



# **National Museums NI**

## **Human Remains Policy**

**Approved:** 6<sup>th</sup> May 2025

### **Introduction**

National Museums NI is responsible for human remains in both the Irish Archaeology and the World Cultures collections. In addition, there is one human hair specimen in the Modern History collections.

National Museums NI does not hold human remains less than 100 years old, which would require a licence under the Human Tissue Act (2004). National Museums NI has developed this policy in accordance with the DCMS Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums (2005).

This policy should be read in conjunction with the National Museums NI Collections Development Policy, National Museums NI Collections Care and Conservation Policy, National Museums NI Collections Information and Access Policy, and National Museums NI Research Policy.

### **1. Working Principles:**

- 1.1 National Museums NI recognises that human remains have unique status in museum collections as the remains of living persons. We will therefore care for them in a respectful way, while also making ethical judgments on if and how the collections should be made available for research, display and learning.
- 1.2 In relation to human remains in the World Cultures collection, we are committed to consulting with representatives of source communities, other museum professionals and those with relevant expertise, to ensure that all culturally-sensitive items are cared for appropriately. It is recognised that, as cultures differ, what is appropriate for one group of remains may not be appropriate for another. The Registrar and the Curator of Modern History will be the first points of contact for any queries relating to these cultural considerations.

1.3 We are guided by the ethical principles set out in the 'Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums' (DCMS 2005), 'Code of Ethics of Museums' (Museums Association 2015) and 'ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums' (2004). For these and other relevant documents please see the References section below.

1.4 This policy will be reviewed and updated regularly. Date for next review: May 2028.

## **2. Definition of Human Remains:**

2.1 Human remains are the bodies, and parts of bodies, of once living people from the species *Homo sapiens*. They include bones, teeth, skin and other organs, body fluids and slide preparation of human tissue. The Human Tissue Act (2004) does not include hair and nails as 'human remains', but these are included in the National Museums NI World Cultures inventory for transparency due to their cultural significance in some societies.

2.2 Where human remains have been modified or incorporated into cultural objects, together with other materials, such objects are also considered to be human remains.

2.3 We recognise that items in museum collections other than human remains may also be culturally sensitive. These include other depictions of human remains or people now deceased, and museum records relating to human remains.

## **3. Collections Descriptions:**

3.1 There are ninety-seven records of human remains, primarily human bone pieces, in the Irish Archaeology collection, including unaccessioned material and assemblages within excavation material. The World Cultures collection contains forty-three recorded instances of human remains, including the mummified remains of a young woman from ancient Egypt, Takabuti, and items made with human hair, which is sacred in some societies.

3.2 The Irish Archaeology collection spans the time when people first arrived in Ireland c.8000BC to around AD 1600. The majority of human bone assemblages within this period are derived from excavations. These include some of the pioneer excavations of Neolithic sites during the mid-20th century; Bronze Age cremations and a significant collection of human remains from the medieval urban excavations at Carrickfergus, County Antrim. National Museums NI is no longer involved in undertaking excavations or acquiring excavated material. There have been two important acquisitions of human remains since the last iteration of this policy – the skeleton of a Viking woman from a burial on Rathlin Island (acquired 2022), and the bog-preserved human remains of an Iron Age young woman found in Bellaghy (acquired 2024).

3.3 The World Cultures collection illustrates the history and life of Indigenous peoples around the world, and is a reflection of human relationships, as well as relationships to nature and spirituality. It also reflects our history of both imperialism and globalisation. It includes the Ethnography collection of approximately 4,500 items (modern material from Asia, Africa, Oceania, the Americas, and the Arctic largely collected during the 18th and 19th centuries)

and the Non-Irish Antiquity collection (material from early history to medieval times, from outside of Ireland, with many items from Ancient Egypt). There are twenty-seven records for human remains in the Ethnography collection and twelve records for human remains in the Non-Irish Antiquity collection. In 1991, one Maori ancestral remain was repatriated to New Zealand and in 2022 two ancestral remains and five sacred objects made with human hair, bone and teeth were repatriated to Hawaii. Three further ancestral human remains were repatriated to Hawaii in 2025. Provenance research and dialogue with source communities are priorities for National Museums NI, to enable further repatriations.

- 3.4 The Modern History collection covers a range of objects relating to the political, social and economic history of Ireland, including archival materials (photographs, maps, paper ephemera), paintings, books, banners, costumes, weaponry, coins, banknotes, medals and tokens. There is one record of human hair in the modern history collections - 'a gold ring with a glazed top containing human hair and in gold the letters H.J.McC'. The hair belonged to Henry Joy McCracken, beloved brother of Mary Ann McCracken, who was executed in Belfast in July 1798 for his part in the United Irish Rising of the same year. The ring was donated by the great, great-nephew of Henry Joy McCracken

#### **4. Collections Development:**

- 4.1 The human remains in the World Cultures collection were acquired prior to the Human Tissue Act (2004) and reside in a legacy collection. National Museums NI will not acquire additional human remains for the World Cultures collection.
- 4.2 National Museums NI may collect human remains for the Irish Archaeology collection within a legal, ethical and due diligence framework with full provenance, in accordance with the National Museums NI Collections Development Policy.
- 4.3 National Museums NI welcomes enquiries about the repatriation or restitution of material in the World Cultures collection, including human remains. Requests for return will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, in a prompt, transparent and sensitive manner in accordance with the National Museums NI Collections Development Policy. The final decision on the return of human remains will be made by National Museums NI Board of Trustees.

#### **5. Collections Management:**

- 5.1 Human remains will be clearly identified as such and National Museums NI will be able to provide an inventory of all human remains in the collection.
- 5.2 Cultural sensitivities regarding human remains will be documented in the object records. This may include preferences for marking human remains, any restrictions on access and any restrictions on photography.

5.3 National Museums NI will consider requests to borrow human remains by source communities (World Cultures collection) and for ethically-approved research purposes. Loans for public display will not be permitted. Any institution requesting to loan material must demonstrate it satisfies the legal, ethical and practical considerations dealt with in the Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums. Each loan request will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

## **6. Collections Care, Conservation and Storage:**

- 6.1 National Museums NI will designate a specific area for the storage of human remains, with access restrictions in place.
- 6.2 To minimise deterioration, the storage area will have stable, controlled and regularly monitored environmental conditions, and will be assessed regularly for pest activity and other risks and hazards.
- 6.3 Human remains will be stored in enclosed boxes.
- 6.4 Human remains will be identified as priority items for immediate consideration in the event of an emergency which threatens the collections.
- 6.5 Handling is to be avoided unless absolutely necessary. Latex or nitrile gloves must be worn when handling and a clean area prepared if the remains are removed from their storage units. Where possible, source communities must be consulted about any proposed handling of human remains in the World Cultures collection. During the movement and handling of human remains, all individuals involved are expected to operate with full respect at all times.
- 6.6 Any conservation treatment deemed necessary will aim to maintain the integrity of the remains. Every effort will be made to ensure that any material added to improve stability will be sympathetic, reversible in the long term and will not alter inherent characteristics such as DNA.

## **7. Research:**

- 7.1 Research proposals must be submitted to National Museums NI's Research Manager for consideration within the Collections Directorate. Approval will only be given to research proposals that align with National Museums NI's research priorities and ethical approach.
- 7.2 Access to human remains in storage will be limited to authorised National Museums NI staff, representatives of source communities (World Cultures collection) and those with approved ethical research projects.
- 7.3 For research into human remains in the World Cultures collection, attempts will be made to contact and discuss proposals with representatives from source communities. If these representatives raise any concerns about the proposed research it will not be approved to proceed.

- 7.4 If a researcher is associated with a Higher Education Institution or Independent Research Organisation within the UK and Ireland, they will be required to provide proof of ethical approval from their institution before access will be given.
- 7.5 If a researcher is not associated with such an institution they will have to provide justification for their research in accordance with the Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museum Collections (2005).
- 7.6 The information provided in 7.3 or 7.4 will be reviewed by the Research Manager, Collections Care and Curatorial staff to ensure the work is appropriate and fits within ethical guidelines. National Museums NI reserves the right to deny any research request involving human remains.
- 7.7 Any destructive sampling of human remains should take place within a clearly planned programme that has a realistic prospect of producing new and valuable information that furthers our knowledge and understanding significantly. National Museums NI's 'Destructive Sampling' form will need to be completed before a decision is made.
- 7.8 Only the minimum quantity of material required to answer a research question will be provided in all requests involving human remains. Any material removed but not destroyed during analysis should be returned to National Museums NI. These samples will be clearly labelled for where, when and why they were sampled, and by whom, and stored in secure storage.
- 7.9 All sampling will be documented by National Museums NI staff to ensure a complete history of research involving human remains is retained by National Museums NI. Any skeletal element sampled should be fully recorded and measured prior to sampling.
- 7.10 All research findings will be shared with National Museums NI to augment the history detailed in 7.8 above.
- 7.11 Digital research, including 3D-scanning and digital reconstructions of human remains, requires prior approval to ensure ethical and cultural sensitivity. National Museums NI reserves the right to decline requests that do not meet institutional standards or ethical guidelines.
- 7.12 National Museums NI must be consulted upon and give approval for planned dissemination of findings.

## **8. Display and Interpretation**

- 8.1 Human remains from the World Cultures collection will not be displayed in National Museums NI's temporary exhibitions.
- 8.2 The display of human remains from the Irish Archaeology collection in National Museums NI's temporary exhibitions will be considered on a case-by-case basis, taking into account ethical guidance.
- 8.3 National Museums NI will continue to assess the use of human remains in permanent displays and make adaptations in response to ethical best practice, current thinking and, where applicable, feedback from source communities.
- 8.4 Where human remains are incorporated in permanent displays and are clearly visible as human remains, they will be situated off the main visitor route and be clearly signposted, enabling visitors to make an active decision about whether or not to view the remains.

- 8.5 National Museums NI will ensure interpretation that accompanies the display of human remains is sensitive, rigorous and research-based.
- 8.6 National Museums NI will continue to survey audiences and stakeholders to assess current prevailing attitudes towards the display of human remains, and will utilise feedback to inform decision making.

## **9. Photography and Filming:**

- 9.1 National Museums NI will keep photographs of human remains in its collections for record purposes only. Where possible, we will seek guidance from source communities (World Cultures collection) on how these images can be ethically and sensitively retained.
- 9.2 National Museums NI and its employees will not share images of human remains on websites, social media channels or with the media.
- 9.3 Third parties will not be permitted to photograph or film human remains that are not on display, unless they represent source communities (World Cultures collection) or such imagery has been approved for genuine research purposes as outlined in Section 7.
- 9.4 National Museums NI recognises that visitors who chose to view human remains on public display may wish to photograph them, but signage will be incorporated into displays to remind visitors of sensitivities around the sharing of such images.
- 9.5 Image licensing requests for scholarly publications will be dealt with on a case by case basis. Approval to license images will need to be provided by the Director of Collections, on the recommendation of a curator.

## **References and Links**

Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2005) 'Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums' <https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/DCMS-Guidance-for-the-care-of-human-remains-in-museum.pdf>

Honouring the Ancient Dead [www.honour.org.uk](http://www.honour.org.uk)

ICOM (2004) 'Code of Ethics for Museums' <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/code-of-ethics/>

Museums Association (2015) 'Code of Ethics for Museums' <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/code-of-ethics/>

Museum Ethnographers Group (2003) 'Guidance Notes on Ethical Approaches in Museum Ethnography', Journal of Museum Ethnography 15: 157-169 and online at: [www.museumethnographersgroup.org.uk](http://www.museumethnographersgroup.org.uk)