

CONFERENCE REVIEWS

Human Remains: Conservation, Retrieval and Analysis, Williamsburg Institute, Colonial Williamsburg, 7th-10th November 1999

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Human Remains: Conservation, Retrieval and Analysis sought to bring together conservators, archaeologists and physical anthropologists to discuss their roles and objectives in the handling of human remains, and to encourage discussion amongst these groups to ensure better collaborative efforts in the future. Over 100 people participated in the conference, coming from Australia, Brazil, Canada, Canary Islands, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Peru, Sweden, the US and the UK. Despite the fact that Colonial Williamsburg is not particularly well known for its collections of human remains, or as a vocal policy-maker regarding their handling, these were exactly the reasons that made them feel compelled to host the conference: to provide a neutral venue for such discussions. Although references to the topic inevitably arose, the subject of repatriation was not specifically addressed by this conference.

Forty papers were presented in six sessions covering: Excavation and Fieldwork; Conservation; Soft Tissue and Mummies; Curation; Analysis; and Ethics, Law and Public Perception. Although many papers were case studies about specific sites or collections, a few common themes evolved including the storage and handling of remains; on site lifting techniques; various testing methods such as DNA, stable isotope and the study of dental calculus microfossils; the use of non-destructive testing and imaging techniques (x-ray, CT scanning, MRI and laserscanning); and the role and use of the media and public responses to human remains.

As it is not possible to summarise each presentation here, only a few papers are discussed. The Excavation and Fieldwork session consisted of papers presenting various case study projects of archaeological research and rescue archaeology, but only one paper on forensic archaeology. This, by Charles Slaymaker and Michael Trimble of the US Army Corps of Engineers addressed 'The Archaeology of Recovering Unaccounted for Military Personnel from the Vietnam War.' As the only paper that strayed from the more traditional archaeological theme of the session, it served as a reminder of the unfortunately increasing need for the involvement of the scientific community in the acquisition and handling of recent war dead.

One particularly useful paper in the Conservation session was that presented by Jessica Johnson, entitled 'A Long-Term Look at Polymers Used to Preserve Bone' which was an extension of her previous publications regarding consolidants and adhesives. Another paper containing practical advice was 'Standardized Condition Assessment-Skeletal Preservation' by Robert Janaway, Andrew Wilson, Anwen Caffell and Charlotte Roberts, who discussed storage and handling issues. They specifically mentioned that the use of Blu-tak should be avoided in skeletal collections as it is radiographically opaque and, therefore, appears in x-rays.

Of particular interest in the Curation session were the preliminary results that Anwen Caffell presented in 'Pressures in Osteological Collections - The Importance of Damage Limitations.' She documented the damage sustained by teaching collections at the University of Bradford, and in particular, the numbers of lost and gained elements on a per skeleton basis. Her research continues, and the final results should prove interesting in terms of collections care, research and laboratory space planning.

The integration of public attitudes and expectations dominated the Ethics, Law and Public Perception session. An interesting discussion was provoked by the two museum based papers, 'When Your Insides are Out; Museum Visitor Perceptions of Displays of Human Anatomy' by Lisa Berndt and Lenore Barbian of the National Museum of Health and Medicine (Washington, DC) and 'London Bodies: An Exhibition at the Museum of London' by Helen Ganiaris of the Museum of London. Both papers concerned the responses of individuals (including the previous owners or descendants of donors) and the general public as a mass entity to human remains, and demonstrated that their visitors are genuinely interested in what can be learned from human remains. It was also stressed that such material must be presented with a clear objective in a sympathetic manner, and it was further advised that museum visitors should be warned prior to entry that human remains are on exhibit.

Throughout the conference it became clear that more discussion must take place amongst conservators, physical anthropologists and archaeologists regarding their interests and activities, as they can often run counter to each other. For example, chemical treatment of bone, such as the use of consolidants, may preclude future chemical and molecular testing, such as stable isotope or DNA analyses. Furthermore, during question and answer periods and other discussion sessions the variation in attitudes towards the handling of human remains (or the lack thereof) in different geographical areas became apparent, as affected by population demographics, local legislation and the role of archaeology.