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University professor uses teeth to find information on past cultures

By Yvette Jefferson

Of the Emerald

Teeth are used not only for eating.

Studying teeth is a useful tool to finding out about other cultures, said John Lukacs, University anthropology professor.

Lukacs, who has been studying teeth for about ten years, has traveled to several archaeological sites in eastern Asia, including Afghanistan, to research teeth.

"Most people feel that it is OK to study teeth — if you are a dentist," Lukacs said. "Some people actually question my sanity when they find out I study teeth."

Examining teeth is more conclusive than examining skulls because teeth provide more accurate information about ancient and contemporary populations, he said.

Skulls are usually smashed when found at sites, having been buried under the ground for hundreds of years, Lukacs said. As a result, the human skull often is not a valuable tool for learning about past generations, he said.

Teeth, on the other hand, are smaller and harder than the whole skull and are thus able to withstand the weight of the earth, he said. Teeth also last longer because of their size and texture, he added.

Studying teeth can help determine a person's race, health, eating habits and occupation by showing where

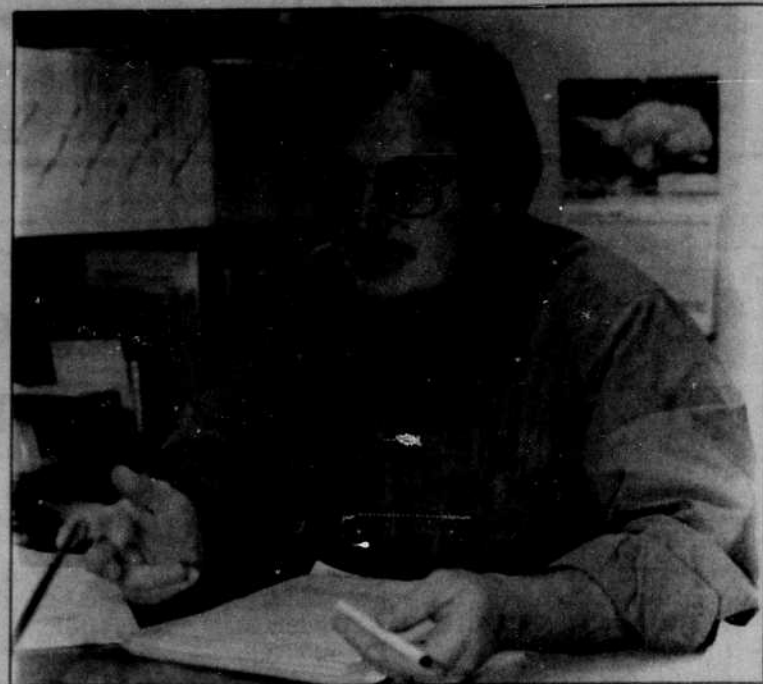


Photo by Bobbie Lo

John Lukacs, University anthropology professor, uses teeth to uncover secrets about past generations.

each tooth is worn, Lukacs said. For example, the hunters and gatherers had very strong teeth because their diet was varied.

However, people in the agricultural society had worse teeth because of their dependency on crops, he said. They would eat only what their crops provided, he said, and if their crops failed, they had nothing to fall back on.

The social standing of a person can also be determined by studying teeth, Lukacs said.

Higher classes are distinguished by the relative

health of their teeth compared to that of the lower classes, he said. Because higher-class people could afford more things, they had better eating habits and were better able to eat a nutritious diet than the lower classes, which is apparent in the structure of its teeth, he said.

The manner in which a person is buried plays a big role in determining his or her place in a class society, he added. The richer the people were, the more pots and jewelry that could be found at their burial sites, he said.

Lukacs plans to undertake a new project in Pakistan in January. In the project, Lukacs will work with Brian Hemphill, a graduate student who will assist in research.

The excavation, to be held at the Harappa archaeological site, will be funded by the Smithsonian Institution, Lukacs said. National Geographic will provide funding for technical equipment needed for research, such as an X-ray machine, he added.

"I am very excited about my upcoming trip," he said. "This winter's work should provide some fascinating new information," he added.

Lukacs' prior excavation was at the site Mehrgarh in southern Asia, where Lukacs analyzed 30 different anatomical traits of modern teeth and discovered that the prehistoric people of that region are not closely related to the present-day inhabitants of northern India and Pakistan.

This showed that India's Hindus currently living in India and Pakistan are relatively recent migrants to the area, Lukacs said.

Lukacs presented the results of the findings at Mehrgarh to the 7th International Conference on Dental Morphology in May 1985 in Paris. The results of the study will be published in the conference proceedings in early 1987.

Lukacs also will present his Mehrgarh findings to the University of Wisconsin at Madison later this month.

Lukacs, who is studying the biological relation of prehistoric and living South Asian populations, said he plans to make additional trips to Pakistan to study teeth.



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