Reply sent to TLS on 7 February 2004

A Reply to Ronald Hutton's Commentary 'What did Happen to Lindow Man?' TLS Jan 30th

Dear Sir

As the nameless 'justly respected expert' who was criticised in the TLS for confidently repeating the 'traditional' interpretation that Lindow Man was a human sacrifice on Channel 4 last year, I welcome the publication of Ronald Hutton's polemical article questioning the interpretation of how the bog body, Lindow Man, died. However, as the curator at the British Museum with the responsibility of looking after 'Pete Marsh' and also someone who has researched Iron Age ritual, I would like to take the opportunity to answer some of Professor Hutton's assertions. He appears to take strong exception to the interpretation that Lindow Man was a ritual killing, a victim of human sacrifice. However in making his case, Ronald Hutton pays little attention to the historical and cultural contexts in which the death of Lindow Man must be set. Nor does he acknowledge new evidence and research that has taken place in the 20 years since Lindow Man's discovery, which considerably strengthen the interpretation that he was a sacrificial victim. He also wrongly attributes views and interpretations to Dr Ian Stead which Dr Stead did not express in his conclusions to the initial report on Lindow Man. For example, Ian Stead did not mention the 'triple killing' in his conclusions, nor did this or a reliance on later Medieval texts and folktales influence his interpretations of why Lindow Man died. This is not to say that the interpretation of this person's death is not open to re-examination, or that the assumption behind this interpretation now and in 1986 should not be critically evaluated. However, such detailed debates are better served in specialist archaeological publications.

There are two elements to Ronald Hutton's argument. First, that selective questioning and use of some of the scientific evidence challenges the ritual interpretation of Lindow Man's death. Second, that Lindow Man because he could have died in the Roman period he therefore can not have been a human sacrifice.

Specific aspects of the pathological evidence for Lindow Man's death are open to interpretation. This is to be expected with a body that is not as well preserved as most modern murder victims. The chain of events inferred by Iain West from the surviving evidence has been questioned by other specialists, including Robert Connolly, whose views Ronald Hutton quotes. However, the article presents no attempt to establish which of the conflicting interpretations is most likely. It simply states there are conflicting views without critically assessing where those views come from or on what they are based. Robert Connolly is not a pathologist, rather he was in 1984/5 a lecturer in physical anthropology. He was not one of the team responsible for the examination and excavation of the body. Iain West, who carried out the post-mortem, was one of the leading forensic pathologists of the time. It is his interpretations about the cause of death that are the basis for the interpretations about how and why Lindow Man died.

There is no space here for a detailed discussion of these points. However, the evidence does show that this man was killed in the middle of a bog, some distance from the nearest likely settlement, and he was naked or semi-naked by the time his body was in the pool of water where he was left. He was hit two or more times on the top of his head with a narrow bladed, blunt object. The physical evidence show these blows did not kill him. His neck had been broken and he ended up face down in a pool of water. In addition he may have been stabbed, possibly lacerated the occipital region of his head and may have broken a rib during these events. There was a loop of sinew around his neck, tied with an unusual series of knots, which was extremely tight around his neck and left a well defined mark on the front and sides of his throat. If this had been worn as an ornament in life it would have been very tight. Alternatively, it was more probably used as a garrotte. Finally, there is a wound on the right side of the neck. Robert Connolly suggests this was caused by damage to the body while in the peat, although the pathologist Ian West interpreted it as a wound at the time of death. Given the position of the body in the peat, its careful excavation in the laboratory and the clean and deep nature of the cut, it is more likely this is an original wound.

What is not in doubt, then, is the violence of his death. What is in question is; how should we interpret the circumstances and purpose of his death? This is the case regardless of the specific details of his death, or even when he met his death. Professor Hutton rightly is critical of the over reliance by some on the use of Medieval and later folklore and mythology to interpret this remains by some, although this was not used by Ian Stead in his conclusions in the 1986 report. However, a major fault in Professor Hutton's argument is that he fails to consider the wider historical context in which any interpretation of Lindow Man must be placed. He appears not to have considered how both Iron Age and Roman British societies are now understood, or how these understandings have changed in the two decades since the discovery of Lindow Man. Archaeological interpretation, like anthropological and historical interpretation involves setting a discovery or set events in their broader historical settings. The interpretation of many bog bodies dating to the Pre-Roman and Roman Iron Ages from Holland, northern Germany and Denmark as ritual killings clearly influenced, and still influences, the interpretation of Lindow Man's death. The violent nature and location of Lindow Man's death does make for close comparisons with the (near) contemporary Dutch, German and Danish bodies. As these are seen to be ritual killings, a similar

interpretation of the evidence for Lindow Man's death is a real possibility. Since Lindow Man's discovery in 1984 our understanding of Pre-Roman religion and ritual in Britain has significantly changed. Much of this change has centred on the critical examination of how ritual behaviour can recognised in the archaeological record, and is leading to a detailed understanding of the logic and grammar of Iron Age rituals. The relatively common occurrence of human remains and unusual human burials in ritual contexts on settlements suggests that human sacrifice or ritualised killings did sometimes take place in Pre-Roman Britain. At the same time it is widely recognised that wet places, including bogs, were a preferred location for making offerings of objects and animals in later Prehistoric Britain and other parts of northern Europe. There are 20 years later more examples of 'odd' deaths from wet places in Later Prehistoric Britain. In this context, in which a bog away from the nearest settlement would often be a preferred location for religious offerings, and in societies which did on occasions carry out ritual killings, a ritual interpretation for Lindow Man's death is more likely now than it was in 1986. It also provides a fuller context to interpret the presence of mistletoe in his stomach, which is highly unlikely to breathed in or consumed accidentally by Lindow Man given the way mistletoe is pollinated by insects and does not disperse its pollen by air.

Does this interpretation change if Lindow Man was not an Iron Age person?
The most important aspect of Ronald Hutton's article is to highlight the problem of when Lindow Man died, and that he could be Roman. The scientific dating evidence for when he and the other human remains from the bog at Lindow has not, in my opinion, been seriously considered by many archaeologists. This is almost certainly, as the author points out, because it can make for an inconvenient conclusion that Lindow Man and the other people could have died in the Roman period and not the pre-Roman Iron Age, when the possibility of human sacrifice is more acceptable. The dating of the human remains from Lindow Moss has not been straight forward. These remains are only directly dateable using radiocarbon dating. Radiocarbon dates have to be used with care, and there were specific problems with the radiocarbon dating of Lindow Man. Accepting these qualifications, the available dates suggest Lindow Man and his fellow victims mostly probably died between c. 1 to 250 AD. Rome invaded southern England in CE 43 and conquered the north west of England, where Lindow Man died, by the CE 70's. Lindow Man himself is statistically more likely to have died before this region was under Roman rule or in the initial decades of Roman control when many aspects of Iron Age life and culture continued. That Lindow Man's moustache was trimmed by shears or scissors is not conclusive dating evidence for him being Roman as Ronald Hutton suggests, as shears were used in the last 100-150 years of Iron Age Britain as well as in the Roman period.

There are other human remains from the same bog. At least one of these people probably died after CE 70. That is the period when Roman rule and culture become established in northern England. Two other human skulls have less secure radiocarbon dates placing them in the Roman period. However, to then assert that because at least one, and possibly all of these other people were likely to have died in the Roman period (after CE 70), and Lindow Man might possibly have died after the Roman conquest, that their deaths can not have been ritual killings is based on a questionable presumption; that human sacrifice could not to have taken place in the Roman period

because it was socially unacceptable and illegal. This is to impose a generalisation and expectation of Roman Britain that also does not take into account the changing understandings of the period since 1984. 'Unusual' burials and killings are known from Roman Britain. There is certainly evidence for the ritual manipulation of human remains both at the time of the Conquest and much later in Roman Britain as foundation offering or other offerings. The possibility that some of these unfortunately victims may have been ritual killings is an interpretation that is far more likely in the light of recent discoveries and research. That Iron Age religious practices could continue or, more often, be transformed or recast in Roman Britain is now widely attested. There is good evidence that traditions of votive deposition of objects, often in wet places, by local people continued in northern England and southern Scotland into the Roman period for several hundred years or more. Professor Hutton is right to point out that there is a possibility Lindow Man might have died during the Roman period, but he is wrong to then assume this must mean his was not a ritual killing.

Yours Sincerely

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