

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DEATH AND BURIAL

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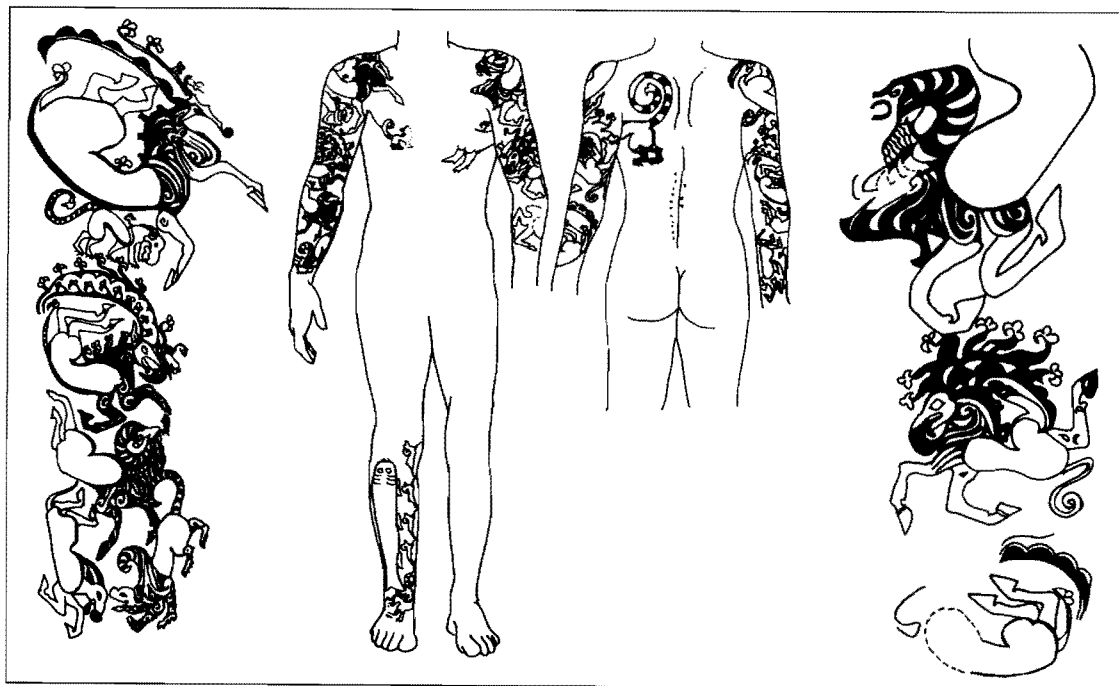
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3.10 Tattoos on the man in Barrow 2. Those on his right and left arms are shown in greater detail. There are no tattoos recorded on his left leg because the skin was not preserved.

### Material culture and animal symbolism

The contexts in which these animals are represented on other forms of material culture from the tombs reveal particular patterns, especially when comparing the outer grave shaft area which contains horses and horse gear with the inner burial chamber where the body is placed. Although many animals are represented in the Pazyryk art, their numbers and their associations vary. The rarest species are humans (only represented as bearded heads), horses, fish, boar, wolves, and eagles or predatory birds. Herbivorous elks, deer and rams are largely confined to bridle fittings. Carnivorous felines are also found on bridles but are equally found on saddle decorations. The most common animal motif on saddle decorations, however, is of predator and prey: the carnivore attacking a herbivore, the latter often with a twisted crupper, as on the body tattoos. A variety of birds, notably swan, cock, woodcock and grouse, are found less frequently on bridles and saddles and more often as cut-outs appearing on a woman's head-dress, on a coffin, on clay bottles, on a felt canopy and as mane covers. Chimeras/griffins (or monsters) adorn saddle fittings, bridles and other items of horse gear but they are more common than other animals on the fittings within the inner burial chamber (as opposed to the outer grave shaft area), such as those which appear on the torque (neck ring) in Barrow 2.

Thus the chimeras/griffins (both on the human skin and in contexts in close association to the human body) and, to a lesser extent the birds, are most directly associated with the human realm inside the inner burial chamber. The monstrous chimera/griffin creatures, however, may be perceived not only as 'imaginary' but also as liminal 'betwixt and between' creatures of danger, power and chaotic violence. Their adornment of the human skin thus serves to draw attention to and to reinforce the central significance of this

boundary between the individual and the chaos beyond, transgressed by the tattooing but thereafter protected by these powerful and dangerous entities. Similarly the predator/prey pairs of carnivores attacking herbivores occur especially on the saddle, the interface between person and horse. It is interesting that horses, like humans, are generally not represented in the art. They are also adorned, as people are, and are incorporated into the tombs of people. Horses were thus symbolically close to humans though they were treated not as equals but as companions to the dead.

The tattooed man in Barrow 2 was not only scalped but his head was pierced by three holes made by an oval battle-axe, in addition to his skin being methodically sliced open across his body.<sup>98</sup> Although he was probably about sixty years old when he died, his wounds indicate a violent death for this old warrior. Tattoos were probably indicators of high status and noble birth, but they might also be read as the garb of the warrior.<sup>99</sup> Treherne, drawing on Vernant's analysis of Homeric Greek warrior bodies, suggests that 'in the fray, the body of the individual warrior served as an "heraldic device" on which were emblazoned the values which proclaimed his honour'.<sup>100</sup> Even though the tattoos may have been entirely hidden under his clothes during battle, the Pazyryk warrior's skin was protected by its motifs of power and danger from its rupture and the resultant moral danger of the body's permeability, disfigurement and death.

### BOG BODIES: HUMAN SACRIFICES OR SOCIAL OUTCASTS?

At the same time that the hollow corpses of Pazyryk were being buried, a small group of people in north-western Europe were meeting their ends in unusual ways that would bring later attention to their bodies. The preserved corpses of over 1,800 individuals, from many different periods, have been recovered in the last few centuries from peat bogs in Denmark, Germany, Britain, Ireland and Holland. Sixteen of the 418 bog bodies or bog skeletons found in Denmark have been dated by radiocarbon to between c. 840 BC and c. 95 AD, that is, from the Late Bronze Age, through the pre-Roman Iron Age and into the first half of the Early Roman Iron Age.<sup>101</sup> In contrast to the Pazyryk bodies, these corpses were probably disposed of without any intention that they might be illustriously preserved in both memory and materiality. Their story is magnificently told by Wijnand van der Sanden in a masterly review of bog bodies, their contexts and conditions of discovery in north-west Europe.<sup>102</sup> The Danish bog bodies were made famous by P.V. Glob, who drew extensively on Tacitus's *Germania*, written in AD 98, to interpret them largely as sacrifices to the earth goddess of fertility, Nerthus.<sup>103</sup> Glob was not the first to draw on Tacitus's references to '*ignavos, imbelles et corpore infames* [cowards, deserters and 'sodomites']' who were drowned under wicker hurdles in bogs and swamps; this explanation was first published in 1824 but Heinrich Himmler later used it in a speech to Waffen-SS officers in 1937, explaining that this was not a punishment of these 'degenerates', 'but simply the termination of such an abnormal life'.<sup>104</sup>

A few examples can illustrate some of the ways in which these bog bodies were treated. Tollund Man was discovered lying crouched on his right side with his head to the west and looking south. His eyes had been closed and he was entirely naked save for a leather cap, a leather belt and the leather thong noose, secured tightly around his neck, with which he seems to have been hanged. His hair was cropped short and there was stubble on his jaw. Grauballe Man lay naked on his back, with his body twisted, legs flexed and his head to the north (Figure 3.11). He suffered from tooth decay and also incipient spinal arthritis. Unlike Tollund Man, his hands survived in good condition and their fineness demonstrated that he had not performed manual work.<sup>105</sup> Among his stomach and

intestine contents were whipworm eggs and grasses infected with ergot, a fungus which may cause fits, mental disorders and gangrene and from which LSD is derived.<sup>106</sup> Ergot poisoning, known as St Anthony's Fire because of the burning sensation it causes in mouth, hands and feet, sometimes reached epidemic proportions in the historical period after wet summers affected rye harvests.<sup>107</sup> Grauballe Man had swallowed a dose sufficient to render him comatose or dead, after suffering convulsions and hallucinations.

Borremose I was an adult man deposited sitting with crossed and bent legs and with his head twisted round. His eyes had probably been closed, and his thick stubble indicated that he was not shaved on the day of his death. Again, his fine hands suggest that he was a stranger to manual work. His right leg had been broken above the knee (either pre- or post-mortem) and his brains were visible through a hole bashed in the back of his skull. In addition, a slip-knotted hemp rope was attached around his neck. Although naked, he was laid with a small scrap of cloth under his head and two sheepskin capes rolled up at his feet. Borremose II was probably a woman; she lay face down with her head to the north and feet to the south. Her hair was only one inch long and she was naked except for a leather neck thong threaded with an amber bead and a bronze disk, and pieces of cloth laid over her legs. Three short sticks, the bones of an infant and half a clay pot lay with the upper part of her body. Her right leg was fractured below the knee, probably pre-mortem. The amber bead is an artefact normally associated with the graves of high-status individuals in the region at this date (first to second centuries AD). Borremose III was a plump woman laid face downward with her head to the east, with one leg drawn up to her waist. Although her hair was of medium length, the back of her head had been scalped and her face was crushed, probably by a heavy blow. Her body was laid on a bed of tiny white cottongrass flowers which the marsh ecology indicates were probably picked from another part of the bog.

### Death and diet

Although there are no consistent orientations or formal arrangements of the body and limbs, there are a number of interesting features which are common to these Iron Age bog bodies. About fourteen individuals provide clear evidence of how they died – by hanging or strangling, throat cutting, battery with a blunt instrument, decapitation, stabbing and possibly pegging down and drowning.<sup>108</sup> A number were killed using several of these methods and some were badly beaten. For example, before his throat was cut, Grauballe Man was wounded on his right temple and his fractured tibia indicates that his leg was deliberately broken. The violence meted out was excessive, both post-mortem as well as pre-mortem. Lindow II, the best preserved of three bodies from this English bog, had been garrotted and stabbed in the throat in such a way that, had these been effected simultaneously, then a small fountain of blood would have issued from the incision. In addition he was twice hit on the head, probably with an axe, so hard that bone chips from his skull entered his brain and one of his molars cracked.<sup>109</sup>

Although the identification of Harris lines (lines on the skeleton caused by nutritional stress) in the lower leg of a girl from Windeby led Glob to suggest that her winter diet was inadequate, the fine hands and feet of certain other bog corpses and the quality of associated items suggest that many of these people who ended up in bogs had been of an unusual social status.<sup>110</sup> For example, the quality of the textiles accompanying the Huldremose and Haraldskjaer women is comparable to that of those found in contemporary graves of high-status individuals in the Early Roman Iron Age.<sup>111</sup> Also, although some of the individuals were short, the bog corpses and bog skeletons tend to be in the taller range of the Iron Age



3.11 The young man from Grauballe bog. His twisted head had been almost severed by a slit across the throat from ear to ear. His stubbly face, with open eyes, was shaved but his hair was of ordinary length.

population – a factor that they share with the ruling élites of the first to fourth centuries AD in Denmark – possibly because their diet was superior to that of others.<sup>112</sup> Such conclusions are at odds with the three instances where stomach contents indicate a last meal of gruel made from barley, linseed, knotweed and gold-of-pleasure. This simple food, presumed by some to be a special meal for the condemned, is just as likely to have been standard fare.

### Leather and nakedness

Many Iron Age bog bodies were apparently deposited in the bog naked or near-naked.<sup>113</sup> Their only clothing is normally of animal skin, especially the short skin cape which reaches to just above the waist; woven clothing is normally found separate from the body or lying over or under it.<sup>114</sup> The most fully dressed example, the woman from Huldremose, was wrapped in one skin cape and covered with another while a woollen scarf was draped around her neck and a woollen skirt was wrapped around her waist; a woollen *peplos* (an outer robe) was found nearby. The injuries to her right leg and foot and right arm show that she had been hacked at repeatedly. In many cases we cannot be sure whether clothing has survived or not, or whether earlier researchers missed textile remains associated with the bodies, but there is the possibility that the close association of leather items (capoes, armbands, shoes, hats, belts) with these bodies may have been deliberate. If they are found wearing any garment, then these are nearly always of leather and also inadequate to hide much of the body, especially the genitals and lower regions.

We do not know whether leather clothing was a regular component of dress during the Iron Age since cremation was the dominant funerary rite in Denmark and Germany during these

centuries, and there are few burials against which we might compare dressing of the corpse. There are, however, Middle Bronze Age mound burials which contain clothes and garments mostly made of woollen textiles but without leather capes whereas a single bog body known to be of this earlier date, from Emmer-Erfscheideneven in Holland, was wrapped in a skin cape and his woollen and other leather clothes lay around him.<sup>115</sup> At the other end of the chronological range, the 'girl in blue' from a first century AD (Early Roman Iron Age) high-status inhumation at Lønne in Jutland was buried in a blue woollen dress without any trace of leather clothing.<sup>116</sup> Traces of clothing surviving as oxidized imprints on copper alloy and iron dress fittings in Early Roman Iron Age burials also attest to the common use of textiles rather than leather.<sup>117</sup> This potential emphasis on leather garments on the Iron Age bog bodies may be out of place for the styles of the period and their restricted and immodest use suggests that they were tokens of a 'second skin', drawing attention to the body and possibly accentuating notions of a body clothed but immodest. The partially shaved heads of some of the victims may similarly have served to emphasize a state of impropriety and shame. The nature of the associations with leather is not easy to gauge but, as the clothing of animals, these skins, leathers and furs may also have served ritually to separate the victims from the world of humans.<sup>118</sup>

#### Sacrifice or execution?

As mentioned above, cremation was the dominant archaeologically visible funerary rite during the period in which the bog bodies were deposited. In the final stage of the rites, the cremated bones were placed in a pot along with no more than a single metal dress fitting and buried under a small round mound. These final resting places were on high and dry land generally about half a kilometre from water, in contrast to the close proximity of settlements to water sources.<sup>119</sup> The symbolic geography of the Iron Age dead was divided into three: the worthy dead above, fully transformed by fire into dry burnt bones and associated with things made through fire; the middle world of the living; and the wet underworld of the sacrificial and executed dead who were entirely untransformed and returned to an animal-like state. The bogs were also final resting places for a wide range of offerings which include pots containing grain, wooden figurines, ploughs, imported metal cauldrons such as the Gundestrup cauldron, human hair, clothing, bronze neck-rings and weaponry.<sup>120</sup>

Some of these items might be redolent of fertility and reproduction but others may have been removed from circulation for reasons of maintaining social equalities. The settlement evidence prior to c. 150 BC, from sites such as Grøntoft, indicates broadly egalitarian village communities with slight but growing differences in economic resources between certain farmsteads.<sup>121</sup> This evidence of communities in which all households were involved in farming is at odds with the evidence of the Borremose, Grauballe and Haraldskjaer bodies which indicate the existence of people who did not participate in manual labour. Large and dominant farms, such as those excavated at Hodde and Kraghede, along with elite funerary rites, appeared on the margins of these Iron Age societies after c. 150 BC.

There is no doubt that the circumstances behind each death and deposition preclude their interpretation as being due to a single set of causes.<sup>122</sup> However, serial killing and clandestine murder, followed by secretive disposal of the body, do seem to be unfounded and inappropriate explanations.<sup>123</sup> Suggestions that many bog burials might be the unfortunate results of failed attempts at rescue or retrieval involving injudicious use of ropes can also be discounted.<sup>124</sup>

We might interpret the 'work-shy' bog people as victims of human sacrifice or executions of war captives, social scapegoats or outcasts such as witches. Many may have

come from the upper echelons of society and may have been witches, shamans or priests.<sup>125</sup> Their apparent life of leisure, however, coupled with their degrading deaths is perhaps a leitmotif for a society in transition from local, relatively egalitarian communities to one composed of warring and unequal social divisions.

A group of perhaps three bog bodies from the early first millennium AD were found in Lindow Moss in England. One of these, Lindow III, has a vestigial thumb, and John Magilton has raised the possibility that this rendered this individual imperfect in a society in which physical perfection was a requirement of kingship and the morally imperfect were preferred for sacrifices according to Caesar.<sup>126</sup> There are continental Iron Age bog bodies also with physical abnormalities such as the Dutch cases of the Yde girl suffering from mild scoliosis (deformation of the spine), the Zweeloo woman's skeleton with exceptionally short forearms and legs, the two male skeletons from Dojringer, one with his right arm shorter than the other, spina bifida and two trepanation holes, and the other man with a short left arm and a perforated but healed skull, the boy from Kayhausen in Germany whose damaged hip would have prevented him from walking normally, and the thirty-year-old woman from Elling in Denmark with osteoporosis.<sup>127</sup> Given that so few of the Iron Age bog bodies have been thoroughly examined, a remarkable proportion have physical abnormalities. This raises the possibility that many of them may have been considered to have been 'touched by the gods' and were somehow imperfect (either physically or mentally) yet special, set apart from ordinary people. They may have been raised specially for sacrifice, leading lives of leisure until the moment of their deaths. Tacitus's 'shirkers' may, in fact, have been a special category of people, honoured by their eventual sacrifice to the world of the supernatural.

#### CONCLUSION

The body is not simply a biological entity but is a carefully crafted artefact, further worked and transformed after the moment of death. It is used to convey representations of death and the afterlife, of society's boundaries, of the nature of humanness, and of the ordering of the social world. The treatment of the corpse embodies complex concepts not only about the living body (what it is to be human, how to follow codes of conduct) and society at large (how the social order is represented) but also about the nature of death. The archaeological remains of the body are the culmination of rites of passage which serve to separate the dead from the living and install them within another dimension of human understanding. In certain cases, such as collective burial after secondary rites, we find only the terminal actions of those ritual processes. In others, such as the Pazyryk graves, aspects of the rites prior to entombment are recoverable, such as the cutting open and sewing up of the corpse's skin. The ruler's physical body was often a metaphor of the body social (society at large), as we have seen with Tutankhamen's mummified body, and the treatment of that corpse might reflect either the dangerous liminal period of interregnum or the institutional overcoming of such temporary rending of the social fabric. There are no universal interpretations of how the corpse is used in different societies by different people – each investigation must work contextually at recovering past attitudes and understandings.