
Ancestral bone bank at center of rights fight

Aborigines demand the return of skeletal remains, although this could deal a heavy blow to research

By Robin McKie
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Along the walls of a crumbling Cambridge basement, rows of brown cardboard boxes are packed on cramped wooden shelves. It could be the storeroom of a hardware company were it not for the cartons' strange labels: "Zuni, Fuegian, Saxon."

In fact, each box contains the remains of a human being. Skulls and bones from more than 18,000 men and women are crammed into this unlikely mausoleum. This is the Duckworth Collection, one of the world's most important anthropological resources, a scientific treasure trove dedicated to human variation.

Scientists believe these skeletal remains can be used to trace the history of humanity's colonization of the world and are therefore of immense importance. Yet in a few weeks, a government committee is expected to back legal changes that could result in the collection's decimation.

"There is a real chance some of the most important parts of the Duckworth could be removed and destroyed or put in inaccessible places," said Robert Foley, director of the Leverhulme Center for Evolutionary Studies, Cambridge.

"The loss to science would incalculable," he said.

This stark threat is posed by the Palmer Committee, set up by the Government following a recent meeting between British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Australian counterpart, John Howard. It has been charged with deciding if Britain should succumb to calls from Aboriginal groups who are demanding the return of ancestral remains taken by 19th- and 20th-century expeditions and displayed in British museums

Most researchers fear the committee is about to give an affirmative answer. Indeed, some centers have already given back remains in anticipation of such a recommendation. Two months ago, several skulls kept at the Manchester Museum were handed to Aboriginal leaders at a ceremony which included an antidote to any curses the city may have earned as a result of its sacrilege.

But museums like Manchester's usually possess only a few skeletons. By contrast, the Duckworth -- an exclusively research-oriented center -- is devoted to human remains, and along with London's Natural History Museum, the country's other main repository, has most to lose. Hence the alarm of scientists there.

"This collection is fantastically important. Much of the work that supported the 'Out of Africa' theory -- which shows all humans are of recent African origin -- was done by measuring skulls and bones from this collection," said Marta Lahr, director of the Duckworth Collection, which is based at the Leverhulme Center.

"It was the diversity of our samples that made this possible. If we lose our Australasian samples, that will damage the collection irreparably," she said.

But native groups -- of which Australian Aborigines have taken a world lead -- are unrepentant, and dismiss such anthropological research as "pretentious." One of their leaders, Rodney Dillon, said: "Aborigines were not put on this earth for British scientists to do research on."

They point to the case of the Tasmanians, a population exterminated by British colonists, whose remains ended in some cases in museums. The Duckworth possesses three Tasmanian skulls, which Aboriginal groups -- who claim to be the skull owners' descendants -- want back. But as Foley pointed out, the Tasmanians no longer exist, and can have no descendants. For their part, mainland Aborigines claim 'cultural ancestry' with the Duckworth skulls.

In Australia, Aborigines have already had several sets of remains reburied. In one case, a 14,000-year-old skeleton from King Island, between Australia and Tasmania, was taken from researchers and buried in special graves. Yet it is impossible for any group to claim ancestry to remains of that antiquity, say researchers.

"These weren't the bones of a living person's grandparents," Foley said.

"This is something very ancient and important that was taken and ruined. What voice will science have when repatriation decisions are made? So far the omens are very poor," he said.

Nor is the issue similar to the one surrounding the Elgin Marbles, he added.

"They are not going back to Greece to be destroyed. They are going to be preserved. By contrast, human remains face being destroyed. Nor is it fair to depict the Duckworth as a vast repository of colonial pillage: 7,000 of our remains are of ancient Egyptians and 5,000 are British. They are here for what they can tell us about human history," he said.

Aboriginal groups argue that science has had long enough to study the remains. But researchers say new techniques are constantly being developed. Genetic analysis techniques -- developed in the past 10 years -- have made it possible to remove DNA from skulls and determine the relatedness of different peoples, effectively constructing a giant family tree for humanity.

In future, it should be possible to work out diets from bone samples, thus revealing crucial data about our history.

"Science is always throwing up new questions, and we may find we can no longer answer them," Foley said.

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