

HONOURING THE ANCIENT DEAD

ENSURING RESPECT FOR ANCIENT PAGAN REMAINS

PRESS RELEASE

**Consultation on the Request for Reburial of Human Remains, Avebury, Wiltshire
February 2009**

A number of Druids from one wing of the Council of British Druid Orders (CoBDO) submitted a request to English Heritage (EH) and the National Trust (NT) in June 2006 for the reburial of ancient human remains excavated at Avebury, Wiltshire. In response, EH and the NT put the request to public consultation in the autumn of 2008, submissions to be received by February 2009. Honouring the Ancient Dead (HAD), with its remit to advocate for the ancient British dead and those for whom their remains are sacred, submitted a response in January 2009.

HAD expressed both support and caution. Primarily, it fully backs the appropriateness of the request for reburial on religious and spiritual grounds: CoBDO's position is an entirely valid Pagan perspective based upon genuine, experiential, spiritual connection and the profound duty of care which such a deep connection evokes. HAD is also aware that such a request usefully reveals how EH and the NT are not adequately prioritising community engagement. While many museums, as publicly funded bodies with public accountability, are now readily working with local communities, EH and the NT are as yet not properly addressing this need. Furthermore, the request highlights the need for archaeologists, museums, government and heritage organizations to take into account spiritual and social (not only scientific) interests in decision-making about human remains.

HAD's caution, however, is because CoBDO is not representative of the Druid or Pagan community. HAD's more broadly reaching representation of British Paganisms informs that there is not a unanimous call for reburial, and particularly not for iconic remains such as the child in question at Avebury. While there are many whose animism and reverence for ancestors fuels a visceral need to rebury excavated remains, there are others for whom the stories gleaned and the material presence of the ancestral remains are more important than reburial.

Most importantly, however, HAD's response addresses the problems inherent within the consultation process itself. Decisions made are to be based upon the DCMS Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums, yet the language of this Guidance is inappropriate for this case, the document having been developed for overseas claims such as those of indigenous Australians; being forced to use the Guidance has put CoBDO in a no-win situation. If a British group such as CoBDO had been able to talk of their significant 'interest' as one of several stakeholders in the future of the remains, instead of needing to justify an exclusive 'claim', the relevance and value of their input could have been heard. This is true for all ancient remains of British origin and makes it essential that an inclusive language be offered that is appropriate for the British situation.

In conclusion, HAD asserts that *use of the current DCMS Guidance is inapplicable for human remains of British provenance*, and to use the Guidance as a basis for decision making in this case *invalidates any decisions made*. HAD recommends that the DCMS, together with EH and the NT,

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develop a process for inclusion of Pagan and other community groups in decision-making and programming around these (and other) human remains

A further press release will be published when the consultation is complete.