acceptable standards of respect.
- Where an ancestor was exhumed with grave goods, these should be kept with the ancestor. Where this is not reasonably feasible, a record of all the individual's grave goods should be kept with the ancestor, as well as in the holding organisation's usual records system, thus ensuring that there is an ongoing reminder of these associated goods. Grave goods should not be disconnected from the ancestor, for example, by being deaccessioned and transferred to another collection.
- Where funding does not allow the creation of a separate facility, and where environmental conditions do not require otherwise, ancestors may be housed within a collection's general storerooms. This does not mean it is acceptable to house ancestors in the same containers used for artefacts. It should be immediately evident from a storage container that it contains ancestral bones or ash.
- Where the bones or ash of various individuals are found mixed together at the time of exhumation, they should remain this way.
- Where ancestors' bones may have been mixed together with others during the process of their exhumation, where possible they should be separated into identifiable individuals by forensic analysis, and not separated into groupings based on the type of bone (e.g. skulls with skulls, leg bones with leg bones, etc).

#### **3.2 *Information***

- All ancestors should have information recorded about them. Even ancestors whose bones or ash are unprovenanced should have any available information recorded, even if this is to state how long they have been in a collection, or when their presence in the collection was first registered.
- All information about the ancestors stored in collections should be made as freely available as possible, including at the place of storage, through online documentation, and more widely through other means. A lack of funding does not excuse this lack of availability, given resources that can be drawn on within the wider community, for example, local history societies, schools, colleges, community groups.
- Information must include the number of ancestors being held by the institution, where they are within that institution, in what conditions, as well as all the information is known about them, both as living individuals and since they were disinterred or found.
- Museums should be honest about the level of information they hold on their collection of ancestors and their condition.

### 3.3 *Access*

- Physical and intellectual access should be available to all who have an interest in an ancestor, whether their connection is specific to the individual ancestor or more general. This access should be possible to people regardless of physical or intellectual abilities, religion, gender, nationality, without prejudice or distinction.
- Although conditions may be imposed on access specific to the particular institution, for example, due to staffing constraints and the need to avoid any damage, such conditions must be comprehensible to all parties, transparent and reasonable.
- No charge in addition to any usual museum entrance fees should be made for access.
- Facilities for individual and group interaction between living people and ancestors should be available. Any conditions that protect the ancestor from damage must be reasonable.

### 3.4 *Display*

Where ancestors are to be displayed in a museum or other heritage institution, please refer to HAD's **Guidance for the Display of Ancestors in Museums**.

### 3.5 *Security*

- Arrangements to minimise or remove the possibility of theft, accidental or deliberate damage should be in place.

#### **4. Location and Movement of Ancestors**

- Ancestors should be housed as close to the site of their exhumation as is possible. If there is plausible evidence of their connection with another region, this can be considered. In other words, they should not be held in a place that is geographically or contextually at odds with their probable expectation.
- Where a museum or heritage organization is facing closure, and a collection is to be relocated, if ancestors within that collection were exhumed within (or are in other ways significantly connected to) the region, all efforts should be made to ensure they remain within the region. Reburial close to the site of exhumation would be the preferred option.