

FINDING LIFE FROM GRAVE GOODS

Summary:

In archaeology classes it appears that students are often told what the “correct” answer is, rather than being forced to make inferences themselves based upon archaeological evidence. Seldom, however, do archaeologists uncover finds that are straightforward, forcing archaeologists to make deductions based upon the evidence unearthed. In order to simulate deductive processes that would ordinarily take place when trying to synthesize archaeological data, this in-class activity has been designed for small groups of approximately 4-5 students in my small discussion sections (approximately 25 students) at the University of Michigan. This activity is used for K-12 students who are affiliated with the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology (Ann Arbor, MI), but it can easily be adapted to college students, who seem to find the activity worthwhile, as it makes them understand the importance of finding artifacts *in situ*. Students also learned how archaeologists looking at the same evidence can come up with vastly different conclusions, as one burial was thought to contain the grave goods of either an Egyptian child, woman, or even King Tut himself!

Preparation:

Shoeboxes were filled with various assemblages of grave goods, including (reproductions of) oil lamps, other ceramics, beads, votive figurines, an “ancient” *tabella*, and even knucklebones. Since crew members often contain personalities with whom one may not normally associate, students were split into predetermined small groups rather than being allowed to choose the members of their archaeological team. Students were given brief descriptions and pictures of their assigned tombs [see attached], which gave them further direction as they tried to reconstruct the economic status, occupation, and even health of the person put to rest in their assigned grave.

Instructions:

Students were also given “Grave Assemblage Analysis Sheets” [see attached], which they were instructed to complete only after first discussing their conclusions as a team. The teams were allowed to consult with a “specialist” (myself), but they were limited in the amount of access to and consultation to the specialist, as they were forced to brainstorm as a group rather than simply being told the “correct” answer. “Answers” were discussed at the end of class, and the students made surprisingly astute conclusions based upon their archaeological evidence.

GRAVE ASSEMBLAGE ANALYSIS SHEET

Look at each object and try to decide what it is and what its function might be. After you have finished looking at the objects try to answer the questions below, being sure to give a reason for each answer. **As on archaeological excavations, you must work as a team to come up with your conclusions.** You may ask a “specialist” (me) one question about any of the artifacts or the burial itself, though I will try to be deliberately vague in order to make you come up with your own hypotheses.

Objects found and possible function(s)?

Male or female?

Occupation?

Age?

Rank in society?

Health?

GRAVE ASSEMBLAGE

Grave 1: Giza, Egypt

Team: Marcus, Katie, Meagan, Neal

Human Remains: Mummy found in sarcophagus

Burial Type: Small pyramid found on the Giza plain in proximity to the larger Giza pyramids. Inside the pyramid, the tomb chamber is painted with scenes of feasting. Grave goods found scattered throughout the tomb chamber.



GRAVE ASSEMBLAGE

Grave 2: Alexandria, Egypt

Team: Kevin, Kelley, Chad, Rashelle

Remains: Room where assemblages found was looted in antiquity, no human remains found in this particular burial

Burial: One large underground tomb shaped like a house: funeral assemblage found in small room adjoining larger room with burial of a man and woman lying on couches; bone analysis of the man and woman indicated that they died of the plague



GRAVE ASSEMBLAGE

Grave 3: Outside Rome, Italy, along the Via Appia

Team: Teddy, Jay, Kayla

Remains: Poorly cremated body, with a few very worn surviving

Burial: Tomb marker along the main road



GRAVE ASSEMBLAGE

Grave 4: Rome, Italy

Team: Sara, Erika, Mike

Remains: No skeleton unearthed

Burial: Cinerary urn was found in a wall niche in a *columbarium* (tomb with ash burials)



GRAVE ASSEMBLAGE

Grave 5: Orvieto, Italy

Team: Alex, Chris, Sarah

Human Remains: Skeleton of a man found lying supine on a funeral couch

Burial Type: Found within Etruscan necropolis with flat-topped tombs; in addition to the ceramics found within the tomb, ecofacts (poultry bones, seeds) and remnants of ceramic drinking cups were discovered atop tomb.



This reconstruction of mound-topped tombs at Orvieto is incorrect, as the original excavators thought that the tombs within this necropolis should have been mound-like, as at the famous Etruscan mound tombs (*tumuli*) of Cerveteri, Italy. It is now thought that these tombs at Orvieto were flat-topped, though the reconstruction remains as is.