

Bioethics and the treatment of human remains

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Abstract: Osteological material from archaeological context represents the value and the experience of a person who was once alive, and, at the same time, offers a valid and irreplaceable contribution to scientific research. It is then a necessity the identification of bioethical norms to regulate the treatment of skeletal remains. The Valcuvia archive offers an example of how anthropological material can be handled in university skeletal collections.

Keywords: bioethics, human remains, archive, Valcuvia, skeletal collections

Human remains recovered from archaeological contexts are valuable evidence of past culture, history, diseases that afflicted people and the remedies that were applied (1, 2) and as such it is our responsibility to preserve them from deterioration and carefully protect their entirety. Osteological remains must be considered as “culturally sensitive material” on account of their nature; they represent the person to whom the body belongs with its dignity and identity which is inscribed with symbolism as well as cultural and political significance (3). The analysis of the genetic heritage of a deceased person itself carries multiple ethical and deontological issues regarding research goals and scientific benefits that need to be carefully evaluated. DNA analysis can reveal personal information such as predispositions to genetic diseases or kinship, which also involve descendants of ancient populations. It is crucial to ensure that genetic information is used responsibly, respecting the privacy of the individuals involved and preventing any form of discrimination or misuse of the knowledge obtained (4)

Likewise, human remains provide crucial and unreplaceable support to a large number of scientific disciplines ranging from medicine to physical anthropology, thus justifying the creation of skeletal collections all over the world, which are often open to the public. In this scenario, the osteological evidence recovered from the archaeological context shows a duality represented

by what is left in the present, such as the significance of a past life, and what this material means in terms of scientific interest. The current controversies surrounding the detention and exhibition of ancient human remains reflect the complexity of the underlying ethical, cultural, and identity issues (5, 6). It is therefore evident the necessity of following a code of ethics in the exposition and collection of anthropological material, which, for Italian museums, is represented by the document “I resti scheletrici umani: dallo scavo, al laboratorio, al museo” created by the ICCD and ICA institutes (7). The human remains which are stored in universities and laboratories constitute an unusual circumstance as they do not fall under a proper legislation and the treatment reserved to them is up to common sense. However, it is often the case that the osteological material is not preserved and valued as it should, ending up being stored in unsuitable containers and handled by people who did not receive the right training. This results in a chaotic situation for both scientific purposes and ethical reasons. On these premises, the Valcuvia bioarchaeological archive created by the physical anthropology team at Insubria University, chaired by Dr. Marta Licata, wants to be a starting point for a more aware treatment of human remains in the context of university skeletal collections (8). The archive falls within the project “Paesaggi della Valcuvia. Riqualificazione ambientale attraverso un percorso archeologico: valorizzazione, tu-

tela e fruizione del Patrimonio Culturale.” funded by Fondazione Cariplo and Fondazione Comunitaria del Varesotto whose purpose is to enhance the cultural and scientific potential of local contexts. The archive stores in a single location the anthropological material recovered throughout the years in the archaeological sites of Varese Province (Italy) and it is open to all the researchers who are willing to carry out analysis on the human remains, by providing a digital catalogue which collects all the information about the skeletal evidence. The Valcuvia archive intend to conserve and valorize the osteological material, aiming to the physical preservation of the evidence and to respect and dignify what they represent.

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