

Guidelines for the handling and preservation of human remains in the museums of Uppsala University

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Introduction

Uppsala University has had *Guidelines for the handling and conservation of human remains in the museums of Uppsala University*, adopted by the Vice-Chancellor, since 2014. In 2020, acting on instructions from the Government, the Swedish National Heritage Board drew up a document providing guidance to Swedish museums on human remains in museum collections. Uppsala University was involved in the process. This document is an update of the University's previous guidelines in response to an update of the guidance document from the Swedish National Heritage Board.

Scope

Like many other museums, two university museums at Uppsala University, Gustavianum and the Museum of Evolution, hold a considerable quantity of human materials, which can be divided into two partly overlapping categories:

1. Burned and unburned human bones from archaeological investigations and mummies.
2. Anatomical collections, consisting primarily of osteological material (crania, post-cranial bones, pelvises and mounted skeletons) but also soft tissue (mounted separate organs, micro tissue specimens and whole embryos/foetuses) and wet specimens/specimens in alcohol. The most recent osteological material dates from the first half of the twentieth century.

Human remains held by the museums of Uppsala University are primarily made available for research and educational purposes. As a fundamental principle, all handling of human remains must be characterised by respect for the integrity of the individual, restrictiveness, transparency and clarity. Relevant ethical frameworks, such as good research practice, are to be followed in each individual case.

Definitions

The term 'human remains' is understood to include anything that was once part of the body of a person of the species *Homo sapiens* (e.g. bone, hair, teeth, soft body parts, etc.). The state of preservation of the human material (e.g. ash, mummified bodies or specimens in alcohol) is of no consequence for this definition. Objects made from human material are not included where the object was originally intended to be used as a tool, musical instrument, appliance or religious object (including relics).

Storage, security and care

Uppsala University's museums do not make any distinction between objects on the basis of their age, but aim to treat all human remains equally, irrespective of how old they are. All identified human remains must be clearly labelled and stored in premises that are appropriate for the remains and protected by an alarm system. The climate must be monitored, and the premises must be inspected and cleaned regularly. Each museum is responsible for ensuring that storage is managed satisfactorily in other respects, in accordance with standard practice in museums for the different types of material.

All human remains are kept in locked storage facilities and are not on display to occasional visitors to the premises.

The museums' disaster contingency plans include human remains, and the treatment of any contaminated material follows the museums' own guidelines on the management of chemicals in museum collections. In the event of packing and transportation, the museums follow the European standards (SS-EN 15946:2011 and SS-EN 16648:2015). In the event of transportation abroad, the museums contact the Swedish National Heritage Board for permission, i.e. export permits and licences as required by Chapter 5, Section 7 of the Historic Environment Act (1988:950) and Section 32 of the Historic Environment Ordinance (1988:1188).

Acquisition and de-accessioning

The museums of Uppsala University take a very restrictive approach to the acquisition (accessioning) and removal (de-accessioning) of human remains. Only remains with full rights of disposal are accepted; no restrictions or exceptions are permitted. Each acquisition must be justified in writing and all available documentation of the provenance should accompany the remains. Uppsala University can only accept human remains from private persons and legal persons in exceptional cases, if special grounds exist for doing so. When an inquiry is received, the Vice-Chancellor takes a decision following internal consultation.

De-accessioning does not normally take place, but human remains without a known context can be transferred within Uppsala University, and in certain cases to other universities in Sweden, if the transfer benefits teaching and research at the universities. If remains that lack documentation and a context cannot be kept or used for teaching, they may be cremated and buried. This is subject to decision by the museum director responsible.

Documentation and information management

Human remains, like other materials, are to be inventoried, documented and provided with identification numbers and location documentation by museum staff responsible for collections. The museums are responsible for documentation of human remains, preserving basic information for internal use in the museums' own databases and/or in their physical archive records, together with information updates (e.g. provenance investigations or DNA analyses). The museum director responsible for the collection decides on making information available in online databases such as ALVIN.

Research and sampling

Permission to conduct research on human remains can be granted upon application from a researcher affiliated to a research institution. A research explanation document and, if relevant, sampling record form, are required, clearly stating the qualifications of the researcher, purpose of the study, material to be examined and, if applicable, amount required for sampling, as well as expected new research results along with information about planned publication. Uppsala University does not grant access to human remains that are the subject of ongoing repatriation proceedings.

If a study and/or sampling is approved, it must be carried out in consultation with, and if necessary in the presence of, authorised museum staff. Destructive analysis is only allowed in exceptional cases. A report on the results must be delivered to Uppsala University within four years of the time of sampling.

Access

Uppsala University's collections of human remains should be regarded as a resource for students and researchers at universities and other scientific institutions. Students and researchers granted access to the collections must comply with the museums' regulations and respect human dignity. The general public is given access to the museums' collections in exhibitions. The relevant museum director decides on exceptions; such decisions are not subject to appeal.

Exhibitions and educational activities

One of the purposes of having human remains at Uppsala University is that they can be used in presenting research results, illustrating evolutionary trends or the status of humankind within the biological sciences, and shedding light on past living conditions and historical attitudes to dead bodies. Human remains can also be shown in exhibitions, e.g. in order to explain the value of the collections and various biological aspects associated with past and present research on the development of humankind. Exhibitions must be produced with due consideration for ethical values and norms for the museum profession drawn up by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). When human remains are exhibited, the context must always be made clear and explanatory texts must always accompany the exhibited remains.

Image management

The museums of Uppsala University are to adopt a restrictive approach to the publication of images of human remains, with the exception of photographs taken in scientific contexts, e.g. during archaeological excavations. Photographs may and should be taken for the museums' own internal documentation and inventories, and some of these photographs may be published in scholarly publications. An application must be made to the museums of Uppsala University and permission granted in order to publish photographs of human remains in scholarly contexts or show them in public exhibitions. Photographs of human remains from indigenous ethnic groups are not normally to be published. If such publication is nonetheless to occur, this must be done in dialogue with and with the permission of any groups concerned. Photographs must not be manipulated or used in unethical connections, nor may they be modified without permission or used for commercial purposes. Uppsala University's own photographers must always be used. Photographs taken by visitors to exhibitions or by students during teaching sessions may be used for personal purposes but not disseminated.

Loans and depositions

The museums of Uppsala University are to adopt a very restrictive approach to outward loans of human remains. Special application is required. Scientific studies should, as far as possible, be conducted in the premises where the collections are housed. If human remains are temporarily

loaned, e.g. to an exhibition or for research, the purpose and use must be clear, as must responsibilities. An institution must be the recipient and provide a secure location for the purpose where the material will be analysed/stored/displayed. The material must be treated in an ethically acceptable manner, including during transportation. The same applies to inward loans. The receiving institution is responsible for the return of loaned material. Temporary depositions of human remains can be allowed in special circumstances after an approved application, which must include reasons and be accompanied by documentation of the provenance of the remains.

Repatriation and burial

Decisions in all matters relating to return (repatriation) and (re)burial are taken by the Vice-Chancellor after consultation. If the Vice-Chancellor decides in favour, the matter is forwarded to the Government, which may approve or reject the request. Anyone who wishes to request repatriation of human remains must send a formal inquiry to Uppsala University. It will be registered there as a matter received by the authority. Any such inquiry must be accompanied by information elucidating and substantiating the inquirer's legitimate claim to request repatriation. When the inquiry has been received, the museum concerned must:

1. Act promptly by withdrawing the remains concerned from research and beginning the necessary work of investigation and documentation. Each case is assessed individually, taking scientific, ethical and cultural aspects into account and investigating the legitimacy of the recipient's claim. A dialogue is begun with the claimant/recipient and is pursued throughout the process.
2. Deliver briefing material to the Vice-Chancellor of Uppsala University who will decide whether a request for permission for repatriation and/or (re)burial is to be sent to the Government.
3. If (re)burial is approved, the remains must first undergo thorough scientific documentation. The documentation is to be preserved at the museum concerned and can be used for future scientific purposes.

Responsibilities

Each case is processed at the museum where the remains are housed. The museum directors are responsible for the collections of their museums.