

East Kirk of St Nicholas dig - 1st to 5th May 2006 - Week 14

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Judith Stones, Keeper of Archaeology, writes...

Some superb archaeological discoveries are being made on this dig, but another contributor to its richness is the variety of people who are working there and their reasons for getting involved.

Among the volunteers who have been with us for the last few weeks, when they can fit some time in between their studies, are two third-year painting students at Gray's School of Art, Pat Davidson (right) and Debbie Cormack.



Pat's painting is all about geology, strata and rock formations - related to time and evolution, so she finds it satisfying to experience the unearthing of layers in an archaeological context.

Marlene Weston, an Aberdeen University Archaeology student, is recording layers of stone - the work of human hands rather than geological in this case.

She's been drawing the side elevation of one of those massive 15th-century 'sleeper' walls which supported the pillars, arcade and roof of the choir at that date. Every stone has to be drawn to scale (usually 1:10) by hand in relation to a measured line, the height of which is also recorded - using Ordnance Survey bench marks.

Detailed photographs will be taken of these medieval walls as well before they are stripped down, layer by layer, to reveal, we hope, further evidence of the underlying 12th century (and possibly even earlier) structures.



This week Maria has been uncovering a skeleton which is of great interest, as you will be able to see in the next couple of photos.



The remains are those of a young man, probably in his early 20s, who seems to have died a very violent death. A large number of blade-cuts are clearly visible on his skull, including at least two which have caused major fractures and one which has clearly removed a portion of his upper jaw.

In the early stages of excavation it seemed possible that the skull damage had been done after burial by the spade of a later, over-zealous gravedigger, but as more soil was teased away that interpretation was quickly discarded.

The man had also suffered a blow which cut through his breastbone. Although skeletal remains can tell us an immense amount about health, diet, stature, longevity and disease in a population, they can't often give us a cause of death - so this is a relatively rare example in that sense.

About to go on display inside St Nicholas Church as 'find of the week' is another rarity - in this case because it is made of gold.

Such precious materials are not often found on excavations in Aberdeen - presumably because those people who did have them looked after them very carefully and had the metal re-used in the event that the original object broke.

We're assuming that the delicate spiral seen being dug up below is a piece of jewellery and we think that it might be an earring, but we'd be happy if someone came up with a better interpretation.



We haven't really had too much chance to do any research on it yet. It was found within a family grave which had several occupants, one of whom, from coin evidence, was certainly buried in the 1690s - although the gold object could be earlier in date than that, if it had been disturbed from a previous grave nearby.



Please let me know if you have seen anything like it before by [emailing](#) me.

Jan Dunbar, one of our illustrators, is going to draw it very soon, so I hope I'll be able to include her drawing next week.