

# Three sets of skeletons reveal the tragic history of the first African people to reach America

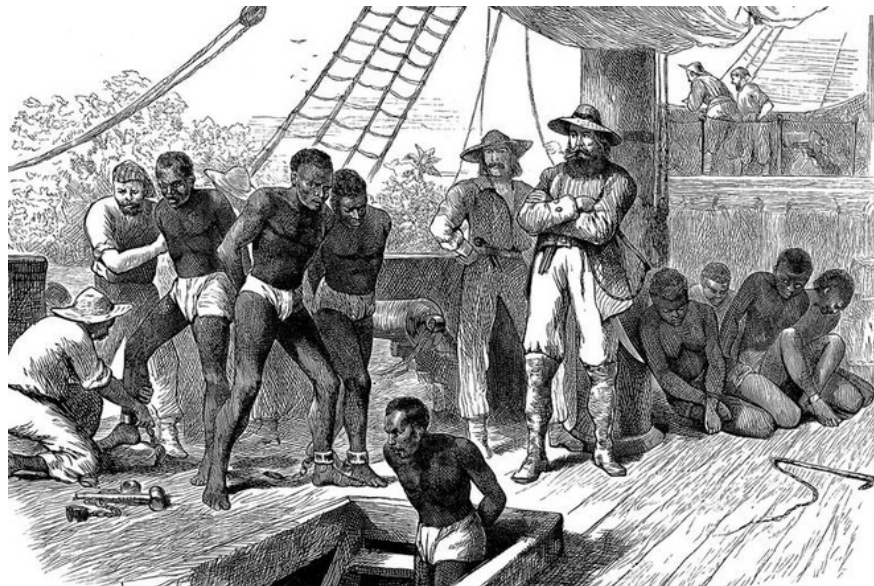
Modern archaeological methods will increasingly be able to recreate the lives of these slaves, piecing together pieces of their lives, giving them a forgotten identity. hybrid, interdisciplinary studies like this will be increasingly popular, there will be more and more n

In 1992, while workers in Mexico City were constructing a subway tunnel for the city, they discovered a mass grave containing three remains more than 500 years old.

This place used to be a hospital called Real de San José de los Naturales. Spanish colonists after conquering the Americas built it to treat the indigenous people. That is the meaning of the phrase "*los Naturales*" in Spanish.

But DNA analysis of the three remains revealed that they did not belong to North or Central American Indians. Dating back to around 1,500, these people were clearly African.

Not only that, they are also one of the first African people to set foot in the Americas. Like other compatriots, they may have been abducted from their homeland and taken to the Atlantic colonies of Europe to become slaves.



It is estimated that over a period of 300 years from the 16th to the 19th centuries, about 10-20 million slaves were transported from Africa to the American colonies. About 150,000 of them, like these three men, fell into the hands of Spanish colonists.

Living a life of anonymous slaves, they had no identification, no photos or documents that recorded their names, hometowns, and events in their lives. After dying, the skeleton is the only thing that helps them retell their life story.

And it was a very tragic story for these 3 men. The remains revealed they all died young in their mid-twenties. The skeletons imprinted with the years of hard labor with countless injuries and harsh diets.

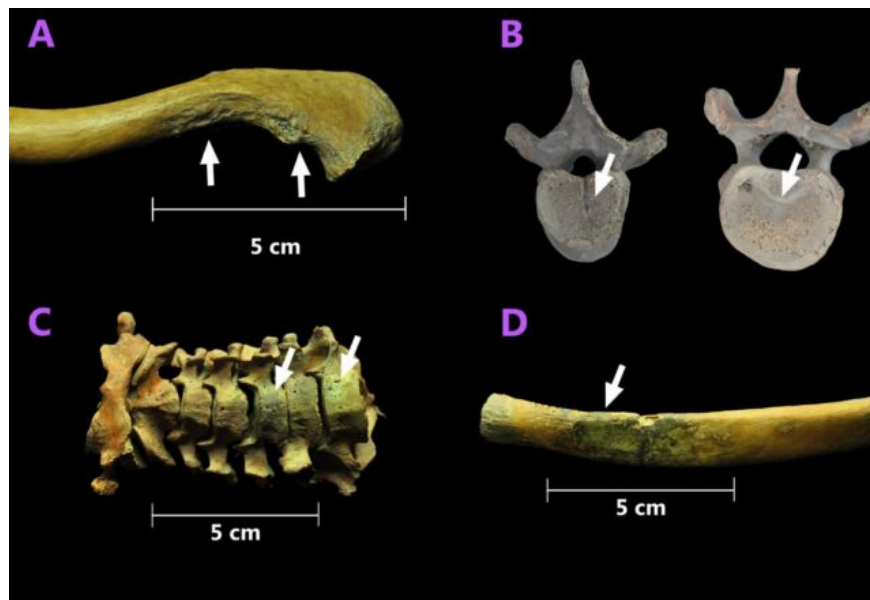
In their teeth, archaeologists found traces of DNA from two chronic pathogens that probably tormented them painfully. DNA and isotopic ratios finally confirm some of the homeland of these ill-fated boys.

### **A life of hardship, pain**

All three men died at the age of about 25, the age of broad shoulders, but the marks on the bones revealed a harsh truth. Their bodies have been severely degraded. A man with a spine with 5 intervertebral disc herniation in the back.

His left collarbone is deformed, probably the result of years of heavy lifting on his shoulders. And it was probably those heavy objects that damaged the man's spine.

Another skeleton revealed that its owner had osteoarthritis in at least one knee. This person's lower spine is degenerated, which can only be found in the elderly.



Some time before he died, he was injured by a cut in his forehead. Maybe it was a blow to the bone, and the wound had not healed before he died.

His leg was also broken and not properly treated, causing the bone to heal in a wrong position from the beginning. The third man also has signs of aging on the bone. A person with a severe herniated disc has two ribs and the neck vertebra is changed to green.

"It is possible that this man was shot and pieces of metal bullets were embedded in his body [causing the bone to turn bronze], " said archaeologist Rodrigo Barquera at the Institute of Human History Science. Max and his

colleagues said.

All three men were in very poor health: their bones were porous, not solid, neither did the skull and the top of the eye sockets. This type of bone can only be seen in severely malnourished people.

Most often, it is the result of a diet anemic due to iron deficiency, intestinal parasite infection or chronic infection.

### **Youth away from home**

Youth, the most wonderful time in the lives of these men was stolen. Their painful lives revealed their lowly status in America. No one was born in Spanish colony, they are from Africa, most likely sub-Saharan.

The scientists learned this by analyzing the proportion of strontium isotopes in their bones. We know, as plants grow, they get nutrients from the soil and rocks, including an element called strontium.



When people eat fruits and vegetables, strontium is absorbed to help build bones. This element will remain there until you die and your body decomposes back to the soil. Therefore, the ratio of different strontium isotopes in your bones and teeth can reveal the land in which you were born.

In the case of these three men, the strontium in the bone indicated that they had grown up somewhere far away from the Spanish colony, probably in West Africa.

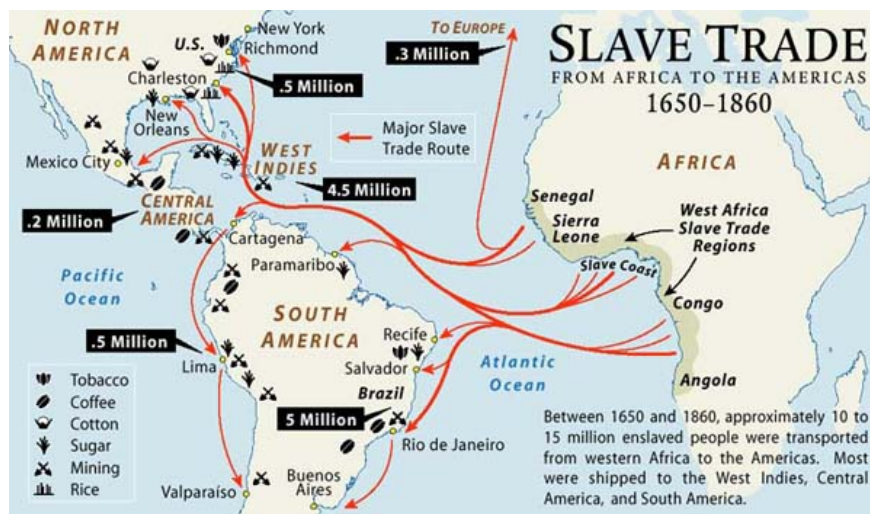
### **The world they left behind**

When they were captured and brought to the Americas, these men still tried to maintain their own cultures. One of the first signs that Barquera and colleagues thought these people might be from Africa was the marks on their teeth.

Many tribes around the world have the custom of grinding their teeth, shaping or removing them. Sometimes, it is part of a ritual of spiritual significance, but often it is just like a form of makeup, such as tattoo or piercing.

The man with arthritis on one knee and the third man who has the upper teeth in a T-shape, looks very similar to a tradition of the modern D'zem people still living in Cameroon.

Meanwhile, the man with the herniated disc bent his upper incisors into a V shape. Today, some minority groups living in Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and northern Gabon also arrange their incisors into a similar shape.



Further digging, Barquera and colleagues compared the three men's DNA to a database of modern human genomes. Results showed that the men with herniated disc were closely related to modern Mende people in West Africa. The other two are closely related to the Wambo people of South Africa.

But all three men seem to share a common ancestry with several sub-Saharan African groups, including some currently living in Central Africa. Barquera and his colleagues say that over the centuries of slavery, colonization and migration have transformed the continent's demographic landscape.

How can the DNA from three men in Mexico City help tell not only their story but also the story of the colonial era and slavery that spun an entire African continent?

### Transmission of pathogens into the Americas

When the slave traders brought these men across the Atlantic into the Americas, they probably didn't know the viruses and bacteria smuggled tickets on their ships. Two of the men were found carrying a strain of hepatitis B virus found only in Africa and Haiti today.

These may be the first strains of the hepatitis B virus found in the Americas, suggesting the disease has entered transcontinental.

In the remains of the other man, Barquera and his colleagues found DNA from a strain of bacteria called *Treponema pallidum pertenuis*, a close relative of syphilis.



It can be a source of painful sores on the foot and in bones and joints, as well as on his skin. The remains have revealed the painful scars this man suffered from the disease.

The disease caused by *Treponema pallidum pertenuis* is very contagious, especially in poor personal hygiene. Historical records show that there was a European colonist who died in the 1600s in Mexico City, not far from the Real de San José de los Naturales hospital. This person was also infected with the same strain of *Treponema pallidum pertenuis*.

So, together with their captive slaves, the Spanish colonists entered their community with a terrible disease and also suffered from it.

**Not just a story, it's a fact**

It was not until the 18th and 19th centuries that some of the first African slaves serving the British and American colonies began to write down the stories of their lives. These stories have revealed to us a heartbreaking and cruel history.



But with millions of slaves before them, their lives were a complete mystery. Facing the skeletons of three African slaves living in the 16th century was something completely different. These skeletons not only tell a story, but they are also a testament to the fact that happened.

Modern archaeological methods will increasingly be able to recreate the lives of these slaves, piecing together pieces of their lives, giving them a forgotten identity.

In the future, interdisciplinary studies like this will become more and more popular, and more and more pieces of life in the past will be revealed, said researcher Thiseas C. Lamnidis. That's how science can help dead people tell stories.

You finished reading the article "**Three sets of skeletons reveal the tragic history of the first African people to reach America**" edited by the [TipsMake](#) team. We hope this article has provided you with many useful tech tips and tricks. You can search for similar articles on tips and guides. Thank you for reading and for following us regularly.