

HUMAN REMAINS: THE ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF SANCTITY

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Honouring the Ancient Dead

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Once again I find myself in a room talking with a group of museums professionals and archaeologists, people for whom a day like today is another working day, and though attendance at such a conference may be provoked by personal interest, it is still a part of the job for which you are paid. Some of you may still have attended such a conference even if it weren't in a professional capacity. That you have all actively chosen to be here is wonderful.

I am not paid to stand here. Indeed, a Druid priest and writer, I am no paid professional in this field of museums and archaeology. Furthermore, unlike Piotr Bienkowski who spoke before me, I am not presenting a range of ideas for you to ponder, but here expressing my own perspective. I wonder what gives me the right to do so, and wonder what right you feel I have to do so. Being a founder and council member of Honouring the Ancient Dead (HAD) provides some justification, but still I am conscious that, as a theologian, I am likely to be speaking a professional language that is different from your own.

There are, however, poignant commonalities between us that have drawn me along the various paths leading to this moment, and these I shall try to express, together with areas where ideas perhaps diverge. For example, why do I use the word *sanctity* and what does that mean? Why do I not simply use the term *respect*, and what does respect mean within Pagan semantics? Am I representing a spiritual or religious perspective that doesn't happily sit within your sense of the museums or archaeological world? Would you feel happier if people with religious beliefs and convictions stayed out of your way?

Perhaps the key question is not, then, why am *I* here, but what gives Pagans the right to advocate for ancient British human remains? Two further questions are embedded within that one: why are ancient British human remains so important to Pagans? and indeed, why should curators and archaeologists listen? These questions I shall address here, starting with...

Why are ancient British human remains so important to Pagans?

Paganism, like any large spiritual or religious tradition, is enriched and complicated by its inherent diversity. I myself express most powerfully, and with an inevitable bias, my own animistic, polytheistic, British, Druidic tradition.

There is, however, genuine validity in one embracing definition: Pagans acknowledge nature to be sacred. Nature is the nonhuman environment, the wind and the oceans, the mud and forest, the moors, every animal, each element and natural force, from gravity to germination. Yet nature also includes human nature: blood, flesh and bones, love, lust and fear, instinct, emotion and reason. History, heritage, memory are also an integral part of our human nature, our ancestry, its genes and epigenes, its weakness and lessons learned, all of which goes into what makes an individual.

Pagans find their gods in nature, as thunder and waves, or hunger, regeneration, rage and justice, through ancient gods whose names are in our blood and mythology, or simply through the mud, sun and wheat. Seldom submitting in subservient worship, they forge powerful relationships with their gods, celebrating with them, learning from them, moving upon their tides of natural flux and flow.

Yet, if all nature is sacred, seething with divine energy, the term cannot retain any definition that requires the object to be set aside, consecrated, to be used only in ritual. To the Pagan, sacred is not about drawing deity into an object; it is about being flush with the divinity of nature. Thus there are no natural objects, no *things* that can be used: every aspect of nature, every creature, is a being in its own right, drenched in the energy of the gods and the ancestors, of its gods and its ancestors.

This immanence of deity means there is no sense of dualism, of spirit or mind being separate from matter. Consciousness is inherent within all nature. From the subatomic level, through the atoms, cells, leaves, tree, copse, valley, landscape, and out to the planetary and beyond. So when a Pagan says that nature is sacred, that a storm or stone is sacred, a child or beetle, a snowdrop or bone, he means that it must be respected as a subject in its own right, and that he will do his very utmost not to block *unnecessarily* its right to flourish as what it is within the tides and cycles of nature.

The profound sense of connectedness that comes with this animistic or integrated Pagan perception means that no person is an isolated creature. From the moment of conception, we are an integral part of the web, the threads or influence of ancestry touching us through our parents, the environment touching us through food and water, the community or tribe into which we are born touching us with its energy, its memories, through shared experience and intention, all of which are consciousness - not of some intangible mind, but as an integrated being.

Consequently, to the Pagan, death is not the removal of a member of the community. As we live our lives within those threads, fed by them and feeding into them, when we die we continue to do so. Our stories continue as a part of the tribe of our community, our family, in memories, in blood and genes. In other words, when we are dead, we live on, both within the consciousness of our human tribe, and as a part of nonhuman nature, in the environment that we are buried in, in the water we've pissed, the air we've breathed, the blood we've shed. The dead remain a part of the living community.

It is possible to hold a perception of the dead that, as in the 2004 Human Tissue Act, lasts for little more than a century, three generations, back to our grandparents. But that is not the Pagan way. While modern consumer culture, with computers and mobile phones, may be only a generation old, the Pagan's awareness is much longer, reaching back many millennia. This is something, surely, that we hold in common with those drawn to work in museums and archaeology, this fascination with the past, with the ancestors; to the Pagan, what is discovered and treasured from the past are not objects, however, but parts of his own being. If the human remains were exhumed from a landscape he knows well, the landscape of home, that feeling is amplified.

When a Pagan sees human remains, let us say pieces of bone, in a museum display case, there is for most a deep sense of discomfort. For the more sensitive, this will be a visceral unease,

even anxiety, dread or revulsion. The more clinical the display, the brighter the lights and cleaner the environment, the harder it can be. Dry, isolated, the bones feel trapped, unable to release their story, to continue upon the currents of decay, of integration, separated from the process of renewal and regeneration. It doesn't matter if they are bone fragments or whole skeletons, the instinct - at least in a priest of temperate climes - is to wet the bones, to push them back into the dark earth, to allow them to continue the journey of dying, of being, within nature. Humanity is, after all, *an integral part of nature*, and to isolate any part of it in a clinically clean and static environment, to preserve it, is to deny the sanctity of nature: to block its course.

Any artefacts that were buried with a body, exhumed with remains or from a burial site, are interwoven with the being who was interred, the consciousness of both human and artefact holding an integrated intention not only through the funerary rites, but strengthened by the passing of time. After 55 years of marriage, a wedding ring hums with its wearer's spirit. After 2000 years of dying, the connection is profound. So do Pagans find it hard too when funerary goods are separated from the human remains with which they were exhumed, for to do so disconnects what has been purposefully bound together.

In the same way are burial sites also considered deeply important. The earth itself is richly crafted of the stories of the ancestor who was laid there, the stones hold the stories in place over time, the trees are nourished by them. It is not possible to separate these into things - the place, the bones, the artefacts and stones - for they share one story. So are burial sites not just locations, but sacred containers of consciousness, over time woven together with the remains of the dead.

To Pagans, the old stories are also fundamentally important. Again, this is something we share with museum curators and archaeologists whose work is about piecing together the stories from clues left behind. However, where human remains are on display, all too often the stories told in museums are bland: observations contained within the safe parameters of a scientific materialist mindset. Where the remains are in store, those stories are even less honoured: disallowed the release of burial, and forgotten by their community, it feels as if they are abandoned. Yet to the Pagan, the stories are sacred, suffused with the land and the ancestors, with deity, for they speak of the ongoing relationship between the people and the environment. They are filled with memories we may never have any awareness of, but memories that we can sense if given the stillness and receptivity. The stories, for Pagans, are a living part of who we are.

Needless to say, some ancestors were psychopaths and bastards, cursed and rejected by their communities. Some ancestors are of tribes that were at war with those of the lands that we call home. Some worshipped gods that we would rather have nothing to do with. It is tempting to slip into superstition, for imagination to overwhelm perception, for logic and reason then to leap back in and battle for sense, creating a binary right or wrong, instead of a blend of ideas and possibilities. To the Pagan, there is relevance in acknowledging that not all stories are comfortable. We are all related to murderers and rapists. The memories are in our blood, they linger in the bones. Yet this too is no reason to abandon the dead.

I run a natural burial ground, and one of the wonderful (literally, 'wonder-full') aspects of the work is the sense of being responsible for the care of those who have died. Most graves are visited within the first few years, but seldom afterwards. Yet I am not caring for those graves just in case some living relative happens to pop by, in ten or thirty years time, to find a

grandmother. My responsibility, given to those who grieve, is that I will look after that being whom they have loved, whom they still love. Their instinctive concern is not just about the next few years, or until granny's body has dissipated into the soil. They want to know that the land is secure - *sacred* in Pagan terms - ad infinitum. I am not talking about Pagans, but folk of many spiritual beliefs and none. They come to me because they don't like it that churchyards and local authority cemeteries are dug up and reused. They don't like the cemeteries with great marble headstones and concrete kerbs that seem hold the dead as if trying to contain them; the natural burial ground, like nature, grows with the seasons, changing every day.

To the Pagan, this concern is not just about the grandmother. Pagans feel the reality of being themselves the living relatives of ancestors who died 1500 years ago, 4000 years ago, back into the mists of time. That these ancestors have been gone so long, that their names may be forgotten, does mean the bond is weaker than that which we feel with a loved one who has recently died, but the bond is still there. As we say in the prayers of my own tradition, 'sacred ancestors, whose breath we breathe', the connection is based upon walking the same land, inhaling the same air, drinking the same water, loving, working, crying, dying in just the same way.

It makes no difference how long ago someone died. We are their living relatives.

I speak, then, on behalf of the Pagans who feel the stories, the threads of connection that stretch out through these thousands of years, humming as a deep undertone in their ongoing spiritual awareness, that rise in the songs and prayers of their religious rituals. I speak out as a call to respect their (our) ancestors. For in doing so, we respect ourselves. I don't mean as individual human beings, separate from each other and existent only within these moments, these twenty-first-century years. I mean a respect that acknowledges all we have been, as a species within its environment, as creatures within nature, recognizing how that feeds into all we are, as we live, step by step, breath by breath, giving and taking.

And I speak for those ancient British human remains, calling for respect - which brings me to the second question.

What gives HAD and Pagans the right to advocate for ancient British human remains?

Let me speak first of HAD.

Honouring the Ancient Dead was forged into being almost three years ago during the Public Inquiry into the Stonehenge A303 development, which I had attended in order to present Druid concerns. My aim was primarily to place firmly on the agenda of priorities, for planners and developers, including their archaeologists, the sensitivities of the Pagan and Druid faith community. As a sole voice, albeit backed by many, I was heard, but it was clear that I needed to translate the unofficial backing I had been given into concrete support: HAD was the result. Its initial objective was to act as a medium of communication between archaeologists, developers, museums, government departments and quangos, and the British Pagan community, ensuring that misconceptions were dissolved on both sides. Most poignantly, when it came to ancient British human remains, the religious sensitivities of Pagans needed to be laid out clearly and non-confrontationally before what is still overwhelmingly a scientific materialist and dualist culture. Indeed, as it developed, HAD

became an advocacy group not only for modern British Pagans within this field, but for the ancient dead.

Does HAD represent all Pagans? In the 2005 document forged by English Heritage and the Church of England, *The Guidance for Best Practice for Treatment of Human Remains Excavated from Christian Burial Grounds in England*, it states wholly inaccurately: 'in England there is no activism towards wholesale reburial of collections of human remains' (77). Some of you may already have come across militant Pagans, inflexibly demanding reburial of all ancient human remains. HAD's council of theologians and advisors come from across the board of perspectives, including those whose convictions lie with reburial and those for whom reburial is not essential. As a result, HAD is a non-confrontational organization, utterly determined, yet believing that discussion through sound relationships is the most productive course to inspire the necessary progressive action. HAD is also backed by PEBBLE, the Public Bodies Liaison Group for British Paganism, that is at the forefront of encouraging the government to accept the religious needs of British Pagans.

So yes, HAD is a sound representative of mainstream Paganism, speaking out for the care of ancient British human remains.

But does a religion - a collection of traditions that hold key beliefs in common: the sanctity of nature - have a right to advocate for the ancient dead? Paganism in Europe has been squeezed first by Christianity and then secularism for over a thousand years; a religion that inevitably changes as fluidly as nature has been pushed into more change than perhaps it would have been without the pressure of such determined opposition.

The DCMS *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums* requires any individual or group who declare an interest in human remains to establish genealogical proof of direct descendency. These conditions are clearly constructed with reference to repatriation of remains overseas, and remains that are at most a few hundred years old. Yet time and again, at HAD, we have been asked the same question: what proof do we have of direct descendency from the human remains about which we show such interest?

The answer is hard to find, for the instinctive response is bewilderment. If we are talking about individuals who have died 1500 years ago, perhaps 3000 or 5000 years ago, what proof could there be? Do we need genetic testing? Recent tests do show that good swathes of every population are related to the indigenous people of that location. In around just one millennium, we have perhaps 8.5 billion direct ancestors (I base that on 33 generations, but add another and the figure rises to 17 billion); the population of the world was thought to be just 250 million a thousand years ago. If we are looking at one small area of land, such as Europe, and looking at 60 or 100 generations, it is unlikely that we aren't in some way related.

To the Pagan, however, the sincere answer is, simply, that they are ancestors of these lands. I am British and they are British. Usually, in reality, it is far more specific: I am from the landscape where this ancestor was exhumed. We are the same tribe.

It is worth adding here that Pagans aren't concerned with the religious affiliation of their ancestors. To the Pagan, his task is not only to honour those of a Pagan heritage: all ancestors, Christian or Pagans, bastards and saints, are in need of care. If Christians are not willing to care for those buried as Christian, Pagans will.

Furthermore, as well as blood links, as Pagans the DCMS asks to prove that our cultural and spiritual beliefs are the same as those of the individual(s) whose remains we are focusing on, yet when we are speaking of more than a thousand years any such proof would be daft. All cultures change. Christianity in Britain is now very different from what it was when it first arrived on these shores. Paganism, like any other religious tradition, has changed over centuries; we no longer sacrifice animals and we tend to invest a great deal in planting and protecting forests.

Twenty-first-century Pagans find reverent and relevant ways in which to respond to the divine powers of nature, within and around them, each new day, in just the same way as our ancestors did. We share many of the same gods and some of the same stories, we share much of the same landscape, sun and moon, oak and bramble, we have the same experience of love and death. We are still Pagans.

Both issues are therefore an irritant, posed by museum curators who are unwilling to step out of their scientific boxes, entrenched in their materialist or dualist worldviews. However the basic question is still interesting. My answer may sound as if it is responding to a *why do Pagans*, as opposed to *what gives Pagans the right*; however, if the Pagan perspective is accepted, the right is understood.

Essentially it rests with how we identify ourselves as human, and again reflects the Pagan focus on connection and consciousness.

Where we identify ourselves as single isolated individuals, relationships are crafted upon threads of affirmation, ensuring security. But we are not isolated beings. Just as there is consciousness within atoms, leaves and trees, so is there consciousness within each cell that together creates the belly, that with other organs becomes the human individual, that with other people becomes a family, then a tribe. When a woman screams giving birth, she is not just crying her own pain but the collective memories of every woman who has felt that pain. When we grieve, we are not just keening the loss of the one we loved, but sharing that grief with every mammal who feels loss. When we find the rhythm of the chant, we are one being with every other person chanting it in the football stadium.

So are we a part of nature. At times we are no bigger than the agony of a clump of nerve cells in a tooth abscess, at times identifying with every other woman who has felt the overwhelming passion of lust, losing ourselves in the high seas of it all. There are times when we are more than human, willing to give our lives for the sake of a dozen veal calves or a stretch of ancient forest, identifying ourselves as mammals, or as a part of the environment, through our profound ability to empathize: aware of how we share consciousness.

To the Pagan, then, the dead are a part of his *tribe*. It is a word I've used before; let me here define it more clearly in Pagan terms. I don't mean some historical notion of documented tribes; I use the word to define that coherence of consciousness. The tribe is that family, or community, or landscape, or environment that we identify ourselves as being an integral part of at any given time. It is through that act of claiming tribal kinship that we find both a source and a context of shared morality. In other words, we make decisions based upon how we identify ourselves at any given moment and within which tribe we stand.

To the Pagan, the ancestors are always a part of his tribe.

When ancient ancestors are removed, that tribe is torn apart. It leaves us rootless, shaky in our confidence, grasping for security. We may not be aware of what is wrong, but we feel the disconnection. When the Pagan is made aware of the stories, he feels that disconnection acutely, and more often than not that provokes a mixture of grief and real anger. The tribe has been dishonoured, compromised, the stories broken. Where before Pagans would have nowhere to complain, nobody who would hear their distress, now increasingly they are getting in touch with HAD, and with museums and archaeologists.

Why should curators and archaeologists listen?

Primarily, the answer is because the Pagan perspective and sensitivities are valid.

All too often, the agnostic humanist or scientific materialist determines his own worldview as *rational*, and as such it must be correct. Any spirituality is therefore irrational nonsense. Christians have slipped under this razorwire for long enough to be acknowledged as acceptable, if at times daft, for they are still a part of the establishment. Pagans, however, are still too often dismissed as ... (you can all fill in the gap, and as you do so I ask that you are aware of your perspective).

If I were called Susie Black Water and were seeking repatriation of my great grandfather's bones back to my own tribal lands in north America, if I could meet the conditions of the DCMS Guidelines, most museums would now deal with me courteously, pleased to be able to express the political correctness expected of them. There would be no need for the museum to accept or understand my animistic Pagan religious sensibilities, for I would be categorized and accepted simply as a native elder from overseas. However, because I am British, asking about the bones of my ancient ancestors, too often the curator judges my religion as irrational and bases his response upon that.

Secondly, Paganism is the fastest growing religion in Britain. In the 2001 census it was the seventh largest religion in Britain, and the figures are acknowledged by the Office of National Statistics as severely undercounted. The ONS are talking with Pagans about how to count more accurately for the 2011 census, using a technique that in Australia increased the Pagan population sevenfold between 2001 and 2006. Estimates put the number of British Pagans at around five times the 2001 figure, potentially placing Pagans as equal in numbers to Buddhists in Britain. With a sevenfold increase, there are as many Pagans as Jews.

Not only are Pagans within every community that your museum serves, but these are members of the British community whose religious traditions embrace history and heritage as sacred. They put your postcards on their altars. They are the quiet folk who linger by display cases, dreaming, whispering prayers, wanting to touch the displays, finger tips on the glass. They are your audience.

The third reason is because it is not only British Pagans that hold these sensitivities. We are all aware that the attitude towards human remains is changing. Why this is so is debated. Within museums, there is talk of Alder Hey, medical practice and the Human Tissue Act waking curators to think more carefully about how they treat human remains in their care. The repatriation issue has added to this, and perhaps the increasing multiculturalism of the local communities their museums serve.

However, there is another change, one that is a part of broader society, the same current that is inspiring so many to turn to Paganism. The sense of disconnection as families break apart, the isolation of individuals within violent communities, the sense of life's meaninglessness, the environmental crisis: all these are issues that people speak of when finding their way to Paganism. They quest an understanding of nature that isn't purely scientific, rational and conventional, but allows equally the instinctive, emotional, imaginative, individual and creative. They seek out their tribe, and the way in which they are naturally connected to the environment within which they live, the environment of earth. As they do so, they think more carefully about the sanctity of family, of life and memories, of stories and landscape, and how they can more effectively engage with respect.

Unthinking people will remain sodden with drugs and soap operas. But thinking people are finding these issues important. They are beginning to question.

So what does respect mean? In part this conference has been crafted in order for that very word to be discussed.

That Pagans are generally not just polytheistic, but honour the diversity of tribes and cultures, allows them naturally better to acknowledge different worldviews. What I pose here as an initial concept of respect is that willingness to hear and acknowledge the validity of another's philosophical, spiritual or religious belief without judgment. I am not alone amongst Pagans in being tired of being dismissed for my religion by people who believe their god is the only god, or that their apparently rationalist secular perspective is unquestionably right.

Although for many Pagans, the visceral need is to cry out for reburial of all human remains, this is neither the purpose of this conference, nor of HAD. Respect, however, must encompass the way in which human remains are exhumed, stored, displayed or reburied, with decisions and action based upon sincere and informed debate.

The English Heritage / Church of England *Guidance* acknowledges, 'in the case of human remains from cemeteries of some minority faiths (such as Judaism), opinion of contemporary representatives may strongly favour reburial' (77). It goes on to say, 'Decisions concerning the long term fate of skeletal collections should be taken on a case by case basis, with consultation as appropriate in order to take into account opinions from interested parties' (85).

In other words, respect requires that equal voice be given to those for whom these remains are sacred.

Museums, archaeologists and government can't ignore this, for it is clearly the way in which attitudes are moving. Our challenge is to make that respect practical.