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To:

Members of the Board of Trustees, Trinity College Dublin

Director of the National Museum of Ireland

Keeper of Irish Antiquities, National Museum of Ireland

We write as members of the Cultural Landscapes of the Irish Coast (CLIC), an international research team that has worked for fifteen years alongside residents of Inishbofin and other coastal and island communities in Counties Galway and Mayo to document local heritage through archaeology, ethnography, and oral history.

We, the authors and co-signers, support Inishbofin islanders' claim of rightful stewardship over the skeletal material stolen from St Colman's Church in 1890 and subsequently held in the Haddon and Dixon Collection at the Museum of Anatomy, Trinity College Dublin. We urge the Board to pledge to work with islanders, in consultation with the National Museum of Ireland, to return the remains into the care of the community of Inishbofin.

The documentation of the crania's provenance is unequivocal and uncontestable. As recorded in their field notes and sketches, Haddon and Dixon stole the crania from a niche near the altar in the eastern wall of St Colman's Church in 1890. Their theft was committed under the cover of darkness with the explicit intent of avoiding local witnesses and interference.

Significantly, the basis of Haddon's interests in the skulls was a study of racial origins based on craniometrics, a field of inquiry that subsequent generations of anthropologists have universally repudiated on theoretical and methodological grounds. The "science of race" and eugenics in the nineteenth century offered a veneer of intellectual rigour to colonial stereotypes that depicted indigenous and other marginalised groups as primitive. Not only was this science empirically wrong, its practices and premises naturalised inequalities based on histories of colonial oppression. For Trinity College to maintain possession of these human remains against local wishes would perpetuate the structural violence, colonial ideology, and institutional impunity that facilitated their theft more than 130 years ago.

Inishbofin islanders' claim that the skeletal remains belong to their cultural patrimony is equally clear and supported by the archaeological, historic, and folklore record. **Islanders today represent the most recent generation of a community of care that has venerated and safe-guarded the site of Saint Colman's Abbey over more than 1,300 years.**

The foundation of Saint Colman's Abbey on Inishbofin in c. 668 CE is recorded in the Irish annals and narrated by the Anglo-Saxon Historian Bede. References to the deaths of holy men on Inishbofin continue in

the annals until the early 10th century. In subsequent centuries, the site of Colman's monastery became a venue for the worship and burial of local lay people. The ruined church from which Haddon and Dixon stole the crania is a multi-phased structure, built, renovated, and used for the celebration of Mass between the 12th and 19th centuries. While in the early 1800s a new parish church was built elsewhere on Inishbofin, the grounds of Saint Colman's Abbey remained the primary cemetery for the people of Inishbofin - a practice that continues to this day.

The inhabitants of Inishbofin have confronted many challenges in the last two centuries, from famine, disease, poverty, and depopulation. Nevertheless, they have remained stalwart curators of their island's heritage. Local Inishbofin historians and heritage practitioners, including Tommy Burke, Kieran Concannon, and Marie Coyne, have worked for decades to preserve late 19th- and early 20th-century oral history, material culture, photographs, letters, and genealogical information. In 2008 Marie Coyne published the volume *Saint Colman's Abbey Inishbofin*, a book that meticulously documents the site by combining oral history, folklore, archaeology, and a detailed mapping of family plots within the cemetery.

Because of islanders' careful preservation of oral history, we know how and why the crania in question came to be deposited within Saint Colman's Church by 1890. The cemetery has served as a burial ground for more than a millennium, and islanders since at least the 19th century have maintained family plots that periodically re-used existing grave settings. When grave-diggers disturbed earlier burials, it was customary to transfer intact crania into the church in a place of honour near the altar. This care practice prevented the crania from being unceremoniously disintegrated when coffins of the recently deceased were interred in freshly dug graves. This practice endured till the early twentieth century. In the 1950s, a local priest instructed islanders to re-bury the surviving collection of crania.

The tradition of curating crania within the church must be understood within its local cultural and historical context. The practice was neither careless nor crude: by shifting the skulls into the church, community members offered respect to those previously laid to rest within the cemetery. The curation of these skeletal remains in the church ensured that the crania would continue to decay naturally and peacefully near the altar of Saint Colman's Church, a place of heightened sanctity. It was from this refuge that they were stolen by Haddon and Dixon.

In their opposition to repatriation, the Museum of Anatomy claims that a single radiocarbon sample (dated to the AD 1509-1660) and the lack of DNA evidence precludes islanders' claim to ownership over the crania. This argument is premised on an exceedingly narrow definition of patrimony based on genetic descent. Inishbofin islanders need not demonstrate that they are direct descendants of the individuals whose crania remain locked in the Museum of Anatomy. Islanders continue to bury their dead alongside generations of ancestors, neighbours, monks, pilgrims, and others who venerated the grounds of Saint Colman's Abbey and who wished for themselves and their loved ones to remain there peacefully interred. **Islanders are the living members of a community of care that has acted for centuries as trustees of these wishes. They ask now only to fulfil their obligations to the deceased forebearers of this community.**

The [Vermillion Accords on Human Remains](#), adopted by the World Archaeological Congress in 1989, recognizes both the wishes of the dead and of the guardians of the dead as factors that must be respected in making decisions about the treatment of human remains. In this case, the wishes of the guardians of the dead are quite clear, and there is every reason to believe the dead never wished to be removed from the site of Saint Colman's Abbey and kept in a museum's storage unit.

The act of preservation cannot be used to justify theft. Archaeological materials, especially human remains, should not be withheld from their proper community of care solely for the sake of preservation. The crania were stolen from what was already a secondary context, a circumstance which severely limits much of the archaeological potential of the crania. An osteoarchaeological study of the crania has been undertaken, and

there is little else that can be learned from the materials without destructive analysis. As the rightful caretakers of these remains, islanders must have a say in what happens next, and we support the community's request to reclaim the remains with the ultimate goal of reburial within the cemetery on Inishbofin.

Trinity College is an internationally renowned centre of learning with complicated links to histories of colonialism. Repatriation of the Inishbofin crania offers a valuable opportunity to confront that institutional heritage and to redirect Trinity's legacy in pursuit of collaboration, respect, and restorative justice. We ask Trinity and The National Museum of Ireland to embrace the opportunity to work collectively with the Inishbofin community to repatriate these skeletal remains to their rightful community of care.

Sincerely,



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