

“Hi, My Name’s Fox”?: An Alternative Explication of “Lindow Man’s”  
Fox Fur Armband and Its Relevance to the Question of Human Sacrifice  
among the Celts<sup>1</sup>

The discovery of a well-preserved first-century male body in Lindow Moss in 1985 has been rightly termed by Dr. Anne Ross an “archaeological sensation.” Ross has interpreted the strip of fox fur that is Lindow Man’s only removable adornment as a clue to his name, which she suggests is *Lovernios*, a name attested among Continental and Insular Celts meaning “fox”. This is an interpretation that has always bothered me. But before offering my own explanation, it is first necessary to review and contextualize the evidence for human sacrifice among the Celts.

Allegations of Celtic human sacrifice begin with the commentary of the Classical ethnographers. Julius Caesar made the earliest known reference to the mode of sacrifice that for lack of a better term we now know as the Wicker Man, an immense structure in human form which, he claims, the Gauls of 1st-century-BCE France would stuff full of malefactors and set alight as a sacrifice to the gods. His allegations were echoed by Strabo, who added several other quaint Gaulish idiosyncrasies to the list: stabbing men in the back and taking divinations from their death-throes, shooting them with arrows or impaling them. Burning and

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## “Hi, My Name’s Fox”?

impaling are also mentioned by Diodorus Siculus as methods of sacrificing criminals, and impaling turns up in Dio Cassius as part of Boudicca’s bag of tricks. Pliny adds cannibalism to the charges. Lucan, in the *Pharsalia*, mentions three Gaulish gods, Teutates (“the God of the Tribe”), Esus (possibly “the Lord” or “The Master”), and Taranis (“the Thunderer”), and states that each had a favorite form of sacrifice: drowning, hanging, and burning respectively (Kendrick 1966; Chadwick 1966; and Piggott 1975).

The question of whether the Celts actually practiced human sacrifice, or if these ethnographic charges are mere xenophobic calumny, has a long and contentious history. Did any of the Celtic tribes of Iron Age Europe practice human sacrifice? All of them, or only the Gauls? All of the Gauls, or some of the Gauls? All Gauls all the time, or only under special circumstances? Was this actually “human sacrifice” or merely a misinterpretation of an ancient means of capital punishment? A slander generated by Caesar to whip up support for his Gaulish campaigns, and repeated by others to forward similar political agendas? A commonplace of the Posidonian ethnographic tradition mindlessly parroted by his followers? A stereotypical accusation against The Other as Savage Barbarian (as opposed to The Other as Noble Savage)? If the Celts did practice human sacrifice, where were the bodies buried?

As it turns out, one of them was buried in Lindow Moss, outside of present-day Manchester. Outside of the pages of Classical ethnography, Lindow Man is the best evidence we have of Celtic human sacrifice. One problem of identifying human sacrifice, of course, is that it is often difficult to distinguish between a corpse that was murdered or killed in battle and one that was dispatched by ritual means. The reason that Lindow Man can be identified as a sacrificial victim is that archaeologically-determined circumstances leading up to his death, the method of his killing, and the disposal of his body all indicate a deliberate ritual that is in conformity with what we know of the symbolic systems of the Iron Age tribes of Western Europe, on the one hand, and of the Celtic-speaking peoples of medieval Britain and Ireland, on the other (Ross & Robins 1989). It is this correlation of physical and symbolic data

## “Hi, My Name’s Fox”?

that identifies this death as a sacrifice.

Lindow Man was struck on the back of the skull with a heavy instrument, garroted, stabbed in the jugular, and deposited in a shallow pool. In conceptual terms, this seems to accord with Lucan’s account of the sacrificial methods appropriate to his divine triumvirate. The accounts offered by Strabo and Diodorus in conjunction with Lucan suggest that the appropriate sacrifice to a god of thunder (and its concomitant lightning) is to be struck, with or without fire. Strangulation is accomplished whether with a garrote or by hanging. And drowning is basically getting a body into the water in circumstances that will prevent it getting out alive, even when other methods have ensured that death is certain.

While Lindow Man’s death harks back to the forms of sacrifice alleged in real life on the Continent, it also resonates with ritual deaths described in the medieval literature of Ireland and Wales (Rees & Rees 1961:326-41). These deaths are not human sacrifices per se, but neither can they be dismissed merely as domestic murders or deaths in battle. The death of Llew Llaw Gyffes in the Middle Welsh tale of *Math vab Mathonwy* (“not easy to accomplish,” as Llew himself points out) requires him to stand on the edge of a tub in which he had just bathed and to be shot through with a spear worked on only during the time that Mass is being performed, uniting the themes of impaling and drowning—and the word used for Mass in the text is *aberth*, literally “sacrifice,” as opposed to the more common word *offeren* for “[Catholic] Mass” (Williams 1982:86). Surely a simple *crime passionel* wouldn’t require such elaborate, Rube Goldberg preparations? The plot twists necessary to maneuver Diarmat mac Cerbaill (O’Grady 1892:2:76-88) into a tub full of ale in a burning house with a spear in his chest so that he can be conveniently pole-axed by a falling burning beam likewise suggest something more than a verdict of “death by misadventure.” Especially since another tale tells us that virtually the same fate befell Muirertach mac Erca (Cross & Slover 1969:519-32).

Indeed, the phrase *guin 7 bádud 7 loscud*, ‘wounding and drowning and burning’ is a standard description for a peculiarly ritual kingly death

## “Hi, My Name’s Fox”?

in medieval Irish literature, even when the king in question hasn’t actually suffered all three fates (see Dalton 1970, O Cuiv 1973, Radner 1983, Ward 1970). Joan Radner (1983:184-5) has pointed out that whatever its historical context, the Threefold Death constitutes what she calls a “riddle death,” in which an apparently self-contradictory prophecy or series of prophecies is fulfilled by the bizarre nature of his final fate. Not only kings but religious figures—with both pagan and Christian affinities—such as Suibhne Geilt, Myrddin, and Lailoken suffer this fate (Tolstoy 1985: 170-86) whose narration is really concerned with not so much the nature of death as the nature of prophecy. Riddle deaths express a blasting of the certainties of either/or thinking, placing the victim in a cognitive liminal zone that allows him to show that you *can* get There from Here.

Patrick is credited in the *Metrical Dindshenchas* with eradicating human sacrifice to the idol Cromm Cruaich at Mag Sleacht: “For him ingloriously they slew their hapless firstborn with much wailing and peril, to pour their blood around Cromm Cruaich. / Milk and corn they asked of him speedily in return for a third part of all their progeny: great was the horror and outcry about him.” (Gwyn 1924:18-21). Here we have an actual reference to human sacrifice for the sake of the fertility of the land, though hardly an eye-witness account. Likewise, in the story of the Adventure of Art mac Conn the blight that has fallen upon Ireland (due to inappropriate marriage of the king, Art, and the archetypal Bad Fairy, Bécuma) can, according to the druids, only be reversed by the sacrifice of a (sexually) sinless man (Cross & Slover 1969:491-502; O Hehir 1983). Both of these cases cannot escape the suspicion of having been influenced by Christian morality and Biblical and Classical paradigms. The sacrifice of firstborn children to an awful god resonates with Biblical references to child sacrifices to Moloch, and also of the plague visited on the Egyptians; the ultimate substitution of a magical cow for the sinless boy gives a peculiarly Irish twist to the stories of both Abraham and Isaac and Agamemnon and Iphigenia (see McCone 1990:152-3).

Archaeological evidence, then, provides a very little evidence of actual human sacrifices among the Celts. What evidence exists suggests that

## “Hi, My Name’s Fox”?

when it occurred, it was a rare event possibly undertaken in the most drastic of circumstances. Literary evidence suggests that by the medieval era, at least, the people of Ireland, Scotland and Wales found the idea of ritual death a useful mythological tool for expressing the ambiguous relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds. They also participated in the wide-spread trope of distinguishing Us and Them, in this case constructed as “pagan” and “Christian”, by “performs human sacrifice” and “doesn’t perform human sacrifice.” This may well be the same mental process that was at work in the original ascription of human sacrifice to the Celts by Posidonios and his school. Or maybe it isn’t.

Take the Wicker Man, for instance. While there is no evidence of the literal sacrifice of human beings and animals by burning them alive in a wicker edifice, in fact the burning of wicker or straw man-shaped “colossi”, often filled with snakes or cats, was practiced in France, the Netherlands, and Britain up to the nineteenth century, usually as part of Midsummer celebrations. The most easily-accessible source for these customs is James George Frazer’s often-derided *Golden Bough* (1913:2: 31-44) but, whatever one may think of Frazer’s explanations of these rituals (Fraser 1990), he cannot be beat as an indefatigable collator of primary source material. Given that the geographical distribution of these folkloric wicker men corresponds pretty closely with the distribution of the Celtic tribes at the time that Caesar first wrote of the wicker man sacrifice, it is hard to flat-out deny that there can be any connection between them. However, if there is a connection it seems most likely to me that Caesar took the opportunity to sensationalize a Celtic seasonal festival custom by grafting onto it an occasional tendency to human sacrifice found elsewhere in their religion. The tabloid imagination is hardly a recent phenomenon.

But it is not enough merely to list possible instances of human sacrifice among the Celts over a wide geographic and temporal range. The discussion of Celtic human sacrifice seems to always have tacitly assumed that it was practiced in one form, and for one, usually unstated, reason. Who needs an excuse for human sacrifice? Human sacrifice is mad. If you do it, you are either mad, and therefore your reasons are

## “Hi, My Name’s Fox”?

beyond logical explanation, or you are deluded, and therefore your reason is wrong, or you are using human sacrifice as a smoke screen for a rational but detestable exercise of power, terrorism, or murder. Part of the confusion over the Celts’ possible practice of human sacrifice may derive from the fact that, not only is the evidence fragmentary, but where found, it relates to a number of practices carried out for diverse reasons.

Anthropological study of the practice of human sacrifice world-wide reveals that it is carried out for a number of reasons, and that the reason for a particular sacrifice is often revealed in the circumstances of the disposal of the body (see Davies 1981, esp. 21-22). Humans have been sacrificed to accompany a prominent individual in death, as with the bodies found by Leonard Woolley in his excavations at Ur, or in the Hindu practice of suttee. In these cases, the bodies of the sacrificial victims are necessarily found in close proximity to the primary burial, an individual who may have died in war, of an accident, or of natural causes. Humans sacrificed as messengers to the "gods" are probably a subset of this group, since in most cases these sacrifices occur in societies where the gods are deified ancestors. Here the bodies are usually disposed of in a sacred precinct. Humans have been sacrificed for deposit in the foundations of defensive walls or of buildings, as a propitiation to the gods, and again, quite obviously, these victims are discovered in the foundations they protect.

Human sacrifice has been widely believed to promote the fertility of crops. In these cases, the body is usually dismembered or burned, the pieces or ashes deposited in the fields as a kind of ritual fertilizer, and thus it is difficult to identify this type of sacrifice by archaeological remains. In some cases the body may be deposited in some high locale overlooking the area meant to be made fertile by the sacrifice; this seems to have been the intention behind the child sacrifices found at high altitudes in the Andes, which are being discovered with increasing frequency in recent years (Tierney 1989). The sacrifice of members of one's own society for victory in war has taken more varied forms in both the ritual and the disposal of the body. However, these are by their nature public ceremonies that must take place in the "center" of the community,

## “Hi, My Name’s Fox”?

usually within a temple or other sacred structure, and the bodies disposed of nearby.

Finally, humans have been sacrificed as scapegoats, ceremonially taking on the sins of the community in order to purify the whole through their individual deaths. In this type of sacrifice, which may take place regularly or may only occur in times of unusual desperation, the scapegoat, either of his own volition or under duress, breaks some religious taboo or commits some minor misdemeanor which thus justifies his expulsion and slaying. As a very mild form of this sacrificial principle, the sacrifice of oxen in ancient Greek ritual required that the ox eat some of the offerings that had been already dedicated to the deity; thus, the ox had committed a crime which was punishable by death and the sacrifice ensued. The same ritual breaking of taboo through eating takes place in Haitian *voudoun* animal sacrifice. However, in the case of human scapegoating, what happens most often is the literal expulsion of the victim from society, that is, driving or otherwise removing the victim from the “center” to the “periphery”.

Lindow Man’s body was deposited in a location that could stand as the very definition of “periphery.” Ross herself has described Lindow Moss as a “No-Man’s Land” (Ross & Robins 1989, 91). She also suggests that his actual slaying took place at a nearby sacred site, probably Alderley Edge, and the body brought to Lindow Moss for deposition (ibid., 95-96). The method of execution, by the so-called “triple death”, reflects the preferred modes of sacrifice to Esus, Taranis, and Teutates already mentioned. These gods as a triumvirate can be seen to encompass the whole of (Celtic) society, representing the Dumézilian “three functions” of sovereignty, force, and fecundity, or the Lord, the Warrior, and the People. This triple sacrifice of a single individual also fits Bruce Lincoln’s theories of the body of the human sacrificial victim as a microcosm of the cultural cosmos (Lincoln 1991). All these factors suggest to me that Lindow Man was slain as a scapegoat sacrifice.

Killing a human being is not undertaken without evoking a certain amount of guilt in the sacrificers. Human sacrifice is a consistent aspect of human religion, and its prevalence prevents us from simply dismissing

## “Hi, My Name’s Fox”?

its occurrence as the manifestation of an occasional societal psychosis. Human sacrifice invariably takes place within the context of its justification. Of all the types of human sacrifice, scapegoat sacrifice is the type that causes the greatest feelings of guilt in the sacrificers and thus most requires some kind of rationalization. One way of rationalizing the choice is through casting lots, such as the piece of burned bannock found in Lindow Man's stomach. In this way the choice of the victim is really the choice of the gods rather than responsibility of the sacrificers (even if the lottery is rigged). Patrick Tierney's (1989) study of several recent instances of human sacrifice amongst the Mapuche of Chile and the Aymara of Peru offers relevant insight into the lengths to which a community will go to exculpate itself when it has felt a necessity to perform a human sacrifice. In many cases the victim becomes a saint or is assimilated to the deity after the sacrifice, but equally the victim is vilified before the sacrifice and even labeled as a thief even though everyone is well aware that this individual is not a thief (ibid, 268). As Tierney points out, it is necessary to concentrate on the benefits that this sacrifice will produce for the society as whole rather than dwelling on the cries of a young boy begging his grandfather to save him as his arms and legs are cut off, or the pleas of a man with a family who will now be left with no means of support. Not only is it necessary to make the killing somehow the victim's "fault" through either a matter of chance or some kind of ritual breaking of taboo, it is also necessary to eliminate the individuality of the victim by making him (or her) merely the embodiment of some ideal. Significantly, one common characteristic of human sacrifice victims is physical perfection, health and vigor, and lack of blemish—all characteristics of Lindow Man himself. One could say that the signal difference between the victim of human sacrifice and the victim of murder is that a murder victim is killed because of who he is as an individual in relation to the murderer--someone who stands in the way of the murderer, who poses a threat to the murderer, or in most cases simply someone who is having an argument with the murderer--while the victim of human sacrifice is killed anonymously as the representative of a group--virgins, that is, those who are sexually mature but not sexually active; children,

## “Hi, My Name’s Fox”?

who are often seen as closer to the realm of the ancestors; red-heads, sacrificed in ancient Egypt to a red-headed god. It is perhaps significant that the murders that cause the most unease in contemporary society are those in which the individuality of the victim is not relevant, mass murders, serial killings, "ritual" murders, killings that bear more of an uncomfortable resemblance to human sacrifices than to common murders.

It is the emphasis on the victim as a representative of the social whole rather than as an individual which lies at the base of my discomfort with Ross’s hypothesis that the fox-fur band indicates Lindow Man’s given name. The name of a murder victim is relevant; the name of a sacrifice victim, as Tierney discovered, is not. Efforts begin immediately to subsume the identity of the victim to that of the deity. Emphasis on the individuality of the victim makes the killing too uncomfortably murder-ish.

Nonetheless, the arm band is clearly relevant in some way to the circumstances of his death. Anne Ross believes that it serves, essentially, as a name tag: “Hi, my name is Fox.” I have no doubt that the name Lovernios was available as a possible name for a first-century British male, but even though Smith is a common name, my name is still Jones, even if I were to be buried with an anvil as an indication of my occupation, or with it placed on my chest to keep my dangerous spirit from walking. I believe that the band is part of the rationalization process involved in the performance of a scapegoating human sacrifice, much like the consumption of a piece of burned bannock Lindow Man. I think it functions to label Lindow Man as an outlaw—though not necessarily a criminal. Criminals may become outlaws, as Caesar attested was within the druids’ power. But the role of “outlaw” is not identical to that of law-breaker. Witness the legend of Robin Hood, the archetype of outlawry as a form of political rebellion against injustice, or the romantic image of the Wild West outlaws like the James Gang, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, or later Bonnie and Clyde and all the bank-robbers of the Depression who epitomized rebellion against crushing poverty. Or even more relevant, the popularity of the fictional Zorro—whose name means “fox”—the outlaw champion of the downtrodden in Old Los Angeles. In

## “Hi, My Name’s Fox”?

the medieval Celtic literatures the outlaw par excellence is Finn mac Cumhail, the leader of the *fian*, who lives in the wilds on the periphery of society yet who is in many ways central to the functioning of society (Nagy 1985).

The fox is regarded in many societies, including the Celtic, as an outlaw animal. The fox lives on the periphery of human society, neither domesticated nor fully wild. On one hand, it is despised by farmers for its depredations on their livestock (hence the rationale behind fox-hunting), while on the other hand it is grudgingly admired for its wiliness (hence its frequent role as a Trickster figure, such as Reynard the Fox). Joseph Nagy has discussed the ambivalent role of foxes as simultaneously wild and domestic beings in Irish hagiography in the context of Patrick's Letter to Coroticus (Nagy 1997, 104-106 and n. 110). The Letter is believed to be an authentic composition of Patrick's, in which he rebukes a British king named Coroticus who is persecuting Patrick's followers. By the time Muirchu composed his *Life of Patrick*, the confrontation between Patrick and Coroticus appears to have passed into legend, with the concomitant mythologizing that so often accompanies oral tradition. As Muirchu tells the story, the king (here called Corictic) is read Patrick's letter, and mocks his admonitions. When Patrick hears of Corictic's response, he prays to God to "expel this perfidious one from this world and the one beyond." Shortly afterwards, Corictic is satirized by a bard. "Then Corictic, in the midst of the assembly, in their presence, turned into a fox and absconded immediately . . . ." (Bieler 1979, 100). Here is a fox who is simultaneously a king and an outlaw, and who literally makes the transition from the center to the periphery.

Myths of human sacrifice often suggest an exchangeability between the human victim and an animal; the two most well-known examples are the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, in which Isaac is replaced by a ram, and the alternative version of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, where the girl is replaced by a doe. Numerous scholars have suggested that these narrative exchanges are an attempt to rationalize or assuage the guilt of an actual practice of human sacrifice. In practical terms, in the context of an actual human sacrifice, it would be impossible to literally

## “Hi, My Name’s Fox”?

exchange the human for an animal, but it would be possible to suggest the interchangeability of human and animal by marking the actual body of the sacrifice. Lindow Man’s fox-fur armband, I would argue, signifies not “My name is Fox” but “I am a sacrifice.”

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**“Hi, My Name’s Fox”?**

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