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VIDEO

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

For the complete videos with media resources, visit:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/bog-bodies/>

Most bog bodies are victims. Violently killed thousands of years ago, the 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 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, then discuss the questions in the Questions tab.

Questions

- What are some differences between Europe's bog bodies and their more glamorous cousins, Egyptian mummies?

Bog bodies are “accidental mummies,” preserved by the natural chemistry of the bog. **Egyptian mummies, on the other hand, were intentionally preserved** in a complicated process developed over time by experts.

Another difference between bog bodies and Egyptian mummies is the bodies themselves. **Bog bodies are anonymous victims of ritual sacrifice. Egyptian mummies are mostly royalty or high-ranking officials** honored with fantastic splendor.

Archaeologists are challenging the second assumption, however. According to one expert quoted in *National Geographic* magazine, all the bog bodies discovered in Ireland “were buried on borders between ancient Irish kingdoms. In ancient times . . . Irish kings symbolically married the fertility goddess; famine meant the goddess had turned against the king and had to be mollified.” Bog bodies may have “represented the most splendid of offerings: high-ranking hostages taken to force rebellious lords into obedience, pretenders to the throne, or even the failed kings themselves.”

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Why do you think Iron Age communities allowed these people to be killed?

Answers will vary! Originally, many historians thought bog bodies were the remains of criminals, killed as punishment for crimes against society. According to *National Geographic* magazine, these theories were largely discounted after an archaeologist discovered that Windeby Girl, a bog body supposedly killed for adultery and buried near her lover, was actually a man and the body of “her” “lover” was 1,000 years older.

Today, most archaeologists think the bodies were **victims of ritual sacrifice**. Community members most likely chose a victim days ahead of time, with the victim’s full knowledge. Victims were walked to the bog, then killed: throat slit, stabbed, strangled, beaten to death or, in at least one case, decapitated.

In the video, Iron Age Europe is depicted as a superstitious and “harsh world, filled with uncertainty, foreign invasion, and premature death.” Victims may have been killed to ward off some of these hardships.

Victims may have also 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.”

Fast Facts

- Most bog bodies are found in Northern Europe. However, peat ponds in Florida have also preserved the skeletons of ancient Native Americans.
- The oldest bog body yet discovered is that of Koelbjerg Woman. This 25-year-old Danish woman died around 8000 BCE.
- 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 2300 years old, these are the oldest fingerprints on record!
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

Vocabulary

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
anonymous	<i>adjective,</i> <i>noun</i>	unknown person or contributor.
anthropologist	<i>noun</i>	person who studies cultures and characteristics of communities and civilizations.
archaeologist	<i>noun</i>	person who studies artifacts and lifestyles of ancient cultures.
bog	<i>noun</i>	wetland of soft ground made mostly of decaying plant matter.
bog body	<i>noun</i>	prehistoric remains of a person, preserved and discovered in a wetland bog.

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
chemistry	<i>noun</i>	study of the atoms and molecules that make up different substances.
circumstance	<i>noun</i>	condition or situation.
corpse	<i>noun</i>	dead body.
fertility	<i>noun</i>	capacity of soil to sustain plant growth; or the average number of children born to women in a given population.
geology	<i>noun</i>	study of the physical history of the Earth, its composition, its structure, and the processes that form and change it.
gruesome	<i>adjective</i>	gross or violent.
harvest	<i>noun</i>	the gathering and collection of crops, including both plants and animals.
invasion	<i>noun</i>	an attack or move to take possession.
Iron Age	<i>noun</i>	last of the prehistoric "three ages," following the Stone Age and the Bronze Age, marked by the use of iron for industry.
mummy	<i>noun</i>	corpse of a person or animal that has been preserved by natural environmental conditions or human techniques.
ritual	<i>noun</i>	series of customs or procedures for a ceremony, often religious.
sacrifice	<i>noun</i>	destruction or surrender of something as way of honoring or showing thanks.
superstitious	<i>adjective</i>	influenced by legends, spirits, or stories of the supernatural.

Images

- [National Geographic Magazine: Tales from the Bog—Photo Gallery](#)

Interactives

- [PBS: Nova—The Perfect Corpse: Tollund Man](#)

Maps

- [PBS: Nova—The Perfect Corpse: Bog Bodies of the Iron Age](#)

