Secret histories rise up from the bog

Over thousands of years – a much longer timespan than previously thought – human bodies were left in the bogs of northern Europe. There were peaks and troughs in the frequency of this practice, as a comprehensive research project has now shown. Why? That is a riddle still to be solved.

TEXT ROELOF KLEIS **PHOTO** ALAMY

The Tollund Man, a bog body found in Denmark in 1950. The man lived in the fifth century BCE and was probably killed by hanging. Such finds have shaped our ideas about bog bodies – incorrectly, according to recent research.

> ‘You’re staring a prehistoric human in the face’

Bog bodies capture the imagination. An aura of mystery surrounds the well-preserved mummies. Who were these people and why did they meet their end in the bog? Were they ritually sacrificed, killed in some other way, or did they just get lost and drown?

Landscape archaeologist Roy van Beek, of the Soil Geography and Landscape chair group and Cultural Geography chair group, has long been fascinated by this subject. ‘It’s great material for an archaeologist,’ he says. ‘This is the closest you can get to someone who lived that far in the past. With the best-preserved mummies, like the Danish Tollund Man from the fifth century BCE, you can still see the stubble on the chin. You’re staring a prehistoric human in the face.’

Popular conceptions of bog bodies stem from finds of well-preserved mummies like the 16-year-old Yde Girl, who was strangled around the start of the first millennium CE. Incorrectly, says Van Beek. ‘For a long time, we’ve had tunnel vision, based on a small set of finds of bog mummies. The books about these fill many bookcases, creating a particular idea about bog bodies, which assumes that most of them date from the Iron Age and Roman times, and were the victims of ritual sacrifices to the gods. But this idea is largely unfounded.’

PARTIAL SKELETAL REMAINS

Van Beek and an international team of experts charted all the bog bodies in northern Europe, from Ireland to the Baltic states. The survey was not restricted to the well-preserved mummies, but also included skeletons and skeletal remains. ‘If you take a broader view of it, you get a different story,’ he says now. ‘At first, I too assumed that there was no comparison between those mummies and partial skeletal remains – that they were two totally different phenomena. Until the penny dropped one day. The Yde Girl is essentially no different from a find of a remnant of bones elsewhere. The preservation conditions in the bogs, which can vary widely, determine what an archaeologist finds. That’s why you’ve got to put the finds together. Besides, mummies may have nails, skin, hair and sometimes you can even see what their last meal was, but they don’t usually contain bone material. A mummy is a bag of skin. Skeletons yield different information, and sometimes even the cause of death.’

PUZZLING PATTERN

The results of the study were published early this year in the journal *Antiquity*. The database of bog bodies that was created includes more than 1000 individuals across 266 sites, and spans seven millennia a much longer timespan than previously thought.

It is also striking that the finds are not evenly distributed over time. In fact, statistical analysis reveals a puzzling pattern of seven peaks with long periods between them from which significantly fewer or even hardly any mummies or skeletons have been found. Why is that? ‘That is the key question,’ says Van Beek. ‘The first finds are from the Neolithic period starting from 5000 BCE. It was in those agricultural communities that human populations began to cluster for the first time. And that was also when peat formed on a larger scale. You don’t get bog bodies without peat. But why are there peaks and dips in their occurrence? I don’t know. Maybe it has something to do with cultural preferences and customs. In the case of the big spike in finds from the Iron Age and Roman period, some of the bodies can perhaps indeed be seen as ritual sacrifices. But there won’t be just one clear reason behind those spikes. There will be a complex interplay of factors. You can’t lump all those corpses together.’

The idea that bogs served as burial grounds has been ruled out, according to Van Beek. ‘We know quite a lot about what a normal burial was in this period. You have the dolmens, the burial mounds, the urnfields. Bog bodies are a deviation from these. The question is why these people were not entitled to a normal burial. Were they criminals, people with disabilities, or outcasts in some other way, who were rejected by their society? Besides the sites where a single individual was found, you have places where bodies were repeatedly deposited. Cult sites of some kind, where sacrifices were made. And in such places, you also come across quite a few child corpses as well as weapons, jewellery, animal bones and pottery.’

Van Beek emphasizes the importance of conserving the peat bogs. ‘Not just for the sake of their biodiversity, but also because they have things to tell us about who we are. They are important cultural archives.’

VIOLENCE

Less than 20 per cent of bog bodies were demonstrably killed by violence. But Van Beek is cautious about this. ‘You can by no means always establish whether violence was involved. Many of the finds were made between 1880 and 1950. Not everything was well conserved and recorded. We have to work with whatever there is. This study is the first to include Central and Eastern Europe. There are vast peat bogs there – peat is still cut in the Baltic states. And yet there haven’t been as many bodies found there as I had hoped. That might be because finds just weren’t recorded. That is the tragedy of an archaeologist’s work.’ ■

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