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The Meaning of Seahenge

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An unusual storm hit the quiet north-west corner of Norfolk in 1999. This was a storm of publicity, bringing in its wake confrontation, uncertainty and spiritual violation. And whereas a normal storm clears the air, this one exposed fundamental conflicts between the discourses of archaeology and those of people affected by its practice.

The village of Holme-next-the-Sea sits in the corner of a bleakly beautiful coast, with mud-flats, sand and shingle covering peat deposits, backed by dunes and salt marsh. Part of this coast is a National Nature Reserve, a 'Ramsar' site of vital and fragile significance to a variety of birds. And fragile it is; human intervention in the form of coastal defences and off-shore aggregates dredging has altered erosion patterns in the area. As a result, the peat is giving up ancient secrets, hidden for thousands of years, and the sea is washing them away. What is being revealed is an ancient sacred landscape that demonstrates that this part of what is now Norfolk was once considerably more important, perhaps explaining why the Roman Peddars Way ends near here.

The most spectacular structure to emerge in recent years was an 18-foot long, 15-foot wide ellipse of 55 oak posts surrounding an up-turned oak bole, recognised immediately as being Bronze Age. Although it was 'discovered' and reported to the Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU) in spring 1998, news of its existence did not reach the wider general public until the following January, when newspapers, led by *The Independent* and closely followed by the *Eastern Daily Press*, picked up on the story. The saga of 'Seahenge' had begun.

A special place

Despite the difficulty of finding Seahenge, exposed only at low tide, visitors flocked to see it. There was clearly a risk to the structure and to wintering birds, which have only a short time for feeding on the mudflats. Norfolk Wildlife Trust and the NAU therefore asked people to stay away. Whilst many ignored this plea, many others decided to delay their visit, not suspecting that there would soon be little left to see.

Almost everyone involved recognised Seahenge as special. For local people it was one of the mysteries of their enigmatic shoreline, a slowly emerging relic of people as far in the past to Boudica as she is to us today. Many in Norfolk and beyond recognised this special feel as sanctity. Some saw significant alignments in the orientation of the central bole; others claimed to have found symmetrical (energy) leys around it, or a mystical link to Stonehenge and Avebury. But many more were happy with the certainty that this was a sacred place, with no need to find rationalisations to back

that up. Even the archaeologists who were keenest to excavate and record the ring felt something special about the place.

At first there was no money for more than minor investigations, which, overall, suited locals and the wider Norfolk community, save that a large wedge had already been cut out of the central bole with a chainsaw for dendrochronological dating – a tree-ring analysis for which a much smaller bore is normally adequate. Despite English Heritage's eventual apology for what was effectively an act of vandalism, it rather set the scene for the attitude of the archaeological establishment throughout.

The first U-turn

In May 1999, English Heritage (EH) decided, following pressure primarily from the media and the Secretary of State for Culture,[1] that the timbers would be excavated and preserved. It was by now clear that the majority of people in the local community and across the county who had a preference wanted the ring to be left where it was. Certainly some were convinced that the timbers would be covered again by the shifting sands, but others espoused an attitude that the archaeologists never understood: that the ring should be left where it was even if that meant it would eventually be washed away. This philosophy was perhaps most eloquently described by Libby Purves in her column in *The Times*, as "A transient beauty".[2] At least the magic of Seahenge in its position on this liminal coast would have been present for a year or two. As it was, it was removed within months of most people being aware of it. As she wrote: "Seahenge inspires a sense of mystery that it will lose once in a museum." She also correctly assessed the community's feelings: "There is real bitterness locally and a sense of violation... ...the Druids have dramatised the debate, and for that they too deserve some honour."

EH called a public meeting, to which local people went expecting to debate the future of Seahenge. Instead, they were faced with a *fait accompli*: work would start on the excavation the next day. Local people began looking for ways to stop EH's plans, and the archaeologists were soon being hampered by peaceful protestors. Most of those moved to take a stand in this way were from the local region, but outside help was requested from the Council of British Druid Orders (CoBDO), who in turn recommended Essex tree campaigner, Buster Nolan. The protest grew, aided by a supportive local media, until EH and the NAU decided to convene a meeting ostensibly to try to achieve common ground with the opposition.

EH, NAU, Norfolk Wildlife Trust, the protestors and local people were represented at the meeting, held in Hunstanton at very short notice. It began with the assumption that the excavation would continue somehow, but this was not accepted by many of those present and no agreement that the rest of the timbers should be removed was ever reached, contrary to subsequent official reports.[3] EH was keen to use the meeting to be seen listening, yet it had no intention of ceasing the excavation, and a High Court injunction was taken out against *anyone* entering the site. The excavation was completed on 17th July.

The timbers were taken to the Bronze Age centre, Flag Fen, near Peterborough, to undergo a lengthy preservation treatment. Whilst some people wanted to see the

timbers displayed locally, it was not clear how a suitable building would be paid for. Another option, however, gained ground in local opinion: reburying the timbers at a deeper level on the beach at Holme, close to if not exactly at the place from which they were extracted. This would at least go some way to making amends for their initial removal. Also, being buried, the ring would not attract sightseers, so protecting the wildlife.

Having looked favourably on this option initially, EH came out against it at the end of 2001, on the grounds that it would not preserve the timbers from the sea in perpetuity. Once again, the philosophies of preservation at all costs and of allowing nature to take its course, whilst granting "transient beauty", were at loggerheads.

What was it for?

If the excavation was worth doing, one would expect significant findings unavailable otherwise. The dating of the central bole by means of the wedge removed by chainsaw yielded a very precise date: early summer 2050BCE, with the timbers of the ring following a year later. This remains the most significant piece of information from the archaeological investigation, yet its value is questionable when compared to the damage done in the removal of the sample wedge, let alone the removal of the entire structure.

Other knowledge gained is of little real value in understanding the monument. For example, the number of distinguishable axe marks tells us no more than that 35 axes were used. As some of these were probably designed for different purposes, it does not imply that 35 people were involved. It suggests a significant number, but ceremonial cutting and shaping could as easily have involved many more people, sharing tools.

There has been much speculation as to the purpose for which Seahenge was built. The excavation and analysis have provided little evidence on which to build theories. Cutting in the summer could mean all sorts of things: seasonal rituals, the date someone important died, the season of arrival on this piece of land, or even that this was when the local inhabitants were attacked and a sacred oak felled.

Despite the media-label 'Seahenge', it was not a henge, having no earthwork. It was also too small to be a timber circle, such as at Woodhenge or Arminghall, south of Norwich, and the posts were close-fitting, split timbers, a palisade rather than pillars. Suggestions for its purpose covered the prosaic, such as a stockade, the ceremonial, such as a beacon, and the sacred, with an excarnation platform still seen as the most likely possibility.

Outsiders

Whilst the community felt Seahenge to be an important local feature, it was the actions of outsiders which largely controlled what happened, and local people felt aggrieved that their perspectives and wishes were over-ridden. NAU and EH made

decisions without reference to them, and then Channel 4's *Time Team* retold the story its own way, rekindling resentment.

People from elsewhere even took the limelight in the campaign to prevent the ring being excavated. Whilst the presence of Buster Nolan from Essex and Rollo Maughfling of CoBDO was at the request of local protestors and was key to the campaign, they were still outsiders. Indeed, the fact that nationally prominent Druids had claimed Seahenge as a Druid place of worship as soon as it had hit the headlines[4] had caused annoyance even in the Pagan community.

The Pagan Debate

Whilst Pagans do not have a monopoly on sacred places, they hold the sanctity of the land as a basic concept. Several of the protestors were Pagans of one sort or another, the Druids included, and the general feeling in the Norfolk Pagan community was clearly that the ring should have been left where it was, even if it therefore disappeared over time.

Archaeologists discussing Seahenge often claimed that Pagans campaigned for excavation. When pressed, it is the organisation Save Our Sacred Sites that is implicated. Once again, even in a community that acknowledges personal connections with the sacred land, a national organisation stepped in without seeking local perspectives.

Some Pagans were a bit wary of the protestors, some of whom had a New Age approach and may have appeared similar to the kind of people from whom organisations like the Pagan Federation (PF) have spent years distancing themselves in debates about access to Stonehenge. These protestors' arguments might have been rationalised with spurious claims, but the underlying motivation was a profound sense of the spiritual significance of the ring in its environment. The PF surprised many people by publishing without criticism the EH version of the Hunstanton meeting in its magazine *Pagan* Dawn.[5]

With the timbers removed from their home of 4000 years, the question of what to do with them led to less agreement in the Pagan community, although there was strong support for the proposal to rebury them at Holme. They would be back where they came from, yet hidden to protect them and wildlife from visitors, to re-emerge again at some later date, with nature taking its course. This view was not as strongly held as that the timbers should never have been removed in the first place, but there appeared to be little support amongst Pagans in the region for their preservation as a decontextualised museum artefact, divorced from the environment in which they had sacred meaning.

What does Seahenge mean?

Whatever the Holme tree ring was built as, it became a modern sacred place. Archaeology is beginning, very slowly, to recognise that modern perceptions of sanctity are valid, regardless of the original purpose of an ancient monument.[6] To

modern people, leading lives increasingly separate from the land, any ancient remains form a link to the past, to our ancestors, to the land with which we still feel a need to engage. In that they have a sacred function; when they are in a numinous location, they become a sacred place. This is, perhaps, the key importance of Seahenge's position on the beach, although it would be arrogant to rule out ancient geomantic relationships. When built, it would have been on a drier piece of ground in the marshes behind the dunes, but today it occupied a position where it had deep meaning for practically everyone who saw it.

Some have drawn parallels between the emergence of a monument containing a conspicuous inverted tree and humanity's destruction of the natural environment, which whilst nothing new (the smelting of the metal after which the Bronze Age is named caused major deforestation for its fuel) is today at an unprecedented scale. Certainly the emergence of such an ancient structure as this puts our modern-day concerns into perspective.

However, a further meaning actually came out of the way Seahenge was handled by the archaeological establishment. Norfolk people became suddenly aware of something special on their doorstep, were immediately told to stay away from it, and then saw it torn out of the ground and removed. The excavation and the manner in which people were treated by the archaeological bodies amounted to the violation of Norfolk – its people and its soil.

To those who consider the land sacred, the significance of this event goes beyond the physical and psychological: it was a spiritual violation. Like a tooth pulled or a favourite ring lost, there was a gap, a nakedness in the north-western corner of the county. Over time, the wound has healed, but the process would have been aided by the return of the timbers to their original site. Even burying them nearby, as had been proposed, would have gone some way towards restitution.

Conflicting attitudes

Looking beyond Norfolk, the Seahenge saga exposed basic conflicts between the everyday business of archaeology and the beliefs and wishes of other parts of society, notably to do with sacredness, local self-determination and whether things should automatically be preserved in aspic. It has brought into sharp perspective the fact that archaeologists and people who regard the land as sacred tend to operate in distinct paradigms. Archaeology claimed to have Seahenge's best interests at heart, but was actually concerned to preserve 56 pieces of wood.

However, a recognition of sanctity is slowly growing within archaeology, and there are Pagans and others in the profession with a spiritual sense for that with which they work, although whether Seahenge moved things on or encouraged the conservatives to batten-down the hatches is unclear. In this writer's experience, the archaeologists involved with Seahenge are still presented as being ready to compromise, whilst the perspectives of protestors and locals are belittled, and the point of view that the timbers should have been left where they were *even though* they would have been washed away over time is ignored.

However, there is a debate in the archaeological world about the 'ownership' of ancient places. Members of the profession are beginning to question archaeologists' automatic authority, and a survey of the issues can be found in a book by Robin Skeates[7] of the University of East Anglia (UEA), who attempted to bring together the various parties involved in Seahenge at a seminar in March 2000.

Skeates provides a snapshot of the debates surrounding archaeological heritage, covering definition, ownership, protection, management, interpretation and experience. There are many perspectives on ancient remains, especially where cultural differences are concerned. As Skeates writes: "Archaeologists do not own the material remains of the past; they must now demonstrate that they deserve a share in them" (p.37). World-wide, the future looks quite promising, with "affirmative" approaches to the history of minorities, battles over interpretation being won by indigenous peoples, and a slow recognition that ancient human remains should be treated with the same respect as modern ones. Skeates says (p. 85):

"My sympathies lie, then, with the inhabitants of places such as Holme-next-the-Sea in England and Medicine Mountain in the USA, whose valid interests in their local archaeological heritage have been overlooked by outsider archaeologists and government agencies, and who have consequently had to shout to be heard."

However, Skeates' book is important as much for what it omits as for what it includes, reflecting thereby the attitude of archaeology as a profession. Sacredness is beginning to be recognised as regards indigenous peoples in far-flung parts of the world, but when it comes to Europe, the admission that some people regard certain ancient (and indeed modern) places as sacred *today* comes somewhat grudgingly. Skeates parcels such people together as "New Age" – for him a catch-all phrase covering everything from eco-feminism to soft drugs, incorporating "Druids, neo-pagans and eco-warriors" *en route*. Where he discusses access to Stonehenge, his inability to distinguish between New Age and Pagan leads to an unhelpful (to say the least) confusion between those who have a spiritual interest in ancient ritual places and anarchic festival-goers.

This is significant beyond the sensibilities of members of the Pagan community, as archaeology in general could learn a great deal from active ritualists (without implying that today's rituals are the same as those of the ancient past), in the same way that it gains knowledge from what has become known as experimental archaeology and period re-enactment. Furthermore, many people who would not consider themselves Pagan attach a spiritual significance to specific, special places, yet are ignored by the archaeological establishment and the Town and Country Planning system. In archaeology, what counts is knowledge about the past. In planning, it is economic development, tourism, recreation and designated wildlife and architectural conservation areas that count. Both sectors have a massive impact on places that may well be sacred to various people. In neither discipline is sacredness officially recognised and where the imperatives clash, as at Holme, sacredness loses almost every time.

In part the problem lies with the self-referential nature of academic professions. Thus, an understanding of the motivations and nature of contending perspectives is sought from within, from those few academics who have undertaken specific research in such areas, rather than directly from the people who hold the heterodox viewpoints

in question. Thus the nature and motivations of different groups that lie outside 'mainstream society' are inadequately understood and distinguished.

As a result, institutions like archaeology try to incorporate new perspectives, if at all, by fitting them into existing decision-making processes. This is seen as putting them into a practical framework, yet fails to question whether the framework itself needs alteration.

What now?

Seahenge was an unusual case, in that it was being destroyed, slowly, by the sea and molluscs. The significance and most appropriate management of most ancient (sacred) places can be debated with somewhat less urgency: Stonehenge is not about to disappear into the sea. The very speed at which events unfolded at Holme doubtless exacerbated the conflicts, but the fact that the ring was not permanent allowed hitherto poorly recognised issues to surface.

If the whole Seahenge story has any positive outcome, then it has to be that these issues have been raised. If it leads to a sincere reconsideration of archaeology's relationship to other people, and of society's relationship to the land, then some good will have come out of it. The signs are not, however, encouraging.

Notes and References

1 As admitted by Richard Morris, Chair of English Heritage's Ancient Monuments Advisory Committee, when challenged about the claim that the decision was made following pressure from the public, at the 'Debating 'Seahenge'' seminar at UEA, March 2000.

2 Libby Purves (1999) 'A transient beauty' *The Times* 29th June.

3 Matthew Champion (2000) *Seahenge: A Contemporary Chronicle* Barnwell's Timescape, Aylsham (ISBN 0-9531851-3-3).

4 For instance, Philip Shallcrass, Joint Chief of the British Druid Order, quoted in the *Eastern Daily Press*, January 16, 1999.

5 'Seahenge' *Pagan Dawn* 133, Samhain/Winter 1999, pp. 15-6 (reprint of an article by Robin McKie from *Heritage Today*, September 1999).

6 As espoused, for instance, by Peter Ucko of University College London, chairing the UEA seminar, March 2000.

7 Robin Skeates (2000) *Debating the Archaeological Heritage* Duckworth (I.S.B.N. 0-7156-2956-5).

Postscript (2022)

This piece, in its original form, was published in the journal *3rd Stone*, no. 43, pp. 49-54 (2002). The central bole (*right*) and half of the palisade timbers are now displayed (separately) in King's Lynn Museum, with the chainsaw cut hidden and, at any rate at this writer's last visit, no mention of the controversy in the interpretation and labelling. It does however feature in the on-line image stream at https://artsandculture.google.com/story/seahenge-lynn-museum/pwVhBxecshzaMQ?hl=en .

Interestingly, a second timber ring ('Holme II') nearby (*below*), about which it was inappropriate to write in 2002, remained unexcavated and unsung, and was allowed slowly to be taken by the sea, until one of the central logs was removed in 2004 (the other having been washed away) and samples were taken from the palisade posts in 2013. The dendrochronological analysis revealed that Holme II was constructed at the same time as Seahenge, in 2049 B.C.E. This is the most significant finding, that the two are contemporary with each other. However, as we know nothing about what else was going on in the area at that time, it is not revelatory knowledge.

Some of the timbers from the Holme Tree Ring are, at the time of writing, on show in the British Museum's exhibition, 'The World of Stonehenge', along with other iconic Bronze Age artefacts, such as the Bush Barrow horde and the Nebra Sky Disc. This visibility is good reason for considering what, if anything, has changed over the two decades since the monument's extraction.

The spiritual gap in the north-west of the county was slowly healed by Nature and the magical work of many in the county and beyond. Whether we as a society have learned anything is another matter.

Further commentary on the Seahenge saga can be found in:

- Robert J. Wallis (2012) 'Pagans in Place, from Stonehenge to Seahenge: 'Sacred' Archaeological Monuments and Artefacts in Britain', in T.A. Heslop, Elizabeth Mellings and Margit Thøfner (eds) (2012) *Art, Faith and Place in East Anglia: From Prehistory to the Present*, Boydell, pp. 273-86.
- Charlie Watson (2005) *Seahenge: An Archaeological Conundrum*, English Heritage.
- Chris Wood (2022) 'Seahenge: Two Rings to Divide Us All?', *The Newsletter of the Network of Ley Hunters* 43 (forthcoming).

The dendrochronological evidence is presented in:

- Groves, Cathy (2002) *Dendrochronological Analysis of a Timber Circle at Holme-next-the-Sea, Norfolk*, Centre for Archaeology Report 6/2002, English Heritage.
- Tyers, Ian (2014) *Timber Circle II, Holme-Next-The-Sea, Norfolk, Dendrochronological Analysis of Oak Timbers: Scientific Dating Report*, Research Report 26-2014, English Heritage.