

THE PENWITH LUNULA

On loan from the British Museum



Currently on show at Penlee House is a truly spectacular item - the Penwith Lunula, on loan from the British Museum which has been returned to Cornwall more than 170 years after being bought by the London-based institution for the nation.

Lunulae are flat, crescent-shaped gold collars dating from the Early Bronze Age (c.2500 – 1550 BC). Most have been found in Ireland, but moderate numbers have also been found elsewhere in Europe: this example is one of four found in Cornwall.

There is some mystery surrounding the find-spot of this particular lunula, which has been given as either Paul or Gwithian. Its discovery was first recorded in 1783 by John

Price, a Cornish antiquarian, who lived at Chywoone in Paul Parish. In a letter to a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London he describes it being found: 'in the hundred of Penwith, in this county, by a husbandman, in collecting manure nigh the remains of a circus which from description he apprehends to be composed of earth & not stone.'

On Price's death in 1797, the lunula passed to his son. By 1838, it was in the possession of Edward Trafford Leigh, a coin collector who was rector of Cheadle in Cheshire. Leigh had bought it to prevent its export to America. He sold it to the British Museum for 25 guineas in 1838: it has remained there ever since.

It may be Price's residence in Paul that led authorities to believe that it had been found in that parish. A footnote in a now lost manuscript apparently claims that it was found in Gwithian. This is supported by a much later account, written in 1860, which describes how it was found in Gwithian, taken to the author's grandfather (an apothecary in Camborne) to be assayed, and was then sold to Mr Price.

Archaeologists still cannot agree which provenance is the more likely. The other three lunulae found in Cornwall were all found on the North coast, making Gwithian the favoured spot for some. What the mystery does tell us is the importance of recording an object's find-spot accurately.

The British Museum brought the lunula to Penzance in 2011 for a special exhibition entitled 'Treasures from the Earth', funded by HLF and Renaissance in the Regions. Thanks to funding from Cornwall Council, it is now on long-term loan, installed in an extra-secure display case upstairs at Penlee House, where it sits on its own alarmed plinth.

Beautifully worked and with the gold shining as if it had been made yesterday, rather than some 4500 years ago, this breath-taking item will remain with us until at least 2014: do come and see it!

References: A. Jones, J. Marley, J. Mattingly, 'Five Gold Rings? Early Bronze Age Gold Lunulae from Cornwall', *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, (2009), 95-114

The drawing is from *Primeval Antiquities*, Vol II, 74.1