



‘Gods, Wights¹ and Ancestors’: The Varieties of Pagan Religious Experience at Ancient Sacred Sites

Jennifer Uzzell

Department of Theology and Religion, University of Durham

j.s.uzzell@durham.ac.uk

This article explores anomalous experiences reported by people identifying as Pagan whilst visiting places of ancient religious significance in the UK and the US. The article seeks to establish the extent to which these experiences conform to William James’ (2016, pp. 380–381) descriptors of mystical experience as ineffable, noetic, transient and passive, and suggests that while some of the experiences described do conform to the traditional categories, others describe a different sort of experience, possibly arising from a very different world view, which is neither monotheistic nor monist and as such is not concerned with concepts such as transcendence in the way that James used these terms. The article suggests that an alternative definition of ‘transcendence’ is required to accommodate these accounts. Experiences such as those described here are real and meaningful to those who have them but have, to date, been under-represented in research into religious experience. The article concludes that more research is needed into religious experiences within the context of the ‘new animism’ (Harvey, 2006).

Keywords: Paganism; animism; ancient sites; religious experience; transcendence

Introduction

This article arose out of a wider piece of research into funerary and memorial practices among contemporary British Druids. One interesting aspect of this research concerned the construction in recent years of a number of long and round barrows, similar in outward appearance to Neolithic and Bronze Age constructions, but designed as a repository for modern cremated remains. Whilst these seem to have a wide appeal for a surprisingly diverse group of people including Christians and those with no particular religious identity, they are also proving very popular with those identifying as Pagan. This led to a consideration of the role that burial mounds have played in the popular imagination in Britain over the ages, and the relationship that contemporary Pagans seek to develop with them. Much has been written on the contested ‘ownership’ of such sites and of the conflicts between Pagans and archaeologists, particularly over the treatment of the ancient dead recovered from them (e.g. Rathouse, 2013). These

¹ ‘Wight’ is a term used predominantly although not exclusively by Heathen Pagans. It comes from an Anglo Saxon term meaning a living being and for Pagans it denotes a being that has never been human and yet is not a deity. They are sometimes referred to as ‘spirits of the land’ or of place, although ‘spirit’ in itself is a problematic term for some Pagans. ‘Wight’, therefore, seems an appropriate term to use here (Blain and Wallis, 2007).

conflicts have arisen in part because some Pagans view human remains from sites such as these as being the ancestral dead that 'belong' to the Pagan communities in a way that is analogous to the claims of indigenous peoples in the Americas to the remains of their ancestors (Williams and Giles, 2016). Connection to the ancestors is of central importance to some of the Paganisms currently active in the UK, notably Druidry and Heathenry or Asatru (Matthews, 2015). In an online survey conducted as part of my research (see below) 81% of respondents claimed that the ancestors formed a regular part of their religious, ritual or magical practice, and for many this included the ancient, pre-Christian ancestors as well as the more recently deceased friends and family of the respondents. This suggests that for many Pagans living in the UK the burial places of those ancestors would be places of particular religious power and significance and that some might have experiences in such places that might be described as religious or mystical.

Methodology

This article arose out of my doctoral research into death ritual and the development of a funerary tradition and ethos among contemporary British Druids. The ethnographic information used for the article came from two sources. The first is an online survey² constructed through 'Online Surveys' (formerly Bristol Online Survey Tool) and available between 17th October 2017 and 8th May 2018. It contained 30 questions in total and was mostly qualitative in nature, allowing respondents to give as much or as little detail as they chose for each topic. It covered aspects such as belief about deity and life after death, preferred funeral practices and attitudes to 'The Ancestors'. The survey was posted to around 20 Face Book groups connected to Druidry and Paganism and was shared by a number of individuals to their own networks. I was also interviewed by The Wild Hunt, an online magazine and newsfeed for all topics related to Paganism, and the link to the survey was posted there. When this article was completed there had been 867 responses, which had risen to 1042 when the survey closed on 8th May, making it the largest data base currently in existence dealing with Pagan beliefs and attitudes towards death, funeral and death ritual and relationships with 'Ancestors'. Question 16 asked if the respondent had ever had an experience that they would describe as spiritual, religious or supernatural whilst visiting an ancient sacred site. Question 16a invited them to give a detailed account of such experiences if they so wished. 61% answered in the affirmative to question 16, although some then specified that their experience had taken place within nature rather than at a man-made site, however ancient. Several also specifically rejected the label 'supernatural' to define their experience, 'Not supernatural, because everything's in nature, but dowsing for energy lines at ancient sites is a mystical experience for me.', and, again: 'I wouldn't use the term supernatural, all experience is within nature. Paganism isn't a transcendental (sic) practice'. Many of those who had answered 'yes' to question 16 commented that they either could not, or did not wish to give further information about their experience. The information used in this article is taken, almost in its entirety, from the accounts of those who did describe what they had experienced. Quotations from respondents are given exactly as they appeared in the survey. A small amount of additional information is taken from free-form interviews with a number of

² The survey was accessible to anyone who followed the link and was available between 17/10/17 and 08/05/18 at <https://durham.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/pagan-attitudes-to-death-funerals-and-ancestors>

individuals as a part of the wider research for my thesis. These interviews were recorded during the Autumn of 2017 and quotations in this article are taken from transcriptions.

The survey was initially aimed at Druids living in the UK, as this is the main focus of my doctoral research. However, the response was far greater than I had anticipated and participants were drawn from all over the world, with a large proportion based in the United States. I initially considered removing these responses from the data set but upon reflection decided that they would provide an interesting counter-narrative; and so it proved. This gave me the opportunity to look at a far wider range of views than I had anticipated. Respondents also came from a variety of Pagan traditions. The largest single group identify as Druids, but there were also a high proportion of Wiccans, Heathens, and Pagans claiming no particular affiliation. A small number also came from reconstructionist groups such as Hellenic, Kemetic or Sumerian traditions. The number of responses I received and the wide variety of Pagan traditions from which respondents were drawn, led to a unique and unprecedented opportunity to study the ways in which those who identify as Pagan interact with the ancient human landscape.³

The American Problem – Negotiating Sacred Space

One obvious issue confronting Pagans living in the Americas, the majority of whom are of European descent, is the question of the ownership of the land in general and of sacred spaces in particular. Most Pagans living in Western Europe can claim that the barrows, henges and megaliths of the ancient past were constructed by peoples that could reasonably be regarded as ancestors (despite recent genetic evidence suggesting that only 10% of modern human ancestry can be traced to the Neolithic population). This is not the case in the US where archaeological sites, where they exist, were generally constructed by indigenous peoples who claim a more or less exclusive right to them. Furthermore, the relationship of the blood ancestors of the American Pagans to the indigenous population is problematic to say the least. This is clearly a difficult question for Pagans, whose spiritual practice is often deeply connected to ideas of landscape, 'spirits' of land and place and to ancestors. In the case of American Pagans there can be the idea that all of these things to some extent 'belong' to others and that these relationships therefore need to be carefully negotiated. One respondent explained: 'I live in the US, where the ancient sites are not really "for" me. Using them is tricky at best and exploitative at worst'. Another says: 'the ancient sites near me (Minnesota, USA) are likely to be Native American. I'm

³ Paganism is a notoriously difficult term to define in the context of modern religious or spiritual belief. It is best understood as an 'umbrella' term covering a number of religious or spiritual movements. That these movements have certain values and ideas in common is almost universally accepted. What, exactly, these common elements are is far harder to find consensus on. In Pagan Dawn magazine in December 2016, Prof. Ronald Hutton suggested that Paganism could be defined as 'A complex of religions calling on ancient images and ideas, but addressing some of the greatest needs of modernity.' For the purposes of this research I have included anyone who consciously self-identifies as Pagan (Large, 2016).

white, and would be unlikely to visit one unless directly invited, not wanting to offend any further than white people have already managed (to put it mildly!)

Not all respondents felt like this, however. For some there was no obvious issue with connecting to the land spirits or to ancient indigenous dead. One possible explanation for this is that within Druidic Paganism in particular, there is a very wide interpretation of the word 'ancestor'. Ancestors are, in short, the sum total of every influence, human and otherwise that has combined to make a particular individual what they are (Restall-Orr, 2012). Various sources (e.g. Brown, 2012) suggest three categories of ancestors with whom it is possible to interact. These include the most usual interpretation of ancestors as those from whom one is genetically descended. These are 'ancestors of blood'. There are also 'ancestors of place' and 'ancestors of tradition'. Ancestors of place include all those, human and otherwise, who have lived in the same landscape. This provides an obvious framework within which American Pagans of white European descent can interact with the indigenous ancestors provided they do so respectfully. It is interesting that this category would also include the animals that have inhabited a particular location in the deep past. Several respondents described experiences that were inspired by seeing dinosaur footprints:

Traveling through Utah with my mother I remember seeing the footprints of dinosaurs and I felt the spirit of their presence. Going to the natural history museum in my childhood in Denver and seeing fossils of beings that once lived where I live. Being in Santa Cruz at a retreat in a grove and feeling the peace that dwells there. Seeing the Pacific Ocean at any time, listening to birds sing and wondering if dinosaurs sang. Knowing that sacred sites are all around us and that all beings are sacred.

I have absolutely felt powerful energies from ancient sites or burial places. One example is a trip I made to the Oregon Caves. Inside is a well preserved Cave Bear skeleton, found just in that location. Being so close to fossilized beings, anthropological sites, or the impressions of dinosaur footprints gives me the most intense feeling of excitement and happiness. Being fully aware, and being around other people who are also, that the human existence is merely half a blink of an eye in the history of the universe is where I get excited most. Being around the fossilized remains of a massive and foreign-looking animal that lived 200 million years ago is awe inspiring, let alone gathering knowledge on rocks and other geological processes that are billions of years old.

The one which comes to mind: When I lived in Oregon, my ex-wife and I visited Fern Cave, in the Lava Beds National Monument, in Northern California. The beds are the site of the Modoc Wars, in the 19th century. Fern Cave is a sacred site to the Modoc. Access is limited, as it's a fragile ecological site. It's a partially-collapsed lava tube, into which fern seeds have been blown and taken root, where the sun can reach. The cave has petroglyphs, and a stone wall which can be played like a drum. Lovely site. I had the sense of several folk being present -- ghosts, for lack of a better term -- and that the cave did *not* want me or anyone else to pass beyond a further point into the cave. Later, I described them to my (then)wife, who's something of a scholar concerning the place. She replied that some of them were commonly 'seen,' and one or two I described were rarely seen, and considered by the native folk an indication that the cave approved of the person 'seeing' them. She also stated that the point I felt uncomfortable with passing corresponded to the point at which the native folk stated one shouldn't

pass beyond, because it was spiritually dangerous to do so, and that people who did so tended to come to harm, either in the cave or shortly afterward.

On our way out of the monument park, we were swooped by a red-tailed hawk, who then circled, flew ahead of us, and landed in the center of the road. We stopped, as it didn't move. When we left the car, it cried, flew up, swooped us again, then hovered in the air. Soon it was joined by others, forming a full dozen. They...all hovered. Forming an incredibly intricate aerial ballet of continually changing geometrical patterns. With nobody else around to see but ourselves. It was astounding and breathtaking. We were gobsmacked. We watched openmouthed. It was all hovering. Not a wing moved throughout.

Eventually, the ballet ended, and the hawks drifted off, one by one and then flew away. Only the original hawk was left. He flew off, down the road, then turned, flew back, swooped us again, crying, and flew-off. We didn't know quite what had happened, but we both knew it'd been incredibly, amazingly special, and that it'd obviously been done either for us, or we'd been invited to watch it happen, and that we'd been honored by it, even if we didn't know the precise nature of the honor bestowed. Perhaps the hawks knew. In any case, it was the experience of a lifetime. I really must go back, someday. Always meant to, but never managed it. Always thought I'd have time.

The latter account is also concerned with the human ancestral spirits of the place and with the preservation of a respectful distance from certain areas. There is a sense that 'approval' was both needed and given in order for the respondent to be present and that he needed to respect the boundaries and limits imposed.

Ancestors of tradition include those who might be supposed to be forerunners in an intellectual, or institutional sense. Those who are not related by blood but who have, nonetheless, been instrumental in making a person what they are. For Druids, they might include figures such as Iolo Morganwg or Ross Nicholls while for Wiccans Gerald Gardner is an obvious example. Since many Pagans consider indigenous American religious traditions to be similar in kind and intent to modern Paganism, the indigenous dead may well be regarded as ancestors of tradition and, as such, a legitimate source of inspiration and guidance. There is, as yet, insufficient information regarding how this relationship is viewed by indigenous peoples.⁴

There is then, for some, the feeling that indigenous sites are a legitimate locus of mystical experience for white European Pagans, although respect and caution are required and access is neither automatic nor guaranteed.

Preparing for a wedding here in Mexico at a pyramid. I asked the nature spirits and ancestors of those lands to give me permission to open a gate there...I actually received the answer in a strong feeling and in the Mayan language.

In Australia, our sacred places are not places with human structures. They are song-lines and natural forms. I have heard a tree speak to me in traditional language. It took me a while to get a translation. I also became very ill when I camped at a place where 3 rivers met. I learned that places of power are not always good places to sleep.

When I was in grade school we went to a Native American Museum. Part of the museum was an out door burial mound. With the curator, we climbed the mound. Once

⁴ Having said this, Phillip Shallcrass (Greywolf), head of the British Druid Order, is a regular visitor to a tribal drumming circle where he is regarded as a full member.

at the top I felt a great weight pressing down on me, I could smell fresh turned soil, and could hear drumming. This went on for a few minutes before I passed out. That has stayed with me even today.

Most recently, at a local hilltop site on a full moon night, as my partner and I climbed towards the top of the hill, which is covered with massive granite boulders, we were both assailed by fear - I mean absolute terror. Neither of us are timid people and we're both given to adventuring, but this was like a veritable hurricane of fear. I was even scared of my partner. It's not the first time either of us have experienced that sort of testing, or gatekeeping, and, while really unpleasant, it feels different from the times when sites are just telling you to Keep Out, so we paused to catch our breath, and showed ourselves to the spirits of the place. We were buffeted some more and then the most incredibly profound feeling of welcome enveloped us both. We made the rest of the climb as if pulled gently to the top, and I flopped onto one of the giant stones that held me like a mother.

I later found out that this was a sacred ritual site for the local indigenous Aboriginal people, and that another (druid) friend had had a very similar experience at the same place.

I have meditated at Native American mounds often before.

I have had contact by spirits and deities at several sites. On one occasion I was asked to leave by a spirit as I had planned to stay at the site overnight but they told me it wasn't appropriate for me to do so.

For other respondents there was no clear connection to ancient human sites and the mystical connection was, instead, to be found within nature itself. One respondent explained, 'I feel a lot more connected with the woods, the ocean, the mountain than I would ever feel in a human structure, no matter how ancient or important it might be'. This was a common theme:

I live in a land that has only been settled by Europeans in the past 200 years. California. Ancient sites are composed of Earthquake Faults and Volcanoes. Even the land is new in Geological terms to the rest of the North American Plate. But I do find giant Redwoods impressive.

All sites are ancient, the world itself is far older than any man made monument. Touching the soil, the sea, rocks and plants is a mystical experience – it's the culmination of everything nature has achieved to date. Concentrate on that and there is a peace and certainty of the power of the world and the carbon cycle. Nature and its science embracing the continuum.

The problem with your statement is that it assumes that everyone has access TO ancient sites. In the US, we do not have that many. However, I have had plenty of mystical or spiritual experiences at ancient natural stone features, waterways, shores that have been there for millennia.

This preoccupation with the natural world is hardly surprising since the sacredness and even divinity of the natural world is one of the central ideas in most forms of

Paganism.⁵ It is interesting to note that William James also found that for many, being in nature was once of the most direct ways in which to experience the divine or to bring about a mystical experience. Almost invariably, this experience was monist or pantheist in nature, with the individual sense of self dissolving into a greater 'Self' where no divisions are to be perceived (James, 2016, pp. 394, 397). While this dimension was not absent from the Pagan responses it was, interestingly, not the dominant narrative. I will return to this idea below.

Some respondents acknowledged the indigenous presence and sense of past indirectly, as something that was there but remained 'other' and not directly related to the experience itself.

I don't know if it counts as an "ancient site", as it's not delineated as such, but the woods I walked through as a young adult on the way to college had an area with an intense feeling of spirit. It was as though there had been a Native American village or seasonal camp there a long time in the past, before the land was enveloped by the suburbs and turned into the park. If I sat there and meditated, I never felt like I was alone.

One account is particularly interesting in view of the ongoing controversies regarding the treatment of the indigenous dead in the context of archaeology:

Not really at an ancient site, but dealing with the remains of one. I worked at an archaeology laboratory that had the remains of hundreds of Native Americans, as well as burial goods. These were related to the Etowah Mounds. I would often hear conversations that I couldn't make out, even though I was the only one there. I would see shadows moving down the storage halls, and there was one time where it sounded like someone was thrown against the metal racks. My boss and I ran back to see what had happened and nothing was amiss. Aside from this, I have had experiences at more modern sites.

It seems then that for modern Pagans of European descent living in the Americas, a number of mechanisms are developing whereby 'sacred space' can be negotiated in a contested and controversial environment. For some, the indigenous dead are ancestors of place and tradition and can legitimately be approached with respect. For others, this remains too problematic in the face of the genocide perpetrated by their own blood ancestors and the solution is to seek encounters with the numinous in nature.⁶ I did not encounter in the survey responses any discussion of the supposed relationship between the land itself or land spirits and the descendants of its conquerors. This would be a fruitful area for further research.

William James and the Varieties of Pagan Experience

In his chapter on Mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), William James proposes four characteristics of genuinely mystical experience: Ineffability, or the inability to satisfactorily describe the experience; a noetic quality, in which the

⁵ The website of the Pagan Federation defines Paganism as 'a polytheistic or pantheistic nature-worshipping religion'.

⁶ Although this was by no means the only reason giving for finding connection primarily within nature. For many respondents in the UK as well as the US the natural world was their main source of religious experience.

recipient learns something of which he or she was previously ignorant; transiency of the experience, which rarely lasts more than an hour; and passivity, in which the recipient feels they are 'grasped and held by a superior power' (James, 2016, p. 381). In this section I will examine the extent to which the experiences reported by Pagans conform to, or differ from these characteristics. I shall leave the most significant category, that of noetic quality, until last as the other three can be covered more easily and with less discussion.

Ineffability

This characteristic of religious experiences as they have traditionally been defined and studied was widely represented in my findings. Many respondents expressed difficulty articulating or explaining their experiences and were aware of this as an issue:

I'm sorry I don't know how to describe these experiences.

Hard to put into words. Just felt I HAD to sit and light candles and light incense and drum. It felt so natural and right

Had an out of body experience in Rome. Can't explain it well other than to say it felt like my soul recognized it.

I'm not really sure how to explain this.

Words do not describe the experience. If you've had one, then you know.

Like said before, in some sense, sometimes I can feel a presence of 'something old' when I'm at a burial mound/other ancient sites. But nothing supernatural. More the presence and energy of the history of the site. I know I'm kinda' vague at this, but it's hard to explain this feeling. It's a very subjective experience.

Beyond being unable to articulate their experiences, a significant minority of respondents were unwilling to do so, as the experience was 'private', 'personal', 'only for myself and those close to me' or 'intimate'. One respondent commented 'Now come on, you know we can't talk about these things, it would be disrespectful!' That many would be unwilling to talk about their experiences was, perhaps, unsurprising; what was striking, however, was that so many felt a need to say that they were unwilling to talk about it. In the survey, question 16 asked if they had had an experience that they would describe as supernatural or mystical. 16a asked them to elaborate further if they wished to. There was no need to write anything at all in this box and yet around 20 respondents wrote specifically that they did not wish to respond. This was not the case with any other question. This suggests that the experiences were not only difficult to express but also felt to be intensely personal and intended specifically for them to the extent that it would be 'wrong' or 'disrespectful' to share them with a third party.

Another interesting feature of several of the responses was the anxiety that they would be disbelieved. One respondent who declined to comment did so because 'it would seem crazy to all but another polytheist'. Others were keen to make clear in their reports that they had not been drinking or taking mind altering substances.

I get an instant vibe or connection to a more primitive existence - A feeling of harmony and calm - Life falls into perspective more easily. I have, on occasion, seen colors and energy represented in the sky. - (No drugs involved.)

This concern that the account will not be believed and that the recipient will be thought to have been mad or drunk if they talk about what has happened to them is a common feature of many reported experiences such as Near Death Experiences.

It is worth noting, however, that while James includes ineffability in his list of characteristics, he goes on to include in his chapter several extremely detailed and eloquent accounts of religious experiences. Clearly, then, ineffability is not a universal feature of mystical experience even if there is an acknowledgement that words cannot do full justice to it. This is borne out by my research, which also included a number of very detailed accounts of experiences, which respondents were very happy to be able to explain.

Transience and passivity

James regards these qualities as secondary and 'less sharply marked' (James, 2016, p. 381). They are less central to the quality of the experience and we can pass over them here relatively swiftly.

Transience is a fairly inherent quality of an experience at an ancient sacred site since visits to such places are of limited duration. A number of respondents took part in the ancient practice of incubation, sleeping at or in an ancient monument, most usually West Kennett long barrow in Wiltshire. The length of visit at these times was longer but the duration of any particular experience was still relatively short.

I sometimes sleep in chambered cairns and similar sites and have had some interesting visitations - not being certain if I was awake or asleep does not invalidate the experience. Also I have twice been led into a site I was looking for by a hare, once at night and once in fog. Can't prove any of it of course.

A deep sense of communion with my ancestors when I slept in W. Kennett Long Barrow.

Passivity is rather more difficult to assess. James acknowledges that people may do things to 'invite' the experience 'as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe' (2016, p. 381); and yet the experience itself, when it comes, is beyond the will of the subject. There is insufficient information in the survey accounts to make any firm judgement on this. Certainly, many go to ancient sites actively seeking an experience. Several respondents reported that their experiences took place while they were meditating or drumming. One interview subject explained that when visiting a site, she opens herself to whatever is there, inviting the wights of a particular site to communicate with her. This is a potentially dangerous activity as it involves opening oneself up and making

oneself vulnerable. In this sense, the experience is sought. Few of my respondents reported that during the experience itself the individual will was lost, but then again few mentioned the issue at all. One account was clear that the experience was unsought and unexpected, but this was an exception. 'I met the Morrigan at a holy well. It surprised me because I wasn't reaching out to her, and she wasn't like I'd expected either. I actually thought she was of this world to begin with'.

Noetic Quality

Perhaps the most significant defining factor of a mystical experience, according to James is its noetic quality. It imparts knowledge to the receiver. This is, however, not merely an intellectual or rational knowledge; rather it is:

Insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time. (2016, pp. 382–383)

Later in the same chapter, James elaborates on what he regards as the true knowledge that is imparted by such experiences. They all lead, he suggests, to a realisation of the oneness of the cosmos. They lead, in short to a monist worldview in which there is only one proper subject. During a mystical experience, it is possible to experience the world as it truly is, devoid of duality or individuation. This knowledge, which he compares with the Upanishadic concept of 'That thou art' is the true knowledge that is conveyed by an experience that can genuinely be described as religious or mystical.

Looking back at my own experiences, they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles were melted into unity....it is a monistic insight in which the *other* in its various forms appears absorbed into the One (2016, pp. 388–389).

This feeling was not absent among the Pagan respondents, one describes a feeling of 'being held', and 'being connected to something bigger'; while another experienced being 'mentally/spiritually spun out into the oneness of everything' while touching the central standing stone in Bryn Celli Dhu burial chamber in Anglesey Others describe 'just a feeling of being part of everything', or 'Feeling in contact with the Earth, universal love, empowered'. One account in particular is reminiscent of James' expectations of a mystical experience:

I was in Arizona with a soulmate/twin flame and we had multiple experiences while in each other's presence -- once in Phoenix and once in Sedona. The experience we had together in Phoenix was one of the worlds melding, the stars spinning, and time swirling out of the illusion of past/present into all that has ever been.

However, this feeling of 'oneness' was not the dominant narrative. Far more common was the experience of being in communication with a particular being or beings who were, like the recipient, both individual and limited. Most usually these beings fall into one of four categories. These may be the ancestral dead who may be, or have been

buried there. For Phillip Shallcrass, head of the BDO⁷ the presence of the ancient dead at a particular site for millennia imbues the rocks and land itself with the essence of those people even if any physical remains have now been removed so that it is still possible to connect with any ancestors that had been there. There were many such accounts. Generally, though, the experience consisted primarily of feeling the presence of ancestors rather than receiving any particular knowledge from them. A common theme is feeling the weight of ancestors and a powerful feeling of deep time.

At Fosbury hillfort. Being up there, suddenly having a feeling of being watched & that someone was standing with me. Being completely alone and hearing children playing, hearing whispering.

Sticking to the theme of ancestors as the dead, relatively few. One outstanding one occurred at Heysham. I'd never been there and a friend took me to the remains of an old Celtic Christian church. St Patrick's, I think. It has graves carved into the rock. I experienced the feeling of many spirits of the dead, accompanied by 'seeing' many different faces, in my mind's eye. I followed a trail that was blocked by a wall. A tree had filled the gateway so it was impassable. I gave up and returned to my friend, who was waiting. she took me back to the main route down the church in use - St Peter's. She meant to show me an ancient Heathen artefact in the church, but I felt a compulsion to enter some scrubland several yards away. I followed a path through the woods... to the same gateway, from the other side. I returned to my friend but experienced another compulsion to visit a large grave marker. It was far larger than normal and I don't recall reading anything on it. I just felt it was right to stand there, for a while. My friend told me later it was the mass grave of some Vikings.

Had a strong feeling of the Ancestors being with me, when initiated at Avebury

I have seen visions of ancient landscape in my mind's eye, albeit informed by a knowledge of ancient landscapes. I have felt the power coursing through my body at stone circles energising my spirit and soul and making me almost feel overwhelmed. I feel a glow inside and a buzz in my solar plexus. I have felt the weight of millennia of ancestors at barrows and the cold dark claustrophobia of an ancient tomb.

West Kennet Long Barrow last year. I went to walk in and felt 'pushed back out', I had forgotten to pay my respects and ask for permission to enter. When I did, I walked in easily.

Generally, encounters are with a generalised and homogenised group identified only as 'the ancestors'. This is hardly surprising as nothing is or can be known of the individuals interred in ancient burial mounds. Occasionally though, there is an encounter with an individual ancestor. One interview subject recounted several occasions on which he had encountered ancestral dead at ancient sites. On one occasion during a Druidic ritual at Stonehenge, an invitation had been extended to the ancestors to take part (as is customary). The leader of the ritual (who was the subject of my interview) was surprised to find himself in the company of an equally perplexed

⁷ British Druid Order

Victorian cycle club. On another occasion, he encountered an Anglo Saxon who was trapped within the stones at Avebury and in need of help to move on.

A different interview subject explained that she had only very rarely encountered ancestral beings at ancient sites but that on one occasion she had come across one who she felt had volunteered to stay there as a guardian and gatekeeper. She suspected that his (or her) remains were within the stone circle. She had a strong impression that she was required to walk across the circle from one part to another, where there was a recumbent stone, and that this was an enactment of the soul's journey into the underworld and back. Her impression was that this initiatory journey was, and had always been the purpose of the site; she has never had that sort of impression at any other site.

Very occasionally there is a relationship developed between the visitor and the ancestors that may have benefits for both parties:

As a founding member of the Rollright Stones Appeal group and then a founding Trustee/ de facto site manager for many years these are too numerous to relate. They include being led by a spirit guide who I believe had her mortal remains discovered a couple of years ago, time slips, hearing sounds with no source and receiving warnings. Finally being gifted my heart's desire in the form of a baby girl born a year after dedicating myself to the place - after years of trying without success

Another group of beings that Pagans regularly encounter at sacred sites are the 'wights' or land spirits. These are generally understood by Pagans to be beings that have never been human and yet are not deities; they are usually limited to a small geographical area and are common in and around barrows and stone circles. An interview subject explained that in her opinion most people are 'tuned in to' either ancestors or wights, but rarely both. She herself almost always encountered land wights. These were encountered by opening up her mind on approaching a site and 'feeling' what the wights wanted her to do. At times, she was refused permission to enter. At other times, she was told to approach from a particular direction or to make a particular offering. The wights presented with 'personalities' as varied as humans. Some were friendly and welcoming, others hostile. At one site where an artificial concrete roof had recently been placed on a burial mound she described the wight she encountered as 'mad', screaming over and over inside her head. At other sites, particularly those frequented by large numbers of tourists, the wights may be sleeping or inaccessible.

Encounters with deities were far less commonly reported by respondents than those with ancestors or land spirits. Pagans have very varied attitudes towards the divine but a number of respondents were polytheistic and described meetings with named deities at ancient sites. Those named included the Morrigan, Ceridwen, and Thunderbird. Others are not named, but are described in terms that suggest a deity rather than a more localised land spirit. One describes meeting 'the Bone Mother', who he describes as a chthonic deity at West Kennet. Two describe a goddess like figure associated with the Chalice Well at Glastonbury. Often these encounters are accompanied by unusual animal behaviour, or are experienced in animal form.

I'm going to preface this with the fact that one of my Prime Divine is The Morrigan. I was at Stonehenge with some friends. I stepped away from them towards the stones to show respect to the obelisks. I knelt down on one knee to be able to press my fingers

to the earth. I saw a crow land on the stone nearest to me as I invoked the Morrigan's name in honor and thanks. As I bowed closed my eyes and bowed my head to thank her for the guidance she has given me, it cawed, but I continued my mini-ritual. As I finished, I looked up and the bird was gone. No sound of wings, nor any other caw. And the part that was the most strange was that my friend and her kids never saw a crow to begin with.

I met "The Lady of Mists & Sheep" on Cadair Idris. I have experienced the presence of the Genius Loci of Primrose Hill who is best described as a large "Talbot" [a red-eared hunting dog somewhat akin to an Irish Wolfhound & about the size of the largest Great Dane you could imagine]

Finally, the encounter may be with an element of the landscape itself, unmediated through a 'being' of any sort. Trees and stones may be encountered as sentient beings with which it is possible to communicate.

I have met two very ancient trees with whom I felt connected for a few precious seconds. I felt they were aware of my presence, and I was aware of theirs. I assume I was connecting with their essence of the divine.

I visited a lone standing stone in the Midlands. I meditated with her and got the impression of how much she misses her "sisters"- the other stones that used to stand with her but have since gone. I also saw where they originally were, but I haven't found any sources to verify that what I saw was accurate.

If I can touch the stones at an ancient site, I usually get either a static type feeling, pins and needles sensation or a repellent 'don't touch' sense. Also at some sites I cannot shake off the feeling I'm being watched or there is an unseen crowd near me

Occasionally there is an encounter where it is uncertain if the contact has been with ancestors or some other kind of being. One particularly interesting account involved an encounter at Weyland's Smithy that was clearly quite disturbing. The nature of the beings with which the respondent's husband met remains elusive but clearly it was a powerful experience.

My husband (and Magical partner) and I went to Wayland's Smithy, a place I always wanted to go to, but had never managed. He was fine with this and was wearing his usual pale jumper and jeans. When we got there, he hung back, outside the perimeter wall and I went ahead. No problem - in I went, looked around, felt fine, said Hi to those who had been part of its building and use, but he didn't follow. I went out, bright sunlight through the trees, and he was shaking his head. What's up? I can't go in there, or rather, I don't want to go in there, but I'll go. You don't have to. Ah, but I do, and I don't feel good about it. I'll come with you. No, it's fine, and he walked forward to the 'gate', ducked and suddenly turned completely green and disappeared inside. I hurried up to the gate and looked inside. There were people (definitely not in modern clothes) shadows, and then he came back from the far end looking somewhat dazed, but back in his 'modern' form and his light jumper and jeans. What happened I asked. Lots of people, very old, very odd. I'm really glad to be out of there. I didn't tell him about his change in colour until we were talking about it later. He said I felt surrounded by and swallowed by vegetation. And no, we hadn't been drinking (we were driving) and don't use 'interesting substances'. The walk back to the car along the Ridgeway was bright and we both felt that we had dropped a weight off that we hadn't known we were carrying.

In all cases described here the 'point' of the experience was the meeting of a different kind of being rather than a feeling of monistic wholeness in which the individual self is

subsumed. Clearly these were very significant experiences to those who received them, but the point was the meeting itself rather than any particular knowledge.

On occasions, though, some specific knowledge is communicated through the experience, this tends not to be the sort of personal gnosis described by James, as an insight into a different timeline, or a knowledge of other, presumably ancient languages. Many respondents described a strong feeling of having been in that place before, possibly in a past life, and of having a knowledge of the layout and use of the site in antiquity. One claims to have seen how Stonehenge was built, although he was not willing to explain. Another describes how her two year old son, whilst being driven past Stonehenge, exclaimed ‘I helped to build that!’. A common feature was that of being able to understand ancient languages that they heard spoken, although none of the respondents said whether or not they continued to be able to speak or understand that language after the experience had ended.

For a few respondents, the sites can be a source of inspiration in which they are given a ‘vision’ of a completed piece of music, poem or novel. This is not described in terms of being inspired by a contemplation of the landscape or its history, but of being given, as if from an outside source, a complete and entire artistic creation.

At the Roman-era ruins of a house in Slovenia, I was gifted with a complete novel: characters, story, and finish. It has since been published. I have had more mystical experiences in natural settings such as the wild Northern California coast and Badlands of South Dakota.

When I pass an ancient site, I have frequently had the experience of being a person in a bygone age and have experienced what it is actually like to live in that era. My novel ‘Where Rowans Intertwine’ is really a feeling for the Druid site on which I lived for many years and my response to it. I believe Ceridwen channelled information to me as she wanted to rebalance the Roman ‘spin’ about the Druids. She would often take over writing the novel as I worked.

How far then, can the Pagan experiences reported in this research be described as ‘noetic’. Often, but not always, information is gained through the encounter (although this may be of a kind that is unverifiable. Clearly inspiration is commonly gained, but rarely the sort of life-changing gnosis required by James. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine James’ views on religious experience and conversion. He does, however, refer to the authority of mystical experiences and their ongoing significance in the life of the receiver. A small number of accounts reveal that the impression made was so great that it resulted, directly or indirectly, in a change in direction which ultimately led the respondent to Paganism.

On 4 August 1994, shortly after visiting the Chalice Well in Glastonbury, England, I met Mother Earth and Father Sky at the base of Glastonbury Tor, while on an archaeological tour of the British Isles. Seemingly, simultaneously from somewhere deep underground, and also from somewhere far above, I heard two distinct voices, one male and one female, saying:

“Just because mankind has not presented you with an image of deity that you can believe in, does not mean that We do not exist.”

As a lifelong atheist, I was very disturbed by the encounter, and at first attributed it to a graduate-school-stress-induced nervous breakdown. But, just in case I was wrong, I

read, prayed, studied, and meditated every day for a year, seeking guidance on what to do about it. Whom to worship? What church or group to join?

The insight that returned to me, again and again, was that I was not to look to the words or workings of men for guidance, but to the workings of deity. I therefore focus my devotions and attention on Nature, and on the source of those two voices, which I came to call Mother Earth and Father Sky.

As a mystic, my calling is now to forge the deepest, most direct connection with Deity that I am able to forge. That process requires independent study, direct observation, prayer and meditation, and a process of opening myself up to the direction and instruction of Deity.

It was a trip to Avebury that took me back, enraptured me, and why I joined OBOD⁸.

I went to Avebury in 1991 two months after my youngest child was born. I was living in England at the time. I had been reading about Druidry during the year that I was living there. I remember it was a very rainy day in May. I was living in Luton in Bedfordshire, but we took a trip to Stonehenge. I was kind of disappointed at it being all roped off. But in the gift shop I came across about different sacred sites in Wiltshire and asked my then husband if we could go to Avebury. It had stopped raining when we got to the parking lot, but the kids were asleep so I went by myself down the path into the village where the stones were. It was late afternoon and the sun just came out, and the way it was shining through the wetness made the stones and the grass glow with a golden light. As I walked amid the stones and touched them, I had a very unique spiritual awakening. Then energy was so intense and different than anything I had experienced before. And even though I didn't become a member of OBOD back then, that experience stayed with me and eventually led me to make that step into Druidry.

The evidence, then, is mixed. While some of these experiences might satisfy James' primary criteria for a 'mystical experience' the majority would not. This does not, however, make them unworthy of study as they can still give us valuable insights not only into the Pagan experience, but on the wider and deeper varieties of human religious experience.

Conclusion

William James gives a relatively narrow definition of what he regards as 'genuine' religious experience, relegating those experiences that do not conform as being of less value. Later in the chapter he asserts of experiences that he regards as genuinely mystical:

It is possible to give the outcome of the majority of them in terms that point in definite philosophical directions. One of these directions is optimism, and the other is monism...we feel them as reconciling unifying states. They appeal to the yes-function more than to the no-function in us. In them the unlimited absorbs the limits and peacefully closes the account. Their very denial of every adjective you may propose is applicable to the ultimate truth – He, the Self, the Atman, is to be described by No! No! (2016, p. 416).

On this model, much of the later research into religious experience has been based. Viewed in these terms, the majority of the Pagan experience would be rejected as not

⁸ Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids

pure mystical or religious experience but as something entirely inferior and not worthy of further study. However, James' categories are, by his own admission, based on a subjective view of the nature of absolute reality and therefore of what the experience of it must involve. In order to reach his conclusions, it is necessary for him to discount much of the reported account of what humans believe to have been their experiences of the mystical or the 'other'. This is something that he himself acknowledges.

In characterising mystic states as pantheistic, optimistic etc., I am afraid I oversimplified the truth. I did so for expository reasons, and to keep the closer to the classic mystical tradition. The classic religious mysticism, it must now be confessed, is only a 'privileged case'. It is an *extract*, kept true and to type by the selection of the fittest specimens...It is carved out from a much larger mass; and if we take the larger mass as seriously as religious mysticism has historically taken itself, we find that the supposed unanimity largely disappears (2016, pp. 424–425).

In other words, James is aware that his definition excludes a significant proportion of the human experience. In his opinion, 'true' religion is monist and so 'true religious experience' must conform to this model. Monism, or even monotheism is not, and has never been, the only religious model practised by humanity. For many Pagans (although by no means all, as evidenced by the variety of experiences attested here), the world is not to be understood in terms of a single reality, or even a single, all encompassing divinity. Many of my respondents describe themselves as animist. This does not necessarily imply Tylor's definition of animism as the belief that inanimate objects have 'souls' (Tylor, 2012) so much as what Harvey has described as the 'new animism'.⁹ Religion in this sense is best understood as people building negotiated relationships with the other 'persons' in their networks; familial, local, national and even global. Some of these persons are human, some are plants or animals, and others are different kinds of beings altogether including ancestors encountered in a number of ways. The purpose of religion is to negotiate a place within a world that is both wider and deeper than human persons (Harvey, 2006). This research has examined some of the ways in which Pagans, including animists, relate to other than persons through ancient sacred sites. It reveals a coherent pattern totally in tune with a world view that is neither monist nor monotheistic, and yet is entirely comparable to the lived experience of much of the world's population. James asserts that genuine mystical experiences are transcendent in that they point to an understanding of the universe that is essentially monist. Ezzy (2014, 170) proposes a different definition of the religious experience of transcendence, 'This is a form of transcendence, although not typically in the sense of contact with something that is in a higher realm. Rather, it is a form of self-transcendence in the sense of an understanding and experience of the self in a relationship with others, nature, spirit, life or deity that transcends the individual.' This is very much the way in which my respondents experienced the sites that they visited. Rather than a feeling that everything was one, there was a feeling that everything was in community and that this contributed to a sense of belonging, wellbeing and self-worth. It is my contention that the wide range of 'religious experiences' that do not conform to James' highly selective definition remain largely understudied and I see this as a fruitful area for further research.

⁹ New, not in the sense that it implies a change in belief; rather a different and more accurate way of understanding the way in which indigenous animistic peoples have always related to their world.

I will leave the final words to one of my respondents:

At ancient sites, I've had experiences of a greater connection to divinity, a greater sense of the numinous, a stronger connection to the land spirits. These have been incredibly meaningful but not at all, as I see it, supernatural. I feel this is because ancient sites make it easier and quicker to connect to a sense of divinity (the cliché 'the veil is thinner') rather than they being inherently more divine. They prime the mind to being open to numinous experiences. I believe you could achieve the same experience in your living room, it just requires a lot more mental energy and effort!

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