

Ethics in human osteology

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With the publication of ClfA's *Introduction to professional ethics* and the revised BABAO *Code of Ethics* (2019), ethics is a topic at the forefront our minds.

Human remains come with an extra ethical consideration. In the UK there are many legal requirements (for an overview see White 2010), but these do not always cover the ethical decisions that commercial osteoarchaeologists must make daily. Guidance documents are available (archaeologicaethics.org), but ethical dilemmas are rarely straightforward enough to be detailed in the exact same circumstances.

At the root of all work with human remains is the premise of respect. This is included in the UK legal requirements and in the Vermillion Accord on Human Remains (1989). When unsure of a course of action it always best to ask yourself: 'is this respectful?'

Recently, an ethical dilemma presented itself when I was asked what should be done with some cremation residues. These were bags of fine powder, containing sediment 1mm and less in size, left after cremation burials had been washed, sorted and bagged. They contained tiny powdered fragments of cremated bone that were too small for any analysis, but nonetheless were human



**“SKELETON DISCOVERY:
Ritual burial site from 3,000 years ago”**
Daily Express

**“Oxfordshire water pipe work
uncovers ancient skeletons”**
BBC News

**“Incredibly well-
preserved Iron age
and Roman remains
found in stream in
Oxfordshire”**
Evening Standard

**“Iron Age skeletons may
have been the victims of
ritual human sacrifice”**
Daily Telegraph

**“Amazing haul of Iron Age and Roman
artefacts – including two dozen 3,000-
year-old human skeletons – is uncovered
by workers laying new water pipes in
Oxfordshire”** *Daily Mail*

Examples of the varied headlines by news outlets from the same press release. Credit: Cotswold Archaeology



Excavation of a human skeleton. Credit: Cotswold Archaeology



Storage of human remains. Credit: Cotswold Archaeology

remains. Given that space is an issue when it comes to archiving, should the bags be disposed of, as there was no potential in their use osteologically or archaeologically? Or should they be kept because they contained almost microscopic parts of cremated human bone?

These decisions are never easy, but financial pressures should be disregarded when making them. Instead, considering the long-term potential of the material and whether the treatment is respectful are important.

Public presentation and outreach work are challenging when it comes to human remains. There are many different opinions amongst the heritage and museum community about whether to and how to display human remains. There are also many opinions about the use of images (and the printing of 3D images) of human remains. Balancing these views is not easy, and we don't always get it right. It is generally accepted that plastic skeletons are fine for open days and outreach work, but that handling and displaying real human skeletons should be kept for teaching or specifically themed events. Site visits for the general public during cemetery excavations are normally not possible, for health and safety reasons or because of construction activity, but it can be done and there are examples of successful open days. The legal requirement to screen excavations of human skeletons from public view does not preclude open days, and it can be very beneficial to get the public in to see the work. 'Hiding' our work from the public can create concern about how it is being undertaken and this can be dispelled when the careful removal that is part of professional archaeology is seen in person.

Using images in social media and other outlets is an increasingly challenging ethical area. Some feel that no images of human remains should be posted on social media. However, this goes against the 'Death Positive' movement, which aims to bring discussions and experiences of death and dying back into society to counter the medicalisation of death – something that has removed the experience from our everyday lives, making it more extraordinary than it once was. Encountering human remains is a part of our job and to not include images in our reports and website stories misrepresents the past. However, this should be done to educate or to highlight part of the story and not for sensationalism. But what happens to an image once it is out of the control of the organisation publishing it? Comments on websites and social media cannot be controlled. Despite a carefully worded press release accompanying an image, once the news outlets get the story, they can construct any headline they like. It is important to weigh this up against the public interest in the archaeology.

Sampling human remains for destructive analysis is coming under increasing scrutiny. Years ago, whole bones had to be destroyed to obtain a radiocarbon date. The *Science and the Dead* guidance document (APABE 2013)

was created to encourage proper recording and archiving to ensure that the same sampling is not undertaken twice on the same bone. This document is shortly to be updated to take into account new techniques, which are developing all the time.

Osteoarchaeologists should be consulted before destructive analysis is agreed, to ensure that full recording of the material to be destroyed has been undertaken and to balance the need for a result against the amount of material available to ensure that the process is repeatable. Recently, a request was made to sample a deposit of cremated bone to gain a radiocarbon date for a feature. The feature was not clearly a burial, but it may have been cremation-related and was also the only feature in the trench. The cremated bone weighed a total of 8g, but only 2g of it was positively identified as human (tooth roots, etc). Sampling this amount of human bone would have reduced it to such a small amount that any future analyses would not be possible. My professional opinion was that the benefit of a date did not outweigh the destruction of a valuable and finite resource, and given that the work was at an evaluation stage, further excavation may reveal better sources. Ethically it must be remembered that we are destroying human remains when we sample for radiocarbon dating or isotopic analysis. The cost and speed of scientific analyses has reduced considerably over recent years, making it more readily available, but it is no panacea and not to be used 'just because we can'.

It is also important to understand the scientific analyses you request. *Science and the Dead* (APABE 2013) outlines some of the current options. For example, if you request carbon and nitrogen isotopic analysis on a neonate, you will not gain a useful result. Babies and infants carry the isotopic signatures of their mothers due to breastfeeding (this is useful if looking at weaning ages), so all it will tell you is they are one trophic level higher than the adults.



Bone sample for C14 dating. Credit: Cotswold Archaeology



1mm residue sample. Credit: Cotswold Archaeology

Proportionally, neonates and infant skeletons are very small and a 2g sample from these is an entire limb. So, it is crucial that advice is sought from a specialist and alternative options are explored.

While human remains reside in our stores, we have a duty as the curators to treat them with dignity and respect. We cannot ask their relatives for permission to undertake the destructive analysis, so we have to consider requests carefully. We must also ensure that their research potential for the future is not compromised by inadequate archiving of the scientific sampling.

Further information

<http://archaeologicaethics.org/topic/human-remains-and-ethical-practice/>

References

White, B 2010 Chapter 42 – The United Kingdom, in N Marquez-Grant and L Fibiger (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Archaeological Human Remains and Legislation: An International Guide to Laws and Practice in the Excavation and Treatment of Archaeological Human Remains*. Abingdon UK; New York, NY: Routledge

Vermillion Accord on Human Remains (1989)

APABE (Advisory Panel on Archaeology of Burials in England) 2013 *Science and the Dead – A guideline for the destructive sampling of archaeological human remains for scientific analysis*. English Heritage

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