

# MORTAL REMAINS, GUILT AND THE LOSS OF THE PAST



Press release from the Ministry of Culture in the UK

UK National Museums Get New Powers To Return Human Remains

Nine national UK museums, including the British Museum and the Natural History Museum, have this week acquired powers to move human remains out of their collections as the Government brought section 47 of the Human Tissue Act 2004 into force.

The nine national museums listed in section 47 now have

the power to move out of their collections human remains which are reasonably believed to be under 1,000 years in age. This means that these national museums can respond to claims for the return of human remains by indigenous communities.

Culture Minister David Lammy said:

“This announcement is the right response to the claims of indigenous peoples, particularly in Australia, for the return of ancestral remains. It fulfils the terms of the joint declaration made by Tony Blair and John Howard.

“We have established a fair and equitable framework for the holding of human remains in UK museums, and for museums to consider claims for their repatriation. I hope that this will lead to renewed and mutually beneficial relations between our major institutions and claimant groups.”

The guidelines are sound on ethics and the responsibility owed to human remains.

The 1000 year guideline for when repatriation is supposed to become an issue got me thinking.



Saxon (?) – before the Normans arrived, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 11th century

Back at the beginning of my career in 1980 I was an archaeological fieldworker in the NE of England. Our work at the Castle, Newcastle-upon-Tyne revealed for the first time the remains of the Roman fort and a pre-Norman community. I dug, drew and photographed scores of Christian graves. It was a much-used cemetery and many interments had been cut through by later. This was one skull that had lost the rest of its body. The policy was to focus on complete burials, and many fragmentary remains were discarded. I hung on to the remains of the skull and pieced them back together.

The community had been completely lost to history. Though we are very aware of the early medieval north of England, the building of the Norman castle in the wake of conquest had obliterated the earlier community and its church, buried under six feet of clay laid down as foundation.

I have been fascinated by this material trace of someone who was lost to history and has returned to look at us again. I felt I had rescued something, someone who had been lost.

But is it that simple?

In the last twenty years we have become much more sensitive to the associations and connections of human remains and I feel distinctly awkward about having this skull as part of a small teaching collection.

“Part of a collection”, to be taken as a memento of the loss at the heart of history, as a prompt to think of that community wiped away by history; its scientific value as an access to ancient demography, disease, whatever, is minimal. Should I be feeling so guilty about these uses of someone’s mortal remains?

And that it is 1000 years old seems irrelevant.