

The ultimate cold case: Anthropologist 'bones up' on site of ancient invasion

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The body was found in a small, graffiti-stained tunnel. Robbery was likely not the motive, as his possessions and cash were found with him.

The University of Alberta's Sandra Garvie-Lok can't tell exactly how the victim on her table died, but she has a good idea. Given the visible previous cranial trauma on the body, the events that took place around the time of the murder and the location where his remains were found, she is willing to bet that this John Doe was murdered. Yet, no suspect will ever be tried or convicted for the crime. And she's OK with that.

That's because Garvie-Lok is an [anthropologist](#), and her "victim" died almost 1,500 years ago in the ancient Greek city of Nemea during the Slavic invasion of Greece. Garvie-Lok, whose findings on her deceased subject were recently published in the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, suggests the victim was likely an eyewitness to Slavic invasion of Nemea. The deceased possibly used the tunnel entrance as an escape from the invaders, where he died/was killed.

"The Slavs and Avars (another group of eastern European peoples) were pretty brutal," said Garvie-Lok, a professor in the department of [anthropology](#). "If he was hiding in that unpleasant place, he was probably in a lot of danger. So, he hid out, but he didn't make it."

A specialist in osteology—a field of anthropology that studies bones—Garvie-Lok was called in to the site to try to determine how the subject died. However, aside from the damage to the [skull](#), which Garvie-

Lok says are not related to the fatal injury that caused his death, there are no markings on the bones that would give her a definitive idea of the circumstances of the victim's final hours or days.

But, she knows from the region's history, and from how he was found, that he lived during a very turbulent time. Like a detective, she pieces together a probable scenario of what happened to around the time he succumbed to his injuries. Add into the mystery that he was found with some personal possession and several coins, and Garvie-Lok can put a bit more together about his life.

"It was common in Greece when things fell apart like this for people to bury coins under a rock or inside a wall, hoping that whoever was coming through wouldn't find it and maybe they could collect the coins and move on after things calmed down," said Garvie-Lok. "Of course, things didn't calm down for this guy."

The ancient fatality was likely just a local peasant farmer and not a soldier, she noted, since it was uncommon for the leaders of the Byzantine Empire to conscript. While it is possible that he was simply a "wrong place, wrong time" victim of a gallop-by spearing, Garvie-Lok says he may have decided to join the fight in the hopes of defending himself, his family and his community. "Or he was pressed into service because everything was just going south, we can't be sure," says Garvie-Lok. "Either way, that he was hiding with his possession when he died is a pretty clear reflection that, for him, his world was ending," she said.

If her work sounds a lot like a form of ancient-crime CSI, Garvie-Lok agrees that while there are some parallels to solving mysteries, both ancient and current-day, her job demands far more time and scrutiny than an hour-long television show depicts. Observing the surroundings of where things are found, looking for small clues and piecing together tiny bits of detail to try to put together a probable theory of what happened

are traits that anthropologists have in common in with police scientists. The advantage in current crime-scene investigation is that police can formulate and hypothesize about how a crime was committed and then fill in more details when a suspect confesses. Her work, she muses, is a little more vague.

"In this job, you're always talking about likelihoods," she said. "Until we develop a time machine, we can't go back and know for sure."

For the would-be forensics technician who expects that the work will be much like it is on TV—"the whole 'we've-got-the-answer-in-12-hours' thing"—as she puts it, Garvie-Lok cautions that her work is much more laborious and time-consuming. Working in often-adverse conditions and facing long hours poring over the minutiae of a site—or a body—is what it is all about. That is where the story is found, and that is what draws her to this work.

"This kind of connection to people's lives is why I got into this," said Garvie-Lok. "I really do feel while I'm studying the bones that I'm touching someone else's life, I'm reaching out to the past."

"That's why I like this job."

Provided by University of Alberta

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