

Management of Delicate Cultural Materials: the Human Remains of the *Museo Etnográfico Municipal Dámaso Arce, Olavarría, Argentina*

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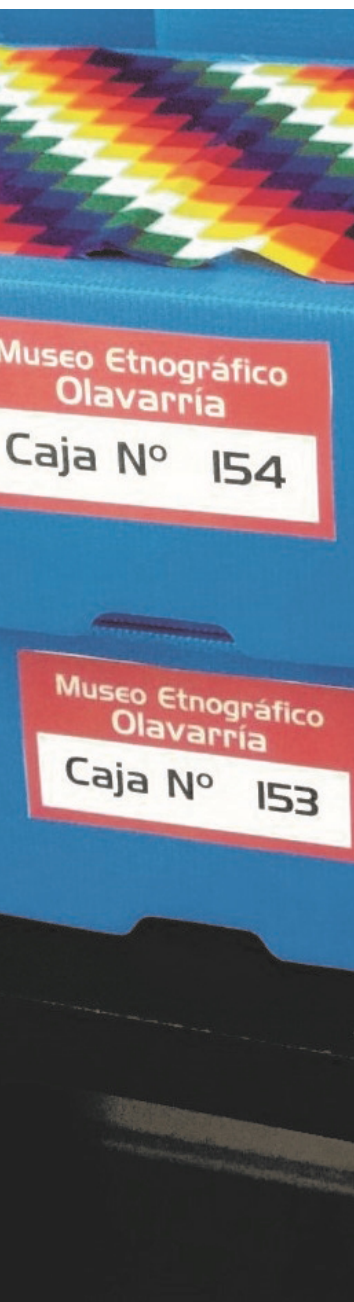
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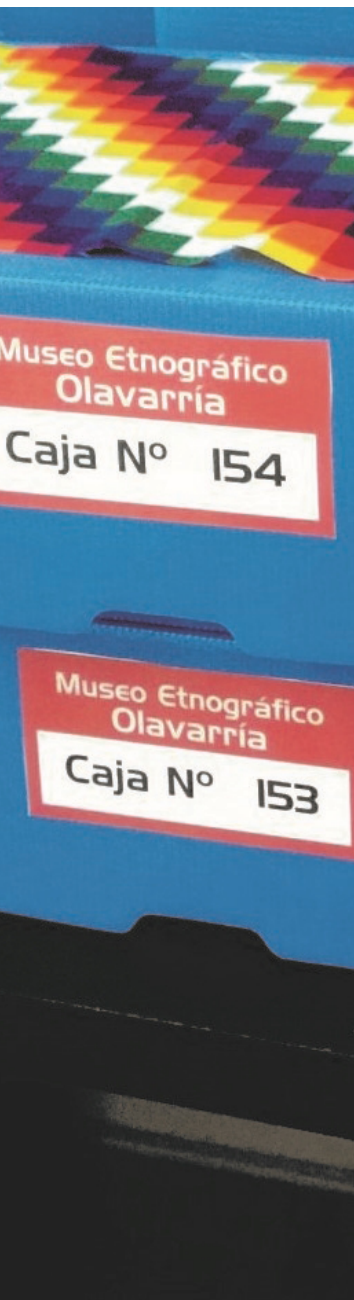
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SUMMARY

Museums that keep human remains must conform to a set of regulations and professional recommendations for their safekeeping. The ICOM (International Council of Museums) *Code of Ethics* identifies these pieces as sensitive cultural materials and has a number of related guidelines. This will form the premise of this work, which aims to present the procedures that are being adopted to legally and technically condition the human skeletal remains of seven persons that are located in the *Museo Etnográfico Municipal Dámaso Arce* (MEDA, for its initials in Spanish) de Olavarría, in Argentina. Currently this museum is not open to the public and its archaeological collections are stored in a municipal warehouse. Based on a diagnosis on the state of the overall collection, the human skeletal remains and the contents of a report submitted a few years ago, several actions were put in place to reverse and remedy some of the identified problems.





KEY WORDS

museum; collections; human remains; sensitive cultural materials; Argentina

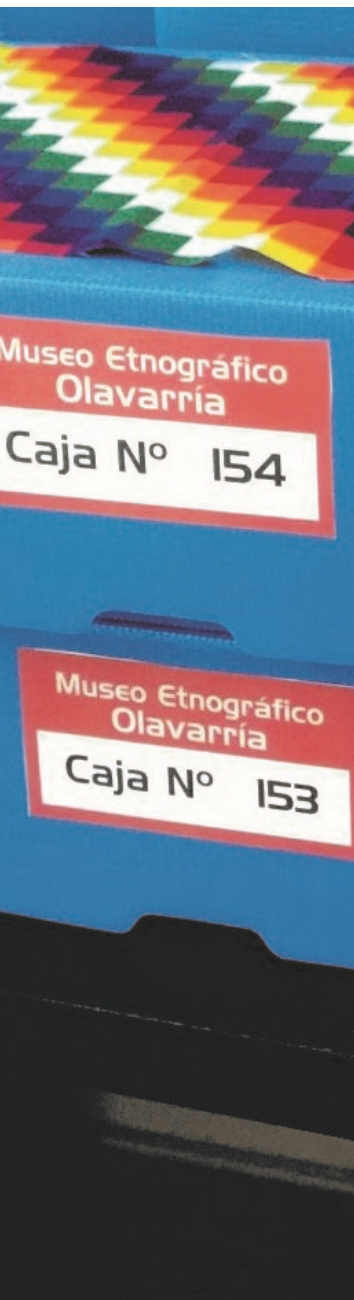
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to present some of the results from the conditioning of the human remains found in the *Museo Etnográfico Municipal Dámaso Arce (MEDA) de Olavarría*. A few years ago, the museum was the subject of a comprehensive analysis that included a diagnosis of its overall state as well as a review of its historical trajectory and legal status, which led to the identification of several problems. Among those that can be mentioned are: the absence of a permanent exhibition open to the public, losses and problems both in the conservation of artefacts and administrative files (rules, regulations, letters, correspondences, etc.), lack of an updated inventory, a large number of pieces that lacked the associated documentation to properly explain their origin and history, and a lack of adaptation to the current regulations surrounding delicate cultural materials. This context is the result of various converging actions including: general ignorance, political motivations, personal interests, negligence or lack of training, factors which can only be understood when analyzing the history of MEDA in its nearly 100 years of existence (Chaparro, 2017).

One of the biggest problems identified by the report was the absence of adequate and up-to-date management of the skeletal remains of seven bodies in the museum. According to the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) terminology, human remains and sacred objects housed in museums are referred to as *delicate cultural materials*, and the *Code of Ethics* (2004) recommends a number of actions for the professionals within these institutions to adhere to.

Based on the above-mentioned requirements and the diagnosis of MEDA's study submitted to the municipal authorities, some of the technical problems identified were addressed and the collections with human skeletal remains were conditioned accordingly. This article will firstly present the case and legal framework governing the protection of archaeological heritage in Argentina and the province of Buenos Aires, in relation to the municipal jurisdictions as determined by MEDA. It also describes the current international and national ethical parameters for the management of museum collections and human remains. Secondly, we present the details of the bio-anthropological and documentary surveys carried out on these remains, and of the recommended chemical studies used to obtain better approximations of their provenance.

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS IN ARGENTINA: LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ASSOCIATED REGULATIONS

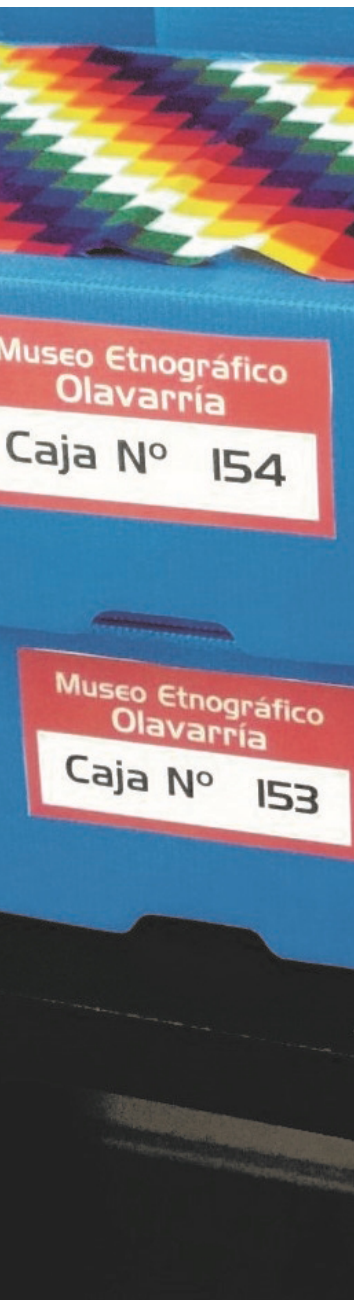
The ruins and archaeological sites of scientific interest belong to the public domain of the State, as well as any collections that come from them (*Ley Nacional 25.743 & Decreto Reglamentario 1.022/04*). As the domain is provincial, it is important to note that the legal framework in the province of Buenos Aires is disadvantaged compared to others (Endere & Pedrotta, 2010), since its laws are outdated. The current laws in regard to cultural heritage in Buenos Aires (Law 10.419/86) predate constitutional reforms and National Law 25.743. On the other hand, neither the national nor provincial law establishes municipal competencies for matters of heritage, thus leaving the municipalities in legal vulnerability (Endere & Iturburu, 2010). It follows from the analysis of the aforementioned regulations that collections in municipal warehouses are in fact provincial domain, even if no specific reference is made to the procedures for their protection. In practice, the department in charge of such matters in the province of Buenos Aires, that is, the *Centro de Registro del Patrimonio Arqueológico y Paleontológico (CRPAP)*¹ has nowhere suitable to house collections, meaning that municipal museums, without specific regulations to regulate them, act as transient repositories. That is, the mastery of each municipality's museum collections resides with the province, but each one has the power to promote local ordinances. In fact, the Olavarría municipality's recent ordinance (3934/16) establishes that the collections and buildings of municipal museums must integrate the Register of the Cultural Historical Heritage of the Municipality of Olavarría.

Since 2005, the nation's Ministry of Culture adopted the ICOM *Code of Ethics* (2004) as an instrument that provides the minimum standards of professional practices for museums. According to its guidelines, good administration includes legitimate ownership, permanence, documentation, accessibility and the responsible transfer of collections (Principle 2), meaning that these institutions have an obligation to keep and maintain reliable backups of all relevant information, including: form of acquisition, valid title of ownership, geographical origin, type of material, measurements, status, classification/taxonomy, internal or external movements with respect to the institution, location (if in exhibition), preservation and restoration treatments or a log of procedures to which they have been

¹ English: Center for the Registration of Archaeological and Paleontological Heritage

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exposed, etc. It is also mentioned that museums have obligations in terms of the protection, accessibility and interpretation of their collections.

Human remains and the regulatory framework

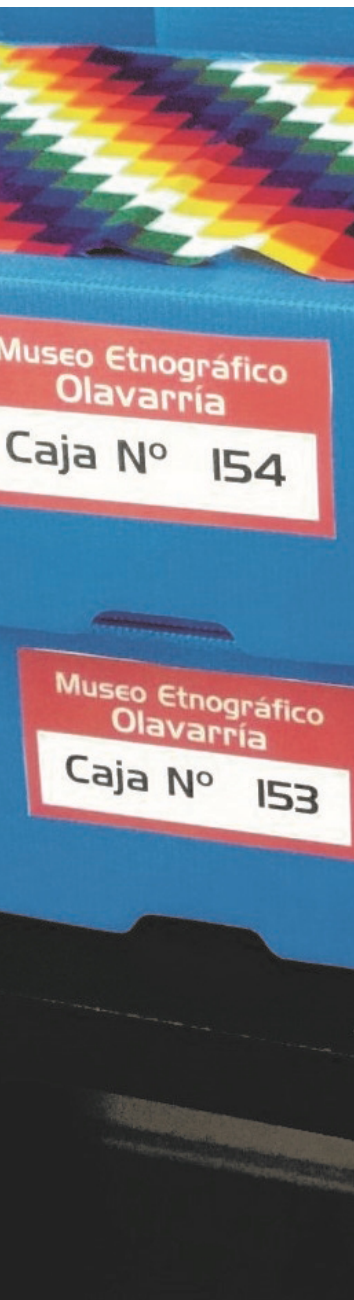
For several years there has been a legal framework in Argentina surrounding human remains kept in museums. The *Ley Nacional* 25.517/01 mandates that such remains be made available to the indigenous people or communities that claim belonging to them, and that those that remain unclaimed may continue in the institutions that house them and should be treated with the utmost respect. Its regulatory decree: 701/2010, determines that the *Instituto Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas* (INAI) is responsible for coordinating, articulating and assisting in the monitoring and study of compliance with the directives provided for by Law 25.517. However, before the sanctioning of this rule, restitutions had already been made to different people, indigenous or family communities (Ametrano, 2015; Endere, 2002), re-burials (Curtoni & Chaparro, 2007-2008) and repatriations (Pérez & Pegoraro, 2004; Rodríguez et al., 2005). These actions were linked to the processes of ethnic re-emergence that have been developing in the country for several years (Centro Promocional de Investigaciones en Historia y Antropología [Cepiha]², 1999; Podgorny & Politis, 1992; Straighten et al., 2014), in line with the international movement named “reburial issue” (Fforde, 2002; Hubert, 1992 & Ucko, 2001), the recognition of rights such as those from the International Labor Organization (ILO, 1989) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (ONU, 2007).

In addition to this legal framework, there are a number of national and international ethical recommendations associated with the management of human skeletal remains within museums (*Asociación de Antropología Biológica Argentina* [AABA], 2005; Aranda, C., Barrientos, G., y Del Papa, M. C., 2014; Cassman, Odegaard, Powell, 2007; Giesen, 2013). In 1999 a civil association of voluntary integration was created, the AAPRA, which has its own code of ethics in which it states (Article 14), that human remains should be treated with particular respect, taking into account criteria agreed upon between the different stakeholders concerned. In correspondence, the above-mentioned *Code of Ethics* (2004) considers that the acquisition, conservation and exposure of human remains and

² English: Promotional Center for Research in History and Anthropology

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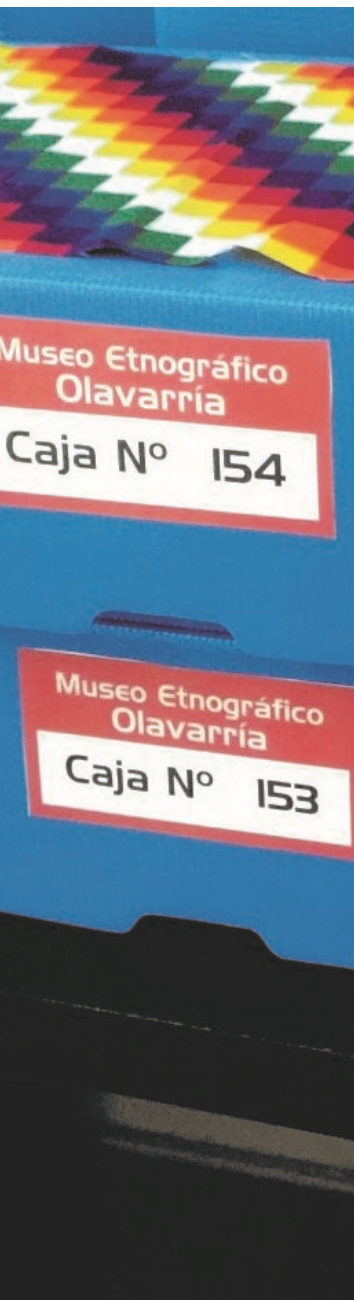
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sacred objects investigated, should be carried out in accordance with professional standards, respecting the interests and beliefs of the ethnic or religious communities and groups from which they originate (Principles 2.5 and 3.7). With regards to accessibility, it states that “it is necessary to facilitate free access to the collection and all relevant information related to them” (Principle 3.2). With regard to exhibition, it mentions that it must be done “with great tact and respect towards the feelings of human dignity of all peoples” (Principle 4.3). In the same vein, in 2005 the Declaration of Rio Cuarto was signed, within the framework of the First Forum of Archaeologists-Indigenous Peoples (XV National Congress of Archaeology Argentina). This declaration proposes: a) the non-display of human remains, b) respect for ancestral sacrality, c) mutual collaboration to achieve the restitution of these human remains, d) the need for archaeologists to responsibly assess the socio-political consequences of archaeological research in relation to the rights of indigenous communities, and e) to have prior agreement from these communities for the conduct of archaeological research. Subsequently (2007), AABA approved a declaration regarding the ethics of the study of human remains, which recognizes the rights of both the original people and the subjects of their study, as they are of interest to all humanity (Endere, 2013). In 2011 the AABA adopted a Code of Ethics that established, amongst other issues: that it is the responsibility of biological anthropology professionals to ensure the proper conservation of human remains, that the study of human remains must be carried out with due justification, that those responsible be adequately trained to do so and that interaction with communities that hold claim of belonging must be promoted; respecting their customs, creeds and values.

In order to meet these new requirements, museums (and other research centers) have adopted special protocols for the treatment of indigenous remains, updated their inventories, and reviewed documentary funds and movement records. They have also begun to prepare exclusive deposits, to enable spaces to hold indigenous ceremonies and impart workshops open to the community in order to discuss these issues together with interested parties (Aranda et al., 2010; Castro et al., 2009; García, P., Conforti, M. E., & Guichón, R. A., 2018 & Noticias del Museo de Córdoba, 2017). One topic of debate is, for example, the scope of the concept of *respectful treatment*. In the case of a museum in the province of Santa Cruz and in response to collaborative work with some Mapuche and Tehuelche communities, it was requested not to name the remains alongside the term *collections* because, according to their own cul-

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tural parameters, such a concept reduces them into simple objects (Nahuelquir et al., 2015).

GENERAL DIAGNOSIS OF MUSEUMS IN ARGENTINA

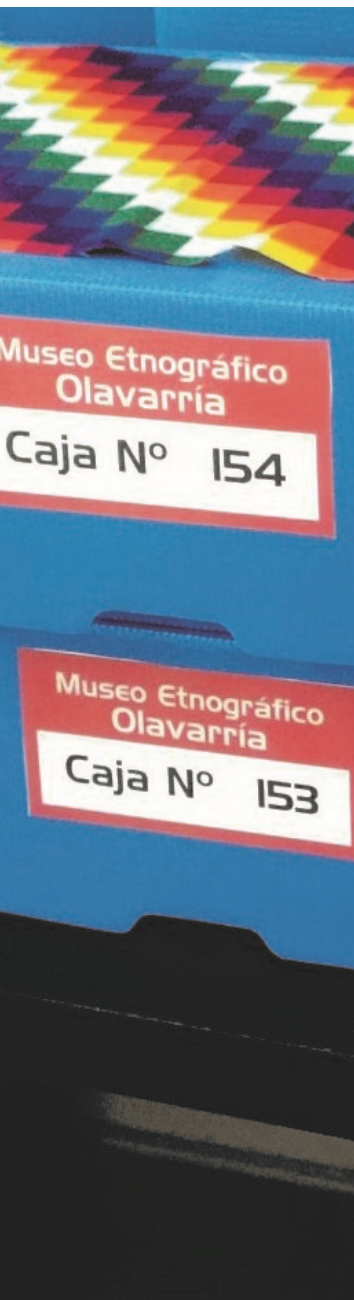
According to the jurisdictional membership of Argentine anthropological museums, the status of the heritage housed within them is rather disparate, which is evident across infrastructure, conservation, staff training, cooperation and academic advice, among other aspects. Some private or municipal museums are relegated and even abandoned to the good intentions of whichever government is on duty as well as on the whims of individuals within them. On the other hand, some university, provincial and national museums have been able to update and renovate their facilities and practices by securing funding sources from national or international agencies (Bonnin, 2014). Since 2003, a plan by the *Dirección Nacional de Patrimonio y Museos*³ has been implemented at governmental level which aims to contribute to the overall improvement of many institutions, while the formation of professional associations (such as the *Red Jaguar*, the *Comité de Educación y Acción Cultural Argentina* [CECA], a member of ICOM, and the TYPA Foundation) facilitated updates and training. However, the above-mentioned improvements were limited to the support of these organizations, and not all municipal museums participated in, or had access to them, meaning that, in many cases, their conditions remained unimproved.

Currently, the province of Buenos Aires boasts a great diversity of municipal museums, depending on the degree of liaison with the academic sphere or state dependency that they have achieved, and the support of associations of friends. Some of the most successful ones are those that knew how to maintain a direct link with researchers over time, such as in the *Museo José Mulazzi* in *Tres Arroyos*, the *Museo Gesué Noseda* in *Lobería*, and the *Museo de Ciencias Naturales* in *Necochea*, to name a few of the ones closest to *Olavarría*. However, the *Museo Dámaso Arce*, in spite of being located in the same city as the *Instituto de Investigaciones Arqueológicas y Paleontológicas de Cuaternario Pampeano* (Incuapa)⁴, devoted to archaeology and paleontology, did not enjoy the same fate. There are several reasons for this and they can only be understood through a historical analysis of its development over time (Chaparro, 2017).

³ English: National Directorate of Heritage and Museums

⁴ English: Institute of Archaeological and Paleontological Research of the Pampean Quaternary

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OVERVIEW OF THE MUSEO ETNOGRÁFICO

DÁMASO ARCE (MEDA)

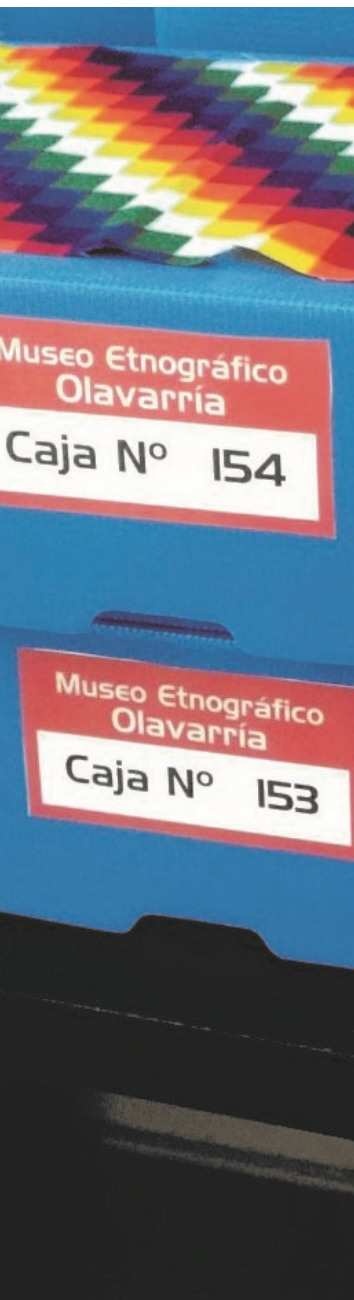
In the first decade after its foundation (1963), MEDA received an important award of national academic prestige, which was consolidated with the creation of the *Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas de Olavarría* (IIAO), both dependent on the Municipality of Olavarría (Politis, 2005). Several conditions converged to make this happen, including a visionary and proactive director, with extensive intellectual and management skills (Guillermo Madrazo), and the confidence and political and economic support of the municipal administration. It should be noted that this museum has a longer history, since it was originally private when, in the first decade of the 20th century, the autodidactic goldsmith Dámaso Arce began to build up a private collection in his home. In 1918 he opened his first exhibition, where he included a *Sala de Indios* (Hall of Native Indians), and in 1923 he officially inaugurated the *Museo Hispano Americano*. Over the years it gained in popularity and prestige, partly driven by the tenacity of its founder who, like other collectors of the time, integrated networks for the exchange of information and pieces (Podgorny & Lopes, 2008; García, 2011). In retrospect, Dámaso Arce had no official municipal support, as it took 20 years after his death for the family to manage to bring the collection into the state domain (Chaparro, 2017). More than 50 years after its official creation as MEDA and a century after its initial creation, this state support has not been present again, which is why today the museum is closed to the public, without a building of its own and with a collection on the brink of neglect.

In 2009 a permit was obtained granting access to the museum's reserves⁵ with the goal of making a diagnosis on the state of conservation of the collections, within the framework of the investigations of the first author (without any connection to the municipality). It is worth remembering that, at that time, the MEDA headquarters were located on the first floor of a large mansion on San Martín street, a few meters from the city of Olavarría's central square, also the headquarters for the homonymous municipality. As a result of this diagnosis, an analysis on the condition of the museum was presented to the municipal authorities, which included recommendations and proposals for intervention. Amongst the findings, these were the main problems identified: the unstable or moving wooden

⁵ Since 1998 MEDA (separated from the IIAO) has been without management, with only one municipal employee responsible for it.

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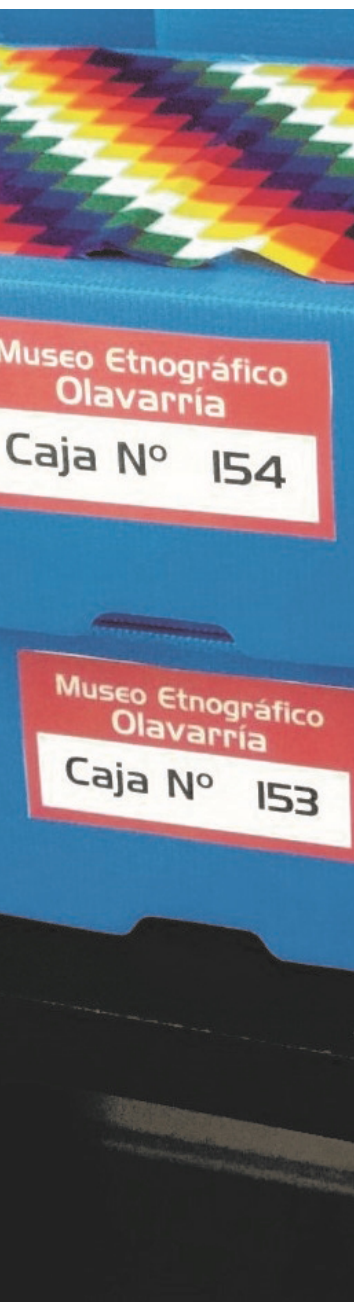


floor in the exhibition hall, the general state of abandonment of the collection storage and the lack of an updated inventory.

According to the last updates (in 1987 and 1988), the collection has 589 pieces, few of which emanate from Dámaso Arce's time. The objects come from various regions of the country, correspond to different periods of time and are made from a great diversity of materials including: bone, textiles, leather, rocks, ceramics, metals, shells, etc. Amongst the items identified were a number of lithic pieces and more than 300 megafauna fossils that do not contain dates of entry or that were added in draft after the preparation of the inventory, the result of fortuitous discoveries by neighbours or recoveries from quarries in the district —none of which contain dates for their entry to the collection or were added in draft form after the initial inventory had been carried out (Chaparro, 2017). Human skeletal remains were also identified and will be described later. In 2014, five years after the diagnostic report was delivered, the authorities decided to dismantle the exhibition and move the complete collection to the *Bioparque Zoológico La Máxima* (also a municipal facility) however, it is not known if the report had any impact on this decision. A space was conditioned within the zoo to serve as storage that would meet minimum standards: humidity and temperature control, indirect artificial lighting, metal shelving, appropriate packaging, and the digitalization of the collections began. However, these conditions were only maintained until 2017, when an electrical malfunction damaged the facility and all maintenance ceased afterwards. At the same time, the same municipal administration accepted a proposal for the conditioning of the indigenous human remains and granted a subsidy for its implementation (Chaparro, 2017).

This summary gives an account of the complex picture presented by MEDA. In general terms, it can be said that a series of irregularities linked to the management of the institution by some municipal officials (former and current) occurred and continue to occur to this day. Three factors associated with their actions influenced the decline and closure of the institution to the public: ignorance towards the patrimonial value of the collection, a lack of interest in updating national and provincial legislation that would have protected it, and a lack of awareness on international regulations and professional recommendations that should have been applied over time. These actions, and a range of others carried out without proper planification (such as removals or loans of pieces), or in an arbitrary manner (lack of personnel) or by chance (floods), affected at various times—and continue to directly affect—the integrity of the collections.

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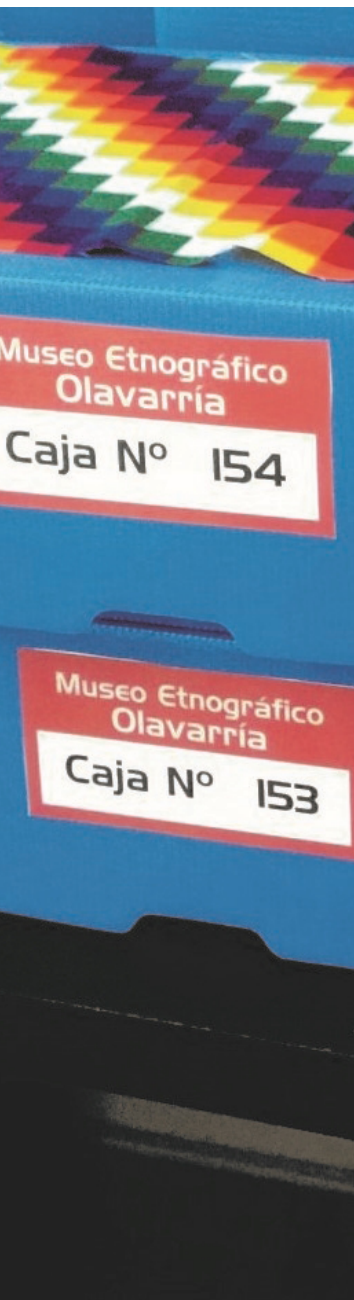
THE HUMAN REMAINS: CURRENT STATUS AND STUDY UNDERTAKEN

As detailed above, for collections of objects to be properly preserved and valued, they must have the most comprehensive and reliable supporting information possible; the same applies to human skeletal remains. In the diagnosis carried out at MEDA, a human skull with cultural deformation and a toddler in an urn were identified during the revision of the inventory (from 1988 to 1989), both originating from the northwest of Argentina. In addition to these, sets of skeletal remains were identified in the collection, that were in various boxes and were not included in that inventory. It should be noted that the two communities and indigenous people of Olavarría were informed and consulted prior to conducting these studies. Based on these irregularities, a general description of the contents of each box was made in the first place. This included: identification of whether they corresponded to human remains; evaluation of whether they had some kind of label or numbering that would indicate if they were indeed already part of the inventory; determination of sex and age; analysis of the state of preservation and bone integrity; and photographic records (Figure 1). Secondly, the IIAO carried out a new documentary survey on the origin of the remains. Until about 20 years ago, MEDA and the IIAO published about research and exchanges that were taking place, leading to the suspicion that, whilst studying them, some of these remains could be associated to archaeological excavations from other periods. In fact, through the interweaving of these two data it was identified the possible origin of some of the indigenous remains (two) found in the MEDA storage that resulted from the archaeological excavations carried out by its first director, (Madrado, 1966, 1969).

Likewise, in order to corroborate or get a closer approximation of the true origin of the bone remains (one of the necessary legal requirements), it was advised to carry out a chemical study of stable oxygen isotopes ($\delta^{18}\text{O}$). Oxygen molecules in human tissues are derived from embedded water, diet and atmospheric O_2 levels. The stable isotope values of $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ in the water consumed (both directly drunk and obtained through food consumption) are translated in a linear way to the tissues of their consumers (Ehleringer et al., 2008; Longinelli, 1984), so they are useful for studies on population movements and region allocation. Seven analysis were performed on bone and tooth samples, the results of which are in processing at the University of Wyoming's Stable Isotope Laboratory (USA).

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MEDA Box no.	Minimum Number of Individuals	Description	Observations / Origin
151	1	Contains 16 items that appear to be from the same individual (with no skull).	The box also contains 9 skeletal elements of fauna (they were left in a separate bag). Internal label, possible provenance to be corroborated: <i>San Blas</i> . Human bones. Superficial collection.
152	1	A baby with an estimated age of between 0 and 1 month approximately. 105 elements are present. Label written on the right parietal: 137	By association with a MEDA funeral urn and documentation, its probable origin is from the <i>Alfarcito</i> archaeological site (<i>Tilcara, Jujuy</i>), AR VI site, excavated and published in Madrazo (1969). To be corroborated with isotopic studies.
153	1	Possibly all the bone elements correspond to the same person. Label written on the bone: 194 Adult person, possibly male with cranial deformation.	
154	1	A fragmented skull with reddish coloration. Label on wooden paper: <i>skull without provenance</i> .	
	1	A mummified left foot, it is not possible to know if they correspond to the same person.	
155	1	Skull fragments.	Furthermore, the box contained 12 bone elements of indeterminate fauna that were separated.
156	1	A possibly female young adult person. Old sign 202.	
	1	A possibly male adult with cranial deformation. With preserved remnants of dissected soft tissue. It has two labels 201 and 119.	Possible provenance to be confirmed: el <i>Durazno</i> archaeological site (<i>Tilcara, Jujuy</i>). Excavated and published in Madrazo (1966).

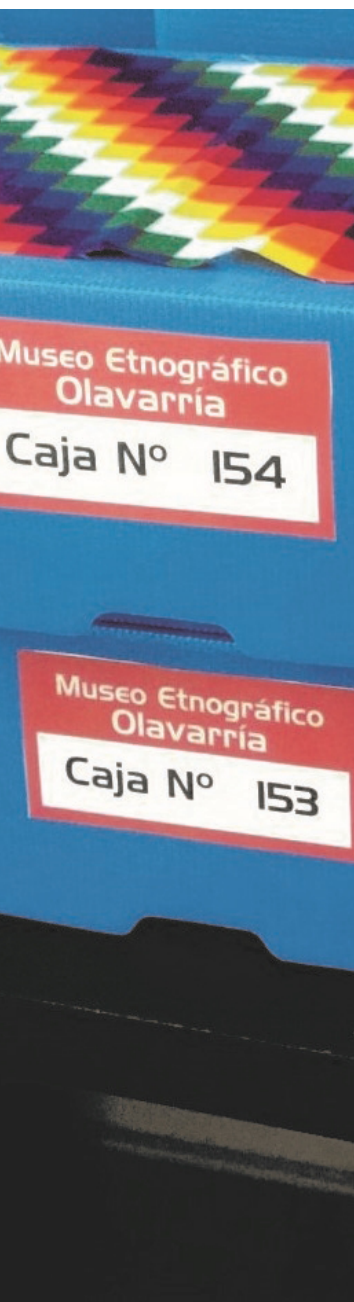
FIGURE 1: Summary of the contents of the six boxes held at MEDA (Table: Chaparro, García & Guichón).

FINAL COMMENTS

As institutions of public interest, museums have the duty of safeguarding heritage and are obligated to best management practices. On the basis of these principles, MEDA does not conform with the concepts of *legitimate ownership* and *documentation of collections*, especially of sensitive cultural materials. This is compounded by the failure to comply with National Law 25,517 on indigenous human remains. In order to adapt to these requirements, basic descriptive morphological studies were carried out to correctly identify the remains, as well as a bibliographic research that enabled the establishment of legitimate ownership of some of the pieces: date and form of entry into MEDA. Finally, it was decided to complement the samples with chemical studies that would allow approximate determinations of their provenance, in order to gather the necessary documentation and evaluate the origin of the remains, which could be key in the face of possible requests for reports from indigenous peoples or communities and claims for restitution.

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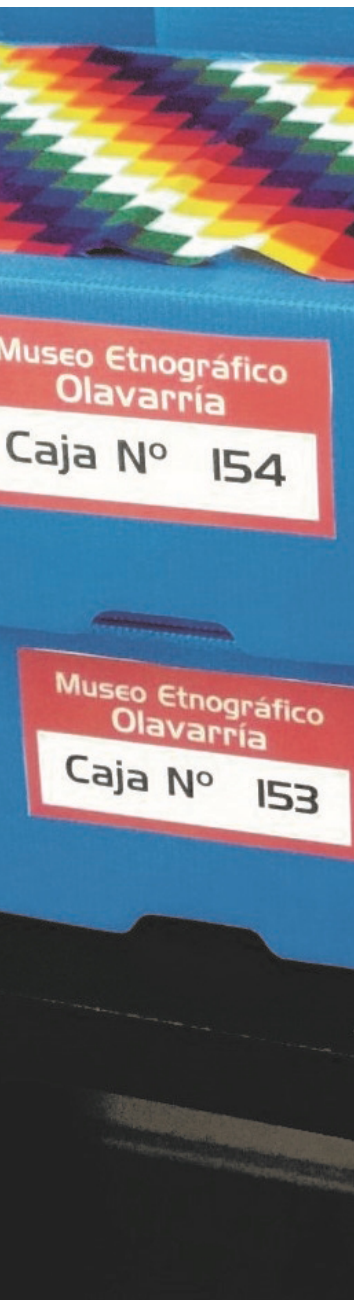
We would like to thank the authorities of the Municipality of Olavarría (Argentina), Dr. Diego Robbiani (Secretary of Human Development and Quality of Life), and Agustina Marino (Sub secretary of Culture and Education), for authorizing and approving a grant to carry out the studies that gave rise to this article. To the museologist Hernán Quiroga, in charge of MEDA's collections, for his interest in ordering and physically conditioning them and for facilitating the analysis. To Víctor Hugo González Catriel (Peñi Mapu Mapuche Community), Mirta Millán (Pillán Manque Urban Mapuche Community), Nora Galván and Carlos Silva for the ancestral knowledge shared on this and other topics. This study is carried out in the framework of projects PIP 106/15 and PICT 0551/16 headquartered in Incuapa (Conicet-Unicen).

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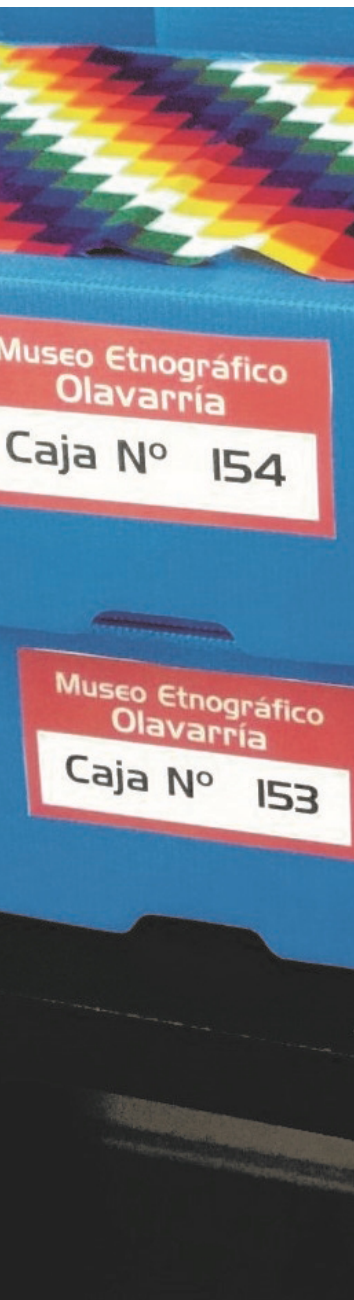
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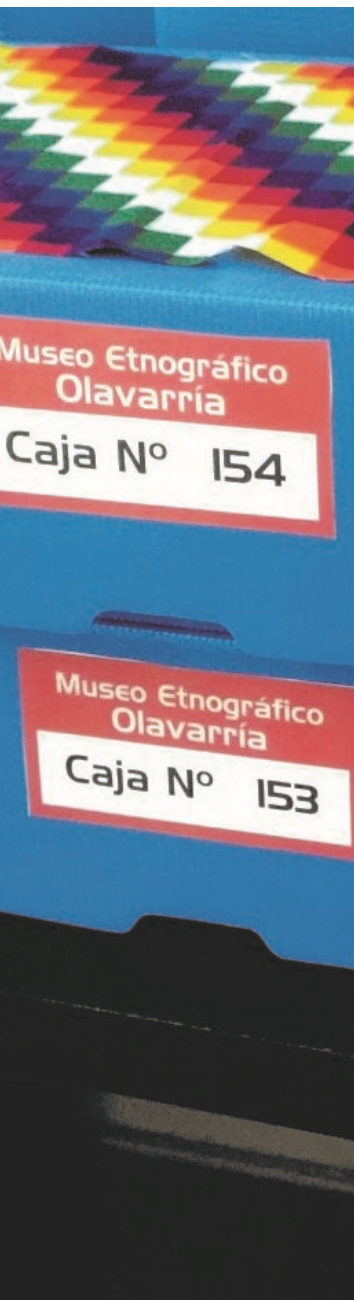
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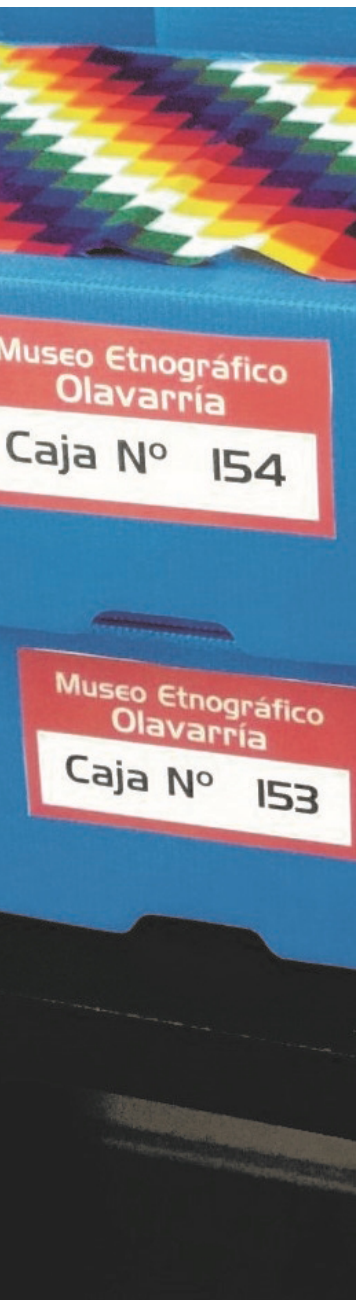
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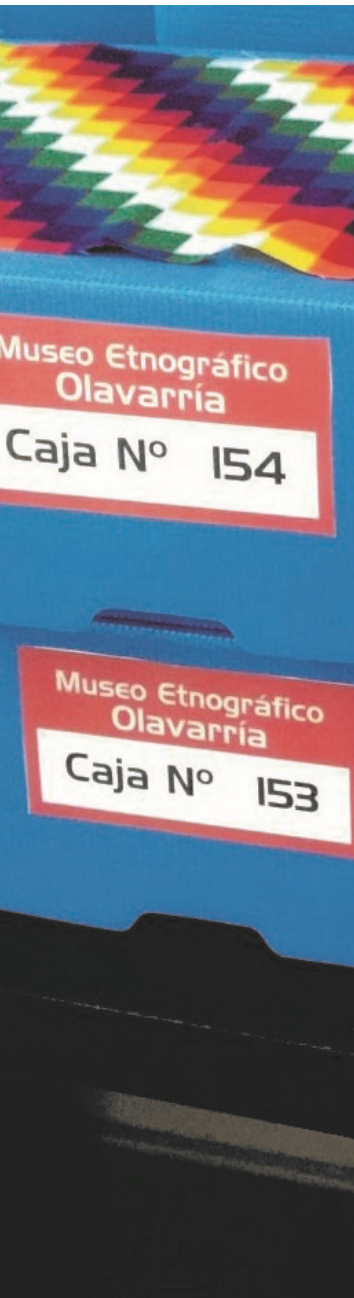
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