

Rupert's Valley Archaeological Excavations

Press Release

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SUMMARY

Half way between the decaying slave forts of West Africa and the overgrown plantations of the New World, on the tiny island of Saint Helena, archaeologists have uncovered the human face of Britain's fight to suppress the last decades of the transatlantic slave trade.

Excavations in Rupert's Valley, sheltered from the Trade Winds on the leeward side of the island, have examined the remains of over three hundred 'Liberated' Africans and located the last resting place of many thousands more. The valley was the site of a treatment and holding depot used by the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron; an organisation founded in the first half of the 19th century to hunt the increasingly illusive and determined slavers and liberate their human cargo.

Preliminary study of this dramatic and disturbing find suggests that the vast majority were children or young adults, with some less than a year old. Often buried in groups, the individuals were occasionally interred with personal effects, jewellery and fragments of clothing, as well as artefacts that relate to their enslavement and subsequent rescue by the West Africa Squadron.

This discovery will not only advance understanding of the 19th century slave trade and the political machinations behind its abolition; it will bring a voice to a forgotten people who died in the limbo, in a place physically and conceptually between freedom and slavery.

INTRODUCTION

During 2008, a team of fifteen professional archaeologists from the UK, supported by a number of St Helenian (Saint) and non-Saint volunteers, carried out excavations in Rupert's Valley, St Helena.

Rupert's Valley is a narrow, arid valley in the northwest part of the island, adjacent to James Valley in which the island's capital Jamestown is situated. Despite its proximity to Jamestown, Rupert's Valley retains an isolated character, with access only via a precipitous road descending the valley side. Plans to develop a new town there in the 1860s were not realised and only a small number of houses are present. The valley is instead the focus of the island's industry, containing the power station, fuel storage depots and a small number of industrial units (mostly engaged in fishery).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

St Helena's contribution to Britain's maritime history is very considerable. As an East India Company possession between 1673 and 1836, it played a central role in the expansion of English power and commerce in Asia during the 17th and 18th centuries. Because the Dutch retained possession of the Cape until 1795, for many years St Helena was the only victualling station available to English shipping in the South Atlantic, as well as a place where convoys could be assembled prior to their return into hostile European waters. Historical records show many hundreds of vessels visiting St Helena every year. Britain's other Atlantic possession, Ascension Island, was far less favourable due to its more distant location and its unhealthy climate, and was only permanently settled in the early 19th century. St Helena's importance is illustrated by the names of some of those who have stopped there: mariners such as Dampier, Cook and Bligh; and pioneers of the age of scientific exploration, for example Maskelyne, Halley and Darwin.

St Helena's maritime role once again came to the fore during the mid 19th century, as part of Britain's efforts to suppress the Atlantic Slave Trade. Britain had been making efforts to stamp out the trade since Parliament had passed the *Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* in 1807. The 1807 Act abolished the slave trade in the British Empire, though not the institution of slavery itself. This remained legal until the *Slavery Abolition Act* of 1833, but even this latter act excluded Sri Lanka and British territories in the possession of the East India Company – including St Helena. Slavery was not formally abolished on the island until 1836, although it had been in decline for several decades.

Britain's efforts to suppress the slave trade were both of a diplomatic and military nature, but it was to prove a long, drawn-out process. Colonial rivalries with the other European powers, and with the emergent United States, proved as much of a hurdle as the practical problems of finding and capturing the slave ships. The numbers of Africans transported across the Atlantic actually increased in the decades following Abolition, and the slave trade to Brazil and Cuba did not end until the 1850s and 1860s respectively.

THE 'LIBERATED AFRICAN ESTABLISHMENT' ON ST HELENA

One aspect of the suppression process was the formal trial and condemnation of slave ships captured by the Royal Navy's West African Squadron. By 1840 Vice Admiralty courts existed at Sierra Leone, St Helena, Barbados and the Cape. These operated in concert with Mixed Commission (bi- or multi-national) courts set up under treaties with Spain and Portugal at Sierra Leone, Loando, Rio, Surinam and Havana. St Helena, as a part of this network, came to play a key part in the suppression of the slave trade.

The Vice Admiralty Court in St Helena was established in 1840. When the first Africans were brought to the island in that year, they were released from the condemned slave ships and quarantined in a number of locations around the island, the largest numbers being taken to Lemon Valley and Rupert's Valley. The 'Liberated African Establishment' ultimately settled in Rupert's Valley, which served as both a holding depot, hospital and quarantine zone.

Historical records show that a great deal of effort (and not an inconsiderable sum of money) was devoted to the care of the Africans. However, many did not survive the brutal conditions of the Trade, either dying on the slave ships or subsequently in the hospital. Smallpox, dysentery and a myriad of other diseases took their toll. An observer in 1861 described the scene as a slave ship was landed at Rupert's:

"A visit to a fully freighted slaveship is not easily to be forgotten; a scene so intensified in all that is horrible that it defies description ... The whole deck, as I picked my way from end to end, in order to avoid treading on them, was thickly strewn with the dead, dying and starved bodies of what seemed to me a species of ape that I had never seen before. Yet these miserable, helpless objects being picked up from the deck and handed over the ship's side, one by one, living, dying and dead alike, were really human beings. Their arms and legs were worn down to about the size of a walking stick. Many died as they passed from the ship to the boat, but there was no time to separate the living from the dead."

Between 1840 and 1850 over 15,000 Africans were landed on St Helena, of whom nearly 5,000 died. The Liberated African Establishment continued to receive freed slaves until the late 1860s and did not finally close until 1874. Large areas of the mid- and upper parts of Rupert's Valley were given over to graveyards and it became, in the words of a visiting missionary, a "valley of dry bones".

THE 2008 EXCAVATIONS

The buildings associated with the Liberated African Establishment were concentrated close to the sea, but many parts of the mid and upper valley are occupied by the African graveyards. These are not cemeteries in a formal sense, with identifiable boundaries or visible graves. Rather, they form a poorly-defined and diffuse burial zone amidst a landscape of rock and scrub, of which there is no longer any indication above ground.

The first task of the archaeologists was to locate the burial areas. The approximate location of two cemeteries was known from a map of 1861 but this map had not been surveyed for the purpose of showing the graveyards; and in any case it was drawn up several years before the final burials took place. Individual graves have been encountered during construction work in the past, but there had been no formal attempt to map the cemeteries or define their limits.

Trial-trenching was undertaken throughout the valley, which established the presence (and absence) of burials at various locations. Ultimately, full open-area excavation focussed on a small area of the mid-valley, close to the remains of the 19th century prison, the modern power station and fuel depot.

This one small area – a tiny proportion of the total cemetery – measured approximately 100m x 25m. It contained the remains of 325 people. Some were interred singly, but most were buried in groups. The largest burial group comprised seven individuals, deposited in a narrow sub-rectangular cut, which in modern terms would be considered as adequate for only a single burial. The rocky ground was extremely unsuitable for the digging of graves: the holes were often very shallow, and the bodies packed around large boulders which could not be removed.

It is not yet known – and indeed it may never be established – whether the excavated graves belong to the victims of a single slave ship, or of many. However, the excavation area was a discrete parcel of land – a small promontory elevated above the valley floor – and the adjacent land proved to be devoid of burials. The excavations, therefore, took in an area isolated from other parts of the cemeteries, and it may belong to a single time-period or episode of burial. Further study may be able to prove whether family or tribal groupings can be detected within this part of the cemetery. The positions of some of those buried may suggest that this could be the case, but such conclusions must await scientific testing.

In part, the multiple burials may reflect certain 19th century European burial practices. Cemeteries associated with Greenwich Naval Hospital, for example, have produced evidence for ‘stacked’ burials, within grave cuts that were apparently left open for a reasonable period before finally being backfilled. However, these multiple burials must also reflect the lack of available space for burials within the valley: there is little land between the rocky, flood-prone valley floor and the steep hillsides. Moreover, when a slave ship was landed the need to inter large numbers of bodies quickly must have been acute. The health of the survivors took priority over the dignity of the dead.

The majority of bodies were deposited directly into the ground without shrouds or coffins. However, four coffins belonging to still- or newborn infants were found. These miniature burials contained grave goods such as beads and coins, denoting an emotion which is not detectable in the interments of the older individuals. A single adult coffin burial was also unearthed, but the reason why this one person merited such treatment is as yet unclear. Further analysis should determine whether he was African: an interesting point given that the fragments of his clothing are distinctly European in style.

In addition to the articulated burials, a significant amount of disarticulated bone was recovered from pits. It is suspected that these are derived from burials which may have been disturbed in the later 19th century when foundations were dug for the nearby prison.

The preservation of the skeletons was variable, dependent on the microenvironment of each individual grave and the extent of crushing from the weight of earth and rock above. However, in many instances the preservation was extremely good, and this provides a potential insight into the life – and death – of many of these individuals.

A significant proportion of the burials were of children and adolescents, with the remainder being young adults. There also seems to be a high proportion of males to females. Such proportions are similar to many (though not all) historical records of captured slave ship cargoes in the 19th century. For example, the barque *Cora* (captured by the *Constellation* of the US Navy’s Africa Squadron in 1860) carried 694 persons: 175 men, 320 boys and 199 women, girls and babies.

A significant number of the post-adolescent skeletons exhibit evidence for intentional dental modification. This was a tradition amongst various African ethnic groups, and in some areas of West Africa it continues to be practiced. Similar modifications have been found in other slave cemeteries. Evidence of pathology is also present, including for broken bones and healing injuries which seem likely to have occurred, or to have been

inflicted, during the period of capture and transportation. Much more evidence of this type is expected to be revealed by detailed osteological analysis of the remains.

Artefacts from the burials were, as expected, relatively rare. The slaves would have retained few if any of their possessions, and various contemporaries describe them emerging from the slave ships naked, or nearly so. Nevertheless, a number of personal items were recovered: these were mainly glass necklace beads, but a small number of metal bracelets and earrings were found. Physical reminders of the slave trade were also present, notably in the form of diamond-shaped metal tags (similar to dog-tags): their precise purpose is not yet known, but they are comparable to examples worn by 19th century slaves in the United States.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

The excavations began in May 2008 and concluded in September 2008. All of the burials within the excavation area have been removed from the site and are now in secure storage in St Helena. The finds from the excavations are in the UK where they are being studied and conserved: all these items will be returned to St Helena in the near future.

Only a preliminary examination of the human remains was undertaken in 2008. More detailed osteological analysis is currently being carried out. This will provide detail about each individual (e.g. age and sex), and their life and death (e.g. diet, disease and injury). Study of the dental modifications, indicating cultural or tribal practices, may allow identification of the homeland origins of certain individuals. The evidence from the excavations as a whole will complement (and test) the historical records relating to the Liberated African Establishment on St Helena, and about the slave trade as a whole.

The post-excavation analysis will be completed by May 2010 and its findings will be published as a Council for British Archaeology (CBA) monograph, *Infernal Traffic: Excavation of the Liberated African Grave Yards, Rupert's Valley, St Helena*. This monograph will present the archaeological and osteological data, but in many ways represents only the starting point. The potential for long-term historical and scientific research is vast.

Ultimately all of the human remains will be reinterred within Rupert's Valley. Discussions are ongoing as to precisely where, when and how reinterment will take place.

CONCLUSION

It is estimated that over 11 million Africans were forcibly shipped across the Atlantic between the 16th and 19th century. Britain played a great part in this process: between 1662 and 1807 British ships carried 3.25 million Africans into slavery, and much of the wealth of Empire was founded on this 'respectable trade'. St Helena also owed much to slavery: throughout the 17th and 18th century, records show that its free population was often matched in number by slaves.

As a whole the archaeological assemblage from Rupert's Valley is dramatic and disturbing. Above all it is highly revealing about the process and conditions of the

Atlantic slave trade, a physical remembrance of what Wilberforce and others came to describe as an 'infernal traffic'. (Strictly, the site does not represent the 'Middle Passage' of the triangular slave trade, which ceased to exist after abolition – 19th century slave trading became a simple two-way process between Africa and the Americas).

Moreover, the site is extremely rare. Much is written about the slave trade, but the physical remains of its victims are not often encountered. Other surviving slave graveyards are known in the United States and the Caribbean, the best-known being the African Burial Ground in New York, from which over 400 bodies were excavated in the early 1990s. However, these cemeteries contain a mixture of first-generation slaves (i.e. from an African homeland) together with others of second- and later slave generations born in the Americas. St Helena, by contrast, may hold the only graveyards that comprise solely first generation individuals – that is to say those taken directly off the slave ships, who had been living in Africa only weeks earlier.

The cemeteries in Rupert's Valley are not only a vivid reminder of the Slave Trade, but also of efforts in the 19th century to bring it to an end. These efforts – with all their diplomatic, financial and military implications – lasted into the 1870s in the Atlantic and continued still later in the Indian Ocean. St Helena's central place within this process is rarely acknowledged.

Slavery is not only a phenomenon of the past, but also one of the present. UNESCO (2005) estimate that there are over 27 million enslaved persons worldwide, more than double the number of those who were deported in the 400-year history of the transatlantic slave trade to the Americas.

"If all the crimes which the human race has committed from the creation down to the present day were added together in one vast aggregate, they would scarcely equal, I am sure they would not exceed, the amount of guilt which has been incurred by mankind in connection with this diabolical Slave Trade"

Viscount Palmerston, 1844