

# The kennewick man controversy



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The “ Kennewick Man Controversy” has been an issue debated among scientists and the Umatilla tribe. The debates focused on the question of who should take ownership and immediate possession of a human skull found at the edge of the bank of the Columbia River. Archaeologists argued for a right to study the human skull, causing the legal battle to stretch for several years until scientists were allowed to study the “ Kennewick Man”.

The discovery of the skull paved the way for realizing the urgent need for archaeological analysis and gave rise to certain ethical contentions which drew the lines between scientific and cultural pursuits. In this paper, I argue that archaeological study is an immediate need that should overcome certain ethical and cultural considerations for a specific duration. There are scientific limitations and ethical issues raised by the debates over the Kennewick Man. Scientists arguing for the right to study the human skull are limited by an existing law of the United States: the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act.

Also, once scientists are permitted to study the human skull, their study’s length will be limited not only by their scientific tools but also by the demands of the Umatilla tribe to take possession of the remains the soonest possible time. One of the results of the scientific study conducted reveals that the Kennewick Man did not fit any of the modern classifications of “ race” and that more is yet to be known about the identity of the human skull (Fiedel, p. 86). As far as ethical issues are concerned, the controversy has stirred the delicate balance between the importance of scientific research and the respect for cultural beliefs.

The major point raised by the archaeologists—that the human skull needed archaeological analysis in order to solve the “puzzle”—came in conflict with the contention of the Umatilla tribe, which is that they have a claim to the bones and, therefore, it is only proper to repatriate the bones to them. On closer inspection, the granting of the permission of the archaeologists does not necessarily imply the higher significance of scientific analysis over the cultural rights of the Umatilla tribe in general.

Permitting archaeologists to examine the remains only signify that there is an urgent need to study the skeletal material. The fact that the law forces the scientists to return the artifacts after examination signifies that, in the long run, the ethical considerations for the cultural rights of the Umatilla tribe still weigh more than scientific pursuits. Elizabeth Weiss argues that “the demand to bury aboriginal skeletons, not only in America but also around the world, poses a potentially serious impediment to scientific inquiry” (Weiss, p. 13), to which I fully agree.

While we should consider the cultural rights of native groups to their heritage and cultural property, the examination of archaeological findings to expand the human understanding of human civilization’s evolution is likewise a significant thing to consider. Legal arrangements can be made in order to preserve the integrity of the skeletal material during archaeological analysis under a prescribed length of time and to guarantee the claimants of the skeletal remains that they will have possession of the object after the study.

To this day, modern scientists are still seeking the humble beginnings of humanity through what is little that remains of it, from aboriginal skeletons to historical objects. When archaeologists and the larger body of scientists

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across the world are prevented from examining such materials from the past, there is reason to believe that it will similarly deprive future generations of knowing and understanding the past.

The greatest threat is when these objects eventually get buried in time, forgotten and never to be seen again; the result is catastrophic because humanity will have no reason to mount attempts to study human history. James Chatters also writes that most of the analyses and interpretations about “ the peopling of America” and “ where the immigrants came from” are “ limited by the tiny sample of ancient skeletal material” (Chatters, p. 291).

Thus, scientists should not be deprived of studying ancient skeletal materials once they are found. The more objects we can study, the more we can unveil a hidden history and the more we can know and explain how human civilization has evolved. Cultural concerns should not be abandoned, yet the primacy of scientific study should also compel us to at least suspend our ethical judgments for a moment and allow science to aid us understand our world.

## **Bibliography**

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