**Tales from the Square: The Human Remains Project Podcast Transcript**

**Dr Ruth Nugent**

You're listening to Tales from the square with me Dr Ruth Nugent, in the Department of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology at the University of Liverpool. My name is Dr Ruth Nugent. I'm a burial archaeologist, and I’m in Abercrombie Square, at the University of Liverpool. I'm in the Archaeology Department and I work on the long history of excavation in Britain. My background is in early mediaeval and later mediaeval studies, I also do post mediaeval work up to the 19th century. Yep, so I'm a historical archaeologist.

I'm looking at how people in the past actually began to disinter the dead. So that means to actually dig them back up again, or open tombs, or to kind of move bodies around once they've been buried. So I do a lot of not just post mortem, but post burial work, which a lot of people don't expect that people in the past actually, were so engaged with the dead, there's this idea that the dead will, would rest in peace and be left alone. But that's really not true, people are constantly moving the dead around for a variety of reasons. So it could be for practical reasons, because the tomb was too big, or that they needed to actually add someone else to the grave, or they wanted to relocate them to be buried somewhere else to be with a spouse or someone that they really admired. So there's a whole variety of reasons, sometimes it's in times of crisis, they'd start digging them back up again. And then quite often, the most common reason is because they've got, they've run out of space. So they begin to dig bodies that once they become what we call skeletonized. So there's, they're just skeletal remains by that point. And then they start to selectively pick out skulls and normally long bones and put them in what's called a charnel chapel, and begin to stack them up over time, and the rest of the bones would only be sort of dumped in a pit somewhere. So that's a kind of little whistle-stop tour of how exclamation worked in the past a little bit.

At the moment I'm working on a project called ‘The Human Remains: the digital library of British mortuary science and investigation’, and I'm working with a fantastic team of researchers and PhD students as well. We've got over 1200 texts already, just from the mediaeval period of people talking about exhumation, and all their attempts to try and dig people up and what they find. And we are building this into right up to the 19th century. So we're just moving into the post mediaeval period at the moment, although I know mediaeval and post mediaeval are arbitrary, it's just the way it's easiest for us to kind of divide up tasks. One of our PhD students, Tom Fitzgerald, has just joined us, he currently is working with about 600 examples of charnels. So that's from the early modern period in the 16th century through to the 19th century. And that's where people have had their bones dug up long, long after they were dead, and then placed in these charnel chapels to create them.

So what we're doing is for the first time, we're building new digital methods from an area called Digital Humanities, which allows us to use the computer to do the heavy work of intensely reading all of these texts all at once, and finding really intricate patterns across different genres, different languages, between different types of authors, and all the different periods that we're looking at, to look at really interesting patterns, both on a small scale and a really large scale. And so we're beginning to build this for the first time. And so using something called corpus linguistics, we can begin to really zoom in on how people use language to express how they feel about death. So one of the things that we're doing as part of our heritage and public engagement, is beginning to think about how people in the past thought about the ethics and the emotion, being involved with exhumation, how they actually felt spiritually, how they felt about the practical concerns of it. And using that information in the modern day can help us really draw upon what does it mean to respect the long dead, because it's very easy for us to talk about what we must be respectful of the dead when we dig them up, and what constitutes respect. So what we're doing is providing the first kind of massive amounts of data on how people actually thought about conceived of respect in the past in different times in different places, even from different religious traditions as well.

**Dr Terence Heng**

I'm Dr Terrence Heng. I'm a senior lecturer in Sociology at the University of Liverpool. My research looks at sacred spaces and ethnic identities particularly to do with people who practice Chinese religion in Singapore. I examine death, burials, spirit possession, and various other aspects to do with Chinese religion. I'm also interested in photography and visual methods and the way we investigate social issues, making use of innovative research methods. My research looks at the ways in which people make use of different kinds of urban spaces in which to practice their religion and turn into sacred spaces. So it can be anything like a corner, a tree, a social housing flat, a cemetery, and the various practices that they do that turn something that is very mundane into something that is sacred, religious, or even spiritual. I also look particularly at Chinese spirit mediums, and in the ways that they practice their religion in somewhere that is really modern and really not so traditional.

We're very used to thinking of sacred spaces as the things that we deem as official sacred spaces, things like churches, temples, mosques, sometimes even cemeteries and burial places. I'm interested in those kinds of places. But I'm also really interested in the very mundane spaces that we, we often encounter in our everyday lives, places that we walk past that we don't normally think of as being sacred. You we see this in many countries, even here in the United Kingdom, if someone was to leave flowers by a memorial bench, or there's an accident, and they would have some kind of maybe a few letters or something like that, one could think of that as a sacred space. In other countries, we can think of unofficial sacred spaces as makeshift shrines or offerings that are left by the roadside, or even temporary altars that have been set up in honour of a particular deity or spirit, understanding burials and exhumations is important because we don't pay enough attention to it.

We are, as Ruth said, sometimes we and very often we think of death as the end, we often think of cemeteries and places like cemeteries as dead spaces, people don't go there, it's creepy, you know, you only go during Halloween, maybe you go to get scared or do other kinds of things. But actually, cemeteries are a very rich source of social life, social and cultural life, where people go and talk to their loved ones, to the deceased, to the to the deceased, they spend time there, you know, they set up a chair, they'll sit there and drink, apparently, Fridays are the best time to do it. And because of that, I think it's really important to understand the social implications of cemeteries and burials, I think it's equally important to realise that explanations are crucial to understanding how we as a society operate, because life doesn't end with death. And the dead continue to exist in many, many different kinds of ways. And one of these ways is to exclamations because those, what we academics will call continuing bonds. And the explanations whether these bonds of a family or with the government or with companies, these bonds exist through explanations and through reinternment, where we choose to pull the debt from and where we choose to put them makes a really big difference.

**Dr Ruth Nugent**

I think in the modern era, we are a lot more concerned about someone being left to rest in peace for perpetuity. And this idea that once you're buried or cremated, that's the end of the matter, really, but certainly the past, certainly, up until the 19th century, at the very least, people didn't have necessarily that attitude, the idea was that the cemetery or the church or is placed to process your body. But that wouldn't necessarily be where you'd stay forever, there was a very pragmatic understanding that space is limited, and everybody had a right to be buried at some point. But whether you got to stay, there was a very different matter, even though headstones might say rest in peace. And the idea is that a successful burial a successful funeral means that you can be relocated or move somewhere else when you've been skeletonized. When you've got skeletal remains left. So generally speaking, people were far more pragmatic maybe than us and, and they had, I think part of it is theological. They had a strong sense about where their eternal destination was. So they didn't have as much anxiety about necessarily what happened to their bodies back then.

At the moment, we have a really nice, relatively new website that we've got set up for the project that I'm doing, where you can read a lot more about what we're doing. We've also got opportunities for people to collaborate with us and work with us on what we do. So we have a residency scheme where people can apply to actually do some short term paid work with us if they have a particular case study or particular example that they want to look at. So the project I'm working on is building the first ever digital, open access online public library of all these accounts and pieces of evidence of exclamation. So you're welcome to follow us on Twitter at @TheHumanRemains. And you're very welcome to come find us on Instagram, which is the same handle as well. And you can find us the University of Liverpool website where you'll find us on the department page for Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology. So we're relatively easy to find and you can also email us at remains@liverpool.ac.uk