

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH
SCHOOL OF HISTORY, CLASSICS AND ARCHAEOLOGY
Archaeology ethics and standards

ETHICS AND STANDARDS IN THE HANDLING, STORING AND ANALYSIS OF HUMAN AND ANIMAL REMAINS IN THE CARE OF ARCHAEOLOGY, SCHOOL OF HISTORY CLASSICS AND ARCHAEOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH.

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This document should be read in conjunction with the School of History Classics and Archaeology's instructions on 'Research Ethics and Procedures' accessed here:
<http://www.ed.ac.uk/history-classics-archaeology/research/ethics-procedures>

The generation of knowledge about past human lifeways using archaeological data is a worthy goal. Human remains are our most direct source of evidence in this respect. Their study is therefore central to our understanding of the human past.

The Archaeology subject area at the University of Edinburgh holds a number of collections of archaeological human skeletal remains. These are retained for the teaching of human osteology, zooarchaeology, and forensic anthropology students at undergraduate and graduate level, and for scientific investigation by researchers. We consider that, while teaching undergraduate and postgraduate archaeology and forensic anthropology students about the value of studying human remains is an essential part of their education, it should always be remembered that utilising human remains for teaching or research purposes is a privilege. By virtue of their status as the remains of once living people, treatment of human remains requires ethical considerations over and above those that pertain to other classes of archaeological materials.

Given the importance of human remains as a source of information about our past, osteoarchaeologists should work toward the long-term conservation of the osteoarchaeological record. Osteoarchaeologists should be committed to public education and promote the value of the scientific study of ancient human remains. It is the policy of the Archaeology subject area that the human remains in our care are treated with respect and dignity.

Depending on the nature of the research and teaching work, its procedures and practices should comply with the best appropriate standards. It is acknowledged that this is a rapidly-evolving field and thus researchers should ensure that they have the most up-to-date documentation on Codes of Conduct and Practice at the time of embarking on their projects.

We adhere to the following code of ethics and standards advocated by the British Association of Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology and the World Archaeological Congress:

<http://www.babao.org.uk/index/ethics-and-standards>

http://www.worldarchaeologicalcongress.org/site/about_ethi.php#.codes

In Scotland, the fullest statement is Historic Scotland's revised Operational Policy Paper 5 (2006):

<http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/human-remains.pdf>

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 1989:

www.worldarchaeologicalcongress.org/site/about_ethi.php#.code2

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.

For Forensic Anthropology projects, attention should be paid to Codes of Conduct and Practice of the Forensic Science Regulator in the Home Office:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/forensic-science-providers-codes-of-practice-and-conduct-2016>

Also of importance are the *Standards and guidance for forensic archaeologists* of the Institute for Archaeologists:

http://www.archaeologists.net/sites/default/files/CIfAS&GForensics_2.pdf

For remains less than 100 years old, The Human Tissue (Scotland) Act 2006 applies and work on such remains required a license:

http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2006/4/pdfs/asp_20060004_en.pdf

Storage of human and animal 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 SHCA 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.

<http://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/publications/publication/378/guidelines-for-the-care-of-human-remains-in-scottish-museum-collections>

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 above.

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).