

## CLAS Open Seminars - Lent Term 2026

SG1 Ground Floor, Alison Richard Building, 7 West Road, CB3 9DP

Monday 02 February - 5:15pm

### The Mummified Republic: Peruvian Independence and the “Inca” Dead in Britain, 1821-1893

[Chris Heaney](#) (The Pennsylvania State University)

Chair: [Adrian Lerner Patron](#) (University of Cambridge)

**Abstract:** In 1822, after declaring Peru’s independence, the South American patriot José de San Martín sent an “Inca mummy” to King George IV, hoping his gift would reach the British Museum. The first half of this talk draws from *Empires of the Dead* (2023) to think through this strange present’s relevance to the use and abuse of history—material and embodied—in early Peruvian and Latin American independence. While the Peruvian history of archaeology often identifies lasting colonialism or renewed empire for the field in this era, this paper emphasizes how South American actors—particularly scholars with museums—believed that their ability to demonstrate their “science” of knowing Andean history via the grave-opening and display of “scientific” Inca predecessors gave them a privileged position in the wider investigation of humanity’s American past. The second half of this talk explores how this republican advantage of literally shared “sovereigns” was received abroad—particularly in Britain, where San Martín’s “Inca mummy” was diverted to London’s Hunterian Museum, received as an object of anatomy, not history. What followed was a “dissection” of Inca achievement that helps explain the intermittent presence of Andean history and remains in some of Britain’s surviving 19th century museums.



**Christopher Heaney** is an historian of Latin America with research interests in the history of indigeneity, science, and deathways in the global Andes. An Associate Professor at the Pennsylvania State University (USA), he is a Visitor at UCL Institute of the Americas for AY2025-2026. He is the author of two books. His most recent, [\*Empires of the Dead: Inca Mummies and the Peruvian Ancestors of American Anthropology\*](#) (Oxford University Press, 2023), is a history of the collection of Andean ancestors and kin in the Americas, from the 16th century to the present. It won the Bolton-Johnson Prize from the Conference on Latin American History for the best book in English on Latin American History published in 2023.

His 2010 book, [\*Cradle of Gold: The Story of Hiram Bingham, a Real-Life Indiana Jones and the Search for Machu Picchu\*](#), was used the archives of both Yale and Peru to document Bingham’s smuggling and help advocate for the return of Machu Picchu’s human remains and gravegoods. His writing for a wider audience has been published by [The New Yorker](#), [The Atlantic](#), and [The New York Times](#).