

English Collections of Human Remains: An Introduction

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British museums and collections currently contain the skeletal **remains** of several tens of thousands of individuals, and although the majority of these remains are European, a significant number are of non-European origin. Those non-Europeans who figure most prominently are Africans, Native Americans (“North American Indians”), Inuit (“Eskimo”), Australian Aborigines and Maoris, although collections also contain skeletal remains from many other localities and peoples in the world. Although the collections consist almost entirely of skeletal material (with skulls in the majority), some also contain preserved heads and other parts of the anatomy. Anatomical museums, for example, often contain European and non-European soft tissue specimens (see the report on the Royal College of Surgeons, below).

Human remains exist in many different types of collections, for example universities, teaching hospital museums, anatomical museums, anthropological museums, ethnographical museums, phrenological museums and private museums. This variety reflects the fact that human remains have been collected for many different reasons and uses. For example, skulls in phrenological museums were collected in order to teach and illustrate phrenological principles (that the shape of the skull reflected the character of the owner) and to ascertain the character of particular peoples, whereas skulls to be found in ethnographic museums had usually been worked or decorated.

In the U.K., over the years, there have been at least 30 (and probably many more) collections containing non-European skeletal material at any one moment. However, over time, as some became redundant, collections moved and many were amalgamated; thus, for example, in 1890 the Anthropological Society sold its collection of some 300 skulls to the Royal College of Surgeons. Similarly, the skull collection owned by the London phrenologist, James Deville (b.1777 d.1846), was bought by the craniologist Joseph Barnard Davis, whose museum was subsequently bought by the Royal College of Surgeons. What survives of this collection is now in The Natural History Museum.

Non-European human remains have been brought to Britain certainly since the seventeenth century, and probably earlier. In 1681, for example, the Museum of the Royal Society contained “the entire skin of a Moor”

(Nehemiah Grew 1681: 4). However, it is not until the late eighteenth century that the systematic collection of human remains really began, and it is at this point that a small number of collections appeared—for example, John Hunter, the surgeon-anatomist (1728-1793), included a cranial collection in his medical museum, which contained skulls from many different areas of the world.

Throughout the nineteenth century, collection continued at an ever increasing rate. Although differing sciences were involved in collecting, the vast majority of non-European remains were acquired for the use of anatomists, and as a result it is anatomy institutions which tend to contain the largest human osteological collections (for example, the Royal College of Surgeons, and the Cambridge, Oxford and Edinburgh Universities' Anatomy Departments).

Up until the 1870s anatomists collected skulls in order to describe human racial variation (in this way the sciences of anatomy and physical anthropology were intricately interlinked—most of the leading physical anthropologists, up until the early twentieth century, belonged to the medical profession). Skulls (as opposed to other parts of the skeleton) were thought to best illustrate racial characteristics, and large numbers were needed in order to determine true racial, as opposed to individual, variation. Because “the ethnological value of...a series depends directly on the number of comparable specimens” (Macalister 1893: 960), the procurement of skeletal remains from around the world accelerated throughout this period, and collections began to contain many thousands of items.

With the introduction of Darwinism in the late nineteenth century (see section, Non-Darwinian Collecting of Human Remains in Russia, below), a new theory became available which could be applied to the skeletal material. In order to establish an evolutionary scale within modern *Homo*, scientists placed even more importance on obtaining skulls of as many different people as possible. Although skulls were still regarded as the most important part of the skeleton (because they contained features considered to be the most indicative of “primitiveness”), other parts (such as the pelvis and spine) began to be collected, as it was thought that their study could also be used to place different peoples on an evolutionary scale (for example, see Cunningham 1886).

Collection for research, teaching and reference purposes continued on a large scale until the Second World War. However, by the mid-twentieth century it was becoming clear that different peoples within modern *Homo* could not be placed within an evolutionary hierarchical scale. After the War, interest in human skeletal remains shifted towards the reconstruction of the nature and characteristics of past populations, often of European origin and from archaeological sites (see the section on Demography of Past Populations, below). Such studies require well provenanced comparative collections

of large size, localized in provenance and not just from, say, "Australia" or "North America", and such collections are at their most useful when comprising complete skeletons. Very few of the extant huge anthropological collections could meet these criteria. There was a tendency to amalgamate collections – many, for example, including most of Oxford's collection, the "Williamson collection", and the surviving Royal College of Surgeons collection (see separate reports, below), were transferred to The Natural History Museum during this time.

Human skeletal remains were obtained in a large number of ways. Most were acquired from burial sites, some were taken from mortuaries, others from battlefields (see the report on "Williamson", below). They were traded between museums and individuals, were purchased directly from sources, from middlemen or dealers, or donated by travellers and interested individuals. Most of the famous early exploratory expeditions brought back the remains of the peoples whose lands they had visited (e.g. H.M.S. Challenger, see Turner 1884–1886). A small proportion of remains were those of indigenous peoples who were brought to Europe and who died before they returned home. Among these were those of the "Bushman", Terence Cannon (for details, see later pages of this *Bulletin*).

In some instances collectors went to enormous lengths in order to acquire human remains (Urry 1989; and see section, William Lanne, below). Among these was the ethnographer/social anthropologist, Franz Boas, who collected approximately 300 skulls and 100 skeletons during his visits to the North West Coast of America in the 1880s and 1890s (some of which have ended up in English collections). He stated in his diary that collecting bones was "most repugnant work but someone has to do it" for, as he emphasised, skeletons were "worth money" (quoted in Cole 1985: 119). Within the English market in the 1890s, the skeleton of a Tasmanian, for example, could easily fetch £115.

Another zealous collector was Andreas Reischek, who collected for both economic and scientific reasons. Reischek collected artefacts and human remains in New Zealand during the 1880s and became obsessed with the need to obtain examples of Maori "mummies" (actually desiccated bodies) for European, and especially Austrian, museums. After a long search he found some "mummies", and, although having given his word that he would not remove any human remains from the area, stole them with a great deal of subterfuge. In his own words:

The undertaking was a dangerous one, for discovery might have cost me my life. In the night I had the mummies removed from the spot and then well hidden; during the next night they were carried still farther away, and so on, until they had been brought

safely over the boundaries of Maori Land. But even then I kept them cautiously hidden from sight right up to the time of my departure from New Zealand. Now both these ancestors of the Maori adorn the ethnographical collection of the Imperial Natural History Museum at Vienna.

These words were reported by King (1981: 96–97), who also recorded the continuing presence of the bodies in the Museum Für Völkerkunde in Vienna some ten years ago. In England the *only* non-European holdings in some museums consist of Maori material; for example, Whitby Museum (Pannett Park, Whitby, North Yorkshire, YO21) contains the following examples:

Chief's head; tattooed; donated 1831 by Capt. Stephenson Ellerby of the ship "Lady Feversham".

"Chief's" head; donated 1834 by Captain J.R. Potter.

2 Skulls; donated 1862 by Rev. G. Smales.

From this very brief and general outline it can be seen that human remains have been collected for many centuries, for many reasons, and in many different ways.

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