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Archaeologies of slavery and servitude: bringing 'New World' perspectives to Roman Britain

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"Vegetus, assistant slave of Montanus the slave of the august emperor, has bought the girl Fortunata, by nationality a Diablintian, for 600 *denarii*. She is warranted healthy and not likely to run away." (Writing tablet, London).¹

'A likely yellow girl about 17 or 18 years old, has been accustomed to all kinds of house and garden work. She is sold for no fault. Sound as a dollar.' (Broadside 1833, Charleston).²

"Modern historians and sociologists, knowing full well the need to make every allowance for particular variations in one society after another, have disclosed nevertheless the universalist features of slavery across time and place: to pretend otherwise is futile." (K. Bradley).³

This contribution addresses the archaeology of slavery, not as Roman archaeologists now know it, but as I hope it might one day appear. I explore some of the approaches to material culture developed by archaeologists who study slavery in the 'New World'⁴ and argue that similar strategies might help us to see more clearly some of the least visible persons in the Roman world: slaves and other servile groups.⁵ I take Roman Britain as my starting point and, to illustrate some of the things that 'New World' approaches to the complex material world of the unfree might offer, I develop a case-study on slave-quarters (accommodations) that moves from the plantations of Virginia and the Carolinas to prisons (*ergastula*) and roundhouses in Roman Britain.

The proposals made here are offered in the hope of encouraging a revival of interest in an inexplicably moribund field. Slavery, colonialism and empire have always gone hand in hand, and the archaeology of slavery is in the ascendant from South and West Africa to Brazil, the Caribbean, and the former slaving-ports of Britain. These are places, of course, where slavery has a continuing legacy, and where descendant communities have fought hard for the experiences of their ancestors to be acknowledged and articulated. No similar imperative exists to promote the study of slavery in the Classical world, and perhaps for that reason an 'Archaeology of Roman slavery' has never emerged as a sub-discipline in its own right. It is time it did, and here I put forward some suggestions, all informed by work on modern historical slavery in N America, that I hope will stimulate debate.

In the Roman world, and throughout the American colonies, slave-worked estates, gang labour, rebellions, slave markets and auctions, and legal frameworks for bondage and manumission were facts of everyday life. Put this way, it does not seem at all surprising that an intellectual 'cross fertilisation' goes on between ancient and modern *historians* of slavery, and has done since the 1970s. Today, many ancient historians regard the comparative study of slavery

1 Writing tablet from No. 1 Poultry, London, dating to A.D. 80-120: see R. Tomlin, "'The girl in question': a new text from Roman London," *Britannia* 34 (2003) 41-51.

2 From a broadside announcing a "Public sale of Negroes", offered by Richard Clagett of Charleston, S.C. on March 5, 1833.

3 K. Bradley, *Slavery and society at Rome* (Cambridge 1994) 180.

4 This paper focuses on N America, where the archaeology of transatlantic slavery (c.1500-1860) is especially well developed; important work has also been undertaken in the Caribbean.

5 Many forms of servitude are likely to have existed in Roman Britain, and one of the themes of this paper is the difficulty archaeologists face in trying to distinguish between them. Throughout I use the word "slave" to denote human beings regarded as the moveable possessions, or chattels, of their owners. I employ "servile group" as a general term denoting coerced labourers, semi-servile kin, *coloni*, and other known or putative semi-free groups; freedmen and women also fall into this category.