

## The return of the ancestors

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**Abstract.** The repatriation of American Indian bones from museums, universities and historical societies is a major concern of many North American tribal groups. This paper presents a survey of bone collecting mostly in the nineteenth century and finds that contrary to the current views of some anthropologists and archaeologists such activity met with Indian anger and resistance. In the controversy over this issue, this paper suggests that part of the problem lies in differing cultural concepts of the body. This paper also suggests why repatriation has suddenly emerged as an issue of contention.

In 1971 an Iowa road crew accidentally unearthed an unmarked cemetery. There were 28 skeletons. Twenty seven belonged to whites and state money quickly paid for their reburial. The other, a young female Indian, was packed in a box and shipped off to the University of Iowa and the state archaeologist. A local Indian by the name of Running Moccasins learned of the incident and demanded that the woman's bones be returned for proper burial. Initial resistance by the university and the state archaeologist led to protests by Indians, who were joined by the press, local churches, and students at the University of Iowa. The protests forced the state archaeologists to quickly proclaim that the remains were of no "scientific or historical significance" and the skeleton was released for burial. This incident probably marks the beginning of the recent movement for the repatriation of what Indians call the expropriation of Indian bodies for science.<sup>1</sup>

As one archaeologist admitted, "much of the archaeology done in the United States has paid little explicit attention to Indian concerns" and he sees this as one of the principal objections of Native Americans.<sup>2</sup> This, he feels, is partly due to the reasoning of archaeologists who see the subject of their research as pre-historic and hence pre-tribal. That is to say, the bones have no tribal identity and are only very distantly related to living tribal peoples. This, however, is not how the Indians view the skeletal remains. They see a definite connection between themselves and the bones that archaeologists dig up and physical anthropologists study.

The issue of repatriation has both a religious and political component and is seen by Indians in the larger context of their cultural decline. They see it as part of the ra-

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, D.: Reburial: Is It Reasonable? *Archaeology* 38:5 (September/October 1985): 48-49.

<sup>2</sup> Meigham, C. W.: Archaeology: Science or Sacrilege? In: Green, E. L. (ed.): *Ethics and Values in Archaeology*. New York: The Free Press, 1984, 209.