

University of St Andrews

Centre for Archaeology, Technology, and History

Ethics and Standards for Handling, Storing, and Analysing Human Remains in the Care of the St Andrews Centre for Archaeology, Technology, and History

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The generation of knowledge using archaeological data is central to our understanding of the human past. The Centre for Archaeology, Technology, and History at the University of St Andrews holds a number of collections of archaeological human skeletal remains. These are retained for the purposes of research into the history of medieval people conducted by staff, postgraduate students, and occasionally undergraduate students. One of the purposes of the St Andrews Centre for Archaeology, Technology and History's lab is education, and particularly teaching students at all levels the value of studying human remains in conjunction with the study of history. Working with human remains is a privilege, as we are handling the skeletons of once living human beings. The handling of human remains thus warrants ethical considerations beyond those for other classes of archaeological materials.

Given the importance of human remains as a source of information about the historical past, we work toward the long-term conservation of the osteoarchaeological record. We are committed to public education and engagement, and we actively promote understanding of the value of the scientific study of premodern human remains. At the core of our lab ethos is our commitment to treating the human remains in our care with respect and dignity. We explicitly prohibit the sharing of images of human remains on any personal social media platforms. We handle no remains from individuals from the modern period, and we therefore never house or handle remains under 100 years old.

We are carefully following the contemporary debate regarding the display of human remains, and we are committed to following agreed best practices as they emerge in this area.

Our procedures and practices comply with the highest established standards. As this is a rapidly evolving field, we will strive to keep to the most up-to-date best practices on Codes of Conduct and Practice.

We adhere to the codes of [ethics and standards advocated by the British Association of Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology](#) (updated 2019):

In Scotland, the most recent [Operational Policy from Historic Environment Scotland is from 1 November 2016](#)

We also endorse the Policy on the Excavation, Conservation, the Display and Storage of Human Remains adopted by the signatories to the [Vermillion Accord on Human Remains](#), adopted in 1989 at the WAC Inter-Congress in South Dakota USA:

1. Respect for the mortal remains of the dead shall be accorded to all, irrespective of origin, race, religion, nationality, custom and tradition.

2. Respect for the wishes of the dead concerning disposition shall be accorded whenever possible, reasonable and lawful, when they are known or can be reasonably inferred.
3. Respect for the wishes of the local community and of relatives or guardians of the dead shall be accorded whenever possible, reasonable and lawful.
4. Respect for the scientific research value of skeletal, mummified and other human remains (including fossil hominids) shall be accorded when such value is demonstrated to exist.
5. Agreement on the disposition of fossil, skeletal, mummified and other remains shall be reached by negotiation on the basis of mutual respect for the legitimate concerns of communities for the proper disposition of their ancestors, as well as the legitimate concerns of science and education.
6. The express recognition that the concerns of various ethnic groups, as well as those of science are legitimate and to be respected, will permit acceptable agreements to be reached and honoured.

In adhering to the above principles we will ensure that:

1. human remains are kept in suitably safe and secure premises with access provided only as and when authorised.
2. rooms where human remains are stored or examined will be kept locked at all times.
3. human remains are stored in clean and dry conditions, protected from the elements and extremes of climate and seasonal changes.
4. the transportation of human remains between storage rooms and laboratories will occur only where essential.
5. human remains will only be examined in designated laboratories.
6. human remains are housed in suitable, clearly-labelled containers.
7. the risk of dissociation of human remains is minimised.
8. human remains are handled, studied or viewed for bona fide research or educational purposes only.
9. prior to the handling of remains, students will be reminded of ethical obligations and provided with written guidelines on the handling and treatment of human remains.
10. destructive tests or analysis will be considered in the light of the type and amount of information they can provide and samples taken will be the minimum required.
11. health and safety precautions will be followed and lab coats, protective gloves and masks will be provided.

Storage of Human Remains

The conditions of storage of materials, issues of access to collections, procedures for teaching, the undertaking and supervision of research, the treatment of samples submitted for analytical procedures, disposal of materials (where necessary) and publication of results should comply with best practices as codified in the UK, even outside the UK, unless those of the other country in which the work is being undertaken are of a higher standard than that practiced here in which case they should be matched.

Human material should be kept in a locked store to which access is restricted to those who need to see, examine or otherwise treat it. Environmental conditions must be appropriate.

Where the University of St Andrews is acting as the final place of deposition of human skeletal material, records should be compiled indicating the source of the material, the agreement by which deposition has been agreed, the extent of the collection and where it is stored to enable retrieval. Because of the costs of storing this material permanently, efforts should be made to get depositors to meet the costs of long-term storage. All usage of the collection, other than for supervised teaching purposes, should be logged. It is acknowledged that teaching collections will suffer attrition.

Best practices as defined by Museums Galleries Scotland should be followed.

Where human skeletal material has been deposited temporarily for study and / or report production, it should be treated as far as possible according to the conditions specified therein.

Health and Safety

Everybody working with bone from the earth should have up-to-date tetanus inoculation cover. White lab coats should always be worn when handling human remains and should be removed before leaving the lab. Non-latex gloves and face masks should be available for use when required.

It is unlikely that human remains carry a risk of infection because pathogens are unlikely to survive more than a few months after death, however, BABAO advise that “individuals working with human remains should be aware of the circumstances under which they may be encountered” (BABAO Code of Practice 2010).