

“Distant Freedom: St Helena and the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave, 1840-1872

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In 2008, archaeological excavations in Rupert’s Valley, on the South Atlantic island of St Helena, unearthed the graveyards of thousands of “recaptive” or “liberated Africans”. These people – virtually the last victims of the notorious Middle Passage – had been aboard slave ships intercepted by Royal Naval patrols, but had died on their voyage to St Helena, or subsequently in the refugee camps set up on the island to receive them.

During the middle decades of the 19th century, St Helena played a pivotal, but almost totally forgotten, role in Britain’s military campaign to suppress the Atlantic slave trade. For three decades it served as the principal base from which naval vessels operated, and during this period the island took in over 25,000 liberated slaves.

This lecture tells the story of this overlooked outpost of Abolition. In its first part it considers the diplomatic circumstances that brought St Helena’s “Liberated African Establishment” into being, and the longer-term articulation of power between the Imperial government, its distant South Atlantic colony and the Royal Navy. All these factors would be critical in shaping the circumstances in which the recaptives would live – and die – after their arrival at the island. The second part of the lecture comes to rest on St Helena. Drawing on a combination of historical sources and archaeological evidence, it describes the experiences of all those – both African and European – whose lives were drawn into the compass of Abolition, long after 1807 and far from the political ideals of London.