

SO YOU WANT TO BE A ROMAN BIOARCHAEOLOGIST...

July 29, 2011 Kristina Killgrove Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2011, Osteology, Romano-British, Science Academia, American Anthropological Association, anthropologist, Anthropology, antibiotics, archaeologist, Bioarchaeology, chemical analysis, Classics, Cultural relativism, Culture, Czech Republic, education, Franz Boas, Jeremy Sabloff, Kristina Killgrove, mathematician, Public Outreach, Research, Romans, Rome, scars, Science, Skeletons, Teaching, Tuscany, Twitter, United States, university professor, Vanderbilt University

If you're anything like me, you've wanted to dig up the bones of dead Romans for **as long as you can remember**. (Well, except for that brief period where I wanted to dig up dinosaurs and the even briefer one where I thought I might become a mathematician.) But if you live in the southern U.S. like I do, you're certainly not discovering **Roman skeletons in your garden** all the time. What does a Roman bioarchaeologist do every day? Generally, teach, research, and talk to colleagues and the public about teaching and research.

Teaching. The great thing about the American incarnation of the discipline of anthropology – something I didn't honestly learn until graduate school – is that it's what we call four-field: it combines archaeological, biological, cultural, and linguistic approaches to understanding humankind, past and present. As a university professor, it means that, in a given semester, I teach undergraduates about genetics, monkeys, and cultural relativism more often than I talk about my own research projects on the ancient Romans. But the amazingly diverse subject matter of my typical Introduction to Anthropology course also means that I can draw from almost any topic in the week's news to illustrate my lectures and to foster discussion: How does the hubbub over the **"gay caveman"** from the Czech Republic reflect our preconceived notions about sexuality? Why does anyone care if Shakespeare – or any Elizabethan Brit – **smoked pot**? Who polices American gender norms, telling us that **little boys can't paint their toenails pink** and little girls shouldn't **pretend to nurse their dolls**? In teaching students about anthropology, I try to teach them to question the ideas we take for granted and to critique the categories that we often think of as inherent and immutable, to let them see that every culture has its own rules and is a product of its own time.

Research. I'm not going to lie – fieldwork is the best part of my job. Who wouldn't like digging up dead Romans by day and eating pizza in the shadow of the Colosseum by night? While teaching gives me the thrill of watching students who have never been exposed to anthropology realize they love it, holding the bones of someone long-dead and reading their biography from their bodies still gives me chills. After two millennia, the Romans introduce themselves to me, telling me where they were born, showing me their scars, and complaining about their arthritic knees. It can be hard to listen to the woman with a fractured nose (a victim of domestic violence?) and especially to the babies who didn't have a chance to grow up because of a simple lack of antibiotics and multivitamins. And yet, as the field of bioarchaeology has advanced and incorporated the techniques of chemical analysis, my research on the ancient Romans has gone beyond the wildest dreams of my 12-year-old self. I've gotten to **identify immigrants to Rome** and to investigate their lives in the largest urban



Sometimes I get to teach osteology in the field (Tuscany, Summer 2004)



Roman Woman with Healed Broken Nose

center of its time, a topic the historical sources rarely discuss. I've gotten to find out what the average Roman ate, and to see that their **childhood diet was actually quite different from what they ate as adults**. And I've gotten to work with an array of amazing international archaeologists and anthropologists along the way.

Outreach. The final piece of my job is not mandatory but is becoming increasingly common. In his keynote address at the American Anthropological Association meeting last fall, the archaeologist Jeremy Sabloff pointed out that **there are no academics representing the face of anthropology**. We no longer have a Margaret Mead or a Franz Boas. Moving the discipline forward in the digital age, he said, means that it's going to be "public or perish." So why be content with the few dozen people who will read your dissertation? Being an academic today is about putting yourself out there as an expert, being the face of some topic, the person who can explain the importance of an anthropological concept to students and the public. I have tried to take up this challenge with **my own blog**, which I envision as a public form of the informal communication that I have all the time with my colleagues. Through blogging, I have started discussions with people in my field, in other academic disciplines, and outside of the academy completely. It's also been useful as a way for me to work through my **plot bunnies** (or **academic otters**), those nagging ideas that may not be fully formed but need to get out so that I can focus on one thing at a time. Fortunately, other academics are also choosing this route to public engagement, and projects like Day of Archaeology allow us to contribute to a broader discussion of what the discipline means and how best to show others our enthusiasm for it.

It's certainly not easy being a bioarchaeologist in academia, juggling several facets of our work on a daily basis and multitasking like mad. But the rewards are fantastic: not just flying around the world to excavate in exotic locales, but watching students have "a-ha" moments after a heated discussion about evolution, and explaining to the public why we anthropologists don't single out the privileged few who "shaped" society while ignoring the millions of others who actually made that society function.

I may not be a dinosaur-mathematician, but I've discovered that my childhood dream of studying the dead could come true with a little hard work. I will continue to define myself broadly as an anthropologist and narrowly as a Roman bioarchaeologist for as long as I can.