

RESPECT FOR ANCIENT BRITISH HUMAN REMAINS: PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE

A conference organised by The Manchester Museum (University of Manchester) and
Honouring the Ancient Dead, supported by the Museums Association

Manchester Museum, Friday 17th November 2006

It is becoming standard practice for UK museums to repatriate human remains to their originating communities in Australasia and North America for reburial. An emerging issue, hotly debated, concerns the British counterparts of those remains: the communities for whom they are important are advocating with museums and archaeologists for respectful treatment, storage and sometimes reburial of ancient British human remains, both those recently excavated and those accessioned long ago and held in museum stores.

The rationale for archaeologists excavating human remains, and museums collecting, studying and displaying them, is that they contribute to understanding of human history and that their analysis advances scientific knowledge in various fields. But the rights of science, archaeology and museums to use dead bodies as a research and teaching resource are not universally accepted. For many communities, human remains are sacred, they contain the stories of individuals, peoples, and landscapes. From that perspective, they must be treated with respect, and some question their use as objects of scientific investigation at all, or at the very least their continued storage in museums once research has been undertaken.

Museums and archaeologists are beginning to engage with various communities in the UK who experience the world in different ways, particularly pagan faith traditions, who feel an unbroken ancestral connection with ancient human remains and their landscapes, and are demanding respectful treatment for those remains. As a result, the assumptions, approaches, and practices of museums and archaeologists are being challenged and changed. In response, and in consultation with those communities, some museums are amending their policies and treatment of ancient British human remains, and in some instances reburying or seriously considering reburial.

This conference explores ideas of the sanctity of the human body and arguments for what constitutes respectful treatment within a robust philosophical, cultural and ethical framework. It offers practical guidance for museums and archaeologists on consultation, appropriate storage and treatment, and the process of reburial. Issues examined are:

- Different ways of experiencing and understanding the world and humanity's position within nature, and their implications for the meaning and treatment of human remains

- Cultural attitudes towards sanctity of the human body
- A critique of the attitude and practice of western archaeology towards human remains, using bog bodies as a case study
- Analysis of pagan views of the sanctity of burial
- Do modern pagan communities have a claim to be consulted and heard?
- Are the age and cultural background and connections of human remains relevant?
- Museum practices and processes regarding human remains
- The benefits of scientific study and analysis of ancient human remains
- A practical guide to respectful treatment, storage and reburial, including consultation, decision-making, funding, location, deaccessioning from museum collections, and associated rituals.

Speakers

The conference speakers are museum directors and curators, archaeologists, academics, and the founder of Honouring the Ancient Dead, a British network organisation set up to advocate for respect towards ancient pagan human remains and related artefacts and create dialogue with museums and archaeologists.

Professor Piotr Bienkowski: Deputy Director, The Manchester Museum, and Professor of Archaeology and Museology, University of Manchester

Dr Jenny Blain: Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Division of Applied Social Science, Faculty of Development and Society, Sheffield Hallam University

Dr Melanie Giles: Lecturer in Archaeology, University of Manchester

Laura Hadland: Senior Curator, History, Leicester City Museums

Sarah Levitt: Head of Museums Services, Leicester City Museums

Emma Restall Orr: Head of The Druid Network, founder and council member of Honouring the Ancient Dead

Professor Elizabeth Slater: Garstang Professor of Archaeology, and Dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of Liverpool

Dr Robert J. Wallis: Associate Professor of Visual Culture, and Associate Director, MA in Art History, Richmond the American University in London

Papers delivered at the conference

Persons, Things and Archaeology: Contrasting World-views of Minds, Bodies and Death (Piotr Bienkowski)

Human Remains: The Acknowledgment of Sanctity (Emma Restall Orr)

Bog Bodies: Representing the Dead (Melanie Giles)

The Sanctity of Burial: Pagan Views, Ancient and Modern (Jenny Blain and Robert J. Wallis)

Museums and Human Remains: Duty of Care, Consultation, Consent (Sarah Levitt and Laura Hadland)

The Benefits of Scientific Study and Analysis of Ancient Human Remains (Elizabeth Slater)

Respectful Treatment and Reburial: A Practical Guide (Emma Restall Orr and Piotr Bienkowski)