

What are Grave Goods?

Courtesy of wiseGEEK.com; author Mary McMahon



Vast treasures were often buried with the dead who were entombed in the Giza Pyramid Complex.

Grave goods are objects which are buried or cremated with a body. Many cultures have traditions of leaving grave goods, from the modern United States, where mementos are buried with the dead, to Ancient Egypt, where high-ranking people were buried with a lavish assortment of objects. Beliefs about the function of grave goods vary, depending on time and culture.

The practice of including grave goods with burial is ancient. Some hominid burials include crude objects, indicating that even at earlier stages of evolution, death was an important experience. The objects in ancient burials include things like textiles, baskets, bowls, and jewelry; organic materials like food may have been included at the time of burial as well.

In many ancient societies, the dead were buried with objects which they could use in the afterlife. The Vikings and the Egyptians both had lavish funeral practices in which the dead were buried with food, servants, tools, toys, pets, working animals, garments, jewelry, and a wide assortment of other items, and it was believed that people needed to be buried with everything they might need in the afterlife. This tradition endures in many cultures; in parts of Asia, for example, people are cremated with special bank notes or credit cards which can be spent in the afterlife.

Grave goods are also left as offerings to the dead, or offerings to the gods. In Ancient Greece, for example, people were buried with two coins to pay death's ferryman, and in other cultures, the dead have been buried with money to pay death himself. In this sense, the objects are considered to be a type of votive deposit, meaning that they are left in a sanctified location for a specific ritual purpose.

Because grave goods often include items of immense value, **looting** of graves has been a common problem throughout human history. Many tombs have been looted for the jewelry and other valuable goods they contain, and some of these looted objects have found their way into museums or private collections. Finding a grave which has not been looted is extremely unusual, and a cause for celebration among archaeologists.

There is some dispute as to what to do with items unearthed at grave sites. Some people believe that such items should be restored, studied, and displayed, while others feel that graves should be left undisturbed as a mark of respect for the dead. This problem was greatly exacerbated by widespread archaeological practices in the 19th century, when numerous priceless items were removed from colonial subjects and exported; most of these items have yet to be returned to their nations of origin.



Grave goods were often buried alongside ancient Egyptian royalty.