

Activity 1: Archaeology around you

Think about all the different things happening in the world right now; politicians debating, engineers building, information being shared, banking, new inventions, farming, medicine, artists creating, and people teaching others, the list is endless. Well, archaeology could study any of these things from the past, but often the problem is that we have to understand these ideas and processes through the physical remains that were left behind. We can't talk to the people who left these things behind, we may only have rare examples of writing or symbols (or not at all) and we may not ever know if we are right!

Let's think about some examples and unpick them the way an archaeologist might.

Mugs are very familiar to us today, they are an everyday object that can come in a variety of sizes and styles and are in each home in the UK, but how would an archaeologist of the future examine this object?



What to think about:

- **Technology:** Has this object been made by machine, implying a large and sophisticated chain of production, or hand-made by a craftsman? What are the technological processes for firing and glazing the teapot? Where has this mug been made? Can we look at the type of clay to find out where that has come from?
- **Ritual:** When and how is tea served? You are more likely to drink tea at breakfast, rather than with dinner, or at a party. In some cultures, like Japan, there are specific ceremonies that involve tea. Can we tell if this object was for ceremonial or everyday use?
- **Diet/Health:** Are there any remains of the contents preserved on the inside? Certain teas are drunk that are known to have benefits to your health.
- **Trade:** Tea is not grown in the UK and therefore large trade networks must exist to bring it here.
- **Art/Symbols/Text:** We know what even this mug commemorates. The images of the lion and unicorn are heraldic symbols of the British monarchy implying the power and lineage of the royal family. Would people in the future understand all these messages and the specific event? There are some languages written in the past that we cannot translate today, so even the text may not be fully comprehensible in the future.

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Square headed brooch: This object is known as a square headed brooch, so called because it has a large square top or head plate and were usually very ornately decorated, often with animal patterns. They were used for fastening women's clothes during the Anglo-Saxon period (AD 410 -1066). They could have been worn singly or in pairs and would have been an expensive and time consuming item to make, which does suggest that they would have been worn by the wealthier Anglo-Saxon women only, those who could afford to pay the high prices to the craftsmen.



Image ©: CCO

What to think about:

- **Gender:** Only women wore these brooches, so would you expect to find them associated with any male objects or activities?
- **Social Organisation:** These were made of precious metals and engraved with complex designs, making them expensive objects which only the rich few could afford. This could therefore also represent a higher status objects, owned by the wealthy few and, as is often the case, the wealthy are the most powerful in society, this object could have been utilised to showcase this power to the rest of society.
- **Technology and trade:** How was this brooch made? It must have been a craftsman skilled in fine metal work who created this as it is not an everyday object and would have taken much time and effort. It has been suggested by some archaeologists that objects such as these were produced in a few specialist workshops and then traded, but is there evidence for this?
- **Symbols:** There are a great many swirling shapes, animals and faces on this brooch. It can be hard to identify individual animals to our eyes, as they are high stylised. We do not know the stories or meaning behind the choice of these particular decorations. Could there have been a religious mean behind them? Did the chosen design mean something to the individual who made it and brought it? Was it their favourite animal? Did the design add to the idea of status for the purchaser?

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Burials: Of course, archaeologists don't often consider objects in isolation. They are understood in context, in relation to where and with what else they were found. The discovery of a burial brings a number of objects together, including the individual who was buried, the way they were buried and what (if anything) they were buried with, all of which can give us a lot of different information.



Image ©: Ann Wuyts

What to think about:

- **Health:** Marks on the bones may reveal the marks of injuries and disease. How did this individual die? Genetic analysis may reveal more such as ethnic origins and their sex. How old were they when they died?
- **Diet:** By taking a small sample of the bone, **isotopic analysis** can reveal the type of diet this person had, as well as what areas they lived in. Did the person buried originate where they were found or had they travelled from far away?
- **Climate:** Things not purposefully included in the grave may reveal much about the landscape when the person was buried. Different environments will have their own particular mix of pollen, microfana (insects etc.) and soils, which can all be analysed.
- **Religion:** Death is a time when religious beliefs are often marked. Can we tell anything about the society's religious beliefs from the objects here? How was the person buried (on their back, side or front, flexed or extended?) Was there a coffin, or were they just wrapped in a shroud? If there was a coffin, looking at the rings in the wood may give us a date for when the coffin was made (**dendrochronology**).
- **Trade and Technology:** How were the objects found within the grave made? Where have they originated from or were they locally made?
- **Social identify:** What part did this person play in society? Were they powerful? Were they part of a larger society? The relative wealth/poverty of the objects around the burial might tell us that. However this might be influenced by the religion of the person. For example, Christian burials do not tend to have any grave goods.



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When looking at objects, it's important to remember that we aren't seeing the whole picture as many of the objects will have rotted away, broken or not left any trace. Archaeologists call this '**preservation**' and how well or not an archaeological site is preserved can distort our view of the past. To explore this further, complete the following task.

Task

Draw a room you know well. Maybe your bedroom, the kitchen, or your living room. Any room you know well. Remember to...

- Draw the walls as thicker lines
- Show doorways as gaps
- Include lights, windows - and doors!
- Draw everything you can remember
- Label carefully – e.g. red china mug, white plastic rubbish bin, painted wooden desk with metal legs.



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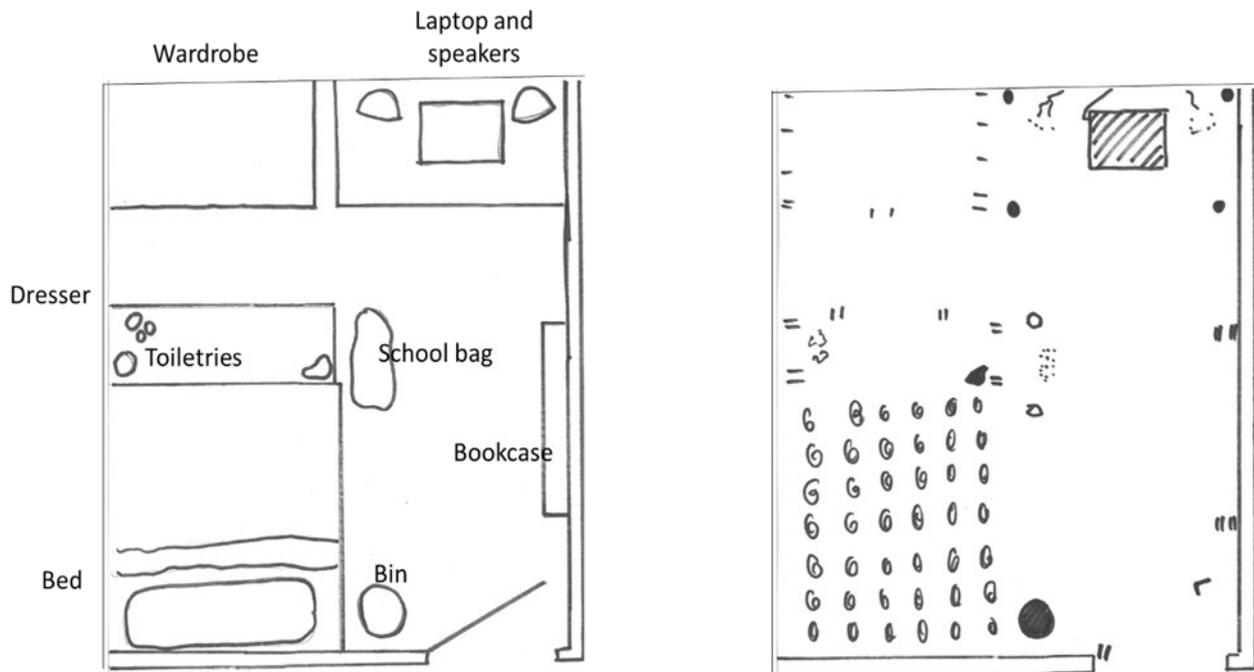
Task 2

Draw your room again, but pretend **1000 years** has passed...what would be left? Remember :

- Objects that are made of metal, plastic, glass, or bone will probably survive. They won't look new though! What will have happened to them?
- Things made of fabric, wood, plants, or food won't survive.
- Things made of two materials like a wooden hairbrush with plastic bristles– will someone know what it is used for if the wood has gone and only the plastic survives.
- Label what would have happened to the objects after 1000 years.

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Example of a bedroom



What is left?

After 1000 years all the organic material has gone: The wooden bed has rotted away leaving just the rusted metal springs. Other metal objects have survived as well, like the nails and screws in the furniture. Think carefully about the laptop; we assume people in the future will know everything about us as we store so much data about ourselves. But will they be able to access it? Will it all be stored? The laptop has become a rusted lump here, but even if it was preserved, could people in the future access the information. Today we have forms of technology storage that have gone out of date and we can't easily access - think about Betamax tapes, or floppy disks. Similarly, all the plastic items have disintegrated. Museums and other places where objects are stored are trying to work out how to preserve plastic objects, as they can be easily damaged and broken, even if the plastic itself won't fully break down for a long time. Glass also preserves well, but is easily broken. Here there are broken fragments of the light bulb and a broken perfume bottle. Pottery objects - such as plates, dishes, and mugs are often found by archaeolo-

Task 3

Why do you think it's important for museums to preserve objects?