

## 350-year-old remains found in a Stone Age site in Portugal

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Credit: Uppsala University

An African man who lived just 350 years ago was buried in a prehistoric shell midden in Amoreira in Portugal. This was very surprising because Amoreira and other midden sites in the Muge region are well known by archaeologists for the cemeteries of the last hunter-gatherers living in the area 8,000 years ago. To investigate this burial researchers from Uppsala University and Universidade de Lisboa combined biomolecular archaeology, ancient DNA, and historical records.

We could determine that these were the bone remains of a first-generation African, probably from Senegambia, arriving in Portugal via the trans-Atlantic slave trade, who died around 1630 and 1760. His genetic signature indicates African ancestry, while dietary isotope analysis shows that for most of his life, his diet consisted of plant foods commonly found in Senegambia, but not in Portugal at that time, plus a minor consumption of low trophic level marine foods (such as bivalve molluscs). The oxygen isotopic signal in the bone bioapatite reflects the ingested water at the place of origin, which could be narrowed to the coastal areas of western Africa, in present-day Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia.

For more than three centuries, Africans were brutally dislocated from their homeland while forced to adopt a new religion, a new name, and a new language. African communities in Portugal developed strategies to preserve their socio-[cultural identity](#) and values, similarly to what is documented in the Americas.

We used our results to search for other clues that could help us

understand the motivations behind his unusual burial. The burial of this man in an 8,000-year-old site could be an example of the maintenance of African cultural beliefs and practices by African people translocated to Europe, even though this particular practice is not documented in the [historical records](#). Like many other [archaeological sites](#), Amoreira was probably known by the [local populations](#) as an ancient burial ground, given the abundance of animal and [human bones](#) at the site. This grave seems to have been arranged with a layer of sand, suggesting a level of preparation for a burial in a seemingly deviant place; in Portugal, from the Middle Ages up to mid-19th centuries, the dead were generally buried in religious grounds, but this one was not.

We found that interestingly, up to present day, shell middens are actively used in western Africa. In Senegambia in particular, the usage of shell middens includes ancient and modern cemeteries. The burial of this individual in a Portuguese shell midden could indicate the recognition of the site as a meaningful place by the African community of Amoreira, possibly according to West African socio-cultural traditions. In fact, other examples of non-Christian funerary practices have been identified in a cemetery of enslaved people in the Canary Islands. Future investigations may clarify if this was an isolated event or part of a broader movement.

We attempted to identify this individual and found a document from the local church dated to Nov. 1, 1676, which mentions the murder of a young man named João at Arneiro da Amoreira, which is precisely the area where the bone remains were found. However, the church registers state that the victim was buried in the churchyard, but the bones we found were buried at Amoreira. Additionally, the murdered man is described as brown or dun, possibly describing an interracial individual, but our results show that both mother and father were of African ancestry. Whether the concurring site of the described murder and our studied bone remains is a mere coincidence, or rather the result of

incompleteness, lack of detail or even accuracy of the historical records remains unknown.

Despite the incompleteness of the human remains and the historical records, the intersection of several lines of investigation enabled the reconstruction of specific aspects of the life and death of a first-generation African individual in Portugal during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade period, which would not otherwise have been possible to scrutinize from the skeletal material in the archaeological context. More importantly, it shows the value of multidisciplinary research to investigate individual African life-histories in Early Modern Europe which have been obscured in large-scale studies.

**More information:** Rita Peyroteo-Stjerna et al, Multidisciplinary investigation reveals an individual of West African origin buried in a Portuguese Mesolithic shell midden four centuries ago, *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jasrep.2022.103370](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2022.103370)

Provided by Uppsala University

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