



McGregor Museum Kimberley

Archaeology Department: Archaeology Collections

Physical Anthropology

Museums and universities around the world often keep human remains from archaeological sites – and face issues concerning their respectful treatment in relation to changing attitudes.

But there are sometimes remains with a rather different history, obtained – often in the name of science – by the robbing of graves of recently dead individuals. Trafficking in so-called Bushman “relics” has emerged as part of the colonial legacy of museums in South Africa and Europe.

As archaeologists and museologists at the McGregor Museum we condemn these practices unconditionally.

Some of the atrocities are revealed in the paper by Martin Legassick and Ciraj Rassool, which the South African Museum (Cape Town) and the McGregor Museum (Kimberley) have now jointly published. This important work will help museums to redress the wrongs of the past.

Reverence for the dead, past and present, makes human remains the most sensitive of materials that archaeologists are likely to uncover. Skeletons and grave goods are today treated with the utmost dignity and, where possible, living descendants are brought into negotiated partnerships in the management of sensitive material. Graves are not disturbed unless for very good reason

Late 1980s	The treatment of sensitive collections began to be debated in museums, and displays with human remains were removed in the years that followed.
Mid 1990s	Codes of ethics in the archaeological and museum professions were revised with respect to the handling of burials and human remains.
1996	The Museums Association Conference in Kimberley adopted a resolution calling for the return of the remains of Saartje Baartman, and for a workshop (also held in 1996) to address the issues around human remains in museums. Funding was not forthcoming to implement all the recommendations.
1999	The McGregor Museum's "Ancestors" display acknowledged past atrocities.
2000	Publication of "Skeletons in The Cupboard" by the South African Museum (Cape Town) and McGregor Museum (Kimberley).
2001	Workshop on "Human Remains in the Museum's Collection".



From the revelations in Legassick and Rassool's publication, it appears possible that up to 30 skeletons in the McGregor Museum collection may have been obtained by unethical means. We need to identify which these are, and to deal appropriately with the remains that were subject to atrocities.

It is hoped that:

- Discussions will lead to negotiate processes to deal with these issues.
- We may obtain resources for addressing the issues, and for upgrading the documentation and storage of skeletons of bona fide archaeological context. A place for dignified safekeeping needs to be set aside or built, with negotiated access policies and controls.
- The launch of the book and the workshop that follows will be a way of taking this process forward.

For archaeologists and communities interested in their history, human remains of the distant past, objects found in graves, and burial patterns can provide valuable information not otherwise available. They can yield evidence about individuals and the societies in which they lived. They reflect beliefs, customs, social identity, subsistence, health – and even crime.

<p><i>Skeletons and 'race'</i> It was once believed that 'race' classification was possible from a few skull measurements. But fixed racial types do not exist. Broad characteristics may be shared within a population, but individuals vary and communities never exist in total isolation from others. Racism is a form of prejudice and intolerance that has no biological basis.</p>	<p><i>A young person died about AD 1560</i> Remains of a burial were carefully salvaged near Kimberley in the early 1990s. More than half the grave was washed away in a donga. A permit was obtained to save the rest of it from destruction. The few remaining bones showed it was a child, about 12 years old. A calibrated radiocarbon date showed the child died in about AD 1560. The type of burial suggested the child was perhaps a member of a Khoisan community, but two metal earrings showed interaction with a metal-producing group, possibly Tswana. More than 3100 ostrich eggshell beads showed that the individual was buried with a simple necklace, and an ornamented apron. Grave goods do not always reflect gender, so we cannot say if the child was male or female. Nor can we be certain of its ethnic identity. But the grave provides important clues on social interaction between different communities more than 400 years ago.</p>	<p><i>Tracing life histories</i> New study techniques yield new evidence. Isotopic research in the 1980s–90s detected diet in skeletons from Cape sites. At first, diet averaged over a lifetime was shown. By refining the technique it was possible to trace change in diet, evidence of a person's life history. This helped identify a slave, removed from a life in the tropics to one of servitude at the Cape. There is no knowing what new techniques will arise in the future.</p>
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"Scientific needs will have to accommodate personal feelings and religious beliefs concerning the handling of human remains"
– M. Steyn et al., Thulamela, 1998

Museums and archaeologists, on the one hand, and communities, on the other, can establish common ground with regard to sensitive materials. Mutual interests in preserving and protecting the evidence of the past, and in re-writing our histories, can be recognised. Museums and communities can form partnerships for keeping human remains safely and with dignity.

Recent projects to salvage human remains accidentally disturbed during development work are described here: [Gladstone Cemetery Consultative Forum](#)

Suggested Reading

- Legassick, M. & Rassool, C. 2000. *Skeletons in the cupboard: South African museums and the trade in human remains, 1907–1917*. Cape Town & Kimberley: S.A. Museum and McGregor Museum.
- Morris, A. 1992. *The skeletons of contact: a study of protohistoric burials from the lower Orange River Valley, South Africa*. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Press.