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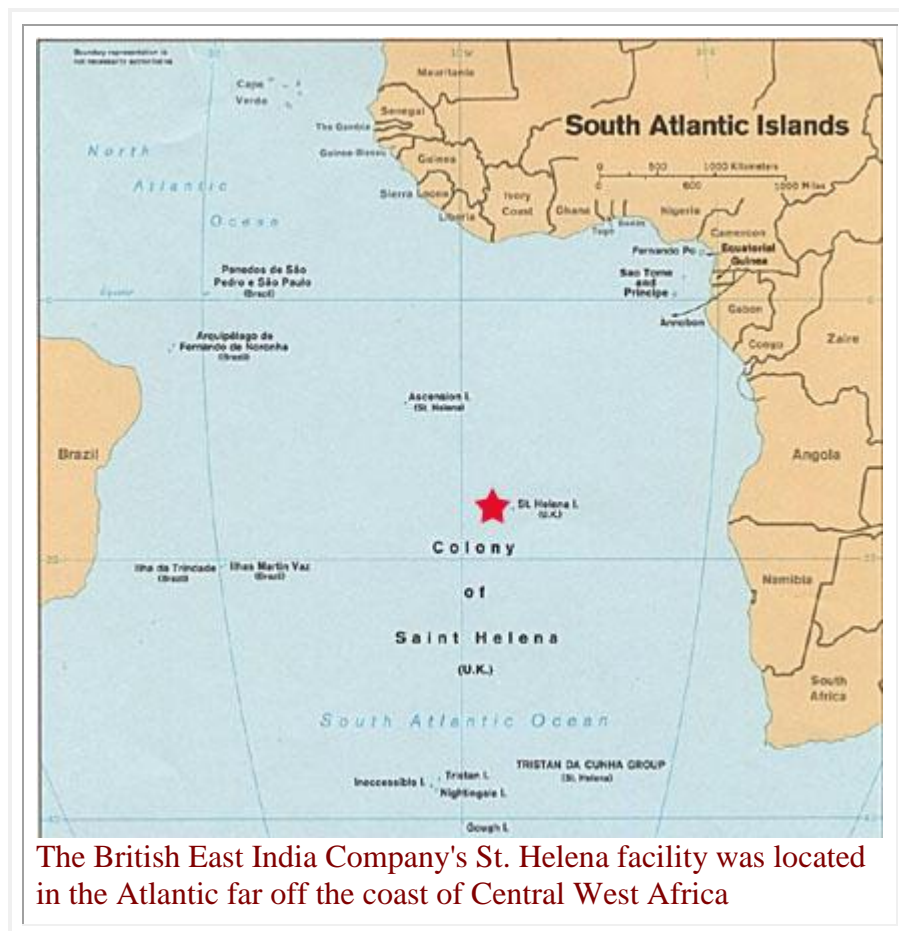
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The Legacy of an Inhuman Trade at the British Colony of St. Helena

By Michael Binyon
The Times
December 10, 2009

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Halfway between the decaying slave forts of West Africa and the overgrown plantations of the New World, on the tiny island of St. Helena, archaeologists have uncovered one of the largest slave graveyards anywhere in the world.



The bones of some 10,000 young Africans lie buried in the rocky valleys of this isolated British territory in the South Atlantic, victims of the ruthless trade that Britain dominated in the 18th century but fought to suppress after the abolition of slavery.

A team of British archaeologists uncovered the first graves last year after preparation had begun to build an access road to the site of the planned new airport on St. Helena.



Excavation of the grave of a captive African at St. Helena in 2008. Photo copyright by The Times.

The bodies, many of them children, were discovered where they had been buried after being brought to St. Helena between 1840 and 1874 by Royal Navy patrols hunting the slavers. The captured ships were forced into the island where the traders were arrested and their victims liberated. By then, however, many were already dead in the fetid holds where they had been packed together for the long journey.

Many of the survivors also died soon after they were brought to Rupert's Valley, near the capital Jamestown. It was used as a treatment and holding depot by the navy's West Africa Squadron. Smallpox, dysentery and other diseases claimed many of those who had endured hunger, thirst and the terrible conditions below decks.

The discovery of so many bones is of enormous importance in researching the history of slavery. Few graves have been found of captives who died before they were sold in Cuba, Brazil, the United States and other parts of the New World. The find may stimulate fresh emotional debate, especially in the U.S. and other countries involved in the slave trade until the mid-19th century.

The excavations raise very sensitive issues, not least on St. Helena itself. The island, a vital staging post on the route to India, was governed for almost 200 years by the East India Company, and slaves were used there until long after Britain outlawed the slave trade in 1807. Many St. Helenians are themselves descendants of these early slaves, who remained on the island after they were freed, and there is some reluctance to acknowledge that most people can trace their origins partly to slavery as well as to the early British settlers and labourers brought in from the far corners of the British Empire.



"A View of the Town and Island of St. Helena in the Atlantic Ocean belonging to the English East India Company," engraving circa 1790.

The dig was led by Dr. Andrew Pearson, an archaeologist working on behalf of the Department for International Development and the environmental consultancy Aecom. He said the discovery will advance understanding of the 19th-century slave trade and the political machinations behind its abolition. "It will also bring a voice to a forgotten people who died in limbo, in a place physically and conceptually between freedom and slavery."

Some 325 skeletons have been excavated. They are now being examined by a research team in Jamestown to determine their age, sex, life history and cause of death. So far, the vast majority have been males, with a significant proportion of children or young adults, some less than a year old. Often buried in groups, the individuals were occasionally interred with personal effects, jewellery and fragments of clothing, as well as a few metal tags and artefacts that relate to their enslavement and subsequent rescue. The dry conditions have led to extremely high levels of preservation and hair has been found on some skulls.

Evidence of disease or malnutrition is easy to establish. Bone specialists -- osteologists -- can also detect fractures, trauma, osteoarthritis and other conditions. Many of the young captives appear to have had a hard-working life before being shipped out of Africa. Between 1840 and 1850, 15,000 Africans were landed on St. Helena, of whom nearly 5,000 died. The liberation centre did not finally close until 1874.

Further research will be carried out in Britain, using, for example, isotope analysis to trace the signature in the bones left by groundwater. This may help to pinpoint some of the captives' origins. No one in the 19th century, however, could tell where the slaves came from. Naval officers could not speak their tribal languages, and it was hard to repatriate them to their homeland.

Some of the most striking evidence of their origins, however, comes from their teeth. Most had front teeth filed in particular tribal patterns -- either as an M or an inverted U or with a V notch cut into their front incisors. Some of the patterns were made by chipping at the teeth with stones. Often the result was infection and terrible abscesses, which left marks on the jawbones. Anthropologists may be able to relate tooth patterns to the customs of certain tribes.

The excavation in summer 2008 took 10 weeks. All the graves were found in a swath stretching a few feet on either side of where the airport road will run. Thousands more skeletons still lie in Rupert's Valley, but no more digs are planned, as there is no intention to disturb the other graves. A decision is pending whether the bodies will be reburied in Rupert's Valley, or placed within an ossuary close to their original place of burial.

An observer in 1861 described the terrible scene when a slave ship landed at Rupert's. "The whole deck, as I picked my way from end to end, in order to avoid treading on them, was thickly strewn with the dead, dying and starved bodies of what seemed to me a species of ape that I had never seen before. Yet these miserable, helpless objects being picked up from the deck and handed over the ship's side, one by one, living, dying and dead alike, were really human beings. Their arms were worn down to about the size of a walking stick. Many died as they were passed from the ship to the boat, but there was no time to separate the living from the dead."

The only consolation to those whose ancestors suffered such Belsen-like conditions is that most traders tried to keep the captives fed and fit enough to fetch good prices at the slave markets in America. The journey in sailing ships

across the Atlantic took weeks, and if most had died there would have been little profit for the slavers.

The Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron was based in St. Helena and Ascension Island, settled by Britain in only 1815. It was an arduous and dangerous job catching the slavers, especially as warships rarely fired on the elusive traders for fear of killing the captives. There were too few warships to patrol an enormous stretch of coast, and most were slower than the fast American-built vessels used by the traders. Only when steam warships were used did the navy really gain a decisive advantage.

Dr. Pearson said the analysis of the bones will be completed by next May and the findings published by the Council for British Archaeology.