

**Human Sacrifice in Iron Age Northern**  
**Europe:**  
**The Culture of Bog People**

Maximilian A. Iping-Petterson

**Maximilian A. Iping-Petterson**

**Student Number: 0886165**

**Supervisor: Prof. Harry Fokkens**

**Specialisation: Prehistory of North-Western Europe**

**University of Leiden, Faculty of Archaeology**

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# **Chapter 1: Ritual Acts**

## **1.1 Introduction**

The fact that rituals involving the sacrifice of people were present within the cultures of Iron Age Northern Europe has long been known. The purpose of this paper is to dig further towards the socio-cultural reasons behind such rituals, and to examine the evidence for how these rituals might have played out within the context of the cultures at the time. What was the nature of this sacrificial practice, and what was its purpose? Did the ritual exist purely for spiritual reasons, or did it have any other functions for the people who practiced human sacrificial rituals? These questions will be answered by examining the current literature surrounding the subject and by conducting a cross-cultural analysis between the culture of the bog people and other societies whom are known or suspected to have engaged in human sacrificial practices. In order to establish the nature and function of this ritual as it pertained to the Iron Age cultures of Northern Europe, a number of avenues will be explored. The types of victims will be analyzed. What was the age and sex of the average victim? Do we know anything about their place in society? The answers to these questions will give further insight into the motivations and justifications behind the ritual, and the way that such a ritual might be orchestrated with respect to the social order of a group. What was the method of execution? What degree of violence was deployed with these sorts of rituals? When and where did human sacrifice occur? Was there any particular significance or symbolism behind the chosen location or time frame for the ritual? By understanding the answers to these questions the inner workings and symbolic meanings behind the ritual become apparent. What will also hopefully become apparent is that along with representing a dialogue and exchange with the supernatural filled with symbolism, the ritual of human sacrifice also had many pragmatic societal functions for the maintenance of social order and the protection of power for a class of religious elite.

In this first chapter the concept of ritual is examined in order to provide a framework of ideas and vocabulary for explaining the characteristics of human sacrifice. First, the term ritual is defined and the distinction between the formal and the practical

functions of a ritual is established. The idea that there are practicalities for ritual behaviors, as they often serve an important social function is presented, as well as the possible social functions that a ritualized practice may serve. This chapter is also devoted to explaining the many difficulties that may arise when attempting to address an abstract concept like ritual and the idea that ritual may not be a purely human phenomenon. The characteristics that in embody a ritualized behavior are described, as is the basic formula for the psychology and economics behind making a sacrificial offering. Violence is often an integral factor in the ritual of sacrifice, and the reasons for this phenomenon are also explored. Finally, the ways one might distinguish a ritualized sacrifice from a simple execution are touched upon along with an assessment of the role of violence and the shedding of blood within a sacrifice.

## **1.2 Defining Ritual**

A ritual is a coordinated act which an individual or group carries out in order to fulfill a particular social function, usually meant to bring solidarity or enforce social roles within the community, always characterized by having demonstrative, exaggerative, and repetitive qualities (Hughes 1991, 1-2). Ritual acts are not necessarily connected to religion or conceptions of the supernatural. Ritual can in fact only be described as a repeated behavior as it is often disconnected to any sort of ideology, belief, or widely shared opinion. Although great importance is frequently placed upon the formal reasons of such rituals, whether conscious of it or not, the participants of ritual have often attached hidden or ulterior motives to their symbolic (Hughes 1991, 2). In the case of the ritual sacrifices that took place in northern Europe during the Bronze and Pre-Roman Iron Ages it has been generally assumed that appeasing the gods was the main purpose of such bloody rituals. However, whether the people of this time were conscious of it or not, the sacrifices had other uses and motives.

As Hughes discusses in his book on human sacrifice in ancient Greece, ritual is usually formed out of a necessary basic function (Hughes 1991, 2). For instance, the ritualized sobbing and dramatic displays of grief exhibited by some cultures during a funeral is a ritual that arose out of the basic human emotional need to vent their sorrow, go through the process of grieving, and move on with their lives. Similarly, rituals and

ceremonies marking the beginning of adulthood arose out of a social need to have a definitive point distinguishing childhood from adulthood for reasons of the community, specifically legal in nature. This can also be observed in the ritual sacrifices of the bog people. What was important was that there was some result. This may not have necessarily been a direct gift from the gods, but the result may have been a strengthening of social ties and the reinforcement of order within the community. As long as these things were accomplished the ritual had served its purpose.

### **1.3 Reasons for Ritual**

One of the main difficulties when writing about ritual is determining what behavior actually constitutes ritual and what does not. Ritual is often thought of as a very rigidly choreographed series of actions which follows strict guidelines that have been preserved and maintained throughout generations. This is not always the case. Rituals grow and change with time and although many rituals we observe today are thought of as being quite ancient and unchanged they are undoubtedly different from approximately a century ago. This is because the people who have inherited these rituals are different from people living a hundred years ago, and as long as the outcome remains the same the individual parts of the ritual are usually allowed to evolve. In some instances it is difficult to distinguish a ritual from other kinds of behavior. This is largely because “ritual” is an abstraction which humans have invented; it is a category whose lines are becoming increasingly blurred. What makes a certain action a ritual is that an added meaning or emphasis is artificially placed upon it. This added meaning often reflects a culture’s social concerns or issues of a serious and pervasive nature which must be addressed. In a sense, ritual creates a social structure which acts as a means of dealing with and safeguarding against the problems that individuals are faced with when attempting to understand the reality which is their everyday lives (Morris 1992).

Within the culture of the time appeasing the gods was most likely the main stated reason for conducting such sacrifices, however there were probably many other more real and pragmatic reasons for inventing such rituals. The destruction of prisoners of war or even common criminals from within the community is an example of this (Bremmer 2007, 4-5). By sacrificing such individuals the community is doing away with

their enemies or destructive elements within their own community, both of which present a threat to the survival and well-being of the group. Under the assumption that being sacrificed was something to be feared during this time, this may have served as a deterrent to those who may wish to inflict further harm upon the community, in which case, the sacrifice of prisoners also reinforces community laws and hierarchies. Of course, it is not a given that being sacrificed was necessarily feared amongst all peoples. There are societies, the ancient Greeks for example, who held the concept of voluntary self destruction as an integral part of the sacrificial ritual (Bremmer 2007, 5). This idea may have had some place within all instances of human sacrifice, as it dates back to the time of prehistoric hunters who would view the slaying of their game as a voluntary act of self sacrifice on the part of the animal. However, it is important to note that the indication of a ritualized execution does not necessarily mean that a human sacrifice had taken place. Funerary rights were not solely reserved for the free or the innocent, they may also have been performed for condemned criminals. A ritualized burial or execution may not have had any connection to the act of communing with the divine.

#### **1.4 Characteristics of Ritual**

Hughes states that even animals exhibit the phenomenon of ritual behavior, which he describes as a sort of repetitive demonstrative act (Hughes 1991, 2). He emphasizes that it is the act which is important, and the meaning assigned to it is always of secondary importance. The act fulfills a psychological or emotional need whereas the meaning assigned is often merely invented and arbitrarily associated with the action. One of the main characteristics of a ritual which distinguishes it from mere behavior is that the actions are highly formalized, in other words they are portrayed as more important than other kinds of behavior. This can also be observed within the larger animal kingdom. Birds of paradise before performing their highly choreographed mating dances will go through the trouble of meticulously cleaning the area in which the dance is to take place (Dawkins 1995, 83). It is not only the dance itself but the preparation involved in this mating ritual which stresses the importance the bird's actions. The related bowerbird will go as far as creating an incredibly elaborate display, with

sometimes hundreds of different objects found in the jungle organized in a way that is the most aesthetically pleasing (Dawkins 1995, 83). This sort of elaborate preparation may show that the animal is engaging in a kind of formalized behavior to emphasize its importance and high ranking status in order to hopefully increase its chances of attracting a mate. This may in fact be the reason behind all forms of ritualized behavior. An individual stresses its own importance and high ranking status within a group by glorifying the actions of a ritual of which that individual has privileged knowledge. In other words, power is gained through the formal declaration of one's self as being the privileged keeper of some holy knowledge or the coordinator of some sacred rite.

Another difficulty in writing about abstract ideas like ritualized human behavior within the context of archaeology is determining from what vantage point to examine the phenomenon. Archaeology has traditionally steered clear of addressing issues that involve delving into the minds of the individuals whose remains are being examined (Bradley 2003, 5). This is because it is difficult to make any assumptions on what people were thinking or feeling thousands of years ago. Instead archaeologists have tended to focus on things like categorizing potsherds or coming up with broad theories of human subsistence or migration. Ritual, as a concept, was previously something best reserved for cultural anthropologists. However, archaeology and anthropology are nowadays converging more than ever before, and abstractions like: what constitutes a ritual behavior? are being addressed by archaeologists more and more. This move towards a more holistic approach to archaeology can certainly be seen in a positive light. In terms of human sacrifice, it means that an approach that deals more with the individual can be coupled with a broader more traditional approach that attempts to explain the phenomenon as a result of a large cultural group behaving as if it were a single organism.

### **1.5 Additional Functions**

Generalizations must be made in order to learn anything about how a society functions as a whole, but to do this one must study the functions and roles of individuals within a society. Also, if one merely examines the physiological or economic reasons for a certain pattern of behavior then only half of the story is being told. Of course, the

practice of human sacrifice can be explained away by saying that it is merely a means for a society to purify itself and eliminate unwanted elements from the population, but this would be an enormous simplification of the phenomenon. The fact is that humans do not only act in materialistic or pragmatic ways. Yes, one could describe human behavior in the same manner as, for example, a troop of chimpanzees or a colony of bacteria but then something very important would be absent. Some things can not be explained in these terms precisely because human beings often behave irrationally. It is important to bear in mind that although human beings should be thought of as existing within the realm of the natural order of things they also have the tendency to try to overcome nature. This is, in a way, what human sacrifice is all about.

A sacrifice always involves the destruction of a person, animal, or object with the hope of a positive repercussion working in the favor of the sacrificer (Green 1998, 169). In order for this positive outcome to occur the object of the sacrifice must be removed from the mortal world and transported into the realm of the supernatural. There is also a distinction between the sorts of outcomes which are desired from conducting a sacrifice, namely, one either desires something positive and advantageous in return or desires for something negative to be taken away or averted. With regards to the Bronze and Iron Age cultures being considered in this paper, these desires would most likely include things such as a good harvest season, victory in battle, or perhaps the alleviation of an illness plaguing the community. A sacrifice may also have been performed for the sake of something far less specific, for instance simply thanking the gods so as to be on relatively good terms with them.

### **1.6 Violence**

Not only was the destruction of the sacrificial gift important, but the violence used to destroy the offering may have also played a primary role in the ritual. There is evidence to suggest that physical violence may have been of enormous significance in the symbolic act of human sacrifice. Certainly amongst the non-human offerings there have been extensive findings of needlessly shattered swords or mutilated animal corpses. This lends credence to the idea that the violence was an integral part of the ritual, and that perhaps the violent energy exerted may have been symbolically transferred into the

ritual offerings and eventually to their recipients. Perhaps this violent energy was seen as necessary in order for the sacrifice to reach the gods and in order for the desired outcome to actually come into fruition.

There may have also been a connection between the violence utilized in the ritual act and the reasons for the sacrifice itself. Many of the areas in which Iron Age peoples were asking intervention from the gods were violent ventures in themselves, such as hunting or war. It is possible that some of these violent activities being undertaken required an equally violent sacrificial act. In order for the gods to be of any help, they must first have been reimbursed for the violent energies being expended. Of course, this interpretation requires the assumption that the gods were seen as being able to utilize the same sort of energies used by man. This assumption, however, is entirely congruous with other beliefs and practices associated with the belief system under discussion. Namely, the fact that feasts were undoubtedly held wherein some of the sacrificed animal would be consumed by the community but the rest would be offered up to the gods inviting them as the peoples' honored guests whom were welcome to join in on the food and merriment. Assuming this, the gods must have been viewed as being partial to the same sort of food as man. When the flesh and blood of an animal or human is offered to the gods, it must be under the assumption that the gods could make some use of it either as food or because they are comprised of the same sort of material. This indicates that the gods may also have been able to make some use of any violent energy being used in the ritual.

### **1.7 Knowing the Difference**

One of the most important questions that should be asked when researching bog bodies that have been appropriated the status of a sacrificial victim is: what evidence is there that a particular case is in fact a human sacrifice and not merely an accidental death, or victim of a non-religious murder or execution? There are a number of factors which should be considered: probable cause or method of death, position of the body, presence of grave goods, and other less obvious clues such as the stomach contents of the individual. Any number of these clues have the propensity to be misinterpreted or over-interpreted in which case the researcher places far too much relevance on a

certain feature and begins to invent answers to questions which did not need to be or could not be answered.

Miranda Green in her paper on ritual victims presents the argument that the apparent “overkill” factor present in many of the bog body finds is a fairly good indicator of a highly ritualized method of execution (Green 1998, 172). Many of the bodies are found restrained, either bound with rope or pinned down in some way and often both. A young woman discovered in the Juthe Fen bog in Denmark was pinned down underneath the marsh by means of several stakes, one of which passed directly through her knee joint. Apparently this injury had occurred while the woman was still living due to the noticeable swelling which had occurred in this area of the body. The fact that many bodies show signs of having endured an excessive amount of violence, or more than would seem necessary for an effective execution, suggests that the victims had undergone something more than just a simple execution. A good example of this sort of excessiveness comes from Lindow Moss, where the bog body known as Lindow II had not only been strangled prior to death but also had had his throat cut and had sustained numerous blows to the head (Turner 1995). This particular example provides a good case for the assertion that not only were individuals such as this being ritually murdered but also that violence and perhaps blood played a very important role in such sacrifices. This indicates that symbolism and perhaps the whole spectacle of the execution was essential to the ritual.

# **Chapter 2: Tollund Man and the Mechanism of Preservation**

## **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter is devoted to one of the most frequently discussed of the bog bodies, the Tollund Man. The circumstances of the discovery of Tollund Man are talked about as well as the work done by Dr. P.V. Glob, who has done much in the way of starting a discussion of the topic of the bog people. This chapter also looks at the time frame in which the bog people lived, and the considerations that should be made when attempting to address the topic of what life may have been like for people of a different time. The significance of the time of year in which people were sacrificed will be discussed as it bears some insight into the reasons behind the ritual, along with what can be learned from examining the larger time-frame for the presence of human sacrificial rituals in Northern Europe. Dating techniques are also discussed, with particular interest in the main factor allowing for the preservation of bodies in a bog environment: sphagnum moss.

## **2.2 Tollund Man**

The Tollund Man was discovered in 1950 by Viggo and Emil Hojgaard while they were busy cutting peat near the city of Silkeborg, Denmark (Purdy 2002, 443). Due to the miraculously preserved state of the body the pair assumed that the man must have been the victim of some relatively recent murder and eventually informed the local police of their find. Unable to determine a time of death for the body, the police contacted professor of archaeology Peter Vilhelm Glob whose analysis and writings on the subject have made the Tollund Man and bog bodies in general famous well beyond the borders of the field of archaeology. Due to his book on the bog bodies of North-West Europe, P.V. Glob opened the world of human sacrifice and its peat bog victims to a very interested general public and has also changed the discourse on the subject within archaeology. The bodies themselves are completely astonishing in their own right in that

with such lifelike features still visible one does not find it hard to imagine Tollund Man or others like him living out their lives as ordinary people.

Aside from his amazingly preserved skin and hair, the most striking thing about the Tollund Man is his facial expression and the positioning of his body. Unlike many other bog bodies which have been found, the Tollund Man gives an impression of serenity, almost as if he were asleep. Curled up in the fetal position with his eyes gently closed, his posture suggests that he had been purposefully deposited in his place of rest rather than merely arbitrarily thrown into the bog. The people who buried Tollund Man also left him the noose by which he was hung, which remained fastened around his neck (Purdy 2002, 445). It is clear that he was hung rather than simply strangled from the abrasions present on the sides and the fore-side of his neck underneath the chin. No marks were left on the back his neck; damage which would have been sustained if the man had been strangled.

### **2.3 Dating**

The time of year that the sacrificial rituals occurred was of tremendous importance to the culture of the time. Since these ritual executions were for the most part of a religious nature, they often revolved around a religious calendar. Analysis of the stomach contents of many of the bog people has shown that up until the time of death they had primarily been eating a sort of porridge comprised of a variety of spring-time seeds and grains. In the case of the Tollund Man, analysts have found up to forty different types of seeds within his stomach. The man's last meal contained a variety of cultivated and wild species of plant seeds, some of which would have been quite difficult to collect as they were only available in very specific areas and not normally harvested by members of the community. This could mean that Tollund Man's porridge was specially designed for rituals such as the one that ended his life (Glob 2004). If this is indeed the case, it shows the added meaning placed upon the execution of this man and perhaps the spiritual or religious nature of executions like this one. For someone to go out of their way and spend the necessary time and effort to assemble these various ingredients for the victim's last meal, it shows that there is certainly more going on here than just a

simple execution and that there must have been some larger meaning behind the death of the Tollund Man (Purdy 2002, 447).

It is important to keep in mind that any written evidence that exists from this time period on the practice of human sacrifice in North-West Europe comes from the classical world. This presents a problem in that the authors of such sources would have been not only culturally biased towards their neighbors but also would have had their own personal or political agendas. Such was the state of affairs at the time, that “barbarians”, for example, were often painted as being much more savage than they probably were. Not only is the validity or honesty in these authors’ writings in question but the time in which they were written presents another problem. Most of the written sources from the classical world on this subject date from around the beginning of the first millennium, a time at which Roman culture and ideas were spreading well beyond its borders. This means that the kinds of people which were the subject of Roman ethnographic investigation, although not Roman, may have already been long exposed to Roman culture making them a poor representation of their wider ethnic or cultural group.

#### **2.4 Sphagnum Moss**

The mechanism for preservation should be examined in order to acquire a fuller understanding of why we are left with such an extraordinarily uncommon archaeological treasure like Tollund Man and the other bog bodies, so that we might develop more insight into how to locate and further preserve future archaeological finds. In order to do this we must examine the environment in which the bog people have rested for these many centuries. A bog is a complex and unique ecosystem in which a multitude of natural forces would be interacting with an organic object like a dead body, so it is somewhat difficult to find the key features which react with the bodies and make them as we know them today. There are also many different kinds of bogs with varying features, not all of which are suitable for the preservation of a human body. Most of the well preserved bog bodies of Europe are found within lowmoor bogs, which have a continuous flow of water running through them that has been drained from higher elevations. This means they receive more dissolved salts and have a slightly higher pH

value than similar environments in higher elevations. Highmoor bogs receive their water from direct rainfall and have a lower acidity than lowmoor bogs. It is this difference in acidity which is the deciding factor of whether or not an area has antimicrobial qualities to it. However it is interesting to note that the difference in pH level between tissue preserving lowmoor bogs and other non-preservative areas is quite minimal.

According to T.J. Painter's article on the subject a team from the British Museum researching Lindow Man found that the best preserved parts of the body were mostly connective tissue (Painter 1991, 124). This tissue had been tanned into leather by some agent present in the water or the plant material surrounding the body. Sure enough a preservative agent with the ability to tan was found present within sphagnum moss which grows in the peat bogs of Northern Europe. Of course, this is not the only factor which contributes to the preservation of the corpses. However, the tanning of the bodies' skin and connective tissue is a major part of the process since these parts of the body are for a large part the only tissue that has survived. This tanning polysaccharide was named sphagnan, after the moss in which it was found and along with the absence of air is the major component in the extraordinarily preserved bodies.

Painter also points out that there has been a gross misunderstanding among people in both disciplines, archaeology and chemistry, concerning sphagnum moss and the preservation process (Painter 1991, 125). It is widely believed that the preservation phenomenon is a result of reactions caused by an antimicrobial compound called sphagnol which was believed to be found in sphagnum moss's natural state. This is, however, not the case. The confusion arose out of a misinterpretation of a paper published by biochemist Friedrich Czapek, which concerned the compound. In his paper, Czapek made it clear that the sphagnol compound was not found in the free state of the living moss. Actually, the sphagnol compound is produced by boiling extractive-free sphagnum moss in sodium hydroxide, and it is in fact sphagnan which is present within the natural form of the moss.

## **2.5 Radiocarbon Dating**

Radio carbon dating is the most common and reliable method of dating archaeological finds up to approximately 60,000 years old, and in regards to bog bodies there is no

exception (Van der Sanden 1990). Through this method we have come to know, with amazing accuracy, the dates that the victims of ritual sacrifice had met their ends. Put simply, the C-14 isotope, which is present in all organic material, decays at a constant rate and measuring the amount of C-14 still present in an organism it is possible to determine when this organism has died. In his thesis on the bog bodies of the Netherlands Dr. Wijnand Van der Sanden incorporated the findings from the Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit in Oxford to date many of the Dutch bog bodies which have become important to the discipline. The results of these tests, along with a number of more recent data from a study incorporating well known bog bodies from other nations done by Dr. Van der Plicht and Dr. Van der Sanden in 2003 at the University of Groningen, are as follows:

#### 1990

Yde	190 B.C.E. - 220 C.E.
Weerdinge	170 B.C.E. - 140 C.E.
Exloermond	510 B.C.E. - 180 B.C.E.
Zuidoost-Drenthe	520 B.C.E. - 200 B.C.E.
Aschbroeken	110 B.C.E. - 230 C.E.
Emmer-Erfscheidenvveen	1380 B.C.E. - 1100 B.C.E.
Zweeloo	80 C.E. - 250 C.E.

#### 2003

Elling Woman	355 B.C.E. - 205 B.C.E.
Tollund Man	780 B.C.E. - 520 B.C.E.
Bareler Moor Girl	260 C.E. - 395 C.E.
The Marx-Etzel body	45 C.E. - 125 C.E.
The Marx-Stapelstein body	135 C.E. - 185 C.E.
Oberaltendorf Man	260 C.E. - 380 C.E.
Neu Versen Man	135 C.E. - 385 C.E.
Brammer Man	1440 C.E. - 1520 C.E. or 1585 C.E. - 1625 C.E.
Bernuthsfeld Man	680 C.E. - 775 C.E.

Juhrdenerfeld Man	90 B.C.E. - 80 B.C.E. or 55 B.C.E. - 25 C.E.
Husbake Man	765 B.C.E. - 520 B.C.E.
The Hunteburg Foot	1215 C.E. - 1300 C.E.
Sedelsberger Dose Man	1050 C.E. - 1200 C.E.
Neu England Man	140 C.E. - 320 C.E.
The Hunteburg Men	245 C.E. - 415 C.E.
The Hunteburg III body	40 B.C.E. - 75 C.E.
Damendorf Woman	410 B.C.E. - 390 B.C.E.
Bunsoh body	560 C.E. - 620 C.E.
Damendorf Man	135 C.E. - 335 C.E.
The Datgen bog body	345 C.E. - 535 C.E.
Rost Girl	200 B.C.E. - 95 B.C.E.
Damendorf Girl	895 B.C.E. - 810 B.C.E.
The head of Osterby Man	75 C.E. - 130 C.E.
Windeby Girl	150 B.C.E. - 135 B.C.E. or 115 B.C.E. - 0 B.C.E.
Datgen Man	135 C.E. - 385 C.E.
Yde Girl	40 B.C.E. - 50 C.E.
The Weerdinge Men	40 B.C.E. - 50 C.E.
Exloermond Man	365 B.C.E. - 115 B.C.E.
Emmer-Erfscheidenvveen Man	1370 B.C.E. - 1365 B.C.E., 1315 B.C.E. - 1260 B.C.E. or 1235 B.C.E. - 1215 B.C.E.

All of these dates were determined through testing done on a variety of different materials associated with the bog body in question. Some examples may have two or more possible dates assigned to them. This is because various materials associated with that particular body were tested independently and have yielded different results. The kinds of materials vary from bone, skin, hair, wool, textile, leather, or wood, and some have proven themselves to be more reliable than others in terms of accurate dating. Wood seems to be the ideal candidate for use in radiocarbon dating, however, wood samples that can be positively identified with the body are few and far between. Textile is also a preferable choice, but can also be difficult to attain. Skin, fur and hair all

seem to be equally reliable and more readily available than the for mentioned materials. Bone is also highly valuable in terms of radiocarbon testing, in that it may contain collagen which has proven in the past to be highly reliable. Unfortunately, bog bodies rarely contain bone as they are not preserved in the way that skin and hair are by the properties of the peat moss.

By using the selection of bog body dates determined by Drs. Van der Plicht and Van der Sanden as a sample, a rough idea of the frequency of the ritual throughout time can be made. The vast majority of these examples date from either the Iron Age or the Pre-Roman Iron Age, with only a handful falling into the Bronze Age or Early Medieval periods. This is a good indication that in this particular part of the world (Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands) human sacrificial rituals were reaching their zenith during the Iron Age period. Knowing this, it becomes important to examine other cultural trends which are known to have been taking place in this region during this particular point in time. It is during this period that what were most likely Germanic groups represented by the Jastorf culture and the Harpstedt-Nienburg group were expanding southwards out of Scandinavia and establishing themselves in new areas like Northern Germany and the Netherlands (Wolfram 1995, 22). These migrants would have run into contact with the Celtic Hallstatt and LaTene cultures, which undoubtedly effected their material culture and perhaps also their belief system and ritual behavior. However, these two ethnic groups would have practiced human sacrifice independently from each other, as the practice long predates the period of contact in both groups. Celtic examples of ritual sacrifice will also be discussed in the following chapter, as will the fundamental characteristics of ancient Germanic spirituality as they must have been an influential force with respect to the ritual as it was practiced during this period in the areas surrounding the North Sea.

## **Chapter 3: The Culture of the Bog People**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter the cultural realities of Iron Age Northern Europe are discussed. The culture and spiritual beliefs of the ancient Proto-Germanic peoples are paramount to the study of human sacrifice rituals within this region, as it was within this context that such rituals were allowed to develop. The development of the ancient Germanic peoples is touched upon, as is the formation of their language and their relation to neighboring peoples. Their mythology and spiritual beliefs remain the focus of this chapter as examining these aspects allows for considerable insight into the inner workings and motivations for human sacrifice. Clonycavan Man is discussed as he is a good example of how bog bodies can tell us much about the cultural details of past eras. The difference between past and present conceptions of morality and the intrinsic value of human life are also talked about, along with what sort of victims were most likely to have been used in human sacrificial rituals.

### **3.2 Proto-Germanic Culture**

The primary group of people that this paper concerns are the Pre-Roman Iron Age and Iron Age Germanic tribes of the areas which are now Southern Scandinavia, Northern Germany, and the Netherlands. These regions were inhabited by a number of different cultures including the Jastorf culture, the Harpstedt-Nienburg group, and the House Urns culture. All of these are suspected to have spoken Germanic languages but, as they left no written records, it remains unclear what stage of development their various languages had achieved and to what degree they had separated and branched off from each other. However, at some stage of development a common ancestor language which gave rise to modern day Germanic languages must have existed. There is no evidence of this supposed language within the archaeological record, as it was only spoken and not written down, but linguists have dubbed this hypothetical language "Proto-Germanic". These groups were strongly influenced by their southern neighbors,

the Celtic Hallstatt culture, although some being in closer proximity to the Celts had a much more direct relationship with them.

Along with a common language this meta-culture of different Germanic groups shared similar mythologies and similar conceptions of spirituality and the supernatural. They believed in a pantheon of gods, many of whom possessed counterparts in the mythologies of other Indo-European groups, which would have been the objects of worship and the acceptors of the human sacrifices being performed. Although very little is known of these ancient peoples' belief system, Roman authors have recorded a great deal of the gods and religious practices of the Germanic tribes. Pre-Roman Iron Age Germans must have already believed in gods such as Odin and Thor or at least some sort of precursor to them because of their similarities to various other Indo-European gods.

### **3.3 Germanic Spirituality**

In Tacitus' *Germania*, he describes a number of Germanic gods which received particular admiration amongst the groups he was writing about. Among these gods is Tuisto, a particularly interesting figure who is not usually thought of as standing alongside Freyja or Freyr within what is now considered to be the traditional Germanic pantheon (Rives 1999). Tacitus writes that he was considered amongst those who worshipped him to be "a god, born of the earth" as well as the divine ancestor of the Germanic peoples. Tuisto is associated with the hermaphroditic Vedic god Tvastar, with whom he shares a similar Proto-Indo-European origin. Tuisto may have had some connection to Ymir, a primeval being which was present within later Viking mythology, or they may have in fact been the same being. Both were viewed as ancient hermaphroditic progenitors, however this is where the similarities end. Ymir was the ancient ancestor of a race of frost giants and viewed as an altogether negative or malevolent being, whereas Tuisto was revered as the ancestor of man (Rives 1999).

According to the mythology, Tuisto was the father of Mannus whom later fathered three sons. These three sons of Mannus would go on to found the three greater tribal groups of the Germanic people: the Ingaevones, the Irminones, and the Istvaeones. Tacitus noted that these three groupings of tribes were distinguished according to the

the geographic region which they inhabited. The Ingvaeones, viewed as people of the sea, inhabited the region constituting what is now essentially Denmark and the North Sea coasts of Germany and the Netherlands. The Irminones lived in the 'center' region of Germania or what is essentially the Elbe watershed. Finally, the Istvaeones inhabited the remaining parts of the region, namely the area bordering the Rhine river (Rives 1999).

Many Roman scholars went to considerable lengths in order to describe the differences between what they deemed to be "good" and "bad" religion, with "bad" religion almost always being one of a foreign and barbaric people (Rives 1995). The Romans also banned human sacrifice at a certain point thinking it to be uncivilized and un-Roman. By 97 B.C.E. the Roman senate had outlawed the practice, preferring that its citizens reserve their sacrifices to only animals and inanimate objects (Green 1998, 172). The Romans, in all their documentation of the surrounding peoples, never once indicate that their Germanic and Celtic neighbors had similar habits of substituting animals for humans in their religious practices. It may have been that the Celts and Germans inhabiting formerly Roman territory inherited this practice from the classical world, being forced to cease their ritual slaughter of human beings by a senatorial decree. However, Roman writings on their neighbors are well-renowned for being stereotypical and prejudice towards the "barbarian" peoples of the north, emphasizing and exaggerating their barbarity and un-Romanness (Green 1998, 172).

Accompanying many of the bodies that are speculated to be examples of human sacrifice are objects fashioned from the hazel tree. This, of course, may be a mere coincidence or rather a consequence of seasonal foodstuffs which were readily available during the time of sacrifice. On the other hand, it may also show that the hazel tree and its nuts were of some symbolic significance to the culture of the time and the ritual itself. Lindow III, for instance, contained a sizable amount of crushed hazelnuts within his belly, indicating that the man's last meal must have consisted of a large percentage of the nut (Turner 1995). It is unclear whether this curious meal had been designed and fed to him for some spiritual reason, or whether it was simply what was available at the time. Another body found at Undelev in Denmark was buried along with three hazel rods.

### **3.4 Clonycavan Man**

Socio-economic status of the victim also played an important role in determining the value of the sacrifice. The higher the status that a person had the greater the sacrifice would be. Slaves and prisoners may have been sacrificed more readily, and certainly more frequently, than a well established nobleman but in no way were people of the upper class off limits from being made sacrifice to the gods. Clonycavan Man, who is thought to have been a wealthy man in his early twenties dating from between 392 B.C.E. to 201 B.C.E., is a good example of this. The young man was found in Clonycavan Ireland in 2003 with well manicured nails and a coifed hairstyle held in place by the earliest example of hair gel ever found (Lange 2007, 2). His erected hair is thought to have been an attempt by the man to make up for his short stature, 1.57 meters. The substances found in the man's hair have been analyzed and found to be a mixture of vegetable oil and a pine resin which originates from Spain or southwest France. Only a person of considerable wealth would have been able to afford cosmetic products from a foreign land during this time. This means that the ritual of human sacrifice was one which would include victims from all levels of the social stratum.

Clonycavan Man was also most probably tortured before his execution and must have died an extremely painful and violent death. The man had suffered an injury to the head from a sharp object, leaving the skull split open with particles of brain matter present within the crevasses of the wound. The man had also suffered facial injuries, most probably caused by the same sharp object, along with a severe blow to the chest and had also been disemboweled. Along with Clonycavan Man, another Irish bog body had been discovered in 2003 on Croghan Hill in the county of Offaly. Old Croghan Man also appears to have been a person of some wealth and status mostly because of his well cared for hands which do not show any signs of having done any kind of physical labor. This unfortunate individual also exhibits signs of having been tortured before meeting a particularly grisly death. The man was restrained by rope which had been strung through holes mad in his upper arms, and before being beheaded and having his torso literally cut in half he had been stabbed and cut across the nipples (Lange, 2007, 3). Croghan Hill is known to have been situated on the border between two ancient

kingdoms, it is quite possible that Old Croghan Man was placed here because of this fact and was used as a way to sanctify or solidify the border (Lange 2007, 2). If these two examples are indeed victims of human sacrifice they represent even more evidence that extreme violence was an important part of the ritual.

### **3.5 The Value of Life**

When looked upon with a modern eye the practice of human sacrifice seems to be incredibly cruel. One is taken aback by the sheer barbarity and even inhumanity required to assign a value to a human life on par with that of an ox, and then to bury both within the peat as if they were of equal value. It is important to note, however, that ancient peoples would not have had the same reaction of horror and disgust in watching another human being ritualistically put to death. This was a much harsher time, for the most part, when violence and death were commonplace and where conflict and war had a much more brutal and personal quality to them. Wars, for example, were not fought by the mere pull of a trigger, but by confronting the enemy face-to-face with the primary aim being to maim. Medical science being what it was, people would have been accustomed to death and carnage at an early age, or at least to a much greater extent than we are today. People would have also been very accustomed to the idea of slavery, which was a commonplace and accepted reality of the time. This being said, the value placed on human life would have been considerably different to that of today. The fact that humans were sacrificed alongside cattle or a golden brooch, however, should not leave one with the idea that the value of human life was lost on ancient peoples. On the contrary, domesticated animals, embroidered jewelry, and other such objects of sacrifice were of tremendous value to the culture of the time, not only economically but also symbolically and spiritually.

The sacrificial value of a certain object or person, however, was not set in stone. The ancient Gallic peoples were known, by the Romans, to have paid particular interest to this fact. In some instances chosen victims were treated extremely well by the community and fed all variety of delicacies for an allotted amount of time before being sacrificed. Greek city states are known to have had similar practices in which a chosen person would be decorated and paraded through the streets, after which time the victim

would be cast out of the community as a sort of scapegoat (Green 1998, 183). This generous treatment of the sacrificial victims could be perceived as somewhat consolatory or perhaps a way of lessening the community's guilt, but it may have simply been a way of increasing the value of the sacrifice.

### **3.6 Preferred Victims**

In the case of a child sacrifice the issue of value immediately arises. Children are generally of lower social hierarchical status than most adults but they are the next generation who are to inherit and carry on the ways of their parents, and thus represent the future of the community. To sacrifice a child would, in a sense, be like sacrificing one's own future and jeopardizing the future prosperity of the community. It stems to reason that a community's future and thus their children would be deeply cherished, meaning that this would represent one of the greatest sacrifices a community could make. For a community to feel the need to make such a highly valued offering to the gods the ritual must have been of critical importance. Such an enormous gift must have necessitated an equally enormous reciprocal blessing from the gods or even a miracle of sorts. It is quite possible that in such cases the community may have been in great peril or under the misery of epidemic disease, so as to necessitate such an enormous sacrifice.

Nevertheless, there was enough intrinsic value placed upon human life so that ritualistic human sacrifice was avoided when possible. However common the practice may or may not have been, animal sacrifices appear to be much more frequent and widespread (Green 1998, 171). There are many examples from all around the ancient world where animals were chosen over humans as the most preferred gifts to the gods. The ancient Greeks, for instance, had outlawed human sacrifice as a barbaric act and used animal sacrifices in their place. At the same time, references to human sacrifice within Hellenic culture are prodigious. Albeit, they were referencing an earlier more barbaric time, and referring to the ritual in a hypothetical romantic sense of the past.

The ancient Moche of Peru, who we know also practiced human sacrifice rituals, apparently preferred young adult males as their victims (Verano 2001, 1). At a site called Pyramid of the Moon Dr. Verano and his team have uncovered the remains of

over 100 individuals who are believed to have been sacrificial victims, all of whom are males between the ages of around 15 to 25. A large portion of the victims showed signs of previous wounds which had healed before the moment of death. Many fractures were found on the skull, ribs, scapulae, and forearms of the victims, which has been interpreted to mean they were warriors and most likely prisoners of war. The cause of death for some of the victims appeared to be the striking of the skull by a blunt object, but most victims exhibited cut marks along the cervical vertebrae which was how the majority most likely met their end. These findings are consistent with depictions of prisoner sacrifice found in Moche art.

# **Chapter 4: The Importance of Location**

## **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter the conditions of the bog environment are more closely examined along with a description of how the bogs played an important role spiritually as a place of holy reverence for the people of Iron Age Northern Europe. The importance that bogs play for the archaeologist is also explained as they have proven to be an invaluable asset to the field of archaeology. Two sites are discussed in this chapter: Cuddesdon and Sutton Hoo. Both of these locations have proven to provide considerable insight into the way that the location and positioning of the bodies within a gravesite can help to explain things about the specifics of the rituals performed before burial as well as the social climate of the time. Social hierarchy is another facet which can be explored through the study of the spatial arrangement of bodies. Lastly, the degree of organization and formalization of the ritual can be studied through the observance of patterns of spacing in the arrangement of individual graves.

## **4.2 The Bogs**

The locations for the sacrifices were of the greatest importance to the people involved as well as for those of us studying these rituals today. In the case of the archaeologists and other professionals who have studied the remains of these unfortunate individuals buried within the peat bogs of Northern Europe the environment at the location is everything. The precise mixture of essential acids and absence of oxygen of the peat bogs has made it possible for these human sacrifices of the Bronze and Iron Ages to be so well preserved, and thus making any study of this practice, its practitioners, and its victims possible.

Without the bogs any direct evidence of such practices would surely be lost to time and the study of these ritualized executions would be dependent upon a few second hand sources which offhandedly mention such practices but offer little in depth observation or analysis of the phenomenon. Instead, because of the unique conditions of these environments we are left with a wealth of direct archaeological evidence that

has survived in such an ideally-preserved state so as to make any archaeologist leap for joy. The near perfect condition of the peat bog remains far surpasses any other preserved human remains found around the world, the best and most known example being of course the Tollund Man whose facial features were so strikingly well preserved he could have been mistaken for someone whom had only recently passed away.

Just as the peat bogs are so incredibly important for those of us who are around today to study the bog people, the bogs were of enormous significance to those ancient individuals responsible for the carrying out of these sacred rituals. For them the peat bogs of Northern Europe represented something magical which should be considered with a great deal of respect. The bogs were of primary importance to the ritual act of human sacrifice in that they represented a barrier between the physical or human world and the world of the supernatural (Coles 1999). In order for a sacrifice to take place and be truly successful, that which is being presented to the gods must somehow be transported to them so that they might receive their gift and reciprocate this act of good will.

For the Bronze and Iron Age peoples of Northern Europe it was largely peat marshes which served the function of acting as a barrier between the physical and spirit realms. The locations where the offerings occurred would have been thought of as being a direct portal to the realm of the gods and thus incredibly sacred. So much so that it most likely would have been considered extremely taboo to penetrate and disturb such a barrier once it had been sanctified with an offering and established as a holy place. These taboos were, in fact, so real and gripping for local communities that they managed to survive within common lore up until the day when individuals like Grauballe Man and Tollund Man were being unearthed. Although the communities in question had long since been converted to the Roman faith and had, through centuries of Christianization, been taught to do away with their ancient pagan superstitions, the sites where sacrifices had once occurred remained known and stuck in the minds of men and women as magical and even frightening places.

### **4.3 Cuddesdon**

The Cuddesdon site in Oxfordshire, England is a unique example of how the positioning of bodies, especially in regards to mass graves, can be telling of the sort of symbolism incorporated into a sacrificial ritual. The site consists of a single burial assemblage surrounded by a number of additional bodies buried in a radial formation around the main part of the gravesite (Reynolds 1996, 23). The grave in the center of the formation has been described by Dr. Tania Dickinson as a “princely” burial due to its central role in the formation and its high quality grave goods such as a bronze bucket, iron swords, and two glass vessels. The surrounding burials were most probably either slaves or captives who had been sacrificed in honor of the burial of such a high-status individual. They were arranged in such a fashion as to point to the importance and high status of the central figure. Buried face down with their legs crossed, the victims heads were also pointed outwards and showed signs of rough treatment. The fact that such a uniform arrangement of bodies had taken place suggests that they were all sacrificed and interred at one time. This is not necessarily the case. A marking system may have been employed to keep track of the arrangement of the bodies within the gravesite and this formation may have been followed with individuals being buried at different times, however with such a uniform pattern it is much more likely that a mass burial had occurred.

### **4.4 Sutton Hoo**

Sutton Hoo is another prime example of a mass grave site which exhibits strong signs that human sacrifice had occurred. Although the burials found here are from a much later period than the majority of bog bodies, they represent a similar culture to that of Tollund Man for instance. The Anglo-Saxon culture represented by Sutton-Hoo has its roots in the Iron Age cultures of Denmark and Northern Germany and would have inherited many of its cultural and spiritual characteristics (Carver 1992, 5). The site consists of another “princely” burial accompanied by many other graves, which display wide variation in terms of body orientation, physical trauma endured during the time of death, and other factors concerning the death and burial of the victims (Reynolds 1996, 24). The site has been excavated and categorized into two main groups by Prof. Martin

Carver, who worked on the site between 1986 and 1992. Group one is comprised of 23 graves, the orientation of which varied greatly when compared to the highly uniformed and organized graves of Cuddesdon. The main difference between the two sites being that the bodies which make up Group one of Sutton-Hoo were quite diverse in that twelve of the bodies were found facing upwards, five facing down, two were manipulated into an odd kneeling position, and one was positioned in such a way so as to recreate the act of ploughing. This indicates that there was certainly some thought and planning put into the burial of these individuals, and perhaps some symbolic meaning behind their positioning but the site lacks the uniformity and organization of the Cuddesdon site. At least ten of the bodies exhibited strong signs of being mistreated or physically assaulted in some way, which begs the question of whether or not rough handling or indeed torture was a common or even integral part of sacrificial rituals.

Group two was arranged in a similar fashion, with rather sporadically placed graves, some of which were surrounding a central mound containing a cremation (Reynolds 1996, 24-25). One of the more interesting features of the site was that one body appeared to have been buried with what might have been a noose tied around his neck. This was the only example of this present within the site, however, nine of the sixteen graves showed some signs of physical mistreatment. By itself this is not overwhelming evidence which confirms the fact that a sacrificial ritual had taken place at this site, but it does say a great deal about social hierarchy with respect to how a person was buried. Although when examining this site by itself there is no conclusive evidence of human sacrifice, other sites of a similar nature should be kept in mind. It is the build up of evidence from sites spanning all of Europe which suggests that sacrificial rituals were present at this point in time, not any one definitive site. In general, Group one provides more insight as to the lives of the people being buried. It included the "Plough-Man" burial and also contained another grave which held a joint of meat. It is these sort of grave goods which give insight into what was deemed important enough to be buried alongside someone, and start to paint a picture of what life might have been like all those centuries ago.

If the bodies found at Sutton-Hoo are indeed the victims of a religious ritual it is clear that such rituals lacked an overarching and clearly defined formula, which is to

some degree the very essence of what a ritual is. It is quite probable that the nature and mechanics of sacrificial rituals of this kind varied greatly with respect to distinct cultural or language groups, tribes or villages, or even individual families or kin groups. However, whatever the reasons or circumstances for such rituals to occur, there is a common thread. It can be said with a reasonable amount of confidence that in some shape or form sacrificial rituals were occurring throughout Northern Europe at this time. Perhaps the manifestations of this sort of sacrificial mode of thinking varied throughout different communities, but the fact remains that men and women were being put to death not for having broken a law or social taboo but simply for the glory of death itself. In a way it is inconsequential precisely how much the gods were emphasized during any particular ritual, what is important is that an execution occurred for the sake of the act itself.

# **Chapter 5: Reasons for Sacrifice**

## **5.1 Introduction**

In this last chapter the possible reasons why a society might develop rituals of human sacrifice are considered. First, the various methods of sacrifice are examined, including details such as the various tools utilized, the sorts of wounds that were often inflicted, and the probable time frame of the ritual. The actual procedure of the ritual and the most likely manner of how it was performed is central to understanding the reasons behind it. This chapter also explores how rituals like this one, which are thousands of years old, should be analyzed and interpreted. Various strategies for studying human sacrifice amongst the ancient Germans are discussed.

## **5.2 Methods of Sacrifice**

It is very difficult for someone who is alive today to answer the question of why human sacrifice occurred. In order to even make an attempt at answering such a question one must consider how the rituals were carried out and then make the most probable deduction based on those facts. It is clear that the practice of human sacrifice took a variety of forms throughout the ancient world. In terms of the bog bodies of Northern Europe, most prevalent of these forms was undoubtedly strangulation. Victims were most commonly hung or garroted and then submerged into the waters of the bog. This is not to say that strangulation was by all means the only method of sacrifice. In fact, there is evidence of some victims being drowned, buried alive, or also being put to death by way of some kind of puncture wounds or spilling of blood. It can clearly be seen from examination of the remains of Grauballe Man that some sacrificial rituals must have gone beyond a simple strangulation. The remains of Grauballe Man indicate that the man suffered a devastating wound to his throat (Purdy 2002, 446). Taking into account the fact that the wound appears to have almost severed the esophagus in two and that Grauballe Man had been left with a facial expression of terror and extreme pain, this wound must have caused some degree of blood loss for the man. Several of Grauballe Man's bones had been broken, which has been accredited to other forces

acting on the body after it had already been buried. However, one vertebrae of the neck had been fractured which was almost certainly caused by the blade that killed him.

Tacitus in his writings on Germania creates a vivid description of the cultures and rituals of the people living near his country's northern border. According to his account as part of a ritual devoted to Nerthus, a Germanic earth goddess, slaves would be forced to take part by way of cleaning a holy cloth (Green 1998, 177). As the cloth was a symbol of the divine, it would have been offensive to have it washed by just anyone. Ordinary slaves would have been unfit to handle such a holy shroud: instead the object required that it be washed by a person who was in the same liminal state between the worldly and the supernatural, namely the condemned. Slaves such as these were ritually drowned presumably as an added gift to the goddess. The drowning of the slaves in water may have also had symbolic meaning in that the water not only functions as a medium or mode of transport to the divine but also a way of cleansing or purifying those people and objects which were to be presented as gifts to the divine.

Many of the Irish bog bodies have been found in several pieces with clear indications that butchery of the body had occurred as a part of the sacrificial ritual. One recent example found by workmen in the Cul na Mona bog in the county of Laois, and examined by researchers from the National Museum of Ireland starting on August 11, 2011, indicates that just such behavior had occurred (Gartland 2011). The body is estimated to be over 2,000 years old and could represent a young woman, but the precise age and the gender of the individual remains unclear. One of the more interesting features of the discovery is that the head and torso appear to have been placed inside a leather bag and were not preserved by the surrounding peat. The legs, on the other hand, were left unprotected from the elements and were able to reap the benefits of the preservative properties of the peat moss.

Archaeologists and experts from other varying fields working with the National Museum of Ireland have attempted to explain the bog body phenomenon in both Ireland and from other areas of Europe as a rite which ultimately stems from Proto-Indo-European culture that was usually performed in conjunction with the coronation of a new king. This newly discovered body in Cul na Mona, along with examples like Clonycavan Man and Old Croghan Man, support this theory in that they were thought to be of noble

birth or were buried at a politically significant geographical location (Kingship and Sacrifice 2008). Untrustworthy nobles are often done away with upon the declaration of a new king, as they might represent political opposition to the new regime. Burying people along a political border is also indicative of a reigning monarch attempting to clarify and solidify the borders of his realm. Along with body parts, many other items have been found buried along the borders of various kingdoms including luxurious eating utensils, silver and bronze cauldrons, clothing and elaborate headdresses, weapons, jewelry, and anthropomorphic wood carvings which are thought to function as border markings. This hypothesis for the reasons behind sacrificial burials seems reasonable enough, however, it would be ambitious to assume that this explains all or even most of the bog bodies which have been discovered around Northern Europe.

It is reasonable to assume that human sacrifice rituals, which were present all across Europe, do have a common cultural root dating back to Proto-Indo-European times (Bray 2004, 125). The likelihood of such a practice arising independently within so many varying European cultures rather than them being simply different expressions of a common cultural ritual is doubtful. This assertion is supported by the fact that, although the various descendant groups of the Proto-Indo-Europeans may have diverged quite far from each other in terms of culture, language, and geography, within the field of religion and spiritual practice there were clear and essential similarities. This can be observed upon analyzing the names of the various gods belonging to distinct Indo-European groups, the very similar mythologies and origin stories, or by observing the common feature of a priestly class amongst the cultures of the various Indo-European cultures of the time.

### **5.3 Methods of Analysis**

Is it even possible, or at the very least academically honest, to assume that we as archaeologists are able to make any inferences as to the motivations of a people who left no written record? A skeptic would say that since the people in question left no written evidence themselves about their reasons for conducting ritualized human sacrifice, and since the only clues we have towards their motivation are a very limited number of writings from a foreign and biased culture, it follows that no viable assertions

may be made concerning this matter and we will never know the reasons behind the deaths of the bog people (Lewis-Williams 1998). Aside from the bodies themselves and a handful of writings from Roman authors there is no other evidence to suggest that human sacrifice to the gods was occurring in Northern Europe during this particular time period, how then do we know that it was?

It is very difficult to determine the motivations behind the individual murders, however when looking at the phenomenon as a whole a few very meaningful generalizations can be made as to the question of why this was happening. This is done by comparing the Northern European Iron Age to other known civilizations who have provided written documentation from their own hand concerning their exploits in the realm of human sacrifice. From this sort of comparison, it is possible to form a general picture of under what circumstances ritual sacrifice occurs in a society and what the usual stated reasons or explanations are for execution and propagation of such rituals. Of course it is not always wise to compare and contrast societies as if they were operating under the same conditions, but in as much as we are all humans and a part of the animal kingdom and thus subject to the laws of nature some generalized comparison is quite possible without fear of operating under false assumptions. The fact that human sacrifice is such a wide range phenomenon, and found in almost every human society at some point in their history is enough of an indication that some degree of cross cultural comparison should be an acceptable way of deducing valid information in this instance.

Similarly, we should be allowed to examine modern societies' and modern peoples' conceptions of human sacrifice and use them as a possible comparison to the people of Iron Age Europe. This should be done with great caution, for the danger of cultural and temporal bias is quite real, but in the same way that members of different cultures must share some basic similarities in that they all belong to the human race individuals from different times periods of history must also share some basic similarities. The bog bodies are a perfect example of this idea. Even though not a great deal is known about the individuals that are Tollund Man and Grauballe Man, as beings of the 21st century, we can still relate to their suffering on an emotional level. The vividness of their features and the expressiveness of their faces tell us that they are

human and that they were once very much alive and were a real part of the world. They are human, this single fact lets us know that we had something in common with the bog people and that in some areas our two different conceptions of human sacrifice there must have been some overlap.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

It is clear after examining the evidence for ritualized human sacrifice practices amongst the ancient Germanic tribes of Pre-Roman Iron Age and Iron Age Northwest Europe that such practices did indeed take place, this fact has been accepted by the archaeological community for some time. What has proven to be somewhat elusive, and the principle question that this paper has attempted to answer, is why human sacrifice was practiced at this particular time and place and thusly why is human sacrifice practiced at all by any civilization? The answers are not as straightforward as one might think. However, through the implementation of a detailed analysis of the psychology and sociology of what it means to take part in a ritual sacrifice, this paper attempts to answer this question to the fullest extent possible.

The most obvious answer to the question of why human sacrifice may occur within a society is the practitioners' stated reasons for the ritual, namely, the glorification and appeasement of gods and goddesses. This may seem superficial to those whom are interested in learning the practical or ethological reasons for human sacrifice but it should not be ignored. Culture plays an enormous role in the way that human beings behave, so much so that it often takes precedent over much more pragmatic and utilitarian ways of doing things. Social hierarchies like political or religious leaders hold an enormous amount of power over the minds of their subjects, and sometimes there is no other reason for doing something other than simply following the cultural norm and obeying the ones that have been accorded such power. If the holy man says that the gods must be appeased through the taking of a human life, then it must be so. The common man has little understanding of the gods but great faith in their existence and an equal amount of faith in the fact that those who have been dubbed "spiritual leaders" have a special relationship and understanding with the gods. Why then do the spiritual leaders of a community and others who may be aware of the

shamans' creative interpretations of divine messages insist that they are able to interpret a god's will to meaning that occasionally a human sacrifice is necessary? This can be answered fairly simply: in order to maintain the social hierarchy and cohesiveness and to cement their standing as a person of respect and power within the community.

Ritualized human sacrifice, like most any ritual, does help to maintain social order and power structures within a given society but this does not explain why something as excessive as an execution is necessary. Social order can be maintained any number of ways and its maintenance does not necessarily require death. Why then, under the right circumstances, does superstition and worship of a deity or deities which has the ability to intercede in human affairs turn into something so deadly? This question is somewhat more difficult to answer, as it involves a number of factors. First of all, the issue of value must be considered. A human life, whether it be the life of a slave or of a king, is usually accepted as having great value, perhaps even the greatest value of any of the possible sacrifices that one may make to a deity. It stands to reason, especially during a particularly dire time, that with the sacrifice of something of great value comes an equally valuable gift from the gods. When something of enormous value or importance is needed by the community or perhaps when intervening from the gods seems particularly unlikely a sacrifice of great value is needed.

Human sacrifice can also be effectively employed for various pragmatic social reasons. The destruction of prisoners or criminals is an obvious example of how sacrificial rituals may prove to be beneficial to a community. Human sacrifice can also be used as a form of eugenics by sacrificing individuals born malformed or with undesirable genetic disorders. CT scans conducted on Yde girl, discovered in the peat bogs of Yde in the Netherlands, have revealed that she possessed an abnormal curvature in her spine, which would likely have distinguished her from the group and made her a candidate for sacrifice. The practice of human sacrifice appears predominantly in organized agrarian societies and empires (Bremmer 2007, 4). In other words, societies which have developed to a stage where the amount of food being produced can be supportive of a relatively large population. In these sorts of large societies, especially in the case of empires where foreign conquered peoples often

migrate into the dominant culture, there tend to be more deviant individuals than in smaller more isolated cultures. This gives the proponents of human sacrifice many more victims who otherwise would not be greatly missed by the population as a whole.

It is clear from mere observation of people from around the world and throughout time that ritual is a part of us all. It is an integral part of human culture which serves a variety of functions, the most apparent of which is the unification of the community and the strengthening of power structures and communal ties. The ancient pagans of Northwest Europe also utilized ritual for this purpose, whether they were aware of it or not, however their rituals sometimes took on a sinister quality. Within any society, when the death of another human being is called for, many justifications will start to arise. With this particular example, the ancient peoples of Pre-Roman Iron Age and Iron Age Northwest Europe, these deaths were justified by invocation of deities whom had the power to benefit the community in a way which was beyond the power of mere mortals. This justification of death may seem trivial, or barbaric, or outright false to those of us living in a time which for the most part abhors meaningless violence carried out for the purposes of superstition. We must, however, try and see the ritual through the eyes of those who practiced it centuries ago in order to find a fuller and more balanced view of the reasons behind human sacrifice.

**Abstract:**

This paper attempts to answer the question of why sacrificial rituals were present within the cultures of Iron Age Northern Europe and to what extent human sacrifice in particular was a part of such rituals. The assertion is made that sacrificial rituals as a concept represent a common thread woven into the fabric of human culture which manifests itself in different ways but can be observed cross-culturally and throughout time. Human sacrifice, although it represents the most extreme example of the ritualized sacrifice phenomenon can be observed in cultures around the globe. An in depth analysis of the concept of ritual is explored along with an attempt to define the parameters of the phenomenon in terms of how it applied to the culture of Pre-Roman Iron Age and Iron Age Northern Europe. This paper also explores the environmental conditions needed in order for a bog body to be preserved, with specific interest in the key element in the equation of preservation: sphagnum moss. The methods of dating bog bodies are analyzed, with radiocarbon dating usually being the most reliable and accurate. The cultural and spiritual characteristics of the ancient Germanic peoples are also examined as they are related to and give considerable insight into the reasons behind the practices of human sacrifice. A description is made of the various bog bodies which have been discovered and categorized as victims of this behavior and an analysis of the suspected reasons behind their deaths is also presented. Finally, along with the probable reasons behind the question of why a culture might practice human sacrifice and why the ancient Germans in particular engaged in such rituals, an assessment of the various approaches taken to study such things and archaeology in general is also presented.

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