

# Digging Deeper: Comment on Resolving the Human Remains Crisis in British Archaeology

Mike Pitts\*

---

I think it's worth very briefly putting the issues in this excellent paper into a wider context. As the authors rightly say, the debate about the archaeological use of human remains in Britain can superficially look as if it is part of an international shift in attitudes that focuses especially on indigenous minorities in post-colonial nations – but it is in fact quite different. This does not, however, stop some campaigners from seeking to make such links, often obliquely and sometimes disingenuously. Archaeologists should resist this.

At Stonehenge, for example, in his attempts to force reburial of recently re-excavated prehistoric human remains, Arthur Pendragon has referred to “our ancestors” and “ancestral remains”. In 2010 when he successfully argued that the Charity Commission should treat the Druid Network with official recognition as a religion, he said, “We are looking at the indigenous religion of these isles” (BBC 2010).

When I searched the website of Honouring the Ancient Dead (“a British network organisation that advocates respect for ancient pagan human remains and related artefacts” ([www.honour.org.uk](http://www.honour.org.uk))), I found 14 documents in which “indigenous” appeared at least once (e.g., “British Pagans use similar language to Native Americans and other indigenous communities”). Reviewing an

exhibition of the Lindow bog body at Manchester Museum, Emma Restall-Orr (2008) wrote how she wished to thank him “for all he has given us, as an ancestor, a grandfather”.

The Council of British Druid Orders has claimed that “Modern research...proves an unbroken genetic link between people today indigenous to Europe and our long dead”, adding, “It is time to remember who we are – the ancestors reborn” – a statement not immediately distinguishable from the voice of former British National Party leader Nick Griffin when he said, “The indigenous people of these islands... the people who’ve been here overwhelmingly for the last 17,000 years, we are the aborigines” (Spoilheap 2010).

Such vague language has sometimes been used by heritage professionals. Occasionally one wonders if Pagan affiliations or sympathies of archaeologists or museum staff, not always made explicit, have influenced public debate, as is suggested in the paper here for Fundamental Christian belief. In the preparation for the Manchester exhibition noted above we saw a curious “public consultation”, in which seven archaeologists, nine museum curators, five “community representatives”, three “members of local archaeological societies” and 12 “Pagans” were invited to take part.

As Spoilheap wrote at the time (2008), “The latter, who let’s face it, represent one of the smaller constituencies (archaeologists and curators stand for us all) should have

---

\* Editor, *British Archaeology*

been pleased to be there – and to see their names heading all the lists.” An exhaustive public survey sponsored by English Heritage has since shown overwhelming public support in England for the display of ancient human remains, and their use in research (BDRC 2009).

Like many UK archaeologists, I had followed events regarding licensing of the excavation of human remains, and the changing conditions applied, with concern. I was prompted to open a campaign, initially in the magazine *British Archaeology*, when there seemed to be a real danger that the prehistoric cremation burials excavated in 2008 at Stonehenge (a project in which I was involved) would be reburied under a Ministry of Justice order. I contacted Duncan Sayer in August 2010, and found him to be as concerned as I was. There had been much private discussion of the issues among archaeologists and others, including officers at the MoJ, but apparently no progress at all – while archaeologists had already begun to rebury ancient remains. It seemed to us both that a reasoned plea through the media had a strong chance of resolving the deadlock: with the issues debated openly, it would be hard for anyone to hide behind bureaucratic process. And so it proved, in what I think is a casebook example of how considered engagement with media can advance academic causes. One of many resulting insights lay in comments on the online version of an article in the *Daily Mail*: in contrast to what one might have expected from common Pagan claims, there was stronger support for retention than for reburial – a note saying “Archaeologist = Grave robber” had the worst rating of all, with a negative balance of 78 votes (Daily Mail 2011).

One of the most obvious similarities between the approach of some indigenous minorities in post-colonial nations and of some British Pagans and campaigners, is the strong, almost exclusive, emphasis on

human remains and occasionally associated artefacts. Logically, however, it might seem just as relevant to address the issue of excavation more generally. Many of us might today feel uneasy about strangers rummaging through our bins, filtering our ccess and studying our personal belongings. How much worse, though, if such activities were the sole basis for a judgement on our lives. Would we trust an archaeologist to get it right?

Jo Bell, an archaeologist turned poet, wrote well about this in a recent Guardian blog. “Archaeology”, she said, “like poetry, is usually a one-way conversation”. We might hope that particular objects survive us, diaries, family heirlooms, things with powerful associations. In fact it’s as likely that a future archaeologist will find “some mundane object which we never intended to represent us” (Bell 2010).

Yet here, perhaps, lies the key to the human remains debate. Few of us as archaeologists would imagine that we get close to the true personality of an individual from the remote past, however much we analyse their remains or scrutinise their middens. We would be naïve to think so, and the suggestion is faintly patronising towards ancient people – who among us would say everything that makes us what we are could be read from decayed scraps by people from another and entirely remote culture?

In reality we do not communicate with past individuals, and we do not claim to. Rather we seek to understand communities, cultures and civilisations, human groups. The individual, and individual remains, are metaphors for more encompassing units. And by exploiting the shreds and fragments that once were personal in the quest to re-imagine lost times and societies, we respect the individuals that made up those groups. But never do we claim to know exactly what those individuals thought, or would think about what we do now.

## References

- BBC** 2010 Druidry to be classed as religion by Charity Commission, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11457795](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11457795).
- Bell, J** 2011 Jo Bell's poetry workshop, [www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/aug/09/jo-bell-poetry-workshop](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/aug/09/jo-bell-poetry-workshop).
- BDRC** 2009 Research into Issues Surrounding Human Bones in Museums.
- Daily Mail** 2011 Put those bones back! Future of archaeology threatened by law forcing scientists to rebury ancient remains. *Daily Mail*, [www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1353620/Law-requiring-reburial-ancient-remains-threatens-future-archaeology.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1353620/Law-requiring-reburial-ancient-remains-threatens-future-archaeology.html).
- Restall-Orr, E** 2008 Lindow Man in Manchester : On Display, [www.honour.org.uk/node/242](http://www.honour.org.uk/node/242).
- Spoilheap,** 2008 One man and his bog (and the consultation committee). *British Archaeology* 101, 29.
- Spoilheap,** 2010 Who are you calling an ancestor? *British Archaeology* 110, 4.