

THE TRAPRAIN LAW SILVER HOARD

Use this worksheet to complete your own drawing of a decorated late-Roman silver plate!

Traprain Law, a large volcanic hill in East Lothian, has shown evidence of occupation since 1000 BC. Just over one hundred years ago, in 1919, archaeologists excavating the Law discovered a stunning hoard of buried treasure made up of over 300 fragments of objects which had been cut up either for exchange as bullion or for melting down and recycling into new objects. Coins in the hoard date from the early 5th century AD, when the province of Roman Britain was under pressure internally from native tribes and immigrant Germanic invaders - both of whom sensed that the might of the Roman Empire was waning.

Many of the fragments from the hoard were originally pieces of exquisite aristocratic silver tableware. However, these dishes, flagons and platters were not used in Scotland – instead the hoard of hacked-up silver is likely to have been given as a diplomatic gift or in payment for mercenary activity. The Romans retreated from Caledonia, (Scotland), in the 160s and the discovery of this hoard is evidence that they were still keen to exert their influence by paying a loyal native chief - probably the Votadini - to prevent attacks south of Hadrian's Wall into England, which they still occupied.

Amongst the Treasure is a wide range of vessels, including items decorated with characters from classical mythology side by side with others featuring Biblical scenes and Christian symbols.

There are more personal objects, such as jewellery and buckles, as well as spoons and a strainer, some with Christian symbols, including the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek, 'Chi -Rho'. Amongst several fittings decorated with animal motifs there are handles in the shape of panthers, from a large wine flagon – panthers were sacred to Bacchus, god of wine. There are also pieces of a very rare openwork silver cage which fitted around a glass cup or bucket.

The mix of pagan and Christian symbolism tells us a great deal about how Roman myth continued to co-exist alongside the established Christian religion in Roman society.

Having accepted the gifts of silver bullion, the local tribe melted them down and made jewellery from them, such as the heavy neck-chain also found at Traprain Law. This not only demonstrated their own technical skill but was also a cultural expression of their continuing Celtic identity.

You can view the Traprain Law silver hoard at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh.

The image below shows the head of Hercules, a popular Roman mythical hero carved onto a silver dish. However, only part of the head is shown, the rest of the dish having been cut up and probably used for its monetary value. Can you draw in the top of his head? Don't forget to draw in his club that we can see to the left of his head, and also his hair band of twisted cord just above his ear.

Congratulations, you have just completed a reconstruction drawing!

