

# Fighting *Ancient Aliens* in the Classroom: Restoring Credit to Peoples of the Past in Introduction to Archaeology Courses

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Over the past ten years, I have heard student after student suggest that so-called “primitive man” could not have built the pyramids: aliens must have built them, or at the very least provided people with the knowledge and technologies necessary to build them. Initially, I only briefly addressed these beliefs, hoping that by the end of the semester, the truth—the abilities of peoples of the past—would have become obvious. However, as the years went by, and with the growing popularity of shows like *Ancient Aliens*, an increasing number of students were in my class specifically because of their interest in (and oftentimes belief in) Ancient Alien theories. I realized that I needed to address—repeatedly and head-on—this assumption that past peoples were incapable of designing and building the incredible structures, like pyramids, that we see in the archaeological records of both the New and Old Worlds. What’s more, I needed to somehow address this (directly and indirectly) while teaching students about every facet of archaeology, including the history of archaeology, archaeological laboratory and field methods, and the peoples of the past. Sometimes I needed to develop new lectures or activities, but oftentimes I needed to only tweak older ones to reach my goals.

I ultimately realized that my determination to restore recognition of the abilities of past peoples was all about highlighting inequality. Though inequality was always an important part of my Introduction to Archaeology course, it now became the central theme of the course. As a class, we now examine a) the blatant racism that shaped early approaches to interpreting the past, b) the thinly masked racism that shapes current popular approaches to interpreting the past (most notably, those having to do with Ancient Aliens), and c) the inequality that existed in the many complex societies represented in the archaeological record. For example, any discussion of the history of archaeology in the Americas should include reference to the racism with which early explorers and “archaeologists” approached the past. The “Moundbuilder Myth,” for instance, was a popular method by which people in professional and public spheres stripped a complex past from Native Americans, insisting instead that various other peoples, such as Spanish explorers, Vikings, or a number of other white groups, had built the mounds that stretch across the eastern U.S. (Stiebing 1993, 170-180). This theory remained popular for more than 150 years in large part because Euroamericans did not want to believe that Native Americans were capable of such constructions and because

admitting as much would interfere with Euroamerican expansion onto supposedly “unclaimed” and “undeveloped” lands.

Exploring the racism of historic interpretations of the past is important because these approaches are not so different from current popular Ancient Aliens postulations, where individuals ignore the archaeological record, deny the abilities of past peoples, minimize ancient power structures, and insult previous belief systems. Both scenarios (Ancient Alien theories and the Moundbuilder Myth) reveal an ethnocentrism so strong that it denies the abilities of our fellow humans. In my class, I spend time talking about these assumptions early on, and then return to many of the very sites targeted in Ancient Alien theories throughout the semester. When I return to these specific cultures, we do not need to explicitly discuss Ancient Alien theories. Instead, we simply talk about the organization of the societies and the construction methods used to build or create the various structures and features so often linked to aliens. We explore how and why those features and structures were important to the people who designed, built, and visited them. And in order to do this, we need to talk about inequality. We need to spend a lot of time talking about what it would have been like to live in the many complex societies of the past. Below, I briefly describe some of the lecture topics, films, discussion topics, assignments, and class activities I have used to teach my Introduction to Archaeology students about inequality, thereby “fighting” against Ancient Alien theories in my classroom.

### **Focus on Everyday People and Discuss Infrastructure**

One method by which we can explore social inequality *and* the abilities past peoples had to design and build monuments is by focusing on the everyday people, *not* the kings, queens, and pharaohs. We can accomplish this by spending time looking over the Mesopotamian Standard Professions List and by reading Ancient Egyptian Literature. Egyptian poems and letters (especially those found in Lichtheim 1973, 184-192 and 1976, 168-175) regularly include reference to the daily struggles and toils of peasants, teachers, barbers, weavers, carpenters, jewel-makers, potters, masons, gardeners, farmers, cobblers, washermen, and fishermen. Learning about occupations reminds students that these were *real* people with *real* jobs, and that these jobs were an essential part of maintaining and supporting a stratified society that was thus capable of almost anything.

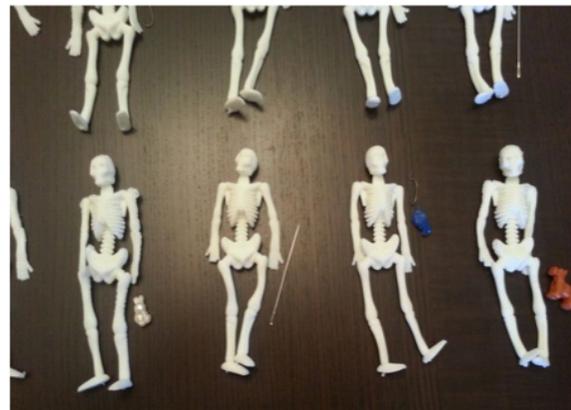
Students also look over maps and reconstructions of ancient cities and discuss the various occupations necessary to design, construct, and maintain the cities and their infrastructure. It usually works well to have students look at maps and photos of ancient and modern cities throughout the semester, as they then realize that ancient societies would have required many of the same specialists as modern ones, even if they were employing different technologies or world views in the process.

## Explore How We Identify Social Status in the Past and Present

To help my students think about how archaeologists identify social stratification and status, we spend some time talking about the ways in which socioeconomic status today and in the past impacts one's access to goods and is thus visible in architecture, clothing and accessories, occupations, diet, agency, and so much more. Students read Kedmey (2015), an article exploring what toothbrushes reveal about one's status, as this helps them see that almost every part of our lives—including the quality and quantity of our family's toothbrushes—is impacted by social status. To apply this knowledge and work through it on their own, students each create a photo essay wherein they compare different items and structures that tell us something about wealth. (This assignment is adapted from one employed by Dr. Matthew E. Hill, Jr. of the University of Iowa). Some students focus on architecture—comparing building materials, size of buildings, or the practical and impractical features of mansions and run-down apartment buildings, for example—while others focus on vehicles, neighborhood infrastructure, shoes, or electronics.

After reflecting on material culture and status and submitting their photo essays, students make their way through a miniature cemetery that I have created. I provide a general description of the imaginary society, and they move through four stations, each representing a different part of the cemetery. Students are asked to assess characteristics like gender, occupation, religious beliefs, and social

status based on burial goods and grave architecture. Station A includes 32 skeletons buried close to each other (see Figure 1). Most of the individuals are buried without preserved burial goods, though some are found with rabbit, dog, or fish skeletons, spears, and/or fish hooks. Since there is no evidence of stone tombs or hardware for wooden coffins, students usually suggest that these individuals were buried in cloth, hide, or other perishable and “cheap” or utilitarian materials. Stations B and C contain increasingly wealthy individuals, who have more space to themselves, large coffins or tombs, and a growing number of luxurious grave goods (see Figures 2 and 3). Finally, Station D includes three very large tombs complete with monumental architecture, immense amounts of gold and silver, dozens of sacrificed animals, and several sacrificed humans to accompany these powerful individuals into the afterlife (see Figures 4 through 6).



**Figure 1:** A portion of “Station A” in the mock cemetery exercise. Station A is used to reveal “lower class” individuals. Students are informed that needles represent spears and that plastic animals (shown here, from left to right, a rabbit, a fish, and a dog) represent animals buried with these individuals. (Image courtesy of author)



**Figure 2:** An individual burial from “Station B” in the mock cemetery exercise. Station B individuals are certainly better off economically than those seen in Station A. These individuals are buried in large “stone” coffins with dozens of semi-precious and precious stones, shown here as plastic beads. (Image courtesy of author)



**Figure 3:** An individual from “Station C” in the mock cemetery exercise. Station C individuals are “upper class” individuals who must have had substantial resources in life. These individuals are buried in relatively large tombs with an even greater amount of non-utilitarian goods than those from Station B. (Image courtesy of author)



**Figure 4:** The three tombs of “Station D” in the mock cemetery exercise. Students are instructed to recognize the images show on the lids of these boxes as representative of monumental architecture built above the tombs. In addition to monumental architecture, a large number of exotic sacrificed animals (represented by plastic animals) as well as large treasure chests filled with “gold” are visible both outside and inside of the large tombs. Individuals buried in the tombs on the left and right are buried with dozens of sacrificed animals (some of which are shown here), immense amounts of gold, and royal insignia (see Figure 5). In contrast, the individual in the center tomb is buried with hundreds of sea shells and several sacrificed humans (see Figure 6). Students often suggest that perhaps the difference in monumental architecture and burial goods reflects a distinction between royal/governmental elite individuals (on the left and right) and religious officials (in the center). (Image courtesy of author)



**Figure 5:** An individual buried in one of the three tombs of “Station D.” This individual is recognized by students as a leader due to the monumental architecture above the tomb (see Figure 4), the great wealth accompanying the individual to the afterlife (including the gold and silver shown here and several large jars of gold and pearls), and the regalia clearly seen here. (Image courtesy of author)



**Figure 6:** Sacrificed victims buried with an elite individual from “Station D.” (Image courtesy of author)

## Bioarchaeology and Inequality

The cemetery exercise described above ends with students making lists of questions we cannot answer from this cursory observation. I have been using this activity for four years, and each year, several students mention our need to analyze the skeletons for sex, health, cause of death, occupational markers, etc. The cemetery activity takes place after students have spent several weeks learning about different field and lab methods, an exploration that includes brief reference to bioarchaeology. This “post-cemetery discussion” is a great opportunity to remind students of the methods and goals of this sub-field, and they are thus well prepared to understand the numerous examples of bioarchaeology I present during the second half of the semester as we explore inequality in various societies of the past. For example, we discuss research by Robbins Schug and colleagues (2013) finding that some Harappan people were more likely to get various infectious diseases than others. The authors link these disparities to structural violence and pathologies of power. Our module on Andean civilizations also includes a review of groundbreaking bioarchaeological research revealing evidence for imperialism and state sponsored violence among the skeletons of the Wari, as presented by Tung (2012). Exploring the many ways in which inequality can be seen in skeletal remains reinforces the stratified nature of these societies *and* forces students to think about the impact of inequality on living bodies today.

### **Be Explicit: Why and How Were these Features Built?**

*Nazca Lines, Easter Island Moai, Andean Walls, and Pyramids*

I have also found that students attracted to Ancient Alien theories need to understand the purpose of the features and structures that are so often attacked by Ancient Alien proponents as being “too advanced” for peoples of the past. One set of features that have suffered greatly from attacks by Ancient Alien proponents are, of course, the Nazca Lines. My discussion of rock art and geoglyphs has long included an exploration of the construction and meaning of the Nazca Lines. However, the prevalence of alien explanations for the construction of these geoglyphs led me to eventually include a more detailed discussion of who the Nazca people were and how they survived in the Andean desert. To achieve this goal, I added Hall’s article, “Spirits in the Sand: The ancient Nasca lines of Peru shed their secrets” (2010) to the syllabus. In this article, Hall summarizes the chronological depth, construction methods, and use of the geoglyphs. Since adding this article to our syllabus, students seem to be much more accepting of a human origin and purpose to the Nazca Lines.

The famous *moai* of Easter Island are also often associated with extraterrestrial technologies. My discussion of Easter Island has long included reference to the abilities and belief systems of the islanders *and* an exploration of the ethnocentrism with which Easter Islanders have been discussed historically. This ethnocentrism (which could easily be called colonialist racism) still dominates current public discussions of

these “cannibalistic” and “savage” peoples who *somehow* made their famous *moai*. Despite this approach, some students insisted that the islanders could not have made and then moved the *moai* without help from *someone* or *something*. To address this perspective, I recently added the Nova special “Mystery of Easter Island” (2012) to our course schedule as an example of experimental archaeology. This video presents Hunt and Lipo’s (2011) research suggesting that the *moai* could be “walked” into place. Since this video was added to the course, student discussions of the *moai* have not included any reference to extraterrestrials!

Similarly, my discussion of the Inca civilization has long covered the engineering skills required to build famous sites like Machu Picchu, but I have become more explicit in this discussion as the years have passed. Now, for example, instead of just talking about this, we watch about 11 minutes of National Geographic’s “Machu Picchu Decoded” (from about minute 26 to minute 37). In this video, the narrator summarizes Wright and Zegarra’s (2000) research on the engineering skills required to design and build Machu Picchu as well as both prevent flooding and celebrate water. The director of the National Archaeological Park of Machu Picchu, Fernando Astete, also walks viewers through the ways in which the stones were quarried, shaped, transported, and finished. After watching this clip, I inform my students that while this video is relatively new (it first aired in 2009), this discussion of stone-working is based on more than thirty years of historical, archaeological, and replicative research (e.g., Protzen 1985) that demonstrates that people

can in fact shape and move stones like those seen at Machu Picchu with human made technologies.

Finally, several lectures and discussions focus on the specialists necessary to design and build pyramids. I spend a significant amount of time detailing the construction methods used to build the Pyramids of Giza, particularly the massive labor force required to build them and what the archaeological record tells us about the lives of the workers themselves. (At this point in the semester, students have already read Jarus 2013). Once it has become clear that humans did *not* need aliens to help them create such structures, we must then ask another important question: if the pyramids found across the globe were not built for and/or because of aliens, why were they built? While specifics vary from one culture to the next, all pyramids have one thing in common: they are representative of power and wealth. They reflect the perceived power of the gods, the power of leaders, and the disposable wealth necessary to design and build them. One excellent way to highlight the role religion, power, and inequality played in the construction of pyramids is to have students watch *Out of Egypt: Episode Two*. In this episode, called “The Shape of the Gods,” Kara Cooney surveys the common threads among pyramids across the globe. I have students complete a worksheet as they watch this, forcing them to record the purpose of pyramids in the various cultures explored in the film. Doing this enables students to connect the pyramids to each culture’s political and belief systems.

## Conclusions

The approach outlined above required me to think about the ways in which ethnocentrism and racism have affected how archaeologists and non-archaeologists alike have treated the archaeological record. This approach has been quite successful, with dozens of students freely admitting that they have abandoned their beliefs in Ancient Alien theories. While I only rarely discuss the details of these “theories,” the point is very clear to my students: these theories at best ignore the archaeological record and at worst manipulate it to promote ethnocentric and racist ideas that deny the capabilities and humanity of past peoples across the globe. My focus on economic, religious, and/or political inequality also provides an avenue to understand the features and structures so fetishized by Ancient Alien proponents. By the end of the semester, students have learned how to identify inequality through an analysis of material remains in the past and present. They have learned how agriculture and increasingly stratified societies can require and/or allow for specialists capable of designing incredibly complex rituals and structures. They have learned about the ways in which *power* is displayed and reinforced through monumental building projects. They have learned about the ingenuity of humanity, and the plight of the workers of the past. They have learned that we do not need aliens to explain the past, only an awareness of the archaeological record and of the people who built that past.

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