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## **Sacred, secular, or sacrilegious? prehistoric sites, pagans and the Sacred Sites project in Britain**

BLAIN, J. and WALLIS, R. J.

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# **(Im)permanence: Cultures In/Out of Time**

## **Sacred, secular, or sacrilegious? Prehistoric sites, pagans and the Sacred Sites project in Britain**

Dr Jenny Blain, Sheffield Hallam University

Dr Robert J. Wallis, Richmond University, London

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores issues and tensions developing within today's Britain around prehistoric 'sacred sites' and their appropriation by a wide range of interested or concerned groups. In examining and theorising competing constructions of 'sacredness' and its inscription today, we will draw on examples from well-known and less well-known British prehistoric places, to illustrate how claims and appropriations emerge from spiritual and political processes, and to question how places are themselves agents in the demarcation of their own sacredness. We focus on contemporary pagans as 'new-indigenes' and their engagements with the past and performances of spirituality on the stage of the heritage of Britain, as examined in our 'Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights Project' ([www.sacredsites.or.uk](http://www.sacredsites.or.uk)), now in its fifth year. From the deposition of votive offerings at West Kennet long barrow and long-running disputes over access to Stonehenge as a 'sacred site', to the display of ritual paraphernalia derived from archaeological contexts (a Thor's hammer pendant, for instance), pagans perform their worldviews and engage with heritage in diverse ways. Pagan re-enchantment of the past not only re-replaces heritage, myth, artefacts, 'cultures' in/out of time, highlighting (im)permanence as a linking theme in our analysis, but also disrupts the fixed and unchanging 'past' imposed onto heritage by much heritage discourse – challenging the permanent to yield, bend and accommodate.

## Short Author Biographies

Dr Jenny Blain is Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Science and Law at Sheffield Hallam University, where she leads the MA in Social Science Research Methods. Much of her teaching is on qualitative methods, discourse and critical ethnography. Research interests include constructions of identity within Western paganisms and neo-shamanisms, gender and sexuality, sacred sites, spirituality and marginalised groups. She is, with Robert Wallis, co-director of the ‘Sacred Sites, Contested Rights/Rites’ project, which was recently funded by the ESRC. Major recent publications include ‘Nine Worlds of Seid-magic: Ecstasy and Neo-Shamanism in North European Paganism’ (Routledge, 2002), and she is a co-editor of ‘Researching Paganisms: Religious Experiences and Academic Methodologies’ (AltaMira 2004).

School of Social Science and Law  
Collegiate Crescent Campus  
Sheffield Hallam University  
Sheffield S10 2BP  
Phone: 0114 225 4413  
Email: [J.Blain@shu.ac.uk](mailto:J.Blain@shu.ac.uk) / [jenny.blain@freeuk.com](mailto:jenny.blain@freeuk.com)

Dr Robert J Wallis is Associate Professor of Visual Culture and Associate Director of the MA in Art History at Richmond University in London, and an Associate Lecturer with the Open University. With Jenny Blain, he directs the ‘Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights: Contemporary Pagan Engagements with the Past’ project ([www.sacredsites.org.uk](http://www.sacredsites.org.uk)), and their book of the same title, is due to be published by Sussex Academic Press in 2006. Wallis has published extensively on the archaeology and anthropology of art and religion, especially shamanistic rock art traditions and neo-shamanic representations of the past, including ‘Shamans / neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary Paganisms’ (Routledge 2003), and ‘A Permeability of Boundaries: New Approaches to the Archaeology of Art, Religion and Folklore’ (BAR 2001). Among other projects, he is currently working on a ‘Historical Dictionary of Shamanism’ (due with Scarecrow Press 2006) and a book critically engaging with perceived associations in popular and academic discourses between altered consciousness and art from prehistory to the present.

Richmond the American International University in London  
1 St Alban’s Grove, Kensington, London W8 5BN  
Phone: 020 7368 8414  
Fax: 020 7368 8452  
Email: [robert.wallis@richmond.ac.uk](mailto:robert.wallis@richmond.ac.uk)

## Introduction

Decolonising anthropologies and archaeologies have explored issues of 'sacred' sites and the contested views of indigenes and management. 'Sacredness' within Britain – among the most secularised of today's societies and without 'indigenous peoples' – is generally assumed to relate to Christian or other 'World Religion' spirituality and to be something that is inscribed in place by people, with the building of a church or mosque for instance. This model conflicts with ideas from indigenous spiritualities, of sacredness residing in land or place and being noticed by human people as part of the 'story in the land'. Indeed, 'new indigenes' – pagans, travellers, and others – have taken up ideas of ancient places as 'sacred sites', and this nomenclature has found its way into the discourse of policymakers and heritage custodians. One person's celebration of 'sacredness', however, may be another's 'sacrilege'. In some quarters, 'heritage' is to be respected but not used – the 'look, don't touch' dictum applies to monuments such as Stonehenge – and pagans draw a parallel between their own challenges to honour ancestors or deities at some sites, and Christian use of cathedrals which may equally be tourist destinations and 'heritage' buildings. Further issues include not only what types of practices or celebrations may be 'suitable', but whether other uses of sacred sites – such as the excavation of human remains – should be seen as sacrilegious. Pagans 'perform' their worldviews and engage with heritage in diverse ways, from the deposition of votive offerings at West Kennet long barrow and long-running disputes over access to Stonehenge as a 'sacred site', to the display of ritual paraphernalia derived from archaeological contexts (a Thor's hammer pendant, for instance).

This paper introduces our *Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/ Rights Project* ([www.sacredsites.or.uk](http://www.sacredsites.or.uk)), now in its fifth year, and explores issues and tensions developing within today's Britain around prehistoric 'sacred sites' and 'heritage', and their appropriation by a wide range of interested or concerned groups. We make use of concepts of 'performance' articulated through performance approaches within anthropology<sup>1</sup> and on the theorizing of Schechner<sup>2</sup> and others; and on issues of the politics of postmodernity or late modernity, 'neo-tribes'<sup>3</sup> and 'liquidity'<sup>4</sup>, while critically evaluating the implications of these understandings for practitioners<sup>5</sup>. In examining and theorising competing constructions of 'sacred' heritage and its inscription and performance today, we draw on examples from well-known and less well-known British prehistoric places, to display how claims and appropriations emerge from spiritual and political processes and to question how places are themselves agents in the demarcation of their own sacredness.

## Situating researchers and research

Reflexivity is crucial to our project: we begin by situating our own performances of 'academia', as an anthropologist and an archaeologist caught between teaching, research and university life, and between the worldviews, discourses and understandings of colleagues, research participants and other audiences. We could say, too, the worldviews of those ancestors, deities and other-than-human people who likewise participate in the constructed cultural meanings of those we meet. We are looking at 'the past in the imagination of the present' – the representation of the past – and our

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes-Freeland, F. 1998. *Ritual, Performance, Media*. London: Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Schechner, R. 1993. *The Future of Ritual: Writings of Culture and Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> Maffesoli, M. 1996. *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. London: Sage.

<sup>4</sup> Bauman, Z. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>5</sup> Blain, J. and R.J. Wallis 2006. Ritual reflections, practitioner meanings: disputing the terminology of neo-shamanic performance. *Journal of Ritual Studies* 20(1):21-26.

interest is in how today's performances of humanity are informed by, and located within, understandings of pasts, and how past and present are not separate but each held intrinsically within the sets of practice, geographically and temporarily located, that we observe whether through ethnographic research or examination of material culture. We situate ourselves, as heathens, as part of this research<sup>6</sup>: where personal experience evinces our own partiality, it also brings nuance to our particular project.

The issue of worldview has been considerably unpacked within anthropological theory and discourse. Older understandings have focused on 'culture' and materiality as either determinant or product. More recently, issues of fluidity, change and flexibility, and agency have come to the fore. Cultures, though, however changeable, are learned and awareness, consciousness of 'self' and other, gaze, shift as the cultural boundaries are crossed. The idea of anthropologist as a broker between worldviews<sup>7</sup> or a translator<sup>8</sup> includes the reality of imperfection and partiality: the translation is imprecise, sometimes impossible; the brokerage may fail its task. Learning a culture and shifting focus, viewpoint, gaze and stance, takes time. Guédon<sup>9</sup> comments on her work in living among the Déné and learning to see the landscape as they do – a task of twenty years or more.

A further situating concerns the 'cultures' of our research and their location within the political geography of today's Britain; a locating which is contested. Britain, we are told, has no 'indigenous' groups: we are all, simply, 'British'. While this view may attempt to take partial account of the complexity of British society and its intricate historic constitution, we feel that it lends a false authority to the belief structures which today underpin establishment constructions of heritage and landscape. Be we Christian, Atheist, Hindu, Agnostic, Buddhist, Muslim or 'Other', there are assumptions that the ideals of rationality and materiality will focus our gaze and our discursive practices, whereas Guédon's Déné hosts were legitimated in their 'different' views of landscape by their assumed – and cultural, social, and political – unique historical relationship with the land. Thus, we make use of the concept 'new-indigenous' to describe world-views and those who hold them<sup>10</sup>. It does not refer to (real or imagined) ancestry embedded in place – but to deliberate adoption of worldviews that may be, in some sense, closer to the 'indigenous' perspectives of Guédon's hosts: in particular it relates to the perception of a 'living landscape', a land that sings its own songs to the hearer and that is described within animist understandings of agency and embodiment.

## Situating the performance

Heritage sites hold an immense attraction for many people today and visual representation is

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<sup>6</sup> E.g.: Blain, J. 2002. *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic*. London: Routledge; Blain, J., D. Ezzy and G. Harvey (eds) 2004. *Researching Paganisms: Religious Experiences and Academic Methodologies*. Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira; Wallis, R.J. 2004. Between the Worlds: Autoarchaeology and neo-Shamans. In: J. Blain, D. Ezzy and G. Harvey (eds). *Researching Paganisms: Religious Experiences and Academic Methodologies* 191-215. Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira.

<sup>7</sup> Blain, J. 1998. Presenting constructions of identity and divinity: Ásatrú and Oracular Seidhr. In Scott Grills (ed.) *Fieldwork Methods: Accomplishing Ethnographic Research*. Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Layton, R. 1997. Representing and translating people's place in the landscape of northern Australia. In: Allison James, Jenny Hockey and Andrew Dawson (eds) *After Writing Culture: Epistemology and Praxis in Contemporary Anthropology* 122-143. London: Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> Guédon, Marie-Françoise 1994. Dene ways and the ethnographer's culture. In: David E. Young and Jean-Guy Goulet (eds) *Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters: the Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience*: 39-70. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press.

<sup>10</sup> Blain, J. and R.J. Wallis 2002. A living landscape? Pagans and archaeological discourse. *3rd Stone: Archaeology, Folklore and Myth – The Magazine for the New Antiquarian* 43 (Summer): 20-27.

prominent, albeit mediated re-presentations, not neutral, objective or impartial interpretations<sup>11</sup>. 'Heritage' and 'archaeology' programmes, especially those which appear to address viewers' curiosity about either local or 'iconic' scenes, are consistently popular. Cinema, in a similar vein, offers real or imagined Egyptian, Mesoamerican and other exotic ancient cultures for consumption. Stonehenge, as the best known 'British' skyline of 'prehistory', becomes a symbol to sell almost anything: advertising utilises such iconic stone circles, rock art and other well-known ancient visual culture so regularly that we may fail to register its ubiquity on a day-to-day basis. Stonehenge, though, perhaps succeeds best at selling itself (at least 'itself' as the Stonehenge offered to us by English Heritage) – an idea that appeals to people world-wide. Stonehenge is a place where people 'perform', a theatre, one could say: what they perform may be tourism (of various kinds), management (at various levels), Druidry (of various Orders), re-enactment (of various imagined pasts), spirituality for today (among various pagans), resistance to authority, memory of atrocity (the 1985 'Battle of the Beanfield'<sup>12</sup>), or hope of freedom<sup>13</sup>. The performance may be received differently from how it is intended, and performances may be virtual or framed by videotape.

Winter solstice celebrations at Stonehenge in 2005 marks a case in point. Entrance to Stonehenge on a day-to-day basis is by ticket only and access is limited by the rope cordoning off the megaliths. 'Managed open access', facilitated – or restricted, depending on your point of view – by English Heritage, curators of the monument (the environs are managed by the National Trust), is scheduled at solstices and equinoxes, allowing pagan and other celebrants to enter the monument free of charge, including access to the stone circle, albeit with 'Conditions of Entry'. Sunrise at Stonehenge, around 08.10 on the 'shortest day', is the central point of the managed open access. The moment of Winter Solstice (e.g. 18.35 GMT on 21<sup>st</sup> December in 2005) is not a time of open access; the period of dawn is, with the stones open from 7.45 to 9am. Disputes over appropriate opening times for pagan festivals are an enduring issue. At the winter solstice in 2001, a number of druids, heathens and others planned to make their pilgrimage to Stonehenge on the 21st - 'as we always have done' (Tim Sebastian of the Secular Order of Druids, pers.com.). English Heritage deemed the 'right' day for solstice dawn to be the 22nd, according to astronomical data. People turned up on the 21<sup>st</sup> nonetheless, and English Heritage refused to allow people inside the fenced-off stones. After some time the police, concerned over public safety with people gathered next to and buffering into the A344 road, instructed English Heritage to open the gate. We entered and a pleasant, cold, sunrise was experienced by all.

This situation is particularly interesting: English Heritage are not only controlling the terms on which Stonehenge is accessed, but also stipulating which is the correct day of the festival – in effect telling pagans and other celebrants when their festival days should be. Harvey<sup>14</sup>, writing soon after the event, stated: '...[English] Heritage were doing nothing, insisting we were there on "the wrong

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<sup>11</sup> Smiles, S. and S. Moser (eds) 2005. *Envisioning the Past: Archaeology and the Image*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Wallis, R.J. and J. Blain 2006. Re-presenting spirit: Heathenry, neo-indigenes, and the imaged past. In: I.A. Russell (ed.) *Image, Simulation and Meaning in Archaeology: On archaeology and the Industrialisation and Marketing of Heritage and Tourism*. in press.

<sup>12</sup> E.g.: Chippindale, C. 1986. Stoned Henge: Events and Issues at the Summer Solstice, 1985. *World Archaeology* 18(1):38-58; Wallis, R.J. 2003. *Shamans / neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary Pagans*. London: Routledge.

<sup>13</sup> Blain, J. and R.J. Wallis 2004. Sacred sites, contested rites/rights: contemporary pagan engagements with the past. *Journal of Material Culture* 9(3): 237-261.

<sup>14</sup> Harvey, G. 2001. News: Winter Solstice at Stonehenge. Available online on the Megalithic Portal pages edited by Andy Burnham: [www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=2146410508](http://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=2146410508)

day”. So much for freedom of religion!’ In 2005, there was a growing call for open access for the Winter Solstice sunset: pagans have encountered archaeological sources (literature and television programmes) suggesting that the winter solstice sunset was the most significant time to the ancestors who used the site. Clearly, even if they are not bound to *authenticity*, many pagans are interested in historical accuracy where possible. It is one thing to wear a white robe based on Stukeley's notion of ancient druids which has now, through use over a century or more, become 'authentic tradition'; yet apparently quite another thing to want to honour the ancestors in the most appropriate way possible by following current archaeological theory and celebrating winter solstice sunset rather than sunrise. These understandings of times and their relation to place, to us, stem from worldview and approach. On the one hand, what does it matter 'when' druids, heathens etc celebrate? On another, many look to the winter sunset as the most sacred time, the turn of the year. We are watching with interest this changing discourse among pagans and pagan dialogue with English Heritage vis-à-vis open access to Stonehenge – and Stonehenge itself as the location for these situated performances.

### Performing the situation

The public performance of paganisms, most evident at places such as the stone circles of Stonehenge and Avebury, can be understood in many ways<sup>15</sup>. Part of the remit of our Sacred Sites project is the constitution of identity and meaning through 'performance' at sites – when such 'performance' is itself in contention, both as the right to access place and space, and the ability to define what is done there. The term 'performance' becomes problematic, even while it indexes anthropological theory, when applied to issues of dealing with other-than-human people, as we've discussed elsewhere<sup>16</sup>. Rather than 'performance' we are preferring to talk about agency or active accomplishment of meaning, but the concepts of performance and performativity, resonate within theories of accomplishment, agency and structure. For Schechner<sup>17</sup>, important aspects of performance are its deliberateness ('behaviour twice behaved'), its fleetingness, and its transformatory potential: in the fleeting occurrences we describe and engage with, what is accomplished is both impermanent, in its transitoriness, and transformatory in its effects upon history and biography of humans, landscape, and others.

There are many performances 'at' Avebury, and performances 'of' Avebury. Among the most common – and most noted by the media – are Druid celebrations of solstices and equinoxes (and other pagan festivals such as Beltane and Samhain), usually involving procession around the banks, with a specific format that has become somewhat standardised, including meeting at the 'Devil's Chair' stone. There are, though, other groups and other performances, in different parts of the Avebury 'complex' of monuments.

In July 2005, I [Jenny] am driving through Avebury... In the avenue, though, are people clearly intent on what they are about: a neo-shamanic group from Toronto area, I find, the 'wolf clan'. They have brought water from their own land to offer to the stones.

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<sup>15</sup> Wallis, R.J. 2002. Waking the Ancestors: Neo-shamanism and Archaeology. In: G. Harvey (ed.) *Shamanism: A Reader*. 402-423. London: Routledge. Reprinted in Graham Harvey (ed.) 2003. *Shamanism: A Reader*. London: Routledge. pp. 402-423.

<sup>16</sup> Blain, J. and R.J. Wallis 2006. Ritual reflections, practitioner meanings: disputing the terminology of neo-shamanic performance. *Journal of Ritual Studies* 20(1):21-26.

<sup>17</sup> Schechner, R. 1993. *The Future of Ritual: Writings of Culture and Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.

I park, take photographs, and discover on returning to my car that the muffler is falling off it: well, Avebury is a better place for this to happen, by far, than the M4 or M1 motorways! In search of a shady spot where I can get cell-phone reception, I am in the south circle when the neo-shamanic group – who have processed around the landscape – descend from the banks. I watch as they attract the few tourists, with cameras, on this non-festival day, and watch the onlookers who carefully do not 'watch' them, as they engage with space and place.

Later, I speak to their apparent 'leader', who says she does not want to 'intellectualise' her group's engagement but that their practice is both 'Celtic' (a much-disputed term) and Seneca (an Iroquoian nation from what is now the Canada/US border area). While I am rather puzzled by the association of either with Avebury, and by her asking if I know the 'great white mother', I respect her tiredness and the work that she and her people have done at the site – a pilgrimage in process, in the heat of the day, walking to and touching each stone. I respect, also, their abstinence from leaving traces that will affect the engagement of others. She says she has noted, and respected, my acknowledgement and partial avoidance of their engagement with the site. I talk of pilgrimage, and, to make a link to show that I am not straightforwardly an observer, of my own 'shamanic' practices. In short, both her people, and I, have 'performed' Avebury – each the Avebury that we know – and both been noted by the other, as have those watching (us both) with cameras in hand.

A further example of shamanic accomplishment at Avebury, discussed in our recent article for *The Journal of Ritual Studies*<sup>18</sup>, is here summarised:

At the winter solstice in 2001, we sat out in West Kennet long barrow, an Early Neolithic 'tomb' (and arguably much more than this) in the Avebury landscape, for a specific purpose: to engage with ancestor spirits. Wearing shamanic regalia, surrounded by (human) companions, I (Robert) was initially a 'master of ceremonies'. Vigorously shaking my shrill sounding belled rattle I opened sacred space, called on other-than-human people to attend...

Gungnir, Draupnir, Woden's Eye;  
Sleipnir, Hingatir, Gondlir's Cry;  
Galdr-father, Vardlokur sing...

Starting up a galdr – chant or sung spell – for the god Woden I was soon accompanied by a monotonous drum, my friends beating out the rhythm with their hands, and other voices joined the chant, drowning mine...

Was this a performance? Who was the performer? Who was the audience? Where did the 'performance' begin and reality end? – Where are the boundaries? This was a good time for the rite: at night, at Yule, in the cold is less public and more amenable to focussed, deep trance work. At the end of our time in this magical place, the active accomplishment of meaning was successful, each of us agreeing not only that the ritual was powerful and enriching on a personal level, but that the long barrow – its wight, and the ancestors present – in turn had appreciated and benefited from our rite.

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<sup>18</sup> Blain, J. and R.J. Wallis 2006. Ritual reflections, practitioner meanings: disputing the terminology of neo-shamanic performance. *Journal of Ritual Studies* 20(1):21-26.



In our understanding of new-indigenous accomplishment in these places, such places as West Kennet long barrow and Avebury henge are not simply stages upon which to perform paganisms, they become a part of the doing or accomplishment, as agents themselves. We see this as 'another way of knowing' heritage which does not directly challenge the conservation of sites, but by actively engaging with them, may disrupt the 'look don't touch' mantra of heritage discourse<sup>19</sup>. Other pagan and alternative forms of engagement present other, more direct challenges, at times to conservation practices, at times in an attempt to further conservation. At Stonehenge, people standing on fallen stones – purposely, to gain a better view, or unintentionally due to the push of the crowd – has become an issue raised by English Heritage and discussed at Round Table meetings between the interest groups. For celebrants, a few people standing on the stones seems a minor issue, for the custodians 'stone standing' may damage rare lichens or the patina on the stones. In another instance, at the excavation of the small timber circle known as 'Seahenge' at Holme-next-the-Sea in Norfolk, pagan understandings included preservation – approval of English Heritage's proposal to preserve the site by removing it from the ravages of the sea, and the challenging of this agenda – that the circle should be left alone in situ, whether it be eroded over time or not (archaeologists were also split on the issue<sup>20</sup>). A tension between impermanence and conservation is evident: the 'freezing' of time implicit in many conservation efforts is problematic for pagans and some archaeologists alike – those who might wish to excavate further and raise again some of the great stones at Avebury, for instance – while many archaeologists accept that excavation has done more to 'damage' sites such as Stonehenge than could be done by any amount of pagans dancing to celebrate the solstice.

## Public performance

For some pagans, performing their paganism on the stage of Britain's heritage requires more than visits to sacred sites and making ritual there. For these pagans, direct action and protest offers a more active performance of their pagan identity and their honouring of ancient pagan (and other) ancestors. One current example is Prittlewell in Essex, with a Saxon cemetery including the burial site of the so-called 'Prittlewell Prince' nicknamed 'King of Bling'; a site of importance likened to the famous Sutton Hoo ship burials. The cemetery, at Priory Crescent, Southend-on-Sea, was excavated in 1923 and 1930, and most recently, in 2003, the 'princely burial' was found on the highest ground of the cemetery: a man, laid in a coffin within a timber-lined chamber (4 metres square by 1.5 metres deep), was accompanied by such high-status objects as bronze feasting bowls and cauldrons, drinking horns and glass vessels, a gaming set, a sword, a lyre - and a gold buckle, two gold coins and two small gold-foil crosses. The coins (dated to 600-650 CE) may have been placed in each hand of the 'king', while the crosses are thought to have been placed over his eyes. The find is crucial evidence in furthering our understanding of the conversion from paganism to Christianity. There is a possibility that further barrow burials may still exist on the site directly related to the 'prince'.

Now 'Camp Bling', an urban tree camp, has been established above the burial site: The cemetery is threatened by proposals for road construction (the F5 dual carriageway planned for the A127/A1159 Priory Crescent, scheduled for March 2006) – despite near-unanimous local public opposition. The road building would involve an 870 metre stretch of new carriageway estimated to cost £11.242 million (three times the initial estimates), and would have a major impact on the

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<sup>19</sup> Letcher, A., J. Blain and R.J. Wallis. 2006. Re-Viewing the Past: Discourse and Power in Images of Prehistory. In Mike Robinson and David Picard (eds.) *Tourism and Photography*: in press.

<sup>20</sup> Wallis, R.J. 2003. Shamans / neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary Pagans. London: Routledge.

surviving archaeology across the site. Fragile remains would likely be damaged by vibration and compaction during the construction of the road and subsequent road use. The Camp Bling community of pagans, local people and veteran road protestors is establishing a visitor center about the cemetery, the protest site, and the campaign to stop the road-building. For eco-pagans such as Adrian Harris, who has been protesting at various sites for some years, the difficult living conditions and unsettled protester lifestyle is part and parcel of performing his pagan-ness, and as such his commitment to the land and to the ancestors (pagan or otherwise) is part of the performance of what we term new-indigeneity. Perceived connections to the land and ancestors for these pagans is also expressed in terms reminiscent of Native American and Aboriginal Australian indigenous discourse pertaining to reburial. A growing call from pagans for the reburial of prehistoric human remains or at least permission to perform pagan ceremonies over human remains as they are excavated, has led to the formation of HAD, an organization (though not exclusively pagan) committed to 'Honouring the Ancient Dead' (<http://www.honour.org.uk/index.html>).

### **Re-constructing and displaying heritage**

Not all pagans perform their spirituality – their connection with archaeological material – so politically or so evidently. For instance, Heathens construct their spirituality by reclaiming and re-interpreting ideas, stories and artefacts, from academic reports of archaeological assemblages and mythologies, to alternative readings of the Norse sagas and prehistoric sacred sites. Heathen spirituality is expressed visually and publicly in a number of ways, such as the display of reproduced artefacts (Thor's hammer as a pendant), pilgrimages to sacred sites (and votive offerings left there) and 'visits' to museum collection displays of artefacts which offer direct visual (and other resonant) links to ancient religions. There are also less public though no less visual manifestations, from personal, internalised mythologies (e.g. understanding Odin as a patron shaman-god) to ritual equipment for private use (e.g. a rune-inscribed 'gandr' wand). Archaeological finds of rune rings, brooches with mythological associations (e.g. the two identical bird-shaped ornaments from Bejsebakken near Ålborg in Denmark, identified as the ravens of Odin), and so on, become items for reproduction for personal adornment – with display of spiritual identity, and linking to spiritual ancestors, as an imperative.

Wearing these sacred artefacts may mark a significant part of heathen identity, for those who choose to express or perform their identity visually. What for one visitor to Roskilde Viking Ship Museum (in Denmark) shop may simply be a trinket worn as adornment, may be to another a symbol loaded with meaning for constructing and displaying 'heathenness', and such sacred artefacts are widely available, not only in museum shops, but also in high street shops, at re-enactment fairs and at online stores. Other artefacts are available and utilised in heathen ritual, from reconstructions of a small image of what scholars widely agree is a representation of the god 'Freyr' (11<sup>th</sup>C, Rällinge, Lunda parish, Södermanland, Sweden; the original at Historiska Museet, Stockholm) and the small artefact variously identified as an image of the god Thor, or a gaming piece (c. 1000 CE, Iceland, in the National Museum of Iceland, Reykjavík), to much larger reconstructions, e.g. of rune-inscribed swords runes derived from burial contexts. Such visual culture – or visual representation of material culture – is mediated and subject to interpretation. The way in which certain artefacts are selected and visually presented shapes perceptions, expectations and ideas of the past. Artefacts as 'materialized ideology'<sup>21</sup> or embodied discourse convey not only the political processes of their first making (including accommodation and resistance to dominant discourses) but the tensions inherent

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<sup>21</sup> DeMarrais, E., L.J. Castillo & T. Earle, 1996. Ideology, Materialization and Power Strategies. *Current Anthropology* 37(1): 15-31.

in the contemporary cultural and political embedding of the (situated performance) of today's 'reconstructions'. Practitioners, too, find themselves subject to the charge of 'getting it wrong' when academic critics insist on 'authenticity': resulting in pressure on some practitioners to insist on documentation and cross-referencing of 'fact' about cultural artefacts and landscapes. Some however, may handle it differently: during fieldwork in Iceland, Jenny was interviewing Jörmundar Ingi Hansen, then leader of the Ásatrúarmenn, the largest Heathen group in Iceland, when they were interrupted by a telephone call from the press. An archaeologist was speculating that the 'Thor' statue was actually a representation of Christ. What did Jörmundar think of that? His reply was quite straightforward: Whatever the statue had been in the past, it was 'now, for us today, Thor'.

## Situating the knowledges

Relating performance to situation may seem obvious: a conventional 'performance' is located by stage and set, people act within space and place. We are trying to go beyond such understandings, into and through concepts of how knowledges arise or are constituted, within, through and between specifics of cultural, physical and political context. Such reflexivity refers not to simple reflection or researcher involvement, but that all agency creates its own context. In our analysis, meanings are constituted through doing and through discourse – in post-modernist accounts of 'self' there is no separation of interpretation, perception and experience. We perceive discursively and bodily, while interpretations and meanings change as experience is re-told, re-storied. Pagan accomplishments, at Avebury or elsewhere, public or private, are not simply 'experience' but are constituted from understandings of the (human and other-than-human) worlds – that is, they are theoretical and political, with deliberate and non-deliberate elements, events and outcomes. (In Marx's phrase, 'People make history, but they do not make it just as they please...'). And they are accomplished within sets of relationships, through different modes of consciousness (or 'altered styles of communication'<sup>22</sup>) with landscapes, human people and other-than-human people, through attending to and interpreting different inner and outer events within space and time. 'It's partly spiritual, and partly scientific' one protester said to us, at the long-standing Stanton Moor protest camp (17<sup>th</sup> December 2005).

The situating of these knowledges has been discussed extensively within feminist and queer theory debates. In particular, Donna Haraway<sup>23</sup> has raised, for social and human sciences, the issue of situated knowledges linking epistemological, phenomenological and experiential perceptions: can truth in research be separated from personal located praxis? In her writing, an idea of reflexive research enables an assessment of observation and knowledge, where situating is specific and transparent and hence accountability enables an 'objectivity' that is one of juxtaposition not of distance. This is not as simple as saying merely that different people will see the world differently, but that, in Haraway's words

Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and authorship of 'objective knowledge'<sup>24</sup>.

And here – for us at least - the 'object of knowledge' need not be only another human being, as active agent, but place and those 'others' within it. In such a perspective, understanding and location

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<sup>22</sup> Harvey, G. 2005. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. London: Hurst and Co.

<sup>23</sup> Haraway, D. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid: 198.

are intertwined, and the artefact, the landscape, with its history and its own (political) presence becomes a constituent of the specific knowledge<sup>25</sup>. The statue of Thor or the landscape of Avebury becomes part of how we 'know' or theorise it: which returns to the position from which we began this discussion, the 'living landscapes' posited by various indigenous understandings, the work of Guédon and others, the understandings of new-indigenes<sup>26</sup>, and indeed to a poetic understanding that is part of, not separate from, history and archaeology.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have offered an overview of how pagans perform their identities on the stage of Britain's heritage, from pilgrimage to Stonehenge at the winter solstice, to protesting against the destruction of archaeological material due to road-building or quarrying, and some expressions of heathen identity deploying archaeological visual cultures. We argue that these creative engagements with the past and re-enchantment practices should be of serious interest to archaeologists, heritage managers and other implicated parties, just as they are taken seriously by pagans themselves. Far from being inauthentic and separate from heritage discourse and management, such praxis is intrinsically linked to the situating of performance in these discourses. Furthermore, pagan performances are (im)permanent, re-locating the past (heritage, myth, art/artefacts, 'cultures') in new understandings, both in and out of its original context, and in/out of time, in order to re-enchant and enrich everyday life, and heritage sites themselves, as sacred. This sacredness is no simple construction, however, diametrically opposed to 'the secular' and inscribing the land and its ancient places with meaning: the sacred-profane distinction is disrupted in a living landscape which offers up its own agency in the discourse of paganisms. Understanding of self, community and experience, interaction between humans and living landscape, cannot be reduced to a mere 'determinism' of one or another agent, but is given within the complexities of relationship and context. Such discourse, crucially, offers a radically alternative approach to the fixed and unchanging 'past' imposed onto heritage by some quarters of heritage management. Heritage managers in indigenous contexts often find it difficult to deal with the plurality of native voices; similarly, there is 'no one voice'<sup>27</sup> among British pagans: this diversity is not a barrier to communication and development, however: decolonising anthropologies and archaeologies facilitate dialogue and reciprocal exchange, and in the process both interest groups (in our case heritage managers/archaeologists and pagans) are required to accommodate, to be reflexive. In synchronicity with and in some instances inspired by indigenous understandings of a radically living, animist world(s)<sup>28</sup>, pagan performances of heritage challenge the 'permanent' to yield, bend and accommodate – to be (im)permanent.

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<sup>25</sup> See also papers in: Bender, B. and M. Winer (eds) 2001. *Contested landscapes: Movement, Exile and Place*. Oxford: Berg.

<sup>26</sup> Wallis, R.J. and J. Blain. 2003. Sites, sacredness, and stories: Interactions of archaeology and contemporary Paganism. *Folklore* 114(3): 307-321.

<sup>27</sup> Wallis, R. and J. Blain 2004. 'No One Voice: Ancestors, Pagan Identity and the 'Reburial Issue' in Britain. *British Archaeology* 78: 10-13.

<sup>28</sup> Harvey, G. 2005. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. London: Hurst and Co.

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