Headline: **What did happen to Lindow Man?;Commentary;Opinion**
Source: **The Times Literary Supplement**
Issue Date: **Friday January 30, 2004**
Byline: **Ronald Hutton**
Page: 12

Why Britain's best known bog burial can no longer be used as evidence for ritual human sacrifice

Lindow Man is the name given to a human body found in a peat-bog at Lindow Moss, near Manchester, in 1985. After a leg was discovered by workmen sorting peat, archaeologists were called in and the upper part of the body was found still in the ground. It was boxed and transported to the British Museum, where it was carefully excavated and thoroughly examined by a large team of specialists. When he met an horrific death, sometime in the middle of the first century AD, Lindow Man was about 25 years old. Stunned by a couple of blows to the head, he was then garotted, his throat was cut, and he was bled, before being placed in a pool in the bog. This elaborate sequence of events strongly suggests that Lindow Man was a ritual sacrifice, and it may be no coincidence that shortly before his death he had a drink including mistletoe -the pollen was still in his stomach. At least one other contemporary body was found in the same bog.

This is the notice displayed beside the curated remains of the man concerned, in Room 50 (dedicated to "Celtic Europe") in the British Museum.

He was probably the most sensational archaeological find to be made in Britain during the 1980s, and may well be the most intensively studied human corpse in history. Apart from misdating the discovery -which was actually in August 1984 - the notice neatly summarizes the official and dominant view of the significance of the remains. Lindow Man has been the trump card to be dealt by what Stuart Piggott once termed the "hard primitivist" attitude to British prehistory: that which emphasizes those aspects of prehistoric life which appear barbaric and alien to modern people. A recent American commentator, Leslie Ellen Jones, has stated that the body is "the single best evidence of Celtic human sacrifice in Britain, and this is to say, he is the best because he is pretty much the only". As such he has featured as an exemplar, and proof, of ritual killing in the books of leading authorities on Iron Age religion such as Miranda Aldhouse-Green, Anne Ross, Barry Cunliffe and Jane Webster.

The same conclusion has been accentuated and propagated by authors of more general works on prehistoric ritual practices such as Ralph Merrifield, Mike Parker Pearson, Timothy Taylor and (a dozen years ago) myself. It has continued to appear in print until the time of writing, as the scholarly orthodoxy, and dominates references to the find on the internet and in other academic disciplines than that of archaeology. Only two months ago I was involved in the making of a BBC television programme on the Roman conquest of Britain. Reading a draft script, I pointed out that it might not be wise to credit the ritual killing of humans quite so confidently to the Iron Age

British. The immediate reply of scriptwriter and director was that the body from Lindow Moss represents the absolute proof of such killings. It does not; and the time has come for historians and prehistorians collectively to remove it from this symbolic role.

Behind the official interpretation of the find lies an apostolic succession of writings, each inspiring the next. The document on which that interpretation rests is the report published in 1986 by the team brought together by the British Museum to study the body and its context. This concluded firmly that the man concerned had suffered a triple death as part of an Iron Age rite. Behind this, in turn, stood a book by a Danish scholar, P. V. Glob. Issued in English in 1969 as The Bog People, it had itself been inspired by the sensational discoveries of bodies in Danish bogs. Glob revealed to the world that these had represented only the best-known of a large number of corpses recovered from wetlands in northern Europe, which he interpreted as the victims of a widespread tradition of human sacrifice.

His book became an international bestseller, and without it there would have been no Lindow Man.

The very name echoes those given to the most famous Danish bodies, such as Tollund Man. More particularly, it was Glob's book that inspired the county archaeologist for Cheshire, Rick Turner, to look out for similar finds in British bogs. Without it, he would probably not have identified the possible significance of the leg found at Lindow Moss and attracted the attention of the Museum. There is no doubt that a large part of the excitement caused by the discovery derived from the fact that England had at last produced a well- preserved body of its own to set alongside those that Glob had publicized from the Continent. Unfortunately, the Cheshire corpse was also immediately placed within the interpretative framework of Glob's book; and behind that in turn stood much older opinion-makers. These were the writers of the civilized ancient world who had accused the northern barbarians of an addiction to human sacrifice: Julius Caesar, Diodorus, Siculus, Strabo, Lucan and (above all in this context) Tacitus. In the traditional European literary canon these were familiar and beloved authors.

To prove them correct fitted into one of the great impulses of archaeology since its appearance as a profession in the nineteenth century: to take a story from a well-known body of literature (such as the Bible, the Greek myths or the Arthurian cycle), and give it an apparent basis in material reality. This is one of the chief ways in which archaeologists have drawn public acclaim: by functioning as protagonists in a quest romance.

Unfortunately for this particular romance, every part of the interpretation of Lindow Man can now be demonstrated to rest on insecure foundations. The pathology on which the verdict of ritual death depends was questionable from the beginning.

The diagnosis of a triple act of violence was made by Iain West of Guy's Hospital, and his views were given full prominence in the British Museum's report and trumpeted in its conclusion, written by I. M. Stead. Sharp eyes might have spotted a slight but significant discrepancy in the same volume with the views of another medical expert who had examined the body soon after discovery: Robert Connolly of Liverpool University. He had, in fact, already published a short piece in Anthropology Today in which he rejected the verdict of ritual killing completely.

He agreed with West that the man's skull had been fractured twice by blows, but believed that a third blow had broken the neck, which West had thought fractured by a garrotte.

That instrument was allegedly still around the corpse's throat, being a thin cord that might have been operated by turning a rod in the knot at its back. Connolly disagreed completely with this identification as well, asserting that the knot showed no signs of stress and the throat cartilage no evidence of trauma: both being classic indications of strangulation. In his reading the cord had been used to suspend an ornament that had been removed before the body was pitched into the mire or had corroded away. Finally, whereas West reported that the man's jugular had been slit to produce massive bleeding, Connolly thought that the gash concerned had been caused by damage to the remains while in the peat.

One specialist therefore concluded that there was evidence for an elaborate, ritualized death; the other that the victim had simply died under a rain of blows from a blunt instrument.

In the report, Connolly's view was excluded completely from consideration in the concluding section and marginalized almost to invisibility in the text. This treatment has never ceased to rankle with him; in 1998 he was able to repeat his opinion in a BBC television programme and during a recent interview with me he put on public record his belief that the report had over-emphasized the view of the man as the remains of a human sacrifice. His frustration is understandable, in that his statements seem to have made no impression on archaeologists despite their public reiteration; but the situation is even more complex than his views would suggest. Reading through the detail of the 1986 report, it is clear that the body carried yet other injuries, such as a broken posterior rib and a possible stab wound in the chest.

Added to those already described, this is an impressive total for a corpse of which only a third survives and, taken on face value, suggests that the man died under a hail of blows. These torso wounds have, however, either been dismissed or associated with those on the head and neck on which the emphasis of the triple, ritualized death is placed; and there is a further complication. It is by no means clear how much of this accumulation of

damage had been inflicted when the corpse was already in the bog, in the course of peat-cutting activities; as seen, this question is part of the disagreement between the two medical experts. It may thus be concluded that there is, in fact, no secure knowledge of the manner of the man's death; the fact that he was apparently laid in the bog stripped of all clothing save a fur arm-band indicates that it was not accidental, but beyond that nothing is certain.

Behind the readiness of the Museum's team to accept the diagnosis of a threefold killing lies another literary tradition; this time medieval. Six texts, the earliest being twelfth-century in its present version, record the fate of a king or hero who perished by suffering fatal injuries in three different and simultaneous forms. Whether romances of this date can be used as evidence for prehistoric practices is itself controversial, but it also matters that none of these stories associates the death in question with ritual. They are designed, instead, to illustrate the inexorable workings of fate or else the power of prophecy (in that such an unlikely end had been predicted for the person concerned). Nonetheless, at times explicitly, this literary trope lay behind the willingness of archaeologists to repeat the diagnosis of ritual killing at Lindow Moss.

A different sort of problem concerns the age of the body. The first radiocarbon dates yielded by samples of it were pronounced by one laboratory to be post Roman and by another to span the period from the Iron Age to the late Roman Empire.

The 1986 report got round the problem simply by rejecting them, and declaring the death most probably to have occurred in the fifth to third centuries bce; safely back in prehistory. Three years later, new samples were taken and the results published in Antiquity: the dates now clustered between 2 bce and 119 ce. These could still be fitted into the Iron Age if the man were made a sacrifice offered up by the local people on the eve of the Roman conquest or during the course of it; and this became the most commonly repeated context for his death. It is the one recorded on the notice in the Museum. This whole process ignored the fact that in 1983 a human head had already been found in the Moss and dated to the Roman period.

The problem was, however, forced by further discoveries made in 1987, when seventy pieces of another male corpse were also found there (together with more bits of Lindow Man himself). The dates yielded by the new body clustered between 25 and 330 ce, and the two labs that provided them agreed in 1995 that, taken all together, the human remains from the Moss belonged most probably to the early Romano-British period.

This was an inconvenient conclusion for the interpretation of ritual killing, because under Roman rule such killings were both socially unacceptable and illegal. The proponents of that interpretation have therefore resorted to two different strategies, both of which featured in a

second report published by the British Museum on the Lindow bog bodies in 1995.

One was to take advantage of the undoubted fact that all the possible dates for them still stretched from the late Iron Age to the post-Roman period, and carry on treating them as pre-Roman. The other was to suggest that they represented the secret continuation of prehistoric practices of human sacrifice under Roman rule; an argument which has to ignore the fact that there is no firm evidence for such practices. Lindow Man himself was, after all, supposed to be that evidence. If he and his companion or companions actually are Roman in date, then other causes of death, such as robbery, or execution for a heinous crime involving commitment of the corpses to a lonely mire, become more likely.

There is a further detail in the original report which would support this later dating: the moustache of Lindow Man had been trimmed by shears or scissors. The former were rare in the pre- Roman period, and the latter unknown; but both were used in Roman Britain.

There remains the matter of the mistletoe pollen in the man's stomach. As seen, the Museum's notice still draws attention to its presence as reinforcing the verdict of ritual killing, and so did the 1986 report. Once again, a literary text lies behind the interpretation, this time Pliny's famous assertion that mistletoe was particularly sacred to the Iron Age Druids of Gaul. In 1995, however, the Museum's own second report on the bodies declared that it was unlikely that the contents of the stomachs or guts of either had any ritual significance. The pollen in Lindow Man himself amounted to just four grains, too few to have been consumed in a drink. It might have come from flowering plants and been either breathed into his mouth or blown onto his food before he ate it.

All this data is in the public domain, and most of it has been so for several years. It is possible that references to Lindow Man have as a result become less common in the works put out by British archaeologists. Nonetheless, they still appear, with the traditional intepretative framework, and to the best of my knowledge not one specialist in the Iron Age has printed either a critique or a reasoned defence of the latter. A seven-part account of the development of Britain, supposedly based on the latest archaeological and historical thinking, was televised by Channel 4 late last year.

In the episode on the Iron Age, a justly respected expert in the period repeated the traditional interpretation of the Lindow body, as established fact and with complete confidence, and the commentary naturally supported him.

As a matter of professional ethics, this situation must not be allowed to

persist, and there are two different ways out of it. One is to expunge references to Lindow Man from works on Iron Age ritual and remove him from display, as so many challenges can now be mounted to the established interpretation of him. This procedure would be consistent with the attitude that produced the interpretation concerned, and which proclaimed the growing power of archaeology, equipped with ever greater technological resources and expertise, to recover the truth of the past. It was an approach rooted in the earliest years of the discipline, and depended on dramatic discoveries that could be presented to the public in vindication of that increasing prowess. Lindow Man was one of the latest of these and, to play by the same rules, he must now be rejected with the same authoritative confidence as that with which he was originally presented. Only thus can knowledge continue to advance and professional competence be sustained.

There is, however, a different solution which is more in harmony with altering approaches to history and prehistory. This would recognize that the bodies from the Moss are now susceptible to use in a range of reconstructed pasts. The man himself may have been a willing or a reluctant human sacrifice, a member of or a stranger to the people who put him into the bog, a victim of violent crime or an individual executed (justly or not) for an offence himself. He may have been Iron Age, Romano-British or post-Roman, and so can feature in the work of specialists of any of those periods. He can be used to exemplify the triumphs or failures, the potential or the limitations, of recent archaeology. How the notice beside the exhibit in Room 50 can be adjusted to take account of such an approach is an interesting problem; but the solution of it should be well within the powers of the nation's foremost museum.

Source: **The Times Literary Supplement**
Issue Date: **Friday January 30, 2004**