




Among the Dead and Their Possessions: A Conservator's Role in the Death, Life, and Afterlife of Human Remains and Their Associated Objects


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AMONG THE DEAD AND THEIR POSSESSIONS: A CONSERVATOR'S ROLE IN THE DEATH, LIFE, AND AFTERLIFE OF HUMAN REMAINS AND THEIR ASSOCIATED OBJECTS

SANCHITA BALACHANDRAN

ABSTRACT—This paper argues that conservators working on human remains preserve not only the physical remnants of a once-living body, but also the traces of the narratives of a human life and its afterlife. The author examines the conservator's ethical and moral obligations to the dead and their associated artifacts, and considers the conservator's role in both dehumanizing remains into mere "objects," and in rehumanizing such "objects." These issues are explored in relation to the conservation of the remains of three specific individuals and their possessions: an ancient Egyptian female mummy now in a museum in the United States, an ancient Egyptian child excavated on an archaeological site, and a beatified Catholic nun's relics and bone fragment. The author recounts her personal interactions with these three individuals to argue that the traditionally detached, technical role of the conservator may be inappropriate or inadequate when preserving both the tangible and intangible aspects of human remains. The paper suggests that even minimal and mundane conservation practices can take on invasive qualities or new ritual significance when performed on human remains, and that respectful conservation treatments elicit an empathy for, and emotional response to, the remains themselves.

TITRE—Parmi les morts et leurs possessions: les vestiges humains et objets funéraires associés et l'impact de la restauration sur des concepts immatériels tels que la mort, la vie, et la vie après la mort. **RÉSUMÉ**—Cet article soutient la thèse que le restaurateur travaillant sur des vestiges humains permet non seulement la préservation physique de corps autrefois vivants, mais aussi des indices à propos de la vie de ces personnes et de ce qui s'en est suivi après la mort. L'auteure examine les obligations morales et déontologiques du restaurateur face aux morts et à leurs objets funéraires, ainsi que l'apport du restaurateur soit dans la déshumanisation des vestiges humains, réifiés en simples 'objets', soit dans la réhumanisation de tels 'objets'. L'auteure explore ces questions dans le cadre de la conservation de trois cas spécifiques de vestiges humains et de leurs biens funéraires: une femme momifiée de l'Égypte an-

cienne se trouvant maintenant dans un musée aux États-Unis; un enfant de l'Égypte ancienne provenant d'une fouille archéologique; et les reliques et ossements d'une religieuse catholique béatifiée. L'auteure relate son expérience personnelle dans ces trois cas pour en venir à la conclusion que l'approche traditionnelle, détachée et technique, du restaurateur n'est peut-être pas appropriée ou adéquate lorsqu'on veut préserver les aspects immatériels, ainsi que matériels, des vestiges humains. Cet article fait la démonstration que, lorsqu'il s'agit de vestiges humains, même des pratiques de conservation considérées comme minimalistes ou routinières peuvent avoir des conséquences envahissantes ou prendre un aspect presque rituel. Une approche respectueuse lors de la mise en œuvre de traitements sur des vestiges humains implique donc une sensibilité et empathie envers ces vestiges mêmes.

TITULO—Entre los muertos y sus posesiones: el papel de un conservador en la muerte, la vida y la vida después de la muerte de los restos. **RESUMEN**—Este trabajo sostiene que los conservadores que trabajan con restos humanos preservan no solamente los restos físicos de lo que fue alguna vez un cuerpo vivo, sino también los rastros de la narrativa de una vida humana y su vida después de la muerte. El autor examina las obligaciones éticas y morales con el muerto y los objetos asociados, y considera el papel que juega el conservador tanto en la deshumanización de los restos para convertirlos en "objetos" simplemente, para luego volver a humanizar tales "objetos". Estos temas son explorados en relación con la conservación de los restos de tres individuos específicos, y sus posesiones: una momia egipcia antigua de una mujer que ahora está en un museo de los EEUU, un niño egipcio antiguo excavado en un sitio arqueológico, y las reliquias y fragmentos de hueso de una monja católica beatificada. El autor relata sus interacciones personales con estos tres individuos, para concluir que el papel tradicionalmente impersonal y técnico del conservador puede ser inapropiado o inadecuado cuando se preservan tanto los aspectos tangibles como intangibles de los restos humanos. Este trabajo sugiere que aún las más mínimas y corrientes

práticas de conservação pueden adquirir cualidades invasivas o nuevos significados ritualísticos al ser practicada sobre cuerpos humanos, y que los tratamientos de conservación respetuosos producen una empatía y una repuesta emocional hacia los restos mismos.

TÍTULO—Entre os mortos e suas posses: o papel de um restaurador na morte, na vida e na vida depois da morte de restos humanos e objetos associados. **RESUMO**—Este trabalho argumenta que os restauradores que trabalham com restos humanos preservam não somente os restos físicos do que foi algum dia um corpo vivo, mas também os rastros da narrativa de uma vida humana e sua vida após a morte. O autor examina as obrigações éticas e morais com o morto e objetos a ele associados, e considera o papel que desempenha o restaurador tanto na desumanização dos restos mortais para transformá-los em simples “objetos” quanto na re-humanização de tais “objetos”. Estes temas são explorados em relação à restauração dos restos de três indivíduos específicos e suas posses: uma múmia egípcia antiga de uma mulher atualmente em um museu nos Estados Unidos, uma criança egípcia antiga escavada em um sítio arqueológico, e as relíquias e fragmentos de ossos de uma freira católica beatificada. O autor relata suas interações pessoais com estes três indivíduos para concluir que o papel tradicionalmente impessoal e técnico do restaurador pode ser impróprio ou inadequado quando se preservam tanto os aspectos tangíveis quanto intangíveis de restos humanos. Este trabalho sugere que ainda as práticas mais simples e mundanas de restauração podem adquirir qualidades invasivas ou novos significados ritualísticos ao serem praticadas sobre corpos humanos, e que os tratamentos de restauração respeitosos produzem uma empatia e uma resposta emocional para com os restos mortais em si.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Nobody’s dead.” (Cordova 2006, 71)

Are human remains individuals, objects, or art? The growing anthropological, museological, and conservation literature suggests that human remains confound simple categorization, and in fact slip between these designations, often making discussions on their appropriate and respectful care uncomfortable and contentious (Brooks and Rumsey 2007b). Even the term “human remains” is vaguely defined and redefined

from one author to the next: it may refer only to skeletal or body fragments; include the artifacts once placed in situ with the human body; or encompass the grave markers, the site, or even the landscape associated with the burial (Curtis 2003; Cordova 2006; Goodnow 2006b; Cassman et al. 2007). Sledzik and Barbian (2001, 227) trace the root of “remains” to the Latin *maneo*—to stay, last, or endure—and ask, “What part of the remains is taken away?” Indeed, the essential animating aspect of human remains, i.e., the living person, may no longer exist, but the values associated with the remaining body and its associated artifacts continue to live and change. Given the mutability of these values, Goodnow (2006b) suggests questioning assumptions about human remains, that they are always sacred and are all of equal significance, that they hold the same importance for all people even within the same cultural group, that their meanings remain static over time. Such ambiguities highlight the complex, deeply emotional, and ever-changing values associated with death, and the dead and their commemoration.

Parker Pearson (1995) and Curtis (2003) suggest that unlike previous historical periods during which the death of family members or the viewing of human remains attributed to specific saints in religious ceremonies was a familiar experience, the present day public rarely experiences death in such a direct manner. Today, death is confronted more often within the context of a museum or academic institution or on television than in daily life. The mummy in the museum, the recreation of an archaeological excavation with a real or cast skeleton, or more recently, the plastinated sculptures of human bodies by Gunther von Hagens and others, have become the most common means of accessing the dead. These individuals, objects, and art are usually safely displayed at some distance from the onlooker, or placed behind a protective physical and emotional boundary of Plexiglas, and separated from the viewer’s own time by a wall label describing them as ancient or from a distant geographic region (Cordova 2006; Goodnow 2006a).

For some viewers, this physical and temporal distance is both expected and necessary. However, members of descendant and/or religious communities, as well as professionals such as archaeologists, curators, anthropologists, and conservators, may require direct access to these human remains in order to maintain their cultural or religious practice, or fulfill their professional responsibilities, respectively. However, the claims that these different groups

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make on human remains are often at odds with one another, a situation that has given rise to legal battles as well as mutual mistrust and a lack of collaboration. These problems can be traced in much of the existing literature on the care and protection of human remains, that can be broadly described as split into two major concerns. One main area of interest is that of scientific data, i.e., the archaeological and technical information gleaned from the physical body. The other significant concern relates to the moral, ethical, and legal issues associated with human remains, and often focuses on policies related to the possession, repatriation, and display of human remains. The conservation literature often falls in between these two areas, emphasizing the ways in which our profession engages both the tangible and intangible aspects of human remains. The main publications to date evidence our unusual, often difficult and ever-evolving role in the preservation of human remains (McGowan and La Roche 1996; Johnson 2001; Pye 2001; Williams 2001; Buenger 2004; Cassman and Odegaard 2004; Cassman et al. 2007).

Often at stake is the ability of disparate groups such as religious community members, curators, archaeologists, and conservators to control, present, and interpret human remains for the general public. Curtis (2003, 30) asserts that, "Curators and archaeologists [and this author would add, conservators] are like priests or elders, with arcane knowledge and the power to control access to materials and ideas." He suggests that archaeological sites and museums often function as "sacred arenas" in the way that classical temples or churches might, as spaces "within which visitors speak in hushed tones in front of barely visible iconic treasures while the attempts of conservators to prevent decay and the invocation of posterity as our goal speaks a timelessness that is a common attribute of the sacred" (Curtis 2003, 29). Sullivan and Edwards (2004b, x) echo this idea:

The work of museums and the practice of religions resemble one another in feature and function: gathering and arranging sacred objects, displaying them to amplify their power, divining new meanings through them and playing on the contrast between appearance and concealment.

As much as the museum, archaeological site or religious space can heighten the power or sense of sacredness of human remains, they also can neutralize or purify this potentially disturbing or polluting material

by placing it within a recognizable conceptual framework, and offering a way for contemporary humans to connect with individuals from the past (Brooks and Rumsey 2007b). As will be described further in this article, these sacred and powerful spaces can impose distinctly different interpretations on human remains, and therefore demand very different responses on the part of the conservator in particular.

Unlike descendant or religious communities who make claims on human remains for repatriation, reburial, or other ritual use in the future, and the scientific communities who wish to utilize human remains (or parts of them) to answer particular research questions about the past, the conservator confronts human remains and their condition in the present moment. That is, the conservator's immediate concern is the existing physical state of the remains. However, as with objects or art works, the current physical state of human remains is deeply dependent on the history of their exhumation or excavation, the contexts or institutions in which they were/are housed, and the different values with which they were/are imbued. Furthermore, any appropriate and respectful conservation treatment must necessarily take into account their intended future use. Therefore, the role of the conservator can (and indeed must) vary significantly from each individual body and his or her burial artifacts to another, and from one context to another, but must still fall within the ethical obligations of the conservation profession.

The focus of this paper is to draw out the ethical obligations of the conservator further, and acknowledge what conservators actually do when they conserve human remains. What and whom do we preserve? Every conservation treatment is in fact an interpretation which can conceal or reveal different historical moments or aspects of an object's or a human's life. The conservator, through his or her conservation decisions, can witness, erase, commemorate, or reanimate specific moments in an individual's history. Therefore, even the most familiar and routine of conservation tasks takes on a different ritual significance because of our heightened responsibility and emotional response to human remains. Unlike more easily categorized objects and art works, the human aspect of human remains requires significantly different sensitivities on the part of the conservator, a fact that has been previously remarked upon by other conservators but merits further exploration (McGowan and LaRoche 1996; Pye 2001; Williams 2001; Cassman and Odegaard 2004; Cassman et al. 2007). Our work

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cannot simply be limited to the physical stabilization of the existing materials, e.g., holding together loose fragments of bone, skin, or body wrapping; cleaning or reassembling burial artifacts; or designing preventive conservation methods to minimize further deterioration. Concentrating solely on “physical conservation could undermine a sacred object’s conceptual significance which also needs to be preserved” (Mino 2004, 99). Conservators must therefore make conservation decisions based on a knowledge of the physical materials involved, and the history and context of the human remains, but also a personal and empathetic response to their human and intangible aspects. Finally, we must acknowledge that while our conservation interventions can change human remains, they also have the power to change us; this acknowledgement would challenge the insistence upon scientific objectivity and emotional distancing that has been a principle in the field for the last several decades.

One of the fundamental questions in the study of human remains is where the human aspect of these remains begins or ends. Can “human” be applied only to actual skeletal or tissue remnants of a burial, or is it also an aspect of the objects and artifacts created by human hands to accompany a body in death? The distinction between bodies and objects is entrenched in the legal structures of the United States and United Kingdom, where institutions or individuals may *possess* but not *own* bodies in their natural state, but can hold legal title to any objects such as a coffin or burial artifacts associated with the same body (Curtis 2003; Brooks and Rumsey 2007a). Numerous anthropologists and members of descendant and religious communities have argued that separating remains into “bodies” and “objects” ignores the deep interconnectedness of these different elements in a grave, and violates the sanctity, original intent, and conceptual integrity of the burial (Curtis 2003; Ayau 2005; Goodnow 2006b). Others have also asserted that this arbitrary separation of human remains into “people” and “things” is evidence of a late 19th and early 20th century museological practice which relegated the body to the realm of natural science and artifacts to that of social science, thus ignoring the fact that both the body and its objects were evidence of cultural production (Curtis 2003). How then should the conservator confront and respond to these distinctions in his or her work?

This article challenges the traditional distinction drawn between bodies and objects through the author’s experience conserving the remains of three different individuals and their burial artifacts: an ancient

Egyptian adult female mummy owned by Goucher College since 1895 and on loan to the Archaeological College of the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore; a skeleton of a young child and his or her bracelets dated to approximately 3050 BCE, excavated in 2002 by the University of Pennsylvania–Yale University–Institute of Fine Arts, New York University Expedition to Abydos, Egypt; and a beatified Catholic nun’s relics and bone fragment exhumed from a cemetery in Hawa’ii in 2005 and currently housed at the Sisters of Saint Francis Motherhouse of Syracuse, New York. The adult female mummy represents the most familiar definition of human remains, where the focus of the conservation was almost entirely the body, as both her accompanying burial artifacts and coffin had been separated from her at different stages after her death. In the case of the child burial, the initial focus was on the conservation of the skeletal remains. However, the bracelets buried with the child came to represent and speak for the body itself during the course of the conservation treatment. Finally, the relics once buried with Mother Marianne Cope can be defined according to Catholic canon law as “remains of honorable objects, or of saints and beatified persons” (Beck 2001, 17). Therefore, the conservation of her burial artifacts can be understood as equivalent to conserving her bodily remains. In charting the changing definitions of human remains in these three examples, the paper recounts this conservator’s personal experience negotiating the physical, technical, ethical, and emotional aspects of conserving these specific individuals.

Do the dead have agency in how we treat them and their possessions? This introduction began with the quote, “Nobody’s dead,” which takes on two different meanings. In Cordova’s article, the phrase is used by contemporary Aymara peoples to describe the unidentified human remains of their ancestors currently on display in Bolivian museums. They are “nobody’s dead” because their individual names have been forgotten; their social and genealogical connections with living people were severed during the violence of the colonial period. Certainly, this lack of a personal or cultural relationship with the dead is familiar and perhaps comforting to conservators working on human remains. In this article, the author argues that the phrase suggests another interpretation, i.e., that human remains can continue to play an active or living role, but that this requires a broadening of the conceptual framework of contemporary conservation. Curtis (2003, 27) warns that the Western secular

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tradition, of which contemporary conservation is a part:

...does not see the dead as being active agents in the world today, [so] it is difficult to see how they can be offered respect. What we can do is to acknowledge that our ethical decisions are constantly being reassessed and renegotiated in the changing contexts of the present.

Given the mutable and often unknowable aspects of human remains, then, how should the conservator proceed? In particular, when there are no descendant or religious communities to consult on the appropriate treatment of human remains, how can conservators make respectful, appropriate, and empathetic decisions? The following examples describe three professional and personal negotiations with the dead, their possessions, and the present and future meanings borne by their varying sacred and secular contexts.

2. AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN FEMALE MUMMY

The possession and display of some bodies is clearly more acceptable and expected in a museum context than others. While the display of Native American remains and burial artifacts or Maori heads, for example, is often contested by their descendant communities, other dead such as ancient Egyptian mummies, European bog bodies or medieval Caucasian Londoners are perceived of as best understood within the recontextualized interpretative museum setting (Ganiaris 2001; Vaswani 2001; Lohman 2006; Swain 2006). Their display, which is determined by the curator, and to some extent, the conservator, therefore has a significant impact on what aspects of human remains are understood by the public. What aspects then, are appropriate to reveal and conceal, and what is the conservator's role in making those aspects accessible? How does the museum change human remains, and how do conservators negotiate the changing meanings of bodies in the museum?

In January 2008, the author conserved an ancient Egyptian adult female mummy dated to the Ptolemaic period (approximately 305–30 BCE) and currently housed at the Archaeological Collection at the Johns Hopkins University (JHU). The mummy had been a macabre favorite of students and visitors to

the Collection, her aura enhanced by a muslin covering draped over her Plexiglas case which could be pulled aside to reveal a face and upper body stripped of any linen wrappings. Though a resident of Baltimore since 1895, the mummy purportedly originated from the Fayum region of Egypt, and was sold to Dr. John Goucher by "Brugsch Bey, director of the famous museum at Gizeh, near the pyramids" (*Baltimore Sun* 1895) for the collection of "curios" and other "valuable relics" (*American Newspaper* 1895) at what was then the Woman's College of Baltimore. There was nothing unusual about this purchase, as a steady trade in ancient Egyptian bodies, body adornments, and burial artifacts had been flourishing in Egypt for centuries, and grave robbing had a history dating to ancient times (Ikram 2003). In fact, there appears to have been little concern on the part of either the Egyptian sellers or the foreign buyers that graves had been violated for this commercial enterprise.

Once in Baltimore, revealing the "true" nature of the woman beneath the layers of linen was of keen interest not only to Dr. Goucher, but also to several Baltimore newspapermen who chronicled the events of the 16th of August, 1895, under such headlines as "Cut Into the Mummy" and "Unwrapping a Mummy." On that day, the body was lifted out of her coffin (now lost), supposedly inscribed with text from the Egyptian Book of the Dead and described as a "gaudily decorated case in which she had rested for two thousand years" (*Baltimore Sun* 1895). Goucher, wielding "a pair of shears" and assisted by two reporters with "tin cutting shears and... a screwdriver and a hammer" (*American Newspaper* 1895) began the task of "get[ting] underneath the wrappings of the once living object" (*Christian Advocate* 1895). However, "the Egyptian had the best of it" (*Christian Advocate* 1895), yielding only to the exposure of the elbows, the right hand and ears, and disappointing onlookers by not revealing "whether the 'woman of old' was young or aged, pretty or homely, strong in character or lacking in strength" (*Baltimore Sun* 1895). It is unknown when (or by whom) the face and upper body of the mummy were exposed, nor when her head was detached from the rest of the body at the neck, nor when a small hole was made on the left side of her chest.

Though the mummy was unveiled as a human being through the revelation of her face and upper body—both of which maintained well-preserved skin and hair—she also became a museum object, intended for display as both an historical object and a curiosity.

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Fig. 1. Mummy from the Goucher College Art Collection, before treatment. Courtesy of Goucher College.

She also continued her itinerant existence, moving first from the Woman's College (now Goucher College) to the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) in 1938, then to Goucher College in 1971, and finally to JHU where she has been on display since 1988. In her long journey from the Fayum to her current resting place, the mummy lost and regained her identity several times. When first purchased in 1895, she was identified as a "full-grown woman of the plainer class" (*Christian Advocate* 1895); in the BMA, she became the "museum Mummy" (*Focus* 1987) and by 1988, *she* had been nick-named "Boris." Only after computed tomography scans and x-rays taken at the Johns Hopkins University Hospital was her biological nature re-revealed (Young 1988). As a scientific object in addition to a museum object, the mummy was virtually dissected to determine her age (45–50 years), her weight (105 pounds in life), the presence of linen-wrapped internal organs inside her body, and the fact that she had carried at least two children to term. She also received a new name, that of the "Goucher mummy," and thus became known by her possessor.

In Spring 2008, the mummy, along with the rest of the Archaeological Collection, was slated to be moved into temporary storage. Dr. Betsy Bryan, the director of the collection, and the rest of the collections staff, were aware that the mummy's numerous journeys had exacerbated the problems associated with her inherently fragile physical condition, and supported the stabilization of the body to minimize any additional loss (fig. 1). The author first examined the mummy in November 2007, and completed the conservation treatment in January 2008, during the university's winter recess when few faculty and students were on campus. With minimal staffing of the Archaeological Collection at the time, the author generally worked alone on the mummy over a period

of several weeks, an experience which took on the sense of a vigil. The mummy was released from and then re-encased in her Plexiglas bonnet at the beginning and end of each day, respectively. This daily ritual seemed to emphasize the way in which human remains in museum contexts defy easy categorization as object or human; when covered, the mummy regressed to the status of an object, but when released, she seemed to become perceptibly reanimated. Over the course of the conservation treatment, the author felt that the mummy incrementally regained a life-like quality, and while this was gratifying at first, over time, the mummy came to seem too human, and it was a relief to replace the Plexiglas bonnet at the end of the day.

The conservation treatment began with a condition report, a familiar task that requires close and careful examination of an object, a written and photographic documentation of the existing condition and damages, and an assessment of the overall state of the object. Translating these generally objective and analytical skills to a human body, however, made the process take on a somewhat forensic quality, but it also had a voyeuristic and invasive sense as well. The experience of looking at and photographing the mummy in her state of partial undress with her thin and bare arms tenuously covering her exposed chest was uncomfortable and even somewhat repulsive. Noting all of the breaks and losses to her body, wrappings, and bituminous coverings incited a certain anger at how the mummy had come to this condition (fig. 2). Basic techniques such as exploring or gently lifting sections of the body or the wrappings with bamboo skewers or spatulas seemed prodding and invasive. In what seemed like an act of desecration, the author removed several sections of torn cartonnage that had been heaped over the mummy's damaged pelvis; while it is unknown whether this cartonnage was part of

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Fig. 2. Goucher College mummy, detail of the unwrapped sections of linen on the torso. Courtesy of Goucher College.

the body's original burial regalia, stripping away more material (even for conservation purposes) from a body that had already experienced so much loss felt insensitive and cruel.

The basic objectives of the conservation treatment were to stabilize the loose wrappings and detached bitumen, conserve the cartonnage, and remove decades of museum dirt and dust from the body. Though designed to be minimally invasive, as are most conservation treatments, it was clear at the outset that each aspect of the treatment had the potential to either erase particular moments of trauma, or commemorate and make them more permanent. For example, some of the linen wrappings torn away from the body could be returned to their original locations and stabilized to look as they did before Dr. Goucher and others unwrapped the mummy. Other wrappings were so damaged that they could not be replaced in their original locations, and had to be stabilized in the haphazard locations to which they had been pulled off the body. In this instance, the conservator was memorializing a moment of damage and violence rather than respecting the integrity of the burial. Ultimately, given the extent of damage and deterioration on the mummy, the conservation treatment could not neatly

commemorate any one moment in the mummy's history, but rather awkwardly preserved different aspects of multiple events separated in time.

Surprisingly, some of the least intrusive conservation methods seemed invasive and disturbing when performed on the mummy. Instead of adhering or sewing each dislodged piece of linen in its original location, the author chose to overlay large sections of relaid wrappings with a linen-colored polyester Stabiltex that was sewn in a few places and then gently tucked under more stable wrappings or bitumen. This method imposed minimal physical changes on the wrappings while ensuring that they were held securely in place. The similarity in color between the Stabiltex and the wrappings, as well as the transparency of this material meant that the original linen was easily visible. This aspect of the treatment was extremely time-consuming and required an intimate physical contact with the body over many days. Because of the delicacy and precision required to manipulate the wrappings, fine surgical needles, and gossamer-like Stabiltex, the author worked with bare hands rather than gloves, which deepened the sense of physically interacting with the body. Though this part of the treatment was envisioned as a relatively noninvasive one, the task

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Fig. 3. Goucher College mummy, detail of the feet showing the pinning of the Stabiltex before it could be sewn in place. Courtesy of Goucher College.

of first pinning dislodged wrappings in place, then sewing into the wrappings, and finally sliding the Stabiltex under stable areas, heightened the author's anxiety about violating the mummy's body (fig. 3). The shock of piercing or intruding upon the body was particularly powerful when the pins or needle occasionally contacted the hard bone of the mummy with a characteristic resistance. Sewing over seemingly vulnerable or private sections of her body, such as her pelvis or near her exposed upper body, was also troubling, because it was impossible not to empathize with the mummy as a fellow human being and a woman (fig. 4). Even minimal interventions such as adhering Japanese tissue bandages with Acryloid B72 over the fractured bitumen coated wrappings of the pelvis felt both invasive and futile in view of the damages the Egyptian woman had already sustained. At the same time, however, the delicate and deliberate task of applying so many bandages over her "wounds" made possible a sense of recompense for her prior mistreatment.

Ultimately, attending to the minute details of the mummy's body took on the sense of preparing her (as she had possibly been prepared thousands of years ago) for another stage of her afterlife. The final phase of this preparation involved custom-packing the mummy in a Volara- and Ethafoam-padded wooden crate, which

perhaps in some way rectified the loss of her original burial coffin. Her head and pelvis were carefully secured in place so that they would not torque during transportation. There was a palpable sense of relief when the lid of the crate was finally screwed in place, both on the part of the author and the art packers who were uncomfortable handling the mummy. But was this conservation treatment respectful? The physical stability of the mummy had been improved, but this had required both removing materials that had been part of her body for an unknown period of time, and adding new materials that were literally pierced into or adhered onto her body (fig. 5). Did these new accretions, even if attached with respectful intentions, simply add another invasive historical layer to the mummy? Will future viewers see these layers of Stabiltex or Japanese tissue paper as desecrations to the body? How, then, can we offer respectful treatment of such isolated and unclaimed human remains?

What might the ancient Egyptians have wanted? Curtis suggests that "both the open display of the body to the curious public and [a] method of concealment [such as with new conservation materials] are unlikely to correspond to the wishes of those who once buried that body" (Curtis 2003, 25). Ikram (2003, 24) notes that ancient Egyptians believed that:

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Fig. 4. Goucher College mummy, detail of the area over the torso, during treatment. The white patches are Japanese tissue paper repairs. A large overlay of Stabiltex has already been sewn to the lower section of the wrappings. Courtesy of Goucher College.



Fig. 5. Goucher College mummy, after treatment. Courtesy of Goucher College.

In addition to the physical body, a person was made up of different component parts that, when taken together, constituted an entire individual: *ren*, the name; *shuyet*, the shadow; *ka*, the double or life-force; *ba*, the personality or soul; *akh*, the spirit. A major part of Egyptian funerary religion is devoted to ensuring the survival of not only the body, but of all these components.

Furthermore, severing any of these aspects of a body would deny the individual's passage into the Afterworld. Should we therefore offer apologies for a series of circumstances which brought the remains from their consecrated burial grounds to the open display of the museum? Or should we invite viewers to offer prayers for the sustenance of the remains in the next world as solicited in the 2000 exhibition *Digging*

for Dreams at the Croydon Clocktower in England (Vaswani 2001)? The notion of respectful care has clearly changed since the mummy was mummified in ancient times, exhumed and sold and unwrapped in the nineteenth century, and conserved in 2008. In fact, traces of all of these historic moments are physically embedded in the body itself. Which of these moments should conservators and curators memorialize as a way of rehumanizing human remains?

3. AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN CHILD BURIAL FROM ABYDOS

In the interpretive space of the museum, human remains are sometimes displayed within a recreated archaeological context. This reimagined interpretive setting offers a way for “archaeological evidence to rehumanize the remains. . . [so that we don’t deny] the people of the past their humanity” (Vaswani 2001, 35). But what of the space of the archaeological site, or indeed the actual burial discovered in the course of a scientific excavation? While the curator of the museum display reassembles the elements of an excavated burial for the purposes of interpretation, the archaeologist disassembles the original burial for study and analysis. Archaeology is therefore an inherently destructive, irreversible process that affects a limited cultural resource, i.e., the archaeological site (Lipe 2000; Lynott and Wylie 2000b), and conservators on archaeological excavations participate in this process of disassembly even while they work to preserve the individual elements removed from a once-intact context. Typically, the conservator’s role involves ensuring that fragile bones or artifacts can be lifted from the ground intact, and cleaning, reconstructing, and storing these same materials so that they can be made available for study. Do the conditions of an archaeological excavation raise particular questions for the conservator preserving human remains? Are there instances in which the requirements of an excavation conflict with the conservator’s ethical concerns about the respectful treatment of human remains and their associated artifacts? How do conservators participate in both the dehumanizing and rehumanizing of remains?

Most of the remains and objects excavated from archaeological sites will not enter a museum for display. Rather, they are typically separated into skeletal remains and artifacts and stored away after being examined by appropriate specialists. Objects are often

stored according to material type for preservation purposes, and because it allows for comparisons between similar materials over different periods of time. But does this separation of bodies and objects violate of the sacredness or conceptual integrity of the burial? Ancient Egyptians clearly assembled collections of objects and goods meant to accompany and sustain the dead in the afterlife. These artifacts therefore served specific talismanic but also practical needs for specific individuals, and may in fact have been personal “belongings that served [them] in life” (Ikram 2003). This echoes the beliefs of many descendant communities who see these items as “extremely personal effects that represent an extension of the body” (Peters 2007, 130) and as essential to the “completeness of the integrity of the person” (Sadongei and Cash Cash 2007, 100). In fact, both descendant communities and archaeologists acknowledge that associated burial artifacts may reveal historic, cultural, and social information about the skeletal remains in ways that the bodies themselves may not. Are we therefore obliged to physically maintain these collections of remains intact, or is it enough for them to document them in photographs and published reports of the excavation? And are conservators complicit in interrupting or destroying the conceptual integrity of these collections for the purposes of preserving only their physical integrity?

The sacredness and importance of the vast site of Abydos, located ninety miles north of Luxor, Egypt, is affirmed by its constant use and occupation since approximately 4000 BCE. Abydos was a significant funerary site during the Old Kingdom, a cult center for the worship of the god of the dead Osiris in the Middle Kingdom, and the chosen location for an impressive New Kingdom temple built by Seti I. During the Roman/Byzantine (“Coptic”) period, Christian monks carved cells and other structures into the massive walls of the Shunet-el-Zebib, a massive mud-brick monument on site that is dated to the reign of King Khasekhemwy (c. 2750 BCE). The site continues to resonate with Egyptians today. The contemporary Coptic Christian church of Deir Sitt Damiana, which traces its foundations to the 6th century, sits at one edge of the excavation boundary of the Abydos North Cemetery. The modern minarets of mosques in the nearby town of Arabeḥ rise above the ancient walls of Kom el-Sultan and dominate the landscape in another direction. During the 2002 excavation season, a woman who had driven from the city of Sohag, some 50 km to the north, asked permission to circumbulate the active

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Fig. 6. An overall view of the child's legs and the associated bracelets, as found. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania–Yale University–Institute of Fine Arts, New York University Expedition to Abydos, Egypt.

excavation. Her Coptic Christian priest had advised her that walking around this powerful place would help her conceive a child.

Excavations began at Abydos as early as the 19th century under the auspices of such important Egyptologists as Auguste Mariette, Émile Amélineau, and Flinders Petrie, among others. Since the mid-1960s, the northern part of the vast site of Abydos has been the focus of the work of the University of Pennsylvania–Yale University Expedition under the codirectorship of Dr. David O'Connor and Dr. William Kelly Simpson. The Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, joined the expedition as a cosponsor in 1995. Beginning in 2002, the excavation has focused on investigating the funerary monuments and graves associated with King Aha of the First Dynasty (c. 3050 BCE). On Christmas Day in 2002, archaeologists uncovered the grave of a small child, the first ever juvenile burial found in this area. This highly unusual discovery immediately raised questions about the identity, gender, and age of the child. Had the child been sacrificed, and if so, why? The grave itself had the potential to answer some, but not all of these questions, as it had been previously disturbed by grave robbers which resulted in the extensive damage to some parts of the burial. The upper half of the child's body had been shattered into tiny fragments

which were scattered over the cobblestone floor of the grave. The legs, however, were perfectly articulated, and some of the original grave goods, including approximately 25 ivory bracelets and 5 lapis lazuli amulets depicting protective animals, were still in situ (fig. 6). As per excavation protocol, the body and each group of artifacts were assigned distinct numbers; while the objects received accession numbers, the body was identified as ANC 2002.36, i.e., the thirty-sixth body found at the cemetery in 2002.

In the case of this burial, there were three main priorities for the archaeologists. First, the context and its contents had to be thoroughly documented through photographs, measured drawings, and written notes, before any conservation could take place. Second, given the rarity of a child grave occupant, the osteologists wanted to lift the articulated remains in as intact a state as possible for study. Finally, the grave goods, and in particular the ivory bracelets, were to be lifted and reconstructed, if possible (fig. 7). The sequence of these archaeological priorities raised concerns for the conservation of the remains; in particular, the time required for the thorough documentation of the burial would place the bone and ivory at risk of deteriorating and fracturing further due to exposure to the fluctuating temperature and relative humidity and windy conditions of the site. Furthermore, these

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Fig. 7. Detail of the ivory bracelets as found. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania-Yale University-Institute of Fine Arts, New York University Expedition to Abydos, Egypt.

more deteriorated materials would likely require more intrusive conservation treatments or might be past the stage where treatments could be completed successfully by the time they were lifted. Nevertheless, the importance of documenting the burial took precedence over conservation intervention; the author began working closely with archaeologists to lift the remains immediately after documentation was completed (fig. 8). By the time the conservation work began, the body had formed new drying cracks, and the bracelets in particular had shattered into more fragments.

Working on human remains within a burial context is entirely unlike doing so in the neutral environment of a conservation laboratory. In this case, after descending a few meters into the subterranean environment of the child's grave, the everyday bustle of the excavation overhead disappeared and was replaced by the sense of quiet concentration. It was also physically impossible to climb out of the grave unassisted, meaning that at times when there were no workmen or archaeologists watching the work inside the grave, the space felt especially isolated and remote. Given the small dimensions of the space and the need to avoid crushing any bone fragments still in situ, the author found that kneeling at the feet of the body and leaning over the diminutive pair of legs was generally



Fig. 8. The author working with osteologist Brenda Baker to stabilize the remains in the grave. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania-Yale University-Institute of Fine Arts, New York University Expedition to Abydos, Egypt.

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the most appropriate position for carrying out the conservation treatment. This crouched position also brought the author to within inches of fractured skeletal remains, emphasizing their small size, the extent of breakages to the bone—some of which we had induced—and the poignancy of the death of such a young person. The author began bridging the numerous breaks in the child's femur, tibia, and fibula using small slivers of Japanese tissue paper coated in Acryloid B72, after advising the osteologist that these organic materials would contaminate the bone sample for future scientific analysis. While the use of tissue paper to stabilize cracks is a common conservation technique, applying these tiny bandages to the fractures on the child's legs demanded both extended periods of concentrated effort and an unusual delicacy of touch. In some areas, the bandages required additional coaxing to adhere in place, and though there were reasonable physical explanations for this, i.e., there were sand grains on the bone or the bone was too desiccated, it was difficult not to associate this with the challenge of calming an injured child. After two days of conservation work, the consolidated leg bones were finally lifted out of the grave where they had rested for five millennia; they seemed particularly tiny and vulnerable resting in a small padded box without their accompanying bracelets.

Though the skeletal remains of the child were removed from the grave, the remaining ivory bracelets seemed to anchor and maintain the sense of a continued human presence in the space (fig. 9). Because they had originally rested next to and just underneath the body, it was impossible for the author to think of them as separate objects that could be divorced from the child. The physical similarity in material, color, and types of damage between the skeletal remains and the ivory bracelets further emphasized their interconnectedness while highlighting the different ways in which the body and objects were handled on the excavation. The child's bones were precisely stabilized only along individual cracks and breaks so that the rest of the body was minimally contaminated by the consolidant and immediately available for study by the osteologists. By contrast, the bracelets had been temporarily consolidated overall with brushed applications of molten cyclododecane (CDD) to ensure that they did not deteriorate further while the legs were being conserved. Unlike the fine tissue paper bandages, the CDD applications were not neat or particularly contained; instead, the wax-like material flowed into crevices and over edges, and immediately solidi-



Fig. 9. The author stabilizing the bracelets remaining in situ after the removal of the skeletal remains. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania-Yale University-Institute of Fine Arts, New York University Expedition to Abydos, Egypt.

fied into a white crystalline needle-filled mass, as was the intention of the author. However, the unsightly appearance of this material over the delicate bracelets was shocking and seemed disrespectful, despite the knowledge that CDD would eventually sublime and leave no residue on the objects' surface. The coated, temporarily disfigured bracelets remained in situ until the skeletal remains were lifted, seeming to witness the contrasting treatment and priority given to child's body, as well as its eventual removal from the grave. When the bracelets themselves were finally lifted *en masse* out of the burial floor on New Year's Day, any real presence of the child seemed to dissipate, leaving the grave an empty container.

Once in the conservation studio, the author began the slow task of micro-excavating individual bracelets, cleaning and consolidating the fragments, and attempting to readhere them together with Acryloid B72. Due to the thinness and deteriorated condition of the ivory, even bracelet sections which appeared somewhat robust began fracturing in the author's hands. The ivory was so damaged and fragile that despite numerous efforts to reassemble the bracelets, only five were eventually reconstructed (fig. 10). The



Fig. 10. Four ivory bracelets after reconstruction. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania-Yale University-Institute of Fine Arts, New York University Expedition to Abydos, Egypt.

joins of some of these reconstructed bracelets were poorly aligned because of the extent of warpage to the individual fragments, and given the pace and demands of the excavation, there was little time for the author to spend on improving their visual appearance. While nearly every conservator is familiar with situations where the conservation treatment is either unsatisfying or cannot be completed to the level of perfection that is hoped for, the author had felt a moral obligation to reconstruct most of the bracelets, and the inability to do so induced a profound sense of guilt. This guilt was exacerbated by the knowledge that the remaining jigsaw puzzle of hundreds of bracelet fragments may never be re-assembled, as well as the awareness that these protective objects would not be placed near or displayed with the child's broken body again.

Once all of the grave contents had been lifted from the burial context and brought back to the excavation house, they were immediately relegated to distinct study spaces. The skeletal remains were given to the osteologists for study, the bracelets came to the conservation studio, and the lapis lazuli amulets and

other grave goods were briefly examined and cleaned in the conservation studio before being taken to the registrar and the archaeologists. Eventually, the skeletal remains were packed for storage with other bodies excavated in that and previous years, while the bracelets and fragments were placed in yet another storeroom. The amulets were registered by the Supreme Council of Antiquities and removed to a vast storehouse in the city of Sohag. These now disparate components of the original burial are unlikely ever to be reunited either for study or display. Unlike a museum setting where the original context might be reconstructed for interpretive purposes, the remembrance of this burial remains only in photographs and written documentation, and in the memories of those who witnessed it in situ.

Six years since the excavation of the child, some of the fundamental questions about his or her identity still remain. Though osteologists have narrowed the age to between 4 and 5 years of age, his or her gender is still unknown because of the difficulty of conducting analyses on the body within Egypt and the impossibility of taking a sample out of the country for study. Furthermore, the skeletal material may not preserve much DNA evidence, as this often does not survive well in sites that are subject to high heat (Baker 2007). The conservation treatment of the bracelets has also reached a similar stalemate. After the original conservation campaign which resulted in the reconstruction of five bracelets, there has been little time for the author or other conservators to return to this project in light of numerous other more pressing conservation treatments. While these are common concerns on any archaeological excavation, what more might we owe the inhabitants of the graves we disturb? Do our goals of advancing scientific and historical questions, and preserving the physical evidence that answers these questions, justify disassembling intact burials and disturbing the powerful personal, spiritual or religious relationships that may have existed between the human bodies and their burial artifacts?

4. BLESSED MOTHER MARIANNE COPE

The two previous examples have focused on human remains that were once part of sanctified contexts that have been recontextualized and reinterpreted in secular sacred spaces. In these cases, the conservator depends in large part on the institutional authority

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of the museum or the archaeological excavation, rather than on a descendant or religious community, to formulate his or her ethical approach to the preservation of the human remains. But what about instances where the religious and moral authority of the institution guide both the exhumation and exhibition of human remains? What new demands are placed on a conservator handling human remains that are considered active spiritual and powerful agents? Can we actually change these powerful remains and if so, do we have the authority to do so?

Recent scholarship on the conservation of living spiritual and religious heritage has highlighted the ways in which conservators may inadvertently damage or destroy the power of human remains, relics, or other sacred objects invested with religious significance (Maggen 2005; Stovel 2005; Zekrgoo and Barkeshli 2005). Thus, the advice and involvement of descendant communities and religious authorities in the decision-making process about the care and conservation of their cultural materials play a vital role in maintaining both their intangible and tangible aspects. In the Buddhist tradition, an appropriate religious authority must deconsecrate a living, sacred object before its conservation, and then reconsecrate it after the completion of the treatment in order to avoid destroying its power (Beck 2001; Mino 2004). In order to ensure the holistic preservation of Native American and First Nations religious objects and human remains, Haakanson and Steffian (2004) and Moses (1992), respectively, have argued convincingly for traditional care such as gender-specific handling, offerings to and feedings of objects, and culturally appropriate storage environments. In the Catholic tradition, relics "are typically perceived not just as reminders but remainders, not *like* but *of* the saint. . . The relic thus frequently evokes an image of being inhabited, animated by the saint, imbued with something like a 'real presence'" (Geisbusch 2007, 78). Beck suggests that relics do not require rites or prayers to be observed prior to conservation treatment as their spiritual value cannot be removed from them; however, because "saints are present not only in every single piece of their bodies, but also in everything intimately connected with them," and each individual object or fragment is bestowed with the power to mediate between the devout and God, conservators must proceed respectfully, and in consultation with the appropriate religious authorities (2001, 17).

In July 2005, the author examined and conserved fourteen burial artifacts exhumed from the grave of

Mother Marianne Cope (1838–1918), a Franciscan nun who had served the needs of leprosy patients in Hawaii for the last 35 years of her life. From 1888 onwards, she lived and worked at the Kalaupapa Settlement on the island of Molokai, an isolated peninsula where individuals afflicted with Hansen's Disease (the medical term for leprosy) were forcibly relocated and exiled beginning in 1866. An estimated 8,000 people, mainly native Hawaiians, were sent to Kalaupapa, a place described by some as a "living tomb" (Law and Wisniewski 1988, 16). As superintendent of the Charles Reed Bishop Home, Mother Marianne oversaw the medical treatment and general care of the women and children sent to the settlement. She is remembered as a woman of great fortitude, piety, and efficiency in the memoirs of many individuals who served with her. Sister Leopoldina, who went to Kalaupapa with Mother Marianne in 1888 wrote: "To me our dear Mother always seemed like a beautiful white lily so fragile and delicate suffering most of the time, yet as bright and cheerful as the morning sun, and so strong and enduring" (Hanley and Bushnell 1980, 293). In 1918, at the age of 80, Mother Marianne Cope died and was buried near the Bishop Home.

Efforts began early on to gather materials for Mother Marianne's canonization, a complex process composed of a series of stages, each with specific requirements (www.blessedmariannecope.org 2008). In 2003, she was declared heroically virtuous by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, and in 2004, Pope John Paul II named her Venerable. In 2005, she was beatified after the Vatican Medical Board ruled that the miraculous recovery of Kate Mahoney from multiple organ failure in 1993 could be attributed to Venerable Mother Marianne's intercession (www.blessedmariannecope.org/miracle_favors.html 2008). With Mother Marianne's new status as "Blessed", it was decided that her "remains should be in a church or chapel where they are secure and where they are in an accessible area for the faithful to gather to pray." (www.blessedmarriannecope.org/beatification2005.html 2008) Her remains were exhumed between January 23 and the first week of February, 2005, and "her skeletal remains. . . placed in a metal container with great reverence. . . [and] soldered shut never to be opened again without the permission of the Holy See" (www.blessedmariannecope.org/beatification2005.html 2008). In 2009, these remains in their zinc container were transferred to a newly carved

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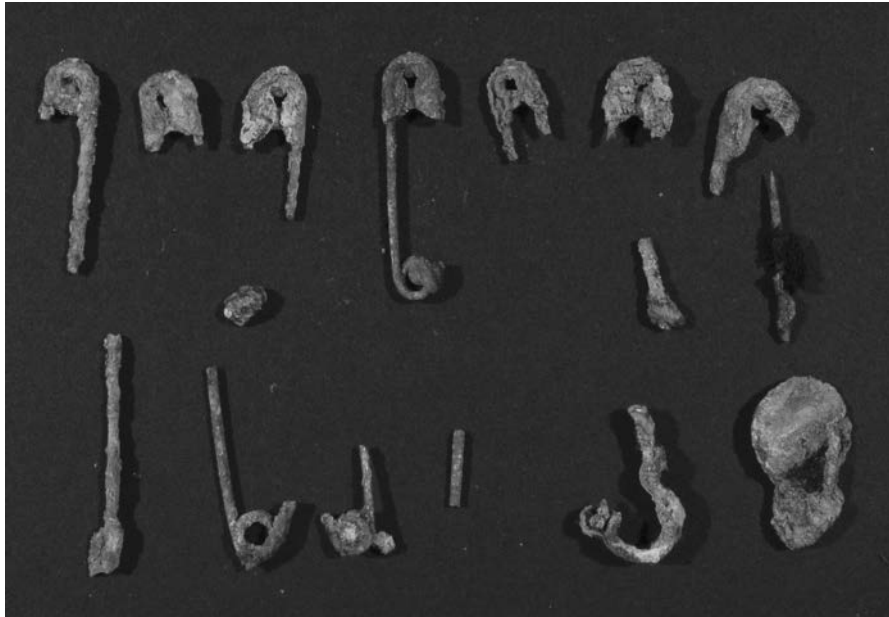


Fig. 11. Copper alloy safety pins which once belonged to Mother Marianne. A small fragment of her habit is still attached to the pin on the far right.

reliquary in St. Anthony's Convent Chapel at the Sisters of Saint Francis Motherhouse in Syracuse, New York, on January 23, Mother Marianne's birthday and feast day. Her burial artifacts, now relics, were returned to the Shrine & Museum of Blessed Marianne Cope at the Motherhouse following their conservation treatment in July, 2005.

Given her beatified status and the current campaign to declare Mother Marianne a saint, the relics buried with her skeletal remains took on new prominence and meaning. The small collection of objects recovered from Mother Marianne's grave represented both mundane items such as buttons, safety pins and a fragment of her habit (fig. 11), as well as objects associated with her religious devotion such as crucifixes, a rosary, and a medallion with a cast image of Mary. In addition to artifacts closely connected with Mother Marianne's daily life, objects related to her death and commemoration were recovered. These included the iron alloy decorative bosses and nails which once decorated her now deteriorated coffin, as well as offerings of crucifixes by other residents at the Kalaupapa Settlement. During the course of the conservation treatment, the author also discovered a small bone fragment, presumably that of Mother Marianne, scattered among one of the bags of iron nails; this fragment was

placed in a glass vial and stored along with the burial artifacts.

Prior to the beginning of the conservation treatment, Sister Grace Anne Dillenschneider, Codirector of the Franciscan Collaborative Ministries of Syracuse, spoke with the author about the importance of Mother Marianne's holy relics: that they were irreplaceable, would be visited and venerated by the devout after their conservation, and that every fragment should be preserved. Conservators are not unfamiliar with the notion that they are temporarily entrusted with unique and rare objects that will eventually be seen by an audience. Archaeological conservators in particular are aware that even grains of burial dirt or corrosion products can provide valuable information; in the case of the relics, the author assured Sister Dillenschneider that any of these materials—any sand, burial dirt, or corrosion—removed from the relics would also be carefully preserved, so that they could be displayed with the relics or distributed as deemed appropriate. Finally, in discussing how to conserve the burial artifacts, both parties agreed that it was important to ensure the stability of the objects, but not to clean them to an extent that erased either their use by Mother Marianne, or their age and history of being buried at Kalaupapa. Most archaeological

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conservators have faced the difficulty of preserving the visual appearance of an ancient object, i.e., avoiding making the object look new, while cleaning corrosion or concretions to reveal important details. How easily could the author maintain the sense of historic authenticity of these objects, while revealing telling details and stabilizing them for the future?

Mother Marianne had “assured the sisters [who accompanied her to Hawaii] that God had called them for this work, that he would protect them, and that no sister of their order would contract leprosy” (Law and Wisniewski 1988, 43). While this promise was fulfilled for the women who served with her, her burial artifacts could not escape being ravaged by time and the environment at Molokai. Nearly ninety years of burial in acidic volcanic soil and exposure to high heat, salty conditions, and cycling humidity had almost entirely disintegrated any organic materials and induced severe corrosion in most of the metal alloys. Though there were logical and easily attributable explanations for the condition of Mother Marianne’s relics, it was impossible to examine the frugal and poignant collection of artifacts simply as objects, and to describe their damages in the objective language of a condition report. Rather, their physical condition seemed emblematic not only of Mother Marianne’s life and death, but also the devastating history of the Kalaupapa Settlement. Under the microscope, tiny fragments of woven black wool, the only remnants of her habit, clung to broken and mineralized copper alloy safety pins. Pustules of corrosion erupted near Mary’s head on the copper alloy medallion, marring the inscription around the perimeter. Several of the Christ figures had been dislodged from their crucifixes, and copper corrosion products grew from their faces or the holes in their palms with which they were once nailed to their crosses. Even the actively rusting nails, the most mundane artifacts, were particularly affecting, in part because the bone fragment was found among them, but also because there was no conservation method which could completely arrest their deterioration.

Most of the conservation treatments were begun under the magnifying lens of a microscope. This concentrated and detailed meditation on the objects’ surfaces, while a standard conservation method, acquired new significance because the author had been advised that each sand grain or particle of corrosion removed from them was imbued with spiritual power and had to be carefully preserved. However, this process was complicated by the question of whether conservation

or religious ethics should take precedence. Though there was a clear conservation reason for separating much of this damaging or visually disturbing material from the artifacts, it also seemed somewhat invasive to detach corrosion that had become so intimately associated with these living objects. This closely paralleled the situation of removing the cartonnage from the Goucher mummy, or the child’s body from the bracelets, albeit on a smaller and sometimes microscopic scale. In one case, gently micro-chiseling a large concretion of actively rusting iron from the side of a crucifix, though appropriate from a conservation viewpoint, seemed cruel and unfeeling, particularly since the corrosion had once been a chain that may have attached the crucifix to Mother Marianne’s habit (fig. 12). However, a large iron concretion on the attachment loop of the Mary medallion was left in situ because it contained a pseudomorph of the woven habit worn by Mother Marianne when she was buried (fig. 13). The different approaches taken with these two artifacts also emphasized the ways in which conservation decisions may result in the loss of some kinds of information while maintaining or revealing others.

If separating parts of the remains raised questions about the moral authority of the conservator, so too did reconstructing certain artifacts. Most of the crucifixes buried with Mother Marianne were composed of a copper alloy frames inlaid with wood, and decorated with hammered copper alloy “INRI” plaques and cast Christ figures. Some of the Christ figures, plaques, and wood had detached from the cross, and the wood inlays showed large losses in some areas (fig. 14). Reassembling these elements to their crucifixes was a necessary and relatively simple conservation procedure. However, the task of reattaching the Christ figures to the cross, and in particular replacing copper alloy nails through the existing holes in the palms, seemed beyond the conservator’s moral authority precisely because this event looms so large in Christian theology and contemporary culture (fig. 15). Concerns were also raised by the question of whether losses in the wood should be left exposed for purposes of historic authenticity, or should be stabilized with small pieces of inpainted Japanese tissue paper to minimize any additional loss. Ultimately, this conservator decided to bridge areas of splintered wood with tinted Japanese paper and Acryloid B72 in acetone even though this gave the false impression that the wood was completely preserved in some cases.

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Fig. 12. Iron concretions were present on the crucifix and medallion in this group of objects, before treatment.

The final aspect of the conservation treatments was preparing the treatment reports and offering suggestions for handling and display of these relics which would soon become museum objects in the Shrine and Museum of Blessed Marianne Cope in Syracuse, New York. Given that Mother Marianne's artifacts are seen by Catholic believers as imbued with the power of mediation, Sister Dillenschneider had previously expressed a hope that some of them might be handled by members of the public. Geisbusch has discussed how the tactile experience of a relic "[questions] the sharp divide between object and subject," and asserts how the "close and prolonged contact with the unprotected relic, its plastic cover removed, creates a deeper intimacy between saint and devotee than could sight alone" (2007, 80). Unfortunately, the fragility of the relics made their regular handling extremely problematic, and plans were instead made to ensure their visual accessibility in a more traditional museum display. Even so, the author provided simple guidelines so that the Sisters transporting and handling the relics would be aware of their inherent weaknesses. This included writing statements such as, "Do not handle

crucifix by Christ figure" or, "Do not handle by long arm of the cross." While these were relatively standard assertions from a conservation point of view, did the author have the authority to expect these guidelines to be followed by people for whom these remains held far more powerful values? Does the conservator have the right to make such demands on a descendant or religious community? Certainly, these interactions are ultimately negotiated and moderated by the individuals involved, and depend on the expected use of the remains themselves. In the case of Mother Marianne's relics, the conservator's role was to facilitate, in a small way, the continued use and veneration of these living objects. Though Catholic relics may not gain or lose holiness through conservation interventions (Beck 2001), their visual and interpretive qualities may be affected by changes in their physical appearance. Thus, it behooves conservators to approach these "active" remains with reverence, and be particularly mindful of the many subtle changes that conservation treatments can impose.

Unlike the two previous examples of human remains presented in this article, the conservation of

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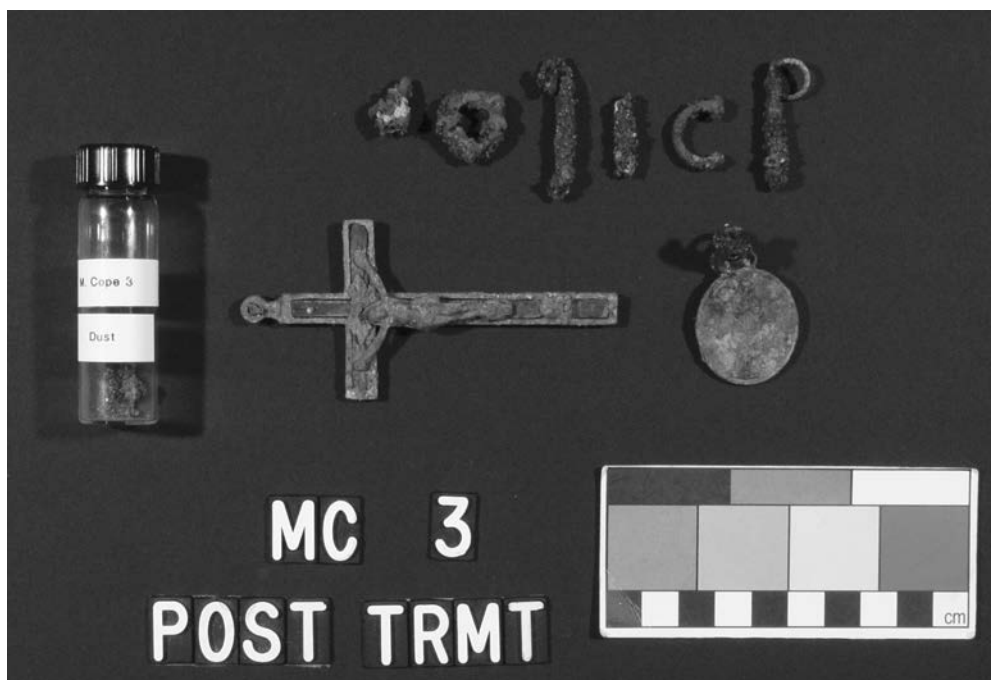


Fig. 13. The iron concretion was removed from the crucifix but left in place on the medallion, after treatment.

Mother Marianne's relics forced the author to confront the life and death of an individual who lived in recent history. Though both the Egyptian mummy and child were once alive with particular life histories, there are few ways to access their humanness other than through their physical remains and artifacts. Mother Marianne, however, remains alive in distinctly modern ways. The Franciscan Sisters of Syracuse host a regularly updated Web site devoted to the cause for her sainthood; the site allows a virtual encounter with Mother Marianne by providing excerpts of her letters, photographs, and information about various stages of her life. Though these visual and documentary aids are vital in keeping her story and cause alive, the author would argue that her physical remains—the relics which accompanied her in life and death—ultimately speak to the devotion and sacrifice of this human life. The author's small role in stabilizing these remains so that they can continue to be used and venerated raised questions about the goals of contemporary conservation. As conservators, we usually endeavor to preserve the physical traces of a life lived by objects or human beings, but in doing so, we also keep alive or revive their intangible aspects. Are we ethically prepared to do so? When the tangible and intangible aspects of

human remains are so closely intertwined, how do we ensure that our interventions do not compromise one aspect while favoring the other?

5. CONCLUSION: CAN HUMAN REMAINS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES?

“The dead are not all past, locked away and finished.” (Lohman 2006, 22)

The satiric Edgar Allan Poe story, “Some Words with a Mummy” (1845), chronicles a late night unwrapping of an Egyptian mummy named Allamistakeo by a group of learned Baltimore men. After numerous attempts to cut into the body fail to satisfy the curiosity of the assembled group, a battery is connected to the open wounds of the body and an electrical charge is applied. With subsequent electric shocks, Allamistakeo first closes his eyes, then violently kicks the doctor administering the electric current, and finally sits up and indignantly demands to know why the audience is mistreating him. He addresses the two Egyptologists in the group “in very capital Egyptian”:

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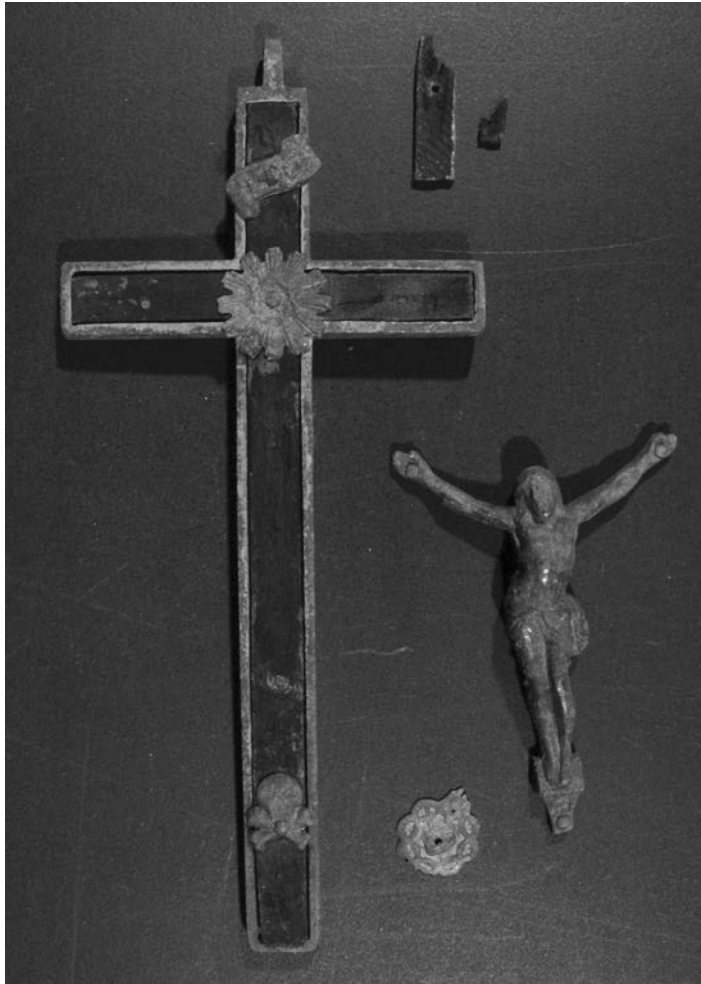


Fig. 14. The Christ figure and several other elements had become detached from this crucifix, before treatment.

I must say, gentlemen, that I am as much surprised as I am mortified, at your behavior. . . [you] who have traveled and resided in Egypt. . . You, I say, who have been so much among us that you speak Egyptian fully as well, I think, as you write your mother tongue — you, whom I have always been led to regard as the firm friend of the mummies — I really did anticipate more gentlemanly conduct from you. What am I to think of your standing quietly by and seeing me thus unhandsomely used? What am I to suppose by your permitting Tom, Dick, and Harry to strip me of my coffins, and my clothes, in this wretchedly cold climate?

The alarmed Egyptologists offer apologies, but also excuse their behavior with claims that they were simply acting in the interests of advancing scientific knowledge. Allamistakeo is mollified, and after having his wounds sewn up and bandaged, delivers an eloquent address on the scientific, artistic, and political superiority of the ancient Egyptians over 19th century Americans. He also asserts that he is very much alive, had been for 700 years, and planned to remain so for at least another 300, as had his father before him.

Poe's fanciful tale underscores both our complex fascination with human remains and our revulsion and shock when these remains have the ability to speak for themselves. But even in Poe's imaginative retelling, the

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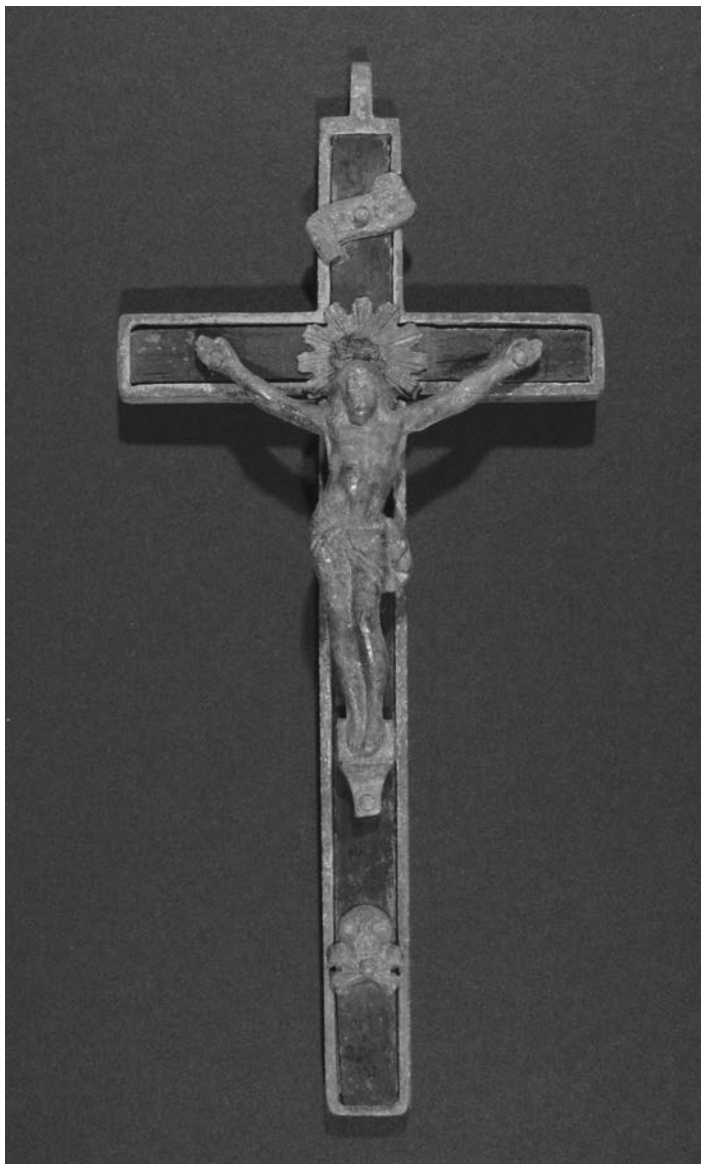


Fig. 15. The crucifix after the reattachment of the various elements, after treatment.

mummy cannot speak until he is reanimated by living human beings in some way. And once Allamistakeo has been revived, he still speaks through the Egyptologists who must first willingly listen to and then interpret his words for a broader audience. These actions parallel those of the curator, archaeologist, religious believer, descendant, or conservator involved in the treatment, interpretation, and presentation of hu-

man remains. It behooves these individuals with their specialized knowledge and access to human remains to be especially sensitive to their respectful treatment. Just as Allamistakeo rejects and refutes the trite justification of “science” for the damage inflicted on his body, so too must various stakeholders, including conservators, consciously examine their purposes for changing human remains in any way. Finally, we

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must acknowledge, as do the Baltimore scholars in the Poe story, that human remains may have agency that we might not always understand or that may not fit our particular conceptions of the world. Allamistakeo's assertion that he is still alive echoes the approach of some Native American groups who believe that "human remains may still retain personhood and can still exist or be spoken of as an individual being. A Native person may maintain or reforge a relationship with the individual being represented by those remains and can therefore feel under an obligation to treat that person with respect" (Lippert 2005, 277). These personal interactions and relationships, then, are an important aspect of our need to conserve human remains.

The concept of respect for, and respectful treatment of human remains has been an underlying theme of this article. The author has presented examples of her personal negotiations with three specific individuals, arguing that respectful treatment varies from one set of human remains to another, and is constantly negotiated during every stage of a conservation intervention. In fact, these negotiations continue even after the treatment is complete. The author asserts that it is essential and appropriate that some anxieties and concerns about the change of human remains through conservation persist in our memories; this is precisely because human remains are more than mere objects, and thus demand our empathy and emotional engagement. Anxieties about reverential treatment also shape the conservation process in surprising, nontechnical, and emotional ways. When conserving the Egyptian mummy, the author struggled with whether it was appropriate to listen to music or the radio as a way of dealing with both the tediousness of the conservation work and the disturbing experience of sitting alone with a dead woman for several hours a day. National Public Radio was ultimately deemed suitably reverent, distracting, and separate in time and space from the mummy. However, hearing reports on the return of the bodies of American soldiers who had served in Iraq, and listening to an interview about the importance of dying an "honorable" death during the American Civil War, brought the author to tears. These disparate deaths—those of American soldiers from two different conflicts, and that of the Egyptian woman—though disconnected in time and space, were still the deaths of individuals loved, claimed, and memorialized by someone. As conservators working on human remains we too witness, document, and remember the life and death of another human being, but do so within the safety

of our technical language and our specialized conservation materials and techniques. But do we not, and should we not, also confront the mortality of our own endeavors?

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