



Brian Hole: The debate at Avebury

I generally support the return and reburial of human remains to indigenous communities, because I feel that righting past wrongs and improving relations between international communities is of the greatest necessity. This, however, is a very different situation.

With reburial, rare artefacts from this world heritage site, rich in their ability to tell us about a long vanished culture, would be destroyed forever, no longer available for ongoing research with ever-evolving techniques, nor as educational resources. While all of these points are important, the key words here are 'long vanished' - the remains in question date back to the late Neolithic period, around 5,000 years ago, and no one population in Western Europe can claim a lineal relationship to them better than any other. The Council of British Druid Orders' (CoBDO) reference to these remains as ancestors (by which they imply a special relationship) is simply incorrect: the remains cannot be repatriated because there is no modern community with any demonstrable lineal or cultural connection to them.

Any perceived similarity between pagan and indigenous movements is deceptive. While indigenous movements have arisen from situations of great inequality and past exploitation, pagan movements have been created during the past 100 years from within majority ethnic groups in Western countries. They are, essentially, fundamentalist new religious movements.

That English Heritage and the National Trust are even considering this request means they are lending the CoBDO's claims of ancestry a degree of credibility - with archaeology inevitably losing some small amount of authority to pseudo-science. While reburial by indigenous communities may heal divisions, there is a risk here that the opposite could happen. Groups who claim descent from the oldest known inhabitants of a place often do so in order to establish a difference between themselves and other ethnic groups, and to claim greater rights to that place. Racist paganism is one of the fastest growing sections of the extreme right in the US (see M Gardell, 2003, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism*, Duke University Press, Durham), and, while I am not

Above The Neolithic human remains were found in the area near the famous stones at Avebury, Wiltshire.

Inset Brian Hole discusses this complex issue.

saying that the CoBDO fits this profile, we need to be very careful not to set a precedent that could give right-wing pagan groups a foot in the door.

An example of such motivations involved the remains of Kennewick Man, discovered in Washington State in 1996. Based on the remain's semi-caucasoid features, a pagan group called Asatru proclaimed them as evidence that white Europeans had been the first to inhabit North America. At 9,200 years old, any claim of descent was even more far-fetched than in the case of Avebury but, while their request to rebury the remains was rejected, the Asatru nevertheless gained substantial publicity.

I hope that as many members of the public as possible will make their opposition to this request known on the English Heritage website, in order to preserve world heritage and increase knowledge, rather than to legitimise pseudo-scientific beliefs and inadvertently assist the far right. ☸