

THE  
BRITISH  
MUSEUM

# The Display of Human Remains

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## What do we know?

- BM commissioned research in 2004:
  - The results gave us the same kind of data that we now get from our monthly visitor snapshot reports.
  - It showed that visitors are less concerned about Human Remains than their immediate comfort needs.

## What do we know?

- June 2007 – new research by Karis Eklund at UCL on the display of human skeletal remains at the BM.
- Objectives:
  - Ascertain visitor reactions.
  - Identify the values visitors ascribe to human remains.
  - Understand the ethics of their display from a visitor perspective.

## What do we know?

- Methodology
  - Survey questionnaire – used to interview 100 visitors.
  - Targeted to two galleries:
    - Prehistoric Europe (Barnack burial)
    - Ancient Levant (Jericho tomb)

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What do we know?



Barnack



Jericho

## What do we know?

- Visitor profile
  - 54% Male, 46% Female
  - Young profile – 45% under 35 years old.
  - 65% were British or North American
  
- Very similar profile to the 2004 survey

## What do we know?

### ■ Results

■ "Did you expect to see human skeletal remains on display?"

■ Yes 72%

■ No 25%

■ Unsure 3%

■ "What first came to mind when you saw the remains?"

## What do we know?

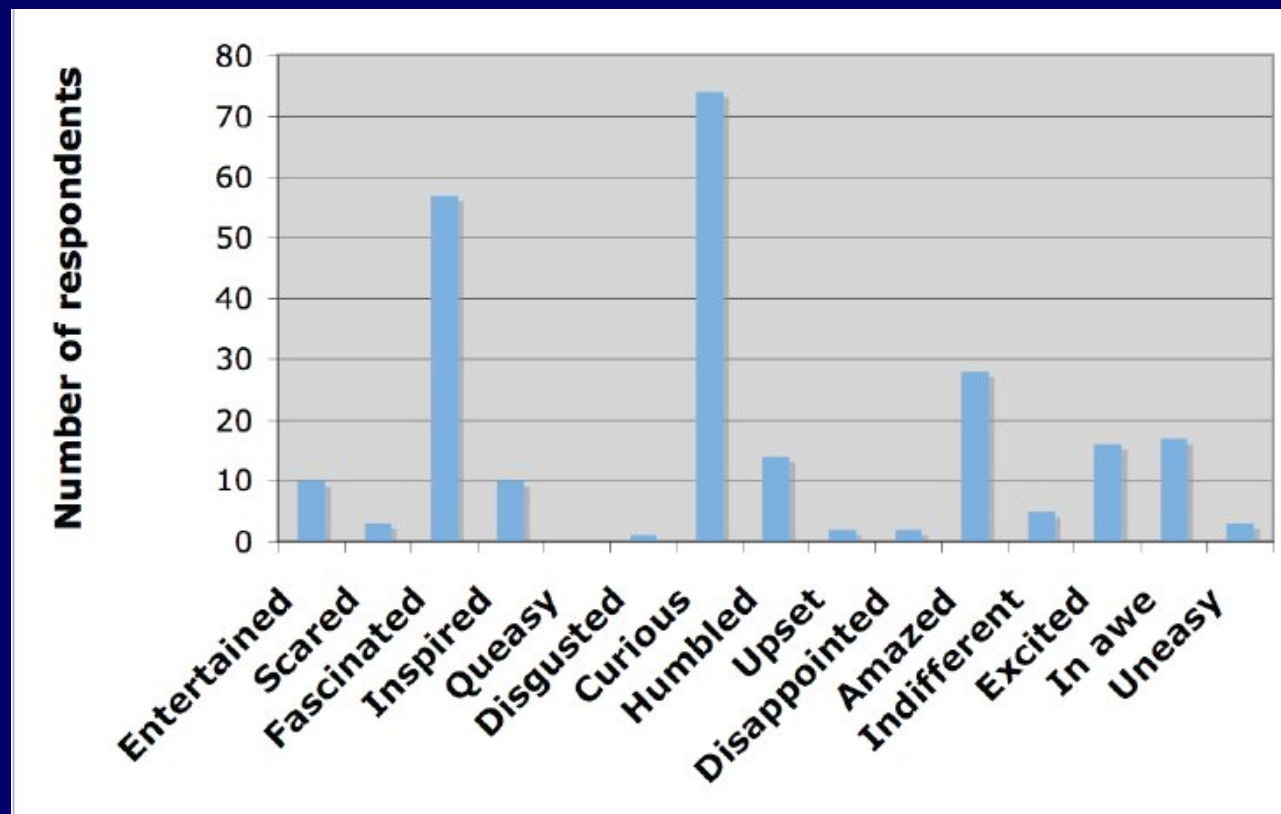
- General surprise/excitement/interest 20
- Age of skeleton 12
- Preservation of skeleton 10
- That it was a human being 7
- Archaeology/discovery 7
- Whether or not it was real 5
- Burial context 5
- "Who" they were 5

## What do we know?

- "How did you feel when viewing the remains?"
  - Interest 27
  - Neutral 15
  - Curiosity 12
  - Amazement 7
  - Sacredness 5
  - Sadness 4
  - Fear 3
  - Intrigue 3
  - Mixed 3
  - Awe 2
  - Other positive 10
  - Other negative 3

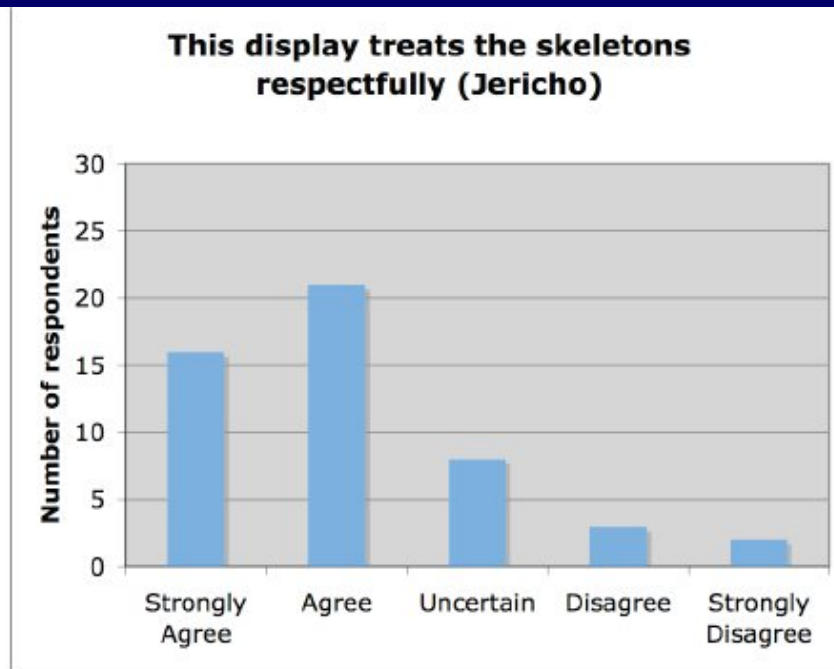
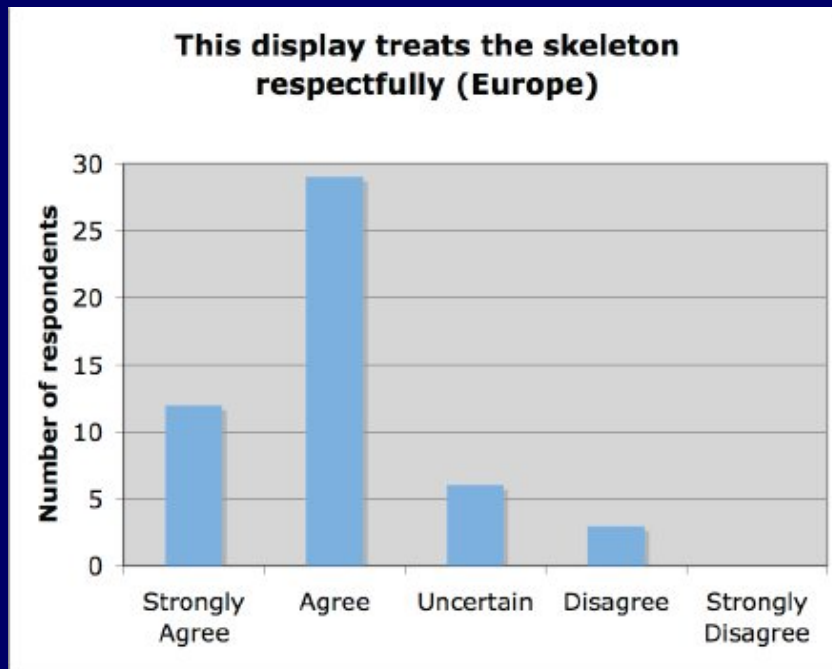
# What do we know?

- “What best describes your feelings?”



# What do we know?

- The display is respectful...

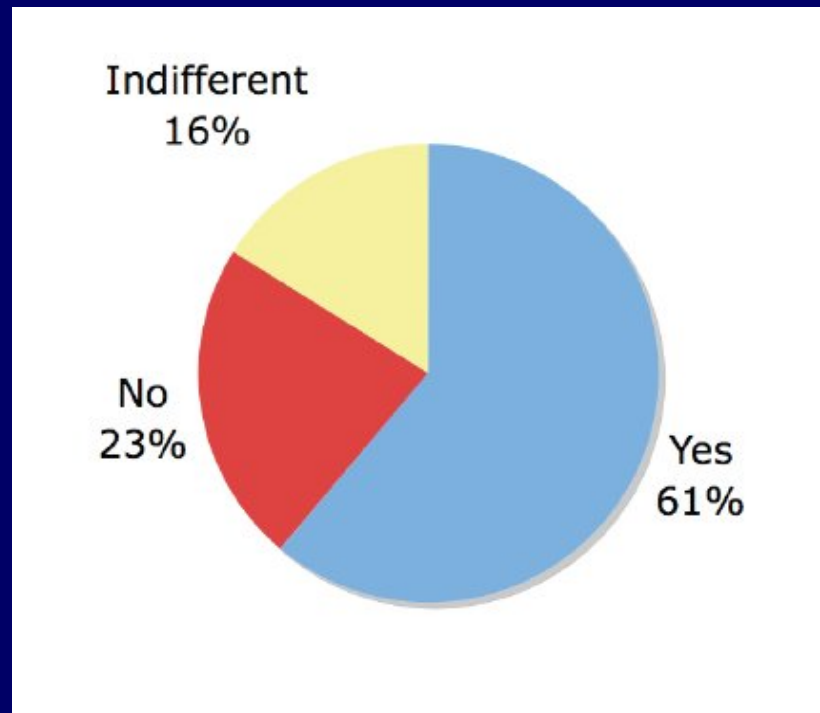


## What do we know?

- “Was there anything you wanted to know about the skeleton that wasn’t presented?”
  - Sufficed 56
  - People 17
  - Body 9
  - Burial 8
  - Death 7
  - Acquisition 5
  - Map 2
  - Other 2
  - Didn’t read 3

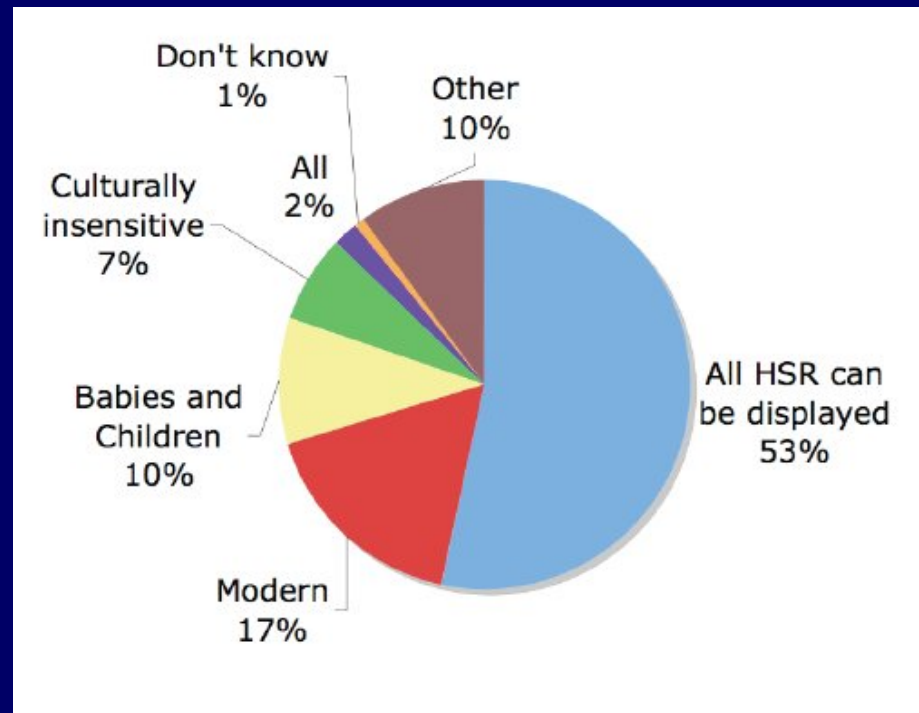
## What do we know?

- “Would you be interested to see more remains like this on display?”



## What do we know?

- “Are there any kinds of human skeletal remains you feel we should not display?”



## What do we know?

- “What factors should the museum consider when displaying human skeletal remains?”
  - Display as found 23
  - Demonstrate a clear purpose 21
  - Show cultural sensitivity 11
  - Convey the skeleton’s humanity 8
  - Consider the effect on children 7
  - Consent 5

## What do we know?

- “What factors should the museum consider when displaying human skeletal remains?”
  - Warn visitors beforehand 5
  - Space 4
  - Age of skeleton 3
  - Provenance/collections history 3
  - Origin of skeleton 2
  - Conservation concerns 2

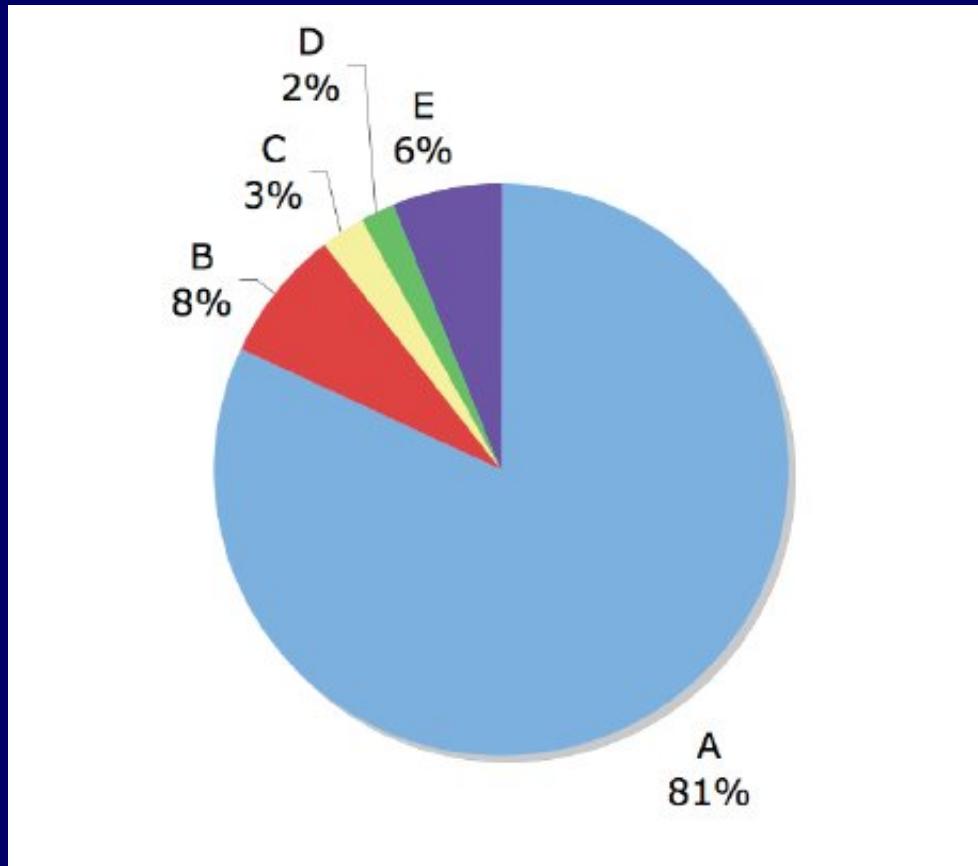
## What do we know?

- “Your thoughts on the museum displaying human skeletal remains can be best summed up by which one of the following:”
- A. This museum should be allowed to display such remains in whatever way it believes to be respectful.
- B. This museum should definitely show more respect in the way it displays such remains.

## What do we know?

- "Your thoughts on the museum displaying human skeletal remains can be best summed up by which one of the following:"
- C. It is okay for this museum to hold such remains but they should be kept in store and not displayed.
- D. It is not appropriate for this museum to hold such remains.
- E. I have no strong opinion on this matter.

## What do we know?



81%  
The British  
Museum should be  
allowed to display  
such remains in  
whatever way it  
believes to be  
respectful.

## What do we know?

Overall:

- $\frac{3}{4}$  of visitors expect to see skeletal remains
- $\frac{3}{4}$  of visitors react positively to them
- The vast majority of visitors think respect is important – and 81% trust us to judge
- Around half think all kinds of remains can be legitimately displayed

## What don't we know?

- Sample size is still very small.
- Sample has a very narrow age and cultural profile.
- Do visitors think authenticity matters? Many asked if the Barnack skeleton was "real".
- Do visitors respond differently to other types of remains – e.g. mummies or bog bodies?
- What do visitors think of body parts, or objects that include body parts?

## What don't we know?

- Does the display method influence visitors' responses?
- Do visitors connect on a human level? (Most refer to a skeleton as "it".)
- What else?

## What can others tell us?

- Very little published literature on visitor responses to human remains
- What research do other UK nationals have?

## What can others tell us?

- UCL have undertaken comparative research on the display of mummies across three museums including the BM.
- This has not yet been published, but the findings were very similar to Karis Eklund's research.

## What can others tell us?

- National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington DC have researched visitor responses to display of human body parts.

## What can others tell us?

- Manchester Museums' policy requires consultation before displaying human remains – particularly with marginalised communities and faith groups. Their Lindow Man consultation report has been published this year.

## What can others tell us?

- Manchester's display guidelines also state that remains will only be referred to by a proper name when that name is known, or the name of a cultural group or site is used.
- They also stipulate that casts of human remains will not be displayed or interpreted in a way that would be inappropriate for real remains.

## What can others tell us?

- The Museum of London has published a list of guiding principles for display.
  - Skeletons will only be used if they are part of the Museum's collections, with good provenance.
  - A named individual will only be displayed if we are happy it is with the consent of any known descendants.
  - If a skeleton from an modern cultural community is displayed, it will only be done so with the consent of any *bona fide* members of that community.

## What can others tell us?

- Skeletons will only be handled by, or handled under the supervision of, appropriate Museum of London staff.
- Where a skeleton has been recovered complete, it will be kept complete for display.
- A skeleton will only be displayed where the project team is happy that it makes a material contribution to a particular interpretation; and that contribution could not be made in another way.

## What can others tell us?

- Wherever possible skeletons will be displayed in the position and layout in which they were found.
- Wherever possible skeletons will be displayed in the coffin, or burial surroundings in which they were found.
- Skeletons and burials will be displayed in high quality plain cases.
- As a general principle skeletons will not be on 'open display' but located in such a way as to provide them some 'privacy'. This might be in a specially partitioned or alcoved part of a gallery

## What can others tell us?

- The Museum will invite visitors and users of the Museum to comment on the general, and particular display of skeletons and take note of comments received.
- The Museum will not normally loan skeletons for display to other institutions. Images can be loaned.
- The Museum will review this guidance in the light of changing views in society.
- The Human Remains Working Group will make any decisions that are needed over the interpretation of these guidelines.

- UCL research project details:

'Displaying The Dead - Visitor attitudes towards the display of human skeletal remains at the British Museum'

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