

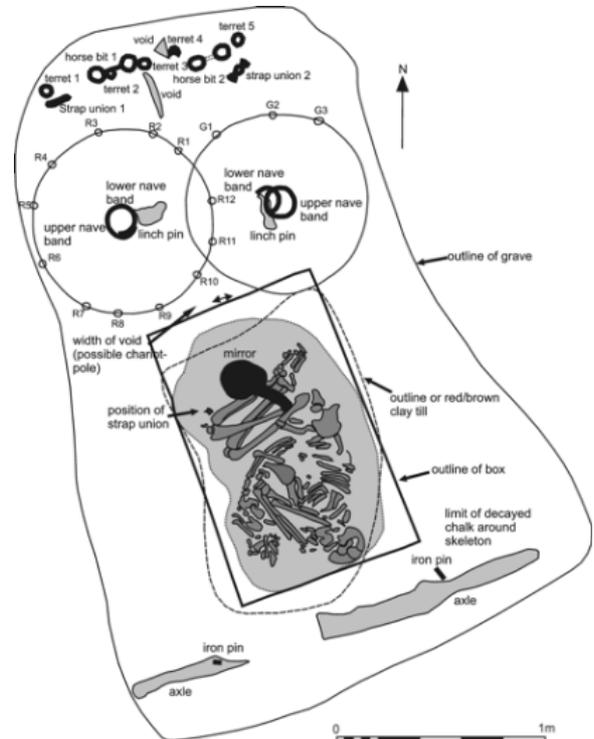


In the popular imagination, Iron Age (800 BC – AD 43) ritual and religion is all about Druids conducting ceremonies in sacred groves. The Romans, who were in contact with Iron Age peoples, described the Druids as religious specialists who also acted as judges and teachers, arbitrating in disputes and teaching religious knowledge. The Druids may well have been present in some parts of Britain and France during the second and first centuries BC but we know very little about their activities beyond the descriptions left behind by the Romans. Archaeologists, however, have revealed a great deal of evidence for other types of ritual activity, including from burials, and even the deposition of objects in water and in the ground.

### Gifts for the Afterlife

Burials provide perhaps the best evidence for Iron Age beliefs but burial practices varied significantly throughout the Iron Age. In East Yorkshire from the fifth to first centuries BC people were buried in large cemeteries in graves accompanied by objects such as brooches and pots, as well as cuts of meat. Occasionally people were buried with things like swords and mirrors and even chariots. It is thought that people were buried with grave-goods for use in the after-life. But not all people were buried with grave-goods, suggesting that this belief was not universal, or that to some access to the afterlife was achieved in different ways.

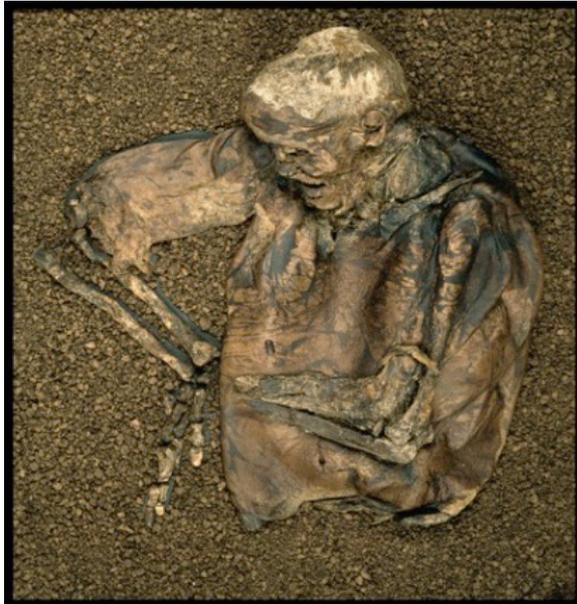
Elsewhere, burials are found at settlements in pits, ditches and enclosure boundaries. It is thought that these burials may have been a way of linking people and their ancestors to the land. Some bodies may have been exposed to the elements and left to decay, this a practice known as excarnation. Where excarnation occurs elsewhere, such as in Tibet, the decay of bodies is important in the transition of the body from the human to the spirit world. During the Iron Age, bits of bodies could have been removed from decomposing bodies and put in locations such as pits possibly as a form of offering to the gods as bits of bodies such as skulls are also found at settlements.



*Plan of the burial of a woman found at Wetwang, East Yorkshire. She was buried with a chariot and a mirror, placed near her feet. You can see the chariot wheels and metal horse-fittings at the top of the plan. Image: drawn by the author*

### What is a Bog Body?

Bog bodies are well-preserved human remains found in bogs which, because they are cold and acidic, preserve human tissue and skin. Bog bodies have been discovered in bogs in Britain, Ireland, Denmark, the Netherlands, and north-west Germany. They date from 500 BC – AD 100 and many show signs of a violent death. For example, Lindow Man suffered blows to the head and his throat had been cut. Some archaeologists believe people like Lindow Man were the victims of ritual sacrifice and deposited in bogs as offerings to the gods. They may have gone willingly to their deaths, or were perhaps executed prisoners of war, or even criminals.



*Lindow Man was discovered in 1984 near Wilmslow in Cheshire. He was around 25-years old when he died. The bog has preserved his skin, hair and facial features. Image: ©Trustees of the British Museum*

### **Cast Aside or Offerings to the Gods?**

Sometimes well-made artefacts, particularly shields and swords, were also deposited in water, especially in rivers, lakes and bogs. Some of these, like the Battersea Shield found in the River Thames, were probably ceremonial objects and had not been used in anger. So many objects have been found, they can't all be accidental losses and it is thought that like bog bodies, these objects were placed in water as an offering, possibly to a water god.



*This bronze shield decorated with red glass enamel and raised patterns was discovered in the River Thames near Battersea Bridge. Image: ©Trustees of the British Museum*

Sometimes objects such as coins and neckrings known as torcs were buried together in small holes in the ground. These deposits are known as hoards. For example, 14 hoards of objects including gold and silver coins and torcs have been found in a field near the village of Snettisham in Norfolk. But why on earth would people bury such valuable objects and not come back for them? They could have been buried for safekeeping and then forgotten but, like watery deposits of metal artefacts, archaeologists find so many hoards, they cannot all have been misplaced or forgotten. Often hoards are placed in prominent positions in the landscape, for example the Snettisham hoards are on a small hill. Hoards also contain artefacts that were deliberately broken before they were buried. These different factors have led archaeologists to conclude that hoards were put in the ground for some other reason than for safekeeping and they may have acted as some form of offering, perhaps to a land god, with the location of deposition also important to their beliefs.



*A hoard of torcs from Snettisham, Norfolk. They were tightly packed into the ground and arranged in colour order with silvery torcs at the top and golden ones at the bottom. Image: ©Trustees of the British Museum*

Similarly, groups of objects have also been found in the mouths of caves. Caves may have been thought to act as gateways to another world.

### **Summary**

Iron Age people probably believed in many different gods associated with nature, including the earth and water. Unlike today where religion is often separated from everyday activities and where we worship in specially built places like churches, it is thought that religion and everyday activities in the Iron Age were not so clearly defined with beliefs permeating all aspects of everyday life. Religious specialists such as Druids may have officiated at special ceremonies but ritual activities also occurred day-to-day taking

place within the home and special places in the landscape.

### **Further Reading**

**Aldhouse-Green, M.** 2015. *Bog Bodies Uncovered: Solving Europe's Ancient Mystery*. London: Thames & Hudson

**Bradley, R.** 2016. *A Geography of Offerings: Deposits of Valuables in the Landscapes of Ancient Europe*. Oxford: Oxbow Books

**Ghey, E.** 2015. *Hoards: Hidden History*. London: British Museum Press

**Hutton, R.** 2007. *The Druids*. London, Hambledon

**Joy, J.** 2009. *Lindow Man*. London: British Museum Press

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*This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Jody Joy (University of Cambridge)*

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