

HUMAN REMAINS IN ANTHROPOLOGY: LEGACY, CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

Maria Giovanna Belcastro

University of Bologna, Alma Mater Studiorum, Department of Biological, Geological and
Environmental Sciences, Bologna, Italy

Background: The term human remains encompasses a broad range of materials, including skeletons, mummified individuals, biological samples, digital reproductions, and objects containing human traces. These materials are essential for evolutionary, bioarchaeological, and forensic research, providing valuable insights into past populations, health, mobility, and biological diversity. Many collections derive from archaeological excavations, exhumations, scientific expeditions, exchanges, and donations. However, their acquisition histories, particularly in non-European contexts, are often linked to colonial, Eurocentric, and racialised scientific practices. Beyond their scientific value, human remains hold symbolic, cultural, and emotional significance, contributing to identity formation and collective memory.

Objective: To explore the ethical, cultural, and scientific challenges surrounding the management, classification, ownership, restitution, and heritage value of human remains within contemporary frameworks of cultural heritage and social responsibility.

Subjects and methods: This study adopts a critical interdisciplinary perspective informed by anthropology, bioarchaeology, heritage studies, and museum ethics. Particular attention is given to the impact of colonial legacies on university and scientific collections. The project “Colonial Legacies of Universities: Materialities and New Collaborations” provides the conceptual framework for examining these issues and promoting dialogue among researchers, institutions, and stakeholders.

Results: Human remains emerge as hybrid entities situated between scientific specimens, cultural heritage, and ancestral remains. This status generates debates regarding ownership, restitution, access, and stewardship. Current heritage approaches increasingly emphasize participation, transparency, and collaboration with descendant and stakeholder communities.

Conclusions: The study and management of human remains require ongoing ethical reflection and socially responsible scientific practice. Transparent dialogue and inclusive collaboration are essential for developing equitable and sustainable approaches to the stewardship of human remains and their associated heritage.

Keywords: Human remains; Collections; Anthropology; Cultural heritage; Colonial legacy; Ethics.

Acknowledgement / Funding Source: Project “Colonial Legacies of Universities: Materialities and New Collaborations” (2025–2029; HE - Proposal No. 101177706).