COMMENTS ON THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF COMPARATIVE SLAVERY

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ABSTRACT

The archaeology of slavery as practiced in American historical archaeology has concentrated on plantation sites of British colonial and post-colonial heritage. Some work on northern and urban sites has begun, but relatively little. Our sense of “comparative” archaeology has reached little farther than the British Caribbean. We need a broader perspective. A comparative archaeology of slavery should incorporate other post-medieval European empires as well as their home countries, and also Classical Mediterranean societies. The study of Classical slavery is, however, strikingly underdeveloped, and the most progressive studies are looking to us to lead the way.

Lately I’ve been thinking a bit about the comparative archaeology of slavery. I take my inspiration for this commentary from a couple of sources. One is that I seem to be drifting back to historical archaeology as a major focus, and into sites that had or probably had an African-American presence. This includes a project in Falmouth, Jamaica—this paper is partly an excuse to show some Jamaica slides—and also two sites in western Kentucky, one completed and one planned.

The other source is the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery, DAACS for short, which is web-accessible, based at Monticello in Virginia. Before I say anything more about DAACS, I mean nothing negative in my comments to follow.
DAACS is a very well-designed and useful site and I look forward to seeing it expand. I’ve been told that Kevin Bartoy is thinking of starting a Mid-South version, beginning with the Hermitage data, which would be a terrific idea.

First, my sites, so that I can show some slides. In 2005 and 2006, the Murray State University field school worked at Columbus-Belmont State Park, on the bluffs of the Mississippi in Hickman County, Kentucky. This is the site of an extensive Civil War fortification, built by the Confederates and then occupied by the Union during Grant’s campaign into Kentucky. The fort was nicknamed the Gibraltar of the Mississippi, and is famous for an attempt to stretch a huge chain across the river to blockade river traffic. The chain broke. The only military engagement happened across the river at Belmont, Missouri.

Our project began by metal-detecting, mapping the hits, and shovel-testing to recover artifacts. In a more remote area of the fort—that is, with fewer modern items left by park visitors—one of our shovel tests hit a feature. We opened up an excavation and found a large, irregular feature with a nearby cylindrical feature, both intruding subsoil. Both were filled with burned materials and artifacts suggesting a domestic assemblage. I think right now that the small feature was a barrel cistern, and the large feature contains the remnants of a
house that was burned and shoved into a hole during the construction of the fort.

My impression so far is that the ceramics fit an 1850s occupation. From the ceramics and the clay pipes, I’m considering the idea that this was an African American occupation, whether free or enslaved I don’t know. I think that the Confederate builders of the fort would have had no qualms about burning out an African-American family. Unfortunately the Hickman County Courthouse burned, so that pre-Civil War property documentation is unavailable. I do know that a small African-American community moved in to the fort area after the Civil War, and I suspect that they may have been reclaiming previously-held property. The artifacts are still in cataloguing. I hope to do a thorough report on the site at this conference next year, and to explore whether I can make an argument for African-American occupation.

This coming summer, I hope to begin a project in the Land Between the Lakes, on an iron furnace community called Hematite. The iron communities generally grew up in the early to mid-19th century, and a few maintained production into the Civil War. Some of the workers were African Americans, and incidentally some of the first Chinese laborers brought into this country came to the iron communities in this area in the mid-1800s
In 2006 I began excavations in Falmouth, a late-18th century port on the north coast of the Jamaica. Falmouth became a backwater by the mid-19th century due to changes in the market system and the shipping industry and to the siltation of its harbor. It retains one of the best concentrations of Georgian period architecture in the British Caribbean. A non-profit program called Falmouth Heritage Renewal is restoring many of the buildings and training Jamaican craftsmen to do historic preservation work.

My excavation tested the yard of the Barrett House, home of Edward Moulton Barrett, one of Falmouth’s founders and leading citizens. We did a surface collection and systematic posthole testing, and placed four test units in the yard. A heavy rain raised the water table in the last week, so that some of the units weren’t completed the way I’d like, but the lower zones of the yard appear to date to the early occupation, the first several decades of the 1800s.

Jamaica’s emancipation came in 1838. My Columbus-Belmont site, and likely the African-American sites at Hematite, belong to the several decades before the American Civil War, that is, before our own emancipation proclamation. So this is the first connection that got me thinking about comparative archaeology of slavery.
The second connection, particularly between Falmouth and Hematite, is the problem of urban slavery, that is, of recognizing the presence of enslaved populations in urban sites. I know calling Hematite urban is stretching the term, but it is not plantation-rural, which has been the focus of so much of our archaeology of African Americans.

For example, the Barrett yard is architecturally complex. The presence of the water table within artifact-bearing sands suggests one reason why the yard underwent so many grade-raising fill episodes. Many of the fill and pavement episodes may be attributable more to renewal of working or aesthetic surfaces after wear and tear than to any conscious effort to rise above a swampy land level. In this, the Barrett yard resembles yards of Charleston, South Carolina, which Bernard Herman (2005:121) describes as “a work area presenting either a brick-paved surface or aggregate crush of shell, dirt, bone, and debris.”

Large quantities of ceramics attest to domestic activities. However, only about 10% of the wares belong to utilitarian stonewares and red earthenwares. Most of the ceramics are fine wares, generally representing the teawares and table settings that would grace an upper-class household of the Georgian period.

In one sense, this may be expected. Edward Barrett, a leading planter and merchant of Trelawney Parish, certainly was
a member of what Bernard Herman (2005) calls “a larger Atlantic culture steeped in acquisition, display and exchange.” It’s possible that he used his town house primarily for entertaining and business, and not as a residence for more than short periods. So, a large quantity of creamwares and pearlwares would be predictable.

On the other hand, evidence for the support services for lavish entertaining is conspicuously lacking. Barrett’s house and yard complex probably served at least part-time residential as well as commercial purposes. In the ceramics so far examined, the presence of the staff and support services is little in evidence. Only a single sherd of colono or yabba ware was recovered that might betray the presence of African-Americans. But free or enslaved servants almost certainly were involved in creating the archaeological record in the Barrett houselot.

Finding the living quarters of these less fortunate citizens of Falmouth may be difficult. Servants’ quarters are generally poorly documented in urban settings. Would the house and business servants of Barrett’s urban establishment have lived in the lot, or in districts with other Afro-Jamaicans elsewhere in town? I don’t know yet.

At least at Hematite, based on the little information I have so far, it looks as though the slaves’ houses were
separated. But as far as I know, there is even less archaeology of small-town slave occupations than there is of urban slave occupations. Will Hematite’s African-American neighborhood archaeologically resemble a plantation slave village, or an urban pattern, or neither? I hope to find out, but right now I don’t know what to expect.

This thought brings me back to the idea of comparative archaeology, and the paucity of truly broad-based comparison, which brings me back to DAACS. The DAACS database, reflecting its focus on Monticello, emphasizes plantation African-American sites of the British colonial and post-colonial system. Last year, in keeping with their goal of a comparative archaeology, DAACS staffers began a study of Stewart’s Castle plantation in Jamaica—a plantation African-American site of the British colonial and post-colonial system. This strikes me as a pretty limited sense of what comparative should be.

Let’s think bigger. Let’s think about the problems of studying slavery in cross-cultural and cross-temporal perspective. Surely there’s more out there than plantations of British colonial tradition.

Even in North America, there’s a broader perspective. Warren Perry has been documenting the presence of slaves in New England, generally ignored by northern-oriented histories that place all the ills of racism in the South. Of course, there are
Baker’s Black Lucy’s Garden and Deetz’s Parting Ways, but I’ve never seen a technical report on the latter.

Speaking of overlooked parts of the North American story, there is a spate of historical research on slavery of Native Americans, showing that their presence in the enslaved work force was quite considerable. How do we find them in the archaeological record? This question, among other things, should cause us to revisit the colonoware issue, and maybe admit that intertwined African and Native American influences are detectable rather than the either-or often presented in the literature.

What about elsewhere in the historic period? The British seem no more eager than the American north to examine their heritage of slavery. In the journal *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, slavery is addressed only in three articles about Caribbean sites and one about the Chesapeake Bay (that’s since the journal began in 1967). David Crossley (1990), in his review of the field, makes no mention of slavery or Africans. I guess all the African-descended people in Britain moved in as free persons after emancipation?

Other European powers also trafficked in and employed slaves. I was interested in the problem in French colonial Ste. Genevieve, but unfortunately had to end the project after only three seasons. Historians know that African slaves were part of
French Louisiana, but they remain undetected by archaeologists. And how about France itself?

What about Portugal? Saunders (1982) notes that the Iberian countries had had long interaction with North Africa before Columbus, and that every ship from the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria on probably had African crewmen. Lisbon was 10% black by 1550. I asked a Portuguese colleague at an Africanist conference once whether doing an archaeology of slavery in Portugal would be a good idea, and she seemed to think that there would be a great deal of resistance to admitting there were Africans in the community tree.

Let’s also not forget that the Islamic slave trade likely removed as many Africans from their home continent as did the Atlantic trade, although over a longer period (Segal 2001). Where did they end up? The historical archaeology of the Middle East is woefully undeveloped, but there’s an interesting topic.

What about Classical Greece and Rome? There are societies that were permeated with slaves, and which offer a historical record as well. If you tour Pompeii or Herculaneum or Paestum, you get a sense that the situations of urban settings, the cheek-by-jowl juxtaposition of upper and lower classes, free and unfree, would have been shared with our colonial cities. I thought, surely the Classical archaeologists have worked out approaches to urban slavery. It turns out, they’re looking to
Hugh Thompson (2003) recently published a book entitled *The Archaeology of Greek and Roman Slavery*. It’s kind of amazing that he spun it into a whole book. It’s peppered with should be’s and expectations, but the data are pretty lean. They find shackles in a number of sites, urban, rural, and mining settlements. Do shackles mean slaves, or imprisoned criminals?

Besides manacles and fetters, the only other evidence Thompson really had to work with was architecture, and this evidence too is ambiguous. To simplify only a little, small rooms must have been slave quarters, and bigger rooms belonged to free citizens and owners’ families. Because Classical archaeology is so architecture-oriented, there is very little in the way of contextual data to distinguish sleeping rooms from other kinds of rooms. Archaeologists of Roman buildings confidently identify various rooms’ functions, but for someone outside the Classicists’ tradition of interpretation, the chain of reasoning is quite obscure.

I’ve seen two papers that really try to grapple with the problem. The first is by Jane Webster (2005) who makes explicit analogy to American studies. She points out that we have a clear advantage in that there should be a distinct ethnic and cultural distinction between the European and Euroamerican owners and the
African-descended slaves—and yet, we have found that there are no definitive markers of enslaved status, but rather subtle pattern differences. How much harder will it be to identify Classical slavery, which was largely European on both sides of the relationship?

Webster points out several approaches, and I’ll mention one here. At a number of Roman villas in Britain, archaeologists have exposed round dwellings, which are very unlike rectilinear Roman structures. They are, instead, like British houses of the Iron Age. Could they have housed British slaves? Unfortunately, like so much Classical archaeology, Webster says that “The key point is that none of the previous interpretations was based on analysis of artefacts from these structures.” She says that artifacts were recovered, but nobody bothered to analyze them, because the focus is on architectural form.

The literary evidence for Roman slave-holding refers to ergastula, slave prisons. Two potential ergastula have been recovered in Britain, at Colchester and Chalk. Webster suggests that more could be found, if they were analyzed correctly.

We have much the same situation in Greek archaeology, but a recent article by Sarah Morris and John Papadopoulos (2005) suggests that Greek towers were slave quarters. Towers throughout the Classical Greek world have in the past been dismissed as medieval defensive works, but recent evidence
places them in the Greek period. Further, their contents indicate domestic use, and they are often associated with presses, grinding equipment, and cisterns or wells and enclosed in walls in an agricultural complex. Most telling, the evidence suggests that they were locked from the outside, which would be rather impractical for defensive works. Their suggestion, supported by textual references, is that the towers housed slaves.

Both the Roman British and Greek sites I’ve just mentioned are rural agricultural sites. They show that, with some thought, an archaeology of slavery in the Classical world is possible. The problems of doing this study in the cities are much the same as doing them in more recent urban settings. Slaves’ quarters are incorporated into a complex urban environment, tucked into garrets and nooks and perhaps upper stories of urban outbuildings; slaves’ material statuses were variable, as were the statuses of the free citizens, and they were spatially mixed in urban settings. It will be a challenge to identify their presence. Mark Leone’s (2005) recent discussion of African-American caches in an Annapolis kitchen underscores both the possibility and the creative analysis required to meet the challenge.

A comparative archaeology of slavery is possible. The DAACS database is a great step towards making datasets available
for a broad audience to study and think about the problems. But we also need a broader conception of what comparative slavery could encompass: global in scope, thousands of years in perspective, and subtle in approach. This is another field in which historical archaeology can lead the way into holistic and cross-cultural studies, rather than maintain a narrow Americanist insularity that too often characterizes it. But you’ve heard me rant about that before.

Thank you.