The Maritime Archaeology of Slave Ships: Overview, Assessment and Prospectus

Jessica Irwin and Dave Conlin

In one of the most consequential historical processes in global history, over a period of approximately 300 years, more than 12 million enslaved persons were stolen from their homelands in Africa and forcibly placed in the Americas. Driven by market forces, the maritime technology utilized for this shameful trade developed rapidly, while the physical characteristics of ships designed to transport slaves changed over time due to economic, cultural and historical constraints.

This presentation will provide a brief overview of wrecks known, or thought to have been involved in the slave trade; discuss what might archaeologically define a slave ship, and then situate this discussion into the larger program of study currently being done by an international consortium of scholar with the slave wrecks project and others.

Overview

In the single most consequential historical event in human history, ships carrying human captive cargo crossed the Atlantic continuously for nearly 300 years. Over those three centuries, an estimated 12.5 million individuals were taken from their homes by force and transplanted to the Americas. Taken in context, 12.5 million people out of a global population of approximately 1 billion would equate to about 90 million people today—that's 15 Holocausts stacked on top of each other for 3 centuries. The ships that facilitated this shameful history were the single largest factor in shaping the cultural, racial and economic climate of today and of the last 400 years, and the idea that these ships have left little or no mark in the archaeological record is ludicrous. Nearly every country with access to the Atlantic participated in the slave trade, financing the building and purchase of vessels, collecting trade goods, acquiring African slaves, and distributing them across two continents in the Americas. Many of these ships may not have wrecked with slaves on board, but that does not bar them from contributing to the potential story of the slave ship.

The maritime technology utilized for this hateful trade developed rapidly and was driven by market forces, while the physical characteristics of ships designed to transport slaves changed over time due to economic, cultural and historical constraints in Europe. The material cultural that survives in the archaeological record developed and changed due to cultural and historic changes taking place in Africa rather than Europe, and these changes leave distinct markers in the archaeological record.

To this point, with few exceptions, the slave ships that have been discovered or examined archaeologically have not been investigated in a manner that allows for historic understanding or progressive knowledge to the subject. The most famous of these ships have been discovered by treasure hunters, and thus examined in a way driven by profit and not academic understanding of the global process or microeconomics. The ships that have been examined in a more acceptable archaeological manner are ships that at the time of wrecking were serving a purpose other than slaving. These ships contribute to the slave ship narrative more through historic research than through ship structure and material culture.

Only recently have ships that sank as slavers been examined archaeologically. In particular, the slave wrecks project has examined the remains of a ship off the coast of West Africa—the Portuguese slave ship *Sao Jose* (*Saint Joseph*), which sank just south of Cape Town in 1794 with the loss of 212 enslaved persons.

The nature of the economics around the slave trade and the slave ships themselves present several challenges to historic and archaeological research. One of these challenges is that a slaver could sink while working as a slaver without human cargo on board, so that researchers must look for other clues to link the ship with the active slave trade. More research of the material culture of the slave trade needs to be done to help identify ships that may otherwise be identified as merchant vessels. A study of this nature could also lead to the re-examination of unidentified shipwrecks by surveying the onboard material culture and its possible implications.

A re-examination of previously excavated vessels requires the definition of a slave ship to include any ship participating in the slave trade, regardless of country of origin or time period of participation. It also requires the definition to include ships that sank without human

cargo on board, as well as ships in support of the vessels that carried enslaved humans. While the discovery of wrecks that had onboard human cargo would give by far the most insight into the structure and construction of the ship itself, ships that sank at any stage of the journey could give insight into the changing and fluid nature of the slave trade itself. When discussing previously examined wrecks in the archaeological record, it is important to distinguish the changes over time. The most logical way to do this is to differentiate between early ships; ships used at the height of the trade; and ships involved after the trade became illegal in England. Early ships transported not only slaves but also supported new and growing colonies that were not yet self-sufficient and trade routes that were not yet totally established. The height of the slave trade lasted from 1700 to 1807, when roughly 50% of the total number of Africans were taken from the continent and ship construction exploded. After 1807, ships adapted to British and American statutes that made the trade illegal, changing the overall nature of the trade and shipping, by enforcing these statutes on all slaving enterprises not just those originating in England and the United States. Although ships carrying enslaved peoples developed for speed to carry humans who died over the course of their terrible journey, as the practice became illegal to participate in more countries the ships themselves changed in a technological "arms race" that exactly paralleled those of smugglers and blockade runners.

Assessment

The potential for slave ships in the archaeological record is huge. A study done by New Castel University indicates that there are potentially 261 wrecks of slavers: 85 British wrecks, 33 Irish wrecks, 97 West African wrecks, 72 Caribbean wrecks, 17 North American wrecks, 6 South American wrecks, and some 31 mid-Atlantic wrecks. If even a small portion of these were discovered and researched by archaeologists, what is known about the structure and construction of slavers would grow exponentially (Smith, 2014).

To date the most famous slave wrecks have been those discovered by treasure hunters. These include The *Henrietta Marie*, the *Whydah*, The Manilla Wreck, and the *Fredensborg*. These wrecks have been re-examined from an archaeological perspective since their discovery, but mainly because the cultural material or historic research indicated that those wrecks were in fact slavers.

The *Queen Anne's Revenge*, *James Mathews*, *Adelaide*, and *Elmina Wreck* are all wrecks that have had extensive archaeological investigation. In the case of the *James Mathews* and the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, the vessels sank while working as something other than a slaver. However, the characteristics of the vessels (speed primarily) that made them suitable as slave ships are also what made them desirable as pirate ships. The *Adelaide* and the *Elmina Wreck* were both working as slave vessels, but slaves were not on board at the time of sinking. The findings on the *Adelaide* have yet to be published, but the *Elmina Wreck* can serve as a marker for what a slave ship could contain and how archaeological investigations can be carried out.

The *Enterprise* and the T*rouvadore* were salvaged at the time of wrecking. Neither of these vessels contained much cultural material at the time of examination, but they are examples of how the hull of a ship that worked as a slaver at any point in its life can add to the narrative of the slave trade.

A re-examination of the material culture of unidentified wrecks may also lead to further understanding of these vessels. Shackles and other articles of restraint are certainly indicative of a slaver, as are larger galleys, larger water tanks, and segregated interior spaces. Research into historic documents related to the outfitting of slaving vessels both in the United States and England show that the most common goods being sent to Africa were items that would not last in the archaeological record or may not have survived a wrecking event at all. They include foods stuffs, livestock and other organic material such as fabric. Because material going to Africa was highly localized and changed often, much like fashion today, material culture has the potential not only to reveal where ships were traveling from but also to suggest the date at which they were operating.

Fabric was an exceptionally popular slave trade item. Bale seals have enormous potential to identify slave ships. Beads have long been associated with slave ships and are small enough that they often survive among the ballast stones of a vessel long after it stopped transporting human cargo. What is missing is a comprehensive study of slave-related beads, and a method to use them as a diagnostic marker of both port of departure and destination. Taste in beads was highly regional and changed frequently, as they were utilized both as status symbols and currency. Cowries especially have led to some confusion, because these shell beads were highly sought after; they appear in the archaeological record rather frequently; and they may be mistaken for local shell. In fact, if these shell

types are found on a beach, they likely washed ashore there as these particular shells are only found in specific places, none native to Africa (Lorenz and Hubert 1993, 205).

Another item that could notably change the discussion is one that would indicate that a ship sank with slaves on board. The presence of bricks from a slave stove would most likely survive in the archaeological record. While cook stoves existed on most vessels, a slave stove was constructed on deck only while slaves were on board. This feature is particularly unique to slave ships during the height of the trade. They were often placed in the middle of the vessel and served to both divide the ship into manageable sections and feed the hundreds of extra mouths now on board.

Metal items being transported also can be diagnostic. Historic documents record that many African ports preferred the import of European iron and copper in a raw state. The skill level of many smiths in Africa rivaled that of those in Europe, but the quality of the imported stock was much better than the locally available material. This resulted in vessels full of copper rods and iron bar. Manillas are often associated with the slave trade as well and have been an indicator. They rarely show up on terrestrial sites and this could be the reason. Items that are both currency and status symbols reigned supreme on the African coast (Johansson, 1967).

In addition to iron for trade is iron ballast, used extensively in slave ships like *Sao Jose*. This iron ballast speaks to the sickening physics of human transport in a ship—people take up room but don't weigh very much, so dense iron ballast blocks provided hydrodynamic stability.

Dye wood survived aboard the *Henrietta Marie*, and fabric survived on the Manilla Wreck site. Both of these wrecks lay in shallow tropical waters. This suggests that more careful excavation of other wrecks could reveal many of the materials that we often think of as unable to survive in highly aerobic environments.

Prospectus

Cargo on all three legs of a slave ship's journey held high value. Many of those items are still valuable today, which is why treasure hunters and salvors have a particular interest in finding them. Coupled with this is the incidental destruction of slave shipwreck sites that have no inherent value but are destroyed in the industrial dismemberment of history that is modern treasure hunting—particularly in less developed countries like (until recently) Mozambique. *Henrietta Marie* was not targeted; it was found during a focused search for Spanish treasure shipwrecks.

Because slavery was a global phenomenon, the international community of archaeologists needs to work together to examine these wrecks—particularly wrecks in the mid-Atlantic that may not be protected in the same way that wrecks found in the waters of flagship counties may be. There is significant potential to find well-preserved wrecks that will illuminate the construction and structure of the vessels themselves in the deeper waters managed under international jurisdiction. Open ocean wrecks are also the most likely to retain their cargoes—trade goods or enslaved humans. The development of more stringent protection of underwater cultural heritage is needed in many Latin American and African countries that were the destinations of these ships. The Slave Wrecks Project is dedicated to a global effort and a global examination of the trade in enslaved humans. The project includes archaeology, history, law and legal protection, development and capacity building for local constituencies. This shameful history is something we don't talk about. It's something that makes us uncomfortable, and it's something that we all—African, European, American—carry a piece of. We are building a coalition of scholars willing to look at the ugly and the forgotten, to give a voice to 12.5 million stolen souls, and we would welcome your help, expertise and participation.

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Jessica Irwin
2206 BE Wheatley Drive,
Beaufort SC 29902
805-712-9466
jessicaglickman@aol.com

David L. Conlin Ph.D.
Archeologist/Chief
National Park Service
Submerged Resources Center
12795 W Alameda Pkwy.
Lakewood, CO
(303) 969-2665
(303) 378-6285 cell
(303) 969-2659 fax
daveconlin321@yahoo.com