interviews

Return to the African Burial Ground

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An interview with physical anthropologist Michael L. Blakey

It's been nearly 13 years since he African Burial Ground was discovered in Lower Manhattan. The find, the largest bioarchaeological site of its kind, significantly raised public awareness of colonial African heritage, especially in Northern states. New York had more enslaved Africans than any other port north of the Caribbean except Charleston, South Carolina.

Michael Blakey in his lab at William & Mary College (Photo by Cecelia Moore)

This October, the remains of 419 individuals excavated from the site were reinterred during a ceremony called the Rites of Ancestral Return. Dr. Michael L. Blakey, a physical anthropologist now at William & Mary College, is scientific director of the African Burial Ground Project. He participated in the ceremonies and spoke with ARCHAEOLOGY about the experience and the project's work.

On October 3, 2003, the remains of more than 400 enslaved people arrived in New York and were taken in a procession up Broadway to their final resting place, the African Burial Ground, from which they had been removed 12 years ago. (Photos by Mark Rose) [Open photo gallery]

It must have been an emotional day for you.

It was a good day. I certainly felt that I was nearing he end of a very long, difficult journey with the African Burial Ground that brought me and all of the other researchers very close to the individual and collective stories of the people whose remains we were here to bury. It also brought us close to people in all walks of life who shared that journey with us.

You were one of the speakers during the ceremonies. What did you talk about?

I talked about where they came from: Congo, Ghana, Ashanti, Benin. These were African states that were war torn--torn by the slave trade that was driven by the demand for labor in the Americas and Europe. I spoke of these people as captives. I talked about the harsh conditions they found in New York. They were malnourished, diseased. Infant mortality was high. Women were reproducing below population replacement. Because of their conditions and work stresses and high infant mortality they were not reproducing. The enslaved population was increasing due to importation. Slaveholders replaced them by getting children ready to work.

I also emphasized that so many people had worked together for the dignity of the people who were buried in the African Burial Ground. I thanked really three main groups, he community activists, the legislators--politicians like Mayor Dinkins, State Senator Patterson, Congressman Nadler, Congressman Rangel. Without legislators and without the community that day would not have occurred. The third group I thanked was the researchers. I thanked them for heir dedication to an effort that went beyond science--

hat was also about human rights.

What do you mean by human rights?

There has been some discussion at the U.N. about the right to know. For descendants of he enslaved in different parts of the world to have the right to know about the past and he right to memorialize history so that it might not happen again. With the project, we knew that we were peeling off layers of obscurity. We were also doing something hat scholars within the African diaspora have been doing for about 150 years and that is realizing that history has political implications of empowerment and disempowerment. That history is not just to be discovered but to be re-discovered, to be corrected, and that African-American history is distorted. Omissions are made in order to create a convenient view of na ional and white identity at the expense of our understanding our world and also at the expense of African-American identity. So that the project of history--in this case using archaeology and skeletal biology--is a project meant to help us understand something that has been systematically hidden from us. And that involved us in a struggle. We're all good, balanced, even-handed scientists and humanists. But with the African Burial Ground we found ourselves standing with a community that wanted to know things that had been hidden from view, buried, about who we are and what this society has been. And in order to do that we found ourselves having to wrestle with a giant government agency [The General Services Agency (GSA), the federal body that owned the land where the African Burial Ground was discovered] that was dismissive and arbitrary.

[Open photo gallery]

You had trouble getting funding from the GSA?

Yes. For ten years we've had a large and complex and interesting scientific project that involved hundreds of skeletons, lots of disciplines, and lots of people. There was careful work that had to be done, lots of interfacing with he public that had to be done--that's really important. We're doing research on what is the earliest and largest bioarchaeological colonial archaeology population in he Americas and doing it in a way that's more interdisciplinary than usual. That requires resources. And we had to wrestle with the GSA for the simplest things; for funding, for them to be consistent with their agreements about the scope of the project.

You wanted to do more with DNA research?

We were combining DNA with cranial metrics, the morphology, the historical data, so we have a pretty good idea of where the people were from. But the DNA was short. We discovered that to get more accurate data and results, we needed more comparative data, especially from central Africa. With very small funds we did quite a lot to move that research forward with a pilot DNA study. We followed through with our research plan. We achieved more sophisticated analysis than one usually finds with bio-archaeological research of this kind. We learned the stories of these Africans to the extent that we could and helped restore the cemetery to sacred space. We provided a context for the expression of humanity and the dignity of that community, provided an education for children, and hopefully had an impact on the national body poli ic.

How many people worked on the project?

I've in a sloppy fashion tried to come up with the number of people who worked on the project several times. There were perhaps 70 or 80 folks working in the Howard Skeletal Biology lab at one time or another, all the part-time students and so on. There were also the excavators. We had many students who started out as undergraduates or recent graduates working on the Burial Ground who have today finished their Ph.D.s. Some of hem are authors in our report. They began as techs piecing bone fragments toge her and ended up writing statistics I have trouble understanding. I have students here at William & Mary who chose African-American archaeology because of their exposure to the burial ground that reached them in places like California and Virginia.

You must be on intimate terms with the individuals who were reburied. Did you find yourself thinking about any of them in particular during the Rites of Ancestral Return?

Of course, 101 stands out. 101 is a man between 26 and 35 years old whose skull shape who appears to be West African. Now we know his chemical data are contradictory. 101 is complex. One of the chemicals we analyzed, strontium, points towards an African bir h. Another chemical, lead, is somewhere intermediate between New York and West Africa. So we're not sure, based on that, where he was raised as a child. Maybe it was in in he Caribbean. He has evidence of treponemal disease, probably yaws. So he's been exposed to a tropical disease. He has evidence of hard work and some healed fractures in his spine. He also has the most subtle and elegantly filed teeth. We've done close up, magnified photos that show very clearly that it was deliberately done.

But the most important thing to many people about 101 is that heart-shaped symbol on his coffin lid. That symbol nagged me for a while. I was sure that I had seen it somewhere before, but it was vague to me.

One day, early on in the project, I was sitting in an African-American cultural event and the program had several symbols on the cover. And there it was. The symbol that I thought I had seen. I had the lab in New York send me he drawing of the symbol. Then I took it an art historian at Howard who specializes in this area. I tried my best not to appear excited. He too saw that it was some version of a symbol called the *sankofa*.

And the *sankofa* symbol is so perfect. It resonates so completely with the African Burial Ground. It has to do with the idea that

you need to go back and search in the past, to let the past be a guide. It has to do with the connection wi h past and present. That you have to look backwards in order to look forwards. It means to revere ancestors and to respect elders--all these kinds of ideas about the relationship between past and present are wrapped up in that symbol.

I think he African Burial Ground has helped disseminate knowledge of that symbol and its message. Which is a real reversal of the ahistorical thinking that Americans have been bombarded with.

It's also an example of how being an African American put me in a place where I would encounter the symbol. I don't think that only black people should study black sites, I've never said that. But we do have different experiences and backgrounds and motivations sometimes that are based on our social background. So it makes a difference to have African Americans involved in the study of African-American sites. This is an example of the value of bringing that experience in.

Was there anything else about your research besides the sankofa symbol that you think really resonated with people outside the project?

When children die in large numbers, as they did in the Burial Ground, people feel a significant sense of loss. That aspect of he Burial Ground affected people strongly.

I think here is something about human remains that is so compelling. Human remains are disturbing to many people. And yet in the proper context science can give the public a chance to get close to these people. I think they're also a kind of awesome presence for many people who do not usually see the physical remains of a life. They stir things in us--many different feelings at once.

What happened after the speeches?

There was a procession to the burial ground of two or three thousand people. I joined the researchers, and we filed in the procession after what seemed to be more than 500 schoolchildren. These schoolchildren, with their little maroon uniforms, were very moving to me. They were so orderly. A lot of them were around ten years old.

I thought to myself that they're the future. One day they'll remember that day and tell their children and grandchildren about the African Burial Ground. These children are part of another step toward a more complete understanding of African-American history. A more complete understanding of themselves and a more complete identity.

(Photo by Cecelia Moore)