

APT Conference 2007: Report

The 2007 conference of the Association of Polytheist Traditions was held on 26th May at the Manchester Museum. The doors opened at 9.30 for a 10.00 start. There were 52 attendees, and we were assisted by three students from Preston who staffed the door on a rota basis and in return had free admittance to sessions. Museum staff were very helpful throughout the day (and on the following day when we returned to hold the AGM).

Many people facilitated the conference. Thanks are due in particular to:

- Linda Sever for organising student helpers and for finding an evening venue.
- The student helpers
- Tina Smith and Natalie Westwood for event promotion
- Sean Fitton, chairing a panel and contributing music to the evening
- Anna Davey, of the museum staff, who facilitated the booking and assisted with audio-visual set-up; and all other staff who assisted
- Piotr Bienkowski, the Deputy Director of the Museum, who offered us the use of the space
- and to all who contributed their ideas, as audience participants or more formal panelists.

The conference was organised principally as a series of panels based in the abstracts or outlines that participants sent in response to a Call for Contributions. All participants, whether formally on the programme or not, are regular conference attendees and all are expected to pay their way. (Speakers do not receive a fee and everybody pays the same entry charge.) This year, events outwith the control of the organisers, as well as some debate over the conference focus, had delayed the sending out of the initial Call for Contributions. Initially the focus of the conference was conceived of as 'Traditions, gods, spirits in the land: with animist religion, do we need gods?' This had arisen from the interest shown in the first panel of the 2006 conference. Additionally, we hoped to include some updates on ancestors in the land and the 'reburial issue', and on the situation at Thornborough Henges in North Yorkshire. However, the nature of contributions resulting from the call and the association of the Museum with the reburial issue and with 'Lindow Man' led to a reassessment and change of emphasis, and abbreviation of the title to 'Gods and Sacred Places'.

Sessions or panels on the final programme were:

- Stories and why we need them
- The Reburial Issue (two panels)
- Sacred Places and threats to these
- and a general audience roundtable discussion on the nature of Gods for polytheists, which moved into discussion of ideas for the next conference. These ideas included 'methodology' or sharing of practice, and ways in which people (present or past) relate to their gods.

The Speaker, Jenny Blain, as conference organiser, gave a welcome to the conference, and chaired most panels, with Sean Fitton chairing the second Reburial panel.

In the first session on the importance of stories, Robin Herne spoke of the need, past and present, for 'word weavers and myth smiths' within spiritual traditions and communities; and why traditions need their stories – these being tales from mythology or folklore and also tales of the group or organisation and its coming into being. Stories are living, they change, and if they don't exist people seek to create them – and the results can be rather less than felicitous, when stories are not grounded in relationships and experiences (few in the audience will forget the bunny/bird). Audience participants had many questions and points to raise and it is clear that polytheists (or at least those present) are seeing stories and their narration as central to the relationships they develop with their gods and other beings or wights.

From this beginning, the concept of *stories and their telling* ran throughout the day, in talks and discussions – the story of the Ice Princess, ways of telling the stories of Lindow Man, stories of the recent past at Thornborough and Mildenhall, recreating the stories at West Stow, re-finding the buried tales.

The first panel on the Reburial Issue opened with Jenny Blain sketching some history of the development of the reburial issue in Britain, indicating background in repatriation of artefacts and remains to various indigenous groups world-wide, and changes of attitude among heritage personnel. This talk raised questions around implications of particular heritage documents, and of the 'rights' of the ancestors (who have a 'right of sepulchre' in Scotland but not in England and Wales). Emma Restall Orr of the organisation Honouring the Ancient Dead (HAD) gave the specific example of the Lindow Man negotiation at the Manchester Museum, where this famous 'bog body' will be housed, viewed or celebrated from April 2008 until March 2009. (For further details on this topic see <http://www.honour.org.uk/projects/lindow.php>.)

After a lunch break, the Sacred Places panel included an invited talk from George Chaplin on his involvement with the Thornborough Henges campaign. He gave some details of the progress of this campaign, with partial victories, partial defeats; but the central part of his talk involved his own progression from being a person seeing Thornborough as 'heritage' and focusing, with some anger, on protection and preservation and prevention of quarrying, to his discovery of pagan spirituality resulting in a new focus on celebration of sacred place. Linda Sever spoke of her current involvement with a project on (the little-known) Sacred Sites of Lancashire, which aims to bring together landscape history, folklore, archaeology and spirituality. Tina Smith moved the geographic focus to East Anglia, updating conference participants on her involvements with re-creation of heritage at West Stow, and giving accounts of the excavations at Mildenhall and Lakenheath, and her concerns and involvements with campaigns for respectful treatment – returning here to the reburial issue. A lively audience debate focused chiefly on Thornborough, as its story and that of George were new to most of the participants. (Indeed the debate continued during the coffee break, with people returning with their coffees to the hall.)

The second Reburial panel included a move out of Britain to look at the so-called 'Ice Princess' of the Altai. Ken Lymer told the story of her finding, problems with the excavation, moving and thawing of this frozen body, of her embalming and display in Russia – and of the calls of local Altai people who want her to be returned to her home region and

for whom her display is a sacrilege. Returning to the British issue, Yvonne Aburrow spoke as a pagan who does not, on the whole, support the call for general reburial, but had her own suggestions for respect including a focus on memory and stories of ancestors. Emma Restall Orr concluded the formal offerings of this panel by discussing what HAD was about and ideas of how different pagan voices could speak within and through this organisation. (Currently three members of the APT are among the HAD council and advisors.) Audience debate was again lively and participants addressed points from the morning and afternoon sessions.

The concluding roundtable discussion and 'wrap-up' had many participants discussing gods, their abilities, their relationships with landscape and ancestors, and included ideas of pagans needing to speak to and with each other. Pagans do not, cannot and indeed *should not* speak 'with one voice' because paganisms are living, developing religious traditions that are creating their own ways to relate humans and other beings to past, present and landscape. Indeed if paganisms have a commonality it is in the emphasis, shared to greater or lesser extents, on encouraging individuals to develop their own spiritual understandings. But communication and discussion can help ensure that while we speak with many voices, we can do so cooperatively.

Report submitted summer solstice 2007
by J. Blain, Speaker of the APT.