Graveyard DNA Rewrites African American History

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Two of Christopher Columbus's shipmates were the first Africans to set foot in the New World, a study has found.

Using DNA analysis of human bones excavated from a graveyard in La Isabela, Dominican Republic -- the first colonial town in the Americas -- the new study adds weight to the theory that Africans crossed the Atlantic at least 150 years earlier than previously thought.

"African Americans have come to believe that their history began when the first slave ships docked in the mid-17th century, but our results suggest that it actually started far earlier, at the same time as the Europeans' history on the continent did," says Hannes Schroeder of the Centre for GeoGenetics at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, who did the analysis.

La Isabela was founded in 1494 on Columbus' second voyage to the New World. Seventeen ships deposited 1700 people – including farmers, builders and priests – on the part of the island of Hispaniola that today is the Dominican Republic. Within two years, all but 300 had died of starvation and disease, and in 1498 the town was abandoned.

Last year, one of Schroeder's collaborators, Douglas Price, from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, suggested that up to seven of the 49 skeletons exhumed from La Isabela's 15th-century graveyard had belonged to Africans. The carbon and strontium isotope ratios in their tooth enamel, which give clues to an individual's diet, pointed at possible African origins for the seven. [Read this full New Scientist article online >>>].