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Deposited on: 15 October 2014
Early evidence of the Tooth Fairy? A pair of front milk teeth found at Skara Brae, Orkney

Preparations for the definitive publication of excavations at the Late Neolithic settlement at Skara Brae by David Clarke and Alexandra (Lekky) Shepherd on behalf of Historic Scotland involve revisiting parts of the finds archive held by National Museums Scotland. This has thrown up an intriguing and poignant discovery in the form of a pair of upper central deciduous human incisors – front milk teeth, in other words – that must have been shed by a child who lived in the settlement. The teeth have been identified by Kath McSweeney, who comments that ‘They would have been shed around the same time, not necessarily together, but perhaps days, weeks, or months apart’. They were not found together, however. One comes from the lowest occupation layer on the site (namely context 168, which has been radiocarbon dated to 3350–3020 cal BC – see Discovery and Excavation in Scotland 13, 2012, 205, for details), while the other comes from higher up stratigraphically: a clay/ash/refuse amalgam, context 162, laid over the remains of an early structure, Structure 1, and dated to c. 2900–2840 cal BC. In both cases, a principal component of the context is ash debris, probably derived from house floor or hearth sweepings. The most plausible explanation is that both teeth had belonged to the later context, but that one of these tiny items worked its way down to the lower level through bioturbation of some sort.

Had these teeth been found in a recess in one of the houses, it would have been tempting to concoct a charming picture of a Neolithic belief in the Tooth Fairy. How one chooses to interpret the actual evidence for discard (after curation?) is a moot point. These are not the only milk teeth to have been found on the site: two deciduous molars, shed (possibly, but not necessarily by the same individual) around the age of 10, were also recovered but details of their findspots are less clear.

These teeth are important as a tangible link to the inhabitants of Skara Brae and in particular to one, temporarily gap-toothed, child (whether s/he ever sang ‘All I want for Solstice is my two front teeth’, we shall never know). Human remains from within the Neolithic site are sparse, and the two famous adult female skeletons found under a bed structure in House 7 during Vere Gordon Childe’s excavations in the 1920s are sadly suspected to have been discarded during a rationalisation of collections several decades ago in Glasgow University. A round-up of all the human remains found in and around Skara Brae will feature in the final publication.

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