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## **SLAVERY, LIBERATION, AND EMANCIPATION: CONSTRUCTING A POSTCOLONIAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA**

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The archaeological study of slavery and emancipation, and more generally of the African diaspora, can be considered a post-colonial area of study both chronologically and substantively. In chronological terms, it was initiated in the 1960s when most former colonies had become or were in the process of becoming independent. Substantively, it is a postcolonial pursuit because it was initiated in response to social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Paramount among these was the Civil Rights movement in the United States, which influenced, and was influenced by, worldwide independence movements. The Civil Rights movement was a liberation movement that developed in response to legalized discriminatory practices against African Americans and other people of color, subordinating them to second-class citizenry. Legalized racism of the pre-Civil Rights Act era was

very similar to colonial policies, such as apartheid in South Africa, which had been designed to maintain inequality between European colonizers and non-European colonized subjects. Given the temporal and sociopolitical context within which the archaeology of the African diaspora emerged, it is a postcolonial archaeology (although it has rarely been articulated as such) because it places the subaltern subject (the colonized, enslaved, and oppressed) front and center.

Now, over four decades later, despite the well-intentioned goals of archaeological studies of slavery and emancipation, we must ask ourselves: Has this work been true to the postcolonial analytic? That is, has this research successfully interpreted the perspectives of subaltern subjects, which was initially, and continues to be, a goal of this research? Or, has neocolonialism crept

into archaeological interpretations of slavery and emancipation? How do we continue the work of decolonizing the archaeology of slavery and emancipation? These questions frame the following discussion of the archaeology of slavery and emancipation in the Atlantic world. Slavery was important in the conquest and colonization of other world areas as well—for example, the Indian Ocean—but archaeological research in this area is still in the early stages of development (Kusimba 2004; Walz and Brandt 2006).

In this essay, I begin by briefly summarizing the role slavery played in colonization and how archaeology has contributed to this understanding. Next, I look at the complex relationship between emancipation and independence in the Atlantic world to highlight the contradictions between independence struggles and slavery, and the failure of emancipation to deliver social equality for the descendants of enslaved people. Finally, I evaluate the influence of the postcolonial analytic within the archaeological study of slavery and emancipation by identifying areas of interpretation and practice that are in need of decolonization.

### **Archaeology, Civil Rights Movement, and Subaltern Subjects**

Archaeologists attribute the rise of archaeology of the African diaspora in the United States to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, but they have not always appreciated or acknowledged the direct links between African-American activism and some of the early investigations at former African-

American sites. While a few archaeologists initiated African-American projects on their own (e.g., Bullen and Bullen 1945), several studies—including investigations at Parting Ways (Deetz 1977), Project Weeksville in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bridges and Salwen 1980), and the African Meeting House (Bower and Rushing 1980), among others—were investigated at the prodding of African Americans. These black activists (rather than ivory-tower academicians) played a direct role in the emergence of this research interest. Black activists were not necessarily knowledgeable of the particulars of archaeology, but they understood how archaeological data could contribute to learning about the African-American past and to furthering grassroots preservation efforts of historic buildings, neighborhoods, and sites pertaining to African-American history and culture. Moreover, it was often through their political action that funds were made available for these initial investigations. This kind of black activism has also been seen in more recent archaeological projects, such as at Allensworth, California (Cox 2007: 3–4), the African Burial Ground Project in New York (LaRoche and Blakey 1997), and the Fort Mosé project in St. Augustine, Florida (Landers and Deagan 1999).

Archaeologists who directed pioneering archaeological investigations of African-American life during the Civil Rights Movement era did not make explicit connections between their political views and their archaeological interests, as archaeologists often do today; therefore, we can

only speculate whether or not they saw such studies as contributing to the struggle for equal rights. Charles H. Fairbanks, whose initial testing at slave sites on the Georgia and Florida coasts in the late 1960s marked the beginning of the systematic study of slavery from archaeological resources, was an outspoken critic of racial segregation long before developing an archaeological interest in African-American life (Fairbanks and Smith 1958). Although his writings on the archaeology of slavery did not express his political sentiments, it is very likely Fairbanks saw a connection between the two. Fairbanks, along with other archaeologists of the Civil Rights Movement era, set in motion a shift away from the study of sites of "great white men" to the study of disenfranchised people such as African Americans and other ethnic minorities in historical archaeology. Their interest in oppressed communities may have been more influenced by intellectual trends developing from social movements of the 1960s such as the new social history or ethnic studies, rather than directly from civil rights or independence movements *per se*. Regardless of their political or intellectual persuasions, archaeologists of early studies in African diaspora archaeology paved the way for later archaeological studies of subaltern peoples.

### **Slavery and Colonialism**

In the Americas, slavery was part and parcel of the colonization process from the very beginning. Africans and Afro-Spaniards accompanied Spanish explorers to the

Caribbean, and their numbers greatly increased when the first sugar plantations were established on the island of Hispaniola in the 1510s and 1520s. As the Spaniards conquered areas in mainland America, they brought sugar and enslaved Africans with them (Andrews 2004: 13). Initially, enslaved Africans supplemented enslaved Native American labor in gold and silver mines and on plantations. Spanish, Portuguese, and later, English settlers utilized enslaved Native Americans to some degree. In most cases, Native American slavery was short lived, due in large part to declining Indigenous populations wrought by the introduction of Old World pathogens. After 1570, enslaved Africans became the preferred labor source for large-scale sugar production. Eventually, African slavery supplanted Native American slavery in the production of plantation staples. Sugar, more than any other export crop or extractive industry, set the stage for increased European imperialism in the Americas. By 1600, Brazil, a colony of Portugal, had become the world's leading producer of sugar. Later, in the 17th and 18th centuries, England, France, Holland, and Denmark established sugar operations in the Caribbean and intensified the importation of African laborers. The sugar revolution dictated the course of slavery in the Caribbean and tropical areas of mainland America well into the 19th century (Mintz 1985).

As the numbers of enslaved Africans imported to the Americas increased and slavery expanded to new geographic areas and economies, Africans played significant roles in the construction of colonial societies.



They provided labor, not only for the production of export crops and precious metals, but in diverse economic enterprises, including cattle-raising, factory work, maritime industries, ironworking, metalsmithing, transportation of goods, building and mechanical trades, and domestic service, among other occupations. Dependence on slave labor, however, varied from place to place and through time. Different crop or craft requirements, work routines, and organization of labor profoundly structured the lives of enslaved people and the character of the societies that were formed from their labor. Not all colonial economies with slave workers depended on slave labor, but those that did developed sizable black populations. In some cases, black communities constituted the numerical majority of the overall population within an area.

Wherever Africans and their descendants concentrated, they created discernible Afro-Atlantic cultures with certain beliefs, customs, practices, and behavioral patterns drawn from African, European, and Native American sources. Archaeologists use various terms to refer to the creative process by which these new cultures emerged, including "creolization" (Ferguson 1992), "hybridity" (Leone and Fry 1999), "transculturation" (Deagan 1998), and "ethnogenic bricolage" (Fennell 2007). All of these are in keeping with a core premise of postcolonial theory: that all participants in colonial cultures bring something of their own to the culture and have some power to shape their world, albeit nuanced and constrained in different ways (Gosden 2001: 242). Enslaved Africans and

their descendants contributed to the creation of colonial cultures in ways that will never be fully comprehended because so much of their cultural knowledge was unrecorded. This is where archaeology offers the promise of unveiling little-known aspects of Afro-Atlantic cultures.

Archaeological investigations contribute to our understanding of slavery by providing material evidence of Afro-Atlantic cultures under different colonial regimes throughout the Americas. Although the vast majority of this research has been undertaken in the English-speaking world, studies have been conducted in the former Dutch (Haviser 2001), French (Gibson 2007; Kelly and Gibson 2005), Danish (Armstrong 2003), Spanish (Domínguez 1986; Singleton 2001, 2005), and Portuguese (Orser and Funari 2001) colonies. Analyses of archaeological materials recovered from the places enslaved Africans and their descendants lived, worked, sought refuge, or died provide information on their material world—housing, use of space, personal and household items, craft production, foodways—that can be used for making inferences about non-material aspects of slave lives, including their agency, group formations, survival strategies, religious beliefs, cultural practices, power struggles, and interactions with other peoples.

Slave resistance is an important theme of the archaeological study of slavery that is in keeping with postcolonial analyses of power. Resistance was manifested in various ways, from overt acts of running away and organized rebellions to more subtle acts of slowing down work by feigning ill-

ness or breaking and hiding tools. Slave runaways, referred to as “maroons” (derived from the Spanish word *cimarron*, meaning “wild”), formed their own communities, sometimes with Indigenous Americans, from the very beginning of colonization. Maroon settlements ranged from large, permanent settlements with hundreds of residents and complex forms of sociopolitical organization—for example, Palmares, a fugitive polity in Brazil (Orser and Funari 2001)—to small, temporary encampments in rock overhangs or some other secluded place. To elude capture and re-enslavement, slave runaways located their settlements in marginal environments—swamps, mountainous terrains, or dense tropical forests—that have proven difficult to rediscover for archaeological study. Despite this challenge, however, archaeologists have investigated slave runaway sites in Brazil (Orser and Funari 2001), Cuba, (La Rosa Corzo 2003, 2005), Dominican Republic (Arrom and García Arévalo 1986), Florida (Deagan and MacMahon 1995; Weik 2007), Jamaica (Agor-Sah 1993), and Suriname (Agor-Sah 2005, 2007). Archaeological findings from these sites provide insights into the survival strategies of maroon communities, such as their foraging activities, raiding of nearby plantations, and trading networks.

The subtleties of slave resistance on plantations are difficult to interpret from archaeological sources alone. But, when combined with written sources, the possibilities of interpreting everyday resistance are greatly enhanced. One of the most common examples of everyday slave resist-

ance evident in the archaeological record is seen in modifications enslaved people made of their houses and yard areas. At different times and in different places, slaveholders imposed their ideals of cleanliness and orderliness upon the design and layout of slave quarters to promote their ideas of good hygiene as well as to increase their surveillance of slave activities within slave quarters (McKee 1992; Singleton 1988: 354–355; 2001). Enslaved people responded by modifying their living spaces in various ways: digging subfloor pits within the interior spaces of the houses (Samford 2007), enlarging or changing the orientation of house yards (Armstrong and Kelly 2000), or adding private entrances hidden from view of the slaveholders and overseers (Epperson 1990).

In addition to studies of resistance, archaeological findings have been important in analyzing slave agency, defined here as the capability of enslaved people to take some control of their situations on their own terms. Examples of slave agency inferred from archaeological findings are seen in efforts of enslaved people to shape their material lives beyond meager plantation rations provisioned to them, including such activities as hunting and fishing, recycling broken or discarded objects to make other kinds of tools and implements, crafting objects for sale or their own use, and bartering or purchasing household and personal objects. Studies of slave agency and slave resistance show that enslaved people were acting, thinking beings who sought to control their lives despite the overwhelming odds against them.



### Independence and Emancipation

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Independence and emancipation made for strange bedfellows throughout the Atlantic world. Independence from a colonial power did not necessarily result in the abolition of slavery, nor did abolition of slavery necessarily result in independence. When slaveholders supported independence, they often failed to acknowledge the contradiction between their desire for independence and their denial of freedom to the people they held in bondage. Enslaved people did not accept the contradiction between independence and slavery and used independence struggles to their advantage in the hope of obtaining their own freedom. The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) was the preeminent example of this kind of slave action; it not only produced a new nation, but overturned slavery, implanted black and mulatto rule, and banished the white population from the new nation. Free segments of Saint-Domingue (Haiti)—the world's leading producer of sugar and coffee in the 18th century—began fighting among themselves in their efforts to gain greater autonomy from France during the French Revolution (1789–1799). These internal conflicts, in turn, created favorable conditions for a successful uprising of enslaved workers—90 percent of the population. Reactions to the Haitian Revolution varied throughout the Americas (see Geggus 2001 for specific examples). Haiti became the example of what could happen in colonial settings that were dependent on large numbers of coerced, non-white laborers, and this prospect may have deterred many colonial elites from seeking independ-

ence (Andrews 2004: 54). In some cases, it hastened the abolition of slavery and, in others, it delayed abolition. At the same time, it motivated the expansion of slavery among planters in Cuba, Brazil, Jamaica, and Trinidad eager to fill the void in sugar and coffee production left by the destruction of Saint-Domingue (Davis 2001: 5).

In North America, Thomas Jefferson—the most notable of the slaveholding architects of the American Revolution (1775–1783)—acknowledged the contradiction between independence and slavery, but he accepted slavery as a necessary evil until free labor could replace it. Despite the adoption of the Jeffersonian stance on slavery for the newly established United States, the American Revolutionary War—the first successful independence struggle in the Americas—aroused abolitionist sentiments. After the revolution, slavery was abolished in New England, where slave labor had been marginal, and, by 1830, in the remaining northeastern states (Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey) where slave labor often competed with free labor (Berlin 1998: 178–179). Even in the South, where slavery was firmly implanted, many slaveholders inspired by ideals of liberty granted manumissions to their enslaved laborers, usually through wills after the deaths of owners. The free black population in the southern United States tripled in size as a consequence of Revolutionary-era (1790–1810) manumissions (Johnson and Roark 1984: 33).

Other enslaved men and women, as well as some free blacks (perhaps uncertain of their fate among slaveholding patriots), sided

with the British Army during the American Revolution. Known as "Black Loyalists," thousands of them were evacuated to Canada, England, and the British West Indies when the war ended and peace was declared. This secondary diaspora of African-descendant people was one of the largest in the Atlantic world (Pulis 2006: 194–195).

In many Spanish colonies, there was a close association between independence and abolition. Slave participation in the wars for independence not only provided opportunities for slave men to obtain freedom through military service, but also paved the way for the establishment of gradual emancipation programs. In colonies where the slave population was small and slavery was of minor economic importance (Chile, Mexico, Central America), emancipation came shortly after independence. Where slavery was economically important, emancipation was a long, slow process following independence. Because slaveholders were opposed to freeing enslaved people without getting compensated, emancipation sometimes involved civil wars, such those of Argentina, Columbia, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela (Andrews 2004: 65–67). Slave emancipation preceded independence in Cuba, the last Spanish colony to abolish slavery in 1886, but even there, the abolition of slavery came about after Cuba fought an unsuccessful 10-year war (1868–1878) with Spain for independence.

Slavery and independence were totally unrelated in many colonial situations. Brazil, the nation with the largest slave population, gained independence without warfare in 1822 but was the last nation in the Americas to abolish slavery, in 1889.

Great Britain, on the other hand, was among the first colonial powers to end slavery throughout its empire, in 1834–1838, but independence of the British West Indies did not come until 1962. Today, several Caribbean islands are still officially colonies or territories of industrialized countries, while neocolonialism has rendered many independent states dependent on wealthier nations. For many peoples of the Atlantic world, liberation from colonialism is not yet a reality.

Whether emancipation preceded, followed, or came about at the same time as independence, it simply put an end to slavery. It did not, however, alleviate racism, discrimination, and unequal social relations. People of African descent continue to be among the poorest and most undereducated social groups throughout of the Americas. Most of the archaeological research of post-emancipation has been undertaken in the United States, but some preliminary work has begun elsewhere (Armstrong 2003; Havisser 1999; Gibson 2007). Post-emancipation studies in the United States have shown how racial discrimination was manifested and how African-American communities responded to these conditions in both rural (Wilkie 2000) and urban settings (Mullins 1999). Growing both in number and in importance, archaeological studies of emancipation and post-emancipation are being undertaken at the sites of former black towns, post-emancipation plantations, and frontier settlements, among others. These investigations, unlike those associated with slavery, offer opportunities to work directly with descendant communities who often



have firsthand knowledge of sites being studied. Archaeology of post-emancipation holds great promise for putting into perspective the aftermath of slavery and the historical struggles of people of African descent for equal rights.

### **Evaluating the Postcolonial Analytic in the Archaeology of Slavery and Emancipation**

Archaeological study of slavery and emancipation contributes to postcolonial archaeology by yielding data from the application of postcolonial concepts and theories in the investigation of subaltern peoples. Because archaeological data provide direct evidence of lived experiences, it allows us to reevaluate colonialism and gain new insights into the lives of those who suffered from it. Despite potential contributions of archaeology to postcolonial analyses of slavery and emancipation, however, archaeologists seldom examine how archaeology's links with colonialism may have influenced how we interpret slavery and emancipation. Additionally, white privilege and middle-class values influence how archaeologists interpret their data and their perceptions of subaltern peoples. It may be easy to convince ourselves that because the archaeology of slavery and emancipation emerged from liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, it needs no decolonization.

Most discussions about the decolonization of the archaeology of the African diaspora have addressed issues concerning the audience or constituencies for this research (Farnsworth 1993; Leone et al. 1995;

McKee 1994; Potter 1991), the roles of African-descendant communities within this research (Derry 2003; McDavid 2003; McDavid and Babson 1997; Singleton 1995; Singleton and Orser 2003; Wilkie and Bartoy 2000), or the small number of archaeologists of color engaged in this research and the profession of archaeology as a whole (Agbe-Davies 2002). All these important issues related to the practice of the archaeology of slavery and emancipation have had an impact on archaeological interpretations in recent years. Unfortunately, however, too much of the archaeological discussion of the African diaspora still remains unaffected by these changes; it is in this realm that research still needs to be decolonized.

In 1995, I suggested in a review essay on slavery in North America that archaeologists had created an archaeology of the Other by making racial minorities in the United States the focus of ethnicity studies (Singleton 1995: 121–122). This “Othering” was premised on the use of topdown approaches, or white middle-class perspectives, rather than sources derived from the people being studied or the abundant African-American scholarship on African-American life. Since that time, many practitioners of African diaspora archaeology utilize written, oral, or ethnographic sources generated from people of African descent to some extent.

Topdown interpretations of African diaspora archaeology, however, still persist in some areas—for example, in the study of slave consumption. In conference papers and other presentations, some archaeologists have characterized large quantities of objects



or the acquisition and use of certain fashionable, expensive, or prestige items as “conspicuous consumption” on the part of enslaved people. Such statements not only reinforce the biased accounts written during the time of slavery by colonialists, but serve to demean subaltern subjects—the very people we are attempting to unveil from ethnocentric, colonialist narratives. Moreover, the use of the term “conspicuous consumption” in the context of slavery is particularly inappropriate and abuses the intended meaning of the term. Thorstein Veblen, Norwegian economist and sociologist, originally coined the term to refer to the lavish spending of a new upper class that emerged from industrial capitalism during the second half of the 19th century (1899). Later in the 20th century, the term was applied to middle-class individuals and households with expendable income who used their consumption as social masks to identify materially with the upper class while lacking the social position and power of the upper class (Wurst and McGuire 1999: 197). Neither should usage of “conspicuous consumption” be applied to slave laborers who were themselves human commodities. Archaeologists should seek alternative interpretations for the recovery of large quantities of objects or prestige items from slave contexts, and examine the social relations of slavery that might explain their presence. The issue that should concern archaeologists regarding consumption “is not what people buy, but the social relations that enable and constrain what they buy” (Wurst and McGuire 1999: 196). Furthermore, archaeologists’ preoccupation with what enslaved people acquired or purchased misses

the point regarding the significance of the informal economies in which enslaved people were engaged. That enslaved people were able to use slavery for their own ends provides insights into their agency. It is this kind of analysis that will further the development of a postcolonial archaeology of the African diaspora.

In the practice of African diaspora archaeology, archaeologists need to continue reevaluating how they see their role as specialists of the past. Despite two decades of discussion and debate concerning the ownership of the past, some archaeologists still project the attitude that they are the owners of the past, bringing aspects of a silenced or unrecorded history to oppressed communities, rather than perceiving their job as uncovering someone else’s tradition and history (Singleton and Orser 2003: 150). Archaeologists should also be willing to admit they do not have all the answers and their research can best be described as “works in progress.” The study of slavery and emancipation, in particular, requires archaeologists to confront, with sensitivity, a wide range of horrific and painful topics and to discuss these issues in ways that make them intellectually liberating.

### **Conclusion: Decolonizing Archaeologies of Slavery and Emancipation**

How do we continue to decolonize the archaeology of slavery and emancipation? First, we must acknowledge that this research needs to be decolonized like any other area of archaeological study because of the ties archaeology has had with colonialism, and the

tendency of archaeological practitioners to impose Western views on their data. We should not become complacent and assume that this research has been liberated because it developed in response to liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Second, we must ask ourselves, What are the ultimate goals of postcolonial archaeology of the African diaspora? If decolonization means an archaeology based on non-Western precepts and assumptions, as has been proposed for anthropology as a whole (Harrison 1991: 7), then archaeology has a long way to go, and it is unlikely that such an archaeology will be realized in the near future. To realize such an archaeology requires us to rethink many concepts that we use and take for granted in our work or that we assume meant the same to the people we study as they do today (as in the previous discussion of consumption). On the other hand, if the goal is to apply core concepts of postcolonial theory to the archaeological study of slavery and emancipation, then this process has begun in earnest. We must not accept these concepts uncritically, however; instead, we should continue to critique our use of postcolonial theories and improve on them. Third, and finally, we must always be mindful of neocolonialist tendencies to revert back to older paradigms, models, or interpretations that impede rather than advance our understanding of subaltern people both in the past and in the present.

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