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# THE SANCTITY OF BURIAL: PAGAN VIEWS, ANCIENT AND MODERN

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## Abstract

Archaeologists worldwide increasingly engage with calls from indigenous communities for the repatriation and reburial of ancestral remains. In this paper, we present findings from the *Sacred Sites, Contested Rights/Rites Project: Contemporary Pagan Engagements with the Past*, now in its sixth year. Having examined the diversity of Pagan representations of the past and engagements with monuments, we turn our attention here to calls for respect and reburial with regard to prehistoric remains and associated artefacts held by museums and archaeology departments in Britain. These British Pagans, Druids in particular, are claiming a say in how human remains and associated artefacts are excavated by archaeologists and curated in museum and university collections. We identify Pagans as 'new-indigenes', in part due to their drawing on indigenous perspectives elsewhere in their discourse, and we problematise and theorise this discourse. There is no single Pagan voice on the issue. The Council of British Druid Orders' press release (leaked October 2006) calling for the immediate 'return' and reburial of certain pagan remains is proactive in its approach, while Honouring the Ancient Dead (HAD), a British network organisation set up to ensure respect for ancient pagan human remains and related artefacts, has collaborated with the Museums Association in this conference bringing professionals and Pagans into dialogue to explore the 'philosophy and practice' surrounding 'respect for ancient British human remains'. This dialogue, alongside instances of reburial already in action, reflects a diversity of Pagan voices as well as the ways in which heritage managers and museum professionals are reflexively addressing this issue.

## Authors

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Wallis and Blain's volume *Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights: Contemporary Pagan Engagements with the Past* will be published by Sussex Academic Press (2007).

## Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights

During the summer solstice (21-22 June) in 2006, English Heritage facilitated 'managed open access' for 17 hours (8 pm on Tuesday to 1 pm on Wednesday), allowing an estimated 21,000 thousand people (this figure has stabilised since some 31,000 people attended in 2003) into the Stonehenge environs to celebrate the auspicious occasion. In a survey conducted in 1998 at Avebury, the World Heritage Site twin to Stonehenge, 16% of people expressed 'spiritual motivation' and 11% said 'personal meditation' was the purpose of their visit. Local Pagans have also worked in an unofficial capacity with the National Trust in recent years to establish a Guardianship Scheme to protect the monuments from such human impact as chalk graffiti and votive offerings of coins wedged into the cracks of megaliths.

Across the country, people are attending to the needs of their local 'sacred sites'. Yet, around the spring equinox of 1993 at the stone circle of Doll Tor in Derbyshire, 'persons unknown "restored" it prior to holding rituals there' (Barnatt 1997). In 1996 and 1999, stones of the West Kennet Avenue at Avebury were covered with graffiti, some of it claimed by the journal *Antiquity* to be the work of 'new age crazies' ('Reports: The Future of Avebury, Again', volume 70: 501-502; see also comments in *3<sup>rd</sup> Stone* 1996 'Editorial', volume 35: 3), and a recent change in National Trust management has arguably led to greater tension between the Trust, local people and Pagans (some of whom are locals themselves). Then, in 1999, on 'the sacred night' of 5<sup>th</sup> November, a group calling itself 'Friends of the Stone' vandalised the famous Cornish site of Men-an-Tol, by setting fire to an ersatz napalm-like substance. More recently, in March 2005, one of the stones of the Twelve Apostles stone circle on Ikley Moor was split in two, probably by a single heavy blow with an instrument which caused the stone to crack. Just as 'sacred sites' in Britain are receiving increasing attentions from those who respect them for 'spiritual' reasons, so bizarre instances of vandalism begging the term 'ritualistic' seem also to be in the ascendant.

The *Sacred Sites, Contested Rights/Rites* project ([www.sacredsites.org.uk](http://www.sacredsites.org.uk)) has spent the past six years attending to theoretical and pragmatic on-site issues of how British archaeological sites have been renamed 'sacred sites' by contemporary Pagans who engage with them 'spiritually' and by heritage management itself which has had to negotiate these issues (see, for example, Blain and Wallis 2004, 2006; Wallis and Blain 2003, 2004): David Miles (Chief Archaeologist, English Heritage), while involved with Pagans at the excavation of 'Seahenge', said that he accepted Seahenge was a 'sacred site' (personal communication); and Clews Everard, until recently the site manager at Stonehenge, used 'sacred site' as a term which might develop dialogue between the interest groups involved in 'round table' negotiations over summer solstice access and other ritual occasions (personal communication). The Sacred Sites project, conducted by an archaeologist (Wallis) and an anthropologist (Blain) has examined the renewed currency of 'sacredness' in archaeology and Pagan discourse, and the interface between them, as well as exploring practical and theoretical issues of paganisms and identities in today's society.

The issues raised have implications for, most obviously, archaeologists who excavate and interpret sacred sites, and heritage managers who curate (re-present, manage and conserve) them. The implications extend to anthropologists interested in constructions of identity in contemporary Britain, local communities, the hospitality industry and, of

course, Pagans themselves. Having examined the diversity of Pagan representations of and engagements with the past, we turn our attention here to calls for respect and reburial with regard to prehistoric human remains and associated artefacts held by museums and archaeology departments in Britain. Pagans have been claiming a say in how archaeological sites are curated for some time; now their interests increasingly look towards how human remains and associated artefacts are excavated by archaeologists and curated in museum and university collections.

### **Paganisms and sacred sites**

‘Contemporary Paganism’, said to be one of the ‘fastest growing religions’ in the West today, is a term more properly covering an alliance of nature-orientated religions, paths or traditions; that is, it is not a singular religion or centrally coherent belief system. These Pagan paths include Wicca (modern witchcraft), Druidry (well known for its interest in Stonehenge as well as the European Iron Age past), Heathenry (drawing on sources from Norse, Anglo-Saxon and Germanic literature and folklore), and a number of Pagan paths may also be termed ‘shamanistic’. To those unfamiliar with Pagans, their interests in the past may appear, at first glance, laughable, spurious, inauthentic and romantic; and on the latter point at least, some Pagans may be accused reliably of romanticising the past in order to ‘re-enchant’ their lives in an increasingly secular society. But on closer inspection, it is clear that Paganism is far more complex than the tabloid stereotypes imposed on it.

We have proposed the term ‘new-indigenes’ to describe those Pagans whose re-enchantment practices involve engaging with nature as alive with spirits, ‘wights’, multiple deities and otherworldly beings. These Pagans also identify with ‘ancestors’ from ancient Europe (particularly the Iron Ages), finding particular resonance with prehistoric cultures of especially the Neolithic and Bronze ages, and also take inspiration from indigenous ‘tribal’ societies elsewhere (particularly those whose ‘religion’ is animate and/or shamanistic). We are particularly interested in the sorts of relationships that Pagans establish, often in respectful ways, with the ‘other-than-human-persons’ (wights, ancestors, etc) that they engage with, and how this recognition that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, is crucial to the construction of Pagan identities which resist the secularism of late modernity. The term *new-indigenes* therefore acts as an extension specific to paganisms of Maffesoli’s (1996) ‘new-tribes’. Pagans are deeply committed to their religious practices and take their interest in prehistoric ‘ancestors’ very seriously. Indeed Pagans are increasingly attracting the attentions and imaginations of people in today’s Britain. So whether non-Pagans should believe in what Pagans do is beside the point – their interests in the past must at least be engaged with and, we argue, taken seriously, by those whose professional interests lie with the past.

It is important to foreground the diversity of paganisms. There are many Pagan paths and while some Pagans choose to ally themselves to a particular path, and within that path work with a group such as a Wiccan coven, Druid order or Heathen hearth, many Pagans practise alone and may keep their Pagan identity private. With such variety, evidently not all Pagans ‘visit’ sacred sites, but those that do, do so in a way which goes beyond simply ‘visiting’: such places are perceived to be where the presence of ancestors, gods, goddesses, wights and other nature/spirit beings is felt most strongly, and where communication with these ‘other-than-human persons’ is particularly

effective. Rituals and ceremonies are most often conducted at these sites during auspicious times of the year, including Summer Solstice (21<sup>st</sup> June, midsummer) and Winter Solstice ('Yule', 21<sup>st</sup> December), which celebrate, at both individual and community levels, the turning of the seasons and subtle changes in people (human and non-human). Such rites happen at hundreds of archaeological sites across the British Isles and Ireland, and indeed other parts of Europe, as well as Australia and the USA: while some leave no trace of their occurrence, others are more visible. To show their respect, some Pagans leave votive offerings, increasingly in some places, from flowers and mead, to more enduring 'ritual litter' such as candles, incense and crystals. Such material is common in West Kennet long barrow (part of the Avebury landscape) and at a wide variety of other 'sacred sites', especially stone circles and related megalithic monuments. Now, we are seeing a move from not only engagement with these ancestors in various ways, but also concerns over ancestor welfare – and calls for reburial.

## Reburial

The currency of a 'British reburial issue' among Pagans and its impact on heritage management makes the urgency for discussion of these issues and dialogue with Pagans all the more pressing. The politics of decolonising archaeology and anthropology, and the reburial of prehistoric human remains and associated artefacts, have been 'hot topics' in the 'new world' for some years. The example of Kennewick Man in the USA illustrates how the claims of contemporary Pagans – however controversial – have been included alongside those of archaeologists and indigenous groups. In this case, not only were claims made on prehistoric remains by both local Native American communities and a local Pagan organisation, the *Asatru Folk Assembly* (unusually, among Pagans, being right-wing), but also both groups were granted access to the remains to perform ceremonies which honoured the 'ancestor', while the scientific analyses of the physical anthropologists were halted – temporarily – by law. This was a complicated case, too complex to examine sufficiently here, but it certainly evinces the way in which both indigenous groups and, now, contemporary Pagans, are making claims to the past, including reburial – with ramifications for archaeologists and others in Britain.

On the one hand we have 'repatriation': for instance, the Ghost Dance shirt returned in 2000 to the Lakota (Sioux) by Glasgow's Kelvingrove Museum, to the accompaniment of considerable publicity. Then, in 2001 the Royal College of Surgeons revised its policy on considering the return of human remains following requests from indigenous groups. And, the 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 (DCMS Human Remains Report, November 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 – some of which are now being implemented by individual museums. This working group did not, however, make explicit recommendations with regard to British prehistoric material. (The issue of respect and treatment of remains in museums was treated most obviously in the 2005 DCMS Guidelines for England and Wales, Scotland having its own, earlier, material emphasising respect.)

On the other hand, 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 some (not all) prehistoric remains. They are not alone in this call, nor is their voice a ‘fringe’ one: on a British archaeology email list, archaeologists and museum curators discussed unease among members of the public when seeing prehistoric human remains, and some revealed considerable sympathy for the call for (at least) their removal from public view. Pagan calls, though, go further, regarding context and philosophy of reburial as well as a need to ‘remove’ the remains from public view, with reports in the national press and Pagan magazines.

Through their rituals, Pagans may identify themselves as spiritually allied with the prehistoric peoples who built the 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 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; they have also begun to address issues of ‘ancestor’ welfare; i.e. concerns over the archaeological excavation and storage and of human remains and artefacts, even challenging the excavation process itself. Archaeologists excavating at Avebury in recent field seasons, for example, have had to deal with interest – some of it negative with regard to the excavation, some of it positive (there is not a singular voice) – from local and other Druids.

### **Druids’ voices**

Pagans have framed their approaches to British reburial in language similar to that of Native Americans and other indigenous communities. The words of one Druid (a member of the Council of British Druid Orders) 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’s view clearly has an indigenous-inspired tone to it. Given that many Pagans, neo-shamans in particular, actively engage with indigenous religious practices (however contentious this may be, with instances of neo-colonial appropriation), such rhetoric is not surprising – in this sense, some Pagans perceive themselves as ‘new indigenes’. To Davies, the reburial of prehistoric human remains in Britain ‘makes perfect sense; bones are living people and should therefore be respected and ceremonially reburied’ (Davies 1998/9:11), and he outlines how Pagans can 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 1998/9:10-12).

At first glance, individual Pagans and Pagan groups do not have agreed core beliefs or practices, let alone centralised spiritual beliefs concerning disposal of the dead. Nor is their discourse on 'ancestors', in a 'multicultural Britain', clear-cut (and, of course, nor should we expect it to be): while there are right-wing agencies caught up in 'blood-and-soil' issues, the majority of Pagans walk a liberal line of ethnic tolerance and intercultural dialogue. Nonetheless, there are various understandings of 'ancestors', and these do include implicit and explicit constructions of ethnicity and 'race'. Pagan understandings of ancestors range from 'those previously living on the land', through 'family members' to ideas of bounded, identifiable 'peoples' who may be 'Celt' or 'Saxon'. 'Ancestors' therefore become a contested category within Pagan relationships with place, raising issues of how Pagans understand their relation to 'ancestors' and 'heritage', how 'protection of heritage' is an offering to ancestors and to those – all those – with an interest in Britain today, yet may become exclusionary or even racist. For at least some of today's Pagans, a focus on 'ancestors' of the distant past, ancestors within place, may be seen as legitimated or even necessitated by the emphasis on culture and history that seems apparent for other – often marginalised and disprivileged – religious and cultural groups.

In the 'time of tribes', the reburial issue is gathering momentum and coherence. Stonehenge, within the context of the Management Plan and proposals for a tunnel to replace part of the A303, is one area where the British reburial issue has intensified, and which has been raised at Stonehenge Project meetings (the liaison group established to discuss the future of the Stonehenge environs). As a result of her involvement with the Stonehenge Project and other developments, Druid priestess Emma Restall Orr (who also spoke at this conference) formed Honouring the Ancient Dead ([www.honour.org.uk](http://www.honour.org.uk), [had@druidnetwork.org](mailto:had@druidnetwork.org)), which includes a range of professionals as well as Pagans and aims to: 'ensure respect for ancient pagan remains' with 'clear interactions between archaeologists, historians, landowners, site caretakers, museums and collectors... and the pagan community'. Restall Orr runs a natural burial ground where ancient remains could potentially be reburied, indicating that some of the logistics of reburial could be managed effectively. But HAD is not calling for mandatory reburial and is most concerned with furthering dialogue between the interest groups and in particular establish consultation between these groups during excavations, as well as the opportunity for Pagans to 'make ritual in appropriate ways, honouring the spirits involved'.

There are issues here of how 'appropriate ritual' is constituted, since we do not know what sorts of rituals, if any, were associated with these remains. HAD itself is also cognisant of the problems raised by appropriate ritual, with its proposed 'Rite for the Committal of Human Remains' taking a generic approach focussed on respect and avoiding reference to particular faiths and beliefs (Pagan or otherwise). This is also something seen as problematic in some quarters of the Pagan community, as discussed on the 'Association of Polytheist Traditions' (APT) and 'BritWitch' email lists. Clearly 'the Pagan community' is not in its entirety represented by HAD, as the



organisation itself recognises – we might rather speak of diverse and often conflicting pagan communities.

### **World-view, Wyrd and relationships**

Davies's comment that 'bones are living people' will seem strange to many. Indeed few Pagans would phrase it quite like that. But, the importance here is to relate world-view and understandings of death and life, relationships of humans with other beings, and, we feel, to see these are arising from something other than frivolity, strangeness, or whim. Piotr Bienkowski's paper at this conference (Bienkowski 2006) has emphasised issues of world-view and ontology. What is a 'person' and how do people relate to the world around them? Cartesian philosophy and structuralist anthropology emphasise dualisms in how humans conceptualise the world – male/female, day/night, life/death and so forth, including those of culture/nature, a separation of living humans (through culture and knowledge processes) from the rest of the 'natural' world, 'objective' or scientist-etic versus 'subjective' or insider-emic knowledge. Dualisms have received considerable critique within philosophy and the social sciences, including, let it be said, structuralist anthropology itself. Also staying for a moment within academic discourses, the separation of academics from what they study has likewise received considerable critique, and within social sciences 'insider research' has become much more accepted, subject to issues of rigour and so forth. (One could say of course that some research – that on dominant groups within society – has always been 'insider' and that much of the previously-considered 'objective' research falls within this remit.)

For these discussions on respect and reburial, it seems to us that two issues become important.

1. Issues of the 'personhood' of the one placed in the ground, the 'sacredness' of (or power in) bones etc.
2. Issues of community:
  - a. relationship with landscape and other beings (landwights, spirits, physical beings)
  - b. relationship with other 'ancestors'.

From a more 'insider' approach these may be seen as degrees of

1. Desecration vs. respect and
2. Disruption of community

and from where we stand – with connections to Pagan and academic communities, brokering ideas between these – we see how world-views – and theologies, if you like, lead to discursive positions of treatment and of how respect can be constituted. We stress, here, that current archaeological practice emphasises respect during excavation, and Home Office regulations require maintenance of screening and avoidance of accidental public viewing. We note however that there are still many views on 'personhood' and on the processes of life and death that surround each excavation and the subsequent treatment of remains.

A report prepared by the Church of England and English Heritage (2005) giving *Guidance for Best Practice for Treatment of Human Remains Excavated from Christian Burial Grounds in England* is particularly interesting in this respect. Its guidance has rather little relevance for pre-Christian/Pagan remains (other than the emphasis on respect) but it introduces into the debate, overtly, ideas of how theology

and theorising of personhood within a particular (and changing) religious tradition may inform policy. Other theologies and cosmological understandings underpin indigenous relationships to remains and artefacts elsewhere: and here, differing views from the multiplicity of religions in Britain need to be taken into account. What therefore are Pagan theologies? They are multiple, but they tend to agree in looking at relationships, whether those of a person with their Goddess or God, or, in more animic paganisms, a focus on community construction and on the relationships of diverse communities of wights, plants, humans – and ancestors. Heathenry has the concept of Wyrd, which may be conceptualised as a web of intercommunication, linkages of relationships rather than individuals. In some versions, the relationship of remains to the landscape, the positioning within communities of other bones, the understanding of how family ties and non-human relationships are maintained over time, may be what was important – and if so, is still important today. From an animic viewpoint, what happens when the material from (for instance) West Kennet Longbarrow or Hob Hurst's House is removed and separated? What happens to the bog when specific parts of it (bodies) are treated differently from other finds?

When interviewing in Iceland, Jenny was told that death was not an abrupt transition, but a process happening over very long periods of time: with people becoming gradually further removed from their still-living kin, becoming part of the community of ancestors. An issue that has been raised, and will continue to be so, is that of a perceived lack of cultural continuity. Why should Pagans have any greater relationship to excavated material than do any others in Britain? And, of course, in terms of either genetics or transmitted culture they do not! But, what they may well have is the recognition that these issues of world-view and relationships matter, and that culture and understanding of personhood go beyond the material. Changing ideas of personhood within Christianity have obscured other understandings, and been in their turn largely overtaken by rationalisms (and let us say colonialisms), but there remain traces of other world-views, whether in mediaeval and older literature, or poetry, artistic expression and folk magic up to the present.

Finally, there is the issue of to whom the bones and artefacts belong: Who speaks for the dead? Is the ancestor asked for consent? While many will find such ideas laughable, to at least some Pagans they make perfect sense. And while we are told that here in England the ancient dead do not have 'rights', this is not the case in all parts of Britain. The document on treatment of remains produced for Historic Scotland (1997/2003) emphasises the Right of Sepulchre, of not being disturbed.

So, from this basis, we will explore how various Pagans seek to go 'beyond respect' today.

### **Beyond respect**

Various Pagans are pushing for more than respect for 'ancestors', the possibility of ritual, and dialogue on reburial. In 2004, the *Western Daily Press* (Bristol) reported that 'Druid leaders' had:

'called for the creation of a sacred site at Stonehenge for the re-burial of human remains unearthed during [the implementation of the Stonehenge Management Plan]. They want a parcel of land near the site to be set aside as a ceremonial

shrine for the Pagan and Druid communities' (Western Daily Press, 2 March 2004).

Furthermore, during discussions with English Heritage and the National Trust, Druids have been involved in issues of reburial with regard to the Stonehenge Management Plan, with Philip 'Greywolf' Shallcrass asking the authorities:

...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 (Philip Shallcrass, pers.comm.)

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).

Shallcrass explicitly states that respect *and* reburial is his main reason for involvement with the Stonehenge Project. While some archaeologists, especially osteoarchaeologists, might react with outrage, and while private landowners may find themselves in a difficult position on this issue (perhaps erring on the side of being against reburial on their land), Pagans are clearly proactive in negotiations on this issue and have had some success in their campaigns. More recently, in 'The Druid's Voice' magazine, Shallcrass (2003) reports on the reburial of an early Saxon woman in the Woodford Valley, near Stonehenge. Following excavations by Wessex Archaeology, and a period of scientific analysis, the Home Office agreed to a reburial. The District Council's Director of Housing and Health sanctioned the burial site in the near vicinity of the original excavations, after which Wessex Archaeology (who had legal and moral responsibility over what they had excavated) reburied the woman's remains. Clearly, calls for and negotiations over reburial are not only in evidence, but reburial itself, in this instance at least, though not instigated by Pagans, is now in effect – with some archaeologists approving of reburial in certain instances.

More challenging and more difficult to engage with, however, are Pagan voices which make authoritative claims on remains, demanding the immediate reburial of high-profile remains. A Swansea Druid group naming themselves 'Dead to Rights', for instance, have made authoritative claims over the 'Red Lady of Paviland', a young man buried approximately 26 thousand years ago on the Gower peninsula, receiving publicity from regional BBC News (see [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/south\\_west/5372598.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/south_west/5372598.stm)), demanding reburial. The Druid Paul Davies, cited earlier, has recently advanced his claims beyond stating his opinion in Druid magazines. In the summer of 2006, Davies made direct contact with

the National Trust at Avebury and Devizes Museum in Wiltshire which holds much of the excavated material from the site, calling for the reburial of ‘our sister’ (personal communication), a female child excavated by Harold Grey in the early twentieth century from the southern ditch of the henge. More recently, the Council of British Druids Orders (COBDO) produced a document, submitted to heritage organisations, entitled ‘Guidance and Request for the Reburial of Druid Ancestral Remains at Avebury’; this was apparently shown or ‘leaked’ before public transmission to a Pagan archaeologist, an employee of a heritage organisation, who published an online counter-response:

I largely agree with the COBDO aims of reburial of human remains, and am not content with the current different treatment of Christian and non-Christian human remains that exists in the current laws. However, I encountered your “Guidance and Request” while at work and had to respond as it claimed to represent my views. I, unfortunately, had to say I found it embarrassing to be associated with as I am openly pagan at work. It is badly written, and poorly argued, which largely defeats its noble objectives. (I am dyslexic so I always get someone to check my writing.) It was a great disappointment to see such an opportunity wasted. My reading and commenting on this document may break confidentiality, but I could not let the matter lie. I do not think such an important document, intending to set such a precedent, should be confidential (<http://obbyoss.livejournal.com/869.html>)

In this rebuttal, ‘Obbyoss’ is particularly concerned with the way in which COBDO did not consult with other Druids and Pagans in order to gauge wider opinion, before submitting their document to the heritage bodies.

Pagan politics are complex, so those engaging with such alternative views should expect a diversity of voices. How these voices are negotiated, however, presents a challenging problem for heritage managers.

### **Negotiating the issues**

The Human Remains Report (DCMS Human Remains Report, November 2003) has met with its detractors. Some osteoarchaeologists have already noted Pagan interests as a ‘threat’ to their research: in their response to the DCMS Consultation Document “Care of Historic Human Remains” the British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology (BABAQ) states:

Guidelines for determining the legitimacy of claims on behalf of a religious community, in the absence of direct family relationship to the deceased, must address the question of how frivolous claims are to be discerned and rebutted. As one example, in the UK there are already new-Age and neo-Druid claims for the reburial of prehistoric remains, but no demonstrable continuity across the intervening millennia in terms either of genealogical descent or of recognition and care of the original burial location’ (Steele n.d.: 8).

Of particular interest here is the discursive construction of what is ‘frivolous’ (i.e. Pagan interests) and what is ‘legitimate’ (i.e. scientific research), with the *a priori* assumption that the former can be dismissed as wrong while the latter is common sense. After our article on Pagans and reburial in the Council for British

Archaeology's journal *British Archaeology* (Wallis and Blain 2004), the Curator of Archaeology at Guildford Museum replied in the letters column:

It is irritating to be told how to do one's job, by people who know little about it... Careful excavation and study reveal a great deal about burial and ritual, and an understanding of what prehistoric people were doing, and why they did it. Archaeological method, by its very nature, involves respect for whatever is being dug up. It is archaeologists who discover the sites and suggest possible ritual landscapes, not 'pagans'. There is no tradition in this country that human remains should never be removed. They are far safer in museums than in the ground. By excavating human remains (only done when the site is to be destroyed) we are giving the individuals concerned a form of immortality. Who could object to that? When I am dead I will have better things to think about: whatever happens, I am happy to be dug up after a decent interval, and put in a museum.  
Yours sincerely,  
Mary Alexander

On the other hand, a second letter suggested:

'Pagan mysticism' may have 'no place in serious archaeology' (Letters, September) but pagans (like every other interest group) certainly have a role to play in the management of the archaeological resource. As a community heritage officer for a local authority, I work on many heritage and archaeology-related projects. There are as many outlooks, prejudices and hidden agendas as there are groups, but all are passionate about their heritage and committed to working for the benefit of the archaeology. They all have something of value to bring to the table and all deserve the common courtesy of respecting their views - even if we do not agree with them.  
Yours sincerely,  
Frank Olding  
Abergavenny

(both letters: *British Archaeology* 79, November 2004. Online: <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/ba/ba79/letters.shtml>)

These views evince as much diversity in the interests of archaeologists and related professionals as that we see among Pagans. It should also be noted, in this complexity, that, contra Steele, there are archaeologists who are also Pagans (or vice-versa): setting up an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy is not only inaccurate but also undermines constructive, respectful dialogue. Respect and dialogue are key issues, as evinced by improved relations between curators and indigenous communities in museums in which a dialogic relationship can be successfully established. But while indigenous communities may be able to (and are compelled to by, for example, Federal legislation in the USA) demonstrate genetic or cultural links to satisfy the law when calling for the reburial of ancestral human remains, addressing the extent to which Pagans can claim British prehistoric human remains are 'theirs' is to miss the point. First, 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'. Second, the issue is whether archaeologists, heritage managers and so on are prepared to address such pluralities and engage with them dialogically, rather than dismiss them as 'fringe' and 'eccentric'. Dialogue between heritage management and Pagan 'new-indigenes' is already in action at several sites,

and Pagan-heritage negotiations over the British ‘reburial issue’ at sites of prehistoric burial and their associated artefacts, too, suggest similar – respectful – processes are already in effect.

We see the Human Remains Report as having opened up a considerable debate, with room on all sides to explore the contested territory of what is ‘sacred’ and how ‘science’ may negotiate with the sacred. Indeed, Pagans, indigenous peoples, and many British people today – including some archaeologists – are indicating that ‘sacredness’ rather than perceived ‘objective’ and universally applicable scientific knowledge should be the *default* position. Prehistoric burials involve the deliberate placing of a ‘person’ (however variously constituted) within a landscape (also culturally constructed in some way). We cannot know the particular interpretations of that landscape, or the person’s relation to it pertaining at the time of interment of skeletal or cremated material, or even the meaning behind the burial or of prehistoric personhoods. We do know that there was an intention which, from comparison with ethnographic records and indigenous accounts today, suggests a consistent ‘sacred’ relationship. By interrupting the association of person, land, and grave-goods, archaeologists and others are intervening in that relationship. We do not negate claims of scientific knowledge, nor do we automatically support the case for reburial put by the Druid voices expressed in this paper. We do suggest that the ‘spiritual’ evaluation of respect for British prehistoric remains is every bit as pressing as that for overseas indigenous claims, and we posit that science should have to make a particular case for the retention, in the private or public eye, of such material. We commend the Report on Human Remains and the developments we are now seeing as a result of it, and anticipate seeing similar recommendations for indigenous British material in the near future.

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