



# HISTORY AS MYSTERY

## Purpose

This activity will show students the difference between learning history from a book, and actually being a historian. They'll learn that the study of history depends on forensics, a bit like the crime labs we see on television, because true historians don't retell neatly written stories—they solve mysteries. Historians must use a variety of approaches and seek input from a variety of experts to make sense of the past. This lesson illustrates the importance of using an interdisciplinary approach to solve a complex question, one of the core tenets of the Big History course.

## Process

Tell your students that they're going to think about how to solve the Mystery at York. In 2004, 30 decapitated human skeletons, all male, were discovered in York, England. Scientists dated the bones to the third century CE. The heads of the decapitated bodies had been placed around the knees and feet. Eventually, about 80 male skeletons were unearthed.

Have your students answer question 1, on page 2 of the Student Materials section of this worksheet. Then, ask several students to share their answers. Give the farfetched responses as much consideration as those closer to the truth, and help students identify how consistent their responses are with the facts given.

Give students a little more information by telling them that the Roman Empire extended to this part of the world at that time. Do a quick poll to find out what they already know about Ancient Rome.

Watch a 15-minute excerpt (3:52 to 18:55) from the video, *The Mystery of the Headless Romans* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rhLzmUTkc>). Before you start the video, emphasize that students should try to notice how researchers from different disciplines contributed to the development of a hypothesis for why these men were there, and why they were buried in the way that they were.

After watching the video, have students respond to the question 2. Take a few minutes to answer clarifying questions. It may help to write some of the types of experts on the board for students to see, such as archaeologist, bone specialist, and dental expert. Identifying the experts can be done as a class, but students should fill out the description section on their own or working with a partner.

Either read aloud or have your students read to themselves the short essay, "What Will We Leave Behind?," on page 4 of the Student Materials. Have a discussion about the amount of information we are now able to record and store—compared to how little we had to go on when studying the Romans—and then tell your students to answer the last question. Have a discussion about their answers.





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**Directions:** Have your class answer question 1 before they watch the BBC video, *The Mystery of the Headless Romans* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rhLlzmUTkc>). Once they've watched the video and discussed it, have them answer question 2. Following a discussion about their responses, tell students to read the short essay, "What Will We Leave Behind?" Lead a discussion about the reading, and then tell the class to answer the final question.

1. Based on the information you have – 80 skeletons, all male, 1,800 years old, buried in York, many of them with heads cut off and placed near feet – what do you think happened? Just make a quick guess.

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Note that your students' responses can be broad and farfetched since they have so few facts. Sample answers: "There was a war between different tribes of people, and it was common to behead your opponent." "They all died of some illness. One of the survivors removed the heads because they believed in zombies." "They were all criminals who were sentenced to death by beheading." "This society had too many men and not enough women, so the men were sacrificed to balance the population."

After your class has watched the video, prompt them to answer question 2.

2. Write down the disciplines of the experts who have been involved so far in determining the age of the bodies and what happened to them. You may use the experts already discussed in class, or think of new ones. Write a brief description of what they do.

Expert	Description
Sample answers: archaeologist, human bone specialist, dentist, anthropologist, Roman historian, data expert	Note that students' answers will vary when it comes to suggesting new experts that they didn't hear mentioned in the film.
	While watching the video, students may have noted some of the actual names of the experts, but we're really just interested in having them get the disciplines right.
Archaeologist	An archaeologist has ways of determining the age of ancient things, and how they got there.





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<i>Expert</i>	<i>Description</i>
Dentist/dental expert	A dentist can look at the teeth of the corpse and tell us what their diet was like back then, so we know more about who they were.
Human bone specialist	Human bone specialists are able to show what kind of weapon was used to cut off the heads.
Anthropologist	An anthropologist might be able to give information on what people were like at that time and in that place, to help figure out why this happened.
Roman historian	A historian can say who was at war or fighting at that time and might have a theory about the dead men being soldiers.
Data expert	A data expert might be able look at a lot of information at once and use a computer program to analyze the data and come up with a theory that no one else has.





# HISTORY AS MYSTERY

## What Will We Leave Behind?

The bodies in York were buried 1,800 years ago, but dedicated researchers from several disciplines have been able work out many details of what happened, and about Roman life in general. What do you think our current society will look like to the historians of the future, once another 1,800 years go by? We have so much information recorded in so many ways by so many different people—and these people all have different perspectives on what the world is like. How much time will a history student in the class of 3800 spend on “The Information Age”—or whatever they call this sliver in time when electricity, computers, phones, and the internet came into people’s lives? They may only have one day for that lesson because there will be so many other things to cover.

What will they look at? Will it make us seem like a happy people? Will they learn about the things that caused stress and controversy in our culture, like racism or climate change or cancer, all of which may be foreign concepts by then? Will the things we value, such as democracy, chocolate, and education seem as strange to them as the Romans’ custom of burial decapitation seems to us?

But the historian in 3800 will have a very different problem looking at our world than we have when looking at the Romans. The Romans didn’t have the internet, television, printed books, nor any of the tools we use for recording and storing information. **We have so little evidence about the Romans to go on, but future historians will have far too much information about us.**

There is more information on one smart phone than *all* the information historians have ever collected about the Romans. And our modern world has billions of phones, computers, books, magazines, and newspapers, not to mention Wikipedia. Most of this will probably be available to future historians, but hardly manageable because there will be so much.

What information will they focus on as truly important? Mideast politics? *Dancing with the Stars*? Fast food restaurants?





Name: Date: 

## Purpose

This activity will show you the difference between learning history from a book, and actually being a historian. The study of history depends on forensics, a bit like the crime labs you see on television, because true historians don't retell neatly written stories—they solve mysteries. Historians must use a variety of approaches and get input from a variety of experts to make sense of the past. This lesson illustrates the importance of using an interdisciplinary approach to solve a complex question, a process that's very important in the Big History course.

## Process

You're going to think about how to solve the Mystery at York. Your clues: In 2004, 30 decapitated human skeletons, all male, were discovered in York, England. Scientists determined that the bones were from the third century CE. The heads of the decapitated bodies had been placed around the knees and feet. Eventually, about 80 male skeletons were unearthed. You're going to think about the clues you've just been given, and then watch an excerpt from a video to see how researchers from different disciplines contributed to the development of a hypothesis for why these men were there, and why they were buried in the way that they were.

Respond to the first question on the worksheet. Your teacher will follow up with class discussion.

Watch the BBC video, *The Mystery of the Headless Romans* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rhLlzmUTkc>). At your teacher's prompt, answer the second question on the worksheet.

Read the short essay, "What Will We Leave Behind?," on page 4 of this worksheet. Be prepared to participate in a discussion about the amount of information we are now able to record and store—compared to how little we had to go on when studying the Romans—and then answer the last question.





Name:

Date:

**Directions:** Answer question 1, below, and then watch the BBC video, *The Mystery of the Headless Romans* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rhLLzmUTkc>).

1. Based on the information you have – 80 skeletons, all male, 1,800 years old, buried in York, many of them with heads cut off and placed near feet – what do you think happened? Just make a quick guess.


*Wait for your teacher's prompt before answering question 2.*

2. Write down the names of the disciplines who have been involved so far in determining the age of the bodies and what happened to them. You may use the experts already discussed in class, or think of new ones. Write a brief description of what they do.

<i>Expert</i>	<i>Description</i>







Name: Date: 

*Wait for your teacher's prompt before you start reading.*

## What Will We Leave Behind?

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