

A VERY COLD CASE

THE MARSHES, STAKED INTO THE BOG SHE WAS, a ritual killing, a woman's body found in 1849 but from so much earlier, an unsolved case. Sacrificed to the gods, she herself turned –or so it was thought– into an earthly goddess at the time of death, with the marshes the gateway to the other world, whatever that other world might be. What a story she could tell, you would think, probably epic and wondrous. But if the bog spoke it would know more than we can ever get to know, for it has been here well before us and will remain here well after we have disappeared. Back then the bog was surely so much more important than a woman. Sacrifices were carried out to appease it, as mighty and mysterious as it was seen to be. Boglands were most likely considered daughters of Nature; and as such, imperishable, deliverers of birth and death without any kind of external intervention. They demanded the sacrifice of victims and, in the process, their waters would get some kind of natural satisfaction, their hunger pangs mollified. Thus, staked into the bog, unable to flee, the woman must have been subjected to, what else, some kind of ceremonious slaughter. The gods had to be placated when crops failed, or no children were born, or there was a bout of pestilence or sickness, or storms pounded the land for days on end. Back then any reason was valid to sacrifice animals for daily rituals, and humans for major occasions –a woman better than a man in that she can procreate with minimal intervention from the male of the species, for she has the power to give life just like the land, she is primarily its true heir. And appeasing all those many deities –the corn, the fire, the river, the wind, the sun, anything that showed its power by transformation– had to be performed in the most abominable way –abominable for us today, but in those days we tried to live as best we could, despite any probing by those

with divine or regal powers; life but a race to get to the end while trying to avoid any perils on the way, so many more perils for the dispossessed. Back then and at times of need, which were most times, we frantically searched for roots to eat, poisonous or not, for hunger was hunger, or for muddy waters to drink, for thirst was thirst, and we did not look back as there was not much left behind. The bog as the source of all things, a woman staked, her body preserved almost intact in the marshes. In all this, we have answers to some of the questions. That she most probably perished in her search for whatever it was that she pursued, whether of a personal nature or as part of a collective enterprise. That once she existed, since we have a dead body as proof. That all this time she was not moved away from her place of death, and for this we have scientific evidence. But what we do not have is an explanation about why her life ended as it did. They were indeed times of scarcity, ignorance. Times of human agony and suffering, for this was the purpose of our presence on the land, as some claimed at the same time as they ruled over others. It was the Iron Age after all, and human sacrifice was rife for any reason. At the time they knew much less than we did, for sure, but the question to ask is whether they were lesser humans –or whether we are better ones. There is a contemporary equivalent to staking someone in the bog. Almost everything that has gone on in the world before us has contemporary equivalents. Staking in the bog, it was called then, but now it has so many other names. Enslaved, browbeaten, fraught with worry. The difference is that back then, in the Iron Age, and not discovered until 1849, the woman was staked into the bog both ritualistically speaking and in a very real sense, for she was also probably browbeaten, full of woe and worry, maybe enslaved. With dozens, hundreds of gods, anything that lived or moved became a god as the needs arose. Water was necessarily seen as the foremost of divine elements, the most obviously stirring of all constituents. And the woman, likely a priestess who wished to become a goddess as the ultimate

advancement, was persuaded by those in a position of authority –a power assigned by themselves to themselves– to volunteer and give up her life and die swallowing that most precious of elements, water. For the sake of others. Out of ignorance, or pride, or generosity. A stake, the bog, the marshes. Staked in the bog. A ritual killing within the bog. Staked, slain, drowned, choked. Forever there, preserved as in day one. And then, so very much later, in 1849, no one knew what to make of her when she was accidentally found. A priestess, an aspiring goddess, a humble peasant, the victim of a mix-up, an inhabitant of the wrong time and the wrong place, a thief or a murderer. It must have all been the result of wrongdoing, whether hers or someone else's. But now that we know more, but not much more, we want a resolution to the crime. Ritual sacrifice or murder, take your pick, as if one could be better than the other. As if anything could bring her back. As if we could change History by speculation or resentment. As if we could honour victims by giving a reason for their untimely death. Our reaction is only natural, for we wish to somehow avenge her, probably the purpose of carrying out all this research in her memory. So that if there is a soul, it will rest in peace. And if there is none, then we will feel better with ourselves for having tried, placating not the gods that claimed her but our own taxing nature that demands answers to everything around us. So, what you have to ask yourself is whether you think she was held down, in the bog, staked as she was. Or whether there was another explanation, more sublime yet equally horrifying. Something to do with beliefs and customs, with beauty and its obliteration. Excessive beauty might be perilous, it could anger the gods, Nature, the bog itself. This is what some whispered, I am almost sure, back then. And we owe it to her to find out. The stake, the bog, a woman who was probably 25 years old. Some interpret the episode as the sacrifice of a priestess who offered to die so that crops would improve the following year. Others claim that there were minor signs of a struggle and that she was probably

held down in the bog, staked there so that she would not be able to move, let alone escape from the cold waters of spring. Some evidence points at the fact that it was a voluntary sacrifice, for she did not put up a major fight, there were no broken bones and no wounds to her face. Sacrifice. Murder. Ritual. Rape. All that, and probably more. What is clear is that she had fine bone structure, delicate features, small hands and tiny feet. We can also conclude that sometime between the Iron Age and 1849 all her organs had been removed. We do not know why, but again it might have been part of another ritualistic misadventure. They took the organs and left the body otherwise intact, in the bog, staked, preserved very much as it was, for those marshy waters can keep you going for centuries. Had her organs been spared we would know if she had had one last ritual meal, how fast her heart was beating at the time of death, what her lungs had breathed in, what she held in her womb until that last instant, dead in the water so to speak. As to what she harboured in her mind, we can only talk about being staked in the bog, a ritual killing, the gateway to the other world, the profound ignorance that made ritual murder acceptable and solely for the virtuous. She must have been a woman who agreed, out of necessity or a lack of vision and a lack of fear, to sacrifice herself for the community so that the gods would leave them all in peace for a little longer until their next horrifying demand. Anointed as a goddess herself only to be killed. A woman given the highest honour only to have it taken away. The bog, the ritual killing, the Iron Age. Yes, it was probably slaughter, we can now conclude almost without hesitation. In all, a life celebrated but denied. Staked as she was, in the marshes, her body preserved as it must have been when alive. Almost. Or not. Or perhaps we got it all wrong. Perhaps History is mere speculation. Perhaps historians are not necessarily living the battle or the revolution, nor do they witness murder or depravity, nor are they converted by saints or are they captivated by artists in the flesh. Their task is to rely on witnesses, on

information present in Nature, on the commonsensical and on the more-obvious-than-not, on hearsay and possibly on what goes on in their minds. A visual inspection of the facts can never make up for the truth. And yet this is what we have and nothing more: the marshes, the Iron Age, a ritualistic slaying, a stake, the bog as it might have been back then, the land as we never knew it, the preserved body of a woman unable to fight back, a case unsolved.

*© Isabel del Rio 2018
from 'Paradise & Hell', published by Friends of Alice Publishing 2018*