

Round table 1

Issues of institutional framework, ethics and management of human remains in Greek museum collections

Niki Tsironi, PhD

Byzantinist, Research Fellow, Institute of Historical Research, National Hellenic Research Foundation

The context for reflecting on the display of human remains is the contemporary museum: an anthropocentric space that allows the visitor to perceive aspects of ancient civilizations. More and more, archaeologists are adopting a reflexive stance that, beyond the display of material remains of ancient civilizations, tries to conceptually relate the evidence to contemporary questions and attitudes. Popular subjects over the last few decades include everyday life as well as morals and customs. Among these are burial customs that betray the perceptions of past cultures regarding the afterlife, and the expectation or not of resurrection. Views on death to a large extent also shape people's ways of living, since that which follows death creates a moral code for life, imparting to each epoch its special character.

In the frame of this dialogue on human remains and their management, I would like to mention the sanctity of the material and by extension the possibility or not of displaying it in a museum setting. Looking at Byzantine tradition, we see that the material remains, the relics, became a focal point of piety for the residents of Constantinople and the imperial court already in the 4th and 5th centuries, when the Holy Cross and also the Maphorion of the Virgin reached the city (Dagron, 2000, pp. 465-466). On the south side of the church of Blachernae, the chapel of St Soros was once the place for all-night vigils, and the robe, veil and part of the belt of the Virgin were also kept there (Weyl Carr, 1991, p. 1929). Testimonies are found in Andrew the Fool-for-Christ, who visited the chapel along with his disciple Epiphanius and a slave. Epiphanius relates that around the fourth night hour (according to Byzantine time), Blessed Andrew saw the Holy Mother of God proceeding from the royal gates towards the altar, demonstrating how the relics are connected to the presence (Rydén, 1996, pp. 254-255).

From the imperial women of the 5th century to the period of iconoclastic strife, the veneration of relics takes on dimensions that will play a significant role when venerating icons became equated with venerating the saints' relics. In the refutations of the iconophiles, and in the speeches and hymns of the Middle Byzantine period, icons and relics take on the role of martyrs testifying to the sanctity of

matter, on the basis of which the veneration of images was supported, a crucial element in the Orthodox doctrine especially after the 9th century. Hence, for Byzantine theologians, icons and relics bore witness to the possibility of the deification of matter, which, as Gregory the Theologian writes, was sanctified by Christ during his incarnation. In this sense, matter is redeemed and partakes in the heavenly kingdom. The consequences of this view become apparent in Byzantium with the development of iconographic church decoration, the veneration of relics as well as indirect means of affirming the senses and emotions.

Thus, the Byzantine position on matter and its sanctity can be summed up in the fact that icons and relics participate in the eucharistic life of the community, they are displayed and venerated, and are counted as living presences that often perform miracles and are truly evidence of the potential for the deification of man.

In Byzantine and post-Byzantine churches, icons and relics are the focus of worship and ritual. To what extent can we say that it is desirable for human remains (at least of the Byzantine period) to be exhibited in museum spaces? The key to proceeding with such reflection is to consider the *reason* for such a display. Icons are displayed – and this has been widely accepted even by the Church – as works of art directed at audiences that may have no relation to the religion. Yet I know of no museum that displays saints' relics, as these belong in places of worship. Thus, when we talk about the display of human remains, we are talking about common people and are therefore touching on a distinct, sensitive issue. Human remains inside a grave can give the museum visitor direct insight into the way in which people of the time viewed death, and the rites of passage that accompanied it. The size, stance, the objects that accompany the deceased, the decoration of the tomb and any other elements that help reconstruct the human attitude and way of dealing with death are of exceptional interest to a 21st century visitor, who stands removed from the reality of death and rituals of separation.

The objections that can be raised have to do with the demand for respect for the deceased. As a space, however, the museum presupposes and guarantees respect. Human remains complement the image of ritual, of attitudes towards death and in this way contribute to a fuller appreciation of past civilizations. In a modern reading, the Byzantine tradition in its own way insists on the display of human remains on the condition of purpose, distinction and respect.

References

Dagron, G. (2000) *Η Γέννηση μιας πρωτεύουσας. Η Κωνσταντινούπολη και οι θεσμοί της από το 330 ως το 451*. Greek transl. M. Loukaki. Athens: Educational Institute of the National Bank of Greece.

Rydén, L. (ed.) (1995) *The Life of St Andrew the Fool*, Vol. II: *Text, Translation and Notes Appendices* (Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia 4/2). Uppsala: L. Rydén.

Weyl Carr, A. (1991) 'λήμμα Soros' in Kazhdan, A. (ed.) *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Vol. III. New York – Oxford: OUP, p. 1929.