

Who owns the bones? Should bodies in museum exhibits be returned home?

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From Egyptian mummies to Ötzi the Iceman, human remains are a common, if macabre, feature of museum exhibits. Writing in *Clinical Anatomy*, Dr. Philippe Charlier explores the argument that curators have an ethical obligation to return these bodies to their native communities for burial.

The recent case of the 'Irish Giant' Charles Byrne reveals that this is not an issue limited to cadavers from pre-antiquity. Byrne found celebrity in the 1780s and while his skeleton remains in the Royal College of Surgeons in London, ethics experts argue his remains should be buried at sea in accordance with his wishes.

Dr. Charlier argues that human remains in museums and scientific institutions can be divided into four categories, 'ethnographical elements' such as hair samples with no certain identification; anatomical remains such as whole skeletons or skulls; archaeological remains; and more modern collections of skulls, used in now discredited studies in the early 20th century.

After exploring case study examples from around the world, Dr. Charlier argues that the concept of the body as property is anything but clear and depends heavily on local political views and the administrative status of the human remains. The author proposes that the only precise factor permitting restitution should be the name of the individual, as in the case of Charles Byrne.

"The ethical problem posed by the bones of this 18th century individual approximates to that of all [human remains](#) conserved in public collections, displayed in museums or other cultural institutions," said Dr. Charlier. "In the near future, curators will have to choose between global conservation of all (or almost all) anthropological collections on the one hand and systematic restitution to their original communities or families on the other."

More information: Philippe Charlier, 'Naming the Body (or the Bones): Human Remains, Anthropological/Medical Collections, Religious Beliefs, and Restitution', [DOI: 10.1002/ca.22358](https://doi.org/10.1002/ca.22358)

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