

Book Review

“The Slave Ship: A Human History” by Marcus Rediker
ISBN 978-0—670-01823-9
2007, Viking Penguin

It’s About the People and their Stories, not the Shipwreck

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Ten years after my exhortation to move the field “towards a postcolonial nautical archaeology” (McGhee 1998), it has been interesting to watch developments within nautical archaeology unfold. The response of the professional underwater archaeological community appears to have been the undertaking of research initiatives to locate and excavate more slave shipwrecks. NOAA funding has been used in several of these efforts, examples of which include the search for the wreck of the *Trouvadore* by the Turks & Caicos Museum (Sadler 2008), and the search for the remains of the *Guerrero* off the coast of Key Largo, Florida (Swanson 2004). “A total of 825 documented losses at sea are recorded among the 27,000 entries in the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database (Eltis et al. 1999), with 183 of these losses occurring either whilst slaving or after embarkation (that is, with African captives almost certainly aboard)” (Webster 2008), so this remains a wide open field.

It has been gratifying to see the underwater archaeology community take the “data poor” (Singleton and Bograd 1995) portion of my critique for action. There certainly has always been a need for more fieldwork in this area. Unfortunately the other aspects of what I said, and their implications, remain unresolved. It is here where Marcus Rediker has done the underwater archaeology community, especially nautical archaeologists, a favor. His “human history” of this ghoulis commerce should help put to rest the notion that slave shipwreck archaeology is “nautical” archaeology in any sense that matters, and that the middle-range theory premises that have characterized nautical archaeology since its inception in the 1970’s are ill-suited to the study of slave shipwrecks:

Unfortunately, many archaeologists have seen Binford’s methods of studying site-formation process as an end in themselves. In many cases, the development of middle range theory has become the research goal rather than the means to connect archaeological data with high-level, abstract explanations...although such studies increase our interpretive abilities, they contribute little to the advancement of our understanding of human behavior (Maschner 1996:469).

This is not to say that nautical archaeology has nothing to offer. But while a focus on the shipbuilding technology involved in the construction or reconstruction of slave ships would certainly be insightful—and rather Eurocentric—is that really the point?

In his note “to the reader” at the beginning of *Black Reconstruction* (Du Bois 1935), W.E.B. Du Bois dryly observed in 1934 that “the story of transplanting millions of Africans to the new world, and of their bondage for four centuries, is a fascinating one” filled with human drama of massive proportions. The great strength of Rediker’s book lies in its insistence that

there are *people* in this story, not statistics, obfuscatory categories, artifact typologies, or shipwreck parts, and that the proper vantage point for studying this subject is the lived all-too-human experiences of the people engaged in the drama:

An ethnography of the slave ship helps to demonstrate not only the cruel truth of what one group of people (or several) was willing to do to others for money—or, better, capital—but also how they managed in crucial respects to hide the reality and consequences of their actions from themselves and from posterity (Rediker 2007: 12).

Another strength of Rediker's book is its recognition and exploration of the role of the slave trade in the making of global capitalism. While his book is filled with many anecdotes of racist savagery and unspeakable horror, the book maintains a satisfying focus on the big picture while illuminating the details of these "machines of death" and their effects on the sponsors, captains, crew and cargo of these voyages.

The book is organized into ten chapters plus an introduction and an epilogue. Each chapter builds upon earlier chapters, with the beginning chapters (chapters 1-3) furnishing overall background, the middle four chapters providing description and interpretation of the experiences of the enslaved, crew and captain, and the last three chapters delivering skillful and deeply humanistic summary and interpretation.

Rediker's concern for the individual lived experiences of the participants in the trade is aided immensely by his command of the history of what life at sea is like. While scholars have been using the narrative of Olaudah Equiano to illuminate the experiences of enslavement for decades (Burnside and Robotham 1997), chapter 8 of *The Slave Ship* titled "The Sailor's Vast Machine" contains a learned and astute description of work and suffering at sea. What sticks out is violence, and the shocking degree to which physical and emotional terror was used as a tool for control and psychosexual masochism. Rediker rightly points out that both captives and crew were being exploited by the captain, officers, and sponsors of slave ship voyages, without going so far as to suggest that the sailors somehow had it worse than the slaves. Far from it; Rediker makes clear the degree to which the nascent concept of "race" was lived out onboard, and relates truly debauched tales of rape, torture, concubinage, and murder of essentially helpless children.

Anthropologically inclined readers will find much of interest in chapter 9 of Rediker's book, titled "From Captives to Shipmates." The argument is of course not new; Mintz and Price raised it in the 1970's as have others. In this chapter Rediker discusses favored anthropology themes such as resistance, revolt, music, dance, and other dimensions of the ethnogenesis of African-American culture. On page 305 he observes

Slowly, in ways surviving documents do not allow us to see in detail, the idiom of kinship broadened, from immediate family to messes, to workmates, to friends, to countrymen and –women, to the whole of the lower deck.

And in so observing, Rediker has given underwater archaeologists of the slave trade and the slave ship a research agenda. It's an agenda with which I happen to agree and that I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere (McGhee 2007).

Rediker ends his book with a discussion of the fight to end the slave trade and with the moving testimony of cast-off and dying sailors being cared for by enslaved people in Caribbean ports. He writes, "Theirs was the most generous and inclusive conception of humanity I discovered in the course of my research for this book."

I wonder what conceptions of humanity continue to motivate certain anti-treasure hunting nautical archaeologists. The *Henrietta Marie* and *Fredensborg* remain the two most representative archaeological examples of slave ships in existence. The former, first located in the water by Moe Molinar a Panamanian of African descent in the employ of treasure hunter Mel Fisher, is particularly important. Yet it took an African-American recreational SCUBA diving club, the National Association of Black SCUBA Divers, to denote and demonstrate that shipwreck's importance and to bring its significance to wide attention. Properly trained nautical archaeologists still won't publicly touch that wreck with a ten-foot pole. Although they apparently gladly touch the significance of the *H.L. Hunley* a noted Civil War Confederate submarine.

The moral message of my 1998 article unfortunately remains.

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