

Submission re the Inishbofin skulls

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the discussion on the Inishbofin skulls, and appreciative of the College's commitment to public consultation and transparency around this and other related legacies of colonialism. I offer my views as an archaeologist with a long career in research and teaching, encompassing fieldwork, museum curation and cultural heritage.

Trinity College Dublin has rightly engaged on the first, and important, step of documenting its collections - the nature of the materials held and how they were acquired - as indeed many museums, universities and other institutions around the world are currently doing. In many, if not most, cases, collections were acquired under colonialist conditions - ranging from looting, theft, duress, or simple lack of informed consent. An obvious conversation that results from this is around the *repatriation or return of objects and collections to the place of origin and/or owners of those objects*, where this can be either documented or otherwise identified. The broader impetus towards this can be seen, for example, in the high-profile repatriations of some of the Benin bronzes to Nigeria from European and North American collections only this past year.

The ownership and curation of *human remains* presents a particularly sensitive part of such repatriation and return. In many countries, including Ireland, the classification of archaeological artefacts includes 'ancient human remains', and currently results in a high level of protection and respect for such remains in relation to excavation, study, curation, and possible reburial. Human remains are, however, more than 'objects' and there is extensive scholarship now both around the ethics of repatriating human remains to their local communities, and - beyond that - a more emergent debate around the ethics of display of the dead in museums. One pertinent example here is the call for the repatriation and burial of the skeleton of Charles Byrne (known as the 'Irish Giant') whose body was stolen and is now in the possession of the Hunterian Museum in London; elsewhere in the world, similarly stolen (and displayed) bodies have been respectfully returned, a notable example being Truganami, an Aboriginal Tasmanian woman who died in 1876 but was finally laid to rest only in 1976. Unlike the Inishbofin people, these are known individuals, making their narratives even more poignant, but museums and institutions are reflecting carefully on the educational value of displaying the dead, and acknowledging that, in some cases, removal from display, consideration of conditions of curation, and indeed repatriation are all urgent topics for discussion.

As a model for return and repatriation of human ancestral remains and other artefacts, the Te Papa (Maori) processes stand as an excellent and well-established model of effective negotiation of these issues. It is surely ironic, and out of step with contemporary ethical thinking, that institutions are fully engaged with processes to repatriate human remains acquired and stolen from other countries, but that this same level of courtesy and respect would not be extended to material sourced and very clearly stolen from a known location, Inishbofin, on our own island. In returning this submission, it seems clear to me that the appropriate and ethical next step is to create a dialogue on how best to return these stolen individuals to their home location and community, with careful consideration to their safe curation or reburial (as appropriate) and as part of an important healing process.

Christine Morris
Andrew A David Professor of Greek Archaeology and History
Department of Classics
School of Histories and Humanities
Trinity College Dublin
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