

# 18th century 'runaway' 'slave advertisements and the appearance of Africans carried in to slavery

(Gabrielle Dunbar, BA History and Archaeology, Student Number: 13021018, Email: [g.dunbar@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:g.dunbar@newcastle.ac.uk), Supervisor: Dr Jane Webster)



## Introduction:

18th Century Newspaper advertisements requesting the return of 'runaway' slaves provide detailed information about the ethnicity and appearance of captives carried into slavery from different parts of Africa. As studies have so far focused on scarification (skin markings) and dental modification (teeth filing), I took the opportunity to study the body piercings (of the ear and lip) of these captives.

## Aims:

- 1.) Through the use of recently digitalised collections of 18th century 'runaway' slave advertisements from the USA and Caribbean, my aim was to determine which African ethnic groups favoured piercings, and which did not.
- 2.) I hope my findings can contribute to the study of the ways in which aspects of African identity (like piercings) were maintained in the Americas'.

Sources: Databases for Virginia <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/>, Mississippi <http://aquila.usm.edu/drs/1/>, North Carolina <http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/RAS>, Texas <http://digital.sfasu.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/RSP>, Arkansas <http://aquila.usm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=drs> and Maryland <http://slavery.msa.maryland.gov/>, Jamaica <http://aquila.usm.edu/>

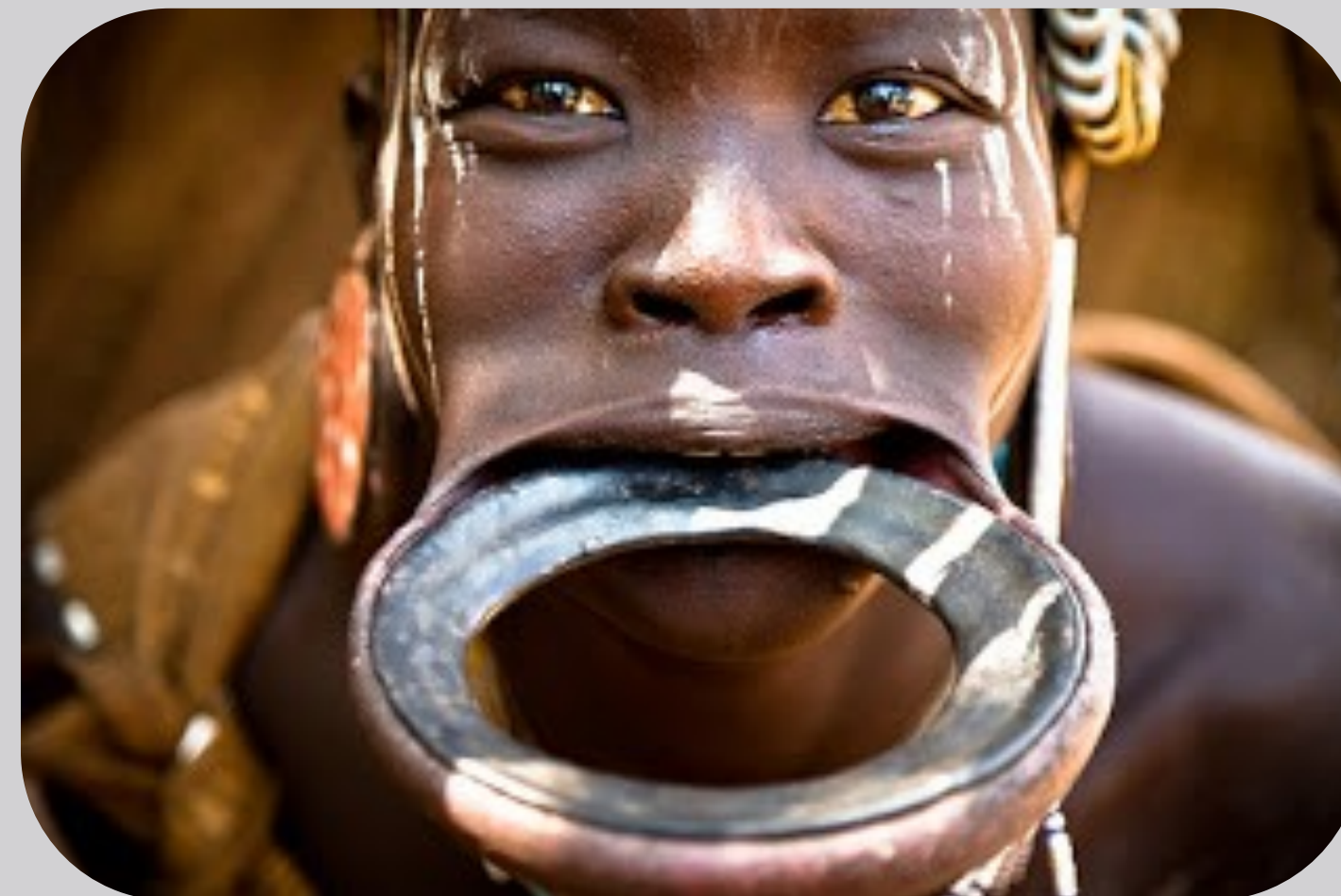


Image showing an African-style lip disk  
([www.thewildestkingdom.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.thewildestkingdom.blogspot.co.uk) Accessed on: 15/10/15)



An example of an online advertisement requesting the return of a 'runaway' slave



Image showing an African-style ear plate  
([www.thewildestkingdom.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.thewildestkingdom.blogspot.co.uk) Accessed on: 15/10/15)

## Methods:

1.) I collated information found in the online digitised advertisements of runaway slaves in order to create a database.

The database includes the following headings:

- 1.) name
- 2.) age
- 3.) gender
- 4.) piercing type
- 5.) other modifications
- 6.) descriptors used to assign ethnic identities to African born slaves (for example, XX)

2.) I then interrogated the database in order to identify the key ethnic descriptors used in the advertisements, and the principal forms of bodily modifications noted in each case

3.) I then used 18<sup>th</sup> century travel accounts accessed via Eighteenth Century Collections online to gain an understanding of body piercing traditions among the key ethnic groups identified in my database

## Conclusions

1.) My research suggests that even if captives were made to remove jewellery during the crossing to the Americas, the original piercings left permanent traces, which were described in the online advertisements of the 'runaway slaves'. While it is clear that some of the piercings could also have been made in the USA/Caribbean, there are also references to noticeably 'different' piercings to the norm (large, or in lips) and these are likely to suggest African birth.

2.) 1200 advertisements were searched online and out of that I found 43 made reference to piercings of the ear and/or lip of African-born slaves

3.) Piercings were most commonly noted with reference to members of three African ethnic groups; 'Congo,' 'Moko' and 'Mundingo'

4.) It can be concluded that the majority of African born slaves had pierced ears in order to maintain cultural ties to their homelands and that the three above ethnic groups favoured piercings most in comparison to other ethnic groups