

The scientific value of the study of prehistoric human remains for our understanding of past cultures

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I have been asked by David Thackray of the National Trust to comment on this issue. I think it is fair to say that all archaeologists are now much more aware of the sensitivities around issues of archaeological disturbance, excavation and analysis of past human remains than in previous generations of researchers. Best practice demands that human remains be treated sensitively and appropriately.

That said, I believe that it continues to be justifiable to include human remains in archaeological analysis. It is often hard to avoid them in excavation. For example, we recovered several isolated human bones in the ditches of the causewayed enclosure at Windmill Hill in my excavations there in 1988, and it would be an archaeological absurdity to stop a given investigation when human bones were encountered; some indeed are not positively identified as human rather than animal until examination by specialists, and this also happened in our 1988 experience at Windmill Hill. In that same case, we also came across a human burial at the very base of a pit, previously suggested by Isobel Smith to be probably 'an ancient badger's hole', and thus more or less at the end of the excavation anyway. I have also investigated long barrows in the Avebury region, but with the exception of the ruined Millbarrow, not in the areas of the monument where one would expect human remains.

Human bones can be a fruitful source of knowledge about our prehistoric forebears. In my own research projects, I have used them for investigation of lifestyle and population diversity (Leverhulme Trust-funded work, 1998-2002) and following from this for a programme of radiocarbon dating on long barrows of the early Neolithic (largely funded by English Heritage (2002 onwards, published 2007)). In the first instance, human remains are handled by trained specialists, within the remit of normal museum curation. In the second case, trained specialists take very small samples for dating (not normally more than 2g per bone), and the rest of the remains return to normal museum curation. The knowledge gain has been enormous in both cases, and I would argue strongly that this knowledge gain is not only of great public general benefit, but actually also, through enhancing understanding of archaeology remains, serves to protect the heritage resource in other situations.

The pilot project on long barrows in turn developed into a much more ambitious dating project on causewayed enclosures in southern Britain and Ireland, co-funded by English Heritage and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (2002 to present). We have dated a wide range of sample material, again including human bone, samples for which were taken in the manner described above. We have examined a wide range of archives, including those of the Alexander Keiller Museum in Avebury, where the material from the excavations at Windmill Hill causewayed enclosures is kept. While in general the finds from causewayed enclosures are abundant, our particular need was for short-life

material in well contexted situations, and while it is often possible to find a sample of animal bone that serves just as good a purpose as a human one, it is also regularly the case that only human remains (note once again, sampled only to the extent of 2g per bone) will do for the task. This was the case too in other famous collections, such as Whitehawk, Etton, Maiden Castle and Hambledon Hill. The overall knowledge gain has been remarkable, and these human samples have contributed to our being able to construct remarkably fine chronologies for the early Neolithic period: enhancing our sense of what it was to be human in those times, generation by generation, and lifetime by lifetime. The same very small samples also enable new scientific analysis of diet and provenance to be undertaken, and once again the knowledge gain is considerable.

We have published results for our long barrow project in *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 17.1, supplement, February 2007, with an extended feature for more general readers in *Current Archaeology* for May/June 2007. There will be an interim paper on causewayed enclosures in *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 18.1, supplement, due out very soon. Our full monograph on enclosures will be published in due course as *Gathering time: dating the early Neolithic causewayed enclosures of southern Britain and Ireland* (by A. Whittle, F. Healy and A. Bayliss).

In this way, I strongly believe that sensitive handling and treatment, limited or non-destructive sampling, prompt publication, and wide communication of specialist or scientific results to the general public justify our continuing with scientific investigation of past human remains. Our knowledge of past peoples would be immeasurably poorer without it.

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