

# HONOURING THE ANCIENT DEAD

## ENSURING RESPECT FOR ANCIENT PAGAN REMAINS



### **HAD's Response to the English Heritage Decision April 2010 Request for Reburial of Human Remains at Avebury, submitted by CoBDO June 2006**

April 2010

#### **The Context**

On Tuesday 6 April 2010, English Heritage (EH) released its decision with regard to the request initiated by Paul Davies on behalf of the Council of British Druid Orders (CoBDO) for reburial of ancestral remains excavated at Avebury and kept at the National Trust's (NT) Alexander Keiller Museum, on display and in store. This decision can be found on the EH and HAD websites, together with information about the consultation and HAD's response to it.

- <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/aveburyremains>
- <http://www.honour.org.uk/node/280>

In tune with HAD's general policy about human remains issues with a national (and international) significance, the decision has been sent out to HAD's council, advisors, volunteers and from there circulated throughout various networks of interested parties, requesting feedback on the decision to be sent back to HAD's central office. The following incorporates all the resulting responses sent to HAD.

Without exception, every comment received was infused with both disappointment at the decision made by EH, yet also expressing a distinct lack of surprise. Just why the decision was so comprehensively anticipated as going against Paul Davies, together with the basis of the disappointment, will be laid out here in this response.

In the press release disseminated by EH, Dr Sebastian Payne (EH Chief Scientist) stated that EH "respect the beliefs that have led to this request, and we have taken the request seriously". While this comment is no doubt sincere, the process and resultant decision only go to reveal the extent to which EH has *not* understood beliefs that underlie the request. Furthermore, if the process with which the request was addressed had been adapted to be fully appropriate to the situation, one could recognize that it was indeed taken seriously; that the process was inappropriate undermines not only Dr Payne's comment about taking it seriously, but the decision in its entirety.

That EH is funded by the tax-payer paints this process further as wasteful of limited national resources, putting into doubt once again the willingness of EH to develop adequate forums for public engagement when it comes to any part of our national heritage currently held in their custody.

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### **The DCMS Guidance**

EH used the DCMS Guidance as the basis for its process of responding to the request made by Davies. They state that the 'principles set out in the Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums published by the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) in 2005 were applied in arriving at the decision.' They describe their decision as resulting from 'consideration of evidence and extensive consultation'.

However, this Guidance was not originally drawn up to deal with British requests, but in response to claims from overseas communities looking to repatriate ancestral remains taken by scientists during Britain's days of empire. HAD, together with many other respondents to the consultation, *criticized the use of this document*, making it clear they felt it to be inappropriate in cases involving British human remains and British communities. EH's press release does not acknowledge this in any way. Considering that such criticism came from some significant national museums, heritage bodies and academics, HAD finds this lack of acknowledgement shocking.

The reasons why the document is inappropriate to British requests are clearly laid out in the various responses, accessible online. Here, one simple and fundamental comment will suffice. As EH state in their press release, the DCMS Guidance 'recommends that claims for remains over 500 years old are unlikely to be successful except where very close and continuous links can be demonstrated'. Dr Payne goes on to note that there is 'no clear evidence for genetic, cultural or religious continuity of a kind that would justify preferential status to be given to the beliefs of the group which requested reburial'. Many responses to the consultation, together with many other commentators on the issue, have stated that no British group *could* ever satisfy such narrow criteria. Unaware of the degree to which he and CoBDO were being ill-informed in order to ensure their request could be dismissed out of hand, Paul Davies was forced by EH to use these criteria; he made a valiant effort to address it but was bound to fail. EH knew he would fail, as did most other respondents, making the process a farce.

### **The Consultation**

Based as it was upon the DCMS Guidance, the consultation questionnaire was inherently flawed and adversarial. It did not offer a broad enough spectrum of answers to include the views of those who did not wish to be part of the adversarial process, or whose views are distinctly different from the mainstream Christian or materialist secular standpoint.

The options given were polar extremes: either reburial which would remove the remains from the local community and scientific research potential entirely, or retention, meaning in museum storage or display. As reburial was not supported within the framework of the questionnaire, with insufficient information given about the possibilities and process, this option was not an obvious

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choice other than for those whose perspective would lie at this extreme.

Furthermore, with no options offered for a middle ground, nor any other suggestions as to an expression of *practical* respect for these remains, the questionnaire was biased from the outset. Certainly, respondents could have sent in comments that were not based upon the questionnaire, but HAD was told by a good number of people concerned about the situation that they personally did not feel the confidence to do so, or felt that doing so would diminish the consideration given to their opinion.

### Value Systems

The only value that EH ascribes to the human remains in this press release is as archaeological evidence and their importance for scientific research. Where Professor Sir Barry Cunliffe states that "remains must be retained for research that benefits us all", he is expressing this comprehensive bias towards the belief in science as being of principal value. His words express an *assumption* that any information accrued from research will not only be beneficial to all, but will outweigh the harm felt by those for whom such treatment of human remains is deemed disrespectful or sacrilegious.

It is not only many Pagans who feel a significant duty of care and a visceral connectedness to human remains excavated from landscapes to which they feel a profound commitment. While Davies and others responding to the consultation expressed an animistic belief in the inspirited nature of the remains, the sense of sharing community with those who have lived in a landscape before us, whether or not linked by blood, is evident beyond that religious perspective. To focus solely on scientific value is to dismiss this very human – and morally pivotal - sense of connection to, and care for, the dead. It is to dismiss the social value of human remains to many individuals and communities, which is being increasingly recognized by anthropologists and other heritage organizations.

EH's words imply without doubt that as an organization it does not acknowledge that these are the remains of *persons*. As such, EH clearly dismisses the idea that human remains have a value *as persons* to many people within this country – and by extension, communities around the world. This lack of acknowledgement is a clear dismissal of any other value systems; it undermines the legitimacy of this consultative process, emphasizing the inappropriateness of the DCMS Guidance as a methodology, or their own status as decision-makers with regard to the treatment of human remains.

As quoted here already, Dr Payne states in the press release that “there is no clear evidence for genetic, cultural or religious continuity of a kind that would justify preferential status to be given to the beliefs of the group which requested reburial”. However, Davies and CoBDO did not declare that they should be given preferential status. The language used was imposed upon them by EH, holding to the DCMS Guidance and its terminology of claims, ensuring their request could be

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rejected.

Indeed, in what can only be seen as an act of hypocrisy, in dismissing this request submitted by a group wishing to be involved in the fate of human remains they felt to be inherently sacred, Dr Payne and EH are declaring that they *themselves* have, and will fight to retain, preferential status as decision-makers. This cannot be morally acceptable in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, with its goal of being an inclusive, caring, multi-faith society.

### Public Opinion

The press release states that EH's decision is 'supported by the majority of respondents. In a separate opinion poll of 1,000 people commissioned in June 2009, around 90% said they were comfortable with keeping prehistoric human remains in museums'. Without the context for this poll, where it was taken and what questions were asked, the statistics have no value. Surveys have been taken with regard to human remains, where differing information was given to those asked the questions, and radically different answers were returned. Such research completed at the Manchester Museum showed that a brief, scantily-informed questionnaire about whether human remains should be on display returned a majority 'yes'; however, when those questioned were asked to consider the bones more closely, as people, the result reversed to a 'no'. HAD's own survey taken with respect to the excavations of Saxon burials at Lakenheath in East Anglia revealed a very different outcome to that celebrated by EH above. (<http://www.honour.org.uk/node/88>)

Further, there is a significant difference between iconic and 'faceless' human remains, i.e. those excavated from landscapes that have no significant heritage or religious status, and those for whom there is little or no documented provenance or context. Even where the belief is held that human remains are devoid of spirit, iconic remains retain a significance: we experience a sense of the individual *person* and are thus inclined through some natural empathy to express care for them as *individuals*. But the research process, and most museum displays, tend to depersonalize even them, treating them as objects and often referring to them as 'it' rather than 'he' or 'she'; equally, superficial questionnaires can also achieve such depersonalization.

### The Fiction of a Precedent

Dr Payne and EH assert in their press release that this case will act as a precedent for future consultations. They say, 'While every case is different and must be determined on its merits, we feel that the general considerations given to this case are likely to apply to most prehistoric human remains in this country. We hope that other museums considering such requests in future will benefit from the evidence we have assembled and made accessible, saving them time and expense in reaching their decisions'.

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Given the comprehensively flawed process by which this decision was taken, outlined here and in many of the consultation responses, to perceive it as having set a precedent is misguided and misleading.

The process of decision-making about the treatment of human remains within British heritage organizations has been explored and enacted by other bodies over the last few years, and achieved in ways that only emphasize each of the significant errors made by EH in this case.

Other heritage organizations, such as the Manchester Museum and Ipswich Museum, have developed processes that are very much more balanced and equitable in terms of acknowledging different value systems, being wholly consultative rather than adversarial. Furthermore, they are cheaper in terms of resources, and as publicly funded institutions, they fulfill their obligations in terms of community engagement and public accountability.

It should be noted that these museums are deliberately *not* using the DCMS Guidance for cases involving British human remains. It is therefore wholly inappropriate for Dr Payne to state that the same general considerations will apply to most prehistoric human remains in this country. Using more inclusive processes, other organizations have decided on the reburial of large numbers of prehistoric remains, the majority of these being 'faceless', with little or no associated data, which have no display or research potential.

### **The Future**

Given the decision now made, if these important remains are to be retained for the time being within the Alexander Keiller Museum, HAD would suggest with some concern that the way in which they are stored or displayed be reconsidered with some urgency. Given the flawed nature of their process so far, we would suggest that decisions now made are opened up to a genuine consultation based on community involvement, where all for whom the remains are considered significant are invited to be a part of discussions and decision-making.

Currently public engagement at the Alexander Keiller Museum, and indeed other EH and NT museums, is very poor indeed when it comes to human remains. Museum staff have no authority to respond to requests for information about remains in their custody, all enquiries being put through to the national office. This does not support the commitment to public accountability or community engagement of either organization, and needs to be addressed with some urgency.

Please refer HAD's policies on Consultation, Display and the Respectful Treatment of Human Remains, found at : <http://www.honour.org.uk/node/35>.

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