

British Druid Order Response to the Report on the Avebury Reburial Consultation

While naturally disappointed at the result of the consultation, I am in no way surprised by it. It was apparent from the start that the consultation process was inherently flawed and biased in favour of the result EH, the NT and the DCMS all desired, i.e. retention of the remains in question by the Alexander Keiller Museum. Since the nature of these flaws and this bias have already been clearly spelt out in responses from Paul Davies and from Emma Restall Orr (for Honouring the Ancient Dead), there is no need for me to repeat our shared concerns here. In common with my friends and colleagues, however, I would draw attention to one major flaw. This is that only three options were offered to those who filled in the consultation document, none of which represented that favoured by the majority of Pagans and Druids I have spoken to, this being reburial of ancient human remains allowing for the retention of small samples where a reasonable case can be made for their value for future research.

The clear popularity of this option points up that fact that none of the Pagans and Druids I have spoken to have any desire to hamper or curtail the work of archaeologists. On the contrary, there is widespread acknowledgement of the valuable contribution archaeology makes to our understanding of the past and of the lives of our ancestors.

It is perhaps in the use of this contested term, 'ancestors,' that the nub of the present disagreement over the treatment of ancient human remains lies. Those of us who live our lives in accordance with Pagan paths often feel a strong, spiritual sense of connection or communion with others who have walked similar paths before us, amongst whom we include those who inhabited these lands in the pre-Christian past. To us, they remain living presences in our lives and in the sacred landscape of these islands. Their spirits are seen to imbue particular places, to inhabit standing stones, chambered tomb-shrines, henges, barrow mounds and other structures and natural features in our landscape. This connection with the land is perceived to be strengthened and enhanced by the presence of their physical remains. The people these remains represent appear to us in visions, speak to us through our dreams, inspire our rituals, poetry and songs, and share with us their own stories and songs. They are our teachers, guides and companions. Or they are simply our ancestors, and worthy of our respect for that simple fact alone. These are the considerations that are in our minds when we see their mortal remains displayed in glass cases or stored in boxes. We think of these remains not as objects of scientific curiosity but as the inspirited remnants of real, living human beings with hopes, fears, dreams and beliefs, much like ourselves.

The age of these contested remains is not seen by us as an unbridgeable gulf between us and them. In the spirit world, time is experienced differently. The essential, eternal present our spirits inhabit readily bridges any distance between 'then' and 'now.' To apply DCMS guidelines that insist on close and provable genetic relationship is, therefore, meaningless to us in this context. It is equally meaningless to attach artificial cut-off points in terms of years for any relationship we may have with the spirits these remains represent. The ancient dead, when we experience communion with them, are as close to us and as 'real' as our living colleagues, friends, neighbours and family.

Attitudes and experiences like these, of course, present a considerable ideological gulf between those of us who experience a world inhabited by spiritual forces and those for whom such forces are delusional, unreal, pointless, meaningless and non-existent. In order for the reburial debate to move forward, this ideological gulf needs to be, if not actually bridged, then at least acknowledged and understood. It is my belief that the proposed book on reburial featuring contributions from all sides of the debate will go a long way towards promoting such understanding.

Those of us who endeavour to speak on behalf of our spiritual ancestors are moved by just that simple desire. We are in no way trying to denude museums of their exhibits, or to prevent archaeological digs from taking place or full and proper archaeological research from being carried out. As suggested above, the vast majority of us regard archaeologists as valued colleagues and collaborators in our own

attempts to understand and connect with our shared past and our shared ancestors. Likewise, we value museums for the contribution they make to our understanding. Problems develop where archaeologists seek to exclude other perspectives than their own from any debate on the interpretation of the past or the treatment of its remains, and where museum curators close their doors, minds and collections to us. We are more than willing to work with them towards greater understanding and cooperation. We can't do so if we are presented with nothing but locked doors and closed minds.

I do not claim that my spiritual perspective is in any way superior to the understanding of the past put forward by archaeologists and curators. Rather I see our perspectives as being complementary. I am delighted to learn of fresh archaeological discoveries and insights. I would be equally delighted to share my own insights with archaeologists and curators. The past is not the property of any one group, it is part of our shared human inheritance. For the record, I have no interest in seeing academic interpretations of the past replaced by woolly-headed notions of a Utopian Golden Age, a global matriarchy, a lost Atlantis or von Daniken's space gods. While such notions make an interesting study in their own right, the reality of prehistory, inasmuch as we can perceive it, is every bit as interesting.

I recognise that some archaeologists and curators have genuine fears about opening their digs and doors to potentially dangerous and disruptive individuals. Such fears are exacerbated by the actions of angry folk like the one who, I understand, tried to disrupt the series of digs carried out in and around Stonehenge in recent years. I am told this individual presented himself as a Druid. I can only say that, having been a Druid myself since 1974, I had never previously heard of this man, nor does he represent any Druid group I have any association with. To judge the rest of us by the actions of this misguided soul would be like judging all Christians based on an encounter with Rasputin, or all Muslims based on Osama bin Laden. Unfortunately, no spiritual tradition is free from troubled and troublesome individuals, and Druidry is no exception. However, the overwhelming majority of us are rational, stable, reasonable, tolerant and open-minded. Many of us, I would suggest, unusually so. And yes, I do realise that, in this largely secular age and country, admitting to talking to dead people may not be an ideal way to convince anyone of my rationality.

The reburial debate is not a simple us-and-them dichotomy. There are Pagans who do not favour reburial, for the same reasons that many archaeologists and curators oppose it. There are archaeologists and curators who are sympathetic to reburial. There are Pagan archaeologists. The blurring of distinctions represented by such individuals suggests the genuine potential for finding a middle ground on which we may all stand happily and in peace.

Steps in that direction are already being taken. Some institutions are expressing a willingness to make available for reburial those remains they hold that are so poorly-provenanced as to be of no research value. Given that such remains may represent more than half those currently held in UK collections, this would represent a huge step forward for those of us who favour reburial. At the same time it would free up space, rationalise collections and simplify cataloguing for the institutions, thus saving them time and money. Everyone wins. If institutions were more open to productive interaction with Pagans, this would obviously be useful. For example, many museums host regular talks and presentations by historians, both professional and amateur, as well as by artists, writers and historical re-enactors. Perhaps more of them might consider hosting occasional presentations by well-informed Pagans. A further helpful step would be for institutions holding ancient human remains to make them more available to members of spiritual groups with an interest in them. There is no reason why this should present any more difficulty than making remains available to orthodox researchers and it would undoubtedly help foster good will and understanding. It might also be helpful to alter the way in which some human remains are labelled and displayed in museums so as to more fully reflect the concerns of visitors, by no means all Pagan, who view them as people and not simply as objects. It would also help if institutions replied to requests for information. Several of my own have not even been acknowledged let alone responded to, including some to the Alexander Keiller Museum. There are, then, several ways to move forward that hold out potential benefits for all concerned.

The favoured option of the BDO would be for the default treatment of ancient human remains in

this country to shift from retention to reburial. Reburial would take place after time had been allowed for full archaeological and forensic assessment of the remains. Where a genuine case could be made for future research value, allowance could be made for the retention of small samples such as a tooth or a bone fragment. We recognise that such a shift may take some time to achieve, given that the current paradigm of retention has been in place and unchallenged for so long. Our preference would also be for the replacement of skeletal remains displayed in museums with replicas. We see these as being of equal educational value and potentially raising fewer problems for conservation and care.

In conclusion, I return to what was said at the outset, that the Avebury consultation process was seriously flawed and fundamentally biased against reburial. It should not, therefore, be allowed to set a precedent for other reburial requests that might be made, whether to the Alexander Keiller Museum or to any other institution. To do so would be a clear breach of natural justice and would unnecessarily create or perpetuate a perceived rift between the Pagan community and the archaeological/curatorial community. Nothing would be gained and opportunities for peaceful cooperation may be lost. When so much room for improved mutual understanding and cooperation exists, to allow the result of this flawed consultation to be used to block future debate would be an unfortunate and divisive outcome that I'm sure none of us would want to see.

Addendum:

Having written the above, I received a copy of your reply to Paul Davies' response to the Avebury consultation. At the outset, you set out your main reasons for refusing his request for reburial. These you summarise as follows:

- (a) the study of human remains provides important evidence about our past;
- (b) the benefit this provides far outweighs any harm;
- (c) the public in general support the keeping of prehistoric human remains in museums for research and as parts of displays provided this is done appropriately;
- (d) retention is the more reversible option; and
- (e) there is no close connection between these human remains and your or other Druid or Pagan groups of a sort that would justify giving you or other groups special rights.

Taking each of these points in turn:

(a) as stated above, no one I know in the Druid/Pagan community has any interest in blocking the study of human remains. Most of us simply favour reburial after such study has been carried out. Many of us would accede to the retention of small samples for future research where appropriate.

(b) your statement here is, to say the least, contentious and very dependent on your view of the remains in question. If they are viewed merely as objects, then you are right. If they are viewed as the physical remains of living, breathing, thinking people and as retaining some spiritual essence of those people, then you are wrong. It is this fundamental difference of belief that underlies this entire debate.

(c) as eloquently explained by Emma Restall Orr in her response to the Avebury reburial report, public support for retention and display varies wildly depending on what questions are asked, by whom and under what circumstances. The Avebury consultation, with its clear bias in favour of reburial, hardly provides an accurate barometer of public opinion.

(d) retention may be a reversible option, but it seems the powers that be will do everything they can to make sure it is not reversed. Therein lies the problem. Reburial can, in any case, be a reversible option depending on how it is carried out. There is, of course, a question as to whether it needs to be reversible, given that funds for research on these remains will always be severely limited, which is why so little of it has been done in the past or is likely to be done in the future. This leaves most remains stored in boxes for generations, often resulting in any trace of provenance being lost.

(e) the question of close relationship has been dealt with above. To summarise, for those of us who experience close spiritual connection or communion with the spirits of those people represented by these remains, the passage of time and the provability of direct and close genetic linkage are simply irrelevant. I'm not sure where this idea has come from that those of us who favour reburial are demanding 'special

rights.' I'm not aware that any of us ever have. What we are asking for is a change in the default treatment of ancient human remains in Britain, and we are doing so for reasons we consider valid. It's not, and never has been, about 'special rights' for us, it's about respect for those we regard as our ancestors of blood and of spirit.

Throughout the rest of your reply to Paul, you continually refer to the results of the consultation process as if they were gospel. Since any fair-minded, unbiased observer looking at this process would see that it is fundamentally flawed and clearly biased in favour of retention, these results may and should be regarded as irrelevant to the ongoing debate.

In the appended 'more detailed notes' to your reply, you state that “we have recognised preferential status in at least two cases that are older than 500 years - in one case because of continuity of community, religion and care; in the other because of close and demonstrable religious connexion.” I would like to know how one proves a “close and demonstrable religious connexion.” Do lifelong encounters with the spirits of the dead, both ancient and recent, count? How about 40 years of visiting ancient sacred sites and connecting spiritually with them? How about a lifelong adherence to a spirituality that has most of its fundamentals in common with what prehistorians such as Miranda and Stephen Aldhouse-Green (*The Quest for the Shaman*, Thames & Hudson, 2005) see as the religion of our ancient ancestors? How about a strong desire to see the remains of those ancient ancestors returned to their rightful rest in the Earth's long embrace? No? Then what?

You say that “The retention of small samples would only permit some kinds of research.” A forensic pathologist I spoke to during my own consultation tells me that the retention of a single tooth, or even a section from one, would be ample for most forms of research. The technology for non-invasive scans of bones and skulls already exists. It is not used because of a lack of resources. As stated previously, the majority of those favouring reburial are willing to allow a reasonable length of time for proper research to be carried out prior to reburial. Future techniques may well be developed and used during that interim. Future techniques can also, of course, be applied to future finds.

You further state that “we have spent most of our time and effort collecting information and analysing it in order to reach the best conclusion, not in partisan activity.” This implies that you began this process with an entirely open mind, not favouring one side or the other and that the consultation process was put together in the same spirit. From even a cursory glance at the process and a knowledge of the support EH and NT naturally have for the current default of retention, this is manifestly not the case. While I don't doubt the personal integrity of any of those involved, the result has been a flawed, biased process resulting in turn in a flawed, biased report. Sad but true.

Yours in peace,

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