

University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology's Policy on Human Remains

The University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) considers its responsibilities for the care and custodianship of human remains a top priority. This document presents our institution's policy of compliance with UK legal guidance and international museum standards as well as our concern for the values and recommendations of communities of origin.

1. Introduction and Definitions

- a. This document describes human remains within the collection of MAA and the institution's compliance with UK regulatory guidance for the custodianship, display and research of human remains as defined by the 2004 Human Tissue Act and 2005 Department of Culture Media and Sport's *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums (DCMS Guidance)*. This policy also describes our practices for care, documentation, display and access.
- b. The UK Human Tissue Authority (HTA) and DCMS *Guidance* define human remains as formerly living bodies or parts of bodies of the species *Homo sapiens* including bones, teeth, skin and other organs, body fluids and samples of human tissue as well as hair and nails which have been taken post-mortem. This includes cultural objects made with human remains which have been modified through a process of skill.
- c. The HTA oversees compliance with these regulatory standards for the remains of individuals who have died within 100 years of the present. MAA is accountable through licences held by the University of Cambridge for Downing Site (#12146) and West Cambridge Site (#12196, see www.hta.gov.uk).
- d. Though the enforcement of the HTA's legal frameworks applies only to a small fraction of the collection in our care, MAA nevertheless extends its ethical standards to any materials which have been identified or documented as human remains within our collection.
- e. MAA furthermore acknowledges that the legal definitions forming the precedent for this policy do not classify recordings of the human voice, images and photographs of people or ancestors, impressions, reliquaries, personal items, burial items and/or other associated materials and documents as human remains though certain cultural groups may recognise them as such. As an institution, we are committed to an ethically rigorous practice which is responsive to the concerns of stakeholders and descendent communities; please note that our policies and procedures are intended to invite a response from the groups, students, researchers and colleagues with

which we engage and it is our expectation that this document will continue to evolve.

2. Human Remains in the MAA Collection

- a. MAA cares for partial skeletal remains; mummified remains; remains resulting from cremation; materials and containers associated with various types of burial and mortuary practices; modified bones and teeth which have functioned as ceremonial objects or personal adornment; skeletal and soft tissue remains preserved as religious objects; and a diversity of technologies and cultural materials which incorporate human hair.
- b. From 2020-2025, MAA is moving its off-site collection to a new storage facility and during this time a further number of human remains are being identified and re-housed. As part of this work, we aim to produce a comprehensive and publicly accessible inventory of human remains at MAA.
- c. Since the mid-twentieth century, the majority of MAA's skeletal material has been in the care of the Department of Archaeology's Duckworth Laboratory. For more about the University of Cambridge's consolidated storage of human remains, see [here](#).

3. Acquisition

- a. MAA no longer actively acquires human remains as part of its collections.

4. Handling, Storage and Documentation

- a. Following internal guidelines revised in 2020 for the Stores Move project, it is our goal that all materials identified as human remains should be indicated within MAA's database and stored in containers labelled 'Human Remains' to enable sensitive handling by staff, identification to visitors, and salvage during emergency response. These should be placed in a clearly marked, discrete and protected area within our stores and facilities.
- b. Any material which has been identified as human remains is handled minimally and respectfully. Where we have knowledge of restrictions made by communities of origin or their descendants in the display or handling of human remains, this is recorded in our collections database and valued in practice. Though photography is often used within the museum to record and monitor the condition of our collections, these images are not publicly available.

5. Display

- a. At MAA, human remains are displayed safely and respectfully according to DCMS *Guidance* and only where they are deemed to be of significant

educational, cultural and/or intellectual value. These materials are clearly indicated in the galleries and our curatorial staff are responsible for maintaining their coherent, ethical and accessible interpretation through labels, online content and didactic presentations. We are moreover committed to transparency in communicating the origins and historic treatment of human remains in our collection as well as their present value within the institution, its programmes and displays.

6. Photography, Photographic Collections and Archives

- a. DCMS *Guidance* states that, in most cases, human remains may be photographed for research, education and as part of general museum practices like display or conservation. Moreover, in addition to compliance with legal frameworks, MAA values the recommendations and sensitivities of other cultural groups and their descendants when considering photography and the circulation of photographic images.
- b. MAA cares for a significant collection of photographic objects as well as an archive of historic documents and drawings related to both archaeology and anthropology. Some of these may contain images of ancestors, funerary practices and/or other sensitive materials and settings which reference or incorporate human remains. Digitised images of human remains are restricted, but catalogue information is accessible via the museum's database and on-line portal.

7. Access

- a. Human remains are visibly accessible at MAA in its galleries and displays, as well as in a supervised context within collections storage at the discretion of the museum's director and/or curators, and contingent on restrictions made by communities of origin. Access may be granted for the purposes of research, education or outreach and engagement. Requests for access to materials which have been identified as human remains must be clearly articulated in writing and are subject to the approval of the relevant curator or collections manager for the department, region or cultural group with which they are associated ([staff directory here](#)). Requests for access may take up to one month to review.
- b. Technical analysis or documentation undertaken as research must be approved by the relevant curator and proposed in compliance with existing ethical frameworks for researching human remains in museums including DCMS *Guidance* and the International Council of Museums *Code of Ethics* (2017). Preference will be given to methods of analysis which are non-invasive and/or non-destructive; requests for sampling and invasive or destructive analysis will need to be justified in writing and approved by the Museum Committee.

8. Loans

- a. MAA will consider requests for the loan of materials which are not subject to HTA regulation but have been identified as human remains from our collections to other cultural and educational institutions. These requests need to be made following [our established procedures](#) and will be subject to additional review by relevant curators, collections management and/or conservation staff to ensure that materials on loan will be handled and displayed securely, respectfully and in a manner consistent with DCMS *Guidance* as well as the goals and values of MAA as an institution. We will not consider loan requests for materials which are subject to pending or active claims for return.

9. De-accession and Claims for Return

- a. MAA will consider claims for the return of human remains in compliance with the University of Cambridge's guidance and procedures for [transfer of stewardship](#). Where the transfer of human remains has been claimed and enacted, these materials will be de-accessioned by MAA.
- b. Where human remains are transferred to another institution, MAA will establish that these materials will be treated ethically and in compliance with legal guidance according to the standard of our accreditation by Arts Council England.

10. Compliance

- a. For questions or concerns regarding this policy or its procedures, contact humanremains@maa.cam.ac.uk. This policy was adopted October 2022 and will be reviewed periodically by the museum's Executive Committee at the same time as our Collections Development Policy. The next review will be no later than September 2025.

Links and Suggested Further Reading:

Department of Culture Media and Sport. 2005. *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums*. https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/DCMS-Guide_0.pdf

International Council of Museums. 2017. *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*. <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf>

Museum Ethnographers Group/Collections Trust UK. 1994. *Museums Ethnographers' Group Guidelines on Management of Human Remains*. http://www.museumethnographersgroup.org.uk/images/meg/human_remains_guidelines.pdf

University of Cambridge Duckworth Laboratory, Department of Archaeology. 2011. *Duckworth Laboratory Policy on Human Remains*. https://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/files/duckworth_laboratory_human_remains_policy_april_2011.pdf

University of Cambridge Governance and Compliance Division. 2008. *Procedure for Handling Claims for the Transfer of Stewardship of Human Remains at the University of Cambridge*. https://www.governanceandcompliance.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/human-remains-procedure_0.pdf

University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. 2019. *Our Approach to the Return of Artefacts*. https://maa.cam.ac.uk/files/media/maa_returns_full_guidance.pdf

University of Oxford Gardens, Libraries and Museums. 2006. *Human Remains Policy*. <https://www.glam.ox.ac.uk/human-remains-policy>

Wellcome Collection. 2018. *Care of Human Remains Policy*. https://wellcomecollection.org/pages/WyjY_SgAACoALCmH