

# Weaving the Second Skin: Protection Against Evil Among the Valongo Slaves in Nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro

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This article presents some of the archaeological finds made at the Valongo Wharf in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans arrived at Valongo, in the first half of the nineteenth century, to be sold in Brazil's largest slave market next to the wharf. We analyze artifacts that were intended to protect their bodies against all kinds of misfortunes. Combined with scarifications and tattoos, these objects produced a second skin, highly social in nature, as shown by the abundant iconography depicting Rio's urban slaves during this period. We argue that such artifacts configured both resistance to domination and negotiation of less-disadvantageous positions in the slaves' harsh daily lives. Through the materiality of these objects—lost, forgotten, discarded, or hidden—we can glimpse the beliefs and strategies of Valongo slaves to cope with oppression, as well as their despair and their hopes.

KEYWORDS Valongo Wharf, Rio de Janeiro, Brazilian slavery, protective amulets

“In its natural state human skin is too thin for this world.  
So men take care to see it grows thicker.”

Bertold Brecht, *In the Jungle of Cities*, 1988



FIGURE 1 An access ramp and platform at the Valongo Wharf and Empress Wharf site, Rio de Janeiro, exposed by archaeological excavations. *Photograph by authors.*

This article presents some of the archaeological finds discovered at the Valongo Wharf, which was constructed in 1811 adjacent to the biggest slave market in Brazil, in what is today's port zone of Rio de Janeiro. This market operated from 1779 until 1831—the year in which the trans-Atlantic slave trade was banned—and was one of the largest that existed in the Americas (Karasch 2000: 67). Hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans passed through this wharf until the market ended its activities. However, clandestine trade may have continued at least until 1843, when the old wharf was buried under a landfill and a new and majestic wharf was built over it to welcome Princess Teresa Cristina de Bourbon, due to arrive from Italy to marry the Brazilian Emperor Pedro II.

Material culture recovered at the site originated from two major dumping areas containing a significant number of artifacts: (i) the lateral edge of the wharf, in which a sealed archaeological layer dated between 1811 and 1843 was found; (ii) the front of the wharf, in which a deep layer, dated from both the first and second halves of the nineteenth century, was identified. The first area was completely sealed by the landfill made in 1843 and was located 2-3 m below the surface. The second area was located 2-6 m beneath the surface, at levels corresponding to the seabed at the time (Figures 1 and 2). In its depositional history, the Valongo Wharf was subsequently landfilled in the early twentieth century for the construction of the port of Rio de Janeiro. This new landfill covered over all of the nineteenth-century evidence, which was revealed during the archaeological investigation.



FIGURE 2 Pavement of the Valongo Wharf, made from uneven stones, deeper and better preserved. A few higher sections of pavement from the Empress Wharf survive, showing cobblestone bricks. Later trenches dug for the installation of underground utility networks are clearly visible. *Photograph by authors.*

In this article we only discuss the artifacts that were interpreted as amulets, which were used by the enslaved individuals for their own physical and spiritual protection. Arriving mostly from Central Africa, with smaller contingents from West Africa and the East-African coast, the slaves brought with them cultural baggage that included an impressive repertory of spiritual practices, disseminated across the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. These traditional practices undoubtedly were adapted to new conditions and necessities when transplanted to the Americas, sometimes taking on different guises. However, the fact that very similar material culture is being encountered in archaeological sites in the USA, the Caribbean, and Brazil, and also reported in ethnographic accounts, suggests a deeper substrate that was maintained by these different groups even during their dispersal throughout the Americas.

In Rio de Janeiro, the use of amulets seems to have been intensified, judging by the large number of finds and also by the abundant iconography of urban slaves left by artists such as Debret, Rugendas, and others (Bandeira and Lago 2009; Diener and Costa 2002; Figure 3). Considering that amulets were designed to protect against all kinds of misfortune (as well as being used for aesthetic, social, and cultural purposes), this intensification appears to have been a response to the new and powerful enemy shared by these different groups: the white masters, who had torn them from their homeland and enslaved them.



FIGURE 3 Enslaved persons from different ethnic groups living in Rio de Janeiro. *Jean-Baptiste Debret, 1829.*

At the Valongo Wharf, Africa was still very much alive. Slaves were separated from their homeland by brutal journeys lasting one or two months. On arrival, their hearts, minds, beliefs, and practices were still deeply rooted in Africa, despite being now physically present in Brazil. The nonstop movement of ships arriving from and returning to the African continent, bringing a constant influx of new contingents of enslaved Africans over a period of at least 20 years, meant that this area always remained very closely tied to Africa, until it vanished under the landfill in 1843.

### The people arriving at Valongo

Estimates indicate that approximately 4.8 million Africans arrived in Brazil during the period of the Atlantic slave trade, making the country the largest importer of

slaves in the Americas, according to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, organized by David Eltis, Martin Halbert, David Richardson, and their colleagues (Eltis and Halbert 2008). The export economy—based on sugarcane, cotton, mining, and, later, coffee—generated a growing demand for slave labor, which reached its peak in the first half of the nineteenth century (Klein and Luna 2010: 74). The volume of disembarked slaves increased at a dizzying rate during this period, culminating in the record number of around 55,000 slaves per year between 1821 and 1830.

With the expansion of coffee cultivation, the nineteenth-century plantations in Rio de Janeiro began to play an increasingly important role in the slave market, especially in the first half of the century when figures reached previously unrecorded levels. Throughout the entire period of the slave trade, Rio was the largest port of arrival for Africans in the Americas, accounting for 48.5 per cent of the total importation of slaves for the Brazilian southeast as a whole—including Minas Gerais, Espírito Santo, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo (Florentino *et al.* 2004: 97–99). The numbers of slaves arriving in the port were unprecedented in the Atlantic context, being perhaps two to four times larger than all the slaves that disembarked in Cuba, for example, which was one of the most important slave areas in the Americas in the first half of the nineteenth century (Florentino 1995: 76). For the period spanning 1811–1842, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database allows us to estimate that at least 620,000 people disembarked in Rio de Janeiro (Eltis and Halbert 2008). Given that this was the period when the Valongo Wharf was operating as the point of arrival for slaves (officially between 1811 and 1831, and perhaps unofficially until 1843), approximately half a million Africans, at least, can be estimated to have arrived there.

Although the port of Rio de Janeiro received slaves from many different origins, traders always showed a clear preference for concentrating their transactions on Central Africa. (We use the term “Central Africa” to describe a region which some other scholars have referred to as “West Central Africa.”) This was due to the favorable currents and winds on the route between the two regions—which considerably reduced the journey time and, consequently, the human losses—and to the existence of strong commercial trade systems between Rio de Janeiro and specific ports like Luanda, Benguela, Loango, and Cabinda (Klein 1972: 909; Miller 1988: 468; Slenes 1983: 570, 576). The slave ships sailing from Central Africa corresponded to 79 per cent of all those docking in the city between the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century (Florentino *et al.* 2004: 94–102).

The mass presence of enslaved Africans living in Rio de Janeiro in the first half of the nineteenth century is incontestable. In demographic terms, Florentino (1995: 289) suggests that the African-born slave population in the period 1822–1835 was 75 per cent bigger than the Brazilian-born slave population. A similar figure was obtained by Karasch (2000: 42), who concluded that 73.3 per cent of the slave population was African-born in 1832, compared to 9.8 per cent Brazilian-born, with 16.9 per cent being of unknown origin. In specific terms of the number of slaves originating from Central Africa, the figures are equally high: for

1832, for example, it is estimated that they accounted for around two-thirds of the captives living in the city.

Accompanying the various groups from Central Africa living in Rio de Janeiro during the first half of the nineteenth century were those from other slave-trading regions. Although less numerous, they contributed to the city's transformation into a mosaic of different ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious groups. It is worth noting that the prominence of Central Africa in the Rio slave trade meant that those coming from West Africa, mainly the Bight of Benin and the Bight of Biafra littoral—one of the most important in the Atlantic slave trade overall—amounted to no more than 7 per cent of the slave population, according to Karasch (2000: 53), or 11 per cent, according to more recent estimates made by Gomes (2011: 218). Among them were various distinct groups (Curtin 1969: 291–298), including Islamized slaves, considered by the whites as literate, skilled, and proud (Karasch 2000: 64).

To all this cultural diversity we should also add the slaves who embarked from the east coast of Africa, who were generally known as Moçambiques, a designation that homogenized a considerable ethnic diversity. Because of the blockade imposed by Britain on the west coast of Africa with the intention of preventing slave trafficking, the slave traders resorted to the east-coast route as a strategy for circumventing this impediment. As a result, the proportion represented by these groups living in Rio de Janeiro leapt from a modest 2.3 per cent in the period 1795–1811 to around 20 per cent in the period 1811–1830 (Alpers 1999). An unequivocal fact, therefore, is that the slaves who arrived in Rio de Janeiro in the first half of the nineteenth century had very diverse origins, although they predominantly came from Central Africa.

## The second skin of enslaved people at Valongo

The exquisite and richly-detailed iconographic record left by Debret, Rugendas, and others, focusing on slaves living in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, attests to the intensity of their strategies for covering the skin—their most exposed organ and thus directly responsible for absorbing the brutalities inflicted upon them (see Bandeira and Lago 2009; Diener and Costa 2002; Figure 3). Karasch (2000: 188–189) refers to the idea, mentioned by a traveler and perhaps common among some sectors of the population, that the slaves had “thin skin,” an allusion to their low resistance to the harsh living conditions in the urban environment.

Along with clothing, direct interventions such as scarifications and tattoos produced a second skin, which was highly social in nature (Knappett 2006). This second skin was combined with an impressive variety of objects covering their ears, neck, chest, back, arms, hands, and ankles—wherever the skin was fully or partially exposed. Among these objects were strings of different beads, earrings, bracelets, armbands, anklets, rings, and a vast range of pendants such as *figas* (hand charms), crystals, corals, animal teeth, shells, crucifixes, medals of Catholic saints, coins, and so on, usually conceived and used as powerful amulets. All this paraphernalia used in conjunction formed a protective layer for the user, which was not just aesthetic but also protective of the body against all kinds of ills.

Serving as an effective medium of social communication for the world's different cultures since the dawn of humanity, sending messages concerning what could or should not be said verbally, skin has always been a primary surface for imprinting and transmitting social codes. Consequently, everything placed on the skin is imbued with culturally attributed and symbolically expressed meanings. As a social construct, the body is a symbolic structure (Le Breton 2003), whose symbolism is constructed not only for its totality but also for each of its singular organs. In the case in question, skin comprises the body's principal organ that is exposed and visible. As Terence Turner observed (1980), the surface of the body is more than just the boundary of the individual as a biological and psychological entity, it is the boundary of the social self. While the epidermal surface of the human body functions as the limit between interior and exterior—the boundary between the individual and society—this *social skin*, in the sense given by Turner (1971), acts above all as a barrier and as “a narcissistic envelope protecting the individual from the chaos of the world,” as Le Breton puts it (2003: 25).

Knappett (2006: 239), exploring the ways in which mind, agency, and object are interconnected and become codependent, has developed the concepts of *layering* and *networking* as two types of interface between subject and object, that is, between the organism-agent-person and the world. The first concept—layering—is what most interests us here since it concerns the practices through which identity is “accumulated” in determined locations through the concentration of artifacts. Accumulation and layering, therefore, in a sense, are equivalent. The author problematizes the distinction between physical and metaphysical, bodily and spiritual, arguing that the skin of the body holds no more than the potential for being a metaphysical boundary. While, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as Benthien tells us (2002, cited in Knappett 2006: 241), skin was perceived to be porous, “interwoven with the world,” in the following centuries the image of the body changed as it became seen as closed and delimited by the skin as its ultimate frontier. Nonetheless, Knappett explores the idea that the notion of the person extends beyond the skin to incorporate artifacts, thereby surpassing this limit. This is the case of the blind and their walking sticks, potters and their wheels, or patients connected to hospital equipment that ensures their survival—situations in which the body extends beyond itself, making it difficult to delineate the contours of its surface. The body enables the interface between mind and matter, and, for this to occur, its margins amount to a permeable border zone, a process, much more than a rigid boundary.

Cosmetics and items of clothing—including the amulets mentioned above—are in direct contact with the epidermis and, as Knappett (2006) argues, comprise another layer or second skin, which is effectively a process of self-extension. Just as tattoos, for example, can be understood as “a kind of apotropaic practice, a means of strengthening the skin as a metaphysical boundary” (Knappett 2006: 240), so too the abundant material culture accumulated on the body by slaves in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro.

It was precisely the high visibility of skin that enabled the projection of strong symbolic meanings onto its different gradations of complexion. In the Euro-American universe, pale skin was fixed as a standard of beauty, evoking purity, morality, cultural refinement, and intellectual and social superiority. Dark

skin, in contrast, was transformed into its antithesis, associated with animality, filth, sensuality, and a low intellectual and social status. Recognizable at first glance, skin became an index of class and a primordial criterion for social exclusion as different colors were attributed with superior and inferior qualities.

Clearly it was no coincidence that the slaves worked so intensely to cover their skin, which was precisely the most pregnable and vulnerable part of their body and the main target not only of racial hatred and discrimination, but also the constant and vicious floggings that lacerated their bodies. The need to *thicken the skin* to be able to withstand such torments led them to place a new layer over it, an additional envelope to protect their bodies. At the same time, this social skin sent out messages concerning ethnic and cultural identities, positions in the social and religious hierarchy, the belonging to particular groups, and other meanings shaped by the sociocultural context, as well as displaying their resilience against any harm that others might wish to inflict upon them.

Almost always on show, the talismans mentioned above were only hidden under a few circumstances, such as the case of the *bolsas de mandinga*, which were small bags used as amulets. Although kept in sight, generally hung from the neck, their contents were carefully hidden inside (e.g., pebbles, seeds, hair, roots, crystals, bones, among others), protected from view, leaving the observer to imagine what they might contain. Generally speaking, the amulets were visible and readily identifiable.

One aspect little explored by those authors who have depicted, described, and analyzed the amulets used by Africans and their descendants is their active quality. Rather than imagining them as merely passive objects that provide a protective envelope against misfortunes, we should also see them from another perspective. Not only did the social skin woven by symbolic compositions tell everyone that here was a body protected against evil in all its manifestations, it often also ensured that any harm aimed towards it, especially sorcery, would be blocked and returned to their point of origin. In other words, the amulets often may have acted as shields and weapons simultaneously as part of an effective system of symbolic communication. This possibility would imply danger and risk to all those who tried to attack the integrity of a body that was “closed” or at least protected—whether slave owners against their slaves, sorcerers against their intended victims, or individuals simply desiring the unhappiness, misfortune, or death of those they disliked. Persisting with the attack would mean coming up against someone under protection, a fact that, at the very least, would demand caution.

The various categories of objects found at Valongo, employed in the fabrication of this second skin by enslaved persons to protect their bodies and spirits and interpreted as amulets, included: beads, sea shells, crystals, plant fiber and metal rings, *figas* (hand charms), copper objects, perforated coins, amber and fossil resins, corals, crucifixes and medals, animal horns, teeth and claws, rattles, and (probably) keys.

### ***Beads***

Encountered in their hundreds at the Valongo site, beads were one of the most common and well-documented items brought to Brazil as a result of the diaspora, used as much in West Africa as on the east coast and in Central Africa. Depicted by Debret and Rugendas in their watercolors, they were also mentioned by travelers



who passed through Brazil. For example, Koster (1942: 326–327) referred to the use of green beads by old sorcerers, imported from Africa as protection against gun shot. The beads were used around the neck, hips, wrists, and ankles, commonly interspersed with numerous other kinds of amulets, such as shells, *figas*, animal teeth, crucifixes, copper coins, and so on, which further increased the protective potential of the cords. Carvalho (1892: 211), on a voyage through the Lunda region of Angola, states that its inhabitants also used cords around their necks, with or without beads, sticks, fruit, dolls, small horns, animal teeth, metal tubes, and so on, as amulets to protect themselves against evil. In Rio de Janeiro, Debret showed the intense use of cords of beads mixed with other objects by enslaved persons in the first decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

Around 2,000 beads were recovered from the Valongo site, fabricated from a variety of raw materials using distinct techniques, forms, and colors (Figure 4). Although most were made from glass of European origin (in monochrome, bichrome, and trichrome), some were made from shells, coral, amber, seeds, ceramics, minerals, and wood.

One unusual finding was a small, round, metal box with a hinged lid, decorated with engraved motifs depicting a scene with a sailing boat, surrounded by vegetation and geometrical patterns (Figure 5). This box was preserved just as it had been left at the moment of being lost, abandoned, or discarded. Inside were found around 1,200 beads, the more numerous being around 1 mm in diameter.

The African-American archaeological literature contains various references to the discovery of bead necklaces in slave contexts (e.g., Deagan and MacMahon 1995; Handler and Lange 1978; Yentsch 1994). In an article published in 1996, Stine et al. recorded the predominance of blue beads in a sample of 1,676 coming from 26 historical sites, making up 26.7 per cent of the sample. The authors argued that, given the absence of African parallels, the symbolism of this particular color must be an exclusively African-American phenomenon. However, this interpretation is debatable, and already questioned in fact by DeCorse (1999), who suggests that the prevalence of blue beads may arise from a range of different factors, including socioeconomic status, specific religious beliefs, or cultural affiliation. Moreover it is found in some sites (see Russell 1997) but not all. In a slave cabin located in Virginia, for instance, Lee (2010) describes a predominance of white beads. Among the 165 items discovered, 65 per cent were white and just 20 per cent were blue.

In Brazilian archaeology there are various accounts of beads at historical sites linked to slaves (Lima *et al.* 1993; Souza 2010: 219–221; Symanski and Souza 2001). However, the largest sample found so far was recovered during excavations of the “Ancient See of Salvador” carried out in the present-day Praça da Sé (See Square) location in Salvador, Bahia. This assemblage of beads consisted of a total of 2,621 beads directly associated with the skeletons of slaves buried at the site. A study carried out by Tavares (2006) indicates that 37 per cent of this total consisted of white beads with just 19 per cent being blue. The stratigraphic position of the finds at the Ancient See site enables them to be chronologically linked to a period spanning from the second half of the eighteenth century to the start of the nineteenth, when there was a considerable influx of West-African



FIGURE 4 Beads and adornments in different materials, forms, and colors, recovered at the Valongo Wharf site. *Photographs by authors.*



FIGURE 5 Metal box with hinged lid, decorated with geometric designs and a scene with a sailing boat, containing 1,200 mm-sized beads, recovered at the Valongo Wharf site. Photographs and image by authors.

groups to Salvador. In Rio de Janeiro, during the first half of the nineteenth century, the largest number of arrivals comprised slaves coming from Angola and the Congo. At Valongo, blue beads clearly outnumber the others, comprising almost half the sample, followed by white beads, which is the opposite of what was observed in the Ancient See of Salvador. The high popularity of blue beads in the Brazilian samples undermines the hypothesis of Stine *et al.* (1996) that these are an exclusively African-American phenomenon. Other factors need to be considered here which may have had a marked influence on the frequency of particular colors in the New World samples. These factors include the beliefs and magical practices of ethnic groups most prevalent during the period and regions under study—West Africans in Salvador and Central Africans in Rio—and the market availability of bead types within the trade networks uniting Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Such multiple factors make the attribution of meanings a highly complex issue in this case.

### Shells

More than 200 shells of marine gastropods from the *Cypraeidae* family have been found either on or close to the Valongo site. Known in Portuguese as *búzios* and in English as “cowry shells,” the majority of those discovered belong to the species *Monetaria moneta* (Linnaeus 1758) and *Monetaria annulus* (Linnaeus 1758). These species occur only in tropical waters in the Indo-Pacific region, including the southern and eastern coasts of Africa. They do not occur in West Africa or the Central African region, and are non-existent in South America. The fact that the shells of these mollusks were intensely used as a medium of exchange in different parts of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands led to their scientific name, which



FIGURE 6 *Cypraea* sp. shells, perforated for use as pendants (top left and right); the example on the top right still has the copper ring used to suspend it. A *Monetaria annulus* shell with incision and perforation (bottom). Artifacts recovered at the Valongo Wharf site. Photographs by authors.

alludes to their monetary function. Oval-shaped with a coloring between white and yellow, the shells of *Monetaria moneta* and *Monetaria annulus* are polished and shiny like porcelain, with a toothed opening down the middle of their flat under-surface, as well as a golden ring surrounding the most protuberant section of their dorsal region. Their hardness and resistance give them considerable durability.

Also recovered was a single shell of *Cypraea zebra* (Linnaeus 1758), a species that occurs along the entire Atlantic coast of the Americas, including Brazil, where it can be found from Maranhão to Santa Catarina. Another two shells of the *Cypraea* sp. were also discovered, perforated for use as pendants: one has a circular perforation, while the other still has the copper ring used to suspend it (Figure 6). Both are very difficult to identify at a species level due to the close similarity among some of the more than 100 species of this genus.<sup>2</sup>

Imbued with beliefs and symbolic properties, the cowries became so popular that they are omnipresent in the material culture of many African groups. They decorate clothing or are attached to adornments, masks, musical instruments, and ceremonial objects, providing protection to those wearing or carrying them (Lody 2010). The North-American archaeological literature has records of cowry shells at sites connected to slaves, sometimes as isolated finds (Wilkie 1995), sometimes in funerary contexts (Bianco *et al.* 2006: 387; see Armstrong, 1999: 180 on shells from the Indo-Pacific region) or forming necklaces (Handler and Lange 1978), among other examples.

### **Crystals**

One of the groups that made intense use of crystals and stones, which they considered sacred, were the BaKongo. Their original territory, Watu Wakele, where all cultures and religions are held to have been born, is home to the Crystal Mountains, a mountainous region extending across Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola, parallel to the Atlantic Ocean. Difficult to access, the range's name comes from the quartz rock covering its surface. These mountains are sacred to some of the Bantu speakers, who considered it to be the place where all cultures and religions were born and the source of all knowledge (Mutwa 1964).

The value attributed to the transparency and brilliance of the crystals, and, by extension, mirrors and glasses, derives from the belief that they attract and capture benevolent spirits. Reflective objects have the property of allowing one to “see the other world” or to “see beyond,” associated with the idea of a spiritual consciousness mediated by their brilliance and luminosity (Thompson and Cornet 1981: 198–199). Thompson (1984: 118) observes the large quantity of rock crystals in *minkisi* from the Congo region. MacGaffey (1988: 196) similarly finds that, like fossilized resins, quartzes were also included in many *minkisi*—a constant presence in magical practices of groups from Central Africa.

The archaeological literature abounds in references to crystals found at African-American historical sites. Among many others, Leone and Fry (2001: 152), conducting a survey of artifacts related to spiritual practices among the slaves of Annapolis, Maryland, encountered a significant quantity of crystals. In this same

publication (Leone and Fry 2001: 144), the authors describe another find made in the same region, at the Charles Carroll House: a group of artifacts discovered in the corner of a room in an eighteenth-century house. These comprised a set of a dozen quartz crystals, perforated bone discs, a dark pebble from a river, the base of a pearlware bowl with a blue asterisk, and two dated coins. In an area occupied by slaves at Monticello—the plantation owned by Thomas Jefferson in Virginia—Klingelhofer (1987: 116) describes the discovery of a large natural crystal, along with the lid of a pressed and faceted crystal decanter, the base of which was broken to make the object more functional. Armstrong and Fleischman (2003: 47) describe the grave of a young woman in a Jamaican plantation dating from the eighteenth century, in which a pecked crystal stopper was placed immediately above the coffin.

Dozens of crystals were recovered at the Valongo Wharf and from the immediate surrounding area, both clear and colored, in hues like violet (amethyst), yellow (citrine), and gray (smoky) (Figure 7). These crystals included columnar prisms of quartz and dozens of flakes of hyaline quartz (rock crystal). In addition, objects such as crystal chandelier drops and perfume bottle lids, apparently used as pendants or as elements of earrings and necklaces, were uncovered (Figure 8). Very similar chandelier drops were found, as at Valongo, in a dwelling occupied by African descendants in a plantation in Kentucky, in the southern USA, which were interpreted as amulets by Young (1996: 144). The faceted and pointed form of these drops mimics the shape of the quartz prisms, difficult to obtain in Rio de Janeiro. Probably originating from Minas Gerais, these clear and colored crystals would have been brought to the city by slaves, who greatly admired them, as they worked as muleteers along the Caminho Novo (New Road) linking the two regions. Microflakings were found at one end of some of the quartz prisms at Valongo, suggesting their use as tools. The primary characteristics sought in these crystal prisms seem to have been their faceted, pointed, and reflective qualities. So much so that, in their absence, substitutes were sought in items of material culture thrown away by the dominant sectors—in this case, crystal chandelier drops and perfume bottle lids. Nowadays, crystals are imbued with symbolic properties by a number of African-origin religions. They provide strong protection against negative forces, since it is supposed that their reflective quality, especially in the case of the pointed crystals, can repel evil. In principle, the negativity may be believed to rebound off the crystal and return without being absorbed, thereby protecting the body.

### ***Plant fiber and metal rings***

Also recovered from the Valongo site were dozens of rings made from the fiber of the *Attalea funifera* palm,<sup>3</sup> commonly known as *piassava* (Figure 9). These were found at different stages of fabrication, either plaited or twisted, along with a smaller number in plaited metal. The *piassava* fibers appear in impressive amounts in the lateral area of the wharf 2–3 m down, and in the nearby area at slightly varying depths. Being fairly hard, the *piassava* fibers were, and still are, used to make coverings and roofs, bindings, nautical ropes, brooms, brushes, baskets, and so forth. Despite the hardness of the fibers, they are flexible, an attribute that



FIGURE 7 Prisms, flakes, and cores of quartz crystal, both translucent and with examples of colored amethyst, smoky, and citrine, recovered at the Valongo Wharf site. *Photographs by authors.*

enabled the manufacture of the delicate rings discovered at the site. The presence of these plaited and twisted objects made from *piassava* and, to a lesser extent, from metal, indicates the emergence of new practices connected with the physical world of enslaved persons in Brazil. Clearly hybrid in form, these artifacts were a product of the cultural traditions brought from Africa, but also of the new context



FIGURE 8 Pieces of crystal chandelier and perfume lids recovered at the Valongo Wharf site including a natural faceted and pointed quartz prism (bottom left) and a chandelier drop, also faceted and pointed (bottom right). *Photographs by authors.*

into which the slaves had been introduced. Although the material chosen to make them was native to Brazil, the logic associated with the production of these rings seems to have much more ancient roots.

According to MacGaffey (1988: 191–192, 195–196), the use of plaited roots and stalks as amulets was common throughout Central Africa, along with the





FIGURE 9 Woven and twisted rings of *Attalea funifera* (piassava), recovered at the Valongo Wharf site. Photographs by authors.

placement of knots in *minkisi*. He observed that these objects visually represented powers that could be captured and kept under control. As Thompson contends (1984: 127–131), such principles arrived in the New World via the diaspora. In Cuba and Haiti, for example, amulets were very often strongly bound in order to ensure capture of the forces contained within. Among African-American communities in the USA, folded, tied, and knotted amulets also were used, as well as a type of root called “John, the Conqueror” as an element used as a love charm. In Brazil, the *ponto de segurar* used in umbanda reflects the same principle. This type of amulet is covered with fabric and tied very securely with string, indicating the ensnarement of the spirit contained inside. According to Congo mythology, the first *nkisi* was given to human beings by the divinity Funza, which was incarnated in a twisted root. As Fu-Kiau tells us (in Thompson 1984: 131), every time one sees a twisted root in a *nkisi* it is a sure sign that it possesses considerable force.

It is possible, therefore, that the woven and twisted *piassava* found in such profusion in the rings recovered from the Valongo site also served as a visual metaphor for the capture and control of supernatural powers, following the principles adopted by groups from Central Africa. In discussing this question, we cannot ignore the fact that the *piassava* proved to be appropriate for this purpose, since, as well as being widely available at the time, as demonstrated by its abundance in the archaeological layer, the plant is recognized for its resilience, allowing it to symbolize strength and control. At the same time, we can note the observation made by Professor Elisee Soumonni, an African researcher from Benin, during his field visit to the Valongo site, that the rings and bracelets made from plant fibers in West Africa are amulets intended to protect the body. Other fibers are used, but, for him, there was no doubt concerning the protective function of this kind of ring.

There are no reports of similar archaeological findings at sites associated with slaves, whether in Brazil, Central America, or the USA. Based on the present evidence, we may be finding a type of manifestation that emerged in Rio de Janeiro alone. Alternatively, we may be encountering a problem involving differences in preservation conditions and a plant fiber that degrades fairly easily and thus may not have been preserved at other sites associated with slaves which have been investigated to date.

### **Figs (*hand charms*)**

According to Ewbank (1976), *figas* were the most widespread amulet in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, used by people across all sectors of society.

Although frequently associated with African cultural traditions, *figa* compositions were popular in ancient Rome, with origins traceable back to the Middle East. Over time this symbolic element spread throughout Europe and subsequently to the Americas. A wide variety of materials were used in fabricating *figas*, including bone, wood, and coral, as well as other more-refined raw materials. For example, in Portugal at the start of the eighteenth century, Brás Luís D'Abreu described a *figa* as an item “customarily fashioned from gold, silver, ivory, or jet.” It could be worn on different parts of the body, on earrings, bracelets, and necklaces as charms, in bunches hung from the waist, on watches, tie pins, or even kept in wardrobes in the belief that it would bring money (Cascardo 1999: 392–393).

*Figas* were polysemic symbols in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their meanings varying according to the user and context. They retain a little-known meaning from their European origin: a representation of coitus in which the thumb corresponds to the male organ and the index and middle fingers to the female organ (Cascardo 1999: 292). They appear in left-handed and right-handed versions. According to practitioners of some African-origin religions, left-handed *figas* are always used as protection against the evil eye. This was the meaning among many enslaved persons, and *figas* could be used either in isolation or in bunches of *balangandãs* to protect the user, give luck, stimulate good luck, or dispel evil, setbacks, and envy (Cascardo 1999: 392–393).<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, *figas* are commonly used in a number of African-origin practices, carved from wood. Traditionally, preference has always been for the wood of rue (*Ruta graveolens*) and *guiné* (*Petiveria alliacea*) to repel an evil eye or neutralize harmful forces.

Although one of the best-known and popular amulets in Brazil, there are few records of *figas* found at archaeological sites, such as the Gongo Soco Mines in Minas Gerais (Junqueira 2002: 118–119). There are a few records of *figas* found at North-American archaeological sites, under Spanish occupation, dating from the sixteenth century. At an outpost in St. Augustine, Florida, dating from around 1565–1570, two bone *figas* were found, which were attributed to the Spanish.<sup>5</sup> Others were also uncovered during excavations of a Spanish trading post in South Carolina, occupied between 1566 and 1587 (Orser 1994: 39). At Valongo, *figas* were recovered that were made from bone, wood, and copper, and were all left-handed, suggesting that they were intended to protect against negative influences and physical afflictions (Figure 10).

### **Copper objects**

Copper has been intensely exploited and utilized in sub-Saharan Africa since prehistoric times, in particular in West and Central Africa, where some of the world's most important deposits are found. In some contexts viewed as more useful than gold and silver, copper was considered to be an element of strength and protection (Bisson *et al.* 2000; Herbert 1984). Many African groups were skilled metallurgists, and turned copper into bracelets, anklets, ear decorations, rings, and neck rings used to protect the person against disease and sorcery, according to nineteenth-century accounts (Davidson 2004: 33). There are records of finds of copper objects in African-American archaeology (e.g., Armstrong 1999: 180). At the Valongo site, various copper amulets were recovered, including perforated

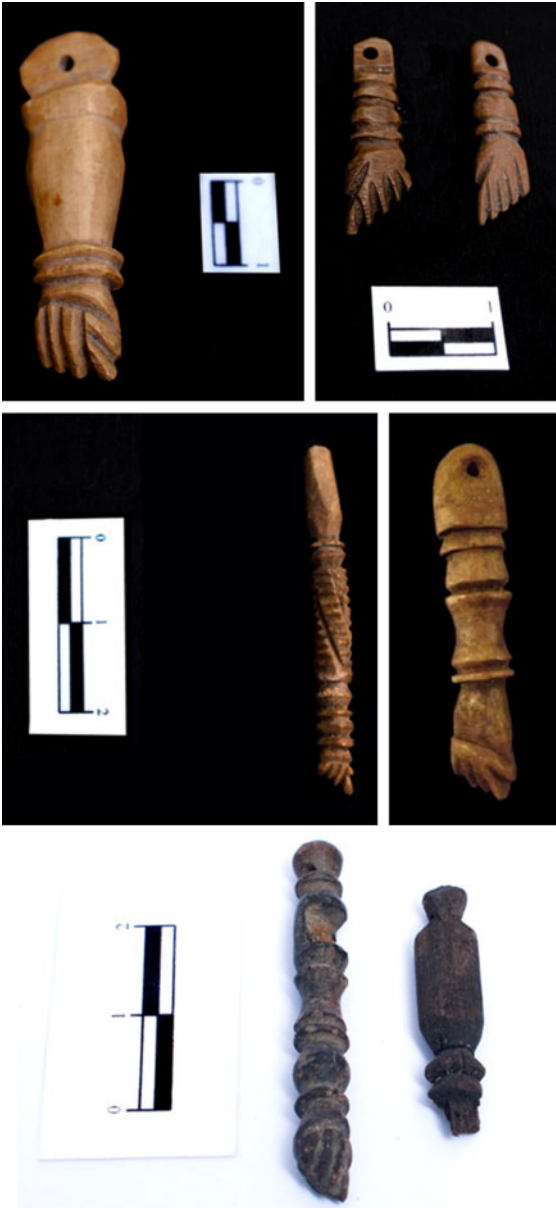


FIGURE 10 *Figas* made from bone and wood, with left-handed configurations, recovered at the Valongo Wharf site. *Photographs by authors.*

coins, bracelets, earrings, and pendants, providing possible evidence of the continuation of a multi-secular African tradition of using copper to protect the body (Figures 11 and 12).

### ***Perforated coins***

The use of coins as amulets is ancient and, at least in Western Europe, dates back to the pre-Christian era, as pointed out by Davidson (2004: 26–31) in his attempt to show that the practice was not derived exclusively from enslaved Africans in the



FIGURE 11 Copper bracelets and rings (left) and an earring with a copper *figa* (right) recovered at the Valongo Wharf site. Photographs by authors.

New World, as some North-American authors have argued. In fact, it was a type of amulet widely found in England from the Bronze Age onwards, used to protect against illness and witchcraft. The practice was probably incorporated by Africans following extensive contact with Europeans and became fairly widespread in the nineteenth century, especially in the Americas, where it retained the same meaning of protection against malevolent spirits, spells, and diseases.

In African-American sites, coins appear with and without alterations, and modifications include holes for suspension. At the New York African Burial Ground, whole coins covered the eye cavities in some graves (Perry and Woodruff 2006: 420–425), while perforated coins were recovered from the North Dallas Freedman’s Cemetery in the neck and ankle regions of some skeletons. The two types also appear outside of funerary contexts at sites related to African Americans, as reported by various authors (Orser 1994: 41; Patten 1992: 6; Singleton and Bograd 1995: 131; Young 1996: 142), and also in Cuba (Dominguez 1986).

Young (1996: 148, citing Rawick 1977: 35) recounts that the children of a slave living in Wayne County, Kentucky, used a silver coin on a cord tied around the leg to ward away evil spells. One day, however, the slave’s daughter left home without putting on the amulet and on the path close to the house her leg collapsed, leaving her unable to walk. He had no doubt that the absence of the protective coin had caused the problem. Similarly, in an 1881 historical novel called *O Mulato*, author Aluísio de Azevedo describes: “Mônica, a *cafuza* [a person of black and indigenous origin], a former wet nurse and slave, who was around fifty years old ... Around her neck she wore a string with a metal crucifix, a 200 *réis* coin, a *cumaru* bean, a dog tooth and a piece of resin set in gold” (Azevedo 1881; da Silva 2005).

Dozens of coins of different denominations were recovered at the Valongo site, most of them copper, several with perforations, and the majority dating from the



FIGURE 12 A half-moon copper earring recovered at the Valongo Wharf site (left). *Photograph by authors*. Excerpt of an engraving by Jean-Baptiste Debret, dated between 1817 and 1829, showing an enslaved *Moçambique* woman wearing an identical earring (right).

first half of the nineteenth century (Figure 13). Those with holes for suspension were very likely worn as amulets. The same use may have been made by the unaltered coins, judging by the occurrences already documented at other archaeological sites, in the specialized literature and in museum collections, by virtue of the strong symbolism associated with copper as a protective element.

### ***Amber and other fossil resins***

Amber is a fossilized or semi-fossilized resin which, in tropical areas, is produced by some plant species of the *Hymenaea* family, with the function of defending them from insects and microorganisms. Acting as an antiseptic and cicatrizing, the resin protects the tree against disease.<sup>6</sup> This mineral of organic origin appears in a wide range of colors from white, pale yellow, and dark red to almost black, the most common being an orange-yellow. In some cases it may preserve its original form in the shape of a droplet. Amber was an important exchange item in Africa where it sometimes functioned as a currency, circulating across large trade networks via the hands of merchants, and thus reaching Brazil during the diaspora.

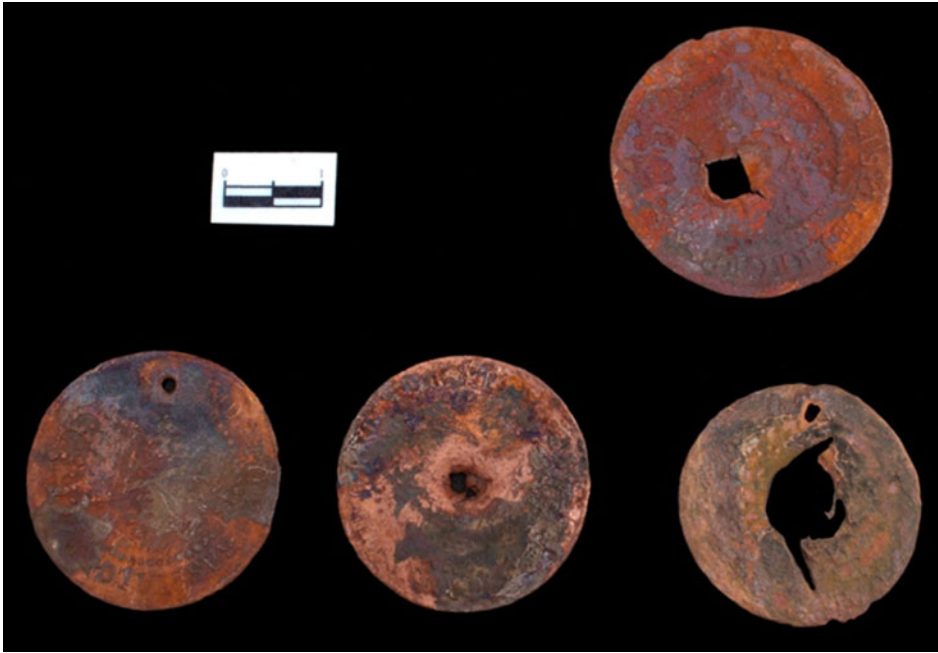


FIGURE 13 A 20 *réis* coin, dating from 1803, issued by the Lisbon Mint, with a square perforation close to the center (top right); an undated coin of unknown origin with an oval perforation towards the edge (bottom left); a 10 *réis* coin, dating from 1818, issued by the Rio de Janeiro Mint (bottom center); a 10 or 20 *réis* coin, dated between 1818 and 1823, of unknown mintage, with a hole in the center (bottom right). Artifacts uncovered at the Valongo Wharf site. *Photograph by authors.*

MacGaffey (1988: 196) records its use in *minkisi*, emphasizing the importance of this resin in the magical practices of Central Africa. Beads were made from amber and were traded in both Africa and Europe, being subsequently brought to the Americas. The grave of a woman excavated at the New York African Burial Ground contained a cord of beads around her waist. As well as glass beads, the cord included a single faceted amber bead, along with some shells (Bianco *et al.* 2006: 387). The natural protective function of the resin seems to have been symbolically appropriated and, in the form of an amulet, projected onto the human body for defense.

Paiva (1999) cites the legacy bequeathed by a woman called Barbara Gomes de Abreu e Lima, originally a slave from Sergipe d'El Rei and later freed in Minas Gerais. Declared in 1735, among the many items included in the estate were "a few gold rings weighing four eighths [of an ounce], a figure resembling Our Lady of the Conception weighing three and a half eighths ... a ball of amber, a string of corals threaded with gold, and a large coral with a suspended figa." The inclusion of this resin among a list of gold and coral jewels attests to its high value, this

formerly enslaved individual being described as a “guardian of ancestral traditions, a priestess and an unequivocal example of feminine autonomy, mobility and power” (Paiva 1999: 58).

Beads and various forms of orange-colored amber were recovered from the Valongo site, in half-moon and drop forms, the rarity of the material indicating that these objects were invested with highly symbolic and hierarchical value (Figure 14). As well as these pieces, shapeless lumps of *in natura* yellow fossil resin were recovered, probably intended for the same purpose of protecting the body.

### Corals

Corals are marine invertebrates of the *Cnidaria* phylum, which can be found in all oceans, either in isolation or in colonies made up of polyps that form calcareous skeletons underneath the tissue, serving as protection while simultaneously enabling them to anchor on the sea floor. After they die, new polyps grow on top of the skeletons, accumulating over many generations and forming large calcareous structures. Their colors vary from pure white to gradations of pink, salmon, blood red, and orange. The sample recovered from the Valongo site included fragments from two distinct genera of Octocorallia from the *Coralliidae* family: *Corallium* (Cuvier 1798) and *Paracorallium* (Bayer and Cairns 2003) (Figure 15). These included the so-called red corals or precious corals, which were used as adornments.<sup>7</sup> While *Paracorallium* occurs in the Indo-Pacific region only, *Corallium* is more widely distributed throughout the Mediterranean and both shores of the Atlantic.<sup>8</sup> This genre also occurs in Brazil, although only in species with white skeletons.

In addition to these corals, the excavations at Valongo unearthed fragments of bryozoans, invertebrate, aquatic (predominantly marine), sessile, and colony-forming animals that participate in the construction of reefs (Figure 15). They can be encountered at all depths, although they are more common in shallow and clear waters in the tropical seas. They are very similar to corals, being often mistaken for them, and it is this similarity that probably explains their presence in the archaeological record.

The corals are attributed with magical properties for curing and preventing a vast range of diseases, evil eye, spells, malevolent spirits, and misfortunes in general, having been appropriated over the course of time by different cultures and used as powerful amulets. Paiva (1999) cites the recurrent use of corals by enslaved and free sectors of the population in eighteenth-century Minas Gerais as proof of the integration of global markets taking place during the century and the role played by Africa in the trade between east and west. Identifying corals as items of great value, Paiva (1999) examines their harvesting in the Mediterranean and Indian Oceans and their use as amulets in European countries like Italy, Flanders, Holland, and France. Corals were distributed in regions of Africa from the fifteenth century onwards by Venetian traders and Portuguese navigators who brought large quantities from the Middle East, Asia, and the Mediterranean in exchange for gold. Corals were used exclusively by kings in the Bight of Benin region, in the former Kingdom of Benin (part of present-day Nigeria). Corals were also popular among the Ashanti or the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), in Dahomey (present-day Republic of Benin), among the Yoruba (mainly present-day



FIGURE 14 Different amber forms and beads recovered at the Valongo Wharf site.  
*Photograph by authors.*

Nigeria), and in different regions of Central Africa, all areas that provided large numbers of enslaved laborers to Brazil.

Archaeological work at the Valongo site uncovered tubular and spherical coral beads used on cords of beads and bracelets, as well as fragments of red coral skeletons and also sections of bryozoans, which very probably served as amulets (Figure 15).

### ***Crucifixes and medals***

The archaeological assemblage from the Valongo Wharf contained a very substantial number of objects related to spiritual and magical practices with roots





FIGURE 15 Fragments and beads of red coral from the *Corallium* and *Paracorallium* genera, known as precious corals (top left and right); the yellow tube among the fragments on the top left is from a polychaete. Fragments of bryozoans, easily mistaken for coral due to the similarity of form and calcareous structure (bottom). Artifacts recovered from the Valongo Wharf site. *Photographs by authors.*

in African cultures. These artifacts also included pendants of non-equilateral Latin or Christian crosses, showing a longer vertical axis, making them metaphors for Christ's crucifixion. In addition to these items, there were medals of saints worshipped by Catholicism, such as Our Lady of the Conception, Our Lady of the Graces and Saint Anthony, and others impossible to identify due to the heavy alteration of their surface features. Considering the context of Valongo and the mass presence of enslaved Africans at the location, the possibility should be

considered that these objects were related to them. This hypothesis is supported by numerous records by European artists who visited Rio de Janeiro in the nineteenth century, especially Debret, and depicted a large number of slaves wearing cross-shaped pendants.<sup>9</sup>

It is a far from simple task to uncover the meanings attributed to crucifixes and medals of saints by enslaved Africans. Part of the problem is the complexity of contact between Europeans and Africans, which preceded the advent of the slave trade. For Central Africa, the work of Jesuit missionaries began at the end of the fifteenth century. Their influence gave rise to what Thornton (1984) calls “African Christianity,” which was inspired by Catholicism but had Bantu overtones (Souza 2005; Thornton 2002: 83–85; Thompson and Cornet 1981: 44; Vainfas and Souza 1998). The influence of Catholicism was undoubtedly intensified by the contact of slaves with European descendants in Rio de Janeiro, and, above all, by the pressure exerted by the Church and free society for African slaves to adopt the Christian faith.

Karasch (2000: 342–375) examined crucifixes used by slaves and contended that the Christian cross had been adopted by captive Africans due to its correspondence with the BaKongo cosmogram. More recent studies of the use of crucifixes by Central Africans allow us to further the repertory of possible meanings attached to them. According to Souza (2005), people in Angola and the Congo adopted crucifixes based on their own cultural codes, reinforcing the interpretation made by Karasch (2000). According to Souza (2005), crucifixes were used in Central Africa by political leaders as a symbol of power, as well as a device for having contact with ancestral spirits, who could guide them in future actions or public discourses. These items also were used by ordinary people as talismans, for spiritual protection against misfortune, and for their healing properties. It is legitimate to assume that some of these meanings were previously known by Central Africans and were attached to crucifixes by slaves in the context of captivity. Such meanings also could be attached to medals. These pendants were likely used as protective elements, perhaps as powerful amulets used to protect the body. Saints such as Saint Anthony had great significance in some Central-African regions (Vainfas and Souza 1998), which could have influenced the choice made by some slaves to pick such a medal as an amulet. In Brazil, in the religious syncretism resulting from the mixture of African cosmologies with Catholicism, Our Lady corresponds in Central Africa to the first ancestor, the mother goddess.

Among the objects worn on the body by slaves, Karasch (2000: 361) emphasizes those related to Catholicism. These allowed their own beliefs and practices to be developed without persecution, punishment, or reprisal, so long as they remained concealed by Christian symbols. In addition to these meanings, some of the enslaved individuals may have genuinely adopted the Christian faith in all its attributes and practices.

### ***Animal horns, teeth, and claws***

According to Father Godefroy Loyer, who in 1714 published an account of the Kingdom of Issiny in West Africa, on the Coast of Guinea:

[T]hese fetishes express the different fantasies of each person ... The fetish of one may be a small piece of yellow or red wood; the other's might have some teeth from a dog,

or a musk tiger ... another's, a piece of filthy sheep horn, some spiny branches or perhaps some small cords made from tree bark (Carvalho 1892: 392).

Loyer (1714), while travelling through the Lunda region of Angola, tells of an encounter with a hunter who used the following amulets hanging from his neck: dried fruits, two beads, a wax-tipped deer horn, and a half-moon of ivory, which protected against all the different kinds of ills that could harm him.

At the start of the twentieth century, Ortiz (1906) reported that it was common for Afro-Cuban sorcerers to use horns as talismans, the practice probably having been introduced to Cuba in the form of amulets by captives coming from the Congo. Therefore, horns were used as protection against misfortunes in West Africa as well as in Central Africa. In 1826, Debret described the use of horns as talismans in Brazil, carried in the hands of enslaved Africans responsible for driving animal troops, offering protection against any evil that might assail them (Bandeira and Lago 2009: 245). Bovine horns with evidence of cuts were recovered from the Valongo site, which may have served as similar talismans (Figure 16).

Mammal teeth, especially those from swine, canines, and felines, are frequently described in the archaeological literature at sites linked to slavery, having been utilized as pendants by slaves, including in Cuba (Dominguez 1986: 18–19). Inlaid in metal, they were incorporated with threads of beads or used in isolation by Rio de Janeiro's slaves, as shown in nineteenth-century iconography, a practice maintained even today among practitioners of some African-based religions (Lody 2010; Paiva 2004).

Among the BaKongo, leopard teeth served as symbols of power (Thompson and Cornet 1981: 34), while wild boar teeth were used in symbolic compositions, such as *Vititi Mpaka Menso*, made with ox horn, or *Ngombo*, where boar teeth painted red and covered with wax signified a treatment to be followed by the person seeking advice. Some of these compositions were believed to protect against poisoning, a common practice in some regions of Africa and Brazil during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Dozens of canine teeth from *Sus scrofa*, the domestic pig, were found at the Valongo site (Figure 16).<sup>10</sup> In Angola these animals are wrongly designated as wild boars,<sup>11</sup> and the same designation occurs in Brazil. According to some African-based religions, wild boar teeth could be used as amulets to protect the body, the animal's strength being transmitted to the wearer. Judging by the quantity in which they appear at the Valongo site, they were certainly highly revered amulets. None of the teeth recovered featured inlays.

As well as mammal teeth, the excavations also uncovered a dactyl from the pereiopod (or moveable finger) of the leg of a Brachyura decapod from the *Xanthidae* family (mud crab).<sup>12</sup> The condylar region of this black-colored crab claw had been filed and prepared to receive an inlay for future use as a pendant (Figure 16). The object has a shiny and satiny patina that seems to have resulted from intense use in direct contact with body sweat and fat. This evidence allows us to suppose that the amulet was well used, but eventually lost when it inadvertently fell out of the inlay.

### **Rattles**

Small metal rattles were found at the Valongo site. These objects were designed to produce sensory stimuli through the emission of sounds and could be used to



FIGURE 16 Pig teeth, a cut horn, and a crab claw prepared for use as a pendant, recovered at the Valongo Wharf site. *Photographs by authors.*

perform a protective function in some West-African and Central-African cultures by pleasing the good spirits and frightening off the bad ones. The ethnographic and archaeological literature contain references to rattles from the Ivory Coast, which were suspended from rings and bracelets (Carise 1992: 121–123), used in women’s braided hair (Yentsch 1994: 194), found in anklets, and on small children, who are always vulnerable to harmful and invisible forces (Carise 1992: 121–123). In Central Africa they were placed on some *minkisi* and used in public performances, destined not only to be seen, but also heard (MacGaffey 1988: 197). Yentsch (1994: 194) describes the discovery of rattles at an urban site from the eighteenth

century in Annapolis, Maryland, with the presence of slaves, in association with glass beads. In Brazil so far we have not identified any other record of rattles being found at historical sites related to enslaved or free Africans.

### **Keys**

Keys serve to open or close, provide or prevent access, properties which can make them symbolically appropriate as protective amulets designed to “close the body” against evil. Worn ostentatiously at the waist by female slaves, as prints by Debret depict,<sup>13</sup> keys also appeared recurrently in the bunches of *balangandās* found in Bahia (da Silva 2005: 66), just as they were found at the Valongo site. It is impossible to establish for certain that those recovered at the archaeological site had been used as amulets, since they comprise objects of everyday use, but the possibility has to be mentioned given the significance of such symbolic meanings.

### **Conclusion**

The Valongo Wharf received a heterogeneous group of people, coming from different parts of West, Central, and East Africa. As archaeological evidence suggests, spiritual and magical practices influenced by individuals from these regions are represented at this site. Although having their own specificities, these practices intersect in a number of ways. It is our understanding that a belief in a continuous, flowing dialogue between the world of the living and the spiritual world (Sweet 2007: 21)—considered here as a pan-African cosmivision—was an important platform for the Africans who disembarked at the Valongo Wharf. Originating from different regions of their home continent and, in principle, without any mutual affinities, this shared platform allowed them to reinvent themselves and survive under the new conditions imposed upon them, coming together now in compliance with a new logic of ethnic awareness.

It was through this cosmivision that they constructed new collective identities and new belief systems, allowing them to deal with the anguishes, uncertainties, and hostilities resulting from their enslavement, as well as any sort of adversity related to their daily lives. From this worldview emanated explanations for the misfortunes that befell them and ways in which they should respond to such adversities. It also enabled them to create a variety of modalities of spiritual resistance, which provided them with the strength needed to create new forms of social action in response to the subaltern state to which they had been condemned. These modalities included multiple strategies engendered for protecting their bodies which were under permanent threat and subject to oppression, violence, every kind of disease, and evil spells. Surviving material evidence of these practices was recovered at the Valongo site and in its immediate vicinity. Just as the epithelial tissue constitutes an efficient barrier blocking the entry of invasive agents into the organism, a second skin was carefully fabricated by enslaved Africans of Valongo through a wide variety of artifacts imbued with meanings, enabling this skin to likewise “close” the body against anything that could do harm. The same protective function of the biological skin was culturally

reproduced in this social skin, overlapping the former and implementing a stratagem designed to rid their bodies and spirits of malevolent attacks. All this paraphernalia was directly related to these forms of agency, which simultaneously comprise resistance to domination and the negotiation of less-disadvantageous positions in their harsh conditions of existence. In this second skin are included the objects described above, which are among the oldest evidence of the beliefs of the Africans who arrived in Rio de Janeiro and their descendants. Given that African slaves outnumbered the Brazilian-born slaves by 75 per cent between 1822 and 1835, according to Florentino (1995: 289), these objects possibly relate to original beliefs and practices that were still very much alive and present among those who circulated through the Valongo Wharf in the first half of the nineteenth century. A place in continuous contact with Africa through the ships that arrived and departed, with an incessant flow of slaves, goods, information, and trade, as well as support for loading and unloading activities, the wharf bustled with Africans.

Some items, such as beads, shells, corals, and ambers, seem to have come through trade networks between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, intended to supply the slaves. Others undoubtedly had been appropriated or manufactured once in Brazil, such as the crystals, animal teeth, coins, rings of metal and plant fiber, and so on. Imbued with a very particular aesthetic, the amulets also functioned as adornments, decorating bodies brutalized by abusive treatment and heavy work, but still capable of maintaining and expressing self-esteem.

With these objects—lost, forgotten, discarded, and hidden—the enslaved Africans of Valongo tell us about themselves 200 years later. Through the materiality of this non-verbal discourse, they allow us to glimpse their beliefs, their strategies for dealing with oppression, their despair, and their hopes. While it was impossible for them to document either the trans-Atlantic crossing or their trajectories after arriving in Brazil—a possibility that remained the exclusive prerogative of their captors—they did leave in the soil of Valongo, as a strong but nonetheless involuntary testimony, these fragments of their history now recovered by archaeology. These material traces provide important and unique legacies for their descendants and posterity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the plates by Debret entitled “Type of black woman: a study,” “Black slaves from different nations,” and “Heads of blacks from different nations,” in *Bandeira and Lago* (2009: 409, 571, 585).

<sup>2</sup> The identification of the cowry shell species found at Valongo and nearby was carried out by Professor Alexandre Dias Pimenta from the Malacology Sector of the National Museum, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>3</sup> *Attalea fumifera* is found in Alagoas, Sergipe, the south of Bahia, and Espírito Santo.

<sup>4</sup> See the plate by Debret entitled “Black woman with tattoos selling cashews” in *Bandeira and Lago* (2009: 205).

<sup>5</sup> Florida Museum of Natural History, carved bone *figa*, Catalog No. FLMNH-8-SJ-31-2066, <http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/histarch/featuredObject.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Carlos Henrique de Oliveira Felipe, “O âmbar como instrumento para inferências paleoecológicas,” <http://www.webartigos.com/artigos/9313>.

- <sup>7</sup> Identification of the genera of coral and bryozoans was undertaken by Professors Clóvis Barreira e Castro and Débora de Oliveira Pires of the Coelenteratology Sector of the Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.
- <sup>8</sup> Information obtained at the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora*. Fourteenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties. The Hague (Netherlands), June 3-15, 2007.
- <sup>9</sup> See the plates by Debret entitled “Female market sellers of diverse qualities,” “Return of the black men from a Naturalist,” “Type of black woman: a study,” “Black men selling charcoal and women selling maize,” “Heads of blacks of different nations,” and “Black female cooks selling angu,” in Bandeira and Lago (2009: 199, 251, 409, 569, 585).
- <sup>10</sup> Identification of the canine teeth of swine was carried out by Professor Fernando Lencastre Sicuro, from the Department of Physiology of the State University of Rio de Janeiro, and Professor Luiz Flamarion B. de Oliveira, from the Mastozoology Sector of the Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.
- <sup>11</sup> Personal communication from Professor Luiz Flamarion B. de Oliveira, Mastozoology Sector of the Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.
- <sup>12</sup> See de Melo (1996). Identification made by Professor Irene Azevedo Cardoso of the Carcinology Sector of the Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.
- <sup>13</sup> See the plate by Debret entitled “Female market sellers of diverse qualities,” in Bandeira and Lago (2009: 199).

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