

To Gaze Upon the Dead

The Exhibition of Human Remains as Cultural Practice and Political Process in Scandinavia and the USA

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INTRODUCTION: EYE TO EYE WITH THE PAST

The clattering sound of a child's shoes across the cold stone floors; the echo is magnificent. I am nine or ten years old and I make my way through the prehistoric exhibition at the National Museum in Copenhagen. The dimly lit display cases are filled with arrowheads, heavy beads of perforated amber, funnel beakers, and bronze artefacts. I reach my goal, the alluring Bronze Age oak cists where the buried men and women from the heaths of Jutland are looking back at me. I touch the glass. My eyes wander over their reddened hair and their clothes, stained in deep shades of peat brown. My eyes seek theirs in the hollow orbits of their skulls. I close mine and imagine a life thousands of years ago. My small hand moves across the glass, leaving an almost invisible trace. Small fingerprints; a dreaming child's gesture. I would stay there forever, dreaming of the past. Feeling it.

I know that it was moments like this, when I could see and feel the humanity of the past that made me want to become an archaeologist. The immediate encounter with an individual from the past is a privileged moment. For a brief moment our destinies cross paths, and hundreds, even thousands of years are transcended. Scenes like this one, of children gazing at the dead and seeing the past, are not unusual. In museums across Europe, the archaeological findings from burials, including both the human remains and the items that accompanied the dead, are often displayed with pride and confidence. The public expects this and is drawn in with fascination to stand face-to-face with the deep past. Beyond this, the display of the dead and of death itself, with all

of the allure and drama that accompany it, becomes a privileged locus for pedagogy and communication.

But while this confident attitude towards the display of the dead may be typical in Europe, it is not as evident in North America. In North American museums, it is rare to see human remains from archaeological contexts displayed in any form (exception seems to be given to Egyptian mummies, which still are prominently displayed by many institutions that have them among their collections). This attitude stems in part from a post-colonial critique of the role of science in the politics of oppression, but also from a greater and more general understanding that the exhibition of the dead is perceived as offensive by many, and especially by people who identify as the descendants of those on display (see McClelland and Cerezo-Román this volume; Swain this volume). The differences in attitudes between the two continents are thus intimately linked to the relationship between the exhibited subjects and the majority populations. In Europe where archaeology was traditionally constructed within a nationalist framework, the deep past was, and still to some extent is, perceived as the origin of the state (Trigger 1989; Hagerman 2006), and the human remains in museums are viewed as the ancestors of the majority population. In contrast, North American archaeology was practised within a colonialist context and when the remains of Native Americans filled museum storage rooms and display cases, their descendants felt that this was just another technology of oppression that not only offended their cultural and religious traditions but also took away their right to write their own history. Whether to display human remains or not has become a political decision that goes beyond the realms of the museum walls and the past, and is intimately tied to contemporary concerns and sensitivities.

This chapter takes a critical look at this contrast in attitudes to the exhibition of human remains. I have chosen to compare the USA and Scandinavia, two cases that allow us to explore a clear contrast between a post-colonial and a post-nationalist experience (for a more theoretical exposé of the contrast and comparison, see Nilsson Stutz 2007 and 2013). This contrast also allows us to discuss how the paths chosen by museums today may be very different, yet thoughtfully crafted and motivated by good intentions. Through examples of museum policies and reactions to exhibitions, this chapter is an invitation for a broader debate that considers the display of human remains as cultural practice and political process.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In order to understand the different attitudes to the exhibition of human remains between Europe (and specifically in Scandinavia which is the focus for

this study) and the USA, it is necessary to acknowledge the different roles archaeology and museums historically have played, and still hold, in these different political, historical, and academic contexts.

In North America, which is a dominating arena for the re-evaluation of museum technologies, archaeology has historically been intimately connected to the colonial project (Thomas 2000). Anthropology, of which archaeology is an integral part in the USA, was part of the colonial politics of oppression. By collecting the artefacts and the human remains of a people that according to the colonial mindset were doomed to extinction, archaeology and anthropology participated in ordering and naming the New World, and in the process withheld the right of the colonized to define their histories, identities, and destinies. This power relationship was challenged and gradually overturned with the repatriation movement that started out as part of the civil rights movement in the 1960s (Bray 2001; see also Hammil and Cruz 1989; Hill 2001) and came to fruition in 1990, after decades of debate and discussion, when the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was signed into law. The history of this process and its legal dimensions have been described in detail elsewhere (Lovis et al. 2004; Ousley et al. 2005), but for our purposes here it is important to note that the law regulates the transmission of ownership from the federally funded institutions that curate human remains (like public universities and museums) to any federally recognized tribe that can demonstrate that they have affiliation to these remains. The legislation also regulates the process of consultation in case of new discoveries of human remains, and it has had a great impact on both archaeological and museum practices. While the law only regulates the handling of human remains and cultural items that can be affiliated to federally recognized Native American tribes, it has had a more far-reaching impact on the museum community in the United States. One unintended and unregulated consequence of the repatriation movement and of NAGPRA is that most large museums today tend to avoid exhibiting human remains from archaeological contexts altogether (a few exceptions to this policy will be discussed below).

The critique of the repatriation movement in general, and of NAGPRA in particular, has seen a gradual change over time. In the 1990s, it was still common to hear scientists object to the implementation of the law on the basis that it restricted scientific inquiry (Landau and Steele 2000; Baker et al. 2001). These voices are relatively rare today, as archaeologists and anthropologists in the United States have made peace with the legal framework of NAGPRA and are starting to see not only the challenges but also the significant gains that have been brought by increasing collaborations (Goldstein and Kintigh 2000; Nash and Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2010; see also contributions in Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008 and Killion 2008). Instead a different kind of critique has emerged among those who argue that while there

are decisively positive outcomes of collaborations, caution must be practiced since there is a risk that claims to culture are essentialist and relying on, and to some extent (re-)producing concepts, such as past–present continuity, that contemporary archaeology has long sought to deconstruct (Roslund 2002; Nilsson Stutz 2007). This critique remains rare in the debate and has more generally been voiced by scholars who tend to view claims to the past by specific groups as more problematic than their North American colleagues (Nilsson Stutz 2007).

The roots to this critique can be found in the European experience, which in many ways is radically different from that of North American archaeology. In Europe, archaeology (in particular prehistoric archaeology) historically was a nationalist rather than colonialist project. Academic archaeology emerged in the nineteenth century as a study of the deep past of the nations and the peoples of Europe, and archaeologists tended create their own roots and their own ancestors (Hagerman 2006). As a stark contrast to archaeology in colonial contexts, archaeology here equalled the ‘indigenous’ with the self and nation rather than with the other, and while the tone sometimes could be patronizing, it was still establishing a link of continuity between the people in the past and the people in the present. This archaeology was integrated into the nationalist agenda at the time and sometimes even co-opted by fascist ideologies, the most notorious example being the exploitation of Germanic and Norse archaeology by the Third Reich (Arnold and Hassmann 1995; Arvidsson 2001; Myhre 2001; Eickhoff 2005; Halle 2005). The deployment of archaeology in nationalist discourses has come under increasing scrutiny by the discipline; the growing field of history of archaeology has critically examined this phenomenon on a worldwide scale (Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990; Dietler 1994, 2006; Kohl and Fawcett 1995; Atkinson and Banks 1996; Diaz-Andreu and Champion 1996; Silberman and Small 1997; Meskell 1998; Abu el-Haj 2001; Halotte and Joffe 2002; Kohl et al. 2007; Greenberg 2009; Boytner et al. 2010). As a consequence of this critical examination, archaeologists in Europe today tend to distance themselves, and the discipline, from all exclusive claims to the past. The past, it is argued, cannot be claimed by any particular group since it belongs to all mankind.

The nationalist use of archaeology is particularly representative of Scandinavia. In Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, which are the three countries examined in more detail here, archaeology has always had a strong connection to the national project. Exclusive claims to this cultural heritage today is mostly voiced from the far right—whether it is the extreme right underground scene that systematically uses Viking Age paraphernalia to express their identity as ‘indigenous’ to Scandinavia, or the right extremist parties that today are represented in all the national parliaments and who have made the preservation of the national cultural heritage a priority (Oestigaard 2001; Jensen 2009, 2011; Gustafsson and Karlsson 2011). Most archaeologists in

Scandinavia today openly resist this deployment of the past in xenophobic discourse, and the notion that any particular groups could claim the material remains of the past because of a perceived connection (real or imagined), has simply become anathema to the critical examination of the discipline and its past. While this image correctly represents the archaeology of the majority population in Scandinavia, we must also recognize that there are minority groups, in particular the Sámi, that identify as indigenous to Scandinavia. In some ways, the Sámi experience with museum collections is more similar to that of Native Americans since their graves were systematically plundered in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the name of science, and the human remains ended up in medical collections (Schanche 2002; Sellevold 2002; Zachrisson 2002, 2004). However, when comparing the two contexts, we must keep in mind that while biological anthropology, as an integral part of the American four fields of anthropology, was closely associated with archaeology, this is not the case for Scandinavia where the two disciplines were separated into different faculties. Archaeology was viewed as part of humanities and biological anthropology fell under medicine and biology. Most collections of human remains were part of medical collections and initially not connected to archaeology or archaeological collections and museums. If anything, archaeology long neglected the Sámi cultural heritage. This kind of omission can of course be viewed as a strategy of oppression and domination as the Sámi cultural heritage was not accorded representation alongside the Southern Scandinavian cultural heritage in the narrative of the making of the nations.

Without going into further detail here, we can summarize the relevance for this brief historical overview by underlining the importance this historical and political context plays in shaping experiences and attitudes to the exhibition of human remains from archaeological contexts. While the display of human remains is viewed as problematic today in many American museums because of the association with colonial politics and a lack of respect for the dead, it is generally perceived as unproblematic in Scandinavian museums where the human remains on display are perceived either as distant relatives of the people that view them, or as interesting scientific specimen.

A TRANSATLANTIC COMPARISON

How do these different perceptions and experiences shape the policies of exhibiting human remains in museums in these different contexts? To explore the topic, I interviewed (by phone and in some cases by email) curators at several large and mid-sized museums in Scandinavia (the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, the National Museum in Copenhagen, the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, and Kulturen in Lund), and in the United States (the

American Museum of Natural History in New York, the National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC, the Peabody Museum at Harvard University in Cambridge, and the Carlos Museum of Emory University in Atlanta). Several of these museums also have ethnographic collections, but while I recognize that there may be significant overlap between categories, this discussion is limited to how the archaeological material is viewed and used. The museums represent a selection and the sample seeks to capture mainly big national institutions, but three important regional museums were included as well. Kulturen in Lund was included since it curates and exhibits a large number of medieval human remains, mostly from the city itself, which creates an interesting proximity between the museum visitor and the remains on display. This sense of proximity is possibly strengthened by the fact that the city markets itself as a medieval city. The Carlos Museum at Emory University was included as a representation of the many art museums in the United States that display Egyptian mummies. The Peabody Museum was included to balance the very large US museums and illustrate how also university museums are working very intentionally with these issues.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. In all cases, the contact was personal and the interviewee answered questions specifically relating to this project. One exception to this approach was my exchange with the National Museum of Copenhagen where my request was answered by a more general response to frequently asked questions. In all cases, the person interviewed was suggested to me by the museum as somebody with specific insight and experiences. These individuals ranged from an archaeologist, to a biological anthropologist or a curator.

The questions asked in the interviews were all relating to policies on human remains (Did they have one? For how long had they had one? What prompted the development of this policy?) and practices (What values underlie the exhibition practices?), as well as experiences that the institution had had in relation to the exhibition of human remains (What reactions did they have from the public? Were there any exhibitions that had caused them to rethink their practices?), and any reflection and reaction on behalf of the institution to the public's response. This study, while limited in scope, brings to the fore some of the differences discussed above and at the same time also adds nuance to the generalizations.

A Scandinavian point of view

All the Scandinavian museums included in the study exhibit human remains. In interviews it became clear that these exhibitions are valued as important by the museums, and that based on the public's reactions, it expects and appreciates them. While the degree of formality involved in stating formal ethical

guidelines vary between the museums included in the study,¹ all interviewees underscored the policy of being 'respectful' in the exhibition of human remains, and all interviews revealed that there is an active reflection in these museums regarding the exhibition of human remains.

It further became clear that what actually constitutes an 'ethical' exhibition of human remains is subjective, and different concerns were highlighted in the different interviews. Concerns could be with maintaining the bodies clothed (where clothes were preserved, as in the case of the National Museum in Copenhagen), or in their coffins. This kind of policy reflects the particular questions emerging relating to the specific material in each museum, but also reveals a more general concern to respect the integrity both of the person and the archaeological deposit. When only skeletons remain of the dead, there is in general less consideration of the integrity of the body. Skeletal remains are often used in exhibitions, both in the form of the entire skeleton exhibited as an individual, or as isolated bones or anatomical segments. When this is done, there is generally a specific purpose to do so.

What transpired as most important to motivate the exhibitions of human remains was the pedagogical content. In other words, human remains should neither be displayed only to seek attention or cause a reaction, nor should the displays be simply decorative or motivated by scenography. The idea, that people want to see human remains because they are spectacular in a horrific or gory way (an opinion that is heard from time to time as a critique of the display of human remains, see Sayer and Sayer this volume), was clearly not supported by the museums who sought to avoid feeding the needs of an overt voyeurism. Nevertheless, exactly *how* the remains were used differed slightly from one museum to the next.

The Swedish History Museum in Stockholm exhibits human remains to achieve a number of different goals in meeting with the public. One such goal is to provide a meeting with an individual from the past. This is emphasized as a common thread throughout the permanent prehistory exhibit *Forntider* (*Prehistories*) where a significant part is created around the imagined lives of eight individuals from different time periods in Swedish prehistory (see also Williams this volume). The exhibited burials are central to the exhibition, as they constitute a departure for many of the stories that are communicated to the visitors. The focus on the individual is also clear in the poster for the exhibition, which shows a cranium in frontal view. The golden shimmer of the image transforms the cranium from its natural state, giving it a hyper-aestheticized, machine-like expression. The choice to use a cranium on the poster, rather than a reconstruction of an individual or a scene of an imagined life history is interesting and could be viewed as contradictory. It clearly speaks to the voyeuristic side of the potential visitor, and could also be viewed as underscoring the scientific content of the exhibition, rather than the storytelling that is the official vehicle for the exhibition. Here the human remains,

rather than the reconstructed pasts or biographies are highlighted and serve as a metonym for archaeological research into past lives. As an example, the reconstruction of 'Disa', the Girl from Birka in the Viking exhibition, clearly aims at communicating a human encounter with the past. The life size reconstruction of 'Disa' is placed in immediate proximity to the exhibition of her reconstructed grave. The impact of the display of a child's grave and the reconstruction of her as a girl have been extremely effective in communicating a connection to a lived experience in the past with one of the large groups of the public, i.e. school classes that come to the museum (Lena Hejll interview). The projection of humanity onto the past is very clear in these cases and the museum seems to prioritize that dimension over the objectivity of the message communicated.

Human remains are also used in the exhibition for other purposes. In some cases isolated human bones are used in pedagogical stations where the visitor learns what information can be obtained through osteological analysis. In another, potentially more problematic exhibition, a cranium from a comparative anatomical collection is used to address the history of the discipline and communicate the darker sides of the science. The skull is inscribed with a note that indicates that despite the fact that it was found in a Bronze Age grave in the southern province of Halland, it was identified as 'possibly Sámi'. Here, curator Lena Hejll explained that the choice of individual was motivated by the fact that the cranium was already used for these purposes, it was inscribed and thus simultaneously an artefact that testifies of this particular cultural practice. It is possible that the archaeological context in which it was found, in Southern Sweden far away from the traditional Sámi region, also played a part in how controversial the specimen would be within the Sámi community. The skull can be seen on the museum's webpage.² The museum is aware of the sensitivity of the case, but according to curator Lena Hejll, this display has not caused any known negative reactions among visitors.

As a contrast to the subjective emphasis in the Swedish museums, the National Museum in Copenhagen takes the approach that while the human remains should be exhibited because it is 'an accepted practice and the public expects it' (Poul Otto Nielsen interview), the display should speak for itself, and an active choice is made to not facilitate the encounter with the past beyond what the remains themselves can tell the visitor. Here the respect for the individual from the past is expressed by not infringing too much on the individual biography. This is likely also a reflection of differences in the recent archaeological traditions between Sweden and Denmark, where the former places a stronger emphasis on interpretation and the latter on empiricism.

If preservation has endowed the National Museum in Copenhagen with extremely well-preserved human remains, the reverse can be said about its counterpart in Oslo, the Museum of Cultural History. Here very few human remains from Norwegian prehistory are on display. The reason is not that

showing them is considered problematic, but rather that there are so few remains to show. The scarcity of well-preserved human remains from prehistoric contexts have even led to a somewhat problematic display of a Viking burial where the human remains are not the ones initially found in the burial, but have been placed there for the museum exhibition (Susan Matland interview). It appears that the use of actual human remains was considered necessary to communicate to the public what a Viking Age grave may have looked like (in contrast to the Sutton Hoo example, discussed in Giles and Williams this volume). The authenticity prioritized is that it is actual human bones in the display, not that it is the bones of the person initially buried in this Viking Age grave. The exhibition was created in the 1980s at a time when this was considered unproblematic. In my communications with Susan Matland, it became clear that while there is awareness today about the ethical dimensions of exhibiting human remains, it is not yet a central question. However, a change in attitude and sensitivity can be seen in the recent changes made in the mummy exhibit (including a display of the lids 'floating' above the coffins, and the use of carefully dimmed lights in conjunction with the remains), and it is possible that this Viking grave will be exhibited in a different way in the future.

Finally, Kulturen in Lund uses human remains in a wide range of different exhibitions. What is especially interesting here is that the exhibited remains are local, medieval, and from Christian burials. The identification factor for the average visitor is therefore likely to be relatively high, not because there is a real genetic link between them and the individuals on display, or that they even remotely identify as practising Catholics, but mainly through the geographical proximity and a more generally perceived sense of 'walking the same streets' of a city that is radically transformed since the Middle Ages yet successfully markets itself as the 1000-year old city. How the human remains are used depends in large part on the purpose of the exhibition.

One exhibition in particular has actually caused some debate on how the human remains are displayed. When entering the first room of the permanent exhibition about Medieval Lund, *Metropolis Daniae* (opened in 1999), the visitor is met by a row of crania lining the upper part of the wall (Fig. 13.1). The purpose is to provide a face-to-face meeting for the visitor with a range of individuals that lived in the medieval city (Roslund 2002), but some, the author included, feel that the display seems to transgress the boundary that separates the pedagogical and the decorative. While the intentions were good, perhaps the communicative message did not fully transfer into the final form of the exhibition. In addition to the individual meeting, isolated bones and anatomical segments are used to tell specific stories about the past through several exhibitions in the museum, for example, as evidence for violence in the context of warfare or legal punishment (Fig. 13.2). Some of the interesting but invisible tensions involved in the exhibition of human remains at Kulturen are given form in the exhibition of a cast of the cranium of Archbishop Jakob



Fig. 13.1 In the *Metropolis* exhibition at Kulturen in Lund, human crania are exhibited along one of the walls. The rationale of this display was to provide an eye-to-eye encounter with a medieval individual. Below the crania, a sign lists a series of names of individuals from Lund corresponding to this time period and known from records. These names do not correspond to the identity of the individuals whose crania are on display

Erlandsen (Figs 13.3 and 13.4). The original cranium was buried in the crypt of the nearby Cathedral and the cast is exhibited to show the impact of a cross-bow shot that was the cause of death of this politically powerful man in 1274. Here we see an interesting tension of where practices of exhibition and reburial have been negotiated. We can wonder why the Archbishop received a reburial while the anonymous many are lined up along the walls. Is it because we know his name, or because of his social or religious status? While the museum has a very reflective attitude to the exhibition of human remains, this discrepancy invites us to ask questions about choices made (Brown, Nordström, and Williams this volume).

A similarly interesting case emerged at Kulturen in 2001 with the temporary exhibition *Underbara Fasansfulla Människa—Vem har rätt att leva?* (*Wonderous Horrendous Human Being—Who has the Right to Live?*). The exhibition problematized the medicalization of human difference and discussed, among other things, racial biology. Human remains, and the history of their study, were central components to the exhibition. While the exhibition



Fig. 13.2 In the *Metropolis* exhibition at Kulturen in Lund, human crania from executed individuals are on display in a part of the exhibition that discusses violence and legal punishment (Photograph by Liv Nilsson Stutz)

contained the remains of many individuals, only the cranium of a Jewish man (later identified by two journalists as a Polish immigrant by the name of Levin Dombrowsky who had committed suicide in 1879, see Orrenius and Fagerström 2005), caused any significant reaction. The cranium was inscribed with the words 'Cranium af Jude', a testimony from a period when it had been part of the anatomical collection of the university. It was exhibited under soft lighting and partially covered by a brown shawl, probably to emphasize both the humanity of this individual and perhaps also his Jewish identity (as a symbolic *tallit*). The exhibition drew the attention of the Jewish congregation in Malmö, which after several years of litigation with the University obtained the remains and reburied them in 2005 (Orrenius 2005). The debates at the time did not really concern the exhibition of the skull (and perhaps it was a case that was difficult to argue since the point of the exhibition was to educate the public on the horrors of racial biology) but the fact that it had been collected in the first place and still was University property (Conny Johansson Hervén interview). However, the case had long-term effects on the internal discussions on how to deal with both human remains and descending communities in the museum and probably also at the University and beyond. And yet, while high profile, the case of Levin Dombrowsky remains an exception in the attitudes to



Fig. 13.3 The display of Archbishop Jakob Erlandsen's tomb is housed the basement of an old house on the museum grounds. A reconstruction of the tomb, initially positioned in front of the altar in a Franciscan friary church, can be seen to the left in this figure. In a separate display case to the right, the reconstruction of the cranium is on display. The original human remains were reburied in the Lund Cathedral (Photograph by Liv Nilsson Stutz)

the exhibition of human remains in Sweden. While it probably had the effect at the time of raising awareness of different sensitivities, it did not significantly affect the practice of exhibiting human remains more generally. It is probably relevant that as a claim from a minority within Swedish society, it was framed as a minority issue, rather than a general ethical problem regarding the curation and exhibition of human remains. Even the local paper *Sydsvenskan*, which sided strongly with the Jewish congregation in this matter, continued to publish images of skeletal remains from the Battle of Lund in 1676 on their webpage to draw attention to archaeological topics (unproblematically, one might add, drawing on the same voyeuristic power in such images). This indicates that there is a clear watershed here in the attitudes to the display of human remains of the majority population. If anything, this particular case was political and about minority rights, rather than more broadly about ethics.

With the exception of the cast of Jakob Erlandsen (mentioned above), none of the Scandinavian museums included in this study use casts in the place of actual human remains. At the National Museum in Copenhagen it is not ruled out, 'but would require a decision since it would transgress the boundaries of



Fig. 13.4 The cast of the cranium of Archbishop Jakob Erlandsen clearly reveals the lethal injury to his head (Photograph by Liv Nilsson Stutz)

the authentic' (Poul Otto Nielsen interview). At the moment, real human remains are used because they are available, the public expects them, and because there is a tradition of displaying human remains (Poul Otto Nielsen interview). At the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, the query about casts is met with some surprise. Lena Hejll answered that it has never come up, since part of the Museum's responsibility is to make their collections available to the public, and the best way to do so is to show them in the exhibitions (Lena Hejll interview). As regards to human remains, this is not a difficult decision since there is very little risk of theft or destruction (something that may not be the case for all items in the collections). This response further clarifies that the museums do not see a fundamental ethical problem in the exhibition of human remains *per se*.

In summary, all the Scandinavian museums included in this study consistently exhibit human remains. Yet the choice to do so is not, as some critics may think, an unreflected position, but rather the result of considerable consideration of the ethics of the practice and a consideration of the responsibility of the museums to both curate and exhibit archaeological remains and communicate in different ways with the public. The differences that can be observed seem to reflect various national traditions within the field of archaeology, and the history of each institution.

The point of view of the USA

For a European archaeologist collaborating with North American colleagues, the contrast in how to deal with human remains is striking. Since the passing of NAGPRA, attitudes have changed dramatically in the United States, not only in museum exhibitions, but also in illustrations in archaeological books and images shown at professional conferences. In many instances, it is considered insensitive or even uneducated to show human remains in any form. While the sensitivities generally have to do with avoiding causing offence among Native Americans, the censorship tends to be a strategy of caution that also encompasses human remains from other contexts. However, just like in the case of Scandinavia, a closer look at the actual situation indicates that beneath this deceptively homogenous surface, there is significant variation that is firmly anchored in cultural traditions and concerns. Overall, the museums included in this study do not exhibit any Native American human remains, but some of them display other human remains. The brief summary below will detail some of the kinds of variations and considerations that can be gleaned from the interviews.

An example of a museum that does not exhibit any human remains at all from archaeological contexts is the Peabody Museum at Harvard. While they have human remains in their collections, they do not have any on display in the museum. The reason is that since the museum has an active and engaged repatriation programme and regularly receives Native American delegations for consultation, they want to show respect and err on the side of caution to not offend anybody. From the museum's point of view, it is more important that people feel comfortable and welcome in the museum than it is to display human remains to the public (Michelle Morgan interview).

The American Museum of Natural History in New York City also has a policy of not exhibiting any human remains from their collections. Still, in specific instances, exceptions to this policy have been made to accommodate the wishes of descendant communities. All displays of human remains, ethnographic and archaeological, were taken down as the debate about NAGPRA was heating up in the 1980s. It was done, as archaeologist David Hurst Thomas remembers it, 'without fanfare' (David Hurst Thomas interview). It is interesting to note that the decision was not restricted to Native American remains but also encompassed materials from other parts of the world. This strict policy even came to conflict with wishes from some descendant communities. For example, Peru wanted the museum to display its mummies, but the museum felt it would not be appropriate.

The only exception made today in the permanent exhibitions is for the Copper Man—a miner who was trapped with his tools in AD 550 +/- 40 years, in a shaft at the mining site Chuquicamata (Chile) and was naturally mummified (for images of the human remains on display, see Fuller 2004).

A discrete out-of-the-way place has deliberately been designated for this display, which remains in place to accommodate wishes expressed by the Chilean state. Temporary exhibitions have sometimes led the museum to loosen its policy. One example was the *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga* exhibition in 2000, where the display of human remains seemed problematic for the museum, but was left in place after a consultation with the consulates of all Scandinavian countries in New York City had assured the museum that this was not only acceptable but desired from their point of view as descendant communities (compare to Gill-Robinson 2004).

This sensitivity that is characteristic of the academic and museum communities as regards to human remains from archaeological contexts does not seem to be universally applicable to the public as a whole. While some stakeholders, and in particular many Native Americans, have a strong point of view on the issue, the American general public seems to find it rather unproblematic to view human remains on display. One eloquent example of this is the huge success of Gunther von Hagens' *Body Worlds* (and versions of it) in the United States.

Another example is the popularity of the display of Egyptian mummies. In fact, Egyptian mummies appear to be an exception to the general caution in displaying human remains from archaeological contexts in the United States. Mummies are often displayed in museums that identify as Art Museums (but also at the Field Museum in Chicago and at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC). In art museums, mummies are on display as an integral part of the coffins, which are the actual focus (being 'art'). The choice to display them is based on an idea of keeping the grave assemblage as intact as possible. It would, in other words, be seen by curators as 'unethical' to remove the mummy from the coffin before displaying it. However, the considerations go further than that. Todd Lamkin, at the Carlos Museum at Emory, explains that the mummies in their exhibitions have been 'closed back up' to preserve their physical integrity (Todd Lamkin interview).

The National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC also exhibits mummies, but, instead of emphasizing the art historical value, it displays them as sources of information to be obtained through scientific inquiry (Figs 13.5 and 13.6). This probably reflects both the history of the museum and its collections when mummies were perceived as scientific curiosities, and the contemporary focus on science by the institution. Based on the experience of museums that exhibit mummies, it seems that they tend to bring visitors through the doors. As an example, at the Carlos Museum, the highest number of visitors ever recorded was generated by the exhibition of the mummy of Ramses I. Another exhibition that was conceived around a mummy from the Old Kingdom placed among the top-five most-visited exhibitions in the history of the museum (Todd Lamkin interview). Perhaps this is what motivated the Field Museum in Chicago to show an exhibition called *Opening the*

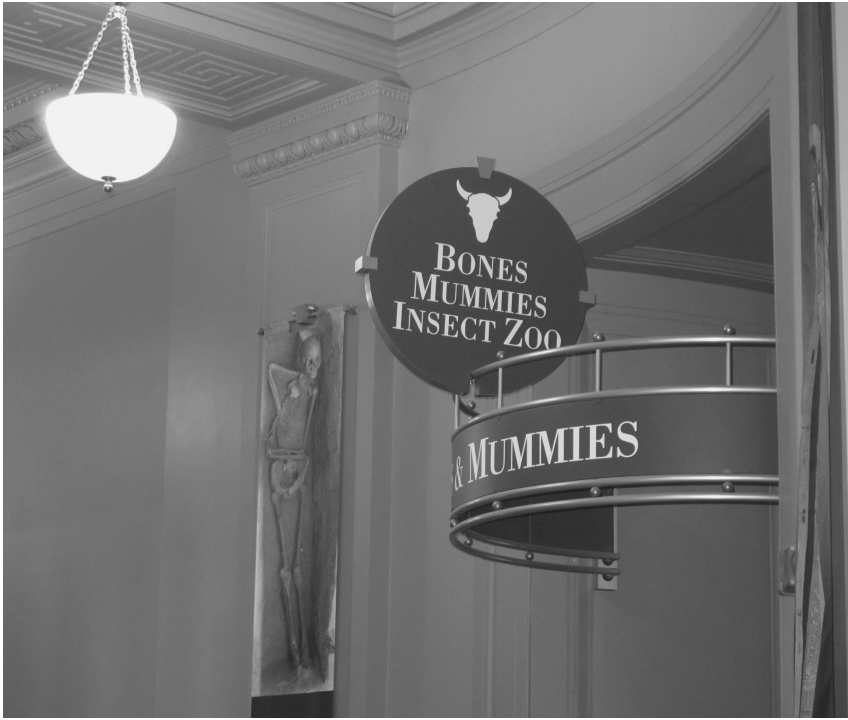


Fig. 13.5 Entrance to the osteology area at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC (Smithsonian). The word ‘Mummies’ is clearly indicated for the visitor, and is placed alongside the words ‘Bones, Insect and Zoo’, placing the mummies within a natural rather than cultural context (Photograph by Liv Nilsson Stutz)

Vaults: Mummies, which showed over twenty mummies from their collections (February–April 2012), with a following exhibition *Images of the Afterlife* focusing specifically on a mummy from their collections containing two individuals and the research conducted on them (June 2012–June 2013). It seems like mummies are not considered in the same category as other human remains. As Todd Lamkin put it: ‘They occupy a different place in people’s minds.’

It is difficult to completely understand this specific and contrasting status in American culture of mummies and other human remains. Perhaps their radical transformation through elaborate past mortuary practices of embalming, in combination with their strong iconicity of the exotic created through a combination of art history, archaeology, and popular culture, removes them from humanity in some sense. It probably also reflects the fact that Egyptology, being a discipline associated with Classics, has not been a part of the critical debates and policies that other branches of American archaeology, most often connected to anthropology, have been so transformed by.



Fig. 13.6 Mummies on display at the National Museum of Natural History, Washington DC (Smithsonian). The display case emphasizes the scientific research carried out on the remains and what we can learn from these studies. In the foreground we see the remains of a mummified child (Photograph by Liv Nilsson Stutz)

Another interesting exception to the hesitation to display human remains from archaeological contexts could be seen in the exhibition called *Written in Bone: Forensic Files of the 17th-Century Chesapeake* at the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian in Washington DC (February 2009 to January 2013).³ The exhibition showcased the osteological material from early Jamestown and was crafted around the concept of the forensic case file, and the kind of information that can be obtained by osteological analyses and what it in turn can reveal about life in the seventeenth century (Fig. 13.7). The exhibition displayed named individuals (Captain Bartholomew Gosnold, 1572–1607), but also told the osteological biographies of the unnamed many, for example, that of a fourteen-year-old boy who was killed by a projectile point, but whose skeletal remains also revealed painful pathologies (Fig. 13.8). The exhibition combined forensic science with the writing of individual and collective histories, and thus constituted an impressive cross-disciplinary learning experience for the visitor. The public received this exhibition very positively, and there have only been a few cases of people



Fig. 13.7 The *Written in Bones* exhibition at the National Museum of Natural History, Washington DC (Smithsonian) clearly communicates a forensic science approach to the remains. In this introductory part of the exhibition, the display cases are built up to resemble lab benches (Photograph by Liv Nilsson Stutz)

voicing their objections (Kari Bruwelheide interview). This makes the experience similar to what we see in Scandinavia. Another significant fact that made this exhibition possible was that it did not include any Native American remains.

The picture gleaned from this limited survey of attitudes and practices in museums in the United States indicates significant variation. But despite this obvious diversity, it is still relevant to point out a few interesting trends. First of all, American museums that are intimately connected to the debate about repatriation appear to be sensitive about exhibiting human remains—the American Museum of Natural History and the Peabody Museum at Harvard being the most striking examples in this overview. In both cases, the policy is driven mainly by internal wishes to accommodate the (changing) attitudes of the public and descending communities. It seems reasonable to conclude that the change in attitudes was driven by the debates surrounding NAGPRA and its implementation in 1990. The fact that archaeologists and anthropologists, who have been engaged in these debates for more than two decades, seem more sensitive to these matters than almost any other museum specialists (compare to art museums, medical museums, etc.) only underscores this



Fig 13.8 The *Written in Bones* exhibition at the National Museum of Natural History Washington DC (Smithsonian) displays the archaeological material through the representation of forensic case files. The signage uses vocabulary such as ‘evidence on the scene’, ‘eye witness accounts’, ‘evidence on the body’, and ‘circumstantial evidence’. In this room we see the individual human remains displayed at the centre of the room with the interpretation on a large sign at the back of the room. A facial reconstruction can be seen in a small case to the right of the sign (Photograph by Liv Nilsson Stutz)

point. In fact, as relatives of individuals who died at the World Trade Centre (WTC) attacks on 9/11 started to press charges against the WTC Memorial Museum to have the remains of their loved ones released for burial, they turned to two archaeologists, David Hurst Thomas and Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh, to help them build their case.⁴

It is also interesting to note that when the focus of an exhibition is not (only) archaeological, the display of human remains seems less problematic. The exhibition of Egyptian mummies in art museums is a case in point. In fact, this framing of the Egyptian mummy seems to even transform it into an entity that can also be exhibited at museums that usually pay significant attention to the needs of descendant communities,⁵ like the Field Museum or the National Museum of Natural History. Other interesting loci for negotiation are the exhibitions that mix the archaeological with the medical, like *Written in Bone*. Here the treatment of the individuals on display is both archaeological and forensic. It is possible that this changes the perceptions in the minds of both

the public and the museums. As the body on display becomes part of medical science, a different set of ethical guidelines appear to be put in motion, absolving the exhibition from the otherwise omnipresent problematization of the practice.

THE MIRROR AND THE PANOPTICON—THE POLITICS OF HUMAN REMAINS

How can we understand these differences in terms of cultural practice and political process? It seems clear that in both contexts, the archaeological museums are moving away from traditional technologies of categorization and display and toward a reflexive approach that considers the humanity in the remains and actively make efforts to both respect it and draw on it for communication and pedagogy purposes. The directions taken are clear reflections of the different political landscapes these museums are a part of.

The objection to the exhibition of human remains from archaeological contexts that dominates the museum landscape in the United States can be framed by several different perspectives that all lead to the decision to refrain from it. First, it is viewed as a display of power that actively denies the individual on display a proper burial according to the wishes of his or her descendants. Second, the display can be seen as a technology of oppression, which reproduces the unequal power relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, and where the gaze by the visitor through the glass establishes a power relationship in which the human being on display—and its descendants that it comes to represent—is subordinate to the viewer (e.g. Foucault 1979). By choosing to not exhibit human remains, American museums clearly communicate a new role for themselves as non-offensive meeting places. When exhibitions of human remains are carried out in the USA they are often in art museums that have not been as intimately involved in the NAGPRA debates as the archaeological museums (and more rarely hold Native American collections of importance), or the exhibitions are connected to the natural sciences and the medical realm that still hold a position of uncontested status and where the connection to the human body perhaps also seems more acceptable.

For the exhibition of human remains in museums in Scandinavia, the situation can be seen as almost the opposite, and the practice is embraced and defended by every museum approached in this study (with the exception of the exhibition of Sámi remains which, in recent years, have become increasingly contested in Sweden, Norway, and Finland). Since the archaeologists, the curators and the public all have been socialized into viewing the

remains on display as their own ancestors or more generally as ancestors of a shared humanity, the gaze they project onto the remains is affectionate and characterized more by fantasy and desire, and perhaps even identification, closer to the mirror stage described by Lacan (2002) than Foucault's panopticism that is characteristic for the understanding of the display of human remains in the USA. In Scandinavia, the exhibition of human remains from archaeological contexts remains relatively unproblematic due to both deep-seated expectations of, and perhaps the cultural elite status of, the museum, and a faith in the authority of academia and science to provide the stories of a mythical past that today are deliberately opened up to be democratic and inclusive.

If we turn, then, to decode how these dominating attitudes are negotiated and what exceptions occur in each context we get further insights. The exceptions in the USA are either products of negotiations and active engagement with the wishes of stakeholders (as in the case of the exhibition of human remains at the American Museum of Natural History), framed as part of a communication which both underlined the medical and biological component of the writing of history (*Written in Bone*), or concerned special kinds of human remains (specifically mummies). An interesting twist which highlights the comparison is that when Gunther Hagens' *Body Worlds*, which was so popular in the USA, was shown for the first time in Sweden in 2012 at Tom Tits Experiment (a science museum directed toward children), the contemporary media coverage was filled with articles questioning the ethics of the project under titles such as *Exhibition of Corpses to Sweden* (Langseth 2012; see also Svanell 2012). While the medical realm seems to provide sanction in the USA, the opposite appears to be the case in Sweden where the exhibition of human remains from archaeological contexts is mainstream, but where *Body Worlds* is questioned. In Scandinavia, negotiations to remove human remains from archaeological exhibitions are rare, but the reburials of human remains from Kulturen—whether part of their collections (Archbishop Jacob Erlandsen), or only associated with them by a loan for an exhibition (Levin Dombrowsky)—indicate that while the topic on the surface appears to be unproblematic, complications may run deeper in the national psyche.

While this study is only preliminary it indicates that the exhibition of human remains in museums is an interesting example of cultural practice and political process that is deeply seated in the cultural concerns. Both contexts show examples of interesting negotiations and exceptions, and ultimately also a set of circumstances that are taken for granted since they are recognized and reproduced by a dominating discourse. These structures are constantly in flux, and perhaps more so now than they have been in the past. For that reason, the choices made in one context are not necessarily relevant or transferrable to the other.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to warmly thank everybody who agreed to talk to me about these sometimes highly contested topics. Marie-Louise Franzén and Lena Hejll at Statens Historiska Museum in Stockholm, Poul Otto Nielsen at Nationalmuseum in Copenhagen, Susan Matland at Kulturhistorisk Museum in Oslo, Conny Johansson Hervén at Kulturen in Lund, David Hurst Thomas at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Michelle Morgan at the Peabody Museum in Cambridge, MA, Todd Lamkin at the Carlos Museum in Atlanta, and Kari Bruwelheide at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC. I also want to thank Mats Roslund and Fredrik Svanberg for helping me initiate some of the contacts, and the Swedish Research Council (VR) for funding a research programme on repatriation that has led me to these questions. Thank you also to Melanie Giles and Howard Williams for including me in this volume, commenting on the content, and patiently allowing me to carry this project to term. Finally, I want to thank the anonymous reviewer who contributed with thoughtful and interesting comments. All opinions expressed in this chapter are my own.

ENDNOTES

1. The Swedish History Museum in Stockholm has a formal document that outlines the principles in detail. The Culture History Museum in Oslo is currently developing such a document, which previously has been missing. Kulturen in Lund does not have a museum specific policy but states clearly that they follow the guidelines formulated by ICOM. At the National Museum in Copenhagen, ICOMs guidelines are followed for the ethnographic collections, but there is no formal document outlining guidelines for the archaeological exhibitions.
2. <http://www.historiska.se/template/RelatedImagePopup.aspx?parent=18404&image=22129>
3. More information on the exhibit can be found at <http://anthropology.si.edu/writteninbone>.
4. For more information, please see <http://www.respecthumanremainsatthe911memorial.com>.
5. Of course there is nothing that indicates that the exhibition of mummies should be problematic for contemporary Egyptians, but this is still an interesting contrast when compared to the caution to exhibit human remains from Scandinavia or South America at AMNH described above.

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