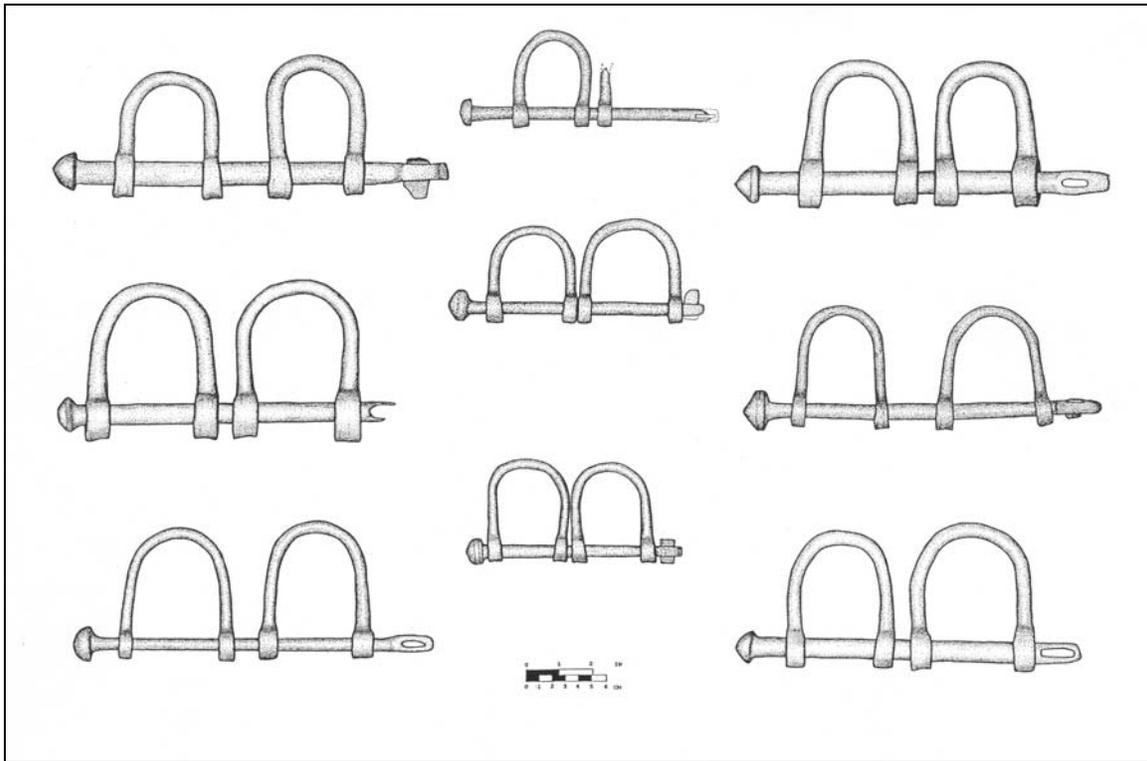


The Iron Bilboes of the *Henrietta Marie*

by Corey Malcom

Reprint from *The Navigator: Newsletter of the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society, Vol. 13, No. 10*
October, 1998



Various types of Bilboes recovered from the *Henrietta Marie*.
Drawing Corey Malcom/MFMHS.

Of all the artifacts recovered from the wrecksite of the *Henrietta Marie*, none serve as stronger icons for her involvement in the slave trade than the crude iron restraints known as bilboes. They succinctly express the grim nature of a voyage in which a group of people was forcibly held, and shipped as a cargo. Bilboes gave the slavers a physical and psychological advantage, allowing them to control the Africans from the time they were put aboard the ships until they could be safely delivered to the markets of the Americas. By inhibiting resistance and rebellion by the captives, they prevented physical injury to crew or cargo that might result from any such insurrection. A sufficient number of components - shackles, bolts and wedges - were found on the wreck that, when assembled, once formed just over eighty bilboes; enough to hold more than 160 people.

Throughout the history of the slave trade, items of restraint have been called by many names, including *fetters, irons, manacles, hand bolts, givies, shackles, and handcuffs*. But whatever the name, their purpose was singular, to limit or deny the free movement of a group of African men, women and children, and make them available for sale.

A common belief is that bilboes came to England from Spain during the Armada campaign of 1588, when the invading Spanish supposedly carried them by the dozens in anticipation of taking English prisoners (Earle, 1896). The word bilbois beleieved to be derived from the name of the northern Spanish port, Bilbao (ibid.). Bilboes certainly were used in early colonial Spain, and have been recovered from two Spanish shipwrecks in the Americas;

the Molasses Reef wreck, tentatively dated to ca. 1513, and thought to have been a slaver capturing Lucayan Indians (Keith, 1988), and the galleon *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* of 1622. They remained in use through the period of the United States' Civil War, with a set recovered from the site of the ironclad CSS *Georgia*, wrecked in 1862 (Garrison and Anuskiewicz, 1987).

Bilboes were used both on land and sea to hold and punish those who committed offenses against society. In the earliest American colonies, they served effectively as low-cost, self-contained "prisons". In Boston during the 1630's offenders would be "sett in the bilbowes", which had been imported from England, in the town square in full public view (Earle, op.cit.). An early treatise on sea service describes that among the duties of the boatswain, "... he is (in the nature of a Provost Marshal at land) to see all offenders punctually punished, either at the capstan, or by being put in the bilboes..." (Boteler, 1685).

Exactly when bilboes were put to use in the slave trade is unclear, but contemporary references from European sources provide the reasoning for their implementation. Restraining the Africans could effectively prevent rebellion and suicide, which always loomed as threats to the success of any slaving voyage. An uprising by slaves was not only perceived as a threat to a ship's crew, but to any profit as well. If the Africans did manage to take up arms, the Europeans would have been compelled to protect themselves, and possibly injure or kill them. From the slaver's perspective, this would be destroying cargo, which, obviously, ran counter to their purpose.

The owners of the *Dispatch*, writing in 1725, instructed their captain, William Barry,

"So soon as you begin to slave let your knetting be fix'd breast high fore and aft and so keep 'em shackled and hand Bolted fearing their rising or leaping Overboard , to prevent which let always a Constant and Carfull watch be appointed to which must give the strictest Charge for the preservation of their own lives, so

well as yours and on which the voyage depends..."

Other writers involved in the slave trade express similar reasons for shackling, but also, they describe the manner in which the Africans were held. Consistently, it is seen that it was usually the adult male captives who were joined by irons, in pairs. Captain Thomas Phillips of the Royal African Company's *Hannibal*, which sailed to Guinea in 1693-94, describes, "When our slaves are aboard we shackle the men two and two, while we lie in port, and in sight of their own country, for 'tis then they attempt to make their escape, and mutiny...(Dow, p.73)." Alexander Falconbridge, who served as a surgeon in the slave trade during the latter part of the 18th century, wrote, "The men negroes, on being brought board ship, are immediately fastened together, two by two, by hand-cuffs on their wrists and by irons rivetted on their legs. (1788, p.19)", but he goes on to describe how this situation could become problematic. "It often happens, that those who are placed at a great distance from the buckets [toilets], in endeavouring to get to them, tumble over their companions, in consequence of being shackled. These accidents, although unavoidable, are productive of continuous quarrels... (ibid., p.20)." Capt. William Snelgrave, a slaver with over thirty years' experience, describes, from 1754, a somewhat more judicious use of restraint for the Africans, "When we purchase the Negroes, we couple the sturdy men together with irons; but we suffer the Women and Children to go freely about: And soon after we have sail'd from the coast we undo all the mens Irons." (Dow, p.131). Finally, James Barbot, Jr. recorded in his narrative of the voyage of the English slaver *Don Carlos*, a scenario where the Africans mutinied, and probably felt that, for once, their bilboes were being put to the best use;

"... as having premeditated a revolt, and seeing all the ship's company, at best weak and many quite sick, they had also broken off the shackles from several of their companions feet, which served them, as well as billets they had provided themselves with, and all other things they could

**lay hands on, which they imagin'd
might be of use for this enterprize.
Thus arm'd, they fell in crowds and
parcels on our men..."**

There are few accounts of the slave trade recorded from the African perspective, but one, that of Olaudah Equiano, who was captured and put into slavery as a boy, describes the psychological terror induced by the sight of his countrymen in shackles and chains. After having been sold to English slavers in the mid-1700's, he entered their ship to await transport to the Americas;

**" When I looked around the ship too,
and saw a large furnace of copper
boiling, and a multitude of black
people of every description chained
together, every one of their
countenances expressing dejection and
sorrow, I no longer doubted of my
fate; and, quite overpowered with
horror and anguish, I fell motionless
on the deck and fainted. (in
Bontemps, 1969 p.27)"**

From even these few accounts, it can be seen that bilboes served as a way to ensure that African captives taken into the slave trade were more easily kept and transported during at least portions of the voyage to the Americas. By being able to restrain their unwilling merchandise, the slavers could increase the likelihood of a safe, and profitable delivery.

The basic design of the *Henrietta Marie* bilboes is one that went virtually unchanged for at least three centuries in Western Europe and the American colonies. Two U-shaped shackles fit over the ankles or wrists of the slaves, too tightly to slip hands or feet through. Loops at each terminus slid onto a bolt fashioned from iron round-stock. The bolt had a larger diameter head forged onto one end, and a slot pierced into the other. The large head served as a stop to keep the loops from sliding over the end of the bolt. The same effect was achieved at the other end by hammering an iron wedge tightly into the slot, locking the shackles, and thus the prisoners, to the bolt and each other. Eighty-one bolts and 165 shackles have been found at the site of the *Henrietta Marie*. Many of these were found as intact sets, but bolts with one shackle, and many individual components were also found. It is

unclear how they were stored, but presumably it was as intact sets, and the wrecking process put the collection into its relative disarray.

There are differences in the recovered bilboes which give clues to those they once held. Most significant is the size of the U-shaped shackles. Some are large, and presumed to have fit only the ankles of large men. Others may have been wrist shackles for large adults, or ankle shackles for those who were smaller. Others, whose diminutive form is quite startling, suggest they were used to shackle the wrists of small adults, or the ankles of juveniles. It seems the shackles could also be custom fit by compressing or expanding the "U". This appears to have been done to some of the recovered examples, with two shackles of the same size, on the same bar, having different widths.

Though the functional design of these bilboes is identical, there are slight stylistic differences, which suggest that more than one artisan worked to create this collection. Some bolts are short, meant for the shackles to fit tightly. Others are long enough to allow a gap of approximately 6 inches between shackles. Bolt lengths vary between 6 1/2 to 17 inches. Some of the round-stock used in their construction is a heavy, 3/4 inch diameter, and in others a more slight 1/2 inch diameter is found. The design of the finished ends also varies; with some having rounded heads, others pointed. The shackles also have varying qualities; some are formed of round-stock of 3/8 inch diameter, some of 1/2 inch. Some shackles have large, flaring loops, and some are formed with blended lines nearly the same width as the stock from which they were made.

Two shackles from two different bilboes from the *Henrietta Marie* were seized with cord, presumably for a cushioning effect to prevent chafing of the captives' skin. It is unknown if these were special sets, or if all the shackles were once similarly wrapped, with the cordage



Iron Shackle loop bound with twine.
Photo Dylan Kibler/MFMHS

of the others long ago destroyed by the natural actions of the marine environment. Considering the similar nature of the deposition for the collection though, this seems unlikely. A more likely theory for having “cushioned” shackles reflects on the assumed recalcitrance of a few Africans. No contemporary reference indicates the Africans were held in irons for the duration of Middle Passage, and this makes sense. Bilboes would have surely caused considerable chafing if worn for prolonged periods, and increased the likelihood of infections and other health problems among the slaves. This would have affected the quality of the cargo, and impeded the ship’s ability to operate profitably. A fine-line of reason, falling between economic gain and the physical well-being of the cargo,

would dictate the limited use of bilboes. Inevitably though, some of the Africans would have been “bad,” and, for the crew’s safety, required prolonged restraint. Perhaps it was that these seized shackles had a special-purpose: They were designed to hold unruly captives for longer periods, without affecting their salability.

It appears likely that one of the merchants who had consigned goods to the *Henrietta Marie*, ironmonger Anthony Tournay, was also the supplier of the bilboes. Tournay was a wholesaler of iron goods, and shipped 33 tons of iron trade bars on the last voyage. He had close business and social ties to Sir Ambrose Crowley, the most prominent ironware manufacturer of the time, and who contracted to provide various iron slave restraints to the Royal African Company (Tattersfield, 1994). It is not farfetched to see at least some of these bilboes as having been channeled by Tournay, from Crowley’s ironworks, to the *Henrietta Marie*.

This group of shipwrecked wrought-iron restraints represents the essential horror of the transatlantic slave trade. In 1700, people were forced to wear these very devices, and suffer as much as any human can. As they sat in the equatorial swelter, bound to their neighbor aboard the *Henrietta Marie*, the Africans were probably unsure of what the future held for them, but the bilboes represented the beginning of a new life --- one where they were barely considered human, and would never again be free.

Bibliography:

- 1732 Barbot, James Jr.
“A Supplement to the Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea.” in *Collection of Voyages and Travels*, Awnsham and John Churchill, eds., London.
- 1685 Boteler, Nathaniel
Six Dialogues about Sea Services. Reprinted 1929 as NRS, Vol. LXV.
- 1789 Equiano, Olaudah
“The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African,” in *Great Slave Narratives*, Arna Bontemps, editor. Beacon Press, Boston, 1969.
- 1896 Earle, Alice Morse
Curious Punishments of Bygone Days. Reprinted 1969 by Singing Tree Press, Detroit.
- 1788 Falconbridge, Alexander
“An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa.” Reprinted 1973, AMS Press, New York.
- 1987 Garrison, Ervan G. and Richard J. Anuskiewicz
“An Historical and Archaeological Evaluation of the CSS *Georgia*.” *Historical Archaeology*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 74-100.
- 1988 Keith, Donald H.
“Shipwrecks of the Explorers” in *Ships and Shipwrecks of the Americas*, George F. Bass, ed., Thames and Hudson, New York.
- 1746 Phillips, Thomas
“Thomas Phillips’ Journal” excerpted in *Slave Ships and Slaving*, George F. Dow, ed., Cornell Maritime Press, Cambridge, 1968.
- 1754 Snelgrave, William
“A New Account of Guinea, and the Slave Trade” excerpted in *Slave Ships and Slaving*, George F. Dow, ed., Cornell Maritime Press, Cambridge, 1968.
- 1994 Tattersfield, Nigel
“An Account of the Slave Ship *Henrietta Maria* of London 1697-1700.” Manuscript on file at Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society, Key West, Florida.