

# SNAILS AT SNAIL CAVE, AND ELSEWHERE IN WALES

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*This post has been published on behalf of Dr. Ben Rowson, Senior Curator: Mollusca at Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales.*

I am not an archaeologist. Instead, I am a specialist in non-marine molluscs (slugs and snails) at Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, Cardiff. Nonetheless I have the occasional privilege of working on molluscs from archaeological sites, and today is one of those “inter-disciplinary” days.

My usual role is to sort and identify any molluscs from the excavations (which can range from easy to very difficult) and to comment upon their possible significance. In this brief blog I can only give a flavour, but a great new book now exists for anyone keen to learn more (<http://www.oxbowbooks.com/oxbow/molluscs-in-archaeology.html>).

There are three main roles of molluscs in archaeology. Two are as old as humanity itself.



*Snail Cave, North Wales (photo by George Smith)*

Firstly, food. Barring religious taboos, inexplicable cultural preferences, and indelible experiences of food poisoning, edible shellfish have been important since prehistory, as attested by shell middens at

countless occupied sites. When archaeologists first excavated Snail Cave, a prehistoric rock shelter near Llandudno, North Wales, they found it dominated by shells of the edible winkle *Littorina littorea* and other edible rocky shore molluscs. Many of the shells were intact, suggesting that they were “winkled out” with an implement, something almost impossible without first cooking the snails. Seasonal shellfish harvesting was a likely function of the shelter, perhaps in the autumn. Did some Mesolithic months have an “r” in them too?!



*The Mesolithic cowrie bead from Snail Cave*

Snail Cave also yielded evidence of a second ancient use of molluscs: the manufacture of artefacts. A single perforated bead made from a shell of a northern cowrie *Trivia* cf. *arctica* was present in the deposits. This was only the second such bead yet found in Wales, probably dating to the Later Mesolithic age like others found the Britain and Atlantic Europe. The holes appear to have been pierced deliberately to string the bead. Cowrie beads, of course, can still be seen adorning necks, wrists or ankles in the seaside towns of Britain today. And cowries are catnip to shell collectors of all ages.



*A snail community in situ, preserved in marl near Monmouth (photo by Stephen Clarke)*

In south Wales, my young daughter and I find that *Trivia* is just rare enough to be worth hunting for, yet common enough to be confident of finding at least one during a summer's day down the beach. Their eye-like shape gives them a mystic air; in Welsh they are the Cragen Fair ("Mary Shell"), perhaps denoting a more religious power; and in much of the world cowries were literally what wealth was made of. For me personally, there are few better examples of archaeology's ability to connect us to the past than to imagine that prehistoric beachcomber, feeling just as I do when a cowrie winks up from the sand.





*Another snail community characteristic of its habitat  
(in this case, sand dunes)*

The third role of molluscs in archaeology requires shells not touched by human hand. Terrestrial molluscs – most of which are small – can live and die in tiny patches of the right habitat, yet their shells can persist for millennia. This can make them excellent indicators of past environmental conditions. The reconstructive use of land snails in archaeology was pioneered by John Gwynne “Snails” Evans (1941-2005), whose collection now resides at Amgueddfa Cymru. From time to time I have identified snails in the same vein, most recently from excavations near Monmouth, where a rich mollusc fauna thrived beside what is thought to have been a large post-glacial lake. Currently, I am working on material from far earlier in our prehistory – from hominin sites in Africa — but that will merit a blog of its own another time.

I would like to thank Elizabeth Walker for introducing me to the work at Snail Cave and in Monmouth and Matt Knight for inviting me to contribute a DoA blog.