



Why excavate human bones

Human skeletal remains are a rich source of evidence about our past, and scientific advances are rapidly increasing the data available. (*Historic England, 2023*)

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- Diet
 - Health
 - Biological affinity
 - Population history
 - Past diseases study help modern medicine and research

Ethical and Legal Issues for excavating human remains

The excavation and treatment of human remains involves ethical sensitivities and legal considerations over and above those in other areas of archaeology.

The involvement of a human osteologist is therefore central to the success of an archaeological project involving human remains

BABAO Code of Ethics and a Code of Practice. (British Association of Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology).

Legal and Ethical Framework.

Code of ethics when handling, storage and analysis of human remains from archaeological sites

It is also illegal to exhume or remove from a place of burial human remains, including archaeological remains, without the proper legal authority. In England and Wales this can be in the form of an [Exhumation Licence](#) from the Ministry of Justice, or a Diocesan faculty where they are in consecrated ground.



Skeletal Excavations

Questions that need answering

Are they human or animal?

Who are they?

Where did they come from ?

What food did they eat ?

How healthy were they?

Were they male or female?

How old were they?

How tall were they?

What mortuary practices did they have?

Human Remains excavations: field procedures

- All human burial excavations are different, and the archaeologist must be prepared for this.
- Cemetery excavations differ from isolated skeletal excavations- contexts can vary from waterlogged conditions to collapsed burials.
- Condition of the bones can vary, and bones may be scattered, so will require marking with a flag pin.
- Care should be taken to ensure no further damage occurs, and fragile bones preserved where possible.
- Photographs and recordings should be made before the skeleton is removed.





Deposition

- Coffin Burials- wooden, lead
- Barrow Burials
- Stone Cysts
- Caves
- Cremations
- Singular/ Mass/Multiple
- Offerings within the burials - time period/religion dependent.
- Articulated
- Disarticulated

Burial Positions

Supine (lying on the back).

Prone (lying on the front).



Flexed position with the legs bent or crouched with the legs folded up to the chest.



Fragmented Bone

Cremated Bone

Trauma Bone

Diseased Bone



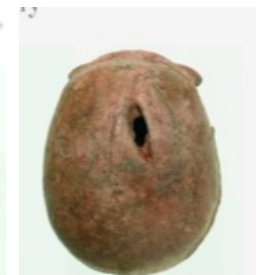
Syphilitic skull



Enamel hyperplasia



Blunt force injury



Sharp force injury

For further information regarding Osteoarchaeology

Please read

The Role of the Human Osteoarchaeologist in an Archaeological Fieldwork Project
(published 2018). Downloadable pdf. Available at www.historicengland.org.uk

Thank you

Any Questions

Key Links and Resources.

- British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology - <https://www.babao.org.uk/>
- The role of the Human Osteoarchaeologist in an Archaeological Field Work Project (2019) Historic England.
- Brickley, M. & McKinley, J., eds 2004. Guidelines to the Standards for the Recording of Human Remains. British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology / Institute of Field Archaeologists, Reading. <http://www.babao.org.uk/assets/Uploadsto-Web/HumanremainsFINAL2.pdf>
- Mays, S., Sidell, J., Sloane, B., White, W. and Elders, J. 2015. Large Burial Grounds. Guidance on Sampling in Archaeological Fieldwork Projects. London: Advisory Panel on the Archaeology of Burials in England. http://www.archaeologyuk.org/apabe/pdf/Large_Burial_Grounds.pdf
- Advisory Panel on the Archaeology of Burials in England (APABE) <https://apabe.archaeologyuk.org/>
- The Human Bone Manual. (2005) Tim D White and Pieter A Folkens.