

AVEBURY REBURIAL REQUEST: SUMMARY REPORT

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Summary:

In June 2006, English Heritage and the National Trust received a request from Paul Davies of the Council of British Druid Orders for the reburial of prehistoric human remains kept at the Avebury Museum. After careful consideration and very wide consultation, English Heritage and the National Trust have decided to refuse this request for the following main reasons:

- (a) the benefit to future understanding likely to result from not reburying the remains far outweighs the harm likely to result from not reburying them;
- (b) it does not meet the criteria set out by the DCMS for considering such requests;
- (c) not reburying the remains is the more reversible option;
- (d) the public generally support the retention of prehistoric human remains in museums, and their inclusion in museum displays to increase understanding.

While we respect the beliefs that have led to this request, we see no good reason to privilege the beliefs of a small number in this way as there is no clear evidence of particular continuity of a kind that would justify such privilege, whether genetic, cultural or religious.

Our recommendation to refuse this request has been accepted by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, which has final responsibility for these remains.

The process that we have followed has been long, and, we believe, thorough. While every case is different and must be determined on its merits, we feel that the general considerations set out here are likely to apply to most prehistoric human remains in this country, and hope that other museums considering such requests will find this report and the evidence on which it is based useful, and that it will save them time and expense in reaching their decisions.

I. Introduction and background.

In late 2006, English Heritage and the National Trust received a request from Paul Davies of the Council of British Druid Orders (CoBDO)¹ for the reburial of prehistoric human remains kept at the Avebury Museum. As the Museum is managed by the National Trust for English Heritage, English Heritage and the National Trust have together been considering this request. (Further details are set out in Thackray and Payne 2008.)

2: Consideration according to DCMS process: Report and Consultation.

2.1 The DCMS Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums (2005) gave recommendations for the way in which museums should consider claims for the repatriation of human remains from other countries, and especially those obtained during the colonial period. However its basic principles were felt to apply to the Avebury request, and it was felt that the criteria that it set out could reasonably be applied, especially in the absence of any more suitable established process. This was agreed with Paul Davies and CoBDO at the outset.

2.2 The one substantial addition to the process was that it was clear to all those involved that there were other interested parties who should be given an opportunity to give their views and provide further evidence; it was therefore agreed that we would prepare a report setting out CoBDO's request, the evidence on which it was based, and EH and the NT's assessment of the request according to the criteria set out in the DCMS guidance, and that this would be put out to public consultation.

2.3 The 2008 report was completed in the summer of 2008 (Thackray and Payne 2008 – referred to below as the 2008 report), and was put out to public consultation between October 2008 and February 2009. 73 responses were received from groups and organisations, and 567 from individuals; these are summarised and analysed in Thackray and Payne 2009. The summary that follows is based on both reports, and is ordered and lettered to refer to the criteria as set out in the DCMS Guidance (2005: 26-29).

Criterion A: *The status of those making the request and continuity with the remains.*

Genealogical descendants. The DCMS guidance makes clear that considerable weight should be given to direct and close genealogical links, but also that consideration should be given to whether there are others in the same position who might be harmed. In this case there is little evidence as to the genetic relationship of the Avebury human remains. The 2008 report concluded that “EH and the NT currently take the view that the genetic relationship between members of CoBDO

¹ During the process of consideration of this claim, CoBDO split into two organisations. The other CoBDO has dissociated itself from the evidence presented during the discussion and set out in the 2008 report; and have commented separately during the public consultation.

and the Avebury human remains, which is presumably shared with most of the population of Western Europe, is not a “direct and close relationship” in the sense meant in the DCMS guidance”. 92% of individuals and 72% of groups who replied to the consultation agreed with this view. 3% of individuals and 6% of groups disagreed; they questioned the criterion but provided no further evidence.

Cultural community of origin: The DCMS guidance says that it would generally be expected that continuity of belief, customs or language should be demonstrated; and that other potential claimant groups must be considered. In this case while there may be some ancient elements of traditional custom and belief which have been adopted by modern Druids and Pagans, it is clear that modern Druidry and Paganism are relatively recent movements, with no substantial continuity from the prehistoric past, and that any elements of older custom and belief are widely shared with the rest of the British population.

We therefore conclude that there is no basis for giving preferential status to CoBDO’s request on the basis of continuity with the remains.

Criterion B: *The cultural, spiritual and religious significance of the remains.*

These provide a second basis for claims and requests. It is clear that the Avebury area and remains have considerable significance for CoBDO and for other Druid and Pagan groups. However it is equally clear that they have great cultural significance for many others as well. The 2008 report concluded that “EH and the NT recognise the importance of the Avebury landscape and these human remains to CoBDO and to other Druid and Pagan groups; at the same time they recognise and respect their cultural and spiritual significance to others as well”. 83% of individuals and 69% of groups who replied to the consultation agreed; 7% of individuals and 1% of groups disagreed.

A frequent additional comment made by those who replied to the consultation emphasised that their belief in the importance of research and of increased understanding of the past and of our shared humanity is important to them, and deserves the same respect as other beliefs.

Criterion C: *The age of the remains.*

There is consensus that the remains are between 4000 and 6000 years old. The DCMS guidance comments that claims for remains over 500 years old are unlikely to be successful except where very close and continuous links can be demonstrated.

Criterion D: *How the remains were removed and acquired.*

The remains were excavated by Alexander Keiller in 1929 and 1934-5, and have been in the Museum since 1938. This was done entirely in accordance with contemporary practice, without objection at the time. Some of those who replied to the consultation feel that this was wrong; but this view does not appear to be widely held.

Criterion E: *The status of the remains within the Museum.*

The contents of the Museum were given to the Nation by Mrs Keiller in 1966. The Museum is currently managed by the National Trust under an agreement with English Heritage. The responsibility for making decisions rests with the National Trust and English Heritage, and ultimately with DCMS. They have been curated well, and their security is good.

Criterion F: *The scientific, educational and historical value of the remains to the museum and the public.*

The area is of great archaeological significance as recognised by its World Heritage Site status. The human remains are well-documented and well-preserved, and in view of recent (e.g. ancient DNA and stable isotope analysis) and expected advances in analytical method, clearly have considerable potential to add to knowledge and understanding. 92% of individuals and 81% of groups who responded to the consultation agreed with this; only 2% of individuals and 2% of groups disagreed.

Some of the remains are an important part of the Museum's exhibits, and the Museum survey shows that most visitors value this. Many of those who responded to the consultation also commented on the importance of public access and education; however it is clear that some visitors and respondents are upset by the display of human remains.

Criterion G: *How the remains have been used in the past.*

The remains were described in the original excavation reports and have since been included in two recent studies (see 2008 report for details).

Criterion H: *the future of the remains if reburied.*

CoBDO wish the remains to be permanently reburied, if possible at Avebury. This would mean that they would no longer be available for research; reburial at Avebury would also require Scheduled Monument Consent.

Criterion I: *Records of the remains.*

Good records exist.

Criterion J: *Other options.*

The consultation put forward three options.

Reburial was supported by 5% of individuals and 10% of groups. A number of those who commented said that if the bones were reburied, this should be done without any ritual as we do not know what ritual would have been appropriate.

Reburial with continuing research and public access was supported by 4% of individuals and 5% of groups; however many of the respondents felt that this is an

unsatisfactory compromise, and we agree with those who commented that it would be an expensive solution if the conservation and security of the bones is not to be compromised.

Retention in the Museum with access where reasonable for CoBDO and other Druid and Pagan groups was supported by 89% of individuals and 81% of groups. Some commented that they welcomed arrangements for access; however a larger number expressed opposition to any preferential arrangements for religious groups.

Criterion K: *Policy of the country of origin.*

Not relevant.

Criterion L: *Precedent.*

Requests of this kind have been made in the past but have generally been met with a refusal and no detailed consideration. (See below, p. 7, for comments on the precedent provided by this decision.)

3. Public Opinion Poll.

3.1 People who reply to a consultation are a self-selected group, and not necessarily at all representative of the population in general. Rather than make unjustified assumptions about what people think, we commissioned BDRC to carry out an opinion survey (BDRC 2009). The purpose of the poll was to find out whether people thought that Museums should be allowed to display human bones and to keep them for research.

3.2 These and other related questions were included in an ICM Omnibus Survey in June 2009 of a nationally representative sample of just over 1000 people in the UK aged over 18, 864 of whom lived in England.

3.3 This showed clearly that a large majority (91%) of the population agree that museums should be allowed to display prehistoric human bones and keep them for research as long as this is done sensitively, and only 9% are opposed.

4. Conclusions.

4.1 There is no evidence of any substantial continuity linking CoBDO or any other modern group with the Avebury Museum human remains; for this reason there is no basis for giving CoBDO or any other group preferential status with respect to these remains.

4.2 We accept that these remains and the landscape with which they are associated have cultural and spiritual value to CoBDO and other Druid and Pagan groups, and respect these beliefs. However we also accept and respect the cultural and other

values that the landscape and remains have to many others, and must give equal respect to those beliefs.

4.3 These remains, together with other prehistoric human remains, have important potential for research to add to our understanding of our shared past, and important potential also for public access, understanding and enjoyment. Reburial would remove this potential; reburial with continued access would be an unsatisfactory and expensive compromise.

4.4 Continuing to keep the remains in the Museum and using them for display and research creates greater benefit and less harm than reburial, and clearly commands general public support. It is also the more reversible option, and should be preferred for this reason as well.

4.5 English Heritage and the National Trust have therefore recommended to DCMS, which has final responsibility for these remains, that the request be refused and that the remains be retained in the Museum; and DCMS have accepted this recommendation.

4.6 A relatively small number of people will be disturbed by this decision. It is important to respect their beliefs and feelings, and important to consider these feelings and do what can reasonably be done to minimise any hurt by always showing respect and sensitivity in dealing with human remains and with those with different beliefs. Specifically, careful consideration should be given to different sensitivities in the design of displays which include human remains, and to warning people who may not wish to see them.

4.7 Access for ritual is a particularly difficult issue. On balance we feel that it is important that access be given to CoBDO and other Druid and Pagan groups where reasonable provided that it does not significantly impede public or research access, and does not create any risk of damage or contamination to the remains. It is also important that it is clearly understood that we do not know what beliefs were held by these prehistoric individuals, and that no particular beliefs should be imposed on their remains.

5. Addendum: Process and Precedent

5.1 56% of individuals and 50% of groups who responded to the consultation felt that the DCMS process was appropriate, and 68% of individuals and 56 % of groups thought the consultation was appropriate.

5.2 About 10% of individuals and groups, however, felt that the process was inherently biased, or that the criteria were inappropriate; but no better process was proposed.

5.3 The commonest comment on the process was that this detailed consideration has been a considerable waste of time and public money.

We do not agree. There are a fairly large number of prehistoric and early historic human remains in English museums. They have contributed in an important way to our understanding of the past and to public enjoyment and understanding and, if retained in museums, will continue to do so. We think it is important that this research continues, and at the same time important that those who made the request can see that we have considered their request seriously, and have taken the decision to refuse it on the basis of clear evidence that has widespread support. We hope they will understand and accept our decision.

5.4 The decision taken in this case sets no binding precedent. We hope, however, that the evidence that has been gathered and set out will simplify matters for those considering similar requests in the future, and establishes a presumption – in line with the comments in the DCMS guidance – in favour of keeping well-preserved prehistoric human remains from this country in museums rather than burying them.

References:

DCMS 2005 Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums. London

BDRC 2009 Research into issues surrounding human remains in museums.

Thackray D and Payne S 2008 Draft report on the request for the reburial of human remains from the Alexander Keiller Museum in Avebury. National Trust, Swindon and English Heritage, London.

Thackray D and Payne S 2009 Report on consultation on the request for the reburial of prehistoric human remains from the Alexander Keiller Museum in Avebury. National Trust, Swindon and English Heritage, London.

Note: This summary report and the reports it quotes will all be made available on the EH and NT websites.

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