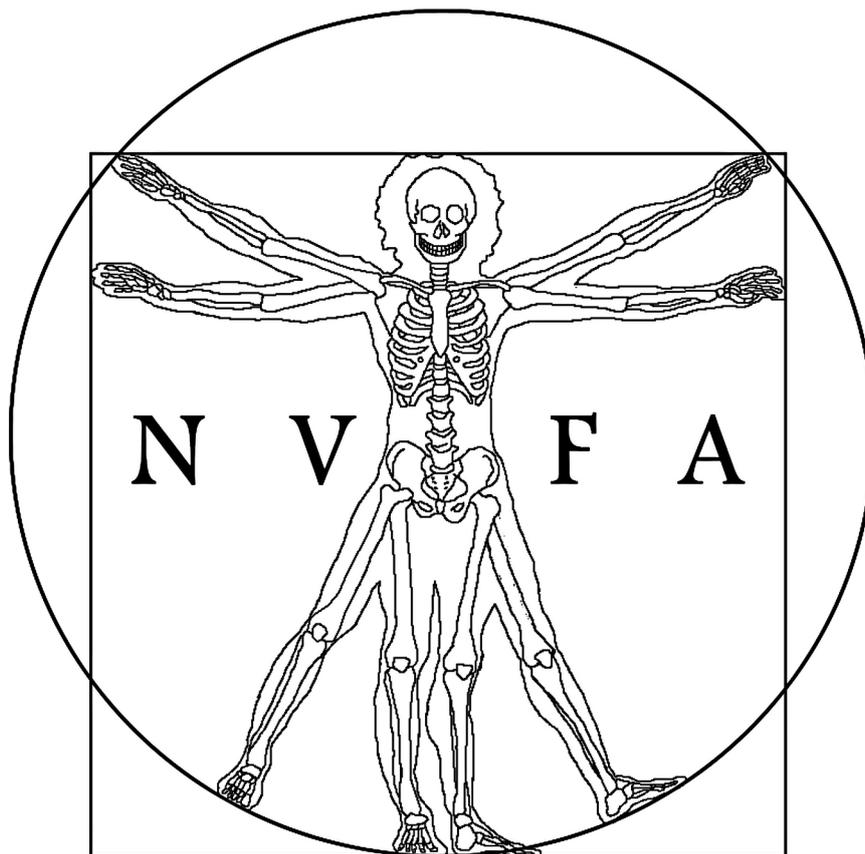


# NVFA – Ethical Guidelines on Human Remains

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Nederlandse Vereniging voor  
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# NVFA - Ethical Guidelines on Human Remains

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## 1. Preamble

By virtue of their status as the remains of once living people, treatment of human remains requires ethical considerations over and above those that pertain to other material remains of past human activity. Human remains should always be treated with dignity and respect regardless of chronological age, biological sex, biological age, ethnicity, religion, nationality, socioeconomic status, health status, cultural tradition, form of burial or mortuary treatment, condition of remains, or circumstances of acquisition. Therefore, the methods, approaches, expertise and ethical considerations used in the planning and execution of archaeological excavations, scientific research, sampling, storage, education and public information, are subject to specific requirements.

The *Nederlandse Vereniging voor Fysische Antropologie* (Netherlands Association for Physical Anthropology; NVFA) is concerned with the discipline of physical anthropology, now more often referred to as 'biological anthropology'. Physical anthropology is a multidisciplinary field of science and scholarship, which comprises the study of biological aspects of humankind, our extinct hominin ancestors, and the interaction between biology and culture. Human remains are one of the most direct sources of evidence of the lives and biology of past people, and their study is important for our knowledge of the human past and present. The NVFA holds that generating and appropriately using knowledge (i.e., publishing, teaching, developing programs, and informing policy) on human remains is a worthy goal, and that this should be achieved in an ethical manner. The NVFA encourages its members to strive for the highest achievable ethical standards and to take into account the views and wishes of all stakeholders.

The purpose of the NVFA Ethical Guidelines on Human Remains (NVFA-EGHR) is to provide a framework for making ethical decisions during work involving human remains. NVFA members should honour and comply with the spirit and intent of

these guidelines, and strive to promote and uphold these standards in professional contexts. In drafting the NVFA-EGHR, the NVFA Ethics Working Group consulted various codes of ethics, recommendations and guidelines, which are listed in section 7. In particular, the guidelines closely follow the spirit and intent of the 2019 BBAO Code of Ethics (BBAO, 2019a).

## **2. Leading principle**

Human remains must always be treated with care, dignity, and respect.

## **3. Behaviour**

The NVFA promotes professionalism, integrity, and competency in its membership's actions and activities. NVFA members should strive to improve the practice, elevate the standards, and advance the cause of physical anthropology. NVFA members have a duty to be informed about standards of practice and legal requirements relating to their work with human remains. NVFA members must act in accordance with the ethical standards set out below, as well as the Dutch *Wet op Lijkbezorging*.

### **3.1 *Honesty***

- NVFA members must accurately represent and be transparent about their education and expertise;
- Scientific results and publications must be accurately and completely represented;
- Public statements on the position of the NVFA are made exclusively by the Board.

### **3.2 *Transparency***

- Recognise the different views and opinions of different stakeholders regarding the handling and/or study of human remains. Be aware that any form of research on human remains can be a sensitive subject and can invoke mixed

responses;

- Acknowledge (and thank) the communities, institutions, and/or individuals that (financially) support(ed) or fund(ed) the work;
- In the preparation and carrying-out of research, be clear and open about the purpose(s), potential consequences, source(s) of (financial) support, participating parties, and projected outcomes of the study;
- Communicate clear and realistic expectations regarding the timing of the work and manner of dissemination of the outcomes;
- Identify and involve other stakeholders<sup>1</sup> – such as, but not limited to, descendant communities and/or culturally affiliated groups – in all stages of the research.

### **3.3 Integriteit**

- Wees op de hoogte van de lokale wetten en verordeningen, en eventuele institutionele voorschriften, met betrekking tot de omgang met menselijke resten en houd zich hieraan.
- Handel bij de (planning van) opgravingen, analyses en onderwijs- en voorlichtingsactiviteiten met betrekking tot menselijke resten objectief en integer.
- Hanteer bij (de planning van) opgravingen, analyses, en educatieve en publieksactiviteiten met betrekking tot menselijke resten de hoogst mogelijke ethische en wetenschappelijke normen.
- Men onthoude zich van voor het vakgebied der fysische antropologie schadelijk gedrag, zowel in de professionele als in de privécontext, met inbegrip van illegaal of onethisch gedrag, alsook het gebruik van diens naam en reputatie ter ondersteuning van dergelijke activiteiten. Dit omvat onder andere het:
  - Do not traffic, sell, or illegally appropriate human remains or (associated) cultural items, or facilitate or encourage the illegal acquisition of human remains or (associated) cultural items;

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘stakeholder’, as used in this document is considered synonym to the Dutch ‘belanghebbenden’ (Algemene Wet Bestuursrecht, Art. 1:2, or Burgerlijk Wetboek Boek 1, Art. 18b) and follows the definition provided by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO, 2010, p. 4), i.e. an “individual or group that has an interest in any decision or activity of an organization”.

- Whenever and wherever safely and reasonably possible, strive to highlight aforementioned activities to the relevant authorities;
- Ensure, to the best of one's knowledge, that human remains for scientific analyses were acquired legally and that permission has been provided by conduct analysis.
- Although ownership of human remains is, in certain cases, not considered illegal in the Netherlands, human remains should in general not be considered as private property.

#### **4. Excavation and Analysis**

The involvement of trained experts in physical anthropology is crucial to the (planning of) excavation, analysis, and education and outreach activities on human remains. The decision to excavate and study archaeological human remains should be made in consultation with all stakeholders and only after careful consideration of the ethical implications and the feasibility of meeting scientific and educational standards. If financial limitations are likely to hinder appropriate ethical treatment or adequate research, or if for any reason ethical and scientific standards cannot be upheld, every reasonable effort should be made to leave the remains undisturbed (referred to as 'preservation in situ' in archaeology).

##### ***4.1 Excavation/recovery of human remains***

Experts in physical anthropology should be consulted prior to, and involved in the decision-making process of, any work involving archaeological human remains. In addition to the directives stated in sections 2 and 3, prior to and during the excavation/recovery of human remains, NVFA members should:

- seek to identify potential ethical difficulties during planning and preparation, and define a course of action to resolve these;
- communicate with all stakeholders regarding any ethical concerns that are identified.

##### ***4.2 Analysis & destructive sampling***

Preserving the anatomical integrity and completeness of human remains is paramount, and remains should be protected from avoidable damage or degradation. Experts in physical anthropology should be consulted before performing destructive analysis of human remains. Destructive sampling should:

- be avoided if the research question(s) can be addressed using non-destructive techniques;
- only be performed using the least destructive sampling procedures and methods of analysis;
- only be done with the permission of the relevant authorities, and after consulting any descendants and/or culturally related groups;
- only take place after careful consideration of the benefits of the newly generated information and the potential loss of information for future research and of the wishes of all stakeholders;
- only be conducted when agreements have been made about the return of unused samples and/or leftovers;
- be documented in such a way that unnecessary repetition of the processing is prevented.<sup>2</sup>

## **5. Storage and display of human remains**

Curation of human remains in collections for research and education should be frequently re-evaluated, and the manner of storage and use of the remains should be examined against current ethical norms, as well as the wishes of the community. In the interest of the protection of human remains from physical degradation, and their preservation for future scientific research and education, appropriate storage conditions are critical.<sup>3</sup> Besides this, to protect the dignity of the human remains in storage and on display:

<sup>2</sup> See also Guideline for the destructive sampling of archaeological remains for scientific analysis (APABE, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Additional Guidance on storage and curation of human remains can be found in the *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums* (DCMS, 2005) for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. For Dutch examples, please refer to the *Waaier Eerste Hulp bij Kwetsbaar Vondstmateriaal* (SIKB) *Archeologie Leidraad 1: Veldhandleiding Archeologie* (Smits, d'Holloosy & Panhuysen, 2002, pp. 55-60) and *KNA protocol 4010: Depot Management* (SIKB, 2018).

- Human remains should be displayed sensitively and appropriately for the context. In cases it may be more appropriate to use alternatives;
- Human remains should be stored or displayed in a designated area away from main activity areas. The need for prior warning of the presence of human remains should be considered;
- The display of human remains or access to collections should serve a demonstrable educational and/or scientific purpose, conditional to the wishes of descendants and/or culturally related groups;
- The remains of each human individual should be kept together;
- Human remains should be kept together with any items and/or the remains of other human individuals found in association with them.

Curation of human remains in perpetuity is not always a viable or desirable option. In some cases, the decision is made to deaccession human remains from collections and (re)bury them. The decision should always include careful and informed consideration, involving all stakeholders, of the potential impact of the loss of information for future research and education, balanced against the wishes of descendant communities or affiliated cultural communities (when known), who may ethically have the most important voice in certain contexts. The decision to (re)bury should never be (solely) financially motivated, or designed to avoid/circumvent proper scientific discourse.

## **6. Storing and sharing of data on human remains**

### ***6.1 Data on human remains***

It is important that facilities that hold human remains maintain records on the provenance, context, association with other materials, state of preservation, previously conducted scientific research and/or (destructive) analysis of the remains. Safe and sustainable storage conditions should be created to prevent loss of information.

Whenever possible, all results and/or data on human remains should be published (e.g., in reports, peer reviewed journal publications, museum exhibits, non-specialist publications). Dissemination benefits future (re-)analysis, and the

(re-)use of data for research, educational and outreach purposes. Reuse of data also plays an important role in reducing the need for frequent handling of human remains, thereby helping to prevent degradation. Publications should in principle be publicly accessible, as long as this does not jeopardise the safety of the remains and does not go against the wishes of descendants and/or culturally affiliated communities.<sup>4</sup> The following principles apply to the storage and sharing of data on human remains:

- Uphold the highest ethical standards when sharing data on human remains, and strive to publish research results within a reasonable time;<sup>5</sup>
- Be aware of potential misuse of data, and consider this before publicly sharing information;
- Do not publish data and/or results on human remains without permission from the curating institution;
- In cases where human remains have known descendants or culturally affiliated communities, strive to inform these groups of the results prior to publication.

## **6.2 Images and digital copies of human remains**

Images and digital copies (e.g., 2D photographs, CT scans, 3D models) of human remains are important for research and public education purposes. Because they are easily shared online, and can become separated from their original context of publication, extra care and consideration is warranted in their use and distribution. The NVFA subscribes to the spirit and intent of the BBAO guidance document on digital imaging.<sup>6</sup> NVFA members should adhere to the following principles:

- Present images and digital copies of human remains sensitively and appropriately for the context. In some cases it may be more appropriate to use drawings or other alternatives.
- Do not publish images of human remains without permission from the curating institution.
- When possible, provide prior warning in publications or posts that contain images or digital copies of human remains.

4 FAIR and CARE Principles (GIDA, 2019; Russo Carroll *et al.*, 2021; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2016).

5 For guidelines, see Squires, Roberts and Márquez-Grant, 2022

6 BBAO, 2019b.

- Consider the views of descendants or culturally affiliated communities prior to publishing images or digital copies of human remains.

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