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A Prone Burial from a Plantation Slave Cemetery in Barbados, West Indies: Possible Evidence for an African-type Witch or Other Negatively Viewed Person

ABSTRACT

Dating to the late 1600s or early 1700s, a burial excavated from a slave cemetery at Newton Plantation in Barbados had several unique characteristics. Buried in the largest artificial earthen mound in the cemetery without grave goods or a coffin, this young adult woman was the solitary interment in the mound and the cemetery's only prone burial. Her skeleton showed no signs of unusual death although analysis of lead in her bones suggests she suffered from severe lead poisoning. Documentary evidence on Barbados slave culture in general and ethnographic/ethnohistorical evidence on West African mortuary practices suggest interpretations for this burial: She may have been a witch or some other negatively viewed person with supernatural powers who, following African custom, was feared or socially ostracized.

Introduction

The Caribbean island of Barbados was England's first American territory to depend on sugar plantations and African slave labor. From around the 1630s until emancipation in 1834 to 1838, many thousands of people, slave and free, were buried on this compact 166-sq.-mi. island. Free people were usually interred in church cemeteries, but the vast majority of the several hundred thousand slaves who perished were not baptized—baptism of slaves was infrequent in all of England's early New World colonies—and thus were not buried in consecrated grounds, particularly those of the Anglican Church, the established church of Barbados. The historical data are very strong that the great majority of these slaves were buried in unmarked plantation ceme-

teries that were scattered throughout the island (Handler and Lange 1978:174–181; Handler 1989: 13–15). Although excavated in the early 1970s, the cemetery at Newton Plantation is still the only plantation cemetery discovered in Barbados as well as the earliest and largest undisturbed plantation slave cemetery yet reported in the New World (Handler 1989; Jamieson 1995:39, 42, 54). Archaeological research at Newton took place over an eight-week period during two field seasons in 1972 and 1973, and is described at length in Handler and Lange (1978; cf. Corruccini et al. 1982; Handler and Corruccini 1983).

Only a small portion of the cemetery was sampled, but the remains of 104 individuals, interred from about 1660 to 1820, were excavated. Some of these burials were highly distinctive relative to the cemetery population. This paper addresses one such burial, unique not only to Newton but also to early African cemetery sites in the Americas—including the hundreds of burials recently excavated from a colonial-period cemetery in New York City (e.g., Blakey et al. 1993; Harrington 1993; Handler 1994a; Mack 1994; cf. Rankin-Hill 1993; Watters 1994:68; Jamieson 1995:42).

Newton Cemetery and Mound Burials

Newton Plantation is located in Christ Church parish in southern Barbados, in one of the island's historically most fertile sugar-growing areas (Figure 1). The plantation's slave cemetery is close to the site of the former slave village, in an uncultivated field of approximately 4,500 sq. m (Figure 2). The field is covered with a thick blanket of sour grass, a common pasture grass in Barbados, and has changed very little since the early 1970s. The only major difference between then and now is that the casuarina trees which once dotted the field's surface burned down in the early 1980s (Figure 3). Surrounded by fields of sugarcane, this grassy area, which had never been cultivated or plowed because of its shallow soil cover and frequent limestone rock outcroppings, includes a rise in slope of approximately 8 m. The bottom of the slope is relatively level, and in the early 1970s most mortuary activity

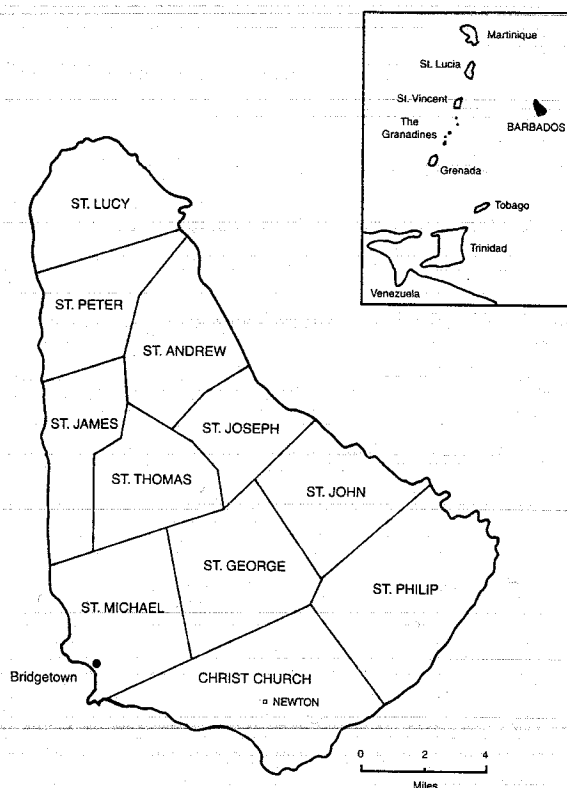


FIGURE 1. Barbados parishes and the location of Newton Plantation.

was evident in this approximately 3,000 m² area (Figure 4). The area contained several low, formless mounds arranged in no particular pattern; before excavation these mounds appeared as slight undulations in the dense grass surface which covered the entire site. Some of the mounds turned out to be natural features of the terrain, while others were humanly created and contained burials. The Newton burial mounds are "archaeologically unique in the West Indies" (Watters 1994:68) and appear to be unique for the rest of the New World, although some prehistoric Native American mounds in the American South were reused by African Americans for burials (Jamieson 1995:48).

Mound 1, the largest and most clearly defined of the Newton mounds, was roughly circular in shape and approximately 7.5 m wide and slightly less than

1 m above ground surface. Coral limestone rubble covered the top and edges of the mound, but its core was plain earth. The size of the mound suggested that considerable effort had brought soil from elsewhere, probably a neighboring field; the amount of earth implied more labor than the requirements of simply filling a settled-in grave.

Mound 1 contained only one interment. Although the mound was only 80 percent excavated, because of a tree rooted in its southeastern portion, "related evidence from the mound suggests" that no other burials were present (Handler and Lange 1978:110–111). Reflecting the anonymity of so many early slaves, the individual remains nameless. Designated Burial 9 after the order in which it was excavated, the individual had been placed in a prepared sub-surface pit, a shallow excavation of about 50 cm into the underlying bedrock (Figure 5). Field notes 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—skeletal lead content and its implications for suggesting birth in the Old or New Worlds is discussed in Corruccini et al. (1987). A trace mineral analysis method developed to measure skeletal lead content (e.g., Wittmers et al. 1981; Aufderheide et al. 1985) was applied to 52 skeletal tissue samples of the Newton slave population. The method yielded a mean bone lead content of close to 118 ppm (parts per million, or micrograms of lead per gram of bone ash). Burial 9's skeletal lead content was very high (249.7 ppm), more than twice the mean for the all-ages group as well as for her own age group (Arthur C. Aufderheide 1995, pers. comm.; Handler et al. 1986:402–403). Moreover, Burial 9 lacked modified/mutilated teeth—a virtually certain marker of African birth (Handler 1994b), and she had much higher lead levels than skeletons with this characteristic (Arthur C. Aufderheide 1995, pers. comm.).

Grave goods or associated artifacts were absent from Burial 9, and she lacked a coffin. Coffins were absent from one-third or more of Newton's burials,

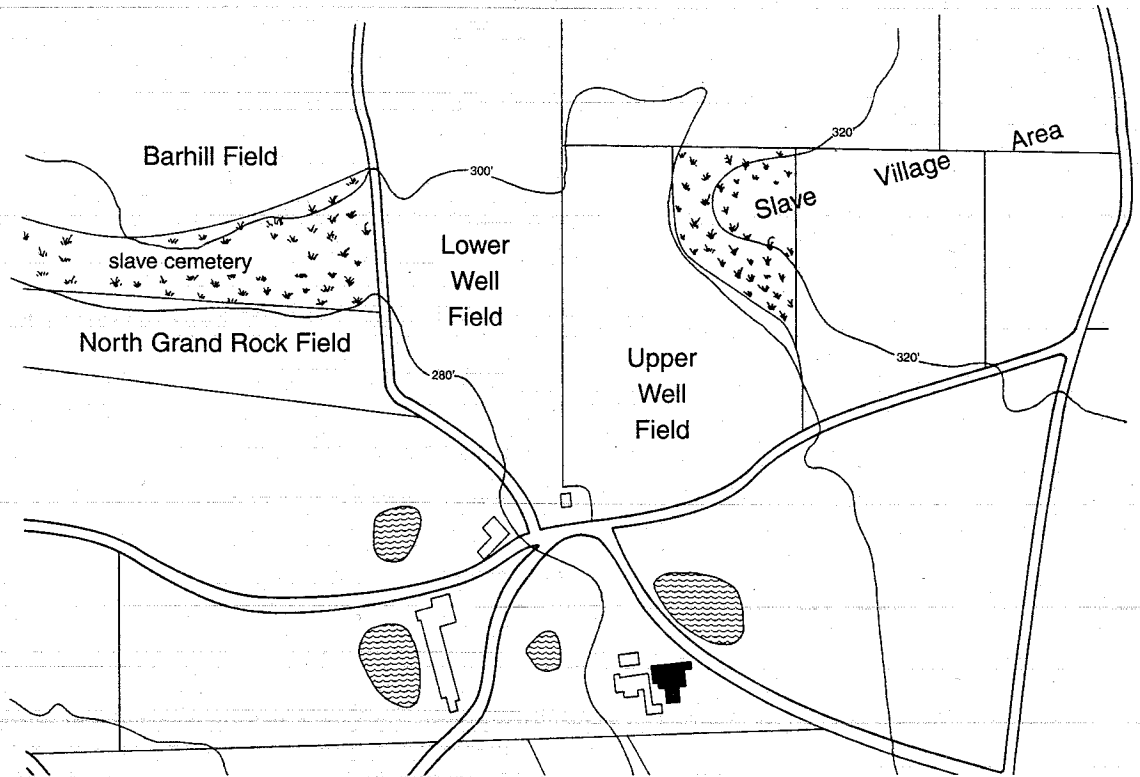


FIGURE 2. Newton Plantation. The central area of the plantation is illustrated, showing neighboring fields and the site of the slave cemetery and former slave village.

usually the earlier ones. Her skeleton was fully articulated on an east-west axis with the head facing west. Not only did Mound 1 only contain this solitary burial, but what is especially significant is that Burial 9 was also the cemetery's *only prone* burial; aside from one or two flexed burials, all others were in extended supine positions. A handful of prone burials have been reported from African-related sites in the New World, but Burial 9 is arguably the earliest and the only one known from the Caribbean (Watters 1994:68). The large African burial ground

in New York City lacked prone burials (Michael Parrington 1996, pers. comm.). Of the two reported prone burials from North America, one, from a free black cemetery in Philadelphia, dating from 1822 to 1842, is problematical—the investigators not being sure if the body shifted from the “ordinary supine position” while being lowered into the grave or “perhaps postmortem movement occurred after burial” (Parrington and Roberts 1990:154). The other prone burial, from a rural black cemetery in Arkansas, dates from around 1890 to 1927; the



FIGURE 3. Newton cemetery, 1972, facing northeast. The main burial area is along the slope bottom, lower right; the approximate location of Mound 1 after excavation is indicated by the arrow. The slave village is in the right background; the dirt road, illustrated in Figure 4, is in the foreground. The casuarina trees were gone by the early 1980s.

investigators apparently did not attach any special cultural significance to its position (Rose and Santefford 1985:59–60, 134–136). Neither of these burials were found in mounds.

Physical evidence from the fill around the skeleton and the surrounding area suggests Burial 9 was interred during the late 1600s or early 1700s, an early period in the cemetery's history and at a time when many Barbados slaves were African-born or first-generation creoles. Handler and Lange (1978:111) provide a description of this evidence.

If Mound 1 was, indeed, constructed early, why it was not used again becomes a relevant question in interpreting Burial 9 because a smaller mound, Mound 2, approximately 3–3½ m immediately west of Mound 1 (Figure 4) contained about 45 percent of the excavated burials. Mound 2 was congested with skeletons intruding on one another at different levels (Handler and Lange 1978:112–116, Figures 11, 12). It was not a mass grave containing interments buried around the same time because of an epidemic or hurricane; rather, 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 among Newton's slaves concerning this large mound and the individual it contained. This paper offers an explanation for why Burial 9 received different treatment than the cemetery's other burials.

The identity of Burial 9 will never be known, but questions can be raised about her status in the slave community. Burial 9's unique features as the cemetery's only prone burial and the only one interred in the cemetery's largest mound suggest that she possessed unusual characteristics or died under special circumstances. The extremely high lead level in her bones suggests that at death she would have been suffering from the effects of serious lead poisoning, and might have displayed symptoms which could have been interpreted as bizarre behavior. These symptoms might have included a "miserable, nearly daily experience" of "abdominal colic," a "paralysis of some muscles," and epileptic-like seizures or convulsions. People around her would have noticed such behavior as "sudden, abrupt episodes of clutching her abdomen, moaning or crying out in pain." These episodes could occur abruptly and unpredictably and "persist for minutes and even hours"; her "weakened and paralyzed extremity muscles would generate an erratic, grotesque gait," and the epileptic-like seizures would have varied from "uncontrollable . . . arm and/or leg movements to the whole-body convulsions followed by a variable period of disorientation, confusion, or actual coma" (Arthur C. Aufderheide 1995, pers. comm.; cf. Handler et al. 1986). 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 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?

Mound Burials and Prone Burials in West Africa

The relatively abundant archival sources on Newton (Handler 1971:158, 1976, 1991:60) lack

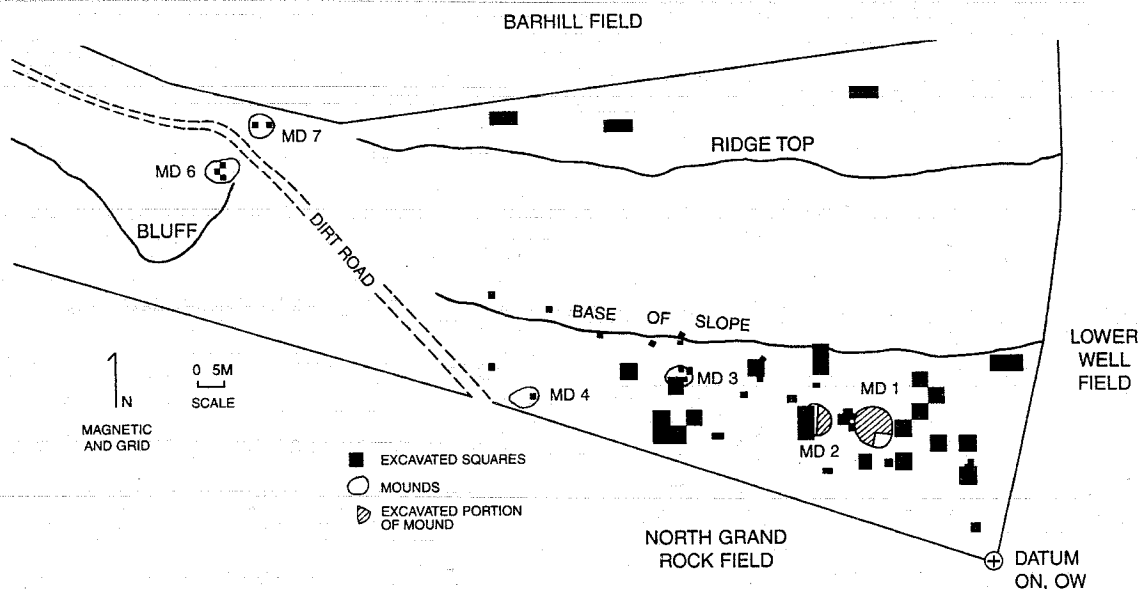


FIGURE 4. Newton cemetery area, illustrating location of excavated squares and mounds, including Mound 1, which contains Burial 9, and Mound 2.

any specific information for an interpretation of Burial 9, and there are no contemporary ethnographic or other oral data from Barbados that would help interpret the burial. For suggestive ideas one must turn to more general data on Barbadian slave culture and, lacking comparative archaeological data on colonial- or slave-period mortuary practices in West Africa (cf. Jamieson 1995:43), the ethnographic/ethnohistorical literature on West African mortuary practices. It is to be stressed that the vast majority of slaves who were transported to Barbados during the period of Burial 9's interment came from West Africa, not the Central African-Angolan region (Handler and Lange 1978:20-29).

Nothing in the Barbados documents helps to interpret the significance of Mound 1 in and of itself, 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. Approximately 154 published ethnographic/ethnohistorical works deal-

ing with West African cultures were searched for information on mortuary practices, and this literature generally indicates that graves were level and not mounded. It is impractical to list all these references here; only those that yielded specific information are cited below. Only a few references to earthen or "clay" mound constructions were found in early sources and these mention or allude to diverse functions: "Big conical mounds" in an Ibibio town in southeastern Nigeria contained the bodies of horses "sacrificed to the deceased chiefs of the place" (Partridge 1905:243); a neighboring people constructed a "monument . . . of a plain and unadorned mound of hardened clay, dyed or stained black" over the graves of high-status people (Leonard 1906:183; cf. Talbot 1969[1926], 3:510). Among Akan-speakers on the Gold Coast, "traditionally a coffin-shaped mound of earth or clay is placed above a grave" (Marees 1987[1602]:181 n. 5; cf. Carnes 1969[1852]:374), while among the neighboring Ga "protective medicines" owned by medicine men were buried in special mounds of "variable size and shape made of clay [or] stone." Under these mounds there was "always . . . some

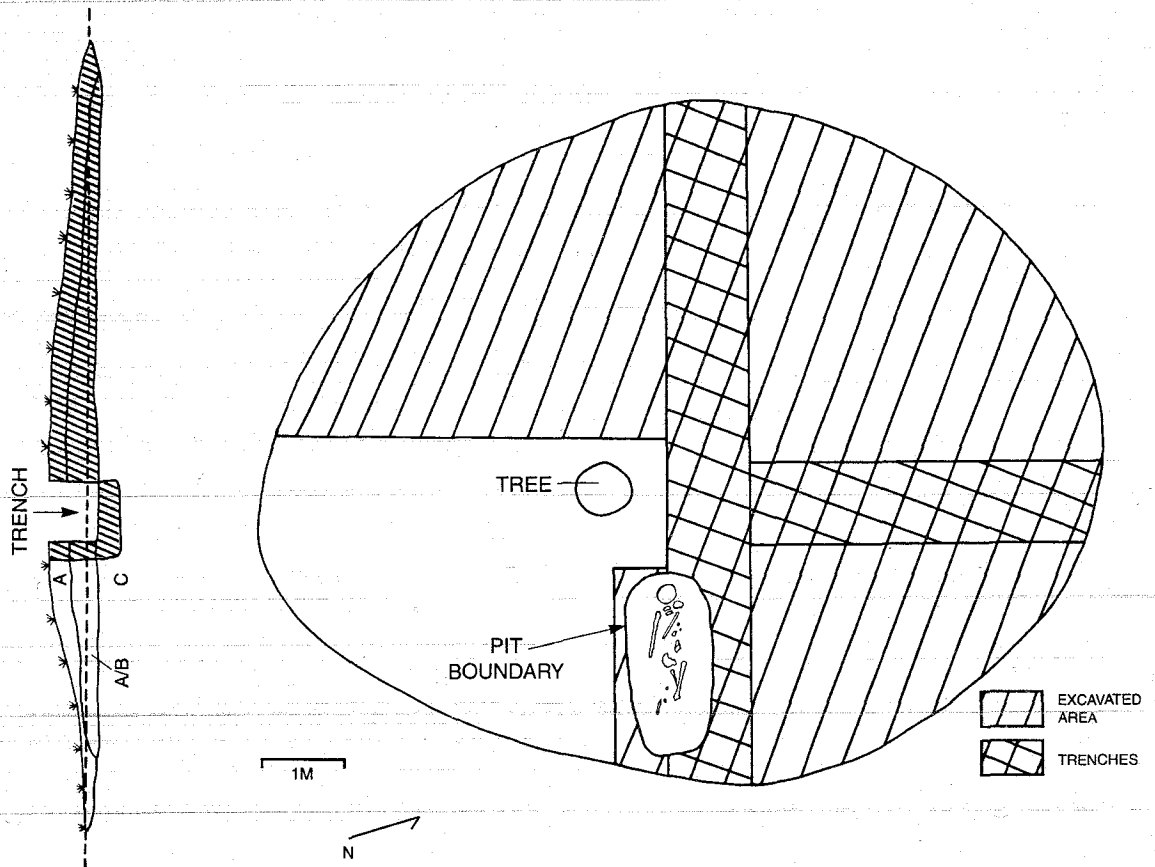


FIGURE 5. Excavation profile of Mound 1, Burial 9.

living thing buried alive''; in earlier times, the ''living thing'' was ''one or more human beings'' sacrificed to a major ''war-god'' (Field 1937:40-41, 121). Although data on earthen mounds are very sparse and sometimes vague, the few references to mounds that were located seem to link them to high-status people whose communities viewed them positively or in a favorable light. There is one exception, however, and this exception is suggestive of an interpretation for Burial 9.

Jack Goody (1962) reports that the LoDagaa of Northwestern Ghana have three main methods of ''disposing of the dead.'' The ''ordinary'' burial involves digging a new grave in the form of a ''bell-shaped chamber'' in the ''local'' cemetery or in the compound of the decedent. The other two

methods are reserved for ''members of the community who are considered dangerous.'' In one method a ''trench grave'' is dug in an area removed from where normal people have been buried and without the usual funeral ceremonies. Trench grave burials can include victims of epidemics, suicides, those convicted of various crimes, and witches; the body of a witch, in fact, ''is simply disposed of as quickly as possible in an old grave, which is never again reopened.'' Another burial for ''dangerous'' persons involves the ''building of a mound above the corpse.'' This method is apparently mainly used for children ''who have not yet been weaned'' and who are thus not considered fully human; however, Goody implies this type of burial can also be used for others such as suicides and witches. Goody

explains that the "principle underlying" the mound burial "appears to be the avoidance of burial within the earth itself. For the Earth is not only the custodian of corpses; she is also the guardian of the living... [and] is associated with the main activities of human life... the interment of an evil-doer below the surface of the earth might adversely affect any of these important activities"; "one way of minimizing contact with the earth is to build the grave above ground." Thus, an "evil-doer" is "buried under a pile of earth," but even persons buried in trench graves are considered to have "sinned against the Earth shrine"; witches fall well within this category, as witchcraft is considered "an offense against the earth" (Goody 1962:142, 148-155).

I am not suggesting that the mound over Burial 9 can be literally interpreted as the LoDagaa explain their mound burials, but their practices raise the possibility that mounds could be associated with persons who possessed unusual characteristics or negatively viewed traits. Such an interpretation is strongly reinforced 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 could occur within the same geographic and cultural areas and are regularly reported in the literature (e.g., Handler and Lange 1978:198, 318 n. 28). Information on prone positions, however, is much more limited and has been far more difficult to obtain.

The many publications sampled on West African ethnography/ethnohistory yielded only a 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. Among the Kpe and other coastal Bantu peoples in the western Cameroons, there was a "special form of witchcraft"; people convicted of this witchcraft were "buried face downward so that if they attempt to come out of their graves they will move in the wrong direction" (Ardener 1956:90, 105). Not far to the west of the Kpe, the Ibibio normally buried their dead in extended supine or flexed positions, but the bodies of "undesirables whose return is not

wished are placed in the grave face downward" (Talbot (1967[1923]:144-145); among the Efik Ibibios of Old Calabar "corpses of witches were sometimes buried with the face to the ground" so that the "'witch ghost'" would be prevented from returning to "'wreak havoc' among the living" (Forde 1956:22).

Finally, an English resident of Sierra Leone during the late 1780s described the execution of a convicted witch among the closely related 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" (Matthews 1966[1788]:127-128). Little (1951:230) alludes to a similar practice among the neighboring Mende.

Interpretation of Burial 9

When specific 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, e.g., suicide, in pregnancy or childbirth, from lightning; who possessed unusual physical characteristics, e.g., albinos, twins; or negatively viewed social traits, e.g., sorcerers, witches, 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, and their bodies, clothed or naked, could be burned (Nassau 1969[1904]:234; Milligan 1970[1912]:151), sometimes after being hacked to pieces (Schwab 1947:252), merely thrown into the "Bad Bush" (Talbot 1969[1926], 3:481-482), left "on the surface to rot" (Meek 1969[1904]:222), or simply placed in a grave without any ceremony (Thomas 1970[1916]:

49–51; cf. Rattray 1969[1932], 2:290; Goody 1962: 152–153); one early writer (Milligan 1970[1912]: 241) reports that women accused of having caused the death of their husbands through witchcraft were “buried alive with the dead body of the husband,” and “their legs were broken before they were thrown into the grave.” Further, it is important to stress that even if witch burials are not described, the sources imply or explicitly indicate that their bodies were treated differently than those of other people.

Only at great personal risk could Barbadian slaves execute or murder one of their own, but, it has to be emphasized, they were relatively free to bury their dead according to their own customs (Handler and Lange 1978:171–215); relative freedom in mortuary practices was widespread in the Americas, especially during the early colonial periods (e.g., Jamieson 1995:41, 46–47). An interpretation of Burial 9 as a negatively viewed member of the slave community is further reinforced by evidence from Mound 2, the smaller mound which contained many burials interred over a relatively long period. 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 associated with evil supernatural powers was buried there.

Barbadian slaves, as West Africans in general, did not consider major illness and death as accidental; rather, such misfortunes were caused primarily by supernatural forces that acted through human agents. Thus, evil magic was a major factor in their lives, and witchcraft, in particular, was frequently invoked to explain major personal calamities. For an overview of slave beliefs concerning witchcraft/sorcery, see Handler (1996). In considering evil magic I follow a traditional anthropological distinction between sorcery and witchcraft, particularly as it relates to African societies. In sorcery, magic is consciously performed to injure, even destroy, others. Sorcerers acquire their knowledge through learning, and theoretically their techniques can be carried out by anyone with the requisite knowledge and skill. Although the witch’s power might be acquired through special

ritual procedures, it is usually inborn or inherited. However acquired, this power cannot be learned; it resides within the individual and is directed against others for evil purposes. Witchcraft “is part of an individual’s being, a part of his innermost self, while sorcery is merely a technique which a person utilizes” (Middleton and Winter 1963:12). Africans frequently believed that “the witch need merely wish to harm his victim and his witchcraft then does this, or it may be enough for him to merely feel annoyance or jealousy against someone for the power to set itself in operation without his being aware of the fact that it has done so” (Middleton and Winter 1963:3). Witchcraft, then, is a psychic or mental act whose believers affirm that the harmful power of the witch is unleashed merely through the activation of certain negative thoughts (e.g., Middleton and Winter 1963; Bohannan 1963:346–349; Mair 1969). Barbadian slaves, at least in the earlier periods when slave life was more directly influenced by the African-born and first-generation creoles, may have made distinctions between witchcraft and sorcery in a broadly similar manner to many West Africans. These distinctions, however, went unrecognized by the whites who reported on Barbadian slave life, and thus are difficult to isolate in the ethnohistorical record. In any event, beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery were pervasive features of the world in which slaves lived—as they were in the West African homelands, and slaves clearly subscribed to an essentially African view of witches: A witch is everything a good person should not be; witches are universally feared and despised.

A final point should be made concerning Burial 9. It was certainly not unique at Newton in its absence of grave goods, and that absence alone would not make it a very special case. In West Africa, grave goods were common and included materials ranging from food and drink to personal articles or possessions of one kind or another. The types, quality, and quantity of these goods varied by culture and, of course, according to the wealth and status of the deceased. West Africans explained grave goods in a variety of ways, but whatever the explanations, the documentary sources used for this paper yield absolutely no ethnographic/ethnohistorical evidence that grave goods were interred with

persons whom their communities viewed negatively; in brief, the evidence is very clear that grave goods were only placed with persons who were positively regarded in their communities or who were considered ordinary people (cf. Jamieson 1995:48–49).

Thus, mortuary evidence on Burial 9 includes data like the burial's solitary location in Mound 1, prone position, absence of grave goods, body forced into a grave pit that was too small, possibly suggesting a disdain or lack of care for the corpse, and the possible behavior associated with severe lead poisoning. This evidence, 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 that of 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.

Conclusion

This paper has provided another possible line of evidence for the perpetuation of African mortuary practices in the New World. To date, the Newton data provide the earliest and strongest archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence for African influences on the mortuary practices of African Americans, but the evidence for African influences extends beyond Barbados into other areas of the New World—e.g., literature cited in Jamieson (1995:46–54) and Rankin-Hill (1993). However, archaeological discussions of African-American burial practices focus on the conventional mortuary treatment of “ordinary” people, or persons who were not negatively viewed, feared, or ostracized by their communities. Since African beliefs and practices were manifest in many areas of early slave sociocultural life throughout the New World, and there is ample evidence for the widespread belief in negative magic, it should not be surprising that beliefs surrounding negative magic and witchcraft should be manifest in mortuary behavior and reflected in the archaeological record.

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