



The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved

Peter Vilhelm Glob , Elizabeth Wayland Barber (Introduction) , Paul Barber (Introduction)

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One spring morning two men cutting peat in a Danish bog uncovered a well-preserved body of a man with a noose around his neck. Thinking they had stumbled upon a murder victim, they reported their discovery to the police, who were baffled until they consulted the famous archaeologist P.V. Glob. Glob identified the body as that of a two-thousand-year-old man, ritually murdered and thrown in the bog as a sacrifice to the goddess of fertility.

Written in the guise of a scientific detective story, this classic of archaeological history--a best-seller when it was published in England but out of print for many years--is a thoroughly engrossing and still reliable account of the religion, culture, and daily life of the European Iron Age.

Includes 76 black-and-white photographs.

The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved Details

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Neil says

Dear Professor Glob,

Unfortunately, I was disappointed in your book. I regret having to tell you because you obviously worked very hard on it. The subject was fascinating, but the text read like an autopsy report. Sadly, it only became exciting for a brief time in the last chapter. Better luck next time.

Very Truly Yours,

Neil

Fox says

I got this book at the Darnestown Presbyterian church bazaar last year, along with a few others. The book was in fairly good condition, and on intriguing enough a topic for me to be eager to read it and see just what new information I might learn.

As previous reviewers have noted, this book is charming from the outset. It's dedicated to a group of schoolgirls who wrote the author inquiring for more information about the bog bodies. The author wrote this book by way of offering it up to them - a long letter of sorts. This book is focused firmly in facts, and for the Iron Age civilization draws heavily from Tacitus's Germani, within reason. It's less speculative than the other book I read on the topic, but is charming for its straightforward approach.

The pictures would've benefited from a color release, but are startlingly vivid even in black and white. Apart from a few typos the translation was great. The book was nowhere near as dated as I expected it to be. I found myself rather liking the Nerthus hypothesis in the end.

Jan-Maat says

The best thing about this book is that it was dedicated to a group of fairly young English school girls who wrote to Glob in 1962 as follows:

Dear Doctor Glob,

We were very interested in the Tollund Man. We learned about him in history. We would like to know where he is now because we want to visit him when we are older. We have been told that you are very busy and so we hope you do not mind our bothering you but we would like to know more about him (p.16)

The nature of the life of a Danish museum director in the early 1960s was such that it took him a couple of years to get round to finishing this book which serves as a reply to their interest.

The strength of the book is that it was written with that particular audience in mind and leads from fairly detailed discussions of the then recently discovered Tollund Man and Grauballe Man, to a general overview of Bog Bodies in Denmark, then in Europe generally, followed by chapters on life in the Iron Age, one on the presumed beliefs and worship of the time and how that was believed to relate to the bog bodies.

Naturally this is also a weakness, perhaps out of a desire to tell a complete story, Glob's account is eventually speculative and uncritical - but then since the idea that bog bodies were sacrificial victims seems as far as I can tell to be the Orthodoxy I am quite probably over suspicious here.

We're on solid ground in the opening two chapters. There is technical detail - the weight of the stomach contents, how the bodies were prepared for conservation by the museums, lovely black and white photographs showing the stubble on the chin, the lines on the hands and feet as clear and distinct on a body two thousand years old as on my own. The survival and quality of the bog body depends on the bog in which it was sunk. If the water was too acidic then even the bones would dissolve, just leaving a skin bag (possibly water acidity is why some of the bodies are found naked or near naked). If the water wasn't deep enough then only well covered parts of the body were properly preserved.

Over the centuries the weight of the peat could damage the remains, and since many of the bodies were discovered by peat cutters the corpse might show spade inflicted injuries too. With Tollund man the decision was taken to only preserve the head (view spoiler) unfortunately due to the method used, the head shrunk by 12%. This encouraged curators to use a different method with Grauballe man which was to tan the body in a giant vat of oak chips.

The middle chapters in my opinion lack a statistical analysis, there are some crude numbers of how many bodies were found where but not enough detail to support or undermine a theory. But then again this was a book written in response to the natural and innocent desire of school girls to know about leathery dead bodies, and not a book written to quieten the minds of irritable people.

The reliance on the Gundestrup Cauldron as evidence of Iron Age Danish beliefs in the last chapter bothered me since the cauldron is generally thought not to have been made in Denmark at all (France or Bulgaria are apparently leading contenders) and so strikes me as reliable an insight to the spiritual life of ancient Denmark as the cement Buddhas on sale in UK garden centres do to the faith of modern Britons.

Perhaps the need to categorise the bog bodies into sacrificial victims (which eventually is Glob's approach), or people punished for particular crimes as Tacitus described in Germania, or as chance murder victims is the problem, particularly since Glob's generation and later were writing after Frazer had drilled in to the collective academic unconscious via The Golden Bough how far religion could be traced back to the regular execution of a king to ensure the fertility of the soil and the fecundity of the harvest and how in the world after Freud we have the luxury of not having to take seriously the conscious reasons and motivations that we give to ourselves to explain why we do what we do. Perhaps the categories themselves hinder more than they explain.

Late in his book Glob mentions one of the medieval bog bodies, Bocksten Man, dated (on the basis of his clothing) to around 1360 AD and found in Sweden. This Glob is confident was a case of murder. Yet like some of the prehistoric bog bodies and as per Tacitus he had been pinned down into the bog with birch stakes, and an oak stake had been driven through his heart. Finally the bog in which he had been dumped was at the boundary point where four parishes met.

From the point of view of murder this was all very practical, pin the body down under the water so no-one

will find it (well not for a few hundred years at least), and a good stake through the heart generally tends to be fatal, dumped at parish boundaries away from settlements is well out of sight and out of mind (similar thoughts seem to have crossed the minds of the people who dump piles of old kitchen units that I come across from time to time close to local council boundaries). Yet at the same time the bog is a liminal place, neither land nor water, the stake through the heart familiar from all kinds of folklore, the pinning down an echo of ancestral practise. Making a division between the spiritual and the practical is perhaps unhelpful when our own actions are boggy neither truly wet nor dry and I'm left with my familiar unease at how we view people at once distant yet in the case of the bog bodies very close to ourselves at the same time. An alien would no doubt see the common daubings hereabouts of erect phalluses ejaculating seed as evidence of a vigorous and widespread fertility cult noting in passing that many of the markings were made on Friday nights - sacred to the ancient fertility God Frey and the night of course ruled over by the feminine moon whose waxing and waning suggest pregnancy and the menstrual cycle, while from within our culture we'd view such things as graffiti and vandalism. There's a tendency, it seems to me, for Archaeologists to over interpret and to turn a figurine definitively into a religion and evidence of cult practise.

Despite that I like this old book, the scholarship has moved on, new bodies have been discovered, the older ones reinvestigated (view spoiler), particularly for its fine black and white photographs which provide the same sense of connection and kinship that I otherwise get from seeing these elderly ladies and gentlemen in museum cabinets.

Something else I like about this book is the distance between Glob's time and our present. His was still a post war world in which smallholders would dig out peat to heat their own homes and a crowd of volunteers (one man dying in the process) would be needed to extract the body while museum staff would argue with the station master over the tariff to pay to have the leathery remains carried across the country. Books and bodies both a window to our past.

Mel says

I remember reading this as a kid. It was one of those interesting books that was on my parent's book shelf. I didn't remember anything about it so I re-read it. I got my copy from the library and someone had sliced two pages out of it. (sadly an all too common occurrence in library books that have interesting photos) Luckily I think I only missed one page of writing. I was able to carry on with reading without missing too much.

This was not a hard read and provided much information about people who were found in a bog in Denmark. This is also an older book so I would like to see updated research on this subject matter. I only gave it four stars cause it was an older book so not sure how up to date the theories are and I added it to my best reads pile. The photos of the nearly perfectly preserved people are fascinating.

Lynne King says

This book is a must read for those with a scientific inclination towards a detective viewpoint of the Iron and Bronze age people found preserved within the peat bogs in Denmark.

I admit that the title is not the most exciting but still it did intrigue me and sent me on a wonderful fact finding mission on life, via the bog people, in the Iron and Bronze Ages.

The attention to detail is magnificent and the seventy-six black and white plates present a remarkable testimony of the life and final deaths of these people, be it for religious reasons, murder, such as decapitation, etc.

The author Glob was "most noted for his investigations of Denmark's bog bodies such as Tollund Man and Grauballe Man -- mummified remains of Iron and Bronze Age people found preserved within peat bogs."

A most amazing and highly recommended book.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

I'm not generally into archaeology/anthropology, but this intrigued me. These bodies were found in bogs, mostly in Denmark. The acidic water in the bogs preserved the bodies so well that people who found them thought they were recent murder victims and often called the police! Turns out they were 2,000 years old, from the Iron Age. The photos are amazing. Except for the darkened skin from the tannins in the water, some of these people look like they're just sleeping. Even their brains and eyeballs were preserved. COOL! From the objects found with the bodies, experts were able to determine that many of these people were ritual human sacrifices to appease the fertility goddess so she would provide an abundant harvest.

My modern-day version of this book will feature discoveries of people mummified in front of their computers. The Blog People :-)

Suvi says

One of my (weird) dreams is to see mummies and bog bodies lying on their museum beds. There's just something utterly chilling and amazing that we have an opportunity to see a person who lived thousands of years ago. When I was a lot younger I watched a documentary about bog bodies which made me utterly fascinated with the subject. Then I saw a picture of a little girl, Rosalia Lombardo. It creeped me out from these things for a while, but now I'm older so I think I can handle it. Although she still makes me kind of sad and the thought of barging into the chapel and taking a picture is inappropriate.

Edited 31.7.2012 Well, it was definitely interesting, even though I'm still leaning towards Egyptian mummies in my interests regarding creepy wrinkled people (British Museum, I finally conquered you during the summer of 2011). This was still fascinating, though. Most of the bog bodies found in Denmark seemed to have marks of violence, like a rope around the neck or their throats slashed. There might have been a few people who accidentally drowned into the marshes or they were murdered and hidden, but most were apparently human sacrifices for the fertility goddess.

Plus, there were were lots of pictures. Black and white, unfortunately, but still pretty great. The text was dated and a bit jumbled, and I didn't get the prologue about the letters, but overall worth the read.

Scott says

Glob's *Bog People* (1965) is well illustrated, finely detailed, and absolutely gruesome. I've never really given much thought to what happened to the bodies of all the millions and millions who died in antiquity. I figured they turned to dust and disappeared. But Professor Glob shows us that with the right conditions - acidic water in an anaerobic environment - human hair and skin can last millennia. While bones and cloth dissolve in peaty bogs, skin and organs react benignly with the tannic acids. What results is the leathery sheath of a body. Discovered centuries after their demise, these human "bags" retain the same expressions they took to their soggy graves. These semi-serene countenances, preserved for thousands of years under peat and now carefully displayed under glass, have made the bog people some of the most popular exhibits in the greatest museums of the world.

Glob's minute study of the remains of these bodies will interest those who find autopsies entertaining. Without a doubt, his first three or four reports with their painstaking descriptions of the length of the hair, the color of the irises, or the partially digested contents of the stomach and large intestine are interesting. By the tenth, you too may feel bloated. This is not a book to be savored right after supper.

Interspersed with the dissection of the bits and pieces are brief allusions to the culture of the Iron Age. Tantalizing? Yes! but also disappointing. Glob doesn't make strong links between the body on the dissecting table and the world of Iron Age Germania. It turns out that the bodies themselves give us few clues as to who these people were, how they lived, and how they came to be buried in a bog. To respond to these perplexing questions, Glob has to turn to already well-known classical sources: Caesar, Tacitus, Ptolemy, Strabo. Relying on these accounts, none of which are principally concerned with the northern Germani, Glob concludes that most of the bog people were willing human victims ritually sacrificed to a fertility goddess. Others appear to have been criminals or transgressors of social taboos who paid for their sins by being staked into the bog. Whether they were alive or already dead when their bodies were pinned to the peat remains unclear. In the end, the bog bodies, their manner of death, and burial offer some validation of the anecdotes recorded in the classical sources, but they don't really help us see the world of Iron Age Germania more clearly.

The most disturbing part of the book, though, may be the dedication. *Bog People* was written for fifteen English schoolgirls from the Convent of the Assumption, Bury St. Edmunds. They learned of the bog men in their history course and then wrote to Glob for further information. His response was this book, a "long letter" as he calls it, dedicated to his "dear young girls," who entertained an interest in how well the bog people "have kept." I shiver to think how the young scholars, and their mistress, received Glob's ghastly conclusion. Ewwwwwwwwww!

Michele says

The bog people comprise a fascinating aspect of naturally formed mummies from the Iron-Age. P.V. Glob introduces the Tollund and Grauballe men in the first two chapters before expanding to other individuals found in and outside of Denmark. In the last two chapters, Glob draws in historical accounts - Tacitus, for example - of the Germani people and then presents archaeological evidence, particularly with regards to hypothesizing that the bog people were sacrifices to the female goddess, Nerthus. It is a compelling argument; one I'll enjoy investigating with the more recent book, "Bog Bodies Uncovered: Solving Europe's

Ancient Mystery" by Miranda Aldhouse-Green.

Glob's written voice is engaging, sprinkled with some technical concepts and a dash of European wit. It is that tone that successfully straddles armchair enthusiast and level 100 coursework. The chapters are well organized and with each, Glob builds a foundation of understanding and appreciation for bog people. Thankfully he is generous with photographs, however, given the age of this book's release (1971), all of illustrations are in black and white.

This is a seminal work on bog people and Glob is a significant scholar in this area. Additionally, this book is one that Aldhouse-Green references in her own book, so I was anxious to read Glob's book first before reading anymore of "Bob Bodies Uncovered."

Kobe Bryant says

We have so much to learn from the bog people

Duntay says

I can't even remember the first time I picked up this book.. I hold Prof Glob responsible for my becoming an archaeologist. My husband holds him responsible for being dragged to museums through Europe to see leathery dead people.

Jasmine says

Read this as part of my research for university. Really insightful but the pictures were so grim ?

Jennifer says

I came to this through re-reading some of Seamus Heaney's poetry, who is fascinated by the bog people, and decided that I wanted to know more too. I have to admit I skipped over the numerous soil analysis passages, but apart from that I found this a very engaging book about something that both repels and amazes me (some of the 2,000 year old bodies were so well preserved that they still had fingerprints!). I also think that Mr Glob has the perfect name for a bog body expert, and that made me quite fond of him from the beginning.

Alissa says

I feel like I must explain my rating for this book a little. I came across the title of this book referenced in another book that I finished recently. The topic piqued my interest so I thought I would give it a try. The subject was fascinating. I had never heard of these discoveries in the Bogs of Europe. Finding bodies that are 2000 years old amazingly preserved? I had to know how this could happen!

As I read, my question was answered, but the writing was a bit dry, and because of when this book was published (1960's) the pictures were all in black and white and scientific methods of studying these people are not as advanced as they are today. These days one can go online and find much more up-to-date information on this subject. I found a National Geographic article from just last year--more accurate information and much better pictures. That's why this book is just ok for me even though in it's time it would have been quite the popular read. Especially for the creepy factor.

Jacopo Turini says

Bellaghy, nella contea di Derry, è una cittadina pervasa dall'odore affumicato della torba. C'è anche una statua, the Turf Man, dedicata proprio al taglio dei mattoncini di torba da bruciare. A Bellaghy c'è anche il museo di Seamus Heaney, che è il motivo per cui ho letto *The Bog People* di P.V. Glob, testo di ispirazione per *North*, il quarto libro di Heaney. Visitando il museo mi è capitato di destare la curiosità sia del personale che degli altri visitatori, perché ero giunto fin lì da molto lontano. Una famiglia del luogo mi ha offerto il caffè; erano due signori anziani in visita con la figlia e il genero. Era una famiglia mista, per quello che può valere un discorso del genere in Irlanda del Nord. La signora, al sentirmi dire Derry, mi corresse in LondonDerry. Il genero si affrettò a dirmi che invece lui era di Dublino. Tutt'attorno a Bellaghy i cartelli stradali avevano London raschiata via. Il genero mi disse anche che lui di poesia non capiva molto, ma gli piaceva Heaney perché anche lui a sua volta aveva avuto un padre che tagliava la torba, a Sud, e ritrovava quindi molte sensazioni familiari, molti ricordi. Questa volta anche gli altri erano d'accordo e potevano raccontarmi le stesse cose. La torba era parte di tutti loro.

Ecco una parte del racconto dell'estrazione dell'uomo di Tollund:

The soft surface of the bog made it impossible to bring up a crane up to the spot, and everything had to be done by hand. This was not accomplished without loss. One of the helpers overstrained himself and collapsed with a heart attack. The bog claimed a life for a life; or, as some may prefer to think, the old gods took a modern man in place of the man from the past.

(E ancora, la conclusione:

At the same time, through their sacrificial deaths, they were themselves consecrated for all the time to Nerthus, goddess of fertility - to Mother Earth, who in return so often gave their faces her blessing and preserved them through the millennia)
