

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 10
Issue 3 September 2007

Article 2

9-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Handler, Jerome and Norman, Neil (2007) "From West Africa to Barbados: A Rare Pipe from a Plantation Slave Cemetery," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol10/iss3/2>

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September 2007 Newsletter

From West Africa to Barbados: A Rare Pipe from a Plantation Slave Cemetery

By Jerome Handler and Neil Norman¹

White clay pipes of European manufacture regularly appear in African descendant sites in the Caribbean and North America. They are usually recovered in the form of bowl or stem fragments.² Many such fragments were found at Newton plantation cemetery in Barbados in the early 1970s (as well as at 13 other Barbados plantations where research was conducted). The cemetery also yielded 21 whole pipes, defined as a significant portion of the bowl and a section of the attached stem (Figure 1). These pipes were an important component of the cemetery's grave goods and constitute what is still today the largest collection of whole pipes thus far reported in the archaeological literature for African descendant sites in North America and the Caribbean; it is possibly one of the largest, if not the largest, collection of whole pipes reported for any archaeological site in British America.

Moreover, Newton also yielded one specimen of a very distinctive short-stemmed earthenware elbow/elbow-bend or stem/socket pipe of almost certain West African, possibly of Gold Coast (Ghana), origin (Handler and Lange 1978; Blakeman and Riordan 1978; Handler 1983; Handler 1997). It is rather remarkable that approximately 35 years after this pipe was discovered, as far as we are aware, nothing similar has yet been reported from African descendant sites in British America, despite the amount of archaeological research that has been

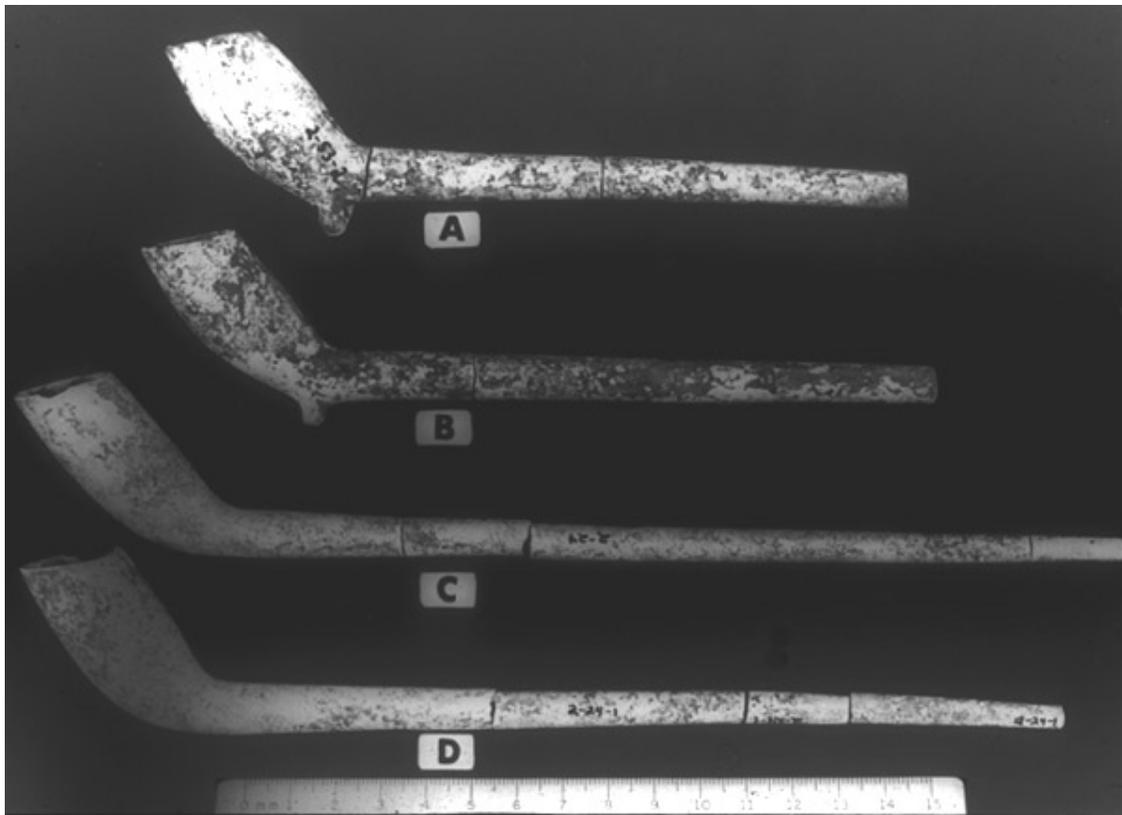


Figure 1. Examples of whole European pipes associated with burials excavated from Newton plantation cemetery.

conducted in such sites since the early 1970s. This brief article is intended to bring this find to the attention of a new generation of researchers, as was an earlier one in this *Newsletter* describing two distinctive carnelian beads from Newton (Handler 2007).³

The pipe was discovered with what was the richest burial in the cemetery in terms of its associated artifacts -- all intentionally placed grave goods. The burial dramatically contrasted in its quantity and types of artifacts with the over 100 other burials discovered at the cemetery. In fact, to this day, this burial remains among the most distinctive of known interments from African descendant sites in British America, if not in all of the Americas. Designated Burial 72, this was a male of around 50 years of age, buried without a coffin in an extended supine position.

He was probably interred in the late 1600s or early 1700s; the geographical area of his birth is uncertain (Figure 2). Burial 72 was interpreted as once having been an important member of the



Figure 2. Burial 72 (Initially numbered Burial 30), extended skeleton, showing (with arrows) metal bracelets and pipe (on pelvic area).

enslaved community. He was probably what in the West Indies would have been called an “obeah man,” that is, a diviner/healer or medicine man. Artifacts associated with this burial included an iron knife, several metal finger rings and bracelets, an elaborate necklace, which included the carnelian bead noted above, and the clay pipe which is the subject of this paper (Handler 1997; Handler 2000; Bilby and Handler 2004).

Although West African smoking pipes have been investigated for several decades, the paucity of study collections with exact provenience and regional comparative studies make regional identification of the Barbadian pipe tenuous. The pipe, recovered from Burial 72’s pelvic area (Figure 3), relates to a broad class of smoking implements found throughout West Africa from the Middle Niger to the coastal area of Benin and Ghana (DeCorse 2001: 165-67; Kelly 2001: 92-95; McIntosh et al. 2003: 192; Ozanne 1962). In an early comparative article, Shaw (1960: 274) noted that West African pipes have two characteristics that differentiate them from North American and European examples: reed and stem construction and an acute angle created by an axis between the bowl and stem socket. With West African pipes, a reed or tube of wood was inserted into the hole at the pipe’s short stem (i.e., the stem socket) in order to lengthen or enlarge the stem. Wilhelm Müller, a German Lutheran minister in the service of the Danish African Company in the 1660s, briefly mentioned how the Fetu (a coastal Fante-speaking kingdom) of the Gold Coast had “tobacco pipes without stems, instead of which hollowed-out sticks are used,” and implied that potters made these pipes (quoted in Jones 1983: 255; several plants were still being used for pipe-stems in Ghana in modern times [Irvine 1961: lxix], and Norman has observed similar pipes being manufactured today in the northwestern Republic of Benin).



Figure 3. Burial 72, torso, showing bracelets and (with arrow) pipe.

The Barbadian pipe is a reed and stem form with an acute stem/bowl angle axis. This example was fired to a buff color with a brown polished slip; there was no evidence of a mold seam, as appears on white-clay European pipes. Although molds are occasionally used to form the interior of the bowl for early West African pipes (Ozanne 1962: 55), the other formal characteristics (i.e., bowl, foot, and stem) as well as the decorative fluting were most likely formed by hand (Figure 4). The short-stem is approximately 3.8-cm long and 1.9 cm wide (see Handler 1983 for details on the pipe's dimensions, clay composition, decorative features, and possible method of manufacture; Figure 5).

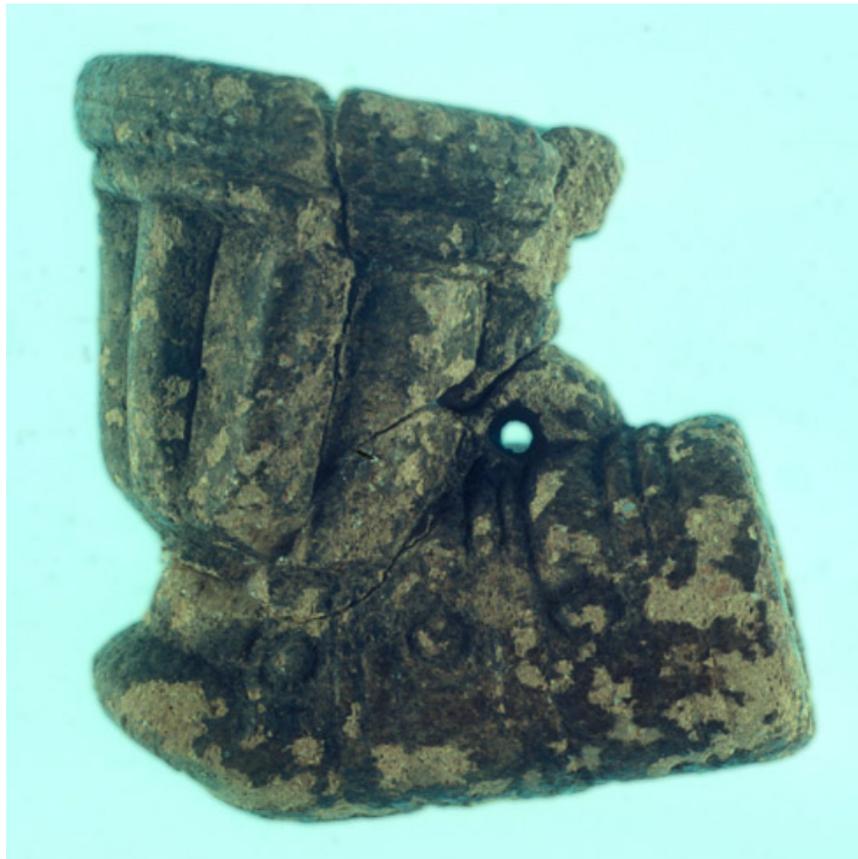


Figure 4. Burial 72 pipe; note the “hook” with a hole between the bowl and stem.

In terms of provenience, the Burial 72 pipe is most probably a West African pipe, quite possibly from the Gold Coast region.⁴ In its form and shape, short stem, decorative features, flutes, and especially its bridge or “hook” between the bowl and stem, the pipe closely resembles a number of pipes from southern and coastal Ghana sites dating from the latter half of the 17th century. Such pipes have been described and illustrated by Paul Ozanne (1962, 1964; Figure 6). The small hole on the bridge between the top of the back of the bowl and the top of the Burial 72 pipe was probably used to tie or otherwise secure the detachable stem to the rest of the pipe.⁵ This hook is possibly the most diagnostic element as it is a common feature of Gold Coast pipes from the late 17th to early-18th century, but is infrequently found on pipes from similar temporal contexts in coastal Benin and other non-Gold Coast sites.⁶

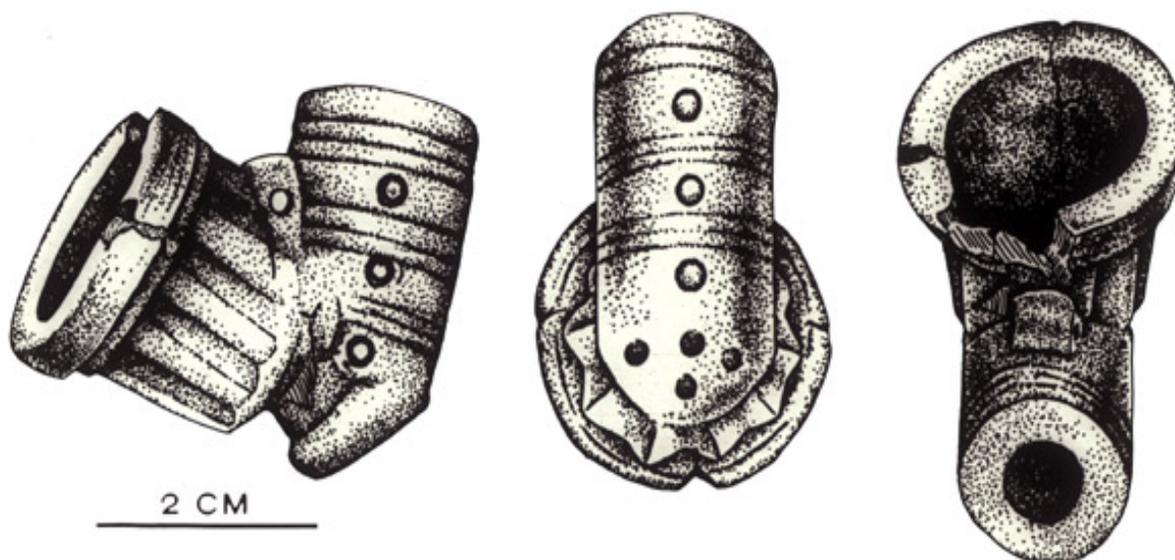


Figure 5. Burial 72 pipe; views of side, bottom, and top.

Archaeological evidence for a Gold Coast provenience is supported by data from the English/British slave trade from the Gold Coast to Barbados during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. From around 1650 to 1750, during which period the Burial 72 interment most probably took place, at least 123,400 captive Africans were shipped to Barbados from Gold

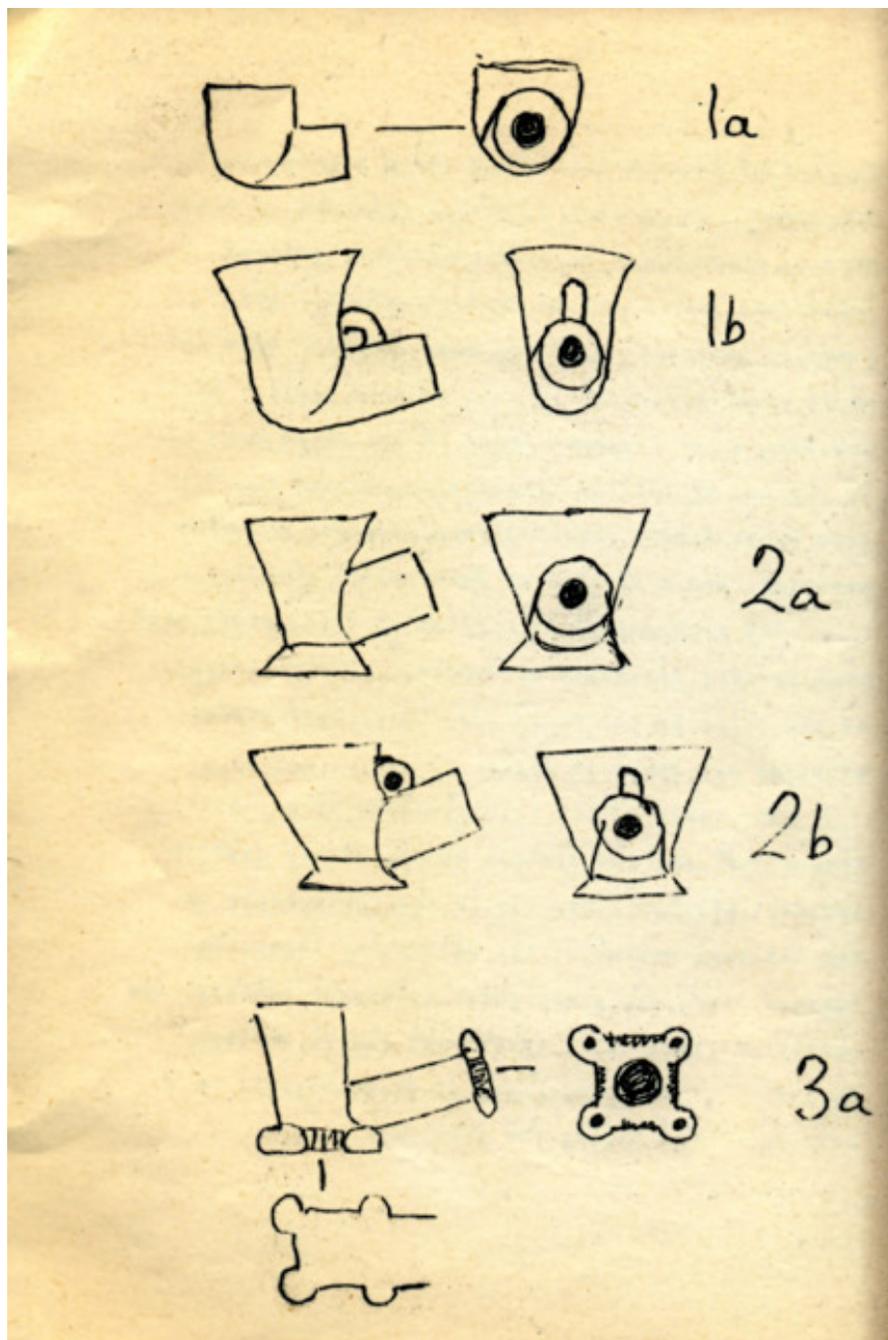


Figure 6. Pipe types from southern Ghana, as shown in Ozanne 1964 (facing p. 6). The Barbados pipe appears to most closely resemble Type 2b, described by Ozanne as "flat-based pipes with a hook between the bowl and the stem."

Coast ports; and persons identified with the Gold Coast, such as "Coromantines," were a significant element of the island's enslaved population (Handler and Lange 1978: 21-28).⁷

As with the carnelian beads reported earlier (Handler 2007), it will never be known how the Burial 72 pipe came across the Atlantic, and if it arrived with the person with whom it was ultimately interred or with some other person, African or European. Preliminary findings from the primary source literature (Handler 2006) suggest it was extremely difficult for captive Africans to bring their personal material belongings aboard slave ships, and that in most cases they were probably divested of such items before they boarded the ships. It is possible, however, that the pipe, as with other small items such as beads, was smuggled aboard by its owner, or its owner was otherwise permitted to retain it either by his African captors or European purchasers; of course, it is also possible that the pipe was brought by some European, and somehow acquired by enslaved Africans in Barbados. The white clay pipes interred with burials at Newton cemetery may have been acquired from plantation managements as part of the plantation “reward system” (Handler and Lange 1978: 133-35, 218), or through other means in Barbados, such as internal trade, but it is unlikely that plantation managements would have distributed a pipe of African manufacture. By whatever means this pipe came to Barbados and whether it was brought by the person with whom it was ultimately interred -- or by any other enslaved person for that matter -- it is another example of the material links between enslaved Africans and the New World during the era of the Atlantic slave trade.

Notes

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² Late 18th century export statistics of “British produce or manufacture” from British ports destined for African trade include hundreds of tobacco pipes annually. Some of these pipes were apparently used for trade on the West African coast, but others were distributed to captives during the Middle Passage. The distribution of pipes and tobacco, particularly to enslaved adults after the main meal of the day, apparently occurred fairly regularly on British slaving vessels by the latter half of the eighteenth century, if not earlier. Tobacco distributions, probably of low-grade tobacco that originated in the West Indies or Virginia, also occurred in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. There are no data on whether the enslaved were allowed to keep the pipes they received aboard the ships. In an article now being prepared for publication, Handler is developing in greater detail the evidence for the issuance of pipes and tobacco on slave ships during the Middle Passage.

³ This pipe and other artifacts from Newton cemetery, including the carnelian beads, have been on display at the Barbados Museum for a number of years.

⁴ The pipe was surely not made in Barbados as its clay differs from the Barbadian clay that provided the raw material for a local small-scale, household-based pottery industry and there is no other archaeological evidence for similar pipes. Nor do ethnohistorical sources mention or even suggest the existence of any pipe manufacturing on the island (Handler 1963a, 1963b; Handler and Lange 1978).

⁵ Thurston Shaw shows a pipe with an apparent loop between the bowl and stem, but the illustration is not clear enough for us to be certain (Shaw 1960: 298, Figure 4, Dawu Type V).

⁶ For Gold Coast examples see Ozanne’s (1960: 54-57) Types II and III, and especially IIb. Although Ozanne’s illustrations are imprecise, they are the only ones of which we are aware to show the “hook” with the small hole (see Figure 6).

⁷ The figure on Gold Coast shipments is from the revised and expanded version of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database; courtesy of David Eltis, pers. communication, 22 August 2007.

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