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Rio's Cemetery of "New Blacks" Sheds Light on Horrors of Slave Trade

**By Tom Phillips
The Guardian**

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Tooth analysis shows Africans taken from wide area ranging from Sudan in the north-east to Mozambique in the south

Locals called it the "cemetery of the new blacks," but in truth it wasn't much of a cemetery. Devoid of headstones, wreaths or tearful mourners, this squalid harbourside burial ground was the final resting place for thousands of Africans shipped into slavery.

The new world greeted them with a lonely death in an unfamiliar land.

For decades the cemetery and those buried there between 1760 and 1830 were forgotten, hidden under layer after layer of urban development.

But 15 years after the cemetery's fortuitous discovery -- during the renovation of Petrucio and Ana de la Merced Guimaraes's family home when builders unearthed a series of muddy skeletons -- academics now believe they have evidence of the true reach of the slave trade.

The study of teeth from 30 partial skeletons has hinted that slaves arriving in Rio – many of whom were sold on to work in coffee and sugar plantations or gold mines – came from a much wider geographical region than once thought.

Archaeologists and anthropologists studying bone and tooth fragments are shedding light on the horrors of a trade that saw at least 3 million slaves shipped from Africa to Brazil between 1550 and 1888, when the practice was officially abolished.

"It was ugly: a dump into which bodies were thrown and burned," said Sheila Mendonça de Souza, a bio-archaeologist studying the cemetery in Rio de Janeiro, once one of the busiest slave ports in the Americas.

"People weren't buried in tombs, they were tossed away into mass graves."

Della Cook, a biological anthropologist from the University of Indiana working on the burial ground, said: "There is a lot of scholarship on slave cemeteries and the slave trade in North America but very little in South America, which is one of the things that makes this site fascinating.

"We have historical records but we haven't been able to look before at the people themselves."

Using strontium isotope analyses of tooth enamel -- a technique that helps detect where a person was raised and has previously been used on samples from burial sites in the Caribbean and Mexico -- academics were able to confirm the large area from where the "new blacks" came.

"What we got was essentially the entire range of strontium isotope values," said Cook. "It surprised us that the spectrum was so broad."

The results indicated that slavers had "waded way into the interior" of Africa rather than restricting their search to coastal areas, Cook added. [Read this full [article](#) at *The Guardian* online >>>].