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The Wreck of The Henrietta Marie. An African-American Spiritual Journey to Uncover A Sunken Ship's Past

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The Wreck of The Henrietta Marie. An African-American Spiritual Journal to Uncover A Sunken Ship's Past

Michael H. Cottman, Harmony Books, New York, 1999. 242 pp., prologue, time line, epilogue, bibliography, index, \$23.00 (cloth).

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Cottman's volume about the Henrietta Marie is a beautifully conceived and executed epiphany. Cottman, a journalist by profession, searches for and commemorates that part of the story of the African in the Americas that general readers may not often find discussed in terms they can understand or empathize with. He goes far beyond the mere idea of the "Middle Passage," in order to look at the slave trade through a personalized history of one particular ship, the Henrietta Marie: its creation, and its instruments and equipment for human destruction and spirit-breaking. There are also the beginnings of a discussion about the nature of the men and their families (including contemporary descendants) who would be part of the machinery (or its beneficiaries/heirs) for the transport of other human beings, not just as ship captains but as ship-builders, ironmongers, cannon makers and fitters, and investors, who though having only indirect association with the atrocities of the trade, were nevertheless not benign participants. It is one story of many, in the history of the Atlantic slave trade, but is important and different because, in terms of an archaeological search, it converges recovery of artifacts from a shipwreck that connects African captives, the sea, particularly the Atlantic Ocean, and forces of nature, with the adventures of 20th-century Black scuba-divers. These men and women, especially members of the National Association of Black Scuba Divers (NABSD), are sharing an interest in deep sea-diving, and also making history themselves by pursuing recognition and distinction in a field, whether vocation or sport, still dominated by whites, but also by racism.

The archaeological aspects of the story, once the wreck of the Henrietta Marie is located off Florida's Key West - with its shackles, ale bottles, glass bead currency, pewter dishware, elephant tusks, cannon, and ship's bell which identified the ship's remains - provide palpable evidence of the journey of African peoples to the western hemisphere and their enslavement. Black scuba diver and treasure hunter, Demosthenes "Moe" Molinar, a black Panamanian, discovered the wreck in 1973, and Cottman writes that in finding "the shackles from the Henrietta Marie on the ocean floor [he brought] . . . the Henrietta Marie to the forefront of the archaeology community and to the world. Without [his] phenomenal discovery, the slave ship would still be buried beneath sand and clay, quite possibly for another three hundred years." Members of the NABSD, along with other fellow divers, were uniquely placed to play an integral role in this story's telling, and in developing and interpreting

artifacts for a traveling exhibition while also planning and performing a commemorative service where a plaque was placed in the ocean marking a space/place where African peoples, over a period of four generations, lost their spirits and too many their lives as well.

When the *Henrietta Marie* sank, it was not transporting Africans, for they had just disembarked in Jamaica. The slaver went down with its crew, on its return trip to Europe, during a violent storm. But the Atlantic Ocean is considered hallowed space/place because millions of Africans, who were taken captive, never reached the West Indies or North America having died, or been killed, during their passage across the ocean. Cottman, and others in the book, speak often of the spirits of those who perished during the Middle Passage and find inspiration in those, their ancestors who were survivors, who struggled, protested and persevered on land until, and even after, freedom from slavery was won.

This is a very personal and appropriately subjective writing of the tragic and inhuman history of slavery, but the finding of artifacts not only fills gaps in the written text, but also helps to legitimize Cottman's outrage and places African peoples most prominently in the midst of European colonial economic history and commercial policies. I break company with Cottman only in his placing racism above what economic determinists, such as myself, see as an horrific commercial and trade policy based on the greed of the Europeans, of a certain class, who then in turn, justified their brutality with "scientific" theories that attempted to turn men, women, and children into non-human beings or animals. In other words racism, if not racialism, followed a money trail.

To his credit, besides his underwater activities relating to the *Henrietta Marie*, Cottman uses traditional primary source material in archives and libraries in England, the Caribbean, and the United States -- and he visits three continents, on land and sea, to trace the places the ship sailed. He also seeks out oral testimonies from Black descendants of captive Africans, as well as the family or heirs of those associated with the processes of enslaving "innocents." Cottman is not a professional historian. He is, however, a student of history who clearly appreciates its significance in a community's moving forward into the future. A journalist, his "history" is also personal epiphany -- moving and emotive; his passion, regret, and anger legitimate in the telling, and his sense of adventure invigorating. Cottman, who has written the book on the Million Man March, considers this particular experience, for those who took part in it (including women divers), a mini Million Man March!

Michael Cottman's story of the recovery of the wreck of the *Henrietta Marie*, should energize the study of the history of African peoples brought to the Americas, and most especially the field of archaeology. And, as the usefulness of deep sea-

diving to that history is better understood, increase the number of divers of color and we can hope also archaeologists of color. This is an important book because of its accessibility to the general reader and its discussion of new directions in historical research and techniques for the specialist.