

## TECHNICAL NOTE

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# Human Remains Sold to the Highest Bidder! A Snapshot of the Buying and Selling of Human Skeletal Remains on eBay<sup>®</sup>, an Internet Auction Site\*

**ABSTRACT:** Internet auction sites have become increasingly popular, with diverse items up for sale to the public worldwide. The purposes of this paper are to inform the forensic community that human skeletal remains, old and new, are for sale on the eBay<sup>®</sup> internet auction site, and to advise forensic scientists that eBay<sup>®</sup> does not use a forensic anthropologist to assess photographs of these materials. Over the last few years, this website was “surf-ed,” with numerous auctions during this period. After contacting eBay<sup>®</sup> by email, representatives responded that they adhere to Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and that their website indicates that auctions must state that sale of human remains is for instructional purposes only. Based on the photographs, the remains appear to be of prehistoric and modern origin. An unfortunate consequence of such sale may generate interest in stealing remains from graves, mortuaries, hospitals, or county morgues worldwide.

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, human skeleton, skeletal remains, Internet, eBay<sup>®</sup>, NAGPRA, looting

Internet auction sites, such as eBay<sup>®</sup>, and Yahoo, have become a mainstay of American society. A wide variety of items, including human skeletal remains, are placed on these sites for auction to the highest bidder. Several different types or categories of skeletal materials—older recovered prehistoric, historic, commercial and perhaps even modern forensic—are sold on eBay<sup>®</sup>. Moreover, it is important to state that, to date, eBay<sup>®</sup> does not have a forensic anthropologist, nor does it consider the sale of human skeletal materials to be an issue. In all cases, if it were desired to evaluate skeletal remains as potentially significant forensic materials, such determinants would have to be made from photographs alone. Direct examination would require purchase of the materials, or their seizure by law enforcement personnel acting under warrants.

The purpose of this paper is to inform forensic anthropologists and other forensic specialists of transactions concerning human cranial and post-cranial skeletal materials conducted every day on eBay<sup>®</sup>. While most of these materials may be from prehistoric and historic contexts, it is still possible, indeed probable, that some are of forensic significance. Examples of four different categories of remains will be addressed.

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## Methods

Photographs from a variety of auctions were assessed for qualitative (nonmetric) features that may indicate sex, race and age of these skeletal remains, as well as their possible origin. Based on visual inspection of such photographs, these auctions may include four categories: 1) recovered prehistoric and historic remains where the remains appear to be unearthened and/or commercially unprepared; 2) commercial materials prepared and sold by biological supply houses, or sold second-hand from these suppliers; 3) modern materials that may be of medico-legal significance, and without proper preparation, such as screws, wires, spring; and 4) materials of unknown origin, where no photographs are provided to help evaluate their origin.

## Results and Discussion

The first category is recovered prehistoric and historic remains, which appear to have been unearthened without commercial preparation. The first case (Figs. 1–3) is eBay<sup>®</sup> item number #1697192809, advertised as a Peruvian skull, of unknown sex and without dental restorations. The cranial features include large supraorbital tori, deepened infraorbital fossae, maxillary and mandibular alveolar prognathism. Other traits that need to be assessed to determine race include the teeth for shovel-shaped incisors, crenulated molars, protostylid pits and other features, including nasal sill/gutter, shape of the external auditory meatus, skull sutures and more. This item sold for \$455.00 in February 3, 2002. The advertisement reads exactly as follows:



FIG. 1—eBay® item number #1697192809 is possibly historic material advertised as a Peruvian skull of unknown sex and without dental restorations.



FIG. 2—eBay® item number #1697192809 is possibly historical material advertised as a Peruvian skull of unknown sex and without dental restorations.

This real human skull would be perfect for educational or medical purposes. I'm not too knowledgeable on things of this nature so I'm not sure if it's male or female. This skull appears to be older as there are no dental fixes and is believed to be Peruvian. He/she is missing one lower front tooth and two upper middle back teeth. (one on each side) Part of his/her inner eye socket (sinus area) is missing. It's about 6 1/2 "tall and 9" long. Please email me for more pics or questions. Shipping with insurance will be 10.00. Thank you for looking.

The second category is commercial materials prepared and sold by biological supply houses, or second-hand from these suppliers.



FIG. 3—eBay® item number #1697192809 is possibly historical material advertised as a Peruvian skull, of unknown sex and without dental restorations.



FIG. 4—eBay® item number #1065779130 is possibly commercially prepared material advertised with cut-hook calvarium without origin or provenience.

The second case (Fig. 4) is eBay® item number #1065779130, which sold for \$325.00 on January 26, 2002. The advertisement reads exactly as follows:

Real human skull with cut hook held calvarium and spring held jaw for educational use only. Skull is bone with synthetic teeth in good occlusion. Repair to left medial orbit and left skull base. Greenish tint to left mastoid process<sup>3</sup> with overall whitewashed appearance. Please email me with any questions before bidding. Winner pays \$15 shipping. I accept eBay® payments, personal checks, and money orders.

<sup>3</sup> A greenish tint to natural bone usually indicates exposure to copper.

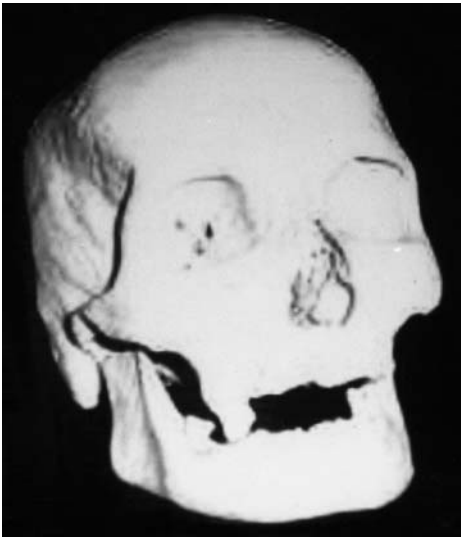


FIG. 5—eBay® item number #1067822144 is possibly medico-legal case without proper preparation advertised as teaching material.

The third category is modern and possibly of medico-legal significance, and without proper preparation, such as screws, wires, or springs to indicate commercial source. The third case (Fig. 5) is eBay® item number #1067822144. This particular photograph is difficult to assess, given its lack of quality. It is overexposed, washing out the skeletal features. While the seller states that this skull has an excellent patina, there appears to be exfoliation from the outer table, post-bregmatic depression, enlarged nasal aperture, and gonial eversion. This skull sold for \$285.00 (date unknown). The advertisement reads exactly (and in capital letters) as follows:

ABSOLUTE REAL HUMAN BONE SKULL IN EXCELLENT CONDITION! ONLY A VERY SMALL PIECE MISSING FROM THE VERY TOP OF THE NOSE. HAS 3 TEETH AND THE COMPLETE SKULL IN MINT CONDITION WITH EXCELLENT PATINA. NO CRACKS OR HOLES. WOULD BE EXCELLENT FOR TEACHING OR FOR STUDY. THIS HUMAN SKULL HAS NOT BEEN CUT ANYWHERE. BUYER TO PAY \$20.00 SHIP AND INS. !!NO RESERVE!! SORRY FOR THE BAD PICTURE! PLEASE EMAIL FOR A MUCH BETTER ONE!!!

Another example of this category is eBay® item #1158729226, advertised as a “real bone human skull with a bullet hole” (Fig. 6). Note the trace of the metopic suture, narrow nasal aperture, large nasal spine, deep nasal sill and bilobate chin. Presumably, the fractured mandible suggested a gun-shot wound to the seller (Fig. 7).

The last category is material of unknown origin, where there are no photographs provided to aid in assessing their origin. The first example is #1701292569, which is an auction for wisdom teeth. The advertisement reads as follows:

My two upper wisdom teeth. Extracted in 1992. Slight curve to the roots. Shows some wear. No cavities. Not a joke. Cleaning out my place! All teeth must go! Also have sharks teeth! Will add picture shortly.

Other examples include eBay® item number #1069440744 (a scapula of unknown origin) and #1070843693 (an “arm bone” of unknown origin).

Presented are four different categories of remains visually assessed from photographs posted to the Internet. Multiple auctions



FIG. 6—eBay® item #1158729226 is possibly medico-legal case without proper preparation advertised as a skull with a bullet hole to the mandible.

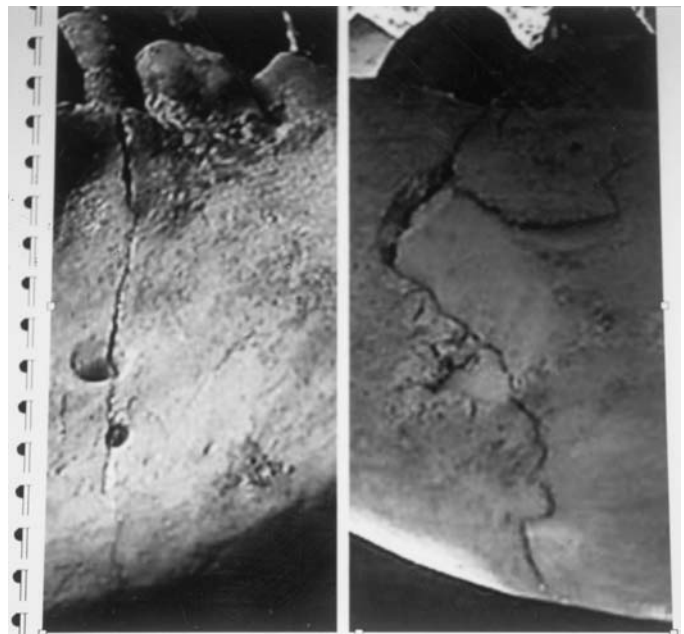


FIG. 7—Closeup of eBay® item #1158729226 illustrates what the seller states is a GSW to the mandible. The inner surface of the horizontal ramus has a defect, and the outer surface a linear fracture perpendicular to the horizontal ramus.

occur everyday under the auspices of educational purposes. According to eBay® rule #42020018 regarding prohibited items, “Items that contain human hair (e.g., lockets) as well as skulls and skeletons that are used for educational purposes may be listed on eBay®.”

eBay’s® policy regarding the selling of human parts and remains states: “Humans, the human body or any human body parts may not be listed on eBay®. Examples of prohibited items include, but

are not limited to: organs, bone, blood, waste, sperm, and eggs. You may not include such items as a gift, prize or giveaway in connection with an item listed on eBay®. Items that contain human hair (e.g., lockets) as well as skulls and skeletons that are used for educational purposes may be listed on eBay®.”

Moreover, the only rules or laws that eBay® enforces are the following: “eBay® does not permit the sale of Native American skulls, bones or other Native American grave related items, as the sale of such items may violate federal law. For more information on eBay’s® rules regarding the sale of such items and the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), see their website (1).” If materials thought to be of prehistoric origin are listed, these auctions are closed by eBay®. It is unclear what criteria are used. Perhaps search engine key terms such as prehistoric, ancient, Indian, Native American, or archaeological are used to surf the auction site, then someone in the company closes the auction. If someone is selling a prohibited item, there is a method for buyers to report that auction number to eBay®.

Moreover, the following response is a direct quote by Jade, Community Watch at eBay when directly contacted by email:

eBay does not possess or examine the items that are listed on our site, we are not in the best position to judge the legality or authorized nature of the item for auction. We truly appreciate your knowledge about these types of items, however, we often cannot remove items based on representations of third parties. The reason for this is because we can not independently verify the credentials and accuracy of the information that is provided by third parties. As a result of this, unless the item is, in our judgment, plainly prohibited by law or by our own rules, we instead rely on help from government agencies for an authoritative view on the legality of a particular auction. However, I can suggest, if you would like, you can contact the appropriate government or law enforcement agency regarding this issue. eBay has a longstanding policy of providing full cooperation with law enforcement agencies and we will gladly assist them in an investigation of unlawful conduct.

As human skeletal materials of any kind, old or new, can sell at auction for 500–2000 U.S. dollars or more, an enterprising person could advertise these remains as modern whether they were or not. For example, one particular skull was advertised with a bullet hole through the zygomatic bone (i.e., “:=> REAL Bone Human Skull w/Bullet Hole! <: Item #1158729226”). Since these human remains

may auction for a great deal of money, the sale of human remains may generate interest in stealing from graves, mortuaries, hospital or county morgues, or other sources.

In one newspaper article, grave goods, or artifacts, were looted from the gravesite of the 1879 Battle of Milk Creek near Meeker, CO. and sold on eBay® for \$300.32 (2). Moreover, cultural artifacts, including human remains, from private collections located all over the world may make their way onto these auction sites (3). Once sold on eBay®, these materials loose provenience, and may later be confiscated in house raids, yard sales, or from other locations.

If a forensic specialist desired to evaluate skeletal materials, then one of several options may be taken: evaluate the pictures posted to the auction site; purchase of the human skeletal materials from the eBay® seller; or seize the skeletal materials by acting under warrant. It is difficult to precisely identify the specific biological profile of the remains by evaluating an oblique photograph. One cannot look for both qualitative and quantitative macroscopic and microscopic features, unless the remains are in hand. The sale of human remains needs to be regulated by drafting and enforcing federal laws that limit sale of human skeletal remains on the Internet.

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