

## **Stewardship and Human Remains**

Abstract

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I argue that the debate over who should control archaeological human remains (with its implications for policies of repatriation to indigenous communities) can be profitably advanced by giving greater attention to the contrasting ways in which the stewardship of human remains is conceived by (many) indigenous peoples and by western-trained archaeologists and anthropologists. While the academic world looks on stewardship of remains as a one-way relationship, for many indigenous communities it is quintessentially symmetrical, with the deceased being expected to protect and guide their descendants in return for receiving reverence and ritual service. Commonly this amounts to an enriched form of social contract whereby the living and the deceased serve not only each other's individual needs but jointly promote the good of the trans-generational community. I suggest that archaeologists and other researchers need to understand the rich and intricate nature of this relationship if they are to be duly sensitive to the concerns of many indigenous people regarding the treatment of ancestral remains.