

Finding the Forgotten Ones: Search and Identification of an Unmarked Mass Grave in San Juan, Puerto Rico

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When the Spaniards in Puerto Rico started to build El Fuerte San Felipe del Morro in 1539, little did they know that the fort was going to be not just a barrier against the living, but also a barrier against the dead. In 1855, Puerto Rico was struck by the cholera epidemic, killing 20,000 to 50,000 individuals – 4-10% of the total population at the time (Kiple 1985). Due to the high volume of corpses piling up and fear of the disease's further spreading, a cemetery outside of the walls of El Morro was established (Sifres-Fernandez 2015). This cemetery remained untouched for over a century, due to fears that the disease might resurface. Today, however, this cemetery is in danger of being destroyed, as tourists in Old San Juan have been recently granted access to this section of the fort. Thousands of people are walking on top of the cemetery without knowledge of what lies beneath them, uncovering human bones as they walk and erode the landscape.

This cemetery contains critical information regarding the late Spanish colonial period in Puerto Rico and the impact on the health and lives of enslaved people during this time. The loss of such information would be devastating to the studies of said context. Therefore, I have developed a salvage bioarchaeological investigation of the site, with the main objectives of collecting, analyzing, preserving, and repatriating the human remains buried here before erosion and intrusion destroy or further compromises the site and its contents.

This past summer I had the opportunity to conduct my first season of field work, which had as its goal the identification of the delineations of the mass grave and the mapping of the site.

During the first week of fieldwork, me and my colleagues dedicated most of our time to the clearing of the vegetation that was growing in some areas of the site. During this process we discovered dozens of human skeletal fragments in the soil, as potentially having been there for a long time. Our first step, therefore, was the recovery of said skeletal fragments to avoid any further damage or loss; the great quantity of skeletal material recovered highlighted the importance of the recovery and salvage of this site and the individuals found here.

After the clearing, we proceeded to collect data using a Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR). A GPR is an instrument that sends pulses of energy to the ground while measuring the strength and time of the pulse to return to the receiver. Changes in soil composition or density, as well as architectural or human-made features can also affect these readings. Afterwards, we completed the mapping of the site, its features (like the cemetery wall, the fort wall, the trail, trees, etc.), and the quadrants we had created for the geophysical data collection. Beware, measuring out 10 quadrants that do not overlap but touch each other will not take less than an hour to complete, or less than 4 hours, for that matter (this may have been omitted in archaeology methods courses).

After collecting the GPR data, we continued on with the collection of Magnetometer data. A magnetometer is an instrument that transmits electromagnetic waves down to the ground; changes in the magnetism of the soil (from features or archaeological artifacts) will be read by the magnetometer's receiver, giving us insight into what may be under the surface.

Finally, towards the end of the season we proceeded to conduct a systematic surface collection of the skeletal material that was visible on the surface. This allowed us to determine changes in the density of where the bones are found throughout the site. In total, 432 human bone fragments were recovered and transported to the National Parks Service's San Juan National Historic Site. Additionally, 81 human bone fragments were identified in the trail within NPS' jurisdiction, which could not be removed due to procedural matters that are currently being worked on.

Apart from collecting data, a great part of this season was spent meeting with multiple governmental agencies as well as meeting the local community. As archaeologist, it is imperative that we understand that we work for the community and descendants of those we study. I am thrilled to have met with the Community Board of La Perla in Old San Juan, and to have heard from them what they think of this project and what they would like to see from it.

Although there is still a lot of work to be done and a lot of data to be analyzed, this summer we were able to find evidence of forgotten individuals, those who perished in an epidemic that preferentially targeted those already marginalized. It is not surprising that a mass grave utilized to bury those who died from a disease that preferentially infected marginalized groups, especially the enslaved population, was forgotten with time. By continuing this project, we can bring these individuals' histories back to life, and finally correct the systemic and historical violence and erasure that these individuals experienced and continue to do so.

References

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