

6-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Handler, Jerome S. and Lange, Frederick W. (2006) "On Interpreting Slave Status from Archaeological Remains," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol9/iss2/11>

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On Interpreting Slave Status from Archaeological Remains

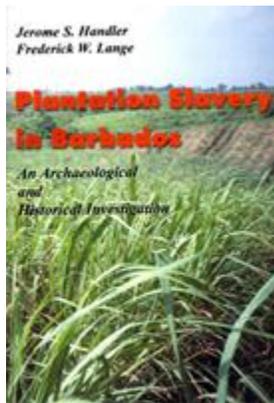
By Jerome S. Handler and Frederick W. Lange

Introduction[1]

Newspaper reports in late January and early February 2006 announced the discovery of skeletal remains in a colonial period church cemetery in Campeche, Mexico; the reports stressed that these remains represent the earliest evidence of African slavery yet found in the New World.[2] A brief article in the latest issue of *Anthropology News*, under the header "Excavated Teeth Confirm African Slavery in Colonial Campeche," summarizes the research in Campeche, and implicitly makes a similar claim, though it is more equivocally stated.[3] The author of the article, Vera Tiesler (who had originally discovered the skeletons in 2000), notes that the excavations in Campeche "provide the first physical evidence. . . of [the] early African diaspora in the Yucatan peninsula, and perhaps in the New World" and that "The physical evidence . . . clearly confirms the historical sources that report the forced importation of Africans with the arrival of the Spanish." Although Tiesler does not explicitly claim these people were enslaved, as opposed to having some other form of servitude or a different social status, she maintains that in mid- 16th century Campeche there was "no economic need for hard-labor slavery"; further that "Africans were employed as servants in Spanish households, and their presence in a Catholic cemetery is not unusual for this time, as African slaves were converted to the Catholic religion upon arrival."

Tiesler's *Anthropology News* article is, in effect, a summary of a much longer article in the January 2006 *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, under the authorship of T. Douglas Price, Tiesler, and James H. Burton.[4] The suspicion that some of the recovered skeletons may have been of African birth was first aroused by the presence of dental modification/mutilation in four of the skeletons. These individuals "had tooth filing and decorated chiseling in their permanent teeth characteristic of West African traditions." [5] More fundamentally, however, the case for African birth rests on analyses of strontium isotopes in dental enamel. The analyses, particularly of the four individuals with signs of dental modification, were conducted by Price and Burton at the Laboratory for Archaeological Chemistry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. They found in these skeletons "unusually high" strontium ratios, "inconsistent with an origin in Mesoamerica, but consistent with origin in West Africa." In brief, they concluded, it is "highly likely" that the individuals with the "highest values" of strontium ratios "came from West Africa." "Although filing and chiseling could not be determined for one of these four," they write, "the other three exhibit the dental decoration characteristic of West Africa." Maintaining that these individuals were interred "sometime in the late 16th century or early 17th century," and are "likely to be among the earliest representatives of the African Diaspora in the Americas," the article avoids making any definitive statements about the social status of the individuals concerned; in fact, in a personal communication, Price emphasized this point: ". . . in truth we cannot know for certain whether these Africans were slaves or not. We know from historical records that there were slaves in Campeche at this time so it seems the most logical explanation." [6]

Price et al. have convinced us that the remains under discussion are, indeed, those of African-born persons and represent "some of the earliest representatives of the African Diaspora in the America"; moreover, it is quite possible, given the historical context of early Campeche, that these persons were enslaved. However, it is clear that the physical evidence in and of itself does not unequivocally demonstrate the social status of the people concerned. Persons of African descent in Campeche at this period could have been free or held other social statuses that were not chattel slavery as it is commonly known and defined in the New World slave societies. Whatever the case, the Campeche remains raise the issue of archaeological interpretations of social systems, in this case the social system of chattel slavery.



In 1978 we published what was then the earliest full-scale monograph based on archaeological and historical research of an enslaved plantation population in the Caribbean (Figure 1; click on the images below to see larger illustrations by the authors). In that book, *Plantation Slavery in Barbados*, we described the excavations and findings at Newton plantation slave cemetery, as of today still the largest undisturbed plantation cemetery yet discovered in the Caribbean or North America.[7] We argued that archaeological remains alone cannot determine the presence of slavery, and believe the issue is still a timely one.[8] We reprint here excerpts from the

final chapter of our book. We do recognize, however, that some of our comments are dated in light of the considerable work that has been done in African American and plantation archaeology since the early 1970s, when we conducted our research in Barbados.

Chapter 7, THE ETHNOHISTORICAL APPROACH TO SLAVERY[9]

Archaeological data and information derived from written sources (supplemented on occasion by ethnographic observations) have enabled us to describe various dimensions of the plantation system and slave life and to view cultural changes that took place during the slave period. A great deal of our information could only be acquired from the written record, but archaeology was the sole source of data for certain areas of investigation. This was particularly evident in our discussion of slave mortuary patterns. The documentary sources were crucial for ascertaining the nature of pre- and post-burial behavior, though only the archaeology provided data about the interment of the body in the grave and the use of grave goods. . . . In general, archaeology can make definite contributions to the study of plantation slavery and slave culture because it yields information and generates questions not available in the documentary sources. It nonetheless has limitations because many aspects of plantation slavery and slave life did not leave archaeological traces. . . .

Subsequent studies will probably alter some of our tentative and occasionally speculative conclusions. These conclusions advocate the use of the ethnohistorical approach for studying slave cultures and also have broader implications for archaeological objectives in the study of ahistoric and prehistoric populations. In this chapter, we utilize the synthesis

of archaeological and historical data presented in earlier chapters to briefly examine the theoretical and methodological bases of archaeological, anthropological, historical, and ethnohistorical approaches to the study of slave cultures. In distinguishing between ethnohistorical and archaeological approaches to the study of slavery, this chapter also emphasizes the methodological contrast between our study and studies traditionally conducted by many historical archaeologists. . . .

THE ETHNOHISTORICAL METHODOLOGY

Within the framework of the research described in this book, ethnohistory . . . is an approach to describing and understanding culture and cultural processes and, like archaeology, is defined primarily by a methodological criterion. Methodologically, ethnohistory is not solely the companion of archaeology, ethnography, or history, but may also supplement such fields as historical linguistics or paleobiology Though none of these fields employs an ethnohistorical approach in every research situation, the most significant aspect of ethnohistory is its flexibility in bringing seemingly diverse sources of data to bear on particular problems.

In her study of a Tlingit community, Frederica de Laguna concluded "that archaeological, ethnological, and historical data, if combined and analyzed together, can give a deeper insight than any one type of material or any one methodology alone." . . . [David] Baerreis reemphasized this position in defining the archaeological approach to ethnohistory as " the means for coordinating diverse kinds of data in the solution of anthropological problems For archaeology, an ethnohistoric approach serves as a means whereby a fundamental link in the broad narrative of man's culture history is achieved." Barbados plantation rewards or incentives are excellent examples of the improved level of interpretation derived from integrating archaeological and historical data. Prior to our archaeological research, written sources yielded fragmentary information that indicated the various types of rewards or incentives and some of the social contexts in which they were allocated. These data, however, were dispersed throughout notes dealing with other dimensions of plantation slavery.

In trying to interpret the archaeological remains from Newton cemetery, we had to account for apparently disparate allocations of artifacts in association with interments, particularly the presence or absence of whole clay pipes and coffins. During the archaeological analysis, notes from written sources were reexamined to isolate references to types of excavated artifacts. In the early stages of analysis we found that pipes and tobacco were sometimes distributed to slaves as rewards and that material assistance at the time of burial was sometimes given to certain slaves. We began to suspect that the occurrence of particular artifacts, such as coffins, with interments may have been a manifestation of plantation rewards or incentives. As a result, the notes were more intensively reexamined, the presence of a reward-incentive system was established to a



degree not previously understood, and the function of various archaeological materials as remnants of this system was inferred. In this case, the step-by-step articulation of the historical and archaeological data utilized the historical data for a purpose for which they were not initially intended; furthermore, this articulation produced an interpretation that would have been difficult or delayed on the basis of historical data alone and probably impossible if only archaeological data had been available.

In this instance, applying the ethnohistorical approach suggested a new perspective. Though the historical data were necessary to define the existence of the slave system before questions about rewards and incentives could even be asked, the encounter with specific archaeological data, for which the presence or absence of certain artifactual materials suggested cultural explanations, led to a useful organization and analysis of the historical data. . . . In general, the inability of either history or archaeology to individually deal effectively with the problem of slave culture lies in the limits of the data. The written record is fragmentary, selective, and biased and the slaves themselves did not contribute to this record. Although archaeological data can illuminate some areas of behavior not covered in or obscured by the written records, they also have limitations. Some are practical ones, such as the preservation of cultural materials over time, while others are related to theoretical and conceptual limits of the archaeological record as a basis for interpreting past human behavior. . . .

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

Some of the practical limitations of our archaeological record reflect the fact that Barbados is a small island that has experienced heavy population densities, intensive agricultural exploitation and reuse of land, and the recycling of nonperishable building materials over long periods. Hurricanes and the tropical environment have also taken a toll. . . . Daily activities during the slave period also affected the archaeological record, through either redistribution of nonperishable items or changing patterns of settlement and land utilization.

The archaeological record on Barbados reflects the struggle between the island's limited surface area and its dense population. The slaves had no choice in settlement pattern. The criteria for locating slave villages were partially agricultural (not having people occupying good agricultural land) and largely a matter of social control. The result of locating the villages near the plantation yard and the house of the owner or manager was intensive reuse of a limited area for slave habitation. After emancipation, when the ex-slaves were moved to the peripheries of the plantations, the limits of local resources dictated that materials should not rest unused or that land should be unproductive. Available building materials were reused and former slave villages became the sites of new buildings or storage for machinery or equipment or were placed under cultivation. Thus, the limitations of the archaeological record in reflecting slave life on Barbados are partially practical problems of preservation that may or may not be encountered in other situations.

Regardless of preservation, however, no artifactual remains were independently characteristic of slave culture and status. Positive delineation and isolation of data

indicative of slave status and slave culture lay at the heart of our analytical problems with the archaeological data from Barbados in general and the data from Newton plantation in particular. Though the written record established that the plantations on which we worked existed prior to 1834 and were, indeed, slave plantations, the archaeological data alone, without the support of documentary evidence, did not reflect an institution or behavioral system identifiable as slavery. This problem presents a major obstacle to any purely archaeological study of slavery and has also confronted others who have worked with the remains of slave cultures.

In Jamaica, for example, [Barry] Higman noted that despite documentary evidence that slaves lived at New Montpelier estate the artifactual materials recovered from house excavations did not reveal the social status of the occupants. The artifacts alone could not identify a slave system. In their excavation of a slave cabin in Georgia, [Robert] Ascher and [Charles] Fairbanks recognized that archaeology might recover data that were not found in literary sources or oral traditions. They chose their excavation site, however, because historical sources documented the location of slave cabins, not because they independently arrived at the conclusion that the structural remains they excavated were those of a slave house. Their objective was to gain an archaeological insight into known slave remains, not to test whether such remains were actually indicative of slave habitation. [John] Otto has also indicated that his choice of slave areas to be excavated was based on documentary evidence.

Although archaeological data clearly supplement historical data on the institution of slavery once the presence of slavery is known, the initial identification of a slave system in a society and at a particular site, or areas to be excavated, depends on historical proof. The historical data from Barbados indicated that most slaves were buried in plantation areas set aside for such purposes. There was no specific documentary mention of a slave burial ground at Newton, and in this sense the archaeological research helped to validate the generalization derived from the historical record. Whites were also sometimes buried on plantations, but their graves were usually clearly marked, and they were not buried in the same areas as slaves. Information from Barbadian informants also supported a belief that Newton cemetery was slave in origin. Though the characteristics of the burials were not wholly European, the artifactual material of glass beads, clay pipes, and coffin hardware indicated we were dealing with an historical population. Although metric cranial analyses of the skeletal population were not conducted, they undoubtedly would have demonstrated the Negroid physical identity of the population, but they would not have indicated that the individuals were slaves. All evidence supported a strong inference but nothing archaeological was independently diagnostic of a slave cemetery. . . .



It was generally difficult to identify archaeological materials reflecting the African background of the slaves. Historical evidence, of course, showed that many Africans and their descendants lived in Barbados during the slave period. Because most of these persons were slaves, we could assume with relative assurance that artifactual materials

reflecting African motifs and patterns were slave-related; thus one means of identifying slave culture would be through identification of artifacts reflecting African technical or decorative traditions. However, we were unable to define an artifactual complex diagnostic of the slave population. . . .

One of the problems, then, in dealing with the artifacts recovered from the archaeological research was determining what was and what was not a part of the slave milieu. Slave manufactures reflecting African cultural traditions would most likely have been of either ceramic or organic materials, because these were the most readily available resources on the island. We found no organic material and could not identify any ceramics with decorative or manufacturing aspects distinctive of African derivation. Some non-wheel pottery was found, but its cultural affiliation is uncertain. . . .

Similar problems in identifying slave artifacts are seen in [R. Duncan] Mathewson's study of Afro-Jamaican pottery. The ceramics were culturally distinguishable from English manufactured ceramics and some were clearly derived from African ceramic traditions. It is not, however, discernible from the pottery itself that it was made by slaves, although this was not a concern in Mathewson's study. Higman's work in Jamaica has also failed to identify archaeological material uniquely indicative of slavery, and Otto has made a similar observation about his research off the Georgia coast. In observing the cultural materials recovered from excavations at the Kingsley plantation in Florida, Fairbanks reported: "It was surprising that no surely African elements in the material culture could be identified. It has long been known that blacks . . . did manage . . . to leave survivals of their language and other behavioral traits . . . which survive in Afro-American culture until the present. . . . Pottery, ornaments, game pieces, or ritual objects might well be expected in such a milieu. We found nothing, however, that could surely be identified as such. "Why no African-type materials were found in such differing slave situations as Barbados and the American South is not fully clear. Similar observations in these areas, however, suggest that verifying archaeological slave complexes cannot be dependent on survivals or materials derived from African backgrounds.



In interpreting artifacts of slavery or any other artifactual remains, the archaeological context is fundamental. [Michael] Schiffer detailed several ways in which an artifact may move through a society. The two parts of his model of most importance to our study are procurement and lateral cycling. Applied to slavery situations, procurement is the manner in which slaves or other members of a slave society obtained material items from commercial or natural sources. Lateral cycling is the passing of items from one segment of the society to another, possibly with a change in function, prior to any permanent discard from active use.[10]

Barbadian slaves procured a large percentage of their nonfood materials from sources equally available to whites and free non-whites. To varying degrees, all segments of society

utilized such locally available raw materials as wood, clay, and gourds. Slaves obtained such imported items as cloth, clay pipes, and some tools and cooking utensils by such means as theft, plantation allocation and rewards or incentives or by purchase and exchange on the internal marketing system. In other cases, as artifactual materials were discarded by planters and other free persons, they were laterally cycled into the slave or lower free classes and reused before their final archaeological deposition. . . . The money Barbadian slaves acquired from the sale of cash crops or stolen goods, the birth premiums paid mothers whose children survived their first month, the money given to various plantation officers, and the wages earned by slave tradesmen who were hired out also facilitated the entry of goods into the slave milieu by permitting slaves to purchase products from white and freedman shopkeepers and others. In brief, any patterns of purchase, trade, exchange, or gift giving would have tended to blur absolute artifactual distinctions between the nonslave and slave segments of the island's population.

One of our major interpretative problems was assigning shared artifactual material to a particular segment of a stratified, complex society -- in this case distinct social groups that, for archaeological purposes, occupied more or less the same area and separately, but concurrently, used many of the same resources. Fairbanks faced this problem on the Kingsley plantation and the problem is also seen in Otto's work in Georgia on dietary patterns Otto found the remains of domestic and wild foods used by planters, overseers, and slaves. His excavations were conducted in refuse middens associated with habitation areas of the three groups; the areas were located through documentary evidence and by analogy to other coastal plantations. Otto concluded that status differences could not be discerned among all three groups on the basis of either food or the remains of food procurement equipment. In all three cases, procurement equipment was present in approximately equal quantities. Minor differences were seen in the concentration of certain fish and turtle species at the planter's house, but these items were equally present in the slave and overseer areas. The contrast derived from Otto's archaeological data is between slaves and overseers as a group, and planters as a group, rather than overseers and planters as opposed to slaves or, alternatively, a tripartite distribution.

In Barbados (and apparently in other slave site studies) the artifact assemblages (such as imported and local ceramics, glass beads, clay pipes, hardware) consisted of materials available to and utilized by the slaves as well as other population segments: planters, middle and lower class whites, and freedmen of various socioeconomic strata. Various societal segments probably used the same types of artifacts, or indeed on many occasions the *same* artifact was discarded by one segment of society, acquired by another, and by a variety of other means transmitted vertically as well as horizontally through the society.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND SLAVERY

None of the archaeological data from Newton and other plantations investigated in Barbados are solely indicative of slavery and slave status. The limited comparative data from other research on slaves suggest this generalization may be acceptable from an archaeological perspective. One problem in identifying the physical remains of slaves and artifacts indicative of slave culture is that slave status did not give people distinctive

phenotypes or genotypes; nor did it give them material goods that were not found among other segments of the society. A somewhat different perspective on this problem might be derived from envisioning a grave in which two complete human skeletons, one an adult male and the other an adult female, were found. Once we have described their age, sex, manner of interment, and whether or not grave goods were found, we are left with the possibility of social interpretation: were they husband and wife, brother and sister, queen and courtesan, or lovers? We can never know, for these are arranged, genetic, and contractual human relationships that leave no artifactual remains. Despite extensive data on the Newton interments, the archaeological data as such do not establish if the individuals found in the concentrated burial areas, . . . were kinsmen, or what the relationships were, if any, between the adult men and women, or whether the adult in the multiple Burial 69-70 (regardless of whether it was male or female) was a parent of the interred child. Furthermore the archaeological data do not even establish that these persons were slaves.

An extreme but nonetheless useful illustration of potential difficulty in archaeological interpretation of status or social position was the interment of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia. At the time of his assassination in the spring of 1975, Faisal was one of the world's wealthiest men and the undisputed leader of his society and government. Although preinterment behavior differed somewhat from what would have occurred had a person of lesser status and prestige died, burial customs were those of the Islamic sect to which Faisal belonged. His body was wrapped in a simple shroud and was interred in a graveyard where commoners as well as royalty are buried. Like other graves in the cemetery, Faisal's had a small mound and was encircled by unmarked stones.[11] Subsequent excavation in the cemetery would yield the physical remains of other members of Saudi royalty, including Faisal's father, but they would be indistinguishable from the many other interments in the same area.

Lewis Binford has contended that "the formal structure of artifact assemblages together with the between element contextual relationships should and do present a systematic and understandable picture of the *total extinct* cultural system" and that "there has been as yet no attempt to assess the limitations of the archeological record for yielding different kinds of information". We submit, however, that our study of plantation slavery and slave culture is such an assessment of limitation for one broad area of archaeological research. "Even if all the material items in a culture are related to its non-material aspects, the archaeological remains may be so limited, altered, or destroyed that a complete description of the past cannot be reconstructed from them . . . because the complete past is simply not reflected in the material that remains." (Watson, LeBlanc, and Redman 1971:21).

In Barbados and in archaeological research on slave cultures elsewhere, the means for extracting a more useful body of data has been to utilize historical records dealing with slavery in the specific instances under investigation. Once historical documents have established the existence of slavery, excavated materials have contributed to the study of slave cultures and provide a new perspective on the written sources. The same perspective would have been impossible on the basis of the excavated materials alone. Slavery is an institution of variable structure that cannot be inferred, deduced, or otherwise derived from purely

archaeological remains. A search of the literature of prehistory has revealed a glaring lack of mention of slavery, not because prehistorians have been methodologically naive but simply because archaeological data do not identify slave status and slavery. The fact that there were blacks in Barbados who were free, Amerindians who were either free or slave, and poor whites who were free or indentured servants (but who lived at the same low economic level as some freedmen and even black slaves) is also a cause for interpretative concern when only artifactual or skeletal remains are used.

Although the archaeological record has definite limitations, archaeology can in fact contribute to the sociocultural history of "inarticulate" peoples . . . who left no written records and about whom documentary sources are often silent, contradictory, or biased. We believe that plantation slavery and slave culture can be most profitably explored through the ethnohistorical approach advocated in this book and that our work has shown more detailed results than might have been obtained by employing only one source of data or a single methodology. At the same time, the excavation results from Barbados and other New World slave sites clearly indicate that archaeologists who do not employ the ethnohistorical approach cannot effectively deal with the problem of slavery and slave culture. As [Bruce] Trigger has noted in a more general vein, "Archaeologists must learn to live with the realization that their desire to study whole cultural systems cannot be realized. This, however, is not meant to be an unconstructive comment. On the contrary, the real weakness of much modern archaeology can be attributed to the tendency of many archaeologists to treat their discipline as being merely the 'past tense of ethnology' or a kind of 'paleoanthropology,' rather than defining its goals in terms of the potentialities of its data."

Our study has shown the substance of Trigger's remarks to be true for plantation slavery and slave life. In general, we have defined certain limits to one area of archaeological endeavor; we also believe that we have defined new directions in the study of plantation slavery and slave culture that can be undertaken by applying an archaeological methodology within the ethnohistorical framework.

Notes

[1]. Thanks to Jane Landers and T. Douglas Price for their help with our introductory comments.

[2]. See, for example, *Wisconsin State Journal* (31 Jan. 2006), *Los Angeles Times* (4 Feb. 2006), *New York Times* (31 Jan. 2006), and various wire service reports on LexisNexis.

[3]. Vera Tiesler, "Excavated Teeth Confirm African Slavery in Colonial Campeche," *Anthropology News*, April 2006, p. 18.

[4]. T. Douglas Price, Vera Tiesler, and James H. Burton, "Early African Diaspora in Colonial Campeche, Mexico: Strontium Isotopic Evidence," *American Journal of Physical*

***Anthropology*, published on-line, 27 January 2006.**

[5]. For evidence that dental modification/mutilation did not take place among persons of African descent in the New World and that its presence on skeletal remains is suggestive of African birth, see J.S. Handler et al, "Tooth Mutilation in the Caribbean: Evidence from a Slave Burial Population in Barbados," *Journal of Human Evolution* 11 (1982): 297-313; and J. S. Handler, "Determining African Birth from Skeletal Remains: A Note on Tooth Mutilation," *Historical Archaeology* 28 (1994): 113-19.

[6]. T. Douglas Price to Handler, e-mail communication, 13 March 2006; quoted with permission.

[7]. *Plantation Slavery in Barbados: An Archaeological and Historical Investigation* (Harvard University Press, 1978).

[8]. See, for example, the detailed and lengthy report on the "African Burial Ground" in Lower Manhattan, published on-line in February 2006, on the website of the General Services Administration.

[9]. For the sake of brevity we have eliminated references to this section; these can be found in the Handler and Lange volume cited above.

[10]. In our initial discussion of Schiffer's procurement and lateral cycling concepts, the focus was on artifacts of material culture slaves obtained on the island (white clay pipes, buttons, European pottery, coffin hardware and other items). Such artifacts appear to have been broadly procured. Artifacts that apparently came directly or indirectly from Africa, however, such as copper bracelets, a pipe from the Gold Coast, and carnelian beads (which ultimately originated in Cambay, India) had a much more limited distribution and did not cycle freely among all levels of society.

[11]. *New York Times*, 27 March 1975; *Time Magazine*, 7 April, 1975.