Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum returns remains of 39 Naga ancestors

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News

The Pitt Rivers Museum of the University of Oxford, England, is returning the remains of 39 Naga ancestors (mostly skulls) taken during colonial rule to the Naga people. A Naga delegation led by Naga Tribe Hoho leaders left for Oxford on 6 November 2026 to complete the formal procedures. The remains were taken to Oxford between 1910 and 1940, mostly by the colonial administrators and anthropologists J.H. Hutton and J.P. Mills. A Naga delegation visited Oxford in June 2025 and issued the Naga–Oxford Declaration (13 June 2025); the FNR later filed the formal claim; the University's Council approved the return of 39 remains on 13 July 2026, holding back one whose Naga origin could not be established. It is reported to be the largest repatriation of human remains in the museum's history. The remains are to be buried in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland.

Key facts for the exam

Point	Details
Process	Naga delegation left for Oxford on 6 Nov 2026
Museum	Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford
Number	39 Naga ancestral remains (mostly skulls)
Claim filed by	Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR)
Taken	1910–1940; J.H. Hutton, J.P. Mills

Point	Details
Approval	Oxford University Council, July 2026 (1 held back)
Reburial	Kohima, Nagaland
Significance	Museum's largest repatriation of human remains

Background

- History: the Pitt Rivers Museum (founded 1884) holds the world's largest collection of Naga objects (over 6,000). The museum itself acknowledges that many were seized during colonial punitive expeditions. In 2020 it removed all human remains from display. J.H. Hutton served as Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills and wrote 'The Angami Nagas' (1921); he is also known as Census Commissioner for the 1931 Census of India and author of 'Caste in India' (1946).
- Polity: special provisions for Nagaland are in Article 371A (13th Amendment, 1962). Acts of Parliament on Naga religious or social practices, customary law and procedure, administration of justice under customary law, and ownership of land and resources apply there only if the State Assembly so resolves. Peace efforts: in August 2015 the Union government and the NSCN (IM) signed the 'Framework Agreement'. The Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR), formed in 2008, is a common platform working for reconciliation among Naga groups.
- Geography: Nagaland shares an international border with Myanmar and borders Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur; its capital is Kohima and its highest peak is Saramati. Naga people also live in Myanmar's Sagaing Region. In World War II, at the Battle of Kohima (April–June 1944), British-Indian forces halted the Japanese advance; the Kohima War Cemetery commemorates it.
- Return of cultural property: returning objects and human remains taken in the colonial era to their source communities (repatriation) is a growing global trend. The Pitt Rivers Museum has earlier returned remains to Indigenous communities in Australia, New Zealand and the United States; ThePrint described this as the first such effort by an Indigenous community in India. In India, the export and trade of antiquities is regulated by the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972.

Tamil Nadu link: Oxford and Tamil Nadu: Oxford's Ashmolean Museum handed over a 16th-century bronze of Saint Thirumankai Alvar, belonging to the Sri Soundararaja Perumal temple at Thadikombu in Dindigul district, to India at India House, London, on 3 March 2026. The museum had bought it at a Sotheby's auction in 1967; it was returned on evidence of an old photograph taken at the temple. In Tamil Nadu, recovery of stolen idols is handled by the Idol Wing CID.

Frequently asked questions

What is this news about?

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What are the key facts to remember for the exam?

Process: Naga delegation left for Oxford on 6 Nov 2026; Museum: Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford; Number: 39 Naga ancestral remains (mostly skulls); Claim filed by: Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR).

What is the background to this news?

History: the Pitt Rivers Museum (founded 1884) holds the world's largest collection of Naga objects (over 6,000). The museum itself acknowledges that many were seized during colonial punitive expeditions.

Practice questions (with answers)

1. Special provisions for Nagaland, protecting Naga customary law and land ownership, are in which Article?

A) Article 371A

B) Article 371B

C) Article 371F

D) Article 371H

Answer: A – Explanation: 371A – Nagaland (13th Amendment, 1962). 371B – Assam; 371F – Sikkim; 371H – Arunachal Pradesh.

2. J.H. Hutton, the anthropologist who sent Naga remains to Oxford, was Census Commissioner for which census of India?

A) 1901

B) 1921

C) 1931

D) 1951

Answer: C – Explanation: 1931 – the last census to publish full caste-wise data. 1901 – Risley; 1951 – free India's first census.

3. In March 2026, Oxford's Ashmolean Museum handed back to India a bronze of which Alvar, belonging to the Thadikombu temple in Tamil Nadu?

A) Nammalvar

B) Periyalvar

C) Thirumangai Alvar

D) Andal

Answer: C – Explanation: Thirumangai Alvar – a 16th-century bronze bought at Sotheby's in 1967. He composed the Periya Thirumozhi and Thirunedunthandakam.

4. At the Battle of Kohima in 1944, during World War II, British-Indian forces halted the advance of which country's army?

A) Germany

B) Japan

C) Italy

D) Thailand

Answer: B – Explanation: Japan – April–June 1944; the Imphal–Kohima offensive was repulsed. Netaji's INA also fought in this region alongside the Japanese.

5. Which group signed the 'Framework Agreement' for Naga peace with the Union government in August 2015?

A) ULFA

B) NSCN (IM)

C) Mizo National Front

D) NDFB

Answer: B – Explanation: NSCN (IM) – the Isak–Muivah faction. The Mizo National Front signed the Mizo Accord (1986); ULFA signed a peace accord in 2023.

Sources: AFP via Yahoo News; The Sentinel (Assam); The Daily Pioneer; The Morung Express; The Art Newspaper; News On AIR; DT Next; ThePrint; Pitt Rivers Museum. © Shanmugam IAS Academy.