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ARTICLE

# Materializing mortality: Re-enchanting grave goods in the British Museum using mixed-method approaches to audience research

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**Abstract**

Grave goods are among the most common, but at the same time most powerful, objects on display in many museums. They possess the rare—often latent—ability to convey both particular *and* universal themes and to collapse chronological and cultural differences by connecting the shared embodiment of museum visitors and past people. To explore these values, this study draws on the results of two phases of in-depth, mixed-methods audience research before and after a rapid and low-cost interpretative intervention: the "Death, Memory and Meaning" trail in the later prehistoric galleries of the British Museum. The analysis highlights the importance of fore-fronting intimacy and the complex relationship between bodies and objects. It also demonstrates the importance of contextual, emotionally and spiritually connected approaches to the presentation of grave goods. Our findings are especially timely given the intensification of ethical concerns surrounding displays of prehistoric European human remains in museums.

**KEYWORDS**

audience research, embodiment, ethics of display, grave goods, human remains, prehistory

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# INTRODUCTION

From the golden splendor of Mycenae's Bronze Age shaft graves in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens to the brilliantly preserved 3000-year-old tree-trunk coffin burials in the National Museum of Denmark, grave goods are highlights and cornerstones of many museums and, often, of what we know and say about later prehistoric Europe (Harding, 2008; Kristiansen & Larsson, 2005). Globally, the discovery of arrays of glittering grave goods has long been synonymous with the growth of public awareness of—and interest in—archaeology as a maturing discipline: from finds made within Pharaonic tombs in Egypt and the Royal Cemetery at Ur in Iraq—breathlessly relayed by the early- to mid-20th century print media to audiences across Europe and North America (Bacon, 1976; Ceram, 1952; Wheeler, 1957)—to recent high profile representation of grave goods in video games and films such as Tomb Raider, Assassin's Creed, and Indiana Jones. It is unsurprising, then, that grave goods feature prominently in many museums. A significant proportion (approximately 40%) of the objects currently on display in the later prehistoric European galleries of the British Museum come from funerary contexts and are thus technically "grave goods".[1] Their prominence together with the significant role these artifacts play in accounts of this period made them an ideal subject for our project's audience research and gallery intervention. The collections are currently presented in two galleries: "Britain and Europe 800 BC–AD 43" (Room 50) and "Europe and Middle East 10,000–800 BC" (Room 51). Our analysis reveals that considerably more could be done to highlight the funerary origins of many of these objects, and to re-enchant them; encouraging more dynamic and fulfilling visitor engagements with these often highly symbolically and emotionally charged objects that can elicit strong, even spiritual, feelings among contemporary audiences (cf. Perry, 2019).

The often eye-catching materiality and skilful production of grave goods from prehistoric Europe have long influenced curatorial selection at institutions such as the British Museum, especially since the 1970s and 1980s when more selective displays of "outstanding" things were increasingly preferred to "stand for" the rest or the whole, which might include "general" or "everyday" objects or assemblages (Longworth in Cherry & Walker, 1996, p. 28)—a process of "iconification" (Garrow & Wilkin, in press). Grave goods are by their nature a distinct category of objects, chosen (in the past) from a much wider assemblage of material culture which might be termed the "living material repertoire" (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 109–110). Their selection was underpinned by their (condensed) symbolic and representative potency, and because that meaning could be successfully conveyed during the limited duration of funerary events. These qualities make grave goods particularly well suited to the ambitions and restrictions of contemporary museum displays.

It is clear that "glamorous" and high impact grave goods like the Mold Gold Cape, found in a burial beneath a cairn in North Wales, are important, "star" museum objects with popular appeal that will guarantee their continued prominent position within displays (Figure 1). According to our audience research (outlined in detail below), the Cape had the highest attracting power (37%) and holding power (36%) of any objects in our study. However, out of the 25 visitors interviewed, only six people identified it as a grave find. This is representative of a need to contextualize such objects fully and powerfully to prevent their aesthetic appeal overshadowing the wider-reaching stories they can tell. Contemporary grave goods made of more humble, non-precious, materials are even more likely to be overlooked within exhibitions, displays and popular accounts (cf. Monti & Keene, 2013). This is problematic as these less alluring objects may convey more personal and representative stories (Cooper et al., 2022). A shift in focus is therefore required. This can be understood in the wider context of calls to rethink and decolonize the stereotypes, language and nomenclature of prehistory and its public display (Elliott & Warren, 2023; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Griffiths et al., 2023; McDowall, 2023; Pitcher, 2022; Smail, 2008). This move seeks to abolish distorting and false barriers between

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**FIGURE 1** The Mold Gold Cape (c.1900–1700 BCE). This remarkable embossed gold mantle was found in a grave near Wrexham, Wales in the early 19th century (© Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareALike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

"historic" and "prehistoric" societies, and recognize the shared humanity, complexity and variability of past societies. The display of prehistoric grave goods (especially undervalued categories of material or social status) has much to offer this important paradigm shift. They can deftly illustrate the skilfulness of prehistoric people. Furthermore, they can powerfully convey the universal experience of mortality and embody the ways past societies expressed some of their deepest, most complex, and intimate beliefs and ideals (see papers in Biers & Stringer Clary, 2024; Williams & Giles, 2016 and for a gallery-based project which links past and present discussions of mortality, see Lindqvist & Tishelman, 2015).

## RE-IMAGINING GRAVE GOODS

To better understand the potential of grave goods to connect with museum visitors and to push forward new understandings of the deep past, we drew on a mixed-method approach to audience research for representing grave goods in permanent museum displays. Between May 2019 and March 2020, we collectively curated a temporary "Death, Memory and Meaning" trail through Rooms 50 and 51 of the British Museum (DMM, 2019a; 2019b) as part of the AHRC-funded *Grave Goods: objects and death in later prehistory* project (2016–2020). The trail focused on a series of key burials selected to represent all three periods of later prehistory in Britain, contrasting both mortuary rites (cremation, inhumation and "body-less" deposits) and the character of grave goods and materials. Specially designed, visually striking, full-height case labels were added to each of the relevant displays (Figure 2). This intervention enabled the trail to be low-cost and temporary but also contemporary in its interpretation. The label text was closely guided by the preliminary

**FIGURE 2** A temporary "Death, Memory and Meaning" trail label in situ in British Museum Gallery 51 (© Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareALike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

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results of audience research (as well as the Grave Goods project's findings) and highlighted more detailed, personal and contextual narratives with a strategic focus on more humble objects or alternative perspectives on more spectacular and prestigious grave goods. Audience responses were collected in the galleries before and during the lifespan of the trail to understand public perceptions of, engagement with, and knowledge about grave goods during this period.

Over the last two decades, there has been a steady increase in concerns regarding the ethics of publicly exhibiting human remains in museums, with calls for them to be more selectively or sensitively displayed (Giles, 2020, p. 253), or withdrawn entirely from public view (Alberti et al., 2009, p. 140; Brooks & Weston, 2006; Licata et al., 2020). As an alternative, grave goods can play an important role as proxies for the burial, its power and meaning. They are often asked to stand for the personhood of the dead, their identity and life experiences (Williams, 2016). Perhaps reflecting this trend, the British Museum's Rooms 50 and 51 display only two instances of human remains, both discussed in greater detail below. This also reflects the enduring and widespread practice of separating artifacts and human remains for storage, display and retention, driven initially by the priorities and interests of early antiquarian and early archeologists and, subsequently, by increased specialization within archaeology as a discipline (cf. Sofaer, 2007). As a result, prehistoric human remains and objects from the same graves are sometimes held by two different institutions. Issues surrounding the clarity, impactfulness, and morality of display are made (even) more complex because there is often an intimate, even porous, relationship between grave goods and human bodies in the past and present. Grave goods may have had an indissoluble bond with the deceased which we should respect and represent (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 140; Rebay-Salisbury et al., 2010, p. 2); they may have literally been material parts *of* their personhood (Figure 3). There are even examples of later prehistoric grave goods that are made from human remains. For example, a flute carved from a Bronze Age human thigh bone of an adult male was found in a grave beneath a burial mound in Wilsford, near Stonehenge (Brück & Booth, 2022, p. 456), and is currently on display at Wiltshire Museum, Devizes (England).

The relationship between the bodies of prehistoric people and grave goods can thus be described as a complex spectrum of relations rather than a clear dichotomy between the human and the non-human which can be neatly distinguished, or even severed, in contemporary museum displays. The ideology of the individual body with clear boundaries and identity is arguably a construct of the Global North that had little relevance during later prehistory (Brück, 2019, p. 61–63). This raises a range of cultural, moral, and ethical factors that museums should consider when displaying and interpreting grave goods from this period. During our study, it became clear that grave goods which are presented *without* human remains—due to issues of preservation or ethical sensitivities—can raise some unexpected questions about how to create embodied and meaningful connections between past people, the objects they were buried with and contemporary museum visitors. At the end of this study, we suggest some key ways in which the important issue of embodiment might be addressed in future displays.

## ASSESSING THE PREVALENCE OF GRAVE GOODS IN GALLERIES

A survey (by MG) of the provenance of objects in the British Museum's Room 50 ("Britain and Europe, 800 BC – AD 43") and Room 51 ("Europe and Middle East, 10,000 – 800 BC") demonstrated that among the 934 Iron Age objects on display in Room 50, 378 (41%) were from funerary contexts.[2] Where funerary contexts are discussed in these displays, the topics raised

FIGURE 3 The skull of an adult male from Mill Hill, Deal, Kent with bronze "crown" or diadem that has stained the skull to form a composite (or hybrid) of object and human remains (c. 250–150 BCE) (© Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareALike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

typically concern social hierarchy, status, and power. More interpretatively challenging themes are touched upon, albeit rarely and briefly, and they concern funerary rites, ceremonies, and feasting associated with death and burial. Occasionally label texts mention the excavators (or collectors) but little or no space is given to discuss the lives of the people buried with the objects on display.[3] More personal or emotional themes are largely absent.

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There is a smaller total number of Neolithic and Bronze Age objects on display in Room 51 (218), but again a sizable proportion of these (83 = 38%) are grave goods. As in Room 50, the most common trope in case headings and labels related to the uniqueness and individuality of both grave goods and, by inference, the person or people buried with them. Discourse analysis was also undertaken across both galleries (by MG), analyzing case headings, artifact labels and panel text, mapping key words, explanatory phrases, and interpretive tropes. From this, it was apparent that while funerary rites, ceremonies, and feasting are occasionally mentioned, the details given are generic rather than specific. Keywords included "rare, unique, precious, value, privilege, high status, power," and only one example (the Mill Hill Deal warrior) gave voice to the "complex" aspects of identity (social, political, ritual) that the grave goods might embody. Inevitably, these traits reflect attitudes and priorities at the time Rooms 50 and 51 were installed in the 1990s and early 2000s, respectively.

Although we may consider death and burial to be a universally important dimension of life, it is striking that as many as 40% of the 1152 objects displayed in Rooms 50 and 51 are from funerary contexts. This is not a reflection of the make-up of the entire collection held by the British Museum as most of the European later prehistoric objects (in excess of 1.5 million items, approximately one third of the entire collections database) come from non-funerary contexts (MacDonald, 2022, p. 5), including settlement sites and flint mines. We suspect the prevalence of grave goods reflects biases of preservation (the grave serving to protect and take important objects out of everyday circulation) and the process of "iconification" outlined above, as particular objects, especially those with immediate aesthetic impact and appeal, have been selected to stand for the many.

# METHODOLOGY

## Understanding public interactions with grave goods

In preparation for the DMM trail, one of the authors (RC) designed and implemented a qualitative audience research study to understand how visitors interacted with and made their own meanings from grave goods in Rooms 50 and 51 (Cecilia, 2018). This preliminary data collection took place in the summer of 2018 (6 August–5 September). The research questions of the study were three-fold:

1. How do British Museum visitors understand grave goods in the galleries?
2. How do visitors move in the gallery space in relation to grave goods? Are they aware of the presence of grave goods in the displays, and do they recognize them?
3. How accessible is information about grave goods? What values does it communicate to visitors?

To answer these questions, the qualitative research combined three methods of data collection: visitor tracking, ethnographic observation, and semi-structured interviews. Naturalistic visitor tracking occurred as visitors moved through the galleries. They were observed, their movements tracked and timed on a map of the exhibition space, and observations of their behavior in relation to objects and interpretation panels were logged. Ethnographic observations were made for an hour each day for the duration of the evaluation period with the aim of recording visitors and groups of visitors interacting with different displays in the galleries. The observations focused on visitors who read and engaged with labels connected to grave goods. In addition, semi-structured interviews were carried out using open-ended questions to gather insights into visitors' understanding of grave goods in the galleries. For each gallery, 50 visitors (selected at random) were tracked, and 25 visitors were interviewed. There was no

overlap between interviewed and tracked visitor. Although interviewees were selected after observing their behavior in the galleries, there was no overlap between those who were selected for interview and those who were tracked. While the sample size was relatively modest, the overall study included other galleries in the British Museum, including ancient Egyptian objects (Rooms 63–64) and the Living and Dying display in Room 24. In this article, we focus specifically on the findings from Rooms 50 and 51, although the wider findings contained much of contextual relevance and value (see Cecilia, 2018).

When interviewees were asked to recall one or more objects that they had seen in the galleries that *were* grave goods, the responses (unsurprisingly) aligned with the objects and human remains that, according to findings from the tracking, held the highest attractiveness and holding power[4] (see Table 1). Yet as we anticipated, there was a clear bias in the type of object recognized *as* a grave good. Standalone objects were more likely to be "remembered" as grave goods (whether they were actually grave goods or not), while smaller, more humble objects were overlooked. For example, the Iron Age "Battersea Shield" and "Waterloo Helmet" (Figure 4) are striking and prominent objects on display in Room 50 but they are not grave goods. Nonetheless, some interviewees had the impression that they were. Furthermore, nine interviewees (36%) recalled a bog body from Lindow Moss, Cheshire, in northern England, as a prominent grave good. Apart from a (difficult to see) fox-fur armband, the man from Lindow was found naked with no other objects, and his violent death is better interpreted as a very special kind of ritual offering rather than a traditional burial (Joy, 2009). The interviewees' conceptualization of this violently murdered man as a grave good does however reflect larger ontological issues related to the categorization of human versus non-human artifacts, as well as difficulties in distinguishing between burial and non-funerary depositional practice (Cooper et al., 2020; Joy, 2014, p. 10).

One interpretation of these results is that interviewees tended to associate grave goods with more "glamorous," "iconic" or otherwise visually striking objects, "treasures" or aesthetically intriguing displays, including those of human remains (cf. McDowall, 2023, p. 722; Williams et al., 2022). This reading is further supported by participants' responses when asked if they could think of objects that people most regularly placed in graves (Table 2). Most interviewees associated grave goods with prestige objects of intrinsic value, including jewelry, weapons, and

**TABLE 1** Alignment between the objects identified as grave goods by visitors, their attractiveness, and holding power.

| Object | Number of visitors who mentioned them as grave goods[a] | Attractiveness (%)[b] | Holding power (%)[b] | Grave good(s)?[b] | Human remains?[b] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Barnack Beaker burial | 11 | 39% | 36% | Yes | Yes |
| Lindow Man | 9 | 36% | 39% | No | Yes |
| Generic: Weapons | 6 | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Mold Gold Cape | 6 | 37% | 24% | Yes | No |
| Welwyn Garden City burial | 5 | 42% | 18% | Yes | Yes |
| Generic: Jewelry | 5 | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Waterloo Helmet | 4 | 23% | 19% | No | No |
| The Battersea Shield | 3 | 36% | 14% | No | No |
| The Basse-Yutz Flagons | 1 | 34% | 29% | Yes | No |

*Note*: Some visitors gave more than one answer and nine answered "none."

[a] *N* = 25 visitors interviewed.

[b] *N* = 50 visitors tracked.

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**FIGURE 4** The Iron Age Waterloo Helmet (c.150–50 BCE), dredged from the River Thames at Waterloo Bridge in 1868, the helmet was identified as a grave good by a number of participants in the study (© Trustees of the British Museum.). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

in general status symbols. Objects associated with religious practices (offerings and religious symbols) were mentioned 11 times, while more humble, unassuming, and less precious types of objects were mentioned less than five times each.

Interviewees were also asked what, if anything, they would like to know about the grave goods displayed in the galleries. Only 14 visitors had suggestions, while the other 11 replied "nothing" or that "the amount of information provided was ok" (Table 3).

The responses suggest that the meaning visitors make of grave goods is nuanced, complex and goes beyond aesthetic fascination with "glamorous" things. The desire for a scaffolded understanding of grave goods in their funerary context is clear; visitors were particularly curious about geographical/spatial contexts (provenance, origin, location in the grave, where they were found), intimate personal or relational context (such as the meaning of an object for both the deceased and the living, how such meanings changed, and who they might have belonged to), functional context (an object's crafting history, its use before burial), and finally, the context of discovery.[5] While the results from Table 1 clearly demonstrate how "iconic" grave goods stood out for the visitors, the more nuanced findings from Table 3 make the case for a different hierarchy of museum interpretation of funerary contexts. Rich contextual information, a more personal connection between the grave goods and the living, and a better understanding of objects' biographies were advocated for by visitors (cf. McDowall, 2023, p. 714).

In summary, many of the visitors interviewed felt that the existing text labels failed to sufficiently frame and contextualize the finds to forefront their human stories and interpretative potential. This posed the question: how could the funerary context and meaning of these objects be made more relevant, compelling, and illuminating? While we were open to the importance of other aspects of display (for example the selection, mounting and clustering of grave

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TABLE 2 Interviewees' understanding of objects that people most regularly placed in graves.

| Description | Number ($n = 25$) |
|---|---|
| Valuables/Jewelry | 11 |
| Weapons | 9 |
| Generic: offerings | 8 |
| Generic: status symbol objects | 7 |
| Metals | 6 |
| Personal items/daily life objects | 5 |
| Clothing/Ornamental objects | 4 |
| Coins | 4 |
| Generic: religious symbols | 4 |
| Food/drinks | 2 |

*Note*: Some visitors gave more than one answer.

TABLE 3 Interviewees were asked what else they would like to know about grave goods on display.

| Requested additional information | Number ($n = 25$) |
|---|---|
| Provenance/Origin information | 6 |
| Function of object (grave good) before burial | 3 |
| Meaning of grave goods for dead/living—how meaning changes | 3 |
| Who grave goods belonged to | 2 |
| How and where grave goods were found | 2 |
| Who found the grave goods | 2 |
| Manufacturing process of grave goods | 1 |
| Location of objects in the grave | 1 |

*Note*: Some visitors gave more than one answer.

goods on display), and we do revisit the importance of these aspects in the conclusions to this paper, the budget and aims of the intervention were limited to additional textual and visual information.

## Implementing the death, memory, and meaning trail

The DMM trail was implemented in Rooms 50 and 51 for 10 months, from May 2019 to March 2020 on a modest budget. During this period, an estimated 101,250 people per week passed through the relevant galleries, and visitor studies suggest that approximately 32,400 visitors stopped to engage with at least some of the trail content throughout its lifetime.[6] Eleven burials or funerary contexts were selected for re-interpretation, and care was taken to spread these across the two galleries (Figure 5). The visual design of the trail labels consciously drew on Victorian funerary palettes to create a somber yet respectful tone, aesthetically "signaling" its mortuary theme to visitors ahead of any detailed reading of the panels.[7] Working from the initial audience research and wider experience of curating later prehistoric objects, we identified three aspects that should be addressed by each stop on the trail.

The first aspect, "people," concerned personhood, time, and place: who were the *people* buried with the grave goods on display and how could we ensure that their story was not

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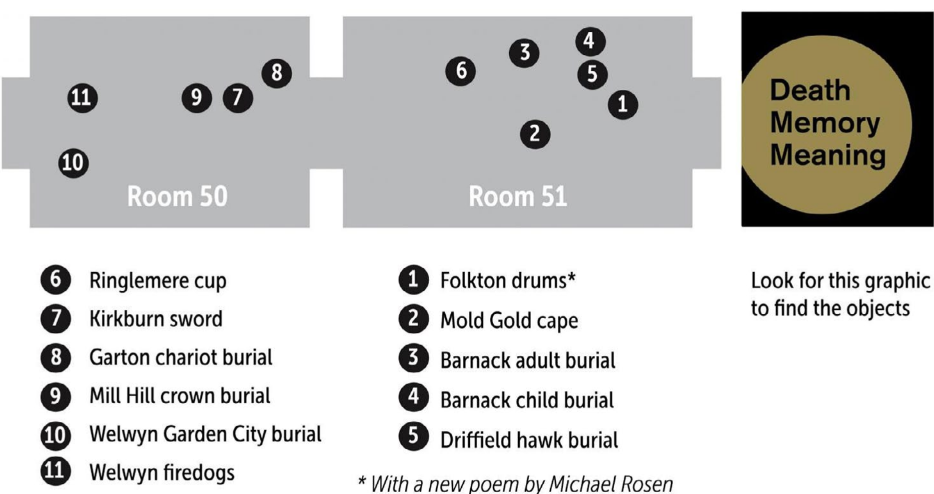


FIGURE 5 The location and identity of the 11 grave goods selected for the Death, Memory & Meaning trail across Rooms 50 and 51 (© Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareALike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

lost? Given the perceived gulf between the present and prehistory, and the poorly understood nature of this period among many audiences, it was especially important to humanize and re-embody the story of the objects on display, highlighting intimate, personal details to redress the impression of remoteness. It was also important to stress that in selecting later prehistoric grave goods, matters of individual wealth, power, and status were less relevant concerns than has traditionally been suggested within popular accounts of prehistory (cf. Brück, 2004; Cooper et al., 2022; Fowler, 2013). The artifacts left in graves are emotional and relational—they speak of the care shown to the dead by the living as well as our entangled relationships with objects.

The second aspect, "objects," was to guide audiences toward seeing the objects on display in new and more interesting ways by asking them (1) to examine one particular detail of the object, and (2) to focus their interest on that, rather than skimming across the whole surface of the case. Various strategies were used: evidence for the "human touch" in traces of crafting, use-wear or repair; material fragility and evanescence; extraordinary craft skill, or aesthetic finish; size, especially miniaturization or hidden detail; metaphor and symbolism.

The third and final aspect, "today," concerned the contemporary resonance of the objects on display. We the specific details of these objects to reveal moving connections between past and present. We wanted to make modern-day connections more obvious and integral to the way we discussed the objects within the trail, yet our challenge was also to open up new understandings of how grave goods have been (and continue to be) used to deal with loss and bereavement.

The full text of the 11 DMM trail labels is available from the project's Archaeology Data Service webpage (DMM, 2019b). They include examples such as the Mold Gold Cape, which offered the opportunity to present the powerful role of female figures during prehistory (Figures 1 and 2), as well as stories of loss related to infants and children (the Barnack baby and Folkton Drum child), redressing the frequent invisibility of childhood/children in displays. Yet the alterity of identities we could present in the trail was constrained both by the over-representation of "male" burials in the galleries and limited budget: a conundrum faced by many museums. To illustrate the value of this approach, we have selected 3 of the 11 case

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studies to discuss in depth, each representing a key theme and period: death in childhood (the Neolithic Folkton Drums inhumation), the marking of relations through materials (the Bronze Age Barnack Beaker burial) and funerals as important social events during times of change (the Welwyn Garden city cremation).

## The Folkton drums burial

The Folkton Drums from North Yorkshire (England) are a group of three, solid, chalk cylinders with elaborate carvings that reflect the artistic style of Britain and Ireland during the period c. 3200–2500 BCE (Figure 6) (Longworth, 1999). They were excavated in 1889 by William Greenwell, who recorded their presence in the grave of a child aged around 6 years old.

The function of the "drums" remains uncertain. Although human faces appear to peer out from the decoration of the largest and smallest examples, their decoration is otherwise abstract and non-figurative. The style of decoration does, however, belong to a wider tradition shared with other decorated objects from this period (including pottery known as Grooved Ware), found at sites across Britain and Ireland (Garrow & Wilkin, 2022, p. 104–19).

In addressing the "people" aspect of the DMM trail, our primary concern was to make it clear that, although they possessed abstract qualities, these objects were grave goods buried with a child. Details were recorded about the position of the "drums" which had been carefully arranged around the child's body. We wanted to emphasize this intimacy, noting that their position close to the body may have indicated a desire to protect a vulnerable child. We also took the opportunity to illustrate this point in a specially commissioned reconstruction drawing (Figure 7).

The aspect of the "object" that we drew out concerned the decorative motifs, why they were important and what they may have conveyed. Special emphasis was placed on the possible apotropaic role of the decoration and how the style of art connected the "drums" (and thus

**FIGURE 6** The Folkton Drums (c.3000 BCE) (© Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareALike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

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**FIGURE 7** A reconstruction drawing of the Folkton Drums burial (© Craig Williams). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

the child) to a powerful wider ceremonial world. Uniquely in this instance, our label included a new poem commissioned from the well-known children's author Michael Rosen—who is renowned for his ability to write sensitively about grief (Rosen, 2004)—as part of the *Grave Goods* project's engagement with school-aged audiences (all resources are available at: doi.org/

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10.5284/1052206). The poem gave voice to the child itself, giving the absent body a presence in the gallery, gently appealing for the company of these enigmatic but loved things. It allowed us to connect these objects to the sense of loss but also the tenderness of memories surrounding the death of any child—from prehistory to the present day. The second stanza of Rosen's poem illustrates the narrative voice he created:

> If I am not to last the summer
> If I am not to live out the light
> If, when the mists hang in the air
> lay at my head
> lay at my back
> lay at my hip
> the treasures I have had
> since I was on all fours
>
> (from The Folkton Drums by Michael Rosen)

## The Barnack beaker burial

The audience research undertaken in advance of the trail highlighted the attractiveness and holding power of the skeletal remains of an adult male burial (Figure 8; Table 1) from a cemetery site at Barnack, Cambridgeshire, England (Donaldson et al., 1977). This prominent display case, with its human remains and associated grave goods, plays an important role in the gallery's overarching narrative and structure, introducing a major genetic and cultural change that took place during the period c.2500–2300 BCE, associated with the so-called "Beaker people" (Armit & Reich, 2021).

FIGURE 8 Image of the Barnack burial, Cambridgeshire on display in Room 51 (© Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareALike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

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The objects that accompanied the burial include the distinctive Beaker pot that gives this type of burial its name, a copper dagger, and a fastening toggle made of sea-mammal ivory (possibly walrus), which is surprising considering the burial was located many miles from the sea. Beside the man's wrist lay a stone object with gold studs, thought to represent—or symbolize—an archer's wrist guard, worn as protection when using a bow. The gold probably came from Cornwall in the south-west of the country while the stone was quarried on a high peak of the Langdale Pikes in the Lake District in north-west England. These geographical connections, relating to this individual who lived around 4300 years ago, and indeed people living during the Beaker period more generally, were highlighted in the trail label to address the interest shown by study participants in the function, meaning, and provenance of grave goods.

A final element of this label highlighted the presence of other, often overlooked, burials and grave goods from the same barrow mound, which had never been displayed in the British Museum galleries. A more modest, small grave close to the richly equipped man contained the body of an infant, just 4 or 5 months old (Donaldson et al., 1977, p. 206, 209). The grave goods from this infant's burial included a small, undecorated Beaker pot and a tiny chip of flint. The miniaturization of “adult” things seems appropriate for the child—both objects are unassuming, humble—but they seem to respond sensitively to a little life unlived, contrasting with the adult's more complex and story-laden objects.

## The Welwyn Garden City “rich” burial

The contents of an Iron Age grave from Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, in southern England, provided one of the most visually impressive expressions of grave goods on the DMM trail (Figure 9). Arranged around the cremated remains of an adult male were a dazzling array of objects made of ceramic, glass, and bronze, including numerous imports from the Mediterranean world (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 255–59; Stead, 1967). When measured by number or rarity of grave goods, it could be described as one of the “richest” known graves from the earliest stages of Roman contact with Britain, traditionally interpreted as reflecting ties between 'elite' members of Iron Age society and the wider Roman Empire well before the conquest of Britain in 43 CE.

Drawing on our preliminary audience research, which highlighted the superficiality of messaging given or taken by such “wealthy” burials, we chose to highlight an aspect that was less straightforward. When discovered, this grave was surrounded by other simpler cremation burials in urns nearby, suggesting that it may have served as a focal point for the wealth and identity of the wider community in response to a changing world, rather than simply representative of one 'elite' individual (Harding, 2016, p. 153).

Fragments of bear claws were found with the cremated remains, suggesting that the body was wrapped in a bearskin before being burnt. We noted that bears were rare in England by the time of the burial, meaning that their pelts may have been high-status and symbolic items. As the human body was transformed by fire, the bear pelt with claws still attached may have expressed the ferocity of the dead individual or imbued the remains with magical qualities required to negotiate the dangerous space between the worlds of the living and the dead (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 255; Kirkinen, 2019, p. 70).

A further strand to the trail label emphasized how these grave goods evoked the living world and the “comforts of hearth and home” (Harding, 2016, p. 151); of a man who, both in life and death, was an excellent host and perhaps also a skilful game player and strategist. The neatly arranged dining and drinking services suggest a diacritical funerary feast, with the bowls and jars possibly filled with provisions for the afterlife. Here, we did not play down the notion of wealth, privilege, and distinction; we used it to foreground how death itself was a socio-political arena used to construct kingly figures at a time of great change.

FIGURE 9 The Welwyn Garden City burial and grave goods assemblage (c.50–25 BCE) on display in Room 50 (© Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareALike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

## Audience research: the death, memory, and meaning trail

The second audience research study was carried out by one of the authors (RC) in the summer of 2019 (21 June to 1 August), to assess the impact of the DMM trail and visitors' renewed interaction with grave goods in Rooms 50 and 51 (Cecilia, 2019). It followed the same mixed-methods approach as the study carried out in 2018. The research again combined three methods: visitor tracking, ethnographic observation, and open-ended semi-structured interviews. The findings were similarly analyzed through the qualitative lens of grounded theory (Denzin, 2007). The objectives of this additional stage of research were to gather information about: (1) the accessibility of DMM labels; (2) the clarity of the text and content; the values that DMM trail labels communicated; (3) how DMM trail labels contributed, if at all, to visitors' understanding of concepts like "death," "memory," and "grave goods"; and (4) the impact of DMM labels on visit routes. Fifty visitors were tracked, and 15 were interviewed in Rooms 50 and 51. Only those who had stopped to read at least three DMM labels were approached for interview.

To compare results with our 2018 preliminary study, interviewees were asked if they remembered one or more objects that they had seen in the galleries that were grave goods (Table 4). Overall, 6 of the 11 DMM trail objects were mentioned, double the number cited in 2018. Those that had been mentioned previously saw notable increases, probably due to their increased attracting power.

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**TABLE 4** Comparison between the objects identified as grave goods by visitors in 2018 and in 2019.

| Object | No. who identified it in 2018 ($n=25$) | No. who identified it in 2019 ($n=15$) |
|---|---|---|
| Barnack Beaker burial* | 11/25 (44%) | 13/15 (87%) |
| Lindow Man | 9/25 (36%) | 5/15 (33%) |
| None | 9/25 (36%) | 9/15 (60%) |
| Mold Gold Cape* | 6/25 (24%) | 8/15 (53%) |
| Generic: Weapons | 6/25 (24%) | 6/15 (40%) |
| Generic: Jewelry | 5/25 (20%) | 5/15 (33%) |
| *Welwyn Garden City burial* | 5/25 (20%) | 7/15 (47%) |
| Waterloo Helmet | 4/25 (16%) | 1/15 (7%) |
| The Battersea shield | 3/25 (12%) | 2/15 (13%) |
| Folkton Drums* | 0/25 (−) | 1/15 (7%) |
| Ringlemere cup* | 0/25 (−) | 3/15 (20%) |
| Kirkburn sword* | 0/25 (−) | 1/15 (7%) |

*Note*: Some visitors gave more than one answer. Objects with a DMM label are marked with an asterisk.

Table 5 presents a comparison between how many interviewees read each DMM trail label and how many remembered the associated object as a grave good during their interview. There was good cross-over for around half of the labels. The labels that did not achieve this (e.g., the Folkton Drums, Barnack infant burial, Driffield burial, Garton Station chariot, and Welwyn "fire dog") share a common characteristic within the gallery context: they lack human remains or forms that evoke a human body. Some of the most "successful" labels (e.g., the Mold Gold Cape, Barnack burial, and Welwyn Garden City burial) either feature human remains or, in the case of the Cape, evoke the body on which they were worn.

When participants were asked if they could think of objects that people most regularly placed in graves in the past, the majority of interviewees still associated grave goods with more "glamorous" objects, including jewelry, weapons, and in general status symbol objects (Table 6). However, the comparison between findings from 2018 and 2019 shows a strong increase in mentions of more humble, personal objects like clothing, food, drinks, and items associated with "daily life."

Eight interviewees commented on how their understanding of grave goods had changed (four interviewees) or had been enhanced (four interviewees) after reading the DMM trail labels. Two interviewees specifically expressed their surprise at learning that more humble, everyday objects *were* placed in burials:

> I didn't realise that they would put everyday objects in graves. I guess I always thought that only very special objects were
>
> [interviewee]

> I thought that grave goods were the symbols of power. Like the things the Egyptians put: all gold and jewellery to show how powerful someone was. Here I read that they can also symbolise how people lived. It's really fascinating. You know, something like the cart. I'd never guessed they would put it in a burial, really!
>
> [interviewee]

Despite the format and themes of the DMM trail labels being as unified as possible, some clearly drew more attention than others. The human skeleton on display in the Barnack burial

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**TABLE 5** Comparison between visitors that interacted with DMM labels and those who recognized the associated object in the interview.

| Object associated with DMM label | No. of interviewees who read the label ($n = 15$) | No. of interviewees who recognized object(s) as grave goods ($n = 15$) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Folkton drums | 3 | 1 |
| 2. Mold Gold Cape | 10 | 8 |
| 3. Barnack burial | 13 | 13 |
| 4. Barnack infant burial | 5 | 0 |
| 5. Driffield burial | 4 | 0 |
| 6. Ringlemere cup | 5 | 3 |
| 7. Kirkburn sword | 2 | 1 |
| 8. Garton Station chariot | 3 | 0 |
| 9. Mill Hill warrior | 1 | 0 |
| 10. Welwyn Garden City burial | 9 | 7 |
| 11. Welwyn fire dog | 7 | 0 |

**TABLE 6** Comparison of interviewees' understanding of objects that people most regularly placed in graves.

| Description | No. who mentioned it in 2018 ($n = 25$) | No. who mentioned it in 2019 ($n = 15$) |
|---|---|---|
| Valuables/Jewelry | 11/25 (44%) | 13/15 (87%) |
| Weapons | 9/25 (36%) | 8/15 (53%) |
| Generic: offerings | 8/25 (32%) | 5/15 (33%) |
| Generic: status symbol objects | 7/25 (28%) | 6/15 (40%) |
| Metals | 6/25 (24%) | 7/15 (47%) |
| Personal items/daily life objects | 5/25 (20%) | 11/15 (73%) |
| Clothing/Ornamental objects | 4/25 (16%) | 9/15 (60%) |
| Generic: religious symbols | 4/25 (16%) | 5/15 (33%) |
| Coins | 4/25 (16%) | 3/15 (20%) |
| Food/drinks | 2/25 (8%) | 6/15 (40%) |
| Animals/animal bones | 1/25 (4%) | 6/15 (40%) |

*Note*: Some visitors gave more than one answer.

was a key focus of interest. This was the most popular label for interactions (27, with nine recorded visitors taking photographs of the label). Families and younger audiences were well represented. The human remains formed the focus of a range of discussions around age, sex, health, and life experiences, with six groups discussing the scientific evidence for mobility and migration touched upon on the DMM label. It is notable that no negative comments were recorded regarding the ethics of displaying the skeleton, reiterating audience research suggesting a generally positive audience response to the display of archeological human remains that are over 100 years old (Antoine, 2014, p. 6; English Heritage, 2009, p. 9; Frost, 2018; Williams & Giles, 2016). Despite the range of different interactions, our visitor observations revealed the success of the trail as a way of encouraging visitors to move between a constellation of objects that may otherwise have seemed unrelated or distinct.

Overall, the labels of the DMM trail were described as appealing, accessible, informative, and useful to understand the objects. While none of the interviewees had negative feedback,

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several made suggestions for improvements. Some were related to the actual labels' design (larger text, more images, etc.). Others related to the interpretation provided, as interviewees wanted: to have similar labels in other galleries; to know more about comparable labels in other British Museum galleries; to have a physical sheet with the trail labels' location; or for the trail to be advertised at the entrance of the galleries. These findings are consistent with the desire to "know more" that visitors expressed in 2018, and they also suggest that the DMM trail was successful in providing an additional, emotionally and intellectually stimulating layer of contextual interpretation.

## CONCLUSION: EMBODIED ENGAGEMENT

At the outset of this study, we observed the centrality of prehistoric grave goods in museum displays across Europe and beyond. We noted that "glamorous" items of perceived high economic and social value tend to be singled out by institutions such as the British Museum. We made a theoretical case for the importance of more "humble" and "everyday" objects and for the contextual—or human—significance of grave goods in communicating the variety, emotion, and depth of prehistoric lives. Our findings go some way toward demonstrating the need (and potential) for prehistoric objects to be represented in more engaging, thoughtful and intellectually stimulating ways (cf. McDowall, 2023), and that grave goods can play an important role in a process of re-imaging and re-enchanting the deep past (cf. Perry, 2019; Stutz, 2018; Tringham, 2019). As the results of our study have shown, re-enchantment can be used as a collaborative approach using audience research as the basis for representing archeological findings in more imaginative and emotional ways. The results of the study have already directly influenced approaches to the display of grave goods (and objects more generally) in a recent, larger scale exhibition "The World of Stonehenge," held at the British Museum (February–July 2022), furthering the notion of promoting "alternative icons" forwarded in this paper (see Garrow & Wilkin, in press), The study will feed into the Museum's ambitious redisplay of its permanent collections (Kendall Adams, 2022), and refreshing English Heritage's Stonehenge Visitor Centre exhibition currently being undertaken by one of the authors (JW). Furthermore, the DMM trail also lives on through the archive British Museum webpage (DMM, 2019a) and the Grave Good project's digital repository (DMM, 2019b).

We have also noted the growing ethical and moral issues raised (in academic studies) regarding the public display of human remains. While the potential for "visceral shock" when encountering human remains cannot be denied (Parker Pearson, 2016, p.vi), museums remain places for dialogue, where human remains can play a role in deep reflection on death and mortality (Antoine, 2014, p. 6; English Heritage, 2009, p. 11). It can also serve to remind audiences of our shared mortality. Furthermore, the lack of written records can have a "dehumanizing" effect in audiences' perceptions of the deep past, leading them to view both the objects and people of this period as (more) "barbaric/undeveloped" than those of more recent periods (cf. Pitcher, 2022). In this context, human remains (or the bodies they can effectively presence) can be a powerful reminder of shared humanity and attitudes to death and burial spanning millennia. However, skeletal morphology/presence is arguably reductive and not the best way to measure or mark socio-cultural and behavioral similarities and differences (cf. Wragg Sykes, 2020). In our view, this important and ongoing debate, as it relates to the prehistoric period in Europe at least, has been shorn of a significant additional dimension: the complex relationship between grave goods and human bodies. Given that the ideology of individual, bounded, body and identity are, at least in part, a modern, construct of the Global North, curators need to be open to displaying and appreciating alternative and complex relationships between objects and corporeality (Brück, 2019; Fowler, 2004; Thomas, 1991).

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As a result of this study, we have identified three key themes to consider when (re)displaying grave goods of all periods in both permanent and temporary exhibition spaces:

## The recognition, comprehension, and visibility of grave goods

It is important to provide clearer explanations and interpretations regarding which objects are—and are not—grave goods. In achieving this, the presence of bodies—and objects that evoke them—appears to play a key role in determining what audiences perceive to be a grave good; so do the apparent "glamor" or socio-economic value of objects. Conversely, we noted that there was a latent desire for more personal and emotive stories to be told about grave goods. The audience research undertaken to assess the DMM trail's effectiveness highlighted increased recognition of grave goods, including the more understated and humble objects that we had wished to forefront. A recurrent observation, however, was the appeal and interaction created by the prospect of past bodies, real or imagined.

## Embodied engagements in the past and present

Bodies play a fundamental role in both our understandings of prehistoric funerary practices *and* in the experiences of contemporary museum audiences. In the case of prehistoric burials, bodies were recurrently the foci of readings and performances of socially and culturally important values, principles, and beliefs manifested through the placing of grave goods (Cooper et al., 2022; Thomas, 1991). Sometimes objects and bodies were treated in similar ways, reflecting the alternative approaches to the ideology of bodily integrity we tend to prioritize today (Brück, 2019, p. 61). There is reason to believe, however, that the alterity of prehistoric body ideology has something instructive to tell us about how audiences connected with objects in museums on a deeper, sensory and embodied way. Wang (2023) has noted the critical role of embodied experiences and encounters with objects in museums (real or virtual) in the creation of meaningful audience engagements. Although Wang is skeptical about whether traditional displays of objects in cases can ever bridge the "gap between objects and bodies" without the assistance of virtual technology (2023, p. 122), the inherently body-related nature of objects from burials (and the ability to presence and visualize bodies using carefully selected language and illustration(s), as we did in the case of the Folkton Drums) provides a fruitful prospect. Indeed, arguably the most important finding from our audience research centers on the importance of (further) developing curatorial and display approaches that forefront encounters between present day audiences and people who lived long ago, mediated through the universal reality of our mortality.

## Presenting bodies without the need for human remains

The cue of the human body—its silhouette, size, form, but also its story and its fragility—may provide a way of personalizing otherwise abstracted or decontextualized objects from burials without the need to display human remains. How this can be achieved through interpretative strategies and design approaches without quickly dating or appearing unconvincing or unsensitive is an area that needs more thought. Digital approaches, including projection, augmented and virtual reality may provide immersive (and opt-in enabled) solutions. However, the observation that bodies play such a key role in allowing visitors to contextualize grave goods and understand their relationship to lives, emotions and people who were "like us," does give us cause to reflect on what would be lost in terms of

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visitor's reflections on their own humility, mortality, and shared values if human remains from funerary contexts were completely withdrawn from museum display (Frost, 2018, p. 17; Giles, 2020, p. 252–3).

Finally, a key outcome of our study is to consider displays of prehistoric grave goods in a new light: not just as high-status objects designed to "wow" visitors and counteract dangerously simplistic perceptions that their makers were in some way "primitive" but also as a means of deepening and enriching the stories we tell about past people's complex lives; and how by interacting with them we might enrich and illuminate our own.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflicts of interests to disclose.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The full text of the Grave Good Trail labels and the evaluation data (Cecilia, 2018, 2019) that supports the findings of this study are available from the Grave Goods Project digital archive (https://doi.org/10.5284/1052206). The full text of the Michael Rosen poem is available from the same link (Schools Resources).

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## ENDNOTES

[1] We define prehistoric "funerary contexts" as locations where human remains were placed in a range of different conditions: cremations, inhumations, disarticulated, and articulated remains in graves, ditches, and surface scatters (see Barrett, 1988; Cooper et al., 2022, 49–53; Parker Pearson, 2003). While there was a considerable degree of variation in the treatment of prehistoric human remains at these sites, most grave goods on display in the British Museum galleries have been recovered from unburnt inhumation or cremation burials of a kind that are widely recognizable to modern communities as burials, even if, today, they are increasingly unlikely to encounter dead bodies first-hand. There is an obvious bias against burials and grave goods placed in less visible locations (including in the open air and in watery locations). It is possible that some prehistoric European objects considered "votive" (e.g., river finds) were originally deposited as grave goods.

[2] Some objects such as shield fittings, coin hoards, and fragments from the same objects were counted as one.

[3] An exception is the multiple identity narrative given to the Mill Hill Deal burial in Room 50, where visitors are asked to decide whether they were a warrior, king, or priest, thus querying stereotypes of power.

[4] We define "attractiveness" as the percentage of people of people who stopped at an object and "holding power" as the length of their engagement with a stop.

[5] We suspect some of these questions have arisen in the visitors' minds because of prior knowledge of other museums

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experiences, popular archaeology programs, or even self-study.

[6]This figure, supplied by Stuart Frost, Head of Interpretation and Volunteers at the British Museum, is based on studies that show approximately 32% of visitors stop in any given gallery to engage with at least one case.

[7]The DMM trail built on and was shaped by the (evaluation-based) lessons of prior British Museum themed trails, including the "A History of the World in 100 Objects" trail and the "Desire, love, identity: LGBTQ histories" trail.

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