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Evidence Unearthed of Earliest African Slaves in the New World

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In the early European histories of the New World, there are numerous accounts of African slaves accompanying explorers and colonists.

Now, digging in a colonial era graveyard in one of the oldest European cities in Mexico, archaeologists have found what they believe are the oldest remains of slaves brought from Africa to the New World. The remains date between the late-16th century and the mid-17th century, not long after Columbus first set foot in the Americas.

Skeletons of Africans were found in the cemetery in Campeche, Mexico.

The discovery is to be reported in an upcoming edition of the American Journal of Physical Anthropology by a team of researchers from UW-Madison and the Autonomous University of the Yucatan.

The African origin of the slaves was determined through the reading of telltale signatures locked at birth into the tooth enamel of individuals by strontium isotopes, a chemical which enters the body through the food chain as nutrients pass from bedrock through soil and water to plants and animals. The isotopes found in the teeth are an indelible signature of birthplace, as they can be directly linked to the bedrock of specific locales, giving archaeologists a powerful tool to trace the migration of individuals on the landscape. [read more >>>].