

***Human Remains: Guide for Museums and Academic Institutions.* Vicki Cassman, Nancy Odegaard, and Joseph Powell, eds. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2007. 330 pp.\***

Reviewed by Linda T. Grimm

This handsome and unique book can serve both as a reference guide and as a comprehensive manual for establishing policies related to the curation and conservation of human skeletal remains. With a title that is printed on the spine in a large and legible font and possessing a colorful yet durable pictorial cover, it is ready to be plucked off the bookshelf, quickly consulted and swiftly returned to its designated spot among other frequently used reference works. It is appropriate for students, professionals, and stakeholders who are concerned with the ethical care of human remains collections. The chapter authors include museum curators and conservators, professors, private consultants, and collections' managers from the United States, South America, and Europe. They represent the fields of archaeology, bioarchaeology, conservation, forensic anthropology, museology, and physical anthropology.

Its 17 chapters fall into a half dozen thematic groups. One concerns the mechanics and protocols of practice in relation to condition assessment, laboratory examination and analysis, treatment and invasive actions, and storage and transport. Another emphasizes the role of the curator as archivist and focuses on procedures for the systematic documentation of skeletal collections as well as the preservation of associated records. Of special note in this group is a chapter that surveys the associated records of the Kennewick Project, revealing a standard of records management to which we all must aspire. Another theme, explored in four varied chapters, centers on research and fieldwork, addressing the importance of multidisciplinary research, how to prepare for fieldwork involving the recovery of human skeletal remains, as well as the development of appropriate excavation and field laboratory regimes. A chapter on health concerns associated with handling human remains identifies significant hazards, both natural and cultural, and recommends procedures for reducing the risk of worker exposure to dangerous pathogens and substances. Additional chapters focus on indigenous concerns and perspectives, the law and human remains, and the body in the museum. The latter explores many of the complex issues associated with the public display of human remains in a revealing comparison of two recent British exhibitions, *London Bodies* (Museum of London) and *Body Worlds* (von Hagens' Institute of Plastination).

Most chapters contain at least one insert, developed from the general literature, that supplements the text discussion in significant ways. Some direct the reader to topical websites, sample documents, and sources for supplies and equipment. Others provide glossaries, case studies, instructions for casting or making beanbag supports, guidelines for the treatment of Indian people in archaeological sites, and numerous other topics. One in-house creation is a free software program called *Bones* that was developed especially to accompany the book. Available through the publisher's website, it allows the user to catalog human osteological collections, inventory records, and create inventory diagrams whose placement on the outside of storage

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boxes will help to reduce handling of the contents. The insert feature further amplifies the reference guide aspect of the volume and brings additional expertise to an already highly authoritative effort.

But this book is much more than a quick reference guide and anyone who purchases it would be seriously shortchanging themselves if they did not make the effort to digest its innovative agenda as laid out in the initial chapters and elaborated throughout the remainder of the book. Human remains, as we learn in the introductory chapter, are not just another artifact. They are a special category requiring a broad definition of curation that includes respectful research, study, collection care, policy, documentation, and education. With the 1990 enactment of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), we know there are an estimated 200,000 Native American remains held in federally sponsored institutions. No one knows the total count of all remains held in United States facilities but the general consensus is that it far exceeds that number. The starting point for institutions to improve the preservation of human remains collections is policy and Chapter 3 provides an empowering, “how to get your house in order” discussion that will be instructive for practitioners across the full spectrum of institutions housing such remains. General guidelines are provided in a discussion of three levels of policy—mission statements, collections policy, and procedures. Once the broad outlines of policy have been crafted one may consult subsequent chapters to hammer out the details that are appropriate for a particular institution. In writing a mission statement, the most elemental question, according to the editors, is to determine whether human remains actually fit into the mission of an institution. If no such fit can be demonstrated, then the institution has an ethical obligation to develop a plan, again using the guidelines provided, for transferring them to an appropriate facility. Otherwise, this revolutionary book contains all the tools needed to begin the process of creating or revising policy so as to meet the goals set by the authors: improved preservation and management practices in concert with new attitudes that approach these remains with respectful concern for their humanity.

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