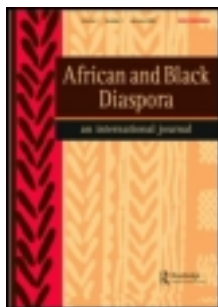


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Daniel Schavelzon<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Centro de Arqueología Urbana, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina

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## On slaves and beer: the first images of the South Sea Company slave market in Buenos Aires

Daniel Schavelzon\*

*Centro de Arqueología Urbana, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina*

Images of the Retiro slave market in Buenos Aires had never been seen previously and the possibility of excavating the site has long gone. The discovery of etchings of the underground cellars in 2010 of the Bieckert Brewery, which occupied the site years later, has made it possible to see the nature of the market and understand the functioning of the construction that preceded the brewery. This market was unique in the city in that it functioned almost underground. The issue of the presence of the African population in Buenos Aires has had a great impact on archaeology. All information regarding the black population's material culture and architectural places, whether made by them or for them, is important; such is the case here of accessing a system of vaulted subterranean constructions quite different from the city's other architecture.

**Keywords:** urban archaeology; slave market; Retiro; architecture

Buenos Aires, founded by the Spanish in the sixteenth century, was an important port for smugglers. Spain prohibits the entrance of any kind of goods to protect the Lima commercial monopoly, but the location of Buenos Aires in front of the Atlantic, with easy entrance and good roads to the inner continent, make it great for smuggling. A long practice of political corruption among politicians made it possible to do lucrative business by authorizing the import of slaves and turning a blind eye to the export of silver taken illegally from Potosí. It was this that made the existence of the city possible, turning a military garrison into one of the continent's largest cities.

Slavery in Buenos Aires that began to be studied around 1950 has become an important form of social revisionism today. The main problem is that Buenos Aires is a city seen and conceived as entirely white, whose history has denied the presence and contribution of the African and Afro-descendent population, making the Afro invisible both through physical erasure and through making it white or colored, more acceptable to the upper class the whitening of the population. It is part of a complex historical issue which has begun to be analyzed by archaeologists since 1999 (Schávelzon 2003). Although at the time of independence over half of the north of Argentina and around 30 percent of Buenos Aires was Afro-descendent, in the collective imaginary, these people did not and do not exist.

With this as a starting point, any attempt to locate the places where the slave markets operated has always been a large problem for archaeology because the issue has not been studied, and the data are not reliable, or readily accessible. It has been possible to find out

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\*Email: [dschavelzon@fibertel.com.ar](mailto:dschavelzon@fibertel.com.ar)

which places had markets, but their location and exact form, and especially the possibility of excavating them to reconstruct the material culture of those enslaved groups at the place where they arrived and were sold has been impossible. One was destroyed a few years ago (a private market called *Aduana Vieja*), another could not be found archaeologically because of the geographic transformation of the site (the French Company in Parque Lezama; Schávelzon and Lorandi 1992) and there remained only the possibility of finding the market used by England (in the Spanish tradition *England* is used as a generic name for Great Britain) located near what is now Plaza San Martín.

The problem we faced in our research is that the area where the market was located has been transformed to such an extent that we did not even have a reliable map or the possibility of knowing exactly where the site was. And the disappearance of the site in the eighteenth century, before the advent of photography, meant that there were no accurate images of either the exterior or the interior (Figure 1).

In 1853 a young Franco-German, Emil Bieckert, born in Alsace, arrived in Buenos Aires. He started to work in the recently founded Santa Rosa Brewery. In his seven years there, it is evident that the then Baron Emil (Emilio) Bieckert learned the trade well and saw the possibility of going it alone because of the great wealth of his cousin Bernd (Bernardo) Ader. With the latter's help, he set up a small brewery in 1860, working with just one laborer with whom they managed to produce two barrels of beer a day. But it seems to have been a good brew because sales grew. Within a year and, in partnership with Emilio Hammer, Bieckert moved to larger premises on Salta Street for the next five years. He also brought an innovation to the city in the form of its first ice factory.

In 1866 it was necessary to extend the brewery, so Bieckert bought land in what was known as El Retiro, now part of Plaza San Martín and the surrounding area, specifically at 9–11 Esmeralda Street (using the old numbering system). This closely matches the site of the Anchorena family residence between streets Arenales, Basavilbaso, and Juncal, which after the start of the twentieth century was the Palacio San Martín, now the Foreign Affairs Ministry. After 1900, the entrance for the whole block was at 21–27 Esmeralda Street. Bieckert sold the brewery in 1889 to an English business conglomerate and moved to Nice. In 1908, the brewery moved to Llavallol and went on to become one of the largest in the country.

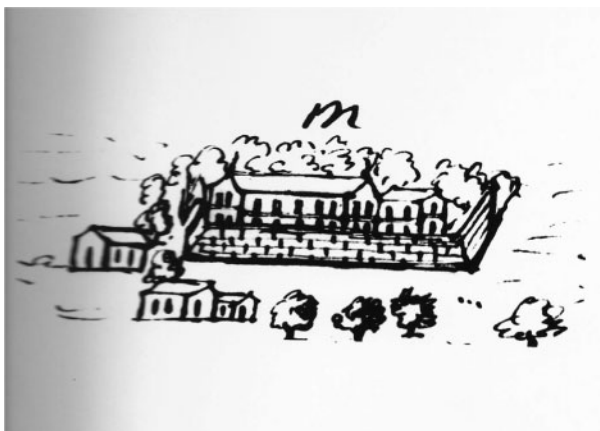


Figure 1. Slave market at El Retiro, map of Joseph Bermudez in 1713.

The brewery was a complex construction. For a long time, it was a group of buildings with construction made in different times along two centuries, which were modified over time and grew with the incorporation of new technology. What we found is that Bieckert bought this property precisely because of the preexistence of something that would be of great use to him: the underground cellars of the slave market. He most probably did not know what they were once used for, but they were perfect for brewing, because of the temperatures needed.

It was not easy to prove that these cellars were underneath the brewery. We have known for a long time that the El Retiro house was the site of various slave companies. We even had simple eighteenth century images of its exterior (Schávelzon 2003), but it was difficult to locate the actual/precise place because of several reasons: the intensity of changes that were made to the area as it became integrated into the city center; the small cartographic errors from the period; the presence of other nearby buildings; many changes by legal or illegal owners; and the opening of new streets such as Juncal, Arroyo, and Basavilbaso in what had once been large and near-empty plots. Things changed when we came across Bieckert's subterranean vaults, thanks to a set of 10 etchings made and printed around 1875, which allowed us to see what these interiors looked like before they were destroyed, and locate them in the area. To date, they are the only internal images of a slave market in Buenos Aires, even though what we see in the images are activities posterior to the slave trade (Figure 2).

On Esmeralda Street, down toward the river, between what are now Arenales Street and Libertador Avenue, the brewery occupied the whole double city block that was once there as an open plaza in the center, which would allow visitors to move around easily inside. The different buildings were located along the same municipal line of façades, so



Figure 2. Map and exact location of the slave market of El Retiro, plan of Antonio Malaver, 1875.

the common center was a large space that showed the workings of the brewery. It was certainly not a typical construction for the city. At first, it was an anarchic group of buildings that were later unified into a large construction with a modern appearance.

Working from these etchings, and later texts and photographs of the brewery, we can make an approximate reconstruction of the site: the brewery was on the slope leading down to the river and from the side of the slope, there was nothing more than the railway from the north. Juncal Street did not yet exist as such, as it was just that, a *juncal* or a reed bed, and marked the unofficial limit of the city before the river. The block at first had nine constructions: on Esmeralda Street was a large building with arches rather like the former Rosas mansion, or Eduard Taylor's more modern buildings as the customs house, with two floors within the block and three on the slope. This house was built by Raymundo Marino for Manuel de Azcuénaga around 1800, or a little later, on the existing cellars. The building was positioned to take advantage of the slope so that the building would have two stories facing the river, i.e. the same as Eduard Taylor did a little later when he built the customs house extension facing the port, using the slope of the hill to add an extra floor (Schávelzon 2010). This building appears to be the largest and the oldest at the place, bordered on two sides by gardens and a wooden fence. We were not able to locate construction records for the building (Figure 3).

As one continues toward Arenales Street one would see a flat terrace construction from the mid-nineteenth century and a floor with a sign reading 'Escritorio', or Office. In front of this was a leveled area with four posts which indicated the place where carts would stop before going out to sell goods. The rest of that half of the area was used for storing barrels. Crossing the inner street there was, heading toward the Bajo area, three buildings on wooden stilts, like those still used in the Tigre Delta and which in that period were typical of La Boca, known as *palafitos* and designed for frequently flooded areas. In later years, these were made from bricks. There was then a stone construction with two large chimneys, a square mill and a building with three naves and a portico at the front extended over the dividing wall for the draft horses of the Germanic carts that carried the beer. The rest of the space was for barrels. These things tell us that different architectural types were used in the construction of buildings and structures over time. On the same

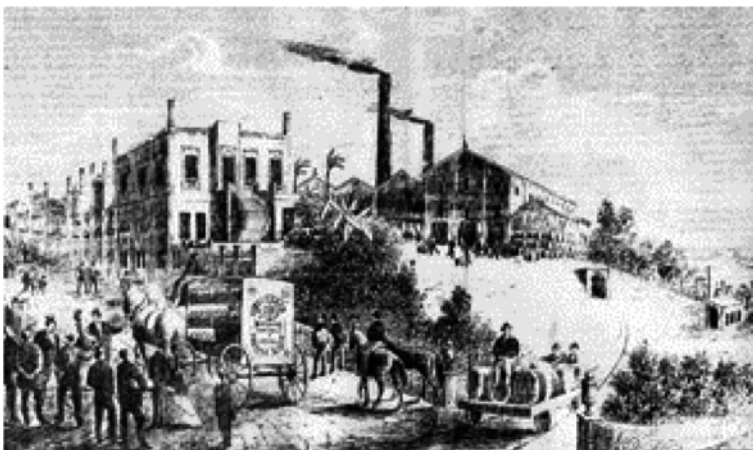


Figure 3. View of the Bieckert Beer Factory around 1875, with the underground entrance and the old building over the cellars at right front.

slope there was an entrance tunnel, a strange dark opening that led underground. Although this is most uncommon in the city, it is not unique as we know of some ways in which the unevenness of the slope was used, Taylor's customs house toward the river being the best example, and some of the tunnels still remain, albeit much altered by the construction of the new Bicentenary Museum. But the concept is similar and the architectural solution would appear to be almost the same, at least from what can be seen in the etchings. To what underground place did this tunnel lead? It is impossible to know now without further information, but the other drawings show us the underground sites and many of the activities that were performed there, which were common activities for a brewery with a need for stable temperatures. It is evident that these underground works must have been below a brick building because some of the walls are vaulted niches. There is at least one case of a square hole in the roof through which objects were passed, and in one of the groups of niches, oblique windows can be seen at the base, so they therefore looked out on what appear to be the views downhill from Esmeralda Street. Because of this, we believe that this must be where the Azcuénaga building was located, and the tunnel must have curved to reach under this mansion. The other option is that the tunnels were under the large central loading area and because of this nothing was built on top. But this contradicts the few documents we have and would have meant demolishing the house that we know was on top. It should be remembered that the Azcuénaga family later owned another slave market on Balcarce Street known as the Old Customs House (Aduana Vieja; Luqui-Lagleyze 1979; Figure 4).

The history of the site began with the arrival of Governor Agustín de Robles, who governed from 1691 for five years, subsequently extending his service to 1700. He had a large fortune which grew spectacularly with the start of his governorship, so he asked the king permission to buy land and build a house to retire upon leaving his post. The king granted permission, which was required because Robles was not allowed to buy property while serving as a governor. Hence, the house was called El Retiro (Hanon 2001; Del Carril 1988). In 1696, he built a two-story house, with 32 rooms, large cellars, and secondary buildings. It was the largest dwelling in Buenos Aires and continued to be so for many centuries. But Robles would never inhabit the house for legal problems with the king related smuggling. And he was unable to account for his fortune, he fought in the courts for many years before selling the house in 1703 to his partner and friend with a similar name, Miguel de Riblos (or Riglos), who in turn leased the property to the Company of Guinea, which legally imported slaves to Buenos Aires. Riblos immediately extended the property through the purchase of neighboring land, and the images that exist



Figure 4. The Bieckert Beer Factory as seen from the entrance; the old building is at rear right.

from this period show an enormous but isolated structure, uncommonly large for this period.

But the Company of Guinea's days were numbered, and in 1713, Riglos leased the building to the new British South Sea Company, which then bought everything from the owner and further extended the area to 1212 *varas* (yards) at the front and one league deep – the building now had a façade of some 10 city blocks, about 1 km. The company was expelled in 1740 because of the war in Europe between Spain and England. As a result, the land was abandoned and partially occupied, the main house fell into a state of disrepair, and the land was illegally occupied, mostly appropriated by civil servants. The situation was complex and too large to ignore, all the more so as the Cabildo (City Hall) had in this period started to sell and regulate the lands surrounding the city. By 1763, the valuation and sale of the Retiro houses were ordered. Because of these plans and documents, we know that there was one main house and two smaller additional houses, 'the one with the cellar' and 'the one after the soap works' (Hanon 2001, 25). This clarifies that the larger house was not in fact the one with the cellars, and although the slave market would have operated in all the houses, Riblos' house was not the one with the cellars. This detail is one that has generated confusion historically as well as enormous difficulties in locating the site. It was not easy to sell the lot, and the situation remained the same until in 1774, the main house was allocated for the artillery stores, and this remained the case into the next century. The other two buildings, for reasons we shall see below, ended up in the hands of Domingo de Basavilbaso.

Here there begins a new stage in the history of the land which makes each space unrecognizable. Because the site was enormous, it was uninhabited, and in a place, right next to the city. It was used especially for storing the goods of various smugglers and for other various purposes of which we have no certain information. The best-known of the characters who used the place was the Spanish-born Irishman Thomas Hilson, who appears to have been in the area since 1730 with total impunity. When expelled in 1762, he sells the land again, but there were others factories operated here, such as a soap works. All these constructions are now underneath the mansions occupied by the Foreign Affairs Ministry and once belonged to Ortiz Basualdo family. What we do know is that Hilson claimed that the land was sold to him by Thomas Stuart in 1743, and that he was in possession of the deeds. The next cities' census indicates that the brewery was operated by Hilson, two English assistants, and six slaves. A little later, Hilson sold the land to Domingo Basavilbaso, a major figure of this era. Faced with the problem of the irregularities in the deeds, it would take Basavilbaso 20 years of litigation before he could put everything in order in 1773. Taking advantage of the situation, his son Manuel bought the neighboring land, namely, the 'second house' with the 'large cellar' and other lands and houses, i.e., everything but the artillery store. It appears to have been at this time that Raymundo Marino repaired the main two-story house with 'a large cellar with vaulted roofs' (Hanon 2001, 371).

After this, the history is simple. In 1829, the site was leased to John Tweede, the English naturalist, and in 1839, to Manuel Pinto. Juncal Street was built in the same year and finally, in 1842, Adolfo Bullrich and Carlos Ziegler reopened the brewery, selling it the following year to Vogel and Schmitz, who continued in the same business, before selling it in 1857 to some people who set up the city's first mechanical joinery. The documents of property sold state that 'in this house there are large cellars with vaulted roofs, which are currently used as a deposit', and 'part of these constructions are situated on the part to be occupied by the future Juncal street' (Hanon 2001, 380). Basavilbaso

Street was also opened leaving the area with the streets that exist today. Unfortunately, the exact location of this construction is not perfectly clear. In the land register of Pedro Beare made in 1860–1865, it is not possible to see which of the various buildings is the one in question. In the map of the city made by Malaver in 1867, it would appear to be the house that is indicated as belonging to Azcuénaga (Hanon 2001, 371–372).

While this was happening, a large part of the enormous block bordered by the streets Esmeralda, Suipacha, Libertador, and Juncal was purchased by Miguel de Riglos, a distant descendent of the first owner. He built a large house on the hill, and it was he who sold the land to Bieckert in 1860 for his brewery (Hanon 2001, 365). The brewery first built by Stuart and Hilsen, and later Bullrich and Ziegler, was joined with the cellars used for fermenting yeast at a controlled temperature. We do not know the exact site of these cellars, but they are under the actual Anchorena Palace (Del Carril 1988). This all came to an end in 1910 when Nicolás Mihanovich bought the land from the owner and Arroyo Street was built. A series of large aristocratic palaces would be built on the land, some of which are still standing (Figure 5).

We can imagine the living conditions at the site when we read that in one of the South Sea Company's ships 350 of the 500 slaves died during the voyage, and another 50 died on arrival. In the old reception rooms that the governor had not used, there were up to several hundred slaves, and the use of the cellars is sometimes better not to imagine, especially the cells which are seen as alcoves in the illustrations. With regards to the sale section of El Retiro, we only know that this was 'an ample platform, like a stage' which was located where Florida and Maipú Streets are now (Studer 1958).

The slaves on the continent were sold at places called *asientos* (sites) or *compañías* (companies), sites acquired by the European slave companies and highly complex places for the period, consisting of constructions, moorings, and open-air spaces enclosed by high walls, always close to a river. They were no different in Buenos Aires, through

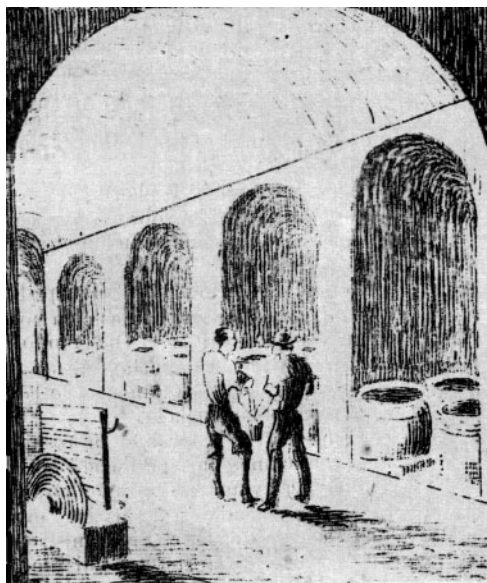


Figure 5. Undergrounds structures under the beer factory.



which several thousand slaves passed, both legally and illegally, because the city was one of the major slave ports of South America (Studer 1958; Molinari 1916, 1944; Andrews 1979, 1980, 1989; Crespi 2000). In some cases, they were huts with thatched or tiled roofs, and in other cases, large buildings were rented, as was the case with El Retiro. Existing constructions were used to avoid large investments, as wars in Europe brought with them rapid changes in these companies. The recently imported slaves lived in those buildings, whether healthy or sick, and had an adjoining kitchen and access to the river where they were washed before being sold. Obviously, there were no toilets, hospital, or anything remotely resembling one, as it was cheaper to let the slaves die than to care for them or feed them adequately. This can be seen in the mortality rates: around 40 percent died during the transatlantic voyage and another 10 percent between arrival and sale. Unfortunately we do not have detailed descriptions of life in the markets, but quotations from period documents show the pestilent state of these places where slaves lived among corpses for seasons at a stretch. Some references lead us to imagine this: according to the *Actas del Cabildo* (City Hall records) with regard to the mansion at El Retiro, when Sarratea was prohibited from establishing a new slave market there in the earlier nineteenth century, it was said that:

This establishment dominating the city and which is situated in the northern part, which is the wind that generally prevails, is most harmful to the health of the public [...] because as the negroes tend to arrive with illnesses, full of scabies and scurvy and issuing from their body a fetid and pestilent odor, they may through their proximity infect the city. (Hanon 2001, 166)

During (Figure 6) the voyage itself slaves were stripped of what little they had or what the company provided them with. We have the trial published by Elena Studer against the captain of a slave ship who sold ‘even the clothes intended for the negroes’, with the result that of the 563 dispatched from Guinea some 275 died of cold and hunger. After arrival, the slaves were unloaded, naked whether in summer or winter, where ‘they were piled into said corral’. The survivors were then branded and measured to give them a price according to their size, strength, and potential. They were cleaned a little and dressed in rags when they were taken to be exhibited at the market as ‘rationale bales’ (*fardos racionales*), as stated on the papers. At the site, there were also offices, homes for the overseers, and places of punishment by the whip and the stocks. On days of sale, they were exhibited on benches or platforms to tradesmen who bought them and decided their

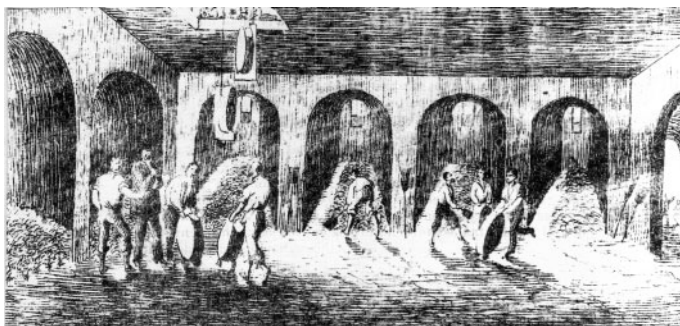


Figure 6. View of the undergrounds cellars.

fate, taking them to yards where they were chained in lines or loaded onto carts to be transported to other cities, especially Potosí. It was at the place of sale that branding was carried out, a crucial activity for later identification and to prevent escapes, and until the eighteenth century, it was customary to brand the slave's face. This is of interest because a great deal is known in Argentina about the branding of cattle, but nothing is known about where or how this was done at slave markets.

A large part of the city was physically and economically connected to the slave trade. The first successful slave trader that we know of, from an order he sent to Brazil to purchase slaves for resale, was the Bishop of Tucumán, Don Francisco de Vitoria. He became bishop in 1580, at the same time as the foundation of Buenos Aires. He rapidly amassed a great fortune and organized the first expedition to buy supplies and slaves. The expedition set sail from Buenos Aires in 1585 with 30,000 pesos in silver, an uncommonly large sum of contraband for the period. They bought goods, ornaments, equipment for establishing a sugarcane plantation, and 80 slaves. But they were attacked by Tomas Cavendish on their return, and the travelers were looted and returned to Buenos Aires. In 1587, Vitoria organized a similar expedition that was shipwrecked on leaving the River Plate but was destroyed by indigenous people. Despite this, the prelate recovered and made a substantial fortune from the slave trade.

After the foundation of Buenos Aires, the slave trade was in the hands of the clergy and other individuals, who smuggled in what they could and sold them as they saw fit. A few years after the arrival of the Jesuits, there were daily scandals over their smuggling of slaves in their thwarted attempt to build the first church opposite what is now Plaza de Mayo. In 1696, Spain gave exclusive authorization to the Royal Company of Guinea, at that time based in Portugal, to import slaves. In 1701, the right was transferred to the same company in France, then passed on to the English South Sea Company in 1713, until its contract was canceled in 1727. It would appear, however, that over the following years, the English continued to trade because of the lack of any other authorized company, until in 1765, the *Compañía Gaditana* was founded, which led in turn to trade by the *Real Compañía de Filipinas* in 1787. Each of the companies had headquarters and markets in the city. There were basically three large urban architectural groups during the time: one at the junction of the present streets Belgrano and Balcarce, known historically as the Old Customs House or Basavilbaso house; the one in Retiro; and a third at what is now Parque Lezama. The South Sea Company legally imported just over 10,000 slaves (Clementi 1998).

## **Conclusion**

The significance of the recognition of the importance of slave traffic in Buenos Aires and the mark it left on city life is unarguable, and this has had an effect on archaeology, which is unaccustomed to this third social interlocutor between whites and indigenous. The presence of large slave markets belonging to international companies and the size of their buildings seem to be significant, and the building at Retiro was a construction of colossal dimensions for the city at the time. Although created for other purposes, the documents spoke of the presence of cellars, but there were no images or plans that showed these until now. And without the exact location, we cannot conduct any archaeological excavation. Today, thanks to these images, we can see where the building complex was located, and what it was like, an underground structure of uncommon dimensions, with cells. These must have had doors for the slaves which were then removed to turn the place into a

depot. Although this is still a case of little information and much hypothesis, this is all we have to go on. Yet our findings can be considered an advance in understanding this site in the city.

### Acknowledgements

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