

Title to come

Several years ago when I lived in Bonn, I lived just down the road from the Rheinisches Landesmuseum, which holds the original Neanderthal remains discovered in 1856. My regular visits to view these remains were always very moving and meaningful; gazing at them, I was establishing a connection to someone who had lived over 30,000 years earlier and whom I longed to understand. Without these fascinating remains our understanding of our past and what it means to be human would be greatly reduced.

However in most situations where the retention or reburial of human remains is hotly contested, the remains were collected in countries during colonial times, and it is questionable whether or not it is appropriate in these cases to retain them. Factors other than science are of much greater importance in certain cases of human remains. It is not enough to treat human remains with respect – our priority must be to act with respect toward people living today.

Scientists contesting the return of remains are undeniably doing their jobs, but in doing so are often taking a very narrow view of the world. In many cases the claimants of these remains are peoples who have experienced highly traumatic events in recent history, often genocide, and it is these very events that have created the opportunity for the remains to be collected. These communities still live with the results and emotional scars of those events. Allowing them the basic right to control the fate of their own dead is a first step required in order to restore their dignity and rebuild relations with them. It is a sad commentary on our field that government intervention is sometimes required to force the return of remains in the interest of justice and good relations.

Few indigenous peoples around the world possess sufficient economic or political power to organise the return of remains by themselves, and are instead required to go through a difficult and humiliating process of raising support

through the press and petitioning their governments. Public support for reburial tends to be related to the closeness of the public and the claimants. For example, New Zealand is an increasingly bicultural country, and thus New Zealanders are more in tune with Maori culture and concerns. A recent survey I conducted there showed that they are significantly in favour of reburial, and only 11% believed that remains should be kept until archaeologists no longer wanted them – as opposed to 71% in the

In the long term, we stand to gain far more from strong relations with the indigenous peoples we claim to interpret and represent in our collections and articles than we do from remains alone.

UK. Once again, few other indigenous peoples in places as diverse as Australia, North America, India or Scandinavia are so fortunate. Instead they require goodwill and understanding on our part. Groups such as HAD have also not yet reached this level of influence in the UK, but they are becoming more organised with time and may do so in future.

When it comes to the legitimacy of claimants, it can be easy to lose perspective about what the cases often mean to them. It is also important to recognise that the vast majority of contested remains collected over the last 2-300 years are not of great research value. The people whose bones these are were not any different to their living ancestors today. Many of the collectors at



the time believed that they were either collecting examples of dying races, or that they could prove contemporary theories of racial hierarchies; both assumptions are now known to be false. Thus, the perceived value of the remains is no longer as high, and yet they languish in collections and labs, victims of international policy.

The minority of contested remains in collections which come from much earlier times (and are not so easily traceable to living communities) should not be allowed to cloud this issue and make it seem more contentious than it actually is. It is likely that were the more recent remains returned, indigenous communities would be much more open to the study of the older remains, and would engage significantly more with archaeologists and museums. But they need to be accorded sufficient respect first.

In the long term, we stand to gain far more from strong relations with the indigenous peoples we claim to interpret and represent in our collections and articles than we do from remains alone. By integrating ethnographic information with artefact collections, museums can gain context and depth and maintain their relevance to the world today by including references to the modern descendants of those who produced them. Reburial is much more than this for indigenous peoples – it is a crucial step towards healing and rebuilding the vitality of their communities, something that surely makes this a much richer world for all of us.

Brian Hole is a PhD research student at the University College London Institute of Archaeology.