ALTOGETHER ARCHAEOLOGY

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Newsletter

What's inside…

1 Editor's Update

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Summer edition of the Altogether Archaeology newsletter.

The year's half over and we've had a varied itinerary of activities from guided walks to archaeology networking days to the practical hands-on side of archaeology. Brilliant!

The Gilmonby excavation is now well under way with the Gueswick dig ready to kick off on 16th August. Check out the AA website for more details and for future activities.

Moving on, in this edition Martin Green takes us on a journey to the Shetland Islands, a fascinating place full of interesting sites. We also have 2 book reviews: the first by Malcolm McCallum who gives us insights about a book on 'Lost Scotland', and Greg Finch who gives a review on *The Mercian Chronicles* by the well-known historical author, Max Adams. If needlework is your thing, Kay Fothergill gives an interesting account of the techniques of Anglo-Saxon embroidery (and I must say, well done Kay!) And to end, take a look at the 'Mystery Objects' on page 19. Any ideas? Please let me know.

Enjoy!

Sue Goldsborough

NB: if you would like to submit an article for the spring newsletter then send them directly to me at sgoldsborough2002@yahoo.co.uk

2 SHETLAND IN THE SUNSHINE

While many of you were at the AA AGM in April, Dot and I were topping up our sun-tans on Shetland. We settled on taking the car over by ferry, rather than flying and hiring. The cost is much the same (depending on how much you want to spend on a fancy ferry cabin) and the advantage of the ferry is that it goes overnight both ways, arriving at breakfast time, so you get a full day on Shetland at both ends of the holiday…though the disadvantage is that it's a longer drive to Aberdeen for the ferry, than to Edinburgh for the plane.

The weather was generally great: no strong winds and only a few rainy hours, with plenty of sun (though cool). Much better than we were expecting. Another surprise was how big Shetland is; the Mainland is about 60 miles long (crow-flying); it's the third largest UK offshore island (after Skye and Lewis-Harris) and considerably larger than Orkney's Mainland.

Prehistoric people found and settled Shetland, helped by the fact that Orkney, Fair Isle and Shetland are visible from each other (in clear conditions), encouraging exploration. Notably, the next islands out into the Atlantic, the Faroes, aren't visible from Shetland, and weren't settled in prehistory.

However, it seems that settlement did take longer to be established on Shetland than on other Scottish Islands. The earliest radiocarbon dates are for shell middens at the southern tip of Mainland: 4300 to 3500 BC (very late Mesolithic, through to the early Neolithic). There are no grand Neolithic monuments like the stone circles and tombs of Orkney and the Outer Hebrides, just a scatter of isolated standing stones, some potsherds and a few burial mounds.

Things get more interesting in the Bronze Age with many burnt mounds and some roundhouses, but the most impressive remains are those of the Iron Age and early medieval (Viking) period. Archaeological periods on Shetland are a little different to what we're used to in northern England. There's no Roman archaeology of course, so the Iron Age fades into the little understood early medieval Pictish period, until the Vikings arrived around AD 850. And no 1066 Norman invasion, so the Viking era continued up to the transfer of the islands to Scotland in the 15th century.

Perhaps the best way to appreciate all this is the amazing site we visited at Jarlshof (fig.1), incongruously located next to sand dunes by the main airport. Here there are layer after layer of archaeology, piled up on top of each other: traces of Neolithic settlement, Bronze Age houses and workshop, Iron Age roundhouses, then a broch (a defensive tower of the late Iron Age), followed by wheelhouses

(2nd century AD), then Viking longhouses, succeeded by a medieval farmhouse, and perched on top of it all, a manor house built around 1600. Preservation of the site has been helped by it being periodically covered by windblown sand.

Fig.1: Jarlshof roundhouses – spot the saddle querns

Brochs are numerous round the coast of Shetland: about 120 of them. The capital, Lerwick, even has one (Clickimin Broch fig.2) standing on an island in a small loch at the edge of the town: the broch is of the usual form: a round tower with the cavity between the walls used for staircases and small chambers. Our favourite was the ruined Broch of Houlland (fig.3), set on a peninsula in a loch perched on cliff-tops at Eshaness in the far north-west of Mainland. The coastal scenery is spectacular with a huge gash in the ground by the loch, where a sea-cave has collapsed 300m inland and the surf comes roaring in.

Fig.2: Clickimin Brock at Lerwick

Fig.3: Houlland ruined brock in a loch

We spent two nights on Bressay, an island opposite Lerwick; fans of the TV series Shetland will recognise it as Jimmy Perez's view as he stands by his harbour-side house, looking pensively out to sea. Here there is archaeology of more recent times: ruined herring fishing stations active at the beginning of the last century. And most remarkable of all, two WWI naval shore batteries, one at each end of the island. Both are over an hours' walk across rough remote terrain from the nearest roads. This inaccessibility has meant that the huge guns are still in position as it was too difficult to remove them post-war (fig.4). The southern site is particularly spectacular, perched on the edge of high cliffs at the end of a peninsula.

Fig.4:

Trig pillar and WW1 gun at Aith Ness on Bressay

Another highlight of the holiday was a walk round uninhabited St Ninian's Isle, which we visited straight off the ferry at breakfast time (fig.5). It's a popular spot, and another Shetland TV series location, being connected to the mainland by a spectacularly photogenic white sand spit. We were early enough to have the place to ourselves and did the beautiful 4 mile walk around the island, finishing at the ancient ruined chapel where a Pictish silver hoard was found and there are 10th century graves.

Fig.5: Dot admiring the view on St. Ninian's Isle

Best of all was the day spent on Unst: getting there requires organisation as you need to book a place on the small car ferry to cross from Mainland to Yell, then another place on the even smaller ferry from Yell to Unst. Not forgetting to book places to get back at the end of the day. Winter timetables were still in operation: the summer tourist season in Shetland doesn't get going until May, when museums open and ferries are more frequent.

Unst is definitely worth the trouble: it's a hot-spot of Viking archaeology, with more remains of longhouses than elsewhere in Shetland (or, it is said, anywhere in Scandinavia). Some have been excavated, many not. A couple of settlements were reminiscent of AA's Holwick site: groups of dwarf-walled un-mortared longhouses. This isn't surprising as they were occupied contemporaneously: the High Medieval era in Teesdale coinciding with the late Viking era in Shetland.

One particularly beautiful Unst site is at Underhoull, a sandy inlet on its west coast. A ruined broch and a Viking longhouse lie on the hillside above the sandy bay (fig.6). Below them, a "celtic" system of small fields extends down to the shore, incorporating an Iron Age settlement with a souterrain. Over this settlement, a

Viking longhouse was built, and by the shore you can see "noosts" where longships were dragged out of the sea to nestle in clefts in the dunes. On the far side of the bay is another group of longhouses (fig.7)

Fig.6: Brock with field system and longhouse ruin at Underhoull on Unst

Fig.7: Viking longhouse at Belmont on Unst

If you want to read more, there's a lot of information in the "Viking Unst" section of the Shetland Amenity Trust's excellent website, including walking guides. There's

also loads of information about other aspects of Shetland's archaeological and natural heritage. What is lacking in Shetland is lidar…this important tool in landscape archaeology isn't yet available for Unst or for most of the rest of the islands: only the southern part of Mainland has been scanned. Experience in the North Pennines suggests that many more Iron Age and Viking sites will be discovered if and when the rest of Shetland is scanned for lidar.

Not all of the trip was archaeology, of course. We did some grand walks, bagged a couple of dozen Ordnance Survey trig points to add our list, and spent ages watching seals at various locations. No otters, though, and Dot's hours spent scanning the sea for orcas were fruitless. Ironically, we would have done better to stay in the North-East as a group of orcas were active off the Northumberland coast when we were in Shetland. We were also privileged to witness the first ever drag queen night at our hotel in at Hillswick, a remote village in north-west Mainland. A drag queen had allegedly recently moved to Lerwick with her (his?) wife and children. Drag nights are set to become part of Shetland's culture, along with ceilidhs, boat-burning, and a surprisingly high murder rate.

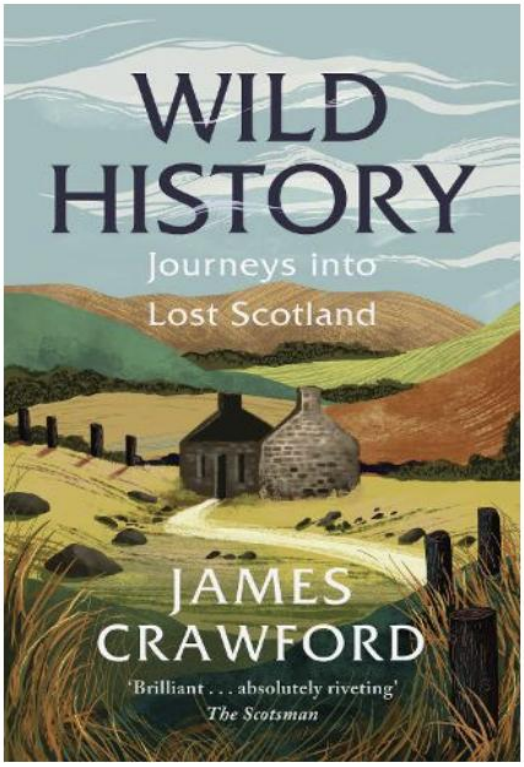
So, highly recommended for a holiday, but worth sacrificing to the weather gods before you go, and remember to book the inter-island ferries or you might not make it to Unst (or might get stranded there if a couple of lorries take all the space on the return ferry).

Martin Green

Photos: Martin Green

3 Book Review

Wild History Journeys into Lost Scotland
(Author: James Crawford)



James Crawford is a writer and broadcaster who worked for some 10 years in the archive for Scotland's Royal Commission, originally founded in 1908, making an inventory of the *Ancient and Historical Monuments and Construction* connected with or illustrative of the lives of people in Scotland. The work made him decide to travel out into the landscapes to see a number of these sites for himself, some of which are pretty remote and not often visited. He travelled by boat, car, bicycle and on foot to the areas he describes in the book. The book itself is split into four categories which, as he describes it, reflect in the broadest terms "how people have used the landscapes over the millennia." His four categories are:

Worked: where the land has been farmed or mined or quarried or used for industrial purposes --
Sacred: where the land has been used as spaces for ritual or worship etc.
Contested: areas which reflect the history of conflicts
Sheltered: where there are traces or remains of occupation such as dwellings and homes

I now give a snapshot of a few examples for each of these four categories, together with their OS Grid references, which Crawford has supplied for all his sites.

Worked

The Viking Shipyard, Rubh' an Dunain penninsula, Isle of Skye, NG 3929 1639.

A small inlet to a sea loch called Loch nah-Airde. Only discovered in 2000 when an upright arm of wood was noticed and then found to be a solid piece of worked oak, part of a crossbeam which connected floor timbers to a hull. Later carbon dated to be at least 1,000 years old.

Ailsa Craig, Firth of Clyde, NX 0216 9974.

Quarrying, which has taken place since at least since the beginning of the 19th century, for the two types of granite, common green and blue hone. These were, and still are, used for the sport of curling.

Kirnie Law, Innerleithen, NT 3484 3869.

An abandoned Reservoir, first built in mid 19th century to supply water power to mills in Walkerburn, 1,000 feet below. Out of use by mid 1940s when mains electricity supply arrived.

Lassodie Village, Fife, NT1315 9253 . An abandoned colliery village, built after the First Edition OS map of the area (pub. 1856) but there in 1896 on Second Edition OS. The pits closed in 1931 and the mining company demolished the houses!

There are another 9 examples of 'Worked' areas.

Sacred

Viking Boat Burial, Swordle Bay, Arndnamurchan, NM 5459 7078.

An oval of rough stones about 3 metres long by 1.5 metres wide, later verified by archaeologists in 2011who uncovered the fragments of hundreds of metal rivets in the same oval pattern.

Dun Deardail, Glen Nevis, NN 1270 7012.

A vitrified hillfort, dating back some 2,500 years and burnt possibly as part of ritual abandonment around 310 BC (or BCE if you prefer!).

Na Clachan Aoraidh, Loch Tummel, NN8386 6200.

A mid / late Bronze Age 'Four Poster' stone circle which has later cremated remains of an adult woman in its centre (carbon dated to around 900 BC).

Square Cairn Cemetery, Bay of Laig, Isle of Eigg, NM 4669 8790.

Fifteen graves in 3 rows, each grave is lined with dressed stones and all then covered with a large slab of rock, then cobbles heaped up on this to make a cairn. Thought to have dated from Pictish times, 1.5 thousand years ago, all have been robbed out.

There are another 8 areas described.

Contested

Dere Street Roman Road, The Borders, NT 7419 1868.

This is part of the Roman road, later called Dere Street by the Victorians, after the Anglo-Saxon kingdom Deira because it started in York (or Eboracum / Eforwic / Jorvic) and headed north over the Cheviots to Crammond on the Antonine Wall. First built by Agricola circa AD 78-84 for his invasion of 'Scotland'.

Clach Na Briton, **Glen Falloch,** NN 3371 2161.

A large cairn which marked the place where three kingdoms met, the northern frontier of British Strathclyde, the westernmost limit of 'Pictland' and the southern and eastern edge of Dalriada.

The Atlantic Wall, Sheriffmuir, NN 8378 0366.

80 metres long wall of steel reinforced concrete built in 1943 to represent the Nazi Atlantic Wall and used for bombing and gunnery practise in preparation for the 'D' Day invasion. Interestingly it was built on land used as a practice area for the Gallpoli landings in WW1.

Garva Bridge, Genral Wade's Military Road, NN 5217 9475.

This was built in 1732 and was part of a network of military roads linking army bases throughout the Highlands, after the 1715 Jacobite Rebellion.

Another 10 areas are described in this section.

Sheltered

The Bone Caves, Inchnadamph, NC 2757 2060.

This is a series of caves containing many varieties of bones, both animal and human. The human remains date from the Neolithic, whilst some of the worked bones (a walrus ivory pin and antler knife handle) are 12th century and thought to b of Viking origin.

Cracknie Souterrain, Borgie Forest, Sutherland, NC 6655 5092.

A large passage cellar (13 metres long) originally beneath a house and thought to be some 2.5 thousand years old.

Coire Gabhail, The Lost Valley, Glencoe, NN 1660 5541.

A place where the MacDonalds held stolen cattle (a la Devil's Beef Tub near Moffat where later Border Reivers hid stolen cattle) and to where the survivors of the Glencoe Massacre, 12/02/1692, took refuge.

Mingulay Village, Mingulay Island, Outer Hebrides, NL 5650 8320.

This island had a long history of occupation and the village was finally abandoned by 1912.

A further 11 sites are described in this section.

Crawford gives very descriptive accounts of how he got to each location, what the terrain was like (including some translations of the Gaelic mountain names etc) and what the weather was doing. He gives a pretty good summary of what is to be found at each site and where and when more detailed archaeological work has been done. He also gives an interesting historical account of these places.

It is an easy book to read and hard to put down once you've started. It also helps to have either your mobile phone, laptop or tablet handy if you have the OS mapping app on it, so you go straight to these sites and see their larger context and even see an aerial view of them via the OS app, although the author has included a number of photographs in the book.

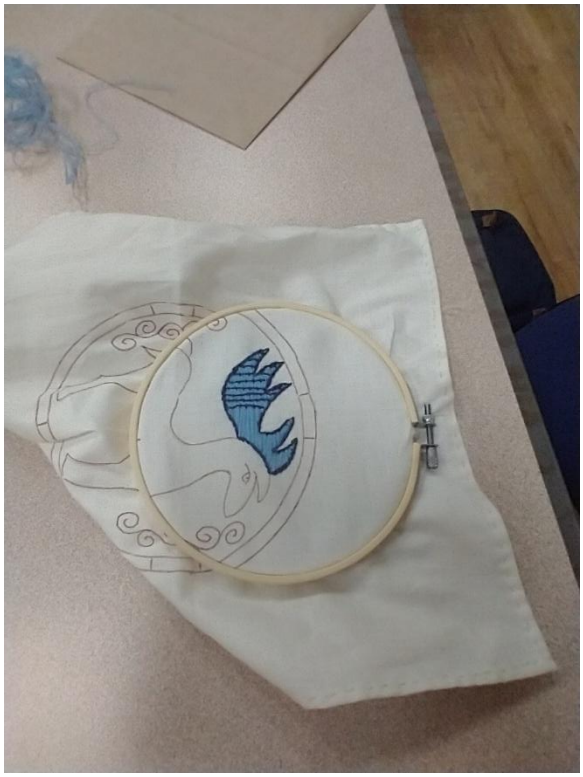
Malcolm McCallum

[Publisher: Birlinn Ltd (2023). Paperback £12.99]

4 Workshop Day: Anglo-Saxon Embroidery

In January Stuart and Wendy held an Anglo-Saxon embroidery day at Mickleton Village Hall. The picture below shows examples of their fine work.

The event proved very popular. Prospective stitchers had the option of making an easier deer embroidery or a trickier angel. Some people seemed to take to the new craft quickly. The picture opposite shows Richard's deer in progress.



I actually found it very tricky. Although I am used to making bead jewellery the techniques are very different. The thread you use for jewellery is very strong and smooth. The 2-ply wool (authentically dyed in colours available to the Anglo-Saxons) was much fluffier and more fragile. Also, I am really a non-sewer. I had never heard of stem stitch which is the stitch used to make the outline of the figures. I even had trouble putting the material into the embroidery hoop. I also managed to catch the spare material under the hoop as I was sewing so had to pull some out. As you can imagine I didn't get very far in the workshop.

Once home I put the part-done embroidery on the back of my sofa. The colours matched and I thought that I should make the effort and finish it. What really was the clincher was there happened to be a documentary about the Bayeux Tapestry (actually an embroidery) a few days later. They were talking about laid and couched work which was one of the techniques they showed us in the workshop. When I saw close-ups of the tapestry, I realised I now knew how and probably why they worked it like that. Laid and couched work is a fast way of filling in large blocks of colour such as the horses on the tapestry and is an economical use of the yarn. The stitches on the back of the work are very small so that the expensive yarn is not wasted.

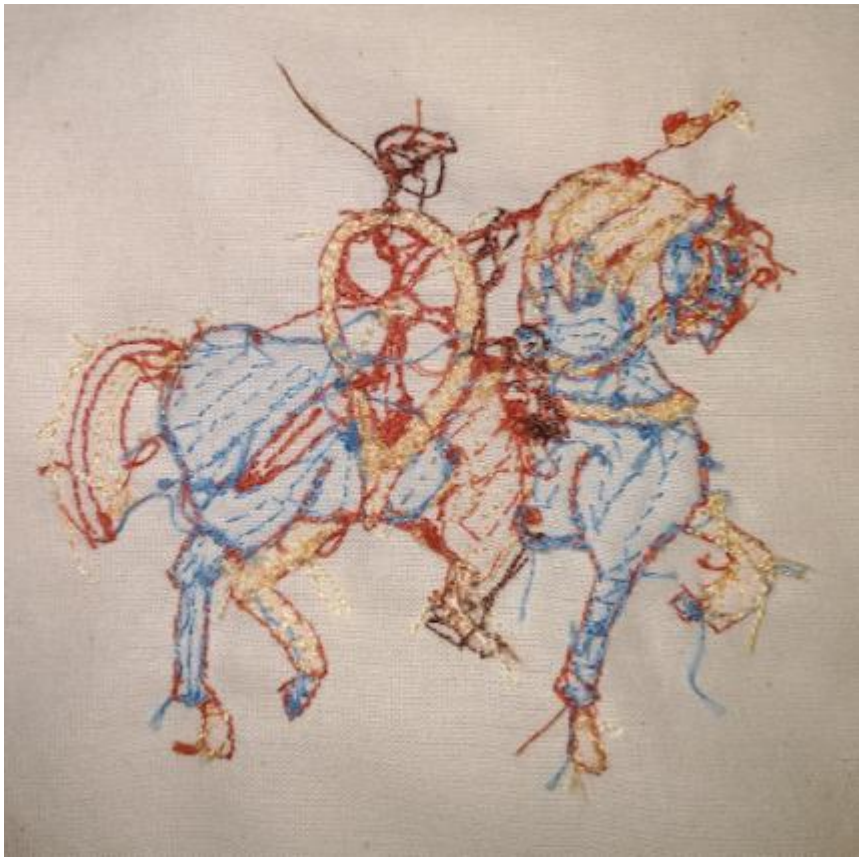
I set to and finished my deer and a few days later ordered a medieval embroidery kit from the internet. This provided a new challenge as this came with embroidery floss not wool so I had to learn how to split the floss without getting a tangled mess. As it was modern floss the colours were rather too bright compared to the authentic natural wool. However, yet another documentary about the Tapestry was shown on the TV and in this one they re-created the colours as they would have looked when the tapestry was made.

I had material left after finishing the horse so decided I would try and do another embroidery with the remnants. This time I went directly to a picture of an archer on the Bayeux tapestry, traced it on to the spare material and embroidered it.

I am currently working on another horse and rider. This one is described as Harold Duke and appears at the start of the tapestry.

Apart from the fun of doing the embroidery it also makes you look far more closely at the tapestry itself. The original embroiderers did not like to waste yarn. On some figures they just used whatever colour yarn happenned to be in their needle, one blue hand, one red hand for example. One consistent thing seems to be that the horses legs are always done in 2 colours. This actually is quite a good effect as it gives the image more perspective. Also some horses have flowing manes and some braided. We still braid (plait) horses for shows today. The Bayeaux archer is shown holding four arrows in his left-hand whilst drawing his bow and his quiver is empty of arrows. Did they actually do this? A question perhaps for Chris our archery expert.

The final picture shows the reverse of the blue horse. It is a bit messy (I have since learnt how to be neater) but it does show that there is much less thread on the back which is the economy of the laid and couched stitch.



Kay Fothergill

Photos: Kay Fothergill

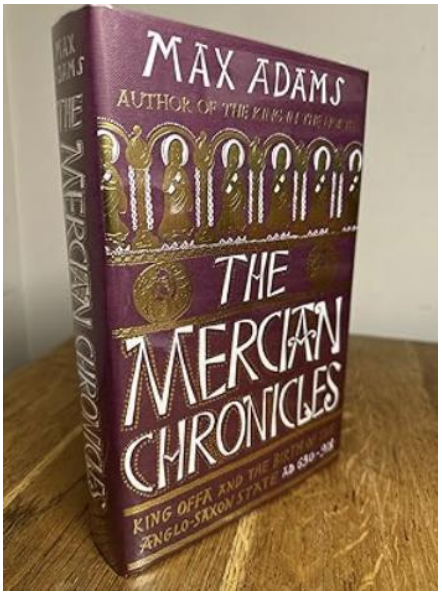
5

Book Review

The Mercian Chronicles

(Author: Max Adams)

Although the geographical coverage of this book lies well to the south of our area, it is highly recommended to anyone with an interest in the Early Medieval period. It has a great deal to say about the creation, structure and operation of not just Mercia, arguably the most powerful and influential English realm in the eighth century, but how its example provided a template more widely for what came later in the country as a whole. Northumbria might not be the focus of this work, but it isn't ignored. After all, there were battles aplenty between these adjacent states between the 7th and 9th centuries, and figures such as the entrepreneur, developer and willful churchman St.Wilfrid were as active in Mercia as in Northumbria.



Extraordinarily, for the times, just two kings reigned over Mercia in the 80 years between 716 and 796: Athelbald and Offa, holding sway over land from the Peak District to the Thames – including London – and from East Anglia to the Welsh Border. And it is roughly along the Welsh Border, of course, that Mercia's most renowned physical legacy can still be seen today: Offa's Dyke. This is given the detailed treatment we might expect, but arguably greater implications emerge from other points of interest discussed. Prominent amongst these are the excavated and carefully recorded remains of the remarkable eighth century Cromwell Bridge (dated from foundation tree ring timbers) over the River Trent almost

adjacent to the Fosse Way just downstream from Newark. As Adams points out, being the 'product of refined engineering principles it cannot have been the first.' What other bridges were there of which no trace has yet to be found, and what does this mean for Early Medieval trade and communication?

In general, the book is an excellent example of the fruits of combining archaeological surveys, excavations and finds analysis with architectural remains and the fragmentary documentary evidence of chronicles, ecclesiastical letters and (especially) charters, effectively the legal deeds from which a great deal can be learned or inferred about court politics as well as landscape and economic development. Furthermore, it is written in Adams' typically engaging style, which will be familiar to those who have read *The King in the North*, about the Northumbria of Oswald's time, and his other works on early medieval Britain.

Greg Finch

Max Adams (2025), *The Mercian Chronicles*, Publisher: Head of Zeus

448 pp, £25

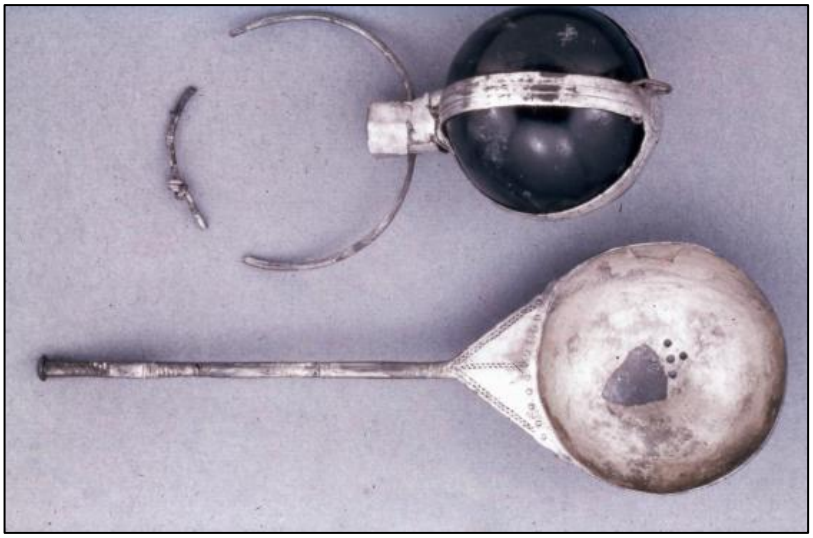
6 Mystery Objects

Study these ‘Mystery Objects’. What are they? What were they used for? Send your thoughts to the Editor (sgoldsborough2002@yahoo.co.uk) for inclusion in the next newsletter.

Roman dodecahedra are complex, 12-sided, hollow bronze objects dating to the late Roman Empire. Each dodecahedron varies in size and decoration, and all have variable-size holes in each face and studs at each corner.

Only 120 have been found across what was the Roman Empire, however, none have been found in Italy, Spain, Africa or the Mediterranean.

The crystal ball and silver spoon have typically been found together in female graves from the Anglo-Saxon period, and almost exclusively in Kent. The number of perforations vary from 5 up to 13.



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