



Lindow Man: Britain's Prehistoric Bog Body

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Lindow Man

Britain's prehistoric bog body

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The discovery last August of a prehistoric human body preserved in a Cheshire peat bog sent a wave of interest and excitement through the media and among the country's physical anthropologists and archaeologists. They were probably not only interested in the information about the inhabitants of Iron Age Britain which may emerge, but also satisfied and almost relieved that at long last a bog body had turned up in Britain; and in conditions making possible a reasonable scientific study. It is indeed strange that with some 10% of the surface of the British Isles covered with peat, much of which has been dug by man for several centuries, there are so few well-documented examples of British bog bodies that could reasonably be dated to more than a couple of hundred years old.

Lindow Man was excavated from a peat bog on Lindow Moss in the County of Cheshire, close to Manchester's Ringway Airport. The area had been dug commercially for horticultural peat for more than 20 years and before that had been dug and in places cultivated domestically. An early account of Lindow Moss describes a 'Roman road' of which unfortunately there is now no trace, and also that the Moss was inhabited by 'a peculiar race of people...dolichocephalic...leaden aspect...very sly and suspicious...', of whom also I can find no immediate trace! Some details of the discovery will be well-known to readers from the massive coverage afforded by the world's press and from the preliminary accounts in the archaeological literature.^{2 3 4}

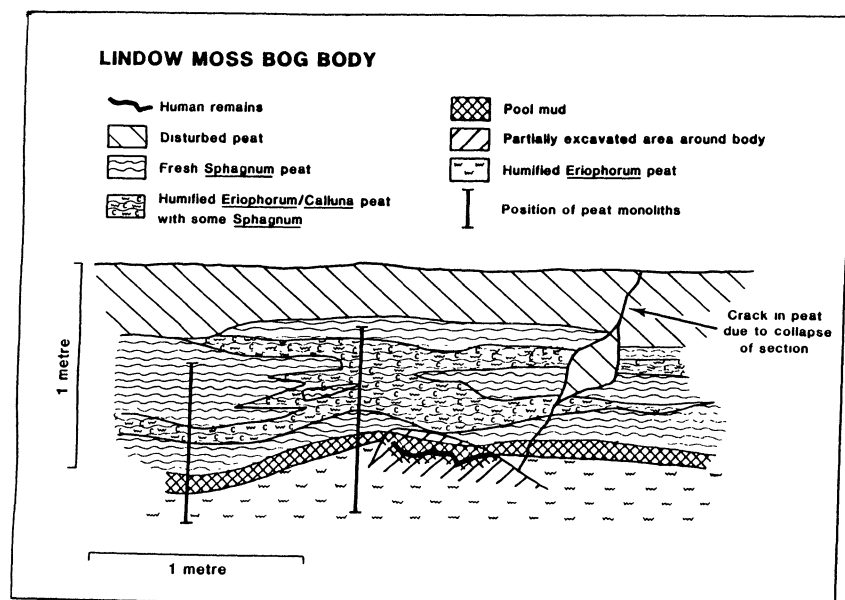
Unlike several of the bog bodies from Denmark and Northern Germany, Lindow Man is unfortunately incomplete. Six months before his discovery and excavation he had been sectioned at the waist by a

mechanical digger cutting the peat, and the two legs (we assume he had two legs) dumped in a peat stack to drain. It was the discovery of the lower segment of the right leg during peat-sorting that led to the location and extraction of the rest of the body, but the upper part of that leg and the whole of the left leg are missing with the exception of a few small bone fragments. It seems unlikely now that these parts will ever be recovered: they have presumably either fed the local crows and foxes or are in somebody's tomato compost! The hands too, although present, are poorly preserved. The magnificent state of preservation of many of the Danish specimens is accounted for by their actual burial deep in the peat, protecting them from predators and human looters and immediately starting the tanning and preservation processes in the acid, anaerobic, microbially sterile environment of wet peat. We must however consider the recovery of what we have of Lindow Man as being of particular good fortune since he was not buried as such, but left face down in a shallow pool of water the mud of which is clearly defined and thus exposed to the ravages of his environment for some time before preservation got under way.

Some simple questions have already been answered from well established anthropological techniques. He must have been about 25 years of age, around 1.65 m in stature, powerfully built and well muscled. The hair of his head, sideburns and moustache has not of course retained its original colour after prolonged wet exposure at an acidity value of pH 3.5 but like his well-preserved finger-nails had, as evidenced by scanning electron microscopy, been neatly trimmed with a sharp instrument. The remnants of the alimentary tract, though histologically unremarkable, have yielded up some preliminary data from its contents with evidence of round- and whip-worms (*Ascaris* and *Trichuris* respectively) and also of vegetable remnants, presumably food, consisting of both wheat and barley. Interpretation of the evidence of some fragments of charred cereal has yet to be assessed: it may be baked as bread, or may result from the burning out of a storage pit or even from natural fire in the crops. Similarly, whether chemically defined residues in the gut are derived from animal food sources or from autolysis of his own tissues has yet to be determined. Apart from remnants of stomach, small intestine and trachea, the abdominal and thoracic viscera are sadly not preserved. The well-preserved ear with free lobes and the meatus are unremarkable, but the eyes are not preserved intact. The teeth, of which thirty survive, are in places heavily worn but show no clear evidence of gross decay. Because of the acidity of the peat water, all the enamel is entirely dissolved away, so that we cannot determine caries frequency: in fact each tooth resembles superficially one huge post mortem caries.

Who then was Lindow Man? What was he doing on Lindow Common and when? How did he die? These

Field diagram showing location of body in layer of pool mud deep in the peat section. F. Oldfield, N. Richardson, G. Yates.



are all questions which anthropologists and archaeologists will wish to discuss in the light of the evidence available, and there are diverse ways in which each individual will wish to interpret that evidence. Artefactual data on Lindow Man himself and in the immediate vicinity is sadly lacking. Around his left upper arm is a strip of animal skin and around his neck a thong of twisted sinew, knotted neatly and decoratively but bearing no remains of a charm or other object. The surrounding area of the Moss shows no structural evidence of habitation and no distributed artefacts - so unlike the Somerset levels with their abundance of artefacts but despite extensive commercial and archaeological excavation, no bog man (so far!). The nearest series of sites of archaeological relationship are the Bickerton Hill group some 30 miles East, with bronze axes at Beeston Castle and Dr. Joan Taylor's excavation at Maiden Castle yielding evidence of habitation in the same episode to which Lindow Man is assigned.

The radiocarbon date of 550 B.C. +/- 200 y. would suggest a Celtic status for Lindow Man, but apart from the fact that he is blood group O there is little that we can add to contribute to or detract from his Celtic status without travelling into wild conjecture. His presence on Lindow Common and his time of death seems to coincide with a period of cultivation and human usage of the area. Professor Frank Oldfield's group at Liverpool University have demonstrated that above and around the body, the peat contains evidence for local human activity of cultivation and disturbance of the surrounding forest, with pollen records of cereals, weeds and disturbed ground in addition to charcoal remnants. They also suggest that the peat was spreading over the surrounding area during and after the time of Lindow Man's burial, so possibly the peat has sealed-in a record of contemporary human activity around the bog margins.

If then he was present on Lindow Common at the earliest stage of its colonization, was he an early settler or was he an intruder from the surrounding regions? Trace element studies of bone, hair and finger nails may answer this question, and neutron-activation analysis and electron microprobe work is in hand to elucidate some of the complexities of this problem.

One thing is certain: he was not alone on Lindow Common on the day he died. Whether he was one of many or just one of two is not certain, but he was not alone. The injuries he suffered at or around the time of his death could not have been self-inflicted even by the wildest of masochists. There are several areas of damage to his body: some clearly postmortem changes, others not so. The top of his head in the region of the coronal suture displays a large flat soft-tissue wound several centimetres in diameter under which the skull is smashed with a large depressed fracture, from which at least three jagged fragments of bone now lie within the empty cranial cavity. It does not appear to be a wound from a sharp weapon like a sword, spear or axe: more likely a blunt instrument, a club or heavy stick. The nature of this wound is graphically demonstrated not by ordinary X-ray imaging but by the Rank Xerox technique Xeroradiography. The back of the neck shows a similar wound and the underlying third and fourth cervical vertebrae can be seen on Computerised Tomography (CT scan), to be smashed into several pieces; which like the head wound is consistent with a very heavy blow from a blunt instrument. The nature of the soft-tissue wounds to the head and neck allow insertion of a finger and the multiple fractures seen in the imaging techniques can readily be felt. There is also a split on the right side of the neck which has been described as 'the throat having been slit', but is less convincing than the ear-to-ear gash in Graubelle Man. The blow on the head would certainly have stunned:

Lindow Man: the wound on the head and the thong around his neck are clearly visible.



and in prehistoric times, with (we assume) little medical care, would probably have ultimately resulted in death. The neck injury however would certainly have resulted in almost immediate death. Which came first is of peripheral interest only, although discussion has started: possibly the blow on the head came first; then as he fell, the blow to the back of the neck. Alternatively, first the lethal blow to the neck, then as he lay dead a last derogatory blow on the head.

If we have some idea how he died, do we have any idea why he was killed? Several reasons can be proposed: ritual sacrifice or judicial slaughter, combat, accident, or simple malicious murder - perhaps an Iron Age mugging. There is certainly nothing accidental about his injuries. The most attractive or at least most spectacular explanation is ritual sacrifice or judicial slaughter; but if this were the case, then why was he just left partly submerged in a pool of water rather than being buried, pegged down or perhaps even dismembered, as many Danish examples were? Furthermore, if human sacrifice or judicial slaughter was practised in Iron Age England, why is this chance find the only victim? If there was sacrifice, why are bog bodies not found in association with every peatland habitation and why no more on Lindow Moss? The simple evidence to my mind points to a chance wayside death rather than a planned sacrifice or judicial slaughter, but I may be proved wrong.

Of the two artefacts on the body, the thin cord of twisted sinew knotted around his neck has attracted much attention. Many suggestions have been made about the significance of this neck cord, in particular the proposal that it was used as a garotte in the course of a ritual murder. If this was its original function then death would have resulted from obstruction of the carotid blood supply to the brain, and the only post mortem evidence that we might reasonably expect to see from such a process in Lindow Man would be damage to one or more of the small cartilages of the throat. There is no such damage, but this does not exclude the possibility of garrotting. One thing is however certain, and that is that the extensive fractures in the cervical vertebrae were not caused by the mere tightening of this 2mm. diameter ligature. Since the ligature is securely knotted, without leaving the long running end which is seen on the noose around the neck of Tollund Man, it would have been necessary to tighten it by inserting a stick or something similar and twisting. There is no convincing evidence for this having been done: no compact double spiral, nor evidence of tension or stress around the knot. The fact that it has in places dug deeply into the neck is, I believe, due entirely to bloating of the body following immersion in the pool with the result that the ligature was relatively tighter around the soft bloated neck than it had been in life: which takes my interpretation back to the brutal clubbing of a man wearing a necklace. But once again, I may be wrong.

Is there then enough evidence to write 'ritual sacrifice' into the anthropology of Iron Age Cheshire? My belief is we are more likely witnesses after the crime of an Iron Age mugging or death from combat. Whether he was fighting naked or his clothes have degraded without trace is open to question. If, as is suggested by his hair, nails and bodily habitus, he was more than a simple peasant, then perhaps his clothes were worth taking either by his assailant or some other person or persons unknown; but absence of preserved clothes does not confirm ritual.

Lindow Man - nicknamed in the press Pete Bogg, alias Pete Marsh - is yielding up his secrets. Facts emerge and



'...the brutal clubbing of a man wearing a necklace.'

theories emerge but the discussion and argument as to who he was, how he died and what he was doing on Lindow Common could continue for another two and a half thousand years.

The excavation and initial conservation of Lindow Man was performed under the direction of Mr. R.C. Turner, The Cheshire County Archaeologist, Dr. Joan Taylor from the Dept. of Prehistoric Archaeology, Liverpool University, the Serious Crimes Squad from the Cheshire Constabulary, Dr. A.R. Williams, Consultant Pathologist at Macclesfield District General Hospital, and Dr. Colin Shell.

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