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PRELIMINARY EXCAVATIONS OF SECONDARY BURIALS IN SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO

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Introduction

In 1855 Puerto Rico faced an epidemic of cholera that killed thousands of inhabitants (Kiple 1985). In San Juan, the steady raise in deaths led to a shortage of burial grounds for the deceased. Public health officials for the city determined that a mass grave outside of the city walls was necessary, and so was a choleric mass grave developed in the outskirts of the Cementerio Santa Maria Magdalena de Pazzi (Camuñas 2013; Sifres-Fernandez 2015). Little else is known about this mass grave or the use of the space by the cemetery following the epidemic.

Today, this area is part of a National Park Service (NPS) San Juan National Historic Site (SJNHS) trail that goes around the city walls. Time, weather, and people walking in the area have eroded the landscape in this site, and human bones are now on the surface. The UC Berkeley-led Proyecto Bioarqueológico del Viejo San Juan was developed to recover the human remains found in this forgotten mass grave, to learn who these people were, and to rebury the remains in a safe space. This report describes the initial excavations and findings of the Proyecto Bioarqueológico del Viejo San Juan, a multi-year-long project which is being done in collaboration and consultation with local, state, and federal agencies, as well as the local community.

Materials and Methods

The site was mapped with a Sokkia SET 530r3 Total Station and Trimble GeoXH GPS. Vegetation, path, features, fort wall, city cemetery wall, significant finds, and geophysical survey grids were mapped by Marrero-Rosado (2022). Excavation units were added to existing site map. This data was processed using QGIS.

Two 2m by 2m excavation units were partially excavated during this Summer 2023 season. Their location was determined after anomalies previously identified in a GPR survey of the site (Marrero-Rosado 2022). Given the nature of the soil in the area, excavation was done by arbitrary levels of 20cm. Hand-held tools were used to remove the soil in the units, while wooden tools were used when human remains were

discovered. Preliminary identification of skeletal material was done in situ when possible as part of the documentation process. All the soil excavated in the units was sifted through ¼” – mesh sifters to recover smaller skeletal material and artifacts. Recovered material was transported to our collaborators in the National Park Service (NPS) San Juan National Historic Site (SJNHS), where the material is being kept while further analysis is completed.

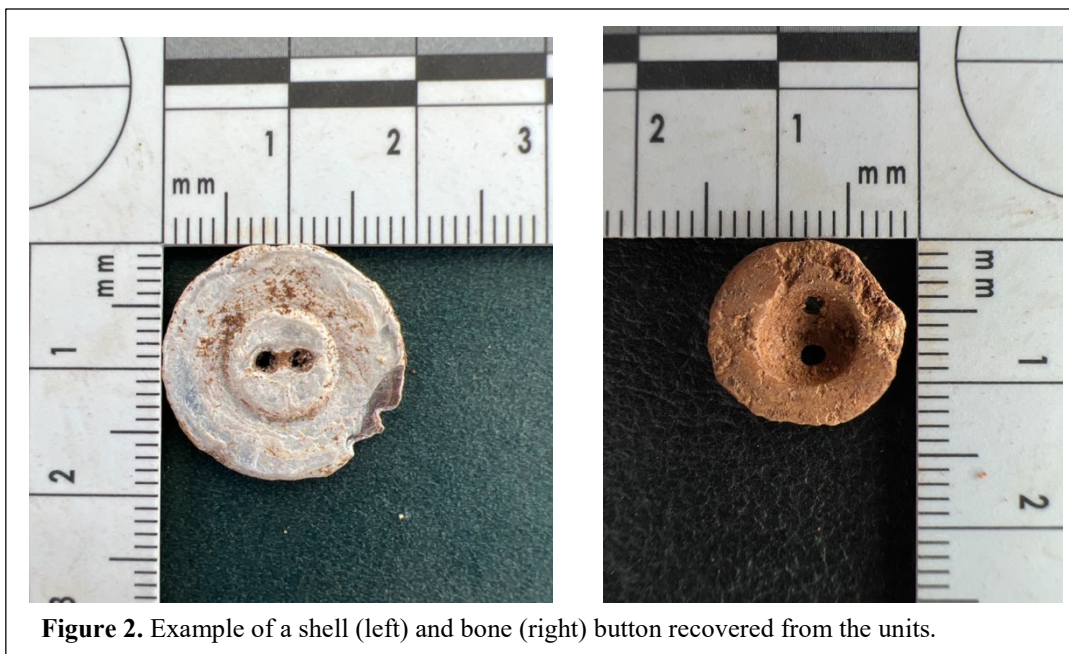
Results

Unit 1: The excavations in this unit reached a depth of 45cm. 3 stratigraphic layers were identified in this Unit. A sandy loose top soil, an extremely compact sandy clay below the topsoil, and a sandy clay (with higher clay quantity) below the second layer. All the layers contained human bone fragments. Buttons were also recovered in all layers. Although mostly intact bones like an ulna were recovered from this unit, most skeletal material recovered was highly fragmented and small in size. Additionally, multiple teeth were recovered, including two mandible fragments with teeth still in place.



Unit 2: The excavations in this unit reached a depth of 95cm (**Figure 1**). However, the northwest 1m by 1m subquadrant of this unit was excavated to a depth of 1.45m. 9 stratigraphic layers were identified in this unit. Most stratigraphic layers were extremely compact sandy clay. Only one layer, a light grey thin sand layer that covered less than 40% of the unit, did not contain human remains. This layer, however, contained the remnants of a glass candle jar with symbols associated with Catholic rituals for the deceased. A dark gray sand layer was identified in the northwestern subquadrant at a depth of 1.35m. This sandy layer produced two of the most complete skeletal elements recovered during these excavations. These lower extremity skeletal elements, which were not articulated, had clear shovel marks.

Overall, human skeletal material was recovered throughout both units, with the exception of a small thin sandy layer in Unit 2. Although some almost complete skeletal remains were recovered, most material was highly fragmented and small. Not one articulated bone was recovered in either unit. Apart from the skeletal remains, other artifacts were observed. Those associated with mortuary practices include: buttons (shell, pressed enamel, bone, and metal), socks, pins, flower vase, tombstone fragments, and a glass candle jar (**Figure 2**).



Discussion

The results from the excavation provide an interesting picture of the use of this area after the cholera epidemic. Given that everything that was excavated was identified as fill, and that it matched the soil of mounds nearby that are known to be fill from the cemetery, it is possible that everything we have been recovering is not associated with the choleric mass grave from 1855, but rather, to the use of the space after the mass grave was closed. Some of the artifacts recovered, like the flower vase, suggest this fill could have been deposited here as late as the 1940s. This adds to the complexity of the site, and raises more questions for us to pursue. Who are these individuals? When were they deposited here, outside of

the cemetery walls? Why were they removed from their primary internment? Further excavations and analysis of the skeletal material and cultural artifacts should help us get a better idea of how this forgotten cemetery came to be.

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Ethics Statement: This project has been conducted after careful discussions with local agencies and stakeholders. The Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP), Department of Health of Puerto Rico (DoH), the City of San Juan, and National Parks Service (NPS) have all closely worked with the authors during the project development and the initial surveys. The local community of La Perla has also been consulted, and we proceeded with the project only after getting positive feedback from them.

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