

# Foreword

Jane E. Buikstra

This is a timely and important theme issue of *Advances in Archaeological Practice*. Guest editors Carolyn Freiwald and Katherine Miller Wolf bring together contributors who care deeply about the ethical, legal, and methodological best practices in the conservation of human remains excavated from archaeological contexts. Today, bioarchaeology is providing ever-increasing amounts of information crucial for interpretations of ancient people and their lifeways, ranging from genetic heritage to diet and residence history. Undoubtedly, innovative methods and interpretative constructs will continue to develop in the future. Therefore, the conservation of both recently excavated and legacy collections should be an important priority for archaeologists and curators alike.

The case studies in this issue here illustrate a range of conservation challenges faced in curating organic materials, including human remains. Plumer-Moodie and colleagues illustrate the challenges faced when provenience information, including site, is missing. They report initial study of the mixed collection accumulated by Fr. Dieckman, perhaps primarily from the Moho Caye location in Belize. A remarkable amount of life history data derived from the remains inform about these individuals, which may ultimately serve as a proxy for site location and chronological placement. In Mongolia and China, where bioarchaeological studies are relatively recent, Lee has also faced many conservation challenges, which include both frozen and desiccated mummies. Under such circumstances, it is important to offer advice and educational efforts without appearing overly critical. In doing so, cultural sensitivity is especially important.

When excavating and conserving human remains, it is crucial to know both pertinent laws and attendant ethical standards, which are region-specific, as Freiwald, Miller Wolf, and Lee underscore in this issue. We must comply with the letter of the law, such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the United States, but as Powless and Freiwald stress in this issue, we should also fulfill the spirit of the law, frequently meaning consultations with descendant communities. Recently, a genomic study of remains from Chaco Canyon in the North American Southwest without consultation created inordinate ill will on the part of indigenous communities (Balter 2017). This could and should have been avoided. In this issue Powless and Freiwald also remind us of the realities attendant in implementing NAGPRA and related California laws, which are largely unfunded mandates that affect tribes as much as they do institutions holding archaeological collections. They also describe ways in which archaeologists and tribes can collaborate to advance mutual goals.

Extending the consideration of ethical concerns, several of the authors in this issue question whether it is ethical for archaeological projects to excavate at all without provision for conservation and

long-term curation. This important point merits discussion in classrooms and planning sessions for archaeological projects. A dose of reality is provided by Miller Wolf's experience with curating the important human remains excavated over more than a century from the Copán pocket, standing both as a cautionary tale concerning the need for proper curation immediately following archaeological excavation and as a testament to the monumental effort expended to organize and conserve this collection.

Turning to issues surrounding best practices, Freiwald, honed by extensive experience with imperfectly preserved remains of the ancient Maya, advises readers about efficient methods for excavators unfamiliar with human skeletal anatomy. These are helpful for capturing field data maximally useful for laboratory reconstructions of context. Contextual data collection efficiency can also be promoted by the digital methods discussed by Novotny, while Wrobel and colleagues illustrate photogrammetry designed to capture skeletal data for remote access. This has the advantage of global accessibility and minimizing handling of oft-delicate skeletal remains. Another time-consuming excavation and analytical problem, commingled remains, is addressed by Osterholtz in her description of a freely available database.

Several general models for best practices in excavating and curating human remains are presented here, including the well-informed advice from Beaubien, a trained conservator. Beaubien and Freiwald both encourage the removal of remains en bloc for recording and conserving in laboratory contexts. They do not, however, recommend this as a long-term strategy. Archaeologists too frequently remove burials en bloc with no firm plan for further excavation and curation, other than that "they" (meaning leprechauns, perhaps?) will take care of this in the lab, with serious consequences as highlighted by Miller Wolf. Prevedorou and I illustrate that in Greece, while leprechauns are apparently in short supply, partnerships with conservator training programs and internships can effectively advance en bloc burial curation efforts. Prevedorou and I have formed such partnerships, with mutually beneficial results.

In sum, the excavation and conservation of human remains need not be daunting for archaeologists, as the sage advice offered in this issue makes abundantly clear. The effort, however, does require knowledge of the importance of contextual information, for which expedient digital data collection methods are increasingly available. Inextricably linked is the requirement for sufficient expertise, materials, and secure storage space to ensure that curation needs are met. Sensitivity to ethical concerns is essential; educational outreach is worthwhile. The authors represented in this edited issue should be congratulated for bringing their knowledge of best practices to the archaeological and bioarchaeological communities. While curation

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may not be as glamorous as field excavation, it is essential for the generation of knowledge and an ethical responsibility for those who dig. These authors and editors should be commended for this timely and well-informed reminder.

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