

RESOURCE

ARTICLE

Bog Bodies

Bog bodies—mummified corpses still intact 2,000 years after their death—offer questions and clues about life and death in Iron Age Europe.

GRADES

9 - 12+

SUBJECTS

Chemistry, Earth Science, Geography, Human Geography, Social Studies, World History



IMAGE

Tollund Man

Black and white photograph of a long-deceased man found in a northern European bog.

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BACKGROUND INFO

VOCABULARY

QUESTIONS

The bog bodies examined in this video are victims. Violently killed thousands of years ago, these corpses of men, women, and children have been naturally preserved by the unique chemistry of Northern Europe's bogs. Today, archaeologists and anthropologists are acting as crime-scene investigators. They're using their knowledge of chemistry, geology, and human behavior to better understand the circumstances that led to these gruesome deaths. Watch this four-minute video from the National Geographic Channel (below), shot on location in a Danish bog, then discuss the questions in the Questions tab.

Instructional Ideas

Consult <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/standards/national-geography-standards/>

What physical characteristics of Northern European bogs helped preserve

the “bog bodies”?

- Sphagnum moss interacts with peat and water to create an “antiseptic” bog environment that one expert calls “the secret behind the bog bodies.”
- How bog bodies are different from other mummies is explored more fully in Question 1.

Consult <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/standards/national-geography-standards/>

Most bog bodies recovered in Ireland have been discovered on the borders of ancient Irish kingdoms. Do students think this is a coincidence?

- Many anthropologists think it is a coincidence. However, at least one historian thinks the locations may hint at royal sacrifice. A theory concerning the placement of Irish bog bodies is more fully explored in Question 1.

Consult <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/standards/national-geography-standards/>

What factors do students think contributed to the deaths of the bodies in the bogs?

- Victims may have been killed to appease the “fertility goddesses that Celtic and Germanic peoples believed held the power of life and death. It could have happened one winter after a bad harvest, the researchers say. People were hungry, reduced to eating chaff and weeds. They believed that one of their number had to die so the rest could survive.”
- The rituals archaeologists think are associated with the bog bodies are more fully explored in Question 2.

- Most bog bodies are found in Northern Europe. However, peat ponds in the U.S. state of Florida have also preserved the skeletons of ancient Native Americans.

FAST FACT

- The oldest bog body yet discovered is that of Koelbjerg Woman. This 25-year-old Danish woman died around 8,000 B.C.E.

FAST FACT

- In 1976, Danish police successfully took fingerprints of Tollund Man, probably the world's most famous bog body and the one shown in the video. At more than 2,300 years old, these are the oldest fingerprints on record!

FAST FACT

- Many bog bodies are so well preserved scientists can tell what they ate for their last meal. Most had cereals (such as wheat or rye) or bread, and a few had meat.

FAST FACT

- The hair on most bog bodies is red. They weren't all redheads, however—the color is a result of hair's chemical reaction with the acidic water in the bog. Scientists don't know the actual color of the mummies' hair.

FAST FACT

- Not all bog bodies are ancient. The pristine bodies of Russian soldiers killed during World War II were discovered in Polish bogs in the 1990s.

Video

Bog Mummies | Explore: Mystery of the Mummy Murders

PBS: Nova—The Perfect Corpse: Tollund Man

PBS: Nova—The Perfect Corpse: Bog Bodies of the Iron Age

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