ARCHAEOLOGICAL ETHICS AND THE TREATMENT OF THE DEAD

by

Paul G. BAHN

"Science is not an absolute to which all things have to be subordinated and eventually sacrificed, even the dignity of man"

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 1987.

ABSTRACT

Focusing on the issue of ethics, and the question of the return and reburial of human remains and grave-goods, this paper examines archaeology's previous attitude of indifference to the wishes of outsiders and its current obligation to face up to responsibility for its actions, both past and present. Compromises are rapidly being reached by many museums and institutions, but some areas of uncertainty are outlined that remain to be settled. It is argued that while not a vital discipline in itself, archaeology does have some noteworthy contributions to make to the good of humankind, and in particular it can serve to strengthen the cause of the very groups who are at present opposing some of its practices.

INTRODUCTION

The above statement, made in a debate concerning test-tube babies and surrogate mothers, is equally relevant to the question of archaeological ethics and the limitations of archaeological knowledge.

Despite the wishful thinking of some archaeologists (particularly those still attached to the so-called "New Archeology", that brave new world of the 1960s) who cannot bear to admit that there are things we shall never be able to find out about the past, archaeology is not a true science. Certainly it draws on many scientific techniques, and uses many of the same procedures of logic and interpretation as the hard sciences, but it is nevertheless inevitable that the subject remains closer to history : we simply cannot prove anything much about past events, and the best we can aim for is a very simplified model with some degree of probability based on inference, analogy, many assumptions and extremely patchy evidence.

Should archaeology's inherent limitations, therefore, impose limitations on its practice? In other words, since the discipline cannot aspire to "truth", or the "real past" or to anything more than a temporary set of hypotheses and a wide consensus, should it be accorded any overriding significance ?

As I have mentioned elsewhere (Bahn 1989), when I first began to study archaeology over 18 years ago it was a self-important and self-satisfied discipline, carried out predominantly by people from the wealthiest nations. They seemed to feel free to investigate whatever and wherever they wished, with only warfare, natural hazards or economic difficulties (lack of funds, equipment or personnel) to set limits to their activities. I cannot recall ever encountering a single word about ethics in lectures or textbooks at that time (see also Zimmerman 1989), except for one paper on "Ethics in Archaeology" (Thomas 1971) which dealt primarily with the moral duty to seek fresh data.

Where the dead were concerned, there were numerous accounts in print about how to excavate graves or skeletons, with an intense concentration on funerary rites, orientation of grave/body, presence/absence/type of grave-goods; but not a word about whether one had the right to disturb the dead in this way, let alone any suggestion of sounding out the indigenous people's feelings on the matter. When asked about disturbing the dead, in a 1973 TV interview, Sir Mortimer Wheeler merely claimed this was a sentimental tradition, and the excavation of graves did no harm (quoted in Bahn 1984:128).

The whole purpose of archaeology seemed to involve obtaining "knowledge about the past" so that it could be passed on first to the archaeological community (for purposes of career advancement and peer respect), then to the educated public, and lastly (though rarely, if ever) to the rest of humanity. To a large degree this is still true in many parts of the world; but in a few key areas, archaeologists have been rudely awakened from their idyllic reverie.

It was in the late 1970s that the first rumblings began to reach Britain about the anger of native peoples in North America and Australia, and of ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel, towards the disturbance, analysis and display of ancestral human remains. I was eventually prompted to put together what was, I believe, the first paper to appear in Europe on this topic (Bahn 1984), which concentrated on the historical aspects of the problem. I followed this with a second (Bahn & Paterson 1986) which examined the position of moral philosophy, and which is still, as far as I am aware, the only attempt to do so despite the importance of morality to this issue.

In the countries concerned – above all Canada and the USA, Australia and New Zealand – the 1980s have seen a radical transformation of the situation. What began as a curiosity in the press, an excuse for editors to print witty titles about "Bones of Contention" or "Skeletons Rattling", has quickly become big news, covered at length in publications such as *National Geographic*, *Newsweek* and countless newspapers, and the subject of television documentaries (completed or forthcoming) in several countries.

But its greatest impact has been not so much on the media as on the academics, with special committees formed by archaeological and anthropological associations and by museums to discuss the issue, and with an international congress held in 1989 at Vermillion, South Dakota. The aim of the committees has been to thrash out policies which will go some way towards

settling the demands of the objectors while limiting the damage to existing collections and the threat to future excavation and research.

Inevitably, it is the extremists whose views are heard most often, because they are the most active and vociferous, and because the press is far more interested in conflicts than in agreements. On the one hand there are those academics who oppose any interference with their work, any return of skeletal material or artifacts, and any reburial. On the other, there are indigenous groups, often self-appointed representatives for entire nations, who insist on the return and reburial of all such material, and who inevitably use the issue as a political football, since skeletons and museum collections are a highly visible (and, dare one say, convenient) symbol of past oppression and of current struggles for rights of all kinds. Human remains are an emotive issue, and it is all too easy to cast the academics as unfeeling racists or patronizing colonists who treat the remains as mere data.

It should always be borne in mind that by no means all past disturbance of the dead was carried out by archaeologists, and it was not limited to the remains of foreign native peoples (see Bahn 1984; 1989). Moreover, although it is archaeologists who actually unearth much of the material, it is physical anthropologists who tend to study and curate it, the archaeologists being more interested in a grave's layout and artifacts.

One American museum curator informed me recently that in the past twenty years fewer than half a dozen archaeologists had come to examine any of his museum's collection of human skeletal material, whereas literally hundreds of physical anthropologists (both students and professionals) and medics had done so. Yet some of the committees and decision-making bodies involved with the reburial issue have failed to consult, let alone include, any physical anthropologists.

Consequently, while it is archaeologists who have borne the brunt of the attack from objectors so far, it needs to be realized that a trinity of characters has equal involvement in this issue; the archaeologist (disturbance and removal), the anthropologist (analysis) and the museum curator (storage and display).

This is not to imply that archaeologists are apathetic to the questions of study and curation : indeed, many of them are vehemently opposed to the return and reburial of skeletal remains. Their view may sometimes spring from a particular interest in this material per se – though, as mentioned above, few of them ever bother to look at it, and very little is taught in archaeology classes about human remains. Yet one might expect those who study the record of past human activities to be interested above all in the remains of the very people who produced that record. In fact, several reviewers of a forthcoming textbook on archaeological methods (Renfrew & Bahn 1991) have expressed surprise (and some satisfaction) that, unlike other similar texts currently available, it devotes a whole chapter to the wide range of methods which can extract a wealth of information from human remains.

Rather, most archaeological objections to the return and reburial of skeletal material tend to be of the "thin end of the wedge" variety : that is, if the skeletons go, can the artifacts be far behind? Some native groups have already begun to include grave goods in their demands for the return of material, and archaeological alarm is growing.

While few archaeologists, other than extremists, can have any great objections to the return of recent skeletal remains, or of those collected under horrific circumstances (such as the Crowther collection of Tasmanian remains), there is considerable disquiet about the reburial of bones that display important clues to cultural behaviour : some of Australia's Coobool Creek skulls, for example, had been artificially deformed during infancy (see Mulvaney 1989), and therefore could be argued to be, in a sense, "artifacts" as well as human remains.

The main argument put forward by anthropologists against reburial of human remains is that no analysis is ever definite, and that new techniques are constantly arising which enable new questions to be asked and which help to improve the information already acquired. Exactly the same can be said by archaeologists of their artifacts, and the argument is indisputable; this was brought home to me quite forcefully when compiling the above-mentioned textbook which, had it been written when I started my studies, would have been a fraction of the size, and which never ceases to grow : several new methods had already appeared between the writing of the text and the arrival of proofs! New analyses of all kinds in archaeology and anthropology are proliferating, with isotopic analysis and genetic studies in particular offering remarkable and unexpected breakthroughs.

On the other hand, it is equally true that, in tandem with these new techniques, there is a tendency for ever smaller amounts of material to be analyzed; radiocarbon dating can now be done on minute fragments, and the genetic techniques also need very tiny quantities of material.

Human remains and burials have been of major importance in the history of archaeology, but they are still only a small part of what archaeologists study. Since we know of far more archaeological sites today than could be investigated by all living archaeologists in several lifetimes, and since there is an immense backlog of unpublished excavations and finds in museums and institutions, there is really no excuse for research excavation of burials at present, and in fact they have largely ceased in many parts of the world. Most archaeological encounters with the dead now come from salvage excavation : so the basic questions are how to deal with "salvaged" graves, and what to do with the remains already unearthed (whether by grave-robbers, archaeologists or bulldozers) and curated.

With regard to what has already been removed from the ground, we should consider whether we really need to hold on to everything for ever. Our museums overflow with material that nobody ever looks at, and even the most eminent institutions face ever-growing problems of disintegrating objects and of insufficient funds and storage-space. Quite apart from ethics, therefore, there are good practical reasons for relieving some of this pressure.

This could be achieved in part by returning much material to those who have petitioned for it and who have solid and sincere reasons for their demands.The floodgates are unlikely to open, and visions of empty museums are a fantasy; there will always be thousands of skeletons available for study, which are preserved in museums around the world, and which nobody wishes to rebury. Even in the most sensitive areas such as America and Australia, indigenous views on the issue vary widely, and a growing number of local communities are in favour of some analysis of remains, provided that their permission is sought and that the resulting information is explained to them. Supplies of new specimens are not going to dry up, since

salvage excavations will certainly continue and graves will go on popping up unexpectedly – indeed, the pace will increase in the face of intensifying development and construction.

In other words, the reburial of some collections is probably far less of a blow to "science" than it might at first appear. We have the means to make excellent casts of all material to be returned (to cater for future analyses involving external features) while the extraction of a small fragment from each skeleton (say, a tooth or bit of bone) should suffice for other new techniques which, as shown above, require ever smaller quantities of material to work on.

There remain five areas of uncertainty which need to be considered in any discussions aimed at drawing up a code of ethics on the issue of archaeological treatment of the dead (Bahn 1989).

1) Natural disturbance -v- human disturbance (construction, salvage, looting); some indigenous groups see natural disturbance (and sometimes even disturbance by the impersonal bulldozer) as part of the process of decay, and object to archaeologists interfering or "rescuing" human remains that have come to light in this way.

2) Buried remains (marked or unmarked) -v- unburied remains. There is a considerable difference between disturbing a real grave (whether purposely or not), into which someone was carefully laid, and exposing a corpse (such as the many bogbodies of northern Europe) that was tossed into a pool. It is possible that this rite was as religious as an elaborate entombment, involving a sacrifice (like the many people thrown into the cenote of Chichen Itza), but the bogbodies usually seem to have met with violent and gruesome deaths, and so could have been executed or murdered. This uncertainty is tied to

3) Burials of people whose beliefs are known -v- those with unknown beliefs. It goes without saying that we know nothing definite about prehistoric beliefs, while so far there have been no objections by descendants to disturbance of many of those whose beliefs are well known to us (e.g. Egyptians, Greeks, Romans - including their intense dread of being disturbed) (Bahn 1984). This leads us to

4) Communities which object to disturbance and/or analysis -v- those which do not. This is an issue that needs to be decided at the local level, because among Aborigines or Amerindians there are widely differing views about what should be permitted.

5) Finally – and most critical in the eyes of many archaeologists and anthropologists – the problem of recent remains -v- ancient remains. As mentioned earlier, there can be few objections to the return of recent material. But the problem of a "cut-off date" is a thorny one, especially as it is often only through exhuming the dead that one can discover how old the remains are. Some native groups refuse to accept any cut-off date, seeing all pre-colonial remains in their land as being necessarily those of their direct ancestors, however remote. Archaeologists, however, argue with some justification that where Pleistocene skeletons, for example, are concerned, they should be seen as a "world heritage" rather than as local ancestors : it goes without saying that nobody knows anything at all about the beliefs and wishes of people many hundreds of generations before us, and to consider them ancestors at all is symbolism rather than fact; it is reckoned, for instance, that of the French people living in 1789, no more than 14 % have any descendants alive today after only two centuries!

CONCLUSION

In the past, archaeologists consistently failed to consult local people about their beliefs and their wishes concerning the disturbance of the dead. Nowadays, somewhat late, they are finally facing the task of explaining clearly to concerned outsiders why they feel it useful, necessary and beneficial to do work of this kind. But there is a more fundamental point to be faced : is there really any point in doing archaeology at all ? Is it necessary ?

Inevitably, the immediate answer is negative. As Glyn Daniel (1976) reminded us, archaeology is a "back-looking curiosity" – it is an intellectual game, a luxury, even a parasite (Bahn 1989). It is also a newcomer, having been around for only a couple of hundred years. The world did not start turning when archaeology began, and could get along very well without it.

The same, however, could be said of most disciplines. And archaeology does have its good points; for a start, it is enjoyable and brings pleasure to ever-increasing numbers of people who share that curiosity about the remote past or their roots. There are also some important practical benefits (other than employment for archaeologists!): these may be financial (some regions, and even whole countries depend very heavily on archaeological tourism); medical (information about leprosy, of value to the diagnosis and treatment of 12 million lepers today, can be obtained from ancient leper-cemeteries); or economic (there are projects underway to reintroduce efficient ancient methods of irrigating desert areas and of farming raised-fields in South America).

Ironically, however, in view of the political overtones of some extremist demands for the return and reburial of material, one of archaeology's major contributions has been political; it is archaeology which can prove that indigenous peoples have been present in Australia or America for tens of thousands of years. It is archaeology which brings out the lost evidence of cultural complexity and sophistication of the indigenous peoples' forebears, of the great antiquity of their traditional rituals, and which provides insights into their cultural identity.

I have argued elsewhere (1989) that mutual respect is the key to future understanding in this area, and it is highly probable that increasing numbers of indigenous communities will cooperate and even encourage archaeological endeavours once they come to perceive the benefits of the knowledge that can be obtained this way. As Mulvaney (1989:72) has aptly summed it up, "It is worth reflecting that, despite terrible violence to their graves, ancestral spirits may approve that knowledge was conveyed through centuries to present generations searching for greater cultural identity".

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