

Stories from below

Human remains at the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History and the Museum of World Culture

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This article adopts a ‘cultural biography’ approach to the examination of an archaeological collection from Arica, Chile, involving two museums located in Gothenburg, Sweden. It provides a comprehensive overview of the history of the collection and how the meanings and contexts of a cranium belonging to this collection have changed over time. Different stages in the biography of the cranium are reconstructed here: we document and describe a shift within the western museum world, focusing on Sweden, from considering the scientific value of human remains to considering another dimension linked to livelihood and personhood; we claim that following the intimate trajectory of an object permits us to move through and document the changing value systems in the history of museums in Sweden and its links to the early development of archaeology in South America, together with the collecting practices of Swedish and German scholars such as Max Uhle and Erland Nordenskiöld.

HUMAN remains have lately become an important subject of debate in museum circles, especially in terms of their handling and exhibition.¹ Discussion of the management of human remains and other ‘sensitive material’ has intensified internationally over the past forty years. In most cases, the debate springs from the clash of value-systems between scientists, museum professionals and source communities – in many cases indigenous peoples. It is important, however, to avoid generalizing by being aware that individual groups do not constitute uniform units and that they can express quite disparate ideas.²

The proliferation of vast collections of human remains in ethnographic and natural history museums³ and in other scientific institutions around the world is due partly to the fact that during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century collecting human bones and measuring living populations in the name of comparative anatomy and the new science which studied the ‘natural history of man’ was encouraged at all levels. At this time, characteristics such as the shape of the head, length of the body and hair and eye colour were used to assign populations to separate categories with the aim of compiling an inventory of human diversity.⁴

Some museums have identified this activity as an aspect of colonialist legacy and have attempted to deal

with it in a new context of national multiculturalism. The way in which this concept is expressed in the museum sector depends to some degree on the individual country’s officially recognized minorities and indigenous peoples. In this paper we will focus on the latter. As one author has put it: ‘The immediate challenge for museums is to explore the historical background to the relationship between museums and indigenous peoples. This requires museums to address the colonial constructions of what constitutes “indigenous” along with the associated discourse of control and dispossession.’⁵ One way to explore this issue is to address matters concerning the study and the ownership of indigenous human remains stored at scientific institutions. The current debate on ethics in collections management, museums and archaeology is the result of many decades of discussion and of the conflicting interests that exist between different social groups.⁶

In this article we discuss these topics by focusing on the museum milieu in Sweden, taking as our starting point a cranium found in storage at the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History (GNM)⁷, but that actually belongs to the World Culture Museum (VKM)⁸. The human cranium in question had a number, which was identified as a reference collection number belonging

to the Ethnographical Department at the Gothenburg Museum (GM), today the World Culture Museum. Our aim is to provide a comprehensive historical context for the collectors and museum men involved in the history of the collection related to the object; to reconstruct a cultural biography (*sensu* Kopytoff)⁹ of the cranium as person and thing; and to analyze how the meanings and contexts of the cranium and its collection have changed over time.

The research stems from the rich archival material stored at the museums mentioned above and at the archives of the Gothenburg University libraries which hold many documents concerning the collectors. We begin our biographical journey with an outline of our theoretical framework, a brief description of the 'discovery' of a cranium in a storage, followed by background data on the collector, of vital interest in reconstructing the object biography. Then we proceed to describe and analyze the different stages in the biography of this museum object which we refer to as a person-thing. This includes a presentation of the historical context in which it was collected and transferred between different institutions and the contemporary context of its 'rediscovery'. Through these biographical stages we discuss the relationship between the collecting and treatment of human remains and the history of science in Sweden, in order to understand past and contemporary attitudes towards human remains there. We also analyze contemporary international examples of human remains management to gain insight into how local and national attitudes and value systems intersect with those on an international scale.

Cultural biography of a person-thing

In order to analyze the implications of the changing meanings and contexts of the cranium and its collection, we use the biographical approach proposed by Kopytoff which stresses the process of social transformations and trajectories of commoditized things and individualized persons.¹⁰ As Kopytoff discusses, 'in situations of culture contact, [biographies] . . . can show that what is significant about the adoption of alien objects . . . is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use'.¹¹ In our case, the cultural biography we are reconstructing includes: the life-cycle of a person who lived and died in a past society in the region of

Arica, Chile; the physical alteration of the remains as a result of death; and their later objectification and commodification as they were transformed into a culturally imbued thing by means of their incorporation into a museum within a modern complex society. In this sense, we are merging what Kopytoff analyzes separately as the biography of (on the one hand) people and (on the other hand) things. Kopytoff speaks of how, throughout history, people have been objectified and commoditized to different degrees through, for example, the institution of slavery, but he gives no consideration to the construction of a biography which includes the physical and cultural transformation of a person into a culturally charged thing, which is our contention here.

Appadurai has discussed how intimate trajectories of things, appropriate to specific objects as they move through different hands, contexts and uses, all the while accumulating a biography, are linked to large-scale dynamics that transcend the cultural biography of the object:¹² 'the social history of things and their cultural biography are not entirely separate matters, for it is the social history of things, over large periods of time and at large social levels, that constrains the form, meaning and structure of more short-term, specific and intimate trajectories'.¹³ For Appadurai, human engagement with material culture lends the objects agency. He explores the conditions under which economic objects circulate in different regimes of value in space and time. For him commodities are things with a certain social potential, existing in a very wide variety of societies. The capitalist mode of commoditization is seen by Appadurai as interacting with a myriad of other indigenous forms of commoditization. Returning our attention to the things themselves is in part a corrective to the tendency to excessively sociologize transactions in things.

When analyzing museum professionals' attitudes towards the treatment of human remains collections, Pickering finds it important to discuss the way source communities view what he calls the translation from *living to non-living*, from *person to body of a deceased person*.¹⁴ We acknowledge that within both western and non-western societies there exist different ontologies regarding the limits between nature and/or culture and between human and/or non-human,¹⁵ between dead and/or alive¹⁶ and finally between person and/or thing.¹⁷ This is accompanied by a set of formal and

informal rules governing the ways these boundaries are to be respected and treated.

We consider that historically museums have been major agents of modernity, deeply involved in what Latour calls the ‘practice of purification’. According to Latour, modernity’s constant purification practice creates two completely separate ontological zones: that of human beings and culture on one hand, and that of nonhuman beings and nature on the other. Until recently other ontologies have been ignored when it comes to the management of ‘cultural’ and ‘natural’ heritage within this type of institution. We claim that when human skeletal remains enter a scientific institution such as a museum they are purified and classified into either person or thing, culture or nature, never both. This material is commonly collected only to end up at anatomy or physical anthropology departments at universities and museums, where it is treated as biological matter and stripped of cultural attributes.¹⁸

As Latour points out, we need to think in terms of modernity’s double practice, including that of translation and the constant production of hybrids throughout time, in order to understand the world beyond what our scientific institutions have presented us as ontologically separate. In this paper we therefore consider the cranium a hybrid being, which we call, for analytical purposes, a person-thing. This is also why we combine the study of its biological matter with that of its culture. These studies have usually been carried out separately as a consequence of modernity’s purification practice in the fields of knowledge production.

The re-encounter

During an inventory check in 2006 a human cranium was found in a wooden box labelled ‘Arica’ in the Africa section of the human remains storage at the GNM.¹⁹ It was marked with the collection number 20.1.19, which did not refer to any object officially registered in the GNM collections. Later it was revealed that this number corresponded to a collection at the VKM, where a catalogue card stated that the cranium had been transferred (on loan) to the GNM, although no reason was given for the transfer. The objects was therefore confirmed as part of a larger collection (1920.1) with thirty-three catalogue entries at the VKM.²⁰

A search of the museum archives established that the cranium was collected around 1917 in the Arica

area in Northern Chile by Max Uhle, a German archaeologist. The arrival and registration of the collection are documented both in the ethnographical section of the GM’s *Annual Report* for 1921²¹ and in its catalogue. It was sent from Arica to Erland Nordenskiöld, director of the Ethnographical Section at the GM, and, although not officially registered until 1920, it arrived in Gothenburg in 1919.²²

The collector in Arica

In order to start mapping how and why the cranium was collected by Uhle, we need to reflect on his personal background, his research interests and the institutional networks in which he participated. After his studies in philology and linguistics, Max Uhle (1856–1944) worked for several museums in Germany (including the Königliches Zoologisches und Anthropologisch-Ethnographisches Museum Dresden, 1881–5, and the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, 1885–91) and had his interest in South American archaeology aroused by Alfons Stübel. He undertook numerous expeditions to countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Peru and worked for the universities of both Pennsylvania and California. He also founded many museums in South America and established the first chronologies of past cultures in several South American countries. Uhle became known as the first scholar to carry out extensive systematic excavations in many different parts of this region, and today he is still referred to as the ‘father of archaeology in South America’ or ‘father of Andean archaeology’.²³

The discovery of the Chinchorro culture in the Arica area²⁴ was a milestone for the international archaeological community. The first of the human remains were unearthed by Uhle in 1917 at the Morro 1 site and at a beach called Chinchorro. He was the first to publish a written description of the material culture belonging to what Uhle called ‘Los Aborígenes de Arica’.²⁵ The Chinchorro culture or complex was an ancient society based on fishing, in which the care of the dead held great importance. They performed elaborate funerary rituals in which the corpses were transformed into mummies in a process predating Egyptian mummies by some 2,000 years, making the Chinchorro mummies the most ancient in the world. The oldest

Chinchorro mummies were formed by exploiting natural processes; later on, artificial mummification techniques were developed. The process of natural mummification took place in the Atacama Desert and was dependent on the hot desert climate and high salt concentrations in the soils in the form of nitrates; these act as natural preservatives by absorbing the body fluids and preventing microbial attacks.²⁶ Radiocarbon dates obtained in the last decades show that Uhle erred in the determination of the antiquity of the Chinchorro mummies,²⁷ but his general typification of mummies has continued to serve as a guide for the description of most Chinchorro mummies from 1919 until the present day.²⁸

Between 1912 and 1915 Uhle founded the Museo de Etnología y Antropología in Santiago de Chile and at the same time carried out extensive archaeological excavations in different parts of the country. Between 1916 and 1919 he was without regular employment but worked as a private scholar in Northern Chile, where he put together various collections which he sold to ethnographical museums all over Europe. The income from these sales financed both his research and his fieldwork. At the time it was not uncommon for museums in the western world to pay collectors for objects perceived as 'exotic' and/or 'scientific' in order to enlarge their collections; the funds came either from the institutions themselves or, more frequently, from a network of patrons and friends of the museum.²⁹ This economic dimension should be taken into consideration when analyzing the formation of the collection acquired by the VKM with the number 1920.1, even though the collection sent by Uhle to Nordenskiöld contained no Chinchorro mummy. The importance accorded to the discovery of the Chinchorro mummies by the international scientific community may none the less explain why archaeologists and museum directors all over the world at that time were eager to acquire objects from Arica, especially human remains.³⁰

The excavations made by Uhle in Arica were neither properly documented nor published and the exact locations where he excavated remain unknown. Skottsberg,³¹ another Swede, who carried out research in the area after Uhle's discovery and also sent collections to Nordenskiöld for the museum in Gothenburg, criticized Uhle for the insufficient documentation from the tombs he excavated.

A person-thing: Cranium 20.1.19 from Arica

To reconstruct the biography and life cycle of this person/museum object the cranium's material condition, as it was found in storage, was re-examined, together with its archaeological-historical context; a physical description was compiled and an osteological analysis was undertaken.

The cranium, which had a yellowish-brown colour, showed evidence of cranial deformation of the vertico-occipital type (Fig. 1). This is normally the result of the flattening of the lower part of the occipital and constitutes the simplest form of head deformation performed during infancy, usually by wrapping the head with cloth in association with a cradle board.³² This observation not only provides us with insights into the kinds of cultural practices performed on the body when alive but also suggests one of the reasons it was collected in the field by Uhle, being perceived as endowed with scientific value. These deformation customs were performed on certain individuals, most probably belonging to the élite segment of society, prior to the Spanish conquest, in a large part of the Andean area.

The dental record can also be revealing of biographical details of the person's life cycle such as diet, ancestry, disease and age estimation. In the upper jaw five teeth survive in place: three molars (M1, M2 and M3) on the left side and two molars (M1 and M2) on the right. In the lower jaw five teeth are in place: two molars (M1 and M3) on the left side and three molars (M1, M2 and M3) on the right. Two of the molars showed evidence of cavities. It is notable that the lower jaw had only three tooth sockets for incisors (front teeth), while the upper jaw had four. Normally there are four sockets for incisors in the human mandible and maxilla: the presence here of only three is probably due to the loss of one of the incisors at an early age, permitting the socket to close up.

In order to determine age and sex at the time of death we used the museum's reference collection and the GNM's reference documents regarding sex and gender determination.³³ It was determined that the individual had most probably been male and had died at approximately sixty years of age.

Attached to the cranium were two tiny paper packages; one was placed in the left eye-socket and the other was fastened with a string to the left zygomatic bone. The package in the eye-socket contained two teeth and the other package four teeth. An additional

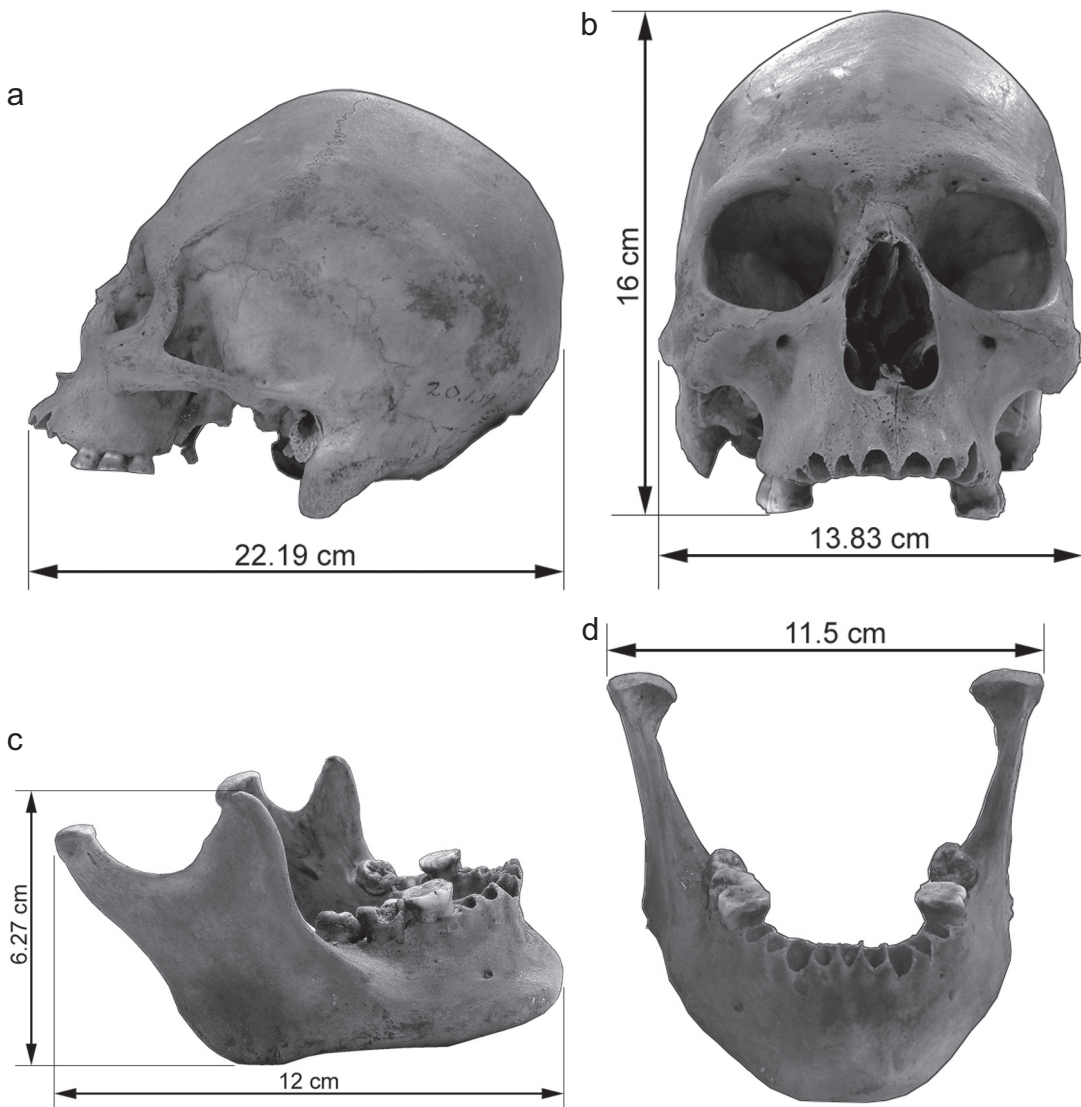


Fig. 1. Human cranium from Arica; collection of the World Culture Museum (VKM), Gothenburg (20.1.19): (a) side view; (b) front view; (c) lower jaw, side view; (d) lower jaw, front view. [Photo credit the Authors]

plastic bag contained two teeth and some soil. All the teeth from the packages were tried in tooth sockets and matched³⁴. The teeth and the soil had probably fallen off or had been detached from the cranium during previous handling by museum staff. The care with which these elements have been preserved and attached to the cranium is an indicator of conservation practices as exercised in the storage environment.

These data provide insights into an important part of the biographical aspect of the object, namely the life and death of the individual who later, through

the practice of collecting, entered an institution as a museum object.

By combining reading of the correspondence between Uhle and Nordenskiöld³⁵ with our own analysis of the shape of the cranium, we are able to confirm that the remains in the collection were archaeological in origin, implying that most of their cultural and material existence had elapsed in a burial context. From a scientific, western perspective, bodily remains in this type of context are seen as dead or inactive, as having passed from life to death. In the society to which this

individual belonged, however, where life and death may have had less clearly defined limits, as for instance in ancestor worship,³⁶ this may not have been the case.

We were able to conclude that the cranium was originally from Arica thanks to evidence from the museum registers: the word 'Arica' was written on the box in which the cranium was found, and the object's inventory number allowed us to trace its origins on catalogue cards and old inventory lists from the two museums. This information on the region where this person lived can bring us closer to reconstructing stages in the biography of this person-becoming-thing.

From tomb to museum

It is at this stage in the biography of the person-thing, in the transition between burial context and museum that a transformation from person to commodity occurs, a 'purifying process' undertaken by the collector and museum staff. This is not merely a commodification of the person – as Kopytoff argues in the case of slavery – but a cultural process which allows the material in question to exit the sphere of personhood and enter the sphere of objecthood. This transformation took place when our object was collected by Uhle and thereby acquired cultural scientific value, specifically as an archaeological/ethnographic object. This value was enhanced by the fact that it was collected first hand 'in the field' by someone who possessed both high academic status and knowledge of the object's cultural context, similar to the process described by Kopytoff concerning the transformation of values from 'primitive' objects into African art that took place under the influence of European and American Africanists.³⁷

In order to comprehend how and why the cranium was acquired by the museum in Gothenburg we need to inquire further into collecting practices at the beginning of the twentieth century. Close historical and commercial ties were established between the important port of Gothenburg and different parts of South America. These ties were also strengthened by students and scholars of the so-called Nordenskiöld school in Gothenburg, who were particularly interested in studying past and present indigenous societies of the South American continent.³⁸

In 1917, when the cranium was collected in Arica, Erland Nordenskiöld (1877–1932), the director of the Ethnographical Department at the GM, was eager

to continue enlarging the museum's ethnographical and archaeological collections from South America, rendering them the most extensive of their kind in Northern Europe. During this same period, Uhle was carrying out extensive field work in many parts of the continent: his discovery of the Chinchorro mummies in 1917 had especially caught the attention of many Americanists, including Nordenskiöld.

As the correspondence from the old Ethnographic Department's archives indicates, Uhle and Nordenskiöld were in touch throughout the period of Uhle's travels in South America.³⁹ Two letters refer directly to the collection in question. Since the museum's collections contained no objects from the Arica region where Uhle had discovered the Chinchorro mummies, Nordenskiöld asked him to put together a small collection and send it to Gothenburg. However, shipment to Europe had to wait until after the end of World War I, so that the objects arrived in Sweden only in late 1919. This is also confirmed by Rowe: 'Uhle's last project in Chile was to make a small representative collection of the antiquities of the Arica region for the Ethnographical Museum in Gothenburg, at the request of his friend Erland Nordenskiöld. He got together some thirty-three specimens for this purpose, without doing any major digging, and sent them off in April, 1919, with a characteristic Uhle catalogue'.⁴⁰

The items were officially registered at the museum in 1920 as 'Collection 1920.1'. Included amongst them are five crania, a hair-knot with several braids, and nine human bones including tibiae and fibulae. Other artefacts belonging to the collection include ceramics and a number of fish hooks, bone tools, wooden tools, lithic artefacts and some textile fragments, as well as samples of quinoa seeds. According to archival sources, the museum was undergoing financial problems at the time and the costs of some 300 SEK were paid by Dr Gustaf Ekman, who donated the items to the museum. It was, in fact, common practice for the Ethnographical Museum to purchase collections through a donation system which assured wealthy families of public visibility of their contribution to the arts and culture.⁴¹ In Sweden at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century the resulting high visibility made it possible for the growing Gothenburg bourgeoisie to climb the social ladder, some of them even acquiring noble status in the process.

A shift from ethnography to natural history

As stated on the original GM catalogue cards, three skulls from the collection 1920.1 were transferred to Leonard Axel Jägerskiöld (1867–1945) at the GNM, at some time during his employment as director of the museum between 1923 and 1937. Neither the exact date of the transfer nor the reasons for it are documented in the annual reports, nor on the catalogue cards. The transfers receive no mention either in the museum correspondence of 1918–33 between Nordenskiöld and Jägerskiöld. Two of the three crania were at some point returned to the GEM but cranium 20.1.19 was not included in the re-transfer and hence survived to be rediscovered in 2006 in the Africa section of the GNM stores. In the course of their transfer to an institution dealing with natural history, all three crania were separated from the remainder of the archaeological artefacts, implying that they were detached too from their cultural context: they became museum objects circulating in a different museum context, transiting through different labelling systems, from being ethnographic, archaeological objects to natural history specimens.

The labelling of objects is linked with the colonialism of power⁴² and the way museum categories have accompanied western knowledge production. In order to further understand the changes in labelling and the transfer from one museum and subject area to the next we need to take into account the different practices and value-systems involving human remains in Sweden during the first half of the twentieth century.

Nationalism and collections of human remains in Sweden

Our inquiry into the reasons why the cranium was collected and sent to the Ethnographic Department at the GM and later transferred to the GNM opens up a dialogue with the vast quantity of human remains which were collected and stored by museums in Sweden as the product of a set of ideas around the value of such material in the documentation of human physical features. In this sense, we seek to connect the trajectory of a single transition from tomb to museum with a larger movement and shared history in which many person-things were attributed scientific value and robbed of their humanity through the mechanism of museumification.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a very specific climate existed in both Sweden as in other parts of the western international scientific community. This fostered the accumulation of vast collections of human remains which are today stored at different types of museums (especially those of ethnography and natural history), at different departments in universities (such as those of anatomy, anthropology, archaeology, geology, etc.), at hospitals and in private collections around the world. Collecting human bones and measuring living people in the name of comparative anatomy and the new science which studied the ‘natural history of man’ were encouraged at all levels. The shape of head, length of body and hair and eye colour – all were studied and used to classify people into categories with the aim of compiling an inventory of human diversity.⁴³

This process of mapping humanity through documenting and collecting people is closely linked to the role of museums as expressions of national identity.⁴⁴ The proliferation of museums in the nineteenth century was bound up with the formation and solidification of nation-states and in the privileged visual and object-oriented arena at the museum, the public was shown an ‘objective vision’ of racial typologies and evolutionary trajectories that helped objectify national identities and cultural/racial/gendered differences.⁴⁵

In Sweden the survey by Gustaf Retzius (1842–1919) of the physical aspects of the Swedish population in the late 1800s, together with the great number of human remains from scientific expeditions which ended up in museums throughout the country, serve to illustrate this phenomenon. The tradition in question might even be traced back to Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), who not only classified plants and animals but also attempted to classify people in his *Systema Naturae*. Later, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Anders Retzius (1796–1860), professor in anatomy at Karolinska Institutet, came up with a measurement system for the skull – a kind of cranium index. His cranial studies led him to distinguish long from short skulls, which led further to the widely used classification of dolichocephalic and brachycephalic types.⁴⁶

This index was later used by his son Gustaf Retzius while undertaking a national survey of physical aspects of the Swedish population. The results were published in the volume *Anthropologia Suecica* in 1902. The type of data collected for the survey sheds light on

scientific preconceptions of the period. In the spirit of nationalism, it was considered of the utmost importance to document and map the physical anthropology of the Swedish population.⁴⁷ Racial biology became a respected and prestigious discipline as worries around the future of the Swedish type and the results of miscegenation grew and became accepted ideas in early twentieth-century society. Although Gustaf Retzius cannot be called a racial biologist, his work was later used in forwarding ideas on racial biology and racial hygiene. The link between physical anthropology and racial biology is described by Ljungström, when he states that the movement for racial hygiene and social anthropology as disciplines shared an interest both in finding correlations between race, social status, and disease, and good and bad customs.⁴⁸ He further explains that the difference between the two is that the latter carries a negative message in that it assumed that loss of racial order threatens the future.⁴⁹

Nordenskiöld had no direct connection with either physical anthropology or the racial hygiene movement, or with race biology. In fact, he found himself in dispute with the Retzius family, which was one of the reasons why he relocated from Stockholm to Gothenburg. As a zoologist who, in the course of his visits to South America, took on the role of an ethnographer, he was mostly interested in documenting a life-style which he admired and which he used to criticize his own society and class.⁵⁰ There is, therefore, no clear indication that Nordenskiöld was specifically interested in crania and this might indeed be the reason why cranium 20.I.19 was transferred to Jägerskiöld, who pursued these matters on his spare time.⁵¹ Jägerskiöld was clearly very interested in these matters and we conclude that this is the reason why the cranium was placed on loan to the GNM.

A new biographical stage, recognition of the person-thing?

Since the moment the cranium was 'rediscovered' in storage a new phase in its biographical trajectory commenced; this calls for an analysis of current context and the way museum objects are handled and studied. It is also necessary to consider our own research and the writing of this article as part of the person-thing's biography. We claim that at this biographical stage the scientific value attributed to the cranium is in a state of tension, as a result of the perceptions of

some conservators and museum professionals of the possibility that the cranium may be treated not only as a museum object or as dead material but also as something sacred and alive. New perspectives in human remains management in museum collections have become an issue in many museums across the world, especially as a result of repatriation and restitution claims.⁵²

A number of key international repatriation policies have impacted on museum practice to varying degrees around the world, notably those issued by World Archaeological Congress (First Code of Ethics, Vermillion Accord on human remains, Tamaki-Makaurau Accord on the display of human remains and sacred objects), the ICOM Code of Ethics for museums, and the articles included in Resolution 61/295 in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.⁵³

For example, in the USA the issue of repatriation of both human remains and burial goods has been treated by a federal law since the 1990s, namely the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which obliges museums to disclose on inquiry any relevant material that might be held in their collections.⁵⁴ In Australia the Federal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act of 1984 supports the repatriation of human remains and cultural material to aboriginal communities from within the country and also from abroad. However, in the UK repatriation, as regulated by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), applies only to human remains,⁵⁵ while in Japan the National Museum of Ethnology, a relatively new institution, has largely avoided the issue by commissioning new items or facsimiles for display and for the explanation of other cultures.⁵⁶

There are no national laws concerning repatriation either in Chile or in Sweden, although on specific occasions human remains and sacred objects have been returned from Sweden to a variety of countries or to specific indigenous communities or ethnic minorities within those countries. The Atacameños who live in northern Chile are one of the most visible and active indigenous groups in that country. They were the first to require that the Chilean state and the archaeological profession should comply with certain procedures regarding the treatment and management of their cultural heritage. As a result of a long negotiation process, they managed in 2007 to reach an agreement with the

Museo Arqueológico de San Pedro de Atacama which led the museum to follow ICOM's Code of Ethics on the Exhibition of Sensitive Materials⁵⁷ and thereby withdraw their human remains from display. Some remains were also returned to the Atacameños and in a number of cases the remains were also reburied.⁵⁸

A documented case of repatriation and reburial of human remains took place in Arica and Chiu Chiu thanks to the NAGPRA legislation and an agreement between the Chilean state agency Consejo de Monumentos Nacionales and the National Museum of the American Indian. The remains, consisting of a mummy and two skulls, were repatriated to the indigenous community – Atacameña de San Francisco de Chiu Chiu, in the Antofagasta region – and to some Aymara communities in the Arica and Parinacota region. It was established that the remains were associated with these communities based on geographical factors, and hence the items were returned to the communities that currently live in the region from where the remains were recovered.

Some felt, however, that more rigorous investigations should have been undertaken in order to analyze archeological, biological and cultural evidence in order to ensure that the remains did indeed belong to the community to which they were repatriated.⁵⁹ Other claims on human remains from Chile have been made by the Mapuche⁶⁰ and the Rapa Nui.⁶¹

In the case of Sweden there have been many claims from Australia and New Zealand. As a result of the repatriation of fifteen crania from the Museum of Ethnography and the Historical Museum in Stockholm to Australia, the Swedish government delegated to these museums and to thirteen other state-funded institutions the task of compiling an inventory of their respective collections of human remains, an exercise that was completed in the autumn of 2005.⁶² The main objective in compiling this detailed information about the provenance of the human remains was that it should be made widely available in order that interested parties might have the opportunity of submitting a repatriation claim. A significant feature of the repatriation and reburial process has been the difficulty encountered by Indigenous groups in accessing information on what museum collections actually contain.⁶³ Making this information more generally available undoubtedly opened up opportunities both for increased numbers of claims against Swedish museums and actual repatriation acts. Since

2005 a series of repatriation cases has been presented in Sweden, notably by the national governments of Australia and New Zealand. For example, aboriginal remains held by Lund University were repatriated to the Australian authorities in 2008, while in 2011 Maori remains from the same institution were handed over to representatives of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. The Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg has received a number of repatriation claims from Latin American countries, although none of them has involved human remains: the Bolivian government first lodged a claim for the Niño Korin collection in 2007, while in 2009 the Peruvian government claimed a collection of Paracas textiles owned by the City of Gothenburg and held in the Museum of World Culture.⁶⁴

Although no federal law has been passed, in 1983 the Swedish National Heritage Board issued general guidelines on how to handle, store and re-bury human remains dating from prehistory and the Middle Ages. It was stated here that reburial of skeletons should be considered on a case-by-case basis, depending on their scientific value and the religious or ethical reasons presented for their reburial.⁶⁵

It has been asserted that 'the analysis of human remains is important since it enhances our understanding of histories that have both local and global implications', but at the same time it is conceded that the need of scientific studies might be questioned if non-Western values are also taken into account.⁶⁶ Others, however, have pointed out that the value of scientific studies on human remains is now widely accepted, not least by representatives of indigenous communities.⁶⁷ In every case concerning objects from other cultures the question of whose values are to be respected evidently needs to be considered. From an ethical point of view it has been claimed that the 'relatives of the dead too often have been excluded from decision making',⁶⁸ while the museum community has responded to repatriation claims by arguing that museums are in better position to preserve human remains excavated by western archaeologists in different parts of the world in the past century and which are currently considered from a western perspective to belong to the international community and to a common world heritage. From this point of view, museum professionals and other sectors of society have come to assert the moral duty of museums to preserve human remains in appropriate conditions.

A certain ‘politics of the deceased’ has been argued for by Sadongi and Cash Cash in their advocacy for guidelines constructed from a Native American perspective in order to ‘support the foundation of indigenous value orientation that is so often neglected’ and which would give to human remains some degree of autonomy from the western scientific value system.⁶⁹ The guidelines observe three aspects: completeness in the integrity of persons; artificial reconstructions; and isolation. The first aspect suggests that the human remains must be stored together with bone dust, bone fragments and any other residues from the burial context; if research activities are likely to lead to deconstruction, then the descendant population should be consulted. The question of artificial reconstruction deals with the desirability that techniques should not be used which might endanger the physical integrity of the remains. The idea of isolation is intended to ‘reduce the risk of casual contact by affected descendant populations’:⁷⁰ the authors suggest that human remains, funerary objects and items that contain human remains should be isolated from the remainder of the collections, a move that would also protect people belonging to religious groups who, for example, are not permitted to see or be in the same room as human remains.

The VKM, which owns the cranium considered here, houses other human remains from non-western cultures for which it maintains a special storage room, demonstrating that the museum adheres to the guidelines mentioned above and to a specific ‘politics of the deceased’. These sensibilities reveal the shift in values ascribed to human remains that has taken place in this particular museum. Human remains and items now labelled as ‘sacred’ continue to be seen as museum objects, but they are treated in a manner different from other materials since they are acknowledged as having the potential of containing ‘personhood’ or ‘spirit’.

Separate storage means that the human remains are isolated from other parts of the collection, and perhaps even from objects with which they were originally buried. The dedicated human remains room may be seen as a gesture of respect towards source communities, although in the case of the VKM (which has numerous human remains from South America) the adoption of guidelines developed in a US context and from a Native American perspective can also carry implications of intellectual imperialism: that is to say, categories developed in one context have been

applied to a very different one. A further interpretation of this form of separate treatment might also see it as a Western response, prompted by a consciousness of the museum’s colonial legacy.

In some cases the VKM has contacted source communities concerning the interpretation of ‘sacred’ objects,⁷¹ in acknowledgement of the recommendations on ‘Culturally Sensitive Material’ contained in the Code of Ethics issued by ICOM.⁷² These state that such material should be treated in a manner ‘consistent with professional standards and the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from which the object originated, where these are known.’⁷³ This declaration leaves plenty of scope for interpretation and room for further discussion, but it stresses above all the need for respectful handling of such objects.

Conclusion

We have considered different stages in the biography of a person-thing – from life to burial before being collected, reclassification as a scientific museum object, transition from an ethnographic sphere to the context of natural history, and finally a rediscovery stage when it is subjected to value systems within the museum which find themselves in tension. We have also described a shift that has taken place within the western museum world, with a focus here on Sweden, from a position in which only the scientific value of human remains was considered to one in which other dimensions are acknowledged, linked to livelihood and personhood.

The concept of the person-thing can be useful in the analysis of people’s attitudes to human remains collections through a cultural biographical perspective. We consider it productive to merge the biographies of people and objects, usually studied separately, in order to open up new discourses about material long forgotten in museums and to make it possible to produce new ways of interpreting objects and new ways of working with people or groups long excluded from the museums. By these means, the imposition of Western scientific categories on the objects under study may be avoided.

Following the intimate trajectory of an object has permitted us to move through and document changing value systems in the history of museums in Sweden and its links to the early development of archaeology in South America and collecting practices observed by

Swedish and German scholars. We have highlighted here the importance of working not only with current data recorded in collections management systems but also with the trajectories of objects with shared histories in order to resolve with greater sensitivity the tensions that continue to exist within the museum environment. In this sense collections management and the study of the history of collections can be seen to be mutually dependent.

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- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut. Preussischer Kulturbesitz. *Der Nachlass Max Uhles*, <<http://www.iai.spk-berlin.de/nachlass/uhle/index.htm>>, accessed 6 April 2014.
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- 39 See Gustavsson *et al.*, op. cit. (note 34).
- 40 J. H. Rowe, 'Max Uhle, 1856–1944 – a memoir of the father of Peruvian archaeology', *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology* 46 no. 1 (1954), pp. 1–134, at p. 16; see also O. Morris, *Max Uhle (1856–1944)* <<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/wilson/ant304/biography/arybios98/morrisbio.html>>, accessed 16 February 2007.
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- 42 W. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Oxford, 2005); Muñoz, op. cit. (note 8).
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