

The lost world: Doggerland

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News Feature

Archaeology: The lost world

Armed with a map depicting a 10,000-year-old landscape submerged beneath the North Sea and fresh evidence from nearby sites, archaeologists are realizing that early humans were more territorial than was previously thought. Laura Spinney reports.

Laura Spinney

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Pilgrim Lockwood, the skipper of a British fishing trawler named Colinda, wasn't quite sure what to make of the thing his nets had scraped up from the bottom of the North Sea. Just over 21 centimetres long, it was made of antler with a set of barbs running along one side. Back on land, Lockwood gave the artefact to the ship's owner, and it eventually made its way to a museum in Norwich, UK. It turned out to be a prehistoric harpoon point dating to the Mesolithic period, between about 4,000 and 10,000 years ago.

A sketch of the Mesolithic harpoon point found in the North Sea by the Colinda in 1931. A sketch of the Mesolithic harpoon point found in the North Sea by the Colinda in 1931. M. BURKITT & G. NORRIE

That was 1931, and archaeologists studying the artefact, which became known as the Colinda point, began to realize that hunter-gatherers would once have roamed across a vast plain that connected Britain to the rest of Europe. But they had no idea what the plain looked like or what life would have been like for the harpoon's makers. Now researchers have drawn the first map of that lost world, sketching out a 10,000-year-old landscape filled with marshes, rivers and lakes. It turns out that the region they call Doggerland may have been a sort of

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paradise for Mesolithic people.

Because the archaeological evidence from the period is thin, Mesolithic people have in the past been depicted by researchers as restless nomads and Doggerland as a land bridge through which they passed without leaving a trace. The new map suggests that, on the contrary, Doggerland would have been an ideal environment for them to linger in until sea levels, rising since the end of the last ice age, finally inundated it, turning Britain into an island about 8,000 years ago. Along with other new discoveries in Britain and continental Europe, the research is helping to fill in crucial gaps in the current knowledge about Mesolithic life. Doggerland is key to understanding the Mesolithic in northern Europe, says Vince Gaffney, a landscape archaeologist