

Archaeologists and Human Remains: Policy and practice behind the latest Guidelines

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Treatment of human remains is an emotive issue, as well as at times a complex legal, scientific and practical problem. New guidance on remains from Christian burial grounds (2005) by the Human Remains Working Group (HWRG) convened by the Church of England and English Heritage for remains dating between the seventh and the 19th centuries at last gives clear guidelines for hard-pressed clergy and archaeologists faced with providing appropriate treatment for the great number of human skeletons that come to light each year in this cultural group. These skeletons range from fragments disturbed during routine works in churchyards, to several thousand bodies at Spitalfields, and include sites such as monastic cemeteries lost after the Reformation which are not under Faculty jurisdiction. The aim of the working party was to combine ethical and Christian considerations with the ethics of science and archaeology, especially in the vexed question of reburial versus storage. Archaeologists take a great deal of responsibility for dealing with human remains, so it is important to have guidance and back up for the approaches we need to take, whether in the field, laboratory or the museum/storage context. Technical issues and theological considerations were considered in detail. As Simon Mays outlined above, recommendations include provision of long-term storage in buildings such as redundant churches; this alone could resolve a lot of pressing problems.

Christian attitudes to human remains: official and folk

As the Guidelines explain ‘There is little in the Bible to suggest that Jesus had great concern for the human body and its remains after physical death, and the view of St Paul and later theologians appears to be that at the resurrection there is no literal reconstitution of the physical body’. Although belief in an eternal afterlife, whether in heaven, hell or purgatory, was and remains essential Christian teaching, the point at which one met God was a matter of theological debate in the Middle Ages (at death, after Purgatory, or at a universal Domesday) and for this reason the value of prayers of intercession and the significance of the body after death were much contested in late Anglo-Saxon England, with splits often apparent between popular and more learned traditions (Thompson 2004, 27). However, the vital departure of the soul was at death, graphically portrayed on illustrations of the deaths of saints such as Guthlac (Fig 1) or at least at burial. After this, a relationship between living and dead continued, the saintly available to respond to mortal prayers and more normal souls capable of benefit from the tears and prayers from their friends on earth. Only unquiet souls (such as witches) remained present on earth after this and may have needed special treatment, for the ancient terror of ghosts persisted.

Alongside immediate consignment to a just fate the concept of the physical raising of the dead at Judgement Day was also commonly accepted, but from St Augustine

onwards the theological case was that this was in no way dependent on the actual physical state of the corpse, let alone the remains that survived. Instead, it was firmly argued that it was the soul that mattered. Popular faith often contested this, perhaps backed up by miraculous states of preservation often ascribed to saintly exhumations, but pragmatism as well as educated theologians prevented logical implementation of a need for a complete and incorrupt corpse, except for the very rich or very holy, for whom there seems to be some evidence for embalming as well as more protective coffins.

Burial and the churchyard

In the Middle Saxon period burial sites, with very few exceptions, were moved decisively away from their ancestral pagan counterparts, though there was not yet much correlation of churches and graveyards. Burial at home was another option at this time, so simple graves, unfurnished or equipped with just a knife or similar, occur in or adjacent to settlements and are probably much under-reported. Christian burials had already broken the ancient taboo about not burying within settlement areas. From the ninth century burial near a church became normal, probably influenced by Charlemagne’s ordinances of parish rights, though unfortunately we have no parallel records in Britain. When the Wessex kings gained control of most of England in the 10th century, part of their regulation of the new kingdom included obligatory burial at one’s parish church, with dues paid there to ensure that priests co-operated with the new



Fig 1: The soul of Guthlac ascending to heaven in a shaft of light (drawing after the 12th century Guthlac Roll)

system - which was not always popular, as considerable travel might be involved.

Another break with tradition was that grave goods were no longer required although, illogically, symbols of office continued to be deposited with clerics, and the Regularis Concordia of 970 specifies that a monk be buried in clean shirt, cowl, stockings and shoes, with a stole if he is a priest. Archaeology confirms that the upper clergy were often buried in full regalia, but evidence for lower clergy is still poor, especially in modern excavations. Some work carried out in the 19th-century however did record discoveries of hair-cloth and coarse woven habits, and monks at Lewes were said to have had linen undergarments, black woollen

habits and leather shoes (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 80). Mathew Paris in 1257 describes watching mass clearance of graves at St Albans, noting that the monks still had crude leather shoes with drawstrings, and 19th-century excavators in Winchester Cathedral found boots on clergy there (ibid). Clerics with chalices, often of base metal or even wax are common. The aristocratic or wealthy might be richly clothed, presumably to make a good display during the burial ceremony, but otherwise clothing was replaced by a plain white shroud, the body sometimes referred to as being wound in it and at other times sewn in, directly influenced by the burial of Christ, although the origins of the custom pre-date Christianity. As Aelfric describes, the dead will rise

in spiritual garments not 'shameful cloth', and homilies note the futility of using luxurious materials (Thompson 2004, 108).

Paul Binski (1996, 55) notes how, during the Middle Ages, *'corpses were manipulable and divisible for essentially practical reasons: graveyards were sites for re-cycling, and their earth and worms participated in a sacred ecology'*. On the Continent bones were collected after decomposition of flesh and stored in a charnel house, and the Greek Orthodox Church practiced exhumation after just a few years. In Britain, the pragmatic tradition was to virtually ignore the long-dead and just go on using the same limited sacred space for a thousand years or more, the sexton replacing bones more or less discreetly as he opened new graves. The procedure was simplified by only rare use of memorials more lasting than wooden markers or even of coffins, except for transport, until the post-medieval period. By the 19th century a combination of much higher population, use of memorials, and stout coffins that delayed processes of decay, led to quite nauseous situations in some (especially town) graveyards. Counteractive measures included clearance of large amounts of build-up, or bringing in 'clean' soil to seal graves and loose bones now present in topsoil, sometimes leading to damp problems as yet more soil was piled against church walls, opening new cemeteries and, from late in the century, increasing use of cremation.

Respect for the physical remains of at least a section of society is common to most religions, although this respect may take the form of ritual destruction such as cremation rather than preservation, and in many religions post-death ceremonies involved extensive interference with the corpse - anointing, embalming, mummification, exhumation, secondary burial *etcetera*, alongside nervousness and/or a sense of impurity of the corpse. Indeed, old traditions that the dead and their bones could be helpfully manipulated by the living, for intercession, magic, soothsaying or communication or could have a baleful and frightening effect survived alongside the need for remains to be secure, distanced and untouched. Eleventh and 12th century laws and codes, for example, forbid divination and veneration of dead men without episcopal authority, and summoning the dead was one of the reprehensible practices of witches; yet missals and prayer books often include information on how to tell the future through corpse divination (Thompson 2004, 38).

A lengthy period of final rest seems to be desirable in most traditions, although re-use of graves, coffins and memorial sites (especially barrows) was practised in every archaeological period in Britain, both by close family and by much later populations claiming ancestral kin. Archaeologists find the older bones and grave goods treated in a variety of ways, from casual discarding to careful appropriation, although whether this was for purely economical or more spiritual motives is not always clear; the

status of the dead has always had considerable impact on how they were treated. Up to the very recent past, heretics and criminals, especially traitors, paid for their sins by post-mortem mutilation including gruesome display, feeding to dogs, *etcetera*, and use for dissection and unpleasant locations for burial; this punishment could be carried out long after the first burial if the political situation changed. It must be remembered that the majority of the population had quite shallow burial that would not protect the body in perpetuity: a handful of earth was enough in Roman times, and burial in field ditches was quite common. Royal corpses were sometimes divided for burial in various locations, re-buried at later periods for political purposes, or even boiled down to clean bones for ease of transport if they died in the wrong place; Boniface VIII in 1299 forbade this practice but it is known to have continued for members of some European royal families who died far from home. Sainly bodies probably suffered most disturbance of all, with minute division for relics and frequent trundling around the countryside in the course of repeated burials and translations (St Cuthbert is an extreme example), or even blatant kidnapping of bones from rival religious establishments. Whatever the expectation of 'laying to rest', it was only a small proportion of the population at any time that was likely to survive undamaged more than a millennia.

Seeking the original theological intentions of those burying in various traditions makes for fascinating study but not many conclusions. Indeed, it is unlikely that past populations could have articulated their vision much better than people at the graveside in our own time, and witty Roman satirists for example demonstrate the gulf between educated and popular beliefs. Planning 'appropriate' burial arrangements for excavated skeletons therefore hardly seems helpful. Roman Catholics might well argue that the reburial of medieval (catholic) bodies by Church of England priests is perhaps also inappropriate. Of one thing we can be fairly confident: few would want their dead reburied according to a religion that did not exist in their time, whether Christian or neo-pagan.

Modern secular attitudes

In modern multi-cultural society, the views of all living faiths in respect to their own dead (recent or ancient) must be respected as far as practicable. Respect for family wishes and other known indications will always be significant factors. Beyond these parameters a policy of non-discrimination in treatment seems the most appropriate in today's world.

The principal recommendation of the HRWG sums up the prevailing secular attitude that is also expressed through Home Office controls: ancient human remains should always be treated with dignity and respect and burials should not be disturbed without good reason; but special reverence for unidentifiable individuals would be theologically inappropriate, as well as rarely feasible. For good practical

reasons disturbance of the dead is known to commonly occur, and distaste is generally reserved for 'disrespect', eg disturbance of graves of recent or well known dead, clumsy digging with machines, misplaced humour, or inappropriate exposure.

Fortunately, the British public, as far as we can tell, seems supportive of work by archaeologists on human remains, and of museum displays that are clearly educational and serious. A small survey carried out by Cambridgeshire Archaeology showed that 88% of the public thought skeletons should be retained if they could aid future scientific work and 79% expected to see them displayed in museums, although only 73% thought this was appropriate (Carroll 2005, 12). Despite the public nature of our work and the popularity of topics relating to burial on television and in the press, so far we have avoided pitfalls that have afflicted the medical, artistic and anthropological worlds. To an extent this must be due to generally intelligent, non-sensationalist and down to earth approaches for which we should congratulate colleagues. We need care to ensure this remains the case, for it would be tragic if the public had to be denied access to some of our most exciting and revealing excavations and exhibits. It would be still worse if scientific knowledge had to be lost before evidence is destroyed.

Scientific ethics and value

Human burials and their contexts are an immensely rich resource. HWRG Guidance summarises this as contributing to knowledge on

- Demography and health
- Diet, growth and activity patterns
- Genetic relationships
- Burial practice, and thus of related beliefs and attitudes
- Increasing our understanding of diseases and their history, which may contribute to the treatment of disease
- Contributing to the development of forensic science, to assist in identification of remains and prevent miscarriages of justice

'These benefits are likely to increase as research methodology advances, and we are likely to see benefits in other areas as well.'

Relevant ethics for archaeologists are summed up in IFA's Code of conduct which requires responsibility for conservation of the archaeological heritage, including justification for destruction, adequate recording and sampling procedures, and full analysis and dissemination of results. Failure to excavate, record and analyse human remains properly would be in breach of our professional ethics. Although nearly all sites are disturbed for reasons outside archaeologists' control, there will be a continuing need for research excavation, but this will always be exceptional and the possible benefits must, as at present, be closely argued and justified. It is crucial too for our profession that skeletal material is used for training purposes,

and that reserve collections are available for use in comparisons. Archaeologists will continue to need properly excavated human bones as evidence for ordinary people in the past and for the diseases they suffered. Already, early progress of various cancers, TB, leprosy and syphilis, as well as the incidence of obesity and malnutrition, are being tracked. As DNA and isotope analysis become routine there will be a revolution in understanding patterns of movement and migration. In York, where the target is to curate the bones of 200 people from each generation of the last 2000 years, an immeasurably valuable resource for medical and historical research is being created. For example, the urban population is already being contrasted with rural groups, and the effects of comparative pollution and lifestyles are being assessed (Mays 1997). Substantial data from wider areas is needed for such studies.

Recent studies have demonstrated the value of re-analysis of human bone excavated more than a century ago. In the latest issue of the *Archaeological Journal* is an account of re-assessment of Neolithic bone from West Tump, Gloucestershire, excavated in the 1880s, curated at Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum and still in good condition (Brickley and Thomas 2004). This proved to be a juvenile buried with an exceptionally interesting young dog, not a mother and baby as published. As the authors say, this *'illustrates the need for proper provision to be made for the long-term storage and curation of material now being excavated from archaeological sites'*.

Meanwhile, a project run by Sheffield University is using museum material to investigate Beaker period diet, osteology and mobility (Mike Parker Pearson pers comm). Wharram Percy burials have already been informatively reassessed (Mays, in press).

Burials excavated under Faculty jurisdiction are usually required to be eventually reburied. For burials found within churchyards this creates few problems and fits the ancient tradition. Most commonly it is unstratified bone that is unearthed, which can serve little scientific purpose and is best passed to the incumbent for burial in or near the trench it was found. More complete skeletons evaluated as suitable for excavation must be recorded and analysed in the normal way, which means there should be no unrealistic time limits - there are stories of only three days being allowed for whole groups to be studied - after which reburial close to the original site is not generally a difficult issue. On occasion the excavations, usually not necessarily those on a larger scale and with datable populations, will be of exceptional interest. Obvious examples are Raunds and Wharram Percy (Boddington 1996 and Mays, in press). For these an excellent case can be made for retention. The case is even stronger for Christian burials that are not excavated under Faculty and where there is no churchyard extant; examples are the Saxon cemeteries of Cherry Hinton and Gamlingay in Cambridgeshire (Taylor 2001), and disused monastic

cemeteries in towns (Mays 1997). There are several thousand burials from Spitalfields, excavated because the church needed to change radically for the modern age and wished to clear its crowded crypt and churchyard (Molleson & Cox 1993). Reburial in such circumstances would normally have to be far from the original site and would potentially be a huge loss to future studies. The proposed panel drawn up by the Church of England and English Heritage will be able to give useful guidance where there are genuinely conflicting opinions in such cases.

The important thing now is to get suitable safe storage for skeletons that are not to be reburied, that will satisfy religious and scientific interests alike. The creation of church archives of human remains would have considerable benefit for the long term curation of an important scientific resource, and would relieve the museum community. As archaeologists we must stress that there should never be indiscriminate reburial of human remains, and therefore the concept of archives of human remains should be developed as quickly as possible. Until this policy, or an equivalent, has been implemented, there should be a moratorium on reburials except where required by Faculty jurisdiction and where no scientific argument for retention can reasonably be made.

The implications of various recommendations in the Guidance have been more carefully thought out than recent governmental proposals, and will hopefully be used to guide revisions of wider guidelines on ancient human remains. The Institute of Field Archaeologists, whose members are usually those coping with excavation and scientific evaluation of bodies, is especially glad to see the issues teased out in this way, and for a clear approach that ties in with their own Code of Conduct.

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