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British Museum decides to return two Tasmanian cremation ash bundles

The passing of the Human Tissue Act in 2005 enabled the Trustees of the British Museum and other national museums to transfer human remains out of their collections.

The Museum's Trustees had long recognised that human remains from the modern period represent a special case raising particularly difficult issues. The Museum was therefore fully and positively engaged with the process which led to the drafting of the relevant clause of the new law.

The Trustees have welcomed this new power which has enabled them for the first time to give serious consideration to a claim made for two cremation ash bundles. The claim is made by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre: the TAC has made several previous claims which could not be considered until the law was changed in 2005. The Trustees are therefore pleased to announce that, at their meeting today, they have decided to transfer the two Tasmanian Aboriginal cremation ash bundles to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre in response to the claim from the Centre made last year.

The two bundles, each containing some ash from a human cremation site, are wrapped in animal skin. They were acquired by George Augustus Robinson in about 1838 (Robinson was appointed as conciliator of Aborigines in Tasmania in 1828). They were taken at a time when the Aboriginal population of Tasmania was suffering greatly from the impact of the European settlement, resulting in substantial population loss. The bundles entered the collection of the British Museum only later via the Royal College of Surgeons in 1882.

Ethnographic evidence collected by Robinson at the time indicates that bundles of this sort were used as amulets against sickness by their owners, and that they were highly valued for their efficacy. Their acquisition by Robinson represented an interruption in the process which would have ultimately led to the remains being laid to rest.

After taking independent expert advice on the matter, and according to their published policy, the Trustees came to the view that the cultural and religious importance of the cremation ash bundles to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community outweighed any other public benefit that would have flowed from their retention in the collection. The objects have been studied, photographed and published in previous decades. It is unlikely that, given present scientific techniques, their retention in London for study will yield any further information of significance.

Baroness Helena Kennedy QC, leading human rights lawyer and the Trustee who led the discussion, said, "The Trustees are clear that the removal of the cremation ash bundles from the collection is the right course of action. The Museum looks forward to continuing to work with indigenous Australian communities in furthering the worldwide public understanding of Australian aboriginal culture, both past and present. The British Museum is currently developing a new Australian and Pacific Gallery to open in 2008."

Notes to Editors

- The British Museum has only a small number of Aboriginal human remains in its collection. We estimate that there are only a further three possible Australian claims which may result from the change in legislation. If submitted each claim would be examined on an individual basis by the Museum's Trustees.
- Information on the Museum's policy on human remains and a complete list of human remains in our collection (including details of material which sits outside of current legislation) is available on our website at <http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/corporate/index.html>
- The new legislation specifically refers to human remains and does not have any bearing on the issue of the Parthenon Sculptures. The Trustees have made their decision based on the evidence presented in this special case. The issue of the restitution of recent human remains is very different to that of sculpture or other man-made objects. The Museum's position on the Sculptures remains the same, that they are integral to the British Museum's purpose as a world museum and allow us to tell the story of human cultural achievement to the widest possible audience.

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