



University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

An African-Type Burial, Newton Plantation Barbados

Item Type	Article
Authors	Handler, Jerome S.
Download date	2026-04-10 15:32:02
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/1490

An African-Type Burial, Newton Plantation Barbados

Submitted by Jerome S. Handler, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

(Note: This article summarizes a longer paper that has been submitted for possible publication to *His-Archaeology*).

The vast majority of the thousands of slaves who perished in Barbados from about 1650 to 1834-38 were buried in unmarked plantation cemeteries.

Although excavated in the early 1970s, Newton cemetery is still the earliest and largest undisturbed plantation slave cemetery yet reported in the New World. The remains of 104 individuals, interred from about 1660 to 1820, were excavated. One of these burials was unique not only to Newton but also to early African cemetery sites in the Americas.

Most mortuary activity took place within a relatively small portion of the cemetery area. This area contained several low mounds, some natural features, others man-made and containing burials. Mound 1 was the largest, approximately 7 1/2 m (22.5 ft) wide and slightly less than 1 m (3 ft) above ground surface. Coral limestone rubble covered the top and edges of the mound, but its core was plain earth; the amount of earth implied more labor than the requirements of simply filling a settled-in grave.

Mound 1 contained only one burial. Reflecting the anonymity of so many early slaves, the individual remains faceless and nameless. Designated Burial 9, the individual had been placed in a prepared subsurface pit, a shallow excavation of about 50 cm. into the underlying limestone bedrock. Fieldnotes recorded the Burial as fitting " into a thin pit, which proved to be too short for the length of the body as the head was jammed against the western edge of the pit and was slightly raised."

Burial 9 was a young adult female, around 20 years of age and perhaps of New World birth. Her possible birth area is based on an analysis of her skeletal lead content. This was more than twice the mean for her age group, as well as that of all Newton skeletons tested for lead absorption in their bones; moreover, although she lacked modified/mutilated teeth -- a virtually certain marker of African birth, she had much higher lead levels than skeletons with this characteristic. Grave goods were absent and she lacked a coffin. Her skeleton was fully articulated with its head facing west. Not only did Mound 1 only contain this solitary burial, but Burial 9 was also the cemetery's only prone burial.

Burial 9 was probably interred during the late 1600s or early 1700s. Why Mound 1 was not used again becomes a relevant question in interpreting Burial 9 because Mound 2, a smaller mound very close to Mound 1, contained about 45 percent of the excavated burials. Mound 2 was repeatedly used over a relatively long period, apparently from the late 1600s through the early 1800s, and grew as new burials were added over the years. The people burying their dead in Mound 2 surely were aware of the neighboring and much larger Mound 1. Yet they avoided using it; a tradition seems to have developed at Newton concerning this large mound and the individual it contained.

Burial 9's unique features as the cemetery's only prone burial and the only one interred in the largest mound suggest that she possessed unusual characteristics or died under special circumstances. The extremely high lead level in her bones suggests that at her death she would have been suffering from the effects of serious lead poisoning, and might have displayed symptoms such as abrupt and unpredictable convulsions or epileptic-type seizures which could have been interpreted as bizarre behavior. One can only speculate on how these behaviors, if they actually occurred, would have affected her fellow slaves and the type of mortuary treatment she was accorded. Whatever was the case, her skeleton displayed no physical evidence of an unusual cause of death, and Burial 9 was probably viewed as having special social characteristics. What might these have been?

The Newton archival sources contain no specific information for an interpretation of Burial 9; for suggestive ideas one must turn to more general data on Barbadian slave culture and the ethnographic/ethnohistorical literature on West African mortuary practices.

Nothing in the Barbados documents helps to interpret the significance of Mound 1, and the limited information discovered on the mounding of graves in West Africa is similarly restrictive. It bears emphasis that I am specifically referring to the construction of earthen mounds, not merely covering the grave with stones, tree branches, or similar materials -- an apparently common practice in West Africa. Scores of ethnographic/ethnohistorical works on West African mortuary practices were consulted, and this literature generally indicates that graves were levelled. The very few references to earthen or "clay" mound constructions indicate diverse functions, but the mounds seem to have been linked to high status people whose communities viewed them positively. In no case were such mounds associated with persons who possessed negatively viewed or unusual characteristics; such an interpretation, however, is suggested by West African data on prone burials.

As indicated above, virtually every Newton burial was in an extended supine position, a common position in West Africa as were flexed and extended lateral burials; all three positions are regularly reported in the literature. Information on prone positions, however, has been far more difficult to obtain.

The many publications sampled on West African ethnography /ethnohistory yielded only a very few specific references to prone burials; in each case the person was considered to have socially negative traits or had been convicted of witchcraft, a criminal offense in all West African societies. One illustration is the following: an English resident of Sierra Leone during the late 1780s described the execution of a convicted witch among the Temne (or Timne) and Bulum. He was forced to dig his own grave and stand at "the edge of the foot of it, with his face towards it"; he was then struck from behind with "a violent blow upon the nape of the neck, which causes him to fall upon his face into the grave; a little loose earth is then thrown upon him, and a sharp stake of hard wood is drove through the expiring delinquent, which pins him to the earth; the grave is then filled up, and his or her name is never after mentioned."

When West African evidence on prone burials is combined with broader mortuary evidence from West Africa that burial practices usually differed for people who had died in special or unusual ways, who possessed unusual physical characteristics or negatively viewed social traits, the case

is strengthened for interpreting Burial 9 as a probable witch or some other negatively viewed person with supernatural powers. African witches were often executed for their crimes and received no interment rites; practices regarding the disposition of their corpses varied from culture to culture, ranging from burning to being cast into the bush to burial in a grave. Even if witch burials are not described, it is implied or explicitly indicated that their bodies were disposed of in different ways from those of "normal" people.

Barbadian slaves were relatively free to bury their dead according to their own customs. An interpretation of Burial 9 as a negatively viewed member of the slave community is further reinforced by evidence from Mound 2. People continued to bury their dead in Mound 2 (as well as in non-mound areas of the cemetery) within plain view of Mound 1. Newton's slaves possibly avoided putting new burials in Mound 1 because a tradition was perpetuated that some person with evil supernatural powers was buried there.

Beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery were pervasive features of the world in which slaves lived -- as they were in the West African homelands. Barbadian slaves (as West Africans generally) did not consider as accidental major illness and death; witchcraft, in particular, was frequently invoked to explain these events and witches were despised and feared.

A final point on Burial 9. It was certainly not unique at Newton in its absence of grave goods; that absence alone would not make it a very special case. Grave goods were common in West Africa, but there is absolutely no ethnographic/ethnohistorical evidence that such goods were interred with persons who their communities viewed negatively.

Thus, mortuary evidence on Burial 9 (its solitary location in Mound 1, prone position, body forced into a grave pit that was too small, absence of grave goods, and the possible behavioral associated with severe lead poisoning) combined with West African mortuary data on the treatment of witches or other despised/feared persons and slave beliefs concerning evil magic leads to an interpretation of Burial 9 as a witch or sorceress -- in any case, someone who, following African custom, was feared or socially ostracized because she was a vehicle for supernatural contagion.