

## A bone to pick with museums

by Tiffany Jenkins  
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***Returning collections of human remains to their home countries may sound noble, but science will suffer as a result, writes Tiffany Jenkins***

Museums are the storehouses of history: collections that help to shine a light on the past. Amid their myriad objects are many curiosities, including human remains, which add detail to our impressions of how people once lived on the other side of the world. They also reveal how cultures were viewed and often misrepresented by the European explorers who “discovered” them 200 or more years ago.

After lying in display cases for decades or even centuries, the future of these resources is now uncertain. Pressure groups in America, Australia, Canada and New Zealand have undertaken a large-scale repatriation of these items, and in many cases have buried extensive collections of human remains, some of which once took pride of place in museum collections.

Now this trend has come to Scotland. Last week it was revealed that two tattooed Maori heads collected by a Scottish adventurer in the 19th century are to be sent back to New Zealand.

In an echo of a case last year that saw three preserved Maori heads and a leg bone returned to New Zealand, councillors in Perth have decided that the elaborately marked heads, known as *toi moko*, should be handed over to the Te Papa museum in Wellington. Once returned, they will not go on display or be available to the public or researchers. They will be stored while the museum tries to trace the descendants of the dead Maoris, who, if found, will decide the fate of the two heads.

The heads were collected and brought to Perth in the early 19th century by David Ramsey, a ship’s surgeon, who had studied medicine in Edinburgh and once lived at 40 Nicholson Street.

Ramsey travelled extensively in the Pacific, acquiring objects of interest along the way. He wrote to his brother, James, about his voyages, which included stopovers in Jakarta, the Indonesian capital, and Java, one of its islands, detailing his growing collection of birds and insects.

In 1825 he sent a collection of curiosities, which included the heads, to the museum of the Literary and Antiquarian Society of Perth, the predecessor of the current Perth Museum & Art Gallery. As Ramsey did not visit New Zealand, it is believed he probably acquired the *toi moko* in Australia, where he settled for some time.

Collecting curiosities was all the rage in Ramsey's day, so it is hardly surprising that so many scalps, skulls and shrunken heads dating from that period are held in museums across Britain. Some were taken in dubious circumstances, others were stolen, but many were bought by Europeans simply out of interest.

Ramsey's *toi moko* will now go home after almost 200 years in Scotland. Michael Taylor, head of arts and heritage for Perth council, said: "They are significant and sacred to the Maori people. They believe they connect them to their ancestors."

But while the return of some objects may be justified, the wider clamour for the repatriation of other museum items is dubious.

Since the British Museum was founded in 1753, it has been accepted practice for museums to collect human remains — from ancient mummies to Victorian jewellery pieces containing locks of hair. These body parts can unlock secrets about our past, including patterns of human migration: who lived where, when and with whom.

Ultimately, bones can help to reveal the story of human evolution. They tell us about diet, lifestyle and the health of previous populations. So research on this material is important, both for our own knowledge and for that of future generations.

Until recently it was not possible to remove items from museum collections. Then in 2000, Tony Blair made a pledge to return aboriginal remains to Australia, and the same year Edinburgh University repatriated a large collection of remains. The Human Tissue Act of 2004 granted some of leading museums the power to transfer human remains from their collections.

Perth and Kinross council's policy in this area states that it "acknowledges that additions to the collections . . . are made in the belief that the material will be held in trust in perpetuity" and that "there is the strongest possible presumption against the disposal of any material from the collections".

This principle is central to the operation of all publicly funded museums in Britain and is there to guard against the influence of finance, fashion and politics — but in recent years that principle has gradually been eroded. The repatriation of remains has already had an impact, with crucial material being destroyed.

This issue is about more than burying old bones, however. Returning material to its country of origin is part of a withdrawal from the pursuit of knowledge about humanity. It is the mission to know more and to understand the past that has been lost — the very spirit that helped to establish museums in the first place.

At present the number of claims remains relatively small. A survey conducted for a working group on human remains for England and Wales found that of the 60 museums holding such remains from overseas, only 13 had received requests for their return. But the working group argued that "while the total number of requests for return perhaps seems low at first sight . . . it is essential to recognise that in many cases the beliefs and emotions leading to individual claims are strong".

Of course, many of these claims are keenly felt. But equally, large-scale and unique collections of valuable material could be destroyed, when very little is known about an object's provenance.

In one case in America, a 10,000-year-old skeleton of a woman from Idaho was discovered by archeologists and then buried by local native Americans (Shoshone), even though the ancestry, beliefs and religion (if any) of the woman were unknown. That is vandalism.

The pleasure of visiting local museums is often to see oddities that reflect the very birth of the idea of a museum. And the spirit that drove Ramsey and other adventurers out into the world is no more.

I don't want to be too romantic. Museums are full of nasty or odd things that are often in bad taste, irrelevant and dusty. And some of the adventurers who found them held ideas that are very much out of tune with our own. But the outlook that sent them across the seas was progressive.

We should try to create a new thirst to know more and understand the world today and not destroy evidence of the past.

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