

Preliminary survey results:

how do professionals in the UK view and approach working with disarticulated human remains?

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Disarticulated human remains (DHR) are commonly found on archaeological sites within the UK, yet they are often overlooked as a valuable archaeological resource. A review of the literature shows that this is due to numerous factors, the main one being budgetary constraints, an issue which is reflective of broader issues within commercial archaeology. Competitive tendering has led to archaeological work often being selected based on the cheapest contract (Belford 2022). Additionally, negative historic attitudes towards DHR (Hamerow 2006), and a lack of clear guidance on how they should be assessed, have led to them being overlooked. The best guidance available discusses the issues that may be encountered when working with DHR but does not give recommendations for how methods should be utilised (McKinley and Smith 2017). This paper presents the results of a preliminary survey of professionals working with human remains in the UK, and their approaches towards DHR.

A survey was undertaken in September 2020 of professionals working with human remains in the UK to determine the current professional attitudes towards DHR and the methods they utilise when working with them. This survey was part of doctoral research developing a framework for working with DHR in commercial archaeology. The survey was distributed via email to 87 commercial archaeology companies, 20 museums and all members of the British Association of Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology (BABAO). It was designed to be answered anonymously to encourage participants to answer honestly. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Bradford. The 68 respondents were diverse, and represented a range of sectors and experience, as shown in the associated pie charts.

The survey results provided valuable insight into the frequency and period from which DHR are encountered and the methods used in their analysis.

Disarticulated assemblages often include multiple individuals, and can include important information about the population. Credit: Rebecca Cadbury-Simmons



When asked how frequently they encountered DHR, the modal answer was 75–100% of burial sites/ assemblages. DHR are certainly prevalent and this is not a surprising response as there are a wide variety of situations that could cause the presence of DHR. Practices such as the secondary burials of prehistoric Britain, or later charnel practices, seem most likely given the time periods from which respondents most often found DHR: 41% of respondents answered that they had found DHR on Neolithic sites, while 40% selected Bronze Age, and 59% selected the medieval period.

The respondents reported using a variety of methods of analysis, but the most mentioned method was the calculation for the minimum number of individuals (MNI). They tended to note the data they would look for rather than naming specific methods – bone identification, age-at-death and sex estimations (where possible), and presence of pathologies. Whilst this is a positive response and indicates that people working with DHR are recording the maximum information, there may be a bias; those who are likely to answer a survey about DHR perhaps already view them of greater value within the archaeological record than those who did not respond. Furthermore, respondents may have answered with the level of work they would like to do with DHR rather than the attention they can currently realistically give them with time and budget constraints.

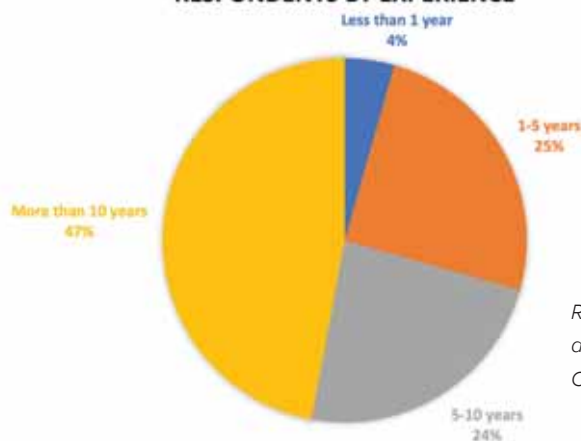
Possibly the most interesting result from the survey was in reference to the public and professional attitudes to DHR – 85.3% of respondents answered that they had experienced different attitudes to the two types of human remains. Answers included that less care was taken of disarticulated remains, that they were too expensive to analyse and that they would be more likely to be chosen for destructive analysis. Additionally, people who answered specifically about the public added that disarticulated remains were more difficult to identify with, and that they were seen as ‘less than’ articulated remains.

As this research has been developing, a follow-up survey focusing on practices within commercial archaeology has been devised. If you currently or have previously worked on human remains within commercial archaeology in the UK, it would be a great

References

Belford, P, 2022 Crisis? What crisis? Archaeology under pressure in the United Kingdom, *Archäologische Informationen*, 44, 1–16
 Hamerow, H, 2006 ‘Special deposits’ in Anglo-Saxon settlements, *Medieval Archaeology*, 50 (1), 1–30
 McKinley, J I and Smith, M, 2017 Compiling a skeletal inventory: disarticulated and commingled remains, In Mitchell, P D and Brickley, M (eds) *Updated Guidelines to the Standards for Recording Human Remains*. ClfA, 20–24

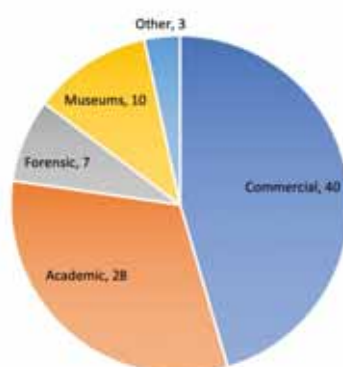
RESPONDENTS BY EXPERIENCE



Respondents by experience and sector. Credit: Rebecca Cadbury-Simmons

RESPONDENTS BY SECTOR

Respondents were able to select more than one answer



Jo Buckberry



Rebecca Cadbury-Simmons



Benjamin Jennings



QR code for new survey. Credit: Rebecca Cadbury-Simmons

help to this research if you would consider completing the new survey. The link is <https://forms.gle/RuvquGmC7bxDQSGd7> or scan the QR code. All responses will be completely anonymous and must be submitted by 31 July 2022.

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