



## Preface

### They Sell *What* Online?

Studying the online trade in human remains was never part of the plan. For Damien, it stemmed from blogging he did from 2010 to 2012 about his graduate student research when studying for his PhD at the Australian National University. His blog, *It Surfaced Down Under!*, was where he shared his interpretations of the latest news about the antiquities trade in Southeast Asia and the Southern Hemisphere, highlighting and calling out galleries known to be actively participating in the trade in the Southern Hemisphere, as well as commenting on news of the day. One day, a particularly rapacious dealer based out of Melbourne was brought to Damien's attention—a man actively selling a wide variety of antiquities both big and small and authentic (or alleged to be so). He was also selling several items made from human remains. Via his website he advertised various fragments of forearms (ulnae and radii), fingers, and even two lower legs (tibiae and fibulae), still encased in soil. The corroded bronze bangles on the forearms showed that these individuals were buried over 2,500 years ago, most likely in what is today northwest Cambodia. Because Damien was beginning to make a name for himself in local circles, the authorities had reached out to him as an expert on human remains and on the antiquities trade. They brought him to the evidence room in the Canberra offices of the Cultural Property Division of the Australian government's Department of Environment, Water, Heritage, and the Arts. As he stood there with the field agents, one of them remarked, "Fair warning, what you'll see in there is more horrific than how it looked online."

The images that Damien had seen online had made the remains look almost . . . artistic. But on the cold evidence tables, they looked like evidence from a crime scene. They *were* evidence from a crime scene. What is more, these were *people*, once. Now, disarticulated, robbed from their resting place, the remains were relegated to anonymous things, fragments, stripped of their humanity, their dignity. This dealer knew the law and knew how to avoid being shut down completely. He had been previously arrested (in Cairo in 2008), and in 2005 he had been forced to forfeit items to the Australian Federal Police, in both cases

for attempting to smuggle Egyptian artifacts, mummies, and sarcophagi into Australia (Milovanovic 2008). Once again, he wriggled free, returning to his gallery and resuming his sales of “rare and exotic” items (Chappell and Huffer 2013). He is active to this day, but so far he has not risked including human remains in the online catalog again.

From there, more and more of Damien’s research involved studying the online places and mechanisms for trading human remains. Shawn followed Damien’s work on Twitter out of a shared interest in the threat posed by the antiquities trade. We first met in person at an archaeology conference in 2015 when Damien presented his research on the human remains trade online, which was happening on sites like eBay and Instagram (Huffer and Chappell 2014). Shawn was in the audience and remarked to the effect, “That was very interesting, but did you know you can do this on a much larger scale? What do you think you’d find if you could look at thousands of posts at once? What if you could get the computer to do the looking for you?” For both of us, how we came to study the online trade in human remains, and to work together, was in a way a function of how social media algorithms work. We were embedded in the same mechanisms that powered the trade. We realized that archaeologists were missing something very important that was happening, and so we began our partnership.

If you know where to look, who to follow, and what phrases to search, it is ridiculously easy to buy human remains online. Vendors and collectors can be found all over Instagram, Facebook, e-commerce platforms of all sorts, and “regular” webstores. For the last several years, we have been trying to understand *why* people do this, *where* and *from whom* do the remains come or belong to, and *how extensive* is this trade. Damien is a bioarchaeologist (one who studies primarily ancient or historic-period human remains to understand how lives were lived in the past). Shawn is a digital archaeologist (one who uses digital technologies to ask new questions of the past, and who also thinks about how archaeological methods shed light on our digitally mediated present). In this book we pull together the answers we have found so far to those different questions by remixing, updating, expanding, and backfilling the gaps in our existing publications into a single, coherent narrative. This book will show that the human remains trade continues to thrive, causing harm to descendent communities and prohibiting what we can ever hope to know about humanity’s shared past.

As coauthors, we have tried to remove as much technical jargon from our respective disciplines to make this book as accessible as possible (we imagine our ideal reader to be an undergraduate student or generally savvy member of the public who has not encountered these issues before). There is a glossary at the end of the book that will define terms and point to useful online sources for further information. At times, we do have to draw on our own disciplinary

language working with this information or in these fields to get our points across.

We imagine that you might be interested in understanding the broader context that surrounds the trade in human remains. Everyone knows that one can buy all kinds of wondrous and bizarre things online. In the last few years, the number of e-commerce websites (in multiple languages) available for bidding, clicking “buy it now,” or selling your own creations, services, or that used microwave that has been sitting in your garage for eons, has exploded. Increasingly large numbers of globalized citizens take this situation for granted. And yet, what is much less seen, understood, or (fortunately) acted upon, relatively speaking, is that these same e-commerce and social media platforms allowed at one time, or in some instances still do, for the sale of a very wide variety of illicit or questionable activities, at a variety of scales. This ranges from one-off individual transactions for, say, a pretty variety of parakeet you have always wanted, to persistent transnational organized criminal networks for wildlife, drugs, “fighting” dogs and other domestic animals, human trafficking for sex or labor, drug cartel recruiting, and the illicit (and so-called “licit”) antiquities trade, among many other problems (e.g., Paul, Miles, and Huffer 2020; Xu, Cai, and Mackey 2020; Garcia 2021; Montrose, Kogan, and Oxley 2021).

These days, the persistence of the use of the internet for illicit activities continues even sometimes against the best efforts of certain platforms to fight misuse of their product. And here, we are talking primarily about e-commerce platforms. Factor social media into the mix, and the landscape has changed entirely, allowing various categories of e-crime and the scope of trafficking networks moving each category of material to flourish. In some cases, such as the human remains trade, the rise of social media platforms as go-to locations for both licit and illicit transactions—the exploitation of built-in features of these platforms for purposes perhaps never intended by the original designers—has actually created markets for products that would have otherwise received minimal attention.

The number one question that we have both been asked when giving talks to students and colleagues alike is: “You can buy that?!” The very existence of human remains for sale, whether loose bones, hair, whole skulls, organs in jars, fetuses, cremated ashes, or a wide variety of items or artwork made from or with human remains, is, we have found, a shocking revelation to most. And that is just the shock that can be elicited from realizing that such a market exists, never mind the immediate follow up questions of why?!, how?!, and who would actually want this?!

In our research to date, and in this book, we attempt to tackle these questions to the best of our ability. To set the scene, in Chapter 1 we will explore some of the routes through which the dead cease to be treated as people and become, after death, mere “things” to be traded. The trade in cadavers for

anatomical specimens is one vector; another is as research specimens to fuel eugenics, social Darwinism, and the scientific racism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We will present stories of specific individuals who were “otherized,” turned into things for entertainment or were displayed or used as educational materials. Indigenous communities and allied scholars have in the last few decades sought to restore names, identities, and a sense of humanity to these disenfranchised people. This kind of collective response to encountering the “thing-ification” of ancestral remains stands in stark contrast to how much of the human remains trade operates explicitly or implicitly. Chosen from among hundreds of possible similar case studies, the life histories of the individuals we discuss in relation to the early days of the human remains trade is contextualized by an overview of key events or players that shaped early Western markets for human remains and the attitudes, the desire, the economic underpinnings, and the connection of early collectors to the birth of anatomy and physical (biological) anthropology as disciplines. We will outline how we conduct our research, and the ethics that go along with it.

In Chapter 2, we continue to look to the past to set the stage for the present. We take as examples two areas of human remains collecting with long histories that remain active today: mummies and reliquaries, as well as the related phenomenon of making contemporary “art” from human remains. We trace some of the themes that unite these earlier phenomena with the more modern social media dimension. We discuss how e-commerce and social media platforms have become primary locations for illicit trafficking, and what collecting looked like before and in the early days of the internet. This means we have to dip into the history of the US Communications Decency Act §230, the foundation of so much of our online lives. As we show, this legislation shields many forms of illicit trafficking and their practitioners online, and the intricacies of how human remains are advertised for sale. We then explore the language of online postings, whether these are made with an attempt to sell, or an attempt to “entertain,” within the context of why our earliest research focused on Instagram and the ethical protocols for studying illicit trafficking on social media “at scale.” Through scraping thousands of posts, and using various techniques of close and distant reading, we explain how it is possible to draw out the patterns that characterize the way people talk about the human remains that have passed into their possession. Not everything that is posted for sale has a price tag attached—many vendors are canny enough to take such discussions offline or into private messages—but still, there are enough price mentions that we can get a sense of the size of this trade. Such numbers are necessarily an underestimate of course, but the broad patterns of change year over year suggest that the trade is accelerating. We can also get a sense of the overall shape of the trade, on some platforms, by stitching together the network of who follows whom; the shape of that network also has implications for how ideas about the

“proper” way to “appreciate” or consume the dead circulate in these spheres. We explore how buyers and sellers find each other both online and off, and how the current, and potentially forthcoming, tools provided by social media and e-commerce platforms make this increasingly easy.

In Chapter 3, we turn attention to how human remains, as pieces of once-living individuals now (usually) disarticulated, commodified, and “fetishized” into “curios,” “specimens,” “trophies,” “oddities,” and the like, are “looked at”: that is, how they are viewed by those who collect, how aesthetics and “taste” trends are formed and disseminated, and how researchers like us also develop and use a variety of techniques to try to understand the visual effect/affect of these posts. We look at how collecting community tastes can be formed through online interactions with the bioarchaeological research community itself (where the latter chooses to engage with the former). We also take a slightly different approach to the question of taste formation among collectors and their online audiences by summarizing our recent work on the community formed around one particular TikTok personality and the “push-back” by archaeological professionals and concerned viewers that this platform’s mechanics allows (Graham, Huffer, and Simons 2022). We introduce and use a neural network approach to see if we can map influence from one collector to another (and so, building up a network of influence that sits on top of the network of followers discussed in Chapter 2). This includes discussion of something of the longer history of how “Western” culture has consumed bodies and why. We try to understand what owning human remains does for collectors and vendors.

In Chapter 4, we ask the big question that everyone wants to know the answer to: is this *really* legal? The answer is complex and depends on many factors, including knowing the actual origin or cultural group to which the human remains belong. But we can approach the question from another direction and ask, *are vendors telling the truth?* Can anything be said about the cultural origin of human remains that are only known from a single photograph or video that emerges for a while on social media, then disappears again, usually once a purchase is made? This was one of the original motivating questions for our “Bone Trade Project” research. To begin to delve into this, we turn to neural network approaches that are built to identify human faces from a single photograph (and discuss the ethical issues that such an approach raises). Through a carefully designed pilot-level experiment drawing on key principles of forensic anthropology that underpin so-called ancestry (read: population) estimation and facial reconstruction (areas still important to law enforcement faced with missing person or John/Jane/Trans Doe cases), we use computer vision to see if broad groupings (formed on patterns of differences rather than similarities) can be determined via reference to examples from published forensic case reports, the bioarchaeological literature, and the same museum collections

whose problematic origins were discussed to some extent in earlier chapters (Graham, Huffer, and Blackadar 2020). We do not think that it is possible to say anything about the large-scale origins of human remains circulating online to date, with the exception of individual examples that sometimes surface that clearly show a burial being looted, or bones naturally or culturally modified in very specific ways too difficult to “fake,” or with the clear inclusion in the sale of specific documentation indicative of provenance, showing former museum accession numbers, or other such clues that can be investigated by civilians or law enforcement. However, we do think that we can demonstrate that what vendors claim about the remains is sometimes false. With that being the case, we argue that many more laws might be applicable than usually thought.

In Chapter 5, we sum everything up and tackle the biggest question of all—why does it all matter? What have we learned in our several years studying this phenomenon to date and where do we see the research headed? We want to leave readers thinking about what the continued and evolving existence of this once-niche, now growing, submarket means for threats to global cultural heritage, the evolving legal landscape of e-commerce and social media platforms, questions of online privacy when illicit or questionable activities are occurring, the damage that “puff-pieces” in news venues lauding a collector as a kooky or interesting individual do, and global society’s ultimate responsibility to do right by the dead. Finally, a series of appendices will walk you through some of the technical tasks related to our work—from scraping to image analysis to some text analysis. We conclude the volume with advice on what the reader can do about this—and related—trades if you inadvertently encounter sales “in the wild” on your daily surfing.