Droppings tell a Stone Age dog story

By science and technology writer JULIAN CRIBB in Stockholm

THE bond between man and his best friend, the dog, is at least 9000 years old, according to dramatic new evidence unearthed by archaeologists in Sweden.

The proof consists largely of the world’s oldest dog stool (poo), which came to light recently during excavations of a prehistoric hunting campsite on the Swedish island of Orust. Its discovery confirms that humans and dogs have been working in partnership for almost 10 millennia and the dog was both friend and guardian for at least two, possibly three thousand years before other livestock such as cattle, sheep, horses and poultry were domesticated.

The discovery was made by archaeologist Dr Bengt Nordqvist of the Swedish national Board of Antiquities during a dig at a Mesolithic (middle stone age) site at Ellos on Orust, an island off the Swedish west coast.

Dr Nordqvist told The Australian that the Ellos site was a camp occupied by hunter-gatherers who entered the Nordic peninsula from Europe across a land bridge as the glaciers retreated at the end of the last Ice Age.

While not the oldest site of human occupation found in Scandinavia – a few date back as much as 10,000 years – it did contain the oldest human remains yet discovered there. These were dated between 8700 and 9100 years before the present using carbon-dating methods.

Its occupants were seafaring hunters who pursued both dolphins and seals as well as fishing for their main source of sustenance. They also hunted deer, many wild boar and gathered large amounts of hazelnuts and other forest fruits and berries.

Dr Nordqvist said the dog faeces indicated the animals were fed mainly on scraps from the hunt – deer, wild boar and dolphins. Detailed analysis has yet to be carried out.

Human burials indicated many of these prehistoric people died from wounds inflicted by wild beasts, and the dogs probably served in a dual role as guardians as well as hunting animals.

Dr Nordqvist said the Ellos site was unique for its preservation. Many similar coastal prehistoric sites were lost when sea levels rose at the end of the last ice age. In this case, however, the removal of the vast weight of glaciers had caused the land to rise 20m, placing it above modern sea levels.

FOOTNOTE: The oldest remains of the dingo found in Australia are a little more than 4000 years old. The dingo is not a native to the continent but a close relative of the Asian wild dog and was probably introduced by Asian sailors in the third millennium BC.
Exercise B: Comprehension questions

1. According to the article, what was the discovery and how old was it?

2. Where was this discovery located?

3. What is the SIGNIFICANCE of this discovery (why is it important)?

4. What kinds of foods did the Stone Age people of Ellos eat?

5. What EVIDENCE found at the site would show archaeologists that these foods were eaten over 9000 years ago?

6. What is meant by ‘as the glaciers retreated at the end of the last ice age’?

7. Match the following words with the correct definition.

   - Excavation: To dig systematically to explore a site
   - Seafaring: People who use the sea for food, trade, etc.
   - Mesolithic: Belonging to the time period known as the Middle Stone Age
   - Prehistoric: A period of time before written records
   - Sustenance: Nourishment (food)
Exercise C: Cloze exercise

The archaeological record

The archaeological record provides access to the human __________ through the study of remains found at a site. ______________ attempt to identify the relationship of these objects to each other at the place they are ______________.

There are four main classes of archaeological __________:

- Artefacts – __________ objects such as tools, __________ and clothes
- Features – natural areas modified by humans such as __________, cave paintings etc.
- Eco-facts – __________ objects such as flora and fauna found at the site
- Physical Remains – __________ material from __________ humans and creatures.

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Exercise D: Cross Curricular

Using the information from the newspaper article in Exercise A, draw what you believe the campsite at Ellos may have looked like 9000 years ago. Label important features you have included from the text.