

English Heritage consultation on request for reburial of prehistoric human remains in the Alexander Keiller museum, Avebury, Wiltshire. Response from the British Humanist Association, January 2009.

About the British Humanist Association

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity representing the interests of the large and growing population of ethically concerned, non-religious people living in the UK. It exists to support and represent people who seek to live good and responsible lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. It is committed to human rights and democracy, and has a long history of active engagement in work for an open and inclusive society and for a rational approach to public ethical issues. The BHA's policies are informed by its members, who include eminent authorities in many fields, and by other specialists and experts who share humanist values and concerns.

In addition to this note, we answer the specific consultation questions. Both should be read together as our full submission to this consultation.

Humanist principles

Humanism is the belief that we can live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. Humanists are committed to the search for truth and advancement of knowledge and resist the interference in these aims of religious and superstitious beliefs. We support scientists, museums and researchers in their quest for knowledge and aspiration to educate. We would not therefore want to see unique human remains or significant collections of human remains lost for ever, unnecessarily.

As discussed in the report and appendices 4-7, the prehistoric human remains in question are of great scientific, educational and historical value. Further, new techniques for extracting information from bones and other remains are constantly being developed: techniques commonplace today would have been beyond the wildest speculation only a few decades ago. There is no reason to expect such advances to cease and we must regard our current collections as still likely to yield extensive information about our past. There is no reason why remains should not be stored in respectful ways, even under religious supervision where this is found valuable by present-day pressure groups but not to the extent that this inhibits curatorial access: what is vital is that the remains should be available to future generations to study.

Humanist attitudes to death and human remains

Through its function as trainer of humanist funeral celebrants and provider of humanist funerals, the BHA has considerable expertise in the respectful treatment of the dead. We acknowledge that the needs of the bereaved for a dignified and appropriate farewell must be satisfied, and that the respectful treatment of the body is, for most people, whatever their beliefs, an essential part of a mourning process. The wishes of the deceased, too, are significant and should be taken into account where known and reasonable. To know that one's remains and those of people close to one will be treated respectfully are elements of a good life in a civilised society.

While we respect genuine feelings, including those of bereaved people and those of religious believers, and we understand very well the need to respect the dead as well as the living, we do not believe that exaggerated feelings, some of them arising out of political grievances, should be deferred to unduly, particularly if that deference will result in harm.

Cultural groups pinning their hopes of social or political advancement and improved health on the restitution of their “ancestors” remains seem doomed to disappointment, as the causes of their problems must surely lie elsewhere. We contend that the more historically remote the remains and the further removed from living relatives or recognisable connections with any existing culture, the less significant the interests of living individuals or groups become.

Most humanists would favour knowledge about and research into human history and origins over the demands of descendants many generations removed from the remains, and even more over the demands of those who can demonstrate only a tenuous cultural connection with the remains. Similarly, the wishes of the deceased become less ascertainable and less significant as time passes; we do not, for example, in the case of bequests, usually expect the deceased to determine what happens to those bequests for generations and centuries to come. Besides, in law, the dead cannot own anything. Hence, we consider the request by CoBDO to rebury ‘grave goods’ together with the human remains on the basis that they ‘remain the property of the ancestor’ (p3, appendix 1) untenable.

Beyond scientific meaning

CoBDO concur with the report’s view that ‘the human remains...are broadly genetically related to most of the present population of Western Europe’ (p4), and state that ‘We all have a close and unbroken cultural and spiritual relationship with the human remains of our ancestors’ (p6, appendix 1). Their claim of particular ancestry to the remains is based on beliefs and ‘ethics’; in particular the belief that ‘reburial is the most loving and respectful act for sacred relics of our ancestral remains and is both morally desirable and spiritually important’ (p1, appendix 1). Further, CoBDO clearly state that ‘the needs of archaeology, museology and medical research should not outweigh the spiritual value of human remains’ (p6, appendix 1).

First, the remains are not of ‘spiritual value’ exclusively to present-day Druids or those who share similar beliefs. Many others will experience similar feelings that the remains are somehow sacred; sacred in a wider humanistic sense that is not tied to religion or beliefs. For example, human beings feel a sense of awe and wonder and are moved in a poetic way at many natural and historical sites and artefacts, for example fossils or great landscapes such as the Grand Canyon. As Richard Dawkins argues, ‘Poetic imagination is one of the manifestations of human nature’¹ and this suggests that many will experience what feels like something spiritual or sacred when they encounter the remains which have such historical relevance and provide a deep insight into our shared history.

Second, the idea that the superstitious beliefs of a group of people with no more genetic ‘claim’ over the human remains than anybody else in Western Europe should trump the enormous scientific, sociological, educational and any other real benefit to the public that the historic human remains provide is extremely worrying – and it must be totally rejected.

Our conclusions

We are totally unconvinced that the ethical and moral argument posited by CoBDO holds sufficient weight to be accepted. It is clear from the report that remains are of great value to all of us and that no one group has any special claim to them. It is clear that English Heritage and the National Trust, presumably under pressure from a DCMS policy that takes remote religious claims far too seriously, have dealt with this

¹ Dawkins, R. “The Sacred and the Scientist” in Rogers, B. (ed) (2004) *Is Nothing Sacred?* London: Routledge

situation with a degree of respect, consideration and sensitivity that would certainly be excessive if repeated on any future occasion. It is also clear from the arguments made in the report and the supportive appendices of expert reports, that the remains are being handled and tested in ways that most would consider respectful; that the scientific research is of great public interest and widely disseminated; that the remains are of international importance for research; and that they are of educational importance as part of a museum display.

Further, despite CoBDO's refutation, it is clear that the bones are not only important now for many reasons as discussed above, but that they are vital for future scientific and historical research, 'as new scientific techniques are developed' and are likely to provide 'new insights into 'our prehistoric past' (p7). Such benefits must be protected and the historic human remains must not be reburied.

**British Humanist Association
January 2009**

**naomi@humanism.org.uk
020 7079 3585
1 Gower Street,
London WC1E 6HD**