



Statement regarding the approach of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (*Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation*) to handling human remains in the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (*National Museums in Berlin*) collections.

Collections of many museums hold human remains and this also applies to the collections of the Berlin State Museums. This mainly concerns the archeological and ethnological collections. "Human remains" refers to body parts of deceased human beings. These include not only bones, either modified in some way (e.g. ethnological artefacts like bone flutes), or unmodified (e.g. archeological findings like parts of human skeletons from Necropolises) that have entered a collection, but also ethnological objects made out of hair, human skin, etc. Up to now, all such objects in the care of the Foundation have been embedded in cultural-historical collections. The human remains holdings of the Berlin State Museums have recently been augmented significantly through the absorption of the Charité anthropological-osteological collections, which include ca. 8000 skeletons, skulls, and other human remains. For the first time, the Prussian Heritage Foundation has an anthropological collection in its care.

Due to this reason, the Prussian Heritage Foundation and the Berlin State Museums have formulated a statement regarding the approach of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation to handling human remains, which will serve as guidelines. It is based on the recommendations of the German Museum Association on how to handle human remains in museums and collections.

- The staff working with the human remains in the collections are always aware that they are handling remains of once living human beings. Therefore, these holdings have a special status and are to be treated with the greatest sensitivity, and the utmost respect. Human remains are cared for in an appropriate and dignified manner, especially with regard to the quality of the storage containers and premises in which they are placed. Human remains of each individual human being are to be kept together and shall be stored in a separate area protected from direct view and in premises with conditions that are monitored to meet suitable standards of preventive conservation regarding temperature, light exposure, pollutants, integrated pest management, packaging material and methods. The documentation must be as precise as possible and managed transparently. Each inclusion in the collection presentation needs an ensured research status and particular sensitivity.
- Human remains still today have an important place within the collections and a high scientific epistemological value. They provide information not only about people's past and previous civilizations. In point of fact, they form the basis for diverse research which can improve the life of humans in the future. Human remains provide e.g. a valuable source of direct evidence about the history of human diseases in the past, which can contribute to the treatment of diseases in the future. They help to explore past migration flows, the diet of earlier generations, and burial practices in various places on earth, which, in turn, can potentially help to understand and deliver answers to present day questions. Human remains are therefore an essential part of collections not only because they provide the museums with a basis for their own research, but primarily due to the fact that they remain publicly available to all areas of the scientific community for their projects.

- Human remains entered the collections in various ways. In some cases, knowledge about how a certain collection object was acquired is partial or even entirely lost. It is an important aim of the State Museums to gradually clarify the question of the provenance of all human remains in the collection. Hence, the provenance research on human remains has an absolute priority and stands before any other research (may it be cultural- and socio-anthropological, human-anthropological, or historical research) either on human remains, or involving them. Before human remains are publicly displayed, their origin must be clear, and must go beyond the knowledge of which source community they came from. The acquisition circumstances must be unambiguous in order to make sure that human remains have not entered the collection in an illegal or unacceptable way. Not all the ways in which human remains were acquired are in accordance with present ethical standards of collection acquisition, as stated e.g. in the ICOM Code of Ethics. If the research of origin proves that an object was acquired in circumstances that are viewed as unethical today, this must be documented and responsible decisions about the further handling of the particular human remains shall be undertaken.
- How to treat the remains of the deceased is a central topic in all cultures, but attitudes and values can differ greatly between diverse cultures. Within the Christian regions, the graves of people who have died recently are under special protection and are memorials of the dead. However, this special status, both legally and culturally, ends after few decades. The burials are then generally dissolved. Once the period for protection has elapsed, the remains are treated as objects and may, for example, be bought or sold. Accordingly, there are rarely any reservations in Germany against holding in a museum collection remains of persons who died more than 10 years ago or using them as a basis for research. In other cultures, values are very different. In some cultures there are significant reservations against human remains being kept anywhere outside of burial places or sacred locations. In addition, there are sometimes objections to research of any kind or particular types of research being conducted on human remains. Opinions about the ethically correct treatment of human remains change over time – a shift that can be observed on the global level. Within this challenging context of varying and changeable opinions and values, the staff of the State museums fulfills the duty of maintaining the entrusted collections and making them accessible to the public. In doing so, they try to take into account different views and bring them into line as far as possible. If human remains can be assigned to a given source community, the values of this group are to be taken into account in particular. Where possible, the representatives of the community will be contacted in order to involve them in the considerations on how to care for the remains. Experience has shown that expectations and wishes can vary widely, so that one should attempt to find an appropriate solution in each individual case.
- In particular cases, the circumstances under which certain human remains entered the collection can diverge so much from the present ethical standards that it appears questionable for the remains in question to stay in the collection. It may also be the case that the source community has significant objections against keeping the remains at a museum. In such cases, a careful consideration of all interests is to be undertaken. Where applicable, further proceedings must be discussed with the representatives of the source community. This presupposes, however, that a clear allocation of the remains to a particular source community is possible. A responsible decision (in cooperation with the representatives of the community / society of origin, where applicable) on further proceedings must then be taken and must be

documented both in written form and in the museum documentation system Museum Plus. One possibility is that human remains are returned to the source community, if they so wish. In singular cases, when the remains cannot be assigned to a source community, burial of the remains is also conceivable.

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