

The Society for American Archaeology
Statement Concerning the Treatment of Human Remains
April 14, 2021

Archaeology is the study of the ancient and recent human past through material remains. Because archaeologists may encounter and study human remains as part of their work, the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) is providing this statement to reflect the [SAA's values of stewardship and accountability](#) in the context of work with human remains.

There are differing viewpoints on many aspects of work with human remains, such as the definition of human remains, what constitutes consultation or collaboration, and ideas about best practices. This statement cannot address the specifics of all viewpoints; instead, it outlines broad principles. It is the archaeologist's responsibility to seek and incorporate the perspectives of descendant communities, affiliated groups, and other stakeholders in making decisions about how and whether to work with human remains.

Since its founding in 1934, the SAA has been dedicated to the archaeological heritage of the Americas. Because of this focus, the principles outlined in this statement apply to all aspects of archaeological work in the Americas (North, Central, and South America) involving human remains. The work covered by this statement includes, but is not limited to, excavation, research, education, curation, exhibits, and publication. While the statement is intended to apply to the Americas, it can also provide guidance to SAA members who work in other regions. By using these principles, archaeologists can avoid the harm associated with some of archaeology's past practices.

Principle 1: Working with human remains is a privilege, not a right.

Archaeologists should approach work with human remains from a perspective of ethical stewardship, responsibility, and equity, rather than entitlement, ownership, or exclusivity. Any work involving human remains should respect the views and interests of descendant communities, affiliated groups, and other stakeholders. In some cases, this may mean that work should not be done unless it is legally required.

Principle 2: Human remains should be treated with dignity and respect.

Human remains are deserving of the dignity and respect afforded to living people. This principle applies to all human remains, regardless of ethnicity, sex, age, religion, nationality, socioeconomic status, cultural tradition, form of burial, condition of remains, or circumstances of acquisition.

Principle 3: Archaeologists should consult, collaborate, and obtain consent when working with human remains.

In each stage of work with human remains, archaeologists should make every effort to consult, collaborate, and maintain communication with descendant communities, affiliated groups, and other stakeholders. Archaeologists should consult and collaborate as broadly as possible, keeping in mind that there may be descendant communities, affiliated groups, and other stakeholders whose interests have not been previously recognized or acknowledged. Archaeologists should seek to obtain consent from descendant communities, affiliated groups, and other stakeholders for any work involving human remains.

Principle 4: It is the responsibility of the archaeologist to understand and comply with the applicable law.

Each country has its own laws and treaties that relate to work with human remains. Archaeologists should recognize the unique legal responsibilities surrounding the sovereign authority of Indigenous nations as established through treaties, court cases, and law. Legal obligations set a minimum threshold for work with human remains, but ethical obligations may go beyond the letter of the law.

Principle 5: Archaeologists should follow best practices and uphold the highest ethical standards when working with human remains.

All work with human remains must be done by individuals with the appropriate qualifications and training. Students must be carefully supervised by experienced and properly trained personnel. Archaeologists must be transparent about funding sources and seek to avoid conflicts of interest, violations of privacy, or other harm during their work and in any subsequent archiving and use of the data.

The SAA encourages its members and their affiliated institutions to develop detailed policies and procedures for the treatment of human remains during excavations, lab research, teaching, curation, exhibition, and publication, even if they do not expect to encounter human remains. The principles outlined above can provide the framework for developing these policies. In addition, the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Principle 12](#), establishes certain rights regarding Indigenous human remains and is a helpful resource when creating policies.

Ethical standards for archaeological practice will continue to change. As a result, this statement will be reviewed at a minimum every seven years to ensure that it reflects the developments in laws and standards. It is the responsibility of the [Committee on Native American Relations](#) (CNAR) and the [Committee on Repatriation](#) (Repat) to draft an updated statement in accordance with the charge issued by the SAA [Board of Directors](#)