



## PRESERVED *in* PEAT

BY SABINE EISENBEISS

### *Decoding Bog Bodies from Lower Saxony, Germany*

**B**og bodies—human corpses naturally mummified in the cool, acidic, and low-oxygen environments of peat bogs—have been found in Lower Saxony, Germany, and in other peaty areas of Northern Europe, including the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. These bog bodies date from *ca.* 8000 BCE to the recent past and are noted for the excellent preservation of soft tissue, skin, and internal organs, although bony tissue is usually dissolved.

Much of Lower Saxony, a large federal state in the northwest part of Germany, is peatland—a wetland environment with peat-forming plants that may also be referred to as a mire or quagmire. Growth of raised bogs began in this area about 8,000 years ago, dissecting the landscape into different size islands suitable for settlement. At the end of the 18th century, the total area of peatland amounted to 6,500 square km, approximately 13% of the area of Lower Saxony.



OPPOSITE: Peat bogs are found throughout Northern Europe. Photograph by Walsh Photos. ABOVE: “Windeby I,” a 16-year-old boy, was discovered in a German peat bog in 1952. Although a leg, foot, and hand had been severed by peat-cutting machinery, his body was very well preserved. A woolen band, which covered his eyes, was probably worn to hold back his long hair. Photograph by Bullenwächter, from Wikimedia Commons.

### History of Research on Bog Bodies

Many archaeologically important finds of bog bodies occurred during exploitation of the raised bog areas for peat. The earliest record of a bog body from Lower Saxony is dated to 1754, but only as a handwritten note on an old map: the bog body itself no longer exists. Before this

time, and through to the present, many bog bodies have been uncovered during peat digging excursions which were not officially documented, suggesting that existing records of bog bodies only represent a fraction of the actual number of bodies found, let alone those buried.

Of the 18 bog bodies from Lower Saxony that have been preserved, 11 have been dated. Most of these are from the first few centuries CE and one is from the 2nd century BCE. The so-called Hunteburg Men were discovered in 1949 in the wall of a peat cutting. As is often the case with well-preserved corpses, the police were called in straight away, since the first body discovered was thought to be a victim of the SS, the feared Nazi organization. This theory was quickly dismissed, and the museum in Hanover was asked to investigate.

Excavation of the site revealed two bodies lying on their sides, one behind the other, facing the same way. They were identified as men, with long hair (18 cm, about



### The Hunteburg Men

Discovered in a wall of a peat cutting (above) in 1949, these two bodies were buried lying on their sides (right). © Niedersaechsisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, Lower Saxony State Office for Heritage.

BACKGROUND IMAGE BY NIK MERKULOV

7 inches) and short beards. The man at the back was about 1.85 m (just over 6 feet) tall, strongly built but relatively slim, and around 20 years old. The other was about 1.90 m tall and around 30 years old. Each corpse was wrapped in a rectangular woolen cloth, the ends of which had been carefully folded over the feet after the bodies had been laid down. No further clothing was found, although they might have been wearing linen clothes, which probably would have disintegrated in a raised-bog environment. Small twigs of flowering heather were found on and in the woolen cloths indicating that burial occurred in late summer. No additional burial goods were found. And no evidence of the cause of death could be determined on either corpse. Unfortunately, at the time of discovery, the men's heads were separated from their bodies by the peat-cutting machine, so that it was impossible to investigate the presence of fatal injuries to the head or neck. Radiocarbon-dating indicated that the two men lived in the 4th century CE.

This unusual find of two young men who met their deaths at the same time was interpreted by the archaeologists who conducted the excavation as human sacrifice. No reliable way of conserving such a find existed in 1949, so a decision was made to dry the bodies. Sadly, the two

corpses were burned during desiccation in a chemical factory, perhaps due to the high temperature of the drying oven.

### Discovering Bog Bodies in Modern Times

In 2004, exactly 250 years after the first documented bog body discovery in Lower Saxony, the most recent bog body was identified. It became known as “The Girl from Uchter Moor.” During machine peat digging, fragments of a human body were uncovered. The police were called immediately and the remains were sent to the Institute of Legal Medicine at the University Medical Center in Hamburg. Four years later, the mummified right hand of the corpse, in an excellent state of preservation, was found by chance near the site of the original discovery, and this led to the identification of the corpse as a bog body, rather than a forensic case.

This female bog body was subjected to extensive scientific tests. In 2005, the date of burial was determined to be about 700 BCE. The young woman was 17–20 years old when she died. Harris lines on the tibia (shinbone)—the so-called hunger lines—indicate that the young woman had been subjected to multiple phases of physiological stress in life. Measurements of bone

density suggest that she was left-handed and frequently carried heavy loads. No evidence of injury was found and the mode of burial or deposition could not be determined.

The identification of “The Girl from Uchter Moor” as a bog body followed a typical course of events: the surprise discovery, call to the police, comparison with missing persons reports from the area, and then, by chance—in this case, the later discovery of the mummified hand—its identification and preservation as an archaeological find. The bog bodies in Lower Saxony, like those throughout northern Europe, were chance finds discovered during peat harvesting. Only in rare cases were the bodies preserved or the sites systematically excavated.

### Why Are Bodies Found in Bogs?

Several explanations have been offered as to why bodies are found in peat bogs: the last stage in capital punishment for a crime, a fatal accident, the disposal of a body after a murder, the sacrifice of a criminal, or a religious sacrifice. Based on the bog bodies from Windeby in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, and with the help of comparable cases known from anthropological studies, Professor Michael Gebühr of the University of Hamburg developed a theory that those who were feared to appear after death as spirits were not cremated, as was customary in the Iron Age (*ca.* 750 BCE–450 CE in Northwest Germany), but were buried in the boggy mire at some distance from the settlement. The concept of an “evil death” appears cross-culturally in ethnographic reports, as a premature or violent death may pose a threat to surviving family members. This theory depends on the assumption that mires were considered to be remote, uninhabitable, and hostile places that the living avoided.

### Temporary Burials?

Since many archaeological excavations on bog bodies were undertaken when cult-based interpretations—referencing evil deaths associated with spiritual beliefs—were popular, it is important that we examine other possible reasons for burial in bogs. One explanation for the placement of dead bodies into peat bogs may relate to the ideal preservation conditions the bogs offer. Were bogs sometimes used intentionally to preserve corpses? The dead may have been given a temporary burial in a peat bog, pending reburial at a later time. This would have served as a practical way of bridging the time required to arrange and pay for a

suitable funeral ceremony. If a bog body site was a temporary grave, the burial would be found at a shallow depth, although variables such as growth rate of the mire and rate of peat extraction might make the burial depth difficult to estimate. Few grave goods would be recovered, which is indeed the case for all known bog bodies. Perhaps there were multiple reasons for burial in a peat bog: a human sacrifice or fear of a victim’s spirit may have also resulted in a temporary burial.

The burial of the dead in the mires of northern Europe may be associated with different cultural practices compared to areas further south. Eighteen bog bodies have been recovered in Lower Saxony. In Bavaria in southern Germany, peatlands are also extensive, and peat harvesting is common. In spite of this, only two bog bodies have been found in this area. This suggests that cultural traditions, including the reasons that corpses were deposited in bogs, may have differed by region.

No single theory can account for all human burials in bogs in Lower Saxony or in northern Europe. Further comparative archaeological and anatomical study of these exquisitely preserved bodies and examination of the ethnographic record of mortuary practice can clarify current interpretations. Ultimately, however, unlike the striking, leathery faces of the bog mummies, the intentions behind the deposition and burial of these remains may have dissolved with time. •

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ABOVE: Bones from “The Girl from Uchter Moor” were first thought to be evidence in a forensic case. When a mummified hand was found later, she was identified as a bog body. © Niedersaechsisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, Lower Saxony State Office for Heritage.



## Tollund Man: Unraveling an Iron Age Mystery

Perhaps the most iconic photograph of a bog body is that of "Tollund Man." He lived during the 4th century BCE (the Pre-Roman Iron Age) and was discovered in 1950 on the Jutland Peninsula in Denmark. Notice his cap of sheepskin as well as the braided leather noose around his neck. Forensic reports indicate he was hanged

and not strangled. Because his body was carefully arranged and his eyes and mouth were closed, many archaeologists believe he was a ritual sacrifice and not executed as a result of a crime he committed. The body is currently on display at the Silkeborg Museum in Denmark. Photograph by Christophe Boisvieux.





