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Building life histories of Cape Town's enslaved, 1700-1850

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Chapter 9

Synthesis and future directions

An historical bioarchaeology of Cape Slavery

The aim of this research was to answer the question: **What were the life experiences of enslaved persons in 18th-19th century Cape Town.** To answer this broad question, this study employed a historical archaeological approach. In this instance, historical archaeology refers to the archaeology of a time, in the past 500 years, and place that simultaneously produced text. This text was written and came to be as a result of European expansion. Elsewhere Africanist historical archaeologists have also employed oral traditions and rock art as equal in importance to written text produced by societies with script, rejecting the primacy of European contact in the development of African societies (Swanepoel, 2009).

Building life histories of people who were given names from cultures other their own, who were often represented as numbers in ledgers, and who in death were often carelessly discarded was the purpose of this research. The lack of headstones, portraiture and material culture, simultaneously posed a challenge and invited us to tackle the aim creatively. An integrated historical-multi-isotopic approach was successful in shedding light on aspects of enslaved persons' lives. I will repeat the sub-questions asked at the beginning of the thesis and explore the extent to which I was able to answer them.

The historical findings allowed us to understand some of the ways that enslaved individuals could find themselves at The Cape but were lacking in that only one migration event was evident from the combined use of the *Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren* and Cape Title Deeds. There are limitations and biases associated with both the historical and skeletal records, using this dual approach mitigates these shortcomings. This was necessary and inevitable because the isotopic data generated required historic context to yield a more nuanced understanding of slaves' lives and the VOC archive was not intended by those who commissioned and wrote it to document the details of enslaved persons lives.

The written record

The questions asked of the extensive VOC archive were:

- *Who were these individuals?*
- *What were their possible geographic origins?*
- *Who owned them?*
- *What became of enslaved persons upon arrival at The Cape?*

The ships passenger lists provided toponyms of transported slaves such as Arij van Mallabaar and Rachel van Macassar, hinting at regional origins (Chapter 3). It is extremely difficult, however, to extract information about how slaves perceived themselves and their enslavement. What is clear from the baptismal and marriage records is the importance placed on respectability by former slaves, long deprived of full membership to the Dutch Reformed Church. Even going to deceased estate auctions, which were as much social gatherings as an opportunity to buy goods, demonstrates a desire to enact respectability. This rare glimpse into the social world of former slaves is sometimes lacking in other scholarship on the colonial Cape.

The informal trade in enslaved persons by VOC high society had previously been mentioned but other scholars, however no comprehensive study had been undertaken. We have traced rhythmic slave migrations from The East on board Company ships and identified the same individuals being sold at The Cape while the ships carrying their masters and mistresses back to The Netherlands were moored there. The middleman role played by ships' skippers allowed even those who were not travelling to The Netherlands via The Cape to take advantage of the relatively high slave prices at this port city. This trade would have been an important source of slave labour for the domestic market as the Company only addressed its own labour demands by trading for slaves on the coasts of Madagascar and Mozambique. The Cape Baptismal Records confirm that *burghers* relied on Asian and Cape-born slaves in the 18th century.

The circumstances of enslaved persons were far from uniform as is demonstrated by the different ways that they came to find themselves at The Cape. The majority of enslaved persons in the *Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren* (OBP) were on board ships to serve their masters and mistresses and to be sold once at The Cape. These masters and mistresses belonged to the upper echelons of VOC society and they used the Company's transport networks to their advantage, transporting slaves from The East to sell them at The Cape for an attractive price. We also encounter slaves who were sent to The Cape as part of deceased estates. Pieter Abrahamsz: was a slave who acted as assistant to the senior merchant and travelled in the cabin implying he was literate and privileged. Simon Grousius and his family travelled to the Netherlands with their slave, Catharina. What became of her upon arrival in Europe? The presence of *vrije zwarten*, free blacks, on the ships' rolls also provides interesting insights. Albertina van Ambon's network included the surgeon Hugo Penck and the skipper Cleudent, and she used these relationships with Company employees to exploit its transport networks and sell two slaves at The Cape. The free black, Jan Gerritz van Batavia, the adopted son of the old bailiff of Batavia, Johannes Ens, also travelled to The Cape. Clearly relationships between free and enslaved, European and persons of colour, were complex and took many forms.

The skeletal archive

The questions asked of the skeletal archive were the following:

- *Were the individuals buried in the unmarked graves in Greenpoint Cape- or foreign-born?*
- *What were their possible geographic origins?*
- *At what age were individuals transported/enslaved?*
- *How many migration events/changes of hand did these individuals experience?*
- *What did they eat?*

The most basic question in isotopic migration studies is whether individuals are local or non-local to the area in which they are discovered. Three proxies were employed in this study to determine whether individuals were born at The Cape or were migrants, namely $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}_{\text{enamel}}$, $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{dentin}}$ and the presence of dental modifications. Based on these proxies, 54.5% and 63.0% of the Cobern Street (Chapter 5) and Marina Residence (Chapter 6) individuals respectively were found to be foreign-born and from diverse geological origins. Moreover, some individuals were found to have experienced multiple migrations in early life, suggesting mobility in indigenous slave networks before coming into contact with the Dutch. This aspect of the slave experience was not evident from the written record. The data from these two burial grounds suggests that male slaves may have come from more geologically diverse areas than female slaves. This latter finding is not suggested by the written record and offers an interesting line of research. Although the sample size of the Fort Knokke individuals is small (Chapter 8), strontium isotope ratios demonstrated that the young were not safe from the uncertainty associated with the condition of enslavement in the western Indian Ocean. Although abolition efforts were in full swing, the demand for cheap labour had not abated.

The most difficult question to address isotopically is where migrants originated from, especially when the possibilities include almost all corners of the Indian Ocean basin as well as inland areas as is the case in this study. As yet, hardly any reference data is available, therefore we only felt comfortable tentatively assigning origins to a few individuals. The very old geology of parts of Mozambique with associated high strontium isotope ratios and the very young geologies of the Indonesian Archipelago and parts of the Asian subcontinent with associated low strontium isotope ratios allowed us to constrain the geographic origins of some individuals to these regions.

It is important to note that the resolution provided by our sampling strategy might not be high enough to identify all the migration events that an individual experienced. Only migration events in early life are detectable, not those that occurred after the formation of the third molar. We also cannot detect enslavement/change of hand if there was no associated migration between geologically distinct regions or a significant change in diet. Be that as it may, this sampling

strategy provided better resolution in the individual migration histories of enslaved persons than earlier studies.

The Cape colonial underclass diet as determined from the Cobern Street (Chapter 5) $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{cancellous}}$ dataset was found to range from -18.8‰ to -13.5‰ ($\Delta 6.3\text{‰}$). The Marina Residence dietary dataset falls within this range but is narrower ($\Delta 3.1\text{‰}$) suggesting a less varied diet (Chapter 6). Moreover, the Marina Residence individuals on average displayed significantly elevated $\delta^{15}\text{N}_{\text{cancellous}}$ values relative to the Cobern Street individuals (14.6‰ vs. 12.4‰) suggesting that they could have consumed more marine resources. Could the Marina individuals, some of whom died after Cape slaves were freed in 1838, have adapted their diet in response to the new challenges presented by freedom? To this day, Cape Malay cuisine is a great source of pride for the descendants of slaves, the isotopic results complement oral traditions and written sources that trace its development. A dietary baseline including the carbon and nitrogen isotope values of faunal remains found at the Castle of Good served to identify mutton and fish as major sources of protein in The Cape slave diet (Chapter 7), in agreement with previous archaeological findings. Such a baseline is the first of its kind to be generated for the colonial Cape.

These case studies have made a great contribution to the limited body of isotopic research on enslaved persons lives at The Cape and added to a more nuanced understanding of the effect that slavery had on its victims as individuals and as a group. The isotopic delineation of a Cape slave diet and the possibility that it varied temporally are both significant findings which highlight the survival strategies of enslaved persons at The Cape before and after emancipation (Chapters 6 and 7). The identification of individuals who had experienced multiple migrations in early life and the fact that the studies presented here underestimate migration bring into sharp focus the uncertainty of life as a slave in the Indian Ocean world.

The case for historical archaeology

Whenever possible historical documents should be used by archaeologists to aid in the interpretation of past societies. These documents are a reflection of what their writers believed to be important and are thus significant in their own right, however as part of a multipronged approach to answering research questions they become even more powerful. This approach is at the very least additive and may even result in insights that neither documents nor skeletons, as was the case in this study, could provide on their own. Using this method, we have situated The Cape in the complex Indian Ocean world, a stage on which mercantile and indigenous interests played out. Intricate processes led to the enslavement, transportation and exploitation of people at The Cape and other nodes in the Indian Ocean world. Whilst slavery was a minor concern for the VOC, dwarfed by its trade in luxury goods, this thesis has demonstrated the profound impact it had on the enslaved.

The strength of the historical archaeological method in this study lies in the fact that it has provided direct access to the Cape slave experience on the scale of the individual. The household has often provided the smallest unit of analysis in historical archaeology (Orser, 2010), historical bioarchaeology has provided another layer of context. This study has successfully written microhistories from below, read between the lines and against the grain, allowing the enslaved of The Cape to speak for themselves as individuals and as a community. This has not, however, been at the expense of the bigger picture. That global processes set the parameters in which these microhistories were lived has not been neglected.

This multidisciplinary approach has lent itself to a multifaceted, multiscale, multi-layered understanding of enslaved persons lives in the VOC Indian Ocean world in general and at The Cape in particular. This could not have been achieved without weaving together multiple lines of evidence. This type of patchwork was in fact necessary due to the limiting factors raised earlier. Those who wrote the VOC archive were not interested in documenting the mundane lives of slaves. Moreover, no traces of material culture were left behind by the enslaved to aid in elucidating their lives.

Issues of representativeness can also be addressed via the historical archaeological approach. One weakness of this study was the small number of individuals available for scientific research. Although our findings cannot be broadly generalised, we were still able to generate meaningful information on the populations under study.

That the institution of slavery objectified and commodified people is a fact. In response we have seen the enslaved and formerly enslaved reclaiming their agency, power and dignity through possible dietary adaptation and community formation. No mean feat considering the odds stacked against them: the law, disease, financial uncertainty, global economic forces, subjugation. Yet this is not a story about defeat and despair, it is about a community that survived a crime against its humanity and continues to thrive nearly 400 years on.

Future directions

Cape colonial history

Several lines of historical research could be explored further based on this research. A quantitative study exploring the numbers and direction of migration of enslaved persons found in the *Boekhouder Generaal's* cargo lists could be carried out. It would also be interesting to further explore if Willem Adriaan Van der Stel, the disgraced governor of The Cape (governed 1699-1707), was involvement in the informal slave trade as a business venture that he pursued to further enrich himself. This is not farfetched as we know that he attempted to monopolise

other aspects of local trade resulting in his downfall. Answers to this question may be found in the Cape Title Deeds from 1699-1702 and 1704-1707.

If modern contamination is minimal and preservation allows, genomic studies could be conducted on the Cobern Street and Marina residence populations to determine ancestry such as has been achieved for a few victims of the Atlantic slave trade (Schroeder *et al*, 2015). Palaeomicrobiological investigations of the Marina Residence individuals could also be carried out to determine if these individuals were suffering from viral, bacterial or parasitic infections. This could support or refute the hypothesis put forward that this population could have been suffering from illness and was associated with the colony's hospitals as suggested by the isotopic (elevated $\delta^{15}\text{N}$), archaeological (haphazard burial arrangement) and osteological (amputation) data (Chapter 6).

The mineral revolution

This historical archaeological approach has resulted in interesting insights into slave labour migration to The Cape and can be applied to another mass migration in South African labour history, that associated with the discovery of gold (1886) and diamonds (1867). Two populations of migrant mine labourers from the Gladstone Cemetery in Kimberly, curated at the McGregor Museum, and indentured labourers from a Chinese cemetery on the Witwatersrand Deep Gold Mine site are obvious choices for such a study. The Raymond A. Dart collection, which includes the Deep Gold Mine population, also includes thousands of skeletons that once studied can add to our understanding of labour migration during South Africa's mining revolution. In addition to strontium, carbon and nitrogen, the isotope systems of oxygen and lead can be added to the suite of tools used to identify migration events. Lead will be of particular interest, as exposure to significant amounts of this element would probably coincide with arrival at industrial centres such as Johannesburg and Kimberly.

A cursory exploration of documents housed at the National Archives of South Africa in Pretoria suggests that there is a veritable goldmine of information available for a study on migration to the Johannesburg. Labour was sourced from Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique), British Central Africa Protectorate (Malawi) and North Rhodesia (Zambia). There are incoming despatches to the government of the former Transvaal Province suggesting that labour could be imported from as far afield as Barbados and Japan in 1904. In the same year the prospect of sourcing "Moorish" labour was also considered.

Some documents relate to an agreement between the Transvaal government and the Chamber of Mines on the importation of Chinese labour. One document in particular refers to Chinese "Coolies", reminding one of The Cape slaves who often worked for *koeli geld*. It is apparent that there was an emigration agent in Hong Kong who facilitated the employment

of 10 Chinese foremen by the East Rand Proprietary Mines in 1904. There is an abundance of census documents for the Transvaal mines recording the total numbers of labourers and racial categories. In 1910 the names of African labourers in particular toiling in the mines of the Transvaal were also recorded.

The Transvaal mines medical inspector's records for 1909-1910 have also survived and would be invaluable to a bioarchaeological study, as would the significant number of documents that pertain to "native" mortality. Later in the century, records on labour conditions start to appear. Records of the cost of food for "natives" in the employ of the mines and general works in Transvaal can provide evidence of diet that can be compared to stable isotope data. The chamber of mines even kept records on the *mealies* (corn/cornmeal) consumed by "natives" in the Transvaal.

In the same way that the Dutch used their seaborne empire to source slave labour from all corners of the Indian Ocean basin, so too did the British draw on labour from their vast empire to satisfy the insatiable demand of the mines. As records cover both the British colonial and Afrikaans nationalist periods, it would be interesting to investigate any changes in the lived experiences of labourers as a result of these political changes.

The way forward; stakeholder engagement

The Cape was a slave society for nearly 200 years yet this history is not part of mainstream discourse in South Africa in the same way that African and Afrikaans nationalism are. This state of affairs borders on erasure and needs to be rectified. Some practical ways that this can be done are firstly emphasising slavery as a major pillar in heritage tourism at The Cape. Cape Town also needs monuments to the enslaved of The Cape and their descendants as they contributed to the development of the architecture, language and cuisine of the region. These actions will go some way to highlighting a neglected history.

The time of South African archaeology as a purely academic endeavour is no more. The clash between academics and Cape slave descendants over the Prestwich Place burials should be seen as an opportunity for engagement. Unfortunately, there is now a deafening silence and lack of dialogue between heritage agencies that have forbidden scientific research on the human remains, academia with its tail between its legs, and an angry, suspicious and dissatisfied public. Previous attempts at stakeholder engagement were at best half-hearted as they began when excavations at Prestwich had already commenced, leaving the public with the impression that their concerns would not be taken into consideration (Shepherd, 2007). Academia and cultural resource management professions missed an opportunity to reflect on the theoretical frameworks that inform their current practices.

The processes that shaped the District Six Museum into “an independent, secular site of engagement and a space of questioning and interrogating South African society and its discourses” (Rassool, 2010:87) could provide a blueprint of how to proceed to formulate a way forward that bestows the respect on the dead that they deserve and allows Capetonians to deal with an uncomfortable past. The Museum privileges both academic and community knowledge, whilst a continuous dialogue between the academy, the descendent community, heritage professions and activist intellectuals has resulted in a space that all stakeholders can stand behind (ibid).

The approach of South African bioarchaeologists to the study of enslaved persons’ bodies has been descriptive and lacking in nuance, not drawing from other disciplines to elucidate the lived experience of the enslaved. This forensic approach to the study of enslavement has rightly left a bad taste in the mouths of the descendent community as it wonders at the relevance of findings. This is in stark contrast to the biocultural approach employed by African American diasporic bioarchaeologists (Blakey, 2001). These scientists come from a long tradition of African American activist scholarship. They use the same techniques as the ‘forensic’ bioarchaeologists but operate in a multidisciplinary space that takes cultural and social history into consideration and offer a critique of slavery. A significant outcome of this approach is the New York African Burial Ground, which is a centre of memorialisation and education which highlights the contribution African Americans have made to the city of New York. This was not achieved without controversy, yet public involvement and clear communication of archaeological objectives by academics resulted in respectful commemoration and an impressive body of scientific work. Bioarchaeology is a tool that can be (mis)used like any other, but in the right hands it can be powerful and yield socially relevant information.