Course Description

From cannibalism to dismemberment, human sacrifice to making pictures with the dead, manipulation of the human body after death is a common feature of mortuary practices in the Near East over a broad chronological and geographical range. This course asks what the evidence for mortuary practices can tell us about issues such as religious beliefs, social and political organization, and the growth of civilization.

Course Goals

You will have an understanding of: the archaeological methods for excavating and processing human skeletal remains, the theoretical approaches to interpreting them, and, most importantly, the significance of the dead to ancient societies. You will also learn how to read and evaluate archaeological reports and analyses.

Assessment

40% Short Papers – 2 @ 20% each (ca. 2000 words): you may choose any weekly topic for further investigation. You will be expected to identify and address a key issue related to the topic. You may use the weekly prompts as a starting point, but additional marks will be given for independent thinking. See also additional bibliography at the end of the syllabus for each week. DUE SEPT 27 and DEC 1

45% Research Project: working in pairs, you will be given original excavation materials from a single tomb from the site of Tell Banat to retrieve from it whatever information you can. You will be graded on the work you do throughout the semester (40%), the written paper you submit individually (40%), and your collaboration (20% - think team challenge Project Runway). The written paper should include a log of time spent and tasks conducted, a description of your methods, your data, and your interpretation of the results. In preparation to starting the project you will attend an extra-curricular session providing the background to the excavations. DUE NOV 17

10% Debates - 2 @ 5% each: in weeks five and nine you will use your assigned reading as the basis of your position in a debate about theory and method. OCT 13, NOV 10

5% Analysis of a Secondary Source: Take a reading from the supplementary list for week three. Summarize the key information provided, delineate the methods used, and assess the theoretical underpinnings of the piece. DUE OCT 6
Readings

This is a reading intensive course. You will be expected to read 20-40 pages per class. Readings will sometimes be discussed in class, sometimes not. Some readings are given as a source of information, but some will apply the techniques or theories we are discussing to a particular subject. Approached critically these sources are also ways of learning how archaeologists do things and why. For this reason you will be expected to do three things with the readings: extract information, analyze the structure and implications of the piece, and break down the argument. Most readings are available online at JSTOR, academia.edu or researchgate.net. Please consult google scholar. Otherwise they will be posted in Blackboard. Please pay attention to the directions in the weekly schedule. Please note that at the end of the weekly schedule there are additional readings listed week by week. These are provided as starting points for the short paper and for general interest.

Attendance

It is very difficult to pass this class unless you attend class regularly. There are three reasons for this: one, I will be modeling for you in class the kind of work you are supposed to do for assignments and exams; two, readings do not replace class content; and three, class discussions, because they are the practice of analysis, are as important as any other part of the course. Exam questions are taken directly from class materials and discussions.

Failure to complete all components of the assessment may result in a failing grade.

Failure to properly reference any written work or to acknowledge source material is considered plagiarism and will result in a failing grade.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism consists of passing off someone else’s work as your own. This may be done in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to: wholesale copying of another person’s writing; getting someone else to write your work for you; quoting someone’s words directly within your own writing, but failing to place the quote in quotation marks and/or failing to provide a reference; failing to provide a reference for someone else’s words that you paraphrase; failing to acknowledge information or ideas that have come from someone else. Plagiarism is a serious offence and will be reported. It will be then treated according to school policies and may result in expulsion. Please see the appropriate web page for the school’s plagiarism policy.

Classroom Policies

No phones or any other digital media are permitted. Class may not be recorded unless by prior arrangement with instructor. Computers may be used to take notes only. Wikipedia is not considered an acceptable source under any situation (so don’t bother consulting it in class). If students persist in inappropriate use of electronic media, they will be asked to leave the class. Behavior that distracts other students will not be permitted. Students are expected to discuss all topics openly and civilly.
WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Week One (Sept 15): The First Burials.

Why is the recognition of the first intentional disposal of the dead important, and what does it mean for human evolution? What is the significance of selective treatment, investment in decoration and symbolic behavior in burials? Can we always tell what is intentional or not?

Examples: Shanidar Cave, Sunghir, and Dolni Vestonice

**Required Reading**


Week Two (Sept 22): The Natufians

The late Epipaleolithic is increasingly cited as the point in time when crucial changes in the Near East, including treatments for the dead, began, reaching their full expression in the next period, the Neolithic.

Examples: Ain Mallaha, Hilazon Tachit, Azraq.

**Required Readings**


Week Three (Sept 29): “Skull Cults”

From Anatolia to the Levant, the human skull becomes the focus of a variety of mortuary rituals – but these treatments are not for everyone. What does selective treatment imply?

Examples: Ain Ghazal, Jericho and Çayönü

**Required Readings:**


Week Four (Oct 6): The Body

If change began in the Natufian, it is in the Neolithic that it really takes off. There is a wide range of strange and fascinating things happening to the dead all over the Near East. Why? And how can archaeologists tell exactly what has happened to the body after death?

Examples: Kfar HaHoresh, and Çatalhöyük,

Required Readings:


Week Five (Oct 13): Cannibalism – Consuming Friend or Foe?

This week we take a detailed look at the remains from Domuztepe and the theoretical frameworks that may be applied in interpretation of them. The class will be divided into three groups and you will be asked to debate the positions presented in the readings given to your group.

Required Readings:


Week Six (Oct 20): Victims of Violence?

In the next period of major change, the Late Chalcolithic or “Uruk” period, there is a remarkable absence of burials. One of the few sets recovered, however, is extraordinary. This is the sequence of mass burials found at Tell Majnuna. What can we learn about Uruk mortuary behavior from this example? Can we, should we, speak of “normative practices?” In this discussion we are
going to think about a number of issues, including the concept of “archaeological expertise”. Are excavators always right in the analysis of their finds?

Required Reading:


Week Seven (Oct 27) Texts – How to Read Them? How to Use Them?

Texts have had an inordinate influence on our understanding of death in greater Mesopotamia, but the archaeological materials often do not conform to this understanding. So how should we deal with the discrepancies? Do different kinds of texts offer different kinds of information?

Required Readings:


Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld: http://etcs.l.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs.l.cgi?text=t.1.8.1.4&charenc=j#


Filled with victims of human sacrifice and fabulous objects, the third millennium / Early Dynastic cemetery at Ur is one of the world’s most spectacular archaeological discoveries. It has occasioned constant theorization, but little actual scientific examination. Until recently. How do the new results change the narrative – and does it matter?

Examples: Ur and Arslantepe

Required Reading:


Signs of wealth and prestige, gifts for the afterlife – or are grave goods far more complex than either of these interpretations? Answers follow the prevailing intellectual trends. But are we getting closer to the truth with each new approach? You will be asked to present the theoretical perspective of your appointed reading.

**Required Readings:**


Week Ten (Nov 17): Death on the Middle Euphrates.

After more than five hundred years from which we have recovered few burials, there is an explosion of both mortuary remains and mortuary practices in the Early Bronze. The greatest concentration of these is on the Middle Euphrates. How should we think about variation and similarity in these practices?

Examples: Titris Hoyuk, Gre Virike, Jerablus Tahtani, Banat, Umm al Marra, and Tell Bi’a

No Required Readings

Week Eleven (Nov 24): Death and Identity in Palestine

From Bab edh-Dhra’ in the Early Bronze to the empty landscapes of the EB-MB, to the new discoveries at Ashkelon, much of the discussion about burials in Palestine has centered on identity – who were these people? Farmers or nomads, families or strangers? invaders or locals? So how do we tell?

Examples: Bab edh-Dhra’, Ashkelon, Philistine sarcophagi.

**Required Readings**


**Week 12 (Dec 1): Of Dogs and Donkeys: Animal Burials throughout Near Eastern History**

Certain animals seem to have specific meaning to Near Eastern societies, playing a role in foundation deposits, closure rituals, treaty ratification, and even having unique burial installations of their own.

Examples: Tell Brak, Tell Banat, Umm al Marra, Ashkelon.

**Required Readings**


Critique and response to the above http://www.antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/molleson/


**Additional references for each week for use in Paper 1**

**Week 1:**


**Week 2:**


**Week 3:**


**Week 4:**


**Week 5:**


**Week 6:**


**Week 7:**

Lugalbanda in the mountain cave. [http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.8.2.1&charenc=j#](http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.8.2.1&charenc=j#)

Inanna’s descent to the Netherworld. [http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.4.1&charenc=j#](http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.4.1&charenc=j#)

Nergal and Ereshkigal.
Kramer, S. N. (1967). The death of Ur-Nammu and his descent to the Netherworld. *Journal of Cuneiform studies*, 21, 104-122. (read translation only)


**Week 8:**

The Death of Gilgamesh: [http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.8.1.3&charenc=j#](http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.8.1.3&charenc=j#)


**Week 9:**

Lugalbanda in the mountain cave. [http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.8.2.1&charenc=j#](http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.8.2.1&charenc=j#)

**Week 10:**


**Week 11:**


Week 12:


