

CASE 3

QUERY

A request for advice was received from Taryn Nixon of Museum of London Archaeology Service. The developer wishes to rebury a probably 3rd century AD Roman skeleton, religion unknown, as close as possible to original burial place (Baltic Exchange, London). The burial was excavated under a Home Office licence 10 years ago.

RESPONSE FOLLOWS

Advisory Panel on the Archaeology of Christian Burials in England (APACBE)

29th March 2006

Advice to Taryn Nixon of MoLAS on the treatment of human remains from the site of the Baltic Exchange

General

The enquiry relates to the long-term curation or reinterment of a single burial plus disarticulated remains of at least three other individuals excavated during development of the Baltic Exchange site in 1996-7. It should be noted that these remains are possibly outside the remit of the Panel, as the religious affiliation of the individuals is unclear. The Panel has nevertheless agreed to offer the following advice, based on the information it has received. Advice might also be sought from the Human Remains Advisory Service administered by the DCMS.

Circumstances of the exhumation

The single inhumation was buried in a large ditch, considered to be the ditch around the early Roman city, and to date to the 3rd century. The remains were those of an adolescent individual of indeterminate sex, whose skull was missing. The grave was oriented north-south and had no grave goods. Religious affiliation is therefore unclear.

Preliminary comments

The request was prompted by the wish of the developer to rebury the remains on the site, marked by some sort of memorial. The Panel considers that given the significant stratigraphic and spatial location of the remains, full recording of the remains should be undertaken before long-term curation is considered.

The advice

The Panel considers that there are four options available, and lists them below in order of preference. The reasoning behind the desirability (or otherwise) of each option is briefly elucidated.

1. Place remains in the Museum of London collection with the other Roman burials.

The Panel considers this the best option in the circumstances. There seems to be no community or faith group pressure for reburial in this case, and it is unclear why an exception is being made for this small collection. The location and circumstances of the burial(s) is of some interest, and researchers may want to return to the material at some point in the future.

In the long term, the Panel is encouraging the Museum of London to actively pursue the idea of storing its human remains collection in a church adapted for this purpose, a Church Archive of Human Remains (CAHR): This solution would satisfy the desire for eventual reinterment (covering the possibility that the deceased was a Christian) while keeping the remains accessible for future justifiable research. Until this idea has been explored, the remains would stay at the Museum.

2. Reinterment in a municipal cemetery.

The Panel considers this the second best option. The remains would be treated as any other of unknown identity. They would be well protected. The disadvantage is that the remains may be moved some distance from their burial site, and would be effectively unavailable for future research. If this option is chosen, full recording of the remains should be undertaken beforehand.

3. Reinterment in the closest churchyard

The Panel considers this the third best option. The remains would be well protected. The advantage is that the remains would be buried in the same parish and vicinity as their original burial place. Every person born within a parish has a right to be buried in the churchyard (if there is still space), and religious affiliation is not necessarily a barrier to this (although the situation may be undesirable to some non-Christians). The disadvantages and conditions are as above in 2.

4. Reinterment on plot where excavated with discreet marker.

The panel considers this the worst of the four options. The remains, if commemorated on the site, would arguably be given unusual eminence and could become a form of attraction. The Panel is also not convinced that this would be a safe or (as much as this can be said for any site) permanent place of rest, given the pressures of development in London. This is not a designated burial site and special permission would have to be sought from the Coroner's Office of the Department for Constitutional Affairs. The other disadvantages and conditions are as above, 2-3.

We hope this advice is useful.

Chair, Joseph Elders
Secretary, Simon Mays