

EASA letter supporting repatriation of human remains in Trinity College Dublin collection to Inishbofin, County Galway

To: Dr. Linda Doyle, Provost and Chair, Board of Trinity College Dublin

18 November 2022

Dear Dr. Doyle and Board Members

I am writing on behalf of the executive committee of the European Association of Social Anthropologists at the invitation of the Trinity Legacies Review Working Group. As the EASA exec board, we strongly advocate for the Inishbofin community's request to return all human remains contained in the College's Haddon-Dixon Collection to their descendant communities, including 13 crania and additional cranial fragments from Inishbofin currently housed in the College's Old Anatomy Building.

As a European association of anthropologists, we recognise the complex colonial legacy of our discipline as well as the harms and injuries carried out in the name of anthropology and other scientific fields. As such, in the spirit of a decolonial ethic, we see the role of repatriation as one crucial aspect of making partial amends with this past. Human remains are of course a special category of sensitive material and we are cognisant of the need for careful stewardship and consultation with descendant communities through the repatriation process.

Alfred Cort Haddon, a British anthropologist, wrote in his diaries about the theft by himself and Andrew Francis Dixon of the Inishbofin crania. Dixon later became University Professor of Anatomy at Trinity. This transgression, of marked disrespect, in an Ireland where funerary and burial practices hold powerful spiritual and cultural value (and continue to do so) is a blatant example of the politics of disregard enacted by the colonial project and supported by different kinds of institutions, including universities.

Throughout the Global North, universities and museums are making very public claims regarding their efforts to decolonise. Decolonisation, as scholars Tuck and Yang remind us, needs, however, to be more than a metaphor and repatriation needs to become a core undertaking with respect to human remains and cultural objects.

That Trinity College Dublin continues to hold materials that came into their possession through theft and imperial disregard evinces the view that the claims and wishes of the Inishbofin community should be respected. To this end, and in the interest of advancing an ethical, decolonial science, we urge you to commit to return these remains to their community of origin without further delay. This is a crucial step to redress past harms, remake kinship between the living and dead within wider geographies of relatedness in Ireland, and most importantly, return the dead to their proper place of rest.

Mariya Ivancheva, President

President, EASA

On behalf of EASA's Executive Committee