

# HONOURING THE ANCIENT DEAD

ENSURING RESPECT FOR ANCIENT PAGAN REMAINS

## Guidance for Display of Human Remains in Museums

The following points are laid down as agreed guidelines compiled by Honouring the Ancient Dead, with consultative input from its council, advisors and other members of the museums profession, for the display of human remains in museums.

*HAD defines human remains as bones, ash, or any part of what was once a living human being, including hominin ancestors not classified as Homo sapiens with whom Pagans may feel an ancestral connection.*

*The term pagan with a capital 'P', as Pagan, is used to refer to the modern religious and spiritual traditions in Britain and around the world. With a small 'p', as pagan, the term refers to the general religious and social culture of our pre-Christian ancestors.*

### 1. Principles

- 1.1 All human remains should be treated with respect. In many cases, this means not placing remains on display at all. However, recognising that for the foreseeable future some museums will want to display iconic or other human remains, HAD recommends that human remains be displayed in a context that supports and reflects the dignity and relationships of the individuals involved.
- 1.2 It should be recognised that modern Pagans feel a spiritual connection with ancient pagans through ancestry, heritage and tradition, as well as geographic or religious association. As such, human remains are considered to be ancestors. The age of the remains does not affect this; thus, neolithic ancestors are as much persons as are our grandparents, and their remains should be treated with equal consideration. It should be noted that such feelings are not restricted to the Pagan traditions, however, but are often found within communities local to the remains' place of exhumation.
- 1.3 Where a museum would like to display human remains, the museum should set in place a consultative process to include all for whom the remains are of particular interest or importance. This may include those with a scientific, archaeological or historical focus, but also local community representatives and those for whom the remains are sacred. Consultation should look at whether display is appropriate, and if it is how it might

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best be done. Museums should be aware of HAD's *Policy on Consultation on Human Remains of British Provenance*.

- 1.4 Because under English law no human remains can be owned, the issue of who holds custody cannot be dismissed. Consequently, considered and informed reviews of decisions should be taken at regular intervals as part of the management of human remains, from their excavation to retention, storage, research, display and disposal.

## **2. Display**

- 2.1 A display should primarily seek to emphasise the remains' personhood, i.e. not treat the remains as specimens, nor imply them to be objects, instead presenting the remains as individual human beings and subjects in their own right. Thus even where the remains are of scientific value, this should be expressed entirely within the context of the individual's life.
- 2.2 As much information as possible about the human being should be expressed in any display, including what is known of their people, their way of life, and individual story. Where there are various possibilities, it is preferable to offer this information rather than to avoid giving any.
- 2.3 Displays should not remove human remains from the context of the landscapes within which they were thought to have lived and from which they were exhumed. Displays should provide such information, thus preserving the importance of a person's connection with the environment. Where possible, this should be enhanced by an understanding of that landscape and its landowners and/or community in the present day.
- 2.4 Any goods disinterred with the human remains should be displayed with the remains. If this is genuinely not possible, quality replicas should be considered. Best practice would entail every item being referred to and explained, possibly with details as to where more information can be found.
- 2.5 Dignity should be restored to the individual where possible. For example, where a skeleton is found intact but with the skull not in its correct anatomical position the display should place the skull at the top of the spine, and not as found within the grave. In most instances it is not possible to know the reasons for the original burial configuration; however, restoring the remains to a normal configuration expresses respect for the individual as an ancestor, recognising their part within the human story. The position of bones within the grave can be presented with graphics in a display, or

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using photographs taken at the time of excavation.

- 2.6 Care should be taken with the use of nicknames for human remains. While using a name can ensure the remains are not perceived as specimens or objects, doing so can imply a level of familiarity that allows a lack of adequate respect. The giving of a nickname is often a part of the remains' ongoing story and should be explained as such.
- 2.7 Remains from different individuals should not be muddled up. Where displays of human remains do contain more than one individual, this must be absolutely clear and justified by the individuals' stories.
- 2.8 Best practice would entail the story of the excavation and exhumation of the individuals being told within the display, together with reasons as to why the remains were disinterred and retained, however briefly. The views of those who found the remains could also be included, further adding to the personal relationship between the ancestor and the present community or that contemporary to his or her exhumation.
- 2.9 Funerary urns should be displayed with explanations of their purpose, together with acknowledgement of the individual and where their remains may now be. They should not be displayed simply as pots.
- 2.10 Low lighting should be employed at all times on human remains. If this does not allow for detailed viewing, graphics or reproductions should be used to illustrate necessary points. This is as true for isolated bones, as it is for skulls or entire skeletons.
- 2.11 Visitors should be warned that human remains are on display, before they approach them, so that they can make an active choice whether or not to view them.
- 2.12 Information about the eventual disposal of the remains should be considered as a respectful and valid part of the display, including whether any decision has been made about reburial, if this is under review or not currently under consideration. If the remains are to be retained within a collection, justification for this should be made clear.
- 2.13 If space does not allow for presentation of sufficient information immediately alongside the display, separate leaflets, information on websites or audio guides could be used.
- 2.14 Best practice would include providing seating near the display so that those who wish to are given the opportunity of sitting with the dead. In some cases, and in consultation with Pagan and local community groups, the opportunity to leave

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offerings could also be considered. This may be as simple as a box for monetary gifts with clarity as to which charity the offerings were to be given to; without adequate explanation, however, such a box is unlikely to be used.

### **3. The Role of HAD**

- 3.1 Nearly all areas have active Pagan communities, but they are often excluded from mainstream public consultations and from local Councils of Faith and other interfaith bodies. For this reason, they should be approached through HAD, who will make the appropriate contacts and develop positive connections.
- 3.2 HAD is willing to act as a consultee in all cases of local significance, either where nominated by the local Pagan community, or contacted directly by organisers of any consultation. In this case, HAD will notify the local Pagan community, seek their approval and involve them in the process if possible.
- 3.3 HAD expects to be consulted directly for all cases of regional or national significance, using its own resource of theologians and contacts throughout the British Pagan faith community to ensure decisions are supported. Decisions made will be disseminated through the Pagan faith community through HAD's website and other public media.

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