

Barbadian Gothic: The Moving Coffins of the Chase Vault in Socio-Cultural Context

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Abstract

The Chase family vault (Oistins, Barbados) is widely known as the setting of a macabre early nineteenth-century story of moving coffins. On several occasions between 1812 and 1821, on opening the sealed vault to add a new burial, the neatly stacked coffins within (some of which were of heavy lead), were found scattered. This legend has never been examined within its contemporary setting, including the Gothic literary and cultural movement. This article seeks to show that the episode reveals much about the negotiation of power roles in an island society on the edge of slave rebellion, where the planter class were fearful of the enslaved peoples' continued practice of the banned spiritual and healing rituals known as Obeah. It further examines how the story reflects notions of otherness, death, materiality, and memory in early nineteenth-century Barbados, where the ordered Protestant world of the planters clashed with what they perceived as the elemental worldview of the enslaved African and Afro-Barbadian population.

Introduction

The starting point of this article is a celebrated and enduring Caribbean supernatural story of the macabre: the moving coffins of the Chase family burial vault, situated in the churchyard of Christ Church (Oistins) on the southern coast of Barbados (Figure 1). The longevity of this moving coffins legend became clear during a chance encounter with three young girls on a research visit to Christ Church graveyard in September 2017, where we had gone as part of a research project to record early colonial commemorative material culture. The girls, who were playing quite happily in the cemetery, knew about the story, but could not be induced to enter the now open vault because of the supernatural connection. They recounted to us terrible stories of what might befall anyone who entered the tomb, and how an English family that incautiously removed a stone from the vault and took it home with them, were allegedly followed by Poltergeist-like activity that only abated when the stone was returned (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Map of Barbados showing the key sites discussed in the text.

Figure 2. The Chase Vault, Christ Church, Oistins (photograph by Niall Finneran, 2017).

The recognition of the durability of this tale within modern Barbadian social memory provided the impetus to this study: here was an abandoned early nineteenth-century

Anglican Planter funerary monument that still maintained a strong emotional hold over the local (predominantly Afro-Caribbean) people who worship at Christ Church in the twenty-first century. Thus, in a post-colonial Caribbean context, we find all the ingredients of a nineteenth-century northern European macabre Gothic horror story: the inversion of order, disturbance of the dead, and supernatural agency. Although the tale of the moving coffins has enjoyed extensive retelling, it is more than a sensational ghost story. Drawing upon Caribbean vernacular and social history, religious themes, and archaeological analysis, we will show that the story of the Chase vault reveals much about the social tensions of early nineteenth-century Barbadian Protestant planter society, specifically around the time of Barbados' only major slave insurrection, the 1816 uprising (Barbados House of Assembly 1818, 26-34; Beckles 1984; Beckles 1985a; Beckles 1998a; Morris 2000). Moreover, the episode can be contextualized against wider global cultural movements, while also embodying the complexities and nuances of power relations in a time of uncertainty on one of Britain's wealthiest and most important sugar islands. This uncertainty was predominantly a result of the island's economic decline in the first years after the 1807 UK Act of Parliament outlawing the slave *trade*, although the Act did not criminalize slave *ownership*, which happened later, in 1833 (Lambert 2005a, 45).

Although an account of supernatural encounters during fieldwork is an unconventional start to an academic paper, it is perhaps the best approach to help frame some of the questions that form the basis of this article. As noted above, our visit to Christ Church formed part of a wider study of the island's funerary culture. Barbados retains a rich wealth of commemorative monuments dating from the mid-seventeenth century and taking the form of a variety of individual tombs, communal vaults, and memorial plaques within churches. Beyond the burial practices of the enslaved peoples (see, for example, Handler 1997a), these memorials have been scarcely studied; to date only two (unpublished) examples of surveys of funerary commemoration in Barbados have been undertaken (Bowey 2012; Cook 2016). Yet memorials offer an important and significant source of social and cultural evidence, embodying the potential to investigate issues of localized cultural innovation (see Finneran 2013 for a discussion of the inter-related concepts of innovation and creolization) and the construction of distinctive island cultural identities both in life and death. This is particularly the case with regard to how the Protestant planter class reconciled their role as 'good' Christians within an industrial monocultural activity (sugar planting) that, while generating great wealth, was based on great cruelty, underpinned as it was by forced African labour.

The Christ Church graveyard is especially well furnished with a large number and wide variety of tomb structures. These monuments capture a cross-section of changes in funerary material culture: from the zenith of the sugar planters' fortunes in the eighteenth century, through to Slave Emancipation in 1833, and the emergence of a new Afro-Caribbean interpretation of death and memory, into the

late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (where older forms of planter grave were reinterpreted in a more homespun manner), to the more American-influenced memorial culture of the present day, where large polished granite slabs predominate. One of the burial vaults, lying almost anonymously against the western wall of the graveyard, some twenty metres south-west of the western door of the church, is the focus of this study: the notorious Chase vault.

The Chase vault was at the centre of the macabre events that took place during the period 1812-1821. When deceased members of the Chase family (a local planter family whose name became a byword for great cruelty) were being interred, the coffins of the earlier incumbents (some of them made of wood and some of heavy lead) were found to have been violently displaced and thrown around, much to the consternation of the onlookers (Figure 3). It should be noted that after each interment the vault was sealed with a heavy stone slab, making the interior virtually inaccessible to chance intruders. In fact, such was the level of local concern about the disturbed coffins, and the tales that grew up to interpret the happenings, that the then Governor, Stapleton Cotton, first Viscount Combermere (1773-1865), took a personal interest in the case. To date, no convincing explanation for the phenomenon of the moving coffins has been forthcoming—only speculative theories. We seek to look deeper into the socio-cultural context of these early nineteenth-century events; events which shocked the white planter class of one of Britain's oldest Caribbean colonies.

Figure 3. Reverend Orderson's contemporary sketch of the state of the vault on its last opening (photograph by Niall Finneran of photocopy at Christchurch, Oistins, Barbados).

When we examined the context of the Chase vault story, it became evident that the episode was grounded in the events around 1816 when this corner of Barbados became the focus of a large-scale slave insurrection that started in the parish of St Philip, which adjoins the parish of Christ Church to the north-east, and then rapidly spread (Beckles 1985a). The further we unravelled the context of the story—examining its social, economic, and cultural backgrounds and setting them against contemporary events—the clearer it became that the tomb itself and its surrounding legend represent a cipher for the complex negotiation of power relations in an island on the edge of rebellion, and at a time of great economic anxiety for the dominant Protestant slave-owning class. In short, the development of the Chase vault legend reveals much about the mindset of the Anglican Barbadian plantocracy and their perception of the powers, imagined or not, of the resisting enslaved Africans who they believed, through magic, could move lead coffins and thus undermine the established Anglican psycho-social order of the sugar planters. Moreover, looking ahead to the observations made towards the end of this article on the wider

contemporary literary and cultural context of the legend, *we argue* that the northern European Gothic ‘mood’—*with its* emphasis on the supernatural, unreal, and disordered—overshadowed these events *even though they took place* on a small British colonial tropical outpost.

Telling the Tales

The legend of the Chase vault disturbances began in 1833 when a book written by the explorer Captain James Alexander (1803-1885) provided the first published account of the mysterious happenings (Alexander 1833, 161-63). A paper read to The Folklore Society in London by Andrew Lang (Lang 1907) developed the outline of the tale presented by Alexander, but drew attention to two sources that had subsequently come to light in Barbados. These were two accounts by Reverend Orderson, the Rector of Christ Church at the time of the events (an early contemporary account and a later published pamphlet that differed in slight detail), and a postscript that mentions briefly another eyewitness account by the Honourable Nathaniel Lucas, a member of the Barbados Assembly in the early nineteenth century. The story was then popularized (and arguably embellished and sensationalized) by the doyen of late nineteenth-century supernatural writing, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Conan Doyle 1919). In more recent times the story has been revisited in popular publications, notably by Robert Curran and Joseph Nickell (Curran 2013, 31-36; Nickell 1982; Nickell 2001, 229), and it is widely known and retold within contemporary Barbadian society (Kevin Farmer, pers. comm. 2017).

Alexander’s 1833 account provides a convenient overview for the chronology of the events witnessed at Christ Church. Three interments, all in wooden coffins took place from 1807 to 1812: Mrs Thomasina Goddard (1807), Miss Mary-Anne Chase (1808), and Miss Dorcas Chase (1812). In late 1812 the vault was once more opened to receive the body of Thomas Chase, and in Alexander’s words: ‘the first three coffins were found in a confused state, having been apparently tossed from their places’ (Alexander 1833, 162). The same disturbance was noted again when the vault was opened to receive a coffin containing the body of a child (Samuel Brewster Ames) in 1816, and shortly afterwards when the confined body of Samuel Ames, a militia member killed in the 1816 slave uprising, was placed in the vault. When the final coffin burial took place in the vault in 1819 (that of Thomasina Clark), the same picture awaited the burial party, and it is at this stage that the Governor of the island, Lord Combermere (Stapleton Cotton, First Viscount Combermere, 1773-1865) became involved. The coffins were re-arranged neatly under his supervision, sand was placed on the floor to capture the footprints of any intruders, and the tomb was sealed with a large stone slab cemented into place, into which the Governor placed his own personal seal. According to the legend, when the tomb was re-opened to check the state of the coffins in 1820, they were found in disarray but without any signs of forced entry. At this stage the coffins were re-interred elsewhere, and the

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tomb was abandoned. Alexander attempts to rationalize the incidents as being related to tectonic activity, but Barbados is not in an earthquake zone and as such his explanation is easily refuted.

Andrew Lang's 1907 account of the moving coffins in the Chase vault is important because it gives some wider cultural context to the case, drawing attention to at least three similar occurrences of moving coffins elsewhere in the world, two of which may have influenced the Chase account, and one of which (from an island in the Baltic) may have been completely inspired *by* the Chase vault occurrences. Lang notes the significant similarities between an 1844 case of moving coffins on the island of Oesel (now the Estonian island of Saaremaa) which involved placing a fine substance on the floor of the tomb to detect intruders and officials overseeing the sealing of the tomb. A suicide was involved in the Oesel case, and Lang links this with the Chase vault by suggesting that Dorcas Chase may have killed herself, slowly starving herself to death due to the abuse of her particularly cruel father, Thomas, who was also interred in the vault. Lang also refers to an undated (earlier) occurrence of moving coffins at Gretford, Lincolnshire, and to Nathaniel Lucas's account mentioning the moving coffins at 'Staunton', possibly Stanton All Saints, Suffolk. It is beyond the scope of this study to analyse similarities in the accounts closely, but they establish a wider cultural context for the legend of the disturbed burial vault. In short, what happened in Christ Church was not an isolated phenomenon and Lang wanted to highlight this.

Interestingly though, Lang did not choose to include the full eyewitness account of the Chase vault events by Nathaniel Lucas (these were not fully published in Lang's paper despite having been sent to him by a relative in Barbados), but clearly they form the basis of the Alexander publication in 1833 (Anon. 1945-46). What Lucas's account does is establish the prior history of the use of the vault and accurately describe its construction. Lucas tells us that the vault was half excavated from the island's coral geology, and half built using cut coral blocks before being sealed with a large and heavy block of 'Devonshire marble'. Burial records suggest that a James Elliot is recorded as being the first burial in the vault on 14 May 1724 (a fact we take issue with below), but it is clear that when Mrs Goddard was interred there in 1807, the body of the former resident was no longer in the tomb (Curran 2013, 32). It may have been transferred to another vault or grave, and this is an important point to note, as it appears that the post-mortem disturbance or movement of corpses to new resting places was accepted practice on the island. Indeed, the body of Samuel Brewster (adult), who was interred in the vault in 1816, had been removed from an earlier grave in St. Philip parish where he had been killed during the uprising (Aspinall 1945).

Later accounts of the moving coffins tend towards the sensational and add unsubstantiated layers to the original. In his version, Arthur Conan Doyle explains the movement of the coffins in his article 'The Law of the Ghost' published in *The Strand*

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Magazine, in terms of ‘overheated negroes’ with a good deal of ‘effluvial emanations’ (Conan Doyle 1919, 544). Further, he writes that the agency behind the phenomenon was explained, with ‘whites putting it down to vandalism and the negroes to ghosts’, while also reflecting that an explosion of corpse gas (a by-product of the natural decay process) could be to blame for the movement of the coffins (Conan Doyle 1919, 544). It must be remembered these were **mainly of heavy lead. The first three interred coffins were of wood with the coffins of the two Chase girls easy to move, but that of Thomasina Goddard would have been reasonably heavy. The later additions (1816 onwards) were as far as can be established, of lead and therefore extremely difficult to move. As such Conan Doyle’s explanation of is highly suspect.** Yet there has been a similar phenomenon reported from a family vault at St Philip in Barbados as late as the 1930s; here the problem was allegedly solved by the insertion of a pipe in the vault to ‘vent off corpse gas’ (Connell 1956, 53-66 and note 23). However, in both cases, with the vaults being below ground, they would be at a constantly low temperature, thus slowing decomposition. Regardless of the ambient temperature, it is during the bloating stage of decomposition (usually around days two to six) where gases from the bacteria feeding on the ruptured cells of the cadaver could potentially result in an exploding corpse. Thus, as with tectonic activity in a non-earthquake zone, corpse gas as an explanation for the moving coffins is implausible.

It is also pertinent to consider the content of more recent retellings because they also fossilize the DNA of the original tale, yet add speculative and occasionally odd details. Curran’s 2013 account, for example, stresses the cruel nature of Thomas Chase; he was ‘the most hated man on the island’ who committed suicide and mistreated his slaves. He also suggests that he had abused his infant daughter Mary Ann Marie, and that her older sister Dorcas (died 6 July 1812) was ‘unable to live with the horror of it all . . . [and] had starved herself to death’ (Curran 2013, 133). Curran establishes the idea that the Chase family had a sad history of unnatural (and therefore socially bad) deaths, and that even for the Barbadian planter class Thomas was especially cruel; although Curran cites no evidence for this assertion. This was therefore, according to Curran, an unfortunate family and given the potent historical connection between socially bad (non-normative, non-natural) deaths and the potential for unnatural post-mortem activity (as Lang noted with the Baltic case), perhaps a family that warranted the supernatural opprobrium they attracted. However, the burial of suicides in consecrated ground and with non-suicides would have been highly unusual. In the parish of St. Peter on the island there is a suicide ghost story. It is alleged that the last member of the Terrills, a leading family in the planter elite, committed suicide and was buried in the cellar of his home, Cabbage Tree Hall (now Alleyndale Hall); his ghost haunts the place to this day (Pariser 2000, 160). Regardless of its veracity, the tale suggests that suicides on the island, even of

the plantocracy, were not normally given a Christian interment and thus it seems probable that Thomas Chase did not kill himself.

Socially bad deaths are almost universally understood as those considered unnatural within their cultural context, and this applied as much to white Georgian society as to African and Afro-Barbadian beliefs. Typically, unnatural deaths, such as suicide or murder, were considered unruly and thus allowed for **equally** unnatural post-mortem activity that could potentially include some form of sentient **behaviour**, such as moving coffins. In Anglican society, even in Georgian times, suicides were often buried at crossroads. This practice was based on the theologically **inadmissible** folk belief that any ghost would be geographically confused; unable to go to heaven because of the sin of self-murder, they were believed to wander the earth (Halliday 2010). In traditional West African spiritual understandings, a socially bad death causes disease (and dis-ease) in the wider community (Bloch and Parry 1983, 16). Curran notes that concern about the strange occurrences within the Chase family vault had grown to such an extent that supernatural and dark practices were the talk of the town, with both ‘duppies and voodoo [*sic*]’ likely candidates for the disruptions (Curran 2013, 34). Duppies are malevolent spirits of dead ancestors in the belief system of Obeah, the African-originating spiritual lifeway of slaves brought to the British West Indies. In brief, Obeah can be understood as ‘a catch-all term that encompasses a wide variety and range of beliefs and practices relate to the control or channelling of supernatural/spiritual forces by particular individuals or groups for their own needs’ (Bilby and Handler 2004, 154). Although Obeah practice could be used malevolently, it was primary concerned with divination, protection from harm, and for healing purposes, with ritual experts typically ‘**skilled in the use of plant medicines**’ (Bilby and Handler 2004, 154; see also Handler 2000; Handler and Bilby 2001; Handler and Bilby 2012; Paton 2015; Richardson 1993).

Curran also repeats Nathaniel Lucas’s claim that the vault was initially constructed to take members of the Elliot family, with the Hon. James Elliot having it constructed in 1724 (Curran 2013, 32). However, a memorial to James Elliot in the church aisle at Christ Church (no longer extant) notes that he died on 14 May 1724, aged thirty-four years. The blue marble ledger states that the memorial was commissioned by his wife Elizabeth, and that his body lies beneath the slab (Oliver 1915, 112). So, while James Elliot may have commissioned the vault, he was clearly not laid to rest there. Curran goes on to claim that Elizabeth (James Elliot’s widow) died on 14 May 1794 and was placed in the vault, although when it was opened in 1807 to receive the body of Mrs Thomasina Goddard, as previously noted, the vault was empty. Curran states that Mrs Goddard was a member of the Walrond family, who had purchased the vault from the Elliots for their own family use (Curran 2013, 32). However, it appears that Elizabeth Elliot remarried, becoming Elizabeth Maxwell, and dying in 1750 (not 1794 as Curran asserts), with records of British slave-owners in Barbados noting that Elizabeth Elliot was in fact Elizabeth Walrond before marriage. As such, it is clear that the vault remained in the family on the maternal side rather than being sold on for the use of a socially or biologically unconnected family; Thomasina Goddard was also a Walrond by birth (UCL 2019). Interestingly though,

there is no record of a memorial to Elizabeth Elliot or Elizabeth Maxwell (nor to her second husband Thomas Maxwell) in Oliver's exhaustive *The Monumental Inscriptions of the Churches and Churchyards of the Island of Barbados; British West Indies*. This book provides a list of all the memorials on the island that were extant in 1913/1914, although given that the Maxwells were owners of the Walrond plantation, and that Elizabeth Maxwell (née Walrond, and previously Elliot) willed the plantation to her nephew, Thomas Maxwell Adams, at her death, it could be that she and Thomas Maxwell were buried on plantation land, with the memorials lost by the time Oliver conducted his fieldwork. That Lucas was incorrect about the provenance of the vault throws some doubt on his eyewitness testimony.

Finally, the issue (or non-issue) of Masonic involvement with the Chase vault needs to be briefly addressed. Nickell claims that the whole episode was an elaborate Masonic hoax perpetuated by the island's Freemasons (who counted Lord Combermere among their members). For example, Lucas's account mentions workmen tapping of the floor of the vault with a hammer to test its solidity. This can be read as having Masonic overtones due to the symbolism of the hammer (or gavel-hammer) in Freemasonry. In 1 Kings 6:7 we find that the Temple of Solomon, the most perfect human construction, was built without the sound of hammers. Thus, in Freemasonry, the use of the hammer reminds adherents that they should try to perfect themselves, and divest their 'hearts and consciousness of all the vices and superfluities of life' (Davis 1843, 151). Additionally, cement (which was used to seal the vault after the final interment overseen by Lord Combermere) is symbolic in Freemasonry of 'that which unites the brethren' (Nickell 2001, 229). Nickell argues, therefore, that the tale is nothing more than an allegory relating to a secret vault for Freemason initiation rites (Nickell 1982).

It may be pertinent here to note that when in 1943 the vault of the founder of Freemasonry on Barbados, Alexander Irvine (1694-1743), was opened, his coffin was also found to be disturbed (Aspinall 1945, 130-31), but the author of the paper offers no further observations or explanations. Irvine's vault can still be seen today in St Michael's Cathedral churchyard where it remains of interest to local and visiting Freemasons. A further intriguing Masonic context is suggested by a correspondent to the *Fortean Times* who draws attention to the fact that James Asperne (1757-1820), the author and publisher of the problematic account of moving coffins at 'Staunton'/Stanton in Suffolk (mentioned earlier), was a prominent Freemason (Utting 2017). The Staunton case appears to have been published around the same time as the events at the Chase vault were occurring.

The information above comprises the essential elements for the biography of the Chase vault legend; a biography that is marked by confusions and inaccuracies. What has been established is that the moving coffins appear to have been attested to by high-ranking persons in Barbadian society and that the purported activity occurred around the time of a slave revolt in that part of the island. Further, we have found

that the story has a wider cultural context and that moving coffins are not unique to this vault. Finally, it is clear that the events were shocking to the white elite, as they offended all known socio-cultural mores surrounding the normative Anglican planter perception of death with its 'rest in peace' rhetoric (see for example the Collect in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*). We now peer deeper into the psychological, historical, and cultural context of the legend whose genesis and development are delineated above.

An Island on the Edge: Landscapes of Order and Disorder

By the early nineteenth century Barbados was undergoing a period of economic and social instability, although it was one of the wealthiest of the Anglophone Caribbean islands (Engermann 1981). Barbados had been solidly English or British since 1627, and many fortunes had been made on the back of the monocultural sugar system, although much of this wealth was built upon the extensive use of imported West African enslaved labour, drawn mainly, but not exclusively, from the Akan peoples of the Gold Coast (modern Ghana) and the Igbo and Ibibio peoples of the Bight of Biafra (modern Nigeria) (Schroeder et al. 2009).

Of all of the Anglophone Caribbean islands there was a greater imbalance of African enslaved to white planters on Barbados, with a rough ratio of about 4:1 (Higman 1986). This is explained by the fact that the island was so heavily focused upon sugar production. On other British sugar islands, mountainous geography militated against dense plantation occupation; so in basic terms this demography can be explained by the simple fact that more enslaved people were needed here, as more sugarcane could be grown. Another important demographic factor to note is that Barbadian planters did not need to import new enslaved peoples from Africa, but were largely able to maintain numbers through population increase (Handler and Lange 1978, 22 and 29). Thus, most of the enslaved were Afro-Barbadian rather than African per se. Towards the end of the slave trade and particularly after the 1807 Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, financial incentives for enslaved women to bear children were introduced on several plantations across the island, yet the birth rate remained below that of the death rate (Morrissey 1986). The cultural implications of these factors suggest a gradual evolution of a stronger and more coherent localized Afro-Barbadian culture.

The geographical conditions of the island also had an impact upon the potential for resistance by the enslaved (Craton 2009). On Barbados, essentially a low-lying coral island, plantations dominated the landscape and the lack of mountains and forests ensured that maroon communities of self-liberated slaves, such as existed widely in the Cockpit Country and Blue Mountains of Jamaica, for example (Agorsah 1994; Campbell 1998), and in the St Lucian hinterland (Devaux 1997), did not become widely established (Beckles 1985b; Handler 1982; Handler 1997b; Heuman 1985). However, recent archaeological research by Douglas

Armstrong suggests that caves along the west-facing escarpment in St. Peter and St. James parishes were probably widely utilized as secret meeting places and places of refuge for run-away slaves, with the material indications of ritual behaviour there—such as the structured burial of iron implements, sacred in broad West African ritual traditions (Armstrong 2015). This is indicative of African belief systems; systems that the ruling elite not only disapproved of, but actively attempted to ban on numerous occasions.

For the most part though, Barbados was spared major slave revolts, although there had been minor outbreaks of violence in 1675 and 1692 (Handler 1982). These seventeenth-century conspiracies by the enslaved population were nipped in the bud by the authorities relatively quickly, and although there was a residual fear of the organizational capacities of the enslaved (Sharples 2015), in general there was more of a concern over run-aways, the withholding of labour, and petitioning to estate managers over ‘conditions of work and leisure, than to armed insurrections’ (Beckles 1985b). In 1816, however, this sense of complacency was shattered. On Easter Sunday, 14 April 1816, a localized slave rebellion broke out in St Philip parish and rapidly spread. At this time there are estimated to have been about 75,000 African enslaved on Barbados, and at its height the rebellion involved anywhere from three to five thousand slaves, not an insignificant number (Beckles 1985; Morris 2000). Within four days the rebellion had been crushed and one of its leaders, a slave by the name of Bussa, was executed. This did not put an end to all enslaved resistance, brutal as the colonial response had been. Members of the convicted rebels were publicly executed in various parishes as an example to the other enslaved, and ‘their bodies—sometimes often just their heads—were in many cases exposed on their home estate’ (Craton 2009, 264-65). For the purposes of this study, it is pertinent to note that three slaves were executed in the Christ Church parish (Beckles 1984). The response from the island’s elite, which included the white militia, was ‘violent in the extreme’ (Walvin 1994, 275). It is inconceivable that the events of 1816 did not have an impact upon the psyche of the white Protestant plantocracy (Lambert 2005b). Indeed, it likely further engendered a fear of the enslaved people’s religious practices, too—here in the shape of Obeah (Beckles and Watson 1987; Beckles 1998b).

At this point it is worth considering how the planter class ordered the landscape around them, to negotiate social roles and provide an element of control. Within the wider context of studies of domination and resistance by the enslaved in the New World, important contributions have been made by archaeologists. A stand-out case study remains the work of Mark Leone (2005). His ideas have been echoed in the work of the British archaeologist Matthew Johnson on the emergence of capitalism, and the imposition of the ‘Georgian Order’, as he defines the cultural *habitus* of the eighteenth century in Great Britain and its colonies, an order based

upon control and surveillance (Delle 2014; Johnson 1995; Leone 1984, 1988, 1995; Wood 2007).

Early nineteenth-century Barbados society was built upon an inequality reliant upon control through social and cultural frameworks rather than a classic Marxist economic framework. Clearly the ‘moving coffins’ story was deployed to a very specific effect and at a very specific time, in response to a very specific set of unsettling events—a tale of physical disorder when social disorder threatened long-established order (e.g. Reilly 2015). The ‘habitus’, or cultural framework, of Barbados was predicated upon correct behaviour and order, and power was reproduced through a series of institutions controlled by the plantocracy: the Assembly, the military, the economy, and the Anglican (Protestant) Church. These elements formed and mediated the ideology of life in early nineteenth-century Barbados, which in turn provided the ‘structuration’ (to use Anthony Giddens’s terminology) of social and cultural mores of all the agents who inhabited this framework (Giddens 1984). So, for the planter class, their emphasis was upon the interconnected notions of Protestant Christian behaviour, order, culture, consumption, safety, and obedience. Set against this was *their* perception of the enslaved population: un-Christian, disordered, nature-focused, producers, sources of potential danger, and disobedience.

Taking Leone’s lead, it is possible to see how the oppositional ideologies perceived by the ruling elite, with their inherent power relations, were mapped onto the island landscape. Plantation houses, ordered in structure and appearance, directed the focus onto the main economic nodes of the landscape. Ordered field and industrial systems surrounded these units, while on their periphery the villages of the enslaved provided a locus for passive resistant behaviour. The legal machine manifested itself in judicial execution and places of incarceration. Georgian parish churches, along with their associated ‘chapels of ease’, dotted the landscape and acted as centres of ecclesiastical power for planters through the ‘vestry system’. The vestry system in Barbados comprised up to sixteen men (church officials, local justices or planters, and annually elected members) who levied taxes and appointed parochial officers; they provided important political and economic components in their own right (Singh 1970, 23; Delle 1998; Harkin 2002). Through this habitus, Barbadian Protestant planters of the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century went about their lives, and when they died they went to their eternal rest in solidly-constructed monumental tombs in Anglican churchyards. The physical form of the burial was surely important (Colvin 1991). The vault was communal and familial; it allowed for extended family members to be buried together, thus preserving and solidifying, in life and death, social identity and social status and also making a statement about belonging to and being fixed in a place (Lull 2000; Chapman 2003).

The Protestant planters’ approach to death contrasted with that of their Afro-Barbadian enslaved in reality, and especially in terms of colonial ideology. Planters

perceived their enslaved to be governed by what they saw as superstition and witchcraft in the form of Obeah, a belief system deemed so subversive it was repeatedly criminalized; notably at this time slaves could not be baptized as slaveholders 'had doubts whether conversion did not imply freedom' (Smith 1950, 172; Gerbner 2010; for the criminalization of Obeah see Browne 2011; Handler and Bilby 2012; Paton 2009). Archaeologically, a few furnished slave graves at Newton's Plantation dating mainly from the seventeenth century hint at hybrid burial traditions, and perhaps an Obeah-like expression of funerary treatment, but these are few in number and it is evident that more work on African burial forms is needed in the area (Handler 1997a). In any case, the contrast in burial treatment is clear: the dominant ideology is based upon the fixed communal tomb in a prescribed Anglican landscape. The Chase vault is just one example of this form of mortuary behaviour.

Military installations also provided a strong arm for political control, and it is important to examine in some detail not only the attempts to bolster the security of the island, but also the character of the man who oversaw these efforts: the Governor, Lord Combermere. Barbadian fortifications were initially constructed to fight off invasion from other European powers, but one might argue that after the events of 1816 they became part of a chain of surveillance and control, with the construction by Lord Combermere of a system of fortifications and signal stations explicitly designed to warn of rebellion and to assist the forces of 'law and order' to swiftly and decisively crush any uprising (Armstrong 2013; Barbados National Trust 1983; Finneran 2012; Hall 1971; Hartland 2007).

Combermere was a seasoned and decorated military commander, distinguished in the Peninsular Wars, and a man who took much interest in the military matters of the island, especially concerning internal security and the preservation of the law. It is notable that Combermere was not only Governor of Barbados, but was also Commander-in-Chief, and was thus able to use his two leading roles to construct a network of six impressive fortified signal stations by circa 1818 (Highgate in Wildey in St. Michael parish, Gun Hill in St. George parish, Moncrieffe in St. Philip parish, Cotton Tower in St. Joseph parish, Grenade Hall in St. Andrew parish, and Dover Fort in St. Peter parish). These stations used semaphore as a means of communication, thus allowing messages to cross the island quickly. They were paid for by the government, but manned by the military (Barbados National Trust 1983, 3-4).

Combermere came to the island in March 1817, eleven months after the uprising. A series of dispatches held by the National Archives in Kew stands as testimony to the destruction of property by the 'insurgents' during this uprising, and notes the probable cause, which Col. Edward Codd, Commander of the Imperial Garrison, asserts (to the then Governor of the island, James Leith), is that the enslaved believe the 'island belongs to [the negroes] not to white men, whom they propose to destroy' (National Archives, 1816; Cranton 2009: 260). It is evident that

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Combermere came to the island minded to bolster its internal security in the wake of the rebellion and concomitant fears of future troubles.

Allied to Combermere's perceived need for internal security is the criminalization of Obeah, seen to be a factor in the organization of the rebellion. Obeah signified witchcraft in the British colonial mind (Richardson 1993, 4), and it is notable that the term 'Witchcraft' is explicitly mentioned in the Reverend Orderson's account of the Chase vault moving coffins; indeed, he used the term to legitimize his investigations into non-Christian activity on the island (Curran 2013, 36). Obeah, like Vodou, suggested a form of political power for the enslaved, and a number of uprisings included aspects of Vodou or Obeah practice: the Saint Domingue rebellion of 1750 was initiated by the Vodou priest (*houngan*) François Mackandal (Joseph 2014, 49-55); a rebellion on Antigua in 1736 was started by Price Klaas, an Obeah man (Gaspar 1978); an Obeah man also started the Tacky rebellion in Jamaica in 1760 (Brown 2003). It was this latter incident that led to the Jamaican Law of 1760 that banned Obeah on penalty of death (Bohls 2013, 69). Barbados first brought in a similar law on 4 November 1806 (Handler 2000), and part of the preamble to the legislation stated 'valuable slaves have lost their lives or have otherwise been materially injured in their health' due to Obeah. Obeah was believed to negatively affect the production capacity of the enslaved (Paton 2015, 92), and also provided the most obvious explanation for the supernatural events taking place at the Chase vault.

It is clear that as well as a white fear of black rebellion and a concern over non-Christian and magical practices, a capitalist anxiety over the potential loss of valuable human labour was behind this legislation. The Act proved ineffective, however, and so on 28 June 1818, and again on 26 May 1819, 'Acts for the Better Prevention of the Practice of Obeah' were instituted in Barbados. Both fell within the purview of Lord Combermere who was appointed on 17 June 1817 and was succeeded on 12 June 1860 by John Braithwaite Skeete (acting) (Schomburgk 1848, 41 and 49). The 1818 'anti-Obeah' Act, signed by Combermere's Acting Clerk to the General Assembly, and passed unanimously, is worth noting in some detail, and states:

Any person who shall wilfully, maliciously, and unlawfully pretend to any magical and supernatural charm or power, in order to promote the purposes of insurrection or rebellion of the enslaved within this island, or to injure and affect the life and health of any other person, or who wilfully and maliciously shall use or carry on the wicked and unlawful practice of Obeah, shall upon conviction thereof suffer death or transportation . . . And it be further enacted . . . if any person in the practice of Obeah or otherwise, shall mix or prepare, or have in his or her possession, any poison, or any noxious or destructive substance, or . . . thing whatsoever, although death may not ensue [shall] . . . together with his or her counsellors, aiders and

abettors . . . suffer death, transportation or such other punishment as the court . . . think proper. (Barbados House of Assembly 1827, 197)

The 1819 'anti-Obeah' Act includes the ineffectiveness of prior legislation and, enacted directly by Combermere and again passed unanimously, largely contains the same legislation as the 1818 Bill. However, it stipulates that slaves go before 'two justices of the peace and three freeholders' for trial, whereas 'free persons' are tried before the Court of Grand Sessions (Barbados House of Assembly 1827, 269). It seems that one of the issues concerning the earlier act was that of Obeah practised by freed slaves. In exploring the two Acts instituted by Governor Combermere, it is evident that Obeah (effectively considered a form of witchcraft by the government) aroused a genuine fear. Combermere himself was a devout Anglican, instituting 'The Barbados Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge' (Cotton and Knollys 1861, 321) and therefore his anti-Obeah stance can be understood as a religio-political act that sought to suppress both potential rebellions by the enslaved and the dangerous practice of magic.

It seems unsurprising, therefore, that with the unruly continuation of the prohibited practice of Obeah acting as a potent backdrop to colonial island concerns, the rapid instillation of signal stations to better fortify Barbados against internal struggles was a priority for the Governor. Combermere was not an uncontroversial figure on the island, and one of his first acts caused a rupture between himself and the House of Assembly (Schomburgk 1848, 401)--a dispute which lasted until his departure (Cotton and Knollys 1866, 321). The local newspaper, *The Globe*, also had issues with Combermere, opposing his use of the militia as a personal guard of honour. The printer and publisher of the paper, Michael Ryan, was eventually arrested for libel and for trying to provoke insubordination in the militia (Cotton and Knollys 1866, 323-24).

The island under Combermere increasingly became a place of surveillance, with the people watching the slaves for signs of restlessness, and the militia watching the people. The erection of the signal stations doubtless caused an increase in taxes, as their construction costs were covered by the Assembly; this would not have played well to islanders already discontented with their Governor. Therefore, it would not be beyond the bounds of credibility for Combermere to play on the fears of white Protestant islanders over the practice of Obeah among the slaves and over the potential for further insurrections by using the strange happenings in the Chase vault to raise the levels of concern, and to provide a valid justification for the increased security and its allied costs.

To sum up, we have considered the frameworks of power that existed in early nineteenth-century Barbados. From this overview one can see the mechanisms through which the planter class enforced its hegemony both in life and in death. We now build upon two contentions established in the foregoing paragraphs, namely

that this was an apprehensive society, ill at ease and aware of contestations to their normative, ordered lives. The historical events of the slave rebellion, the banning of Obeah as a ritual practice, and the construction of the new fortification system by the Governor Lord Combermere—all within the space of a few years in the late first to early second decade of the nineteenth century—all betoken some degree of fear of ‘loss of control’. It is also evident that burial practices among the planters strongly emphasised communality and order; thus, what could be more upsetting during this period of unease and uncertainty than an act of desecration against the Protestant dead? To the Protestant plantocracy, such an unnatural act could easily be read as deriving from supernatural agency (here Obeah) that in all likelihood had a link to the rebellious enslaved.

Why the Coffins Moved

Disturbance of the dead is a culturally specific phenomenon, and not always seen in negative terms. In medieval Roman Catholic England, the removal of bones to charnel houses was not uncommon, but post-Reformation Protestant theology emphasised the individual, so that by the 1700s charnel houses were deemed indecent. However, for those wealthy enough, private family vaults allowed for an appropriate community of deceased individuals (Houlbrooke 1999, 193). Examinations of memorials on the island show that white commemorative culture in Barbados echoed that in England. While the concept of relocating the dead, as many ethnohistorical and archaeological studies indicate, is a common global phenomenon, in Anglican society (and beyond) it has long had negative connotations (see, for example, Bentel 2001; Grimes 1986; O’Dell 2013; Parker-Pearson 1993). Thus, the very act of moving a coffin and disordering a tomb would have been seen as an affront to the ideological order of the Protestant plantocracy of Barbados, an affront orchestrated by the slave practice of Obeah, a practice that also underpinned the 1816 rebellion and which threatened the island as a whole. In short, for the Governor, Obeah had to be undermined and its threat made very clear to a white planter population that would soon be asked to fund a complex system of military surveillance. The events of the Chase vault (with initial reports dating from 1812, **five years before Combermere’s arrival**), provided the pretext.

The idea of the moving coffins also had a wider contemporary cultural currency. Standing outside of the island, we can see how the subject matter of this kind of legend fits within in the context of the nascent Romantic era (Cranston 1994). Rooted in the German *Sturm und Drang* literary movement of the late eighteenth century, and a reaction to Enlightenment-era scientific paradigms, the Romantic worldview represented a return to an almost medieval perspective, placing emphasis upon magic, creativity, and superstition (Runge 1972). Within the literary canon of the period, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a Gothic novel essentially based upon corpse desecration (and a turning upside down of the ‘natural’ order of behaviour) was a

bestseller from the time of its publication in 1818. The moving coffins legend belongs squarely to this *zeitgeist* (Hume 1969). Indeed, as we have shown, there are a series of roughly contemporary accounts of moving coffins that could have shaped and informed the Chase legend, and brought the Gothic mood into the Caribbean.

The Barbadian planter class was subject to a number of competing social, cultural, and economic pressures. The decline of the wealth tied up in the sugar system at the time of slave emancipation led to an erosion in their fortunes and a concomitant development of an awareness that their lives had changed forever. The violence of the slave revolt, which **seemed to** essentially come from nowhere, exacerbated the tensions and further eroded safe certainties, and in any case these planter families would not have been so culturally insulated that they were not aware of the wider influences of the Romantic movement in general and the Gothic mood in particular. The renewed fascination with the macabre and the supernatural made for a ready environment for fevered speculation and hysteria, especially when confronted with an event that defied all cultural and religious norms. It is argued then that wider cultural, social, political, and economic events made the legend more immediate and believable.

We have outlined the multi-scalar contexts of this legend. On the local scale, the events at Christ Church occurred within a society that emphasised an ideology of control and surveillance within an Anglican Christian setting. It was however, a time when these perceived certainties were disintegrating in Barbados, and indeed across the wider Caribbean. Fear—of both the organizational capacity of the African and Afro-Barbadian enslaved to rebel and of their poorly understood cosmology (Obeah)—manifested itself in legal statutes and overt militarization of the island landscape, thus reinforcing the notion of surveillance and control. If the coffins did move, and the story was not a complete fabrication, there are two possible explanations. The first is that the African slaves in the vicinity of Christ Church may well have been motivated by their hatred for the plantocracy to take action to upset a potent symbol of planter dominance, in this case the Chase family burial vault; the vault's location against the wall of the cemetery close to the gates would most likely have made it vulnerable. This is the most likely explanation for the events, if they actually occurred. The second possible explanation is that Combermere either had his own men move the coffins to create just enough social unease to ensure his fortifications were expedient, or he arranged for a series of reports to be made, again to service his own ends. However, Combermere arrived on Barbados in 1817 and the first stories of coffins moving in the Chase vault date to 1812. It seems therefore that Combermere capitalized on an already established legend. On a wider scale, and crossing cultural boundaries, the emergent Romantic Movement was spawning a literature very much focused upon human despair and deviant behaviour. This is clear from a consideration of the popular and widely read Gothic literature of the time, and from the other tales of moving coffins. Cultural tastes had turned to the

consumption of the macabre, the bizarre, and the dark. Into the fevered atmosphere of the plantation island on the brink of chaos came a deviant and macabre act of grave desecration—that is if the coffins were moved at all, and it is entirely possible that the story was manufactured **initially to reinforce the 1806 anti-Obeah legislation (Handler 2000: 61)**, or at the least embellished to justify increased internal surveillance and far stronger anti-Obeah legislation after the events of 1816.

Acknowledgements

This paper benefitted from the involvement of a number of individuals in Barbados ready to share their perspective on what is still a big local story. Dr Kevin Farmer of Barbados Museums and Professor Karl Watson, as ever, were mines of local social history, and some local members of the Christ Church community added their own ideas and theories. We thank especially Dr Matthew Reilly for detailed and pertinent comments on the draft manuscript. Two anonymous referees provided valuable and exhaustive comments and the authors thank them for their attention to detail. Funding was provided by the Research and Knowledge Exchange grants from the University of Winchester. **Please note that every attempt has been made to establish the copyright of the image reproduced in figure 3, but enquiries locally have failed to do so. We are assured that the image, drawn in the early 19th century is original and is thus out of copyright.**

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