

# **BOG BODIES: REPRESENTING THE DEAD**

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## **1. Introduction – Bog Bodies: introducing the phenomenon**

When the teeth of the digger bucket bit into the ditch vegetation at the edge of Croghan bog in County Offaly, Larry Corley noticed something solid sticking out of the cleaned drain. Jumping out of his cab, and bending down, he was shocked to find it was a human arm, ending in a huge thumb (Grice 2006: 19). He reported it immediately to the local Gardaí, and Det. Sgt. Eadaoin Campbell was sent out to photograph the remains and launch a forensic investigation, in the company of Marie Cassidy, the Irish state pathologist. To the modern eye, bogs can be desolate places: bleak landscapes, with dark pools of water, fringed with cotton grass. Both Campbell and Cassidy were aware of the disappearance of several local women from the area, over the last few years (ibid). Bogs were also a favoured place to dispose of bodies during the 1970s and 1980s period of the Troubles (Farrell 2001). Both the atmosphere of the place, and these historical disappearances, gave them to fear they were dealing with a modern murder. What they found, however, when they pulled back the black plastic over the crime scene, was the leather-coloured corpse of a much older victim, who has since become known as 'Oldcroghan man' (Grice 2006: 20).

The circumstances of this discovery were not unique. In 1983, Andy Mould, working on the processing line at Lindow Moss, in Cheshire, identified the partial remains of a human skull amongst the milled peat. Again, the police were called in, since they were concerned about the disappearance of a local woman from the area – Malika Reyn-Bardt – nearly twenty years earlier (Turner 1995b: 13). They had long suspected the husband, and when they confronted him with the remains, he confessed immediately to her murder and burial in the bog at the back of their bungalow: Lindow Moss. It was only after this interview that radiocarbon analysis was conducted on the remains, which dated them to the first or second century AD: Mr Reyn-Bardt had confessed to a murder he couldn't have possibly committed.

Human remains from bogs across northern Europe have been dated to periods from later prehistory up to the nineteenth century. For example, when Graubelle Man was found in Denmark, there was debate over whether the remains were those of a local peat-cutter, Red Christian, who had disappeared in the region around 1887. Apparently found of his drink, it had long been assumed he had fallen into the bog, and drowned (Glob 1969: 60). Such a fate had also befallen two Cheshire men, 'Nat Bell, and Radcliffe' who in 1853, had returned home across Lindow Moss, apparently 'loaded with ale' and had drowned in the bog before morning (Worthington-Barlow 1853: 45 cited in Turner 1995b: 10). Meanwhile, in 1758, Thomas Wormald, vicar of Hope in Derbyshire, recorded that the remains of a couple who had died crossing the Peaks in mid-winter in 1674, were re-exhumed from the bog for burial in 1724, at

which time he noted the extraordinary preservation of those limbs which had not been exposed to the air (van der Sanden 1996: 19). Many bog bodies are therefore the result of accidental death in a treacherous environment and include some more formal burials, of those who died of exposure, and had been interred *in situ* (Turner 1995a: 119). Others may represent more deliberate murders and the dumping of the body in a remote environment, such as those found Quintfall, Caithness and Arnish Moor, Lewis, both of whom had received heavy blows to the head (Turner 1996a: 117). In contrast, several of the late medieval and historic bog bodies from Ireland have been interpreted as the burials of suicides (van der Sanden 1996: 72) or those excluded for other reasons from burial in consecrated ground, such as unbaptised infants, victims of a particular disease, or murder, drowning or shipwreck elsewhere. In this period, bogs seem to have been perceived as appropriate liminal spaces (defined in relation to the domestic parish with its bounded sacred space of church, kirk or chapel) in which to inter the troubled or dangerous dead. It reminds us of the agency ascribed to the deceased, and the ways in which communities had to deal with deaths which fell outside of the Christian framework.

Today, bog bodies continue to present funerary and forensic archaeologists with a particular series of problems. First, they are often found in circumstances which lead the public and police to believe they are dealing with a modern – or at least historically recent – murder. Second, they are often discovered as part of mass peat extraction, which in the process, removes all trace of the original landscape in which the bodies were interred. For both reasons, exhumation is mandatory, both to avoid the complete despoliation of the remains (many are already significantly damaged), and aid forensic investigation.

However, bog bodies also offer us an unparalleled insight into the past. Fen peat, which has a high calcareous content, will preserve skeletons but bog peat preserves soft tissues much better (van der Sanden 1996: 18). If fully submerged, anaerobic conditions will halt decay, and the presence of a polysaccharide – sphagnan – in the decaying *Sphagnum* moss, forms a humic acid which both selectively removes calcium and causes a melanoidin or ‘tanning’ reaction in the skin (Painter 1996). Sphagnun reacts with the digestive enzymes of putrefying bacteria, immobilising them and further inhibiting decay (ibid: 99). This can lead to the preservation of skin, hair and nails, the major organs, as well as food and parasitic remains in the stomach (Stead, Bourke and Brothwell 1986), and garments or objects made of wool, skin, leather and metal. Whilst clothing made of plant fibres such as linen does decay (van der Sanden 1996: 18), good environmental information can be retrieved from the pollen and macro-botanic remains, preserved in the surrounding peat. The archaeological potential of this phenomenon is therefore very rich.

However, it is the particular appearance and condition of the remains from the later prehistoric and early Roman period (which will form the focus of this paper) which fascinates us. Their dramatic effect was first conjured by P.V. Glob’s book: *The Bog People* (1969). His use of black-and-white photography created a series of iconic images which haunt us: Tollund man’s closed eyes, still fringed with eyelashes, and his tightly pressed lips... the perfect whorls on the fingers of Graubelle man. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they have captured the imagination of poets, writers and film-makers, who have responded evocatively to the drama and pathos of such encounters. It is this experience of coming ‘face-to-face’ with the past, which museum displays – from the

British Museum to Dublin to Silkeborg – attempt to capture: indeed, ‘facial reconstruction’ provides the interpretive framework for the exhibition at Manchester. John Robb has argued that such attempts to reconstruct their face and name, tells us much about our own attitude towards the body: our need to re-embed anonymous prehistoric people in a network of relations individuating and re-socialising them (forthcoming).

A few minutes spent in the company of such displays certainly reveals the morbid fascination (particularly of young schoolchildren!) which attracts us to these remains. But why does our attitude towards them differ, compared with more recent remains which we would not place on display in a museum? Is it indeed appropriate that such individuals are exhumed, extensively analysed and placed on view, particularly since we are dealing with those who have often died a violent death? In this paper, I am going to argue yes to all three of these stages: but for very specific reasons, and I will offer some suggestions as to how it might be done differently, hopefully to the benefit of professionals and public alike.

## **2. Ethical issues**

Let me first declare my position here: as an archaeologist specialising in the Iron Age of Britain and northern Europe, I am intrinsically interested in what the bog bodies can tell us about these past communities. I do not believe this can be deduced solely from a reading of the classical texts (which have their own agendas) nor divined from the echoes of ritual recorded in bodies of later myth. I am particularly sceptical of arguments which make use of much later documentary material, positing some kind of ‘Celtic’ continuum in practice or belief.

Instead, I work within what archaeologists would call a contextual and interpretative approach (Barrett 1987, Shanks and Hodder 1997). At a basic level, this involves the analysis of material practice in the past, not as isolated acts, but as meaningful actions by knowledgeable people, working within a particular view of the world and series of relationships with it. I would argue that it is only through excavation and analysis that these can be explored and investigated. However, I accept that my interpretation necessarily draws on analogy to animate this analysis: unlike an anthropologist, I cannot interview my subjects, but must draw on appropriate comparative examples to explore and explain past motivations.

In order to challenge the stereotypes often applied to the ‘Celtic’ Iron Age (particularly those associated with their love of warfare and strange ritual practices), I see this as role as an ethical one of representation – of advocacy – for those who can no longer speak. However, in this endeavour, I recognise that my goals may differ from those of other interest groups, whose prime concern may not be to understand more about humanity in the past, but to respect their original intentions, and advocate a policy of non-disturbance. Such groups may gain support here from the international guidance outlined in the ‘Vermillion Accord on Human Remains’, adopted by the World Archaeological Congress in 1989. This states:

‘2. Respect for the wishes of the dead concerning disposition shall be accorded whenever possible, reasonable and lawful, when they are known *or can be reasonably inferred.*’ (World Archaeological Congress 2006 – my emphasis).

In the majority of archaeological cases, we can reasonably infer that the locale where people were buried – such as a barrow or cemetery – was significant for them, and they meant to remain interred where they were placed. The Vermillion Accord should certainly influence archaeological decisions as to whether to excavate human remains for pure research. However, due to the modern pressures of road or housing development, or (in the case of bog bodies) fuel extraction, leaving the dead to be desecrated by a bulldozer or extractor is not an option, partly because of the forensic concerns already discussed.

Perhaps more significantly, the wishes of the dead are *not* easily inferred: as the anthropologist Leach has pointed out, the dead do not bury themselves – it is the living who make these decisions (1979). Whilst the surviving community evidently wished the deceased to be interred in these marshy pools, we can know little of the feelings or intentions of the deceased *unless* we learn more about the circumstances of their death and interment. What we do with the remains once they are exhumed, and how and whether we choose to display them, therefore form the focus of the rest of this paper.

### **3. The Bog Bodies**

I would like to do this through the lens of four case studies: two from England and two from Ireland:

1. Lindow man (known more correctly as Lindow II, but also perhaps including remains found at a later date, known as Lindow IV, was first discovered in 1984) when a well-preserved right foot and portion of lower leg was again recovered from the peat-processing line by the rather unfortunate Andy Mould. Further investigation of the trench from which this peat had been extracted revealed a large part of the rest of body, which was lifted as a single block and excavated in the laboratory of the British Museum, under the direction of forensic archaeologists. Radiocarbon dates suggest he died between AD20 and AD90. He is an adult male of around 25 years of age, who has no evidence of major disease (apart from parasitic worms) and appears not to have led a heavy manual life. His hair and nails had been neatly trimmed shortly before his death, and he had consumed a last meal of baked, unleavened bread, and a drink containing mistletoe pollen. He was found naked apart from a band made of fox fur, around his upper left arm. The sequence of events leading to his death have been debated but the evidence points to a vicious blow to his back, during which his rib was fractured, followed by two blows to the skull causing a depression fracture strong enough to crack one of his molars and drive splinters of bone into the brain. By this stage, he was probably unconscious, as he was garrotted with a tight cord made of animal sinew, and his throat was finally slit.
2. Worsley man, also from Cheshire but about 20km away from Lindow Moss, was found much earlier in 1958, but was only analysed forensically in 1987. These remains consisted solely of the head of an adult male, again between 20 and 30 years of age. (Despite extensive forensic searches by the police, no other remains were found). Worsley Man also bore a severe skull fracture, and had been strangled or garrotted with a cord which had become embedded in

the flesh of the right-hand side of the face. Afterwards, his head was severed at the second cervical vertebrae, with a sharp implement.

The remains of Worsley Man provide an illustration of a phenomenon common to bog bodies: frequently, the body is partially dismembered and only selective parts are deposited. A gazetteer of Irish bog finds reveals no fewer than fifteen isolated heads have been reported, and these examples provide a perfect corollary to the remains of Oldcroghan man, of whom only the upper torso and arms were found, interred in the bog.

3. Following the discovery of these remains, they were analysed at the National Museum of Ireland. Radiocarbon dates from this body placed it within the middle Iron Age, c. 361-175 BC. Once more, the remains were those of an adult male, whose body bore few signs of physical labour or injury until the time of his death. The high protein level in his body has been interpreted as evidence of his death during winter, when more meat was being consumed. However, his last meal consisted of buttermilk and finely milled flour. He has been estimated as being around 6 ft 6” in height, and the archaeologists and conservators alike, commented on the impression of strength and physical prowess in his ‘enormous arms’ and powerful hands (Grice 2006: 19). He had a stab wound to the chest which he had tried to deflect with his left arm, causing a deep cut before the knife punctured his lung. He had then been disembowelled and dismembered, removing the lower body below the ribs as well as the head. Distressingly, he also seems to have been tortured: both nipples were sliced through, leaving the skin hanging in flaps. Two withies were pushed through holes in his upper arms, possibly whilst still alive (to pinion his arms back) but more probably to stake him into the bog.
4. A few months earlier, yet another bog body had been found in Ireland: like Lindow Man, Cloneycavan Man was found on the peat conveyor belt, and again the body consisted of an upper torso but this time with head intact. The date of death was slightly earlier, around 392-201 BC. Though less well-preserved (possibly due to his death in summer, but mainly due to its removal and damage by the excavator), it is evident that this individual was much slighter – around 5 ft 2” in height. An elaborate top-knot hairstyle, kept in place by a plant-based oil mixed with pine resin from France or Spain, has been interpreted as attempt to create an impression of height, but it may also have been part of the ritual preparation of the body before death. (A number of the Continental bog bodies have either had their hair cut or partly shaved shortly before death). Again, Cloneycavan Man had received three shattering blows to the skull, before being disembowelled with a deep knife-cut.

How have such incidents been interpreted? In all four cases, the ‘overkill’ of violence involved in these deaths suggests they are not incidents of accidental death or manslaughter. Miranda Green has suggested that this kind of multiple wounding is typical of participatory violence, where a group takes communal responsibility for the death of an individual (2001).

1. The first explanation of this kind of group violence draws directly on the classical sources, particularly the writing of Tacitus, who stated that amongst the Germanic tribes ‘the coward, the shirker and the disreputable body are drowned in miry swamps under a cover of wattled hurdles’ (*Germania* XII, cited in Green 2001: 117): in other words, these deaths are punishments meted

out by the community in response to individual transgressions. There is certainly ample evidence for the pinning down of bodies using withies and stakes or poles, such as Gallagherman from Ireland, Windeby Man and the Haraldskaer body (van der Sanden 1996: 98-9). In addition, some of the female bog bodies have been found with half of their heads shaved, the other half cut crudely short (for example, the Windeby and Yde girls), or else cut off and placed alongside the body (as with Huldremose woman). Seamus Heaney, drawing again on Tacitus (*Germania* XII, cited in Green 2001: 118), has interpreted this as an act of shaming and mark of adultery. Tim Taylor has gone on to argue these crimes against honour were punished by the banishment of the individual to an in-between world: 'neither heaven nor earth' but a liminal place in which the soul was trapped between the worlds of the living and the dead (in Grice 2006: 21): a Christian analogy which I am not completely comfortable with for this period.

2. An alternative explanation, put forward by Miranda Green, is that these individuals had not necessarily committed any personal crime but had been chosen by the community to symbolically take on collective guilt or fear, as a scapegoat figure (2001). Such an incident is recorded from southern Gaul by Petronius (Green 1998: 183). Notably, many of the bog bodies are distinguished by some aspect of deformity, such as Lindow III's vestigial thumb, the Yde girl's spine, curved and deformed by scoliosis .... It is possible that these physical differences set them apart in some way from the rest of the community, leading to their selection as appropriate scapegoats at a time of communal crises.
3. However, in the writings of the classical author Strabo, there is an alternative explanation of this rite, which might also explain the disembowelling seen in the two most recent Irish bog bodies. He notes that the such groups 'used to strike a human being, devoted to death, in the back with a sword, and then devine from his death struggle' (*Geographia* IV, 4.5, cited in Green 2001: 83) and Diodorus Siculus noted of the Gauls that they used to 'kill a man by a knife-stab in the region above the midriff, and after his fall they foretell the future by the convulsions of his limbs and the pouring of his blood' (*Histories* V, 31, 2-5). Clearly, we should be cautious of accounts which may seek to deliberately exaggerate or exoticise the 'barbaric' traits of those whom they were keen to colonise. However, the need for augury and prediction may well have motivated some of these killings.
4. Finally, the well-fed and manicured appearance of many bog bodies, alongside a lack of evidence for manual labour, has led to the suggestion we are looking at high status captives or hostages, who were deliberately sacrificed after their seizure in tribal warfare or following insurrection against a chief. Eamon Kelly, the Keeper of Irish Antiquities at the National Museum in Dublin, has argued that many of the Irish bog bodies were buried close to barony boundaries, which – he argues – may well preserve much older tribal boundaries underneath (2006). He noted that other objects – wooden yokes, weapons, cauldrons, personal ornaments, head-dresses and gold collars were found in similar locations, and has interpreted the human remains as part of a deliberate series of sacrifices and prestigious offerings of regalia made to gods of fertility, to ensure successful kingship, as well as perhaps removing rivals from the political field (in Grice 2006: 21). Kelly's interpretation is novel, for the way in which he notes parallels between the treatment of things and of

people. His argument that such offerings tend to be deposited at boundaries is a practice found across the Iron Age, in the deposition of objects and human remains at thresholds, entranceways and in enclosure ditches (Hill 1995, Hingley 1990). However, I do think we need to archaeologically demonstrate continuity between early Iron Age and medieval boundaries: many of them are in fact distinguished by a change in the character of the landscape, such as the edge of fen or bog, river, stream or shoreline. It may be the liminal environment between land and water which is attracting such deposits, rather than a mere political or territorial boundary. On occasion, of course, the two may coincide.

These four explanations: punishment, scapegoating, augury and sacrifice, have dominated archaeological interpretation of the bog bodies.

#### **4. Representing the body**

However, what has been less explored is the way in which the identity of the deceased, and their very materiality, has been constructed through the process of exhumation and analysis. What we see in the museum cases of Graubelle man or the Windeby and Yde girls, is the result of particular aesthetic as well as conservation decisions. The process used to preserve the bodies (soaking them in polyethylene glycol (PEG) and then freeze-drying) results in their slightly glossy appearance, as if freshly exposed in the peat. For the poet Seamus Heaney, these bodies are like leather – worn by time and weather – but his bog bodies also exude fertility, potency, and they speak to us of their dreams, crimes or relationships (1990). Yet seldom is any sense of voice or agency presented in our official displays.

Instead, the bodies are usually presented in a prone position, lower than the viewer (apart from Worsley man's skull, mounted on a stand). This establishes a particular relationship of power with the deceased: we are encouraged to adopt the stance of those who are watching the body sink from view, or that of the archaeologist, exposing the body in the peat. As visitors and voyeurs, we witness time fold: seeing both the moment of excarnation and deposition *as well as* exhumation and revelation.

The museum case itself often conjures a sense of context through textured peat backgrounds, profiles or sections, and more rarely, it may evoke the landscape itself through depictions of background vegetation or evocative photographs of a modern bog. Tellingly, these seldom conjure the original landscape in which the body was deposited, evidenced through environmental reconstruction: any sense of wider context evokes the moment of archaeological discovery in the contemporary landscape.

Certain features may be highlighted through the use of mirrors or careful positioning of the corpse towards the viewer – the slit throat of Lindow man, the noose around Tollund man's neck. Their nakedness is apparent but not exaggerated: instead, attention is often drawn to small items of clothing – Tollund Man's leather cap and belt, the fox fur arm-band of Lindow man or Oldcroghan man's leather and metal armlet. I think these are meant to endear us to the deceased, by revealing intimate traces of stitching, wear and repair... such objects prompt us to think of the life behind the moment of death. Coupled with the analysis of last meals, disease,

tattooing, and the preparation of hair and nails, we are encouraged to literally remember the dead: piecing these bodies back together by looking and reading closely. In this sense, a slight of hand is achieved: the body as evidence does not need to have a voice... as a material object, it is assumed that it speaks to us self-evidently. Yet we know it is *only* through the performative acts of exhumation, analysis in the laboratory and display, that the materiality of the corpse and its biography are constituted and interpretations are made (cf Tilley 1989, Yarrow 2003, Edgeworth 2006). This needs to be brought out much more explicitly in our accounts.

What is absent from all of the exhibitions I have seen so far, however, is a sense of the effect of this interpretive process on those concerned, and an explicit discussion of their motives and emotions. The fact that many of these bodies were initially interpreted as modern murder victims, means that they were recovered from the peat line or exhumed from the bog, with great solemnity and concern. Yet intriguingly it was only in the context of a newspaper article for *The Daily Mail* (Grice 2006) based on an accompanying television programme, *Timewatch* (2006), that the Irish conservators and forensic specialists, admitted the ways in which the experience of dealing with Oldcroghan man had affected them:

‘I was freaked... On a personal level I had trouble... I had a vision of those enormous arms coming round the back of my neck. I was getting flashbacks for a fortnight. I was having nightmares... What hit me hardest, I think, was the fingerprints – perfect fingerprints – the same as a guy’s from today. He could have been anybody off the streets of Dublin... it was like touching your own skin’ (Rolly Reed, head of conservation at the National Museum of Ireland, in Grice 2006: 19 and 21).

As has been found with other cases of excavating and analysing well-preserved remains, a series of conflicting emotions vie with any notion of professional detachment (Reeve and Adams 1993, Boyle 1999, Kirk and Start 1999). Specialists are by turn horrified and frightened, feel haunted and troubled, whilst also touched and honoured by their encounters.

‘There was an exceptional degree of brutality... It has been a privilege to be drawn in. I am a very lucky man.’ (Prof. Don Brothwell, York University, in Grice 2006: 19 and Brothwell 2006).

‘You have a genuine affection for who these people were and how they died. One has a relationship and one treats the person with great respect and genuine tenderness.

On the second occasion [in the laboratory], a number of us were gathered round in white coats and gloves and masks. Nothing was said, but I noticed how we all reached out and held Oldcroghan Man’s head. It was a reassurance across the aeons that we intended no harm. The harm done to those men in their lives was heart-wrenching.’ (Prof. Valerie Hall, environmental archaeologist, in Grice 2006: 20).

Archaeology as a discipline is in the process of encouraging itself to become more self-reflexive about its practice (Hodder 1997, Chadwick 1998). In the field of funerary archaeology, I would argue that this includes admitting that our sense of identity, and attitude towards the past, is transformed by our encounter with it, sometimes disturbingly so. The violence so often involved in bog deaths, strengthens that sense of advocacy I mentioned earlier: an obligation to reveal what happened in the past. In the field of forensic archaeology, such as the exhumation of mass graves, this may be disturbing or unsettling for contemporary communities, families or

individuals (cf Crossland 2000, Hunter and Cox 2005). But the dead also have rights (Wilkinson 2003, Scarre 2003): part of the ethical discharge of our responsibilities to *them* is to tell the story of the one who was beaten, brutalised and hidden.

Personally, I am guided here by the author and critic John Berger's thoughts on the underlying tenet of poetry, which promises that 'what has been experienced cannot disappear as if it had never been' (1984). Elsewhere he argues that writing can achieve this by 'its continual labour of reassembling of what has been scattered' (1993). Berger touches on something subtle here: he is advocating a contextual approach to telling stories, in which we conjure a sense of the world in which these people lived (Giles 2001), so that the decisions they made do not strike us as alien, exotic or barbaric, but rational, knowledgeable and meaningful, within a particular world-view.

## 5. Transforming understanding

In other words, I believe it is important to study ancient human remains because this analysis and interpretation is transformative: it not only has the potential to challenge to modern preconceptions but reveal very different understandings of what it meant to be human in the past.

Let's look again at the bog bodies: first, at their landscape context. What we see as a bleak, desolate and marginal place would not have been perceived in this way in prehistory (Coles, Coles, Schou Jørgensen 1999). From excavations at sites like Glastonbury and Meare on the Somerset Levels (Coles and Minnet 1995), the bog trackways of Ireland (Raftery 1996) and Somerset (Coles and Coles 1986), or the Fenlands of eastern England (Pryor 2005), we know that people went to great efforts to create fordable crossings or paths into the bog, using brushwood hurdles or more complex planked paths. These wetlands were inhabited and visited for natural resources such as carr woodland with its alder and hazel, also reeds, grasses and mosses, and fishing, fowling and gaming. Often, there is a specialist aspect to their use: sites like Glastonbury appear to have been episodically used craft centres, for working metal, glass and wood (Coles and Minnet 1995). The bogs would therefore have been places associated with production, fertility and seasonal abundance. Moreover, as places which *grew* year-on-year, they may have been accorded some animacy or even identity.

In addition, these were places in which land met water: where the ground beneath one's feet was not substantial but a medium which was neither one thing nor the other. The quality of water here – still and limpid, reflective – may have been important. Ethnographically, as amongst the Bakongo people of the Congo river, an explicit analogy is often drawn between the properties of such pools and the surface of mirrors, which are both seen as points of access to the underworld, or realm of the ancestors and spirits (Smith 2002). In contrast to Tim Taylor's vision of these places then, it is possible that those deposited in the bog were being sent directly into the next realm, through a portal used on other occasions to make appeals for intercession or aversion.

This brings us back to the identity of the deceased. Who were these individuals? From the classical authors and material culture such as the slave chain from the lake

deposits at Llyn Cerrig Bach and Gaulish figurines, we know that slaves did exist in late Iron Age society. Miranda Green has argued that there may literally have been people who were considered less than fully human, or were seen as objectified property, making them acceptable offerings (alongside other objects) for sacrifice (1998). This discomforts and challenges both our image of these small-scale communities, and our conception of categories of being in the past.

But perhaps there is a more radical explanation here: in *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour argues that the ways in which we distinguish between subjects and objects, or people and things, is an artifice of modernity. Identities are always constituted through an amalgam of people and things, in what he calls 'messy, material alliance' (1993). We extend our personality through objects so that they come to represent and embody aspects of the self (Hoskins 1998: 54). Likewise, objects can come to have biographies, identities and even names, through the events in which they participate and the histories of associations they garner (Kopytoff 1986). What is striking about our Iron Age examples, is the parallel treatment of people and things, when they are placed in the bog... weapons, personal objects, tools, cauldrons and food such as tubs of bog butter, are often deliberately damaged, twisted or broken, before being pinned or weighed down, as with the bog bodies. Instead of dismissing these individuals as less than fully human then, perhaps there is a deeper metaphorical relationship at work, in which some people were literally seen as 'vessels' for the ancestors.

Remember that many of the bodies were dismembered: people may have been conceived of as partible beings, who were separated into constituent elements and interred in a series of places which were meaningful to them. This brings us back to the particular details of their biography, and the notion that many of the bog bodies appear to be well-fed, lacking evidence for disease or stress, with few signs of having led a life of heavy manual labour.

'We looked for scars. You would think this guy [Oldcroghan man] living in the Iron Age would have taken a bit of a battering. But he'd got the equivalent of two paper cuts on the index finger of his right hand – and that is it. I am a conservator and my hands are more battered than the Iron Age man's.' (Rolly Reed, in Grice 2006: 20).

'He was the golden boy of his tribe. Those big, capable hands... even in death, he oozes confidence, status, presence.' (Valerie Hall, in Grice 2006: 20).

Rather than being a high status captive, there is an alternative explanation of these features: they may well have been already revered and honoured within their communities, as people of exceptional skill, wisdom and prowess. I think it very unlikely that secular and sacred authority were separate aspects of power in such communities (Giles forthcoming): instead, these may have been the people who both orchestrated important social and ritual events. Their distinguishing features, which we see as deformities or anomalies, might have already set them apart as being 'touched' or 'favoured' by the gods. Since they already had one foot in the other world, so to speak, this might have made them the appropriate intercessors, in exceptional times of crises or need, to make a direct appeal to spirits or ancestors: in other words, to make an offering of themselves. Remember that one of the first things to happen to many of the bog bodies is that they are rendered unconscious, either through drugging (as with the ergot found in Graubelle man's stomach, from which

LSD is derived) or through blows to the head. Despite the excessive violence and blood-letting which follows, for the most part, the individual would not have been aware of what was happening to them. This alternative interpretation puts a rather different complexion on Iron Age society, in which we might recognise that authority and power came with responsibilities and consequences. Again, this enriches our understanding of the very different logic and world-view which past peoples might have shared.

## **6. Displaying the dead**

Finally then, what about their display to the general public? Due to the highlighting of the violence involved in these deaths, it could be argued that many current exhibits fetishise the remains, and exoticise the past (cf Merriman 2000). However, a general survey of the public carried out by Cambridgeshire Archaeology (Carroll 2005) suggested that whilst 70% of those consulted expected human remains excavated by archaeologists to be reburied, 79% also expected to see remains displayed in a museum or exhibited at one-off public events.

Ultimately, our goal is a greater understanding of the past (Payne 2004) or rather, human history (Andrews, Barrett and Lewis 2000), which we need to share and disseminate. What then, are our options? First, as I have argued, these remains cannot be easily re-interred, since the original context of their burial has usually been destroyed. I would be cautious about selecting an alternative place of burial and of imposing a rite or ritual upon them, which was not of their own choosing (cf Restall Orr 2004). But should they be displayed in a museum case? I believe this *can* be achieved with sufficient respect, perhaps by screening the body from any immediate visual access, and offering visitors a choice as to whether they actually view the remains. This is a deliberate policy adopted in the Archaeological Museum of the South Tyrol, with regard to the remains of the Ice Man (Robb forthcoming). At this stage, the debate over display and reburial issues could be highlighted, through the views of different interest groups (cf Restall Orr and Bienkowski 2006). A sense of the historical, social and landscape context should certainly be conjured before any face-to-face encounter happens, and this might (as with the most recent display in the National Museum of Ireland) make explicit links between the treatment and deposition of both people and things. In this sense, such displays have the potential to radically challenge and transform people's preconceptions about prehistory. However, it might also look critically at the archaeologists' need to re-humanise and re-dignify these remains: using it to question how prehistoric modes of embodiment: how the body was both made *and* unmade in the Iron Age (cf Scarry 1985), why we want to reconstruct such bodies in the present, and how that reflects on our own notions of identity and corporeality (cf Robb forthcoming). I certainly think we should have the confidence to present multiple and contradictory interpretations, so that the visitor becomes engaged in the debate, and is invited to make their own interpretation.

But there is another reason why I think the display of the dead is important: as Hedley Swain has pointed out, the first corpse we are likely to see in modern society is in a museum context, rather than a member of our own extended family (2002: 99). In an era in which we have become distanced from death, through growing secularisation, and regard the deceased as difficult, dangerous and polluting (an attitude encouraged by the professional mortuary industry), museums provide an important arena in which

encounters with death can be encouraged and debated. The ancient dead have an ongoing role to play here: in Seamus Heaney's poems, he uses the bog bodies as metaphors for contemporary sectarian violence and the punishment beatings and killings which are still being carried out in northern Ireland. At their best then, the events of two thousand years ago can also help us reflect on our own attitudes towards violence and death in contemporary society, in both our personal and political lives.

To conclude, in *The Moveen Notebook*, the second generation American-Irish poet Thomas Lynch, who is both poet and funeral director, asks the simple question: 'To bury the dead, must we first unearth them?' Perhaps more than most, he knows that part of the important process of forgetting is the act of remembering. That, he suggests, involves telling stories about the dead: bringing them to mind, trying to evoke something of their lives, as both an act of respect *and* an occasion through which we come to know ourselves better.

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