

A Meare Spiral Bead from Orkney

by Carole Morris

We have very few articles on new archaeological bead discoveries in the UK, but we hope to improve on this by bringing as many new finds as possible to members' attention. We need your help – if you see any local press cuttings, let us know. Although not local to where she lives, in August this year Evelyn Simak very kindly sent me a press cutting from the Orkney Press & Journal. On 20 August 2005, the Press & Journal had a small article entitled 'Ancient Bead may be Clue to King of Orkney' with a photo of a handful of finds from the excavations at Minehowe, including a broken bead with spiral decoration (Figs 1–3) which led to me to make some investigations and I will summarise the story here for members and put the bead into context. The bead now measures 1.8 cm across.



Photos: Frank Bradford

In the late summer of 1999, local farmer Douglas Paterson rediscovered a prehistoric underground structure at Minehowe, Tankerness, Orkney which had originally been found in 1946. Since its initial discovery the site had almost been forgotten.

An excavation was undertaken and the mound, though natural, was found to contain a chamber and to have been surrounded by a ditch. The chamber comprises a series of steps that descend to an intermediary landing that has two side chambers off to one side. A further flight of steps leads down to a chamber c 1.5m in diameter with a corbelled stone roof rising to c 4m above the flagged stone floor. The floor of this chamber is c 7m below the top of the glacial moraine into which it was built. Most of the structure is lined with drystone masonry. Members may have seen a Channel 4 'Time Team' excavation on the site in 2000, and that the underground chamber is viewed as a probable religious or ritual site.

A Late Iron Age metalworking area outside the ditch that surrounds the underground structure at Minehowe

produced anvils and whetstones, moulds, ingots, crucibles, slag, tuyeres, furnace linings and a kiln which appears to have been associated with an oval stone structure c 6m in diameter. Throughout its history it appears to have been primarily a workshop for the production of non-ferrous metalwork. This workshop may only represent the last phase in a long history of metalworking at Minehowe.

The article in the Press and Journal in 2005 says:

"A small brown and yellow bead which travelled 600 miles from one end of the country to the other has

yielded another clue about where a King of Orkney might have lived 2000 years ago. The round Meare bead has just been found in what was thought to be a rubbish site beside the Minehowe rock-built underground structure.

...the latest dig has been focusing on a ditch, encircling the Iron Age underground structure, and a metalworker's

workshop nearby. A big pile of metal deposits and a rubbish heap have been found beside the workshop. It was there that the Meare bead – thought to have originated in Somerset in the south of England – was uncovered.

Archaeologist Julie Gibson, of Orkney Archaeological Trust, which is conducting the dig, said it was a significant find. 'A couple of beads of this kind have been found down the east coast of Scotland, but this is the farthest north so far', she said. She also said that the bead represented another piece in the jigsaw of what Minehowe was used for. The oldest garment of clothing found in Britain was also found in the area. 'What we have found there have been very beautiful things – the people making this underground structure at Minehowe were very rich and very successful', Ms Gibson said. 'This bead in its own tiny way adds to the growing conviction which amounts to the site being built for the equivalent of the king of Orkney'.

Meare is a lake village in the Somerset Levels, which was occupied from about 300BC to the middle of the 1st century AD, and excavations have produced evidence that glass beads decorated with spirals like that on the Orkney bead (among other, plainer types) were made at Meare (Minnitt & Coles 1996, 41–42). Many were made for home consumption, but others would have been traded farther afield. Most have been found within 100km radius of the Meare Lake settlement, but others have been found in Cornwall, and the Grampian area of Scotland (Ibid). The Orkney find from 600 miles away adds to our knowledge of how far such intricate and valuable beads were traded in the Iron Age.

Bibliography

Minnitt, S. & Coles, J. 1996 *The Lake Villages of Somerset* (Glastonbury)

My thanks to the Orkney Press & Journal and to photographer Frank Bradford for permission to reproduce the article and photos of the bead from Minehowe.



Actual size

