

ANTH 397

THE ARCHEOLOGY OF DEATH

INSTRUCTOR: Amanda Cooke

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

Every culture has a unique way of expressing their grief, of handling the loss of a member, and funerary practices that deal with the biological processes. “The mortuary component of human remains provides the most immediate cultural information regarding the person who died, and thus it reveals a wealth of crucial information that can help expand the understanding not only of the dead but of the living” (Martin et al., 2013: 120). In many cases, these mortuary practices leave behind physical remains that archaeologists can recover from cemeteries, houses, and elsewhere. As Pearson (2003:3) notes, “The dead do not bury themselves but are treated and disposed of by the living.” These practices can help us to learn about the social, cultural, and biological nature of human death and dying. In this course, we will explore mortuary rituals and funerary behaviour, the cultural construction of death, social organization and social structure, spirituality and religion, aspects of skeletal biology, gender issues, as well as the ethics of working with human remains. We will take a holistic, cross-cultural perspective to exploring death and the associated mortuary practices, from the Paleolithic onwards.

Aims

The aims of this course are:

- To gain an understanding of the social, cultural, and biological nature of death.
- To appreciate the political and ethical implications of burial archaeology.
- To analyze published mortuary data to investigate identity, social structure, and social memory.

Learning objectives and skills development

By the end of the course students should be able to:

1. Identify and discuss various types of funerary rituals and their archaeological expression.
2. Assess the contribution archaeology makes to interpreting the ways that societies respond to death.
3. Recognise, describe, apply, and analyze a range of different interpretative stances used in the archaeological study of funerary remains.
4. Discuss the ethical considerations that apply to the archaeological study of funerary remains.
5. Conduct a methodical study of a cemetery which will include data collection, analysis and reporting.