

Activity: Trashed!

*“what people have owned—and thrown away—can speak more eloquently, informatively, and truthfully about the lives they lead than they themselves ever can.”—William Rathje and Cullen Murphy in *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage* (2001, pg.54)*

Directions: This assignment asks you to think critically about our consumption and disposal patterns, and what the physical remains of what we lose and throw away can tell us about human behavior and society. The material collected in trash pits, dumps, and heaps (as well as places where lost or dropped objects collect) can provide archaeologists (and ‘garbologists’) a wealth of information about the people who produced this rubbish—likes and dislikes, access to particular goods, patterns of consumption and changes over time, dates or seasons of items, evidence for trade, etc.

OVERVIEW

The assignment unfolds in three parts:

1. First, **you’ll read about Monte Testaccio**, a Roman “trash heap” in use for about 300 years beginning in the reign of Augustus (1st c. CE) until the mid-3rd c. CE. Excavations of this massive, 150ft high mound (comprised of millions of pieces of broken and complete ceramic vessels called *amphorae*, or *amphora* in the singular), have shed light on a number of different aspects of the Roman economy and how it changed over time.
2. Second, **you’ll explore *Below the Surface***, the website for the artifacts uncovered by archaeologists draining the Amstel river in Amsterdam before construction of a new metro line between 2003-2012. The material found in excavations of the riverbed including 697,235 archaeological finds, with material from 2000 BCE up to 2005 CE! You’ll explore this material, answer some questions, and reflect on what you’ve encountered. Then...
3. You’ll pick **TWO** days and **keep a log of everything you throw away**, including amounts, brands, and where you disposed of it (if a trashcan, where—at the hallway in school, etc.). Then you’ll take a look at your log and answer some questions which ask you to reflect on what you consumed and threw away, and what archaeologists might be able to tell about you from seeing it.

You’ll put all your answers to the questions for each part of this assignment into a single word document for submission.

PART I: MONTE TESTACCIO

1. Read “Trash Talk: Sorting through a mountain of pottery to track the Roman oil trade,” by Jarrett A. Lobell for *Archaeology* magazine (<https://www.archaeology.org/exclusives/articles/2892-rome-monte-testaccio-amphoras%22>). Make sure to click through and read all four parts of the article!

2. Answer the following questions in a word doc.

- A. What material were the amphoras from Monte Testaccio originally filled with?
- B. How was the mound actually formed? Was there any sort of construction involved?
- C. Why did the Romans cover the amphora with lime?
- D. How can archaeologists tell the difference between different kinds of amphoras?
- E. What can these amphoras tell us about Roman trade and the economy? (provide 3 examples)
- F. Consider reuse of the space and amphoras—what happened to Monte Testaccio after it went out of use as a dump? How were some amphoras reused instead of being thrown into a dump?

PART II: BELOW THE SURFACE

1. Open the *Below the Surface* website (<https://belowthesurface.amsterdam/en>) in a browser window and click on the link “Read more about the project -->” on the center of the main page.

2. This will take you to a page called “The Excavations” which has a series of chapters or sections under the subheading “Index.” You’ll want to read the following pages (in this order) and answer the associated questions in the same word doc where you answered the questions for Part I:

-Introduction

- a. Why were archaeologists able to excavate the Amstel river?

-Data processing

- b. How did archaeologists sort finds? (summarize in your own words)
- c. How many archaeological finds did the excavation uncover?
- d. How did archaeologists date objects? (summarize in your own words)

-Finds from Damrak and Rokin

- e. In terms of numbers, what were the two types/categories of objects with the most objects uncovered?

-Spatial finds distributions and 3D GIS

- f. Why were metal objects found lower? (summarize in your own words)
- g. How did archaeologists know that the Nieuwe Brug was a popular area for children to play during the 16th-17th c. CE?
- h. What was found near the sugar factory?

-Classification and catalogue

Skim this to get a sense of how the identified/hypothesized function of an object impacted the use or social category to which it is assigned.

3. Now, click on the three horizontal bars in the upper-right corner, and then select “Objects” from the menu. Finds from 2005 should pop up.

4. Explore the items found from 2005-2000 and answer the following questions:

- i. Based on your impression from scrolling around, what category of items are best represented from 2005-2000 (i.e. the most numerous types of things found). Why do you think there are so many of these items?
- j. In this same span of years (2005-2000) choose an object that you find interesting, curious, or that jumps out at you and click on it. What kinds of information are included in the database entry for this item? List the categories.

k. Describe this same item in your own words. If you were the archaeologist who excavated, what questions would you ask about it to learn more information? Come up with **TWO** questions.

5. Go back to the main page and scroll until you find a white card with a black strip, labeled “Fanashawe College” in the upper left (item NZD1.00061KST002). Click on it. Look at the image of the item (both front and back) and the item description. Then answer the following questions:

l. What is this item? Be specific.

m. Where is this college located? (use Google)

n. What is behind the black bar over the card (think about what’s missing).

o. Consider how this card might be used by an archaeologist to inform them about the past; what would this tell you about the card, the river, or life in c.1975-2000?

6. Now scroll down to 1675, and look at the objects that date from 1675 to 1625 and answer these questions:

p. What new object types do you see that were not well-represented from 2000-2005? Come up with two categories.

q. What major object type is found in both the 2000s and 1600s?

r. Scan through the examples of pottery (they will have “CER” + three numbers at the end of the identification number under the image). Click on a few examples. Although they are all classified as ceramic vessels, they can be further subdivided—what qualities might you, as an archaeologist, choose to divide these vessels into smaller and more manageable groups, organized according to shared characteristics or qualities?

7. Now, click on the magnifying glass in the black box in the lower left-hand corner of the screen. A search menu will pop up. Click on “--> Use” and then pick from one of the categories and answer the following questions:

s. What category did you pick? Give **THREE** examples of object types in this category, and explain why you think they were organized under this use category.

8. Go back to the search menu. In the search box at the top type in “coin.” Scroll through these and click on a few different examples until you’ve spotted examples from 3 different countries/cities (identified under “Use” when you click on the object). Choose a few from throughout the timeline—don’t just stick to the 2000s! [NB--there’s a Roman coin in here, too, very badly preserved—it’s the first coin all the way at the bottom of the timeline]

t. What countries or cities were your three coins produced in, and to what year(s) do they date?

u. Think about the money we use today. In what ways are non-US currencies from across time (again, look at earlier coins for this) similar to modern currency? Come up with **TWO** similarities.

v. Imagine that you are an archaeologist studying these coins. What does a country or city’s money tell you about that community? Consider the economy, trade and movement, denominations, natural resources, and the art used on both sides of the coin.

9. Go back to the main screen and scroll around for a bit. Then, in a short paragraph answer the following questions:

- w. What three things did you learn?
- x. Write down two things you found interesting.
- y. Write down one thing you had a question about OR the object that you found most interesting (CANNOT be an object you described earlier on)

PART III: TRASH LOG

1. Pick **TWO** days in which you'll keep a log of everything you throw away. This should include approximate amounts, name brand, and where things are disposed (including location). You can keep a paper diary, or just jot things down on a note app. This will be mostly private (you won't share the whole thing with me), so be exhaustive in your cataloguing.

2. After your log is complete, answer the following questions below in the same word doc you used for Parts I & II:

- A. Answer the following questions with a yes or no (except for d):
 - a. Is soda present in your log in any quantity?
 - b. Are dairy products present in your log in any quantity?
 - c. Is take-out food or food prepared outside the house for you present in your log in any quantity?
 - d. Are caffeinated beverages present in your log in any quantity? If so, list them in a generic manner (coffee, tea, energy drink, etc.)
- B. Do you think that the list of materials you threw away is a reflection of your normal consumption habits (including the amounts and types of things you ate and threw away, the brands you consumed, etc)? Why/why not?
- C. What one item do you think best represents your daily life and consumption patterns? How does it do so?
- D. Did anything surprise you about the list of trash you collected? Did the act of making a list impact what you consumed or threw away (or where you threw it away) at all? Why/why not?
- E. What materials do you think would survive for future archaeologists (say, in 2000 years) to study? Give an example or two from your log. What materials are likely to not be preserved (again, give an example or two). Would the preservation of certain materials over others impact the types of things archaeologists would be able to study, or the types of patterns archaeologists might recover?
- F. Do you think your log is representative of the consumption and disposal patterns of others? Who?
- G. Pick **TWO** objects and discuss what that object might tell an archaeologist about life in our time. This can be a list of topics/themes/bits of data.