

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Slavery & Abolition* in 2014, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0144039X.2014.944028>

It was part funded by the AHRC (Grant Ref. AH/I027290/1)

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‘Introduction: The Material Cultures of Slavery and Abolition in the British Caribbean’

Two days after the final ending of slavery on 1 August 1838, over 500 freed children assembled at Salter’s Hill Baptist chapel in the parish of Saint James in Jamaica. They gathered to make slavery history by confining its material emblems to the ground. The chapel had been ‘tastefully decorated with branches of palm-trees, fruits, and flowers’, items fittingly associated with youth and growth as well as with freedom. After they sang a hymn, a whip, a chain, and a shackle – the things of slavery – ‘were separately produced’, broken, buried and thereby ‘consigned for ever to the dust’.¹ This symbolism and ceremony at Salter’s Hill, as narrated by Henry Cox in his *History of the Baptist Missionary Society*, forcefully highlights the central importance of material culture to British Caribbean slavery and its abolition.²

As this special issue seeks to demonstrate, material things mattered immensely to those who engaged in daily struggles over the character and future of slavery and to those who subsequently contested the meanings of freedom in the post-emancipation Caribbean. In Cox’s rendition, published in 1842, there is an intimate association between slavery and the manufactured tools of torture with which enslaved people had been so painfully familiar. The act of consigning these objects to the earth suggests their symbolic significance within the

disciplinary and work regimes of slavery. But, as the work in this collection shows, there was much more to the material cultures of slavery than whips or shackles. Throughout the history of slavery, and not just at its ending, many things and places were important in various ways to different groups of people and to diverse individuals.

Enslaved people from Africa who arrived in the Caribbean all but denuded of material possessions entered a strange and hostile New World. Slavery as it was practiced in the British empire denied them the right, at least in theory, to own property of their own. Nevertheless, the archaeological and written evidence demonstrates that enslaved people did accumulate possessions, whether these were portable goods that were transported or exchanged, or non-portable features that were fixed in the landscape like homes, gardens, and cemeteries. Whether or not they ‘owned’ them in any formal or customary sense, slaves made sense of the places where they were forced to live and work by investing time and emotion in items, sites and routes located on and beyond the plantations. Meanwhile, the worlds of those who benefitted most obviously from slavery were characterised by material splendour. Planter opulence is one of the most often-cited characteristics of Caribbean society, but how planters occupied the landscape and attached meaning to specific places within it is only partly understood. Moreover, besides enslaved people and their oppressors, there were other groups including maroons, free people of colour and missionaries, who shared the lived environments of Caribbean plantation colonies, contributing in their own ways to material cultures and spatial arrangements.

This special issue examines these themes of things and places in the worlds of British Caribbean plantation slavery. This collection of work was first conceived as a symposium at the 46th Annual Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology, held at Leicester, England, in January 2013. That symposium was organised by the two co-editors, bringing together a group of archaeologists and historians currently working on plantation slavery in

the British-colonized Caribbean. The aim was to provide an interdisciplinary approach to spatiality and material culture on British Caribbean plantations between the eighteenth century and the period of slave emancipation in the British empire. Several of the authors whose work appears in this special issue delivered early versions of their articles as part of that symposium; others have joined the project since. Working with these different colleagues has been an intellectually stimulating experience, not least because conversations generated by the Leicester papers and the re-drafting of the articles submitted for this collection have produced fruitful starting points for the sorts of cross disciplinary dialogue that we hope to foster and encourage.

Historical archaeologists and historians share closely connected interests in the plantation past of the British-colonized Caribbean. These interests cover themes that include daily plantation life, resilience and resistance, plantation management, the cultural and social interactions of whites and enslaved people, and the material worlds and cultural lives of slaveholders and managers. Moreover, a recent ‘material turn’ within the humanities has built on previous scholarship to lay new emphasis on the importance of spaces, places and things to our understanding of the human past.³ Historians have paid renewed attention to material culture, defined as ‘the study of the made and built world’, and to questions of space and place, examining meanings attached to different locations within the landscape. The interests of historians have therefore become closely aligned with those of historical geographers and historical archaeologists, resulting in rich methodological and theoretical exchanges that have helped us towards an improved understanding of the ways that things and places embodied ‘the beliefs and values of those who made and used them’.⁴ What Igor Kopytoff has called the linkages between our ‘social world’ and ‘the world of things’ have not only become more clear but, as scholars have examined how the construction of objects and of spaces was

intimately tied up with the construction of people, the very idea that these worlds are separate has begun to break down.⁵

Despite these shared interests and the productive turns towards interdisciplinary work, many historians and archaeologists who study British Caribbean plantations continue to work in partial separation from one another. With this volume we aim to inspire collaborative approaches that achieve closer and more fruitful relationships between these distinct but entwined disciplines. The articles demonstrate some of the various ways in which historians and archaeologists explore the uses and meanings ascribed to material culture in the past. They showcase the different methods, data sets and sources used by scholars in each discipline and they demonstrate several ways in which interdisciplinary scholarship can be put into practice.

At least for the British-colonized Caribbean, the rough distinctions between historical archaeology and history lie principally in methodologies and institutions. Put most bluntly, for archaeologists, it is the objects and physical remains on plantations that form the basis of their fieldwork and research, whereas among historians texts are the principal data set. This is not to say that archaeologists ignore the historical background of the plantations they research or that they fail to position their findings in historical context. Nor is it that historians exclude material things from consideration. It is simply that the basic training offered to practitioners in each discipline is typically characterised by specific skill sets and methods, associated with field work and excavation strategies, or with archival research and source analysis. Generally, professional academic archaeologists and historians work in distinctive departments within universities, and they often affiliate to different learned societies and attend different conferences, organised within their broader disciplines. Relevant examples include the International Association for Caribbean Archaeology and the Association of Caribbean Historians. But it is clear that these distinctions are highly permeable, particularly in the area

of Caribbean studies, which is served by interdisciplinary societies and conferences, including the Caribbean Studies Association and the UK Society for Caribbean Studies.

Scholarship on the Caribbean past has long been characterised by interdisciplinary endeavour and certainly has not been the sole preserve of academic historians and archaeologists. Some of those who have made the biggest impacts on our understanding of slavery and abolition in the British Caribbean plantation colonies have either received doctoral training in a discipline other than history or have gone on to pursue interests that range far beyond the confines of academic history writing. Among the most prominent and best known are Sidney Mintz, whose background is in anthropology; B.W. Higman, who has a PhD in Geography (as well as one in History); and Orlando Patterson, who is trained as a sociologist. With a PhD in Philosophy, Kamau Brathwaite has drawn on anthropological scholarship to write some of the most influential work on Jamaican history, while forging a reputation as one of the most original poets of the last half century. The work and influence of such innovative researchers and writers has positioned Caribbean studies as a rich testing ground for creative mixing between traditionally confined academic disciplines. As Mimi Sheller has observed with regard to theories about the process of creolisation, ideas first developed by Caribbeanists have been picked up and adapted by scholars across the social sciences and humanities, and this sort of interdisciplinary interchange was the norm within Caribbean studies long before 'interdisciplinarity' became fashionable elsewhere.⁶

Scholars of the Caribbean working in the disciplines of archaeology and history have made many remarkable contributions to our understanding of British colonial plantation slavery. As Caribbean history expanded as a discipline during the 1960s and 1970s, work on the historical archaeology of the region also appeared, including the pioneering work of Jerome S. Handler and Frederick Lange, which draws on site excavations and archival research to offer an archaeological and historical interpretation of plantation slavery in

Barbados. There have been other important interdisciplinary endeavours, notably the work of Higman (whose synoptic essay concludes this volume) and of Douglas Armstrong, whose article on seventeenth-century Barbados, jointly authored with Matthew Reilly, also features in the volume.⁷

Our aim in assembling the present collection of articles is not to deny the importance of previous contributions by archaeologists and historians who have worked together and bridged the disciplinary divide. Rather, we aim to provide fresh encouragement to historians of Caribbean slavery to think about material and spatial realities of the sites and contexts they study, and to provoke archaeologists who work on the plantation past of the Caribbean region to engage more thoroughly with broad historical contexts brought to life by scholars working with textual sources. Building on existing achievements we can initiate new efforts to bridge the gap between the disciplines.

The articles collected here bring together work about plantation colonies of the British West Indies during the period from the Barbadian Sugar Revolution of the mid-seventeenth century to the gradual dismantling of slavery during the mid-nineteenth century. They explore material histories of slavery and abolition across a number of different sites, including Barbados and Jamaica, two colonies that were focal points for British administrators, commentators and planters throughout the period, as well as Dominica, a territory among the Ceded Islands that were formally colonized after 1763.

By the mid-eighteenth century, Jamaica, the largest and by far the most populous British island colony in the Americas, had become the main strategic and economic focus for British imperial policy. It is no surprise, therefore, that such a location became a major focus for the transatlantic debates about abolition and emancipation that began in earnest at the end of the eighteenth century, or that it has since occupied so much scholarly attention. As is the case of Barbados, extensive archival resources that include rich collections in Jamaica and in

London have helped generate a lively and expanding scholarly literature on the history of the island and its place within the wider British Atlantic. Barbados remained an important British sugar colony into the nineteenth century, and its well-preserved archival records, coupled with accessible sites for archaeological fieldwork, have helped generate rich archaeological and historical research on Barbadian plantation life and politics.

As Higman notes in his contribution to this special issue, the range of scholarly possibilities presented by other islands ‘remains to be fully understood’, and we therefore need to cast our gaze further afield. For one thing, by the formal ending of slavery during the 1830s, the recent British acquisitions of Trinidad and Guyana were the most productive and expansionary sugar colonies in the empire. But even before the nineteenth century, the islands ceded by France after the Seven Years War expanded Britain’s Caribbean sugar production beyond Jamaica, Barbados and the Leeward Islands. To better understand the experiences of enslaved and other people across the Caribbean and chart the changing character of the British colonial world, we need more detailed studies of these often-neglected sites. Whilst we recognise this imperative, most of the work presented in this special issue is concerned primarily with Jamaica and Barbados, although Steve Lenik’s article on Dominica helps to showcase the ways in which the rich archaeological and archival evidence available for other regions of the British Caribbean can be put to use.

The first group of articles, in a section entitled ‘planters, workers and the development of plantation space’, explores the impact of slavery and the plantation economy on Barbadian and Jamaican social life. The transformation of the Barbados economy towards sugar, a process discussed here by Armstrong and Reilly, placed that colony at the ‘hub’ of the English empire during the seventeenth century, providing a suggestive blueprint to planters branching out into other sites.⁸ Using a 1646 map as their starting point, Armstrong and Reilly discuss the complexities of the transition towards a system of coerced African labour

and with it the transformation of the landscape, as small farms gave way to large plantations. Within this process, a widening social and cultural gap opened up between planters and plantation labourers, who lived increasingly separated lives, differentiated by starkly contrasting material cultures and discretely defined dwelling places.

By the late eighteenth century, these defining features of life and work on the plantations were well established but subject, nevertheless, to transformation. In their article, Stephanie Bergman and Frederick Smith provide an archaeological investigation of Saint Nicholas Abbey plantation in Barbados, revealing ways in which the organisation of housing for enslaved people was intertwined with the process of ‘amelioration’. Some planters sought to create new types of slave villages, borrowing from metropolitan ideas about ‘improved’ management, attempting to present themselves as ‘humane’ landlords, and disrupting long-established house-building practices within the enslaved community in the process. In the minds of planters, this was connected to their identities as British subjects, as they tried to present an image of themselves, of their island, and of their practices congruent with the claim that Barbados was a ‘little England’.

Such attempts at what slaveholders called ‘amelioration’ notwithstanding, in many regards the differentiation between the planter class and enslaved workers deepened in the period after the American Revolution. Christer Petley’s article makes use of probate inventories, using these evaluations of personal property to examine the wealth and spatial practices of two prominent Jamaican planters. During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, those at the top of the Jamaican elite were richer than almost any other individuals in the British empire, and their capital was heavily invested in sugar plantations and slaves. Such men sought to distance themselves – literally – from their slave-run sugar estates, choosing to live in peri-urban homes near to Jamaican port towns (or as absentees in Britain). At the apogee of its productive power, the British Caribbean plantation system initiated in

seventeenth century Barbados was one of the most unequal systems ever devised. Differences in material wealth between planters and slaves were mirrored in cultural and physical barriers, undermining even the most articulate attempts by proslavery apologists to argue that their system was 'improving' or 'humane'.

The second section, entitled 'material inequalities and practices inside enslaved communities', explores those hierarchies and differences that defined and divided enslaved communities in the British Caribbean. Justin Roberts's article provides a new analysis of slave communities in Barbados during the second half of the eighteenth century. Using contemporary letters and plantation records, along with the findings of archaeologists, Roberts argues that enslaved people were divided by inequalities in relation to nutrition and wealth that often made for un-harmonious social relations. His work presents a bleak picture of the precarious struggle for life endured by enslaved field workers and of a divisive system perpetuated, defined by a complex and stratified set of communities and sub-communities within the slave quarters.

Various forms of hierarchies among the enslaved also appear in archaeological data from Jamaica, as demonstrated by work on aspects of plantation production and slave life by such scholars as Higman, Armstrong, and Mark Hauser, as well as James Delle, whose recent work on the burial practices of enslaved people in collaboration with Kristen Fellows is showcased in this collection. Delle and Fellows explore evidence from the Marshall's Pen coffee plantation and its cemetery, the above-ground remains of which were recently discovered during archaeological fieldwork. They link this work to information about death and mortuary practices available in archival resources, including slave lists and planters' letters, which suggests that richer slaves could afford grander tombs for relatives, as reflected in surviving material evidence of mortuary practices. In addition, Delle and Fellows reveal the continuities of mortuary practice before and after emancipation, demonstrating one of the

ways in which the material record can complicate our understanding of the transformations that accompanied the passage from slavery to freedom.

The final section of the collection, entitled ‘uses and meanings of material culture between slavery and freedom’, begins with a study of Nonconformist Protestant missions in Jamaica by Natalie Zacek and Laurence Brown. They use a range of textual sources to demonstrate how enslaved people, freedpeople and missionaries were all profoundly aware of the contested meanings attached to possessions, including homes and clothing, in the years before and after the passage of the Emancipation Bill. In the eyes of missionaries, former-slaves’ choices when it came to the consumption of material goods overlapped with questions about their ‘decency’ or ‘frivolity’ and therefore about whether or not such people were making good or bad use of their freedom. Debates about the material needs, material desires and material cultures of freedpeople therefore became interlaced with early Victorian debates about race and the future of the British empire in the Caribbean.

Those early Victorian debates were especially intense in the aftermath of rebellions, particularly after the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica.⁹ Moreover, as Steve Lenik shows in his study of two labourer rebellions at plantations in the region of Grand Bay, Dominica, questions of material culture and space were central to such clashes between workers and planters. Lenik makes use of textual and archaeological evidence to analyse the ways that these groups deployed the material resources at their disposal during these moments of crisis. Enslaved rebels chose to attack the trappings of planter wealth, but so too did freedpeople when they protested about the ongoing iniquities in post-emancipation Dominican society. These rebellions were important episodes in Dominican and Caribbean history, and they reveal much about the lines of tension and differentiation between elites and workers, but – as Lenik argues – they did little to transform the material or social landscape. Without denying the importance of emancipation, such work encourages us to think about how the material

inequalities and distinctions set in motion by the seventeenth-century Sugar Revolution survived the juridical ending of slavery in the British Caribbean.

As shown by several of the articles in this collection, one of the advantages of taking a material approach is that it improves our ability to study the lives of enslaved people who left little by way of written records. Of course, and as Higman underlines, the material culture of enslaved people has not always been so well preserved, compared to that of the planter class. Nevertheless, work on the material remains left by enslaved people in the Caribbean, including on their homes and grave sites, helps us to move beyond a reliance on the second-hand representations contained in textual sources by white authors. When combined with such evidence it can also reveal a rich new picture of things like the changing funerary practices of people in a punishing disease environment who sought to impose some control over how they memorialised the dead and marked their passing. We can see how the hierarchies and tensions that appear to have characterised enslaved communities were emphasised by access to material resources, including better food and housing for some than for others, and we may draw conclusions about how labourers chose to attack specific physical locales during times of open rebellion.

Moreover, a focus on material culture also encourages us to view familiar types of written evidence through a new lens, looking – for example – at the references to clothing and housing in the records left by Nonconformist missionaries or assessing the probate inventories of the planter class for what they reveal about the lifestyles and values of those living in Caribbean plantation societies during and after slavery. Missionaries attached great meaning to material things. As shown by Zacek and Brown, they actively sought to contrast their tastes with those of flamboyant planters who were famous for their conspicuous consumption of the profits of slavery. Even without material artefacts, therefore, it is possible to take a material approach to the study of the plantation past, combining the techniques of

archaeology and history by, for example, taking the evidence contained in a probate inventory not simply as a ledger that can help to reveal the extent of an individual's personal wealth but as a sort of written artefact assemblage that can be used, alongside other sources, to try to understand material culture and the meanings attached to things and places.

Returning to Henry Cox's narrative of events at Salter's Hill Baptist chapel at the moment of emancipation helps to illustrate the political importance of material objects and sites to our understanding of slavery and emancipation in the Caribbean. The chapel was part of the network of Baptist missions established across Jamaica during the early nineteenth century. It was closely connected to the large rebellion that broke out in the region of Saint James at the end of 1831, as many of the participants and leaders of that uprising, who called for an end to slavery in Jamaica, were members of this and other Baptist congregations. In the eyes of some white colonists the Salter's Hill chapel was a monument to the connections forged between revolutionary enslaved people and a Baptist mission backed by abolitionist supporters in Britain. Spurred on by this perception, angry white proslavery activists razed the building to the ground in the weeks after the suppression of the 1831 uprising. But white preachers and enslaved Christians appropriated the chapel as a locus of hope and freedom. They quickly rebuilt and reoccupied their church at Salter's Hill.

Salter's Hill was one of a myriad of sites across the material worlds of British plantation slavery that demarcated various activities, from labour and work to worship and leisure, dwelling, communication and trade. Whether they did it voluntarily or otherwise, those who inhabited these sites and travelled the routes in between invested these places and the material worlds surrounding them with dynamic and multi-layered meanings, which were often ephemeral and unrecoverable, although traces of some are still accessible in textual records and material remains.

The articles presented here show that the focus on material culture – whether through archaeological field work or the reading of texts – allows us to pay close attention to the complex fabric of daily existence during slavery. They highlight questions of practice. To borrow the words of the historical geographer, Miles Ogborn, they seek to make us think about the ‘ongoing making-up of the world’ and about the ‘variety of often routine ways of being in the world which are largely taken for granted, frequently based on tacit knowledge, and are certainly material, embodied and spatial’.¹⁰ They offer different varieties of a material approach which emphasises that the power relations that defined slave and post-slave societies were quotidian and intimate, operating on multiple levels. This allows us to see that the politics of slavery and abolition relate to the most mundane but essential parts of daily life and allows us to connect this to wider transatlantic, imperial and global themes.

This focus on the mundane – on the making and re-making of daily life – is fascinating and enlightening, offering scholars new ways of seeing history from below, of linking localised experiences with global transformations and connecting deeply personal lived realities with larger epochal events. We can only really study the politics of slavery if we accept that the meaning attached to physical locations, such as the chapel at Salter’s Hill, burial sites, slave villages or suburban planter residences were of fundamental importance to the institution as it was lived by its perpetrators and victims in the Caribbean.

Material possessions defined the institution and its endings. Slavery was characterised by immense disparities of material wealth between slaveholders and enslaved people, which meant that enslaved people often attacked the vestiges of planter comfort during times of rebellion. Planters who claimed to be ‘improving’ the conditions of their enslaved workforces, for example by providing them with new housing, often also disrupted cherished and longstanding connections between enslaved communities and their previous homes, which were frequently also burial sites. For enslaved people, the uncertainties and traumas of

slavery came in a variety of forms, and it is increasingly apparent that some of its worst horrors lay in the divisions that carved apart the enslaved community, allowing some enslaved people to acquire a greater modicum of material wealth than others. In the post-emancipation era, when the meaning of freedom was inhabited as much by the occupation of new homes and the acquisition of new clothes as by any abstract transition in legal status. Large questions about the rise and fall of slavery in the Caribbean often came down to the commonplace but deeply significant and politically charged subtleties surrounding the occupation of specific spaces and the possession of small things. The burying of the emblems of slavery at the moment of emancipation in places like Salter's Hill provides just one of many possible starting points for our understanding of these questions.

¹ F.A. Cox, *History of the Baptist Missionary Society from 1792 to 1842*, vol. 2 (London, T. Ward & co, 1842), 248.

² Such descriptions have been put to good use by scholars, including Vincent Brown, in his recent and illuminating study of Jamaican slavery, who comments on how enslaved people 'used the rites of death, which had been the focal point of so many struggles within slavery, to commemorate its end and determine its future meaning'. Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 250.

³ On the wider implications of the 'material turn', see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁴ Harvey Green, 'Cultural History and the Material(s) Turn', *Cultural History* 1/1 (2012): 61-82, 61-2. David Lambert's work has offered interdisciplinary insights that straddle the divide between geography and history, while Vincent Brown's study of the culture of death in Jamaica pays considerable interest to deciphering contemporary meanings attached to

specific sites and artefacts associated with death and mourning. See Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity during the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Brown, *Reaper's Garden*.

⁵ Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 64-91, 90. In her influential analysis Jane Bennett has asserted that there is 'a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans' – 'vital materialities that flow through and around us'. Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, vii, x.

⁶ Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003), 174-203. See also James Taylor Carson, *Making an Atlantic World: Circles, Paths, and Stories from the Colonial South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), xvii-xx.

⁷ Jerome S. Handler and Frederick W. Lange, *Plantation Slavery in Barbados: An Archaeological and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); Douglas V. Armstrong, *The Old Village and the Great House: An Archaeological and Historical Examination of Drax Hall Plantation, St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); B.W. Higman, *Montpelier Jamaica: A Plantation Community in Slavery and Freedom, 1739-1912* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1998).

⁸ On Barbados as a 'hub', see Hilary McD. Beckles, 'The "Hub of Empire": The Caribbean and Britain in the Seventeenth Century', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Origins of Empire*, ed. Nicholas Canny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 218-240.

⁹ On the Morant Bay Rebellion and its aftermaths, see Gad Heuman, *The Killing Time: The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994);

Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 243-64, 406-24.

¹⁰ Miles Ogborn, 'Francis Williams's Bad Language: Historical Geography in a World of Practice', *Historical Geography* 37 (2009): 6.