

# Ethical Issues

Excavation and conservation, study and display of human remains

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# Overview of ethical considerations

- 'Age' of the remains
- Direct or 'cultural' descendants
- Treatment of human remains
- Storage of human remains
- Display of human remains
  - Ethnic identifications
  - Religious sensitivities
  - Interests of children
  - Warning notices
  - Skeletal remains/plaster casts

# Study and Research of human remains

- Historically
  - In the past, there was not a systemised way in which skeletons and remains were systemised, but rather they were just ignored by excavators and stored in various buildings around Pompeii
- Giuseppe Fiorelli, Archaeologist
  - Introduced the method of pouring plaster into the cavities left by the peoples and animals of Pompeii
  - As a result, it is impossible to ever make exact deductions or statements about the manner of death within the site
- Estelle Lazer, Archaeologist
  - Combines her knowledge in anthropology and forensic medicine to investigate sex, age, height, signs of disease and the relationship between victims
  - First studied remains from the *House of Meander* where she found that some of the “skeletons” had in fact been reconstructed to in order to *look like* skeletons
  - Examined the remains of over 300 skeletons in the *Sarno Baths*
  - Skeletal remain examinations of bones and teeth reveal skeletons were: healthy and well-nourished however they have poor dental hygiene (decay), with people living into their 50’s and 60’s.

# Study and Research of human remains - Continued

- Sara Bisel, Physical Anthropologist and classical archaeologist
  - Examined 130 skeletal remains in the Herculaneum boatshed
  - Examines remains in order to establish levels of health, socio-economic status and cause/s of death
  - **Important to note:** Some of Bisel's findings have been found to be “speculative”, particularly in regards to her ‘tampering’ with the skeletons and embellishing them with jewellery
- Luigi Carpasso
  - Reaffirmed that skeletons remained intact as a result of the volcanic ash that formed a ‘plaster cast’

# Ethical Considerations

- **Display of human remains:**

- The latter 20th Century brought about discussions of whether or not it was appropriate to display remains (despite Italian culture having a history of displaying remains- especially those of saints or martyrs)
- A code of ethics was developed by universities, museums and archaeologists
- Appropriate display of remains - Fiorelli's plaster casts: these were considered appropriate to be displayed in situ as a result of the plaster casts
- Inappropriate display of remains: before a 'code of ethics' was established, remains were often displayed inappropriately, with the skeletons positioned and manipulated to create a 'scene'
- Important to note: many if the arguments were from worldwide organisations, not the Italian community themselves (due to the Italian community typically displaying human remains)

# Practice Questions

**Source A: *Victims of the Cataclysm, from the World of Pompeii 2009***

*“It has traditionally been asserted that the sample of victims in the Pompeii is skewed towards the old, the infirm, the very young, and women, all of whom are assumed to have been less likely to escape. There was no such assumption of bias at Herculaneum, since most inhabitants were presumed to have survived, until the discovery of skeletal evidence in 1982... The skeletal evidence from the Pompeian and Herculaneum adult samples suggest that there was no significant sex or age bias among the victims” - Estelle Lazer*

**Source B: excerpt from ‘Pompeii’s not-so-ancient Roman Romans’, from BBC News Magazine 2013**

*“Ghoulish as they are, for most of us (me included), these bodies are always one of the highlights of any display of the discoveries from Pompeii (and a group of them will be starring in an upcoming exhibition at the British Museum)... The truth is, though, that they are not actually bodies at all. They are the product of a clever bit of archaeological ingenuity, going back to the 1860s” - Mary Beard*

# Revision:

- The source below is helpful for providing a scaffold of how to answer a question regarding ethical issues, excavation and conservation:
  - <https://ozziessay.com.au/essay-on-pompeii-and-herculaneum-human-remains/>