



Historic Poo

In this activity you will find out how archaeologists discover what people in the past ate. Children will 'excavate' a human poo that an archaeologist has found in a cesspit. First reactions are usually 'eugh!' but then the children love it. The activity can be extended in many ways, for example to look at differing diets of the rich and poor, parasitic diseases or diets related to different geographical areas. The outline below asks the children to compare diets from different periods of time and can link into talking about the trading of goods.

You will need:

To make approximately 15 coprolites (poos!) you will need to make up the following playdough recipe and select items to put into them from the different periods you wish to cover. Suggestions for items for several time periods are given below.

- Play-dough (2 cups flour, 1 tablespoon oil, 1 cup salt)
- OXO cubes, Bovril or brown food colouring
- Dietary evidence that could pass into the coprolite (see below for suggestions)
- Small sticks – e.g. Cocktail sticks with the sharp points cut off
- Plastic sheeting
- Paper plates or similar
- Gloves (optional)

Activity

Before the session

Make the playdough by mixing the flour and salt together with the oil, mix the colouring agent with a small amount of water and stir in. To get a darker colour just keep adding more colouring but try to use small amounts of liquid or you'll end up with runny poo! Fashion the playdough into appropriate poo-like shapes and then add your dietary evidence. Suggestions for different periods are:

- Roman poo: grape pips, orange pips, melon seeds, olive stones, a few grains to show bread was eaten
- Viking poo: fish bones, apple pips and a few grains to show bread was eaten
- Anglo Saxon poo: lots of grain, a few small stones to show that grains were

ground with a quern stone leaving grit in the bread

- Aztec poo: pumpkin seeds, pepper seeds, maize corns (popping corn)
- Tudor poo: fish bones, small bird bones, grains to show bread was eaten, peas and lentils for poorer people; orange pips and tomato seeds for the rich

You might also like to include jelly worms or cooked spaghetti/noodles to act as parasites such as tape worms.

Finally coat the poos in oil to stop them from cracking and drying out.

During the session

Lead a class discussion on diet and ask them to think about what different people in the past (Romans, Vikings) might have eaten. Introduce the idea of dietary evidence surviving in the ground in cesspits. Give each child or pair of children a poo and ask them to excavate it carefully using the small sticks. Keep any finds in separate piles by placing on the paper plates; you could develop a recording sheet to help the children group their finds. Ask the children to decide which period of time they think their fake poo has come from based on the evidence they've retrieved. You could look at the grains and seeds under a microscope to look for evidence of cooking or to identify what seeds are present.

Useful questions:

- Why and how would this evidence survive?
- What can it tell us about people's diets in the past?
- What other information can it give us? (E.g. trade of foods that weren't grown in Britain at this time, evidence for poor health/disease)
- Why do we have to excavate the poo layer by layer?
- What evidence is missing from the poo? Why?
- Would rich people have different poo to poor people? Why?
- What can we tell about the health of people in the past from what they ate?

Research Opportunities:

- Looking into trade routes and preservation of goods on these journeys
- Researching common dietary related diseases and illnesses from the past
- Comparisons with our diet today; how have things changed?

Useful Websites:

www.cyberpursuits.com/archeo/food.asp Various articles connected with the archaeology of food, including recipes to try

www.mape.org.uk/curriculum/history/tudorfood.htm

www.smr.herefordshire.gov.uk/roman/food.htm

www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/food_01.shtml

Creative Minds Investigate! Archaeology

	National Curriculum	QCA Unit
KS 1	Science: Sc1; Sc2 History: 4a, b	Science: 2A
KS 2	Science: Sc1; Sc2 History: 2a; 4a, b; 8a; 10, 13	Science: 5A History: 6A-C, 8

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The Creative Minds project works with museums libraries and archives across the Yorkshire region, to provide young people with learning opportunities in Science, Technology, Engineering & Maths (S.T.E.M.). This ground-breaking project is the first of its kind in the country and is managed by MLA Yorkshire. This pack was developed by Creative Minds with funding from Yorkshire Forward.