Evidences of trauma in an enslaved African individual from Lagos, Portugal (15th-17th centuries)

Maria Teresa Ferreira, Catarina Coelho, Eugénia Cunha, Sofia N. Wasterlain

Laboratory of Forensic Anthropology, Department of Life Sciences, University of Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

Centre for Functional Ecology / Research Centre for Anthropology and Health (CIAS)

mferreirayahoo.com; coelha.catarina.ng@gmail.com; cunhanofis.uc.pt; sofianawasterlain.uc.pt

Introduction

The traumatic injuries observed in the skeletal remains of an individual recovered from the Valle da Gafaria, Lagos (Portugal), are described. Given the provenance of this individual, an urban discard deposit dated from the 15th-17th centuries, and his probable social status, the observed lesions are discussed in light of his life condition as a slave. For example, are the traumatic injuries presented by this individual suggestive of physical abuse and/or harsh labour conditions? For a more comprehensive contextualization of this collection please refer to Wasterlain et al. (2015).

Material and Methods

The skeleton here described (no. 66) is almost complete and well preserved. The ancestry was estimated based on cranial morphological and metric characteristics (Coelho et al., 2016; Navega et al. 2015). The sexual diagnosis was made through the metric and morphological analysis of the skull and hip bone (Buikstra and Ubelaker, 1994). The age-at-death was estimated on the basis of morphologic changes in the pubic symphysis (Brooks and Suchey, 1990) and auricular surface (Buckberry and Chamberlain, 2002). All lesions were carefully observed and described (Wedel and Galloway et al., 2014), and the injured bones radiographed.

Results

The skeleton belongs to an adult African male. Age was assessed as 30-40 years. Ante-mortem traumatic injuries were observed in the left humerus (fig.1), 2nd right metacarpal (fig.2), and 5th lumbar vertebra (fig.3). Probable peri-mortem lesions were recorded in several bones, namely eight ribs (fig.4), scapulae (fig.5), two sternum (fig.6), thoracic vertebrae (fig.7), right ulna, fibulae, right intermedial and lateral cuneiforms (fig.8), and seven metatarsal bones (fig.9).

Discussion and conclusions

The described individual has suffered several traumatic events during life, and probably at the time of death. The ante-mortem lesions occurred several months/years prior to death since the lesions are fully remodelled. Regarding the peri-mortem lesions, it is not possible to infer if these have been the cause of death based on the osteological evidence alone, since in archaeological material it is difficult to disentangle between lesions suffered at the time of death and one that occurred sometime after death when the bone was still fresh and maintaining the biomechanical characteristics of the living bones. The number of traumatic lesions observed is consistent with a harsh life. These results are in accordance with the historical sources (Caldeira, 2013), which document physical punishments, labour accidents, and hard work since premature ages in slaves’ populations. In the present case, we cannot establish if the observed traumatic lesions were related to inter-personal violence, accidents and/or forced labour. Another study in a sample from an 18th century slave cemetery in Cape Town (South Africa) has also found extensive evidence of trauma, interpreted as indicative of a physically demanding lifestyle (Ledger et al., 2000).

References


