

## Article

# Scientific and Ethical Aspects of Identified Skeletal Series: The Case of the Documented Human Osteological Collections of the University of Bologna (Northern Italy)

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**Abstract:** Osteological collections are an essential source of information on human biological and cultural variability, providing insights about developmental, evolutionary, and biocultural processes. Among osteological series, documented human osteological collections (DHOC) are especially useful due to the opportunity to control biological parameters such as age-at-death and sex, which are typically unknown in archaeological or forensic cases. Raising ethical concerns about the collection, management, and study of human remains poses anthropologists with renewed responsibilities. These issues become especially pressing when dealing with DHOC. In this contribution, we discuss the scientific value and ethical issues characterizing DHOC using as case study the documented human osteological collections of the University of Bologna. This series includes more than 1000 individuals from Northern Italian and Sardinian cemeteries and is among the largest in Europe. It represents the basis for ongoing research on a large range of methodological studies, especially focused on the reconstruction of biological profile. After outlining the scientific studies performed on this DHOC, we discuss it in the context of the specific legislation featuring the Italian territory. Finally, we highlight some directions where work can be carried out to better balance scientific research, preservation needs, and ethical concerns, stressing the advantages of modern imaging techniques.

**Keywords:** identified skeletal collections; human remains; biological profile; standardized methods; forensics; ethics in anthropology



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## 1. Introduction

Human skeletal remains are an important source of information in paleoanthropology, bioarcheology, and forensics. They contribute to the reconstruction of environmental, demographic, epidemiological, as well as social and cultural aspects (e.g., funerary treatments, patterns of interpersonal violence, care, diet). Biological factors (hormonal environment, diseases, etc.) and behavioral aspects (physical activity, surgical interventions, mortuary practices, etc.) leave traces on the bones that can be investigated to reconstruct the biological profile (age, sex, health status, etc.) and life events (occupations, circumstances of death, etc.). The analysis of skeletal remains is crucial for testing hypotheses about the evolutionary processes leading to biological and behavioral traits in modern humans. Conversely, a detailed analysis of modern human skeletal variability helps to better contextualize extinct taxa from a biological, ecological, and behavioral angle [1–4].

These considerations explain the scientific relevance of human osteological collections as a basis to explore and quantify human variability in contemporary and archaeological populations [5]. Among osteological series, documented human osteological collections (henceforth DHOC) are important due to the broad range of information they provide

to researchers. They typically include data about age-at-death, sex, and, in some cases, occupation and cause of death of the individuals. These features make DHOC irreplaceable when exploring the possible influence of these parameters on skeletal variables of bioarcheological and forensic interest.

In sum, human remains housed by anthropological institutions worldwide can be considered as a goldmine of biological and cultural information, directly informing current views on the developmental, evolutionary, and social processes underlying the variability of our own species. However, especially during the last three decades, there has been a growing concern about the ethical issues related to the collection, study, and management of human skeletal remains. This has led in some cases to their restitution and/or reburial [6–9].

The sensitive nature that stems from the ties that individuals and communities established with death and the dead, which go beyond the natural phenomenon towards an abstract, immaterial, and spiritual sphere, poses human remains in a sort of “grey area” when their use deals with scientific and educational purposes [9]. Human remains become long-lasting symbols that play a central role in the process of identity and memory construction for the living [9–12].

The aim of this work is to contribute to the above discussions, focusing on the scientific, historical, and ethical aspects characterizing DHOC. We carry this out by adopting as a case study the DHOC of the University of Bologna. This important skeletal series is considered and discussed in the larger context of European DHOC, and its scientific value is considered in conjunction with current ethical and normative debates. We then use the case study from Bologna as a starting point to suggest a suite of best practice approaches in the management and scientific use of human skeletal remains.

## 2. Scientific Osteological Collections and Their Utility

During the mid-19th and early 20th century, the development of physical anthropology as an independent discipline led to the establishment by anthropologists, physicians, and anatomists of large osteological collections, typically housed in scientific museums. Many of these collections were established by means of scientific exchanges and donations, archaeological expeditions, and cemetery exhumations. In some cases, skeletons were either bought or directly stolen [5,13]. They were firstly used to carry out morphometric studies in order to describe human variation from a hierarchical viewpoint (e.g., racial differences) and provide valuable information for surgical anatomy [14,15].

The growth of these collections went in parallel with the development of anatomical and anthropological studies in Europe, sharing similarities (e.g., period of acquisition, size) with those described by Walker [14] for the United States. Many DHOC were put together in Northern (Terry Collection and Hamann–Todd Collection in the US [16]), Central, and Southern America (Lambre Collection, Chacarita Collection, Mérida Collection [17–19]). Others have been amassed in Africa (Raymond Dart Collection, Pretoria Bone Collection [20,21]), in the Philippines (Manila North Cemetery Collection [22]), and a relevant number in Europe (Christ Church Spitalfields and St Bride’s Church Collections in London [23–27], Simon Collection [28], anthropological and forensic Collections of Coimbra [29–32], Lisbon Collection [33], Granada Collection [34], Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona Collection [35], Schoten Collection [36], Athens Collection [37], Helsinki Collection [38]).

In Italy, the first collection to be set up was that of the Anthropology and Ethnology Museum of Florence by Paolo Mantegazza (1831–1910 [39]), while the first osteological collection in Bologna was created by Luigi Calori in 1860 [40]. Soon after, in the first half of the 20th century, one of the largest collections in Europe was assembled at the same institution by Fabio Frassetto (1876–1953) and Elsa Graffi Benassi (1901–2000). It is constituted by over 1000 complete skeletons (from fetuses to old people) originating from cemetery exhumations carried out between the late 19th and early 20th century in the Italian regions of Sardinia (Sassari, Cagliari, and other localities, such as Nuoro and Alghero) and Emilia-Romagna (Bologna, Modena, Parma, and Faenza) (Table 1) [41–43].

**Table 1.** Composition of the different samples of the documented human osteological collections of the University of Bologna with details about the number of individuals, sex composition, age-at-death range, number of individuals of known age-at-death, ranges of year of birth (YOB) and death (YOD), number of individuals with known occupation, and cause of death.

	Sassari	Cagliari	Bologna	Modena “Criminals”	Modena	Parma	Faenza	Dart Collection
Number	605 (337M-268F)	69 (46M-23F)	418 <sup>1</sup> (229M-189F)	10 (7M-3F)	57 (15M-9F)	39 (20M-17F)	4 (3M)	6 (6M)
Age Range (years)	9–98	14–85	0–91	21–94	0–5	0–79	8–68	30–60
Known age	560	63	397	5	22	37	3	6
Range YOB	1828–1916	-	1814–1922	-	-	-	-	-
Range YOD	1918–1932	1924–1929	1898–1944	1916 <sup>2</sup>	-	1928–1930	1926–1927 <sup>2</sup>	1924–1925
Known occupation	337	2	249	-	-	2	2	6
Known cause of death	2	-	388	-	-	9	-	6

<sup>1</sup> The overall number of individuals is 425; however, 7 individuals are misidentified. <sup>2</sup> The YOD refers to few individuals of the sample and thus is given as a general indicator for the sample dating.

The DHOC of the University of Bologna also encompass six Southern Bantu skeletons (five Zulu and one Basotho), pertaining to individuals who died between 1924–1925 at the hospital of Johannesburg (Republic of South Africa). These skeletons came to Bologna as a donation of Raymond A. Dart to Fabio Frassetto [20]. Other nine complete and identified skeletons (by sex and age) pertaining to the collections also include individuals from several Italian and Corse localities. The collections are enriched by several isolated skeletal elements, comprising crania and postcranial bones, obtained from ossuary deposits from different Italian cemeteries, which are mostly utilized for scientific and educational purposes in order to analyze variations occurring at the level of single anatomical regions. The DHOC of the University of Bologna do not hold any completely mummified specimens, whilst only some individuals still preserve soft tissues (e.g., ligaments, cartilage) or mummified parts, as in the case of some infants from the Parma Collection.

Similarly to the Portuguese osteological collections [44,45], the biographical data of the individuals composing the DHOC of the University of Bologna could include name, sex and age-at-death, date and place of birth and/or death, marital status, parents’ names, occupation at death, health status, cause of death, address at time of death [41–43,46]. These details, hand-written on paper notes included in the box of each individual, allowed the development of new methods for the reconstruction of the biological profile (estimation of age-at-death, sex, stature, health status, etc.) of unknown individuals, as well as the testing of existing ones. Our group experimented with new observations and data filing techniques. The same information, moreover, provided the opportunity for the reconstruction of demographic, epidemiological, and socioeconomic aspects of the populations studied.

Among these skeletal series, the Bologna Collection has a considerable number of skeletons, including more than 400 individuals of different ages at death (from newborns to old adults) who died in Bologna between the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century and were buried at the Certosa, the largest cemetery in the city. The collection was recently reviewed, and its documentary information was compared with cemetery archives [43]. The Sassari Collection, from Sardinia, includes more than 600 individuals who died in the first half of the 20th century. The skeletal remains originate from cemeterial exhumations in the urban and rural area of Sassari [41]. Moreover, in this case, written notes provide detailed biographical information for a good portion of the individuals. A current focus of our group is the possible expansion and crosscheck of these data with those available from cemeterial archives.

These collections have been the subject of a large body of research focused on various topics. The latter include methodological studies focused on estimation of age-at-death and attribution of sex [47–61], the study of enthesal changes in modern humans [62–67], and the discussion of their variability among extinct taxa [1–4]. Additional topics of investigation have been the various expression and demographic distribution of skeletal morphological variants and pathological changes [68–71], as well as dental and palate

traits [72–76]. These collections have also offered excellent biological, demographic, and biocultural background in the analysis and discussion of case studies [77–79]. Finally, part of the collections is currently undergoing digitalization in order to explore the variability and evolution of the human and fossil ankle [80–84] and in relation to subadult ontogeny and bipedal locomotion [85].

In Italy, this biological archive finds a parallel only in a contemporary collection recently assembled by the LABANOF of the University of Milan. This skeletal series (CAL, Collezione Antropologia LABANOF) includes more than 2000 individuals that were born between 1866–2000 and died between 1910–2001, whose remains were exhumed from the main cemeteries of the city [86].

### 3. Forensic Purposes in the Use of Human Osteological Collections

As mentioned, DHOC are the ideal basis for developing new protocols for the reconstruction of biological profiles (estimates of age-at-death, sex, stature, health status, etc.). It is therefore unsurprising the relevance assumed by these collections in the forensic literature. This is testified by the large number of methodological forensic works based on DHOC [17,21,22,30,33–35,37,43,87]. The documented collections described above, including the DHOC of the University of Bologna, are among those listed by Franklin and Blau [88] as suitable for the development of anthropological techniques with applicability for forensic purposes due to their meeting of the criteria of documentation, contemporaneity, and representativeness. Documentation is imperative for the methodological development and testing in the field of forensic anthropology, in order to frame accurate interpretation of biological data and their potential employment in practical and judicial cases [89]. Contemporaneity (i.e., the extent to which biological data obtained by anthropological collections are representative of the variability of a given contemporary population) and representativeness (i.e., how sampling bias may affect the osteological collection process) are two parameters essential for the suitability of a collection in forensic research, due to the risks involved in using a skeletal sample as proxy of the reference population and the shifting trends affecting populations (i.e., secular trends) [90,91]. For instance, the Bologna and Sassari Collections are biased towards people from the lower socioeconomic level, as it is mirrored by their known occupations during life, mostly encompassed within manual and/or dependent labor [43,66,67]. Regarding possible secular trends, we are not in possession of systematic data on modern-day population-specific anthropometrics of Emilia-Romagna and Sardinia. However, our collections already encompass several generations of individuals, as age at death spans over four decades (1898–1944), already offering potential information on secular trends that could be adopted for statistical modelling of metrics derived from our data in application to the modern-day reference [43].

The DHOC of the University of Bologna are also added by recent reviews compiled by Henderson and Alves-Cardoso [92] and Santos [93]. In addition, the DHOC of the University of Bologna appear on the Forensic Anthropology Society of Europe (FASE) map of identified osteological collections (<http://forensicanthropology.eu/osteological-collections/> accessed on 22 February 2022 [94]), created in 2017 and providing details about 153 documented collections located in 41 different countries.

The incorporation of identified skeletal samples in studies exploring novel methodological and theoretical approaches in biological and forensic anthropology may therefore enhance the repeatability and ultimately the scientific soundness and rigor of the resulting assessments [89,93]. The osteological collections included in the FASE map have been employed worldwide in studies on biological profiling of sex and age-at-death, behavior patterns and/or activity, disease diagnosis and/or pathological traits identification, human and population variability, evolutionary anthropology, as well as comparative anatomy [45,92]. For instance, extensive investigations of the processes of adult skeletal ageing were undertaken on Portuguese collections, reflecting upon the influence of several environmental effects and existing biological variations acting upon skeletal maturation and degeneration [95]. Other studies on the Portuguese collections examined sexually

dimorphic features of cranial size in light of secular trends and did not find specific secular trends in both size and sex variation [96]. Especially throughout the last two decades, the Portuguese and Italian identified collections played an essential role in a series of studies on the effect of age, sex, and physical activity on enthesal change variability. The conflicting results of this research led to a critical revision of previous methodological approaches for the scoring and analysis of these variables. At the same time, this line of research represented a discontinuity with previous simplistic assumptions about the use of enthesal changes as proxies of in vivo biomechanical stress [65–67,97–99].

Similarly, anthropological methods of forensic relevance are continuously being developed and implemented on the DHOC of the University of Bologna. Age estimation methods built upon biological data of the osteological collections encompass a technique based on the observations of the timing of fusion of secondary ossification centers of the postcranium [47,48,51,54,55], morphological aspects of the *os coxae* [52,53], and dental features such as the pulp/tooth ratio among canine teeth [49,50] for adults, while diaphyseal linear growth was documented for the leg in subadults [61]. Sex attribution methods were developed with the aid of three-dimensional morphometrics considering the adult morphology of the human cranium and ankle [56,57,80,81,84]. Dental measurements and metric and morphological variables of the auricular surface were tested as potential sex indicators in nonadult remains [59,76]. Other biological features contributed to the recording and interpretation of the biological profile in light of musculoskeletal indicators [60,62–68], the distribution of paleopathological alterations [70], dental traits such as patterns of oral pathologies [72], and crown outline variations [73]. Other forensic fields, such as entomology, have benefitted from studying the entomological samples comprised within the human remains of these collections [100]. In this frame, the entomofauna associated with human remains are an important source of information about peri and post mortem events. This kind of research is not still largely explored within scientific and museum collections, but it is relevant to distinguish between the insects associated with the living subjects or with the decomposing bodies and the pests then colonizing the bones stored in the collections [100].

We are now involved in a project in collaboration with the Istituto Ortopedico Rizzoli (Bologna) and the Department of Physics and Astronomy of the University of Bologna, whose long-term aim is the extensive digitalization of our collections by means of state-of-the-art scanning protocols. Such an endeavor, already started on a selection of lower limb elements, would ensure the sharing of data among researchers, benefitting the ease of accessibility, the permanency of the data, and the non-invasiveness of the investigation [101], with an ethical approach that is, however, still to be accurately framed with this kind of digital data [102].

#### 4. Ethical Issues

Ethical considerations are becoming increasingly central in contemporary scientific discourse as a result of new, emerging questions and the development of novel analytical methods. This revaluation of ethical concerns faces scholars, nowadays more than in the past, with important responsibilities [103–105]. This theoretical frame leads to a high level of sensitivity especially for human remains. The latter represent indeed a unique heritage asset because of their social, cultural, religious, and political implications [9]. Ethical issues regard both bioarcheological and documented human osteological collections that are stored all over the world in different institutions, where their role is nowadays increasingly questioned and renegotiated within the scientific and ethical debate [106].

As mentioned, documented human osteological collections were assembled between the 19th and 20th centuries and mostly used to perform morphometric studies aimed at describing human variation from an alleged hierarchical point of view [107,108]. These studies were typically framed in a Western-centered perspective [13–15,106] and a male-dominated vision [109,110]. Therefore, the dawn of physical anthropology may be related to a dark past, guilty of a bad use of science, that still hovers over it in the current research field, although anthropological paradigms have changed over time proving that human races and



hierarchical classifications are not based on scientific evidence [108,111–113]. Some series encompassed in the DHOC of the University of Bologna may still pose some more specific concerns in relation to the controversial period and purposes of their collection, referring in particular to the so-called Modena “criminals” and the Southern Bantu specimens pertaining to the Dart Collection [20]. In fact, their donation and acquisition could be related to that history of social and ethnic inequality, having been collected with not much clear available documentation during the first half of the 20th century [20,43].

As shown before, the DHOC of the University of Bologna are currently used for research and educational purposes, in order to investigate the human skeletal variability, to describe pathological features, and to implement new forensic methods, while some specimens are also exposed for educational purposes in the Anthropological Collections of the Museum System of the University of Bologna. Thus, for their invaluable scientific worth and for their intrinsic sensitive nature, it is necessary to rethink their role in the frame of the cultural heritage management and ethics discourse in a national and supra-national scene [9].

While many countries signed and adopted some kind of codes of good practices or proper ethic codes and legislations with reference to human remains housing and study, Italy still lacks a clear regulation or set of norms. In particular, many countries are provided with legislations regarding conciliatory practices in the field of restitution of native or minority communities, such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act [114], signed in 1984 in Australia. Similar documents were mainly signed starting from 1990, when the United States government approved the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA [115,116]). Other similar codes, also related to the exhibition of human remains, followed this trail, e.g., the Human Tissue Act in England [117] and the Code of Ethics of the International Council of Museums [118]. In Italy, restitution requests have been recently and unsuccessfully addressed to the Anthropology and Ethnology Section of the Museum of Natural History of the University of Florence, to the National Prehistoric Ethnographic Museum “Luigi Pigorini” of the Museum of Civilizations in Rome, and to the Museum of Criminal Anthropology “Cesare Lombroso” of the University of Turin. In Bologna, the archaeological human remains from the Jewish cemetery of via Orfeo [7,8,119] were claimed by the ultraorthodox group of “Hatra Kadisha for the Preservation of Holy sites” in 2017 and subsequently reinterred with the authorization of the superintendents responsible for the protection and conservation of cultural heritage on behalf of the Italian Ministry of Culture (MiC, first called MiBACT [8,9]).

In Italy, the lack of precise normative criteria contributes to the above ethical issues. Archaeological human remains are more clearly considered part of the national cultural heritage and managed by the MiC. Conversely, many doubts are still open concerning the scientific osteological collections [9]. Article 10 of the Italian Code of Cultural and Landscape Heritage [120] does not directly refer to human bones, but it seems deductible that every bone labelled by a museum inventory number can be effectively part of a public museum collection; hence, museal osteological collections from the mid-19th and the early 20th century may be considered proper inalienable heritage of the Italian State [9]. Indeed, skeletal remains datable to more than 100 years ago are considered of historical interest, while human remains are commonly considered of judicial pertinence only if they belong to periods after the end of World War II [121]. This situation is further complicated by the scant and ambiguous set of norms on these topics. For instance, the different regional cemetery legislations [122] are restrictive in matters of collection, study, and preservation of human remains, not referring to their scientific value and research practices. In Italy, a shared document on ethical issues concerning the use of human remains for research and educational purposes has not yet been signed, even if some works have recently started thanks to the initiative of the Italian National Research Council in 2020 [123].

Nevertheless, in the meantime, in the absence of a dedicated ethics code, there are many things that scholars, researchers, and educators in general are bearing in mind while dealing with human osteological collections, starting from the principles of the ethical

guidelines officially voted in 2003 by the American Association of Physical Anthropology [105,124]. The request for informed consent should be one of the first obligations, as the basis of the modern research standards since the Nuremberg Code of 1947 [105], when dealing with the use of human remains for scientific purposes [124]. It is clearly consciously issued by people who donate their body to medical and forensic facilities, such as the so-called “body farms”, firstly established by William M. Bass at the University of Tennessee in 1981 [125–128]. Even though the main aim of this kind of facility is the study of human body decomposition in different environment settings, the resulting human skeletal remains are then also collected, inventoried, and stored as part of a permanent osteological collection used for further research and teaching purposes [128]. In the impossibility of seeking such an informed consent to those specimens that died more than 100 years ago, today the DHOC of the University of Bologna are handled and employed in the research ensuring full care, respect, and dignity to those human remains. Both in teaching activities and educational museum tours, an introduction to ethical issues is always provided, concerning both legislations and appropriate behavior towards human remains (e.g., behave respectfully, do not damage, do not take pictures). When specimens are given to students and other researchers, most sensitive data of the individuals, such as their names, are preferably avoided while they remain always unpublished in printed and online scientific works. In fact, names, along with the few living photographs of the specimens completing the available documentation, are mostly tied to the individuality of the deceased ones, representing a challenging matter on how to deal with individuality while studying past communities in order to answer to wider research questions [6,129].

Same good practices of respect and privacy are also guaranteed by the great majority of online available databases, as in the case of the New Mexico Decedent Image Database (NMDID [130]), a human full body CT-scan images database that jointly collects several ante mortem data of known individuals. The ongoing digitalization of the DHOC of the University of Bologna goes in this direction [57,80–84]. While the long-term aim of this project is the realization of a complete virtual database, also in this case ethical issues would have to be considered, a matter that would become even more pressing given the larger access provided by electronic datasets [102]. On the other hand, this would increase the chances of study and valorization of human osteological collections, safeguarding and preventing them from improper uses and decay for present and future generations of researchers and citizens [9].

## 5. Conclusions

This work highlights the scientific contribution and main ethical issues surrounding the use of documented osteological collections in evolutionary, bioarcheological, and forensic research for developing and testing anthropological protocols to be applied on unidentified human remains, whether from archaeological or forensic settings. Both bioarcheological and forensic studies, despite having different purposes and scientific and social relevance and impact, benefit from such biological sources. The latter discipline, being specifically aimed at personal identification or assessment of the cause of death for judicial purposes, particularly requires and benefits from the accuracy derived by refining anthropological methods on known, reliable biological information. On the other hand, bioarcheology deals with the reconstruction of our past through the analysis of human remains mostly pertaining to unknown individuals, whose assignment to a sexual or age category is preliminary to any other kind of anthropological study.

Ethical issues are also differently perceived in the diverse anthropological fields. In general, the study and display of extinct human fossils do not raise major ethical problems, while *Homo sapiens* remains, pertaining to our own species, are perceived as more sensitive. This may regard the museum exhibitions of bioarcheological remains, especially in the cases where they may represent minorities or refer to histories of social and/or ethnic inequality. When displayed or used for educational purposes, human remains from documented osteological collections dating to the very last centuries, such as the DHOC of the University

of Bologna, can raise more issues regarding possible kinship ties and the existence of living descendants. In forensics, such ethical questions are even more deeply felt, especially in the case of victims of crimes or unidentified corpses, and still painfully asked by their families.

Full protection and respect towards human remains, especially to those pertaining to documented osteological collections, should be accorded to such a paramount source for anthropological studies. Data from these collections should be easily accessible to all researchers, promoting international cooperation among scholars and institutions. Research projects involving different collections from different geographical areas could highlight possible differences (e.g., in growth and development trends) that could be related to different environmental, economic, and social factors, providing models for interpretation of findings from the study of other anthropological samples. Anthropological research would benefit from a coordination among different institutions, not only for the creation of shared research networks and open permanent databases favoring scientific exchange among scholars but also for the development of common management, protection, and ethical practices that would allow the preservation of this invaluable heritage asset for future generations.

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