

JEROME S. HANDLER

Determining African Birth from Skeletal Remains: A Note on Tooth Mutilation

ABSTRACT

Tooth mutilation existed in sub-Saharan Africa, and was found among slaves transported to the New World. A small number of mutilation cases have been identified in early New World "Negro" skeletons from the Caribbean and Florida. The skeletal evidence alone precludes determining if the individuals were African- or American-born, but limited ethnohistorical data suggested the former. This hypothesis is considerably strengthened by evidence from 18th-century runaway slave advertisements found in the newspapers of five mainland British colonies. Analysis of these ads shows that every runaway who is identified with tooth mutilation came from Africa. This ethnohistorical evidence supports other sets of bioarchaeological and ethnohistorical data that the African custom of tooth mutilation was not generally practiced by Caribbean or North American slaves. Where filed or chipped teeth appear on skeletons "racially" identified as African in New World sites, there is an excellent chance that the individuals were African-born.

Introduction

A major cemetery discovered in 1991 in New York City has generated a great deal of public interest and controversy in New York, and has also attracted considerable attention from the anthropological community (Howson 1992; Howson and Handler 1993; Cook 1993; Harrington 1993; General Services Administration 1993). Containing the earliest and largest number of Africans and their descendants yet discovered in an undisturbed New World site, the Colonial-period cemetery in Lower Manhattan has great potential for shedding light on the biocultural history of Africans in the New World.

The approximately 400 excavated skeletons represent a fraction of the total number of estimated interments. Intensive analysis of the skeletons, scheduled to begin at Howard University in late

1993 or early 1994, will continue for several years. One issue to be addressed with these remains—as it has with slave remains found in other New World sites—is whether individuals had been born in the Americas or in Africa (e.g., Blakey et al. 1993:64–70). The archaeologist or physical anthropologist might be interested in distinguishing between persons of Old World and New World origins or birth—particularly where research is directed to the retention, modification, or loss of African customs in the New World and issues of biocultural change and adaptation. Whatever bioanthropological methods researchers employ to ascertain region or continent of birth, a cultural feature which helps establish if a particular skeleton represents an African-born individual is tooth mutilation—the intentional deformation or alteration of the natural appearance of the teeth.

Tooth Mutilation

Tooth mutilation has been reported from various world regions, including the Pacific and Asia, and among pre-Columbian New World populations (cf. Handler et al. 1982:297). It was also well-known in large parts of sub-Saharan Africa, including the East, Central, South West, West, and Western Central portions, the latter two areas having played crucial roles in the transatlantic slave trade. Tooth mutilation in West and Western Central Africa was practiced on both sexes although it is impossible to quantify the sexual distribution of mutilation from the early ethnographic or travel literature. This literature often does not mention the sex of the persons with mutilation, but sources that do provide such information give the impression that the practice was common among both males and females in some groups, while among others the mutilation was performed chiefly on males. Early European visitors to West Africa, imbued with their own ethnocentric views and naive understandings of African customs, often erroneously associated some forms of mutilated teeth with cannibalism. For Africans, however, tooth mutilation had nothing to do with cannibalism—a prevalent myth Europeans held about African cultures—and was ap-

