

Call for contributions to a special number

“Slavery and Human Remains”

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Scientific editors

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Theme of the Issue

This issue explores how the relationship with human remains has evolved in the context of slavery and post-slavery. It takes a multidisciplinary approach, bringing together history, anthropology, philosophy, archaeology, bioarchaeology, and law.

The question of the legal status of human remains (Fontanieu 2014) raises ethical and heritage issues that are highly relevant today from the perspective of human dignity. In France, a report on the “repatriation of human remains abroad” was presented on January 8, 2025, following the law of 26 December, 2023, aimed at facilitating the repatriation of human remains belonging to public collections. The right to burial is now widely accepted and enshrined in the laws of various countries. However, it does not, or only marginally, concern enslaved people. The treatment of the “marginalized” dead has been addressed in part by the fields of history and archaeology (Carol & Renaudet 2023). Philosophy has also taken an interest in these unburied bodies that cannot be mourned (Butler 2004). For many descendants of formerly enslaved people, mainly Africans, the process of tracing ancestral remains has proven complex. This is due to the lack of individual graves and the difficulty of identifying ancestors

buried in collective graves. The discovery, preservation, and study of cemeteries of enslaved people and all human remains unearthed during archaeological excavations (for example, in Mauritius and Manhattan) are therefore proving invaluable sources of information about the identities and lives of people in slavery and post-slavery situations (Seetah *et al.* 2010; Blakey 2014).

Can the protection of such cemeteries of enslaved people, or even the return or repatriation of the remains of enslaved people (especially in France to the overseas territories), be seen as forms of reparation - existential, social, political, epistemic? Can the links between the dead and the living be re-established in this way? And what should be the nature of these links if the dead are to be treated with respect?

Some of the remains of enslaved people and their descendants have been collected. They are still kept in museums worldwide (United States, Canada, Brazil, Europe, South Africa, etc.), either exhibited or (more often now) hidden away in storerooms. During the abolitionist 19th century, at a time when ethnography was emerging on both sides of the Atlantic, both medicine and “race” science systematised the scientific exploitation of bodies, skulls, and bones, especially those labelled “black” and/or “slave” (Willoughby 2022). In this historical context, collections of skulls and other human remains, as well as collections of face casts, have been used to theorise scientific racism (Mitchell & Michael 2019; Boyer-Rossol & Piccioni 2023). The pervasive process of dehumanisation is demonstrated by the labelling of human skulls in collections as “slaves” (Roque 2023).

In some cases, however, abolitionism and anti-racism have managed to embrace or even promote a “scientific” approach to racial diversity and the study of human remains (Branson 2017). Access to subaltern bodies and the treatment of racialised human remains in both science and museography (dissection, measurement, *post-mortem* casts, display of anonymised skulls, etc.) all raise questions about the perpetuation of power relations and practices of violence after death, including in the post-abolitionist period. Ethical standards for working with and preserving human remains have been increasingly incorporated into biological anthropology and museology over the last two decades (Antoine 2014). The growing number of charters for caring and handling human remains in museum collections evidences this. It is also reflected in the consideration of restorative justice and restitution.

There has been a certain reification of the deceased through the collection of human remains, including those of formerly enslaved people. The question, then, is whether their identification and/or “reunification” (historically, biologically through DNA testing, or symbolically through burial ceremonies) with their descendants can lead to some form of “rehumanisation” of these ancestral remains (Rassool 2015). Does the “social death” of the enslaved person (“a loss of social identity, a loss of social connectedness, and losses associated with disintegration of the body”) (Patterson 1982; Brown 2008; Kralova 2015) continue after biological death? In slave societies, what happened to the bodies of those who were deemed to be “unworthy” or marginalised during their lives? How humane is death for the enslaved? In the context of slavery, how can the integrity of deceased bodies be guaranteed? Finally, how do we deal with the legacy of the dead today?

Specialists in biological and social anthropology, history, archaeology, law, and museology are invited to submit proposals.

Themes

Contributions may focus on the following themes, among others:

- What kind of material and immaterial sources do cemeteries and tombs contain about the identities, lives, and deaths of enslaved people
- Funerary rites, religious cults, spiritual and cultural practices about ancestral remains (localized or absent)
- The scientific exploitation of the dead bodies of people of African and servile descent: medical and surgical experiments, *post-mortem* measurements, and casts
- Scientific racism and Collections of “slaves” and “Blacks” skulls and bones
- Deportation, anonymization, and objectification of patrimonialism human remains in the context of slavery and post-abolitionism
- Restitutions, repatriations, and reburials of human remains whose history is linked to that of slavery and its abolition
- Patrimonialization and memorial policies of slavery burial sites

Submission procedures

Proposal of articles (between 500 and 800 words) must be sent by **June 1, 2025**, to ciresc.redaction@cnrs.fr. Decisions on manuscripts will be announced on **July 1, 2025**.

Accepted papers (45,000 characters maximum, spaces included, bibliography included) must be submitted in French, English, Spanish, or Portuguese before **November 2, 2025**. They must be accompanied by an abstract or résumé of no more than 3,600 signs. The complete list of recommendations to authors is available [here](#). Final versions must be ready by **July 1, 2026**.

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