

PREHISTORIC BURIAL IN BRITAIN

Schools'
information pack
featuring Michael Rosen poems



Image: 'Prehistoric Britain' by Peter Fennell

Classroom handout

This handout is intended to facilitate classroom activities and is designed to be used in conjunction with the associated *Schools' Information Pack*, to facilitate the teaching of prehistory (Stone Age to Iron Age) in primary schools (ages 7-11).

The poems, images and information contained here can be downloaded via this link:

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These resources were created by a team from The University of Manchester (Melanie Giles and Anwen Cooper), the University of Reading (Duncan Garrow and Catriona Gibson), and the British Museum (Neil Wilkin) as part of the 'Grave goods: objects and death in later prehistoric Britain' project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Map of site locations



Folkton, North Yorkshire (Neolithic)



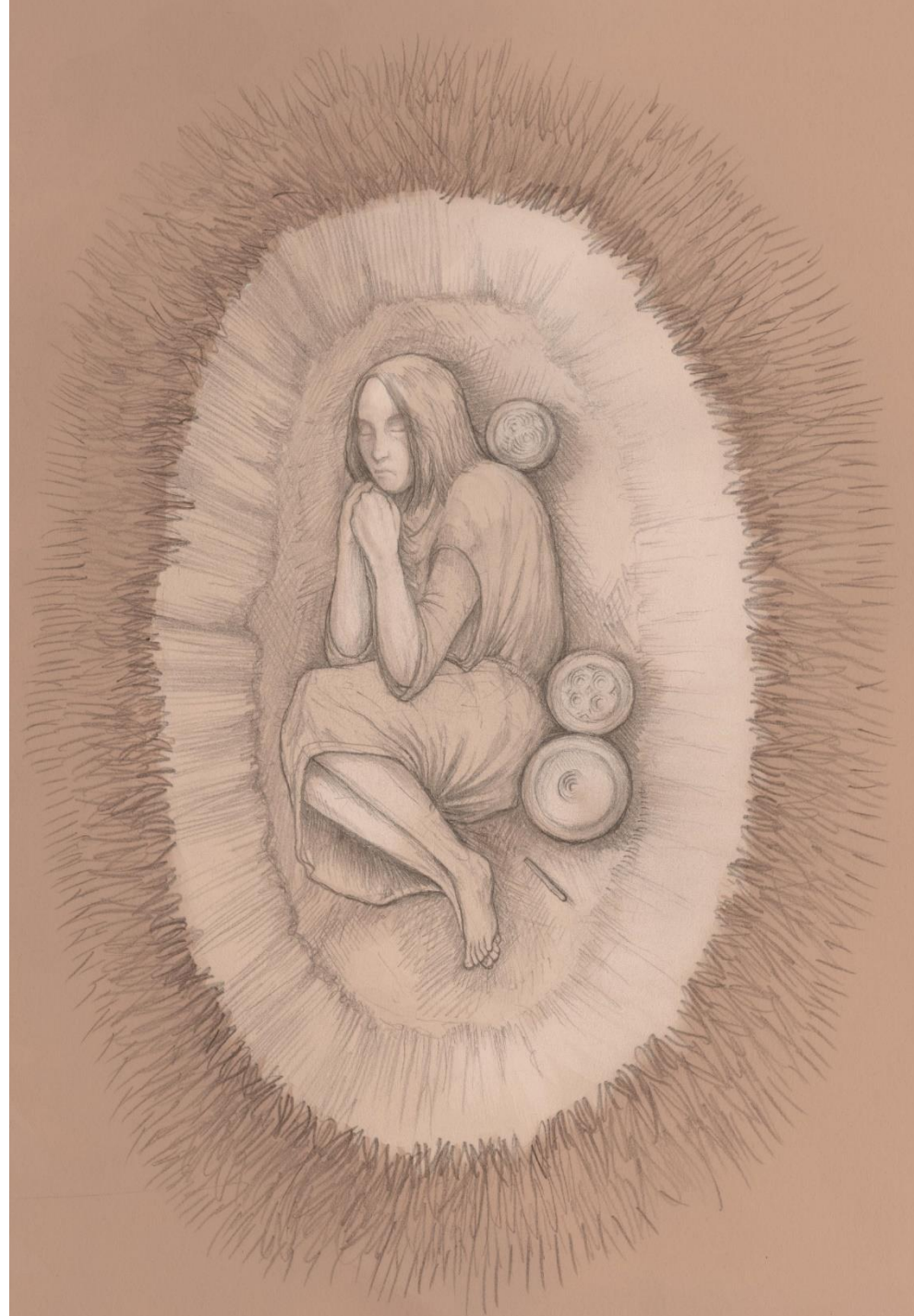
Folkton Drums by Michael Rosen

If I am not to last the summer
If I am not to live out the light
If, when the mists hang in the air
lay me down slow
lay me down soft
lay me down low
just as I lay between you
as a new born.

If I am not to last the summer
If I am not to live out the light
If, when the mists hang in the air
lay at my head
lay at my back
lay at my hip
the treasures I have had
since I was on all fours

If I am not to last the summer
If I am not to live out the light
If, when the mists hang in the air,
lay me close to the paths
lay me close to the star
lay me close to the eyes
traced on my treasures
watching me walking into the mist
watching me walking into your minds

The Folkton Drums burial (reconstruction) © Craig Williams





The Knowes of Trotty, Orkney (Bronze Age)



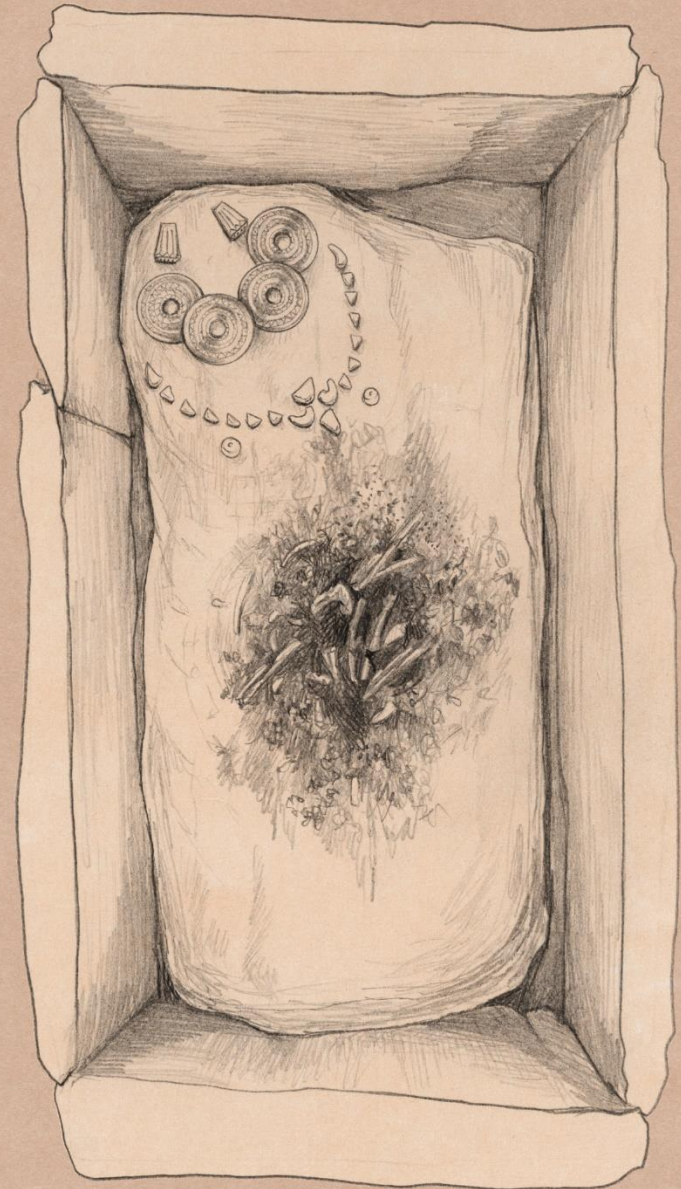
Knowes of Trotty by *Michael Rosen*

We have watched the fire die
We have watched the sun die in the sky
We have watched the light die in your eye

But we have a light that lives
A light that winks in the water
A light that gathers within gold

And you will wear the light that lasts
You will walk with the light that lives
You will wander through the wilds
with the light that lingers.

But you will be safe with your suns
You will be helped by their heat
And you will be loved by their light





The Knowes of Trotty woman © Kelvin Wilson

Portesham, Dorset
(Iron Age)



Portesham Mirror by Michael Rosen

*The power is in me
The power is me
I am the power*

I am the one and only
that sees it all
for now and for ever.

It looked like you looked in me
like people look in rivers
but you weren't looking for you.
You wanted my power
to see beyond yourself,
to see what it is
we will be.

*The power is in me
The power is me
I am the power*

And now you are there
beyond yourself
in the company of what
you let people see
mattered to you most:
the tastes on your tongue
the shine of your show
the blood on the blade.

But I saw that look
to see yourself beyond yourself
And see:

I am
in the time beyond yourself
I am
in the time you looked for
when you looked in me.

*The power is in me.
The power is me.
I am the power.*



The Portesham burial (reconstruction) © Craig Williams

The Portesham Mirror

A True Story

In October 1994, archaeologist Dave Murdie (working for Wessex Archaeology) gets a fascinating phone call...

It's Dorchester Museum here. We've had an amazing find out at Portesham...

A metal detectorist has found a rare Iron Age mirror in a farmer's field.

Off to investigate!

The farmer, the detectorist, and the farmer's dog are waiting for him by the hole.

It's late in the year and the days are short. Dave begins digging and more finds emerge... and then...

... a skull!

It's a burial with some of the most impressive grave goods ever found in Dorset.

Time to phone his boss. Dave sets off for the farmhouse...

The door is open but no one is in. So Dave heads for the phone, but...

It's an Iron Age mirror burial! Send the photographer, quickly!

Nice dog!

When the burial is cleaned up, it is amazing...

① The burial is a woman. A pottery bowl and jar, made in Dorset, were placed behind her back and hips: Did they once contain drink or were they her pots?

② Two brooches at her shoulder probably pinned together her cloak, or a shroud.

③ A bronze wine pan suggests she was trading directly with the Romans, and enjoyed a change from the local beer!

⑤ The mirror had been placed with its reflective surface face down over her hips. It was decorated with beautiful Celtic art... But is this merely a mirror for her own vanity?

⑥ Joints of pork were placed in front of her, close to an iron knife.

④ A small brooch and a "toilet" set (two pairs of tweezers and an ear scoop) were found around its handle, which was worn from use. It suggests she took care in her appearance.

Archaeologists used to think that Iron Age mirrors like these were just beautiful vanities for powerful women to look at their reflection. But ideas change...

...the bronze polished surface would probably never have reflected your face well: it is not silvered or tinned. Instead you might have glimpsed a blurry reflection, a movement of light and shadow. Did the woman see herself when she looked into the mirror or was she seeing into a different world? Glimpsing a grandmother, a ghost or even a goddess?

The handle was very worn from where it had hung, perhaps in a bag, fastened by the brooch. Maybe it was only brought out on special occasions?

The decorated side is entrancing. Swirling and curving designs flow into each other like flowers or eddies in a stream.

What can you see in the swirls?

Bequiling
Enchanting
Dazzling
Powerful

The art looks complicated but it is made up of a few simple designs, entwined together, and left open or shaded. The design is cleverly asymmetrical so your eye is drawn round and around again.

And now, who was she? When did she die and why??

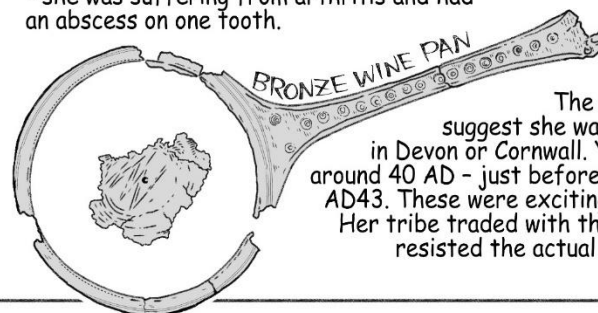
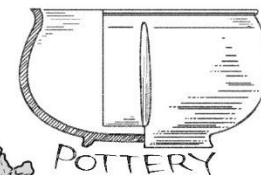
Trumpet
Void

Peltae

Crescent
Rings

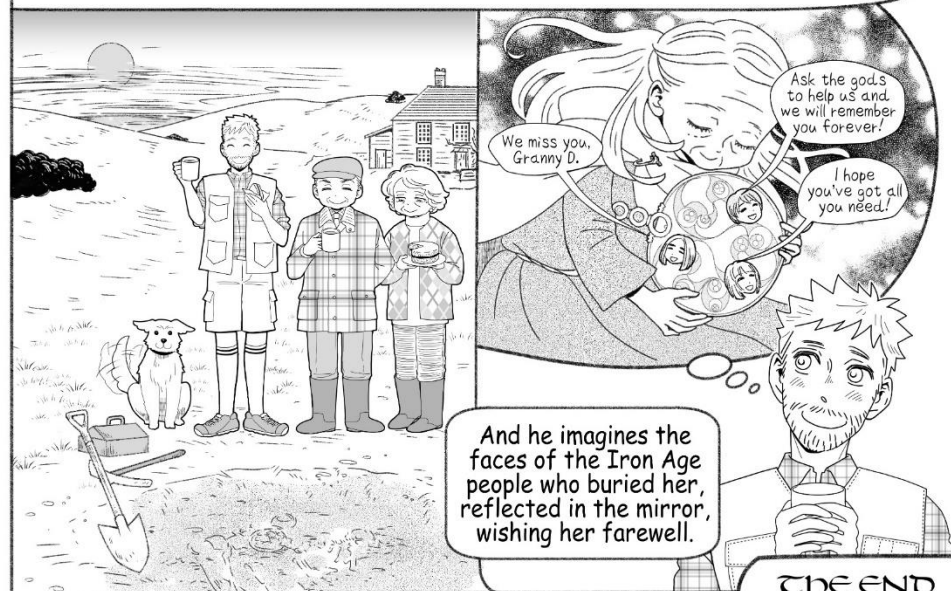
It takes many years to answer those questions, as archaeological scientists work on her skeleton, the animal bones, the metal objects, the pottery and the burial site itself.

From her teeth and bones, we know she was 26-45 years old. She had probably lived quite a hard life - she was suffering from arthritis and had an abscess on one tooth.



The chemicals in her teeth suggest she was born outside Dorset, in Devon or Cornwall. Yet she lived in Dorset around 40 AD - just before the Roman invasion of AD43. These were exciting but dangerous times. Her tribe traded with the Romans but violently resisted the actual invasion before finally being overcome..

It is late autumn. The light has nearly gone and Dave packs up his tools. The farmer and his family have come for one last look, with tea and freshly baked cake. A last feast in her honour.



And he imagines the faces of the Iron Age people who buried her, reflected in the mirror, wishing her farewell.

THE END

There is always more to find out in archaeology and the same evidence can be understood in different ways. What story will you tell?