

THE GOLDSMITHS HALL LECTURE AND EXHIBITION OF THE CORIELTAVI SILVER BOWL FROM THE HALLATON TREASURE

by Vicki Score



Several members of the society attended a special lecture and exhibition featuring the Corieltavi silver bowl from the Hallaton Treasure at Goldsmiths' Hall in London on 21st June, 2011. Silversmiths from the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths at the initiation of Harborough Museum and the Hallaton Field Work Group have been studying the bowl to determine how it was made. The beautiful 2,000 year old Iron Age silver bowl is the earliest known example to have been hand-made in Britain and provides new evidence on the previously unrecognised tradition of the ancient Celtic silversmith. Lectures were given in the magnificent livery hall by Frank Hargrave (formerly of Harborough Museum) on the nature and possible reasons behind the burial of the bowl and by silversmith Alex Brogden who looked at how the bowl was made. The bowl was found buried in the ditch alongside two silver and bronze ingots, a decorated round object, two glass 'eyes' that may have come from a wooden idol and around 100 silver coins. Frank suggested that the deposits may have been part of a purification ritual to consecrate the site and the bowl could have been used for libations during a ceremony. The site rituals could have been in response to the changes in local society brought about by increasing contact with the Roman world on the eve of the Roman invasion of Britain (AD 43).



THE 2,000 YEAR OLD IRON AGE CORIELTAVI SILVER BOWL AND THE REPLICA MADE BY SILVERSMITH ALEX BROGDEN

The work done by Julia Farley at University of Leicester in association with the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths on the origin of the silver was discussed. She has determined that the bowl was high in silver (84%) and debased mainly with copper with traces of gold, lead and tin. Pure silver is an extremely soft metal, and the addition of around 13% copper would have resulted in a harder and more durable alloy, whilst maintaining the ductility. Roman silversmiths always debased their silver with around 1-5% copper. As such it is unlikely to have been made from the melting of Roman coins as has been previously suggested and it seems likely that the alloy was created by a native Britain specifically to make the bowl.



THE LIVERY HALL WHERE THE LECTURES TOOK PLACE.

Alex went on to look at the making of the silver bowl. This is the first time that a silver object of this age made in Britain has been found in an archaeological context and it seems as though the techniques used then were almost identical to those used now. The maker was certainly skilled in the use of silversmithing and a cache of iron hammers found on a site in Lincolnshire look very similar to modern tools used today. It seems likely that silver working was a common practice in Iron Age Britain and the presence of silver objects in other hoards and on ritual sites has led archaeologists to believe that silver may have been used specifically for ritual purposes during this period (as opposed to earlier periods when bronze and gold were the favoured metal for ritual purposes). Alex went on to describe the making of a replica bowl using the same techniques. This involved 'Peening' of a silver disc where the sheet is hammered over a hard surface to form the curve of the bowl. A round hammer was then used on the centre to achieve the desired depth and shape and the edge was hammered down to form the lip. The bowl was then planished to smooth out the bumps. Finally the replica bowl was filled with water to see if it could have been used as a drinking vessel – apparently it fitted beautifully into the hands and was easy to drink from.

Both bowls and the exhibition are on display at Goldsmiths Hall, London until Saturday July 16 (free admission).