

Findings and outcomes of a consultation on the care and retention of Ancient British human remains in the collection of The Manchester Museum, September 2011

Introduction

The Manchester Museum is one of Britain's leading regional museums and its largest university museum. We are committed to consultation regarding matters relating to the display and use of human remains, as set out in our Human Remains Policy¹. This policy was itself developed in consultation with a number of interested parties. We recently consulted on matters relating to the display of Ancient British and Ancient Egyptian human remains, as part of the development of exhibitions containing remains from these cultures. This document outlines the methods, results and outcomes of a public consultation on the care and retention of unprovenanced Ancient British human remains in the Museum's collection, held between 2009-10.

Consultation methods

A list of unprovenanced Ancient British human remains was provided to a number of consultees, along with associated information on these remains. This list was accompanied by a questionnaire which asked the following questions:

1. Should these remains be retained within the Manchester Museum?

Yes / No- If yes, please give realistic and practical proposals for their future use.

2. Should these remains be transferred to another museum or institution?

Yes / No- If yes, please give realistic and practical proposals for their future use, and indicate if possible which specific institution they might go to.

3. Should these remains be reburied?

Yes/ No- If yes, please answer the following additional questions:

a. Why do you consider reburial to be the best option?

b. Should the remains, after reburial, be accessible for future examination or not? Please give the reasons for your choice.

c. Should they be reburied in Manchester or near their place of origin (if identified)? If the original place of burial cannot be identified, where should they be reburied?

Responses

The Museum received eight responses to this consultation: from two major UK museums, the British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology, Honoring the Ancient Dead and four individuals.

Consultation findings

The number of responses was very small. HAD's reply represented the views of a larger number of councils of theologians, advisors and volunteers.

1. Responses were polarised on the issue of whether remains should be retained by the Museum, with individuals and HAD arguing for disposal or reburial, and institutions arguing for retention.
 2. Regarding human remains that had been transferred from anatomical collections, institutions responded that these should be transferred to an appropriate medical collection whereas HAD and other individuals responded that these should be reburied.
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3. A number of institutions criticised the information distributed by the Museum, as giving insufficient information on the history of research on those remains.

Next steps and further work

The Museum is accountable to the University of Manchester's Board of Governors for the proper care and management of its collection. Our Human Remains Policy states that "these can be contentious issues where there may be no consensus, [and] the Museum retains the right to make final decisions...based on ethical judgement, cultural views on what constitutes respectful treatment, measurable benefits and the needs of different communities." As no consensus was reached in this consultation, we will adopt a precautionary principle before making decisions relating to the transfer of these human remains. Work on some of the remains has already linked them to a well-known and archaeologically important excavation, demonstrating that at least some have the potential to enhance understanding of the lives of people of the past.

In summary:

1. The human remains in question warrant further research and investigation, to try to link them to previous studies and to try to clarify their provenance.
2. Until we are satisfied that all avenues for identifying context have been exhausted, we will not dispose of the human remains in question.
3. In the case of human remains that came to the Museum from anatomical collections, we will seek out and identify an appropriate institution to explore the transfer of these remains. Transfer to another institution with a more specialised role regarding anatomical collections would be consistent with the Museum's mission.
4. Any subsequent decisions relating to use or transfer will be made on a case-by-case basis, in line with our Human Remains Policy.