

## Introduction to the Special Issue of *The Pomegranate* on Pagans and Museums

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This special issue of *The Pomegranate* on Pagans and museums was inspired by the role that museums, archaeological sites, and archives have played in the construction and practice of contemporary Paganisms. Articles in this issue investigate how and why contemporary Pagans engage with museums, preserved historical and archaeological sites, and texts today.

Museums and contemporary Paganism are inextricably linked. Gerald Gardner, founder of modern Pagan witchcraft, first publicized Wicca in 1951 at Cecil Williamson's Folklore Centre of Superstition and Witchcraft at Castletown (later The Museum of Magic and Witchcraft) on the Isle of Man. Some of his correspondence suggests that the first formal Wiccan coven might have been created partially to provide provenance for the museum's exhibits. Sold to Gardner in 1954, the museum housed his collections and was the base from which he promoted modern witchcraft and published *Witchcraft Today*.

Inherited by his high priestess, Monique Wilson, after his death in 1964, the museum continued for almost a decade before Wilson sold the 10,000-piece collection to Ripley's Believe it or Not Ltd in 1973. Tamarra and Richard James of the Wiccan Church of Canada purchased much of Gardner's collection from Ripley's in 1987. Cecil Williamson, meanwhile, had attempted to establish a new witchcraft museum on the UK mainland at various locations, eventually settling at Boscastle in Cornwall in 1960. Williamson's Museum of Witchcraft was sold to Graham King in 1996; and has been under the direction of Simon Costin as The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic since 2013.

The museum is the focus of Helen Cornish's article, "Sensing Materiality in the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic," where she explores instances in which contemporary magical practitioners form emotional and sensory relationships with objects in the collection. Unlike many other museums, the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic does not adhere to the secularity model whereby religious or magical objects become devoid of spiritual power once within the confines of a museum; rather, it accepts that the objects it displays may possess animacy and be part of a wider inspirited world. Consequently, the personal magical ontology of Pagan practitioners visiting the museum, their "devotional baggage" that they bring to the museum, is not perceived as problematic or incongruous within the museum setting.<sup>1</sup>

A number of other small museums today focus on contemporary and historical witchcraft and magic: The Buckland Museum of Witchcraft and Magick in Cleveland, Ohio was founded by Raymond Buckland, one of the first Gardnerian Wiccans in America. Others include the Witch History Museum in Salem, Massachusetts; The Hexenmuseum Schweiz in Gränichen, Switzerland; Strandagaldur, The Museum of Icelandic Sorcery and Witchcraft; the Museo de las Brujas in Zugarramurdi, Spain; and HEX! Museum of Witch Hunt in Ribe, Denmark.

Temporary exhibitions of objects belonging to the "mother of modern witchcraft," Doreen Valiente, were held in Brighton, UK, in 2016; the Academy of Arcana in Santa Cruz, California, ran for two years between 2015-2017; and objects loaned from The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic to The Last Tuesday Society & The Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities in London were displayed in 2018. There are also museums dedicated to stage magic such as the American Museum of Magic in Michigan, the International Museum and Library of the Conjuring Arts in Las Vegas, The Magic Circle Museum in London, and the Musée de la Magie in Paris.

Exhibitions of objects pertaining to Paganism, witchcraft and magic also feature in large "universal" museums, galleries and libraries. Occult walking tours of London include the British Museum, while the "Witches and Wicked Bodies" exhibition was

1. Steph Berns, "Devotional Baggage," in *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Gretchen Buggeln, Crispin Payne and S. Brent Plate (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 83-9, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474255554.ch-009>.

held by the National Galleries of Scotland in association with the British Museum between 2013–2015. The British Library presented the exhibition “Harry Potter: A History of Magic” in 2017, which was followed by “Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft” at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford in 2018. In 2019 “Second Sight: Witchcraft, Ritual, Power” was held at the University of Queensland Art Museum in Australia; and “Waking the Witch” at the Bonington Gallery at the University of Nottingham. Most recently (2019–2020), the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery held “Do You Believe in Magic?”

Beyond Wicca, museums have played important parts in other magical and Pagan revivals. The late nineteenth and early twentieth-century members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn sought to commune with the collections of large public museums such as the British Museum and the Louvre.<sup>2</sup> Magical trailblazers Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, Moina Mathers, Florence Farr, and Aleister Crowley responded to ancient Egyptian objects in secular museums through their personal religious lenses. Today, ancient religious objects and images continue to be the focus of quiet reverence by contemporary Pagans in museums, although in early 2020 the Witches of New York conducted a vocal “pop up” ritual to the goddess Hecate at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>3</sup>

Olivia Ciacia’s article, “Seeking Sekhmet: Goddess devotees engaging with statues of Sekhmet in museums,” examines the approaches of contemporary Goddess worshippers to ancient Egyptian stone statues of the goddess Sekhmet in large public museums, and the way in which they function as sources of historical knowledge as well as manifestations of the sacred and facilitators of numinous experiences. As with the objects in the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, contemporary Pagans see these images as

2. Caroline Tully, “Celtic Egyptians: Isis Priests of the Lineage of Scotia,” in *Ancient Egypt in the Modern Imagination*, ed. Eleanor Dobson and Nichola Tonks (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 145–160, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781788319164.ch-009>; “Egyptosophy in the British Museum: Florence Farr, the Egyptian Adept and the Ka,” in *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875–1947*, ed. Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford (London: Routledge, 2018), 131–145, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351168328-8>; “Walk Like an Egyptian: Egypt as Authority in Aleister Crowley’s Reception of *The Book of the Law*,” *The Pomegranate: International Journal of Pagan Studies* 12, no.1 (2010): 20–47, <https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.v12i1.20>.

3. *Hecate Ritual at The Met, with the Temple of Hecate Inc.* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KquXL\\_-eoAQ&ab\\_channel=WitchesofNewYork](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KquXL_-eoAQ&ab_channel=WitchesofNewYork).

living and effectual rather than simply as inert art or archaeological objects. Archaeologist Denis Byrne suggests that museums should make an effort to recognise religious museum visitors' perception of animacy in religious objects.<sup>4</sup> Ciacia argues that rather than perceiving Goddess worshippers as potential hindrances to exhibition projects, museums should incorporate them into their community engagement activities and consider seeing them as a(nother) special interest group that could provide benefit for the museum.

The fact is, however, that unlike more established, well-known religions or First Peoples' forms of spirituality, contemporary Pagans are frequently not taken seriously by museums: a religious relationship with ancient objects (and people) separated from contemporary Pagan practitioners sometimes by thousands of years is often not accepted as "authentic," and it may appear contrived or made up.<sup>5</sup> British Druids have been active participants in the controversy over the storage and repatriation of human remains held in museums and they have had some success in bridging the secular-religious divide with these institutions.<sup>6</sup> In her article "A Singular Empathy: An Animistic Understanding within a Dualist Culture," Emma Restall Orr explains the types of beliefs and attitudes that Pagans might bring to a museum, in this case from a Druidic animist perspective, specifically in regard to relating to ancient peoples whose bodies are held in museum collections. In contrast, archaeologist William Rathouse in his article "Pagans and Museums: Approaching the Ancestors" critically examines how Pagan interest in contesting museum collections of human remains arose and assesses the claims and effectiveness of their various campaigns.

4. Denis Byrne, "Museums, Religious Objects, and the Flourishing Realm of the Supernatural in Modern Asia," in *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Gretchen Buggeln, Crispin Payne and S. Brent Plate, 71–79. London: Bloomsbury, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474255554.ch-008>. Also see also Chiara Zuanni, "Archaeological Displays: Ancient Objects, Current Beliefs," in *Religion in Museums*, 63–70; Amanda Millay Hughes, "Radical Hospitality: Approaching Religious Understanding in Art Museums," in *Religion in Museums*, 163–172, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474255554.ch-007>.

5. Elizabeth Burns Coleman, "Contesting Religious Claims over Archaeological Sites," in *Appropriating the Past: Philosophical Perspectives on the Practice of Archaeology*, eds. Geoffrey Scarre and Robin Coningham (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 156–75, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139026932.011>.

6. See the *Honouring the Ancient Dead* website at: [honour.org.uk](http://honour.org.uk) and also Emma Restall Orr, "Consultation on the Request for Reburial of Human Remains, Avebury, Wiltshire February 2009," *Museum Archaeologists News* 46 (Spring 2009): 1–2.

Museums are often attached to outdoor archaeological sites where Pagans perform rituals. When ancient cult or funerary sites now classified as archaeological exhibits are perceived by contemporary Pagans as still functional, sacred, animate and therefore useable, where does the museum end and the temple or sacred site begin?<sup>7</sup> In some cases these public Pagan expressions of belief at outdoor archaeological sites are inextricably linked with contested ideas about national and religious identity. Fredrik Gregorius' article, "Atlantis of The North: The Contested Reception of Old Uppsala, Between Nationalism, Religious Identity, and Secular History" explains the religious activities of Heathens at this Swedish archaeological site, which consists of three large burial mounds, and the relationship between museological, Pagan, and popular ideas of the Vikings in the envisioning of Swedish history and Heathen religious legitimacy.

Eglė Aleknaitė's article, "Who Owns the Heart of Vilnius? Pagans, Catholics and Contested National Religious Heritage," explores a case of contested heritage whereby contemporary Lithuanian Pagans (Romuva) object to the public presentation of the site of the Vilnius Cathedral as wholly Christian when there are pre-Christian structures beneath the building. She shows how by framing the conflict as an opposition between oppressive Christianity and marginalised Pagans, Romuva can promote itself as a legitimate religion.

Oksana Smorzhevskaja's article, "The Sacredness of Museum Spaces in Activities of the Pagan Community Rus'ke Pravoslavne Kolo (Community of Rus' People Who Praise Gods)" (CRLG), investigates the interaction between contemporary Ukrainian Pagans and museums, specifically their ritual use of archaeological cult structures on the island of Khortytsia in the Dnipro River, which are part of a state museum, and through public outreach by teaching traditional folk crafts under the auspices of the Rodovid Museum, a "wandering museum" consisting of a collection of traditional embroidered textiles owned by a senior member of CRLG.

Pagans not only encounter varying degrees of Christian/secular/civic resistance at museums and curated archaeological sites, but also at active archaeological excavations. The publication of Marija

7. Blain, Jenny, and Robert Wallis, *Sacred Sites Contested Rites/Rights: Pagan Engagements with Archaeological Monuments* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2007); Francis Pryor, *Seahenge: A Quest for Life and Death in Bronze Age Britain* (Hammersmith: HarperCollins, 2001): 315.

Gimbutas' work from 1977 onwards – herself an archaeologist who crossed the secular-sacred divide – promoted a romantic vision of a matriarchal prehistory and directly contributed to Pagan enthusiasm for finding “the Goddess” at ancient European sites resulting in personal pilgrimages and organised Goddess tours.<sup>8</sup> While providing a grudging tolerance for Pagan visitors, the often vastly different interpretation of archaeological remains by Pagans and academic archaeologists sometimes causes friction.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to the academic archaeological site, the commercial project of “Witch City” Salem is a tourist/pilgrimage destination where public witchiness is encouraged; shops promoting and catering to witches abound, the Witch House is used as a backdrop for evocative Instagram photos and offerings are left at the witch trials memorial in central Salem. While downtown Salem encourages an almost giddy adoption of “witchiness,” in addition to all things spooky in October during the height of the commercial calendar in the lead-up to Halloween, the original Salem “witches” were not actually witches at all and there is a troubling disjunction between history and commercialism for anyone who knows the background of the Salem witch trials of 1692.

Cheryl Hubbard's article, “Haunted Happenings and Hocus Pocus: Memorialisation of the Salem Witch Trials – Is Salem Doing Enough?” surveys memorials of the witch trials in Salem and

8. Elinor W. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1989); Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991); Karen Tate, *Sacred Places of the Goddess: 108 Destinations* (San Francisco: Consortium of Collective Consciousness, 2006); Carol P. Christ, “Goddess Tours to Greece – Sacred Sites Tour Goddess Pilgrimage to Crete with Carol Christ,” <http://www.goddessariadne.org/>.

9. Lynn Meskell, “Goddesses, Gimbutas and ‘New Age’ Archaeology,” *Antiquity* 69 (1995): 74–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00064310>; Ian Hodder “Developing a Reflexive Method in Archaeology,” in *Towards Reflexive Method in Archaeology: The Example at Çatalhöyük*, ed. Ian Hodder (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research. British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 2000): 3–14; Ayfer Bartu Candan, “Entanglements/Encounters/Engagements with Prehistory: Çatalhöyük and its Publics” in *Çatalhöyük Perspectives. Reports from the 1995–99 seasons*, ed. Ian Hodder (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research. British Institute at Ankara, 2005): 27–38; Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Caroline Tully, “The Artifice of Daidalos: Modern Minoica as Religious Focus in Contemporary Paganism,” in *New Antiquities: Transformations of Ancient Religion in the New Age and Beyond*, eds. Dylan Burns and Almut-Barbara Renger (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019): 76–102.

Danvers and assesses their design and visual effectiveness in memorialising the events. In contrast to the extreme commercialisation of the town, Salem's Essex Peabody Museum, despite being located in the middle of the commercial witch district, has often been ignored by witch-oriented tourists. Helen A. Berger, in her article "Past and Present at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem" critically examines the recent exhibition at the museum, *Reckoning and Reclaiming*, which brings together historical material from the witch trials, haute couture fashion inspired by the trials, and portrait photography of contemporary witches, the exhibition both seeming to affirm and deny a link between historical victims of the witch trials and contemporary Pagan witches.

Pagans use museums and preserved historical sites as both sources of knowledge and locations that facilitate numinous experience, and their criteria for imbuing knowledge and for relating to objects and sites often differs from the essentially secular, scientific approach of museum curators and academic historians and archaeologists. This is also the case in regard to Pagan research through books and their use of libraries and other textual repositories. Joanne Fitzpatrick in her article "If That Which Thou Seekest Thou Findest Not Within Thee, Thou Wilt Never Find It On The Internet: How Practitioner Contemporary Pagans and Ritual Magicians Access and Use Information" examines different ways which, and reasons why, Pagans and other magical practitioners access and process information, including through reading the work of others, whether academic or popular authors, as well as using the self as a source of information. Fitzpatrick's research demonstrates that much of the information sought and consumed by Pagans and magical practitioners is judged not necessarily primarily on its historical correctness but on its useability.

Through the examination of ways in which practitioners of contemporary forms of Paganism, modern Goddess worship, witchcraft, and magic interact with museums, their collections, historical and archaeological sites, and textual information, this special issue of *The Pomegranate* opens up under-researched areas in the study of contemporary Paganisms. The contributors to this issue on Pagans and Museums consequently provide interesting insights into a selection of Pagan religions in the world today.

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