New York Burial Ground Project - From the Field to the Laboratory

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New York Burial Ground Project - From the Field to the Laboratory

Submitted by Mack E. Mark, Howard University

The New York African Burial Ground Project involves the curation, reconstruction and analysis of the skeletal remains of approximately 400 ancestral Africans who lived, labored and died in colonial New York. The results of this research will shed light on their origins in West Africa, the stresses they faced while being enslaved on these shores, as well as the processes of biocultural adaptation they underwent. In essence, giving a voice to our ancestors who have been silenced for over two centuries.

The initial stage of the research entails the cleaning, reconstruction, anthropomorphic recordation, pathological assessment and photographic documentation of the skeletal remains. The target date for the completion of this phase is February, 1996. Presently, 130 individuals have gone through this process.

The preliminary research has already yielded some interesting findings. There are many examples of individuals exhibiting work or load bearing stresses. Most of the hypertrophy of muscle attachments uncovered so far are in the upper body (shoulders and arms). Enthesopathies have been observed, where lesions are left in muscle attachments due to muscle tears as a result of extreme labor. Osteophytosis has been found in several cervical vertebrae of individuals prior to old age, resulting from carrying heavy burdens on top of the head. Additionally, squatting facets have been found in the tarsal bones of three individuals, showing that they tended to squat, rather than sit, while working, which is customary in some West African societies.

Evidence of tobacco smoking (pipe notches in the dentition) has been found in several men and women. Another significant discovery is that dental analysis has uncovered at least five different dental modification patterns (tooth filing). These cultural practices will aid in determining the West and Central African sociocultural origins of these individuals. The reconstruction, recordation and preliminary analysis of the numerous infants and children have revealed the severe and disproportionate impact of stresses upon the youngest members of this population. Porotic hyperostosis and craniosynostosis have been observed in a number of children. Dental pathologies, such as enamel hypoplasia and hypocalcification, as well as caries formation have been found in the deciduous and permanent dentitions of children. Along with numerous examples of delayed skeletal growth and development, these skeletal indicators point to the stressful conditions that these children faced.

Finally, there are a number of cases of traumatic fractures, the most interesting of which involves two women. One exhibits trauma to the head that led to a circular fracture at the base of the skull which may have caused her death. In the other woman, it is clear that she was shot in the back or side by a musket ball which fractured her left ribs and scapula. In addition, she has a perimortem torsion fracture of her right radius and ulna and multiple fractures of the face. Obviously, these traumatic fractures are clear signs of the violent conditions this population faced under enslavement.
Specialized studies in the future will include DNA sampling and chemical isotope analysis, histomorphometry, demographic profiles, analysis of burial artifacts and practices, the analysis of disease processes, as well as studies focusing on biocultural continuity and change for this population. The entire phase of data collection of the New York African Burial Ground skeletal population will be completed by 1998, and the reburial of the remains will follow.

Tours of our laboratory facilities at Howard University are available to the public and visiting scholars on Friday and Saturday mornings. We can accommodate tours of 30 persons or less. Alternative times for tours also can be arranged. Call Mr. Mark E. Mack (202) 806-5256 to schedule a tour (all tours must be scheduled prior to arrival).