

Tales From The Bog

Hanged with a leather cord and cast into a Danish bog 2,300 years ago, Tollund Man was probably a sacrifice. Like other bodies found preserved in Europe's peat bogs, he poses haunting questions. How was he chosen? Who closed his eyes after death? And what god demanded his life?

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The man—or what was left of him—emerged from the Irish sod one winter day in 2003, his hair still styled the way he wore it during his last moments alive. The back was cropped short; the top, eight inches long, rose in a pompadour, stiffened with pine resin. And that was only the beginning of the mystery.

Spotted in the industrial-size sieve of a peat processing plant, he was naked, his head wrenched sharply to the left, his legs and lower arms missing, ripped away by the machine that had dug him from a bog in the townland of Clonycavan. His head and trunk carried marks of deliberate violence, inflicted before he was cast into the mire: His nose had been broken, his skull shattered, his abdomen sliced open. While he lay in the bog, the weight of sodden sphagnum moss had flattened his crushed head, and the dark waters had tanned his skin to leather and dyed his hair orange red.

A call went out to archaeologists, for this was no ordinary murder victim: Clonycavan Man was a bog body, a naturally embalmed testament to mysterious rituals during northern Europe's Iron Age, the centuries just before and after Christ. Hundreds of these unusual mummies have been found in the wetlands of Ireland, the U.K., Germany, the Netherlands, and especially Denmark, preserved by lack of oxygen and antimicrobial compounds from the sphagnum.

People have been spinning tales about bog bodies ever since they were widely recognized as

ancient in the late 1800s. Their sculpted repose contrasting with their cruel deaths, the bodies inspire fascination and a longing to connect with remote ancestral past, when miry wetlands—now drained and dug out for profit—were portals to another world. Gods inhabited bogs; so did restless outcast spirits. Here Iron Age peoples might have buried the most feared or loathed among them, or sacrificed loved ones and even the powerful to win the gods' favor.

These days investigators have new tools—CT scans, three dimensional imaging, and radiocarbon dating—to make sense of the bodies and the few artifacts found with them. There is little else to go on. Iron Age Europeans left no written records of their beliefs and customs. Many of the bodies themselves vanished when they were reburied or left to decompose. Some, in museums, suffered the restoration efforts of overeager conservators and curators. Others are phantoms: Last year two scholars published an article called “Imaginary People” in a German archaeology journal. They reluctantly concluded that the late Alfred Dieck, a German archaeologist who made cataloging bog bodies his life's work, fabricated many of the more than 1,800 cases he recorded.

Not surprisingly, bog body research has taken wildly wrong turns. Desperate for historical accounts of preliterate Germanic societies, researchers turned decades ago to the writings of Tacitus, a first-century A.D. Roman historian. But his description of customs beyond the Rhine was

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based on second- and thirdhand accounts and written to shame Romans for what he considered decadent behavior. Tacitus declared approvingly that the Germans killed homosexuals and cowards and staked their bodies down in bogs.

Accordingly, many bog bodies were interpreted as people in disgrace, supposedly punished with torture, execution, and burial in the bog instead of cremation, the customary Iron Age practice. Windeby Girl, discovered in northern Germany in 1952, was said to be an adulteress whose head had been shaved in a manner described by Tacitus. Then, researchers speculated, she was blindfolded and drowned in the bog. A body found nearby was identified as her lover.

But the theory unraveled after Heather Gill-Robinson of North Dakota State University took a close look at the body and tested its DNA: Windeby Girl was likely a young man. Radiocarbon dating by other scientists revealed that the supposed lover lived three centuries earlier. The Windeby “girl” may have lost his hair when archaeologists digging out the body were careless with their trowels. And growth interruptions in the bones indicated that the young man was malnourished and sickly and might have simply died of natural causes. University of Hamburg archaeologist Michael Gebühr speculates that the body was blindfolded before burial to protect the living from the gaze of the dead.

In Denmark, a team of forensic investigators including Niels Lynnerup of the University of Copenhagen has reexamined that country’s bog bodies and found that some of the damage once interpreted as torture or mutilation was actually inflicted centuries after death. Grauballe Man, discovered in a bog northwest of Copenhagen in 1952, is one of the best preserved bog bodies and now the most thoroughly examined. Previous x-rays of his body were hard to read—the bones, demineralized by acidic bog waters, looked like glass. Now CT scans have shown that Grauballe Man’s skull was fractured by the pressure of the bog, abetted when a boy wearing clogs accidentally stepped on the body as it was being excavated. Grauballe Man’s broken leg could also be the work of the bog and not, as some scholars had thought, proof of a vicious blow to force him to kneel for execution.

Lynnerup, archaeologist Pauline Asingh, and other members of the team now interpret Grauballe Man’s death some 2,300 years ago as a sacrifice to

one of the fertility goddesses that Celtic and Germanic peoples believed held the power of life and death. It could have happened one winter after a bad harvest, the researchers say. People were hungry, reduced to eating chaff and weeds. They believed that one of their number had to die so the rest could survive.

Grauballe Man, a strapping 34-year-old, apparently learned his fate a few days in advance: Stubble on his jaw indicates that he stopped shaving. Then came the terrible hour when the villagers—perhaps his friends and family—led him into a nearby bog. They picked their way among holes dug for peat and bog iron, the ore from which Iron Age people forged tools and weapons. At the edge of a flooded pit, one of them pulled back Grauballe Man’s head and, with a short knife, slit his throat from ear to ear. The executioner pushed the dying man into the pit. The body twisted as it fell and was swallowed by the bog.

Eamonn Kelly, keeper of Irish antiquities at the National Museum of Ireland, thinks similar scenes of sacrifice may have played out in his country’s ancient kingdoms. Three months after Clonycavan Man came to light, another ancient body fell from the bucket of a backhoe digging in a bog 25 miles away. This man had once stood almost six feet four inches tall, but only his trunk and arms remained. Arm wounds suggested he had tried to fend off a knife before he was fatally stabbed in the heart.

Then his body had been oddly mutilated—his nipples apparently cut, his upper arms pierced and small wreaths (withies) of twisted hazel threaded through the holes. Encircling one biceps was an armband of braided leather with a bronze amulet incised with Celtic designs. Like Clonycavan Man’s hair pomade, made with resin that archaeologists concluded must have been imported from the south of France, these were costly marks of status.

Another clue linked this new body, called Oldcroghan Man, to some 40 other Irish bog bodies including Clonycavan Man: All were buried on borders between ancient Irish kingdoms. Together with the costly ornaments, Kelly says, the locations suggest tales of royal sacrifice. In ancient times, he explains, Irish kings symbolically married the fertility goddess; famine meant the goddess had turned against the king and had to be mollified. Kelly believes the bog bodies represented the most splendid of offerings: high-ranking hostages taken to

force rebellious lords into obedience, pretenders to the throne, or even the failed kings themselves. Each injury they suffered honored a different aspect of the goddess—fertility, sovereignty, and war. “It’s controlled violence,” Kelly says. “They are giving the goddess her due.”

Oldcroghan Man normally ate meat, laboratory analysis of his hair and nails showed. But residues in his gut indicated that his last meal consisted of cereals and buttermilk, emblems of fertility befitting a sacrifice to the goddess. After his death, his nipples may have been cut to mark him as a rejected ruler, says Kelly—in ancient Ireland a king’s subjects ritually demonstrated their submission by sucking on the ruler’s nipples. Then his body was hacked to pieces and sown along the border of the kingdom, his arms threaded with withies to confer protective magic that would guard the territory.

Science can’t prove Kelly’s scenario. Other researchers say, for example, that the bog rather than the killers might be responsible for the damage

to Oldcroghan Man’s nipples; his waterlogged body was as fragile as wet cardboard. And even if Kelly is right about the royal status of Irish bog bodies, people on the Continent had a different culture—Germanic rather than Celtic—chiefs instead of kings, and, almost certainly, other rites of sacrifice.

Bodies still lying undiscovered in the bogs of northern Europe will yield more clues about how and why the bog people met their ends. But new finds are likely to be rare and often damaged when they are ripped from the earth by peat cutters and backhoes.

Lynnerup, who has applied the most powerful science available to the secrets of Grauballe Man and who can call up three-dimensional images of the body’s bones and muscles and tendons on his computer, doesn’t mind the lingering mysteries. “Strange things happen in the bog. There will always be some ambiguity.” Lynnerup smiles. “I sort of like the idea that there’s just some stuff we’ll really never know.”