

The skeletons of colonialism may get a decent burial at last

Body parts trundled back from all corners of the globe and displayed like mere ornaments are among the exhibits most popular with visitors to British collections. **James Morrison** reports on moves to give other cultures' ancestors a more dignified end

10 November 2002

To the Victorians, they were invaluable specimens crucial to the study of human evolution. Today, they are viewed by many as little more than grisly reminders of the worst excesses of colonialism. But sweeping changes to the policies governing museum collections may pave the way for the mass repatriation of human remains to their countries of origin. The sea change in thinking represents a victory for tribal leaders and foreign governments who have campaigned for decades for the return of a vast array of body parts held in British museums and in university research departments.

Although the government report on museums will not be delivered until shortly before Christmas, The Independent on Sunday has learnt that its core recommendation will be the relaxation of archaic laws preventing institutions from parting with bones. It will also suggest that the new register of organ donations set up by the Department of Health in the aftermath of the Alder Hey Hospital scandal be extended to cover collections of human remains in museums.

The working group is understood to have devised this radical idea after being shocked by the sheer amount of anatomical material held in vaults around the UK. Having analysed the collections of a random sample of 150 museums, both local and national, they discovered that at least two-thirds had stores containing human remains. To prevent protracted disputes over the rightful ownership of body parts in the wake of any changes, the report will recommend that an independent panel is set up to arbitrate between museums and claimants.

The long-awaited report is the work of a group of 11 leading academics and curators. Its members include Caroline Forder, professor of European Family Law at Maastricht University, and Dr Neil Chalmers, director of the Natural History Museum, home of Britain's largest human bone collection. A source close to the inquiry said: "The broad thrust of the report will be sympathetic to giving back human remains where there are felt to be strong claims.

"It will recognise that there is a feeling that science doesn't necessarily have the primary claim. There are two sets of values here: the scientific ones and the desires of the individual communities concerned. The overall tone of the report will be pro repatriation. "The change in the law will give permission to national museums to give items back, but there won't be any compulsion ... but there might be a sense of some moral compulsion."

News of the putative proposals has been welcomed by those calling for the repatriation of human remains belonging to indigenous communities. Rodney Dillon, Tasmanian representative on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, is campaigning for the wholesale return of native Australian bones so they can be buried in accordance with local custom. Mr Dillon, who delivered a forceful address on the subject at this year's Museums Association annual conference in London, said: "I'm delighted about this. But what I think we now need to press for is a register for the whole world. Britain should be seen as just the start."

The recommendations have also been greeted warmly by those campaigning for the return of the Elgin Marbles to Greece. A cornerstone of the British Museum's argument against handing back the ancient sculptures is that the law would prevent it from doing so even if it wanted to. It is possible that any change to the law governing museum collections could be couched in such a way that it "liberates" man-made artefacts as well as human remains. However, the report will alarm traditionalists who argue that, by simplifying the path to repatriation, the Government could open the floodgates to a torrent of new claims. Some fear that Egypt, which demanded the return of numerous artefacts during the reign of President Nasser, may decide to revive its pursuit of the British Museum's mummies.

Professor Frank Willett, former director of the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow and a vocal critic of excessive repatriation claims, said: "If you can make a case that human remains belong to a specific individual, that's one thing. The problem is that you get things like the Maori people trying to repatriate trophy heads from New Zealand that, back in history, belonged to their enemies. "Museums open the rest of the world to local people, wherever they are. If you are going to give things back to everyone who wants them, you end up only with local museums." He added that while there were strong arguments for cultural objects to be returned to their countries of origin, museums had an ethical responsibility to preserve items that would be destroyed by the act of burial.

Ahead of any new law, a handful of repatriations have already been made. In May, the Royal College of Surgeons announced it was returning its collection of Tasmanian specimens, including the skin and hair of Truganini, only survivor of the "black war" in which 19th-century British settlers rounded up native islanders.

A spokesman for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, which commissioned the report, said it was due to be delivered to the Arts minister, Baroness Blackstone, before Christmas. A consultation document will follow.

Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford

Wanted: A number of shrunken heads from Ecuador and Peru belonging to the Jivaro Indians. The Jivaro shrunk the heads of enemies killed in battle to seal the avenging soul within, though the practise was outlawed by conquering Spaniards. Found by Major Ronald Hawksby Thomas on expeditions in the 1920s and 1930s.

By whom: Various Native American tribal pressure groups would like to see the heads returned, though several are thought to be fakes, having no ceremonial significance.

Marischal Museum, Aberdeen

Wanted: Maori warrior remains from New Zealand.

By whom: Pressure is intensifying from the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action after Edinburgh University in 2000 handed back to Australia 330 aboriginal skeletons (and the head of William Lanney, below, considered to be the last full-blooded male Tasmanian aborigine). Almost all aboriginal remains have now been returned to Australia.

The British Museum

Wanted: The mummy and coffin of Hor, a priest. Probably from Thebes and dating from around 850BC, the mummy was donated by Henry Salt (1780-1827). Salt was the British Consul-General to Egypt and collected a large number of antiquities during his sojourn in the country, many of which were sold to the British Museum.

By whom: In the 1950s, President Nasser demanded the restitution of all Egyptian relics housed abroad. He was ignored by the British government. More recently, the Egyptian Museum in Cairo has suggested that it would welcome the return of relics that include the British Museum's mummies, although the Egyptian government has backed down.

Source: <http://www.independent.co.uk/>