Session 1: How do we know what we (think we) know?

Key Questions: How do we engage with objects we’ve never seen before? When we make assumptions or interpretations about their function or history, what process did we take to get there? What are some of the ways that we come to know what we know?

Set up: Selection of 15 diverse glass objects, many which would not be recognizable to most participants/students (e.g. Roman astragals / a celery vase). Do not display the typical information/accompanying object caption/details, but give each object a number. Provide participants with clipboards and a numbered sheet. *See session 1 object list

Procedure/Instructions:

1. Participants spend 15-20 minutes looking very closely at the objects on display, writing next to the corresponding number on their sheet what they think the function of each object is/may be.
2. As a group, go through the list, seeing who got closest to the original function of each one, and asking them how they came to that conclusion.
3. Discuss the epistemological models that emerged from the discussion, and how valuable/useful/misleading they are or could be. e.g. personal experience or memory - “I recognized this because my grandmother had one just like it and she used it for…” / formal analysis - “these little spouts have holes in them, so this must be for a liquid or fine material to pass through in some way” / prior or professional knowledge - “in Roman archaeology we find a lot of knucklebones used for gambling – this looks like a glass version of those so these are probably astragals…”
4. Consider the “social lives” of objects - how function may change over time, or how objects can be repurposed for various contexts and users.

This is a great way to “even the playing field”, as no single participant will be able to identify all the objects, but, as a group, participants will likely work out almost all of them by drawing on each other’s prior experience, expertise, and deductive reasoning.