Introduction

The bioarchaeological record of the southern Caribbean reflects a diverse population history due to the eventual replacement of founding indigenous groups by European and African populations as a result of colonial incursion and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This complex history can present problems for proper dissemination of human skeletal remains, particularly when retrieved outside the strictures of controlled excavation. In this case study, we examined a collection of unprovenienced skeletal material comprising four individuals of unknown ancestry deriving from a private collection on the island of Mustique in the southern Grenadines supposedly originating from the nearby island of Petite Mustique. Ancestry has been estimated using a combination of craniometrics and dental morphology, using the FORDISC database and the Arizona State University Dental Anthropology System (ASUDAS), respectively. We find that these data do not support Amerindian ancestry for these individuals, and instead suggest the remains are of European and/or African descent and therefore date to the post-Contact period. Ongoing stable isotope analyses should help in efforts to repatriate the remains to the appropriate governing body and location.

Background

The Caribbean islands were originally inhabited by Amerindian people, likely of South American origin (Fitzpatrick 2006, Keegan 2000). However, they were rapidly decimated by the introduction of communicable diseases following European contact in the late 15th century. Subsequent growth of the Transatlantic Slave Trade resulted in replacement of indigenous populations by European colonists and African slave populations.

Petite Mustique is a small island of approximately 100 acres in the southern Caribbean, five miles offshore of the larger island of Mustique, where the remains were kept in storage. Both islands are now privately owned, but politically are a part of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which comprises a chain of small, mostly volcanic islands in the Lesser Antilles. A single direct AMS date on human bone suggests at least one individual originates from 1436-1616 A.D., or around the time of contact.

The diverse population histories of the Caribbean islands necessitate careful assessment of ancestry affiliation. Although the provenance of remains is very important in any analysis, craniometric and dental morphology analyses can provide some information about peoples in the past.

Skeletal Analysis

The skeletal collection consists of 341 bones or bone fragments representing at least four adult individuals. An anthroposcopic analysis of ancestry was caused for individual 4 (most complete skull). The interorbital width, low, rounded root of the nose, and somewhat prognathic facial profile, suggest these individuals may be of African descent. Biological profiles are shown in Table 1. Sex was assessed using all intact cranial and pelvic markers (White & Folkens 2005). Age was estimated using cranial sutures, and auricular surface morphology (Buikstra & Ubelaker 1994), depending on elements present for each individual. Stature and body mass formulae determined using Ruff (2012) and Auerbach & Ruff (2004) respectively.

Discussion

Ancestry Evaluation. Given the standard skeletal analysis, dental morphology, and craniometrics undertaken here, we conclude that the individuals in this collection are probably not of Amerindian descent, and likely came to the New World following European contact.

Because of the small sample size and equivocal FORDISC results, we are unable to distinguish whether these individuals are of European or African descent. It is possible that these remains represent admixed individuals, as these samples date to a time of prevalent population admixture (Benn-Torres et al. 2008). In addition, the individuals present may not be of the same geographic or temporal origin, as no record of the context of recovery exists and not all individuals have been directly radiocarbon dated.

The radiocarbon date obtained suggests that at least one individual in this collection lived around the time of European contact with the Southern Antilles. This may indicate that the individuals present could be early immigrants to the region. A rib and tooth sample were submitted for 14C, 13C/12C, 15N/15N, and 87Sr/86Sr isotope analysis at the Stable Isotope Lab at University of Florida, Gainesville. This analysis, which is underway, may help isolate a geographic region of origin for these individuals. To further distinguish ancestry of these individuals, DNA analyses would be necessary.

Stewardship. Unfortunately, much of the information that could have been gathered from this skeletal collection was lost when these individuals were removed from their original context without recording the provenance and association of the materials. In addition, permanent glue was used on several skulls, making some reconstructions and subsequent metric analyses of the specimens difficult or impossible, as well as causing permanent damage to the bone. Preservation of remains is necessary for analysis and proper repatriation. Education and outreach about cultural heritage and principles of repatriation can help mitigate the loss of archaeological information. Particularly in small communities, outreach programs can have a widespread effect on the preservation and respect for archaeological remains, and may improve current archaeological practices and local histories.

References


Acknowledgments

Thank you to the Mustique Company, whose cooperation has made this project possible, and to the UROP at University of Oregon for funding the Mini Grant program.