

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND : POLICY ON HUMAN REMAINS

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Introductory Statement

The National Museum of Ireland (NMI) includes human remains among the collections it holds on behalf of the State. These collections are held by separate departments of the Museum.

The Museum endeavours to provide the best possible standards of care for the human remains in its collections.

The National Museum of Ireland is committed to treating all human remains in the museum's collections with respect and with due regard for their dignity as human beings.

The Museum will not knowingly collect or display the remains of identified individuals nor will the Museum collect or display remains in instances where less than one hundred years is known to have elapsed since the time of death.

The Collections

The Irish Antiquities Division curates a collection of human remains largely of Irish origin. It is a valuable resource for ongoing archaeological, anthropological and medical research. Most of the remains have been found in the course of archaeological excavation. The Museum acquires human remains that have been excavated scientifically in archaeological context. In the case of post-medieval and modern remains any decision to acquire will usually be on the recommendation/s of an osteo-archaeologist or other relevant specialist that a given assemblage is of a high level of scientific importance.

The Irish Antiquities Division also holds some non-Irish human remains including those forming part of the ethnographical and Egyptian collections. These collections have not been added to for many years and it is Divisional policy not to acquire any further human remains in these categories. The beliefs and traditions of communities of origin will be respected in terms of the storage and display of these collections.

The Natural History Division holds a small number of human remains that were acquired for exhibition purposes or as comparative specimens for bone identification purposes. The policy of the Division is not to acquire any further human remains.

The Art & Industrial Division also holds a small collection of human remains from historical sources. The policy of the Division is not to acquire any further human remains.

Legal Background

The term 'archaeological object' is specifically defined in the National Monuments Acts 1930 to 2004 and includes human remains of all periods.

The NMI is obliged to claim all archaeological objects on behalf of the State that have no known owner at the time that they are found. Any altering of skeletal material for scientific purposes or otherwise is subject to ministerial licensing under the terms of the National Monuments Acts, applications being assessed by the curatorial staff of the Irish Antiquities Division.

The NMI is also committed to the appropriate treatment of human remains from archaeological contexts due to its obligations under the provisions and ethos of a number of European and international legal instruments. These include The European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage (Valletta Convention) and the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage.

Policy : Excavation

The Director of the National Museum of Ireland is a consultee in the issue of excavation licences and Ministerial Directions and Consents under the terms of the National Monuments Acts.

In the course of this consultative process, all method statements which suggest the presence of or likelihood of discovery of human remains will be examined in detail. Recommendations will be made where necessary concerning their excavation, recording and subsequent treatment.

In recent years, thousands of skeletons have been excavated in developmental context to make way for developments such as new road schemes and urban building projects. The NMI will endeavour through its statutory role to ensure that developers meet their responsibilities to the treatment of human remains at every stage from discovery, through excavation, documentation and analysis to the point of museum acquisition and storage.

It is NMI policy that excavators should have arranged access to the services of an osteo-archaeologist both on site and for purposes of post-excavation analysis and reporting.

Policy : Display

The NMI undertakes to display human remains respectfully and in a dignified manner with a view to communicating scientific and educational information to the public.

Policy : Reserve Collections

The NMI will ensure that human remains are curated separately from other collections and in accordance with best conservation practice.

Every effort will be made to facilitate access to individuals with legitimate research interests.

Knowledge Creation through Study of Human Remains

The NMI retains human remains as a scientific resource and for purposes of research, display and knowledge creation.

Apart from archaeological considerations, the study of human remains has the capacity to add a unique dimension to our knowledge of disease through time, and to assist research in the areas of forensic science and genetics.

All archaeologically significant human remains will be retained for study and with a view to the potential of future research.

Case by case consideration

Every instance of discovery of human remains in archaeological contexts will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis and the NMI will seek to consult effectively with archaeological colleagues excavating in the field, with the National Monuments Section of DoEHLG and with any relevant departments, organisations sister institutions or other interested parties.

The majority of human remains from archaeological context will be retained for research purposes.

However, proposals for **reburial**, especially of material of a more recent date, will be considered on a site-specific basis and taking account of the recommendations of the excavators and osteo-archaeologists involved.

Consultation and Review

The NMI acknowledges the legitimate interest of the public in the treatment of human remains discovered in archaeological context.

The views of local communities will be welcomed and taken into account by the Museum.

This policy will be reviewed periodically, in the light of new scientific developments and in view of proposals that may be made by professional practitioners, policy makers and members of the public.