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Published version

BLAIN, J. and WALLIS, R. J. (2006). Pasts and pagan practices: moving beyond Stonehenge. *Public archaeology*, 5, 211-222.

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ARTICLE

Pasts and pagan practices: moving beyond Stonehenge

Jenny Blain and Robert J. Wallis

ABSTRACT

Theorizing the past is not restricted to archaeology, and interpretations of 'past' both influence and are themselves constituted within politicized understandings of self, community and, in certain instances, spirituality. 'The past in the imagination of the present' is appropriated, variously, to give meaning to the present or to justify actions and interpret experiences. Summer solstice at Stonehenge, with an estimated 21,000 celebrants in 2005, is only the most publicized appropriation (by pagans and other adherents of alternative spirituality and partying) of a 'sacred site'; and conflicts and negotiations occurring throughout Britain are represented in popular and academic presentations of this 'icon of Britishness'. This paper presents work from the *Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights Project* (<http://www.sacredsites.org.uk>) project, a collaboration of archaeology and anthropology informed by pagan and alternative approaches and standpoints, investigating and theorizing discourse and practice of heritage management and pagan site-users. Whether in negotiations around the Stonehenge solstice access, or in dealing with numerous other sites, boundaries between groups or discourses are not clearly drawn – discursive communities merge and re-emerge. But clearly 'past' and 'site' are increasingly important within today's Britain, even as television archaeology increases its following, and pagan numbers continue to grow.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we present findings from our *Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights Project* (<http://www.sacredsites.org.uk>), a collaboration of archaeology and anthropology. In particular, we bring together the issues of reburial and landscape perception in an attempt to address ideas about identity and practices regarding sacred sites. We are dealing with people for whom identities are associated with presences and practices, performances and visual display at prehistoric sites, and interactions with beings or spirits (such as 'wights') met there. Such identities are complex and aspects of their construction may be

problematic. Issues of a direct relationship to land and landscape may assume exclusivist ethnic and 'racial' dimensions of 'belonging', though more importantly, we emphasize that 'theorizing the past' is not restricted to archaeology: it is an activity engaged in by those who visit sites, pursuing stones-viewing as a hobby or as part of their spirituality, sometimes becoming avid readers of such archaeological and anthropological material as they can lay hands on. We discuss how the 'past' is appropriated in the imagination of the 'present', discursively constructed and used to give meaning to the present or to justify actions and interpret experiences. These interpretations of 'past' both influence and are themselves constituted within

politicized understandings of self, community and spirituality.

Summer solstice at Stonehenge (Figure 1), with an estimated 21,000 celebrants in 2005 (decreasing from the 31,000 in 2003) is only the most publicized appropriation (by pagans and other adherents of alternative spirituality) of a 'sacred site' and meanings accruing to it, and conflicts and negotiations occurring throughout Britain are represented in popular and academic presentations of this 'icon of Britishness'. In this paper, however, we attempt to move beyond Stonehenge, summarizing some of our research at other sites but maintaining a focus on theoretical rather than physical constructs. In particular we focus on pagan identities and their relation to constructions of past, 'heritage' and 'sacred site'. We investigate the adoption of the descriptor 'pagan' by a diverse constituency, the meanings of these identifications for practitioners, and how pagan identities position practitioners within today's Britain. Paganisms are intimately associated with other British constructions

of 'self' and community, pagans adopting discursive constructions found (for instance) in the media, but embedding these in their understandings/worldviews of 'paganism'. These, in turn, are grounded in historical dimensions of British culture (Hutton, 1999); portrayals of 'spirituality', 'past' and 'heritage'; and issues of 'authenticity' (cf. Garner, 2001). Within their 'chosen' alterity, practitioners index their paganisms by reference to 'sacred' (usually prehistoric) sites: these have been adopted by pagans as symbolizing paganism.

Our project draws on theory and research on 'alternative' communities and constructions of 'self' and other within late-modernity and/or postmodernity. Bauman (1997) indexes postmodernity as about 'choice': 'alternative' identities of Travellers – often 'pagan' – described by Hetherington (2000), MacKay (1998) and Martin (2002) appear a case in point. Hetherington's extended discussion of Traveller 'choices' indicates a free-flowing desire for freedom and withdrawal from the capitalist state. Martin's analysis, however,



Figure 1: Summer solstice at Stonehenge (2001).

locates choice in rejection and economic need, suggesting social class – as a dynamic process rather than an ascriptive one – may have as much to do with Traveller identities as a desire for ‘freedom’ or a wish to protest. Meanwhile, the Pagan Federation, as the most established organization ‘representing’ pagans in Britain, campaigns for state recognition of ‘Paganism’ as ‘a religion’: diverse pagans themselves, with no single worldview, may contest such an aim, with various organizations and groups (e.g. the recently formed APT or Association of Polythesist Traditions) disrupting many of the Pagan Federation’s principles. While our work indeed demonstrates a wide range of ‘paganisms’, as recognized by some other academic studies (see papers in Blain et al., 2004) heritage management discourse tends to homogenize ‘paganism’ (Blain and Wallis, 2004a).

We question: how is the knowledge of place, self and time developed, and how – and in what diverse ways – do understandings of past become central to presentations of self as ‘pagan’? How are these presentations of paganism foregrounded or concealed as people move through a workday or a festival, performing identities and appropriating places and terminologies? (‘Pagan Pride Day’ has recently made an appearance in Britain.) Why – with specific regard to individual subjectivities constituted within place and time – do prehistoric monuments figure prominently within these constructions? And, does the adoption of pagan identities exemplify fragmentation and fluidity of postmodernity, or reify modernist accounts of a fixed, individual ‘self’?

PAGANISM AND SITES

‘Paganism’ encompasses several recognized and coherent sets of beliefs and practices (Harvey, 1997) including Druidry (drawing on the ‘Celtic’ past), Heathenry (reconstructing Northern religions of the Norse, Anglo-Saxons, etc.), Wicca (modern witchcraft) and others (‘shamans’, hedge witches, goddess spirituality, etc.). Estimated adherents in Britain in the late 20th century number 110,000–120,000 (Weller, 1997), although more recently (2002) the Pagan Federation has suggested as many as 200,000 (see their website <http://www.paganfed.org/>).

Academic research and literature within ‘Pagan Studies’ is rapidly growing (e.g. Blain et al., 2004) but the unique analysis of British ‘sacred sites’, meaning and reflexive ethnography/autoarchaeology is specific to our own output. Long-standing ‘rights’ issues regarding ‘sacred sites’ are indicated by Chippindale et al. (1990) and Bender (1998) (see also Worthington, 2004, 2005). These focus on Stonehenge: our work extends considerably further, combining ‘insider’ perspectives with reflexive ethnographic interpretation and contrasting Britain’s ‘new-indigenes’ with Indigenous spiritualities elsewhere. Our theoretical context includes Maffesoli’s fluid ‘neo-tribes’ (1996); feminist and queer approaches to performativity of contested identities (e.g. Wallis, 2000, 2003; Blain, 2002); and anthropological perspectives and critiques on authorings of ‘selves’ (Cohen, 1994) and consciousness (Cohen and Rapport, 1995), with particular regard to interplay between macro- and microdimensions of changing relations of people and landscapes (Bender, 2001).

A diversity of groups campaign for access to ancient sites, within politicized, historical circumstances: these activities coexist and interact with other engagements related to personal spirituality and group practices. Some pagans use appears, from an archaeological standpoint, detrimental or problematic; other pagans have come forward as ‘guardians’ of sites, ‘educators’ of site-users and volunteers to restore sites. The politics of paganisms are complex: issues of marginalization and processes of accommodation and resistance occur within pagan communities as well as between officialdom and paganisms. In the following discussion, we focus on two linked issues, both of which connect with pagan identities: new-indigenous understandings of landscape, and questions of reburial and ‘ancestors’.

LANDSCAPES AND SPIRITS

Today, ‘landscape’ is fashionable in the thinking of archaeologists and heritage managers, for example in the title of a recent book *Avebury: The Biography of a Landscape* (Pollard and Reynolds, 2002). It is equally in vogue, though in a different way, among those people – especially contemporary

pagans – who have adopted perspectives akin to those of some indigenous peoples, seeing the earth around them as ‘living’, agentic and ‘sacred’, with the reclaimed term ‘animistic’ growing in currency, drawing on the ‘new animism’ in religious studies (e.g. Harvey, 2005). In some ways these views might conflict – pagan approaches to landscapes as ‘alive’ with human and other-than-human people vis-à-vis academic definitions of landscape as cultured, not cultural (e.g. Tilley, 1994; Bradley, 1997, 1998; Ingold and Kurttila, 2000) but in others, they may be aligned – not only in both groups using the term ‘sacred site’, but in ideas about protecting sites from quarrying (as at Stanton Moor, Derbyshire; see, e.g. Blain and Wallis, 2004b, c) or indeed attempting to ‘educate’ other pagans in non-intrusive behaviour at sites. Here we discuss concepts of landscape in popular/pagan discourses of ‘archaeological sites’ in which land, water and other components of landscapes are perceived as dynamic, living entities; archaeological approaches to ancient landscapes that are to a certain degree ‘sterile’ and unpopulated, and that may disengage landscapes and their components (including water, sky, etc.); and some relations between these approaches. Positions are not clear-cut: concepts of the living landscape are discursively constituted in some archaeologists’ talk, though in published archaeological accounts they tend to disappear, and some pagan accounts focus on an inability to know or document precise ‘reasons’ why sites and landscapes might have become important. On the whole, however, pagan discussions can make use of speculative and imaginative elements that are taboo to most academic constructions, and invest landscape with agency as ‘living landscapes’ (see also Blain and Wallis, 2002a, 2006a, 2007; Trubshaw, 2005).

AVEBURY

More so than at Stonehenge, where ‘the stones’ have been the main focus, Avebury has been approached as a ‘sacred’ *landscape*. The monuments of the prehistoric complex, including Avebury henge, West Kennet long barrow, Silbury Hill (Figure 2) and the Sanctuary are prominent, unmissable in the landscape (unlike, say, the

Stonehenge Avenue and cursus, which are visible only to the trained eye). Hence, interpretations of the Avebury landscape by pagans, earth mysteries enthusiasts and others, are common (e.g. Dames, 1976, 1977; Devereux 1991, 1992; Cope, 1998).

The attraction of monuments and landscapes, and an interaction between unthinking damage and self-publicizing, can be seen in developments of the ‘Silbury hole’ phenomenon. There are important dimensions to this story of people’s relationship with landscape. Silbury lies at the centre of ‘crop circle’ country, and in 2000 and 2001 several people billing themselves as crop circle enthusiasts ‘under cover of darkness’, abseiled into the ‘hole’ – taking photographs and making video recordings that they then attempted to sell, via the internet, to the crop circle community. An account – interspersing the abseilers’ text with critical editorial comments, and linking to outraged comments from pagans, local people, crop circle followers and archaeologists alike – is given at *Silbury Hill Damage 2001* (<http://members.fortunecity.com/cropsigns/>).

Indeed, Silbury Hill is a place of concern to pagan activists, who have followed the stories of the appearance of ‘Silbury hole’, its spread, and the attempts to deal with this problem. Their critique of the abseilers’ actions should be seen in a context of both ‘protest’ and ‘protection’. After the hole’s emergence, the Ancient Sacred Landscapes Network (ASLaN) collaborated with local National Trust and English Heritage representatives in seeking volunteers to protect the hill (from those attempting to climb it), many of these from within the pagan community, forfeiting their own opportunity to celebrate solstice in the interests of ‘heritage’, community and landscape. One of those who responded, Matt, described to us some events of the night. Numerous people attempted to climb the hill, and when he explained its precarious situation (and risks to themselves at the summit) almost all went to celebrate elsewhere. Very few insisted on ‘rights’ to ascend to the top. A little polite education provided by a volunteer – albeit one who was 6 feet 7 inches tall and leaning on an oak staff – went a long way. Matt also talked extensively to the English Heritage personnel there about Heathenry (his religious path) and

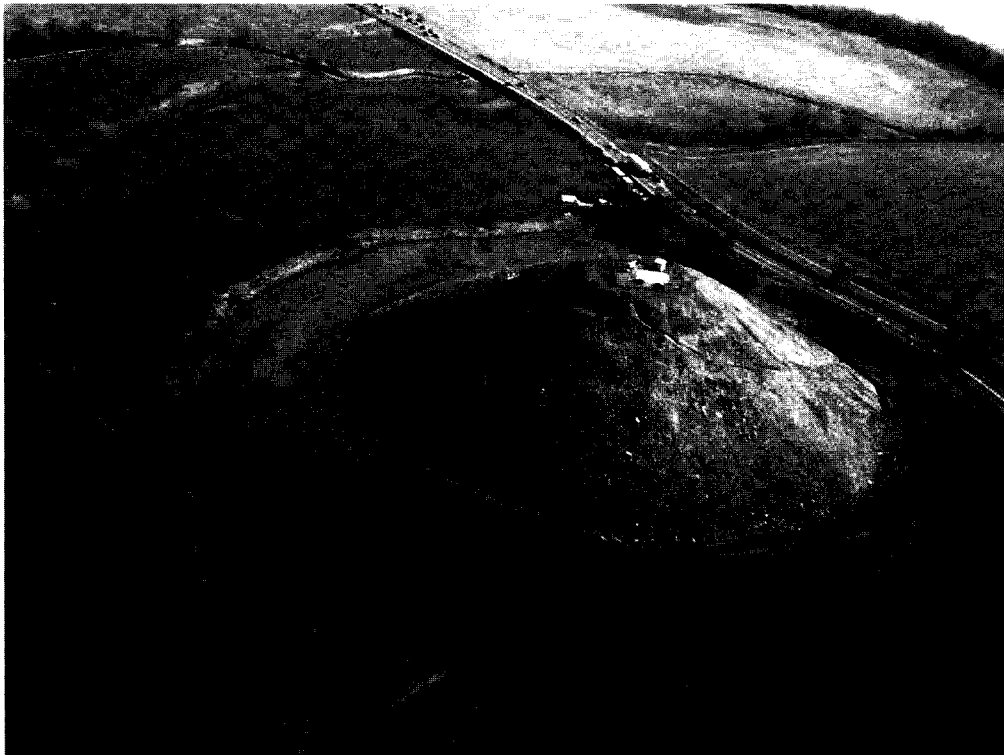


Figure 2: Silbury from the air (2003) (Photo: Pete Glastonbury).

why prehistoric sites, as living places, were important to him.

When earlier there had been little word from English Heritage on the progress of assessing and repairing 'Silbury hole', however, a protest was called by Clare Slaney (of Save Our Sacred Sites) and others. They organized a demonstration – on the road because of ongoing foot-and-mouth restrictions – to draw attention to the problems of the hill, which had slipped from public awareness. Within a few days, two press releases were forthcoming from English Heritage to the effect that the hill's situation was under study. Pagan activists in this case considered that it was their actions that had pushed English Heritage into at least indicating what it was doing, and certainly displayed that there were interested people out there. English Heritage would, possibly, argue this timing was coincidental.

The showing of a documentary about the Silbury 'hole' (BBC2, 14 March and 8 August 2002) has twice met with extreme criticism from pagan activists: first, when it was shown only in the West of England, and second, after national screening, as it implied that the situation was now under control (by English Heritage). 'Megalithic' activists, many of them pagan, point out that the situation is neither straightforward nor rectified, and phrases used to describe the documentary on an email list discussing approaches to megaliths, include 'a spin document' and 'a con'. Some pagans have pointed to the Silbury situation as exemplifying 'heritage' approaches to a living monument, seeing Silbury as all-but destroyed by antiquarian/archaeological intervention, then filled with a mixture of 'plastic' and chalk, and left with no apparent thought for how these additions to the mound affect its relation to the Avebury landscape, spiritually or otherwise.

Engagements with sites and responses to them are not simple. While there are incidents of mindless damage in the cause of self-promotion (e.g. the burning of ersatz napalm at Men-an-Tol in Penwith, Cornwall, by 'Friends of the Stone' in 1999), and deliberate damage (e.g. graffiti on the West Kennet Avenue stones in 1996 and 1999 (e.g. *Antiquity Reports*, 1996), and yellow paint daubed on the Rollright Stones in Oxfordshire, in 2004), much engagement with the sites has benevolent intent and may leave few traces aside from the leaving of offerings – of flowers, mead, perhaps some bread or fruit, or even nail clippings, a crystal or coin (e.g. Blain and Wallis, 2004a). While these may have problems, not least in the eyes of other site-users (e.g. Carpenter, 1998), they are left with good intentions, to perhaps thank spirits of place, to honour gods and goddesses, or to strengthen local land rights. The 'offering' phenomenon is relatively recent – chiefly arising in the last twenty years, and drawing on a number of sources for its inspiration. At some times and in some circumstances, local folklore suggests the offerings – a silver coin at Wayland's Smithy, for instance – or practices are 'imported' from elsewhere, so that new traditions become established – an oak by the path to West Kennet Longbarrow became a 'rag tree', though a change in the routing of the path to the barrow means that it is no longer on a corner of the route (a favourite stand of beech trees on one of the Avebury henge continues to be used as a rag tree). Offerings might also be left for rather more perplexing reasons, such as the Christmas tree festooned with baubles and tinsel found in West Kennet Longbarrow at winter solstice 2000! There may be issues of what constitutes suitable practices in such circumstances – in particular, arguments about what constitutes 'too many' or inappropriate offerings, and a tension between those who welcome some evidence of living engagement between human people and other-than-human people, and those who consider any trace to be unacceptable (e.g. Fleming, 1999, no date a, b). This is not (as it is sometimes presented) a straightforward divide between pagans and heritage management – some pagans appear more strict in their interpretations than some archaeologists or heritage managers, and not all excessive offerings may be left by

pagans. Yet some pagan authors (or authors read by people attempting to learn how to be 'pagan') actively promote these practices, without discussion (as other pagans point out) of effects on site, geology or wildlife. This is a debate to which we are contributing elsewhere (e.g. Blain and Wallis, 2002b, 2006b; Letcher et al., forthcoming; Wallis and Blain, 2003; and via talks, internet site and email discussion groups). Clearly, as a matter of concern, archaeologists should be aware of and respond to these issues.

REBURIAL

Pagan engagements with the past extend beyond the day-to-day use of sites for ceremonies, and some pagan theorizing of land adopts indigenous stances from elsewhere about those who dwell in that landscape – possibly the builders of the monuments or those who earlier engaged with sacred places, and how their remains today should be treated. Our project is exploring the emerging political issue of treatment afforded to pre-Christian human remains: pagans and others are currently calling for excavated remains to be reburied with suitable ceremony and respect (see, e.g. *Honouring the Ancient Dead (HAD)*, <http://www.honour.org.uk>). Arguably this issue will intensify as landscaping at Stonehenge (new visitor centre, tunnel, etc.) develops over the long term. Here, we engage with some of the more contentious ramifications of the focus on 'sacred ancestors'.

The politics of the reburial of prehistoric human remains and associated artefacts has been a long-standing 'hot topic' elsewhere, for instance in the USA and Australia. 'Repatriation' has since become an important issue in the UK. For instance, a Ghost Dance shirt brought to the UK by Buffalo Bill was returned in 2000 to the Lakota (Sioux) by Glasgow's Kelvingrove Museum to the accompaniment of considerable publicity, while in 2001 the Royal College of Surgeons revised its policy on considering the return of human remains following requests from indigenous groups. And, a working group set up in 2002 to examine 'the current legal status of human remains within the collections of publicly funded Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom' has recently (Department

for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003) made recommendations for dealing with requests for the return of human remains, notably the assessment of claims by an independent expert panel – greeted with approval by the World Archaeological Council (WAC). This working group does not, however, make explicit recommendations with regard to British material. Meanwhile, British pagans, drawing on such indigenous claims and, now, the response of the working group, have been calling for the ‘return to the earth’ or reburial of prehistoric remains. They are not alone in this call, nor is their voice a ‘fringe’ one: recently on a British archaeology email list archaeologists and museum curators were discussing unease among members of the public when seeing prehistoric human remains on display, and some revealed considerable sympathy for the call for (at least) their removal from public view. Pagan calls, though, go further, with reports in the national press and pagan magazines (see, e.g. de Bruxelles’ article ‘Pagans angry at Christian burial’ in *The Times*, 24 October 1999 and articles by Davies in *The Druid’s Voice* in recent years, e.g. Davies, 1997, 1998/99).

Through their rituals, pagans may identify themselves as spiritually allied with the prehistoric peoples who built British prehistoric monuments. Rites at megalithic tombs and related sites – from Mesolithic pits (in the Stonehenge car park) to Bronze Age round barrows along parts of the Ridgeway – involving (perceived) direct communication with prehistoric ‘ancestors’ in particular, prompt these pagans to feel a responsibility to ancient peoples once interred there and the ‘sacred sites’ themselves. In turn, not only have contemporary pagans been collaborating with site managers in site welfare, such as picking up litter and removing chalk graffiti, but they have been attending to issues of ‘ancestor’ welfare; i.e. concerns over the archaeological excavation and storage of human remains and artefacts, even challenging the excavation process itself.

Pagans have framed their approaches to British reburial in language similar to that of Native Americans and other indigenous communities voicing similar concerns. The words of British Druid Order member Davies are particularly striking in this regard:

Every day in Britain, sacred Druid sites are surveyed and excavated, with associated finds being catalogued and stored for the archaeological record. Many of these sites include the sacred burials of our ancestors. Their places of rest are opened during the excavation, their bones removed and placed in museums for the voyeur to gaze upon, or stored in cardboard boxes in archaeological archives ... I believe we, as Druids, should be saying ‘Stop this now. These actions are disrespectful to our ancestors.’ When archaeologists desecrate a site through excavation and steal our ancestors and their guardians ... It is a theft ... We should assert our authority as the physical guardians of esoteric lore. We should reclaim our past. (Davies, 1997: 12–13)

Davies’ view clearly has an indigenous-inspired tone to it. Given that many pagans, neo-shamans in particular, actively engage with indigenous spiritual practices – however contentious this may be – such rhetoric is not surprising, and in this sense, pagans perceive themselves as ‘new indigenes’. To Davies, reburial of these looted bones ‘makes perfect sense; bones are living people and should therefore be respected and ceremonially reburied’ (Davies, 1998/99: 11), and he outlines how pagans should get directly involved in this issue:

I speak for the ancestors and guardians of the land, those spirits not currently represented in the archaeological record ... The Druid or Pagan shaman can use their gifts as ‘harmonic bridges’ to communicate between the realities of archaeology, land developers and Pagan Druids ... Druids should join together and encourage debate between archaeologists and museums in the reburial issue. (Davies, 1998/99: 10–12)

At first glance, individual pagans and pagan groups do not have agreed core beliefs or practices, let alone centralized spiritual beliefs concerning disposal of the dead. Nor is their discourse on ‘ancestors’, in a ‘multicultural Britain’, clear-cut (and nor should we expect it to be): while there are right-wing agencies caught up in exclusionary ‘blood-and-soil’ issues, the majority of pagans walk

a liberal line of ethnic tolerance and interethnic dialogue. Nonetheless, in the 'time of tribes', the reburial issue is gathering momentum and coherency. Stonehenge, within the context of the Management Plan and subsequent contested and changing proposals of a tunnel to replace part of the A303 (now, in 2006, subject of another round of 'consultation'), has for some years been a focus for the British reburial issue. In an earlier 'consultation' round, Philip 'Greywolf' Shallcross, of the British Druid Order, asked a National Trust representative:

... if there was any possibility that priests used to working with the spirits of our ancestors could get access when such burials were uncovered and could make ritual for the spirits of the dead ... He expressed his personal sympathy to the idea. Inspired by this initial contact, I wrote a letter to some appropriate folk in English Heritage and the National Trust. In it, I expressed my concern that any burials found might simply end up in boxes in a museum basement. I asked for access to burials on site when they were uncovered, for permission to make ritual before burials were removed, and also whether it would be possible to re-bury the ancestral remains after a suitable period of study ... The National Trust are putting my letter forward to the next meeting of the Stonehenge Archaeology Group and I'm awaiting developments. (personal communication, 2000)

After meetings with the liaison group established to discuss the future of Stonehenge, Greywolf had this to say:

I've come to focus on respect and reburial as my primary reasons for being involved in the talks. I don't like the idea of any remains that may be uncovered during the work ending up either in a museum display or filed away in a cardboard box in a storeroom. I have been, and will continue asking for any remains that are found to be treated with respect and then returned to the earth as near as possible to their original burial sites, preferably with any accompanying grave goods and with suitable ritual. (personal communication, 2001)

And there is considerable support for such views within heritage and archaeology circles. Ideas of

respect loom large, and attempts to create space for dialogue between archaeologists and pagans can be seen in the 'Honouring the Ancient Dead' initiative previously referred to, and in a new attempt spearheaded by Davies to bring together people to consider how such respect might be articulated. The perception that pagans do not 'speak with one voice' is one that has caused consternation within the pagan initiative 'PEBBLE', now attempting to represent issues of religious discrimination to governmental and other bodies. Yet indigenous religions elsewhere do not 'speak with one voice' – and divisions within major faith traditions such as most obviously Christianity or Islam are well documented and respected.

An event (21 November 2003) at the British Museum facilitated the re-engagement of a London-based Maori community (Ngati Ranana) with various *Taonga* ('living treasures' – what many in the west would misleadingly and too simply term 'ritual artefacts') collected during the Cook voyages (and others since), exemplifying how a mutually beneficial and dialogic relationship between indigenous peoples and the current curators of such 'sacred' artefacts can be established. While indigenous communities may be able (and are compelled by, for example Federal legislation in the USA) to demonstrate genetic or cultural links to satisfy the law, addressing the extent to which pagans can claim British prehistoric remains are 'theirs' is to miss the point. First, dialogue between heritage management and pagan 'new indigenes' is already in action at several sites including Stanton Moor, the Rollright Stones and, most noticeably, Stonehenge: 'round table' talks have been developed between pagans (and others) and the custodians of Stonehenge to negotiate solstice celebrations and other rituals. Recent pagan-heritage negotiations over sites of prehistoric burial and associated artefacts, too, suggest similar – respectful – processes are in effect relating to the British 'reburial issue'. And second, the issue here is one of respect and reburial rather than repatriation. Most pagans, whatever their claims on the past, generally do not claim an exclusive relationship to 'the ancestors'. Further, the issue here – rather than being one solely of academic/heritage discourse versus public understanding, or

of (scientific) authenticity versus (perceived 'wacky' pagan) inauthenticity – is of multivocality as well as forms of knowledge and power. More reactionary archaeologists may assume they have the power to make such charges of inauthenticity because 'scientific' archaeological claims are perceived to be more objectively substantive. But such positivist dichotomies (of authenticity/ inauthenticity, validity/invalidity, etc.) and staunchly empiricist approaches not only impose a new metanarrative, but are also incompatible with contemporary reflexive archaeologies and with current social science and humanities research methods generally. In the current politically aware and interpretative climate of archaeology, there is need for archaeologists, heritage managers and others to be self-reflective, accountable and transparent, and for them to open up their research/ data to external scrutiny. So the issue is really whether archaeologists are prepared to address such pluralities and engage with them dialogically, rather than dismiss them as 'fringe' and 'eccentric'.

CONSTRUCTING 'ANCESTORS'

There are still further understandings of 'ancestors' to be considered. Such other dimensions including implicit constructions of ethnicity and 'race'. Pagan understandings of ancestors range from 'those previously living on the land', through 'family members' to explicitly ethnic constructions of 'Celt' or 'Saxon'. 'Ancestors' therefore forms another contested category within this research: how do the 'new indigenes' of our research understand their relation to ancestors and 'heritage'? When is 'protection of heritage' an offering both to 'ancestors' and to those – all those – with an interest in Britain today, and when does it become exclusionary and even racist?

This issue is a thorny one for pagans to deal with. We mentioned above 'blood-and-soil' issues. An unthinking assumption of 'Celtic' ancestors as underpinning a claim to knowledge of the land is documented by Gallagher (1999). Ethnicity and spirituality are linked within other religious traditions, so there should not be undue surprise that paganisms come in for their share of appropriation on other than spiritual grounds:

'Celtic' and 'Saxon' beliefs become then a matter of 'blood' and 'rights', and an emerging identity politics threatens to destabilize, not necessarily paganisms themselves, but the public perception of paganisms. For instance, do people claiming to be pagan seek to 'protect British heritage' because of an interest in history and archaeology, because they speak to 'ancestors' who previously worked the land or because they use claims to 'indigeneity' to exclude others or promote right-wing causes? These issues are not, of course, nearly as clear-cut as this presentation. In Australia, Ghassan Hage (2000) has indicated a discursive slippage between a 'middle-of-the-road' assumption of comfortable non-racism and an extreme right 'white power' grouping: and the existence of the extreme right, he claims, renders it possible for the middle-roaders to feel comfortable with their own moderate exclusivity, by having someone to point to as 'racist' and thus avoiding consideration of their own position. Recent exchanges in the letters pages of *Steadfast Magazine* similarly attest to the burgeoning issues of nationalism, race, ethnicity and immigration among those defining themselves as moderate, non-racist and 'English' vis-à-vis ancient 'English' ancestors (<http://www.hsites.co.uk/steadf/pages/home.html>).

In the rhetoric of right-wing parties in today's Britain, 'protecting our heritage' looms large – a phrase in which each word requires its own deconstruction. A task for pagans and heritage personnel alike is to distinguish how and why – and what – 'heritage' is to be 'protected', and protected from what? Stanton Moor protected from quarrying is a long way from a circle protected from encroachment of perceived 'alien' or 'foreign' others, or from such 'protection' being a factor in inter-religious friction. Yet right-wing parties may attract pagan (and other) members by emphasizing that *heritage* – including pre-Christian religious practice – is important. Particularly where such heritage appears elsewhere undervalued, it is rather easy for people who feel themselves and their beliefs under threat to regard statements of 'protection' as relating specifically to themselves and the places they hold dear: and equally easy for members of right-wing organizations to make statements about 'protecting

all British heritage' that appeal largely to those who look to indigenes elsewhere for inspiration. As previously mentioned, the 'blood link' has been identified (e.g. in Tasmania or in Canada) as transferring a form of spiritual 'ownership' of land that may form the only counterbalancing claim in an administrative and bureaucratic system that is still rooted in colonialism.

Transplanted to a British political context, this concept of indigeneity becomes increasingly problematic: but is largely ignored by official stances that there are no 'indigenes' in Britain (which may compound the problem by seemingly denying perceptions and constituting, in the eyes of 'new indigenes', further oppression). A statement such as '[p]eople care about the historic environment' (English Heritage, 2002: 2), ignores how this concept of heritage, fed by a diet of (largely atheoretical) television archaeology, becomes part of the structuring of identities within postmodern Britain, serving, perhaps, as part of the network of ideas that apparently links, but may also divide, the liquid 'tribes' of today who each claim their own 'authentic' and nostalgic connections with 'mythic communities' of present and past (Maffesoli, 1996: 148) – based on what they do and see. Maffesoli points out that the 'jarring and imperfect everyday life' and its 'everyday knowledge' do not sit well with the custodians of official versions of truth, the 'upholders of institutional knowledge' (Maffesoli, 1996: 148). In this rather difficult area of heritage, blood and 'race', a reflexive situating and contextualizing of knowledge may serve much better than a mystification of 'origins'. One such example of this among pagans is the increasing interest in animistic relationships with 'the land' (of 'Wessex', of 'England', of 'Britain', etc.), involving engagements with local other-than-human people – from tree people, bird people and stone people to the diversity of human-ancestor-people who have ever been remembered in the living landscape, with tombs and other features, from earliest prehistory to the present. The emphasis here moves away from 'what is an ancestor' and 'who ethnically can be an ancestor' towards an inclusivity based on local engagements with the landscape and its diversity of 'life'/lives', both human and other-than-human.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that the representation of the past in the present, particularly the discourse of 'heritage', is deployed and understood in diverse ways, even among such specific interest groups as 'heritage managers' and 'pagans'. Contest over the interpretation of the past, including perceived connections to 'ancestors', and contest over physical access, such as at Stonehenge, engage with the important and enduring issue of who owns the past. Our *Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights Project*, with research stretching over the last five years, indicates that pagan engagements with the past have developed beyond campaigns for physical access (to such sites as Stonehenge), to engage with concerns over how sites are curated by heritage bodies (as with Silbury 'hole'), as well as respect for human remains, that question aspects of the archaeological project itself. In the main, despite the rather simplistic perceptions referred to above, pagan perspectives on such issues are increasingly sophisticated and inclusive, with respect for the past being a point of common ground between pagans and heritage bodies – the 'spiritual' respect and love for the past among pagans meeting the 'intellectual' respect and passion for the past felt by archaeologists. Such interests in the past are always discursively constituted but while some pagans are embroiled in 'blood and soil' issues, others are interested in the 'doing' of engagement with ancestors rather than the defining or ethnicity of particular ancestors. Engagements with local living landscapes, amongst a diversity of life, become opportunities for re-locating self and community in positively empowering ways.

The installation of Anish Kapoor's sculpture 'Turning the World Inside out' (1996) at the King's Men circle (Rollright Stones) in the summer of 2003 (Figure 3), demonstrates, for us, some of these issues, returning also to creative uses of sacred/prehistoric space and ways in which sites can be managed as 'living' and changing environments. This installation, to celebrate the centenary of the Art Fund, facilitated types of interpretations and engagements that would not otherwise have been experienced (see also Wallis, 2006). The installation was negotiated by the manager and trustee group, which includes pagan members. Comments from

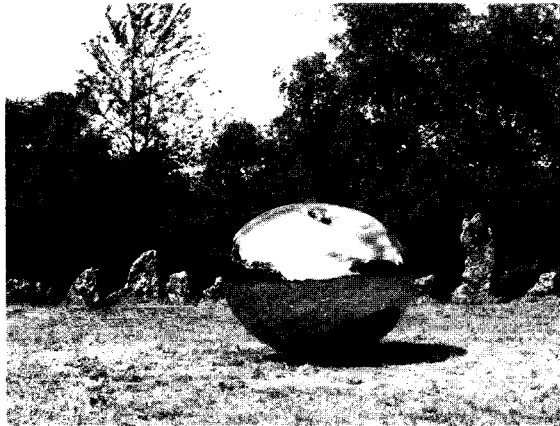


Figure 3: Installation of *Turning the World Inside Out* (Anish Kapoor, 1996) at the Rollright Stones, Oxfordshire (July 2003).

'visitors' indicate a wide range of responses to the installation, as contributing to the ambience of the circle and as disrupting this. As an 'incomer' the installation itself becomes an interpretation – fleeting (the installation was temporary) and, to most, fascinating, though some thought it did not 'belong', becoming intrusion rather than interpretation. To us it becomes a metaphor for the interpretation and reinterpretation of site and land, changing with sky and cloud, at once appearing a window into another circle while reflecting an altered landscape – and viewer/photographer who cannot escape the transformation. A reflexive archaeology, indeed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge the support of the ESRC through grant RES-000-22-0074 which enabled preparation of this paper and presentation at the Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG) Conference, University of Lampeter, December 2003.

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