

Skull found on Caribbean island shows evidence of leprosy

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Petite Mustique 1. A, norma frontalis. B, right norma lateralis (All photos by GCN). Credit: DOI: [10.1016/j.ijpp.2021.10.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpp.2021.10.004)

A skull unearthed on an uninhabited Caribbean island is a rare find: It's one of just a few examples of leprosy identified on a skeleton in the western hemisphere.

And it's the only one that's been directly dated using radiocarbon, by analyzing a fragment of the skull itself rather than estimating an age using nearby artifacts or materials. The bones are from the late 18th or early 19th century, reports a team led by UO archaeologist Scott

Fitzpatrick.

Fitzpatrick's team, which also included lead author and skeletal biologist Greg Nelson and former UO honors student Taylor Dodrill, detailed their findings in a paper published online Nov. 13 in the *International Journal of Paleopathology*.

The specimen was found on Petite Mustique, a rugged uninhabited island. Historical records suggest that the island might have been the site of a leprosarium in the early 1800s, when people with [leprosy](#) could be isolated to prevent spread of [disease](#).

"There are a number of pretty well-known cases in the Caribbean and Pacific where smaller [islands](#) were used as places to segregate people with leprosy, such as Molokai in Hawaii," said Fitzpatrick, who is also the associate director for research at the Museum of Natural and Cultural History.

But while leprosy has been documented in the Caribbean via written evidence beginning around the mid-17th century, those reports have been incomplete. Archaeologists have found scant skeletal evidence of the disease that could help trace its pattern of spread. This new find adds to that picture.

Leprosy causes dramatic disfigurement of the hands, feet and face, and those changes show up in bones. Nelson determined that the person had leprosy based on the pattern of skeletal deformation in the nose and upper jaw of the skull.

The disease spreads through prolonged close contact with someone who is sick, but "the fact that leprosy can also lead to noticeable disfigurement of the hands, feet and particularly the face made it a very scary disease and likely precipitated moves to isolate people with

leprosy," Nelson said.

More information: Greg C. Nelson et al, A probable case of leprosy from colonial period St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Southeastern Caribbean, *International Journal of Paleopathology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ijpp.2021.10.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpp.2021.10.004)

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