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Caribbean Grave Site Illuminates Slavery

By Mat Probasco

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Caribbean Burial Ground Could Shed Strong Light on the Life and Death of Slaves

Charlotte Amalie, U.S. Virgin Islands -- A paper trail documents their lives as human property, from their passage across the Atlantic to their sale as slaves for sugar plantations. Now a newly discovered burial ground promises to shed extensive new light on the lives and deaths of Africans in the Caribbean.

Researchers from Denmark and the U.S. Virgin Islands want to unearth up to 50 skeletons next year, hoping to learn about their diet, illnesses and causes of death, and thus broaden knowledge of slave life in the one-time Danish colony.

Descendants of slaves could discover ancestors through DNA tests. At public meetings, islanders have also embraced the excavations as a way for Europeans to recognize their historic role in the slave trade and perhaps to make new amends.

Most slaves in the Americas were buried in unmarked graves, and studies of slave graveyards "are rarer than hen's teeth. The science that will come out of it will just be

extraordinary," said David Brewer, an archaeologist with the U.S. Virgin Islands government and one of the scientists planning to unearth some tombs in November to assess their condition before the project starts in March.

The slaves are buried in shallow graves beneath mounds of stones and conch shells, some marked by small, illegible headstones. They were found this year on a private 300-acre estate on St. Croix, the largest island.

Details have been withheld while researchers negotiate access to the property, said Brewer, who refused to identify the owner or the exact location of the graveyard.

The scientists will examine teeth and bones and conduct chemical analysis in a mobile laboratory. Brewer stressed that the bones will be disturbed as little as possible and reburied exactly as they were found.

One fingernail-sized shaving will be taken from each skeleton for a database of African DNA that could reveal links to other slave populations.

"This is the closest we can possibly get to telling the story of their lives as they knew it," said Pia Bennike, an anthropologist leading the team from the University of Copenhagen.

More than 100,000 enslaved Africans, mostly from what is now Ghana, arrived in the Danish West Indies from 1617 to 1807, according to Myron Jackson, director of the U.S. Virgin Islands' historical preservation office. Many were sold at slave markets and shipped to the American colonies while thousands remained as the property of Danish colonists.

From the time they were big enough to work, slaves cut sugar cane and picked cotton, tobacco and sweet potatoes in the Caribbean heat, Jackson said. When severe drought hit in 1725 and 1733, some plantation owners starved their work force rather than pay for food to be shipped to the islands.

David Brion Davis, a Yale University historian, notes that Caribbean slaves died much faster than those on the mainland and had a lower birthrate because of the harsh environment and labor conditions.

"Sugar production was a very, very taxing almost lethal kind of occupation," he said, noting that many lost limbs in machines.

Slaves who plotted revolt, tried to escape or threatened a white man were punished by 150 lashes, brandings on their forehead, or having a leg or ear chopped off. Others were hanged or tortured to death.

The Danes outlawed slavery in 1848. The United States bought the three-island territory from Denmark in 1917.

An island group is hoping the project will boost its case for reparations from Denmark.

No demands for compensation have ever been made. But educating Europeans about their role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade will likely lead to more Danish investment and possible payments, said Shelley Moorhead, president of the African-Caribbean Reparations and Resettlement Alliance, based in St. Croix.

Historian Davis said he is particularly interested in whether the genetic testing shows how often blacks and whites interbred.

He said the study holds great potential. "There are probably gaps we don't even know about that will be filled in."