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The place of human remains in the frame of cultural heritage: the restitution of medieval skeletons from a Jewish cemetery

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1 THE PLACE OF HUMAN REMAINS IN THE FRAME OF CULTURAL HERITAGE: THE  
2 RESTITUTION OF MEDIEVAL SKELETONS FROM A JEWISH CEMETERY

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16 10 Keywords: Human skeletal collections, Restitution, Anthropological Museum, Cultural heritage,  
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18 11 Ethics

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22 13 **ABSTRACT**

23 14 For social, cultural, religious and political reasons the human remains may represent powerful  
24 15 symbols with different meanings that changed over time among the different communities and  
25 16 countries. Thus, they have a sensitive nature that poses them in a “grey area”, still failing in terms  
26 17 of finding an adequate positioning in the research, in the contemporary cultural institutions and  
27 18 museums. Italy still lacks any official guidelines to follow in the case of protests and claims for  
28 19 restitution of human remains. Only recently, Italy experienced for the first time the restitution and  
29 20 reburial of skeletons coming from a medieval Jewish cemetery before the whole anthropological  
30 21 study could be completed. This event re-opens the debate, largely addressed in many Western  
31 22 countries from the 1990s but marginally until now in Italy, of the disputes between the legitimacy  
32 23 of scientific research on human remains and other various instances (ethnicity, religion, public  
33 24 view...). The case study provides the opportunity to propose our reflections on the legal position of  
34 25 human remains and on their fate in the often-contrasting viewpoints between the public and the  
35 26 researches.

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37 28  
38 29 **RESEARCH AIMS**

39 30 Italy recently experienced, for the first time, the restitution of more than 300 skeletons excavated  
40 31 from a Medieval Jewish cemetery in the city of Bologna. The osteoarchaeological material was  
41 32 claimed by ultraorthodox Jewish groups that imposed its reburial in the Jewish area of the cemetery  
42 33 of Bologna. The aim of this work is to reflect over the Italian cultural, historical, academic and  
43 34 social landscape in which the restitution of the medieval skeletons occurred.

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**INTRODUCTION**

1 The anthropological study of human skeletons aims at reconstructing the history of past  
2 communities from evolutionary and bioarchaeological perspectives. They can be considered as  
3 historical documents helping us to increase the knowledge and awareness of our place in nature.  
4  
5 4 Indeed, their value and significance in the archaeological contexts emerge studying the biological  
6 and cultural evolution, the health and diseases of past populations, the ancestry and mobility as well  
7 5 as the transformation in cultural beliefs and funerary practices and rites over time [1].  
8  
9 6 Nevertheless, their study and management present critical aspects that have already been largely  
10 addressed [2]. These are related to their sensitive nature, posing them in a sort of “grey area” when  
11 7 their use deals with scientific and educational purposes. This sensitive nature stems from the ties  
12 8 that individuals and communities established with death and the dead, which go beyond the natural  
13 9 phenomenon towards an abstract, immaterial and spiritual sphere. Ever since prehistoric times  
14 10 death has been culturally managed by means of extremely variable funerary practices, likely to  
15 11 overcome a permanent conflict between nature and culture [3]. Indeed, even though the cadavers  
16 12 are not perceived by all the cultures in the same way, they are not neutral and never ignored [4-10].  
17 13 The concept of the ‘past’ is perceived in different ways in different cultures [11-12]. The human  
18 14 remains are powerful symbols that live on long after the individual death and for many populations  
19 15 play a central role in the process of identity and memory construction for the living [13-15].  
20 16 In the confrontation with non-Western populations, the Western archaeologists and anthropologists  
21 17 have experienced new issues and constraints in the research and management of human remains,  
22 18 which forced them to reflect on their established and customary activities. In the post-colonial and  
23 19 post-modern periods, critical voices within Archaeology and Physical Anthropology have argued  
24 20 that the academy and museum collections have facilitated a monopolization of the discourse about  
25 21 the past by propagating a modernist and Western-centred worldview. This monopoly over the past  
26 22 is widely seen as having produced an ideology of domination, stimulating a reflexion over the value  
27 23 and significance of skeletal collections and the museums that host them [12]. Thus, Archaeology  
28 24 and Anthropology are critically reviewed and their contemporary role has to be renegotiated [11].  
29 25 The issues of the restitution and reburial of human remains matured in this framework and find its  
30 26 roots in the late 1960s and 1970s, when the indigenous people in post-colonial countries fought for  
31 27 the right to control their own heritage and safeguard their identity. The struggles between them and  
32 28 archaeologists fully entered the public consciousness [11]. Only during the 1980s and 1990s, the  
33 29 first legal acts in North America and Australia ensured many indigenous populations to assess their  
34 30 place and cultural, social, ethnic, economic issues, reinforcing the legitimacy of their collective  
35 31 identities [11, 16-27]. This favoured the requests of repatriation of human remains and other  
36 32 significant objects of their material culture held in museum and universities of many countries, and  
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1 stimulated the emergence of national legislation to regulate that process of the restitution to the  
2 indigenous populations (Argentina, Great Britain, Norway, South Africa, Israel) [12, 25].  
3 The repatriation of these items is viewed as a means of reconciliation with previously oppressed and  
4 discriminated groups, and a strategy in which the communities of origin regain the right to define  
5 themselves, their history and identity [12, 27]. These legal acts had a profound impact on the work  
6 of biological anthropologists and archaeologists in non-Western countries [24, 28-32]. For some  
7 indigenous communities, the “exploitation” of their past by archaeologists and anthropologists has  
8 constituted a second wave of colonialism, in which science has been viewed as just another vehicle  
9 of oppression, also due to the uncomfortable perception that the archaeologists study “others” [10,  
10 25-27, 33]. This was true also in Europe, where “others” were historically identified as minorities  
11 such as Jews, Roma and Sami, who were seen as impure elements that threatened or disturbed the  
12 continuous genealogies of the nations [12].  
13 In Europe the claims came from populations of former colonies, Jewish communities and from  
14 modern ‘pagan’ groups (e.g. HAD, Honouring the ancient dead). The latter are interested in the pre-  
15 Christian remains in Britain and they base parts of their belief system on folk tradition, mythology,  
16 reinventing beliefs and emulating practices of the pre-Christian past [2, 16, 34-36]. In Europe, these  
17 claims produced a sort of ‘burials crisis’ for the Archaeology and archaeologists in the western  
18 modernity enhancing and favouring a constructive dialogue among the legislators and all the  
19 religious interest groups [35, 37, 38].  
20 Many of the issues discussed before have been only marginally addressed in Italy. The few requests  
21 of human and cultural assets restitution from non-western people until now were addressed to  
22 anthropological and ethnographical museums, and had no success. The only case of restitution  
23 regarding osteoarchaeological materials occurred in a religious frame. It refers to the human skeletons  
24 from the largest medieval (14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century) Italian Jewish cemetery, discovered in the centre of the  
25 city of Bologna (Northern Italy) [39]. This occurrence prevented to complete the anthropological  
26 study [40].  
27 The restitution of those medieval skeletons opens in Italy the questions over the still uncertain  
28 position of osteoarchaeological human remains in the frame of cultural heritage and leaves without  
29 solutions the dilemma concerning their destiny. Considering the fact that ethics in the scientific  
30 field is an ongoing process, because of the emergence of new questions and the development of new  
31 technologies, the scientific communities are directly involved and constantly reminded of their  
32 responsibility [23, 24]. In Italy, unlike what happened in other countries where the governmental  
33 agencies have developed ethical guidelines for researchers working with skeletal remains [19, 23,  
34 24], no good practices or ethic codes have been produced. No debate has been developed over the  
35

1 potential constraints and limitations in scientific research, neither within nor between Physical  
2 Anthropology and Archaeology. In addition, no discussion has involved the public regarding the  
3 social and ethic value of the scientific research on human remains.

4 The aim of this work is to reflect over the Italian cultural, historical, academic and social landscape  
5 in which the restitution of the medieval skeletons occurred. Thus, we will describe the types of  
6 human skeletal collections housed in the Italian public or university museums and the historical and  
7 scientific contexts in which they were amassed, as well as the different roles and competences of  
8 the institutions involved in their management.

## 9 METHODS

10 We will develop our discourse from the starting point of a case study: the recent restitution of  
11 human skeletons from the Medieval Jewish burial ground of via Orfeo (Bologna, Northern Italy)  
12 and their reburial in a Jewish area of the main modern cemetery (La Certosa) of the city.

13 In the discussion, we will examine different aspects:

- 14 1. Typologies of human skeletal remains and institutions in which they are housed;
- 15 2. The role of Physical Anthropology and Archaeology in the process of European identity;
- 16 3. Cases of claims and restitution of human remains in Italy, with a gaze to other European  
17 examples;
- 18 4. Cases of claims, restitution and reburial of human remains from Jewish medieval cemeteries  
19 in Europe;
- 20 5. Definition of human skeletal remains of scientific interest in the frame of cultural heritage  
21 and laws that regulates their management;
- 22 6. The role of Academy and Institutions involved in the management of the human remains.

## 23 THE CASE STUDY: THE JEWISH CEMETERY OF VIA ORFEO

24 The burial ground of via Orfeo is the largest (around 400 individuals) Italian medieval (14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>  
25 century) Jewish cemetery. It was discovered in the centre of Bologna (Northern Italy) and  
26 excavated by the Archaeological Superintendence of Bologna between 2012 and 2014 [39]. The  
27 cemetery presented features that distinguished it from coeval funerary assemblages (e.g. burial  
28 typology; spatial organization; regular layout in rows of the primary and single inhumations  
29 without superimpositions), and sources from the historical archives indicated that it was Jewish. It  
30 was abandoned at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century following the papal decision to expel the Jews from  
31 the city, to dismiss the cemetery and to entrust the area in question to the nuns of a nearby convent

1 [39, 40]. In accordance with the local Jewish community, we developed a research project aimed at  
2 strengthening the memory of this medieval community by reconstructing its history through  
3 archaeological, historical, and anthropological means. The project was presented at a press  
4 conference in the city hall of Bologna (November 2017) with academy, political and religious  
5 authorities. After a few days the restitution of the skeletons was demanded by ultraorthodox rabbis  
6 affiliated to the international group “Hatra Kadisha for the Preservation of Holy sites”, supported  
7 by the “European Committee for the Protection of Jewish Cemeteries” (CEO), all of whom were  
8 explicitly and strongly opposed to the study of the skeletal remains. After some useless attempts at  
9 mediation and negotiation, under a daily strong pressure by the ultraorthodox rabbis through  
10 different Italian institutions, the majority of the skeletons were returned and reburied in the  
11 contemporary Jewish burial ground of the main cemetery in Bologna (La Certosa). The local  
12 Jewish community, who understood the potential of the project to valorise their history and agreed  
13 upon the restitution after a period of a few years to allow the scientific study, found themselves  
14 actively entangled in the conflict. The restitution had been authorized by the institutions in charge  
15 of the protection and conservation of cultural heritage (Ministry, Superintendence). During the  
16 years of the excavation, before the press conference, the anthropological study had been partially  
17 carried out on around 130 skeletons [40].

## 18 DISCUSSION

### 19 1. Typologies of human skeletal remains

20 In Italy, different typologies of human skeletons are managed by different institutions and for  
21 different purposes.

22 a) *Osteoarchaeological collections*. Most of them refer to archaeological remains. Even though  
23 humans occupied the Italian territory starting from Lower Pleistocene, very few remains of this  
24 period are present. Most of the osteoarchaeological collections refer to Holocene and has been  
25 found during excavation campaigns carried out by Superintendences (that depends from the former  
26 Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism (MiBACT) (now Ministry of Culture, MiC) or by  
27 universities (part of the Ministry of University and Research, MUR) that receive specific  
28 concessions from them. These collections are delivered for study purposes to the laboratories of  
29 Anthropology, most of them placed at the Universities. Only recently, the MiBACT began to hire  
30 physical anthropologists in their staff. Thus, in Italy research and safeguard activities are carried out  
31 by different institutions, headed by different ministries.

32 b) *Scientific and medical collections*. These were put together by anthropologists, physicians, and  
33 anatomists, who wanted to endow their scientific museums when Physical Anthropology emerged

1 as new scientific discipline in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century. Many of these  
2 collections were built up through exchange, donations, scientific missions, cemetery exhumations,  
3 but also through raw theft and buying of looted or stolen objects, as occurs still today [12].  
4 Paolo Mantegazza (1831-1910) was the first in Italy who endowed an Anthropology and Ethnology  
5 museum – that of Florence – with osteological collections coming from various countries, diffusing  
6 the Darwinian Theory and proving the groundlessness of the concept of race [41]. The University of  
7 Bologna also equipped itself with osteological collections (the oldest is by Luigi Calori in 1860, and  
8 coming from archaeological areas and various Italian regions [42]). The Anthropology Museum of  
9 the same University, thanks to Fabio Frassetto (1876-1953) and Elsa Graffi Benassi (1901-2000),  
10 holds identified (by age, sex, cause of death, and occupations) modern skeleton collections (19<sup>th</sup>-  
11 20<sup>th</sup> c.) coming from different Italian cemeteries [43]. With its over 1,000 complete skeletons (from  
12 foetuses to old people), it is one of the most important documented European collections (other  
13 relevant collections are those of Spitafields [44], Coimbra [45-48], Lisbon [49], Granada [50]).  
14 These collections reflect the development of the studies of Anatomy and Anthropology in Italy and  
15 Europe, and are comparable in periods of acquisition, and in part in their numeric size, to those in  
16 the United States described by Walker [19].  
17  
18 These osteological collections were used to carry out morphometric studies in order to describe  
19 human variation from a hierarchical viewpoint (racial and gender differences), besides providing  
20 instruction in surgical anatomy [19, 25]. Thus, from its birth, Physical Anthropology marked a  
21 separate pathway with respect to Archaeology. The latter, involved in the analyses of cultural  
22 materials in the frame of a humanistic approach to the study of human history, developed over time  
23 continuously revising its own theoretical paradigms [51].  
24  
25 In Italy, most of these collections are housed and managed by university museums that are  
26 differently managed with respect to civic and national museums. This highlights the articulate  
27 system of competences, responsibilities and financial resources in the Italian museum system that  
28 ultimately affects research, safeguard and protection of the human collections.  
29  
30 c) *Relics and religious remains*. Regarding the religious remains, the relics kept and protected by  
31 Catholic churches have a special role in the Italian territory. Until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in  
32 Europe, no museums had skeletal collections, whereas Catholic churches had huge collections used  
33 as relics, storehouses, and treasuries. Among Christians, the belief that proximity to the bones and  
34 other parts of the bodies of saints, especially of martyrs, could bring about miracles was already  
35 widespread in Early Christianity (4<sup>th</sup> c.) [19]. By the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the remains of the martyrs of Early  
36 Christianity had become so valuable that a regular commerce arose generating, on some occasions,  
37 actual conflicts [19]. An author (MGB) of this paper was directly involved in the preparation of  
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1 bone relics kept in churches and religious institutions, by removing pieces from larger relics. These  
2 relics, attributed to various saints of particular importance and created at the request of Catholic  
3 religious institutions in Italy or Orthodox institutions in other European regions, become objects of  
4 veneration and devotion, and give great prestige, sacred power and protection to the place to which  
5 they are transferred. The Curia is in charge of the protection and management of these pieces with  
6 the Authority of the Superintendence and may seek scientific advice from physical anthropologists  
7 for identification purposes or for beatification processes [52-54]. Human bones may also be  
8 collected and displayed in religious contexts, be part of the *Putridaria*, or have an ornamental and  
9 aesthetic purpose, as well as one of warning (*memento mori*) (e.g. in Italy, the Capuchin crypts in  
10 Rome and Palermo). Actually, the role of the Church in Italy is relevant and the Christian and  
11 Enlightening world-views influenced in different ways the modern Western culture making the  
12 display of the archaeological dead and human remains acceptable [33]. Thousands of relics of  
13 Christian saints, martyrs, charnel houses and ossuaries are on public display in churches in Italy and  
14 throughout other European countries [55]. Among other historical and political reasons, this  
15 attitude and the familiarity to handle, collect, store and display the human remains may explain why  
16 in some European countries the aforementioned discourse of the fate of human remains and  
17 restitution has not been emphasised [55].

18 d) *Recent remains*. Some human skeletal remains straddle the archaeological and judicial contexts,  
19 such as the frozen bodies of Great War soldiers lost during the conflicts, discovered also because of  
20 the dramatic climate changes that are causing thawing in many mountain areas. Those may be  
21 potentially identified and have still relatives in the local communities. For that, they may be  
22 simultaneously considered a soldier, a war hero, a family and group member, a subject for academic  
23 studies and for commemoration [56]. For these, the interest may be judicial in the cases in which it  
24 is still possible to identify the remains and return them to the still-living family members [57]. In  
25 these contexts, MiBACT (Superintendences), judicial authorities, and law enforcement agencies are  
26 all involved. Human remains are considered of judicial interest if they belong to periods after the  
27 end of World War II, a deadline generically considered by the Italian judiciary authorities as the  
28 chronological limit for intervention [58].

29 e) *Remains of outstanding individuals*. The research on the skeletal remains of outstanding  
30 individuals has a forensic, archaeological and historical interest. This line of research is aimed at  
31 reading the osteobiography and check the correspondence with historical and historiographic data  
32 about famous people or individuals belonging to noble families, whose remains are kept in  
33 cemeteries, churches, and museums (e.g. Farinelli in Bologna [59-61], the Medici family in  
34 Florence [62], Can Grande della Scala in Verona [63]). A precursor is Frassetto's study of the  
35

1 bones of Dante Alighieri [64], exhumed in Ravenna (Emilia Romagna) on the sixth centenary of  
2 the poet's death. The purpose of the morphometric study and 3D reconstruction of the skull using  
3 stereoscopic photographs was politically used to demonstrate the genius qualities of the poet,  
4 whose characteristics fell within the so-called Mediterranean type [64-67] (as opposed to the Aryan  
5 type proposed by the Nazi regime).

6 These studies aimed at identifying a single and high profile individual of prehistoric, proto-  
7 historical and historical periods or past celebrities has been criticized for the inherent risk to  
8 enhance the single identity and the cult of personality [2, 14].

9 The via Orfeo Medieval skeletons certainly belong to the archaeological category (a), but their  
10 finding in a Jewish cemetery placed them into a religious sphere, generating conflicts of interest  
11 between scientific and religious purposes and arising issues about the legitimacy of the research  
12 and the instances of the Jewish communities. The relationships between these communities and the  
13 Italian State are regulated by specific agreements (see *infra*).

## 2. The role of Physical Anthropology and Archaeology in the process of European identity

14 The anthropological study of human remains has matured paradigmatic changes over the last  
15 century from a self-referential discipline at the service of controversial views of the groups holding  
16 the power, into a multidisciplinary, strongly empirical science involving the skeleton at many scales  
17 of analysis [25]. Thanks to new combined fields (Bioarchaeology, Genetics, Forensics,  
18 Archaeology, Cultural Anthropology), the skeletal collections are of considerable interest for their  
19 relevance as a biocultural archive for reconstructing human evolutionary history, through the study  
20 and comparison of past and modern skeletal variability, and for standardizing methods of study to  
21 be applied to unknown skeletal remains (of archaeological and/or forensic interest) [68-84].

22 However, Physical Anthropology originated with different purposes in the mid-nineteenth and early  
23 twentieth century. With Archaeology and Architecture as well, it played a pivotal role in the state  
24 building processes of many European countries and in both nationalism and colonialism during the  
25 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The beginning may be traced in the research by Gustav Kossina (1858-  
26 1931) on the ethno-linguistic origins of Indo-Europeans and German culture that, projected in the  
27 archaeological field, introduced a distorted and erroneous interpretation of the Archaeology in  
28 Europe, providing dramatically a strong justification to the racism and authoritarian and  
29 nationalistic Nazi and Fascist regimes [85, 86]. Those disciplines became source of inspiration for  
30 the growing fascist movement of the Third Reich and offered material symbols of the deep and pure  
31 historical roots of the superior German people [12]. Through colonial expansion new dialogues  
32 about race developed and ethnic and cultural identity became linked with the concept of biology or

1 'blood' and Europeans believed themselves to be representative of the highest achievements of  
2 human technical, cultural and intellectual progress [87]. In addition, the assertion of the social  
3 utility and rationality of science together with the concepts of social Darwinism, helped to  
4 naturalize the conceptual link between identity and race [11]. Furthermore, the processual  
5 archaeology theory (1960) increased the assertion of the scientific expertise and authority with  
6 important consequences for the management of the heritage in post-colonial countries. The  
7 narrative of Western national and elite class experiences reinforces the idea of innate cultural value  
8 tied to time depth, monumentality, expert knowledge and aesthetics [11].

9 Currently, in Europe, the colonial and nationalist systems have been replaced by a post-colonial  
10 world and identity politics have changed in, and also with the use of the past. The trends towards  
11 both homogenization and fragmentation, seen through the increasing impact of multicultural  
12 societies, hybrid culture and diaspora cultures, due to migrations and globalization lead to redefine  
13 the cultural identity [12]. Nevertheless, in a less dramatic way with respect to the last centuries, but  
14 still following the nationalist agendas, prehistoric and early historical material remains of many  
15 nations (e.g. Britain, Sweden, and Greece) have been used to project publicly ideas of deep, united  
16 past for the nation's people. More recently, Archaeology and archaeological artefacts have been  
17 used to reinforce transnational identity, such as that for the European Union [12]. However waves  
18 of political nationalisms are still present (e.g. Basque Country and Catalonia in Spain, Scotland and  
19 Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom, but also the UK in Europe, see 'Brexit'). The reassertion  
20 of separate ethnic identities even within Italy itself (e.g. Sardinia, Southern and Northern Italy),  
21 sometimes even baselessly assumed (e.g. the alleged Celtic ancestry of a non-existent "Padania"  
22 region in Northern Italy, touted by some groups for political purposes) goes in the same way.  
23 The same reasoning applies to Europe, where the biological and cultural layers have shaped and  
24 reshaped since prehistoric times in a context of continuous movements of human groups. No group  
25 can reasonably claim to be the direct descendant of any particular ancient human groups without  
26 dismissing the rest of its past and discriminating against the rest of its fellow citizens [27]. Cultural  
27 "essences" were (and are) constantly diluted, negotiated, transformed, and redefined with the  
28 passage of time [88, 89].

### 3. Claims and restitution of human remains in Italy

29 Thanks to the legally acquired recognition of ethnic minorities, Native Americans have managed to  
30 assert their own identity and to assert their rights over the past as well [25, 90]. This had a strong  
31 impact in other countries. Indeed, as the indigenous communities had recognized the ownership of

1 ancient human remains, new requests of their return echoed in many Western countries and many  
2 museums and institutions have been involved in conflicts and legal battles.

3 Britain experienced claims and requests of removing from display and reburial of many museum  
4 human remains and in 2004 the Human Tissue Acts-governed the human remains that are less than  
5 100 years old in museum and related institutions (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, DCMS,  
6 2005). The primary purpose was to regulate the removal from museums, storage and use of human  
7 tissues for listed activities that include research and public display. For instance, the case of the  
8 Irish giant Charles Byrne (1761-1783), who had no direct descendants, opens the issue of a claim  
9 that does not refer to the restitution for ethnic purposes but in the frame of a “shared ancestry”  
10 within a broader category of relatedness [91]. This case, as already occurred in the case of the  
11 Kennewick man, opened the question of the use and introduction of the biomedical technology for  
12 searching genetic relationships in the debate over the most appropriate place for the remains  
13 [91-93]. Indeed, in the Western countries the biological linkage is necessary to trace a kinship  
14 whereas it may be irrelevant for the Indigenous where other issues as traditions hold communities  
15 together [11].

16 As for Italy, among a few and recent demands for restitution, made for different purposes, none had  
17 been successful until the recent case of the medieval remains. The Italian restitution debate has  
18 remained more or less circumscribed to scientific communities, within which, however, there is still  
19 no broader reflection today on many ethical aspects involving, in a combined and integrated way,  
20 the institutions concerned (Museums, Universities, and Superintendences). After 2000s a few Italian  
21 museums (Anthropology and Ethnology Section of the Museum of Natural History of the  
22 University of Florence; National Prehistory Ethnography Museum “Luigi Pigorini” of the Museum  
23 of Civilizations, Rome; Museum of Criminal Anthropology “Cesare Lombroso” of the University  
24 of Turin) had to deal with these matters.

25 The Australian government asked the MiBACT to return the Australian human skeletal remains  
26 housed in the Anthropology and Ethnology Section of the Museum of Natural History of the  
27 University of Florence, and acquired by Paolo Mantegazza during the years from 1870 to 1905.  
28 Following that request, a national committee of advisors confirmed the importance of dialogue,  
29 both desirable and necessary, with the indigenous communities, but also stated that the possibility  
30 for the scientific community to use the collections in a historic and scientific context must be an  
31 inalienable condition [94]. The request, however, opened an anomalous scenario for Italian  
32 museums that had acquired those collections through trade exchanges during missions or scientific  
33 explorations when the rules in the countries from which they came did not prohibit the acquisition  
34 or removal of materials. They had not been acquired by means of colonial campaigns, wars,

1 plunder, or genocide [95]. In this context, a general document drafted by the Association of Italian  
2 Anthropologists (AAI) was approved in 2014, but a widely discussed and shared document on  
3 ethical problems has not yet been provided.

4 Recently, another request has been made to the National Prehistory Ethnography Museum “Luigi  
5 Pigorini” of the Museum of Civilizations (Rome) which holds Maori remains, in particular several  
6 mummified heads adorned with tattoos and incisions, transforming them into objects with other  
7 symbolic meaning. The biological significance emerged in all its seriousness during a visit to the  
8 museum by an official delegation of Natives, for whom those heads evidently represented those of  
9 their ancestors, uncovered and rediscovered after such a long time and in a land so far away. In an  
10 attempt to find an agreement with those populations, the museum initiated a direct dialogue with  
11 the government of New Zealand, and the negotiations are still in progress (Luca Bondioli, personal  
12 conversation, May 2019).

13 A case that straddles the line between ideological, political, and ethnic aspects is that concerning  
14 the restitution of the skull of Giuseppe Vilella, a Calabrian bandit who lived during the second half  
15 of the 19th century [96], exhibited at the Museum of Criminal Anthropology “Cesare Lombroso” of  
16 the University of Turin. Here, the renewed exhibition opened in 2009 with new educational  
17 purposes to reconstruct, in a critical historiographic manner, a dramatic season of Italian science  
18 and to reject the concept of criminal atavism. In the following year an opposition front arose,  
19 guided by a committee which, through the collection of over 15,000 signatures (change.org  
20 website), demanded the closing of the museum. The claim of the restitution of the Vilella’s skull  
21 matured in a mixing of nostalgic Neo-Bourbon and Southernism political ideas, owing to the fact  
22 that Vilella lived during the time of the Bourbon reign (opening a surreal question of the ethnic  
23 identity of Calabrians). Thinking about a form of racism against Southern Italians, Vilella’s  
24 hometown, Motta Santa Lucia (Catanzaro, Italy), with a reawakening of pride mixed with  
25 sentimentalism, requested the skull in order to give dignity through burial to a man whose story has  
26 probably been largely idealized [96-100]. To solve the Vilella’s case the intervention of a court of  
27 law was necessary. The final sentence (n. 892/2017 pubbl.16/05/2017; RG n. 1157/2012, Repert. n.  
28 1027/2017 of 16/05/2017) was handed down in 2017, stating that the skull did not have to be  
29 returned to that Calabrian community [101-102]. In fact, it remains on display at the museum in  
30 Turin [103]. In spite of the closing of the case from the legal standpoint, the petition for the closing  
31 of the museum (change.org website) was active until 2019 and collected about 17 000 signatures  
32 (among them also that of the Mayor of Naples, Italy). In many cases, the final destiny of disputed  
33 human bones is decided by organizations with no direct involvement in either scientific or cultural  
34 endeavours or by the courts, and the legal responses, whether they be positive or negative, are often

1 handed down without any consultation of the parties concerned [104]. This is of crucial importance,  
2 as they give rise to judicial precedents, which must be followed in subsequent cases. This dispute  
3 clearly indicates that the topic is, and will continue to be, a point of contention in the absence of a  
4 definition of the human remains within the field of natural sciences and of codified and shared  
5 rules.  
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11 4. Claims and restitution of human remains from Jewish medieval cemeteries in Europe  
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13 The issue of the control of dead and their possessions in archaeological context raises over the  
14 course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and shows the complexities that may arise when secular and religious  
15 ethics collide in the conduct of scientific research [25]. As regard these cases, even if modern  
16 societies are becoming increasingly secularized, it is widely believed or hoped that life somehow  
17 continues after death, and human skeletal remains are considered of great sacred, symbolic and  
18 cultural meaning rather than mere utilitarian objects for scientific research [19]. The restitution of  
19 human skeletons within the religious realm refers to a phenomenon typically tied to the sphere of  
20 the Jewish religion where religious organizations, such as Hatra Kadisha, consider the  
21 archaeological and scientific research activities a violation of Jewish law. In fact, even though the  
22 Jews, present in Europe from very ancient times, have seen their rights alienated and dramatically  
23 trampled by the Nazi-Fascist extermination, the matter of the restitutions does not fall within a  
24 framework of ethnic claim of subjugated populations. Moreover, although the sense of identity of  
25 the Jewish communities is strong, they are part of European population [26, 27]. Unlike those of the  
26 non-Western communities for whom the restitution and reburial meant, and still mean, the taking  
27 back and claim of a history of a community that is biologically and culturally identified in those  
28 ancestral forebears, the nature of the dispute concerns exclusively the skeletal remains and not the  
29 material culture.  
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32 Following American indigenous communities' vindications, the Archaeology of the dead has  
33 similarly become the perfect battlefield for ultraorthodox Jewish minority groups. The first conflict  
34 with archaeologists in Europe refers to the Jewbury burial ground (York, UK). Here in 1982, the  
35 UK political and Jewish religious authorities were not clear enough on the nature of the ancient  
36 burials (if they were or not Jewish because the evidence did not clearly correspond to a funerary  
37 tradition). Nevertheless, the pressure of the Chief Rabbi's induced the closure of the archaeological  
38 excavation as well as the immediate reburial of the human remains without any further possibility  
39 of osteological analysis. At present, the remaining Jewish graves of York's medieval cemetery lie  
40 under the parking lot of a Sainsbury supermarket [105-107].  
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1 An increase in the opposition of the Ultraorthodox Jewish people on an international scale both in  
2 Europe and in Israel to the excavation of ancient Jewish burial sites, also including the study of very  
3 ancient remains such as the Neanderthals in Israel, started from 1990s onwards [19, 106]. Israel  
4 developed a legislation for the return and reburial of any human remains that are claimed as Jewish  
5 by the ultraorthodox community [12].  
6  
7 In this context, many archaeological Jewish burial grounds have been found and excavated but only  
8 after the mid-1990s, the ultraorthodox Jewish organizations began to interrupt the archaeological  
9 work. In the Iberian Peninsula between AD 500 and 1500 three different religions (Christianity,  
10 Islam and Judaism) gave rise to three different communities that strongly shaped its social  
11 economic and cultural history, but the claims up to now refer only to numerous archaeological  
12 Jewish sites [26, 27].  
13  
14 Except for a few cases (e.g. Girona) where an agreement was signed between the religious and  
15 secular authorities, in Spain the strong pressure of ultraorthodox and the ambivalent interpretation  
16 of the meaning of religious freedom in a secular state had the effect that the Spanish authorities  
17 adopted solutions that contradict the legislation on heritage management [27].  
18  
19 The ultraorthodox Jewish groups do not recognize the archaeological human remains as cultural  
20 heritage. They seem to represent “communities of interest” instead of “heritage communities” (cited  
21 by the Faro convention) and it is not clear how these may take part in the process of heritage  
22 management and decision-making [27].  
23  
24 Today’s European states, based on the respect for individual religious freedom, recognize a certain  
25 legitimate role of religion in the public sphere, but some limitations are prescribed by law in the  
26 interests of public safety and for the protection of public order, health, morals, and the rights and  
27 freedom of others [108, 109]. Consequently, no individual or minority group can impose its religion  
28 (including the practice or laws of this religion) upon the actions of the State. Doing otherwise would  
29 mean asserting the interest of minority groups over the general interest of all other citizens [110]. In  
30 this frame, the instances of fundamentalist groups create new disputes between secularism, and  
31 religious doctrines. They are, on the one hand, equal to other citizens in their freedom to practice  
32 their ultraconservative interpretation of religion, but unequal to the majority because their beliefs  
33 and customs cannot rule over all of society, even if this is prescribed by their dogma [111]. In  
34 addition, this contingency theoretically applies to all religious fundamentalist practices in Europe,  
35 whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or other.  
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37 European Enlightenment secularism established a new model of church-state relationship based on  
38 the notion of separation of the power, separating (except UK) the religious law (canon law) and  
39 civil or public law. In this frame, the archaeological heritage in Europe is regulated by civil law and  
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1 the prescription includes both ancient cemeteries and sacred places. This opens the discussion on  
2 how the traditional religious forces are conceived among secular states in multicultural, multi-  
3 religious and multi-ethnic societies. Many countries experience new conservative or fundamentalist  
4 religion with strong influences in the politics in America, Europe and Arab world [27].

5 In the USA and Australia the problem of archaeological heritage has been solved considering the  
6 society as a “salad bowl” instead of a “melting pot”, where each ingredient (indigenous,  
7 Westerners, and other second-wave immigrants) stays separate to create a united salad [27]. The  
8 question is whether the acceptance of two (or more) distinctive political and social communities,  
9 with separate cultural affiliations and separate ownership of their respective cultural heritage  
10 elements, will actually help solve the historical unequal relationship among citizens. It could be  
11 that, by emphasizing different ancestral heritages at the expense of an inclusive heritage of the  
12 country, it will only reiterate community differences, and therefore reinforce today’s ethnic  
13 divisions [26].

#### 14 5. The human remains in the frame of cultural heritage

15 The term heritage indicates a series of cultural, artistic, environmental and, in general, material or  
16 intangible elements possessed by a person or community [112]. In the specific case of cultural  
17 assets, they are heritage in that they are also attributed an economic value and their management is  
18 subject to specific rules. Italy has central and regional institutions and organic laws on the  
19 protection and management of cultural assets but, in spite of the fact that human remains of  
20 archaeological interest are considered part of the cultural heritage category and managed by  
21 MiBACT, there is no explicit specification on the subject. The legislation of Cultural Heritage was  
22 governed first by the Bottai Law (1939) [113], by the Constitution of the Italian Republic (Article  
23 9) and then by subsequent provisions, until the formulation of the Italian Decree Law no. 42 of  
24 22/01/04, “Code of Cultural and Landscape Heritage” [114].

25 The term cultural heritage is defined for the first time in Italy in 1966 to express everything that  
26 constitutes a material evidence with a civilization value in an attempt to overcome the Benedetto  
27 Croce (1866-1952) viewpoint present in the Bottai law, which envisaged two separate conceptual  
28 categories: artistic-historic and natural things [115]. In his view, prehistory was no part of the  
29 history because it posed the humanity in the field of naturalism and materialism [116]. The Crocean  
30 influences long dominated the Italian academy. The division between mind and nature and nature  
31 and culture found in the Western thought has ancient roots in the classical Greek philosophy of  
32 Plato and Aristotle, where the mind and culture dominate and control body and nature [10].



1 In the article 10 of the Code of Cultural and Landscape Heritage, no clear indication concerning  
2 human bones is given, and they may only become cultural heritage when an inventory number is  
3 assigned to them as part of a public museum collection. However, it is not possible to attribute an  
4 inventory number to either the human skeletal museum collections or the human  
5 osteoarchaeological remains (this is the point!). As far as the osteological collections are concerned,  
6 only museum ones, presumably those acquired between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, if  
7 regularly inventoried and thus registered among the museums' assets, could become the inalienable  
8 heritage of the State as established by the Cultural Heritage code. Taking into account that the  
9 archaeological sites are cultural heritage (art. 10), this definition should encompass all the elements  
10 (also the human remains) coming from there. We of course agree that human remains are *de facto*  
11 historical documents and thus cultural heritage. Nevertheless, for their sensitive nature they may  
12 elude a clear property assignment. From this stems the difficulty to protect them in case of claims  
13 and of finding financial supports for their study contrary to what happens for the other cultural  
14 assets. At present in Italy, their management is regulated by the cemetery legislation (The National  
15 Police Mortuary Regulation, D.P.R. [Italian Presidential Decree] no.285/90, Articles 5, 41, 42, and  
16 43 [117]). Regulatory references change from one town to another, but they are all restrictive, that  
17 is, the legislator is concerned with limiting the cases where collection, study, and preservation are  
18 permitted, and the *pietas* on the dead person prevails over any other, even scientific, interest [118].  
19 The management of sacred objects and remains of religious interest, enclosing Catholic Church and  
20 other religious denominations, are regulated by the Article 9 of the Code of Cultural Heritage and  
21 by the Italian Constitution (Article 8, paragraph 3). Indeed, in Italy the relations between the  
22 secular state and the Catholic Church (as well as other religions) are expressly governed by  
23 agreements. It is worth noting that as a consolidated agreement (INTESA) between the Italian  
24 government and the Union of Italian Jewish Communities has been established in 1987 and later in  
25 the law of 1996 in which the articles 16-18 sets the rules of protection and enhancement of the  
26 Jewish historical, artistic, cultural, environmental, archaeological, archival and architectural  
27 heritage [106, 107, 119]. Being human remains sacred, they fall within the jurisdiction of those  
28 rules that govern the relationships between secular State and Churches. The Draft for a  
29 Recommendation on the Protection and Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries and Mass Graves in  
30 Europe [119], contains many indications concerning the management of Jewish cemeteries, and  
31 their sanctity or holiness (Kedushah). This aspect is considered even greater than that of  
32 synagogues, due to their eternal dimension and the assessment of the limits and barriers to  
33 respecting the right to rest in peace. The protection, inviolability and preservation of Jewish  
34 cemeteries constitutes a central part of the Jewish faith and is entitled to the international guarantee

1 of religious freedom (Article 9 ECHR –European Court of Human Rights). The Jewish religion has  
2 also strong sanctions against the burial of non-group members in their cemeteries.

3 Finally, for museum collections, also the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics  
4 (2016), a reference text setting standards for the practice of museum professionals, provides  
5 specific guidelines and professional standards for the acquisition procedures, research, and  
6  
7 exhibition of human remains and materials of sacred significance (points 2.5, 3.7, 4.3). This has  
8  
9 been reinforced in the recent 25th ICOM General Conference (Kyoto, Japan, September 2019).  
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#### 14 6. Academy and Institutions in the management of the human remains 15

16 The different concern in the restitution of human skeletons with respect to grave goods reflects  
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18 different views and approaches between archaeologists and anthropologists. Even though they  
19  
20 should integrate their expertise in the study of funerary contexts, Anthropology and Archaeology  
21  
22 are part of still different academic worlds, reflecting the long-standing ~~conflict~~ separation between  
23  
24 biological sciences and humanities, preventing to develop common research topics [85, 120]. Even  
25  
26 if the bioarchaeological studies have highlighted the significance of human skeletons in the  
27  
28 reconstruction of the past cultural, as well as biological, landscape [85], the idea is still alive that  
29  
30 human skeletal remains are items of secondary importance, and certainly more problematic, than  
31  
32 material culture. Indeed, in spite of the theoretical developments that see a growing importance of  
33  
34 the "body" as an integral part of social identity, the skeleton still often remains marginalized in the  
35  
36 reconstruction of the societies of the past [120]. This underline the insidious and erroneous idea that  
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38 the skeleton is a fixed and immutable biological entity and therefore less informative in the  
39  
40 interpretation of the archaeological context and dead identity [10, 121]. Thus, in extreme cases,  
41  
42 such as those of restitutions, it is thought that they can be overlooked without compromising the  
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44 comprehension of a context. This leads to other, no less significant, aspects. During the  
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46 reconstruction of the funerary landscape, only a detailed study of the state of conservation and the  
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48 specific markers of bodily and skeletal treatments may shed light on the ancient gestures and rituals  
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50 concerning the deceased, often reducing the risk of speculative assertions. Nevertheless, there is  
51  
52 often the emergence of what Duday [122] calls “epistemological aberration”, related to the  
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54 attribution of hierarchal value to the elements in a burial with the risk of exclusion of the human  
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56 remains from those to be considered for the overall assessment of the funerary landscape. In most  
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58 cases the break-up of the different elements and methodological approaches that commonly occur  
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60 during the study of the funerary contexts risk of being ineffective, if not harmful, to its  
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62 understanding. In this context physical anthropologists risk continuing to play a technical role in  
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64 such a scenario, providing corollary, albeit useful, information, and they are frequently excluded  
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1 from the final interpretation of the context [85], highlighting the separation between scientific and  
2 Croce-influenced humanistic studies, above-mentioned and still present in Italy.

3 To this picture other aspects have to be added, such as the different missions and responsibilities of  
4 the ministry of research and that of safeguard and management of cultural heritage, the role and  
5 representation and representativeness of the scientific communities, and the not well-directed  
6 dialogue *within* Anthropology. In this frame, it is worth mentioning the role and the responsibility  
7 of the scientific anthropological communities that attribute prejudicially different value and  
8 importance to the different types of human remains especially in relation to their chronological  
9 coordinates (ancient vs. recent remains) considering how valuable they may be from the standpoint  
10 of their impact on science and the media. These aspects affect scientific and popular publishing  
11 decisions, financial support for scientific projects and, more in general, society's perception of the  
12 anthropological studies. The study and display of the dead of the distant past, as it occurs for the  
13 fossil records, are accepted by society as a kind of amusing and intriguing form of storytelling  
14 perhaps because they are temporally distant [14, 38]. This is also true for the relics of Saints in the  
15 churches or for some past celebrities (e.g. Otzi) [14]. The same cannot be said for human skeletons  
16 from more recent archaeological, historical, and museum contexts. For instance, problems may arise  
17 for the study of famous people as happened in the case of the exhumation and study of the skeletal  
18 remains of the famous 18<sup>th</sup> c. singer Farinelli, where critical articles appeared on the press assessing  
19 the uselessness of "disturbing" the dead for allegedly scientific purposes. In this context, the media  
20 and social network may assume an increasingly significant value. At the same time and  
21 paradoxically, even though there is a widespread reticence when it comes to the study of recent  
22 human remains, as a matter of fact skeletons are often used as a source of attraction and  
23 sensationalism in museums, and especially in ecclesiastical institutions [19].

24 Then, the scholars have the responsibility to transfer the significance, the potential influence and  
25 ethical values that the anthropological studies could have on modern societies to contribute reducing  
26 marginalization and conflicts (e.g. racial discrimination, oblivion of memory, etc.). For that, a  
27 reflection on the 'fluid' concept of population, ethnicity and identity (that has no absolute value),  
28 nowadays so current and critical, for both living and extinct population, has to be done starting from  
29 the scientific community. This to find a balance in the researches aimed at avoiding human typologies  
30 and categories –concepts underlying the racist ideology.

31 Sayer and Sayer [38] highlighted the positive role of public Archaeology and the engagement of the  
32 public promoting permeability, and push the boundaries of acceptability of display the dead. For  
33 this reason, it is important to urge, within the scientific community, a greater attention to the respect  
34 and dignity with which these remains must be treated, but even the value of the preservation of

1 those collections, as a source of unique insights into our history and place in the nature and as a  
2 “material memory” of the people. The involvement of the society and communities of reference,  
3 providing them with the tools to understand the value and positive effects of these studies for the  
4 entire human community, is crucial [19].  
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## 9 CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

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11 The concept of heritage has shifted from a collection of artistic objects to a cultural process and multi-  
12 layered performance favouring a “critical discourse analysis” (CDA) to overcome an “authorized  
13 heritage discourse” (AHD) [11]. In the more recent views, the cultural heritage includes both material  
14 and immaterial elements with different values and meanings that change over time and among  
15 different populations. Currently, heritage is designed according to rules and canons (historical /  
16 artistic / landscape) identified and dictated by the institutions. Europe is now facing an unprecedented  
17 challenge for the rapid transformation of human societies and environment (e.g. migration, climate  
18 change, globalization...) and solicitations from increasing use of technologies and social networks.  
19 Thus, it is crucial to *re-design* the concept and meaning of cultural heritage, pursuing a broad and  
20 comprehensive definition including past and present cultural and natural environment. In this frame,  
21 the FARO convention of the Council of Europe (2005) [123], only recently (2020) ratified in Italy,  
22 introduces an innovative concept of heritage, focused on a people-centred perspective. It encourages  
23 and reinforces the participative bottom-up process of heritage construction that may enrich citizens  
24 and stakeholders, organized in the form of heritage communities where the identity, memory and  
25 remembering are social and cultural processes at work [27]. This process is not completely free from  
26 risks, as it could involve a complete revision of the remains already part of cultural heritage, and  
27 could develop nationalistic and dangerous social divisions. To be implemented in a harmonic and  
28 assonant way, this process must be increasingly participated and shared between the reference  
29 communities and cultural institutions through dialogue, comparison and a new narrative of  
30 research in the social sphere. In this regard, it should be noted that the recipients of the FARO  
31 convention are the States (not the citizens), that have to introduce it in their legislations. The involvement  
32 of citizens to trigger democratic transformations that take into account their instances and needs is  
33 important. The discussion over these themes, where present, remains delimited to the academic,  
34 theoretical level. The case of return of the human remains from the Jewish medieval skeletons of Via  
35 Orfeo (Bologna, Italy) is emblematic of the risks of a concept of cultural heritage “negotiated”  
36 between public institutions and whatever organised minority group. In general, human remains are  
37 of an ambiguous nature that swings between two extremes: *res* (hydroxyapatite and organic  
38 compound) or “people”, posing them in a “grey area” of study and management. We feel they should  
39 be considered as natural, cultural and common heritage  
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1 (be it Neanderthal, Etruscan, Roman, Medieval or more recent remains) like our evolutionary history  
2 shows, but various factors, previously mentioned, are opposed to this view. Thus, this restitution case  
3 highlights two general aspects of the core of the problem: the position of human osteoarchaeological  
4 collections within or out of cultural heritage, and the opposing views and interests of scientists and  
5 researchers on the one hand, and of minority groups on the other. In the middle, there is the major  
6 part of Italian citizens, divided into those who would be interested in the fruition of the results of  
7 research (in the form of books, expositions, documentaries, etc.), those feeling uncomfortable in front  
8 of the “exploitation” of human remains (or of the “disturbing” of the peaceful rest of the dead), and  
9 those indifferent.

10 The solution to these problems is probably far from being reached, but scholars should promote  
11 discussion and dialogue about the social and ethical values of the anthropological research and  
12 knowledge based on transparency and agreement between the scientific community and citizens.  
13 Civil society should be directly involved to promote people empowering and the citizen science  
14 [124]. The anthropological community also should actively promote discussion and provide itself  
15 with ethical codes and a guide for good practices.

16 We currently have hundreds of thousands of human osteoarchaeological and forensic collections  
17 housed in European laboratories and museums. Thus, a reflection to preserve and protect this  
18 peculiar asset for future generations of researchers and citizens is in need to prevent and avoid the  
19 risk of alienability, exchange, commercial use, and, ultimately, decay and oblivion [125].

20  
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