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Reading the dental record : a dental anthropological approach to foodways, health and disease, and crafting in the pre-Columbian Caribbean

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Citation

Mickleburgh, H. L. (2013, September 26). *Reading the dental record : a dental anthropological approach to foodways, health and disease, and crafting in the pre-Columbian Caribbean*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/21791>

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Issue Date: 2013-09-26

AFTERWORD

“The only thing that archaeology can tell us for certain about ancient civilizations is that they were all skeletons who lived underground... the rest is speculation” Chris Addison – stand-up comedian, writer and actor. 15th August 2010.

It can be hard enough to explain to friends, family, or any other non-archaeologist, what it is precisely that archaeologists do. The quote above humorously shows how we archaeologists often fail in explaining to others why what we do is in any way important. But as I have often experienced throughout the course of my research, the same applies to archaeologists among each other. My assumption that like-minded dirt-lovers would automatically find the study of the teeth of ancient dead people extremely exciting, turned out to be wrong. Therefore, this dissertation is an attempt to explain why boring old teeth are in actual fact incredibly interesting, to both the layman and the trained archaeologist.

But this highlights a deeper issue at the core of our field. Archaeology is one of the most diverse fields of research today, with an incredible variety of research questions, pertaining to a huge array of regions, time periods, societies, cultures, and communities, and perhaps an even greater set of multi-disciplinary tools to answer these questions. This multi-disciplinarity is essential to our scientific endeavours, yet sometimes leaves us less interconnected as a group of researchers working together with one common cause: learning about the history and development of the human race. The enormous number of specializations within archaeology, regarding both material and theoretical approaches, means that archaeologists among each other sometimes have less in common than archaeologists and the general public. In taking a dental anthropological approach, as a trained archaeologist, in an attempt to better understand foodways, health and disease, and crafting activities in the pre-Columbian Caribbean, I have constantly been aware of the fact that those of us who specialize ourselves in highly specific subfields of research, must continually reflect on our contribution to science and society as a whole. Having spent a total of eight years, from my Bachelor research onward, specializing myself in Caribbean archaeology and dental anthropology, I feel I may – in part at least – be able to explain to laymen and archaeologists alike why dental wear and pathology of pre-Columbian Caribbean Amerindians is fascinating and important. I now intend to broaden my scope, and who knows, one day I may be able to explain why ancient civilizations were not simply a bunch of dead people who lived underground. For now though, the rest is just speculation.