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Description

Archaeologists have uncovered a skull of an unidentified teenage girl, nicknamed "Jane", a colonist living at the Jamestown settlement in Virginia, the first permanent English colony in America. Markings on the skull and the method of burial suggest she may have been cannibalized after death, confirming written accounts from the period known as the "Starving Time" in the winter of 1609-1610.

Keywords


Citation

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Evidence of Cannibalism at Jamestown Colony

ALI WEINBERG, reporting:

Experts at the Smithsonian revealed that settlers at Jamestown in Virginia reverted to cannibalism as a last-stitch effort to survive a brutal winter that almost wiped out the entire population.

WILLIAM KELSO, Jamestown Rediscovery Project: The bleak period in early Jamestown history that became known as the 1609-1610 Starving Time.

JAMES HORN, Historian, Colonial Williamsburg: In October or early November, the Palatines launched a full-scale war against the English intending to destroy them or drive them out. Inadequately provisions from the start conditions within the fort became increasingly desperate.

WEINBERG: Among those who died, a fourteen-year-old girl whose remains were found during a 2012 dig in a cellar. The location was a red flag for researchers.

KELSO: The damage to the skull and finding it with the other food remains brought on serious thoughts that this was indeed evidence of survival cannibalism.

WEINBERG: Painstakingly reconstructing the girl’s skull and then face they decided to give her a name. KELSO: We’re calling her Jane. We don’t have a positive identity for her. But we wanted to give her a name.

Unidentified Man: This is Jane.

WEINBERG: Jane’s remains contain high levels of nitrogen isotopes, meaning she probably ate a lot of meat, a rare commodity at the time. That leads researchers to believe she was either a member of an upper class family or she worked for one.

James Horn, a historian at the Colonial Williamsburg site, said the discovery verifies written accounts of settlers going to extremes to stay alive.
HORN: Now we know for certain that cannibalism actually did occur-- occurred at Jamestown during this-- this period. This was the period where Jamestown teetered on the edge of being abandoned. Ultimately the colony survives, but only just, and if it had failed and been abandoned maybe the course of English history, American history would have been quite different.

WEINBERG: Eighty percent of the original three hundred Jamestown settlers perished during the Starving Time. Researchers say it’s likely other victims met a fate similar to Jane’s.