

# Bone Rooms: From Scientific Racism to Human Prehistory in Museums

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## Review

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**Redman, Samuel J.** *Bone Rooms: From Scientific Racism to Human Prehistory in Museums*. Harvard University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780674660410

The Power of Remains: America's Bone Rooms Impact on the Making and Unmaking of Scientific Racism

Museums throughout North American and Europe today contain a surprising number of human bones. U.S. museums house an estimated 500,000 Native American remains with another 116,000 sets of bones and almost one million "associated funerary objects" classified as "culturally unaffiliated." European museums, according to one estimate, are believed to have acquired another half million bones since the nineteenth century. These massive repositories of human remains were collected and stored in so-called "bone rooms" for scientific study beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Turning his investigative lens on these institutional collections and the men and women who built them, Samuel J. Redman has written a wide-ranging and unique examination of the history of medicine and the legacy of racial science in America.

Redman begins with the story of the Army Medical Museum, which was initially created to collect examples of battlefield injuries during the Civil War. As the Civil War ended and soldiers began spreading out into the American West, Army military leaders issued circular calls for the collection of Indian weapons, dress, and crania so as to develop a more systematic understanding of these people they sought to conquer. The collection of human remains from the battlefield corresponded with the rise of World's Fairs, the popularity of commercial museums and so-called freak shows, and the development of anthropology as a field of scientific inquiry. In each of these realms, the growing bone rooms of America played a vital role.

If World's Fairs and commercial museums and carnival shows popularized and gave scientific and pseudoscientific support to popular ideas about racial hierarchies, the validity of race sparked a more heated debate among academics.

In the early twentieth century, adherents to Boasian anthropology began to destabilize the reality of race as a legitimate concept while eugenicists and scholars more in line with Aleš Hrdlička worked to reinforce it. Bone rooms played an important role in these debates as both sides sought to collect data to support their positions. Meanwhile, despite the academic debate, the rise and popularity of public and commercial medical museums such as the American Medical Museum and the Mütter Museum presented exhibits on comparative anatomy, race, and human history to American audiences.

The racial history of human development, however, began to breakdown in the 1920s and 1930s as scholars such as African American physical anthropologist W. Montague Cobb and others turned to these very same bone rooms to conduct their own careful studies of the comparative anatomies of previously racialized bodies only to find the scientifically racist conclusions of a previous generation unsupportable. By the 1940s and in the years following World War II, the racial foundations of physical anthropology began to give way as a new era of studying human evolutionary history began to emerge.

A meticulous researcher and not afraid to embrace the complexity of racial thought across the decades covered by this study, Redman has produced a valuable history. But engrossing as the individual stories and vignettes are, the narrative occasionally suffers under the weight of its own complexities. Yet for the reader willing to sift through the ideological and scientific strata and explore the various drawers and boxes of Redman's *Bone Rooms*, there are fascinating treasures to unearth.

"There is nothing natural about systematically collecting and studying the dead," Redman writes towards the end of his book. "Through a complex cultural process and evolving assemblage of ideas, however, such a practice became a reality." (277). Along the way, scholars who labored in these macabre laboratories painstakingly stitched together evidence to support their theories of racial hierarchies and then, just as painstakingly, they disassembled it. As the study of paleoanthropology replaced scientific racism, the study of human prehistory moved from public museums and institutional collections to university laboratories and seminar rooms. Yet, the hundreds of thousands of bones that still remain in the bone rooms of American museums must remind us of the enduring legacy of this dark chapter in our history.

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