1.16 Encountering Death Archaeologically (through 1.23)

DVD – Questions

- What techniques?
    - Ancient Egyptians – drain fluids till bodies were consistency of leather; brain removed through nose after being whisked to mush
    - Ancient China – buried with silver and gold;
    - Ancient Greenland – freeze-dried and buried in fur
    - Incan – sacrificed and buried on mountaintop; buried in richly patterned clothing; strangulation and blows to the head as ways for sacrifice
- Focus on body or funeral? Body

2 Misconceptions:

- Most archaeology does not involve the study of human remains

Before 1800s

- Tombs were the focus of looting
- Why? It's easier to steal from the dead than the living because the dead are buried with valuables and other intact materials; grave goods are usually very valuable

1800s-1960s

- Tombs became targeted for museum pieces

What Looting and Museum Collecting Shared:

- Little interest in human remains; they cared about objects and grave goods, but not necessarily the bodies that were buried with them
- Treating graves as sources of pretty objects
- Not using graves to answer anthropological questions

Where do you encounter death archeologically?

- Cemeteries
- Near/under house floors
- Mortuary monuments (ex. burial mounds)
- Middens (refuse heaps)

Why do you encounter " ":

- In a village of 250 people, there are at least 5 deaths per year (this equals a lot of graves)

What is special about graves?

- Material is deliberately placed in the ground (since archaeologists mostly deal with things that have been discarded or unearthed, graves were deliberately placed in the ground)
- Very direct link to belief systems (religion, worldview)
    - Product of ritual behavior (funerals, burial rites)

- Bodies provide info on biological aspects of prehistoric population (health, life, history)
    - Called **Bioarchaeology**
- Graves contain *individuals* (allows the study of the individual in archaeology, which is very rare)
    - "Personhood"

Key Point: The dead don't bury themselves! Therefore, graves are the result of funerary/mortuary activities of living people. Archaeology is interested in reconstructing these activities.

Burial/grave = body and the container it is in
Grave goods = materials included in the grave
Every burial is a product of deathways; the deathways are what actually happened in the past, but archaeologists only see the burial

- Deathways have a social dimension; they are also the products of belief systems

Deathways – all of the mortuary practices, including

- Treatment of the corpse
- All funeral rituals and customs
- Construction of burial place

Every grave is an outcome or expression of deathways

Goal: use graves as clues to reconstruct deathways → insights into past social organization and beliefs

One of the key aspects of this approach is that it shifts focus from objects to the deathways; each burial is the static outcome of a dynamic behavior in the past

Modern archaeology

- Sees graves as clues to the past deathways
- Focuses on what deathways generated this particular pattern/grave
- For example, we know that when there are secondary burials, that means there was an intermediary period in this culture, at the end of which the living moved the dead to a different burial

Contemporary Archaeology Questions

- What order was stuff put into the grave? Does this tell us something about the funeral itself?
- Who put it into the grave? What social groups and labor was involved? How many people were involved?
- How does the treatment of the dead express symbolic and social aspects?
- What role did burial rites play in living society?

Excavation

- Systematic, careful
- Record all spatial aspects:
    - Positions (of the body, grave goods)
    - Associations
    - Relationships (between the body and goods, the body and culture, etc.)
- Expose and record things "in situ" (in context) – if the body/good has been moved since burial, you would have no idea what the culture actually did because evidence of their efforts has been lost
- Goal – extract as much information as possible
    - Specialists can be brought in to make sure the excavation is done right, such as geo-archaeologists

Cutting edge additions to archaeology:

- **Soil Micromorphology** – the study of microscopic layering in the soil; can tell you:
    - Season of burial
    - Weather during the funeral
    - If there are unpreserved grave goods
- **Archaeo-entomology** – study of insect remains; tells you
    - Season of death
    - Length of burial (different bugs are at different times, so if more than one kind is present, this shows time)
- **Gut contents** – reconstructing the diet of the body by taking samples of their stomach or, if stomach has decayed, soil around their stomach

Preservation

- Generally correlates with rainfall; the more rain, the worse the preservation
- All soft tissue generally disappears, but bones are very durable (except during special conditions)
- The most durable part of the skeleton are actually teeth
- Preservation is improved by any factors that:
    - Inhibit decomposition
    - Discourage bacterial, microbial, fungal, and scavenger activity
- Factors that improve preservation:
    - Very dry (deserts, dry caves)
    - Very wet (something that gets wet and stays wet preserves well; usually in water-logged sites)
    - Anaerobic (low oxygen) conditions (ex. peat bogs)
        - Bog Bodies created from acidic conditions in bogs; they sort of get pressed flat from the peat
        - Preserved brain tissues
    - Very cold