EDITORIAL

Who do skeletons belong to? Are they scientific data or cultural heirlooms? A consultation paper due early in 2004 will give the British Government's take on this delicate matter of the archaeological treatment of human remains (www.culture.gov.uk/global/publications/). There is to be a three month consultancy period – rather a tight turn-round for a quarterly journal, but it is hoped that readers will want to express their views on this issue in the Debate Section and we intend to publish selected comments as we receive them on our letters page (http://antiquity.ac.uk/Letters/letters.html). A Working Group on Human Remains was set up in May 2001 under the Chairmanship of Norman Palmer, a specialist in art law at University College London. Its 12 members reported to minister Estelle Morris in November 2003, recommending that museums in England should adopt a liberal approach to requests for repatriation and that DCMS (the ministry) should set up a Human Remains Advisory Panel. The working group identified 132 museums in England holding the human remains of 61 000 individuals. They had received in recent years 33 requests for the return of human remains, including 11 from Tasmanian aboriginals, 10 from New Zealand Maoris, six from Australian aboriginals and five from American communities (*Art Newspaper* Dec 2003: 13). The report recommends that museums should not retain remains without the consent of close relatives of the deceased or from those "within a deceased person's own religion or culture with a status comparable to that of close family". In an eight-page statement of dissent, the Director of the Natural History Museum Sir Neil Chalmers voiced fears that advice would soon become obligation: the recommendations did not provide a proper balance between the public benefits deriving from medical, scientific and other research on the one hand and the wishes of the claimant community on the other. If the measures were implemented Sir Neil feared that it would bring all research on human remains to a halt and would result in their mandatory return to those communities.

The British initiative follows (after the usual ten year interval) American practice as incorporated in the legislation of 1990, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) which recognised the right of descendent communities to reclaim and dispose of human remains in their ancestral territories. When human remains are encountered, the field archaeologist makes contact with the Native American authority to negotiate access and a period of study. Where the identity of the descendent community is uncertain, the assemblage is officially "declared" and time is allowed for it to be claimed. Bones may usually be studied with permission and then are returned ("repatriated") for reburial. Examples of declarations and invitations to claimants can be found on www.cast.uark.edu/products/NAGPRA

The idea of a "descendant community" (as opposed to a "claimant community") makes little sense archaeologically, since it assumes that some people move about and others don't. In practice, the manner in which Scotland (for example) was settled, initially and later, by people from across every sea, is the very thing we want to know, and archaeologists will go on wanting to know it, whatever political aurora temporarily dazzles the skyline. As the pages of *Antiquity* are showing, the tools of the inquiry are nearly ready to start work. In this edition we present state-of-the-art assessments of the use of stable isotopes for tracking changes of diet (carbon and nitrogen) and the movement of people (oxygen and strontium) in Northern

Europe (see Milner *et al.*, Lidén *et al.*, Hedges and Budd *et al.*). The implications of this technique for mapping the human experience are immense – and it needs bones. Are we to repatriate the massive collections of northern hemisphere burials in case we don't like the answer? Er no, – because repatriating bones from Scotland to Ireland, Norway or Italy assumes you already know where they came from – and that is begging the question.

Hedley Swain is right to say (*Public Archaeology* 2.2 (2002): 95-100) that what gives offence is determined by context, not by any absolute ethos. Personal anxiety about the excavation and exhibition of bones in Scotland may be just as heartfelt and understandable as in America or Tasmania; but it isn't so much (yet), for example, in England. Swain's 1999 exhibition *London Bodies* registered the highest daily visitor rate of any temporary exhibition at the Museum of London since 1992. Of 162 comments received from the public, only one visitor was unhappy about the ethics of displaying human remains, as compared with 17 who thought the captions and displays were too high, one who was hoping the exhibition would be more shocking and one who wanted to see more skeletons. So the location of an archaeological inquiry and the opinion of the people who live there are obviously key factors in a project's design.

Repatriation does not mean no research. The way forward is perhaps to recognize that the application of science requires not only sensitivity towards the subject but the need to explain the objective and ensure that stake-holders have an unqualified opportunity to participate. In the famous case of 290 Broadway (Manhattan), inspiringly fronted by 1993 editions of the *Village Voice* ("Black Bones, White Science"), excavation at the African American burial ground was brought to a halt through the intervention of the Harlem Community, the New York City mayor, Congress and ultimately George Bush senior and the site turned into a heritage destination. Why was this? On the face of it because African-American New Yorkers were not consulted and felt offended; but, as stated by Mayor Dinkins and others, it was also because of archaeological failings: the lack of a publically accessible evaluation, research design and management plan. These are all aspects of the same thing. We cannot disguise that some communities have objected to the study of human remains because the living (and by extension the dead) were not being treated with sufficient respect and sensitivity; but for any archaeological project, the proper respect due to everybody (the scientific community included) requires the prior publication, in advance, of a project design which takes account of the current, as well as the ancient, context of the material deserving study. Solving that problem solves the other one.

The so-called sky-disk (*himmelsscheibe*) of Nebra is one of the most remarkable objects to have come to public notice in recent years, and we hope to feature a full description shortly by the team who are studying it, led by Professor Ernst Pernicka of the Institute of Archaeometry at Freiberg and Dr Harald Meller of the State Museum for Prehistory at Halle. The slightly convex disc which measures about 30cm in diameter and weighs about 2kg carries gold foil patches which resemble the sun, moon and stars. It was part of a group of looted artefacts discovered in Sachsen-Anhalt either near Nebra or near Sangerhausen (30km apart) in the late 1990s and recovered by means of a police sting-operation in Switzerland. The group includes two swords with gold foil ornaments, two axes, a "chisel" and fragments of arm spirals, all dated to about 1600 BC. The pattern on the disk has been seen as a representation of the heavenly firmament with the seven stars being the Pleiades. The three

Sky-disk (himmelsscheibe).

curved strips (one is missing) are said to represent two horizons and the ship which carries the sun. First acquaintance with the Nebra sky-disc is sensational – but disconcerting: it seems to be winking.

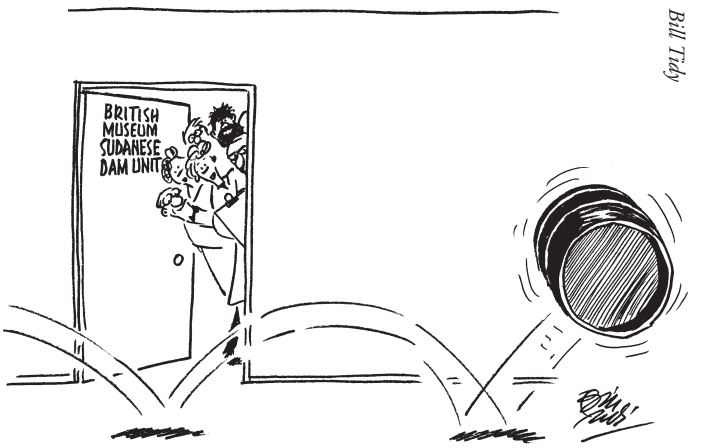
Our correspondent Andrew Sherratt observes: Since the 'Year of the Bronze Age' in 1994 there has been quite a rash of notable finds from Germany, the most spectacular of which have not been made by archaeologists. One is an Late Bronze Age conical gold hat (like the famous example from Schifferstadt) bought from an unknown owner by the Berlin Museum for Pre- and Proto-history, through a firm of intermediaries in Lichtenstein, whose decoration – like that of the Nebra disc – has been interpreted as having astronomical/calendrical significance. Another is the group of amber beads from Bernstorf in Bavaria, with curious "Minoan" incisions, found by a group of amateur archaeologists on a hillfort which would be of the same age as the Nebra daggers, and also yielded gold diadems and pins. And now the Nebra (or Sangershausen) finds themselves. The team investigating the *Himmelsscheibe* are working extra hard to demonstrate the integrity of their find, compromised (like the hat) by its chequered history and in a context where such objects now command huge prices from collectors and museums. Appropriately enough, 2003 was the year when the term "bling bling" was added to the Oxford English Dictionary …"

Readers will find more at www.archlsa.de/sterne and www.angelfire.com/me/ik/sangerhausenGB

Our correspondent Peter Mitchell reports that the Sudanese Government has decided to proceed with the construction of a dam, the effect of which will be to flood the Nile Valley between the Fourth Cataract and Abu Hamed, a distance of 170 km. Preliminary surveys already conducted by Sudanese and international teams indicate that thousands of archaeological sites ranging in date from the Middle Palaeolithic to the early Islamic period will be destroyed by the flood waters. Others are threatened by the establishment of new settlements for displaced communities or the construction of engineering works and power lines. Sudan's authorities have already launched an appeal for international assistance to investigate and document this little-researched area of their country in advance of its loss to archaeology on the completion of the dam in 2007. The British Museum is playing an active

role, holding an international colloquium in May 2003 and an exhibition on the archaeology of Sudan and Nubia in September 2003. Further information can be obtained from Dr Salah el-Din Mohammed Ahmed of Sudan's National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, Khartoum and from Dr Derek Welsby, President of the Society for Nubian Studies (SARS@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk).

☎ The European Latsis Prize is awarded annually to the individual or group who has made the greatest contribution to a particular field of European research. In 2003 the field was archaeology and the prize (€65 000) was awarded to Colin Renfrew at the Hilton Hotel, Strasbourg on 27 November last. Lord Renfrew commented that "*it is wonderful that the European Science Foundation has this year... chosen to recognise the growing significance of the discipline of archaeology*" and expressed himself deeply honoured to represent it. We in Britain are all gratified to see archaeology distinguished among the ESF's pallette of useful sciences, and delighted to have our star archaeological thinker spot-lit in a pan-European competition. Colin Renfrew's special achievements were cited by the panel as the revelation of early exchange systems, indicated for example by the mapping of the chemical signatures of obsidian, his second 'radiocarbon revolution' (its calibration by dendrochronology), the idea of separate (non-diffusionary) origins for megalithic monuments and copper working, his model for the Indo-European language as a travelling companion of farming and the development of methodologies for cognitive interpretation – determining how ancient people thought. As well as being brilliant, this work offers a theme for post-war Europe: humane, liberating, favouring the achievements of the smaller communities and the individual mind. Colin Renfrew retires from the Department of Archaeology in Cambridge this year, and we wish him a happy and productive third age. As father of TAG (Theoretical Archaeology Group) and the only professional archaeologist in the houses of parliament, we shall long continue to rely on his wisdom.



Bill Tidy

Colin Renfrew's successor in the Disney chair at Cambridge is to be Graeme Barker, currently Head of Archaeology at Leicester, an astute academic leader who has launched research projects in three continents (Italy, Jordan, Brunei). We wish him all the best for a fruitful reign – humane, liberating and favouring the individual mind.

Martin Carver
York, 1 March 2004