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Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660

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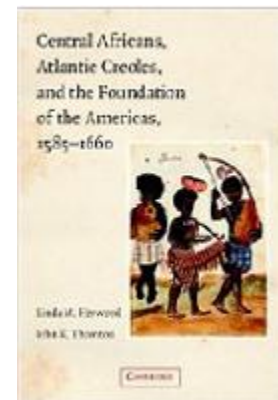
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Book Review

Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton. *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. vii + 370 pp. \$22.99 (paper), ISBN 0521779227.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by John Roby, Binghamton University (SUNY).

In *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* (2007), authors Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton offer a valuable contribution to our knowledge of the early years of Atlantic African slavery. Their argument is twofold: first, that the bulk of the "founding generation" of Africans in English and Dutch America came to the New World from specific and identifiable parts of West Central Africa; and second, that many of those West Central Africans, due to more than a century of interaction with Europeans, were bearers of a more or less unified "Atlantic Creole culture" that then shaped the cultural development of later generations of African slaves. This has profound implications for archaeology. The origins and changes in African/African-American cultural practices is a pressing question, and one that archaeology is well-suited to investigating. Yet conventional wisdom holds that African slaves were heirs to a variety of cultural backgrounds, so sorting out where particular groups and their practices originated at particular times is at best difficult, and at worst futile. Debates thus far have usually operated at fairly high levels of abstraction. Not so in this case: Heywood and Thornton, by pulling together a vast corpus of literature from Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, French and English sources, construct the first leg of their argument coherently and in a way that archaeologists working on African-American origins will find compelling and useful. As for the second part, that Central Africans bore a fairly unified Atlantic Creole culture, questions remain, not through lack of scholarship but because the way the authors envision and argue for "culture" that operates on a level that is difficult to "see" archaeologically. Nevertheless, the idea is a compelling one, and this book should inspire a useful and much-needed program of archaeological investigation.



In Chapter 1, "Privateering, Colonial Expansion, and the African Presence in Early Anglo-Dutch Settlements," the authors outline the origins of the West Central African slave trade. They demonstrate that the initial influx of African slaves into the English and Dutch colonies in North America came about largely through the actions of privateers, and that after 1580, the slave ships that were preyed upon carried mostly Angolans. From there, they argue, English and Dutch companies and merchants slowly began purchasing slaves from markets in West Central Africa, in addition to capturing them on the seas.

Chapter 2, "The Portuguese, Kongo, and Ndongo and the Origins of Atlantic Creole Culture to 1607," develops the concept of an Atlantic Creole culture by situating its origins in the century of interaction between Portuguese, Dutch and West Central African polities

that predated intensive slave trading. They argue that in addition to extensive dealings with Europeans, significant similarities in language, political organization, and social forms linked most groups in West Central Africa from which slaves were later taken. The authors spend a great deal of time examining the extension of Catholicism into West Central Africa, and present European accounts of worship and attitudes toward the faith. In addition, they show how African rulers adopted Christian names and practices, and how European religion was both adapted into local beliefs and used in political power struggles. In this, the authors do a great service: the image is not one of European values being foisted upon a local population, but of adaptation, syncretism, and agency.

Chapter 3, "Wars, Civil Unrest, and the Dynamics of Enslavement in West Central Africa, 1607-1660," is primarily concerned with demonstrating that the West Central African slaves who came into European hands in this period were captives of the protracted wars being waged between different African polities, with the Portuguese more or less involved as well. They demonstrate that the wars were about conquest and dynastic succession, not ethnic conflict, and resulted in thousands of Christianized Africans becoming enslaved.

Chapter 4, "Atlantic Creole Culture: Patterns of Transformation and Adaptations, 1607-1660," develops the idea of Atlantic Creole Culture more fully by introducing the criteria by which the authors judge Africans to have been bearers of that culture, as well as the notion that different groups might have participated to greater or lesser degrees. This is a key chapter, and the one that some archaeologists are likely to find most problematic. The root of the problem lies in how "culture" is conceptualized. The authors -- both historians -- place great emphasis on documentary sources and, following from that, what people are likely to have "believed." They conceptualize Atlantic Creole culture as a continuum, with greatest development in the "core" areas of Kongo and Angola, where European influence was most prominent. Out from the core, they write, adherence to Atlantic Creole culture would have been weaker. They view the hallmark of this culture to have been adoption of Christianity (pp. 170-96), but also discuss changes in music, foodways, dress and naming practices that followed European arrival in West Central Africa.

The problem arises in that "culture" can be abstracted in so many different ways, and the meaning of and evidence for "culture" that interest an historian is likely to be quite different from those an archaeologist would find evidence for. Many of the lines of evidence Heywood and Thornton cite are invisible archaeologically, such as adherence to Catholic doctrine, or the adoption of Portuguese surnames (pp. 208-21). There is little discussion of material culture, or concrete examples of changes in behaviors practiced by Atlantic Creoles. A record of the baptism of an African couple's child is not an unbiased document, and the "meaning" of the ritual is unlikely to have been as clear-cut as we might like to think.

This is not meant as a blanket criticism of the work. The volume's scholarship is impressive, as is the presentation. However, from an archaeological standpoint, the notion of an Atlantic Creole culture remains something to be demonstrated, not accepted.

In Chapter 5, "Shifting Status and the Foundation of African American Communities: Atlantic Creoles in the Early Anglo-Dutch Colonies," the authors argue that the similar worldviews of West Central Africans meant that the "founding generation" was positioned to exert a strong influence on succeeding waves of slaves brought to the Americas, and thus African-American culture. This again raises the question of what one means by "culture;" something that is by no means shared by all archaeologists. Yet again, "worldview" is also a tricky proposition, much more so than behavioral practices, which are largely outside the authors' scope.

Finally, Chapter 6, "Becoming Slaves: Atlantic Creoles and the Defining of Status," traces the authors' views that a shift occurred in how the English and Dutch came to see slavery as lifelong and hereditary, rather than a temporary condition.

In sum, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* is a compelling and well-researched account of the earliest days of Atlantic slavery that will reward students and academics, especially those who reject the notion that we cannot untangle the ultimate origins and cultural antecedents of the first African slaves.