Catherine M. Cameron


Cameron, a prominent archaeologist of the native US Southwest, has been digging for more than a decade into the unexpected remains of abuse and presumed captivity in small-scale societies categorized in her discipline’s conventional modeling as pacific and egalitarian. This small book is her ambitious expansion of these reflections, based on widespread definite historical and possible archeological evidence of captives that she has found in those contexts on scales approaching global. She directs her commentary primarily to archaeologists, in the current interpretive vein that their field terms “post-processual,” since “historical,” the term for its logic that appeals to this reviewer, has long been taken there to refer to material remains studied in contexts of contemporary documentation. Her definition of “small scale” derives from archaeology’s simplistic evolutionary structural sequence of implicitly political ontology from small (also, even in this sophisticated treatment, termed “simple”) to “chiefdoms” to “states” (alone allotted “complexity”). Past heavily sociological modelings of “slavery” often allocated it only to the last, some even (implicitly) playing on the irony of the clear correlation of large-scale uses of slavery, seen as retrograde, with moments claimed in “western civilization” as “progressive.” Her examples extend well into political systems of considerable scale, treated accurately as the confederations that they were and thus avoiding—for the African examples—their misrepresentation as unified “kingdoms” or homogeneous “nations.” Fortunately, she writes systematically against the mislabeling of modesty in size as “simplicity” of any sort.

Against this background, Cameron’s convincing survey of the abundant ethnographic, ethnohistorical (as Native Americanists term their field), and historical (as historians of Africa, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere prefer) documentation amply confirms the presence, even centrality, of captives in these highly competitive, flexible, intricately differentiated, balanced, and dynamic communities. They, like acknowledged larger systems, often responded to changing historical contexts by taking in, or disposing of, captives. The revealing historical evidence includes first-person accounts of Europeans whom Native Americans held as captives but who returned home to tell their tales. She uses the evidence to illustrate a thoughtful assessment of the strategies of the multiple participants: the reasons why anyone might want to bring strangers into contexts presumed organized primarily around idioms of kinship and familiarity; the ranges of circumstances that made outsiders available (mostly kidnapping and “war,” though also trade and diplomacy); and the sev-
eral processes through which captives who were retained (and thus rendered “slaves”) become parts of their captors’ communities (or not), and the consequences of all of the preceding for the captors. The specifics are derived from Cameron’s wide-ranging reading in the literature on the Native Americas, perceptive, though selective, mining of materials on Africa, and a less extensive set of examples from archipelagic southeastern Asia.

The implicit thoroughly historical point is that taking captives—including the ones eventually enslaved—were captors’ means both of creating changes among themselves and with regard to others, as well as means of adapting to changes around them. For this reviewer, the core of the book is this historicity of the processes it explores, purposive on the parts of the captors and also, on the parts of the captives, dialectically contributing to the new and changing contexts in which both sides find themselves, even the enslaved. For her archaeological colleagues, in a book devoted to methods of creating change, Cameron accordingly cautions against projecting modern ethnographic descriptions back in time to interpret earlier archaeological assemblages. Against this methodological insistence on historicity she concludes by considering what might be the material (and hence recoverable) signatures of past captivities, or more likely the marks of the brutality assumed fostered by enslavement: segregated casual burials, especially of female bodies, broken bones, or genetic evidence of births in non-local populations, among others.

Cameron’s quite coherent modeling pulls together insights into slaving as a strategy of creating changes that will be familiar to Africanists and to ethnohistorians of the Native Americas, both of whom could profit by learning more about the other. For her, most (and at times implicitly all) captives came from wars and raiding that killed the males and yielded primarily women and children as captives, cutting cleanly through dense theoretical thickets of anthropological debates between Hobbesians and devotees of peaceable noble savages to reconcile the two abstracted contexts as historically entirely compatible. She understands that captors—or enslavers—wanted the people they obtained and were often prepared to allow them to make the contributions they sought by acquiring them. Among their attractions, she accents the value of the reproductive capacities of the women in bounded communities where sheer numbers often determined prospects, or even survival, the physical strength of boys and men sometimes assigned to drudge labor or to tasks gendered female, the unfamiliar skills and knowledge that they brought that were useful to the captors, including translation and diplomatic skills of multilingual survivors.

Cameron thus appreciates the essential historicity of acquiring outsiders for local purposes, or what—in another context—I have called “slaving.” For