

Association of Polytheistic Traditions Conference

On Saturday 26 May 07, the APT held their annual conference which, this year, focused upon the issue of ancient British human remains. This brief report is submitted to the HAD website in order to express how the issue is being presented, received and discussed within the British Pagan community.

Organised by Jenny Blain, an anthropologist, Heathen and member of the HAD Council, it was an inspiring and informative day.

After a brief introduction by Jenny Blain, the first talk was given by Robin Herne, a well respected Druid, storyteller and priest. He spoke on the craft of weaving stories and myth smithery, which gave a sound foundation to the day, acknowledging the fundamental importance of stories within so many Pagan traditions.

Jenny Blain then spoke on the subject of human remains, considering how polytheists might address the issue through their theologies and ontologies. Poignantly she spoke of her own ancestors and the journey she has taken in search of their stories, considering at the same time the landscapes which both she and they had lived in. Wondering at how we define 'sacred', she spoke of the deep connections that we build with the environment, whether we are settled folks, travellers or migrants, and how we imbue places and people with meaning informed by those feelings of connection.

Referring to the Church of England / English Heritage document, she pointed out how the Christian perspective on human remains had been accepted, as had the view of indigenous groups from Australasia and North America. Why was it so hard, then, for the British Pagan perspective to be heard, when it is simply another theological understanding of value and sanctity.

Jenny then referred to the 2003 Report presented by the Working Group on Human Remains ([link](#)), and in particular point 82 of that document, which gives seven conclusions. Although these relate to human remains removed from overseas indigenous communities, a few points are particularly interesting, for they speak in the same terms that British Pagans do. The third refers to the need for a community to fulfil 'a sacred responsibility to care for the remains, honour their ancestors and lay ancestral remains to rest'. The seventh is poignant: 'the different stances of researchers and indigenous peoples have traditionally been characterised by a relative lack of constructive communication between them. The scientific community in the UK still operates largely in isolation from communities of origin. It will become apparent later that this situation stands in contrast to that in other countries, where indigenous populations exist as articulate and politically active elements of society, and where the scientific community has already taken significant steps to become accountable to those communities.' The scientific and archaeological communities here in Britain have, until recently, worked in isolation from those for whom these ancestors are sacred. The continuing change in this regard is crucial.

Jenny ended by considering the notion of indigeneity. Heritage organisations, in order to reach their audience and win interest in the ancient sites they are protecting, routinely speak of those who populated the ancient landscape as *our* ancestors. However, when we as Pagans step forward and acknowledge these our ancestors as sacred to us, they demand we prove that connection.

Jenny mentioned Philip Shallcrass who, working then with me at the British Druid Order, wrote in *The Druids' Voice* about the reburial issue back in the late 1990s, and Paul Davies who has been mounting his campaign for full reburial of all ancient British human remains; neither of them were present. She mentioned HAD's work. Acknowledging that not all Pagans do hold the same opinion about reburial, she questioned why that negated the Pagan's position, for in any other religious or professional community there are very many different views.

At the end of her talk, she invited me to give an update on the Lindow Man negotiations with Manchester Museum, which I did, at the end of which I felt a strong sense of consensus in the room. Questions were positive, interested and engaged in response to both my and Jenny's words.

After lunch, George Chaplin spoke of his campaign to save the Thornborough Henges. In particular for this report focusing on human remains, I mention simply one anecdote he told, that of a group of local Christians who shed tears watching the bulldozers moving through the Bronze Age graves at the site: a beautiful expression of people feeling the strength of connection with both landscape and ancestry. After George, Linda Sever spoke of sacred sites in Lancashire.

Tina Smith then gave a talk about what is happening at Mildenhall and Lakenheath, giving information that was a clear and passionate expression of her connection with the land and its ancestors, and her Heathen tradition. At these sites, Suffolk Archaeology are excavating a huge amount of material and human remains of Pagan Saxon origin: this is a project that HAD is currently getting involved with. Tina, along with many others in the local East Anglian community of Heathens and other Pagans, was an active supporter of the West Stow Anglo Saxon Village project, and found her religion enriched by history and archaeology; yet at the same she clearly felt a longing for the reburial of the remains exhumed - not only the human, but the horses too.

As we broke for tea, and questions were asked, George made a statement that is worth repeating, for it expressed well what seemed to be felt amongst the delegates: how can we define 'heritage'? Archaeology and anthropology, and especially their scientific renditions, certainly contribute to what we understand to be heritage, but that contribution is a very thin layer of the whole. Far more important in terms of our understanding of heritage is the broad environment and the people who have made relationship with it, their histories, myths and stories.

Ken Lymer, an archaeologist, then gave a beautifully presented paper about the story of a 2500 year old woman found in the Altai region of southern

Siberia. Badly exhumed, her body thawing, much damage was done to her remains, which were then taken to be embalmed using the secret techniques used to embalm Lenin; she now lies on display, naked (though she was found dressed) but for a little cloth partly draped across her, leaving her rich tattoos on show, her robes displayed beside her. With scientists and archaeologists declaring she must be kept on show, and the native Altaians demanding her return to the Altai mountains, many even calling for her reburial, this woman is an important case study in the debate about ownership, custody and authority over human remains.

While Ken's perspective was not judgmental of archaeology, he was critical of both the way she was treated and the way in which she is now displayed, calling it a 'peep show'. With a catalogue of problems on all sides, it is indeed both a complicated and interesting situation, and would be equally so if such an individual were exhumed here in the UK. However, with many more bodies having been exhumed before her, and now a ban on any archaeology in the area because of the dispute this has created, in part the problem is exacerbated by the focus being upon her solely, while other cases, other individuals, remain out of the public eye.

Yvonne Aburrow then spoke, giving her perspective on the human remains debate. A Wiccan (and sometimes Druid, as she described herself), Yvonne is doing an MA in archaeology and has spoken out against widescale reburial of ancient human remains, defending the role of archaeologists and scientists as gatherers of stories. Indeed her talk was a clear exposition of the different views on reburial and human remains, given, as she reminded us, that in England and Wales the living have responsibilities towards the dead, but the dead themselves have no rights.

Gently sweeping away the problem of indigeneity, Yvonne quoted Julian Richards' book, 'Blood of the Vikings', which asserts that the major part of genetic inheritance in most Britons was native, traceable back many millennia. Saxon, Viking and Norman blood makes up a very small proportion of Britons' genes (5%), including those now labelled English. Given the way in which archaeologists and museum curators question the average Briton's connection with the ancient dead, it is an important point.

Yvonne summed up what she saw as the animistic view of the human remains issue: that there is a timeless continuity of land and spirit; if the physical remains are removed from the land, that unity is broken; dissolution of the body is necessary in order to remain in touch with and contribute to the song of the earth and nature; truth is relative, an individual perception and no one person or organisation thus has ownership of truth; the ancestors are not only individuals, but also fundamentally an undifferentiated mass, an 'ancestry'. Considering these points, she suggested that they were problematic because their lack of specificity. Respect need not be expressed through reburial, she said, instead emphasising the importance of remembering the dead. Through monuments, elegies, poetry and stories, our ancestors contribute to our cultural identity, archaeology contributing to those stories significantly.

To scientific materials - and she conceded that many archaeologists do fall into this category - truth is a black and white, polarised measure; human remains are artefacts, objects and not people; once dead, we are dead. However, she concluded her talk with the important emphasis that it is through negotiation, consultation and education that respect is crafted, compromising where we are able and discussing where we are not.

Her talk can be found on <http://vogelbeere.livejournal.com/27419.html>.

After her talk, Jenny asked me again to speak about HAD's work. I gave a potted history of the organisation and a brief summary of some of the current projects that we are working on. It was important to explain just how HAD represents the Pagan community, not through organisations' support but through its council of theologians; however, backed by PEBBLE, the Pagan Federation, the Order of Bards Ovates and Druids and CoBDO, it was good to feel the backing of the APT in the conference audience. I gave a run down on how people could help before the floor was opened out to questions.

The conference closed with half an hour's discussion about where the polytheist's gods fit into the mix of convictions and ideas and our perception of the sacred.

At the end of the day, I was left with a strong sense of there being a general agreement. Paganism may have many voices, but those who had attended the conference felt to me to be fully supportive of the idea of consultation upon the intention of explaining Pagan sensitivities and beliefs.