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## Response from the National Secular Society to the Avebury Human Remains Consultation

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## **About the National Secular Society**

The National Secular Society (NSS) aims to defend the rights of non-believers from the demands of religious power-seekers. We campaign on a wide range of issues, including religious influence in the Government, the disestablishment of the Church of England, the removal of the (unelected) Bench of Bishops from the House of Lords and for the conversion of publicly-funded religious schools to community schools, open to all pupils and staff, without discrimination on grounds of religion or belief.

We work for a society in which all are free to practise their faith, change it or not have one, according to their conscience. Belief (or lack of it) should be neither an advantage nor a disadvantage. We uphold freedom of religion or belief, but it is undemocratic for religion to be permitted a privileged voice to promote its own self-interest in the political arena. The Council of British Druid Orders appears to be claiming a similar privilege, seeking a course of action which would place the interests of a religious minority above those of legitimate scholarship and universal human understanding.

## **Some statistics**

In the UK 2001 Census 1,656 people indicated “Druidism” as their religious persuasion. There is no known more recent data but, by way of contrast, the Office of National Statistics Social Trends 38 shows 46% of the population did not belong to any religion in 2006.

## **NSS interest in the Avebury Consultation**

As an organisation that campaigns for Human Rights for the living, the NSS is concerned that one small portion of a religious minority is attempting to impose its beliefs upon everybody in such a way that it would block legitimate archaeological research and learning.

The NSS believes that the National Trust and English Heritage have abdicated their clear responsibility to the nation to turn down the requests from the Council of British Druid Orders (CoBDO), an unelected and unaccountable group, for the reburial of ancient human remains at the Alexander Keiller Museum in Avebury. It is important that the demands of one small group are not allowed to overwhelm those of the general public and interested groups, including those of scientists seeking to understand and to spread understanding of the lives of our ancestors in prehistory.

Rather than take issue with the theology of the various “druid” groups represented by the CoBDO, the NSS wishes to stress the danger of creating a precedent in this case, whilst also refuting any claims that one specific religious group has over important scientific material which is the property of everyone.

## **Archaeological evidence for ancient paganism**

It is generally acknowledged that we know very little about the beliefs of people in prehistoric Britain. There is no academic consensus and a vast array of competing theories exist to explain the existence of ancient monuments, offerings, funerary practices and rituals.

There is therefore little reason to suspect that one particular and peculiar interpretation is the correct one. Furthermore, to then use this interpretation to seek to prevent continuing archaeological research seems entirely unjustified. Yet this is what would occur should the wishes of the CoBDO be granted.

## **Ownership of the past and ownership of human remains**

The NSS, in accordance with most archaeologists, acknowledges that human remains should be treated with sensitivity. There exist significant deeply-held religious and cultural taboos to be understood, appreciated and negotiated.

The NSS recognises that the main concern of most people is ensuring that the wishes of the dead are respected; this too seems to be the desire of the CoBDO. For this to be implemented we must first have an understanding of what these wishes were, or what they were likely to be.

Archaeologists simply do not know how the majority of prehistoric people wished their remains to be treated. The reburial policies of the CoBDO, and the beliefs from which they are derived, are without any evidential justification. Furthermore, they wish to deny the potential to discover such information in the future: archaeologists rely on ancient human remains to provide them with clues to solve difficult questions relating to prehistoric life, death and burial.

## **Ancestral disconnection and indigeniety**

The CoBDO's claim of ancestral connection to the prehistoric human remains at the Keiller Museum is based not on science but a mistaken notion of biological and cultural continuity. Everybody alive today is equally unconnected to those people alive in prehistoric Britain. The lives of prehistoric Britons almost certainly bore no resemblance to people alive today, even those who practise so-called modern "druidry".

That which is broadly defined as "druidry" is a combination of modern inventions and interpretations of a multiplicity of new and old customs and traditions. It is in no way prehistoric. This is not to de-legitimise "druidry" as a religion, merely to highlight the difficulty of projecting present customs back onto people in the ancient past.

It is difficult to regard the CoBDO's casting of themselves as an indigenous European people as anything other than an act of political expediency. The term "indigenous" has been used by disempowered and oppressed descendant communities as a way of uniting disparate groups with a shared interest in mitigating the massively destructive impacts of colonialism. We acknowledge that the treatment of human remains has become an important aspect of indigenous struggles in America and Australia. Reburial and repatriation issues around the world are extremely complicated; this is especially the case where indigenous communities are involved. In such instances, complicated legal compromises have been devised in which some people are treated differentially by the law. This continues to be a problematic solution to an intractable problem of historical circumstance. However, there is no equivalent oppression of European "druids" to that which was present in colonial settings, and therefore these colonial examples cannot legitimately be used as relevant precedents.

## **Equal rights for the living and the dead**

The NSS is cognisant of the myriad ways in which some people have sought solace in the idea of an afterlife. Sometimes this is a very personal idea, but more often it takes the form of some prescribed religious framework. We see no reason why one particular mythology should be privileged over another – or over science. People of all faiths (ancient and modern), as well as those with none, deserve to learn about the history of their world and the lives and deaths of the people who have inhabited it. Archaeology, as a subject examining the development of all human society, should be of universal benefit and not employed in the service of one small minority.

## **Setting a dangerous precedent**

Were the wishes of the CoBDO to be granted, it would constitute a most perverse application of the Human Rights Act (the document they cite to justify their position). We do not believe that this legislation was intended to be applied to the dead. To allow archaeological research to be brought to a halt as a result of the notions of a small number of self-appointed moral guardians would be a shameful retraction by English Heritage and the National Trust of their support for the principles of discovery, learning, and enjoyment.

If the wishes of the CoBDO are respected, then this risks setting a precedent for the future handling of the claims of other spiritual or religious groups about the treatment of other archaeological material. Other examples might be: anyone claiming to be a contemporary follower of Anglo-Saxon religion might claim the right to give a proper boat burial to the various human remains excavated at Sutton Hoo; calls for burials along Hadrian's Wall to be re-interred in accordance with Roman pagan ritual; or perhaps demands for Viking Age burials from York to be dealt with in accordance with Norse mythology.

Archaeologists know more about the funerary practices in each of these cases than they do of those from prehistoric society. This is partially due to the rarity of prehistoric human remains. A decision in Avebury which caves into the demands of the CoBDO risks setting a precedent that would make it impossible to counter the spurious religious claims of people who would attempt to deny archaeologists the ability to research other material. By this decision, learning would be compromised and archaeology diminished.

## **In conclusion**

If any of the consultation's suggested options are preferred by the NSS it is option 3:

"Retention in the Museum in a way which shows respect for CoBDO's beliefs (e.g. by providing access for ceremonies) where reasonably practicable."

However, this option assumes that respect should be shown for CoBDO's beliefs, a respect whose justification is far from deserved, especially where the prevention of legitimate archaeological research is the price to be paid for this indulgence. We consider that the option would have been better worded as a neutral consultation document if it had read: "Retention in the Museum in a way which accommodates freedom of religion and the CoBDO's beliefs (e.g. by providing access for ceremonies) where reasonably practicable."