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Skeletal Analysis Reveals New Details About the Beginnings of the American Slave Trade

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Skeletal Analysis Reveals New Details
About the Beginnings of the American Slave Trade

Over the past January term, I had the pleasure of taking a brief but very informative online course, taught by Dr. Amy Michael of the University of New Hampshire Anthropology Department. The class, entitled Human Evolution, Fossils, and DNA, gave me the chance to investigate human biological and biocultural variation holistically through the study of biological anthropology and such subfields as primatology, paleoanthropology, bioarchaeology, molecular anthropology, forensic anthropology, and human biology. The course concluded with a research paper on a subfield of our choosing. The goal of the paper was to select a particular period, culture, and site whose biological anthropological relevance connected to larger concepts we had learned. Ultimately, what most piqued my interest was a bioarchaeology article about the discovery in Delaware of skeletal remains with ties to the slave trade.

The Chesapeake Bay area was one of the earliest European settlements in what would become the United States (2). But bioarchaeological research in this region has been somewhat limited as 17th-century sites have yielded few well-preserved skeletal remains. That scarcity made the relatively recent discovery of 11 well-preserved human skeletons on a colonial farmstead in coastal Delaware very exciting. Raquel E. Fleskes of the University of Pennsylvania and her research team were able to determine, using osteological and DNA analysis, that eight of the skeletons appeared to be of European descent, while the other three were of African descent. This finding has implications relevant to the United States' complex role in one of the largest human migration events in history. The transatlantic American slave trade is commonly understood to have peaked in the late 18th-century and was outlawed by the U.S. in the mid-19th century immediately following the Civil War (2). The practice of slavery in the 17th-century American colonies, however, is less well understood. Bioarchaeological analysis is a valuable tool for learning more about the ancestry and kinship of human remains in unidentified burial

sites. This makes it particularly useful for learning more about African-descended individuals brought to colonial settlements during the transatlantic slave trade, because so little documentary evidence exists for these populations.

The discovery was made when the Avery's Rest site in coastal Delaware was excavated. Located near a 17th-century Dutch settlement, Avery's Rest is known to be one of the earliest colonial settlements in Delaware (1). The site was named for Captain John Avery, who transported tobacco and food stores from the colonies to Barbados and the West Indies, and who owned sugar plantations which were heavily reliant on slave labor (3). In 1674, Avery was granted an 800-acre tract in what is today Sussex County, Delaware, which became known as Avery's Rest. Detailed records of land ownership indicate he moved there with his wife and three daughters, and the property remained in the family until 1715 (1). Today, it is owned by Mr. and Mrs. Wayman Harmon, who allowed archaeological excavation to commence on the property.

Beginning in 2006, prior to the construction of a residential development, the site was excavated by Daniel Griffith of the Archaeological Society of Delaware and the Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs (3). Over the course of several years, Griffith and his team excavated structures, fence ditches, pits for household refuse and food remains (3). Most significantly, they also found two burial sites with 11 graves, which dated to the period when the Averys owned the property. According to Fleskes, "a southern group of eight interments was separated by approximately 20 feet from a northern cluster of three burials." All of the bodies were buried in hexagonal-shaped coffins lying face upward, with their hands at their sides or on their pelvis, with an east-west orientation that is consistent with Christian burial practices (3). Burial artifacts were limited to copper pins and buttons that may have been part of clothing and

shrouds (3). From that point, a research team led by Fleskes analyzed the DNA of the skeletons in an attempt to understand who they were and how they came to be buried in colonial Delaware.

In addition to the extraction of DNA, nondestructive analyses of the bones were done at the Smithsonian Institution to evaluate the cranial measurements and dental pathology to estimate age, sex, and ancestry. It was determined that of the eleven bodies discovered, there were two children, two adult women, and seven adult men (3). The adults ranged in ages from 25 to 60, and biological features indicated that the bodies in the southern burial site were of European descent, while the three in the northern site were of two men and one child of African descent (3). Skeletal markers indicated that the adults were routinely engaged in moderate to strenuous physical labor; both European and African descended individuals displayed some degree of joint degeneration, although none was classified as severe (3). Fleskes' study also includes a fascinating photo of the jaw of one of the adult European men, revealing a perfectly round hole between the upper and lower teeth—the result of long-term pipe-smoking. Similarly defined pipe facets have been documented at other rural colonial farmsteads dating to the second half of the 17th-century, coinciding with the rise of tobacco cultivation (3). Additionally, one of the adult males of African descent had perimortem trauma in the form of unhealed facial fractures that resulted in the separation of the zygomatic bone from the face consistent with a fall or a violent assault (3). It is possible that these injuries could have led to the man's death.

Mitochondrial DNA analysis of bone samples from each skeleton revealed even more information about the residents of Avery's Rest. After mitochondrial DNA sequencing was performed for each skeleton, those sequences were aligned against the Cambridge Reference Sequence and then compared with mtDNA sequences for different European and African populations (3). Those comparisons confirmed that the eight bodies in the southern site were of

European descent, and that four of them shared a maternal kinship (3). Because European populations are not mitochondrially distinct from one another, it is difficult to define the specific geographic source of maternal ancestry for the European-descended individuals. Additionally, the haplotypes of these individuals are infrequently reported in contemporary European data sets, further complicating efforts to determine how they came together at Avery's Rest (3). While the DNA analysis does not provide conclusive proof that the eight individuals with European ancestry are members of the Avery family who once resided on the property, positive identification can be pursued using primary source documents and information from the osteological analysis (3).

The three bodies in the northern burial site that were of African descent shared no kinship, and likely came from different regions of Africa during the emergence of racialized labor and society (3). As Fleskes notes, the maternal ancestry of these three individuals “provides a glimpse into the geographic reach of the slave trade from Africa to colonial America.” The maternal genetic origin of these individuals appears to extend across a wide geographic area of present-day Africa, including the West, Central, and Eastern regions of the continent (3). The DNA of the two adult men is associated with 17th-century slave ports in West and Central Africa while the DNA of the child suggests East African origins (3). According to Fleskes, this genetic diversity “underscores the degree to which enslavement was an expansive, far-reaching process during this early period of colonial history.” Analysis of the methodology and location of the burials also provided researchers with a greater understanding of who these people were prior to their death. For example, the physical separation of the African burials from the burial of the Europeans suggests a degree of social separation in life (5). Additionally, in comparison to the

uniform treatment of the deceased individuals of European descent, the individuals of African descent are buried in a far less formal manner.

The presence of individuals of African descent at Avery's Rest is significant in itself since, in 1700, Africans persons represented only about 5% of the population in Delaware (5). During the 17th and early-18th centuries, the Chesapeake region was not a primary destination for the transatlantic slave trade, making the isolated location of Avery's Rest site even more of an oddity (1). The absence of major shipping ports in Delaware meant that most enslaved Africans individuals were purchased and brought to the region through smaller scale trading with the English colony of Barbados (4). Prior to his death in 1682 Captain John Avery worked as a mariner who transported the crop from his plantation to islands such as Barbados and the West Indies (1). It is likely that Avery acquired the enslaved people at some point during his travels. A limited written record from the time period makes the identification of the African individuals difficult; court documents refer to two enslaved males at Avery's Rest, not by name, but instead listed by monetary value as property in Captain Avery's estate (3). Tragically, like so many other Africans in America, their stories are difficult to reconstruct due to the low level of regard for those in bondage.

Bioarchaeology gives us access to study colonial period sites and provides new information about the genetic diversity of, and relationships between, founder or colonizing populations and those of contemporary peoples through the analysis of skeletal remains, grave goods, and burial practices. The lives and deaths of the African and European-descended persons at Avery's Rest demonstrate the complexity of early colonial settlements, governed by pre-existing social institutions and actualized on the 17th- century American frontier.

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