WHY WERE TWO SKULLS RETURNED TO BRAZIL AFTER NEARLY 200 YEARS?



WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Two human skulls taken from Brazil in the nineteenth century have been returned after being held by Harvard University in the United States. The remains are believed to have belonged to Africans or Afro-Brazilians. One skull may have belonged to a man involved in a major slave revolt in Salvador in 1835, when about 600 African Muslims attempted to take control of the city. The other may have belonged to someone who had recently arrived in Brazil from Africa. The skulls were used in racist scientific research connected with eugenics, a movement that wrongly claimed some groups of people were naturally better than others. Brazilian diplomats carried the remains home in padded boxes. They will not be put on display. Researchers may try to learn more about the people, but the government says they should eventually be buried with proper funeral ceremonies.

WHY IS THIS INTERESTING?

The story connects the history of slavery with the history of science and racism. It also raises a difficult question about museums and universities: should human remains be treated as research objects, or as people who deserve dignity? Returning the skulls cannot undo what happened, but it acknowledges the violence involved.

THINK LIKE A HISTORIAN

“Should human remains ever be kept in museums for scientific research?”

Source: The Guardian

https://www.theguardian.com/news/2026/nov/11/harvard-skulls-repatriated-brazil