



Britain's Pagan Heritage

A Review of Ronald Hutton's *Pagan Britain* and Marion Gibson's *Imagining the Pagan Past*

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A Review Essay

Although Christianity had reached its shores as early as the fourth century, Britain only became a largely Christian island in the Early Middle Ages, as the preceding belief systems – heuristically labeled under the broad, pejorative category of “paganism” by the victorious Christian establishment – gradually ebbed away. Contemporary scholars are scornful of the Victorian folkloric doctrine of survivalism which held that even the folklore of the nineteenth-century reflected ancient pagan practice, and while it may be that some pre-Christian practices and beliefs did continue, they adapted to fit the new Christian worldview (see Jolly; Purkiss: 7; Harte: 23). Nevertheless, the British fascination with its pagan past certainly remained, and for over a millennium it has inspired artists of all kinds, from poets to painters, and today stimulates the creation of new religious movements known collectively as the contemporary Pagan movement, or Neo-Paganism, both domestically and across the world. Unsurprisingly, scholars too have been fascinated by this pre-Christian world, and for centuries they have explored the evidence for such belief systems through the two disciplines of archaeology and history. History can unfortunately tell us very little of this pagan world, for the overwhelming majority of Britain's pagan past is prehistoric, and thus pre-literate, with no textual evidence for historians to analyze. It is for this reason that archaeology is clearly at the forefront of research into this field, and each year, a number of new archaeological publications come out shining further light on unexplored corners of Britain's pagan heritage (recent examples include Pluskowski; Armit; Semple). This being the case, it

seems odd perhaps that two of the most significant publications on this subject to have been brought out this past year have been written by historians, and even odder that both are in fact best known for their studies of the firmly-Christian Early Modern period.

In 1991 Blackwell published *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy*, a work of impressive archaeological synthesis authored by a historian who prior to that point had been known for his studies of the English Civil War and the Restoration, Ronald Hutton of the University of Bristol. Now, twenty-two years on from its original publication, Yale University Press has published a completely revised and expanded edition, titled simply *Pagan Britain*. As the new title itself suggests, much has been changed. The focus has been shifted from the entirety of the British Isles to the island of Britain itself, while it has been updated with the past two decades worth of archaeological – and in some cases historical – research. Hutton is that rare beast; a historian who is equally at home among archaeology, and who can wield archaeological evidence as well as – if not better than – a great many archaeologists themselves. *Pagan Britain* is first and foremost a work of synthesis, and stands as a testament to Hutton's prodigious reading. But he nevertheless continues to give his own unique input to the subject; his great analytical strength lies in his cautious and critical mind, always pointing out many different interpretations of the same evidence, something that is at odds with the largely speculative approach to pre-Christian British religion that many archaeologists (and a few historians) have adopted in past decades (i.e., North; Yeates 2008, 2009). As a synthesis and critical examination of evidence for British paganism, therefore, Hutton's *Pagan Britain* marks a good point at which to examine the state of research into this fascinating subject.

Hutton's work is structured chronologically, opening with a discussion of evidence for ritual in Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Britain. Recognizing that the material from Britain is scant – consisting only of a handful of cave burials and a select few images – he turns to the much richer array of evidence from continental Europe to aid our understanding of the sorts of ritual practices and belief systems that might have been found in these prehistoric hunter-gatherer societies. From there, Hutton takes us into the Early Neolithic, when the British population adopted pastoralism and began to erect such monuments as tomb-shrines and causewayed enclosures, for reasons that are still subject to fierce debate in the archaeological community. Thence, he provides us with an overview of our archaeological evidence for ritual in the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, when henges, stone circles, and round barrows became predominant aspects of the ceremonial landscape. Hutton follows this with a discussion of later prehistory, an era that archaeologists typically divide into the Later Bronze Age and the Pre-Roman Iron Age. Here, he delves into one of his specialisms, the druids, before discussing the potential ceremonial associations of hillforts as well as the various types of (potentially ritual) deposit, temples, and religious iconography. Chapter five deals with religion in Roman Britain, provides an overview of our evidence for deities, temples, burials, and other rites, and examines Roman attitudes to earlier prehistoric monuments. He then explores the evidence for Christianity's arrival in Roman Britain and its survival after Roman control collapsed, before examining the written and archaeological evidence for the pagan beliefs brought into Britain by the Anglo-Saxon Migration of the Early Middle Ages. This is an area of my own particular specialism, and it was unfortunate that at least one minor error crept in; Hutton uses the Old Norse name of "Frigg" rather

than the correct Old English “Frig” (an error also made by Anglo-Saxonists, such as Welch: 863, and discussed in further depth in Doyle White 2014), and does not make use of the most recent research into Anglo-Saxon deities (of use to Hutton would have been Shaw 2002, 2011). In the penultimate chapter, Hutton discusses the legacy of paganism in Medieval and Early Modern Britain, highlighting that while pre-Christian beliefs and practices did often get absorbed into new belief systems, there is nevertheless a complete lack of any evidence for a surviving pagan cult that rivaled Christianity. Again there is at least one minor error that came to my attention; Hutton asserts that the famed Cornish petroglyph known as the Rocky Valley labyrinth is unique, whereas recent research has unearthed parallels in Heysham, Morecambe Bay, resulting in a recent reassessment that once again opens up a potential prehistoric origin (Nash 2008a: 227-29; 2008b: 186-88). Although it is certainly not exhaustive – there are many papers and books that could have been cited here which are not – as a synthesis *Pagan Britain* is nevertheless a piece of brilliance. In general, it is up to date, thorough, and perfectly readable, certainly deserving a place on the bookshelf of anyone interested in pre-Christian religion in Europe. Those wishing to learn about religion and ritual in pre-Christian Britain would do well to make this their first port of call.

Pagan Britain makes it quite clear that as an active religious movement, paganism almost certainly ceased to exist half way through the Early Middle Ages as Christianity consolidated its status as the primary belief system of the island. But it is another book, published in the same year, that uses this point at which to begin its story. This is *Imagining the Pagan Past: Gods and Goddesses in Literature and History since the Dark Ages*, a tome published by Routledge and authored by Marion Gibson. Gibson is currently Associate Professor in Renaissance and Magical Literatures at Exeter University, and has previously published widely on the subject of witchcraft in the literature of the Early Modern and Modern world. Her latest book looks not at paganism itself, but instead explores how pagan deities – both native and foreign – have been interpreted in British literature from the Early Medieval right through to the present day. Although the focus is on the deities themselves, rather than on other elements of pagan belief and practice, it nevertheless makes partial reference to ritual specialists and cultic practice throughout. Unlike Hutton's book, Gibson's is not a work of archaeology. Indeed, there is at least one error in the use of archaeological evidence (on p. 5, Gibson states that the largely Bronze Age monument, Stonehenge, has been “firmly categorized as Neolithic”), and the term “Dark Ages” – used in the book's title – has become increasingly unpopular in British archaeology, replaced by non-pejorative categorizations like “Post-Roman” and “Early Medieval.” But these errors are easily forgivable, for Gibson is not an archaeologist, but a literary historian, and her work sits firmly within the history of literature.

The book is the latest publication that caters to the growing interest in the manner in which paganism has been received and utilized in later Christian and post-Christian centuries of British history. Hutton is the foremost scholar to have investigated this area, having looked both at how contemporary Pagan new religious movements have adopted elements of the pagan past in fashioning their own beliefs and practices (Hutton 1999, 2003), and also – in greater depth – looking at how the druids have been interpreted throughout British history (Hutton 2007, 2009). Indeed, in her book, Gibson cites Hutton's influence and he himself provides a positive reference on the back cover.

Gibson's first chapter takes a very broad brush, covering everything from the Early Medieval accounts of Gildas and Bede through to the twelfth-century narratives of Geoffrey of Monmouth and on to the Early Modern literature of Edmund Spenser and William Camden. Her second chapter explores the use of pagan deities in the following two centuries, taking in the work of William Shakespeare, John Milton, William Blake, and the writings of early antiquarians, with a focus on the interpretation of pagan deities in light of the trend to see ancient British religion as a form of proto-Christianity. It also deals with the growing scholarly and literary interest in Stonehenge, and the speculation as to which deities it was dedicated. Chapter three proceeds to explore the utilization of pre-Christian deities in what Gibson describes as the two waves of the Celtic Revival; in this first wave are found late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century authors like William Jones, Edward Davies, and Thomas Love Peacock, while the latter consists of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century figures like Robert Graves, Margaret Murray, and T. C. Lethbridge. In the following chapter, Gibson turns her attention from the deities of the "Celtic" world to those of the linguistically Germanic regions, discussing the writings of Richard Verstegan and the Romanticist interest in the Northern gods as symbols of freedom, before discussing the changes that accompanied the Victorian era, with the rising sense of the uncanny that came to be associated with Northern deities. Chapter five is devoted to a discussion of literary approaches to the pagan deities of the Stone Age, something that came about in the late nineteenth century as geological and evolutionary theory revealed the true age of the Earth. Discussing the academic background established by such figures as James Frazer and Edward Tylor, Gibson highlights the increasing skepticism regarding the supernatural in works dealing with prehistory, citing examples from Andrew Lang, H. G. Wells, and H. Rider Haggard. She proceeds to examine works from this period that take a feminist approach to Stone Age religion, most notably those of Ashton Hillers and Naomi Mitchinson, before discussing the works of authors like Claire Stranlay and William Golding that interpreted the religious beliefs of the Neanderthals. In her final chapter, Gibson explores the use of pagan deities within twentieth-century British literature. In doing so, she examines authors who have discussed Stone Age deities, such as Raymond Williams, Bernard Cornwell, and Michelle Paver, as well as those who have looked at both Romano-British or "Celtic" deities like Kathleen Herbert, Barbara Erskine, and Jules Watson and those who have looked at Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian deities like Brian Bates, Sabin Moore, and Kevin Andrews.

As this brief synopsis illustrates, Gibson has condensed around one and a half millennia of history into what is a relatively short work, consisting of only 257 pages. This being the case, her book represents a good primer to the subject, but lacks the depth and detail that many scholars of particular time periods will probably desire. I am not a specialist in the Late Medieval or Early Modern, so would not feel qualified to comment on her synthesis of the research into those particular time periods, but I am far more familiar with the Early Medieval, and here it is clear that there are areas of research that would have been relevant to her book but which are sadly neglected. When discussing the reliability of the accounts of pagan deities left to us by the eighth-century Jarrow-based monk Bede, for instance, she makes reference to the nineteenth-century theories of Jacob Grimm and Alexander Tille, but not to the more recent work of scholars like Philip A. Shaw (2002). Similarly, Shaw's radical

reassessment of the alleged Anglo-Saxon god Woden and the Medieval literature surrounding him would have been deeply relevant to Gibson's work, but again is unfortunately missing. When Gibson comes to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, she mentions a wider variety of authors, including a few of the core figures involved in the contemporary Pagan revival such as Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente, but a broader discussion of the literature in this field would have been welcome. Although it lacks the thoroughness of Hutton's tome, *Imagining the Pagan Past* is also an impressive and useful work of synthesis, which also makes a number of original observations and comments on the evidence that it assembles. It will certainly be of utility for students just embarking on the study of paganism's legacy in Britain, and I would not hesitate to recommend it to anyone exploring this fascinating field.

Where is the Theory?

As readers of this journal should be aware, theoretical issues pervade academic and wider scholarly investigation. That being the case, it was unfortunate that in *Pagan Britain*, Hutton failed to explicitly describe his own theoretical perspective and relation with the material that he was discussing. This is something that I suspect was probably enforced by the publishers who hoped to keep the work to a strict word limit rather than a choice of Hutton himself, who has elsewhere shown a desire to present his own theoretical perspectives at some length (2003: 259-94). Hutton is nevertheless clearly aware of theoretical considerations and the impact that they have on archaeological interpretation, highlighting how much our interpretation of the past reflects the concerns of the present. Within the text he does mention various theoretical currents (2013: 127), although at other points in the book he discusses changes in the mainstream archaeological interpretation of evidence without recourse to the theoretical currents that underpinned these changes (2013: 34-35).

Although there are certainly many archaeologists operating in Britain who eschew explicit theoretical considerations wherever possible, theory courses remain a core part of undergraduate teaching in the UK. Nevertheless I recognize that most historians of religion – and hence most readers of this journal – would have little background in archaeology or knowledge of archaeological theory, and so I shall provide a very brief overview here, although it should be noted that there are a number of excellent recent primers available (Trigger; Johnston). As archaeology as a discipline emerged from antiquarianism in the mid-nineteenth century, explicit theoretical considerations were largely non-existent, but there was nevertheless a widespread trend toward viewing the past through the lens of cultural evolution. Emergent nationalisms in the latter part of that century and the early part of the next led to the development of culture-historical archaeology, a theoretical current devoted to locating and defining distinct “cultures,” a term that was often used simply as a synonym for ethnic groups. The post-war period saw an increasing rejection of this approach, and in the Soviet bloc, Marxist archaeology came to the ascendancy, soon gaining prominent supporters in Western Europe as well. During the 1950s, improvements in archaeological methodologies and the adoption of improved scientific techniques (most notably carbon dating) led to the emergence of a new theoretical movement, the “New Archaeology,” which today is more commonly known as processual archaeology. The processualists saw

archaeology very much as a science, and believed that the discipline had the ability to ascertain objectively true knowledge about the past, seeking to develop and understand laws that would be applicable for societies across the world. The late 1970s saw the emergence of a post-modern counter-trend against this processual attitude, which has come to be known as post-processualism. The post-processualists rejected ideas about the objectivity of archaeology, instead highlighting the high levels of subjectivity involved in archaeological investigation. Reacting against the manner in which archaeology had become a discipline dominated by middle-class white men, they sought to open the discourse to previously marginalized groups, leading to the development of such post-processual trends as feminist, indigenous, and queer archaeology. Today, all of these different theoretical currents have their proponents, although the culture-historical approach remains the most dominant on a global scale.

All of these archaeological currents have come to affect interpretations within the archaeology of pre-Christian British religion. Though not looking at this area specifically, Timothy Insoll, who is one of the world's foremost authorities on the archaeology of religion, has discussed the manner in which various different theoretical perspectives in archaeology have been applied to the study of religion (42-64), and of two of the most significant recent anthologies published on the topic, one is firmly processual (Kyrakidis) and the other post-processual (Rountree, Morris, and Peatfield).

Although Hutton does not explicitly lay out his own theoretical position, it nevertheless remains clear that his approach owes much to the post-processual ethos, for he accepts multivocality on the issue of archaeological interpretation. He does however caution against absolute relativism, commenting that "nothing that fails to fit the evidence can be admissible save as a private fantasy" (2013: 398). Despite this, alongside outlining the various prominent interpretations of evidence that have been put forward from within academia, he also describes and discusses a number of interpretations that have been made by those situated outside of the archaeological mainstream, in a category that he terms "alternative archaeology." For instance, when discussing the Late Neolithic monument of Silbury Hill, the world's largest man-made prehistoric earthen mound, he is happy to cite the view of Michael Dames that it was part of a geographical personification of a Great Goddess, something that has long been dismissed by academic archaeologists (Hutton 2013: 111-12; see also Dames 1976, 1977). Later on in that same chapter, he devotes twenty pages to a discussion of ley lines and archaeoastronomy, two approaches to Britain's prehistoric past that have long been rejected as hokum by professional archaeologists but which have generated much support from New Age and Neo-Pagan elements within the western counter-culture (2013: 134-53). Hutton chooses to refer to these interpretations of the past as "alternative archaeologies," although other terms have also been used by academics to describe such views, most notably "pseudo-archaeology" but also "fringe archaeology" and "cult archaeology," while in recent years terms like "quasi-archaeologies" and "creative archaeologies" have been suggested as more appropriate alternatives (Derricourt; Carver). Although "alternative archaeology" is probably the most commonly used term at the moment, it is noteworthy that Hutton did not explain that there were other, more pejorative terms that had been used for these groups to indicate that they differ (often significantly) from academic understandings and interpretations of the past.

I personally share Hutton's attitude of showing courtesy and respect to "alternative archaeologies" and their proponents; not only does such an approach have a far better potential for ensuring an open and constructive dialogue between academic and alternative perspectives, but furthermore it is simply a matter of good manners (constructive dialogues between the groups have been advocated in Bender; Wallis; Holtdorf). Nevertheless, I do wonder if part of his decision to discuss such fringe perspectives in an open and courteous manner is to preempt and placate the sort of vitriolic criticism that he had received from certain advocates of such positions following the publication of *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* back in 1991 (i.e., Dashu; Farrell-Roberts; Hutton responded to such critics in 2010). It is unfortunate that while Hutton does briefly describe the reasons why academics studying British prehistory have rejected many of these approaches, he does not offer the reader an explanation of precisely *why* some interpretations fall into the category of "alternate archaeology" and why others do not. Defining and categorizing "alternative archaeologies" has attracted increasing attention from academics in recent years, who have proposed various frameworks for characterizing such approaches, and a brief discussion of this work would have undoubtedly been of benefit (Schadla-Hall).

Just as it neglects to take into account theoretical considerations in the archaeology of religion, so *Pagan Britain* fails to engage with theoretical currents within the history of religions or religious studies more broadly. This brings us on to the important point that archaeological studies of religion in pre-Christian Britain have almost universally neglected to take account of theoretical approaches in the history of religions. There are some works on British paganism that are interdisciplinary, making use both of archaeological and textual sources, but even in these cases, there is an absence of knowledge on theory in the history of religions (there are rare exceptions; for instance, Smith and Walker cite the disputed theories of Mircea Eliade in their discussion of British rock art). This is therefore not something that should be used to criticize Hutton specifically, being symptomatic of archaeology more widely.

Explicit theoretical considerations are similarly absent from Gibson's work, but considering her work fits largely within the history of literature, archaeological theory and theoretical perspectives from the history of religions would be less useful here to start with. I must admit that I am not equipped to comment on the current theoretical position and debates within the history of literature, so will have to leave that for someone better qualified. However, something that does intersect with theoretical considerations is Gibson's laudable decision to include both scholarly and fictional interpretations of paganism in her study, thereby highlighting that both feed into and influence one another to a great extent. Although very much welcome, this approach is not unique to Gibson, having been pioneered previously by Hutton in his study of the British reception of druids.

"Paganism," A Problem of Terminology

Something that is immediately apparent is that both Hutton and Gibson choose to make use of the word "Pagan" very prominently in their titles. This term has its origins in the Latin *paganus*, which was utilized by the early Christian community in reference to non-Jewish religions. The exact origins of the term have never been proven outright, although it is known that in the second and third centuries CE, the term *paganus* was being used in

reference to civilians, and for that reason the early Christians, who saw themselves as *miles Christi* (“soldiers of Christ”), used it to describe those who did not follow their faith. Alternately, it has been suggested that the term *pagani* had been used in reference to those who adhered to localized cults in their communities, thus differentiating polytheism from the Christian monotheism (Fox: 30-31; Chuvin: 7-9; Davies: 1-6). By the start of the twenty-first century, religious studies scholar Michael York could comment that there were at least three definitions of “paganism” being used in western discourse: the first referred to everything that was not Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; the second applied only to the contemporary Pagan or Neo-Pagan new religious movements; and the third used it in reference to those individuals and groups who were irreligious (14). But which of these definitions accord to the use of the term by Hutton and Gibson? The latter makes things fairly straightforward, and defines “paganism” quickly and simply as “ancient non-Christian faiths” (2). Hutton takes a similar approach, remarking in a brief note on definitions at the beginning of the book that he is using “paganism” in reference to “the pre-Christian religions of Europe and the Near East” (2013: viii). Both of these definitions – which are clearly very similar – are heuristic in that they draw a firm line between Christianity and the religious beliefs and practices that went before it, and both fit broadly within the first definition identified by York.

But this definition is not without its own significant problems, which are unfortunately left unaddressed by both Hutton and Gibson. By using “paganism” as a catch-all to describe every ancient, pre-Christian religion in Britain, they are assuming a sense of underlying commonality among these prehistoric and proto-historic belief systems without expressing what exactly that commonality is, or providing solid evidence of its existence. Whatever beliefs and worldviews were held to by the first hunter-gatherers to settle in Britain, it is likely that they were very different in many respects from those of the Norse raiders and settlers who came to populate much of Northern Britain in the Early Middle Ages. Certainly, the material traces of what we would consider to be their religious practices vary widely, as Hutton’s book amply testifies. It is for this reason, no doubt, that Hutton comments that the “heterogeneity prevents any collective sense of a British paganism” (2013: 397). But if there is not one singular paganism, but many paganisms, then why should we separate them from Christianity in this manner? If a Mesolithic hunter-gatherer was shown the belief systems of an Early Medieval Viking, would they find them just as alien as that of a Christian missionary? It is possible. As practiced in Britain, Medieval Christianity was largely polytheistic and continued to divide the ritual year into seasonal festivals, much as the preceding belief systems have done, and for this reason it is difficult to see precisely what it is that was present in all pre-Christian religions but which was not found in Christianity. One possible explanation for this is briefly touched on by Hutton: that Christianity can be seen as a “world religion” that had a systemic written theology and an attitude of exclusivity, universalism, and proselytizing, while the earlier belief systems were “indigenous religions” that were localized, folk oriented, non-proselytizing, and reliant on mythology and customary law as opposed to textual sources (2013: 320-21; this idea is dealt with in greater detail by Cusack: 88-118). A major problem here lies in that while we are well aware that the religions encountered by Christianity fitted what we consider to be “indigenous religions,” we cannot be sure that all such pre-Christian religions would be the same. The stone circles found

across the British Isles might, for instance, have been the markers of a proselytizing, exclusivist religion that by our standards might be considered a “world religion.” The paucity and unreliability of the evidence means, however, that we simply cannot be sure.

A second problem arises from the fact that “paganism” is a concept and a term rooted in Christian discourse. Within the British context, it is a term that was used by Christians to refer to virtually all non-Christians, irrespective of how those non-Christians understood or categorized themselves. Because Romano-British and Early Medieval society did indeed come across and interact with Christianity, it is still common to refer to “paganism” (or the synonym “heathenism”) in archaeological literature on this period. Thus, over the past few decades, we have seen academic books published with such titles as *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, and *Pagan Goddesses in the Early Germanic World*. The concept and term “paganism” therefore continues to be used, however there are certainly some archaeologists who have openly recognized the serious problems that it entails and who have begun to reject it (Turton; Scull). Increasing numbers of books are being published that discuss the beliefs and practices of the period with little or no recourse to the term “paganism” (i.e., Semple), and others have suggested alternatives; the Anglo-Saxonist John Hines (375-410) argued that the term “traditional religion,” itself borrowed from anthropological terminologies, could be used as a replacement (although this term has been criticized within anthropology, see Shaw 1990: 341). However, periods of time that are older than the Roman Iron Age are further removed from the arrival of Christianity; the Neolithic people who began to construct Stonehenge or the early hunter-gatherers who first populated Britain had no understanding of Christianity. For this reason, it is incredibly rare for archaeologists focusing on the study of religious beliefs in this early period to use the term “paganism,” and instead such terms as “ritual” and “ceremonial” dominate when discussing belief systems and related practices. This situation – where archaeologists of the Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon periods are often using “paganism” and those studying the Stone and Bronze Ages are not – is exacerbated by the lack of dialogue between the two groups.

Although we should take into account Hutton's comment that there was no singular paganism, the use of “paganism” as a catch-all term to cover all of these belief systems nevertheless implicitly makes the case that they all somehow belong within the same category due to a set of shared characteristics, something that is evidently problematic. That begs the question as to why he chose to utilize “Pagan” so predominantly within his title, as opposed to the less problematic “pre-Christian” or “prehistoric religion.” One key reason is undoubtedly in that it sounds better, representing a catchier title that is more likely to attract attention on a bookstore shelf. But I would also suggest that another influence on his decision here might have been his close affiliation with the contemporary Pagan movement and a desire to appeal to the contemporary Pagan readership.

Over the past few decades, practitioners of the various different religions within the contemporary Pagan movement have begun to exert an increasing influence within academia, largely due to the efforts of Pagans who are themselves professional academics. The field of Pagan studies emerged in Britain in the 1990s to actively study these new religious movements, and in 2004 an international peer-reviewed journal devoted to the subject, *The Pomegranate*, was launched (Clifton). In 1995, two practicing Pagans, Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, published *A History of Pagan Europe* through Routledge (Hutton

mentions the significance of this book in 1999: 381 and 2013: 141). In this work, they chose to define “Paganism” – which they consistently capitalized – as a catch-all to describe all “Nature-venerating indigenous spiritual traditions” from across the world, asserting that they all shared the characteristics of a polytheistic theology, an attitude that saw the natural world as a theophany, and an emphasis on goddess veneration (1995: 2). Where they led, others followed, and in 2003 Michael York of the University of Bath Spa published a book titled *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* through the New York University Press. York’s controversial idea was to categorize all belief systems that were polytheistic, which practice magic, which emphasize ritual efficacy and corpospirituality, and which view humans and deities as codependent, under the banner of “paganism,” a term that he consistently used in lower case. As a part of this, York saw such disparate religious movements as Siberian indigenous religion, Voodoo, Wicca, and Shinto as being elements of this singular “paganism,” which he then proclaimed to be a world religion, furthermore arguing that it had been the “root religion” of humanity from which all other religions diverged (14). Although not actively identifying with the contemporary Pagan movement, York did see himself as a “pagan,” commenting that he thought it to be “the most sane, the most pragmatic feet-off-the-ground [religion], whilst at the same time allowing for that unstructured expanse of the miraculous to infuse with sober reality yet offer unlimited dimensions for continual exploration” (13). York’s definition soon received the patronage of *The Pomegranate’s* editor, Chas S. Clifton, and through that became somewhat influential within Pagan studies. I cite these two examples as evidence for self-professed modern day Pagans putting forward the idea, in an academic context, that pre-Christian religions (including those of Britain) should also be termed “Pagan” or “pagan,” thereby uniting them – both as a category and terminologically – with the contemporary movement that is inspired by them.

Even within Pagan studies however, there were voices challenging the proposed definitions set by Jones, Pennick, and York, who highlighted that they impose Eurocentric views on oppressed indigenous groups and create an implausibly broad category for religious studies scholars to work with (Raphael; Neitz, Strmiska; 11-13; Doyle White 2012: 13-14). The group who would benefit from such a use of terminology are however the adherents of the contemporary Pagan movement, who would be terminologically and categorically grouped alongside both surviving indigenous and pre-Christian European religions, thereby making their religion appear larger than it is currently considered and connecting it explicitly to older religious and spiritual beliefs. This ties in with the ideas of religious studies scholar Markus Altena Davidsen, who recently charged Pagan studies scholarship with spending more time supporting and propagating contemporary Paganism than actually critically examining it. In particular, he argued that the methodological and theoretical currents prominent within the field were dominated by religionist perspectives. It is also of note that the terminological arguments set forth by York, Jones, and Pennick have had no impact on the study of pre-Christian religion in British archaeology. This seems to be due less to an active rejection of such arguments, but rather to a general ignorance of debates going on in other disciplines and fields – particularly those as comparatively minor as Pagan studies – among archaeologists.

Conclusions

Although I have expressed concern over the theoretical and terminological issues in both Hutton and Gibson's work, I should stress that I nevertheless think highly of them both, and would not hesitate to recommend them to scholars and even general readers interested in Britain's pagan heritage. Each reflects the state of play in two related fields – the study of pre-Christian religion in Britain and the study of the British reception of pre-Christian religion, and in this it highlights how comparatively under-developed the latter field is, despite the fact that the available evidence is far less elusive. As Hutton notes, with the evidence available to us, "it is impossible to determine with any precision the nature of the religious beliefs and rites of the prehistoric British" (2013: 142). He is, of course, quite correct in this assessment. Archaeologists continue to unearth new evidence about pagan Britain, whether that be through burials, monuments, or ritual deposits. But as the post-processual critique within the discipline has illustrated beyond doubt, the evidence does not speak for itself, and must be interpreted by modern-day archaeologists, and thus through the lens of theory. Conversely, we can say much more about the way subsequent generations of British have interpreted paganism with certainty, an area that will undoubtedly prove fruitful for future historians of literature and historians of scholarship.

Hutton also reminds us that there is no singular "British paganism," but a wide variety of different belief systems that existed at different points in time throughout prehistory and the Early Middle Ages. This attitude of treating a huge range of different prehistoric and Early Medieval belief systems as if they belonged to a single category is a byproduct of Christian thought, and has been retained and re-used by elements of the contemporary Pagan movement, who make use of the same terminology and categorizations, albeit for very different reasons. As is evidenced by the publications of figures like York, Jones, and Pennick, this also has a scholarly aspect to it, with attempts made to highlight the commonalities between the two despite the massive gap in time between them. This attitude is, however, quite at odds with that expressed by the mainstream archaeological community who study these pre-Christian beliefs. Increasing numbers of people in this group are recognizing the inherent problems with this terminology, and are throwing out the term "paganism" altogether, just as a select number of Pagan studies scholars are trying to widen its use. How the two competing terminological trends will interact is something that should become apparent in the coming years. I would suspect, however, that it could add to the problems that are already present between the archaeological and Pagan communities over such issues as the use of prehistoric monuments as contemporary religious sites and the reburial of human remains.

Another question raised by these two books is what role historians have in the study of pre-Christian religion, the overwhelming majority of which existed in pre-literate periods of the past. As Gibson amply illustrates, historians still have much to say when it comes to the reception of paganism in Christian periods, but equally, Hutton's tome shows how reliant we are on archaeology to study the actual belief systems themselves. Theoretical considerations certainly play a role in the archaeology of pre-Christian religion, as in the archaeology of religion more generally, but it remains apparent that it is very rare for this to intersect with theoretical considerations in the history of religion. This is not the place to discuss ways in

which the two disciplines can converge and discuss their respective theoretical approaches, although I do believe that that is desperately needed. It would be interesting to see if a broad, interdisciplinary theoretical approach to interpreting British paganism and its legacy could be formulated, but I am unsure of the plausibility of this. It may well prove very difficult to find a theoretical approach that can satisfy both the archaeologist and the historian of religion.

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