

ARTIFACT

Interpretation

Overview

A simple yet intriguing exercise demonstrates the amount of information that the study of a single artifact can yield about a society.

Objectives/Skills

Students will

- assess the characteristics of a society based on analysis of a single coin
- make inferences, analyze details and features, examine assumptions, brainstorm, work cooperatively, formulate questions

Subjects

Social studies

Age Level

Grades 5 through 12

Materials

- one or two pennies for each group
- paper
- pencils

Time Required

Allow 40 minutes to prepare for this activity and 40 minutes to complete it.

Background

Among the hundreds, and often thousands, of artifacts that an archaeologist finds at a site, sometimes a single object will provide an inordinate amount of detail about a society. A coin is an example because it has the potential to

reveal information about leaders, values, technological accomplishments, language, political structure, and a numerical system in operation, as well as the date of manufacture of the coin.

Studying a United States penny, students can gather certain information about the American society, such as:

1. Americans have access to minerals, presumably through mining or trade;
2. men wear or have worn facial hair;
3. Americans believe in a deity;
4. they construct open-air, monumental architecture;
5. they have knowledge of the Latin language;
6. they have a numerical system;
7. they are organized into a system of affiliated states;
8. this object is not wearable.

The temptation may exist to make inferences from the coin based on actual or modern knowledge—for example, that Americans know how to mine or that they construct buildings of stone. Both facts are true, but does the information on a penny really prove them?

Archaeologists often are faced with similar dilemmas, when a recovered object suggests that something may have occurred or existed, but further proof is needed. Armed with such circumstantial evidence, archaeologists develop new questions and hypotheses to test as they proceed with their research. While they hope that certain proof will emerge, sometimes they must state their conclusions by noting that something “may have” or “probably” occurred.

Procedure

1. Divide students into groups of three or four. Distribute one or two pen-



nies per group, and tell the groups to select one member to be responsible for recording the group’s findings on paper.

2. Ask students to imagine that they are examining a single artifact, found alone, from an unknown society. Their task is to determine as many features as possible about the people who made the object.

3. When the work group time has elapsed, ask teams to present their conclusions and to describe the processes that they used to reach their decisions. Lead students in a discussion about the details that can be derived from artifacts and the problem of making assumptions based on modern knowledge and behavior. Discuss as well the cumulative process that allows archaeologists to reach larger conclusions about a population of people.

Extensions

- Present this activity using old or foreign coins.
- Ask older students to develop a schema for artifact analysis and test it on other artifacts from contemporary society.

This activity was adapted from a lesson plan provided by Leonora Isakk, Hollis, NH.