



The Archaeological Journal

Book Reviews



INFERNAL TRAFFIC: EXCAVATION OF A LIBERATED AFRICAN GRAVEYARD IN RUPERT'S VALLEY, ST HELENA. Edited by Andrew Pearson, Ben Jeffs, Annsophie Witkin and Helen MacQuarrie. Pp. xxii and 178, Illus 134. Council for British Archaeology, 2012. Price: £30.00. ISBN 978 1 902771 89 2.

St Helena, that small speck of an island in the South Atlantic — and perhaps more famous as Napoleon's final place of confinement after Waterloo — remains under British rule as part of the British Overseas Territory of St Helena, Ascension and Tristan Da Cunha, and so logically the review of this important excavation report comes under the remit of this journal. Recent capital investment by HMG in London on a new airport has led to the excavation of a nineteenth-century graveyard of freed African slaves on the site of the proposed airport. The site bears tragic witness to the 'infernal traffic' which still took place well after the abolition of slavery in the early nineteenth century, and which engaged the Royal Navy at length for many years. The quote comes from Henry Brougham, First Baron of Brougham and de Vaux, and a passionate opponent of the slave trade, and the full quotation is fittingly reproduced on the Frontispiece.

The excavations themselves yielded the remains of over three hundred of these freed Africans who had been taken to St Helena after their liberation from slave ships. Many of the bodies were of children, victims of the horrific conditions on board ship, and many burials produced a range of European and African elements of material culture, keepsakes which may have come from their early period of freedom or of their period of captivity. No clear structured funerary behaviour appears to be evident; sheer numbers of dying Africans clearly overwhelmed the basic sanitary arrangements of the small island. When removal of the bodies to sea proved to be impractical, bodies had to be dumped in gullies such as Rupert's Valley, with little discrimination. The human remains thus excavated and studied speak of unimaginable horrors of disease, beatings and cruelty.

The report is well illustrated, logically structured and typically precise and exhaustive, as one would expect from a Council for British Archaeology publication. The wider contexts are well dealt with, and specialist chapters are provided on excavation methodology, human osteoarchaeology and the small finds from burials. Special attention is drawn to the use of coffins for neonates, evidencing perhaps a special, tender treatment for the young dead.

This is a timely and important work, essential reading for cultural historians of the nineteenth century, historical archaeologists, human remains specialists, those with an interest in funerary archaeology and indeed those like the current reviewer with an interest in the archaeology of the African Diaspora. Away from the undoubted value of

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this report as an archaeological research document, it retains a rare capacity among archaeological literature to provoke shocking and strong human emotions. The impact of this work is impressive on many levels.

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