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POWER, POLITICAL ECONOMY, AND HISTORICAL LANDSCAPES OF THE MODERN WORLD: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

ABSTRACTS

Douglas Armstrong
Professor, Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University
“Early Seventeenth-Century Settlement in Barbados and the Shift to Sugar, Slavery, and Capitalism”

The initial years of English settlement in Barbados (beginning in 1627) involved small-scale farming and household structures, with planters and laborers living in close quarters. By the 1640s, some farmers were generating surplus capital based on the production of cotton. However, beginning with the first successful sugar crops in 1643, Barbados underwent a rapid shift to industrial production of sugar, which resulted in huge profits, rapid capital expansion, and reliance on enslaved labor from Africa. This shift is tied to a shift in the scale of emergence of agro-industrial capitalism and resulted in spatial and social segregation within plantations and throughout Barbadian society. This paper examines the archaeological record at Trents plantation and comparative data from inventories recorded in deeds, from across Barbados, to examine early farms and social and economic changes associated with the shift to sugar.

Gérard Chouin
Associate professor, Department of History, College of William and Mary
“Crisis and Transformation in the ‘Slave Rivers’ at the Dawn of the Atlantic trade”

Why were captives for sale in the Gulf of Benin in the late 1470s? In this paper, I explore changes in the Ijebu and Benin polities before the opening of the Atlantic trade and their consequences in shaping the new trade in slaves in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. My departure point is the recent dating of the 180-km-long enclosure known as Sungbo’s Eredo in southwestern Nigeria. Based on emerging archaeological data, difficult-to-assess Ijebu oral traditions of the deep past, and scarce early European sources, I propose a scenario of change in the political economy of African polities in the Gulf of Benin during the mid-fourteenth century. A demographic crisis, I suggest, triggered competition among regional polities for the control of people. The necessity to defend the local population and raids into neighboring areas led to radical change in the polities’ organization and to a transformation of the landscape. Kingship was adopted in Ijebu, while a new dynasty took over power in Benin. Both new ruling dynasties were possibly foreign warrior aristocracies that based their spiritual powers in imported cults. The new political economy became dominated by the accumulation and consumption of dependents through raids and wars of expansion. By the time the Portuguese arrived in the Gulf of Benin in 1472, they found ready surpluses of captives that could be exchanged for exotic prestige goods brought by the Europeans, especially copper and brass. This situation contrasted markedly with the demand for captives the Portuguese had met on the Gold Coast. They were able to take advantage of their understanding of these contrasting markets to purchase captives in the Gulf of Benin for resale on the Gold Coast.
Christopher R. DeCorse
Professor, Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University


The past millennium has been a period of dramatic transformation in West Africa, including changes in settlement organization and the associated sociopolitical systems. Beginning in the fifteenth century, Atlantic exchanges intricately linked Africa, Europe, and the Americas and engendered dramatic changes for all of the societies involved. The advent of European trade, the Atlantic slave trade, abolition, the beginning of colonial rule, and the postcolonial period each heralded varied entanglements that reflected both global patterns and African social, cultural, and political structures. Many of these events and upheavals are poorly known and their extent poorly represented in European documentary sources. Archaeology provides a key source of information, in many instances the only source of information, of the transformations that these varied intersections stimulated. Drawing on archaeological and historical sources from across West Africa, this paper assesses the longue durée of the West African past, contrasting change and transformation during the past millennia. I consider how wider economic transformations within West Africa reflect both connections and disjunctures in wider world economy.

Mark Hauser
Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, Northwestern University

“Huge Oceans, Small Comparisons: Danish Forts and Their Enclaves in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans”

The Atlantic and Indian oceans are generally conceived as a constellation of people, polities, commercial networks, and intersecting interests whose scope is defined by the ocean rim and history framed through different tempos. While the Atlantic and Indian Oceans continue to be important analytical anchors, scholarship on the global history of things has demonstrated that there is no reason to limit our analytical gaze to half of the globe. This paper builds on these comparative studies by examining two colonial enclaves associated with Danish forts: Fort Dansbourg in Tranquebar and Fort Christian in St. Thomas. Mercantilism is an assemblage of state policies that transforms states into quasi-commercial enterprises and also into rivals of those of their subjects who wish to take part in such activities. Danish mercantile efforts in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans are commonly viewed as distinct. In Tranquebar the Danish East India Company withered. The limited engagement with local polities resulted in an anemic pattern of peripheral trade that constrained its political and economic growth in the region. However, at the same time, The Danish West India Company in St. Thomas expanded. As the slave trade reached its apogee, the Company’s holdings in the West Indies appeared to mirror Atlantic Ocean patterns of production and market engagement. These different outcomes are not the result of different histories. Dale Tomich (1984) has advocated the study of “particular historical sequences and spatial configurations by locating them within the evolving ensemble of
relations forming the world economy.” The comparative examination of the Danish efforts in Tranquebar and St. Thomas renders intelligible transformations not easily understood through the lens of a single state or its commercial appendages. Such an examination elucidates the interconnected engagements of the Indian and Atlantic Worlds.

Corinna L. Hofman
Dean, Faculty of Archaeology, Professor of Caribbean Archaeology and Director of the Caribbean Research Group, Leiden University

“A Deep History of Indigenous Caribbean Networks: Changing Social, Cultural, Political, and Economical Relationships in a Globalizing World”

At the time of the European conquest of the New World, the insular Caribbean was settled by indigenous societies whose ancestors had entered the archipelago around 6000 BC from different parts of South and Central America. By 1000 AD, culturally diverse island societies had developed, and by 1492, a web of interlocking networks had spread across the Caribbean Sea, crossing local, regional, and pan-Caribbean boundaries. Precolonial indigenous Caribbean networks were flexible, robust, inclusive, and outward-looking systems. The networks at the time of contact echo these overarching patterns of migration, mobility, and interaction between island and mainland(s) communities. Being the center stage of the first encounters between the Old and the New World, the Caribbean was the initial space of intercultural Amerindian-European-African dynamics leading to the formation of new identities and social and material worlds. European settlement and colonization of the Caribbean was not a single event, but a series of processes throughout which some islands resisted European control until the 1800s. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth century, the Indigenous-Caribbean became largely invisible in global history. To a great extent this can be considered as a direct consequence of the European conquests and imported diseases, but it is also partly due to marginality and ethnicity politics. Indigenous people were either no longer allowed to be “indigenous” or they themselves wished no longer to be perceived as “indigenous” by the colonizers. Over time they came to blend into newly formed hybrid cultures, gradually losing their distinct indigenous identity and presence in historical texts and administrations. This presentation examines the transformations in social, cultural, political, and economic relationships of these indigenous communities at multiple temporal and spatial scales.

Matthew Johnson
Professor, Department of Anthropology, Northwestern University

“1492: A Different Kind of ‘Discovery’”

The aim of this paper is simple: To describe a set of landscapes and seascapes as they existed in 1492, those of the British Isles, the archipelago that in the next three centuries was to be the setting for the earliest Industrial Revolution in Europe and the world. This description draws inspiration from the famous journey set out in the conclusion of Cyril Fox’s *Personality of Britain*, and is presented as a “discovery,” a word whose meaning at the time included mapping or exposition. The “discovery” starts at the cliffs of Dover. It moves north and west through the rich Kentish countryside to London; then it heads through the villages and open fields of the
English Midlands, then along the north Welsh coast past mountains and uplands; it traverses the Irish Sea to Dublin; then moves through and literally “beyond the Pale” to the west coast of Ireland, in the end looking out onto the Atlantic. The movement here is from the more fertile and affluent south and east to the more rugged, dispersed settlement and landscape of the north and west. Much of the movement is along Roman roads, or otherwise engages with infrastructure (routeways, settlement forms, farming practices), which were centuries or even millennia old by 1492. Of course, this “discovery” is much more than a neutral geographical description. These landscapes and seascapes can be seen as sets of affordances or infrastructures that set the stage for an unfolding of rural capitalism, and of nascent colonial relations between different parts of the British Isles. I am offering a sort of synchronic mapping or snapshot, before setting time in motion. I end with reflection on method: a combination of old-school historical geography (I draw inspiration from Fox’s famous 1932 work, Personality of Britain) with more current themes of materiality, political ecology, and colonial relations.

Kenneth Kelly
Professor and Chair, Department of Anthropology, University of South Carolina, Columbia

“Nineteenth-Century Coastal Guinea: Unusual Manifestations of the ‘Illegal’ Slave Trade in a Local System”

During the nineteenth century, the Rio Pongo region of coastal Guinea experienced a fluorescence of international attention, as a series of foreign and local merchants exploited the unique maritime geography of the region to engage in clandestine “illegal” slave trade. The cessation of the “legal” slave trade by Denmark, Britain, and the United States in the first decade of the nineteenth century created opportunities for previously overlooked sectors of the West African coast, as the slave trade changed its orientation from the prominently located forts and castles to smaller-scale trading posts typically situated in less visible settings. At these new locations, a robust trade in captives and other commodities ensued, stimulated in part by political conflict in the highlands of the Futa to the east. In a departure from the earlier slave trade, these clandestine slave trade operations were typically organized by private individuals, whether local or foreign, and did not operate with state sanction. As a result, the number of these trade posts fluctuated, from fewer than half a dozen to nearly two dozen, depending on global commerce and politics. This paper integrates archaeological data from four such sites on the Rio Pongo to contextualize the economies linking European and American traders with local elites and the surrounding populace.

Andrew Martindale
Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of British Columbia

“Stories of the Ghost People: European-Indigenous Contact on the Northwest Coast of North America”

The encounter between Indigenous (Tsimshian) and European (Spanish, British, US) people in the late eighteenth century along the northern coast of North America can be seen as many forms
of entanglement. The construct of an entangled encounter is evocative but inconsistently defined. In this analysis, I expand on the idea that encounters between different individuals are inevitable entanglements of the arrangements and the expectations consequent to and emergent from the practices of life. The former includes relations between people and things visible in organizations of settlements, economic transactions, and material belongings. The latter are foundational often-undisclosed expectations of reality: a priori knowledge emergent in part from practices that provide less discursive sensibilities defining both epistemology (what can be perceived) and cosmology (why things are). In this case study, I trace the surficial facets of entanglement in Tsimshian-European contact via settlement trends and patterns of material production and consumption from historical, cartographic, archaeological, and Indigenous-oral records to explore ideas of value, power, sovereignty, and legitimacy. I argue however, that these are predicated on fundamental entanglements over different ways of envisioning human nature. Specifically they are an encounter between a European racialized taxonomy and a Tsimshian classification of humans as soul-forms. Each sees the same world in different ways with dramatically different consequences, which have defined the early modern era in this part of the world and continue to resonate today. The current wave of liquid natural gas (LNG) industrialization of a core Tsimshian territory reveals the persistence of this entangled dichotomy, in which non-native proponents see First Nations expressions of spiritual value to places and their histories as impenetrable essentializations. Consideration of the frameworks of expectation within which material and behavioral gestures emerge provides opportunities for translation in contemporary and historical contexts.

Rahul Oka
Ford Family Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame

“From Peripheral Actors to Global Masters: African and Asian Perspectives on Europeans in the Western Indian Ocean, 1500–1900 CE”

Prior to 1500 CE, Europe was peripheral to the global commercial system. By 1900 CE, Europe was the center of the global commercial system. Hindsight would suggest a deterministic pathway in which European global political and economic dominance by 1900 CE was a predestined outcome of Europe’s economic expansion after c. 1500 CE. In the first part of this paper, I suggest that Europeans remained peripheral players in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea until the mid-eighteenth century CE. During this period, important changes in global trade and manufacturing were the outcomes of non-European interactions, largely due to capital-rich South Asian merchants in East Africa increasingly and exclusively treating their trading areas as sources of raw materials and consumer markets (1500–1800 CE). The second part of the paper will address early British colonialism in South Asia (1757–1947 CE), when for the first time in the history of the world, the British East India Company, a commercial firm originally dedicated to trade and formerly relegated to coastal factories and entrepôts, gained rent-tax control over the vast agricultural and manufacturing region of Bengal. This irreversibly changed colonialism, in which political control became the subservient means to tax-collection, raw material acquisition, and dominate consumer markets in the colonies. Using archaeological, historical, and ethnographic data from South Asia and East Africa, I tie the two parts of the paper together to argue that the behavior common to both periods (peripheries/colonies as sources for raw
materials and markets), an outcome of South Asian merchant activities in East Africa in the Early Modern Era, was refined by the British and other Europeans with the addition of political takeover. This, eventually (and ironically) led to the colonial-political takeover of South Asia and subsequently, East and Sub-Saharan Africa in the Late Modern Era.

Guido Pezzarossi
Assistant professor, Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University

“Colonial Frictions: Maya Knowledges, Infrastructures, and Emergent Colonial Assemblages in Highland Guatemala”

Colonialism, like capitalism, is frequently modeled as the imposition of will, ideology, and/or plan on a passive, subjected population and its environments. However, such plans, even in contexts of outright domination, are transformed or indeed emerge as they are imposed, such that they result not so much in rote imposition, but rather an open-ended process emerging from the situated engagements of a plurality of actors, both human and nonhuman. From this perspective, we are forced to consider how colonist’s agency, intentions, and expected outcomes are tempered, re-routed, transformed, rebuffed, or indeed derived from their “friction” (see Tsing 2005) with encountered and persisting native power dynamics, and social/material assemblages in colonial contexts. Framed by Tsing’s concept, this paper theorizes an archaeology of colonial frictions in highland Guatemala as an analytical tack useful for recognizing how longue durée Maya knowledge, practices, and skills remained embedded in and generative of (and not marginalized from) global economies. By stressing “global” colonialism/capitalism’s embeddedness in “local” politics, cultural practice, power dynamics, and material relations, the local and global emerge as mutually constituted, drawing our analyses to the more illuminating and interesting questions of how value is generated locally, and translated into a universal/global “value” (as capital) that flowed globally, albeit via situated engagements (Tsing 2015).

Archaeological and archival material is used to highlight how Maya/Mesoamerican political economic practices (e.g. tribute payment/collection), power dynamics, needs, infrastructures (e.g. marketplaces, trade routes, groves, etc.), and knowledge(s), as well as the material affordances of the landscape and laboring bodies, shaped and persisted in the contours of emergent Spanish colonial assemblages in highland Guatemala. As a result, Maya people continued to dwell in legible or familiar social/material landscapes, and political economic structures that afforded some a measure of power, opportunity, and even prosperity through the retention and continued valence of Maya knowledge, skills, and regimes of value for diverse, emerging regional and global colonial/capitalist economic assemblages.

Kathryn Sampeck
Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Illinois State University

“Early Modern Landscapes of Chocolate: The Case of Tacuscalco”

This study will examine birth pangs of early modern social, political, and economic relationships by tracing changes in the cultural landscape of one small area in colonial Guatemala. By the late fifteenth century, Tacuscalco was a political, social, and economic center within a larger region in today’s western El Salvador known as the Izalcos. The Izalcos polity was a network of
settlements and affiliated agricultural lands populated by people who spoke Nahuat, a sister language to the Nahuatl of the Aztecs, and who called themselves by the ethnic name of Pipil in early colonial accounts. Pre-Columbian and early colonial residents in this region were super-producers of cacao, the tree whose seed people use to make chocolate. Cacao was a pre-Columbian means of sustenance, and indeed, through tribute demands in cacao, fueled the state. Cacao has a long history of use in ritual practice, but its use as small currency in the pre-Columbian economy was a late development that fueled a system of state-supported inequality sustained by collective agricultural production to produce phenomenal amounts of cacao. The cultural landscape of pre-Columbian Tacusalco exhibits hierarchical order through plaza groupings, temples, and other public spaces and works. The Izalcos was a shining example of extreme abuse and depredation in the sixteenth century, shown in severe depopulation, prison-like systems to manage cacao producers, and other forms of state-sponsored collective violence. Tribute records for Tacusalco show the political jockeying among Spanish colonists for a share of the wealth, and how the divvying up of resources followed indigenous political and social boundaries. Forced resettlement into Spanish-style towns directly controlled people’s mobility, segregating them into containable units to control mixing; but in the case of Tacusalco, this both failed and succeeded: Tacusalco became a barrio de mulatos. Tacusalco’s changing landscape challenges ideas about the early modern development of monocrop plantation economies, regimes of coerced or enslaved labor, racial ideologies, and asserting and subverting rural-urban spatial order.

Erik R. Seeman
Professor, Department of History, University at Buffalo

“Graveyards as Landscapes of Power in the Early Modern Atlantic World”

Burial grounds represent power. A cemetery’s location, dimensions, markers (or lack thereof), and residents all are diagnostic of a society’s power relations. This is true both for power relations among the living and between the living and the dead. Far from quiescent “resting places,” graveyards quiver with the energy of mourners, the activity of spirits, and the immanent presence of deities. To trace the relationship between landscape and power, this paper uses written and material sources to examine two sites in the early modern Atlantic world: a Jewish cemetery in Curacao and the African Burial Ground in New York City. A central fact of Jewish life in the New World was the group’s status as a religious minority. As Jews in Curacao confronted an unfamiliar environment, they worked to preserve their deathways as a strategy to mark the boundaries between themselves and outsiders, and between observant and non-observant Jews. Among New York City’s African Americans, by contrast, little evidence exists of intragroup conflict over burial rites. Instead, the African Burial Ground, a marginal space neglected by Euro-Americans, helped free and enslaved blacks forge an African American identity. An emblem misidentified by archaeologists as a West African sankofa symbol highlights the complex genealogy of African American deathways. In both locations, and by extension elsewhere around the Atlantic, burial grounds contain material expressions of religious and economic power. Grave goods, markers, and the very bodies of the dead reveal the complex legacy of European overseas expansion and the slave trade in the Americas.
Martin Shanguhyia  
Associate Professor, Department of History, Syracuse University


From circa 1890 to 1940, as part of campaigns for wildlife preservation and conservation, colonial states pushed for the creation of game reserves and national parks in the area of early Eastern Africa. This paper focuses on the origins and development of the campaigns, and the policies and measures that colonial states put in place to create these geographical landscapes where none existed before. I argue that colonial engagement with re-organizing African landscapes for purposes of preserving game served to universalize the ideals of the European (British) Empire regarding the environment, behind which existed influential metropolitan and other international impulses. These external impulses aided in efforts to integrate local African landscapes into global networks of information and capitalist interests linked to environment-based modes of production. Creation of game reserves and national parks was a form of colonial land appropriation, which disrupted pre-existing human-environmental relations, but was attuned to serve colonial capitalism and elite imperial culture. To help unearth these developments, the paper also explores the tensions that the colonial wildlife conservation movement created between administrations and local African communities. These tensions played out around environment-based material goods/commodities such as ivory and hunting tools/technologies, some of which—such as ivory and guns—had been essential components that tied East African communities to precolonial regional and global commercial networks. The conservation movement ensured that these commodities and technologies were incorporated into colonial capitalism through the domestication of local natural environments. The territories of focus are Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania.

Dale Tomich  
Professor, Department of Sociology, Binghamton University

“The Space of Time: Mapping the Cuban Sugar Frontier in the Nineteenth Century”

I examine the role of cartography in constructing the Cuban sugar frontier and its integration into the world market during the nineteenth century.

Christopher Kurt Waters  
Doctoral Candidate, Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University

“The Indefensible: Power Dynamics, Social Relations, and Antigua’s Eighteenth-Century Defense Landscape”

Eighteenth-century warfare saw the expansion of colonial defense in the Caribbean, with each island’s government seeking to protect its role in the lucrative sugar trade. Antigua, as the largest of the British Leeward Islands, built dozens of coastal fortifications to protect its borders from the French, Dutch, Spanish, and Indigenous neighbors. As an institution, this martial landscape represents the longest, continuously maintained, geographically diverse, and most expensive
local colonial project undertaken by the Antiguan government. Yet, a closer examination reveals that the fortifications were poorly suited for island-wide defense, but rather represent a nested landscape reflecting local governmental policies, social relationships, and power relations between island elites and between elites and subaltern populations. As loci of social interaction outside the control of the plantation, the fortification network provides a dynamic island-wide landscape where elites, poor whites, soldiers, and enslaved Africans interacted and comingled. This perspective pushes against the primacy of the plantation model, which limits investigations between property boundaries and liminal spaces and subconsciously reifies the fixed plantation entity decontextualized from the wider landscape. By shifting the focus to an island-wide institution like the fortifications, I destabilize the fixed boundaries around plantations and expand a space to reinvestigate movement, policy, and power.