

ART. II. – *Another Cumbrian Bog Body, found in Seascale Moss in 1834*

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THE previous volume of these *Transactions* contained a report of the finding of a bog body from Scaleby Moss.¹ Since then, evidence for another Cumbrian bog body has come to light. Again, the event was reported in some detail in the local paper. The *Cumberland Pacquet* for 3. June 1834 contained the following passage:

A very singular discovery, which has offered abundant scope for the recollections of the local antiquarian, and for the enquiries of the curious, took place on Friday last, in the parish of Gosforth. Mr Aaron Howe was engaged in cutting peat at Seascale Moss, when about one foot from the surface, he discovered a substance which resembled in shape part of the human form, and on further inspection found the remaining parts of a body. From the length of time which it had laid in the earth, however, the bones were mouldered to dust, but the moss water had acted, it is evident, as a preservative to the skin, and gave the hands the appearance of a pair of fine leather gloves: the nails still continuing on the fingers. The left ear and the feet are quite perfect, part of the scalp had the hair upon it, and the chin still showed a vestige of the beard. Unfortunately Mr H. had cut away part of this singular remnant of a former age before the discovery was made. A walking-stick of hazel was lying by its side. How long the body had laid there, or why its last home was made in such a place, must ever remain shrouded by the dark hand of oblivion: it may have laid there for centuries, for it is well known that peat-moss acts as one of the strongest preservatives of the skin, and it must evidently have been some time embedded to cause the decay of the bones. The oldest inhabitants of the district, say that the place where the body was found was formerly a tarn or pool of water, and that about 23 years ago the water was let off and the land drained: arguing upon the shadowy ground here created, some persons imagine that the man had been drowned; but if that were the case how do they account for the walking-stick which was found lying by his side? All, however, is mere conjecture, but the probability is that the English mummy had laid there for centuries; and now it 'revisits the glimpses of the moon' to awaken the curiosity of what would be to him a strange and unborn people. Looking upon this frail wreck of humanity, the moralist is forcibly reminded of the language of the poet:-

'Why should this worthless tenement endure,
If it's undying guest be lost for ever:
Oh! let us keep the soul embalm'd and pure
In living virtue:- that when both must sever,
Although corruption may our frame consume
The immortal spirit in the skies may bloom.'

Seascale Moss does not appear on modern Ordnance Survey maps, but the earliest editions of these maps show Seascale Moor and Deep Moor centred on NGR NY 054 020,² east of the present Seascale-Gosforth road. The map gives the impression of a peat bog formed in an irregular hollow, probably created by the retreating ice, and drained to the south by a small stream. Centuries of peat cutting and drainage, such as that which led to the discovery of the body, must have steadily removed the moss and brought it into cultivation. The description of the body and the circumstances of its discovery show a number of similarities with other bog bodies from elsewhere in the northern half

of England, Ireland and on the continent.³ Different types of tissue were preserved when compared with the body from Scaleby Moss. This suggests that the chemistry of the moss or the layer of peat in which the two bodies were found was different. At Scaleby, the bone was described as if it were in quite good condition, whilst only the most robust of the tissues, the hair, intestines, ligaments and brain were preserved. At Seascale, the bones had almost dissolved away whilst the skin, hair and nails were remarkably well preserved. This implies that the body from Seascale probably came from the upper layers of a true raised bog which receives its water from precipitation alone.⁴ At lower levels in a peat bog, or in other types of organic deposit, there is some passage of groundwater. This water contains some base minerals dissolved from the soils on the margins, which to some extent ameliorates the acidity of the peat, and leads to the formation of different plant communities.⁵ The upper levels of a raised bog are dominated by the remains of sphagnum moss, creating a highly acidic and anaerobic conditions. This dissolves all the mineral content of the bone and the fleshy tissue. What remains are the more robust proteins such as collagen and kaetin, which forms the basis of the skin, hair, fingernails, the organic structure of the bone, and of some internal organs.

In this way, the Seascale body resembles the famous bog bodies from Lindow,⁶ Tollund and Grauballe,⁷ and this might also be taken to suggest that such a body was contemporary with these finds, i.e. of late Iron Age or Romano-British date. The Seascale body is also similar to these other three, in being male and apparently naked. However, other bog bodies have been female and some are clothed.⁸ The correspondent records no evidence for a violent death such as a noose, a cut throat or smashed skull, as is reported for those bodies which are considered to be ritual sacrifices. The local people felt that the man had drowned or been engulfed in what was the wettest and therefore the most treacherous and central part of the peat bog. However, the reporter felt that the presence of the hazel walking stick weighed against this, implying that the body had been put in the bog at this point.

A number of other bog bodies have been found with sticks alongside. It was true at Scaleby, but here the stick was more robust than an ordinary walking stick. At Castleblakeney, Co. Galway, in Ireland, a male bog body was found.⁹ The original description states that 'near him, at each side of the body was found a long staff or pole, which it is supposed he had used near a rivulet.' A single pole came from alongside a skeleton in a bog at Drumcroon, Co. Derry.

Two Scottish bodies of 16th or 17th century date have been found, at Dava Moor¹⁰ where a birch stick was found laid on the body, and at Gunnister,¹¹ where a stick lay across the legs. Both of these people may have died from exposure. In Denmark, a substantial birch stick was found alongside the first body found in Borre Fen.¹² A fully clothed woman was found in Huldre Fen in 1879 with a willow stake about three feet six inches in length and between one and a half and two and a half inches in thickness, lying across her breast.¹³ The body has recently been radiocarbon dated to 1920 ± 10 B.P. and the Borre Fen man to 2600 ± 80 B.P.¹⁴ An earlier discovery was made in 1797 in Underlev Fen, of a male bog body wrapped in two skin capes, where three hazel rods were found alongside.¹⁵ In each of these discoveries, the stick or sticks must have had a purpose, either functional or symbolic, but no clear pattern emerges.

The description of the body from Seascale Moss is a significant addition to the growing list of bog bodies from England and Britain as a whole.¹⁶ It contains various points which could link it to the widely accepted tradition of Iron Age and Romano-British ritual sacrifice and burial in peat which seems to have occurred across Northern Europe. The points in favour of this conclusion were firstly the character of preservation of the body, and what this implies of the date of the layer and type of peat bog in which it was found. Secondly, the body was naked, an adult male and found placed in the bog with a stick alongside it. All these characteristics are shared by some of the famous sacrificial victims but appear in different combinations. In the absence of any more accurate dating or of evidence for a violent death, this case cannot be proved and an accidental death cannot be ruled out.

The extract from the *Cumberland Pacquet* ends with a stanza from a poem. It is peculiar how this class of archaeological object seems to stir the need for a poetic response. Less serious examples have been written about Lindow Man¹⁷ and Grauballe Man¹⁸ but, complex and powerful poems have been written about a body from Clayton Hill, Caithness¹⁹ and Tollund Man.²⁰ The miraculous preservation of these bodies and the way they seem to cheat death seems to be beyond the power of science alone to explain, and only the richness of meaning which can be invested in a poem is perhaps the only sufficient reaction.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Colin Richardson, Tullie House Museum, Carlisle for bringing the extract from the *Cumberland Pacquet* to my attention. My research into British bog bodies, of which this paper is a part, was generously funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

Notes and References

- ¹ Turner, R. C. "A Cumbrian bog body from Scaleby", CW2 lxxxviii, 1-7.
- ² See 1st edition, 1 inch to 1 mile, Ordnance Survey map of 1842, reprinted by David and Charles.
- ³ Turner, R. C. and Briggs, C. S., "The Bog Burials of Britain and Ireland" in Stead, I. M. *et al.*, *Lindow Man, the Body in the Bog* (1986), 144-61.
- ⁴ Walker, D., "The late Quaternary history of the Cumberland lowland", *Phil. Trans. Roy. Soc. London B*, (1966) 251, 1-210.
- ⁵ See Shimwell, D. W., "The distribution and origins of the lowlands mosslands" in Johnson, R. H. (ed), *The geomorphology of North-West England*, 299-312 (Manchester, 1985).
- ⁶ Stead, I. M., Bourke, J. and Brothwell, D., *Lindow Man, the Body in the Bog* (1986).
- ⁷ Glob, P. V., *The Bog People* (1969)
- ⁸ See Glob, *op. cit.*
- ⁹ Petrie, G., "Account of a human body in a singular costume, found in a high state of preservation in a bog on the lands of Gallagher in the county of Galway", *Dublin Phil. Journ. and Sci. Rev.* (1825) 1, 433-5.
- ¹⁰ *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scotland*, 63, 22.
- ¹¹ Henshall, A. and Maxwell, S., "Clothing and other articles from a late 17th century grave at Gunnister, Shetland", *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scotland*, (1952) 86, 30-42.
- ¹² Glob, *op. cit.*, 87-91.
- ¹³ Glob, *op. cit.*, 79-80.
- ¹⁴ Tauber, H., "Kulstof-14 Datering of Moselig", *KUML* (1979), 73-78.
- ¹⁵ Glob, *op. cit.*, 68.
- ¹⁶ Turner & Briggs, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁷ J. Pope in the *Wilmslow World*, 5th October 1984.
- ¹⁸ Glob, *op. cit.*, 61.
- ¹⁹ An unpublished poem by Mrs I. Bell-Fause in the Royal Scottish Museum archives.
- ²⁰ See "The Tollund Man" by Seamus Heaney, and "Tollund Man" by Geoffrey Grigson.

