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## **Spirits of the Passage: The Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Seventeenth Century**

**Madeline Burnside and Rosemarie Robotham. Foreword by Cornel West. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1997. 192 pp., plates, index. \$35.00.**

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Madeline Burnside and Rosemarie Robotham weave a sweeping, eloquent, and complex account of the transatlantic slave trade in this volume. Burnside and Robotham's telling probes the international dimensions of enslavement and colonialism by examining the material culture recovered from the *Henrietta Marie*. A French-built English merchant slaver, the *Henrietta Marie* carried over 400 enslaved Africans and a range of slave trade cargo between 1697 and 1700, when it sank off the Florida coast. The ship lay there until its excavation by the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society in the 1980s. *Spirits of the Passage* is a model of lucid and thorough writing on perhaps the most tangled of historical stories, synthesizing a wide range of historiographical resources and contemplating the myriad facets of the 17th-century world. Rather than an account of an isolated shipwreck, *Spirits of the Passage* is primarily a narrative which traces slave trade connections across space and time between sub-Saharan African trade, western European maritime commerce, the Middle Passage, and African resistance in the Americas.

The volume's foreword by Cornel West adds the sort of concise and penetrating commentary readers expect from West. West's sharply thought-out introduction raises familiar but powerfully articulated paradoxes about the fundamental social contradictions of slavery and racism and their reach across five centuries. Robotham pens a brief introduction to the volume which focuses on the human experiences of the slave trade. Burnside, executive director of the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society, adds an afterword on the archaeological discovery and excavation of the *Henrietta Marie*. The book's exquisite aesthetics and production will be the envy of every archaeologist resigned to read and write contract reports or small press volumes which do not have the benefit of costly technical production.

As a social history drawing on a vast range of period narratives, graphics, and secondary accounts examining the worldwide breadth of the traffic in humans, *Spirits of the Passage* is an incisive and compelling study of the complex state, material, and social forces shaping slavery. *Spirits of the Passage* aspires to paint a picture of the world's players in the slave trade, and it does so quite well. Yet, as an archaeological account, *Spirits of the Passage* does not devote sufficient attention to the *Henrietta Marie*'s material culture. The evocative power of the *Henrietta Marie*'s material culture -- from ankle shackles to Venetian trade beads -- certainly is well-suited to emphasizing the tragic, gripping, and ignoble human dimensions of the transatlantic

slave trade and the Middle Passage. Robotham's introduction recognizes that items like nearly 100 pairs of shackles can conjure powerful human stories, but *Spirits of the Passage* is generally a measured march through slave trade history that is periodically punctuated by illustrations of excavated objects. While it synthesizes a rich range of resources and literature, *Spirits of the Passage* devotes relatively little close and detailed attention to specific objects from the *Henrietta Marie*, their aesthetics or function, or the ship itself with the rigor expected of underwater and African-American archaeologies. *Spirits of the Passage* is constructed like a conventional, albeit eloquent historical narrative with an episodic storyline, a textual style unlike most historical archaeology's use of fine-grained material analyses to illuminate concealed and otherwise-lost minutia of everyday life. The illustrations of *Henrietta Marie* artifacts are striking and the sidebars articulate, but *Spirits of the Passage*'s text tells the story of worldwide social and material changes which created slavery and were in turn impacted by the slave trade, not the history of this one ill-fated ship or the men, women, and children who were captors and captives aboard it. In this sense, *Spirits of the Passage* charts a distinctive textual style which synthesizes archaeological and historiographical conventions. The book eschews the rigorous material analysis associated with most archaeological literature and instead uses stunning graphics to evoke the human stories concealed by the book's otherwise standard slave trade historiography. Some archaeologists may prefer to see systematic material analysis at the heart of such a book, concerned that this sort of graphic-intensive text simply reduces objects to superfluous ornamentation. Indeed, *Spirits of the Passage* might well have been written without the *Henrietta Marie* material culture. Yet the incorporation of even a modest quantity of material culture -- even though these figure primarily as illustrations -- clearly advances the book's effort to contemplate the human experiences of slavery, so it charts a provocative path for the writing of African-American archaeologies.

Archaeological readers inevitably will wonder about the politics of this excavation and its well-known excavators. The *Henrietta Marie* was identified by Mel Fisher in 1972 as he surveyed for the Spanish galleon the *Nuestra Senora de Atocha*. Fisher's team returned to the *Henrietta Marie* after the highly publicized *Atocha* excavation, a dig which likely illuminated the conflict between treasure hunters and archaeologists more than any other underwater archaeological project. In 1972, Fisher passed over the *Henrietta Marie* when it yielded artifacts which revealed it to be English and too late to be the *Atocha*, but *Spirits of the Passage* does not illuminate why Fisher returned to the *Henrietta Marie* a decade later. Madeline Burnside's afterword to the volume discusses the wreck's excavation, but it is a quite brief and circumspect account of the wreck's identification which will not address archaeologists' detailed research questions about the excavation, the ship's material culture, or the politics of underwater salvage. Burnside includes a poignant account of

dives on the Henrietta Marie by the National Association of Black Scuba Divers, but the afterword, and, by extension, the political context of the ship's excavation and interpretation, is not clearly linked to the book's historical narrative.

Spirits of the Passage is a thorough, critical, and lucidly written analysis of the birth of the slave trade, and it is a visually stunning production. Perhaps the powerful material evidence of the Henrietta Marie could be more clearly linked to Spirits of the Passage's broader focus, serving less as an accent for the historical narrative than the framework for the story. Nevertheless, the book provides a solid introduction to the slave trade and suggests how African-American archaeologists can begin to integrate thorough historical narrative, object analysis, and inchoate material symbolism in an imaginative, accessible, and empirically rigorous text style.