

## **Finding a Compromise – Keeping Places**

### **Respect for the Dead**

In any discussion of what to do with human remains, I think we should start from the assumption that almost everyone respects the dead. But it is how that respect is expressed that is currently a source of conflict.

Some have argued that respect can only be expressed by not disturbing the dead; or if they are disturbed by accident or because of development work, then they must be reburied as soon as possible. This is, however, a view that was not *necessarily* held by our ancestors. It may also be a result of squeamishness about death, not wanting to see human remains on display. It is certainly true that many cultures prefer their remains not to be disturbed, and indeed the integrity of the burial is one of the duties we owe to the dead (de Baets, 2004), along with memory and justice. But if the resting place is long-forgotten, then the person has long since passed out of memory, and so archaeologists are at least benefiting the ancestors by perpetuating their memory.

### **Burial Practices**

There are few burials from the Mesolithic, but one of them that is known is the remains of a man found near Tormarton in Gloucestershire, who appeared to have been murdered: he had an arrowhead in his spine, and was left in a ditch (to be discovered in the 1960s when a gas pipeline was cut through the site).

In the Neolithic, some of the dead were placed on wooden platforms on causewayed enclosures (such as Windmill Hill near Avebury) for the birds to pick the flesh off their bones. Some of the smaller bones would have been lost in the process. Any remaining flesh was scraped off, and then the bones were placed in a burial mound. In some cases the skeletons were disarticulated, all the thigh bones placed together in one section and all the skulls in another, and so on. Later, rituals were performed in the mound and with the bones.

In the Bronze Age, individual burial mounds started to appear, and some of the Neolithic barrows (such as West Kennett) were

deliberately closed off. Nevertheless only high-status individuals received burials in mounds.

In the Iron Age, all sorts of bizarre burial practices were used. There were chariot burials in Yorkshire, bog bodies in Ireland (possibly victims of sacrifice or murder), bodies left in disused grain pits (at Danebury Rings, for example), and so on.

The Anglo-Saxons had individual burial mounds in their pagan period, and graves aligned east-west in their Christian period (though confusingly, some of these burials included grave goods, which is normally taken as a sign of a pagan burial). Also, some Anglo-Saxon pagans were buried in an east-west alignment; there is considerable variation in burial practices, and it is difficult to tell which graves are Christian and which are pagan.

All these burial practices presumably indicate different beliefs about the ontological status of the dead – whether they are things, quasi-persons, former persons, or persons (de Baets, 2004), different beliefs about the afterlife (where it is located, who presides over it, whether the dead need objects there that they needed in life, and so on) and the journey of the soul to that afterlife (whether or not the soul travels via some central omphalos or gateway, whether it requires a chariot or a horse to get there, and so on).

### **What do we Mean by Respect?**

Most societies regard memory as a key factor in respecting the dead. The well-known saying “Mustn’t speak ill of the dead” indicates that most people feel that the good reputation of the dead person must not be undermined. Indeed, the *Hávamál* speaks of the individual’s reputation as more precious than material things:

Cattle die, kindred die,  
Every man is mortal:  
But the good name never dies  
Of one who has done well

Cattle die, kindred die,  
Every man is mortal:

But I know one thing that never dies,  
The glory of the great dead

The Quiché Mayan poem *Popol Vuh* (quoted in de Baets, 2004) contains a plea from the dead to be remembered:

Our days are ended. Think, then, of us.  
Do not erase us from your memory, nor forget us.

The building of funerary monuments in Pagan and other cultures around the world indicates a desire for the memory of the dead person to be perpetuated.

Many archaeologists speak of recovering the memory of the ancient dead as part of their motivation for excavating them and carrying out research to find out how they lived and died. Archaeological research has also brought about a deeper respect for the peoples of the past, since it has shown how they survived and flourished in an often hostile environment and how they created art and culture and tools and clothing to help them survive. The excavation of the “Ice Man” (a Bronze Age man discovered frozen at the edge of an Alpine glacier, also known as Ötzi after the valley where he was found) has shown that Bronze Age people had advanced tools and clothing, and that they had acupuncture and knowledge of herbs. Ötzi is now enshrined in a special museum. Another example of increasing respect for the ancient dead by rediscovering their stories is the TV programme *Meet the Ancestors*, which reconstructed the lives of people of the past, giving an insight into their experiences and feelings. Similarly, an archaeologist who excavates bog bodies spoke movingly of how she wants to create some form of restorative justice for the oppressed and marginalised – which some of the bog bodies may have been – by recovering their stories (Giles, 2006).

Others feel that respect for the dead primarily means not disturbing their place of rest, or returning them to the earth as soon as possible. Emma Restall Orr (2005) speaks movingly of the individual’s song being restored to the greater song of the earth:

Each individual’s song is made up of notes given them by the ancestors, by the tribe, by the landscape, by the wind and the food that is eaten, by the rain that falls, that is drunk and pissed. The physical body, then, is crafted of all these

songs. It is the totality of experience, it is every single story of every relationship a person forges throughout their life. With each breath and footstep, in every cell, the body sings its relationships with the environment. With each heartbeat, the body is retelling the stories of its tribe, history and heritage, upon the land. ... Slowly, given the opportunity through burial, the waters of that pool seep back into the earth, cell by cell dissolving. Even that which remains the longest - the bones, still holding those songs - silently lets go, whispering them into the mud and the flow of time.

This is a poetic vision of the process of decay after the body has been buried, but only mystics would be able to recover the individual stories from the greater song – and unfortunately, mystic visions are not verifiable, and whilst they may be psychologically and spiritually true, they are often not factually true. I do not mean to say that *all* visions are factually untrue, just that they generally need to be verified by other sources before we can act on them. So, in order to have genuine respect for and understanding of our ancestors, we need to remember them as well as honour their resting places.

But not all Pagans view people and landscape as a holistic unity in this way. Many subscribe to a dualistic view that the dead go to another plane of existence, and that once the soul has left the body, it is no longer important. Many Pagans find archaeological research to be of immense significance to their sense of who they are and where they come from, and believe that perpetuating their memory is the most important form of respect we can give to the dead.

## **Practicalities**

Sometimes it is impossible to return the dead to their original resting places, or to a nearby burial site, either because the landscape context has been destroyed, or because it is likely that the bones and grave goods would be stolen for nefarious purposes. Given the large amount of bones stored in museums, it would be a lengthy and expensive process to rebury them. It is also expensive to store them, and some museums are investigating the possibilities of reburial, and reviewing the remains that they have in store.

Also, in order to get reliable data, archaeologists require access to large populations in order to be able to ascertain movements of populations, what they ate, how they lived, what diseases they had, and so on (Slater 2006). All of this information helps us to reconstruct a picture of ancient people's lives, which arguably benefits modern people wanting to return to a life more in harmony with nature, as well as helping us to remember the ancestors.

A possible compromise solution to the various requirements for respecting the dead (perpetuating their memory and respecting their privacy) is the idea of a keeping place, which would also be in keeping with the Neolithic practice of allowing descendants access to the bones.

I put forward this idea in a letter to *British Archaeology* in 2004:

‘Perhaps the bones could be stored in a burial mound (a national repository), consecrated by Pagan priestesses and priests, but with temperature and humidity controls to ensure preservation and access for study.’

This idea has actually been implemented in Australia (Cantwell, 2004: 101), where special underground repositories have been created, with shared access for archaeologists and Aborigines. This idea has also been proposed by Melbourn Parish Council in Cambridgeshire.

Another way of achieving compromise is to proceed on a case-by-case basis, only reburial when the bones are no longer needed for archaeological study, or their context has been lost (this is the approach advocated by HAD). The idea that ancient human remains may be kept indefinitely without any scrutiny by an external body has clearly had its day, though.

It would be wonderful if a keeping place for the ancient British dead could be specially constructed, perhaps in the form of a very large Iron Age roundhouse, or a burial mound, where the dead could be kept in special shrines, with all the details known about them and their lives displayed near them, but still allowing archaeologists access for research.

As this dream is unlikely to be realised, other possible solutions are that museums, which should (according to new DCMS

guidelines) already have specially designated spaces for storing human remains, could allow Pagans into the museum store to consecrate the space, perform rituals for the dead, and perhaps even paint sacred designs on the cardboard boxes in which they are stored. Where the remains are on display in public galleries, Pagans could be consulted about the way in which the remains are displayed (as has happened recently with the way Lindow Man is displayed at Manchester Museum) to ensure that this is respectful. One possible way for museums to ensure that displays are respectful is to make them feel like a shrine, perhaps using restricted visual access to heighten the sense of sacred space, and again, to allow Pagans to ritually consecrate the space in which the body is displayed.

Emma Restall-Orr and Piotr Bienkowski (2006) have also suggested that Pagans be allowed to perform brief rituals during excavation of human remains, and be involved in the whole process of transfer to museums, decisions about which human remains to retain and why, display, storage, and (in some cases) eventual reburial. They have outlined a series of guidelines for involving Pagans in the whole process.

## **Conclusion**

There is by no means a consensus among either Pagans, archaeologists, museum curators or the general public on the subject of how to treat human remains, except that most are agreed that respect is important – but there is disagreement on what constitutes respect and how that respect should be expressed in practice. Discussions about this that I have seen on Pagan forums and mailing lists have generally been in favour of archaeology and continued study of human remains. Most Pagans recognise the value of archaeological research and remembering the dead. Even the majority of those who would like to see more remains reburied still acknowledge the need for research. Conflict between archaeologists and Pagans is not inevitable in this area, because museum curators and archaeologists themselves have been reflecting upon the ethical aspects of the storage and treatment of human remains (there have been two recent archaeological books with chapters on this issue).

It is a mistake to see either the archaeological community or the Pagan community as two discrete monolithic entities. There are significant overlaps between the two groups, and different factions within them, and cultural shifts occurring all the time. Both groups have become more aware of postmodernist thinking, which calls into question the notion of scientific objectivity. Archaeologists have also become interested in the phenomenology of landscape, something which was previously regarded as a fringe “earth mysteries” activity (Hutton, 2007). Pagans have learnt a lot from archaeology through TV programmes like *Time Team* and *Meet the Ancestors*, and magazines like *3<sup>rd</sup> Stone*. It is also important to be aware that there are two strands in contemporary Paganisms (Hutton, 2007): the countercultural strand, which is epitomised by rave culture, for example; and the religious strand, which is more interested in developing spiritual and cultural forms associated with Paganisms (epitomised by organisations like the Pagan Federation, which seeks recognition for Paganisms by the existing establishment).

Therefore, we need to proceed carefully through the many complex questions raised by this issue, checking our assumptions and presuppositions, and listening to the multiplicity of voices in the discussion – not just assuming that we know what they are thinking. Consultation with all Pagans, the general public, archaeologists and museum curators will be necessary before we can assume that a consensus has been arrived at. It is necessary to examine what is meant in each cultural context by problematic terms such as 'landscape', 'ancestors', 'culture', 'heritage', 'sacredness' and 'respect', and to look at the philosophical basis of the arguments employed by all parties in the discussion.

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