

Sites, Sacredness, and Stories: Interactions of Archaeology and Contemporary Paganism

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Abstract

Folklore has, until very recently, been at the fringes of archaeological research. Post-processual archaeology has promoted plurality in interpretation, however, and archaeology more widely is required to make itself relevant to contemporary society; so, contemporary folkloric practices *vis-à-vis* archaeological remains are once again receiving attention. In this paper we examine contemporary Pagan understandings of and engagements with “sacred sites” in England. Specifically, we explore how Pagan meanings are inscribed and constituted, how they draw on “traditional” understandings of sites and landscapes, and instances in which they challenge or reify the “preservation ethic” of heritage management. From active interactions with sites, such as votive offerings and instances of fire and graffiti damage, to unconventional (contrasted with academic) interpretations of sites involving wights and spirit beings, Neolithic shamans, or goddesses, there are diverse areas of contest. We argue archaeology must not reject Pagan and other folklores as “fringe,” but, in an era of community archaeology, transparency and collaboration, respond to them, preferably dialogically.

Introduction

Folklore has, until very recently, been at the fringes of archaeological research (for example, Holtorf and Gazin-Schwartz 1999; Wallis and Lymer 2001a). Current trends in so-called post-processual archaeology—much influenced by postmodern resistance to metanarrative and hegemony—have promoted plurality in interpretation, however. And, as archaeology is increasingly required to make itself relevant to contemporary society, so contemporary folkloric practices and earlier understandings *vis-à-vis* archaeological remains are once again receiving attention. In this paper we examine contemporary Pagan understandings of and engagements with so-called “sacred sites” in England (see also Blain 2001; Blain and Wallis 2002; Wallis 2000; 2001; 2003). Specifically, we explore how Pagan meanings are inscribed and constituted, how they draw on “traditional” understandings of sites and landscapes to construct their own “folkloric” narratives, their own knowledges informed by conventional and alternative archaeology, and instances in which they challenge or reify the “preservation ethic” of heritage management. Such issues are timely, given (as this paper demonstrates) that Pagans are increasingly engaging with archaeology in active ways—from votive offerings and instances of fire and graffiti damage at sites, to unconventional (contrasted with academic) published interpretations of sites involving



Figure 1 Druids congregate at the Southern entrance of Avebury henge, Wiltshire, to celebrate the Pagan festival of Beltane. The ritual is led by Philip "Greywolf" Shallcrass and Emma "Bobcat" Restall Orr, Joint-Chiefs of the British Druid Order.

wights and spirit beings, Neolithic shamans, or goddesses. As these new understandings enter the discourse of "site-users" and inform local practices, and as elaborated accounts become associated with specific places, it seems to us that specific rooted folkloric narratives are increasingly informing how people relate to places and spirits of place, and how they understand themselves and construct meaning and identity in the interaction of self, spirit and site.

We address these understandings and narratives from a position "native" to discourses of both academia and paganisms. As an archaeologist and an anthropologist, we deal in academic narratives of time, ritual and human construction of identity. As practising Heathens we engage with sacred space and find ourselves involved not only in disseminating information, but in the construction of stories around site, landscape and spirits. We are therefore ourselves part of the processes we examine in this article. Elsewhere (for example, Blain 2000; 2002; Wallis 2000; 2003) we examine processes and politics of insider research: here we present some findings on stories of sacredness.

Contemporary Paganism

Paganism as a generic term encompasses several recognised and coherent sets of beliefs and practices (for example, Harvey 1997; Blain 2002). Loosely put, Paganism (or the more correct but also more cumbersome "Paganisms") comprises a variety of allied or associated "paths" or "traditions" which focus on



Figure 2 Candles and incense sticks left beside a megalith at the Nine Ladies stone circle, Stanton Moor, Peak District. In total, hundreds of joss sticks had been left here, and one "visitor" described the site as "bristling." So-called "ritual litter" is an increasing problem at many sacred sites.

direct engagements with "nature" as deified, "sacred," or otherwise animated and containing "spirits." The four most well known Pagan "paths" or "traditions" are Wicca, Druidry, Heathenry, and Goddess Spirituality. Not all Pagans concern themselves with sacred sites: some Wiccans particularly tend to conduct their rites in private, often indoors, or otherwise away from the public eye; while Druids, on the other hand, can be archetypal "Stonehenge worshippers," with many orders purposefully conducting rituals in the full gaze of the media (Figure 1). Further, not all people engaging with archaeological sites as "sacred" places are Pagans, since various adherents of the "new age," Earth Mysteries researchers and so-called "new age travellers," along with a variety of local people, other religions, more conventional "tourists," and so on, may attend Pagan gatherings at such sites, hold their own rituals, or of course visit for entirely different reasons including the spiritual tourism of "new-age" and Goddess tours. Importantly, along with tourist impact, Pagan activities are now having a noticeable effect on sacred sites which requires academic study and responses from heritage management—one only has to "visit" Stonehenge or Avebury at one of the eight most common Pagan festivals to witness how many people may perceive such places as sacred (an estimated 14,500 at the Stonehenge summer solstice 2001 event, though not all of these necessarily perceive the monument as sacred), and finds of "offerings" of flowers and such like at these times at small and remote sites, such as the Derbyshire stone circles at Froggatt Edge or (as shown here) the Nine Ladies on Stanton Moor (Figure 2), provide evidence of recent Pagan "visits." The phenomenon of such offerings appears to have arisen within the last twenty years.

Pagans and Archaeological Sites

Arguably, Pagans' engagements with archaeological monuments are both embedded in and constitutive of a "new folklore": such places are consistently perceived as "sacred," as places which are "alive" today, where connections can be made with "ancestors," where the Earth Goddess/God can be contacted, where the spirit/energy of the land can be felt most strongly. Specific narratives are forming around individual sites, or around more general pagan relationships with landscape—narratives of description or explanation, stories of events occurring to tellers or stones, ranging from appearances of supernatural beings, accounts of non-functioning electronic equipment, or accounts of expected or appropriate practices at specific places—and accounts of interactions with officialdom and contestations over knowledge or practices. Sites of interest are chiefly Neolithic and Bronze Age constructions, but also Iron-Age, Roman-British and Saxon remains (for example, the Sutton Hoo mounds). There is no single "Pagan" relationship with such places. Positions range from adopting the official "preservation" ethic promulgated by English Heritage, the National Trust and other organisations, to claiming individual divine inspiration for whatever practices seem appropriate at the time, often involving the deposition of "ritual litter"—flowers and other offerings, candlewax and tea-light holders; the decoration of specific places with symbols in chalk, such as spirals or pentacles; and the insertion of crystals, coins and other materials into cracks (Figure 3). The more destructive practices involve lighting "ritual" fires at "sacred sites" with detrimental effect on the stones, and there have been instances of deliberate vandalism, such as graffiti—linked by some to Pagans (for example, *Antiquity* 1996, 501; *The Ley Hunter* no. 126 [Spring 1997]:2; *3rd Stone: The Magazine of the New Antiquarian* edn 35:3)—on Avebury's West Kennet Avenue in 1996 and 1999 (see www.sacredsites.org.uk for further details).

Much Pagan use takes place with little knowledge of either archaeological interpretation, or what practices are detrimental or problematic for other users. In an extreme example, Peak District archaeologist John Barnatt (1997) describes a stone circle being "altered" by a group who apparently held that the stones were wrongly positioned, according to their information obtained from dowsing. Based on excavation evidence, the archaeologists re-organised the stones into their original positions. However, Pagans have also come forward as "guardians" of sites, and recently in Cornwall Pagan groups worked with English Heritage to restore Men-an-Tol after it was vandalised with a home-made napalm-like substance. In all, Pagan understandings of and engagements with these ancient places are diverse and complex. They may include elements of (often older) academic interpretations of site and symbol, literature and history, together with folkloric understandings of spirits and local deities, sometimes drawing on narratives from elsewhere (for example, *landvættir* or "Landwights" [1] in Iceland; see Blain and Wallis 2002), on pieces of earlier folklores (notably guardians and black dogs) or on names known from research (for example, Verbeia in Yorkshire; see Gyru 1998a), re-enchanting these in line with how their paganisms understand people, deities and places. Some pagan discourses may focus on sites as places where deities can be approached, or that in some sense symbolise or embody deity: cup-marks as symbolic of "The

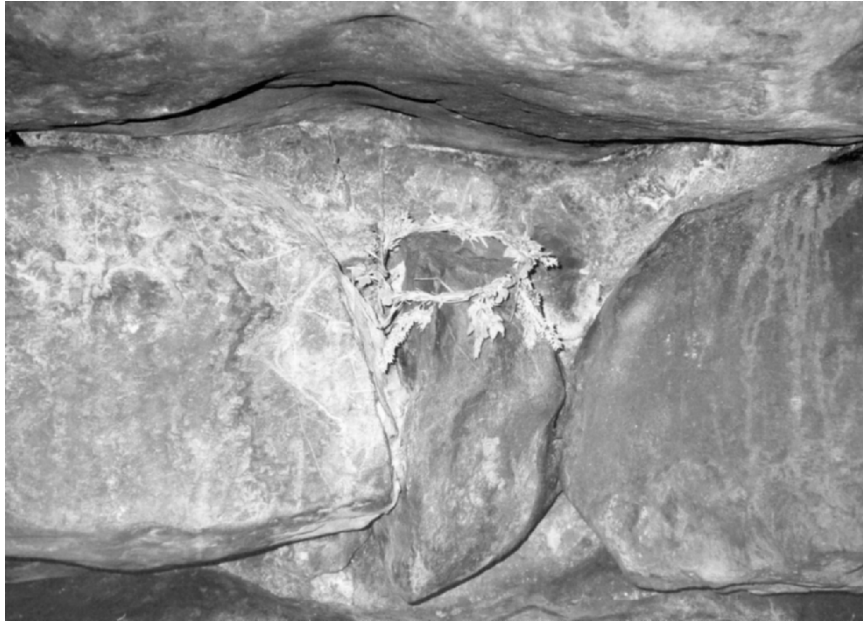


Figure 3 A simple wreath of wild flowers left as a votive offering on a stone in West Kennet Long Barrow, Wiltshire, around the time of the Pagan festival of Lammas. Offerings of flowers, the ears of arable crops, and also food, are particularly notable at Lammas.

Goddess,” or Glastonbury Tor and the nearby landscape constituting (or portraying?) her body and/or an astrological zodiac. Other pagan discourses of sacredness instead relate to use of a site by not only human-people, but other beings, possibly as a location where human and other people enter into negotiations and relationships. Animist views hold that rocks, trees, rivers, and so on, all have spirit and may all create or inscribe meaning in place. Unlike the “rational” understandings of archaeologists in particular, in which meaning—scientific, spiritual or otherwise—is seen solely as a process of human inscription onto sites, Pagans who make offerings often see “spirits” of place (for example, wights, land sprites, goddesses, and so on) as present *a priori*, as, for want of a better phrase, *actually there* (Blain and Wallis 2002), and sites, stones and spirits are active contributors to stories of place.

New Folklore Publications

Some such conceptions of sacredness can be traced to the prominence of particular published interpretations of sacred sites within Pagan communities. Narratives of interpretation become interwoven in practitioner accounts, part of how individuals or groups understand or constitute sacredness. The work of Earth Mysteries researcher Paul Devereux is prominent here, widely read by many Pagans and, interestingly, with ideas which have filtered into academic archaeology (for example, Devereux 1991); indeed Devereux asserts his own position as independent researcher (pers. com.). Devereux is former editor of *The Ley Hunter* and has conducted some twenty-five years of research into ley-lines

(a term coined by Watkins [1925]). Leys, for the uninitiated, are straight features in the landscape accentuated by human endeavours, such as the Nazca geoglyphs and cursus monuments (for example, Devereux 2001), or invisible lines marked by features such as barrows, holy wells and churches. This work has led Devereux to reject the idea that leys are earth “energies” or arteries of the earth which can be discovered and mapped through dowsing. He now suggests they were used as “spirit tracks” by prehistoric shamans who, in trances, travelled along them on out-of-body travel (pers. com.). These findings, or at least “tamer” versions of them, have been published in academic journals (for example, Devereux 1991), as have his analyses of the acoustic properties of rock art sites (Devereux and Jahn 1996), since further developed by archaeologists (for example, Watson 2001).

Devereux’s research as a whole may be regarded as “fringe” by some mainstream archaeologists and various “subjective” interpretations may be questioned. But his idea of “sightlines” between monuments visible only from specific points in the landscape may be considered valuable (as published in *Antiquity* [Devereux 1991] and since employed by academics, for example Tilley 1994; Bradley 1997; 1998). In *Symbolic Landscapes: The Dreamtime Earth and Avebury’s Open Secrets*, Devereux (1992b) develops ideas set out in his 1991 *Antiquity* article, pointing out hitherto unnoticed and intriguing considerations of the monuments by exploring leys in terms of shamanism. Devereux adopts what he calls a “way of seeing” the landscape—an attempt to experience the landscape as Neolithic “shamans” may have done—in which Western rational and linear perspectives are set aside. From this perspective, Devereux argues it is possible to “see” important aspects of Avebury’s landscape. While “seeing” in this way, Devereux first encountered the “Silbury glory” and “double sunrise” of Silbury Hill. In this way also, he learned to appreciate the “dreamstones” of the henge megaliths: seeing faces and other anthropomorphic contortions in the stones, natural features which the prehistoric builders may have used to identify suitable stones for the henge (this idea has since been elaborated, apparently independently, by Meaden [1999], at Avebury and Stonehenge). Devereux has certainly established new directions for research, by exploring the polemical (in today’s anti-drug culture) uses of altered consciousness in prehistory (for example, Devereux 1992a; 1997; also Rudgeley 1993) and severing the link between dowsing and ley-lines. In part, his ideas have percolated into pagan discourses (for instance on ley-lines), whereas in part his ideas reflect concepts already present in the pagan community—perhaps gained from other “spiritual” approaches elsewhere. Devereux’s concepts are not, anthropologically, new—but their application is. They have represented new directions in research into British monuments and contexts, and the possibilities inherent in these. The work of other independent researchers is also pertinent to our discussion, such as that of Michael Dames, who uses the evidence from Silbury Hill to propose a Neolithic Goddess religion in the Avebury landscape.

Dames’s approach to the Avebury monuments resonates well with many Pagans, especially Goddess worshippers and Druids. In her book on Stonehenge, Barbara Bender (1998, 184–5) discusses, with Ronald Hutton, how Dames’s interpretations published in the 1970s were actually influenced by traditional archaeology of the 1950s. Academic research in the 1950s proposed the

existence of prehistoric, particularly Neolithic, Mother Goddesses (for example, Crawford 1957; Childe 1958; Daniel 1958; which was further developed and extended by Gimbutas [for example, 1974]) and thereafter popularised within the "Goddess Movement" (for example, Eisler 1987; Gimbutas and Robbins Dexter 1999). Dames linked this idea of Neolithic goddesses with highly publicised findings from excavations of Silbury Hill by Atkinson in the late 1960s; these suggested the construction of Silbury Hill began around July, harvest time. Since the Neolithic represented (to many archaeologists of that period and in popular imagination then and now) "the agricultural revolution," so harvest must have been an auspicious time of the year. Dames then discovered people had celebrated *Lammas* [Anglo-Saxon "loaf-feast"] or *Lughnasa*, a festival celebrating the bounty of summer, until recent times. Indeed, in some places celebrants had built towers around which to celebrate *Lammas*, and these Dames linked to Silbury Hill. In addition, Dames suggested that from the air Silbury looks like a pregnant goddess figure (see Dames 1976). Following *The Silbury Treasure* (1976) which detailed these findings, Dames (1977) wrote the successful *The Avebury Cycle*, which embeds the major "sacred sites" in Avebury's prehistoric landscape in a cycle of rituals which celebrate the Goddess and which can be enacted in their entirety over the Pagan year: Hutton states, "they were ceremonies which people could perform, and so, within a year, people were there. That's why women dance on Silbury Hill at the August full moon" (in Bender 1998, 185). It is clear that Dames's interpretations have had considerable influence on Pagans who make pilgrimages to Avebury: indeed the Henge Shop in Avebury has Silbury Goddess figurines for sale.

The "goddess" interpretation of "sacred sites" has been popularised most recently by Julian Cope, the punk musician and, now, "modern antiquarian," whose tome-like, lavishly illustrated and psychedelically covered *The Modern Antiquarian* (1998; see also Cope's website <http://www.headheritage.co.uk/>) has, far more than the works of many archaeological researchers, been marketed in all high street bookshops. To archaeologists, the subtitle *A Pre-Millennial Odyssey Through Megalithic Britain* might sum up the character of the volume as more of a pre-millennial *odyssey*, with statements like: "Before the Romans foisted their straight lines upon us, these isles undulated with all that was the wonder of our Mother Earth" (Cope 1998, x). Apparently, furthermore, the Bronze Age brought "the clash" of Neolithic and Bronze working communities, and "the beginnings of patriarchal society."

Cope, alongside other popular writers such as Dames and drawing heavily on the work of Gimbutas and her popularisers, has been instrumental in promoting the idea among practitioners that the Neolithic was a period of matriarchal goddess "culture" followed and destroyed by the patriarchal warring "culture" of the Bronze Age—a narrative through which many Pagans will approach such sites. Interspersed within his "new folkloric" narratives he gives advice including that which heritage management would see as sound: "megalithic adventurers should always leave with more rubbish than they came with" (Thompson 1998, 12).

Less well known than the works of Devereux, Dames and Cope are the small publications of Gyrus about the sacred sites, rock art sites in particular, of Ilkley (Rombald's) Moor, Yorkshire (for example, Gyrus 1998a&b; 2000; Oakley 1998).

Gyrus describes his approach to such rock art and ancient sites as “personal”: “I have to experience the place I’m involved in. I spend time there and immerse myself in it, meditate and do rituals, note dreams and synchronicities” (Gyrus 1998b). He describes a first visit to the Badger Stone rock art site where:

I was too wet to care about the rain, a state which alters consciousness into a more receptive mode ... I did some spontaneous chanting and whirling ... My intuitive offerings to the Badger Stone consisted of pouring some of my drink (water or whiskey) into the cups and watching it stream down the grooves (Gyrus 1998a, online).

Making offerings of fluid in cup marks draws directly on nineteenth-century folkloric practices in the region: offerings of milk were made at the “tree of life” stone in particular to effect fertility and good luck (Crook 1998). Gyrus describes a time when he experienced visions at the Badger Stone after ingesting an entheogen: while chanting in front of the rock he perceived that changes in tone affected the frequency of vision patterns; this, he feels, would be worth exploring to determine how the original creators of the engravings perceived them (Gyrus 2000).

Pagan interpretations of sacred sites, and evidently active engagements with them, may not sit well with archaeologists; but they exist, they are increasingly prominent, they challenge the passive and normative approaches to the sites encouraged by heritage management, and they must, therefore, be engaged with. Very few archaeologists are prepared to do so: unusually, Professor Tim Darvill’s (Bournemouth University) response to Cope, is not to critique Cope, but to criticise archaeologists for not being as successful in getting their approaches into the public domain: “we need to realign our public outputs, to listen up and get real in what we present to the wider world” (Darvill 1999, 29). The new folklore of contemporary Paganism appears to be eclipsing the old “folklore”—dare we say it!—of traditional archaeology. Ideas about who has knowledge, about which stories are apposite, are challenged here: and new stories connect with assumptions about sacredness, what it encompasses, and behaviour at “sacred sites”—to which we now turn.

“Sacred Sites”

What is interesting about these perspectives is not just that some Pagans (if not claiming a continuity of tradition over the millennia) draw on these perceived folkloric traditions; but rather, the way in which these perspectives on the past—conceptions of what constitutes folklore—are mobilised in active attempts to influence and in some instances negotiate site management. Most famous, here, has to be Stonehenge. Despite the violent and antagonistic relations between “alternative” interest groups (including Pagans and travellers) and the authorities (including English Heritage, the National Trust, and Wiltshire Constabulary) in the 1980s regarding the “Stonehenge free-festival,” constructive dialogue between the interest groups in the late 1990s has led to an opening up of access. Initial problems with ticket-only events in 1998 and 1999 were resolved with open access in 2000 and 2001—an estimated 14,500 people were present at the latter, as we have mentioned (Figure 4), and 23,000 in 2002. Yet the 1970s “free festival,” together with stories of its founder, Wally Hope, and his death,



Figure 4 An estimated 14,500 people celebrated the summer solstice at Stonehenge in 2001, the second year a managed open access policy had been implemented by English Heritage. The event was, by most accounts, peaceful and the “festival” looks set to continue in future, though increasing numbers (23,000 in 2002) are likely to present challenges to heritage managers and other interest groups.

the later suppressions and the “battle of the beanfield” (where Police brutality suppressed free-festivalers’ attempts to access the stones for the summer solstice in 1985), have become part of the narrativised context of Stonehenge today, and hence components to the subversive or at least protest-orientated positions of those who seek to celebrate there. And so it is with the example of Stonehenge and recent events there that we close our discussion of sacred sites—specifically regarding how this new folklore of “sacredness” is constituted, negotiated, and politically motivated.

These new concepts of sacredness apparently both emerged from and paralleled indigenous perspectives on and approaches to certain places, “natural” and “human-made,” in contests with archaeologists’ and national parks services’ understandings, related also to issues of access, ownership, and management (discussed, for example, in various papers in Carmichael *et al.* 1994). In such “rights” issues, the concept of “sacredness” and particularly “sacred site” is foregrounded. Pagans find such perspectives attractive and, theorising that their “ancestors” may have approached such sites in similar ways (and also comparing their own situations with that of indigenous religious minorities elsewhere), they have likewise begun to use the term. Equally interesting is the way in which heritage managers themselves, once viewed (and often still) as ostensibly conservative, rationalistic civil servants, are now also deploying the term: The Avebury *English Heritage Management Plan* argues “Paganism may well be the fastest growing religion in Britain and this is linked with the increasing interest in the mystical significance of Avebury as a ‘sacred’ place” (Pomeroy 1998, 27),

and commenting on their negotiations with Pagans, David Miles (Chief Archaeologist, English Heritage; in Wallis and Lymer 2001b, 107) and Clews Everard (Site Director, Stonehenge, pers. com.) use the term “sacred site.” “Sacred sites” are in vogue. However, within this new folklore of the “sacred site,” the meaning of sacredness seems remarkably diverse—and lack of appreciation of this diversity forms a barrier to communication, though some archaeologists and heritage managers are apparently coming to both theorise the term in their discourse, and recognise diversities of “pagan” use of both term and site. Some, further, recognise that the terms hold implicit political positionings.

Contests to the folklore of the “Preservation Ethic”: “Partying” at Stonehenge

On the one hand, heritage managers use the term to refer to the preservation ethic of the heritage industry which comprises an essential part of the “informed” “visitor experience.” If, as they suggest, these sites should be preserved for posterity, then Stonehenge, for example, should be fenced off to avoid unnecessary damage. Sacredness, for them, is on a par with the sacredness conventionally associated with the passive, humble and serene Protestant sobriety many observe (congregation and tourists) at nearby Salisbury Cathedral, for instance. Clews Everard suggested (pers. com.), that in contrast to the ways in which Pagans and others have behaved at the large solstice events in recent years, the site is not an appropriate place for “a party” and “drunken behaviour.” English Heritage feel “partying” and associated raucous behaviour compromises the preservation ethic, compromises their definition of “sacredness,” and also compromises their view of Stonehenge in the past, when, presumably, “parties” did not occur. Quietude, essentially, is assumed to be appropriate in past and present. But this is in no small part a myth, perhaps informed by the widely held stereotypical view that Druids hold sickles, wear long white robes, and false Father Christmas beards when they perform their passive rituals in the stones. What we know, archaeologically, is that it is possible Stonehenge was a meeting place for large-scale feasting and such events may have required ritual observances, but ritual need not be sombre and is by all accounts not passive. Anthropologically such events are described in a wide variety of settings, yet public opinion in the West still encompasses a Durkheimian folklore of sacred versus profane. [2]

The preservation-ethic-informed notion of sacredness promulgated by the heritage industry is accepted or accommodated in the discourse of some Pagans, most obviously in the organisations *Save Our Sacred Sites*, *ASLaN* (Ancient Sacred Landscape Network, http://www.symbolstone.org/archaeology/aslan/docs/charter_en.html) and *Cruithni* (www.cruithni.org), but not others. In contemporary Paganism, or at the very least for some Druids, Stonehenge is the “temple of the nation” (Sebastian 2001), and Tim Sebastian’s Secular Order of Druids has the aims of “new age” travellers and other revellers at heart. Many travellers have strong links with Stonehenge (for example, Craig 1986; Bender 1998); the free festival marked a time when this nomadic group was able to gather together and celebrate their lifeway at a meeting place which is thousands of years old, a monument which may have been used for similar seasonal rituals in prehistory. Stonehenge is therefore a contemporary meeting place for “the

tribes,” as activist George Firsoff pointed out to us at the end of the 2001 summer solstice celebration. His discourse explicitly links meeting place, “tribal celebrations” and the music improvised during the night and the dawn.

People were I think trying to recreate primitive music in this environment here. I spoke to a druid gentleman who said, oh the music in the ancient times must have been very similar, you know very, very heavy on the percussion, a few horns, and maybe bagpipes, and so very similar to what’s actually been happening here. And I thought that was interesting ‘cos they were producing some of the, some very weird sounds, you know it was like, very totally spontaneous, you know, and again that’s very like tribal music that we know about, isn’t it? Because there’s a strong sense of there being a tribe at Stonehenge, and one of the problems is, people couldn’t meet each other any more, when the gatherings here were banned, and you know like the blessings of children and the marriages in some sections of the community ... it was very important to come here.

In the new folkloric narratives of travellers and celebrants such as *Mutant Dance* (an anarchic dance collective) and other “party people” (for whom partying is a means of protest, a political act; Rietveld 1998), such events are continuing a long tradition, an idea connecting/legitimated by ideas about circles as prehistoric meeting places, feasting places, market places, and so on. As one “visitor” to the 2001 solstice event described it, when standing outside the stones, looking in, with the multitude of people among the stones, the immediate impression was of timelessness and that such gatherings may have looked like this in prehistory. Others also repeatedly drew on these concepts. Early in the night, an anonymous celebrant told us that:

I’ve never been to the stones before, but it of all the circles I’ve been at in the British Isles, and old sites, it actually feels like the most normal ... It seems like it’s really OK for loads of people to be here. And that this is probably something that’s not new, people being allowed into the stones, it’s something that’s very old, so seems quite a normal thing to do in a way.

His friend added:

It’s like an ancestral memory bit that’s stored up ... You’re drawn here, quite simply the bottom line is you’re sort of drawn here, there’s all sorts of, well a myriad reasons for that you see ... to me it’s like charging my batteries, it’s kind of like these sort of gatherings like getting a new life really ... and you don’t have to *be* anything here ... There’s no real kind of code here at all, and that’s what I love about, there’s such diversity of people and it is real mixing ... because everyone’s allowed to be what they want.

Others commented that “it’s the place you really should be on solstice,” and that it was a place where the stones held “ancient knowledge,” hence giving a connection with ancestors, a sense of continuity. This sense of identity through continuity ran through many accounts.

And at dawn, one Druid at the same event explained:

[T]his is a holiday, it’s a Holy Day, it’s special, and people I think feel it’s special. And I think the site likes us to be here, as well. Stonehenge wasn’t built as a museum. It was built as a place for people to come, for worship, to use it ... I always think *this* is like New Year’s Eve or Christmas or your birthday, all rolled into one. And it is about—a lot of people partying. There’s nothing wrong with that, that’s a spiritual thing too, or can be.

If “partying” at Stonehenge can be “spiritual,” and if partying can be “sacred”

in spite of the authorities' perceptions of it as secular and non-spiritual, then nearby Salisbury Cathedral is again an interesting analogy (see also Wallis 2003). In contrast to current, passive engagements with that "sacred site," Salisbury Cathedral was, in the pre-Reformation medieval period, a regular location for the commotion of the market place with "a horse-fair held not only in the precincts but also in the cathedral itself" (Davies 1968, 56), as well as the raucous "feast of fools" (Davies 1968, 82; see also Billington 1984). History records also that "church ales" were brewed in church buildings, and that dancing, games, and other "secular" events were commonplace (Davies 1968).

At the Winter Solstice event(s) at Stonehenge in 2001, these issues of contest to the character of "sacredness" were made particularly apparent (for example, Harvey 2001): one member of the Stonehenge Campaign commented (in a communication to the StonehengePeace email discussion list) "[W]hat they [English Heritage] want is tame druids," meaning those Druids who are prepared to accept English Heritage's agenda for solstice events and their equation of "sacredness" with the heritage-cum-preservation ethic. The approaches of "partying" Druids and others align more closely with the "folk carnival" (for example, Bakhtin 1968) in the churches of the pre-Reformation Middle Ages, in which rigid definitions between "sacred" and "profane" break down. We do not make this point to necessarily support "partying" at Stonehenge, though as Heathens and academic researchers of Paganisms and sacred sites we regularly attend solstice events at this and other sites. We do so to make the point that concepts of "sacred sites" are clearly not only diverse in both Pagan and Heritage management communities, but also these conceptions of sacredness are not always commensurable, though they do appear to constitute a focus point where the interest groups can debate and negotiate the issues.

Conclusion

From active interactions with sites, such as votive offerings and instances of fire and, possibly, graffiti damage, to unconventional (contrasted with academic) interpretations of sites involving wights and spirit beings, Neolithic shamans, or goddesses, there are diverse areas of contest over so-called "sacred" sites. We argue archaeology must not reject Pagan and other folklores and narratives of site and sacredness as "fringe," but, in an era of community archaeology, transparency and collaboration, respond to them, preferably in dialogue. The term "sacred," specifically, beyond this problematising, needs theorising—or at least users of it must be explicit by what they mean by it, particularly when attempting to negotiate or bridge gaps. "Sacredness" is made evident in stories: the term exists and indexes meanings within narratives which have meaning within different user-groups—"subcultures" or better "neotribes"—with their own mythologies/metanarratives which form part of the identity construction of adherents. It is possible to move between these different approaches—post-modern approaches contend that one understanding does not rule out others—but it remains to be seen whether site managers and Pagans are prepared to embrace and broker such diversity, to bridge the gap and negotiate the old Durkheimian folklore of sacred-profane with the new folklores of the Pagan "sacred site."

Notes

- [1] The word "wight," referring to an entity or being (including in some instances human people), is being reclaimed and extensively used within pagan interpretations of place and landscape. Such wights need not be "good" or "evil" in human terms but have their own agendas relating to, one presumes, their own interpretations of place and community. Icelanders we have interviewed use the term "wight" as a direct translation of *vættr*, and we follow this usage which seems to us in line with the sense of "wight" (O.E. "wiht") as an independent being.
- [2] Anthropologists have long-since deconstructed the Durkheimian dualism of "sacred" versus "profane" with regards to site, ceremony and celebration elsewhere: yet such deconstruction is in a sense largely academic, as in the West large sections of the general public and of heritage management, and indeed numerous pagans, hold to this dualism, associating sanctity chiefly or only with quiet contemplation.

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