

THE TRADE AND SALE OF HUMAN REMAINS - DEALING WITH THE SALE OF THE DEAD



The **Trade and Sale of Human Remains Task Force**, a subgroup of the British Association of Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology (BABAO), are concerned with the objectification and commodification of the dead, and wish to educate the public about the ethical, legal, and social ramifications underpinning the existence of a private commercial trade in human remains.

BABAO'S STANCE

BABAO does not condone the sale or auction of, or trade in, human remains.

BABAO believes that the sale of human remains is unethical, as it commodifies the remains of once-living people, treating them as objects.

Aims of the Task Force

- ✓ **Collate information** about the commodification of human remains in the UK
- ✓ **Track trends** in how human remains are being sold/collected/trafficked in an international market
- ✓ **Monitor** human remains being used in social media settings associated with sale/trade/collecting
- ✓ **Research** claims of 'ethical collecting' by traders and concerns over provenience
- ✓ **Offer guidance** on the transfer of human remains to appropriate institutions that have policies covering care, storage and ethical use of remains and staff who are responsible for this
- ✓ **Raise awareness** about the ethical ramifications of a private commercial trade in human remains

Legal Loopholes

Currently, there is no law in the UK prohibiting the sale of human remains, other than for organs for transplantation. However, the concept of 'ownership' of most human remains is also not recognised in UK law. This leaves a legal and ethical grey area.

The **Human Tissue Act 2004** covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland and concerns the removal, storage, use, and disposal of human tissue. The HT Act regulates the handling of human tissues in specific contexts, such as hospitals and medical schools, and outlines how tissues may be used for 'scheduled purposes', such as public display and anatomical examination.

Since the **HT Act only applies to remains less than 100 years old**, sellers will often use words like 'antique' or 'ancient' to avoid scrutiny, despite inadequate evidence for their date.

Humans for sale



Since 2016, the Task Force have been notified of over **130** cases where human remains have been bought and sold. However, the scale of activity is much larger. Online searches reveal a great number of human remains for sale from UK sellers, and hundreds more from overseas vendors who can import to the UK.

What is being sold?

Commonly traded human remains in the UK include:

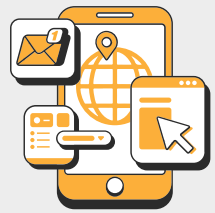


- anatomical/medical skulls and skeletons
- archaeological remains
- culturally modified remains – some vendors are 'modifying' human remains into objects in a way that many would consider disrespectful and abhorrent.

Where are they being sold?

In the UK, human remains are being sold both online and offline. This includes:

- E-commerce platforms
- Individual shops and websites
- **Social media** – the lack of moderation and ability to arrange transactions via 'direct messaging' has allowed social media platforms to become popular hosts for illicit activity.

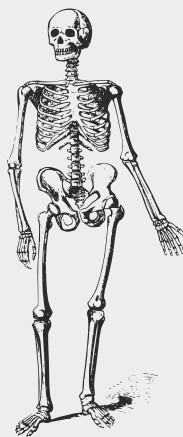


Key Issues

Private commercial trade of human remains is linked to:

- ① **Theft** or misappropriation of Indigenous cultural heritage
- ① **Theft** from museum collections
- ① **Damage, vandalism or looting** of archaeological sites and historic or contemporary cemeteries
- ① **Tampering** with and infiltration of crime-scenes

Medical and anatomical skeletons



Most medical/anatomical remains sold in the UK are the product of mass export from India and China in the 20th century. The export of skeletons for medical school use from China was banned in 2008, while India banned export in 1985 amid government fears of grave robbing and murder. Despite the bans, evidence suggests that the trade continues.

It is difficult to provenience medical/anatomical skeletons. Those for sale are likely to be the result of unethical practices. Many have been traded without consent and may even be of very recent date.

Looting

It is illegal to exhume or remove human remains, including archaeological remains, from a place of burial 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.

The trade of human remains has been shown to encourage looting of both archaeological and contemporary burial sites.



WE CAN HELP!

The Task Force aims to offer guidance so please do contact us! In particular, for individuals or organisations that have human remains and wish to transfer them, BABAO can offer advice on appropriate receiving institutions.



Further information can be found on the **BABAO website**

Contacting the Task Force



If you would like to contact the Task Force, especially to report the sale, trade or unethical modification of human remains, please email saleofhumanremains@babao.org.uk or use the anonymous form available at babao.org.uk

Where possible, the Task Force will act in response to notifications of sales. This is usually through emails to the sellers, making them aware of the ramifications of the commercial trade in human remains.

In 2024, the task force was notified of **74** separate lots containing human remains being sold on online auction websites. BABAO made contact in relation to **99%** of these and **87%** were subsequently removed from sale.