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NAUTICAL ARCHAEOLOGY
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TO BE EXEMPT FROM THIS
MORAL AMNESIA'.**

**written by
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2014**

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Introduction

Fred McGhee's biography (McGhee [no date]) describes him as a maritime archaeologist and a historical anthropologist who has an interest in the maritime aspects of the African Diaspora, the African-American slave trade and its role in the colonization of the Americas. He has "African, European, and Indigenous ancestry"; his career in archaeology began after a period as a deep sea diver in the US Navy, and today he is a disabled veteran who is engaged in social activism and politics (McGhee 2014). When he wrote that "Western mainstream societies are in deep denial about the realities of much of the African-American experience, and it is probably unreasonable to expect nautical archaeology (a field as white as a freshly pressed set of bed sheets) to be exempt from the moral amnesia" (McGhee 1997) he was, I believe, using political rhetoric as a 'call to action' for the archaeological profession to focus on an area that he passionately believes deserves greater attention.

McGhee believes that in our postcolonial world there is a resistance to fully accepting the realities of empire, imperialism and colonialism and that this is because archaeology is still rooted in "Eurocentrism, the intellectual and cultural descendant of colonialism". He argues that nautical archaeology, i.e. the study of maritime technology such as ships (including their cargo and crew) and shipbuilding (Flatman and Staniforth 2014:168), which still has not identified a slave-ship with the remains of its human cargo aboard, will not advance until it accepts the political realities and power issues of the slave trade and develops a humanistic awareness of its impact on the African-America Diaspora.

I will explore McGhee's politicized and challenging statements and assess whether I agree that he is correct to say that maritime archaeologists, i.e. archaeologists who study the material evidence resulting from human activities on the sea (Flatman and Staniforth 2014:168), have consciously avoided investigations of the African slave trade. The study of the African Diaspora, as Flatman and Staniforth (2014:186) say, is a fast-developing area so I will consider whether his assertions have become outdated by recent archaeological activities.

The Slave Trade

The connection between slavery and the British Empire originates from the establishment of colonies in North America and the Caribbean, from the 16th century, often to avoid religious persecution. The colonies were a ready market for manufactured goods and they were a source of agricultural produce such as sugar, tobacco, coffee, cocoa, rum, raw cotton, and tropical woods which were in great demand in Britain and Europe. However, the colonies struggled to satisfy their insatiable demand for labour to perform the exhausting work required for agricultural production on their plantations. Their solution was as simple as it was despicable; they copied, on a larger scale, the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and French by transporting millions of Africans into slavery (Morgan 2000:6-9,12,14,20). Some trading was bilateral, i.e. directly between the colonies and Africa, but it was the multilateral 'triangular trade' which evolved as the most dominant and successful commercial enterprise.

The demand for slaves was one part of a 'triangular trade'. Firstly, European manufactured wares, such as beads [most were manufactured in Venice] (Understanding Slavery Initiative 2011) and manillas [copper bracelets which were the principle money on Africa's west coast] (Semans 2014), were bartered for slaves primarily in western Africa. Secondly, the 'Middle Passage' where slaves, who were considered little more than a perishable cargo, were transported to colonial slave markets. From a slave's perspective the Middle Passage was one of terror in a totally alien world. Olaudah Equiano, a former slave, wrote in his 1789 autobiography:

"... the galling of the chains, now become insupportable, and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole scene of horror almost inconceivable" (International Slavery Museum 2014).

Thirdly, exotic trade-goods were transported to major trading centres such as London, Liverpool and Bristol. The vessels' 'interest' in their human cargo ended after it was off-loaded and sold. For the slaves their existence in the colonies began an endless cycle of work, disease and poor diet along with an inevitably high death rate. It is estimated that Britain transported three million slaves during the eighteenth century (Richardson, cited in Morgan 2000:10). This enforced migration inevitably caused "profound social and cultural changes in the lives of black people" (Morgan 2000:10).

One of the more influential voices on slavery and its impact on the British eighteenth-century economy is Eric Williams' in his 1944 work 'Capitalism and Slavery' (Morgan 2000:29). He, like Marx, viewed the slavery and industrial capitalism as the principle factors which promoted global capitalism. He wrote that, in the Caribbean, the human consequences continued after the abolition of the slave trade because the emancipation of slaves had an economic consequence, including long-term poverty and regional underdevelopment.

Racism and Eurocentrism

Maria Franklin (1997:37), like McGhee, questioned whether "black archaeological past had been colonized by white, middle class specialists?" and stated that if it had, then archaeology must lose part of its relevance to black Americans.

Franklin (1997:36,39) wrote that historical archaeology is able to give "people without a history" a voice and in America this has been especially true for oppressed groups such as "Native Americans, African Americans, immigrants, and women". She does stress that this comes with a responsibility; archaeologists must present the past, as a body of experts, without any judgmental or political slants that an imperialist, nationalist or racist would use. This, to me, seems to be an unwinnable battle because we cannot ever hope to be so agenda-less that the audience has to assess every piece of information and form personal interpretations of it. Maybe the best that we can aspire to is to present the facts to an unknown audience and offer interpretations in a way that is sensitive and mindful of today's society, i.e. race-less, ethnic-less, gender-less and nationality-less. Ultimately, the success or failure of archaeology's interaction with black Americans depends on both groups being willing to make it successful and to gain something from the engagement. For example, there is already an increased awareness of plantation archaeology (Gibb 1997:53-54), but shedding its Eurocentrism and developing relevance to wider audiences is a gradual process – inevitably this is more challenging because, as Singleton and Bograd (1995:1) explained, whether a site is a plantation or wreck we cannot treat it as being one in which only "black artefacts were found".

Anna Agde-Davies (cited in Agde-Davies 2010:419-420) wrote in 2002 that few American archaeologists are African American, for example, The Society for Historical Archaeology reported that only 0.1% of its members were African Americans and this is echoed by Kantner (2002:2) who reported that although 30% of students at Georgia State University are African Americans, only a tiny number of them chose to study archaeology. Clearly there is something wrong with archaeology when it cannot attract students of all ethnicities, but until this is addressed and corrected those who are practicing archaeology have a heightened responsibility to guard against Eurocentrism.

Wanted - 'slave bones'

Fred McGhee isn't simply searching for human remains; if he was then the burials of slaves who died during wrecks, such as those who drowned within the slaver *Pacquet Real*, which sank in 1818 off of Cape Town (Cox and Sealy 1997:207-209) or those interred in the "Negro Burying Ground" [renamed The New York African Burial Ground in 1993] (La Roche and Blakey 1997:84), might suffice.

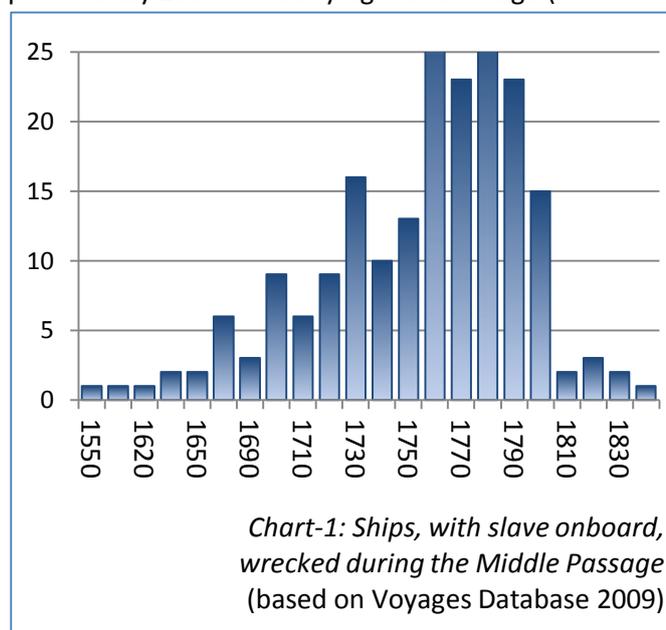
McGhee (1997) believes that finding a slave-ship with the remains of its human cargo, a 'perfect wreck', would be so politically charged that it would provide an undeniable and unavoidable humanization of the slave trade's impact on the African-America Diaspora. His political objective is, I believe, to generate the same levels of passion and ownership as the New York African Burial Ground did within the African-American descendant community. I agree wholeheartedly that excavating a

'perfect wreck' would generate a level of interest, or sensationalism, which would communicate the slave trade beyond the narrow academic confines to the public on an international scale. McGhee (2000:1) certainly understands that archaeology is an inherently political process and he believes that archaeologists have an implied responsibility to help the African-American Diaspora, a disenfranchised community, towards a humanistic awareness of its identity.

Fowell-Buxton (cited by Klien 2010:130-131) estimated that less than 20% of slave mortality occurred onboard ships while over 70% happened while they were being transported from their villages to the coast and I agree with Klien who questions why there is so much emphasis on the Middle Passage when it was only one part of a slave's pathway from freedom to captivity. I suggest that this is, partially, because the Middle Passage is a distinct phase of their journey into captivity, and one that was primarily a product of European Capitalism and because of the highly descriptive anti-slavery writing, for example Olaudah Equiano's autobiography. I do have a concern that, as a focus for the African-American Diaspora, it may result in other equally important areas of research receiving less than an appropriate level of attention. Orser (1998:63) also adds that an "unequal distribution of archaeological research" in the Americas to find an African identity has reduced visibility into the African contributions in other areas (such as Asia or the Middle East). Ogundiran and Falola (2010:34) are succinct when they said "Maritime archaeology of the African Diaspora is ... not just about ... the Middle Passage".

McGhee (2008) acknowledges the progress since his 1997 article and that the archaeological community has attempted to locate and excavate slavers [vessels used for transporting slaves]. There is extensive historical information on the slave trade, including the Middle Passage, and, as McGhee (2010:384) wrote, much of this was generated by the abolitionist movement (which does, of course, have a very strong political agenda). So few slavers have been securely identified, and even fewer have been excavated, that we cannot expect that an equal depth of scientific research to be available. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database is an online resource of which shares decades of scholastic research (Voyages Database 2009); it records that 1,300 of its recorded 35,000 voyages ended with the vessel sinking and, of those, approximately 200 were carrying human-cargo (see Chart-1).

Wreck archaeology has employed broad research schemes for wreck excavation, including the crew and human cargo's material remains (who Henderson (2008:45) says were stripped of all person items); however the wrecks that have been excavated, such as the *James Matthews* (Henderson 2008:39), which had formerly been engaged in the trade or those, such as the *Amity* (O'Sullivan 2009), which sank on the final stage of the 'triangular trade' while transporting exotic trade-goods from the Americas to Europe, did not contain slaves (unless they were part of the crew) and therefore they were not fitted-out for the transportation of slaves.



Jane Webster (2008:6), echoing McGhee, wrote that "The paucity of fieldwork may appear surprising, since in theory, the wrecks of slavers should not be especially hard to find." This may seem a surprising statement, except where she says "in theory", because in reality finding slavers – i.e. vessels that were lost while they were carrying a human cargo rather than a general cargo - has proven difficult. This, for example, has been demonstrated by the expeditions to locate the *Trovadore*, the *Guerrero* and the *Leusden* (Cultural Heritage Connections 2014).

The *Guerrero* was an illegal slaver which sank in 1827 drowning 40 of the 561 slaves being transported to Cuba (Drye 2004). Gail Swanson's (2005) book is packed with detailed written reports by the slaver's captain, salvagers, a lightship [ship used as a mobile lighthouse] keeper and the commander of H.B.S. Nimble, a British anti-slavery patrol, on the location of the wreck, but, so far, the wreck is still missing. Wreck-sites are being hunted for using a magnetometer (Drye 2004) and only promising targets are investigated by divers and a site would only be excavated if it is considered to be in the public's interest to recover the artifacts for research and an interpretive display.

The *Trouvadore*, also an illegal slaver sailing from Africa to Cuba, sank in 1841 and, like the *Peter Mowell* [Barbados] (HeritageDaily 2012), its crew and 193 slaves survived the wrecking (Sadler 2008:58). Most of the ship's fabric, such as spars and rigging, metals and the crew's personal effects were salvaged by local salvors (Slave Ship Trouvadore 2014). Happily, from a humanistic perspective, the slaves were emancipated and 168 of them elected to resettle in the Caicos (Sadler 2008:59-60).

Sadler (2008:64-65) asked an important question, "Can Trouvadore be identified with certainty?" especially as it is unlikely that there will be any identifying artefacts remaining. This question applies to each of the potential wrecks. In the Trouvadore's case, as only two slavers were known to have been wrecked on the islands, should a slaver wreck be found there is an equal chance of it being the *Trouvadore*. Archaeologists will hope to find artefacts which only a slaver might carry – these are similar to the indicators used by nineteenth century anti-slaving patrols including 1) iron gratings, 2) shackles, 3) boilers and large numbers of utensils, 4) excessive supplies of food or water, 5) native canoes or 6) evidence of a 'slave deck' or the materials to make one. To this list, which will vary depending on which element of the 'triangular trade' the vessel was engaged in, we need to add trade goods and human remains. After being submerged for 160 years many of these remains, such as evidence of the 'slave deck', are unlikely to survive or be firmly identifiable.

The Turks and Caicos National Museum, after aerial investigations in 2002 and water-borne searches in 2004, discovered two historic wrecks - a metal sailing vessel and a wooden hulled vessel which had a ballast mound (Sadler 2008:65-68). Test excavations were performed on the wooden vessel and its cathead and some iron and brass fittings were found - but there was no conclusive evidence that it was the *Trouvadore*. The investigation revealed that since 2002 the site had been disturbed - probably by a treasure hunter. Regrettably any artefacts were likely to have been illegally removed and its archaeological value had been compromised.

The Trouvadore Project (Sadler 2008:69) has demonstrated that wreck hunting, especially within coastal waters, is a "collaborative and interdisciplinary process" which must use a combination of resources from a wide range of disciplines, including both professionals and amateurs with diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences. *Trouvadore* is made relevant by the involvement of the Turks and Caicos Island's current communities.

The *Fredensborg* was wrecked in 1768 off of the Norwegian coast, while returning to Denmark with a cargo of exotic trade-goods after a voyage to Africa's Gold Coast (Ghana) and the Danish West Indies, and it was excavated during the 1970s (Svalesen 2000:13-17). Leif Svalesen's excellent book describes the ship, in its full cultural context, using both the excavation findings and extensive historical documentation. The *Fredensborg's* oak hull had been crushed when it was wrecked but many of its fittings, such as decorated plates, a writing slate, a variety of tools and the crew's personal items including a whistle, a thimble and their shoes were recovered (Svalesen 2000:174, 180-186). These could have been found at many wrecks but a small number of artefacts were more unique or specific to the vessel's trade. These included 1) an African stone mortar or rubbing stone for grinding pulses, 2) two small bones which proved to originate from a water chevrotain and a peacock which may have been remnants of a meal or part of an African amulet or charm, 3) clay-pipes, sometimes known as Negro Pipes, which were given to slaves, along with brandy, to placate them during the Middle Passage and 4) iron objects which were too corroded to be conserved but

whose imprints identified them as slaves' foot irons. In many ways the *Fredensborg*, even though it was so close to its home port and did not contain a human cargo, has provided a wealth of information about the vessel's 'place' within the global slave trade.

In 1761, the *L'Utile* was wrecked on the reef off of the miniscule Île des Sables [Tromelin Island] while carrying a cargo of Madagascan slaves to Île de France [Mauritius]; over 80 slaves drowned in the hold but 123 crew and 60 to 80 slaves survived (Patel 2014). Incredibly, seven women and an infant boy had managed to survive on the island until 1776 when they were rescued. The wreck was investigated in 2006 and the only surviving artefacts were its cannons/shot, anchors and rigging – i.e. the heavy items which were not dislodged by the frequent storms. Despite over 100 people being lost on the wreck there was no evidence of their human remains. The sea is a harsh environment and it is very possible that future wreck excavations will not discover human remains.

Neither the *James Matthews*, *Amity*, *Fredensborg* or *L'Utile* represent a 'perfect wreck' but maybe the 'perfect wreck' doesn't exist or isn't needed. There has been significant effort to find more slavers but we must acknowledge Fred McGhee and Jane Webster's frustration that more have not, so far, been discovered. So why is it so difficult for nautical archaeology to find a wreck which was actively engaged in the slave trade?

Nautical Archaeology

The objective for excavating a shipwreck must be to interpret its material remains and, using them, come to a greater understanding of its historical context (Pomey 2014:25). Fred McGhee, for example, might hope to recover the skeletal remains of unambiguously identified slaves who died in the wreck, but an excavation must uncover its total context, including the ship's construction, the material remains relating to the crew as well as any evidence of its cargo – including its human cargo.

Oceans represent 70% of the world's surface area and wherever and whenever a ship was lost finding it is often the result either of chance or thanks to information researched from historical documentation (which may have little or no accurate local/navigational information). When a ship is wrecked it invariably sinks in a place which is unintended (Martin 2014:47-48, 50) but, as Wachsmann (2014:202) observes, coastal waters presented the greatest risk to ships (ships were able to ride-out the severest storm while off-shore but the ability to evade risk was much harder on a lee shore where the prevailing winds forced ships towards the shore or where hidden dangers, such as reefs or shoals, could be struck) and this is where the majority of ships were lost. For nautical archaeologists, this does reduce the search area and make it more likely that SCUBA or surface air techniques might be used (Wachsmann 2014: 204-205,213). Conversely, ships that sank in deep water are likely to be less impacted by destructive processes, such as storms, tides and waves, but their recovery requires significantly different, and most costly, equipment and techniques and a very diverse set of expertise.

A historical shipwreck represents a single moment in time, but, like the "Pompeii Premise", it is neither a literal nor complete version of the vessel when it was wrecked. The ship's sinking was, usually, unintended, for example, when it struck a reef or floundered during a storm or took-on too much water to remain afloat. Its structure was unlikely to have remained intact and once it was compromised by the underwater environment the hull would collapse and its contents would settle on the seabed or float away (which is more probable with historic ships constructed from wood which has natural buoyancy (Wachsmann 2014:205). The result is that only a dispersed debris field remains.

Finding a wreck, even if all due diligence for the archaeological, legal and cultural practices are followed, may have its historical significance devalued if its identity cannot be securely determined. Excavation of a wreck is highly challenging especially as at the outset the team cannot be certain the wreck is of a specific ship - in most cases the excavation only has a small chance of categorically establishing the ship's identity. A ship which was engaged in the slave-trade, which might have

operated clandestinely or only performed slaving during a small part of its voyage, is inevitably difficult to definitively identify a ship's function when it sank. In most cases, where definitive identification is not possible; the type of ship will not prove overly helpful to suggest the ship's function; for example, of approximately 200 wrecks where slaves were known to have perished there are at least 13 different types of vessels (Voyages Database 2009). For this reason it is usual that excavation strategies prioritize the wreck's artefacts ahead of its structural features (Pomey 2014:26). Excavation, as Tuttle (2014:114,116) reminds us, is inherently destructive so we have an obligation to only excavate where absolutely necessary and only when it meets all of the local and international legislative requirements (which are typically complex) and harnesses the wreck's cultural potential. Having spent so much time and money on wreck investigation and excavation it is very much hoped that it concludes with academic publication and, where possible, a permanent interpretive display of the recovered remains and, importantly for slave-ships and the African-American Diaspora, their historical context.

Not all wrecks are found or excavated by archaeologists. Treasure hunters, or salvors, also search for wrecks but their objectives and techniques are very different than archaeologists; many archaeologists, such as Leshikar-Denton (2014:630), see salvors, and the nations who grant them licences, as something akin to thieves who threaten all underwater cultural heritage. The key difference between salvors and archaeologists is that salvors are commercial organizations who extract commercial value from a wreck in the shortest possible time and nautical archaeologists operate in a not-for-profit environment to extract cultural truth, even if, as Bass (2014:11) says, each month of diving results in two years of research, conservation and publication.

The *Henrietta Marie* (Moore and Malcom 2008:24) was discovered by the Mel Fisher treasure hunters. It has proven to be a useful tool for McGhee to politicize black American affinity, via the National Association of Black SCUBA Divers (a society of recreational divers), with the nameless captives who lost their lives in the wreck over 300 hundred years ago whilst advancing our humanistic awareness of the slave trade's impact on the African-American Diaspora. McGhee (1997, 1998:2) has an additional purpose for treasure hunters; to criticise nautical archaeology in its approach to the Diaspora. He certainly has not pulled any punches when he wrote that archaeologists are "... an in-bred clique of supremely arrogant and Eurocentric scholars and capitalists" and he does not perceive any difference between archaeologists and treasure hunters except that treasure hunters are "...more brazen in their opportunistically enraptured quests for fame and fortune". McGhee, over time, has been consistent in his quest to galvanize archaeology to face-up and take action on the political and power issues of the slave trade.

Opinion on the acceptability of treasure hunters is changing and greater levels of diligence are being applied (as are legal protections for wrecks beyond the coastal zone). For example, McKenzie (2014) reported that a Bahamian government official explained that a moratorium had been placed on wreck searches and salvage leases because they did not align with the national interests – even though the state would receive 25% of any profits. The salvors were not surprisingly 'unhappy' but Dr Tinker, of the Bahamian Antiquities, Monuments and Museum Corporation, justified the decision saying that Bahama's waters had been raped by salvors, under the disguise of exploration, and future excavations must protect the nation's cultural heritage.

I believe that in a limited sense salvors do have virtue; their value is their ability to harness technology to find wrecks in both coastal and deep water contexts (even if this is primarily focused on potentially high value targets). It would be pragmatic for archaeologists and treasure hunters to share information and even excavations; archaeologists would accept that they cannot 'save' everything and salvors would accept that, as the majority of wrecks have no commercial value, a less adversarial environment would be an astute business strategy. Sharing is caring – and in this case archaeologists would be caring for cultural heritage and making its profession more relevant and better understood to the general public.

Conclusions

Fred McGhee uses highly politicized statements to 'stage manage' a reaction from the archaeological community. He did this, I believe, because he passionately believes that the African-American Diaspora is an oppressed minority group which was victimized by slavery and that today is being victimized by archaeology. He also believes that archaeology, as a body, is a predominantly white Eurocentric descendant of colonialism and that it still has a moral amnesia about African slave trade.

McGhee's criticism of archaeologists is wide-ranging and, when he says that sees little difference between them and treasure hunters, scathing. McGhee has been very consistent in his attempts to force archaeologists to make their work more relevant in addressing the Slave Trade's political and power issues. McGhee acknowledges the progress in locating and excavating wrecks but he certainly hasn't moderated his quest for a 'perfect wreck'. Finding a 'perfect wreck' would be the perfect political 'tool' to ignite, or rather reignite, interest in the slave trade's relevance to America's African descendant community. It would 'escape' the confines of academia and provide a greater awareness of the black community's disenfranchised position within our current society. Of course, McGhee understands that finding a wreck which was actively engaged in the slave trade will be very difficult, especially as such a small number of ships were lost while carrying slaves and, because the sea is a harsh environment, it is possible that future wreck excavations will not discover human remains. However, every wreck that has been discovered has helped to advance our understanding in some way; so, ultimately, Fred McGhee is helping to encourage archaeologists to join the hunt for new wrecks.

Archaeology as a profession does have elements of Eurocentrism so, as the experts, we must be responsible for how we engage with non-specialist, but interested, audiences. In America, or any other region, our success in interacting with people with alternative perspectives must depend on both groups finding common ground. Perhaps this will become more natural as Eurocentrism diminishes and as people from varying ethnicities see purpose in becoming archaeologists.

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