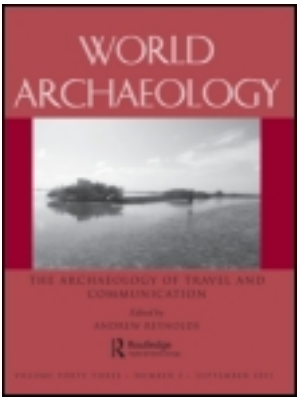

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Archaeology and slave resistance and rebellion

Charles E. Orser, Jr. and Pedro P. A. Funari

Abstract

The archaeology of New World slavery has exponentially expanded during the past two decades to become perhaps the most influential area within today's historical archaeology. As part of this research endeavour, archaeologists have examined many kinds of sites and have made diverse and important contributions to the literature. Sites associated with fugitive slaves have been studied, but not as frequently. We argue that the archaeology of slave resistance and rebellion should be a key element of New World slave archaeology, and we promote the excavation of runaway polities, or maroons, as excellent arenas for such a study. We present an example from Palmares in north-eastern Brazil as part of this exploration.

Keywords

New World; slavery; resistance; rebellion; Palmares; Brazil.

Introduction

The investigation of slavery has matured within recent years into a staple of research in New World historical archaeology (Orser 1990, 1998; Singleton 1995, 1999). Archaeologists have examined such topics as the material culture of slavery, slave diet and subsistence, and the development and maintenance of slave craft industries. Many archaeologists have also begun to consider the archaeological dimensions of slave religions, myths and eschatological symbolism. Some of today's most theoretically robust investigations involve examinations of the material expressions of slave ethnicity and perceived racial categorization. Archaeologists exploring these broad topics have sometimes embedded issues of slave resistance within their research, making it a small but important segment of this burgeoning area of archaeological specialization. In this paper we explore the archaeological nature of slave resistance and propose that the archaeology of slave resistance and rebellion should be an overt cornerstone of the archaeology of New World slavery. We include an example from Palmares, Brazil, to reinforce our argument.

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The archaeology of resistance and rebellion

The archaeologists in the late 1960s who began the examination of slavery and slave life typically approached the subject as an exercise in cultural identification. The goals of the earliest slave-related archaeology of necessity included the completely mundane, but absolutely required task of determining the nature of slave material culture. They had few *a priori* expectations about what they would find buried at abandoned slave settlements since sites of that kind had never been excavated before in any serious manner (see, e.g., Fairbanks 1983, 1984). Faced with the lack of precise archaeological knowledge about the material nature of New World slavery, archaeologists found it impossible to refute the commonly held belief that slaves did not have an active, expressive material culture. Archaeologists examining slave life in the New World have completely exploded this myth as both the archaeologists' interpretative sophistication and the shear amount of their research has exponentially expanded (Singleton and Bograd 1995).

The archaeology of slave resistance and rebellion evolved as part of the larger project to understand the African diasporic experience, but it also benefited from two principal influences that originated outside the discipline: detailed research on the historical and social elements of slave uprisings by historians and anthropologists (e.g., Aptheker 1943; James 1969; Price 1979), and the growing realization by some archaeologists that many of the developing civil rights movements around the world were anchored in traditions of resistance that often had long-standing historical roots. As some archaeologists began to acknowledge that the search for slave material culture was intellectually unsatisfying as an end in itself, many of them began to dedicate their research to unraveling the tensions and conflicts inherent in a system that enslaved some men and women for the profit of others. The topic of freedom necessarily arose once this new line of inquiry was adopted (Leone et al. 1995), and it then became possible to perceive the archaeology of New World slavery as pertinent to revealing the history and social character of the conscious efforts of enslaved men and women to forge freedom on their own terms.

Some archaeologists used the remains they excavated at plantation sites to argue for the polyvalent nature of material culture, with at least some artefacts being used in muted or ambiguous ways to suggest slave resistance. They began to perceive that some excavated artefacts, when fully contextualized within the slave community, could have been used both functionally and symbolically. Thus, slaves may have used some seemingly utilitarian objects – such as pottery and smoking pipes – to promote group cohesion and self-identity (e.g., Ferguson 1991; Orser 1991). Archaeologists inclined to study resistance found the task of making artefact/resistance connections conceptually easier when they discovered the work of political scientist James Scott (1985, 1990). In two widely read studies of modern-day Malaysia, Scott demonstrated that the conflicts between landowners and agricultural workers, rather than being event-driven, were actually elements of an on-going process that was often extremely subtle.

The acceptance of Scott's interpretations has several important implications for archaeological research. First, archaeologists could assume that many instances of daily resistance cannot be counted upon to have left material traces. Sabotage of machinery, tools and personal possessions, surreptitious destruction of crops or maiming of animals,

feigning ignorance, clumsiness, self-mutilation and suicide will not be archaeologically visible. Such 'individual acts of resistance' (Aptheker 1943: 140–9) may have been extremely short-lived and sporadic. On the contrary, however, Scott's studies meant that resistance could be an everyday, perhaps even commonplace, occurrence – even on plantations, where those in positions of power often ruled with ruthless efficiency. Scott's interpretation also implied that it would not be easy for archaeologists to identify the material 'arts of resistance', because it could be assumed that they were both commonplace in number and had other, wholly mundane functions. Slave-made pottery and tiny, metal fist amulets (Orser 1994a: 39) are examples of material culture that may contain muted messages of everyday resistance of the sort that are not readily interpretable as signs of resistance. The complexities inherent in the daily 'arts of resistance' mean that archaeologists actively searching for tangible evidence of daily resistance will encounter the same problem initially faced by archaeologists looking for evidence of Africanisms at New World plantations (see Orser 1998: 67–9). Archaeologists will be searching for something they have already determined must have existed within the past sociohistorical context of a particular plantation site. Just as archaeologists examining the material remains left by Africans in the New World have assumed the presence of Africanisms – based on their unshakeable belief in the power and tenacity of traditional culture – some archaeologists believe that enslaved men and women could not have accepted their bondage without struggle. This second group of archaeologists must accept the possible presence of symbols of resistance at plantation sites. Following recent trends in archaeological research in general, and understanding the difficulties of charting everyday resistance, many archaeologists engaged in the study of the African diaspora have begun to concentrate on religion, ritual and symbolism (e.g., Orser 1994a; Stine et al. 1996; Wilkie 1995; Young 1996).

As part of the subtle refocusing of emphasis, some archaeologists may be ready to abandon resistance as a topic, preferring to promote 'accommodation' instead (e.g., Lightfoot et al. 1998; Garman 1998; Webster 1999). We believe to the contrary that this shift in focus is not entirely healthy for the archaeological examination of African life in the New World. While we reject the *a priori* assessment that *all* slaves resisted their condition at all times, we nonetheless argue that any attempt to diminish resistance among slave men and women ignores the harsh realities of human bondage. Any attempt to ignore the importance of struggle among men and women held in bondage merely serves to reinstate the old belief that slave resistance and rebellion were rare occurrences (Aptheker 1943: 13).

The archaeological examination of African resistance in the New World, no matter how formidable a task, will rightly continue to constitute an important line of research in historical archaeology. Still, the difficulties archaeologists face in being able to make unambiguous statements about the cultural, social, and material dimensions of daily resistance at plantations are formidable. One way through the analytical difficulties is for archaeologists interested in resistance to concentrate on a type of historic community dedicated to resistance and rebellion: the maroon settlement. Maroon polities unquestionably provide the best opportunity for archaeologists to make important strides in the archaeology of slave resistance specifically, and in the understanding of resistance in general.

Maroon settlements and archaeological research

Maroon settlements provide fertile ground for the archaeological investigation of the material expressions of cultural survival and the creation of community by men and women who were forced to live in strange environments among individuals with whom they may not be related by lineage, tradition or language family. A growing number of archaeologists have recognized the potential provided by maroon polities, and archaeological efforts to locate and to excavate them have begun throughout the Western hemisphere (e.g., Agorsah 1990, 1993; Deagan and MacMahon 1995; García Arévalo 1986; Guimar es 1990; Nichols 1988; Weik 1997).

One of the reasons that maroon settlements provide excellent research arenas for archaeologists interested in the broad topics of cultural maintenance and the creation of community stems from their apparently bounded physicality. Runaway slaves intended their settlements to be isolated places generally set apart from the society they were abandoning. As a result, runaways designed their villages and village clusters as discrete places, distinguishable on the basis of their separateness. Nonetheless, it would be shortsighted to propose that maroon settlements were completely isolated. Research demonstrates, and common sense dictates, that even fugitives could not live in isolation, but had to establish and work to maintain a series of complex alliances and associations, many of which extended beyond the limits of their settlements (Orser 1994b). The nature of these connections, and their meanings within the context of cultural survival, are justifiable topics for archaeological investigation.

At the same time, the often-isolated nature of maroon settlements presents severe archaeological challenges. In the first place, the overt character of maroon settlements – as habitations of men and women defying bondage, the core of the slave regime – means that most historical accounts of the polities will have been prepared by outsiders who may have been unfriendly to the settlement. For this reason, researchers must approach contemporary historical writings about maroons with caution, recognizing that they may be biased or even untrue. All historical archaeologists face this problem at most of the sites they study, but it is an especially serious issue in cases were the men and women being written about were commonly referred to by outsiders as 'criminals' and 'outlaws'. Because few Europeans writing about maroons can be expected to have been unbiased, today's analysts must carefully evaluate their estimates of population size, their comments on the simplicity of the maroons' material culture, their observations about the reliability of the food supply, and their assessments of the settlement's military strength.

At the same time, the isolated nature of maroon settlements often means that they will be difficult to locate on the ground. The creation of maroon communities in remote, inaccessible places, such as swamps and mountains, may pose significant logistical problems for archaeologists. We may also expect that many maroon settlements will be difficult to identify, given both the need to move frequently and the possible destruction of the settlements by European enemies. Construction of buildings and other structures from locally available materials may pose the additional problem that maroon communities do not remain well preserved in the soil or, in some cases, may even resemble indigenous, Native American settlements.

An equally important element of the archaeology of maroon settlements is that the

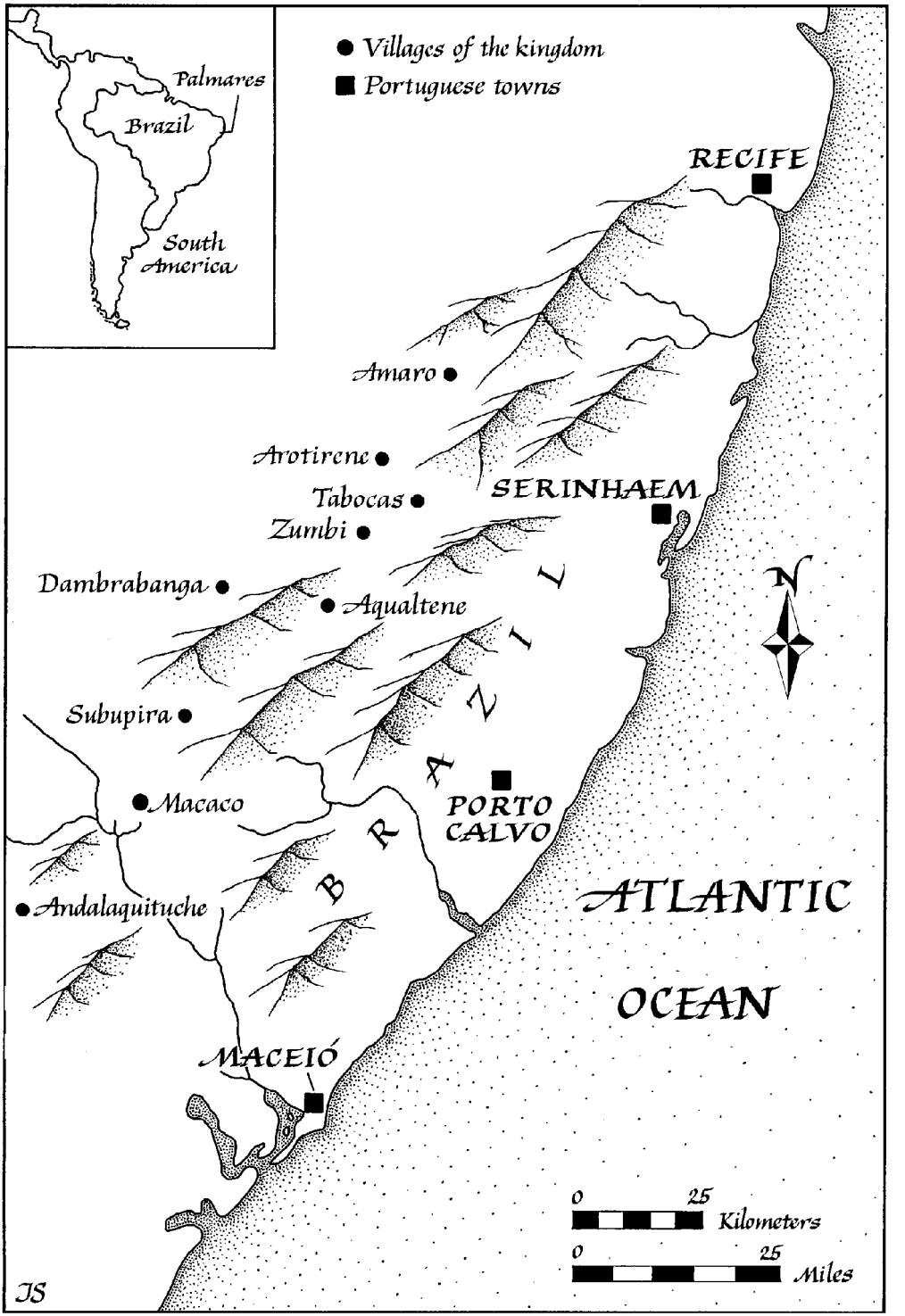

Figure 1 Palmares at the height of its power, mid-1640s–1694.

village sites will often be venerated by the descendant community and, in some cases, they may even constitute places of worship. The modern-day relevance of past maroon settlements is significant to archaeological practice because the investigation of 'places that matter' helps to secure the broader cultural relevance of historical archaeology (McDavid and Babson 1997; Orser 1998: 76–8).

An example of an archaeology of resistance: Palmares, Brazil

Palmares, a seventeenth-century fugitive polity in Brazil, provides an excellent example of the importance of struggle and resistance studied by archaeology. Limited archaeological research at Palmares has yielded evidence that runaway people did not live in isolation, that historical accounts of the rebel state were biased, that maroon communities often resemble indigenous settlements, and that maroon descendants have multiple ways to venerate these once-proud, resisting polities.

The Portuguese developed sugar plantations in Brazil early in their colonial history, and by 1570 there were already several estates combining African and Native South American slave workforces. These Portuguese plantations were in the north-east of the colony, while sugar processing and financing were in the hands of the Dutch, who managed to occupy Pernambuco in 1629 and to stay at Recife until 1654. Runaway slaves settled in the hilly forest areas, some fifty miles from the coast, at the beginning of the seventeenth century. During its initial years, Palmares ('palm groves' in Portuguese) derived its name from its many palmetto trees and its scattered hideouts. Several villages grew up in the foothills from 45 to 75 miles inland from the coastal plantations stretching over almost 100 miles running roughly parallel to the coast (Allen 1999: 144).

The first expedition against Palmares in 1612 attested to the importance of the polity already in the first years of the century. As the settlement continued to grow, the Dutch began to consider Palmares a serious threat, and attacked it several times. In the mid-1640s, Palmares already comprised nine separate villages (Fig. 1). After the Dutch left Brazil, the Portuguese carried out several expeditions against Palmares, with a systematic campaign to destroy it beginning in the 1670s (Funari 1999). Between 1670 and 1678, under the rule of Ganga Zumba or Great Lord, there seems to have been an active trade between Palmares and coast settlers (Rowlands 1999: 333). The decline in prices for sugar and competition from the Caribbean led to the increase in social contradictions between the élites themselves, and force was used to maintain order in a slave-holding society, including an increase in the attacks against Palmares.

The attacks sponsored by the authorities did not preclude a continued, unofficial and unsanctioned relationship between maroon residents and ordinary colonizers on the coast; however, the interests of plantation élites and non-élite commoners were not the same. Whereas planters suffered because of the escape of their slaves, non-élite settlers could profit from their relations with runaways, through the conduct of a healthy trade.

From the late 1670s, a new ruler of Palmares, King Zumbi, was in charge of its defence. Pioneers from the south of Brazil, known as Paulistas or bandeirantes, destroyed Macaco, the capital of Palmares, in 1694, and in the following year executed its leaders, including Zumbi.

Macaco was also known as 'Serra da Barriga', or Potbelly Hill, and the authors carried out archaeological fieldwork and identified several sites there (Orser 1994b). Much has been written about Palmares from historical evidence, but there had been no archaeological study before the 1990s. Pedestrian surveys to locate archaeological materials were followed by testing. In the late 1990s, fieldwork was continued (Allen 1999), and most of the material evidence consists of coarse pottery and ceramics. Three specific wares have been identified in the collection: native, unglazed pottery; European, glazed ceramics; and locally made, glazed ceramics.

The archaeological study of Palmares substantiated the notion that the men and women of the community struggled for freedom and resisted oppression (Funari 1995a). Documents often assume that slaves internalized their masters' *Weltanschauung* and mores (criticism in Glassman 1995: 140), producing a biased description of subaltern groups (cf. Funari 1997: 197). In 1613, the people of Palmares were described as the 'lazy and insulting inhabitants who run away from work' (Carneiro 1988: 50), and in the 1670s, they were said to be 'barbarians who [had] all but forgotten their subjugation' (Allen 1999: 147). The pottery produced or used in the capital tells a different story, as it reveals the cultural autonomy of the community (cf. Glassman 1991: 278). This autonomy, however, did not imply a lack of outside contacts, for the ceramics provide clear evidence of interaction with both native South Americans and transplanted Europeans. Interaction with the Europeans is evident in the use of European-style ceramics, with four varieties of lead-glazed, coarse earthenware in use. These wares were not greatly dissimilar from contemporary Portuguese and Dutch wares, suggesting relations with different colonialists. The wares were utilitarian in nature, suggesting that they were intended for non-élites living on the coast. If this interpretation is correct, then the coarse earthenwares indicate contacts between maroon residents and non-élite European colonials.

Contact with native Brazilians is also suggested by the pottery of native style. These Tupinamba vessels are similar to Ovimbundu African pottery, probably indicating a convergence of African and native traditions. There is no doubt that the pottery is of native South American style, probably because it was made by female native Brazilians, who were married to maroon residents. The escaped Africans may have felt comfortable with the Tupinamba pottery specifically because it did resemble that made in their native homeland. We have no evidence to suggest that the majority of male Africans controlled pottery production, either in Africa or in the Americas, and so we prefer to suppose that the pottery, as a female activitiy, was made by native South American women. Locally made wares were wheel-thrown and so far they have not been identified elsewhere. The pottery used at Palmares thus attests both to the integration of the runaway polity into a much wider world of exchanges – from the Brazilian coast to Africa and to Europe – and to the polity's unique character. The material world of Palmares was not native, European or African; it was specific, forged in their fight for freedom. The same conclusion was reached recently by Claudi R. Cròs: 'Palmares was at the heart of a large area of 27,000 square km., occupied by a federation of 11 maroons and several hamlets where lived, free, from 20 to 30 thousand Africans, Mixed people and even Native South Americans' (1997: 81). But freedom had a price: war.

Palmares was a community at war, fighting for its very existence, and the state of

continuous warfare strongly influenced every aspect of life in the villages. Archaeologically, it was possible to note that all the sites at the Serra da Barriga are located facing the south, in a strategic position in relation to the River Mundaú, used by colonial troops to attack the capital. This landscape is both natural and a cultural artefact. Its significance and the uses to which it was put were understood by Palmarino people, and were culturally prescribed (cf. Palmer 1998: 183). Resistance is, thus, written in the settlement pattern itself.

Historical accounts are biased against resistance fighters almost by definition. Even though slavery was widespread in Africa itself, it is not possible to take at face value a contemporary document in which the author attempts to explain the growth of the maroon by force, stating that 'slaves were taken out of plantations against their own will' (Carneiro 1988: 66). In this telling, Palmarinos menaced the enslaved with knives to impel them to join the maroon. The same biased view has often continued to be accepted by later authors, perhaps most notably by German historian Heinrich Handelmann who, in 1860, reproduced the same argument: 'The inhabitants of Palmares kept people of their own race in slavery, blacks and colored, if they fell in the hands of the runaways in expedition, they were split by the victors and used, they and their descent, as bonded maids. Only when they were recruited to the maroon on their own free will, they were accepted as citizens' (1987: 446). Handelmann, thus, makes the assumption that slaves would rather remain as chattel on the plantations than become servants at Palmares. The available archaeological evidence, however, does not support the idea that life at Palmares would be any harsher than in the plantations – even for servants – considering that there is no evidence of inhuman installations such as sugar mills at the maroon. Despite the bias of the German historian, it is symptomatic that he uses the word *Bürger* to refer to the Palmarinos, for it means both citizen and freeman.

Palmares as a whole, with its 20,000 inhabitants, sheltered probably one in three slaves in the colony, and the archaeological evidence from the capital of Palmares, despite the destruction of the site, is enough to substantiate the claim that it was a huge settlement, comparable only to the largest cities in the colony. The remains of this polity have been gaining attention only recently, but folklore and tradition kept alive several rituals commemorating the saga of these rebels. The residents of several towns in the north-east of Brazil hold festivals to celebrate their churches' patron saints. Many of these celebrations incorporate a mock fight that remembers Palmares. Called 'Quilombo', the fight pits runaway slaves against native Brazilians and occurs around a fortress. Inside the protected area are two thrones, one for the black king and one for the queen, a non-African girl. At one point during the re-enactment, the natives appear armed with bows and arrows, and led by a king clad in a red tunic and carrying a sword. This oral exchange then occurs between the two groups:

> Natives: Come on, come on, knives are not capable of killing even women . . .
> Africans: Don't worry, black man, the white man cannot come here. If he comes, the devil will take him.
>
> (Carneiro 1988: 80–1).

The fight terminates with the victory of the natives, who capture the king and the queen. Church bells then ring, the fortress is destroyed, the Palmarinos are sold and the queen is given to a local potentate.

This story reinterprets Palmares in a rather conservative way, but it also betrays some historical facts: the multicultural character of Palmares, the Indian troops used to assail the polity, and the mixed Indian/Portuguese heritage of the bandeirante Domingos Jorge Velho who commanded the final assault (Funari 1995b). Black and social activists in general have been reinterpreting Palmares for several decades, constituting the symbolic descendant community of the rebels (cf. McGuire 1992: 828). Since the 1970s, the Serra da Barriga has been used as meeting place for all those concerned with raising black consciousness in Brazil, and in the 1980s – with the restoration of national, civilian rule – it was declared a National Heritage Monument (Santos 1995). The archaeological study of the Serra da Barriga has focused the discussion on the importance of the site for a more democratic, less partial and racist interpretation of Brazilian society at large. Given this high profile, the national media have paid special attention to the site and have helped to contribute to a wider debate about the history and culture of Palmares.

Conclusion

Archaeology is in an excellent position to study the dynamic interaction between rulers and ruled, focusing on conflicts and social clashes (Funari et al. 1999). Historical archaeology can challenge master narratives of power which are often represented in documents, as we have shown in the comparative study of written sources on Palmares and material culture from the archaeological sites. Furthermore, we believe that the example of Palmares points to the importance of recognizing that archaeology deals with evidence of conflict as much as compliance, and that the archaeologist cannot claim to be a neutral observer of the evidence (Funari 1996). The material evidence from Palmares is, however, clear enough to challenge biased and conservative interpretations of the settlement (Funari and Podgorny 1998). Recognizing that what we as archaeologists do must be seen in the contexts of history and society (Shanks 1994: 32), the archaeology of slave resistance and rebellion can play an important role in fostering empowerment and critical awareness. Palmares is a reminder that archaeology can successfully play this role.

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