

## Pagan Sacred Sites (KS3)

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I'm currently enjoying a visit to Rome and am taking the time to see some of the sights. I've always had an interest in both Roman history and the ancient Roman religion, so being here also tingles my Pagan senses. While visiting the Colosseum, my guide was speaking about how at one time the great arches on the outside housed statues of the Gods and important figures. It made me a little sad to think about what must have happened to all those statues, either torn down for materials or destroyed as a part of a newer religion exerting its authority.

That's very much the case for so many Pagan sacred sites of the ancient world. The old temples were either destroyed, built over or converted into churches. Those that were not are, in the majority, ruins and all of them are now either tourist attractions or archaeological sites (barring maybe a few scattered exceptions).

Modern Paganism is very much a religion of reclamation. Bringing new life back to old religious ways. But as much as we may like the idea of being able to use these old sacred sites as part of that spirit of reclamation, trying to do so is either impractical (due to masses of tourists or the decimation of the site) or outright disallowed by the authorities.

So, what constitutes an active, sacred site for modern Pagans?

Well, Paganism today is very much a personal religion and the majority of its practices are done in private. It's a religion based in the home. Though the home itself isn't a sacred site, it is very common for Pagans to set up altars and shrines in their homes, as focal points for their religious observations.

Outside of the home, it's not unusual for Pagans to practice their religion out in nature. Perhaps a clearing in a woodland, somewhere, or a nice field where there is space to enact a ritual without being disturbed. Of course, that not being disturbed part doesn't always go according to plan. Many a time have I been involved in such a ritual with people and been stumbled upon by a rogue dog-walker or become a temporary spectacle for passing rambblers.

But the point is that being as nature is generally seen as sacred to many Pagans, a sacred site can be 'set-up' out in nature.

But the desire for a connection to the Pagan past is still strong and so it is quite common for some Pagans to visit old Pagan sites, not merely as a matter of interest, but also with a recognition that the site is still sacred and has meaning. It still has the energy and ambiance of the way it was used by our ancestors and so going to a site like that also stems from a desire to connect with that sense of the past and any energies that may linger there.

In the UK, a lot of Pagans visit the many stone circles and earthworks that are scattered across our countryside. While there, we may just seek to connect with the place, or we may perform rituals. We know that the religion of the people who built the stone circles was not the same as ours and that we may never really know what their beliefs and practices were, but the site is still sacred to us because we recognise that these people probably had

beliefs that were at least similar to ours, honouring spirits of the land and nature, so there is still a kind of kinship there. By being in these places and performing our own rituals, we're a part of the spiritual tradition of the site, and though we may do things a little differently and use different words, we are still giving the same reverence to the site and the spirits that reside there.

For larger, more public events, we have no buildings of worship and gathering 'en masse' in the great outdoors, isn't feasible most of the time – especially not for city dwellers. But there are Pagan organisations and groups who rent spaces, like halls or meeting rooms, where public gatherings can take place. These rented spaces are not sacred sites, but in most instances when we are using the space to perform rituals, as a part of those rituals an act is performed (like casting a ritual circle, cleansing the space, or in some way spiritually anointing the area we are using) that temporarily sets the space aside as sacred. So, in this way, we create sacred space even if we are lacking a sacred site.

At a few places, most notably dotted around Europe and North America, there are some groups who have started to build new temples and permanent Pagan places of worship. These are currently few and far between, but perhaps, maybe, in the future there may be more.

## **Classroom Activity**

### **Design A Personal Altar Space**

Pagans often set up small altars or shrines in their houses, where they keep religious objects and representations of things that are sacred to them. This could be a small table, a dresser or even a window ledge.

Ask the students to think about what an altar would look like if it had on it all the things that were important to them. This doesn't have to be religious items, just an attractive arrangement of things that they feel are important in their life.

Have the students write down what would be on their personal altar and explain why they included each of those things. Then ask them to draw a picture of their altar.

Example: A student could have a small table with a photograph of their family on it, a trinket from their best friend, a piece of jewellery from a relative who has passed away, a vase with their favourite flowers in it, their diary, and a football.

### **Learning Objectives**

- To get students thinking about what is important to them in their lives.
- To consider how objects and images are used to represent important things.
- To understand how sacred space is used to create a focal point for the objects and beliefs that we

consider special, important or sacred.

This resource was written by Luthaneal Adams, one of RE:ONLINE's Email a Believer team. If your class would like to ask a Pagan representative any questions about their beliefs, or to see answers to previously asked questions please visit <http://pof.reonline.org.uk/people-of-faith/paganism/>