



Guidance for Display of Ancestors in Museums

The following points are compiled and put forward by Honouring the Ancient Dead (HAD), following consultation with its base of volunteers, together with other members of the museums profession, and periodically updated.

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.

1. Principles

- 1.1 All ancestors should be treated with respect. In many cases, this means not placing them on display at all. However, recognising that for the foreseeable future some museums will want to display iconic or other ancestral bodies, HAD recommends that these displays be in a context that supports and reflects the dignity and relationships of the individuals involved.
- 1.2 It should be recognised that some people feel a spiritual connection with those who have lived in Britain in former centuries and millennia.¹ That connection may be through ancestry, shared heritage and tradition, geographic locality or religious association. The age of an ancestor does not necessarily affect this connection; thus, Neolithic ancestors may be considered as much persons as if they were great grandparents, and the bodily evidence of their lives should be treated with equal consideration.
- 1.3 Where a museum would like to display ancestors, the museum should set in place a consultative process to include all for whom these ancestors may be of particular interest or importance. This may include those with a scientific, archaeological or historical focus, but also local community representatives and

¹ Emma Restall Orr (2004). Honouring the ancient dead. *British Archaeology* (2004), 77; Emma Restall Orr (2009). The care of ancient human remains. Presented at Honouring the Ancient Dead Conference October 2009. Available from: <https://www.honour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/HAD-Conference-paper-ERO.pdf>.

those for whom the ancestors are sacred. Consultation should look at whether display is appropriate, and if it is how it might best be done. Museums should be aware of HAD's *Consultation Policy with regard to Ancestors of British Provenance*.

- 1.4 Under English law a human body cannot be owned (except where it has been treated or altered through application of skill).² Consequently, considered and informed reviews should be taken at regular intervals as part of the management of care for ancestors in collections, including decisions from excavation to custody and retention, storage, research, display and disposal.

2. Display

- 2.1 A display should primarily seek to emphasise the ancestor's personhood, i.e. not treat them as specimens', nor imply them to be objects, instead presenting them as individual human beings and subjects in their own right. Thus, even where an ancestor is of scientific value, this should be expressed within the context of the individual's life.
- 2.2 As much information as possible about the individual human being should be expressed in any display, including what is known of their people, their way of life, and personal story. Where there are various possibilities, it is preferable to offer this information rather than to avoid giving the information.
- 2.3 Displays should not remove an ancestor from the context of the landscapes within which he or she is thought to have lived and from which he or she was exhumed. Displays should provide such information, thus preserving the importance of a person's connection with their environment. Where possible, this should be enhanced by an understanding of that landscape and its landowners and/or community in the present day.
- 2.4 Any goods disinterred with the ancestor should be displayed with them. If this is genuinely not possible, quality replicas should be considered. Best practice should entail every item being referred to and explained, possibly with details as to where more information can be found.
- 2.5 Dignity should be restored to the individual where possible. For example, where a skeleton is found intact but with the skull not in its correct anatomical position the display should place the skull at the top of the spine, and not as found within the grave. In most instances it is not possible to know the reasons for the original burial configuration; however, restoring the ancestor to a normal configuration expresses respect for the individual, recognising their part within the human

² [1998] 3 All ER 741; Charlotte Woodhead (2004). The Legal Issues around the Excavation and Custody of Human Remains. Presented at Honouring the Ancient Dead Conference October 2009. Available from: <file:///C:/Users/imslm/Downloads/HAD%20Conference%20paper%20-%20Charlotte%20Woodhead.pdf>; Charlotte Woodhead, 'Ownership, Possession, Title and Transfer: Human Remains in Museum Collections' in M Dixon (ed), *Modern Studies in Property Law – Volume 5* (Hart Publishing, Oxford 2009); R Hardcastle, *Law and the Human Body: Property Rights, Ownership and Control* (Hart Publishing, Oxford 2007).

story. The original position of bones within the grave can be presented with graphics in a display, or using photographs taken at the time of excavation.

- 2.6 Care should be taken with the use of nicknames. While using a name can ensure the ancestor is not perceived as a specimen or collection of objects, doing so can imply a level of familiarity that allows a lack of adequate respect. If a nickname has been given, it is often a part of the ancestor's ongoing story and should be explained as such.
- 2.7 Bodily parts from different individuals should not be mixed together in a single display. Where displays do contain more than one individual, this must be absolutely clear and justified by the individuals' separate stories.
- 2.8 Best practice would entail the story of the excavation and exhumation of the individuals being told within the display, together with reasons as to why the ancestors were disinterred and retained, however briefly. The views of those who found the ancestors could also be included, further adding to the personal relationship between the ancestor and the present community or that contemporary to his or her exhumation.
- 2.9 Funerary urns or containers should be displayed with explanations of their purpose, together with acknowledgement of the individual and where their cremated ash may now be. They should not be displayed simply as pots.
- 2.10 Out of respect for the ancestor on display, low lighting should be employed at all times where ancestors are on display. Moreover, spotlighting should be avoided. If this does not allow for detailed viewing, graphics or reproductions should be used to illustrate necessary points. This is as true for isolated bones as it is for skulls or entire skeletons.
- 2.11 Visitors should be warned that ancestors are on display, before they approach them, so that they can make an active choice whether or not to view them.
- 2.12 Information about what will happen to the ancestor should be considered as a respectful and valid part of the display, including whether any decision has been made about repatriation or reburial, if this is under review or not currently under consideration. If the ancestor is to be retained within a collection, justification for this should be made clear.
- 2.13 If space does not allow for presentation of sufficient information immediately alongside the display, separate leaflets, information on websites or audio guides could be used.
- 2.14 Best practice would include providing seating near the display so that those who wish to are given the opportunity of sitting with the dead. In some cases, and in consultation with faith and community groups, the opportunity to leave offerings could also be considered. This may be as simple as a box for monetary gifts with

clarity as to which charity the offerings were to be given to; without adequate explanation, however, such a box is unlikely to be used.

- 2.15 Ancestors should not be displayed in a manner that would commonly be seen to be disrespectful. For example, sited within the floor with visitors walking over them - viewing the bones through Perspex or glass windows set in the ground.
- 2.16 Where parts of the ancestor have been loaned and lost, there should be a presumption against displaying the remaining bones. For example, displaying an otherwise full skeleton with one femur bone missing through previous poor curation would be disrespectful. Their story, including transparency about the missing bones, should be explained, ideally with supporting diagrams of photographs of the original situation.
- 2.17 Careful thought needs to go into the display of ancestors who have been recovered from a site of a known tragedy, i.e. those who are known to have died other than of natural causes. HAD's view is that, on balance, this should be avoided wherever possible, as it could lead to a sensationalist approach, or be perceived as such. To do so would not be consistent with respect shown to those who die in recent memory (who we would never consider displaying in death). Examples would be those executed, lost in battle, or drowned.
- 2.18 No new displays should be commissioned without first considering the use of replicas.

3. The Role of HAD

- 3.1 As a key voice representing the specific standpoint of religious, spiritual and social sensitivity with respect to the treatment of ancestors, HAD is expected to be consulted directly in all cases of regional or national significance. Using its broad network of connections it will ascertain interest in the particular ancestors in question. Although HAD's remit is now open to all, given its roots in the modern Druid community, HAD is also able to consult with and help liaise with local Pagans where appropriate.
- 3.2 HAD is willing to act as a consultee, either where nominated by individuals concerned for the ancestors' welfare, or where contacted directly by those organising a particular consultation.
- 3.3 HAD will disseminate information about consultations and decisions made through its website, its network of connections and volunteers, and other public media, as appropriate.

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