Ethics and Exhibition of Historical Human Body Casts: A Brief Case Study from Pompeii, Campania Region, Southern Italy with an Activist Lens

Dario Piombino-Mascali and Sara Sablone

1 Introduction

Is it ethically acceptable to exhibit casts of human corpses in a museum context? This question is not merely academic—it is a moral imperative that demands we confront archaeology's complicity in systems of dehumanization and structural violence. As scholar-activists we must move beyond asking whether we should display human remains to interrogating why we do so, whose interests are served, and what structural inequalities are reproduced in the process (Blakey, 2020; de la Cova et al., 2024)? Casts of human bodies at the moment of catastrophic death are not just archaeological artifacts; they are the preserved anguish of individuals, whose vulnerability became cemented in volcanic ash and later commodified for scientific and public gaze (Petrone, 2021). The ethics of displaying human remains cannot be divorced from the consideration of social justice; respect for cultural sensitivities, collaboration with descendent communities, and the risk of re-traumatization are critical considerations. When interrogating structural inequalities in museum contexts questions include but are not limited to: even for ancient remains, how do we honor potential descendant claims; were there social hierarchies that influenced

D. Piombino-Mascali (✉)
Department of Anatomy, Histology and Anthropology, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania
e-mail: dario.piombino@mf.vu.lt

S. Sablone
Interdisciplinary Department of Medicine, "Aldo Moro" University of Bari, Teaching Hospital, Bari, Italy
e-mail: sara.sablone@uniba.it

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who died in Pompeii's most exposed spaces, and can exhibition of the remains of these deceased individuals become activist pedagogy, exposing systems of oppression rather than sensationalizing suffering? The plaster that filled the voids left in the solid volcanic ash after the decay of the cadavers' soft tissues does more than preserve a human form. This chapter applies the "ethics of responsibility" model (chapter "Introduction: Bioarchaeologists Should Be Activists Too", this volume), treating the casts as a case study, which whilst an exceptional example, can shine a spotlight on the broader ethical imperatives that concern the display of mummified and skeletonized human remains. Volcanic ash froze Pompeii's victims in postures of anguish, in their final moments of a violent death, but activist bioarchaeology challenges us to build the tools to find ways to provide dignity for the dead and in so doing, contribute towards social justice for the living. We ask not just how to display human remains, but how to restore agency to victims through community-guided narratives. In doing so this may expose systems that may have made their deaths inevitable, and transform museum displays from extractive, sensationalist monuments, to spaces of restorative justice (Watkins, 2020).

2 Historical Background

In a letter published on February 13, 1863, in the *Giornale di Napoli*, Fiorelli who was excavating at site, first described his technique for creating plaster casts from the bodily voids left behind from those who died in the catastrophic eruption almost 2000 years ago. While his method was later refined it remains in use today (Osanna, 2021). Fiorelli's systematic approach to casting (1863) revolutionized archaeological practice and created a human face for the tragedy of Pompeii in a way that has grasped the public imagination for the past 150 years.

Archival excavation reports show that most of Fiorelli-era casts derive from atrium-peristyle houses (versus those from workshops/taverns), per the Pompeii Archaeological Park's 2019 inventory (cited in Alapont et al., 2023, Supplemental Data 1). In common with biased historical narratives, Fiorelli's approach further served to compound the invisibility of everyday Romans in favor of the wealthy. Fiorelli's early plaster casts of human forms quickly sparked strong reactions from both public and scientific communities. Initially, the casts were preserved and exhibited in the houses from which they were recovered in Pompeii, displayed on specially designed supports. In 1874, with the inauguration of the Pompeian Museum, some casts were subsequently relocated for exhibition within. Excavations continued, and additional casts were made after Fiorelli left his position to assume a higher role at the Ministry in Rome. During World War II, in 1943, many of the

Pompeian Museum's casts were severely damaged due to a bomb explosion. In 1948, archaeologist Amedeo Maiuri oversaw their restoration and the museum's reopening, which displayed the surviving casts as an ongoing attraction. For decades, this remained unchanged until the launch of the *Great Pompeii Project* in 2014. The project's first phase involved cataloguing all preserved material, which had never been systematically surveyed. A new display approach was introduced, emphasizing the recontextualization of casts at their original discovery sites whenever possible, following the best available standards. The policy now is to relocate them to the areas where they were found (and died). When *in situ* curation was not feasible due to exceptional national or international interests, conservation issues, or logistical, economic, or territorial constraints, casts were displayed in the new Antiquarium (CNR, 2019a) (Figs. 1, 2, and 3).

Critical review. It could be argued that the eighteenth century fascination with Pompeii's deceased—preserved in hardened volcanic ash from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE—emerged not from scholarly altruism but as an extension of the colonial gaze of Europe and the UK, where southern Italy's ruins became another territory for intellectual extraction (Dhindsa, 2024). As an Inspector of the Pompeii Excavations from 1860 to 1875, during Italy's tumultuous unification, Fiorelli wielded archaeological authority to reshape Pompeii's narrative. The application of his technique could be argued to have perpetuated exiting social hierarchies. He prioritized the preservation of Roman elites over the enslaved and working-class victims whose contorted forms would later become tourist attractions (Ellis et al., 2023). Fiorelli's pioneering efforts at Pompeii undeniably advanced archaeological methods and captured the public imagination—but they also reflect colonial-era power dynamics (Ellis et al., 2023). The decision to primarily preserve and display individuals perceived as elite victims—those in opulent villas or dramatic poses—while laborers, enslaved people, children, and the urban poor were often neglected, reinforces class biases deeply embedded in early archaeology. Victims from modest dwellings, or those buried in less visually compelling contexts were frequently overlooked. Post-WWII restorations further entrenched these biases by privileging aesthetic and elite narratives over a comprehensive social history. This selective preservation itself is a form of structural violence, where social inequalities are reproduced through decisions about whose bodies are recovered, studied, and exhibited. The public display of these remains, often stripped of their social context, risks aestheticizing suffering while erasing the everyday realities of class, servitude, and marginalization in Roman society. Today, activist archaeological frameworks challenge these legacies, advocating for more inclusive interpretations that center marginalized voices and interrogate whose stories are preserved—and why.

Excavation activities in Pompeii continue today, with new casts being made using advanced techniques and materials. Today the accepted process for bioarchaeological excavation is to retrieve as much as possible of the human remains including all bone fragments, so that the final cast does not contain human remains at all. Recent bioarchaeological analyses have helped reconstruct the circumstances surrounding the preservation of the deceased. It is also worth noting that contained

Fig. 1 Three of the four casts made following the 1956 excavation led by Maiuri. (Image Dario Piombino-Mascali)

within volcanic voids are the preserved skeletal remains of the victims and these now remain embedded within the plaster corporeal outlines. Further research on the remains of victims recovered from the nearby, and almost as famous, site of Herculaneum has revealed that they were possibly exposed to temperatures exceeding 500 °C, which caused cadaveric spasms and rapid deposition of volcanic ash that preserved their body positions. It has been hypothesized that the intense heat vaporized fluids and tissues, resulting in skull explosions and bone fractures, followed by rapid cooling that solidified the volcanic material (Petrone, 2021; cf. Martyn et al., 2020). In contrast, individuals who sought shelter inside buildings during the eruption often perished due to structural collapses (Petrone, 2021) and exposure to high temperatures.

Activist Questions and Approaches for Museum Professionals
We pose the following questions drawing on the scholar-activist framework in chapter "Introduction: Bioarchaeologists Should Be Activists Too" integrating aspects of criticality, normative orientation, and active engagement, and those of Black and Indigenous scholarship frameworks central to this volume (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Collins, 2000). We must ask questions of how dominant narratives are challenged or reinforced, what ethical values guide the interpretation and presentation of the remains, how can our work connect with communities, activism, or public debate, and the centering of cultural sovereignty, structural violence and reparative practice:

1. How do current curatorial practices represent the human remains that are displayed and interpreted — as individuals, social subjects, or scientific specimens — and what power dynamics shape these representations?
2. What ethical considerations guide the public display of human remains, and how do these choices reflect broader values about memory, dignity, and historical responsibility?
3. In what ways do exhibitions of victims engage with or overlook issues of social inequality and structural violence — such as class, gender, slavery, or imperial power?
4. Working together, how can curators, scholars, and communities actively reshape the interpretation of human remains from disaster contexts to promote ethical remembrance, public engagement, and dialogue around disaster, vulnerability, and historical accountability?

Following Blakey's model of engaged scholarship (2010), we suggest that bioarchaeologists studying the Pompeii casts can play an active role in reshaping museum practices. This involves moving beyond ethical display toward reparative action—using these remains to reveal any evidence for historical systems of oppression that made victims vulnerable in 79 CE, while remaining mindful of how contemporary choices in exhibition and interpretation shape public understanding. As this volume illustrates, our work is rarely neutral; through our engagement with human remains, we may either challenge or inadvertently reinforce interpretations of past inequalities.

3 Ethical Concerns

A significant ethical question arises: how should the exhibition of these casts be viewed in the context of ancient human remains research? Replicas of historical casts are excluded from this discussion, as they appear initially to lack a direct

Fig. 2 Detail of two casts from the area between the tombs and the city walls. (Image Dario Piombino-Mascali)

connection to the original human remains. Here we discuss original casts, some of which still contain preserved osteological material, even if sometimes fragmented or disarticulated. In Italy, archaeological human remains are legally recognized as cultural heritage and are protected under the *Codice dei Beni Culturali e del Paesaggio* (Legislative Decree No. 42/2004). This legal framework ensures that such remains are preserved, studied, and managed with due respect. Specifically, Article 29 of the Code mandates that conservation activities—including study, prevention, maintenance, and restoration—are carried out to safeguard the integrity and cultural value of heritage assets. The Ministry of Culture provides guidelines for the proper handling of human remains, from excavation to museum display, emphasizing their informative value and the need to consider the wishes and sensitivities of potential descendant communities (Riga, 2022).

In Pompeii, the techniques used to recover and study these remains represent significant milestones in the history of archaeology itself. Therefore, these casts have dual significance: as a direct link to ancient history and as evidence of the evolution of archaeological practices in Italy. Although this article does not delve into debates over the value and controversial "humanity" of ancient bioarchaeological remains (Frerking & Gill-Frerking, 2017; Licata & Monza, 2017; Dellù & Sciatti, 2021; Thomas & Krupa, 2021), it is essential to identify ethical standards within museum studies to guide exhibition decisions.

Research suggests that ancient human remains often hold a different emotional weight for museum visitors compared with other non-human artifacts (Arizza, 2023). Stakeholders in exhibiting human remains from the Vesuvius eruption

Fig. 3 International visitors observing the casts with great interest in the Spring of 2024. (Image Dario Piombino-Mascali)

include descendant communities, activist groups, and heritage professionals. While direct descendants may be unknown, local Italian communities and cultural institutions should be involved as stewards of the region's heritage. The New York African Burial Ground project offers a strong model, showing how respectful collaboration with descendant communities can guide research, interpretation, and public display (Blakey, 2010). Applying this approach ensures that human remains are treated with care, context, and community input. According to Arizza (2021, p. 9), ethical reflection in pluralistic societies may be approached through forms of agreement that emerge across heterogeneous moral positions. Within this account, attention is directed toward the practical consequences of actions and their potential effects. In this context, multiple stakeholders have a vested interest in the exhibition of ancient casts: archaeologists work with communities to showcase tangible evidence of the

catastrophic eruption of Vesuvius; biological anthropologists collaborate to build nuanced understandings of the victims' daily lives and final moments; the broader scientific community engages with these casts and related research to advance collective knowledge; and the wider public—including local communities and those who see themselves as cultural descendants of the deceased—participate in and benefit from museum research, interpretation, and communication efforts.

Balancing these interests requires a collaborative ethical process in dealing with human remains. The rights and sensitivities of museum visitors—as active participants in interpretation—must be respected. In line with the Faro Convention, which emphasizes community rights and shared stewardship of heritage, exhibition design should emerge through dialogue with diverse audiences, especially when addressing emotionally impactful materials. The Archaeological Park of Pompeii has begun to address these concerns not only by continuing archaeological investigations and diagnostic analyses to reconstruct the history of individuals, but also by engaging with communities in shaping exhibition strategies. Favoring the use of cast replicas over originals reflects both conservation priorities and a commitment to ethical responsibility, seeking a balance between scientific inquiry and social accountability.

Recent research continues to reshape our understanding of these individuals and their contexts. A 2024 DNA study by Pilli et al., for example, challenged long-held assumptions. In the "House of the Golden Bracelet," four individuals previously believed to be a family were found to be genetically unrelated. Moreover, analyses of other remains revealed that a significant portion of Pompeii's population had genetic origins tracing back to recent immigrants from the eastern Mediterranean. These findings highlight Pompeii's central role in ancient Mediterranean exchange networks. In presenting such emotionally charged artifacts, exhibition choices are carefully considered. Protective measures including the use of display cases that prevent close-up photography, as well as recommendations for audiences for whom such displays may carry particular cultural, religious, or emotional significance, reflect a commitment to inclusive and respectful interpretation. These considerations culminated in the 2019 international conference "Human Remains. Ethics, Conservation, Display," organized by the Archaeological Park of Pompeii (https://www.humanremains.org). This event brought together researchers, anthropologists, and archaeologists to share methodologies and best practices. A further attempt in this direction occurred in the recent exhibition in Pompeii "The other Pompeii. Common lives in the shadow of Vesuvius," whose catalogue (Bertesago & Zuchtriegel, 2023) contains general methodological reflections on the exhibition criteria relating to the casts, on the set-up project and, finally, on the history of the technique of making casts. As the *Great Pompeii Project* evolves, additional steps could enhance public engagement further, with the aim of designing shared solutions and measuring their impact and results with a view to ethical sustainability. For example, the Egyptian Museum in Turin conducted a visitor questionnaire in 2019 on the display of human remains. This initiative led to a scientific publication and a podcast, "In Search of Life," which explores ethical approaches through stories shared by museum professionals (www.museoegizio.it/esplora/notizie/alla-ricerca-della-vita-il-nuovo-podcast-del-museo-egizio). Implementing similar

initiatives at Pompeii could strengthen community relations, demonstrating mutual accountability to civil society and future generations.

4 Concluding Remarks

In light of the arguments presented, the question of whether it is ethically appropriate to exhibit the casts of Pompeii must be considered within a broader and more nuanced ethical, social, and scientific framework. This issue extends beyond Pompeii and should be addressed in other exhibitions through an 'ethical laboratory' involving all relevant stakeholders as applied to the case of the Egyptian Museum of Turin. Engagement with practical ethical issues can contribute to reinforcing the relationship between science and society, with potential benefits for ethical robustness and overall system functioning (Caporale 2021).

To illustrate, the Pompeii case exemplifies this dynamic ethical process in practice: key stakeholders—including archaeologists, biological anthropologists, and museum professionals—have been systematically identified and consulted; diverse perspectives concerning preservation, scientific inquiry, and respect for the deceased have been critically evaluated; shared solutions such as the exhibition of replicas and *in situ* display of casts have been implemented. While mechanisms for involving the community and visitors in evaluating the outcomes of these decisions are being developed, such engagement remains at a nascent stage.

This iterative process, guided by principles of transparency, accountability, social responsibility, and stewardship towards future generations, demonstrates how ethical considerations can be progressively integrated within museum practice. The most appropriate way forward is to ask: How can these findings be exhibited while respecting the legitimate interests of all actors involved in this significant scientific endeavor (Alapont et al., 2023)? A dynamic and inclusive process can be considered for approaching ethical decision-making in museum contexts. This process may involve identifying relevant stakeholders, considering a range of perspectives, developing shared approaches through forms of convergent agreement, monitoring the outcomes of these actions, and adapting practices in response to feedback.

Such a process is typically discussed alongside established frameworks of ethical research principles (CNR 2019b), including freedom of inquiry, accountability, honesty, rigor, objectivity, transparency, cooperation, diligence, responsible use of resources, social responsibility, and attention to future generations. In the context of Pompeii casts, these principles provide a reference for balancing scientific inquiry, public engagement, and the preservation of cultural heritage, without implying prescriptive or authorial mandates.

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