

From the Collection

Combing the Roots of Colonialism: Jamaican Tortoiseshell Combs and Social Status, 1655–1692

Donald F. Johnson

This article analyzes a set of seventeenth-century Jamaican tortoiseshell combs, arguing that these objects were cultural hybrids, combining recognizable colonial materials with familiar English forms and social meanings to allow those who had enriched themselves in the colonies entry into England's elite. In examining the combs, this essay considers the double-sided combs' origins in a European context, the actual process by which the material for these combs was harvested and forged into consumer goods, the ways in which the turtle trade shaped colonialism in the West Indies, and changing attitudes toward travel that made such an object possible.

SOMETIME IN 1673, a craftsman in Port Royal, Jamaica, bought the shell of a hawksbill turtle. The turtle itself likely had been killed by creole hunters in the nearby Cayman Islands or taken by native tribes on the nearby Mosquito Coast and its shell traded from vessel to vessel along with logwood, mahogany, and other natural resources until it eventually reached Port Royal's vibrant colonial marketplace. With the newly purchased shell in hand, the anonymous craftsman steamed it flat and skillfully separated its plates into workable portions. Taking up an array of tiny saws and picks, he carved a double-sided comb that, in form, had

been part of his cultural heritage for centuries. Not satisfied merely with the comb, however, the craftsman decorated it by engraving floral patterns inspired by the New World plant life he saw around him. Still not finished, he crafted an intricate case for his creation, embellished with palm trees and the same lush floral designs inspired by the Jamaican countryside. When it came time to sign the piece, the artisan chose to remain anonymous, simply scratching "1673" and "IAMAICA" into the opposing sides of the case. Once completed, a wealthy planter or merchant likely bought the comb, and it was taken back to England as a memento of its new owner's New World experience. The comb and case may have been displayed in a country house along with the owner's other exotic objects and shown with pride to visitors and houseguests. Two hundred and fifty years later, the set surfaced in the hands of a London antique dealer and was purchased by an eccentric American millionaire who took it to his own country house and used it to embellish a display of seventeenth-century New England furniture.

The Winterthur Museum now possesses this surprisingly complicated artifact, along with two other double-sided tortoiseshell combs made in Port Royal, Jamaica, between 1655 and 1692 (figs. 1–3). These objects are cultural hybrids, combining New World material with familiar Old World form and social meaning and revealing the rising colonial mind-set.

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Fig. 1. Double-sided comb and case, Jamaica, 1673. Tortoiseshell with engraving; case: L. 6 $\frac{7}{8}$ " , W. 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ " ; comb: L. 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ " , W. 4" . (Winterthur, bequest of Henry Francis du Pont; Winterthur photos, Jim Schneck.)

These combs helped those who had made their fortunes in the New World enter into the cultural elite of the Old World: by couching the material trappings of their newfound wealth in a familiar yet exotic form, colonial merchants and planters were able to display their newly attained social status and claim influential positions in European society. The double-sided comb was a medieval European form, symbolizing upper-class chivalry and religion and reinforcing the traditional social order. The tortoiseshell material was a distinctly New World commodity that shaped the way in which the West Indian colonies developed and prospered. Thus, a European form, which had reflected traditional forms of high status for centuries, was altered in material and decoration to represent a new kind of mercantile high status for newly minted colonial members of the cultural elite.

Objects of Scholarly Curiosity

Previous works on Jamaican tortoiseshell combs have not gone beyond cataloging known examples

and speculating wildly as to their origins. In his 1925 article on Jamaican tortoiseshell carving, Frank Cundall identifies eight single- and double-sided examples of this style from English museums and private collections, all decorated in the same manner as Winterthur's combs.¹ The earliest known Jamaican tortoiseshell comb-in-case is dated 1671, and the latest dates to 1690 (figs. 4–5).² The decoration on the cases varies, with some having coats of arms on one side but most having more abstract palm tree or pineapple designs depicting native Jamaican fruits and plants. Several are single sided, although most are double sided like Winterthur's combs.³ The combs themselves all have the same floral design (which Cundall attributes without solid evidence to a Dutch influence) on the case and dividing line (or spine of single-sided examples) as the Jamaican combs in Winterthur's collection. Geoffrey Wills adds eight more Jamaican combs to

¹ Frank Cundall, "Tortoiseshell Carving in Jamaica," *Connoisseur* 72 (1925): 154–65, at 154–55.

² *Ibid.*, 159.

³ *Ibid.*, 156–57.



Fig. 2. Double-sided comb and case, Jamaica, 1683. Tortoiseshell with engraving; case: L. $6\frac{15}{16}$ " , W. $4\frac{7}{16}$ " ; comb: L. $6\frac{1}{8}$ " , W. $3\frac{15}{16}$ ". (Winterthur.)

the known survivals in his 1957 article, bringing the total to sixteen, with the latest dating to 1692.⁴ All of Wills's combs also share the floral design on

⁴ Geoffrey Wills, "Jamaican Engraved Tortoiseshell Wig-Combs," *Connoisseur Yearbook* (1957): 76–77, at 76.

the dividing line and cases. The double combs in Wills's collection are all closely related to those in Winterthur's collection, with the only real variation being the more elaborate cases with more extensive inlay, carving, and even silver decoration in the former. Given these differences, Wills proposes



Fig. 3. Double-sided comb, Jamaica, ca. 1655–92. Tortoiseshell with engraving and silver hardware; L. 9 $\frac{1}{8}$ " , W. 5 $\frac{3}{8}$ ". (Winterthur, bequest of Henry Francis du Pont.)

that these combs had more than one maker, although whether these makers were “native Jamaicans, Spaniards, Dutchmen or Englishmen cannot be resolved.”⁵ Figure 6 depicts the so-called “Elizabeth Fleming Comb” from Wills’s typology, which is the only one to have an owner’s name inscribed on it.

Philip Hart and Jen Cruse both reach many of the same conclusions in their more recent analyses of these combs.⁶ Although agreeing with Wills’s idea of different craftsmen, Hart focuses on the stylistic interpretation of Jamaican themes on the combs. For example, the author notes that the combs that depict Native Americans almost always depict them “clothed in skirts of leaves,” with a male always carrying “a bow in one hand while the female carries either a bunch of flowers or an

arrow.”⁷ Although Hart uses minute stylistic distinctions primarily to differentiate between two craftsmen, he acknowledges a stylistic commonality among all of the combs, theorizing that his post-1688 “Craftsman B” was probably an apprentice of the earlier “Craftsman A.”⁸ Hart goes on to speculate that Craftsman A may have been one Paul Bennet, an Englishman, who in 1673 was listed in property records as a combmaker.⁹ This possibility would place the combs firmly into an English context. Cruse generally agrees but stresses the way in which ancillary craftsmen, such as silversmiths and engravers, were likely involved.¹⁰ Thus, the three Winterthur combs clearly fit into a larger group being produced in Port Royal, Jamaica, during the period between 1670 and 1692, when the city was wrecked by an earthquake.

⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁶ Philip Hart, “Tortoiseshell Comb Cases: A 17th Century Jamaican Craft,” *Jamaica Journal* 16 (1983): 13–21; Jen Cruse, *The Comb: Its History and Development* (London: Robert Hale, 2007), 154–58.

⁷ Hart, “Tortoiseshell Comb Cases,” 16.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰ Cruse, *The Comb*, 157.

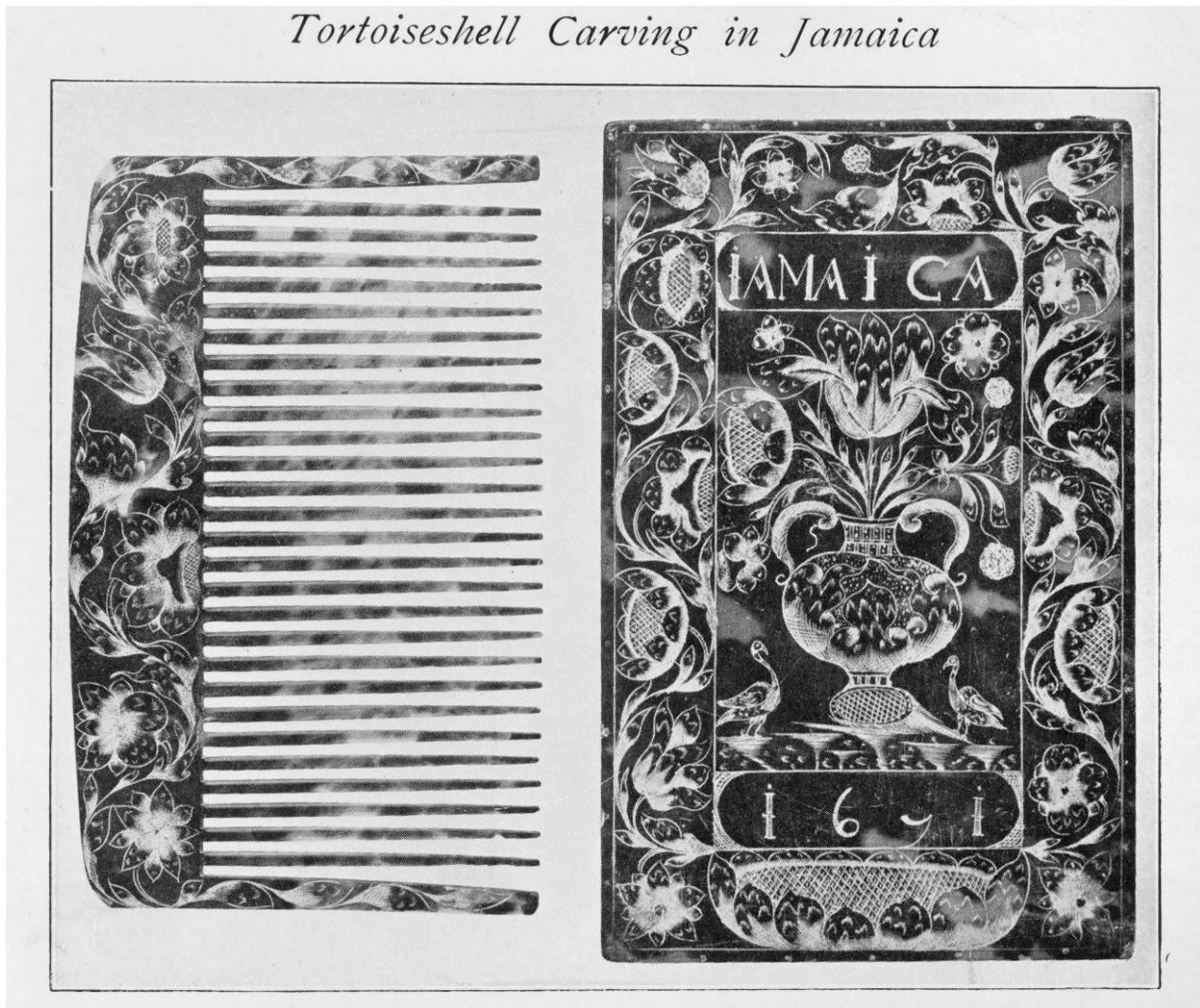


Fig. 4. “Morgan” single-sided comb and case, Jamaica, 1671. Tortoiseshell with engraving. From Frank Cundall, “Tortoiseshell Carving in Jamaica,” *Connoisseur* 72 (1925): 155. (Winterthur Library Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)

A Traditional Form

The combe to be distinguished from the single tooth combe is often termed a double tooth combe, and a head combe . . . but all this needs not in Armory, to say a combe is sufficient, it is a thing by which the haire of the head is layd smooth and straight, and kept from growing into Knotts and Arslocks. This is borne by the name of Combe.¹¹

Randle Holme’s description of a “proper” comb is taken from his 1702 *Academie of Armory*, which gives

detailed depictions of a gentlemen’s proper equipage. Holme goes on to elaborate, stating “the one for a man and both for a woman.”¹² The so-called man’s comb, according to Holme’s illustration, is double sided, one side consisting of fine needle-like teeth and the other having wide, large, “coarse” teeth.¹³ By the time Holme wrote, such double-sided combs were rich with cultural meanings beyond mere gender distinctions.

In form, the double-sided comb has existed since at least the time of the ancient Egyptians and probably since pre-agricultural times. In his 1906 collection illustrating combs from across Europe

¹¹ Randle Holme, *An Academie or Store House of Armory & Blazon by Randle Holme of Chester*, ed. I. H. Jeayes (1702; reprint, London: J. B. Nichols, 1905), 12.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19.



Fig. 5. Comb case, Jamaica, 1690. Tortoiseshell with engraving and silver hardware. From Frank Cundall, "Tortoiseshell Carving in Jamaica," *Connoisseur* 72 (1925): 158. (Winterthur Library Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)

and the Middle East, Ferdinand Winter depicts double-sided combs in Northern Africa and the Middle East as far back as the fourth and fifth centuries BC.¹⁴ Winter does not delve into the function of these combs but traces their European and Near Eastern lineage over the course of millennia. In her collector's guide to antique combs, Evelyn Haertig depicts a fourth-century AD Coptic wood comb very similar to Winter's examples, with coarse teeth on one side and fine teeth on the other.¹⁵ She explains that "the finer teeth of the double-sided comb were used for removing lice, vermin, small particles of dirt . . . and the coarser

teeth for actually separating strands of hair in preparation for some form of coiffure."¹⁶ This form makes sense, then, in the context of the ancient and medieval world, and once it had been worked out, the design experienced few significant changes up to the era of the tortoiseshell examples considered here.

What did change, however, were the materials and decorative embellishments. Ornately decorated double-sided combs marked social status in medieval Europe. By the late Middle Ages, the double-sided comb was a mainstay of Catholic ritual, used in ceremonial grooming during the consecration of bishops and other church officials as well as in everyday masses.¹⁷ Judging from the combs surviving in Winter's collection, the vast majority of ornamented

¹⁴ Ferdinand Winter, *Die Kämmе aller Zeiten von der Steinzeit bis zur Gegenwart: Eine Sammlung von Abbildungen* [The Combs of All Times: From the Stone Age to the Present Day] (Leipzig: H. A. Ludwig Degener, 1906), plates 1–6.

¹⁵ Evelyn Haertig, *Antique Combs and Purses* (Carmel, CA: Gallery Graphics, 1983), 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

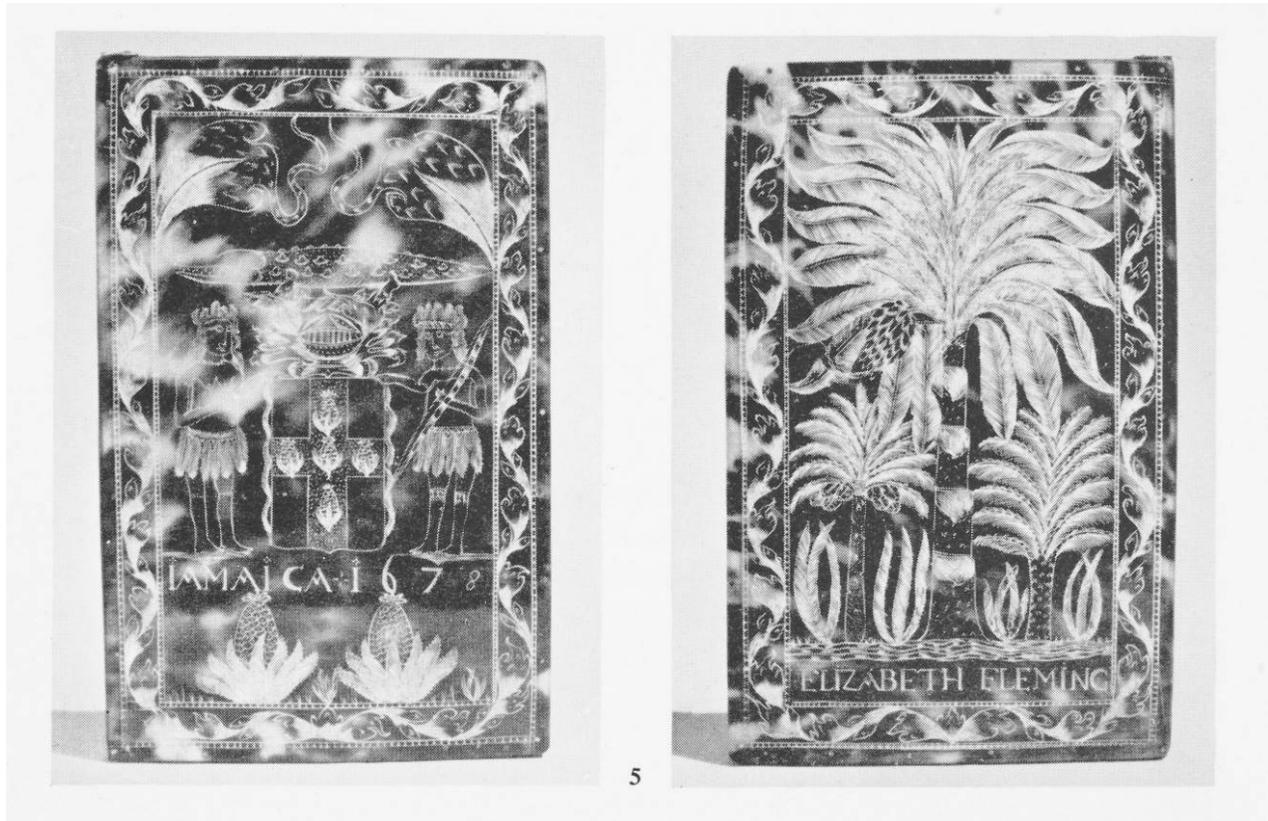


Fig. 6. “Elizabeth Fleming” comb case, Jamaica, 1678. Tortoiseshell with engraving; L. 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ ”, W. 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ ”. From Geoffrey Wills, “Jamaican Engraved Tortoiseshell Wig-Combs,” *Connoisseur Yearbook* (1957): 77, pl. 5. (Winterthur Library Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)

combs were made of ivory.¹⁸ Although ivory was easily attainable in the Mediterranean world of trade, Holme lists combs made of bone, wood, horn, and tortoiseshell in his armory by 1702.¹⁹ Likely, these materials were in common use, although not all would have survived to be added to Winter’s collection. In any case, by the fifteenth century, the double-sided comb was entrenched among the religious elites of Europe. Figures 7 and 8 illustrate two fifteenth-century English and Italian combs from Winter’s collection that are very much in line with the traditional motifs of the ninth-century Etruscan and German examples, which depict figures from the Bible. The decoration, however, suggests a shift from primarily religious use to a more secular tradition in line with Holme’s account. Figure 9, which depicts a sixteenth-century Spanish comb, illustrates this phenomenon. Although the previous medieval combs depicted religious events, figures, or morality tales, this one has a more abstract floral design, suggesting it was perhaps meant for a more

secular use. Indeed, its floral design is even reminiscent of the design found on the Winterthur combs.

The double-sided comb was common in medieval England. In addition to curated examples illustrated by Winter and Haertig, archaeological examples reveal that the double-sided comb was widely used up and down the social ladder. Geoff Egan and Frances Pritchard’s survey of late medieval dress accessories in London reveals that wooden, horn, and antler double-sided combs, often decorated, were common in deposits from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²⁰ It is interesting that the authors note that wood was the most common medium for double-sided combs and also that “two out of three wooden combs from 15th century deposits are decorated.”²¹ This observation is important in two ways. Materially, the use of wood over horn, antler, or ivory implies that these combs were used by people lower down the social

¹⁸ Winter, *Die Kämmen aller Zeiten*, plates 30–40.

¹⁹ Holme, *Store House of Armory*, 13.

²⁰ Geoff Egan and Frances Pritchard, *Dress Accessories c. 1150–1450* (London: Boydell/Museum of London, 1991), 366–76.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 375.

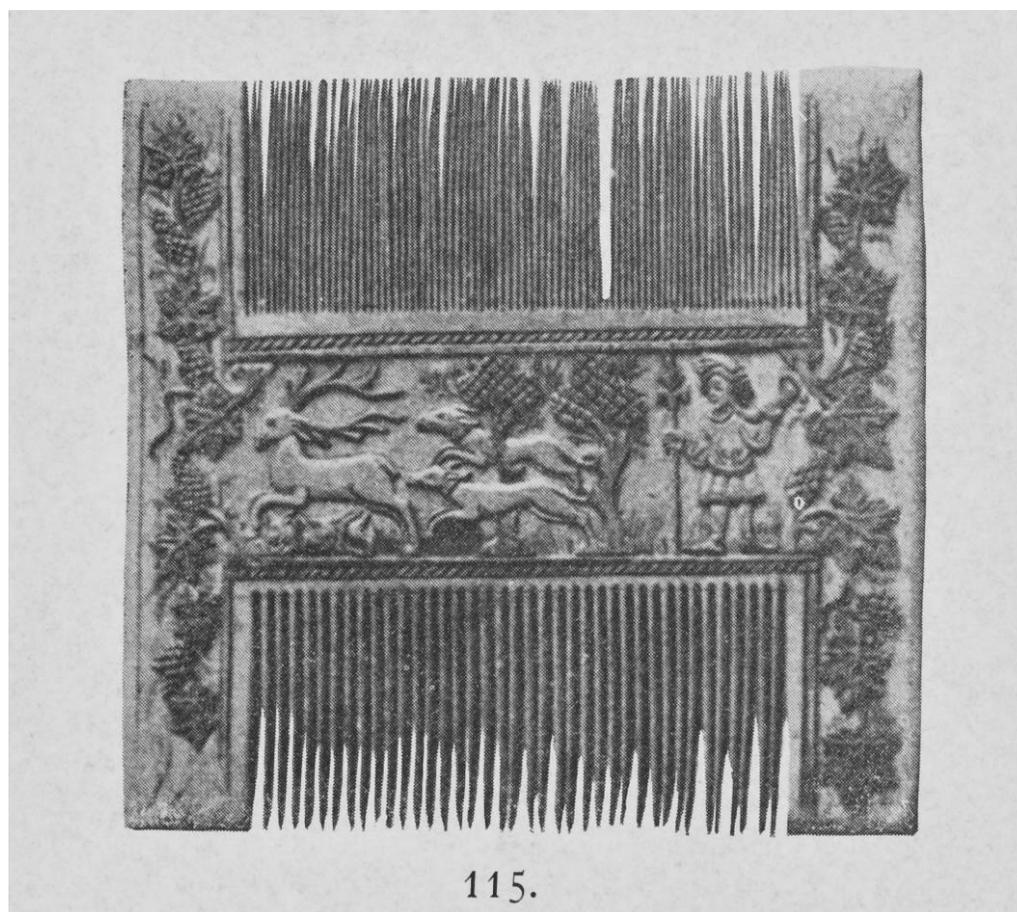


Fig. 7. Double-sided comb, Italy, ca. 15th century. Ivory; L. 2", W. 1 3/4". From Ferdinand Winter, *Die Kämmen aller Zeiten von der Steinzeit bis zur Gegenwart: Eine Sammlung von Abbildungen* [The Combs of All Times: From the Stone Age to the Present Day] (Leipzig: H. A. Ludwig Degener, 1906), pl. 115. (Winterthur Library Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)

scale, unable to afford ivory. Aesthetically, the decoration on wooden combs demonstrates the ways that consumers of modest means sought to own embellished possessions that signified improved social standing. In addition, Sue Margeson's study of middling and upper-class household deposits in Norwich in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reveals a similar assemblage, although with fewer examples of antler and wood and more ivory combs represented.²² Margeson's work is especially relevant to this study because it extends into the early seventeenth century, reflecting the continuity of the form as well as its ubiquity in late medieval and early modern England. Indeed, the archaeological evidence strongly suggests that the double-sided comb form was well known in England on the eve of New World colonization not

²² Sue Margeson, *Norwich Households: The Medieval and Post-medieval Finds from Norwich Survey Excavations, 1971-1978* (Norwich: Centre for East Anglian Studies, 1993), 66-67.

just in the upper classes but among would-be social climbers as well.

As with most aspects of material culture, Englishmen brought double-sided combs to North America in the early decades of the seventeenth century. Figure 10 illustrates a small ivory double-sided comb found in an archaeological deposit near Plymouth, Massachusetts. The assemblage around the comb marks it as most likely dating to the second half of the seventeenth century at the latest.²³ Similar combs (dating to the earliest occupation of the English fort) have been found in more recent excavations at Jamestown.²⁴ The traditional form

²³ E-mail message from Karin Goldstein, curator of archaeological collections, Plymouth Plantation, to author, September 22, 2008. The comb comes from a trash pit in the Winslow site in Marshfield, MA, excavated in 1947. As yet, no site reports have been published.

²⁴ William Kelso, *Jamestown Rediscovery, 1994-2004* (Richmond, VA: Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, 2004).



Fig. 8. Double-sided comb, England, ca. 15th century. Ivory; L. 4", W. 3 1/2". From Ferdinand Winter, *Die Kämme aller Zeiten von der Steinzeit bis zur Gegenwart: Eine Sammlung von Abbildungen* [The Combs of All Times: From the Stone Age to the Present Day] (Leipzig: H. A. Ludwig Degener, 1906), pl. 116. (Winterthur Library Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)

of the double-sided comb, then, moved not only to the seventeenth-century Caribbean but to North America. Still, in both New England and Virginia, the combs were of traditional European materials and likely brought directly from England. The Jamaican examples, however, were wrought from tortoiseshell (an indigenous material with strong colonial connotations for Europeans) and were almost certainly produced in the colonial context.

An Exotic Material

The Port Royal tortoiseshell combs can be understood in the context of the tortoiseshell trade in the city during the second half of the seventeenth century. In order to put these combs in context, three important historical threads apply: the commoditization of West Indian tortoiseshell during the seventeenth century, the role of Port Royal as a

center of trade and commerce for the West Indies, and the evolution of the pre-industrial combmaker's craft. In short, the narrative begins with the harvest of a hawksbill turtle in the wild, continues with the sale of its shell at Port Royal, and concludes with the creation of the object itself by a craftsman. The intermingling of these three distinctly different cultural influences resulted in these combs representing the hybridized and interconnected nature of English colonialism in the seventeenth century.

Understanding the ways in which these combs were interpreted by Jamaican craftsmen requires understanding tortoiseshell's physical and cultural properties. Ephraim Chambers published the following description of tortoiseshell in the fourth volume of his *Cyclopaedia*, eventually published in 1783: "The best of tortoise-shell is thick, clear, transparent, of the colour of antimony, sprinkled with brown and white . . . being of a perfect bony

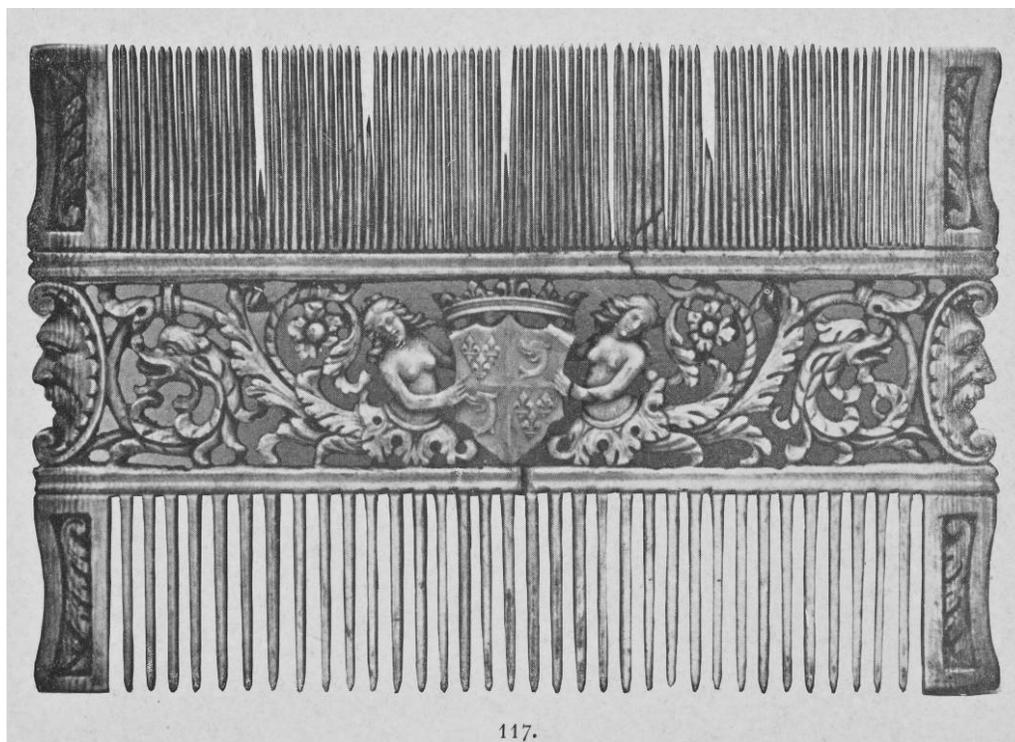


Fig. 9. Double-sided comb, Spain, ca. 16th century. Ivory; L. $4 \frac{1}{2}$ " , W $2 \frac{7}{8}$ ". From Ferdinand Winter, *Die Kämmе aller Zeiten von der Steinzeit bis zur Gegenwart: Eine Sammlung von Abbildungen* [The Combs of All Times: From the Stone Age to the Present Day] (Leipzig: H. A. Ludwig Degener, 1906), pl. 117. (Winterthur Library Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)



Fig. 10. Double-sided comb, Massachusetts, ca. 1650–1700. Ivory; L. $2 \frac{1}{2}$ " , W. 3 ". (Plymouth Plantation and the Marshfield Historical Commission.)

contexture, but covered on the outside with scales, or rather plates, of an horny substance which are what workmen call tortoise-shell."²⁵ At the time of this description, the material had been in use in Europe for centuries in veneers, snuffboxes, jewelry, and (most important for this study) combs. Tortoiseshell, which was (and remains) a common name for the shell of the hawksbill sea turtle, had been popular since Roman times and, in Chambers's time, was a major import from the West Indies.²⁶ Jamaica was centrally located relative to three major turtle-hunting grounds in the seventeenth-century Caribbean, namely, the Bahamas to the north, Cayman Islands to the northwest, and the Mosquito Coast to the south-southwest (fig. 11). One hundred years before Chambers's description was published, trade in tortoiseshell and other West Indian commodities had been at its height in Port Royal, Jamaica.

Among indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, hunting sea turtles, or turtling, had long been a

²⁵ Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia: Or, an Universal Dictionary of the Arts and Sciences*, vol. 4 (London: W. Strahan, J. F. and C. Rivington et al., 1783), n.p.

²⁶ Roger C. Smith, "The Caymanian Catboat: A West Indian Maritime Legacy," *World Archaeology* 16 (1985): 329–36, at 332.



Fig. 11. T. Bowen, West Indies. From *The North-American and the West-Indian Gazetteer: Containing an Authentic Description of the Colonies and Islands in That Part of the Globe, Shewing Their Situation, Climate, Soil Produce, and Trade; with Their Former and Present Conditions. Also an Exact Account of the Cities, Town, Harbours, Ports, Bays, Rivers, Lakes, Mountains, Number of Inhabitants* (London: G. Robinson, 1776), xxv. (Winterthur Library Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)



Fig. 12. Detail of fig. 11.

traditional practice. In the Cayman Islands, Christopher Columbus observed native islanders using semidomesticated “suckerfish,” or remora eels, to ensnare sea turtles and reel them in as early as 1494.²⁷ In his study of Caymanian maritime culture, Roger Smith describes a method where, “handled by a length of string tied to its tail, the remora attached its dorsal suction device to the underside of large marine prey, which could then be hauled into a boat.”²⁸ The Cayman Islands, situated between Cuba and Jamaica, were perfectly suited to turtle hunting thanks to extensive shallows that made it easy to hunt the turtles across the ocean floor and remote beaches on which they congregated to breed (fig. 12). The Spanish even named the islands the *Tortugas* due to the massive turtle population.²⁹ On the other side of the Caribbean, the Mosquito Indians of eastern Nicaragua, an im-

portant ally of the British against the Spanish, also had a long history of hunting turtles that continued well into the colonial period. In his study of the eighteenth-century Mosquitos, Frank Dawson claims that in 1711 at least one tribe “spoke English and traded tortoiseshell with Jamaica for firearms and ammunition.”³⁰ Across the Caribbean from the earliest period on, then, turtling was a part of life for Native peoples before the arrival of Europeans.

Two types of sea turtles, the green turtle and the hawksbill, became essential to the European colonial economy in the West Indies for two very different but interconnected reasons (figs. 13–14). Although the hawksbill was certainly more valuable because of its shell, the green turtle was, for much of the colonial period, essential for the survival of ships in the Caribbean. The green turtle, which can weigh upward of 250 pounds, was used primarily to

²⁷ Ibid., 329–30.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 330–31.

³⁰ Frank Griffith Dawson, “William Pitt’s Settlement at Black River on the Mosquito Shore: A Challenge to Spain in Central America, 1732–1787,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 63 (1983): 677–706, quote at 681.



Fig. 13. Green turtle. From Mark Catesby, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands: Containing the Figures of Birds, Beasts, Fishes, Serpents, Insects, and Plants*, vol. 2 (London: self-published, 1743), 38. (Winterthur Library Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)

reprovision ships arriving from Europe. Used as a food source, green turtles could be kept alive on ships indefinitely by periodically sprinkling them with salt water, and they became a valuable source of fresh meat and a weapon against scurvy on long voyages.³¹ Smith writes that on Grand Cayman, the largest nesting ground of green turtles in the West Indies, “green turtles were caught by nets placed near their nocturnal roosting haunts.”³² Once the turtles had gathered, the large nets would be pulled in by teams of turtlers, sometimes gathering dozens at a time. The hawksbill, however, was barely edible and was hunted individually, as hawksbills generally nest and travel alone. Smith describes turtlers of Cayman Brac “stalk[ing] their prey across the seabed, dropping a circular net . . . at the appropriate moment.”³³ Hunting hawksbill turtles, then, required a very specialized set of fishing skills and

much patience, as the animals were caught individually rather than in batches. Although they certainly brought higher prices on the market, they were not nearly as useful in a practical sense and thus were regarded as a luxury item. These distinctions often made the hawksbill’s shell a secondary resource in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one hunted and sold as a profitable sideline to other, more practical items or whose work-to-profit ratios were more lucrative.

A comparison of the turtle fisheries in the Caymans and Bahamas with those along the Mosquito Coast illustrates the intricacies of the tortoiseshell trade in the colonial West Indies. All three sites emerged as primary sources of tortoiseshell for the English market but developed different and vastly contrasting methods for harvest. From an early date, the Cayman Islands and Bahama fisheries were run directly by whites. Previously uninhabited except for turtling parties from Cuba, Smith explains that the Caymans were “haphazardly settled by groups of shipwrecked sailors, military

³¹ Smith, “The Cayminian Catboat,” 329, 331.

³² *Ibid.*, 331.

³³ *Ibid.*, 332.



Fig. 14. Hawksbill turtle. From Mark Catesby, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands: Containing the Figures of Birds, Beasts, Fishes, Serpents, Insects, and Plants*, vol. 2 (London: self-published, 1743), 39. (Winterthur Library Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)

deserters, and itinerant fishermen.”³⁴ This subculture, originating mostly from Jamaica, was supported almost entirely by the turtle trade, whether in green turtles to supply ships or in hawksbills to provide tortoiseshell. Developing specialized canoes for hunting and other tactics for harvesting turtles, these settlers turned the Caymans into a waystation where ships could come and supply themselves with green turtles as well as trade for hawksbills to sell in port.³⁵

Turtle hunting was a white activity in the Bahamas as well. In his 1743 *Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahamas*, Mark Catesby describes fishermen from the Bahamas collecting turtles in the early spring. Catesby’s description is valuable in that it provides one of the only first-person accounts of turtling in the European tradition and demonstrates the techniques used. As the natural historian describes it, Bahamian turtlers went “in April . . .

in little boats to the Coasts of *Cuba*, and other neighboring Islands, where . . . they watch the going and returning of the Turtle, to and from their Nests, at which Time they turn them on their Backs” (fig. 15).³⁶ In addition to following turtles to their nests and disabling them by turning them over, Catesby also describes Bahamian hunters using a long wooden pole with an iron peg attached to one end to snag turtles on the sea floor.³⁷ Both of these techniques indicate a great deal of innovation on the part of these turtlers. Like their counterparts in the Caymans, white Bahamian turtlers came up with ingenious ways of catching their prey and getting it to market. Unlike the Caymans, however, the Bahamas were an established British colonial enclave, and turtling was just one of many industries pursued by the islands’ inhabitants.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 330.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 331.

³⁶ Mark Catesby, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands: Containing the Figures of Birds, Beasts, Fishes, Serpents, Insects, and Plants*, vol. 2 (London: self-published, 1743), 39.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

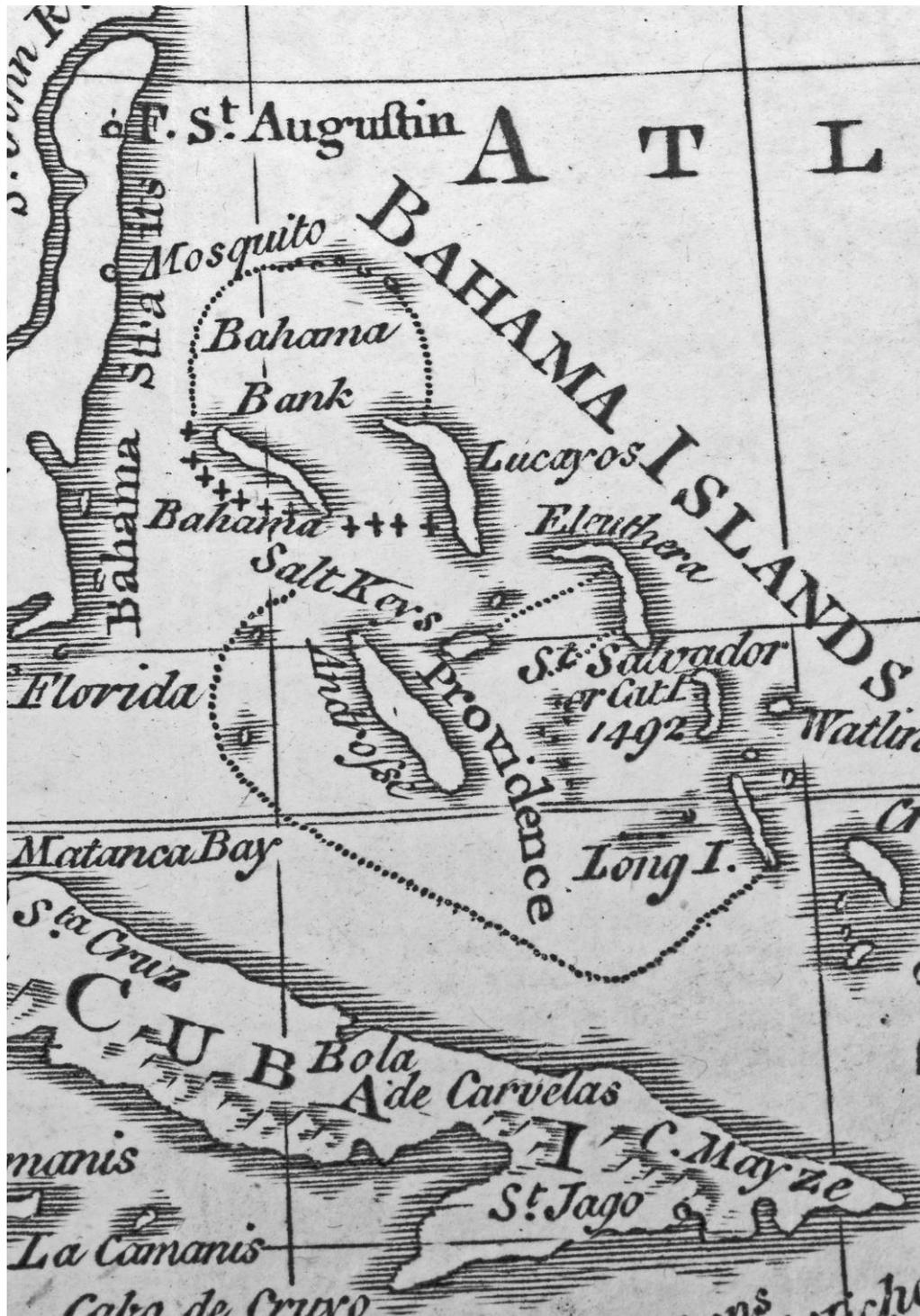


Fig. 15. Detail of fig. 11.

In the merchant-friendly atmosphere of the central Caribbean, Caymanian and Bahamian turtlers became essential to the economic system. It is important to note, however, that the green turtle was the staple: without its use on ships, it is

doubtful that the Caribbean itself would have been settled so early or that hawksbills there would have even been harvested. Indeed, as Catesby put it in 1743, "the green turtle is that which all the maritime inhabitants in America, that live between the



Fig. 16. Detail of comb in fig. 3, showing saw marks on teeth.

Tropicks, subsist much upon.”³⁸ Still, the European turtlers were effective at exploiting their resource, driving both species of sea turtle nearly to extinction in their waters. The turtling subculture on the Caymans, for example, lasted until the early twentieth century, when international practice banned the sale of hawksbills.³⁹ It is important, however, to note that the trade in hawksbills in the Cayman Islands and the Bahamas was, by the seventeenth century, both European driven and dependent on the existence of the more practical, more essential trade in green turtles as a source of meat.

The tortoiseshell trade on the Mosquito Coast, however, was conducted in a completely different manner. Where in the Caymans turtling was carried out by Europeans and was the mainstay of the economy, in Mosquito territory the trade was heavily mediated by natives and was secondary to other, more profitable trades such as logwood and,

later, mahogany. As previously noted, the Mosquito Indians were a valuable ally of the British against the Spanish in Central America, especially after the British captured Jamaica in 1655 and obtained a foothold in the central Caribbean. The street ran both ways: throughout the second half of the seventeenth century, the Mosquitos helped British pirates and privateers raid Spanish ports, and the British allowed Mosquito leaders and their children to be educated in Jamaica and even in Europe and rewarded them with trade goods.⁴⁰ After the British cracked down on piracy and privateering in 1670, the Mosquito Coast became important as ex-pirates began to smuggle logwood from its shores, setting up camps to cut the important dyewood and ship it back to Jamaica and then on to England.⁴¹ The Mosquito Indians were essential to this process

⁴⁰ Dawson, “William Pitt’s Settlement,” 678–80.

⁴¹ Ibid., 681; Bernard Neitschmann, “Ecological Change, Inflation, and Migration in the Far Western Caribbean,” *Geographical Review* 69 (1979): 1–24, at 5–6.

³⁸ Ibid., 38.

³⁹ Smith, “The Cayminian Catboat,” 334–35.

as native guides and also as traders. It was in this way that the tortoiseshell trade flourished on the mainland: as a sideline to illicit smuggling of a more valuable substance. Ships headed back to Jamaica loaded with wood also carried tortoiseshell obtained from locals. Thus, by 1711, the Mosquitos were well ensconced in the lucrative tortoiseshell trade, using as an intermediary the trading posts set up to smuggle wood. As the eighteenth century continued, these operations became more sophisticated and drew a higher volume of goods. In 1780, for example, one such trading station recorded shipping four tons of tortoiseshell along with three million feet of mahogany, which had become another lucrative smuggled commodity.⁴² On an 1841 cruise of the east coast of Central America, Captain Richard Owen of the *HMS Thunder* reported that the main exports of the thriving Mosquito Indians were “mahogany, dyewoods, tortoiseshell, indigo, and cochineal.”⁴³ As with the Caymans, tortoiseshell trade continued to thrive secondarily on the Mosquito Coast until the ban on hunting hawksbills came into effect in the early twentieth century.

In this early trade system, tortoiseshell was almost always a secondary trade good: in the Caymans, it was second to the more practically useful green turtle, and on the Mosquito shore, it was second to logwood and, later, mahogany. The labor-intensive method of hunting hawksbill turtles, and the smaller quantities, made tortoiseshell a profitable “extra” for most merchants, who would sell whatever commanded the best price at the least investment. Rather than devaluing objects made from tortoiseshell, the material’s status as a secondary good made it more instantly recognizable as a by-product of colonization. Although not the primary objective of most trading ventures, tortoiseshell enjoyed associations with mahogany and other luxurious raw materials exported from the West Indies. When worked into objects, such as combs, tortoiseshell reflected both the wealth of the bearer and the exotic origins of that wealth. Such objects were only made possible, however, by the unique cultural and craft interactions taking place in the Caribbean during the second half of the seventeenth century.

⁴² Neitschmann, “Ecological Change, Inflation, and Migration,” 6.

⁴³ Bird Allen, “Sketch of the Eastern Coast of Central America: Compiled from the Notes of Captain Richard Owen and the Officers of Her Majesty’s Ship *Thunder*, and Schooner *Lark*,” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 11 (1841): 76–89, quote at 86.

A Traditional Craft in an Exotic Society

Between 1655, when Jamaica came into English hands, and 1692, when Port Royal was effectively destroyed by a devastating earthquake, the city became a nexus of commercial activity, rivaling other leading ports in the British Empire. In her analysis of Port Royal probate inventories during this period, Nuala Zahedieh found that nearly half of the city’s population considered themselves merchants in one way or another. The author compares this to Boston in the early eighteenth century, where only one in ten bore this designation.⁴⁴ These data, combined with the fact that Jamaica’s sugar industry was in its infancy, establish that seventeenth-century Jamaica’s business was business and that it was centered at Port Royal.⁴⁵ Both the logwood coasts of Central America and the turtle fisheries of the Cayman Islands contributed to Port Royal’s economic prosperity. Port Royal merchants acted as middlemen between ships from England and trading posts on the Central American coast, taking a commission of the goods and cargo exchanged.⁴⁶ In addition, speculators in Port Royal often invested in these voyages and reaped rewards in the form of Spanish bullion and raw materials. The Navigation Acts also bolstered Port Royal’s wealth, in that British ships arriving in the Caribbean were required to make one official stop at a British port before proceeding to more illicit activities.⁴⁷ This requirement provided Port Royal’s merchants with many of their opportunities. In addition, ships carrying smuggled goods often returned by way of Port Royal, both to reprovision their ships and to “launder” their goods by passing them off as Jamaican produce on ships’ registers and customs declarations.⁴⁸ Port Royal merchants, then, had ample opportunities to profit from the English contraband trade with the Spanish Main, as well as opportunities to gain raw materials and bullion for their own economy. As evidence of this, Zahedieh points out that Port Royal had the only cash economy in the colonies during the seventeenth century, using smuggled Spanish coins as currency as early as the 1660s.⁴⁹ During the second half of the

⁴⁴ Nuala Zahedieh, “The Merchants of Port Royal, Jamaica, and the Spanish Contraband Trade, 1655–1692,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 43 (1986): 570–93, at 570.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 570–71.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 581–82.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 579.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 583–84.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 586.

seventeenth century, then, Jamaica, and Port Royal specifically, was the center of Caribbean commerce, into which goods flowed from both Europe and the Spanish Main. The context of the logwood camps along the Mosquito Coast and the turtle fishery of the Cayman Islands becomes clear: these were satellites of a commercial empire centered on Port Royal, supplying vital raw materials for the West Indian trade.

The working of tortoiseshell, specifically in a combmaking context, provides additional context for understanding Winterthur's combs. In his invaluable *Cyclopaedia*, Chambers underscores the demand for tortoiseshell by including a recipe for counterfeiting the material: a thin paste created with "two parts of quick-lime and one of litharge" could be painted onto cattle horn to give it a translucent, tortoiseshell-like appearance.⁵⁰ This counterfeiting method underscores the value of tortoiseshell for inlay work, snuffboxes, and combs. Chambers notes that in order to work tortoiseshell, the material must be constantly heated: "as soon as ever it is warm, the under-shell becomes easily separable."⁵¹ Chambers observes that a single hawksbill turtle could yield up to thirteen plates, five of which would be flat and eight curved.⁵² The plates were manipulated into a workable state by heating. The worker could separate and saw small pieces of the heated plate to be worked into combs or cases. In her article on New England combmaking, Mary Musser adds that hot oil, in addition to boiling water or steam, could be used to soften the tortoiseshell sufficiently to work it and was more beneficial to the shell itself than simple water.⁵³ Musser also points to the development of a wedge press, in which horn or tortoiseshell was placed between two iron plates and flattened into a usable shape.⁵⁴ Still, a flat, narrow piece of tortoiseshell was no different from a mahogany board: neither was a finished product. At some point, the combmaker needed to step in to take the slices of tortoiseshell from raw material to finished product.

Although few accounts survive of combmakers in Port Royal besides the scant reference to Mr. Bennet that Geoffrey Wills points out, two histories of eighteenth-century combmaking in New En-

gland reveal possible techniques used by the Port Royal craftsman (or craftsmen) to create the combs in Winterthur's collection. In his work on North American combmaking, Perry Walton reinforces the idea that tortoiseshell needed to be hot and, in addition, hydrated in order to be worked. Much like cattle horn, a more common material in the combmaker's trade, tortoiseshell was steamed or placed in boiling water in order to make it flexible enough to work. Once steamed, it could be hammered into a desirably flat and thin shape and worked in much the same way as horn.⁵⁵ Now malleable, the shell was then sawn and shaped with a variety of specialized saws and picks. Figure 16 illustrates the intricate tools used in sawing the teeth, revealing the tiny saw marks still evident on one of Winterthur's combs. This suggests that the West Indian craftsman or craftsmen who created the Jamaican combs used techniques similar to those in the English combmaking tradition.

Musser and Walton's work on the craft also emphasizes that, while combmaking was a profession, it did not require a great deal of investment other than raw materials. Musser stresses that "in the early days, combmaking was often a one-man or one-family affair, requiring little capital investment."⁵⁶ Such a craft fits in perfectly with a transient, rapidly moving society like seventeenth-century Port Royal, in which fortunes were made and lost almost instantaneously. In such an environment, it is easy to see an ex-sailor or even a turtler moving into combmaking as a quicker way to wealth, or just to make ends meet between trading voyages. The methods, especially in the seventeenth century, would have been simple enough, and, although the Jamaican combs in Winterthur's collection are exquisitely decorated, the decoration is simply scratched onto the surface and a white resin applied.⁵⁷ Thus, the combmaker or combmakers of Port Royal could easily have been active participants in its economy as well as practicing their craft: it is easy to imagine a seaman or small-scale merchant taking up the craft to earn extra money or while away the months between trading voyages.

Can these combs shed light on broad issues, such as culture change? The idea of overseas travel as a status symbol may be reflected in these portable objects. As goods and peoples moved across

⁵⁰ Chambers, *Cyclopaedia*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Mary Musser, "Massachusetts Horn Smiths: A Century of Combmaking, 1775-1875," *Old Time New England* 68 (1978): 59-68, at 59.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁵ Perry Walton, *Comb Making in America* (Boston: self-published, 1925), 141.

⁵⁶ Musser, "Massachusetts Horn Smiths," 62.

⁵⁷ See Winterthur's internal conservation reports for specifics on the resin used, as well as for more on the engraving technique.

the world in increasing numbers during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, travel itself emerged as a symbol of status and wealth. Although relatively few people traveled great distances, and those who did had a variety of experiences, the growth in popularity of travel narratives (both actual and fictional) in Europe and British North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries suggests a society fascinated with accounts of exotic places and things.⁵⁸ Travel began to play a part in social mobility, and tales of the exotic became valuable commodities in the polite society of the homeland. In addition to creating narratives of their travels to entertain and astonish, however, returning travelers brought back with them material goods that were used as social capital in the mother country.

New World Objects in Old World Society

Almost all of the approximately twenty combs identified in this craft tradition, including the Winterthur combs, were “discovered” in Great Britain. Most of Cundall’s examples, with one or two exceptions, were drawn from museums and private collections in London (including Cundall’s own).⁵⁹ Wills’s and Hart’s additions were, with a few exceptions, donated to the Jamaican Historical Society by wealthy English collectors.⁶⁰ The Winterthur combs were purchased in the 1950s from an antique dealer in London.⁶¹ In the context of the larger British Empire, it seems likely that the combs were meant as small mementos of Jamaica to be sent as gifts, brought back by visitors or returning residents to England. Practical items in one sense, they were meant to be shown off to friends back home, admired, and seen as material proof of the bearer’s worldliness. Cundall hints at this usage, presenting evidence that the wife of Thomas Lynch, a governor of Jamaica, sent to a friend in England “a tortoiseshell box from here with combs and some vanillas,” along with other trifles of West Indian produce and craft.⁶² Analyzing the Jamaican tortoiseshell combs in the context of travel and colonialism’s link to rising social status during the colonial period

requires tracing the changing awareness and conception of travel in seventeenth-century England. With travel culture in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries assessed through written narratives as well as material evidence, the Jamaican tortoiseshell combs can be seen for what they truly represented: hybridized objects created from familiar forms to reflect new cultural structures in a quickly changing society.

Although the colonial period often has been analyzed in a social, political, and cultural sense as movements of people and formations of new cultures, it is important to note that a primary motivation of those taking part in colonial ventures across the non-European world was to gain economic and social advancement that could be taken back to the Old World. In Jamaica, for example, almost all of the large plantation holders of the island just before the American Revolution resided not on their Jamaican plantations but on estates in England, leaving their servants to increase their wealth in the New World while they increased their social standing in England. Even most of the island’s small landholders sent their children back to England for education they themselves had been unable to afford.⁶³ Thus, travel to the distant outposts of the Empire was a path to social betterment as well as economic success. The process of colonization often was commemorated in material goods. In his study of sailors’ “souvenirs” during the eighteenth century, Wolfgang Rudolph discusses “success bowls,” or small presents given to a captain or shipmaster by his peers and backers upon successful completion of a mercantile voyage. Rudolph describes such gifts as taking many forms, including “amber carvings, paintings, or exotic curios.”⁶⁴ Gift exchange was an expected part of a return voyage from the far reaches of the world. Rudolph also describes the way in which some captains obtained trade goods for themselves during their voyages. Focusing on expensive ceramics as an example, Rudolph asserts that German captains often siphoned off parts of their cargo to better their households.⁶⁵ These merchant captains used their positions to obtain the material trappings of the upper classes. As Rudolph tells us, these goods were normally reserved for “royal

⁵⁸ Percy Adams, *Travelers and Travel Liars, 1660–1800* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), 8–11.

⁵⁹ Cundall, “Tortoiseshell Carving in Jamaica,” 154–56.

⁶⁰ Wills, “Jamaican Engraved Tortoiseshell Wig-Combs,” 76; Hart, “Tortoiseshell Comb Cases,” 13–14.

⁶¹ Registrar files, Winterthur Museum and Country Estate.

⁶² Quoted in Cundall, “Tortoiseshell Carving in Jamaica,” 159.

⁶³ T. G. Burnard, “‘Prodigious Riches’: The Wealth of Jamaica before the American Revolution,” *Economic History Review* 54 (2001): 506–24, at 508.

⁶⁴ Wolfgang Rudolph, *Sailor Souvenirs: Stoneware, Faïences and Porcelain of Three Centuries*, trans. T. Lux Feininger (Leipzig: Edition Leipzig, 1985), 43.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 46–47.

courts, the aristocracy, the upper bureaucracy and the upper and middle bourgeois classes” and yet merchant captains, who often came from humble origins, could obtain the same things for their household by using their travels to their advantage.⁶⁶ Material exchange was thus an important factor in returning successfully from the colonies: one was expected to display the trappings, at the very least, of one’s newly obtained success once back in the homeland.

Around this same time period, the early to mid-seventeenth century, the emergence of the grand tour of continental Europe as a right of passage solidified travel as an essential part of a young gentleman’s education. As travel to the colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries provided ambitious up-and-comers a chance to better themselves, the grand tour to Europe likewise provided the already-leisured class with a new way in which to increase their respect among their peers and to “refine” their manners and understanding.⁶⁷ The main point of the tour was for a young man to become polished by experiencing Paris, Rome, and other cultural centers of the continent, soaking up the atmosphere and learning from tutors, ruins, and ancient books. However, the main consequence of the tour, much like the main thrust of colonialism, was at home in England. As one scholar put it, “it meant that England was constantly adding new and vital elements to her own civilization as well as diffusing English standards outside her own borders.”⁶⁸ For the upper classes, “Englishness” was supposed to be both preserved and strengthened by the cultural transmissions of the grand tour.

The effects of the grand tour were most immediately apparent in material form. In his study of English country houses from the sixteenth century to the present, Adrian Tinniswood finds that young English men taking grand tours spent vast amounts of money to bring elements of Europe back to England.⁶⁹ This phenomenon led to the large collections of classical sculpture and French art found today in British public and private collections. However, Tinniswood is quick to note that “some of these Grand Tourists could hardly be described as connoisseurs.”⁷⁰ Many of the expen-

sive goods coming back with these young gentlemen from Italy, France, and the rest of Europe were merely trinkets bought for amusement or to show off at home. So-called curiosity cabinets in English country houses during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reflected an eclectic mix of painting, sculpture, pieces of architecture, natural objects, and other artifacts picked up during one’s travels. Tinniswood accounts for this eclectic nature by asserting that “tourists’ responses were not primarily aesthetic: they wanted to see all that was rare and costly . . . there was no sense of their responding differently to a painting, a tapestry, a piece of clockwork or a curiosity of nature.”⁷¹ Because the exotic was valued so highly at home, it could enhance or confirm the social status of the returning traveler. In this context, it is not hard to imagine a Port Royal, Jamaica, tortoiseshell comb being put on display in the country house of an absentee planter or a wealthy retired merchant captain.

In her study of travel in early modern England, Joan Parkes reminds us that travel in the seventeenth century was remarkably dangerous and that few sought it out unnecessarily. Indeed, Parkes asserts that travelers made their journeys “as few and as short as business, health, and social intercourse permitted.”⁷² Precisely because shipwreck, disease, and robbery certainly hindered travel during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, long-distance travel had begun to serve a distinct social purpose that could not be ignored by upper-class Englishmen. Travel provided a means for both social mobility and social reinforcement: young members of the middling class could be welcomed back from the colonies to England at higher status than they had left, resplendent with their newfound success, and young members of the aristocracy were welcomed back from their grand tour confirmed in their status and ready to take their rightful place as the leaders of English society. Although both travel traditions served radically different purposes and appealed to different sectors of English society, both depended on material goods for reinforcement and reproduction: in the colonies, through exotic, rare, and new objects brought back as proof of success outside of England, and, in the grand tour, with familiar-looking classical pieces of art reinforcing one’s traditional place in society. In both travel traditions, the traveler was expected to display the

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶⁷ William Mead, *The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 407.

⁶⁹ Adrian Tinniswood, *The Polite Tourist: Four Centuries of Country House Visiting* (New York: Abrams, 1999), 67–68.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷² Joan Parkes, *Travel in England in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), 280.

material culture of the journey, and in that sense, almost counterintuitively, a common language of goods linked the colonial project to the more traditional grand tour. Regardless of where one traveled or for what reason, material goods were necessary when travelers returned to England to prove that they had accomplished their social objectives and were ready to take their new places in English society as either newly minted members of the aristocracy or mature, polished young gentlemen.

With the changing context of travel in mind, it becomes possible to imagine the way in which these artifacts fit within the institution of social travel during its formative stages. The double-sided comb form had significance in the religious and secular spheres as both a symbol of the liturgy in the medieval church and as a symbol of chivalry for the medieval nobility. In addition to form, the ornamentation on these medieval combs reflected their intended purpose and the way in which they were meant to be used: liturgical combs often had scenes from the lives of saints or religious motifs carved into them, and chivalric combs had coats of arms and secular scenes of knights and nobility. The Jamaican combs combine the tradition of the combs' form with new, cutting-edge cultural values involved with travel abroad and the colonial world. Although several of the combs do bear coats of arms scratched into their cases, hearkening back to the medieval cultural tradition, they all contain scenes of Jamaica itself: plants, animals, Native Americans, and other motifs reflecting the colonial environment. In addition, the decoration always contains the date of manufacture as well as the location: either Jamaica or Port Royal. The cultural contradictions and continuations inherent in the form and decoration of the combs, then, mark them as transitional objects in this evolution: al-

though the form would be familiar to Europeans as a traditional status object, the decoration indicates a shift in the type of status attributed to the item. Instead of being a symbol of traditional authority in the hands of a priest or a knight, the combs established in a familiar way a new authority: that of the wealthy merchant or the colonial magistrate. The tortoiseshell itself supports this interpretation. Although known in pre-Columbian Europe and valued for its rarity, tortoiseshell was common in the West Indies. By the seventeenth century, the substance was recognizable as a New World commodity. Thus, just as decoration and form contradict and confirm prior cultural values, the coinciding familiarity and exoticism of tortoiseshell in Europe allowed the combs to work as a brand new status symbol.

As complete objects, then, the Jamaican tortoiseshell combs were just familiar enough in form, décor, and material to allow them to be accepted in the English cultural milieu (the goal of the grand tourist) yet exotic enough to support their possessors' efforts to advance their place in European society (the goal of the colonial adventurer). Depending on whose hands they were in and in what way they were used, having and displaying a Jamaican tortoiseshell comb in England could alternately advance or confirm one's social standing. Objects such as these combs, with their contradictory mix of familiarity and innovation, represent the cultural compromises that allowed the colonial world to become an avenue for social advancement. These combs are not only important from the standpoint of understanding the Jamaican craftsman in the New World but also as an embodiment of the effects of colonialism in England and the new ways in which Englishmen on both sides of the Atlantic were reacting to new realities of colonization and global trade.

