



Native American burial mounds on the path to Picnic Point

PHOTO: JEFF MILLER



Professor of Anthropology  
Sissel Schroeder

FACULTY

## Repatriating the Ancestors

Anthropology colleagues are working with tribes to return the remains of ancestors and sacred objects.

BY MARY ELLEN GABRIEL

**B**urial mounds created by Native people can be found throughout Wisconsin. Rolling softly along high points in the landscape and often shaded by ancient bur oak trees, intact burial mounds contain both ancestral remains and funerary objects. We know this because so many of Wisconsin’s mounds have been desecrated, and the remains and objects inside them destroyed or removed to museums, private collectors and, yes, universities.

Professor of Anthropology Sissel Schroeder has been working with Wisconsin’s tribes since 2006 to ensure repatriation of Native American ancestors from museum collections to their modern-day descendants. In 2021,

Schroeder and her colleague Liz Leith, who curates the anthropology department’s collections, partnered with four federally recognized tribes, including the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin, the Forest County Potawatomi Community, the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, and the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, to repatriate 33 ancestors and 20 associated funerary objects from the department’s collections back to southern Wisconsin. Their work was guided by the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which requires institutions that receive federal funds to report on their inventory of ancestral remains, sacred and funerary objects, and objects of cultural patrimony (which belong to the tribe as a whole, not to just one individual), and consult with tribes on repatriation of objects and remains from UW and other collections.

**“What’s important about the funerary objects is the meaning they had for past peoples and why they ended up in the grave. Native people may recognize aspects of these objects that we have no understanding of and that they never share with us.”**

SISSEL SCHROEDER

But for Schroeder and Leith, these efforts extend well past NAGPRA requirements.

“We see this as a human rights issue for the tribes,” says Schroeder, who balances her repatriation work with her teaching, research and other outreach activities.

Leith, who previously served as the Collection Manager of Archaeology at the Sam Noble Museum of Natural History in Oklahoma, concurs. “We want to meet basic compliance but also build relationships and take an ethical approach that should have been followed all along,” she says.

This involves quarterly meetings with the Wisconsin Inter-Tribal Repatriation Committee (WITRC), a group of representatives from each of the federally recognized tribes (often they are tribal historians or elders). It means securing grant funding from the national NAGPRA office that helps pay for the heavy earth-moving equipment

needed to prepare a resting place for long-unburied ancestors and associated funerary objects, or to compensate for travel by tribal representatives. It means creating a schedule and organizing the events leading up to repatriation. It means Leith and Schroeder listening carefully and being attuned to not only what needs to be done to help the tribes but also what the tribes have to say and, equally important, what they don’t say.

“This is really painful, emotional work for the tribes, thinking of the many generations of their ancestors whose remains and associated funerary objects were disturbed,” Schroeder says. “What’s important about the funerary objects is the meaning they had for past peoples and why they ended up in the grave. Native people may recognize aspects of these objects that we have no understanding of and that they never share with us.”

Repatriation from the Department of Anthropology’s own collections largely pertains to remains obtained by past faculty and graduate students at the university who may have participated in, or been called to assist with, excavations undertaken before 1985. That’s when a state law in Wisconsin extended equal protection to all human burial places. Often, items were acquired through salvage operations (a site would be destroyed through, say, construction of a gravel mine, and faculty would rush to save what they could, to prevent items and remains from being destroyed and lost to future generations). But often, ancestors and objects would remain on museum shelves “in perpetuity,” untouched by researchers since being pulled from the earth.

While almost all of the ancestral remains and funerary objects at UW-Madison (in accordance with NAGPRA) have been repatriated, the department continues to manage additional archaeological material, all curated by Leith, and many are used for teaching, research, exhibition and public programming.

Repatriation work is hard and can be expensive, and without their partnership, neither Schroeder nor Leith could have achieved what they did in 2021, nor could they hope to continue doing so much in the future as they work with tribes on issues beyond NAGPRA.

“Each one of us brings a different perspective to each case,” says Leith. “But we both have the same end goal.”

“And the tribes share that end goal,” Schroeder says. “We all work together as partners.” ■