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Let's Talk About Death!

Pop Culture, The Macabre & Death

Proposed Course

Instructor: Kathryn Meyers Emery

Course Description

Want to learn about the archaeological evidence of zombies and vampires? Have you ever wondered about the history of cannibalism? Ever been curious about the new death movement and green burials? Then this course is for you!

Over the last decade, western cultures have increasingly embraced the morbid and macabre, with movies, television, and social media sharing amazing stories of death, resurrection and mysteries of the world. This course examines the current popular interest in morbid topics, and shows how they relate to archaeological and historical evidence. This course will provide you with an understanding of anthropological methods to dig into the myths, movements, and macabre that fascinates us today.

Course Objectives

In this course, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate knowledge of origins of various myths and macabre legends including vampires, zombies, cannibals, witches, and more based on evidence from history and archaeology.
2. Use archaeology, anthropology and historical theories and methods to better understand the popularity and evidence behind these morbid fascinations
3. Synthesize the history of death movements in the western world

Texts

The majority of articles and texts will be provided online. Please check online for these materials. They will be listed in the syllabus. If you have trouble accessing a text, please alert the instructors prior to the due date. It is your responsibility to make sure you have access to everything you need to succeed in this course. Technical issues do happen and as long as you alert us we will do our best to fix the problems.

Course Requirements

This course is imagined as being centered on discussion and active engagement in case studies. Students will be given opportunities to share their knowledge with the general public to practice public engagement, and will use digital tools to create innovative final projects such as podcasts, illustrated stories, and more. For journal articles, students will learn how to distill the evidence and write critical summaries of the research.

Class Schedule

Week 1

Class 1: Course Introduction

Reading Due: None

Class 2: Pop Culture and the Macabre- finding the evidence in the myths

Reading Due: None

In Class Activity:

- Separating myth and truth- how to break down a journal article and parse a popular news article
- Journal Example: Fernandez-Jalvo et al. 1999. Human cannibalism in the Early Pleistocene of Europe (Gran Dolina, Sierra de Atapuerca, Burgos, Spain). *Journal of Human Evolution* (1999) 37, 591–622
- Popular Example: Nigerian restaurant shut down for serving human meat
<http://www.inquisitr.com/2094636/nigerian-restaurant-shut-down-for-serving-human-meat/>

Week 2

Class 1: Introduction to Bioarchaeology

Reading Due:

- Chapter 1. Parker Pearson, Michael 1999. *The Archaeology of Death and Burial*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Video: Gladiators: Back from the Dead
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4bn8bhfjil>

Class 2: Cremation

Reading Due:

- How Stuff Works, Cremation: <http://science.howstuffworks.com/cremation.htm>

Week 3

Class 1: Secondary Burial

Reading Due:

- Tsu, Timothy Y. 2000. Toothless Ancestors, Felicitous Descendants: The Rite of Secondary Burial in South Taiwan. *Asian Folklore Studies* 59(1): 1-22.

Class 2: Mummification and Preservation

Reading Due:

- Katy Meyers Emery, Preservation: When Bodies Don't Decompose:
<https://bonesdontlie.wordpress.com/2013/04/11/preservation-when-bodies-dont-decompose/>
- Len Bloch, How to make a mummy:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gDOK7oH92U>

Week 4

Class 1: Victorian Death

Reading Due: None

Assignment Due:

- Find one example of a Victorian death ritual

Class 2: Grave Robbing

Reading Due:

- Highet, Megan 2005. Body Snatching & Grave Robbing: Bodies for Science. History and Anthropology 16(4).

Week 5

Class 1: Death Today

Reading Due:

- Bess Lovejoy, Fond Farewells: <http://www.laphamsquarterly.org/death/fond-farewells>

Class 2: The Green Burial Movement

Reading Due:

- Caitlin Doughty, Ask a Mortician- Composting Dead Bodies: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXAwHTCXs24>

Week 6

Class 1: Modern Burial Practices Around the World

Reading Due:

- Kelli Swazey, Life that doesn't end with death: http://www.ted.com/talks/kelli_swazey_life_that_doesn_t_end_with_death

Class 2: Deviant Burials and why they are important!

Reading Due: None

Week 7

Class 1: Archaeology of Vampires

Reading Due:

- Gregoricka, L., Betsinger, T., Scott, A., & Polcyn, M. (2014). Apotropaic Practices and the Undead: A Biogeochemical Assessment of Deviant Burials in Post-Medieval Poland PLoS ONE, 9 (11) DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0113564

Class 2: Historic and Modern Vampires

Reading Due:

- Stuff You Missed in History Class, New England Vampire Panic: <http://www.missedinhistory.com/podcasts/new-england-vampire-panic/>

Week 8

Class 1: Archaeology of Zombies

Reading Due:

- Max Brooks, Archaeology of the Undead:
<http://archive.archaeology.org/online/interviews/zombies/>

Class 2: Historic and Modern Zombies

Reading Due:

- Cats vs. Zombies: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcENL_Vdoqw

Assignment Due:

- Remember zombie movies you've watched, books you've read or video games you've played- what are the rules of the zombie?
 - How are they created?
 - How do they infect others?
 - How do they die?
 - How would that zombie appear in the archaeological record or how would we know that type of outbreak occurred?

Week 9

Class 1: Archaeology of Witchcraft and Spells

Reading Due:

- Lucero, Lisa and Sherry A. Gibbs 2007. The Creation and Sacrifice of Witches in Classic Maya Society. New Perspectives on Human Sacrifice and Ritual Body Treatments in Ancient Maya Society, pp. 45-73

Class 2: Historic and Modern Witchcraft and Spells

Reading Due:

- BBC, How to bury a witch: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-29689688>

Week 10

Class 1: Archaeology of Cannibalism

Reading Due:

- Kate Wong, In Prehistoric Britain Cannibalism Was Practical and Ritualistic:
<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/in-prehistoric-britain-cannibalism-was-practical-and-ritualistic/>
- Katy Meyers Emery, Starvation Cannibalism at Jamestown.
<https://bonesdontlie.wordpress.com/2013/05/02/starvation-cannibalism-at-jamestown/>

Class 2: Historic and Modern Cannibalism

Reading Due:

- Smithsonian, The Gruesome History of Eating Corpses as Medicine.
<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-gruesome-history-of-eating-corpses-as-medicine-82360284/?no-ist>

Assignment Due:

- Find one case study of modern cannibalism and bring it into class to share!

Week 11

Class 1: Hauntings, Ghosts and Stories

Reading Due: None

Assignment Due:

- Find one case study of a local haunted house or mystery and bring it into class to share!

Class 2: Hauntings, Ghosts and Stories

Reading Due: None

Week 12

Class 1: Final Projects

Reading Due: None

Class 2: Final Projects

Reading Due: None

*This syllabus is subject to change- however, students will be made aware of any changes prior to the change, and the syllabus will be updated to reflect it.

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