

The Amesbury Archer

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One of the requirements for the Key Stage 2 history curriculum is that children learn about changes in Britain from the Stone Age to the Iron Age. In some ways this is a challenging period to teach – the evidential record is patchy, it is open to interpretation, and there are few concrete examples of events, people and places to make it feel ‘real’. Yet there are some fabulous opportunities for children to engage in some fascinating archaeological works to bring this period to life. For anyone wanting to find out more about this period and to learn more about the fascinating stories from this era, I would thoroughly recommend Professor Alice Roberts’s book *Ancestors*. This book explores prehistoric Britain through seven burials, from the Palaeolithic to the Iron Age.

This article looks at one of these burials, the Amesbury Archer, which offers a wonderful chance for children to investigate an extraordinary burial. In 2002, a team from Wessex Archaeology were conducting a low-key excavation of a site in preparation for the building of a new school. The site was within a couple of miles of the famous Stonehenge. The archaeologists were working on two burial sites, which had been found by chance as they had not appeared on any aerial photographs or geophysical surveys. One of the burial sites contained 32 graves from the Romano-British period. The other site was not going to be excavated; instead the plan was to preserve the site by moving the proposed school building. There were however two features the archaeologists realised would be under a new road (that could not be moved), so the decision was taken to start excavating these on a Friday, with a view to getting the burials completely lifted by the end of the day. As they dug the archaeologists realised these two burials dated from the Bronze Age, so were a lot earlier than the Romano-British burials. The larger of the two features in particular turned out to be a very complicated dig – not only were the archaeologists discovering a rich array of finds around the bones of an individual burial, but they also noticed the gleam of something special. Among the items were a couple of small gold objects – an extraordinarily rare find. In fact this is one of the earliest known examples of gold work in northwest Europe, and the earliest in Britain. Having found such astonishing

Figure 1: The gold items found in the burial. These are only a few centimetres long



items, the archaeological team had to work all through the night and over the bank holiday weekend to unearth all the remains in the grave before out of the discoveries news leaked.

The story of the discovery of the burial is exciting in its own right and could be used to discuss questions about what archaeologists do and how they work, e.g. how do they choose what to uncover and what do they choose to leave in situ, and why, what should be done with the items that are discovered and so forth. Children can be introduced to the topic using the enquiry approach proposed by Ian Dawson in *Primary History* 70. There are five stages to this process:

1. Show the children one or two pieces of evidence to intrigue them.
2. Get children to ask questions.
3. Get children to suggest possible hypotheses.
4. Provide more information.
5. Develop fuller answers.

Stage 1 – introducing the children to some of the evidence. Tell the story of the excavation but for the time being leave out any details of what the archaeologists discovered – try to create a ‘cliff-hanger’ moment! Introduce a couple of the finds.

Figure 2: Arrowheads found with the burial



Stage 2. The children can ask questions about the artefacts, together with the person they were buried with. In order to support this is helpful to make use of the following questions devised by Alf Wilkinson in *Primary History* 85.

a) Design and construction

What is it made of? How is it made? When was it made? Who made it? How does it work? Does it come apart? How does it go back together? Why do you think it was made this way?

b) Appearance

What does it look like? What does it feel like? Does it smell? Is it heavy, or light? Has it been used, or is it new? Has it been altered, or is it in its original condition?

c) Value of the object

Do you think it is valuable? Was it valuable when it was made? Was it an 'everyday' object? Did it make people's lives easier? Was it a special object for special occasions?

d) Function

Why was it made? What was it used for? Who would have used it? Where would they have used it? Is it easy or difficult to use?

These could be supplemented by questions about the person in the burial:

a) The person

How old were they? What did they wear? What might they have looked like? Where might they have come from?

b) Their job/role

What did they do? What can we find out about them from what has been left behind?

c) Their lifestyle

Were they rich/poor? Were they important? What clues do the objects give us about their lifestyle?

The gold items are intriguing and archaeologists are unsure of their use. Each one is made from a flat oval of gold, and there is a tang protruding from one side, which has then been bent around the piece of gold,

Figure 3: A bone pin



Figure 4: Three copper 'tang' (blades of knives)



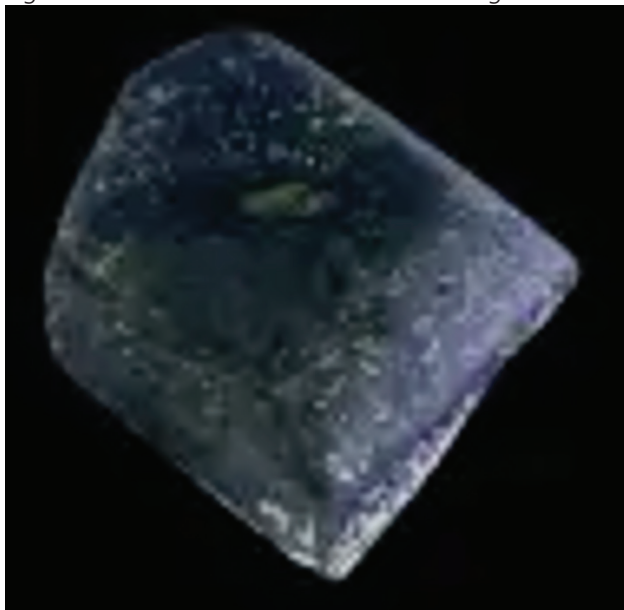
so that it curls around to the front. Each has also been embossed with a double row of dots. The Wessex archaeological website refers to them as earrings or hair tresses, whereas Alice Roberts believes they may belong to some form of headdress. The arrowheads are easier to identify and the fact that there are so many spread across the grave and on top of the body suggest that they were an important part of this person's life.

Stage 3 – from these discussions, get the children to suggest answers to the questions they have been discussing, about the person buried in this grave and the objects found with them.

Stage 4 – provide more clues. These can either be given out individually, a few at a time, or all together.

The bone pin in Figure 3 was most likely used to secure an item of clothing together, probably some form of cloak that has subsequently rotted away. The existence of a shale ring among the finds also gives a hint about the clothing worn, as it is believed this was most likely used to secure a leather strap – perhaps around a cloak. The three copper 'tang' are the blades of knives, minus their handles (which would most probably have been fashioned out of bone or wood). These items, along with the cushion stone in Figure 4, suggest that this person was connected in some way to metal working. The discovery of an antler tool, which is believed to be used in metal working, does add to the suggestion that this person was a

Figure 5: A cushion stone for metal working



metal worker or involved in metal working. The fact that copper items were found potentially places this burial just prior to the development of bronze. It may be worth discussing with the children the nature of different metals as copper is a 'soft' metal, and so in many ways not an ideal metal from which to create tools, so perhaps these items were status symbols.

The wrist guards (Figure 6) are most probably linked to the arrowheads and strengthen the idea that the person was an archer. The wrist guards would have

Figure 6: Two stone wrist guards



most likely been secured to the wrists using leather straps to the wrists, to protect them from the bow-string as an arrow would have been fired.

The Beaker pots are also interesting. No other burial includes this number of pots – typically only one such pot is found in the graves that have been discovered. The decoration on two of the pots is unusual compared to other pots that have been discovered – these two pots have a design pressed into them using a fine plaited cord. Two of the other pots have been decorated by using a comb – this style of decoration tends to be found in Bronze Age burials in Scotland. The final pot seems more typical, with a decoration made by pressing a single cord into the clay to create a series of horizontal lines.

At this point, it may be worth pulling together what the children now know and understand about this

Figure 7: Beaker pottery – five pots like this were found in the burial, although none of them were intact



individual, but also ask whether there are still any unanswered questions, or indeed new questions. Hopefully the children would ask about the individual and what do we know about them – if not they can be directed towards such questions. This is where links can be made to science and also to geography, as we can talk about the actual bones of the body and what they reveal.

In both feet, two of his bones had fused, indicating he may have had flat feet. In his jaw, there was a hole level with the root of his right lower first molar, which indicates he most probably suffered with an abscess, but this had healed over before he died. His left leg was also misshapen, particularly around the kneecap, which appears to be completely missing. There also seem to be slight deformities to the spine. The missing patella could either have been from birth or may have been caused by an injury in later life. He clearly had some form of disability but the other goods found with him suggest he was treated with great respect at the time of his death. His bones also suggest he was aged between 35 and 45 years old. Radiocarbon dating of the bones – drilling out around 500 milligrams of bone, which is then filtered to around 30 milligrams of collagen which in turn is then testable – showed that the person lived around 2400–2200 BCE. In addition, oxygen isotope analysis of dental enamel can identify where someone came from. Minerals connected to a local climate and geology get stored in teeth enamel, and oxygen and strontium isotopes from water sources provide a strong indicator of location. It can be hard to identify a precise location, but the isotope analysis suggests this person originally came from central Europe, possibly the Alpine region. This then raises questions about travel – how did he come to be in Wiltshire, when did he migrate, what attracted him to the region and so forth. Unfortunately such questions can only be answered speculatively.

The children should now be in a position to develop a fuller answer – Stage 5 of Ian Dawson's enquiry process – where they can be encouraged to use the language of certainty in presenting their conclusions. What things are they certain of, what things are probable, what is possible and what is speculation? Alternatively, if you want to extend the enquiry, it would be possible to introduce the finds from the second, smaller excavation. This also revealed a body, of a younger man aged 25–30. Radiocarbon dating places him in the same time period as the Archer. This body was also discovered with a pair of gold items, in the same style as the Archer's. Analysis of the bones showed this individual had the same fusion of bones in his feet as the Archer, suggesting that this person was related to the Archer – potentially father and son. Interestingly, oxygen isotope analysis of the teeth showed that in this case this individual was probably raised in southern England. This suggests that the Archer had migrated at a younger age and either travelled with family who settled in this part of

Wiltshire or met someone in the area following their travels.

Examining the Amesbury Archer provides an interesting and unique insight into the Bronze Age. Clearly the Archer was not an ordinary individual. The range of goods found buried with him hints at a highly respected individual – possibly some form of chieftain or religious figure – suggesting some form of social hierarchy. The clues from the excavations also provide insight into a mobile society, and a highly skilled one, with signs of metalworking skills and other crafts. A focus on a specific burial like this also provides a wonderful way to demonstrate the power of an enquiry approach to children, which will hopefully feed into their understanding of how we come to make sense of the past.

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Resources

General reading

Roberts, A. (2021) *Ancestors: a prehistory of Britain in seven burials*, London: Simon & Schuster.

HA resources

Articles which provide insights into enquiry-based learning

Dawson, I. (2015) 'Enquiry: developing puzzling, enjoyable, effective historical investigations' in *Primary History*, 70, pp. 8–14.

Wilkinson, A. (2020) 'What can you tell about the Vikings from a chess piece?' in *Primary History*, 85, pp. 30–33.

Articles related to the Bronze Age

Birrell, G. and Green, M. (2015) 'Who's afraid of the Big Bad Bronze Age?' in *Primary History*, 71, pp. 40–45.

Pickford, T. (2018) 'The Standing Stone' in *Primary History*, 81, pp. 34–39.

Pryor, F., Morris, H. and Wessex Archaeology (2014) 'Stone Age to Iron Age – overview and depth' in *Primary History*, 66, pp. 20–29 – includes reference to Amesbury Archer.

Wilkinson, A. (2019) 'Re-thinking the Stone Age to Bronze Age' in *Primary History*, 81, pp. 42–44.

Wilkinson, A. (2021) 'How did a volcano affect life in the Bronze Age?' in *Primary History*, 87, pp. 12–13.

HA Scheme of Work for primary history

Changes in Britain from the Stone Age to the Iron Age, www.history.org.uk/primary/resource/7537/scheme-of-work-stone-age-to-iron-age