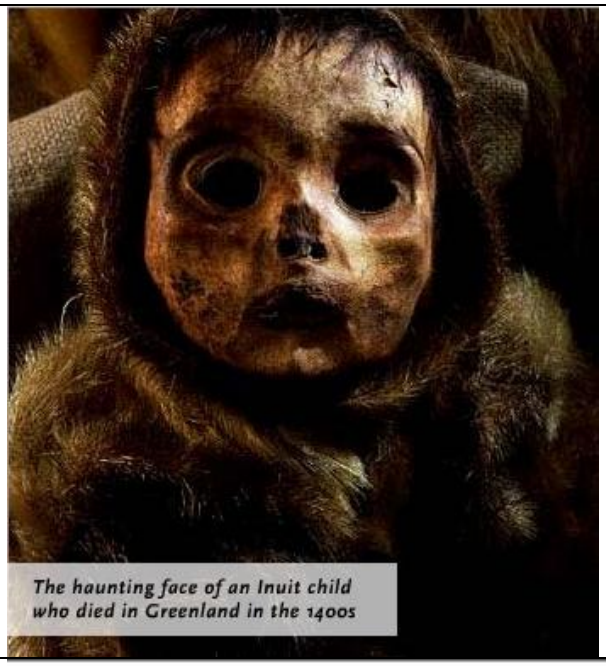
Factors Affecting Rates

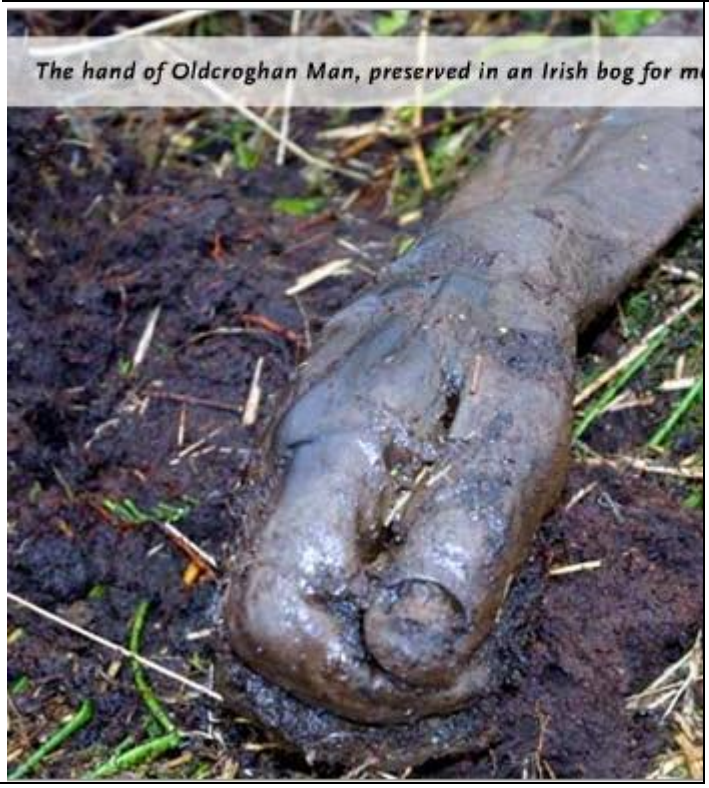
Qilakitsoq Mummies
Greenland
In 1972, hunters roaming near an abandoned Inuit settlement called Qilakitsoq chanced upon the graves of eight people. Six women and two children had been buried in the mid-15th century beneath an overhanging rock that sheltered the burial site from sunlight, rain, and snow. Slowly but steadily, cold, dry winds preserved their remains as well as their sealskin and fur clothing. Museum curators today sometimes use a similar process of freeze-drying to conserve unearthed bog bodies and organic artifacts.


The haunting face of an Inuit child who died in Greenland in the 1400s

Lady Dai
Central China
She's been called the best-preserved mummy in the world. When unearthed in 1971, her flesh was still supple, and her veins contained type-A blood. What accounts for her conservation? Some researchers point to her airtight coffin. Like a Russian doll, her coffin lay nested in a series of six caskets, and the entire burial chamber, with over 1,000 Han Dynasty artifacts, was encased in charcoal and clay 50 feet underground.

Bog Bodies
Northern Europe

The key to the remarkable preservation of bog bodies, as with all mummies, was that bacteria and fungi, nature's agents of decay, couldn't carry out their usual work. For many years it was assumed that merely the acidic, oxygen-free environments of peat bogs kept microbes away. But recently a new explanation has emerged: a substance called sphagnan, found in the Sphagnum moss that blankets many bogs, acts as an antibiotic. Sphagnan also tans skin, giving bog bodies their characteristic coffee color.


The hand of Oldcroghan Man, preserved in an Irish bog for m