

A REPATRIATION CASE STUDY

In December of 1994, The National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) of the Smithsonian Institution returned a large collection of human remains and associated funerary objects from the Middle Columbia River Basin to the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon and the Yakama Indian Nation of Washington State. The Smithsonian had been involved in negotiations for the return of these collections since 1988, when Chief Nelson Wallulatum of the Warm Springs Reservation first formally petitioned the Museum.

The majority of this collection was recovered by Dr. Herbert Krieger of the Smithsonian Institution in 1934 from Lower Memaloose Island, during an archaeological salvage operation associated with the construction of the Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River. A total of 51 sets of human skeletal remains and 164 lots of archaeological objects were recovered from a mixed, multiple burial context on this island. The artifacts found in association with the skeletal remains indicate that the burials dated from the late 1700s through the 1870s. Another fourteen sets of remains acquired by the Museum in 1903 were recovered from a similar context on Upper Memaloose Island, located upstream from The Dalles, Oregon. Native peoples of the region traditionally buried their dead in above-ground burial houses on islands in the Columbia River. These islands are generically referred to as 'memaloose islands,' meaning 'islands of the dead' in the native Chinookan language.

Most of the Native people who lived along the Columbia River were removed to reservations in the mid-nineteenth century. Those on the north bank were assigned to the Yakama Reservation, while those on the south side became part of the Confederated Tribes of the

Warm Springs Reservation. In August 1993, the NMNH recommended that the Columbia River collections be returned. The decision was made in accordance with the National Museum of the American Indian Act, which requires the Smithsonian to repatriate, when requested, culturally identifiable human remains and funerary objects. Given that the remains from the Columbia River islands were equally likely to be affiliated with descendent populations which are now part of the Yakama Indian Nation as those who are now members of the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation, both groups had to be involved in decisions about the disposition of the collections.

Delegates from both tribes arrived in Washington, DC to prepare the remains for return, a process which took two days. During ceremonies held at the Museum, Chief Wallulatum stated that he viewed the individuals who had been housed in the Museum as warriors who had been held hostage in the name of Science, but who were now being returned to their homeland. The collections were shipped to The Dalles, Oregon, where they were ceremonially reburied.

Documentation

Documentation of the remains and associated funerary objects recovered from the Upper and Lower Memaloose Islands and adjacent sectors of the Middle Columbia River Basin in Oregon and Washington began in June 1992. This process was initiated in response to a request from the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation for the return of any culturally affiliated remains from Lower Memaloose Island and the tribe's ceded lands. In addition to the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation, the other Native American community potentially affected by

the findings of the Repatriation Office report were the Confederated Tribes of the Yakama Indian Nation.

A total of 72 catalogue entries in the Physical Anthropology division of the NMNH were identified as having come from the Middle Columbia River Basin. Fifty-one of the catalogued sets of remains were recovered by Smithsonian curator Herbert Krieger during excavations conducted on Lower Memaloose Island in 1934. A single skull in a separate museum accession, collected by a different person 65 years earlier, was also determined to have come from Lower Memaloose Island. Fourteen crania, each with its own catalogue entry, were obtained from Upper Memaloose Island by the Fred Harvey Company and sold to the National Museum in 1903. Another set of remains located in 1948 by the River Basin Survey project comes from an interior site in Crook County, Oregon. The remaining five catalogue entries consist of crania from the Middle Columbia River Basin that were collected during the nineteenth century, and initially sent to the Army Medical Museum. The provenience information on these remains is imprecise. Three of the skulls were recovered near the Cascades of the Columbia River; one was collected upstream from The Dalles on the south bank of the Columbia River; and one was recovered by the Wilkes Expedition in the mid-nineteenth century, somewhere along the Columbia River. In compliance with the National Museum of the American Indian Act, these 72 sets of human remains were evaluated in terms of their probable cultural affiliation.

Cultural History of the Area

The mid-Columbia River region, particularly in the vicinity of The Dalles, was a cultural crossroads where groups from two distinct cultural areas, the Northwest Coast and the

Plateau, converged. Native peoples living in this area at the time of contact included the Wasco, Wishram, White Salmon, and Watlala (Cascades), Upper Chinookan groups affiliated with the Northwest Coast tradition; and the Klickitat, Tenino, and Yakama, Sahaptin speakers associated with the Plateau culture area. The treaty agreements signed with the U.S. government in 1855 established two separate reservations in the region on either side of the Columbia River. As a result, village groups living on the north side of the middle Columbia, including both Upper Chinookan and Sahaptin-speaking peoples, became affiliated with the Yakama Reservation, while those living on the south side moved to the Warm Springs Reservation.

The human remains from both Upper and Lower Memaloose Islands were recovered from mixed, multiple burial contexts. These mixed deposits can be ascribed to traditional mortuary practices in the region, involving the use of above-ground charnel houses. Associated funerary objects from the ossuary on Lower Memaloose indicate that the island was in use as a mortuary facility from at least the late eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century. The artifactual evidence is corroborated by early ethnohistoric accounts and oral tradition. Though lacking associated funerary offerings, the remains from Upper Memaloose Island are assumed to date from the same general proto-historic/early historic time period, based on fortuitous association of a few historic objects and the condition of the crania.

Based on the ethnohistoric and ethnographic information available on aboriginal village locations, the mortuary practices indicated by the context in which the remains were found, the presence of quantities of historic artifacts, and the number of crania in the series exhibiting intentional modification (a practice



associated with the Upper Chinook), it is suggested that the remains from Lower Memaloose Island (52 individuals) were culturally affiliated with the White Salmon, Wishram, and/or Wasco bands of the Upper Chinook. Accordingly, it was recommended that both the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation and the Yakama Nation, the Native American entities under which these bands are now subsumed, be notified about the presence of these remains in the NMNH, and consulted about their wishes regarding their disposition.

Analysis of Materials

The archaeological assemblage from Lower Memaloose included a large collection of personal and domestic artifacts, such as buttons, glass and shell beads, and metal utensils. The collections encompassed a total of 164 archaeology catalogue numbers in the Museum collections. Based on the context of recovery, the items in this assemblage were

interpreted as associated funerary objects and, as such, were subject to repatriation under the NMAI Act. Consequently, it was recommended that these items be offered for return together with the human remains.

Fifty complete crania were recovered from the skeletal remains. Of these, thirty were adult males aged 25 to 65, and eighteen were adult females, aged 18 to 55. Age and sex were undetermined for two of the crania. With respect to the mortuary population from Upper Memaloose Island, fewer of the individuals (about 65%) have intentionally modified (flattened) heads. Given this culturally mixed population, together with the fact that Upper Memaloose Island was located at the outer limits of Upper Chinookan influence, it seems not unlikely that both Upper Chinookan and Sahaptin-speaking peoples utilized this island for burial purposes. Applying the same criteria as listed above for the Lower Memaloose assemblage, it was suggested that the 14 sets of remains from Upper Memaloose were likely affiliated with

either the Wishram (for whom the island was formally set aside as a cemetery in 1926), the Wasco, or the local Tenino. As in the case above, it was recommended that both the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation and the Yakama Nation be consulted about their wishes regarding the disposition of the remains. No funerary items were associated with the human remains from Upper Memaloose Island.

Of the three crania recovered in the vicinity of the Cascades, two were identified as Watlala, while the other was identified as a probable member of the Klickitat or Yakama tribe. The remaining two individuals from the middle Columbia River lack secure provenience information. One of these exhibits the type of intentional cranial modification associated with the Upper Chinookan groups, while the other cranium is unmodified. There were no funerary objects associated with any of these remains. Given the presence of cranial re-shaping and the available provenience information, it was recommended that the Warm Springs Confederated Tribes be consulted regarding the disposition of three of these individuals (those with cranial flattening), and that the Yakama Nation should be consulted on a fourth. The cultural affiliation of the remaining individual is unknown.

The final set of human remains in this inventory was recovered by the River Basin Survey archaeological salvage project in the Prineville Reservoir basin in central Oregon. Evidence of a bullet wound to the head suggests the probable cause of death and dates the burial to the historic period. The cranium also exhibits intentional modification of the type associated with the Upper Chinookan populations. Given that the cultural affiliation of the individual cannot be specified beyond the level of Upper Chinook, it was

recommended that both the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation and the Yakama Nation be consulted as to their wishes regarding the disposition of the remains.

Tamara L. Bray

About Tamara Bray

Tamara Bray received her doctoral degree in anthropology from the State University of New York at Binghamton in 1991, and has been with the National Museum of Natural History's Repatriation Office since its inception in that same year. During this time, she has worked with Native American groups from the Pacific Northwest, the Great Basin, and the Great Lakes region on specific repatriation requests. She has travelled around the country to meet with tribal leaders and discuss the NMNH Repatriation program, participated in regional consultations sponsored by the National Museum of the American Indian, and presented professional papers at several national anthropological conferences on the subject of repatriation. From Tamara's perspective, the challenge of her position has been in walking the fine line between scientific interests and Native American rights, applying archaeological knowledge to address contemporary concerns, and helping to establish policies that have potentially far-reaching effects on American archaeology. The substance of her work in the National Museum has recently been published by the Smithsonian Institution Press in an edited volume entitled *Reckoning with the Dead*.