



Practitioner Narrative

What happened to the body of Julia Pastrana (1834-1860)? Addressing ethical issues and human remains



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In July 1857, the journal *The Lancet* published a note by Laurence [1] on a bearded and hairy lady who was visiting London that year as part of a show in Regent Gallery. Her name was Julia Pastrana. A few years later, in May 1862, the examination of her embalmed and dissected body and that of her child were outlined by Sokolov [2]. Julia Pastrana, was a talented artist, although due to her physical condition was exhibited as part of the so called ‘freak shows’ or ‘circuses’ that toured North America and Europe in the 19th century [3–5]. Her condition was characterised by excessive hair growth over most of her body and an overdeveloped jaw [6,7] (Fig. 1) which Bondeson and Miles [6] in a detailed account diagnosed as congenital generalised hypertrichosis terminalis with gingival hyperplasia. Other individuals with this condition were also exhibited in the 19th and early 20th centuries [4,5] and the condition is still present today [8].

Julia Pastrana entered history as one of the most extreme and earliest reported cases of this condition and, unfortunately after her death in 1860 her body was regularly exhibited in a number of shows until the second half of the 20th century. With monikers such as the ‘Victorian Ape Woman’, the ‘Non-descript’, the ‘Bear Woman’, the ‘Bearded Lady’, ‘The Ugliest Woman in the World’ and described by Darwin [9] as ‘a Spanish dancer, [who] was a remarkably fine woman, but she had a thick masculine beard and a hairy forehead’, she laid in a mortuary at the Institute of Forensic Medicine, Oslo, since the mid 1970s with attempts in the 1990s to rebury her [10,11]. So, What happened to the body of Julia Pastrana? Apart from recent publications in the Humanities and Social Sciences [12], a book bringing several disciplines together [13] and press releases [e.g. 14,15,16], there has been no news in the scientific (medical, biological, forensic, anatomical) sphere. Whilst *The Lancet* published news on her life and death, this paper brings closure, addressing her repatriation and burial.

Her life history as well as the fame she achieved in life as well as in death has been portrayed by Gylseth and Toverud [10], and more recently by Anderson Barbata [13]. Julia Pastrana was born in 1834 in the region of Sinaloa, Mexico. It is understood that as a child she worked and lived at the house of the governor of Sinaloa, where she was discovered by an American entrepreneur. Julia’s artistic talents included singing, dancing and playing a musical instrument. She eventually married her manager, Theodore Lent, and in 1860 in Moscow she gave birth to a child with a similar condition. Respectively, both mother and child died days and hours after the birth. The bodies were sold to Professor J. Sokolov who examined and

embalmed the bodies at the University of Moscow [2]; after which Lent, Julia’s widower and agent, reclaimed the bodies when he saw a financial opportunity in exhibiting both mother and child even after death, including an exhibition in London, UK, in 1862. After Lent’s death, the bodies were ‘owned’ by different individuals and appeared in public exhibitions in Europe and North America; it was in the 1970s when the bodies ceased to be exhibited following public opposition [12]. Subsequently, Julia and her child’s bodies were eventually stored in a building in Oslo, Norway, which was broken into in the late 1970s resulting in damage to Julia’s body and the disappearance of the child’s body. In 1990, it was announced in the Norwegian Press [10] that the embalmed body of Julia Pastrana had been found at the Institute for Forensic Medicine in Oslo, after which Julia’s remains were transferred to the Department of Anatomy at the University of Oslo. The body of the child has never been recovered. In recent years, the issue of her repatriation to Mexico and her burial emerged once again.

Certainly, there has been a number of ethical issues surrounding the excavation, analysis, retention and display of human remains; aspects which bioarchaeologists, physical anthropologists and forensic scientists have been increasingly aware of [17]. On the one hand, the analysis of human remains can provide valuable information about the past, including information on diet, the origin and evolution of disease, mortality, morbidity, level of violence, medical care and funerary practices in different periods of Prehistory and History [18,19]. In addition, the forensic cases follow certain medico-legal requirements, brings where possible identification of the deceased, a dignified burial and closure to families. On the other hand, retention of human remains in museums and other institutions is important for education as well as for future research; since as new techniques advance, further information and other interpretations can be provided [20,21]. By contrast, there are a number of ethical issues surrounding human remains both in bioarchaeology [17] as well as in forensic contexts [17,22]. Sometimes the remains may be archaeological or historical in date, yet they may fall first under cases investigated by law enforcement and forensic scientists, such as the selling of human tissue or assessing the provenance of unidentified skeletal [e.g. 23,24].

Whilst working as a forensic anthropologist in a number of recent cases regarding accidental, natural, violent, suicidal deaths, the current author got involved in 2011 when contacted by Mexican institutions,

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<http://doi.org/10.1016/j.fsir.2020.100103>

Received 30 March 2020; Received in revised form 5 May 2020; Accepted 5 May 2020

Available online 13 May 2020

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press and a number of individuals after his edited volume on legislation [25] was published, and was asked about his (scientific) opinion and possible recommendations on the possible repatriation of Julia Pastrana's body from Norway back to Mexico and her subsequent burial.

However, the issue of claim and repatriation is not straightforward. Certainly, the issue of retention of human remains has been a matter of ethical debate [26–30]. One such example in the UK, is the skeleton of Charles Byrne displayed in a London museum [31]. Museums are increasingly under pressure to repatriate human remains – whether a body, an incomplete body or only a small fragment of body- from their collections, usually where skulls in particular were obtained during and after colonisation of certain territories. These claims for repatriation may be substantiated by genetic, cultural, religious, and geographic links, amongst other factors, between the claimants and the deceased [27,28]. These requests tend to be assessed by institutions on a case by case basis and the process can be long. Examples of successful claims for repatriation and (re)burial are that of Saartjie 'Sarah' Baartman (1789–1815) whose body was displayed until the 1970s in Musée de L'Homme in Paris, and finally buried in South Africa in 2002 [32]. Another example relates to the 'last' Tasmanian woman, Truganini, whose body was retained due to scientific interest when she died in 1876 and it was not until 1976 when her body was repatriated, cremated and her ashes scattered in a specific place as she had requested prior to her death [26].

For a number of years the repatriation requests to bring Julia Pastrana's body back to Mexico was impeded and led ultimately by artist Laura Anderson Barbata. Although in full time forensic anthropological casework, the author decided to voluntarily assist in this request. From the scientific point of view, the dilemma was that of retention versus repatriation; from a personal perspective, much thought was placed into providing an opinion and potentially supporting and assisting in this case.



Fig. 1. Image of Julia Pastrana.
Credit: Process print after G. Wick. Credit: Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

An objective consideration was undertaken by the author with regard to the reasons which had been proposed for repatriation and burial, the value of retaining Julia Pastrana's body for future research to enhance our understanding of the 19th century especially around living conditions at the time, the amount of research that had been carried out already, the uniqueness of her condition in the history of medicine, and whether research on her body would assist in understanding the condition further. In addition, if repatriation were to be granted, assurance had to be made with regard to no further exhibition of her body in Mexico and that her remains be buried in a secure and protected grave. From the author's point of view, answers to these questions proposed a case towards repatriation and burial. As highlighted in Márquez-Grant [33] the questions the present author considered included:

- Who is requesting the repatriation and/or (re)burial and what are the reasons?
- If the body is to be retained by an academic institution and access granted for research, what will we learn about living conditions and history during a particular period?
- Does study help in our understanding of the evolution of health and disease?
- What do we know about the pathological condition of Julia's body today, and are there similar cases?
- Do the reasons for retention involve research and education? Is the body curated in adequate facilities?
- Was she ever buried?
- Would Pastrana have wanted to return to Mexico?
- What is the legislation in Norway in this regard? Who has the power to decide: the university, the scientist, the government?
- If the body is repatriated, can prior research be done using CT scans, radiographs, photographs, and other nondestructive techniques? Should a sample of DNA be taken for future analysis? Would this data be available for study by bona fide researchers in the future?
- How can we ensure that there are no financial gains as a result of repatriation, no exhibition, no cremation, but a funeral and a dignified burial in a protected grave?

More importantly, these views were expressed by the Norwegian National Committee for the Evaluation of Research on Human Remains and their recommendation to the University of Oslo was indeed crucial. In their assessment of such case [34] whilst a coordinated repatriation was proposed; maintaining some scientific documentation and samples potentially for DNA analysis in the future were also encouraged. The opinion of the National Committee was established by taking into account that the body belonged to a known individual, the antiquity of the remains in that they were relatively close to the present day and the (unacceptable) treatment of Julia's body after death, especially around the continued exhibiting of her and her child's body due to their physical appearance. Although Julia's wishes were not known, the Committee thought unlikely that she would wish for her body to be stored in a university museum in northern Europe.

The author, recommended a number of imaging documentation (photograph, radiography) be undertaken and a sample for future DNA analysis. These were undertaken by the forensic pathologists and anthropologists at the University of Oslo. In addition, the author provided information regarding the repatriation process and companies that could help from personal experience in forensic cases and moreover, acted as a witness to the handing over of the body of Julia Pastrana from the University of Oslo to the Mexican authorities. This took place on the 7th of February 2013. After examining the body, and removing her shoes and bolts to attach these to the body, albeit left with her, Julia Pastran's body was finally sealed in a coffin and taken to a chapel in Norway where a service took place, attended by Human Rights groups, disability groups and other notable figures, general members of the public, scientists, representatives of the Mexican government and the University of Oslo. The body of Julia Pastrana then initiated its physical journey back to Mexico where she was finally laid to

rest in a respectful and dignified burial attended by many on the 12th February 2013 in her place of origin, Sinaloa de Leyra.

Although in the following years after her burial, the author understood that there may have been some political propaganda exploiting this repatriation; what he did realise is that regardless how far back in time this named individual is from, and regardless of any available resources, people are always remembered and there will be an effort to never forget those that missed the chance of a dignified burial. It may be that some of these ethical reflections may be relevant to forensic anthropological casework too.

Declaration of Competing Interest

There are no conflict of interests.

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