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Unbundled: European Collecting of Andean Mummies 1850-1930

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Summary

This dissertation approaches collections of Andean mummies in European national and university museums as the focus to understand the relationship between objects, documents, and the practice of collecting in the period from 1850 to 1930. Over 200 mummies, kept by 18 different museums in Western European countries were analyzed. The comparative examination of these mummified human remains and their associated documentation kept by the museums has highlighted the importance of considering the process of formation of collections. This is especially true when dealing with sensitive archaeological “objects” during a specific historical timeframe, and within a contemporary setting. The importance of considering museum collections as embedded in global narratives, rather than isolated cases of collecting, is also emphasized.

This research details the changes that some of these collections have undergone over the years, and the importance of using interdisciplinary approaches within archaeology, including museum archaeology, physical anthropology and paleo-imaging, to understand them. A discussion on the ethical treatment of human remains in archaeological practice and museum collections is undertaken as an important framework for the information presented on the dissertation. Similarly, a comparison between collections of Andean mummies held in their countries of origin in Latin America is presented. The contraposition of the type of remains, documentation and associated artifacts still held in the Latin American collections is vital to understand the positioning of the European collections part of this research. Looking at timeframes, actors and places of collecting, as well as the information recorded about all three by museums, can result in vital information not only about the process of collecting itself, but also about the motivations and contacts between source countries and the European repositories of these remains.

Though an interpretation of the consequences of such processes and motivations on the way these human remains have been stored, exhibited and classified in national museums necessitates further looks into their materiality and history once within the museum, the information presented in this dissertation serves as a valuable starting point to continue exploring these critical topics.