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Cosin's Library – The Context Object Investigation Teacher's Notes

The English Civil War: What can we learn from archaeology? **(about 45 mins)**

This session is aimed at **KS3 and 4 students** who are studying the English Civil War and its impacts. In this session, students can engage with primary material from Durham University's Museum of Archaeology. These can help students learn not only about **life during the English Civil War**, but also **how to critically access historical remains**. They were created as part of the Cosin's Library Project at Palace Green Library, Durham University.

For this session, you will need:

- English Civil War: Object Investigation sheets (these are numbered 1 to 6)
- Cosin's Library – The Context Object Investigation Teacher's Notes, found below – this will provide you with the necessary background information to the objects to help support your students' learning.

Begin by explaining that your students will be looking at some 17th century objects. Each Object Investigation Sheet includes an image of an object, as well as information on its size, although you can find more information in the Cosin's Library – The Context Object Investigation Teacher's Notes (below).

Each object comes with a set of questions designed to encourage your students to engage with it, beginning with straightforward and easy questions about what they see and notice, before moving onto more detailed questions regarding how it would be used.

Students can look at one object in detail, or at multiple objects in sequence and can work alone or in pairs or groups; this session is flexible to the needs of your class.

After they have answered the questions, students can share their thoughts on the objects in a discussion.
Some general questions to consider for each object to help facilitate discussion include:

- How was this object made?
- Who might have made it, and for whom?
- What is the single most important piece of information you can pick out from this object?

Object Investigation Teacher's Notes

Object 1

This object is a partially complete clay pipe for smoking tobacco, found in Durham and dating to the 17th century. Tobacco was introduced to Britain from the Americas, where it had been smoked by indigenous Americans for years, and became enormously popular. Not only did smoking tobacco provide a stimulant effect, it was also believed to provide many health benefits. Because of this, production grew rapidly and clay pipes ready filled with dried tobacco could by cheaply bought by street sellers by the mid-17th century. As they were cheap and broke easily, many were thrown away not long after use – to this day, pieces of clay pipes are common archaeological finds in towns and cities across Britain.

You can also see the impact of using clay pipes in the teeth of those who smoked with them. By placing the pipe in the same place in their mouths for years at a time, a small notch was worn into one of their teeth!

Photo credit Jeff Veitch

A further impact on the health of smokers can be seen in Bishop John Cosin's autopsy report following his death in 1672. It reveals his many health problems ranging from kidney and bladder stones, to 'pectoral dropsy' (fluid around his lungs that would have made it hard to breathe properly), but his lungs are identified as discoloured, a possible symptom of his smoking habit.

Object 2

This is a partial Bellarmine jug, originally used to transport beer or wine from Germany, although many were made in Britain as well. The most striking detail about these kind of jugs are the bearded faces, some of which look quite fierce. It's not known exactly who this is meant to be, or why they were later named after Cardinal Bellarmine, a leading Catholic figure and vocal opponent of Protestantism. It's been suggested that Protestants named the bottles after him to make fun of him and his anti-alcohol stance (presumably before smashing the bottle to bits).

However, these jugs gained a more unusual use during the 17th century as 'witch bottles'. To begin with, these were intended as a defence against a specific curse, and were filled with various ingredients, such as fingernail clippings, hair (human or animal), amulets and urine, amongst other things. They were then walled up inside a house to provide magical protection.

These would have been a common sight in the inns and markets of Durham in Cosin's time, and a reminder that people in the 17th century considered magic and curses a part of their world.

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Object 3

This is a set of 'harquebusier' armour from Durham Castle, though they were originally from Brancepeth Castle. A harquebusier was a type of soldier from the English Civil War period who rode on horseback and was supposed to be armed with a harquebus, or shortened musket, though in reality they were usually armed with a heavy sword and two pistols.

The helmet is designed to protect the wearer from sword blows, with a long 'tail' covering the back of the head, and bars covering the face. The breastplate however, was created with the aim of stopping bullets, and was therefore thicker and heavier. To demonstrate their effectiveness, it was customary to carry out a 'test shot', firing a pistol or musket directly into it at close range. The resulting dent showed that it could stop a bullet. The armour was completed with a thick leather buff coat that gave a little protection against sword blows.

As a prince bishop, one of Cosin's responsibilities would have been to maintain some soldiers, and to be ready to raise a small army should the need arise. In the absence of a police force, soldiers also provided security and kept the peace, so Cosin would have been familiar with sets of armour such as this.

Object 4

These are cannonballs, made of lead and stone. Cannons varied in size and power during the 17th century, from small 'robinets' that fired stones weighing 0.75 lbs (or 340 g) all the way up to large 'royal cannons' that fired 60 lbs (or 27 kg) cannonballs. They could also be loaded with 'case shot' – packages of small stones or musket balls that sprayed out the end of the barrel when fired, peppering anyone unfortunate enough to be caught within its short range.

However, the actual effect of cannons on killing enemy troops was quite small, as they took a long time to reload – up to 4 minutes for some examples. They were also wildly inaccurate, so trying to hit specific groups of soldiers could be difficult. Even assuming that you hit a block of enemy soldiers, one cannonball would probably kill or injure only a handful of men.

However, all of this didn't matter so much, as it was the psychological impact of being shot at while unable to do anything about it that had the biggest effect, not to mention the incredibly violent results. Cannons were also effective in sieges, where their slowness and inaccuracy didn't matter – besiegers would have weeks or months to fire away at the defences to 'reduce' them, ready for an attack.

As with the armour, Bishop Cosin would have probably been familiar with cannon as they formed a key part of his defences at Durham and around the wider region.

Object 5

This object is a copper coin minted in Scotland and known as a 'turner', or two pence piece. Money in the 17th century was different to today, mainly because coins were worth the amount of metal in them – so you would expect larger coins to be worth more money. This did mean that you could pay for something using money from other countries, as long as you could convince the shop or stall owner to accept it. Fake coins made of cheaper metals were quite common, and unfamiliar coins could be viewed with suspicion.

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However, during the English Civil War, the production of coins was slowed down or fully stopped, so people had to make do with whatever coins they had access to. For people living in Durham, close to Scotland, Scottish coins like this one came to be useful for small change. This was doubly so, as Scottish pennies were worth a fraction of English ones:

12 English pennies = 1 English shilling

20 English shillings = 240 English pennies = 1 English pound

12 Scottish pennies = 1 Scottish shilling = c.1 English penny

Turners like this example were often used as farthings, or quarter pennies, in parts of England, so it's no surprise that many were lost, as they were worth so little money. This one was discovered by an underwater archaeologist called Gary Bankhead, who has uncovered thousands of objects from the River Wear in Durham – for more information, see https://diveintodurham.uk/.

Coins of this value would probably rarely grace the hands of someone as wealthy and powerful as Cosin, but they were a vital part of Durham's economy during the turbulent years of war, occupation and plague.

Object 6

This is a mortuary, or mourning, ring. These were created for relations following the death of someone, to act as a kind of portable memorial to them. Usually made of gold with black enamel decoration, they often included the deceased's name and date of death on the inside of the ring, as can be seen on this example. The text reads 'Sr John Marlay dyed 21th Octbr 73' – Sir John Marlay was an important local figure in the North East during the Civil War period, serving as mayor of Newcastle and helping to defend it when it was attacked by a Scottish army in 1644.

There are plenty of references to gold in Cosin's letters, with goldsmiths being asked to adorn books with gold leaf, and as a wealthy man, he would also have owned plenty of gold jewellery. Gold acted as an important part of his prestige. As for Sir John Marlay, he seems to have had some financial dealings with him – he is mentioned in his letters, usually in reference to an amount of money that needs to be paid up!