

Bog Bodies –

a brief Survey of Interpretations

by ELISABETH MUNKSGAARD

“Bog bodies” is a term for human bodies found in acidic raised bogs which have a conserving effect on materials containing keratin (skin, hair, nails, wool, and leather), but which decalcinate bones. The find group is therefore unified only by a common means of preservation, and the term implies nothing about date, nor about how the people ended up in the bogs. It can also be shown that bog bodies occur everywhere where this particular preservative context exists, and from all periods from the later Stone Age to most recent times (Dieck 1965 p. 34f.; Allan Lund 1976; see also Andersen and Geertinger, this volume).

The woman’s body, Borremose III, was found in 1948 during peat-digging in Borremose in Himmerland, where already two bog bodies had been found through post-war peat-digging (K. Thorvildsen 1947 p. 57ff.; E. Thorvildsen 1952 p. 32ff.). The dead woman lay face-down in the bog, laid in her woollen skirt, which lay doubled over on the short side with the fringes facing downwards, and was pulled right up under her arms. The skirt enveloped the body rather like a loose cover on a book (Andersen and Geertinger fig. 1). The woollen skirt was a woven twill, measuring about 180 × 120 cm. All four weaving-borders are preserved, i.e. the starting- and finishing-borders, and both selvages. The skirt has fringes 2 cm. long on either short edge (Munksgaard 1974 p. 140). The skirt has an oblique fold at about the middle of the short edge, and two groups of small holes are found on either side of this. Remains of a leather strip which had been used as a lace or girdle lay in the fold, bound through the holes. When the skirt is folded so that the two groups of holes meet, the waist measures about 70–75 cm. (fig. 1).

The Borremose woman is C 14-dated to about 770 B.C., and the bog bodies or their accessories, e.g. animal skin capes, that are C 14-dated run over a period from the 9th. to the end of the 1st. centuries B.C. (Tauber 1979 p. 73ff.). However, very few bog bodies

are C 14-dated, and there are many exceptions (cf. the introductory words about bog bodies as a find group).

Although bog bodies appear from all periods, they have nevertheless many common characteristics (we

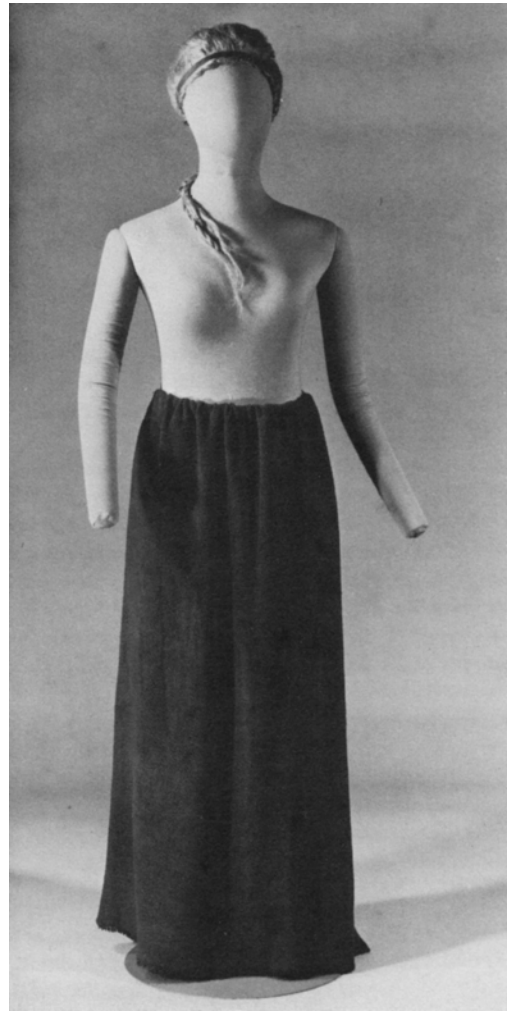


Fig. 1. The woollen skirt from Borremose III placed on a manikin in the National Museum’s exhibition of costumes and textiles of the early Iron Age.

must naturally exclude here those cases which are certainly the results of accidents). The deceased are virtually never clothed, although a costume may be laid beside them. The deceased are found enveloped, like the Borremose woman, in a skirt, a cloak, or an animal-skin cape. Sometimes the women have had their hair cut off, and the men are usually short-haired and always beardless. Exceptions to this general unclothed state are the two medieval bog bodies from Skjoldehamn in northern Norway (G. Gjessing 1938 p. 28ff.) and Bocksten in Halland (Sandklef 1937 p. 1ff.). The Skjoldehamn man was clothed, but lay on a reindeer skin, and was rolled up in a blanket. The bodies often show signs of external violence, such as hanging, decapitation, or throat-cutting, and staking-down is often observed. This might have a practical significance in preventing the body from floating up to the surface, if, for example, it was thrown down into a water-filled peat cutting, but it could also be a ritualistic procedure to prevent the dead from walking again. In other cases the deceased appear to be partially covered with sticks or logs. Decapitated heads also are found, as, for example, from Roum in Djursland and Stidsholt in Vendsyssel. The Roum head was at first thought to be female because of its graceful features, but traces of beard stubble indicate that it is male. The Stidsholt head by contrast is female (fig. 2), with the hair tied up, as is also seen on three other bog bodies: Store Arden in Himmerland, Huldremose in Djursland, and Haraldskær near Vejle (Munksgaard 1976 p. 5ff.).

Not all bog bodies are well-preserved or particularly nice to look at. The much damaged bog body from Borremose known as Borremose II was found in 1947. It was first thought to be male and published as such (E. Thorvildsen 1952 p. 32ff.), although the items of costume seem to indicate that this is a woman. After various considerations this body has also subsequently changed sex. The costume consists of a skirt of four-shaft twill, corresponding closely to Borremose III in size and fashion, and a long, fringed shawl – typical early Iron Age woman's costume (fig. 3). This is known from the above-mentioned bog bodies from Store Arden and Huldremose (Munksgaard 1974 p. 136ff.). The body is C 14-dated to 475 B.C. But the skirt has also been used as a man's cape, as can be seen from the pinholes by the edge and signs of wear in the middle¹ (fig. 4).

Research into the interpretation of the bog bodies

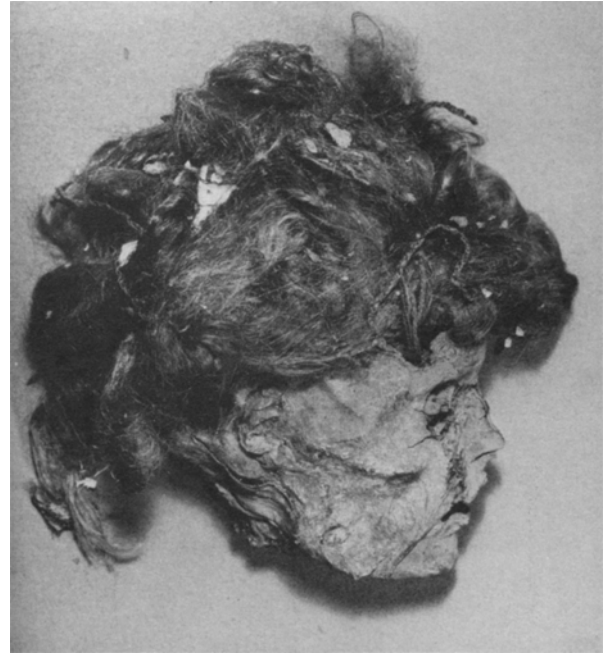


Fig. 2. The decapitated head from Stidsholt in Vendsyssel, found in the last century. The head has shrunk significantly because of internal drying.

can be divided into two camps, one which prefers the sacrifice-theory (Glob 1965; E. Thorvildsen 1952), and another which prefers the punishment-theory (Dieck 1965 p. 34f; Allan Lund 1976; see also Andersen and Geertinger, this volume). Tacitus' *Germania*, of the 1st. century A.D.,² is used to support an interpretation of the bog bodies as sacrifices to Odin, as Tacitus writes in chapter 9,1:

'Above all other gods they worship Mercury, and count it no sin, on certain feast-days, to include human victims in the sacrifices offered to him.'

In Chapter 39,2, Tacitus writes of the Semnones, a Germanic folk group who lived between the Elbe and the Oder:

'At a set time, deputations from all the tribes of the same stock gather in a grove hallowed by the auguries of their ancestors and by immemorial awe. The sacrifice of a human victim in the name of all marks the grisly opening of their savage ritual.'

In a third place, Chapter 40,5, Tacitus refers to the Germanic groups who worship the goddess Nerthus (Mother Earth). She drives around amongst her adherents in a wagon drawn by oxen, hidden under a cloth. On her return to the sacred grove, which lies on an island in the Ocean:



Fig. 3. The fringed shawl from Borremose II placed on a manikin in the National Museum's case of costumes of the early Iron Age. The stretched edges with the pin-holes meet on the breast, and the fringes show wear by the wrists.

'... the chariot, the vestments, and (believe it if you will) the goddess herself, are cleansed in a secluded lake. This service is performed by slaves who are immediately afterwards drowned in the lake.'

But a lake is a rather different thing from a raised bog (see Andersen and Geertinger, this volume).

A late source, Thietmar of Merseburg, in the 11th. century, also mentions human sacrifices to Odin, in his description of the sacrificial grove at Lejre, but none of these sources state that the sacrificed ended up in a bog. All that is said is that "human sacrifices" were "slain", while Thietmar also refers to hanging in a sacred grove.

The human sacrifices which are known from the early Iron Age are essentially different from the bog bodies in

that they are always found accompanied by domestic animals, pottery, or sometimes parts of wagons. Such sacrificial bogs are sunken bogs, which were very likely open lakes when the religious activities took place (J. & K. Ferdinand 1961 p. 47ff. and Kunwald 1970 p. 42ff.; Struwe 1967 p. 57ff.). The fact that one really never finds children as bog bodies also argues against the sacrifice-theory. Only a few examples are known from Germany, and these are undoubtedly cases of accidents. But in the sacrificial bogs, children's bones are often found amongst the skeletal remains.

It may be said that the sacrifice-theory relies too heavily and exclusively on finds dated to the early Iron Age. It must also be emphasized, as already stated, that bog-corpses are found far outside the territories in free Germania which were described by Tacitus.

Thus, as the find-relationships and sources present themselves, the punishment-theory seems to be that which best, or alone, is able to cover the finds of bog bodies from various periods.

A special punishment, described by Tacitus in Chapter 12,1, is often quoted in connection with the bog bodies:

'Traitor and deserters are hanged on trees; cowards, shirkers, and sodomites (*corpore infamis*) are pressed down under a wicker hurdle into the slimy mud of a bog.'

Corpore infamis means "disreputable in body", and may well be construed as homosexuality and/or female prostitution. It must be mentioned in this connection that the corpse Borremose II was found together with bones of a new-born baby (E. Thorvildsen 1952 p. 32ff.). But it cannot be the case that *corpore infamis* refers to wifely infidelity. Adultery is in all Germanic-language law a matter of civil law. Tacitus writes of this in Chapter 19,2:

'A guilty wife is summarily punished by her husband. He cuts off her hair, strips her naked, and in the presence of kinsmen turns her out of his house and flogs her all through the village.'

The punishment-theory covers both sexes. The women executed need not all be *corpore infamis*; they could equally well have been executed for offences which have nothing to do with decency and honour. It also supports the punishment-theory that the bodies are often short-haired and naked, and that cropping and stripping were marks of disgrace, not for unfaithful wives alone. Criminals were hauled to and from the place of exe-



Fig. 4. The big piece of cloth from Borremose II set up as a man's cape. The wear-marks fall on the right shoulder and by the left arm.

cution on a cow-hide, because cultivated land must not be defiled by them. The medieval corpse from Skjoldehamn lay on a reindeer skin and was enveloped in a blanket (G. Gjessing 1938 p. 28), a feature in common with many corpses from prehistoric times. The tumbril later substituted the cow-hide. That the bodies are found in raised bogs might be explained through these being agriculturally useless, and that by depositing the delinquents in a bog one did not defile the valuable arable land.

It may seem marvellous that the same punishment was meted out from the early Iron Age to the late Middle Ages. But society was static, and great changes did not happen. Many legal provisions proceed from the district-laws to the Jutish Law, and thence on to Christian V's Danish Law of 1683.

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NOTES

1. Unpublished report from Karen-Hanne Nielsen whom I should like to thank for permission to quote the results of her analysis of the cloak/skirt from Borremose II.
2. Tacitus, *Germania*: N.W. Breum and A. Lund, *Tacitus Germania I-II*, Aarhus 1974. – English edition by J.H. Sleeman, Cambridge 1939.

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