Secret Britain by Mary-Ann Ochota, Frances Lincoln, £20 HB

Introduction

Every step you take in Britain treads on the past. A street now filled with shops and houses might once have been a royal palace. An anonymous farmer's field glimpsed from a car window might have borne witness to the last gasps of a bloody battle, an event so terrible the people swore it could never be forgotten. An eroded mound under a stand of trees might once have been the holy of holies, a sacred place worth travelling weeks to reach, for generations of ancient people.
In the landscape and in overlooked museum cabinets, archaeological treasures of profound complexity wait to be noticed. When you stop and look, magic happens. These wonders transport you into the secret lives of ancient people. These wonders are the stuff of this book.
In Britain's past we have cannibals, shamans, sun-, moon- and water-worshippers. We have Christian initiations and pagan bog sacrifices. We have mummies, mandrakes and magic. Britain boasts a depth of puzzling archaeology unrivalled anywhere else in the world. At least, that's what I think. Maybe it's because we have such a variety of landscapes, or unfathomable weather. Maybe it's because over the millennia so many different peoples have shaped this island, and made their marks in the landscape and on artefacts. Whatever it is, the mysterious past is what got me into archaeology in the first place. The day I went for an interview at Cambridge University as a nervously eager teenager, news of the discovery of Seahenge (page 60) had just been announced. I sat in a wing-backed armchair with an eminent scholar (Professor Chris Scarre, now at Durham University) and for half an hour we discussed how we might solve the riddle 'What the heck is it and what the heck is it for?' I was hooked. The fact that we're still not sure about the answers to those questions is neither here nor there.

Even the best-known sites, studied for hundreds of years, continue to confound our search for explanation. Every generation of researchers unearths a little more of the picture or offers a new theory that creeps us closer to the truth . . . and then bam, a piece of evidence, a new radiocarbon date, a compelling anthropological comparison and we're back to the drawing board. Just like the people who built these sites and used these artefacts, they're complex, contrary and defy easy explanation. But that's exactly the reason they draw us in in the first place. It's why people love history and archaeology.
There's nothing like touching an artefact last used by someone alive 4,000 years ago, or standing in the doorway of an ancient house

where the residents buried a mummified corpse under their floor. Hiking across a windswept moor to explore a stone row that leads to something or somewhere that – at least to my modern eyes – is invisible, is exciting. Standing at the top of a rocky outcrop, with my foot in a footstep shape that made men into kings, entwines my life with those of my forebears.

Archaeology is often focused on the how – and modern scientific techniques have answered many pressing questions. But I invite you to explore the more elusive question: Why? Why did Viking settlers in Cumbria carve Christian crosses with pagan gods (page 207)? Who built Aberdeenshire's stone altars (page 35) and carved Yorkshire's shamanic headdresses (page 57)? Why did ancient people in the west Highlands whittle a girl goddess by a lake (page 31) and people in Kent bury a fancy golden cup in a mound (page 108)? Why did someone pee into a bottle in seventeenth-century London, then bury it in the cellar (page 92)? Our forebears had different gods and different priorities. They saw the world in a different way. And yet despite the distance, there are threads of meaning that link us, between generations and beyond cultures. It's like looking into a fairground hall of mirrors. It's disorienting, and yet we recognise something in the reflection. The right to stand puzzled, awe-struck, moved or uplifted in the presence of this strange and secret history, belongs to all of us.

In this book we head off on a loose geographical journey around the British Isles, starting in the far north east, on the Orkney Islands, and finishing in the far north west, in the Outer Hebrides. We leap between time periods – the oldest thing in this book is 33,000 years old (Paviland Cave Burial, page 177), the youngest is from 1916 (Headington Mandrake, page 136). If you want to visit these places and artefacts in the flesh – which I urge you to do – look online for access and opening times. If you can't head out, then digital resources can give you cutting-edge 3D models, aerial films and up-close-andpersonal views of some of the most staggering things from Britain's past. There are suggested websites at the back of the book.

This book is full of Britain's secrets. These places and the stories they tell are very ancient, yet strangely timeless. Enjoy.

Westray Wifey

A tiny goddess from the wild Northern Isles

Westray, Orkney

This is the earliest representation of the human form ever found in Scotland. It's at least 5,000 years old, made from a tiny piece of sandstone, just 41 mm (1⅝ in) tall and 31 mm (1¼ in) wide.

At its shoulders are two circles, possibly breasts (hence her being a 'wife', or 'wifey', rather than a man), and on the back is a finely scored lattice that suggests clothing. But it's the face that gets you. The wifey peers out from pinprick eyes, with a faint 'M' denoting a brow, and a four-lined hash symbol for nose and mouth. None of the lines are deep, and even if it was once covered in some kind of pigment, the decoration wouldn't have stood out.

The figure was found in the midden (rubbish) layers at a farmstead on the Links of Noltland, on Westray island in Orkney, and dates to the Neolithic era (late Stone Age), around 3300–2500 BC. Just like the more famous Skara Brae, this village had a number of linked buildings made of stone with central hearths and stone dressers. The residents used their rubbish to insulate the sides of their homes, eventually making the village semi-subterranean. Amid the rotted waste, the archaeologists found this figurine. They've since found more wifeys: the second is made of clay and is missing its head; the third is lumpier, but retains a clear head/torso arrangement and the same little eyes.

Was this place particularly attached to wifeys, or is just an accident that three were found here, and none anywhere else? And how did they end up in the rubbish heap? They could have been lost or dropped, or – perhaps more likely – placed in the midden intentionally, possibly as offerings or talismans for luck, fertility or to ward off evil. Maybe there were originally wifeys everywhere, but just the ones that ended up in the midden survived. There's no wear pattern that would suggest the figures were strung as pendants, and the bases are a bit wonky, so they're not obviously designed to stand up as statues. The features engraved into the stones are fine, and they don't look as though they were heavily handled. Maybe they were made solely to be deposited.

So-called 'Venus figurines' have been discovered across Asia and Europe, from the Neolithic and even earlier. The oldest discovered so far, the Venus of Hohle Fels, from Germany, is a staggering 35,000 years old. These figures are grouped together because they've got obvious female sexual characteristics – breasts, hips, bottoms and vulvas. But the truth is we don't know what they were used for, and we don't know if this Wifey should be classed as a 'Venus'.

The final mystery is whether this figure is really a 'wifey' at all. The two little marks at the shoulders may be buttons for clothes, rather than breasts or nipples. So perhaps the figure is wearing a cloak – which could

be worn by a man. And of course if this is a representation of some form of spirit, god or ancestor, who's to say they conform to a binary gender of man or woman at all?

Thornborough Henges

Yorkshire's secret monumental landscape

North Yorkshire

The low plateau between the Rivers Ure and Swale, flanked by the hills of Yorkshire's Pennine hills and the North York Moors, is home to the greatest concentration of prehistoric henge monuments in the British Isles. These linked henges at Thornborough – ceremonial spaces encircled by earth banks and ditches – are the centrepiece of this vast ritual landscape, created in the late Stone Age and Bronze Age. The henges align roughly north-west to south-east, and are joined together by wide earthwork avenues. Each henge is 240 m (787 ft) in diameter, and spaced 550 m (1,800 ft) apart from its neighbour. The slight dogleg in the alignment mirrors the three stars of Orion's Belt constellation. Coincidence? You decide. The real mystery is how such a significant archaeological landscape is so little known to the public.

Saltfleetby Spindle Whorl

Viking magic written in runes

Lincolnshire

This little lump of lead with a hole in the middle reveals a puzzling yet universal human truth – that people can comfortably think two incompatible things at once. It's a spindle whorl – a weight that helps pull a bundle of wool downwards and twist it into yarn during hand-spinning. That yarn can then be woven into cloth. In order to make enough yarn to produce a typical set of medieval adult's clothes you'd need the wool of up to six sheep, spun into 40 km (25 miles) of yarn. The spinning, weaving and sewing would take weeks of hard, skilled work.

Until its industrialisation in the 1770s, all spinning was done by hand, mostly in the home. We find spindle whorls on British archaeological sites from the Bronze Age to the 1500s. They can be made of stone, clay, bone, wood and lead, and the weight of the whorl determines the thickness of the yarn – the lighter the weight, the finer the yarn. Because they're solid, chunky items, spindle whorls tend to survive quite well in archaeological contexts. This one, from the early eleventh century, is made from lead and weighs 50 g (1¾ oz), which is about middle-weight for a whorl. It survived life in a ploughed field for hundreds of years before it was discovered by a metal detectorist in 2010.

What makes it a rare treasure is its inscription: it's covered with Viking runes. Only half the runes are legible, and they've had the experts in contortions. The inscription starts on the vertical wall, and continues on the upper face. Firstly, *.oþen.ok.einmtalr.ok.þalfa.þeir.*, which can be translated as 'Odin and Heimdallr and Thjalfa, they . . .'

Odin is the chief of the Norse gods and represents wisdom, battle, honour and magic. In Saxon traditions, Odin is equivalent to Woden, and lends his name to the middle of the week – Woden's Day (Wednesday). Frigg, his wife, has Friday. Heimdallr is also a Norse god, and lives as a watchman at the edge of the realm of the gods with a golden-maned horse, nine mothers and a horn that can be heard in heaven, earth and the lower world. He's said to be able to hear the grass grow, can see a hundred leagues and needs less sleep than a bird.

'Thjalfa' is puzzling – it could be linked to the human servant-boy in the Norse sagas, Thajalfi, but this would be a female version of the name, which isn't known anywhere else in Norse inscriptions or stories. It might also be an unusual, poetic word for the sea.

On the upper face of the whorl the inscription continues: *ielba. þeruolflt.ok.kiriuesf.,* which means '. . . help you Ulfljotr and . . .' Ulfljotr is a man's name. The last legible word, *kiriuesf*, is a total mystery, and so is the rest of the inscription.

So in total, what we can read says 'Odin and Heimdallr and Thjalfa,

will help you, Ulfljotr and . . .' It sounds like a prayer. The Norse colonists in this part of coastal Lincolnshire had been around for some four to six generations by the early eleventh century. They weren't raiding and pillaging, they were farming and building and getting on with their settled, mostly peaceful lives. They had local styles of tools and trappings, but they also stayed connected to the old country, culturally and linguistically. The inscription on this whorl, for example, demonstrates cutting-edge innovations in runic grammar.

But however impressive the Lincolnshire Vikings' literacy was, why inscribe a plea to the gods onto a spindle whorl in the first place? Because spinning was not just a necessary and slightly tedious domestic task: in Old Norse literature, spinning and weaving are regularly associated with fate and magic. Women in the stories weave shirts that protect their menfolk in battle; others weave poisoned shirts that bring death and misfortune. The three goddesses of fate, the Norns, represent past, present and future, and are said to spin the threads of life itself, deciding the fate of all living beings. When a baby is born, the Norns are always nearby and through their spinning, they create a web that binds us inextricably into one another's lives. The mystical power of spinning and weaving can be seen beyond the Viking world too. Threads and cords are frequently worn or woven into protective charms in many world cultures, including Hinduism, Native American traditions and kabbalistic Judaism. In Britain, too, we retain traditions of protective textiles – christening gowns and bridal garters being just two examples.

Other Viking spindle whorls have been found carved from rock crystal, amber and jet, potent materials that would have had more than just a functional purpose. As a spindle whorl turned, catching the light and twisting the fibres, it could harness magic from goddesses like Frigg. If a woman spun well, she could weave protection into every fibre of her family's clothes. Perhaps this was the purpose of the inscription on the Saltfleetby spindle whorl. But – and this is the fascinating thing – by the eleventh century the ethnically Norse people of Lincolnshire were Christian. They built churches to St Clement, a patron saint of seafarers, they were buried in Christian graveyards. By all accounts, they weren't worshipping the pantheon of old Gods, they had one, new, everlasting God who didn't tolerate the worship of false idols. But people can hold all manner of conflicting beliefs in their minds at once, especially when dealing with something as important as the safety of their loved ones. Perhaps that's why a Christian Viking scratched a prayer to the old gods on the sides of this spindle whorl: because they loved their family.