**Dr Estelle Lazer (2021), Ethics with respect to the study and display of Human Remains in Pompeii and Herculaneum**

No study should be commenced on archaeological human remains without a consideration of the ethical issues associated with research and display of the material that has been unearthed. Ethics is often described as the science of morals or the systematisation of moral principles. Moral principles are concerned with what is considered right and wrong. Ethical issues are extremely dynamic as perceptions of moral behaviour vary between cultures and sometimes individuals within cultures and can change over time. As a result of this, there are no correct answers with respect to whether it is appropriate to study and display human remains from archaeological contexts. Each case must be considered within its cultural context. It is important to be aware that attitudes can change quite quickly and that what it may be necessary to modify projects and displays with little notice.

Archaeologists have been forced to consider the sensibilities of Indigenous people in countries like North America, Australia and Scandinavia as a result of a history of collection and study of bones without consent, often for nefarious purposes, to maintain the *status quo* of “racial” inequality. From the second half of the twentieth century, Indigenous people in North America and Australia began to lobby for the return of the remains of individuals that they identified as ancestors. Laws have now been enacted to facilitate this process, such as the USA Public Law 101-601, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, that was approved by President Bush in 1990. Australia does not have an overarching law to protect Indigenous remains but there are laws for each state. There are no laws with respect to non-Indigenous ancestral remains, but guidelines have been developed by several states. Further, codes of ethics have been devised to ensure that research is appropriately carried out with the consent of stakeholders. It is important to understand that these codes of ethics are not legally binding. Codes of ethics for professional archaeologists cover issues like, identifying and consulting stakeholders before work commences, making sure that work is completed that the results are published in good time and are made accessible both to the academic and general public. Stakeholders are individuals who claim genetic or cultural affiliations with human remains. It is important to be aware that in some cases, such as with ancient human ancestral remains or individuals from world heritage sites, all of humanity can claim to be stakeholders.

There has been a flow-on effect as a result of the need to address the concerns of traditional communities. It is possible to discern increasing interest in the treatment of the remains of humans in a more sensitive manner, from cultures that have not previously been concerned about the study and display of their ancestors, including those from a modern western context. One form in which this has been manifested, is the development of a series of guidelines for dealing with European remains and cemetery excavations. Australia has been a leader in this field. In 2005, English Heritage and the Church of England produced guidelines for the excavation, study and reburial of Christian remains from archaeological contexts. This is in turn has led to a reassessment of the treatment of archaeological human remains in Italy and Pompeii in particular.

There was a long tradition of displaying human anatomical images in Europe, often in an extremely theatrical manner. The major work of the sixteenth century anatomist, Andreas Vesalius of Brussels*, De Humani Corpus Fabrica*, includes detailed woodcuts of humans divesting themselves of layers of their anatomy, often within the setting of a romantic landscape. The exhibitions of plastinated bodies devised by Gunther von Hagens, while considered highly offensive by some people, clearly operate within this tradition. It is reasonable to interpret some of the public outrage about Von Hagen’s exhibitions of posed humans as a reflection of a shift in attitude.

Until 2019, there was little consideration of changing global attitudes in Italy, as there was a tradition dating back to medieval times of public exhibition of human remains for religious purposes. Natural mummification of deceased individuals who had been placed in crypts, for example, was considered to be the result of divine intervention, as a failure to putrefy was seen as suspension of the laws of nature, and such bodies were usually displayed. Similarly, monks and laic supporters of the Capuchin monastery at Palermo, who were either naturally or artificially mummified between the 16th and turn of the 20th centuries, are on view in subterranean chambers of the building. Sometimes bodies have been exhibited to emphasise views about the Resurrection and the separation of body and soul, like the disarticulated remains of approximately 4000 Capuchin brothers and other individuals who died between 1528 and 1870. These bones have been used to form elaborate patterns, such as a clock made from vertebrae and other skeletal elements, that decorate the crypt of Santa Maria della Concezione in Rome.

There had been no controversy about the ethical considerations associated with the study of human remains in either Pompeii or Herculaneum and while it was known that skeletal elements had been souvenired from Pompeii, there had been no call for their repatriation.

Human skeletal remains in Herculaneum were on display until the final excavations were completed at the beachfront in 2010. Some of the more recent finds were cast in latex prior to their removal for analysis, which allowed skeletons to be observed as they were found in their original locations. This was probably more the result of pragmatic considerations, rather than the desire to deal with sensibilities about seeing real skeletons *in situ*. Ongoing problems with groundwater provided an imperative for the removal of bones, particularly those on the ancient beachfront.

Discussion with members of the Herculaneum Conservation Project revealed that the local community identify as stakeholders and maintain a continued interest in being able to view the remains of the victims, preferably *in situ*. They expressed disappointment when told that the human remains could no longer be viewed on site. There had been suggestions from foreign tourists, mostly North Americans and Australians, that the human remains should not be displayed as they might upset visitors to the site.

It is perhaps rather chauvinistic for people from other cultures to extrapolate their values onto site management. Ultimately, the decisions that are made are the responsibility of the stakeholders, though it could be argued that these sites are of world significance and that we could all be described as stakeholders.

A conference was held in Pompeii in 2019, which for the first time considered whether it was ethical to display the victims of the AD 79 eruption. It was instigated by Dr Valeria Amoretti, physical anthropologist, who now heads the Applied Research Laboratory at Pompeii. Many issues remained unresolved at the end of the conference, but it marked a significant shift in how human remains will be treated at Pompeii in the future. There does not appear to be any problem with continuing excavation and analysis of the human victims. It is unlikely that human remains will be entirely removed from display, though there are plans to present them more respectfully and not treated like random objects as has been the case for the casts that can be seen amongst piles of amphorae, grindstones and structural elements in the granary in the Forum.

## References

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## Activity

1. What are some of the issues covered by ethical codes for professional archaeologists?
2. There is a long tradition of displaying human anatomical images and remains in Europe. Make a table that identifies some examples, including the purpose of display.
3. Why were human skeletal remains removed from the beachfront?
4. Stakeholders expressed disappointment when told human remains could no longer be viewed at Herculaneum. Simultaneously, there had been suggestions from foreign tourists, mostly North Americans and Australians, that the human remains should not be displayed as they might upset visitors to the site. Describe the ethical issues at play here.
5. Why was the 2019 conference important?