

ART. I. – *A Cumbrian Bog Body from Scaleby.*

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UNTIL the discovery of Lindow Man in 1984¹, British archaeologists had been reluctant to accept that the phenomenon of bog burial occurred in this country.² Professor Glob's descriptions of Tollund and Grauballe man, in his book "The Bog People", have so dominated the thinking on this subject, that the abundant evidence for the preservation of human remains in British peat bogs has lain hidden, certainly since the work of the pioneering geologists of the early nineteenth century.³ Glob's book contained clues to this material in the number of occurrences which he quotes; 41 from England and Wales, 15 from Scotland and 19 from Ireland. These figures were based on the work of a German archaeologist, Dr Alfred Dieck, who has spent a lifetime researching bog burials from across all of Northern Europe.⁴

Dieck published a full list of findspots in 1965, and this has more recently been used as the basis for a comprehensive survey of the British and Irish material. A preliminary gazetteer and analysis have already been published.⁵ Further investigation has brought to light information adding to our knowledge of one of these, a body from Scaleby Moss (NGR NT 430 635) discovered in 1845. Not only are the descriptions of its discovery very thorough, but the surviving remains of this body have had a long and eventful journey and still elude rediscovery.

The discovery of the body

The body was discovered by George Hogg on the 25 May, whilst digging peat for fuel on Scaleby Moss. The story is taken up in the *Carlisle Journal* of 7 June 1845.

"... he came to the remains of a human skeleton buried about eight or nine feet beneath the surface, and closely embedded in the lowest stratum of black peat. The skeleton was wrapped in what appears to have been the skin of a deer, and has evidently formed a garment, as the hair was worn off in some places. This garment has been composed of different pieces, united by seams, which had been executed with considerable neatness, and had even been repaired in some places, but in a manner inferior to the original workmanship. The whole was bound together by thongs of strong leather. From the discoverer apprehending at first that he had come to the remains of a beast of some kind, less care was taken to preserve the interesting relique. The writer of this, who visited the spot two days subsequent to the discovery, saw several ribs, a bone of the arm, (*Os humerus*), a scapula or shoulder blade and a part of the spine; the vertebrae still attached to each other by ligaments. There were also parts remaining of the bones of the pelvis, thigh, legs and forearm. It is curious, however, to observe that the skull was wanting. A part of the intestines remained, which seemed to have undergone something like the process of tanning, as they were tough and had parchment-like appearance. From the size of the bones, the writer infers that they must have been those of an adult, of a slender form, a low stature, and if a conjecture were hazarded, he thinks that the skeleton was that of a female. The circumstances of the bones being buried so deep in the moss (a considerable portion of which might be the production of ages) and of their being wrapped in a skin, which, in all probability, was the clothing of the age in which the deceased lived – forcibly bring us to the

conclusion that the remains were those of an Ancient Briton, and that the preservation through so many centuries was effected by the well-known preservative properties of peat moss. The Rev. John Hill, rector of Scaleby, who has taken great interest in investigating the circumstances of the discovery, has in his possession some of the best preserved bones and pieces of skin.”

More of the body was recovered through the continued efforts of the Rev. J. Hill over the next few days. This is apparent from a letter he wrote on 28 June.⁶

“The Rev. J. Hill presents his most respectful compliments to the Rev. J. Isaacson and his pleasure in forwarding to that Gent, the enclosed portions of the human skeleton discovered in Scaleby Moss, on the 28th.

The skeleton was found nearly 9 feet from the surface and almost 3 from the bottom of the moss, enclosed in the skin of some wild animal tied with thongs of white, strong, tanned leather. Had the body been carefully dug up, and not mangled and scattered in the manner it now is, the skeleton as well as the garment in which it had been enclosed would most probably have been complete.

Other portions have this week been found especially the upper and lower jaw, parts of the skull with black hair preserved whole, many of the teeth, together with a large portion of the brain, quite firm and beautiful, much resembling *marl*.

It appears from the remains of the deceased to have been a full grown person, of little stature, as the arm bones are quite short and that the person in question had been lost and bewildered in the wild forest, unfortunately sunk into a morass.

A paper on the subject will be forwarded according to your directions.”

This paper has not been located as yet, but there is one more important detail to add. In the present church history,⁷ the following is reported under the church register, no doubt recorded by the Rev. Hill.

“Within the grip of the bony fingers was a stick, three feet long and 12 inches in circumference, from which it is conjectured that he must have perished accidentally on the spot.”

It is also surmised that the body had lain there since the time of Julius Caesar.

Later history of the remains

The same pieces sent to the Rev. Isaacson passed into the collections of the great Derbyshire antiquarian, Thomas Bateman, about the year 1853. They are noted in the catalogue of his collection, published in 1855.⁸ Bateman wrote that the quantity of brain was “in the state of adipocere” and “from the body of an Ancient Briton”. Adipocere is a condition where the tissues are converted into a mixture of soaps, fatty acids, and volatile substances, which exude onto the body surface. This occurs after death, particularly in submerged and boggy conditions and has been noted for other bog bodies, and is considered a significant factor in their preservation.⁹

When the huge Bateman collection was auctioned by Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge in April 1893, the remains of the Scaleby body appeared as lot 428, three from the end of the sale. They were displayed in a glass frame, and the lot included other miscellaneous items, amongst them a piece of oak from the Mary Rose, recovered in 1840. The lot was purchased by a Mr Rathbone and fetched £4 14s.¹⁰

The skeletal material was next located in the Sub-Department of Anthropology in the Natural History Museum, where it was tracked down by Dr Dieck in 1965.¹¹ It is not

clear how it reached here but the catalogue number suggests that it may have formed part of the collections of the Royal College of Surgeons, whose museum was bombed during the Second World War. Though a number of specimens were preserved and transferred to the Natural History Museum, their associated documentation was lost. It is therefore likely that the significance of these remains has not previously been realised. Unfortunately efforts to locate this material at the museum, have as yet proved unsuccessful, as it is no longer in the catalogue.

Dating and parallels

Because of the quality of the original descriptions, it is possible to make some suggestions about the date of the Scaleby bog burial and to compare the details of the find with those from Britain and abroad. The Rev. Hill, the correspondent of the *Carlisle Journal* and Thomas Bateman all accepted the antiquity of this discovery. The first was quite specific in dating it to the first century B.C., the others less confidently suggested that it was prehistoric. From as early as the late seventeenth century, the antiquity of peat bogs had been demonstrated from the archaeological remains found within them, or the evidence of human activity beneath them.¹² Their preservation and antiseptic qualities were widely recognised, not only from the discovery of fallen trees in particular, but also from earlier bog bodies whose details are quoted by early nineteenth century geologists, such as Rennie and Lyell.¹³

The body was found at a great depth, about nine feet from the surface of the peat bog at the time. Though this is already considerable, it must have originally been greater. The cutting of peat for fuel will almost certainly have taken place, nearly continuously, from at least medieval times.¹⁴ The growing awareness of how careful was the management of woodlands in medieval times and the scarcity of wood for domestic heating, shows how valuable peat must have been as a source of fuel.¹⁵ Parish boundaries are often distorted to include all or part of a peat bog, and the right of turbary was stoutly defended by those who held the mossrooms.¹⁶ In the eighteenth century, demand for peat from Scaleby Moss came from more than the parishioners. Vast quantities of peat are recorded as being cut for sale in Carlisle.¹⁷

The depth of the body can be taken as a measure of age. The find is described as being made in the lowest stratum of black peat and so early in the history of the bog's growth. In lowland bogs in North-West England, these humified peats are to be found below a major recurrence surface, a temporary cessation of peat growth, widely found as a stratigraphic indicator. This surface has been dated to about 600 B.C.¹⁸

However, the situation may not be as straight forward as the stratigraphy suggests. Work on Lindow Man has shown significant discrepancies between the radiocarbon dates for the body and for the peat envelope which surrounded him. It is further complicated by an irreconcilable difference in mean dates for the body provided by two laboratories, Oxford and Harwell.¹⁹ What must be considered is that solid objects can move down through existing peat stratigraphy without apparently leaving any visible discontinuities. Such an idea is alien to all archaeologists, geologists and palaeobotanists, for whom training in the principles of stratigraphy is basic to their disciplines.

That peat bogs are fluid can be demonstrated by reports of bog flows and eruptions. In these occurrences, vast quantities of saturated peat may erupt and engulf their

surroundings. A local example took place in Solway Moss in 1771, which has recently been discussed in these *Transactions*.²⁰ Less dramatic mechanisms may operate within peat bogs so allowing the movement of objects to take place.

What is important about the peat stratigraphy is how it has preserved the body. Small differences in acidity, the degree of humification of peat and other chemical properties would appear to affect what parts of the body survive. These range from just skeletal material, as with most of the finds from the Fenland, to a range of tissue surviving on a demineralised skeleton such as Lindow and Tollund Man, to the almost complete disappearance of the human remains leaving only a fingernail or hair behind, for example some of the Scottish discoveries. In this example from Scaleby, only the most robust tissues, the ligaments, intestines, hair and brain had survived, though sufficient to cause a considerable impact on the finder. There may have been other local bog bodies for which the documentation is much less satisfactory. Stukeley recorded being shown "two Roman shoes found in the bog hereabouts" by Mr Gilpin, at Scaleby Castle in 1725.²¹ Solway Moss, 10km to the north-west, is similar geologically to Scaleby Moss, though it is larger in size. Gilpin records the discovery of a man and a horse in armour in the bog. These were believed to have perished whilst fleeing from the Battle of Solway Moss in 1542.²² If this story is true, this find must considerably post-date the Scaleby discovery. However, Nicolson and Burn record that out of Solway Moss, "have frequently been dug human bones, silver coins, of the later ages, earthen pots, iron and brass weapons",²³ suggesting finds of an earlier date may have occurred at this site.

More specific comparisons can be made to the details of the Scaleby burial with examples from further afield. The body was wrapped in a cape or cloak made from deer skin and sewn with thongs of strong leather. Burials in similar wrappings have been found in Ireland, Denmark and Germany.

The circumstances surrounding the finding of a well-preserved body of an adult male at Castle Blakeney, Co. Galway, are very similar to those from Scaleby.²⁴ The body was found 9 feet down in a bog, 10½ feet deep, in 1821. It had much more tissue surviving, enabling it to be identified as a young man.

"The heads, legs and feet, were without covering, but the body was clothed in a tight dress, covering also the limbs as far as the knees and elbows. The dress was composed of the skin of some animal, laced in front with thongs of the same material, and having the hairy side inwards; and it is not improbable that it might have been that of the Moose-deer. He had no weapon, but near him at each side of the body was found a long staff or pole, which it was supposed he had used to cross a rivulet."

As with the Scaleby body, the finders considered that this man had met his death accidentally. Both body and clothing were reburied but the body re-excavated, and after an eventful history, it is now to be found in the National Museum of Ireland.²⁵ Following the discovery of Lindow Man, it was decided to radiocarbon date this discovery, and preliminary results show that it is late prehistoric in date.²⁶ A similar cape of animal skin, woven with sinew, was recovered from a bog at Derrykeighan, Co. Antrim in 1861, but there was no mention of an associated body.²⁷

Two of the famous Danish bog burials were associated with skin capes. From the same bog which produced Tollund Man came the Elling Woman. This has only recently been studied, having been left forgotten in a cardboard box in the storeroom of the

National Museum of Copenhagen.²⁸ The woman, with long plaited hair, was clad in a cape of sheepskin, with the fur inside. The front edges were doubled over to make a hem and it was sewn together with very fine thread. Remains were identified of a second cape or cloak of cowhide which had been wrapped around her legs. Elling Woman met with a violent death having been hung by a leather halter which survived around her neck. She has also been dated by the radiocarbon method to 220 ± 55 b.c.²⁹

Borre Fen, also in Central Jutland, produced three bog bodies in the late 1940s. The first was a man found in 1946. He had been dumped in an old peat working in a sitting position, having been killed by a combination of hanging or strangulation by a hemp rope around his neck, and blows to the head. The body was naked but rolled up at his feet were two capes, sewn together from pieces of light and dark sheepskin. Lying alongside the body was a birch branch, 1.01 m long and 4.5 cm thick.³⁰ This find has since been radiocarbon dated to 650 ± 80 b.c.³¹ Several more fragmentary discoveries have been made in Denmark associated with skin capes or coats. These include the finds from Sogard Fen, Tued Bog and Horby Fen.³²

In Germany there was a bog body from Ruchmoor, Damendorf in Schleswig, found in 1934.³³ Amongst clothing found with this burial was an oval cape made from four tanned sheepskins which were sewn and repaired with coarse leather stitching.

There are also cases of severed heads being wrapped in skin capes before burial, at Roum in Denmark and Osterby in Germany.³⁴

Conclusion

The bog body from Scaleby is unusual for two reasons. The detail in the original description allows comparisons to be made with better-known finds and for suggestions to be made about the period at which the body died. Secondly as parts of human remains may have survived, it should be possible to study these directly and perhaps, in the future, date these by the radiocarbon method.

It is striking how all the original commentators accepted this discovery as ancient from the consideration of the style of the leather garment and the accumulation of peat over its findspot. There was a broad agreement to its being late prehistoric in date. Many bog burials in the past have been considered as recent deaths, because of their unusual preservation, leading to their reburial in christian churchyards, or at the place where they were found. Much of the interest was in the clothing and any associated artifacts, large collections of which survive in the National Museums in Dublin and Edinburgh. The bodies themselves received little detailed study until modern times. The interest of the Rev. Hill ensured that this was not the case at Scaleby.

With the experience of a further 140 years and particularly in the light of the study of Lindow Man, greater difficulties over the possible date of this body seem to exist. The description of the peat stratigraphy may indicate an older date than suggested previously, perhaps the Bronze Age or even earlier.

Nevertheless, the stratigraphic argument may not apply to objects within peat bogs, as has been explained above. Some comparisons have been made between the garment found at Scaleby and similar examples found with other bog bodies. Three of these bodies have been radiocarbon dated and belong to late prehistory. A date could be obtained from the surviving parts of the Scaleby body. However, animal proteins

preserved in peat bogs would seem to present special problems to radiocarbon dating laboratories. There may be some reaction between the protein and carbon based acids in the peat, leading to contamination of any samples by carbon if a later date. No satisfactory explanation for the differences in the dates from Lindow Man has yet been given, though the laboratories are aware of the importance of the problem which it may represent.

Cause of and the underlying reason for death is harder to judge. The Rev. Hill favoured an accidental death, of someone lost whilst wandering on the bog. However, since the publication of the "Bog People", and following the reconstruction of the complex and violent events leading to the date of Lindow Man, bog bodies have been largely taken to be the results of ritual sacrifice or execution. The arguments centre on a common cause of death, usually associated with the head or neck. The bodies are commonly naked or wrapped in clothing and dumped and usually weighed down in a bog pool. Where these occurrences are dated, they come from the Iron Age or early centuries A.D. The same circumstances are also recorded in descriptions given by several Classical authors, Tacitus, Strabo and Diodorus for example and occur in elements of the Celtic and early English oral tradition.³⁵

Though this is an attractive explanation, too little relevant information is recorded and perhaps too little survived of the Scaleby bog body for it to be suggested in this case. However, the new information relating to this discovery, helps show that the phenomenon of the finding of bog bodies was widespread in Britain, as much as for the rest of Northern Europe. The causes of this phenomenon, a mixture of accidental death, deliberate burial and ritual sacrifice are less understood and are often impossible to prove. Yet the power that the bodies have, to instil fear and wonder, makes them one of the most gripping of archaeological discoveries.

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- ⁴ See in particular Dieck, A., "Zum Problem der Hominidenmoorfunde", *Neue Ausgrabungen und Forschungen in Niedersachsen* (1963), 105-112; Dieck, A., *Die europäischen Moorleichenfunde* (Neumunster, 1965); Dieck, A., "Stand und Aufgaben der Moorleichenforschung", *Archaeologisches Korrespondenzblatt* (2) (1972), 365-8.
- ⁵ Turner and Briggs, *op. cit.*.
- ⁶ This letter is in Thomas Bateman's "Antiquarian Correspondence" (1844-8), Vol. II, H-R, kept at the Sheffield City Museum.
- ⁷ Rutherford, T. W. H., *All Saints Church, Scaleby* (1972).
- ⁸ Bateman, T., *Descriptive Catalogue of the Antiquities etc. preserved in the Museum of Thomas Bateman* (Bakewell, 1855).
- ⁹ Thomson, W. A. R., *Black's Medical Dictionary* (1984), 746-7. The find from Meenabraden, Co. Donegal, recently conserved by the British Museum, showed this condition particularly well (see Turner and Briggs, *op. cit.*, 192).
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- ¹³ See Note 3.
- ¹⁴ The earliest documentary reference to Lindow Moss of 1421 was a confirmation of the right of turbarry, Earwaker, J. P., *East Cheshire : Past and Present* (1877).
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- ³⁵ For classical sources see Kendrick, T. D., *The Druids* (1927) or Piggott, S., *The Druids* (1968); for the oral tradition see Turner, R. C., 170-177 and Ross, A., 162-170, in Stead *et al*, *op. cit.*

