

Bog Bodies

*Tracing Human Narratives Through
Interdisciplinary Methodology*



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It came seemingly out of nowhere, the massive rogue bog that inched across North Long Lake in Brainerd, Minnesota. Home to a sizable tamarack stand, the thousand-ton bog broke free from the shoreline and wandered around the lake, crashing into a dock and a boat. Locals were astounded by its swiftness, as it traveled over 2 miles in just a few days, circumnavigating the lake.

Bogs have captivated the human imagination for more than such strange wanderings. Found across the world, bogs inhabit a marginal space that is neither completely saturated, nor wholly solid land. In fact, they are characterized by layers of acidic water, spongy peat (partially decayed organic material), and sphagnum moss. They get most of their water from precipitation, rather than from groundwater or runoff. Consequently, they have very few of the nutrients necessary for plant growth. These acidic, low-oxygenated landscapes are formed in two ways: terrestrialization and paludification. Terrestrialization occurs when the sphagnum moss slowly grows over a lake or pond and begins to fill it, whereas paludification happens when sphagnum moss starts to cover dry land and prevents water from escaping the surface. In both instances, as the moss continues to grow, the acidic peat deposits begin to build up over thousands of years.

The aura of instability around the bog has personified it as both peculiar and spiritual, and even as evil or malignant. It is within this uncanny ecosystem that emerges perhaps the most revered image of the bog—the bog body. A bog body is a preserved human cadaver that has been mummified in the anaerobic, highly-acidic, low-temperature bog environment. These preserved human specimens date back to 8000 BCE (e.g. the skeleton of the Koelbjerg Man from Denmark) and up to World War II (e.g. entirely preserved Russian fighter pilots killed in the wetlands), though most are dated to the Iron Age (500 BCE–100 CE) in Northern Europe.

Throughout history, particularly in the Iron Age, bogs were considered sacred places of worship, and bodies were thrown into bogs for punishment or ritualistic purposes. At this time, northern Europe was shrouded in dense forest canopies. In comparison, the bog was a relatively wide-open and murky landscape, a mystical borderland. Thus, scholars think that bodies entombed in bogs are sacrificial objects. The main form of interpreting the history of the bog bodies, and the communities the bodies lived in, is the striking physical record of the bodies themselves. Most of the corpses do not seem to have reached their end by natural causes—for many, theirs was a gruesome death by stabbing, hanging, or other violent means.

Intimate physical details are retained because a body in a bog decays very slowly. Once deposited into a bog, acid begins to tan the body, giving it a leathery appearance. Over time, sphagnum moss dies and frees sphagnum, a carbohydrate polymer. Sphagnum extracts calcium from the body's bones and breaks them down, which makes the corpse look deflated. However, the sphagnum binds with nitrogen, which stops bacterial growth and preserves the corpse's bodily attributes, down to fingerprints, nails, facial features, and internal organs. The detailed preservation of the bodies lends them incredibly lifelike auras. *The Smithsonian Magazine's* Joshua Levin describes viewing one bog body, the Tollund Man, found in Silkeborg Denmark's Bjaeldskovdal bog: "What really gets you is his lovely face with its closed eyes and lightly stubbled chin. It is disconcertingly peaceful...You'd swear he's smiling, as if he's been dreaming sweetly for all those centuries."

Because of the exceptionally lifelike nature that Levinson describes, bog bodies stir the literary and historical imagination, giving us physical, seemingly immediate unfettered insight into lives of people

from thousands of years ago. We persistently ask questions about the bog bodies even as our scientific methods paint clearer pictures of who the bog bodies were when they were alive. Bog bodies grip our imaginations and submerge our minds in the muddy, turbid waters of the bog. "They are so alarmingly normal, these bog folk," Levinson writes. In effect, the bog bodies make us identify with them in a way that other mummified corpses are unable to do.

Karin Sanders, Professor of Danish Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, provides a frame for understanding this incessant curiosity with bog bodies in her book *Bodies in the Bog*. "I suggest...that we see bog bodies as unique go-betweens on many fronts, straddling not only the binaries of time and space, past and present, text and image, and ethics and aesthetics, but also the disciplinary boundaries between

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archaeology, history, literary studies, and art history." In this way, the bog bodies ask for an interdisciplinary methodology that uses literary reading and method-driven archaeological and historical examinations to raise questions about the existence of the many binaries Sanders presents.

Additionally, Sanders addresses how bog bodies occupy the same fluctuating temporal and physical space as the bog environment that is in constant movement and growth. The bog body is both seen as archaeological material and a human being. When the body is seemingly born again out of the layers of peat as a scientifically preserved specimen that will sit in a museum, a tension arises between this establishment of the bog body as an inanimate object, yet also a human being. Thus, the bodies are, as Sanders elucidates, "estranged from us even as they mirror us."

Moreover, in the process of being unearthed, the bog body regains personal pronouns. However, almost all bog bodies are still assigned place names, such as the Tollund Man, Grauballe Man, or Lindow Man, all named after villages near where the bodies were found. Bog bodies persistently occupy a middle ground where they are both human and thing. In this gray borderland, the bog body serves as a site for unraveling human narratives.

Gaston Bachelard, a French philosopher, suggests that bogs are an active and creative agent in the material imagination. Likewise, the bog body, as a narrative landscape, offers a space for interdisciplinary imagination and thought. As Anthony Purdy, a Canadian literary scholar, ascertains, the bog body becomes an agent of personal and cultural memory.

Bog bodies offer a way to shake up strict disciplinary thinking. Instead of approaching a matter strictly via scientific or archaeological methodology, bog bodies and the bog landscapes they come from force us to release our tight intellectual grip on the paradigms and dogmas we have come to accept as truth. In their refusal to be strictly defined or imagined, the bodies give us a way to think differently, ask new questions, and delve into uncertainty. ●

If you're interested in learning more about bog bodies, check out Jeanie Evers' article "Bog" published in *National Geographic's* September 2012 issue.