Museums as Deathscapes
Two Examples of Human Remains in Exhibitions

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Abstract: The museum is very often equivalent to a place that is filled with objects and references to human death. Accordingly, this article aims at bringing greater clarity into some of the precautions taken by museums when they choose to expose what can be considered as a highly sensitive matter, namely human remains. Put differently, the scope of the text concerns how museums deal with the task of displaying the dead in public. How do they act in order to facilitate the actual display, and at the same time minimize the risk for public criticism? The overall discussion is informed by the idea of museums as deathscapes, and the intentional use of a kind of ‘morbid aura’ that is sometimes attached to museum objects with a close association to human death.

Keywords: museum, deathscapes, human remains, morbid aura, charismatic objects

INTRODUCTION
Death as a cultural heritage has attracted a number of disciplines. Not least, these discussions have underlined how death has a tendency to materialise in the form of memorials, sights and monuments. A special case is what is commonly referred to as ‘dark tourism,’ meaning the public interest for places associated with battlefields, massacres, spectacular crimes and well-known murders, and other extensive tragedies or traces of human death (Foley & Lennon 1996, Lennon & Foley 2000, Stone 2006, Sharpley & Stone eds. 2009). Generally, museums are rarely considered to be in the range of such more or less macabre attractions or destinations. Nevertheless, there is reason to consider how death functions as a means to tempt visitors to certain museums and exhibitions. In many respects, a wide range of museums, and likewise cemeteries, memorials and shrines, are to be regarded as distinctive forms of deathscapes (Maddrell & Sidaways 2010). Against the backdrop of two recently shown exhibitions in Stockholm, both involving human remains, I will in the following argue that such an enhanced perspective of death-on-display would promote a more thorough understanding of how objects associated with human death are part of museum-activities in general.

Having said that, it must be acknowledged that for quite a few museums mortal aspects of death are clearly recognised. Not least,
this is the case when human death can be considered the strongest contributing factor to the existence of the museum or the exhibition itself, as with Pompeii, Titanic, Ground Zero, or the Holocaust. However, there are admittedly many museums where death is obviously present without leaving such a clear mark on the institution in question. This holds true for most historical museums, even though a good part of the displayed objects might in fact have been chosen on the grounds of their intimate connection to human death, be it weapons designed to kill or inflict severe injuries or artefacts that are somehow connected to a person or event that is itself imbued with death.

Within a cultural heritage context, such museum artefacts, each telling a story of an authentic death, can be related to both the concept of charisma, as introduced by Max Weber (1922/1985), and aura, bearing in mind Walter Benjamin’s perception of the unique artistic object (1936/1997). Weber used charisma as a way to point out how a certain kind of religious leadership attracted especially devoted followers. However, within the field of human animal studies, the same concept has also been applied to other phenomena than persons. Here, non-human charisma refers to how certain species tend to be of particular interest for humans (Lorimer 2007, Lundqvist 2018). In the article, I will draw from these ideas, suggesting that a recognised link to human death sometimes imbues museum objects with a ‘morbid aura,’ and at the same time attributes to them a charismatic nature.

**Aims and Method**

The fact that death is a common feature of many museums’ collections and exhibitions does not mean that the presence of mortality is uncomplicated (see e.g. Nordström 2007, Alberti 2011, Svanberg 2015, Williams & Giles 2016). Museums often have to take death into account; on the one hand, as something that may be used to raise the audience’s interest, but on the other hand, needing to be handled with great caution so as not to turn the exhibition into a spectacle (Ekström 2021b). Therefore, an investigation of how museums deal with the vast corpus of death in their collections brings forward the obvious question of ethics.

A special, and most discussed, example of this intrinsic dilemma concerns the public exhibiting of human remains, such as bones, skulls and skeletons, at the museums. There is an immense body of literature on the subject, varying from arguments concerned with the eventual need of repatriation in order for the museums to make up for historical wrongdoings (Jenkins 2016), to reasoning that focuses on the animistic character of the dead body as a way to say that it is still emotionally connected with the once living person (Bienkowski 2012). I do not intend to use this article to sort out what is the right decision in these often very complicated matters, if such a case as a ‘right decision’ is ever to be found in relation to such highly intense and sensitive museum material (Gustavsson Reinius 2017, Stringer 2018). Therefore, my concern is not whether the remains should be on display or not, nor whether they should be at the museum at all. Instead, I want to narrow in on the following very specific question. If the museum has already made the decision to exhibit the bones, how do they deal with this task?

To study this matter, I have chosen the most simplistic of methods, the juxtaposition of two different cases. During a couple of months in 2021, I repeatedly visited the exhibitions **Medieval Massacre – the Battle of Gotland 1361** at the Swedish History Museum, and **Face to Face** at the Vasa Museum. Each time I had a
Museums as repositories of death

Museums are in many ways repositories of evidences of death. In that respect the museum, or at least several museums, can be seen as a kind of public *deathscapes* (Maddrell & Sidaway, eds. 2010). That makes them similar to places like churches and graveyards, or those silent and gently arranged rooms at the hospital where people can bid farewell to their deceased loved ones. All of these locations are deeply intertwined with the presence of a death that has been carefully staged. So, what can these arranged settings look like when it comes to the museum? I will give you three examples of such encounters.

At the centre of a vast room at the Swedish Air Force Museum, outside the town of Linköping, is the whole body of a severely damaged aircraft. This is the stunning object of the exhibition *Acts of Secrecy – the DC-3 that Disappeared*. The aircraft, originally used for monitoring purposes by the Swedish air force during the Cold War, was shot down by the Soviets during an assignment in 1956. Fifty years later, the wreck was recovered from the seafloor and eventually placed in a huge showcase, very much looking like it was still standing on the seabed, underwater (Fig. 1). Undoubtedly, the curators at the museum have tried to fill the giant showcase with a certain submarine feeling.

Even though some parts of the exhibition in Linköping aim at clarifying how the attack took place, and how the shooting affected the aircraft, the overall scope is to shed light on the processes that for decades have withdrawn the information of the long-missing plane from public reach. For more than half a century, state diplomacy and military needs trumped the public interest to know what had passed. Not even the families of the military staff that
The visitors at the exhibition were given the opportunity to contemplate the tragic accident in front of lifeboats, lifejackets, and wall panels or screens. The latter presented photographs and films from the rescue-operation, as well as stories from those who survived the shipwreck, and from people telling the audience about their loss.

Another example is an exhibition at the Swedish Royal Armoury Museum, where clothing and other items once worn and used throughout history by members of the royal family are on display. Some of the garments are stained with visible traces of blood, telling stories of sudden royal death. Among many other things publicly presented at the museum died on the occasion were ever told of the real bearings of the attack and its causes.

Nonetheless, as much as the exhibited aircraft can be considered a historical proof of what was going on in Sweden during the Cold War, and what was deliberately kept in the dark, it is also true that eight persons died in the incident, inside or in the vicinity of that very plane. The giant showcase is, therefore, so to speak, also a grave put on display.

Now, this is another example. In a temporary exhibition at the Maritime Museum in Stockholm, which opened in 2004, the museum presented objects and narratives from the disastrous sinking of the ferry Estonia in 1994 in the Baltic Sea, when in total 852 persons died.

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are all very much *engaged* with the subject of death. Some of their exhibitions are actually loaded with death, in one form or another. Now and then, in their advertising campaigns, or press materials, and on their websites, the museums use photographs of skulls or bones, or pictures presenting artefacts with a clear connection to human death.

But clearly, some morbidity is less (and some more) morbid than others, and as we have already seen, there is far from just one way to present death at the museum. So, let us have a closer look at some of the most distinct examples of human death, namely the public display of human remains. In the following, I will concentrate on how the curators at the Swedish History Museum and the Vasa Museum have managed to legitimize the presence of death in their respective exhibitions. The question is, what have they done to make their audiences accept human remains as rather unproblematic museum objects. How are they handling their own deathscapes?

**The thrill of the dark**

The Swedish History Museum in Stockholm is housing an exhibition named *Medieval Massacre*, which in some respect can be regarded as an outspoken example of the same ‘thrill of the dark’ that is often seen as a feature of the dark tourism phenomenon (Stone 2006). In several carefully lighted showcases the curator in charge has placed bones and skulls in a way that brings out the fierce violence that had afflicted the bodies when they were still alive. As a result, what is presented for the audience is not just any skulls and bones, rather it is distinctly human remains on display, dramatized to evoke and communicate feelings of fear and agony. Standing in front of
this collection of sudden and brutal death, also including rusty weapons and pieces of worn-out armour, we might even notice the presence of a certain morbid aura (Fig. 2).

That kind of aura is not inherent in the objects themselves. Quite the contrary, it is installed from the outside, with the strategic use of means such as lights and shadows, and by the choice of materials and fabrics placed together with the human bones (Fig. 3). In fact, it seems as if the museum has borrowed a good deal of its aesthetics from the movie character Indiana Jones and other visual narratives known from popular culture.

From Indiana Jones, and the charismatic horror of death, we can then turn to a showcase

*Fig 3. The thrill of the dark. Medieval Massacre – the Battle of Gotland 1361. Photo: Katarina Nimmervoll, Statens historiska museum.*
and a display that is concerned with a rather different content in both style and context. The somewhat spectacular staging of the human remains that we recognised as a distinct feature of the first exhibition is now completely absent. Instead, at the Vasa Museum, we are confronted with a set of attitudes and arrangements that can be said to be, in almost every aspect, a complete contrast to the former display. In an extended showcase, perhaps eight meters long, parts of several skeletons have been placed on dark sand, one after another. There are no other items in the showcase but the white bones, the black sand and the transparent glass above (Fig. 4). Contemplating this plain-looking coffin, which is very much the centre of the exhibition, we meet death that is framed with quite a different expression than what we have just seen at the Swedish History Museum. In sum, this is a display totally void of connotations to horror or plagued bones, instead it is designed to signify dignity and respect for the mortal remains.

With its rather spectacular framing of the displayed remains, the exhibition *Medieval Massacre* is placing itself in the midst of a problematic zone where one might expect some negative judgments. But, as far as I have noticed, no such criticism has occurred. This absence of critique is in itself both intriguing and interesting. Presumably one important factor is the amount of time that has passed since the battle. We are after all invited to consider an event that took place
in the fourteenth century. But there are other aspects than chronology to take into account vis-a-vis the museums’ presentation of the remains.

One of these particularly noteworthy conditions is the ethnic origin of the bones in question. In the Visby-case they can all be seen as part of the Swedish or Scandinavian population, as it was the peasants of the island of Gotland and, to a minor part, the attacking Danish soldiers that were killed during the battle. Accordingly, it is the bones belonging to the ancestors of a conceived ‘majority population’ that are on display, and not remains taken from a ‘minority’ group within Sweden, or skulls and skeletons brought to the museum from some far away indigenous people. Given the amount of ethical reasoning that in recent years has been directed towards the intrinsic dilemma of showing or not showing human remains in museums, this is no doubt an important circumstance (Fabian 2010, Exell 2016, Jenkins 2016, Hjemdahl 2017).

Especially, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) has drawn interest to the issue. Since it was installed by the Congress in 1990 it has had a strong impact on the ethical reasoning concerning how to expose human bones in general, even in countries and museums outside USA. However, that is not really the case for most Scandinavian museums where such remains are still frequently on display (Nilsson Stutz 2016), with one distinctive exception, the Sami people who have long been part of the northern territory.

The relevance of the above-mentioned demarcation line, between majority and minority populations, is thus furthermore underscored by the intense discussion that has in Sweden focused on the way the Sami people and their material artefacts are represented in the contexts of various museological knowledge regimes. A great deal of this attention has concerned how human remains from Sami cemeteries dating from earlier centuries have been gathered and stored at different Swedish museums, and often still form part of their collections (Broberg 1982, Jackelén, Inga & Jakobsson 2019, Svanberg 2015).

Voices from the past

Notwithstanding the relevance of the time that has passed and the ethnic origins of the bones, there is still reason to dwell further on ‘the horror of death’ at the exhibition at the Swedish History Museum. The bones and skulls on display belong to persons that definitely seem to have died in agony, in pain, and in fear. That makes them human, and also considerably like ourselves. Like us they had feelings and thoughts. Like us they cared for their loved ones, they felt panic facing death, or they hit the ground filled with rage and anger. How do I know this? Because it is told by the museum itself.

The plagued bones are placed at the centre of the audience’s attention in the room, and some strongly emotional texts can be reached through a technical device. This is one of them, told by an unknown peasant who is about to die in the battle:

The chain mail is heavy on my chest, Must… breathe.
The sun is scorching, I’m so cold.
Nils, where did you go? “Stay with me, boy!” I cried. But you didn’t hear me.

All the swords raised against the summer sky, the blow from the Danish soldier.
Your head fell heavy to the mud, trampled by feet, torn by hoofs, disappeared.
My heart is bursting! I promised your mother to protect you!

Katarina, God have mercy on you when the Danes come to loot. Good that the key will disappear along with me. Only I know where the silver is hidden. No one can force you to reveal something that you do not know.

My severed arm is turning the mud red. Strange, the hand is still gripping the sword. The sun reflects in my father’s ring. So, we’ll meet again. Twilight is already here. The chain mail is so heavy.

And this is another, now expressing the view of the attacker, a fatally injured soldier, looking at his cut open belly:

So this is where it ends. Why here of all places? I’m dying beneath a sky I do not know.

The blow to my belly has split my body. My guts want to press through my fingers, taking liberties! But I’m pressing them back. There is so much damn screaming everywhere. It’s noisy. Everyone is on their own here. Jesus Mary, how it’s pumping out of my belly. The old man’s blow hit the right spot before his staring head fell before my sword. Now he can lie there and stare at his heaven. I lie here.

War was my work. But this time I won’t be bringing any war pay home. Never again see the yellow rye fields of Zealand. They shall be waiting in vain. It is unbearable.

The sun is mocking me. I can’t hold back any more. Even my intestines are conquering me. May the devil sink this damned island in the sea.

However, in another part of the exhibition, next to the former, the perspective on the mortal remains of the dead peasants and soldiers shifts from emotions to knowledge. In this section, the skulls and bones are treated as material evidence of the kinds of wounds and injuries that can be expected from a medieval battle. In line with forensic logic, the remains are analysed as a way to shed light on what happened to the individuals before death occurred. This is how the theme is presented on the museum’s website:

In this exhibition you can follow the progress of three Gotlanders and two Danish soldiers. New findings are presented about their living conditions. Diseases, height, build and age are some of the things which can be detected by analysing their skeletons. From injuries and bone incisions we can also reconstruct fighting techniques and identify the weapons used, just as in a modern crime scene investigation.

And in another passage from the same text the museum states that:

Take a look also at the young, quite heavily built Gotlander, aged between 30 and 35. He was probably attacked from behind, sustaining several blows to the head from both axe and mace. This exhibition gives us an opportunity of pondering war in a historical perspective. The battle beneath the town wall demonstrates that acts of violence and war are recurrent, destructive phenomena through the ages. The strikingly well-preserved skeletons, the photographs of mass graves, and the weapons on display
here remind us of acts of cruelty occurring in the present. Children and sensitive adults may find some parts of this exhibition frightening.

What I would like to suggest is that the combined osteological and forensic perspectives, apart from their reference to valuable knowledge about historical circumstances, also function as a way to neutralize the presence of these somewhat ‘horrifying’ skulls and bones in the exhibition. This combination is, therefore, an example of how the museums adjust their own deathscapes in order to facilitate, and even justify, the choice to display potentially problematic human remains in public (see Nilsson Stutz 2016). Of course, the same kind of smoothening strategy is operating in the way that the emotional setting invites us to share the individuals’ experiences of their own moments of death. By letting the bones speak for themselves, even though carefully interpreted and curated by the museum staff, much of the critique that otherwise might have arisen is effectively disarmed.

**Faces from the past**

After the Swedish History Museum, we shall now turn our attention towards the famous shipwreck of the warship Vasa. The extended, coffin-like, showcase at the Vasa Museum is included in the exhibition Face to Face. As previously mentioned, this is one of the museum’s permanent exhibitions and has been on display on the ground floor of the building since 2005. If we compare it with the exhibition Medieval Massacre, it is not only the semantic connotations that differ from one another.

At the Vasa Museum the framing of death takes place in an almost sacred deathscape, in no means designed to recognize the bones’ hidden history of pain, fear and sufferings. On the contrary, the arrangement of the human remains is carefully adjusted to signal the museums’ wish to treat the remains with great care and dignity. But that is not all there is to it. If the “comforting” presentation of the publicly displayed remains is a crucial part of how the museum has chosen to express their sensitive managing of the bones, the name of the exhibition, Face to Face, is another clue to the same handling. This is how it is introduced on the website:

In the exhibition Face to Face a number of people emerge from the past. They all share the fact that they were aboard the Vasa on the 10th August 1628, and followed it down to the deep. /…/ The exhibition Face to Face describes osteological and archaeological research, but also allows us the possibility of a ‘fantasy meeting’ with some of the individuals from the Vasa in a film, and through six facial reconstructions.

Similar to the skeletons at the Swedish History Museum, the archaeological and osteological approach is an important feature of the exhibition at the Vasa Museum. This time, however, the bones from the excavation of the sunken ship are not seen as a way to gather information of damages inflicted by weapons and fighting techniques. Instead, we are presented with another kind of truly scientific knowledge. Further on, the website continues to announce that:

In studies of the bones, we are able to determine their height, age, diet, and medical history. DNA analysis allows us to identify relationships between them, and perhaps to say where they came from. We can even reconstruct the faces of some of the crew.
As a human archive, the bones that contain the sought-after information provide evidence of diets and medical conditions. The osteological perspective is therefore utilized to gain otherwise hidden knowledge out of the remains. I find this perfectly reasonable. But we might also notice that osteology, in the exhibition, continuously acts to smoothen ethic issues when it comes to showing the mortal remains.

Clearly, the Vasa Museum is well aware of the criticism that sometimes evolves in connection with the public display of human remains at museums. The hidden information in the bones, successfully revealed by the osteologists, therefore legitimizes the presence of the remains in the exhibition. Perhaps, the authentic bones and skulls do not really need to be there, but thanks to the introduced knowledge their existence is imbued with a scientific, and thus seemingly unproblematic, kind of framing.

We must, however, also put forward a final observation. Of course, this has to do with the facial reproductions that have repeatedly tried to call on our attention. I would like to suggest that in many respects they have the same function as the imaginary narratives of the historical individuals in the former exhibition, the Medieval Massacre. In Face to Face the Vasa Museum commissioned a skilled artist, trained in both archaeology and forensic techniques, for the purpose of shaping a recognizable model of a dead person based on the remaining human skull. Thus, a number of facial models in silicon and human
hair were added to the exhibition, mirroring with extreme realism some of the dead persons from the Vasa wreck (Fig. 5).

This is truly history coming alive. Face to face with these individuals from the early seventeenth century we reach exactly the same kind of human nearness as when reading the emotional narratives at the Swedish History Museum (cf. Nordström 2007, Hjemdahl 2017, see also Hylland 2008, Sanders 2009). We are no longer looking at the history, but experiencing it, as if it has become a part of our own flesh and bones.

Needless to say, this encounter with apparently real human beings from the past, is also an essential ingredient in the orchestration of the museum's preferred deathscape. This is how the exhibition wants its audience to meet and interact with the existence of human death at the museum. Ideally, we should stand there, face to face, stretching over the centuries and calmly looking at each other: silently contemplating the encompassing existential sameness of the human conditions.

Ironically, as we all know, things do not always work out as planned. When interviewing the curator who was in charge of the original exhibition, I learnt that at the time for the opening this long and serious-looking showcase, containing all the carefully recovered bones and skulls, was equipped with a device that would turn off the light when someone comes too close to the bones. Thereby, the dead were to be protected from the excessive attention of the living. But as soon as visiting classes of school children found out that all it took to change the lighting was to lean over the showcase, the exhibition turned into a disco, with a flickering stroboscope. The museum had to unplug the device. Nonetheless, the arrangement is an excellent example of the museum's strong will to communicate its own sensitive approach to the remains on display.

**Housing the dead**

Like most Swedish museums, the Vasa Museum and the Swedish Historical Museum in Stockholm have committed themselves to ICOM's (International Council of Museums) ethical rules for management and display of human remains. Under the heading *Culturally Sensitive Material* the ethical rules stipulate that collections of human remains, and other material of sacred significance, should be acquired only if they can be housed securely and cared for respectfully.6

As we have learnt from the prior discussion, however, there is significant scope for museums to choose how to design their own application of the ethics. The firm conclusion that human remains should be treated with respect and exposed only in dignified conditions is therefore a statement that is open for negotiations.

From this perspective, the outspoken morbid aura, so distinctly present in the anguished death presented in the exhibition *Medieval Massacre* seems a risky card to play. For what if some public opinion labels it as a disrespectful way to lure people to the museum? Put differently, the accusation would thus be that the museum is cynically using the ever-present thrill of the dark to attract visitors, hereby exploiting the bones and their inflated morbid aura in order to improve the museums’ public impact. However, the previous analysis has made clear that an emotional approach to the human remains can serve as a legitimizing enabler making the exposure seem reasonable and well-justified. To a certain extent that effect was achieved by means of the two exhibitions’ closing the historical and affective gap between
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An important lesson to be learnt from the two cases is hence the importance of the framing of the exhibition. By firmly signalling to the visitor that the human remains were handled with (1) care and dignity, and that the museum (2) recognized the presence of the once living person in the exposed human bone-material, and that the display had (3) perfectly legitimate osteological or archaeological purposes, it was possible to exhibit even this kind of otherwise problematic material. Moreover, as shown by the specific example from the Swedish History Museum, this could be done even though the aesthetics of the exhibition in some respects touched upon the morbid and spectacular.

This article has primarily targeted the presentation of human remains, namely bones, skulls and skeletons, at two historical museums (or rather, one historical and one semi-historical). Still, some of the introduced examples in the article indicate that there might also be a much wider scope of interest. Museums in general would probably benefit from reflecting more carefully on how they exhibit, and otherwise display and capitalize on objects that have a certain history of being associated with human death. I suggest that by acknowledging their professional actions as a way of establishing a distinct and articulated deathscape, it should be easier for museums to observe, and even relate to, their own practices.

This ambition should include a thorough reconsideration of how the museum so far has chosen to frame death in different ways and according to various principles. Based on the study of these ‘deathly’ settings, it may be possible to learn more about how museums, in their role as both knowledge-institutions and tourist destinations, manage to balance the obvious attractiveness of death and its ever-existing tendency to tip over into some kind of involuntary public spectacle.

All the same, the fact that death is often intermingled with the daily business of museums, does not mean that death is always given the same kind of attention. Thus, to the museum death is more like an opportunity or an option, something that the museum can either choose to highlight or to leave rather unnoticed in the dark. The examples I have presented can all be understood as occasions, and indeed materialisations, when the museums have used their professional apparatus to bring to the forefront and illuminate the presence of death in their exhibitions. Consequently, they are not only deathscapes in the sense that they are filled with references to a charismatic human death, but also carefully arranged settings intended to present death in certain strategic manners.

Notes

1. For an example of how individual museum objects also can be regarded as charismatic, see Wingfield 2010. In Mårdh 2018 there is a similar reasoning with a focus on museum artefacts as fetishes.

2. The interview was part of a much larger research project on museum matters that resulted in the monograph Drowned at Sea. Spectacular Materiality from the Ocean (sw. Sjödränkt. Spektakulär materialitet från havet, 2021b).

3. The Thrill of the Dark: Heritages of Fear, Fascination and Fantasy was also the title of a conference, 25–27 April 2019, in Birmingham UK. The article’s theme and outline roughly corresponds to the author’s presentation at the same conference. See also Ekström (2021a).

5. See also: https://www.sametinget.se/99423 (accessed 10 September 2021)


7. Of course, I am here referring to the extensive work on frames and keys by sociologist Eving Goffman, notably Goffman 1974. For an expanded reasoning about this matter see Ekström 2021b.

**Literature**


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