Worsley Man: Manchester’s bog head

**Discovery**

On 18 August 1958, the remains of a partially fleshed skull were discovered by John Connolly as he was ‘walling peat bricks’ along trench eight of flat six on Astley Moss (a telling local analogy to the moss ‘rooms’ of Lindow). An employee of the *Lancashire Moss and Litter Company*, he had noticed ‘a black ball-shaped patch’ with ‘matter inside’ and another bit of ‘neck’, making a ‘rough search’ that turned up a piece of bone ‘with teeth attached’ (Anon. 1958). These are the remains now accessioned by the Manchester Museum of a bog head that has become known as ‘Worsley Man’ (Garland 1995; see Figure 7.1). The police were informed, and a ‘vigil’ was kept over the site for three days, while an extensive search of 252 surrounding acres was made by the police. During this time, ‘wild rumours involving skeletons, murder and a horde of gold’ [sic] apparently flew around Astley village (Anon. 2002). Yet nothing further was discovered.

The remains were examined the following day by Dr A. St Hill of Liverpool University who assessed them as male, between twenty-four and forty years, of ‘possible oriental’ [sic] origin (apparently due to the breadth of the nasal bones) – what we might less pejoratively describe today as ‘Asian’. He thought they had lain in the bog for ‘less than a year’ (cited in Garland 1995: 104). They were then viewed by Bolton Home Office pathologist Dr G. Manning on Sunday 24 August at laboratories in Preston. He reported his findings to the coroner’s inquest on 17 October 1958, noting that they consisted of ‘a portion of skull, an upper and a lower jaw, the first two and a half cervical vertebrae, some skin above the right ear, a two-inch section below the right ear, a one-inch strip of skin on the right side of the neck and a separate tooth’, noting that the bone was almost completely decalcified and stained dark brown (cited in Garland 1995: 104). He noted that the jaw was particularly wide and bore a fracture, and that the hair ‘in front of the right ear was grey and light brown’, whereas that on the back of the head was ‘of a reddish colour’ (cited in Garland 1995: 104). The ‘coloured matter’ inside the head was tested microscopically and chemically, and identified as preserved...
brain matter; no trace of this now remains and the interior of the cranium appears to have been cleaned. Manning reported to the coroner and the jury that ‘peat was an extraordinary good preserver’ and that ‘some bodies which were 2,000 years old, yet in a good state of preservation, had been found in peat bogs on the Continent’ (cited in Garland 1995: 104). As Garland (1995: 104) notes, this is a remarkable insight given that Glob’s groundbreaking monograph would not be translated into English until 1969. In all likelihood, Manning had seen

7.1 The bog head of Worsley Man (from Astley Moss, © Manchester Museum, University of Manchester)
the 1954 episode of *The Peat Bog Murder Mystery* (see Chapter 1), but despite this, he personally thought Worsley Man was probably somewhere between one hundred and five hundred years old. The coroner, J. J. Rothwell, reported that ‘in law the remains counted as a body’ but given the absence of an obvious cause of death he returned an ‘open verdict’ and the newspaper noted that the remains were likely to be retained ‘as an historical relic’ (cited in Garland 1995: 104). We owe the knowledge of this groundbreaking discovery both to the painstaking work of the police force, particularly DC B. Lyons (police photographer) and DC A. E. Parr (chief investigator, both of Stretford Police Station) as well as the assiduous but unnamed journalist who made such a detailed record of the coroner’s inquest. The police records are now unobtainable, having rightly been dismissed as an archaeological case. Moreover, I owe my knowledge of this stage of the discovery to the expertise of Duncan McCormick, local history librarian of the Salford Local History Library. No one else would have known where to look and no official paper archive accompanied the head on its next stage of investigation.

**The afterlife of Worsley Man: historiography of conservation and analysis**

The remains were given back into the possession of Dr Manning, who donated them to the Pathology Museum at the Manchester Medical School ‘where they were mounted and placed in a Perspex box’ (Garland 1995: 104). At some point, the post-mortem damage to the skull (partly from peat compression and partly from the mode of recovery followed by forensic examination) took its toll: the skull has been literally re-pieced using wire ‘staples’ to hold bone elements together – requiring penetrative and invasive work on the cranial bone. A still from the 2019 CT scan shows the extent of this ‘robust’ conservation treatment (Figure 7.2). Fifteen thick wire loops, often simply twisted over at the end, have been used alongside two finer twists of wire. Fragments of delicate white cotton thread, observed in the latest analysis, seem to have been used to hold surface tissue together. (A small, loose strand of ‘peat-brown’ coloured thread found within the neck tissue was erroneously identified as a very fine ligature; this has now been dismissed as a modern intrusion, possibly from a remedial conservation measure). Apart from supportive packing, no other conservation method was used on the skull and it has thus been allowed to ‘air-dry’ with no chemical interventions known. The transfer into the Manchester Museum collections occurred in 1992 after the first study programme outlined below, but it arrived with no associated paper, photographic or conservation archive – hence the importance of these early, detailed newspaper reports.

To date, there have been four programmes of investigation. The first, focused on the forensic investigation of the remains, began in 1987 led by John Denton (a specialist in histology) and A. N. Garland (a forensic pathologist) who recognised
the archaeological potential of this skull. Garland (1995) concluded that the skull was that of a young to middle-aged adult male, with a partial metopic suture running from the nasion. He possessed complete dentition at the time of death but only two teeth appear to have been recovered (the upper right second molar and lower right first molar). A fracture extended downwards through the right-hand side of the mandible into the empty socket of the lower right canine tooth; the CT scan undertaken at the time could not determine if this was ante-, peri- or post-mortem. There was survival of the right ear with surrounding tissue, with brown/red hair ‘not neatly trimmed’ (Garland 1995: 105) and a laceration c.28 mm in length extended upwards behind the ear. When examined microscopically, irregular wound edges and displacement of hair follicles into the wound could be clearly seen. Numerous fracture lines were noted through the frontal and parietal
bones but the most notable wound was a depressed fracture in the bregma region: skin and bone fragments were displaced under inner table of the skull (indicative of a fracture to the top of the head). Garland noted the survival of CV1 and half of CV2, showing evidence of sharp-force transection to the latter indicative of decapitation. Finally, a twisted cord appeared to be embedded in the neck tissue, extending upwards between the soft tissue and the right-hand side of the face (Garland 1995: 106).

Samples of ‘skin, hair and cord’ as well as bone were taken for biochemical analysis; the skin showed peaks for ‘chlorine, calcium and lead’ whereas the ‘cord’ indicated chlorine, sodium, silicon and sulphur (but not iron or copper (Garland 1995: 107), in contrast to the skin ‘pigments’ proposed for Lindow Man II/IV and III, see Chapter 6). Significant microbial damage was noted in the skin. Histology on the projecting piece of sinewy material interpreted as a cord, at its ‘cut’ end revealed ‘thick collagen bands’ seen in animal and human tendon (Denton et al. 2003: 49). It was concluded that it was of ‘animal’ rather than plant’ origin (Garland 1995: 107). In addition, a sample of bone was sliced from the cervical vertebrae for histological analysis; this may have made sense as it was a ‘cut’ surface but unfortunately this has marred our understanding of the decapitation wound. It revealed normal lamellar collagen orientation indicating that this was a healthy adult individual at the time of his death: the thin section presented in this article (Denton 2003: fig. 2) also suggests an almost immediate cessation of decay, suggesting the head entered the bog soon after decapitation. A C14 sample from the right-hand side of the facial tissue yielded a date of 1800 +/- 70 years BP (Ox-A-1430), which placed him firmly within the Romano-British era (not the Iron Age).

The second programme was led by John Prag and Richard Neave between 2000 and 2001 (see Prag and Neave 1999; Denton et al. 2003). Its main purpose was to create a facial reconstruction for re-display in a new ‘corridor’ gallery of the Manchester Museum, based around the pioneering use of this technique to bring people ‘face to face’ with the past, which opened in 2002 (Figure 7.3). The display was widely and positively reported in local newspapers (e.g. Anon. 2002). Importantly, as Denton et al. (2003) went on to report, the interpretation of this CT scan suggested that in addition to the head trauma, the wound behind the ear and decapitation identified by Garland, there was evidence of an ante-mortem injury to the face comprising a major ‘step fault’ at the tooth line and a misplaced but healed piece of bone in the nasal septum with a fracture line defect in the left orbit (Denton et al. 2003: 49, fig. 5). They proposed that this was due to a facial blow striking from the bottom right-hand side of the jaw up through the nose and eye socket: an injury that had healed but had led to chronic sinusitis visible in the deformation of the right front nasal bone. The notion that this was an individual who had experienced facial trauma during his life is important, given Fredengren’s (2018) arguments regarding marginalised characters, Redfern’s (2016) study of different forms of violence or the notion that this might be an individual already caught up in inter-/intra-group violent episodes.
7.3 The Worsley Man facial reconstruction undertaken by the Unit of Art in Medicine, University of Manchester, with J. Prag. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.
A third programme of investigation was begun in 2010, led by Jim Bourke (who sadly passed away in 2018), Brian Pyatt and Pat Bradley (University of Nottingham) with John Denton and Judith Adams (University of Manchester, the latter now also sadly deceased). It was coordinated by Manchester curator, Bryan Sitch. The aim of this stage of research (once the bog head had come ‘off’ display during the controversies of the 2008–9 human remains debate: see later in the chapter) was to use the very latest in X-ray and CT scanning to give additional insights into the circumstances of Worsley Man’s death (reported in UniLife 2012). The results of those two new non-invasive methods threw a slight spanner in the works, giving a ‘high’ X-radiograph response in one of the tooth sockets. However, given that one ‘loose’ tooth was recorded at the site of discovery, we believe this response is the result of the use of an unrecorded conservation intervention, using adhesive to reconsolidate the tooth and socket. The new CT scan, featured as part of a 2014 Channel 5 documentary entitled Murdered: The Bodies in the Bog, threw up another unexpected observation: a loose, sharp fragment of bone embedded in the neck tissue. Initially, the team considered whether this was a unique discovery of the tip of a bone spearhead, analogous to those found at Hjortspring (see Chapter 5). However, its irregular profile means that this can now also be dismissed as the fractured end of the temporal styloid process from the right-hand side of the head (suggested by S. Mays pers. comm.), which sheared off during decapitation. One of the finer pieces of wire has been used to reattach the end of this to the main skull, consolidating the articulation of head and mandible.

**Worsley Man: new analysis**

The current programme of research, begun in 2018, comprised the Manchester University and Museum research team (M. Giles, B. Sitch, S. Sportun, I. Narkiss, E. Tollefsen and C. Jones with M. Buckley (proteomics) and T. Lowe of the Henry Moseley X-ray Imaging Facility). The forensic expertise of M. Smith (University of Bournemouth) and hair isotope specialist A. Wilson (University of Bradford) complete the project team. The results presented here distil some of the results of that joint research, which will be published in full scientific detail elsewhere. Most importantly, a new radiocarbon date has established that the Worsley head now belongs to the early to mid-Roman period: AD 131–251 at 95.4 per cent probability (OxA-39355: 1813 +/- 20 BP; see Figure 7.4).

This new forensic examination confirms he was an adult male, based on the defined brow ridges, robust and square chin and large nuchal crest (though this was not particularly prognathic (Figure 7.1): supporting the broad but flattish nose reconstructed by Richard Neave). His overall appearance is Caucasian; there is no reason to believe we are looking at the remains of anything other than a northern European skull though whether he came from an indigenous population or arrived as a Roman auxiliary or immigrant, we cannot yet tell. The partially retained
metopic suture on his forehead, noted by Garland, was confirmed. On the basis of
dentition and sagittal suture, he was aged between twenty-six and forty-five years,
and was certainly not greatly advanced in years (though Denton (pers. comm.) has
recently re-evaluated the bone histology results, suggesting he suffered from some
notable osteoarthritis even at this stage of life).

Having confirmed we are looking at an early Roman head, roughly contem-
porary to Lindow II/IV, we can now compare the character of violence meted
out to both men. The most significant damage consists of a sharp-force wound
to the top of the skull, in the vicinity of the left parietal and bregma, c.6 cm in
length (Figure 7.5a). The ‘clenching’ of the jaw and shock of this cranial trauma
seems to have caused the breakage of the tooth surface of the lower right first
molar. There is also a linear fracture in the occipital, radiating out from the for-
amen magnum bilaterally and a third fracture extending anteriorly from the
foramen magnum to the sphenoid (Figure 7.5b). These appear to be subsidiary
fractures caused by the force of the blow to the top of the head, likely to be the
result of a heavy and wide-bladed weapon such as an axe, wielded either from
in front of the individual, perhaps when they were kneeling down. However,
the fractures to the left-hand nasal cavity and cheek, as well as one extending
through the right-hand jawline (seen by Denton et al. (2003) as ante-mortem
healed trauma) have a softer, more ragged and irregular appearance and we
interpret these here as post-depositional compression and fracture caused by
the bog.

The second major wound is the sharp-force trauma to the anterior of the
surviving right ear; on the exterior flesh, this can be seen as a 28 mm long cut
(as recorded by Garland 1995) evident in the sharp wound margin and displaced

7.4 Radiocarbon calibration curve for Worsley Man (OxCal).
7.5a Cranial wounds to the top of the skull.

7.5b Radiating fractures on the foramen magnum.
hair follicles, though a wider ‘split’ along this wound margin was measured at 5.75 cm by the current team (again perhaps exacerbated by post-mortem tearing in the bog or during the recovery and handling process). Underneath this exterior wound we were able to record the resulting sharp-force cut to the right mastoid process, which is extremely fine in profile and measured 14 mm in length: a damage ratio of 2:1, external (flesh/tissue) and internal (underlying bone). This is important, as James (forthcoming) has recently argued that we significantly underestimate the scale and character of violence based solely on skeletal evidence; as far as we know, this may be the first time that the forensic examination of an external/internal wound site has been possible for a bog body, permissible here only by the fact that the surviving facial tissue can be ‘taken off’ the underlying bone (Figures 7.6a and 7.6b). This wound suggests the use of a sword rather than a heavier bladed weapon, wielded from behind, to the right-hand side of the head while he was standing – this may have been the first major blow.

The final suite of wounds relates to the decapitation of this individual. A small ‘nick’ in the left-hand mandible, 5 mm wide by 10.5 mm deep, has so far not been
recorded by any other analyst (Figure 7.7). The discolouration of the bone and sharp edge to this wide blade wound suggests this is a peri-mortem injury, located in a classic position where an attempted decapitation blow has ‘caught’ on the left-hand edge of the mandible. It suggests the use of either a wide-bladed sword or more probably an axe. A second blow has ‘shaved’ off the surface of the right-hand bone surface of the mandible at the chin. These attempts have also severed the thyroid bone and right-hand styloid process (which in this individual is noticeably long), resulting in its embedding in the neck tissue. The CT scan revealed that the original forensic assessment in the 1950s was correct: decapitation has happened at CV3, slicing this vertebrae in two. (However the ‘stepped’ appearance of this sharp-force wound, originally seen by this team as a two-fold attempt to sever the head, can now be interpreted as the result of an invasive sample for bone histology in the primary phase of investigation). The decapitation clearly did take two attempts, probably with a wider-bladed weapon such as an axe, both from behind: the first biased slightly towards the left-hand side (with the head bowed too far forward on the chest, thus clipping the jaw) and the second successful attempt focused more to the right achieving final, clean removal of the skull in one severing blow.

Having no post-cranial body nor surviving neck tissue to examine, we do not know if there were other wounds such as a cut throat, parry or defence wounds, stabbing to the torso or ‘kicking’ of his legs out from under the body as observed in
other premeditated killings discussed in Chapter 6. The ‘ligature’ noted by earlier teams has now been evaluated using proteomic analysis by M. Buckley; unfortunately, it has proved to be human (Buckley pers. comm.) – a mere piece of his own neck tissue, torn from the wider flesh of the neck, which is why it appears to pass high up into the anterior flesh below the right ear.

7.7 ‘Nick’ in mandible caused by decapitation attempt.
We can thus reconstruct a minimum of three ‘moments’ of violence: a bloody but non-fatal sword blow behind the right ear, a splitting and devastating axe wound to the top of the skull and final decapitation of the head. All of this was blade trauma. It suggests, in keeping with several other bog bodies, the involvement of at least two to three armed figures (and possibly other assistants) participating in the termination of this life. At present, we cannot thus distinguish between a formal execution or sacrifice but the taking of this head and its burial in the bog prompts us to think critically about Iron Age attitudes towards this particular body part.

Remains from the mosses of Lancashire and Cheshire

Bog heads, as we have seen, have been found on other Lancashire and Cheshire mosses; one of the two examples curated in the Duckworth collection from Ashton is that of an adult male, dated to the late Bronze Age: 1315–980 cal BC (Robinson and Shinwell 1996). From the same moss came a late Bronze Age socketed axe with wooden handle ‘preserved by the antiseptic properties of the peat’ and a coin hoard dating to the second century AD, once contained in an earthenware vessel (from close to Castle Farm, see Higson 1859: 29–30), which suggest sporadic consignments of valuables to the bog (Nevell 1992: 71). Meanwhile, the decapitated head wrapped in yellow woollen cloth from Pilling Moss (see Chapter 2) appears to be earlier Bronze Age in date, ‘with an abundance of plaited auburn hair’ and two strings of cylindrical jet beads and one amber bead (Edwards 1969). It was from this moss that the Iron Age short sword or dagger sheath was also found (see Chapter 5). Another late Bronze Age cranium was recovered from the basal sediments of a relict peat-filled basin mire at Poulton-le-Fylde, dating to c.1250–840 cal BC: known as the Briarfield skull (Wells and Hodgkinson 2001: 163). Two worked pieces of wood, possible stakes, were found close to the skull that came from an adult male, approximately twenty-five to thirty-five years old with a partially retained metopic suture (like Worsley Man) and a pronounced occipital bone, creating a notable ‘bun’ protuberance on the rear of the skull known as bathocrany. The lack of mandible and absence of cut marks as well as gnawing marks led Mays to suggest the skull had been temporarily buried or exposed through protected excarnation, to avoid scavenging and weathering marks (Mays cited in Wells and Hodgkinson 2001: 167). A bronze looped palstave was found on the site previously. In the early Iron Age, beaver-worked wood suggests that their dam activity may have encouraged localised flooding of the site (Mays cited in Wells and Hodgkinson 2001: 172). At Red Moss near Horwich, a skull with ‘red hair’ was found in 1942 near to the Blackrod boundary, by a peat cutter called Krikken (Smith 1988: 4). It was thought to be female and presumed to be Bronze Age – Smith (1988: 4) notes a date of 1058 BC though the source of this is unclear. The head was initially given to the Midlands Forensic Science Laboratory who may have dated it but the remains were subsequently curated by Alderman C. Williams of Queens Road (Chorley), founder member of the Chorley Archaeological Society (Turner and Briggs 1986;
Smith 1988: 4), and no current trace of the head has been found. An early Roman rotary quern stone was also found on this moss (Smith 1988: 5).

More complete ‘bog bodies’ are represented in the ‘entire and uncorrupted’ body from Meols (Leigh 1700), also lost. The wider landscape context for this body is now recognised as a coastal node in late Iron Age/early Roman trading networks, associated with significant amounts of copper alloy small finds, both native and Roman. An eroding set of roundhouses (first seen in 1893) were associated with middle Iron Age pins and brooches, with later Iron Age Celtic and Amorican coinage, brooches, spiral finger rings, a looped stud and foot of a Roman patera suggesting intermittent trade along this coastline. Whether Meols was an actual port or not is less certain; it was probably more of a hub or trans-shipment site, conveniently sited between mid-Cheshire salt exchange networks (from Northwich and Middlewich) and north-east Welsh and Cheshire (Alderley) copper and lead-silver networks (Griffiths et al. 2007: 384). Its role expanded in the Roman period, perhaps initially associated with early military activity occupying the north-west (Griffiths et al. 2007: 389) and then as a nexus for products from the Wilderspool and Wigan areas, producing metalwork, ceramics, glass and salt (Griffiths et al. 2007: 393). The Roman Leasowe Man (as we saw in Chapter 2) was found just ‘upshore’ from the Meols in the intertidal peats. Although Meols and Leasowe appear to be rare, formal burials, we thus have a range of prehistoric and Roman bog heads and interments, which complement the Lindow deposits. Isserlin (1997: 93) includes here the bodies from Scaleby, Seascale, Austwick, Grewelthorpe, Amcotts and Wymondham as well as Worsley (misspelled as ‘Worsely’). This has led Nevell (1992: 71) to propose that a Roman ‘cult of the head’ existed in the Mersey basin during the Romano-British period, including the Lindow I remains. Both Nevell (1992) and Prag (pers. comm.) argue that at least some of the many stone heads found in this region (including one from Bramble Cottage on Lumb Lane by Ashton Moss) may be further evidence of an obsession with the head, though these sculptures are notoriously hard to date on stylistic grounds. Is this feasible? What were Roman attitudes towards the head?

Roman attitudes towards the head and headhunting

One of the founding myths of Rome fascinatingly concerns a well-preserved head. In Livy’s Book 1 of the History of Rome (Foster 1919: 1.55), we learn that in preparing a temple to Jupiter on what would become known as the Capitaline, ‘heaven itself was moved to give a sign of the future greatness of Rome’s dominion’. The birds indicated that the temple should be sited over the shrine of Terminus, and then:

Hard upon this happy augery came another strange event, which seemed to foretell the future grandeur of our Empire: a man’s head with the features intact was discovered by the workmen who were digging the foundations of the temple. This
meant that without any doubt that on this spot would stand the imperial citadel of the capital city of the world. (Livy in Foster 1919: 1.55–3.6, my emphasis)

For the early founders of Rome, this well-preserved head was both a powerful prediction of future rule and material metaphor of divine favour. Sculpted heads of gods, goddesses and worldly leaders came to adorn settings ranging from temples and shrines to private housing. In contrast, Richlin (1999: 197) argues that a fleshy severed head later embodied the obverse: a kind of ‘counter statue’ expressive of humiliation and disgrace – this made decapitation a rare but powerful punishment. For example, following his criticism of Mark Anthony, Cicero became the target of a proscription (literally the placing of a price upon his head) and was duly decapitated (nobly and bravely ‘offering’ his head out of his litter) with his hands also severed (Richelin 1999: 197). This was, Richelin (1999) argues, not just a physical but a metaphorical assassination: literally the ‘last word’ in verbal duelling with authority, in which his grisly body parts were publicly displayed to deter both spoken and written dissent.

For Romans in general, decapitation was thus a rare and troubling outward symbol of turmoil when the normal rule of law was suspended. Swift decapitation could be a discrete form of execution for citizens of status but in the arena or amphitheatre it was meant to shock, used alongside hanging, crucifixion, burning or death by wild animals (Fields 2006: 58). The display of such remains and their deposition outside of the walled city (often within a watery setting) might be part of such punishment (Kyle 2001). For writers such as Posidonius, decapitation was thus a rare and abhorrent sight, more typical of barbarians. His views were recorded by Diodorus Siculus (Oldfather 1933: 5.2) in his critical commentary on Gaulish headhunting, noting their fascination for the post-mortem decapitation and display of cranial trophies, hung from the necks of their ponies or nailed up on their houses. He also reported that they embalmed them in ‘cedar oil’ and displayed them proudly in chests and boxes, prizing them above gold: a habit that has recently been scientifically attested at the site of Le Cailar, southern France. Here, a study of cranial and cervical vertebrae fragments from the third-century site in Transalpine Gaul has revealed evidence not just of decapitation but the cutting, scraping and cleansing of cranial vault and mouth cavity (Ciesielski et al. 2011). Biochemical analysis revealed a cocktail of applied substances amounting to a superficial application of conifer resins mixed with plant oils, probably used to produce an antibacterial and anti-odour effect on the facial tissue (Ghezal et al. 2019: 187).

The results maintained facial features to maximise recognition, humiliation (for the deceased enemy) and honour (for his vanquisher, see Armit 2012a). Yet as in the case of the Huron, the effect of seeing a powerful warrior gripped by a glorious death also ensured some kind of personal post-mortem renown: their own ferocity having been magnified through the tale-telling of their victor (see Giles 2017). Such ‘ancestral treasures’ created an intimidating material memory store that served to acquaint strangers with the martial renown of their hosts (Fields 2006: 10). Romans were thus horrified by Livy’s account of the Transalpine Gaulish
tribe of the Boii, who in 216 BC made the head of the Roman commander, Lucius Posthumious, into a silver-gilded sanctuary vessel or cup (Fields 2006: 11)! As cranial niches, skulls and sculpture at Entremont, Roquepertuse and Gournay-sur-Aronde illustrate, or the decapitated warrior corpses from Ribemont-sur-Ancre, the head had powerful meanings for the Gauls but we should not see this as a cross-cultural Celtic obsession (Armit 2012a). Subtle differences in representation, use of body parts and modification illustrate a range of ideas relating to ancestry, mortality and power that were far from universal. These heads shrines (as well as other votive sites) blurred the boundaries between martial and sacred power. The means and ends of taking life were brought into a sanctified setting where this life force could be presented and ceremonially consumed. The tête coupée was thus, Armit (2012a; cf. Harrison 2012) argues, not just a way of humiliating an enemy by defaming or abusing their corpse; it was a means of controlling, channelling and violently ‘harvesting’ the fertility and regenerative power of a feared and revered enemy. This echoes Bloch’s (1982) notion of the predation through which the ‘transcendental vitality’ of a being could be taken over by a violent perpetrator.

Strabo (Geographia 4.4.5, cited in Aldhouse-Green 2016) may have claimed that Roman rule put an end to ‘headhunting’ in its conquered territories but the reality is that in Gallia Transalpina at least, there was a resurgence of headhunting during early Roman rule (Armit 2012b). Armit (2012b: 597) explains that attempts to enforce stability were hampered by a series of revolts and destabilizing conflicts which persisted long after the annexation in the 120s [BC], causing internal power struggles and social fragmentation that inflamed violence. In addition, indigenous customs no doubt ran deep in the northern tribes who later served as mercenaries and conscripts further north (Fields 2005; Redfern and Bonney 2014). Romanised Gaulish forces, alongside later Spanish and Germanic troops, shaped the distinctive and intimidating force of the main army but they brought a few cultural habits with them as auxiliaries (Redfern and Bonney 2014: 242). The taking and keeping of such ‘dark trophies’ might not have been officially sanctioned but it was probably tolerated (Fields 2005): like those from the Vietnam war (see Harrison 2012), this was a ‘private’ matter (A. Fear pers. comm.) with improvised cleaning, preparation or modification of the skull according to personal or cultural tastes. Indeed, the decapitated head was used as a symbolic shorthand for the hyper-martiality of some ethnicities – a cultural topos, such as on Trajan’s column scene LXXII, where auxiliaries are shown ‘presenting’ the emperor with Dacian enemy heads (Fields 2006: 11, figs 1–3), a scene repeated on the ‘Great Trajanic Frieze’ (Fields 2005: 63). An altar dedicated to Mars at Apt, Vaucluse in France (raised by individuals with distinctively Celtic names) was underpinned by at least eight human skulls (Isserlin 1997: 97). The notion that such ‘barbarian’ attitudes had seeped into Roman culture is also suggested by the younger Seneca who laments: ‘would that the barbarities (barberi) of punishments and anger had not crossed over on to Roman mores’ (De Ira 3.18.1 cited in Basore 1989). In another scene of Roman road-building on Trajan’s column, scene LVI, decapitated heads are shown impaled on poles outside a fortified settlement; this might be a scene
of Dacian barbarity being ‘civilised’ by Roman construction or an indication that the legionary troops had adopted an indigenous visual trope to terrify local insurgents. Indeed, the Roman consul C. Flaminius apparently adorned his helmet with a Germanic Suebian scalp (perhaps with its distinctive hairdo in place?) following a battle against the Boii in 223 BC (Fields 2005: 55). In Britain, a piece of epigraphy from the Antonine Wall, inscribed by the Legio II Augusta, shows an auxiliary soldier riding roughshod over four native soldiers, having decapitated one of them (Holder 1982). Close to home, evidence for Roman decapitation and ‘head taking’ are suggested in the ‘Rieter’ or ‘Rider’ type tombstone dedicated to Insus, originally of the Treveri tribe, serving in the ala Augusta: a curator from an auxiliary cavalry unit, of western Germanic origin (Figure 7.8). The normal iconography of this ‘triumphant rider’ sculpture consists of a successful cavalry officer wielding a spear, trampling over defeated barbarians. Insus, however, who soldiered across the north-west and probably died in service, is depicted brandishing a gladius-style sword and the decapitated head of an enemy whose corpse lies under his horse’s hooves, the rider’s own foot resting imperiously upon the small of the man’s back (Bull 2007). In a fragment of tombstone for the cavalry officer Aurelius Lucianus from Chester meanwhile (RIB 522), a banqueting scene includes the deceased in feasting repose yet fully dressed in armour and riding trousers (Fields 2006: 63). On the wall behind him hang his martial credentials, helmet and sheathed sword, while his groom wields the ultimate war trophy: the severed head of an enemy (Fields 2006: 63). This adoption of both the local character of violence and psychologically intimidating trope of decapitation should not surprise us. The Roman soldiers were – like their native counterparts – involved in a moment of cultural flux where weaponry and martial art, fighting styles and tropes of belligerence, were in a process of apparently strict opposition yet some cultural exchange and fusion was inevitable. To be violently affective both sides had to understand and manipulate or exploit the martial customs of their enemy (both in terms of arms and combat styles) while keeping enough ‘exotic’ traits to be disconcertingly different and psychologically disturbing.

We can see this in the South Cave hoard from East Yorkshire (UK), where indigenous weaponry (swords and spears) crossed the martial boundaries of spear/pilum and northern short sword/gladius (rather than long sword/spathe): weapons that were collectively ‘hidden’ or offered up in martial supplication on the eve of Conquest (Evans et al., in prep.). Meanwhile, Haynes (2013: 240) discusses this cultural borrowing from an auxiliary point of view (in terms of arms, dress, combat and particularly cavalry styles), seeing it as a form of powerful ‘martial bricolage’, viewed positively by Roman authors such as Arrian. This fusion of the very best, most frightening, most affective forms of violence worked both ways. Armed bands beyond the limes aped and adopted the accoutrements, organisation and appearance of the Roman Army in places such as Denmark (Pauli Jensen 2017). The foregrounding of connections to, and influential relations with, Germanic Roman martial identity was, Pauli Jensen (2017: 72) argues, part of a ‘calculating need for the best equipment available’ coupled with ‘the visualisation of different aspects of
power – both political and military. It fused these influences into a particular, peculiar Scandinavian effect that produced the phenomenon of ‘war-booty’ sacrifices discussed in Chapter 5 (Pauli Jensen 2017: 73).
Just as this skirmishing across martial traditions began to forge something new in arms, appearance and combat, it also engendered different attitudes towards the enemy corpse. The decapitated head from Osterby with its Suebian knot is very similar in date to Worsley Man (1895 +/− 30 BP, see van der Sanden 1996: 193). This particular type of death and post-mortem fate was something that the Germanic and the Lancastrian tribes mutually understood even though they might have found themselves on opposite sides. The fate of the Lancastrian Insus tombstone itself suggests it was a controversial and inflammatory piece of memorial art. Soon after it was raised (probably in the late first to early second century AD) with its decorative pigments proclaiming Roman triumph over the natives, the monument itself seems to have been toppled over and the upper part of the scene including the ‘head’ of the rider was broken or severed from the main body (Bull 2007: 16), in what may have been a vengeful act of symbolic decapitation.

The importance of the head and its display is seen at other Roman sites (Smith 2017). At the long-lived funerary and ritual complex of Folly Lane, the defleshed skull of a fifteen- to eighteen-year-old (showing four perforations to the cranial vault, concentrated on the left-hand side), was placed upright at base of a pit. Dating to the second to third century AD, damage to the foramen magnum suggested it might once have been on display – possibly outside the nearby, contemporary temple, as part of a cult of the skull (Niblett 1999: 318). At Silchester oppidum, it has been argued that a number of crania may represent ‘heads … exposed to public view’ both at/on the gates (Fulford et al. 1997: 131) and perhaps in the forum (Creighton 2016). Within the earlier Iron Age defensive ditch a waterlogged skull has recently been found on a triangular arrangement of hurdles, amid leather offcuts and dog skulls (reported by Pitts 2020: 7). Other ‘displays’ of heads and body parts are attested at Colchester (Isserlin 1997), where six skulls in the legionary fortress suggest the decapitation of Trinovantian Britons, beheaded by the legio XX Valeria (Fields 2006: 60). Redfern and Bonney (2014) make a similar argument in relation to a suite of Roman era heads from the London Wall site within the Walbrook Valley most of which show a mix of healed and peri-mortem violence (both blunt and sharp force) as well as some decapitation. They propose these could either be men who have been serially involved in violence (such as mercenaries or gladiators) or were victims of execution in the arena. Yet the presence of body parts especially within military settings may also suggest some trophyism or cultic activity involving crania: Isserlin (1997) makes an explicit link between the watery contexts of the Walbrook Valley and those of the bogs where human remains continue to be deposited in this era, as in Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark. She also cites a Roman curse tablet from Brandon that mentions ‘sacrifice’ to Neptune with ‘hazel’, suggesting this is an echo of the indigenous, Iron Age staking of bog bodies under hurdles (Isserlin 1997: 93). Interestingly, many of the Walbrook heads seem to have been deposited in pits cut into still water, some of which also contained leather offcuts. The similarity here with Silchester is fascinating. Is this simply a coincidence, associating decaying, partially fleshed heads with the by-products of the leather trade, or was there a deliberate use of this...
Bog bodies

material to try to cure, ‘tan’ and conserve a head, analogous to the bog? Was the creation of a hated, heroic or founder’s head the goal here? Livy records that consul Claudius Nero instructed his followers to decapitate and preserve the head of the Carthaginian enemy, Hasdrubal Barca, so that he could later throw the trophy in front his brother Hannibal’s outpost guards (Livy 27.51.11, cited in Field 2005: 61). Pompey was also decapitated and his head ‘mummified’ as a ‘perpetual trophy’ (Lucan 8.663–91, cited in Varner 2006: 69). One of the skulls from Colchester’s ‘Head Gate’ deposits apparently had ‘a plaster-like deposit adhering to it’ (Benfield and Garrod 1992: 35): was this indicative of insertion into a wall as a kind of foundation deposit as Isserlin (1997: 95) suggests or something more animated – the attempt to model, to recreate the features of a foe? Preservation aided the drawing out of intimidation and humiliation across the boundary of death and it also created a material mnemonic that could be deployed to underpin conquest and successful rule. Back in Rome, the Capitoline Hill became the preferred location for the display of such mutilated body parts (Isserlin 1997: 69). Posthumous decapitation (for ‘failed wives’ of the emperor, brief rulers and political rivals) as well as the symbolic decapitation of statues, effigies, were carried out in order to disgrace someone’s public reputation and memory, becoming more common in the late second and third centuries AD (Varner 2006: 70). Real or symbolic decapitation deprived such figures of their honour and repudiated their rule. Does this reflection on the martial and sociopolitical purpose of decapitation help us think differently about the head from Worsley Moss? In order to evaluate whether this was a martial trophy or cult activity, we need to set such violence back into the context of the Roman occupation of northern Britain.

North: the historical context of Worsley Man

During the late Iron Age, the region was under the supra-regional polity of the Brigantes tribe (Figure 7.9). Smaller sub-tribal entities have been proposed through close reading of Ptolemy’s second century AD Geographia (including the Carvetii and Latenses to the north and Setantii to the north-west), but we have little epigraphy or coinage belonging to smaller tribal septs apart from a milestone for the Corvetii from Brougham (Philpott 2006: 62). Cheshire was the terrain of the Cornovii, with the Coritani to the south-east and the Deceangli to the west, edging into north-west Wales (Nevell 1992 fig. 5.14).

The late Iron Age and early Roman landscape in the north-west would have largely been characterised by pasture, with seasonal use of wetter grazing areas and exploitation of the bogs in the ways evoked in Chapter 4. An amelioration of climate is suggested for the early Roman period, affecting the bogs: at Over Wyre, Sphagnum imbricatum is replaced by the drier hummock species S. acutifolia (Philpott 2006: 61). In the later Iron Age there seems to have been increased tree clearance and a higher prevalence of grass pollen, with a small but notable increase in cereal cultivation (Philpott 2006: tab. 5.3). Moreover, as Matthews
Worsley Man (2002) cautions, agricultural marginality need not equate with cultural marginality; these communities had their own concepts of wealth that elude the material record: land, food and drink, stock, horseflesh and prowess at riding, with only rare, portable artefacts.

Evidence for settled inhabitation is scarce: an open settlement at Tatton Park consisted of a track with stony ‘metalled’ surface linked to a cobbled yard (a possible ‘hardstanding’ for livestock) and small timber-built roundhouse, with a firepit dating o.c.390 +/- 120 BC (HAR 5147, Nevell 1992: 51). A first-century Roman era palisaded enclosure was built over these foundations (Higham and Cane 1997). Closer to Worsley itself, a series of two large roundhouses and two smaller circular structures dating to the first century BC were discovered in a bivallate enclosure at Great Woolden Hall on the very edge of Chat Moss (south of Astley Moss but part of the same mire complex, see Nevell 1989, 1992: 51). Finds include an oven feature associated with Iron Age coarsewares and VCP ‘briquetage’ (from the salt industry), showing continuity into the early Roman period with Roman coarsewares, black burnished ware, a fragment of mortarium and small Samian rim sherd alongside further VCP deposits, indicating shifts in diet and culinary preparation methods. Another enclosed late Iron Age/Romano-British site may be represented by the Hangingbank enclosure at Werneth Low (Nevell 1989, 1992). Mixed farming on lowland areas (such as Woolly Lane) was complemented by pasture on upland and marginal zones (possibly represented in a square enclosure at Hopefold Farm, Ashton, see Nevell 1992: 69). A further Romano-British settlement at Barton is sited on a sandy promontory at the edge of Chat Moss, along the original course of the River Irwell. Ditched enclosures, small roundhouses and gullies and sparse finds of a glass bead, shale knife handle, rotary
quern fragment, black burnished ware, grey wares and mortaria fragments suggest domestic occupation (Thompson et al. 2014).

These indigenous communities were certainly wise to the riches of their local landscape. Alongside the Lancashire and Cheshire coast, estuarine, marsh areas and brine springs enabled salt production that expanded in the Roman period (Nevell 2005), while ‘a progressive and unambiguous’ increase in lead pollution is noted in the climate record of Lindow Moss from c.900 BC (the late Bronze Age), clearly pre-dating the Roman invasion (Le Roux et al. 2004: 506). At around 200 BC, there was a further ‘dramatic increase’ with a particular spike ‘around AD 0 and another around AD 140’ (Le Roux et al. 2004: 506), suggesting both an indigenous surge in metalworking probably at the nearby Alderley Edge mines and a post-Conquest appropriation and maximisation of production in northeast Wales and the Peak District. This industrialisation fuelled both urban development and the northern campaigns: the beginning of our ‘window’ in which Worsley Man died. At Engine Vein, Alderley Edge (overlooking Lindow Moss) a 12 m deep, square-cut Roman mining shaft (named ‘Pot Shaft’), dating to the mid to late first century AD, contained timbers dating to the Iron Age (250 BC–AD 15 cal), felled no doubt from impressive trees growing around the Edge (Timberlake and Prag 2005: 82). Close to the top of this abandoned, partially infilled shaft, was a vessel containing 564 coins dating to the early fourth century AD (c. AD 340). Weathered blocks of galena, earlier Bronze Age hammerstones and sandy deposits on the surface of this dramatic outcrop would have indicated the potential of Alderley Edge for lead mining and a second cut nearby revealed both lead and copper veins outcropping close to the surface. Iron hammer-pick marks indicate the intense working of this narrow shaft. Lead pigs from Derbyshire refer almost exclusively to the emperorship of Hadrian (AD 117–138) chiming with the second ‘spike’ in lead pollution noted in the moss. The recorded working here at Alderley was small, short-lived and possibly undertaken under military control (Timberlake and Prag 2005: 97); it is possible other Roman works were destroyed by later medieval and historic mining, recorded now only in the pollution trace in the bog. Tantalising hints of bronze offerings back to the bog are hinted at in the supposedly Roman representation of an ox and bronze cauldron found in the peats of the Rixton/Risley Moss areas, within the parish of Croft (Leah et al. 1997: 20), yet both could feasibly be late Iron Age. Seventeen Roman coin hoards, some of which were directly deposited in the peat or close to the bog (such as Denton and Boothstown, see Hall et al. 1995: 119) are also known. These local bogs may thus have been used as a source of iron ore but no obvious workings have been found (Hall et al. 1995). However, a number of Roman roads cross close to or forge across the wetlands, as at Stretford, where brushwood and wattle work were used to consolidate the wet peat (Hall et al. 1995: 199).

Changes in land-use and industry are rarely isolated from wider sociopolitical change. The flux in political allegiances that occupied both the Brigantes and the Roman military in the mid-first century AD in support of Cartimandua (Nevell 1992: 56; Haselgrove 2016), and the campaigns of Roman governors Cerialis and
Agricola (Philpott 2006), certainly made this a turbulent time. Roman incursion probably consisted of a two-pronged foray from the western seaboard, following major river systems such as the Dee, and from the western side of the Pennines (Philpott 2006). Forts began to be established from the AD 70s onwards, first perhaps at Chester (Devon) and then, through the AD 70s, at Lancaster and Ribchester, Mamucium (Manchester, c. AD 78), Slack (in the Peak District), Melandria (Glossop), Rigodunum (possibly Castleshaw, c. AD 78–79), linking this region to Eboracum (York) to the north-east and Carlisle to the far north. Several of these were staffed by auxiliary forces, such as the Cohors I Frisiavonum at Mamucium (with a Germanic origin), and later, the Ollototae (from Gaul) and the Cohors III Breucorum at Castleshaw and Slack (largely drawn from Pannonia, with service in Germany, see Holder 1982). Consolidation of the military occupation of the north was achieved under Agricola (AD 78–84) with the establishment of the northern limes. Vicus settlements sprang up around some of these forts, creating economic and social bonds between native inhabitants and occupying forces. Some forts such as Castleshaw dramatically reduced in size by AD 90 but then show a surge of activity around AD 105, becoming a centre for grain collection and storage, with final abandonment AD 120, when localised grazing decreases and rough pasture re-established itself. The period between AD 120 and AD 140 was a disruptive time of further rebellion that led to the appointment of a new governor, Lollius Urbicus, to the region (Nevell 1992: 70). Troops on the ground then became thinner as the Romans pushed north to establish Hadrian’s Wall (c. AD 122) and the Antonine Wall (c. AD 138) but the abandonment of the latter in c. AD 163 led to some reoccupation of the north-western forts such as Mamucium. In sum, the late first to second century AD was undoubtedly a time of political flux with major contrasts in military presence and absence between generations: a situation ripe for local political machinations and increased violence. As Armit (2012b: 603) puts it:

Where new relations of dominance were being established, [the] control and manipulation of the human body seems to have provided an attractive means by which aspirant elites could stake their claims to social power. Severed heads of enemies could be displayed and curated, materialising power relationships that may often have been insecure or transient.

The Pax Romana supposedly brought about by Roman rule and law (including forbidding civilians to carry weaponry and, as Hutton (2004b) reminds us, supposedly outlawing human sacrifice) may have been more difficult to implement in this region of dispersed inhabitation and bog landscapes. Indeed, quite apart from the army, military occupation would also have brought new types of violence to the region: increased slavery, incarceration and prostitution, as well as violent gaming pleasures (see Redfern and Fibiger 2019: 64). It is not surprising then that the early to mid-Roman period saw at least some continuity in forms of corporeal humiliation that had been sporadically practised for over a millennium by northern tribes, stoked now by the ambitions and punishments brought
down upon them by Roman forces. We are thus no clearer in our understanding of who carried out Worsley Man’s killing, but we can say that he was caught up in the sociopolitical ferment and cultural crises of the invasion and occupation of the north. It is still not unthinkable that this was a Romano-British sacrifice at a time of crises; while normally such offerings were non-human, those designated as ‘other’, demeaned by slavery, captivity, defeat or even cowardice, might count as inhuman or, in Butler’s (2010) words, ‘ungrievable’ lives. Such exceptional sacrifices are recorded in the heart of Rome itself when the world was perceived to be ‘out of kilter’, as Isserlin (1997: 92) puts it (see also Aldhouse-Green 2016: 32). They were part of how civilised life was, ironically, restored. If we are unable to resolve the motivation of his death, what about its means: why does decapitation wield such terrifying power?

**Severed identities**

In her cultural study of the head, Larson (2014: 7) argues that the force of decapitation derives from both the illusion of instantaneous death and the brute vigour and velocity of the act, as well as the ‘sheer audacity’ of the perpetrator. Larson does not shy away from the uncomfortable truth that a beheading is a spectacle that has been ‘enjoyed’ by many audiences (see also Hughes 2011): we are fascinated by its captivating force to transform the living into the dead, and from subject to object, in mere moments – it is both ‘compelling and horrific’ (Larson 2014: 9). She goes on to argue that the severed head tends to preserve a sense of animacy, especially when still fleshed, connecting us to its remnant humanity by that ‘most expressive configuration of skin and muscles’ (Larson 2014: 9). Aldhouse-Green (2016) draws on the common motif of the talking head in later Celtic mythology, such as the head of Bran, to illustrate this. We come back here to some of the ideas raised in Chapter 6, that while this violence is destructive it is also creative ‘because for all its cruelty, it produces an extraordinarily potent artefact’ (Aldhouse-Green 2016: 14). However, like Armit (2012a) in his study of headhunting, Larson (2014: 23) points to the common belief that it is not the head per se that is powerful, but what resided in it, which had been harvested in the taking. Among the Shuar, for instance, the shrunk head was *not* a trophy but the residue that materialised a transfer of power and fertility to the headhunter.

Those facing decapitation and the foreknowledge that their remains would be displayed anticipated a post-mortem infamy that might have been tortuous (Watkins 2013). Strenuous efforts might be made by their families to retrieve their head, particularly in the case of a political execution (Larson 2014). Yet what was meant to shame and shock could also be read as treachery to be avenged or martyrdom: self-sacrifice for a cause. Some knew their remains would become more potent in death as relics than they had been in life. The decapitated head can thus assume a transformed identity as it moves between contexts: even the disconcerting war trophy can be turn into an ironic ‘mascot’, re-personified and
caught up in a new set of relations (Larson 2014: 51). The effort to which soldiers went to clean, prepare and customise their trophies evidences the unsettling closeness they themselves have with death, as well as the complex relationship with those they have killed. Larson (2014: 74) writes of this as both a kind of warped respect for the enemy and on ongoing effort to assert control, to ‘quieten’, ‘domesticise’ and ‘sterilise’ their killings. In a veteran’s hands, among his comrades who have experienced what he has experienced, the head may be seen as a ‘just reward’ of valour, but the ease with which it slips into ‘an aberrant and abhorrent’ piece of corpse abuse is attested in the difficult relationship with legacy remains from the Vietnam War, for example (see Harrison 2012).

In addition to decapitation, the use of ropes, belts, sprang bands, sinewy ligatures and even perhaps sally rods to strangle, throttle or garotte bog bodies still focused violent attention upon the head. The prestige object used to adorn and frame this part of the body in life within the Iron Age and early Roman world was of course the torc: the illustrious, heavy necklet found across north-western and central Europe. Used to signify power (Joy 2016) it can be thought of as a kind of ‘chain’ of sociopolitical office or sacred authority, cumbersome to wear, which reminded the bearer of that weight of responsibility. Many were made in a manner analogous to the twisting of yarn to form two- or three-ply strands, suggesting a borrowing of skills between crafts (Farley pers. comm.). This is certainly the case with the Burnley torc (also known as the Holme or Cliviger torc), held by the Manchester Museum (Figure 7.10). It was found in 1802 in the furrow of a field by a reaper, who presented it to the owner of the field, Dr Whitaker (1818), the author of a study of the local area of Whalley. Made of two simple gold wires twisted together and ending in looped terminals, the gold is unusually pure in composition (Northover 1993). Such torcs continued to be made in the early Roman period, transformed from simple or complex twists of gold, silver or bronze wire with varying types of terminal into more massive combinations of design, such as the south-western ‘Waxall’ torcs or the northern ‘beaded’ copper alloy torcs (as at Dinnington, see Beswick et al. 1990) with or without inscribed or cast plaques (as in the Lochar Moss torc, see Megaw and Megaw 2015). A beaded torc was apparently found at Handle Hill, Rochdale (Garstang 1966). Whether we see such objects as conspicuous expressions of indigenous identity (Hunter 2009) or reinvented objects that came to represent the new fusion of Roman and local ideas (Hunter 2012), the torc had an iconic status. This may be in part, because the taking of a torc as a trophy became a renowned military feat, as recorded by Gellius in the first century BC. Titus Manlius decapitated his Gaulish foe and then placed the bloodied torc around his own neck (preferring this to the trophy of a head!): assuming the cognomen of ‘Torquatus’ (Noctes Atticae 9.13.18, cited in Fields 2006: 57). This notion of a trophy morphed into a Romanised form of this object, the torque, given as a military award specifically to auxiliaries and foreigners (Pliny, Natural History 33.10, cited in Crummy et al. 2016: 9; see also Haynes 2013: 243). Perhaps the plaited ropes and ligatures were humiliating skeuomorphs of the torc: a shameful object meant to end the life of a high-status
prisoner (as Aldhouse-Green (2016) suggests) or the apt symbolic means of killing a humiliated martial captive or unsuccessful leader (as Kelly (2013) suggests – Vercengeterix was himself strangled after Caesar’s triumph, see Cassius Dio, 43.19 in Kilvert 1987). Such ligatures may thus have had special sanction as the mode of death for a sacrificial emissary into the other world.

‘Wilful pieces of mortality’: caring for heads

Having considered Roman attitudes to heads, we can now move on to a critical consideration of the continuing cultural power of the head in this region. A number of skulls that have resurfaced across north-west Britain over the last few hundred years tell us of a rather different relationship with the curated or ‘found’ head: some ancient and some more recent. At Wardley Hall, a skull kept in a boxed alcove at the top of the stairs was reputed to be the libertine son of the Downes
family, an ‘abandoned courtier’ of Charles II who died in a dual with a watchman on London Bridge in 1676 (Harland and Wilkinson 1873: 66). His torso was reputedly tossed in the Thames and the head boxed up and sent to his sisters. Their attempts to bury or destroy it were in vain: ‘The skull was removed … but it invariably returned to the Hall and no human power could drive it thence. It hath been riven to pieces, burnt and otherwise destroyed; but on the subsequent day it was seen filling the wanted place … If removed, drowned in the neighbouring pond … or buried it was sure to return’ (Harland and Wilkinson 1873: 67–9). Harland and Wilkinson refer to the skull as one of Britain’s few ‘screaming skulls’, citing Roby’s (1829) description of it as a ‘wilful piece of mortality’ that ‘will not allow the little aperture in which it rests to be walled up’ (Harland and Wilkinson 1873: 67). Its apparent revenancy as a ‘screaming skull’ was first described by antiquarian Barritt in 1782, while a local rhyme suggested it could transform itself into a hare (Thurston-Hopkins 1953). The head and its niche can be seen in a set of pen-and-ink sketches and early photographs from the late nineteenth century in the Mullineux collection (Chetham’s Library: 1369). There is also a remarkable photo-essay album dating to 1867 held by the Manchester Central Library, by William Hindshaw, in which the end plate is a photograph of the Wardley skull labelled in careful calligraphic hand, under which had been added ‘given under my hand. W.H.’ (Figure 7.11) – a curious legal phrase that suggests both the power of his witnessing and the respectful placing of his hand upon these remains. This may be due to the fact that Hindshaw knew he was actually in the presence of Catholic relics: the remains of St Ambrose Barlow, priest to the Downes family and one of the ‘Forty Martyrs of England and Wales’ (Butler and Bangley 2005). Barlow was executed on 10 September 1641, after a period of incarceration, having been dragged through the streets on a hurdle, hanged and quartered at Lancaster (Historic England 2019) and then ‘boiled in oil … his head was afterwards exposed on a pike’ (Tyldesley 2008). Beatified in 1929, this might explain why only a cranium now survives, the mandible (intact in Hindshaw’s image) is now installed as a sacred relic at the church of St Ambrose at Barlow Moor and other remnants are at Stanbrook Abbey (North Yorkshire) and Mount Angel Abbey (Oregon, USA). Similar stories of victims of violent death (variously linked to the Pilgrimage of Grace, the Reformation or Civil War) are associated with Lancashire skulls from Browsholme Hall, Chaigley and Mawdsley (Clarke 1999: 392–3).

Not all such skulls were treated respectfully. In Chapter 4, the case of the ‘Back Openshaw’ cranium, used as a drinking vessel by John Burgess, was recounted, sounding very like the Iron Age sites of Billingborough in Lincolnshire or Ezinge and Englum on the terps of the Netherlands. Yet at Turton near Bolton two skulls were apparently ‘fished’ out of the ‘Bradshaw Brook’ in 1750, one badly decayed and the other showing evidence of sharp-force wounds, one supposedly male and one female (Harland and Wilkinson 1873). They were kept on the mantelpiece of a farm at Timberbottom for ‘tradition says these skulls must be kept in the house’ (Eyre 1974: 68). Attempts to throw them back into the river or rebury them in the churchyard (as in 1840) did not end well and even temporary
separation of the two skulls often brought noisy disturbances to the dwelling (Eyre 1974: 68). Following the demolition of the farm, the heads left for Bradshaw Hall (where the woman’s skull was mounted on a silver stand and both were stood on a large bible) and finally, the skulls were passed on to Turton Tower in 1949. In the 1990s, PhD scholar David Clarke (1999: 398) was refused access to them but was reassured that they were still kept ‘on a bible’: just in case! Another ‘deeply discoloured’ head, ‘almost mahogany in hue’ (Clarke 1999: 390) was kept in a case behind the bar of the Pack Horse Inn, Affetside in Lancashire, and may be a third skull from the Bradshaw Brook (Clarke 1999: 391).

Meanwhile, a discoloured skull from Appley Bridge north of Wigan (located close to areas of moss and moor), was ‘kept on a beam in the living room of a house near Skull Lane’. The cottage itself became known as ‘Skull House’, giving it the most archaeological address in the country! These remains have also been attributed to those of a monk or priest who had hidden in the chimney breast during the Civil War and was ‘smoked’ out by Roundhead forces (Clarke 1999: 392) perhaps
in direct analogy to the Wardley Hall skull as this interpretation seems to date to a specific historian's research c.1937 (Clarke 1999: 392). Again, its revenancy is made clear, for 'it is reputed to bring down ill luck and unwelcome attention if it is disturbed or taken away' (Eyre 1974: 69). Yet the staining or discolouring of this head is more probably explained by burial in the peat.

Finally, in an example from a Derbyshire farmhouse in Tunstead, near Hazel Grove, a 'singular relic' was displayed 'on a plate in a window' for travellers to view (H. 1867: 2). One such walker was the 'Derbyshire Tramp' (named only as 'H. ') who described seeing the 'four strips of bone said to have formed part of the skull of Dicky' while on a train and walking sojourn with friends in 1867 (although the earliest account by John Hutchinson in his A Tour Through the High Peak dates to 1809). Local folklore held that this was either a murdered 'co-heiress' who had vowed in her last moments that 'her bones should remain here' (H. 1867: 2) or a murdered soldier returning from war, cheated of his rightful inheritance and property (Clarke 1999: 373–4). Whether male or female, the skull was believed to insure good luck to the inhabitants of the farm and moreover it is asserted that all the efforts to get without it have hitherto proved abortive. Old Dicky's skull was once lent to a schoolmaster at Sheffield to illustrate some anatomical lectures, but the folks at home were glad to have it back in order to restore peace and quietude. It has been thrown in the river, but returned of itself. It was buried in the parish churchyard (of Chapel-en-le-Frith) but the inmates of the farm-house were plagued till they were fain to fetch it home. (H. 1867: 2)

Indeed, during an auction sale of its stock some years before, 'all the men and youths in the country side had to be assembled in order to drive away the cattle towards the homes of their new purchasers, so potent was the spell that Dicky had laid on them' (H. 1867: 2). The author goes on to tell the anecdote of the boggart ('for of course, there was one in connection with the skull'), which had disturbed the tenant farmer's sleep one night by rounding up 'all the things' (i.e. the cattle) but shouting out that it had had trouble 'with the little one' – when the farmer went to inspect this supernatural corralling of the herd, he found a hare, bound tight, instead of a calf (H. 1867: 2)! In this strange tale we have the explicit relating of physical remains (the head/skull) to a supernatural being related to the moss (the boggart as helper) associated with a wild mammal often attributed some folkloric powers of its own (an association also noted with the Wardley skull). Clarke details the many oral histories of tenants and villagers relating to the skull, which included an apparent association with a black dog (similar to the manifestation of the Ashton boggarts but here a protective apparition). Hutchinson's (1809: 9) account professed to have traced these cranial remains back over two hundred years at least, noting that the current curators of the skull felt it to be 'more of a guardian spirit than a terror to the family'. Yet 'Tunstead Dickey' was also concerned very much with the issues of the day: it had apparently caused no end of mischief when the local railway had been built across the farmland, blamed for the repeated 'slipping' of the embankment since it objected to 'the modern system
of travelling and traffic’ (H. 1867: 2)! The reporter sagely noted that of course, in reality, this was attributable to the local geology. Yet a few years previous, the Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser noted on 6 June 1863 that the restless ghost would ‘every night … undo the work … which had occupied many men during the day’ and ‘Dickie was only propitiated at last by an interview with the chief engineer, at which he was promised a free pass over the line for ever’ (H. 1867: 9)! Poems, songs and plays were written in Dickie’s honour, though by the 1970s the skull had vanished, perhaps buried in the grounds of the farm (Clarke 1999: 379). Clarke (1999: 369) goes on to note that Tunstead Dickie’s legend appears to have spawned many similar stories of ‘guardian’ skulls in farms and country houses across the north-west, partly due to its popularisation in early ghost story collections.

Some of these Lancashire and Derbyshire ‘screaming skulls’ or heads could thus be viable new bog finds or at least watery deposits of prehistoric date. Dickie himself was described as ‘a rich shade of olive green shaded at the edges with brown and white spots’ (Le Blanc Smith 1905: 9), suggesting he may have been discoloured by peat or even stained green through contact with copper alloy from a nearby Bronze Age burial mound. Yet what concerns us here is not their archaeological veracity but the pattern of their reception. Most had reputedly suffered a violent death, apparently giving them a vigorous post-mortem agency. They were partible and portable but could not be returned to the soil, water or given Christian burial. Their supernatural revenancy deterred any further disturbance, securing a new place of residence and demanding care and curation. As Larsen (2014) argues, these heads were now enmeshed in a new suite of relationships that transformed their original meaning into something potent in the present. The ‘Keep Lindow Man in the North’ campaign, led by Barbara O’Brien of Altrincham, may have been a symptom in part of 1980s Thatcherite Britain and the north–south divide (Turner 1995b: 202), but clearly it should also be contextualised within a much longer indigenous tradition of caring for ancient heads in the north. This attitude is not specific to the north-west, as Clarke’s (1999: vol. 2) gazetteer reveals, yet there are notable concentrations in Lancashire, Derbyshire, Yorkshire and Cumbria. Wider surveys would no doubt reveal other patterns; recently, two bog ‘feet’ were found in an attic in Terenure, south Dublin, one belonging to a child (dating to 60 BC–AD 53) and another to an adult woman with part of the leg still attached (dating to AD 52–250). Their distinctive peat-black appearance suggested the curated remains of bog bodies, kept perhaps by someone with antiquarian interests or medical expertise who had acquired them for study but could not – or dare not – part with the remains (Tarleton 2009). Another alternative is that they too were kept bodies, who had travelled with their ‘curators’ to new homes. Meanwhile, in Denmark, when the Daugbjerg body was sent from Søgards Mose to the National Museum in Copenhagen in 1942, the custodian from the local Skive Museum attached a small, compelling note – ‘Hope you will take good care of the girl’ (Fischer 2012: 121). Some archaeologists and curators find the public naming of these bog remains not just distasteful but disrespectful, indicative
of their ‘partial grasp of the full facts’ (Turner 1995b: 202 and fig. 94: a table of Lindow Man’s ‘common names’) or suggesting an imposition of identity, appropriation or cheapening of their deaths. Yet once named, a bond has been made with the dead; they cannot be discarded, cast out or forgotten. The historicity of this folkloric practice shows us that this is not just a late-twentieth-century quirk, concerning the cultural capital or tourist power of ‘dark heritage’ (see Chapter 9). It has been a way in which early modern and historic communities dealt with the consequences of archaeological discovery, with a sense of both obligation and humanity. In turn, even where they were reputed to have died unexpectedly or violently, most of these remains seemed to have cared about their new residence and its land, bringing their ‘carers’ luck and protection.

**Failures of display**

The museological care and archaeological analysis of Worsley Man discussed in this chapter has brought to light the contemporary assemblage in which he now has iconic status as a Roman ‘bog head’ from northern Britain. Yet you will not find him on display in the Manchester Museum. Why not? This institution has a long history of displaying human remains. Before it became part of the university collections, its forerunner, the Natural History Society Museum, made a feature of this as early as 1834, where antiquarian George Head described a contrastive display:

> Two contrasted specimens of the ancient and modern art of embalming were placed in singular juxta-position … the mummy of a female, supposed to have been young, from Thebes … the other, the corpse of an old maiden lady of Manchester, preserved by a late Dr. White … stood upright in a glass case … enveloped from head to foot in a dress of blue striped ticking. (Head 1836: 77)

This rather surprising inclusion of a near-contemporary corpse would shock us today, but the purpose here was to elide time: ‘a difference even of three thousand years certainly was not perceptible’ (Head 1836: 77), in order to showcase the ancient art of embalming. Following Prag and Neave’s groundbreaking facial reconstruction work, Worsley Man had featured in a small, corridor-length display on the art of this technique, in which a panel evoked the particular power of the bog, and the waxwork model was displayed alongside the preserved remains. Yet in 2007, as preparations were being made to host a return visit of Lindow Man, there began to emerge a growing discomfort in the display of human remains by a small number of the public but also professional curators. Worsley Man – the real head – disappeared, to be replaced by one of the supposed Roman stone heads and a label informed visitors that: ‘We have removed the head from display because we now feel, along with some of our visitors, that it should be displayed in a more sensitive and respectful manner. We realised that this part of the gallery had become a busy corridor … there was little space to explain the cultural context of the Worsley
Bog bodies

discovery’ (2007 Museum case label: Manchester Museum). In a strange quirk of fate then, when the ‘Lindow Man: A Bog Body Mystery’ exhibition opened in 2008, neither public nor professional could directly compare the story nor remains of this body with those of his near neighbour from Astley Moss. Worsley Man has never been returned to display and is unlikely to do so in the near future. It can be argued that this was because the expectations for the display of the dead – whether to do it, and if so, how to do it well – had shifted. It is to that final part of the afterlife of the bog body that the next chapter turns.

Conclusion

Like Robinson’s (2007: 20) study of Roundstone bog, this chapter has followed Worsley’s Man afterlife, tracing just one of ‘a network of precarious traverses, of lives swallowed up and forgotten’. From his re-emergence in Astley Moss in 1958, we can now present the most fulsome understanding of when he died and how he died but not why. His head may have been a sacred offering: the potent remains of an emissary sent to commune with the gods or appeal for intercession at a time of cultural crises. Yet he is more likely to be the victim of turbulent sociopolitical times when his own star rose and fell swiftly. He may have been a murderer or thief, who found himself on the wrong side of a swiftly changing and merciless judicial system, but he could equally be a courageous and outspoken individual who met the same fate as Cicero. The swiftness with which his head was interred suggests he did not achieve infamy as an auxiliary’s trophy. His remains were brought to an unusual and special place, suggesting that the bog was still sought out as a powerful locale in which to deal with events that had ended violently and continued to trouble the community. It is this context that speaks of a continuing local rite, perhaps relating to fears around his revenancy or hopes that his power could be harvested and controlled using the particular powers and properties of the bog. The head had power beyond death that needed the mediation of the mire. Finally, the chapter has raised the issue relating to our contemporary care of the dead and if and how we display them. It is to those thorny issues that we now turn, mindful of this protracted relationship between ourselves and the ancient dead, why they continue to concern us and why this matters. As Laqueuer insightfully argues: ‘It matters because the living need the dead more than the dead need the living. It matters because the dead make social worlds. It matters because we cannot bear to live at the borders of our mortality’ (Laqueur 2015: 1).