

HONOURING THE ANCIENT DEAD

ENSURING RESPECT FOR ANCIENT PAGAN REMAINS



30 June 2011

Angela Boyle
APABE

APABE Consultation - aDNA Sampling 31 March 2011

Dear Ms Boyle,

Thank you for your invitation to participate in the above consultation.

HAD presents itself as a stakeholder with reference to human remains exhumed within the British Isles, particularly those of preChristian and pagan provenance, speaking on behalf of those modern British Pagans for whom ancestry and heritage are a profound and central part of their religious practice and sensibilities. The majority of such Pagans hold an animistic worldview, believing that physical remains are not empty of soul or consciousness, and that the dead remain with the living community; consequently, their surviving remains retain an inherent value and personhood. HAD asserts that decision-making about ancestral remains should be a collective process involving all those for whom such remains are important, and that its religious views and values are as valid as the scientific.

With regard to the content and quality of the document titled "APABE Supplementary Guidance Note 1" (which we circulated to HAD's Council of Theologians, our Advisors and Volunteers, and the following response was collated from the answers received), we felt generally that it is a practical and sensitive summary of the limits of DNA testing in this situation. Specifically relating to the questions posed in the covering consultation directions:

- yes, overall, we do consider the guidance note to be useful;
- yes, we consider the explanation of the science behind aDNA analysis to be sufficient and clear for non-specialists;
- yes, the range of possible applications are helpful in clarifying the potential of aDNA analysis;
- yes, the case studies are helpful, particularly as they show that hoped for outcomes do not always materialise thus emphasising the need for careful consideration before undertaking intrusive DNA analysis. We believe that all applications for DNA analysis should be vetted on a case-by-case basis to assess a) the viability of the project in terms of its potential for the testing to actually work and b) the ethics surrounding the intention of the project i.e. does it

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really have scientific merit or is it just inspired by curiosity or ‘public interest’, or the furthering of an academic career.

As a Pagan representative organisation advocating respectful treatment of ancient human remains we feel we must say a few words from this perspective.

Where the guidelines employ the phrase ‘in the public interest’ this is implicitly intended to mean the current public interest. Many modern Pagans do not see past communities as separate from current. This is a sincere and genuinely held feeling of connection based on shared context, and not one based on assumed genetic ancestry. As a result, we believe that the ‘public interest’ should take greater consideration of the ancient public i.e. the people whom the analysis is intended to study. As noted in the guidance, the HTA centres around the notion of consent. No such consent is possible from the people who would be subject to aDNA analysis, or their families. Although this is clearly impossible to resolve by asking the people concerned, it should not be given any less weight. Indeed, the 1989 Vermillion Accord did agree that the views of the ancient dead, where known or where they could be reasonably inferred, should be taken into account; consent should not be assumed. Therefore, the organizations or individuals deciding on cases of proposed ancient DNA study should attempt to take this concern (i.e. the absence of positive consent) into consideration in their deliberations. Whilst the statements about traditional secular recognition of the importance of scientific information from archaeological evidence in the penultimate paragraph of section 4.3 are no doubt correct, we contend that they alone are an inadequate and incomplete basis for deciding whether DNA analysis should go ahead. Ideally the Pagan perspective should be represented in such cases – something that HAD would be prepared to provide if called upon to do so.

Although the guidelines express the importance of careful consideration of the value of proposed research (section 4.5), we believe they do not give sufficient consideration to the situation where justification for otherwise avoidable exhumation may be made on, or strengthened by, the grounds of potential DNA analysis value alone. We would like the text to be amended to state that the possibility of gaining DNA insights (useful those these may be) should not be, in itself, deemed to be sufficient grounds for avoidable exhumation. Where exhumation is unavoidable (e.g. accidental discovery of ancient graves during civil engineering projects) the case for DNA sampling should be reviewed on its own merits. HAD always advocates public consultation in any process involving human remains and the case of aDNA testing should be no different. The decision to carry out DNA intervention should not be concluded by a closed group who have professional interest in the project.

We strongly endorse the sentiment expressed in the fourth paragraph of section 4.3 that states ‘Proposals to remove and/or destroy parts of skeletons should be submitted to rigorous scrutiny.’ There is a viewpoint that considers the removal of any part of the remains of an individual as destructive to the whole and, for people who hold this view, that any DNA analysis must be avoided as it always requires destruction of some part of the physical personhood of the individual. We would like this consideration to be noted.

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We look forward to hearing the results of the consultation in due course.

Yours
Mike Fletcher
Honouring the Ancient Dead

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