What the Ancient Bog Bodies Knew

The first comprehensive survey of a 7,000-year-old burial tradition reveals an often violent final ritual.

By Franz Lidz

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When Roy van Beek was a teenager in the Netherlands in the early 1990s, he made a field trip to a local museum to see an exhibit of bog bodies: ancient human remains, both skeletal and naturally mummified, interred in the wetlands and spongy turf of northern Europe. He recalled one cadaver on display that was remarkably intact and oddly disorienting. The contorted body of a female about his age, roughly 4 feet 6 inches tall, who had lived in the first century A.D. “She had been left in a shallow mire south of the modern-day village of Yde,” said Dr. van Beek, now an archaeologist at Wageningen University & Research. Her skin had been tanned in the dark tea of the bog.

The Yde Girl, as she became known, was unearthed in 1897 by peat diggers so spooked by their gruesome discovery that they reportedly chorused “I hope the Devil gets the man that dug this hole” and fled the scene. The corpse was wearing a much-darned woolen cloak, which concealed a stab wound near her collarbone. A seven-foot-long strip of cloth, perhaps a waistband, was wound around her neck three times and its slipknot indented below her left ear. “The cloth was probably used to strangle her,” Dr. van Beek said. Most of the bog mummies that have turned up also show signs of multiple traumatic injuries and are presumed to be murder victims.

This month, Dr. van Beek was the lead author of the first comprehensive survey of bog bodies — a burial tradition believed to span 7,000 years. The multidisciplinary study, published in the journal Antiquity, created a database of more than 1,000 such bog people, some arrestingy lifelike, from 266 historical bog sites across a swath of northern Europe, from Ireland to the Baltic States.

Relying on recorded folklore, descriptions and depictions, newspaper reports and antiquarian records, a team of Dutch, Swedish and Estonian researchers focused on the rise of bog burials starting around 5200 B.C., in the Neolithic period and into the Bronze Age. The team took particular interest in the tradition's efflorescence from 1000 B.C. to 1500 A.D., from the Iron Age to the medieval period.

“While a number of bog scholars have been arguing that we need to reconceptualize bog bodies to include the skeletonized remains from more alkaline bog lands and wetlands, this is the first major study to do it systematically,” Melanie Giles, a British archaeologist not involved in the study, said in an email. “The results are really quite important, showing a formal burial phase in the Bronze Age and a rise in violent deaths during the time in which these bogs, within certain hot spots, grow exponentially.”
Cases are divided into three main categories: bog mummies, whose skin, soft tissue and hair are preserved; bog skeletons, with only the bones surviving; and a third group composed of the partial remains of both. “Many finds have been lost in the distant past or are only known through published sources,” Dr. van Beek said. “These ‘paper’ bog bodies are documented with varying degrees of detail and reliability.” Before the 19th century, bodies pulled out of bogs were often given a Christian reburial.

The cadavers owe their state to the natural chemistry of bogs. Layers of sphagnum moss and peat help pickle bodies by saturating the tissue in a cold, immobilizing environment that is highly acidic and almost devoid of oxygen. The decaying mosses release humic acids and sphagnan, a complex sugar, that make life difficult for the microorganisms that would normally cause rotting and decay. Sphagnan also leaches calcium from bones, eventually softening, breaking and warping them.

‘A dark elderberry place’

Bog-mummified people are mainly found in raised bogs — discrete, dome-shaped masses of peat that typically form in lowland landscapes and reach depths of 30 feet or more. (Blanket bogs are generally shallower and spread out widely over wet or upland areas.)

The first recorded body emerged from Schalkholz Fen in Holstein, Germany, in 1640. Since then, the cold-weather swamps of northern Europe have yielded such regional curiosities as Windeby Girl, Haraldskjaer Woman, Lindow Man, Clonycavan Man, Old Croghan Man and Koelbjerg Man. The bones of Koelbjerg Man, recovered in 1941 on the Danish island of Funen, date to 8000 B.C. Seamus Heaney’s melancholy “Bog Poems” include a lament for Grauballe Man, whose throat was slit in the third century B.C.:

The cured wound
    opens inwards to a dark
    elderberry place.

Of the 57 bog people whose cause of death could be determined in Dr. van Beek’s study, at least 45 met violent ends, and quite a few were bludgeoned or suffered mutilation and dismemberment before they died. Tollund Man, dating to the fifth century B.C. and dredged from a Danish peat bog in 1950, was hanged. Bone arrowheads were found embedded in the skull and sternum of Porsmose Man, recovered from
peat elsewhere in Denmark. Seven victims appear to have been slain by several means, a practice that scholars call overkilling. Almost all of the overkills in Dr. van Beek's study occurred from 400 B.C. to 400 A.D.

The bog of war

While most sites held just a single deceased person, some were used repeatedly, with one Danish bog, Alken Enge, estimated to hold the disarticulated remains of more than 380 ancient warriors killed in a brutal conflict and left in open water. The bones, exclusively male and predominantly adult, date to early in the first century A.D., when Germanic tribes engaged in intratribal warfare. Researchers believe that the dead were cleared from the battlefield and dumped into the bog with their weapons and personal ornaments.

This would have been one of the lesser indignities that befell bog people. Many were hastily extracted or improperly conserved; in the Netherlands of the late 18th century, four bog corpses were even ground into mumia — mummy powder — and sold as remedies.

A fundamental question about these Iron Age victims is why. Were they murdered? Executed? Sacrificed to the gods, perhaps as fertility offerings? Miranda Aldhouse-Green, emeritus professor of archaeology at Cardiff University and author of “Bog Bodies Uncovered,” has argued that ritual sacrifices may have been undertaken at times of crisis in a community: famine, extreme weather, war threats, the perceived need to kill foreign hostages.

Grauballe Man's throat was slit in the third century B.C. He was discovered in Denmark in 1952. Moesgaard Museum
Two features recur among Iron Age bog bodies: youth and disability. Many bodies were those of adolescents, at the cusp between childhood and adulthood. “In some traditional societies, such individuals were perceived to have shamanic powers, enabling them to segue between the material and spirit worlds, just as people at puberty contain elements of childhood and adulthood,” Dr. Aldhouse-Green said in an email.

The Yde girl had severe scoliosis, a twisting of the spine that meant her growth was stunted and she would have walked with a lurch. Dr. Aldhouse-Green has proposed that disabled people may have been perceived to be “touched” by divinity.

“Ceremony was key to keeping communities bound together, and ritual killing would provide spectacle similar to Roman gladiatorial shows,” she said. Recent findings from Denmark and north Germany suggest that the people chosen may sometimes have been of high status and had therefore undertaken long journeys in the months before their deaths.
Disease was the likely culprit in a few instances, and from 1100 A.D. on, there were six possible suicides and four accidental deaths. In 1674, a man and a woman died in a snowstorm on the upland peat bog of Hope Woodland in Derbyshire, England. Far to the north in Shetland, during a cold spell late in the same century, the so-called Gunnister Man is believed to have succumbed to exposure. In 1828, a German traveling salesman and falconer named Johann Spieker died in Lower Saxony, probably by drowning.

“His grave was marked with a wooden cross and a fence that remained visible for a long time,” Dr. van Beek said. “During the excavation, only his cloak, some coins and a prayer book apparently were found.”

Arguing against suicide theories, Dr. Aldouse-Green noted that many ancient bog bodies were naked, some found with clothes placed beside them. “Leather and linen survive in bogs due to the presence of sphagnum moss,” she said. Dr. van Beek countered that “nakedness is a very difficult factor to take into account” and that other fabrics can degrade without a trace even when a body is preserved.

For peat’s sake

The growth of boglands was stimulated more than 10,000 years ago by the collapse of the Eurasian Ice Sheet and release of freshwater, which abruptly raised sea levels and groundwater tables. Plant decomposition is slowed to such an extent in these areas that dead vegetation accumulates to form peat, effectively storing carbon dioxide. As a result, preserving bog lands is considered a powerful tool to help mitigate climate change.

“Many bogs across Europe are currently protected nature reserves, often with attempts to restore and expand them,” Dr. van Beek said. He added, with chagrin, that in the Irish Midlands, the Baltic States and parts of Germany, peat is still being cut.

“Never before have we needed to care as much about peatlands,” said Dr. Giles, whose book “Bog Bodies: Face to Face With the Past” explores what she calls “the black hole of the peat pool.” “Yet for hundreds of years we’ve told awful tales about these maligned landscapes, encouraging people to steer clear, to drain and damage those precious places.”

Yde Girl and Tollund Man are a reminder that humans once had very different and more respectful relationships with the bog, she said: “Bog bodies — and artifacts and eco-facts — become strange kinds of ambassadors from deep time. They re-enchant us with these landscapes through their stories.”