

Mystery Cemetery: Students

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AN EXERCISE IN OBSERVATION, INFERENCE, AND HYPOTHESIS-BUILDING

This is an exercise in critical thinking and contextual analysis. It will help show you how unhelpful one object, one burial, or one fact is: what you need is the full context (as far as it exists) of your data before you can interpret well. Historians, social scientists, and researchers must think independently and also consult with colleagues to figure out reasonable reconstructions of material remains and archaeological evidence.

The situation

Your teacher will have introduced the situation of the cemetery to you. If not, here is a possible scenario...

A long time ago, in a place far away, a society existed with different levels of social status and different gender roles. An archaeological team has excavated a cemetery of these people and is preparing a report for publication in a prestigious archaeological journal. Unfortunately, the dig's physical anthropologist is unavailable; therefore you, the dig team, must rely on logic, observation, and inference to figure out the age, sex, and status of the people buried here. The journal's editor—a stickler for deadlines—insists that the report be ready in three weeks. You have to interpret it—time is of the essence!

The burials (intentionally) have no culture-specific clues. This is to keep you from leaping to conclusions.

Your assignment

There are two areas of the cemetery, a main area and a walled-off area to the north. In your evaluation of the main cemetery you will categorize each burial by gender, age, and status. For the walled-off area, you must explain why each burial is unusual and does not fit the rules or logic of the main area. There may be contradictory artifacts, ones that do not seem to belong together, or bizarre elements.

You will:

- Explain the artifacts and attributes belonging to each of your groups.
- Say what the gender, age, and status is of each skeleton, and why (based on attributes).
- Explain EACH of the three burials in the odd area,

specifying why it does not “fit in with” the logic of the main part of the cemetery.

Rules

Observe as many facts as you can, but do not rely on inferences unless there is hard evidence. For example, you may infer that the presence of weapons signifies a male burial, but you may not consider this a reliable conclusion unless you have some real reason to think so (for example, a tomb marker saying: “The Son of a Great Father Lies Here,” would help).

Look carefully before you touch! You may dislocate something that is significant in its position, and other researchers will also be examining these precious remains. Put back what you move!

What you may assume:

(These are not really ancient remains. You have to suspend disbelief a little bit!)

- The skeletons are made of plastic and rubber. Discoloration of bones and other physical results of the manufacture of these items are meaningless. Pelvic shape is not going to tell you gender! They're plastic! They don't provide evidence of gender! Use other clues.
- Nails and screws are metal weapons.
- Metal disks, plastic gemstones (etc.) are ornaments collected or worn by the deceased (even if they seem too big).
- Colored plastic baskets are painted wooden coffins.
- There are metal and ceramic “grave markers” or “headstones” associated with some tombs.
- Skeleton size is a rough indicator of age: baby, youth or adolescent, adult.

You will be evaluating the cemetery in class, looking at the actual skeletons, and continuing at home (looking at a plan/map).

Remember these essential terms discussed in class:

Artifact—a portable object made or altered by humans (for example, coffin)

Category—a grouping of burials, skeletons, artifacts, or attributes

Feature—a structure made by humans that cannot be moved (pit, building, burial mound)

Attribute—characteristics of a skeleton or artifact (for example, color)

Variable—a possible variation in an attribute (for example, white, green)

Correlation—an association of attributes (for example, white coffins are associated with weapons and small skeletons) (this isn't true!)

Steps to take over the next few classes

1. (Worksheets A & B and a Plan/Map will be handed out.) Your teacher may ask you to color code or create a key for a black-and-white map. Look over the cemetery as a whole. Notice what you can about its layout and the nature of the evidence. What is the hard evidence that exists?

2. Examine several tombs closely. Start to identify some artifacts and their attributes (for example, the artifact coffin may have the attribute color (two possible subcategories: white and green). Look around at all the tombs and start to make a complete list of artifacts and attributes. Use Worksheet A. Keep an individual worksheet, not a group one—you may need it at home. Look over the map of the cemetery and add to it if you need to, so that you can use it as a tool when you are not in class.

3. Start to correlate (associate, connect) attributes and arti-

facts and thereby associate burials that seem similar because they share attributes. This is complicated, but you will start to see patterns. Take notes; don't be discouraged by overlapping categories. You will figure it all out! Use Worksheet B to get started. Think aloud. Talk to others.

4. Create your final presentation. Decide what the gender, age, and status of each buried person is. In doing this, you should identify groups of people (for example, "adult royal males") and the kinds of artifacts the group members possessed. You may hand in your conclusions in any form you choose, but the more concise and clear your presentation, the better. To give you some examples, as a final product you may hand in:

- a color-coded map with a brilliant explanatory legend.
- a succinct chart listing categories of people explained through bullet points (illustrating the artifacts and attributes that belong in each category).
- an essay in which you explain your conclusions.

You may work with others, talk to them, listen to them, get ideas from them, and share your ideas. You must, however, write up your conclusions completely by yourself in your own way, and you should cite the people you worked with or learned from.

Be creative! Have fun!

WORKSHEET A

NAME _____

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT ARTIFACTS AND THEIR ATTRIBUTES

Skeletons

Coffins or Burial Containers

Grave Markers

Burial Goods/Artifacts

WORKSHEET B

NAME _____

To get your brain working, start to correlate and categorize your information and decide on a possible, preliminary grouping of burials and their artifacts and attributes.

SITE SUMMARY

Indicators of Gender

Indicators of Status

Indicators of Age

SUMMARY OF THE SOCIAL HIERARCHY AT THE SITE

You may present your conclusions in any form. However, if you have no other plan, you may describe your final ideas here!