

Response to the
**Consultation on the future of poorly- and un-provenanced
human remains in The Manchester Museum**
from Philip Shallcrass
for and on behalf of the British Druid Order (BDO)
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Introductory remarks

Given that the majority of the remains covered in this consultation that are dated at all are labelled as Neolithic, and in lieu of any suggestion to the contrary, I have assumed that all the human remains cited are from pre-Christian or non-Christian burials.

Before outlining my/our responses to the specific questions raised in the consultation paper, I should say a little about the background to my interest in the treatment of ancient human remains and about a consultation process on the subject I undertook among my Pagan and Druid colleagues.

Background

My interest in archaeology began in childhood and assumed a spiritual dimension when I became a Druid in 1974. My understanding of Druidry is that it is a native European spirituality akin to other native spiritualities such as those of the American First Nations or Australian Aboriginals in that it is animistic, recognising the importance of direct communion with spirits of nature and of the ancestors. My own experience over many years has shown that such communion is entirely possible. I founded the British Druid Order (BDO) in 1979 to explore and teach what I saw as the essentially 'shamanic' nature of Druidry.

In the mid-1990s the BDO became involved in discussions with English Heritage and the National Trust regarding peaceful ritual access for Druids and other Pagans at Stonehenge and Avebury. We later took part in discussions on the proposed Stonehenge Bypass. At both sets of talks, I raised the issue of the reburial of ancient human remains.

Consultation process

In 2008, I was invited to submit a response to English Heritage following a request for reburial of ancient human remains held in the collection of the Alexander Keiller Museum in Avebury. Rather than simply state my own views, it seemed more useful to try to find if there was a consensus of opinion on the issue amongst the wider Druid and Pagan communities. To this end, a discussion forum was held at a Druid camp in Shropshire in November 2008. About thirty members of the BDO and the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD) attended. Further views were garnered via the online forum on the BDO website (www.druidry.co.uk) and through personal discussions. These drew responses from about thirty more individuals, so the total consultation group was about 60 people, all identifying themselves as Druids or Pagans. Since it was suggested that the Avebury consultation might set a framework for the treatment of ancient human remains held elsewhere, our discussions were broadened to cover reburial in general. The responses of these 60 individuals inform my/our responses to the present consultation as set out below.

1. Retention

1. *Should these remains be retained within the Manchester Museum?*

Yes / No If yes, please give realistic and practical proposals for their future use

No. Given the lack of clear provenance for the remains in question, they must be regarded as having little or no educational or research value. Without such value, there seems little reason for the Museum to retain them.

2. **Transfer**

2. *Should these remains be transferred to another museum or institution?*

Yes / No If yes, please give realistic and practical proposals for their future use, and indicate if possible which specific institution they might go to.

No. For the reasons stated above.

3. **Reburial**

3. *Should these remains be reburied?*

Yes / No If yes, please answer the following additional questions:

Yes.

a. *Why do you consider reburial to be the best option?*

Homo Sapiens has always tended to treat the ancestral dead with reverence and respect. Throughout much of our existence, this has been shown by rites associated with burial; by the treatment of skeletal remains (defleshing, inhumation within human habitations, use in ritual, deposition within elaborate tomb-shrines, retention over long periods, &c.); by the positioning of bodies in relation to the points of the compass, human settlements, landscape features, &c.; and by the deposition of grave goods with the dead. Reverence for the ancestral dead among our European ancestors is strongly suggested by the deposition of human remains at sacred sites such as the West Kennett Long Barrow and Stonehenge. My own visionary experiences and those of Druid and Pagan colleagues support the idea that communion with the ancestors was of central importance to our Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age forebears. For myself and others in the Druid and Pagan communities, communion with the ancestors is equally important to us now. The ancestors are, for us, a source of wisdom, understanding and guidance. In return, we do what we can for the spirits of our ancestors. It is our regard for their spirits that leads us to call for the respectful reburial of ancient human remains.

Our consultation group of 60 Druids and Pagans were unanimous in their support for the respectful reburial for ancient human remains.

NB. In the BDO, we refer to ancestors of blood and of spirit. Those of blood are those from whom we are genetically descended. Ancestors of spirit are those we perceive to have followed spiritual paths similar to our own and with whom we therefore feel a mutual understanding. Some ancestors of spirit may also be ancestors of blood and vice versa.

b. *Should the remains, after reburial, be accessible for future examination or not? Please give the reasons for your choice.*

Since the remains in question are so poorly provenanced, it is likely that their educational or research potential will remain limited. What resources are available for research are always likely to be directed towards remains whose origins are better known. Therefore, there seems little reason why these particular remains should be buried in such a way as to make them accessible for future examination. To do so would presumably require them to be interred in sealed, airtight containers. Some among our consultation group perceived this to be no better than keeping them in boxes in museum vaults. The group showed a clear preference for reburial to be, where possible, in circumstances approximating those of the original burial, i.e. using natural materials in ways appropriate to the burial traditions of the period of the remains where these can be assessed.

c. *Should they be reburied in Manchester or near their place of origin (if identified?). If the original place of burial cannot be identified, where should they be reburied?*

The Druids and Pagans I consulted showed an overwhelming preference (about 90%) for reburial as close as possible to the original burial site where this can be ascertained. The reason given was that this would be the best way to respect the wishes of our ancestors, who often chose the place of burial with great care. There was a similar level of support for the idea that, where the original place of burial is unknown, burials should take place in non-Christian cemeteries set aside for the

purpose, perhaps green burial sites where perhaps modern Pagans might also be buried. Such cemeteries would become places of pilgrimage for modern Pagans wishing to commune with or honour our ancestors.

Additional Remarks

As well as appropriate location, reburial also raises questions of appropriate ritual. On this issue, our consultation group was divided. Some felt that any ritual would be inappropriate because we have no way of knowing what ritual may have accompanied the original burial. Against this, it may be argued that archaeology provides us with considerable evidence regarding ancient burial practices, and that this may be supplemented by communion with the spirits of the ancestors themselves via their remains. It may also be argued that even a very simple, generic ritual honours our ancestors far more than either retaining them in museum vaults or simply placing them in a hole in the ground with no ritual.

Some of those consulted feared that any ritual reburial might be hijacked by groups or individuals more interested in self-publicity than in the spirits of our ancestors. Concerns were also raised that reburial might generate arguments between groups as to the nature of the rites involved and who should conduct them. While there certainly are argumentative and publicity-seeking people within the Druid and Pagan communities, it seems wrong that fear of them should prevent the rest of us from honouring our ancestors. There was no time for a sustained discussion of this issue at the Druid camp and no consensus could be reached in the time available. My own feeling is that to rebury human remains without some fitting ceremony is little better than leaving them where they are or dumping them on a tip.

Our consultation group also discussed whether reburial should include any grave goods deposited with the original burial. In the case of the Manchester remains, since so little is known about their origins, there are presumably no original grave goods associated with them. However, where at least the rough age and general area of origin of the remains is known, the inclusion of grave goods at the time of reburial may be deemed appropriate. If so, our consultation group agreed that there are craftspeople within the Druid and Pagan communities who would be willing to create reproductions of grave goods specifically for reburials. This was widely supported as allowing original grave goods, where such existed, to be retained for study and display while still honouring the spirits of our ancestors.

One attendee at the Druid camp forum was a forensic pathologist who reminded us that only tiny fragments of bone are required for forensic analysis. There was a general agreement that, where genuine potential for research could be proven, such small fragments might be retained.

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