

The Archaeology of African-American Slave Religion in the Antebellum South

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An interest in New World slavery is a recent and exciting development within American archaeology. As archaeologists have rushed to discover the material aspects of what slaves ate, what kinds of dwellings they inhabited, and what sorts of material culture they used, they have also gathered information about slave religion. Although much of this information is incomplete and open to numerous interpretations, it nonetheless exposes an important area of archaeological endeavour. I explore some of what is today known about the slaves' religious observances, both African-inspired and non-African. My focus is on the antebellum period, roughly from 1800 to 1861, of the American South, with some reference to other times and places.

The archaeology of African slavery in the New World has expanded exponentially within the past twenty years (Fairbanks 1984; Orser 1984; 1990; 1992; Singleton 1991). During this time, several historical archaeologists have diligently set about reconstructing slave life and history at numerous rural and urban archaeological sites. The questions explored by these scholars have been varied, but generally they have been focused on slave diet, the location and size of slave cabins, and the nature of slave material culture. Only a few archaeologists (e.g. Babson 1990; Epperson 1990) have been bold enough in their analyses to consider ideological issues, such as the role of racism in shaping slave–master relations.

Thus, most historical archaeologists interested in New World slavery have begun their studies of African slaves by taking to heart Hawkes' dictum that the material aspects of past life are easier to reconstruct than the social and religious institutions (Hawkes 1954, 155–62). The motivations for conducting slave archaeology at the material level are undoubtedly complex, but one of the primary reasons for such an approach relates to the politics of the present. Until the late 1960s, archaeologists could not imagine that anything of interest or value could be learned by studying relatively recent New World slavery. After all, slavery in the United States ended

only in 1865; in Brazil, slavery was officially tolerated until 1889. In society at large, the general attitude seemed to be that if anything at all could be learned about slavery, it could be derived from reading written records. Historians, of course, knew that this was not true, that much remained unknown about slave life, but it took the Civil Rights Movement in America to convince a new generation of archaeologists that the study of the history and culture of African Americans was a valid kind of archaeology (Ferguson 1992, xxxvi–xxxviii). Charles Fairbanks (1974, 62), a pioneer in the field, wrote in the turbulent years of the early 1970s that the archaeology of slavery could 'broaden and enrich the knowledge of our American heritage at a time when that tradition is in the midst of rapid and often baffling change'. Today, the archaeology of African slavery in the New World is the fastest growing kind of archaeology being practised in the Americas. My focus here is only on slavery in the antebellum American South from 1800 to 1861, even though archaeology is also being conducted on earlier sites and on sites associated with free African Americans (see Schuyler 1980). Most archaeologists who have an interest in slavery have documented several aspects of slave life extending from daily foodways to larger social relations. This paper highlights some of this research as it relates to one aspect

of slave life, that which Hawkes (1954) views as the most difficult to comprehend archaeologically: religion. Before I can develop this theme, however, I must further establish the archaeological relevance of this research.

Historical archaeology and slave identity

The archaeological understanding of New World slavery as a social institution begins with the concept of 'ethnicity'. The issue of ethnic identification in archaeology is nothing new. Childe (1926, 200) stated several decades ago that 'The correlation of cultural with racial [i.e. ethnic] groups is generally hazardous and speculative' and 'beset with pitfalls'. His observation may be easily understandable in prehistory, where the lines of descent between ancient peoples and peoples known historically may be clouded with the passage of time, the impact of cultural change, and the complexities introduced by diverse population movements. Oddly enough, however, his comment is equally applicable to history, where it may initially be supposed that the agreement between the archaeological past and the ethnographic, or historical, present is a close or near-perfect match. In many cases, an historical archaeologist may be excavating a site for which an abundant and rich documentary record exists. We may thus suppose, and perhaps justly, that a strong correlation exists between the archaeological remains and the historical actors being written about. The need for historical archaeologists to be able to identify ethnic groups in the New World is especially pressing, given the importance of ethnicity in shaping modern life (Orser 1991). Historical archaeologists in the United States must be particularly mindful of ethnicity because 'ethnicity is a central theme — perhaps *the* central theme — of American history' (Peterson *et al.* 1982, v). Given the shared colonial histories of most places in the New World — the United States, Cuba, Jamaica, and Brazil, to name a few — we may easily imagine that the archaeological understanding of ethnicity has prime importance in historical archaeology in general. As a way in which to study ethnicity and the contacts between ethnic groups, New World historical archaeologists have turned to the study of slavery. In addition, slavery has relevance outside the narrow confines of scholarship. The understanding of this social institution appeals not only to professional anthropologists and historians, but also to thousands of non-scholars in society at large.

Embedded within the archaeology of slavery is the once much-debated question of whether the Afri-

cans enslaved and brought to the New World had their cultures destroyed by the Middle Passage, the horrendous trip across the Atlantic Ocean. Some scholars, such as Frazier (1964), argue that the process of capture and enslavement — added to the horrors of transoceanic travel — were so traumatic that the people could not be expected to arrive in the New World unchanged. Frazier imagines that these enslaved and traumatized Africans had their cultures literally ripped from them. In this sense, the social landscape of the New World was truly a new one. The slaves' trauma carried over into religion because the horrors of slavery caused their traditional religions to collapse. Any expression of an African belief in the New World was simply a vague memory rather than part of a living cultural tradition.

Many scholars found Frazier's position difficult to accept. Notable among them was Herskovits (1958), who takes as one of his main propositions that Frazier's viewpoint represents a serious 'myth of the Negro past'. This myth, rather than quietly resting among the dust of academic debate, is alive and active in society, helping to perpetuate the idea that African Americans are inferior to European Americans. According to the myth's logic, only an inferior people could 'lose' their culture. For Herskovits (1958, 3), the proof of the vitality of African culture in the New World can be found in certain 'Africanisms', cultural traits from Africa kept alive outside the continent. Herskovits (1958, 143–206) accordingly finds several Africanisms in African-American methods of planting crops, in postures of sitting, walking, speaking and dancing, in the wearing of hair styles, and in concepts of time and punctuality. Further, he proposes that Africans in the New World were particularly adept at retaining their religious beliefs because, unlike agricultural practices and manners of dress, these ideas could be hidden from view (Herskovits 1958, 137–8).

Most scholars today have charted an intermediate course somewhere between the positions held by Frazier and by Herskovits. The current, most prevalent view contains two central propositions: that Africans did not abandon or lose their cultures during enslavement and the Middle Passage, and that the cultures they forged in the New World were not exact duplications of those in Africa. Through interactions with diverse Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans, enslaved Africans created a syncretic culture in the New World. Members of former African cultures gently transformed some aspects of their cultures, radically altered others, and dropped still others. Accordingly, 'one must maintain a skeptical

attitude toward claims that many contemporary social or cultural forms represent direct continuities from the African homelands' (Mintz & Price 1976, 27). We must assume that Africans in the New World retained some elements of their traditional cultures in their new homes, but that many of these elements were changed to the point that they may have become unrecognizable.

We may easily and readily accept this syncretic dictum in art, moral perspectives, foodways, and even dress, but what about religion? What did enslaved Africans do about their religions, and how did they express themselves religiously in ways that would leave archaeological evidence?

Slave religions in history

It would be naïve to imagine that during the Middle Passage all slaves forgot the gods and spirits they worshipped, feared, and appeased, and that because of their enslavement they lost faith in the rituals and belief systems that had sustained them for generations. Most modern scholars agree that slaves were conservative in their belief systems, and that ideas of cosmology, eschatology, curing, and sorcery inexorably link African Americans to Africa. Raboteau, a leading authority on slave religion, writes that 'One of the most durable and adaptable constituents of the slave's culture, linking African past with American present, was his religion.' (Raboteau 1978, 4) DuBois, the great African-American social scientist, notes that 'The Negro church of to-day is the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character.' (DuBois 1961, 142) Religion thus formed a significant part of the slaves' syncretic culture, and was, in fact, one element of life that could mentally tie African men and women in the New World to their kinfolk and way of life still in Africa. Even though the slaves' religious beliefs were altered through contact with others (Raboteau 1978), religious expressions nevertheless retained an African flavour.

Even a cursory examination of the available secondary historical sources on slave religion indicates the complexity of this subject. Nonetheless, at the time of their capture and enslavement, most Africans followed one of two religious traditions: either they were members of large, essentially non-African religions, either Islam or Christianity, or they practised one of the many 'traditional' religions that existed throughout the African continent. Both religious traditions obviously had an impact on African-American slave life in the New World. (Religion also played

a strong role in the lives of free African Americans in the antebellum American South; see Johnson & Roark 1984, 227-9.)

Slaveowners were divided in their views about slave religion. Some masters were unconcerned as to whether their slaves even had religion. These masters cared little about 'the amusements and religion of the Negro so long as they did not affect his working ability' (Puckett 1926, 10). Other slave masters promoted Christianity among their slaves. Comments of ex-slaves from Alabama suggest the range of ways in which slaves could be formally acquainted with Christianity while on the plantation. Molly Ammonds said that her master built his slaves a church with 'a floor and seats, and the top was covered with pine boughs' in which the master's father would preach, but Everett Ingram said that 'De colored folks used de white church and set [sic] in the back' (Rawick 1977a, 11, 204).

Many slaves undoubtedly learned about Christianity and Islam while they still lived in Africa. Capuchin missionaries were sent from France, Italy, and Portugal in the seventeenth century to convert as many African men and women as possible, and many slaves had met Christians at the European forts along the coast (Duffy 1962, 44; Raboteau 1978, 6). Many slaves probably learned about Islam in the same way, and some slaveowners were sensitive to the needs of their Muslim slaves. For example, some masters in the American South substituted beef for the pork that usually comprised the slaves' meat ration (Joyner 1984, 171).

The religions that the slave masters thought they recognized in their plantation quarters, or slave communities, were not always the same religions the planters knew. For instance, many slaves who are attributed to have been devoted to Islam were also widely known for their largely African-inspired magical powers (Raboteau 1978, 5-6). African-American Christianity was also a multifaceted and syncretic religion in the quarters. In his compelling historical ethnography of the slave communities that stretched along the coast of South Carolina, Joyner (1984, 142) proposes that the slaves' Christianity was channelled along two directions. In the first, the slaves incorporated spirit possession and ecstatic trances into their Christian church services; in the second, the slaves continued to believe in witches and evil spirits as 'a sort of parallel consciousness' to Christianity.

Some slaves rejected all but their traditional religions, continuing to believe in sorcery, conjuring, and their traditional cosmology. This religion, actually a unified version of several religions, existed as

an underground, alternative belief system. The slaves used this religion, not only as a form of divine worship, but also as a form of resistance (Stuckey 1987, 52–3). In fact, ‘nearly all quarter communities organized their own clandestine congregation without the sanction or participation of plantation authorities’ (Webber 1978, 191). The continued tradition of African religion on plantations deeply concerned plantation owners. Many slaveowners rigorously attempted to convert their slaves to Christianity, either to Protestantism or, in places like south Louisiana and Spanish-controlled Florida, to Roman Catholicism, simply as a defence mechanism. Of course, the issue of whether to provide religious instruction to their human chattel — which conceivably could lead to open rebellion, through the religious principle of inherent human dignity — was a matter of great consternation to slaveowners, and the issue was hotly debated across the slave-holding world (Webber 1978, 43–58).

Assumptions and problems in the archaeological interpretation of slave religion

The above comments, albeit brief, indicate that slave religion is an exceedingly complex and multifaceted subject. Although manifestations of African religions appeared in the New World in varying degrees, it seems logical to assume that each would have archaeological correlates. We may further assume that the material expressions of slave religion included both places of worship and associated religious paraphernalia. The contextual union of these elements is easy to imagine. For recognized, plantation-sponsored church observances, we may easily associate places of worship with hymnals, candle sticks, crosses, books, and other readily identifiable pieces of religious material culture. For clandestine slave religious practices, we can understandably envision the difficulty in associating religious places with religious objects. The problem with such identification is well voiced by a Mrs Channel, who lived on a plantation where the conduct of religious ceremonies by slaves was expressly forbidden: ‘the slaves would steal away into the woods at night and hold services. They would form a circle on their knees around the speaker who would also be on his knees’ (Cade 1935, 331). One clear object of such religious service, beyond worship, is secrecy. In these clandestine religious observances, we can expect little in the way of easy association between place and object. The locales selected by slaves seeking to conduct traditional rituals were hidden and unpretentious, and the artefacts used for their religious observances were undoubtedly every-

day things pressed into service.

The secrecy necessary for the practice of traditional African religion implies that archaeologists will not easily locate places of traditional slave worship. Until such sites can be found, we must concentrate on the possible religious artefacts found in association with slave sites. These objects can serve as tangible, visible reminders that slaves brought aspects of their African religions with them to the New World and that they learned how to adapt them to the new social and political landscapes within which they found themselves.

Many of the powerful religious objects slaves made in the New World might best be described as having to do with ‘magic’. By ‘magic’ I mean an interactive religious belief system wherein spells can be cast and warded off, where the future can be foretold, and where the sick can be healed. New World historical archaeologists who search for evidence of slave religion look for the sort of material culture easily associated with religious magic because only in the rarest of contexts can traditional religious items be clearly associated with slaves.

The rarest of contexts, of course, are mortuary settings. One obvious value of such context is the underlying assumption of most mortuary studies that material objects buried with the dead were also associated with the deceased while alive. Slaves may have been willing to bury practitioners of traditional religions with African-inspired objects simply because the objects would be forever out of sight, buried for all time in a grave. Slaves could probably not have imagined that future archaeologists would be fascinated by their daily lives, histories, and struggles. We may expect that some objects interred with the dead had specific religious functions. Burial contexts in Barbados and in the southern United States provide such information, but from different ends of the religious spectrum.

At Newton Plantation, a seventeenth-century sugar estate on the island of Barbados, Handler & Lange (1978) found the remains of an old man of African descent which they named ‘Burial 72’. This individual had been buried with several commonplace objects, such as copper bracelets, white metal rings, and a metal knife. Most interesting, perhaps, were an elaborate necklace and a baked clay smoking pipe that had also been placed alongside this deceased man. The necklace contained seven cowrie shells, twenty-one drilled dog canines, fourteen glass beads of various sizes and colours, drilled vertebrae from a large fish, and one large carnelian bead (Handler & Lange 1978, 125–32; Handler *et al.* 1979). The

clay pipe is a short-stemmed variety of the sort where a reed or wooden tube was fitted into the bowl to serve as a stem. The bowl is decorated with a series of lines and dots. Handler & Lange (1978, 132) judge this pipe to be 'of African origin', possibly from Ghana (Handler 1983, 251), because it bears no relationship to any known European pipe of the same period. This pipe, and the necklace — with its cowrie shells and carnelian bead probably from Africa — lead them to postulate that the individual they called 'Burial 72' was probably an 'Obeah practitioner or folk doctor'. According to seventeenth-century accounts cited by Handler & Lange (1978, 32), the so-called 'Obeah negroes' were well known in the slave communities for their African-derived arts of healing and divination. These practitioners were respected and feared, and other slaves often carried charms to protect themselves from the Obeah's power. Handler & Lange (1978) interpret the objects found associated with Burial 72 to be the 'toolkit' associated with these powerful people. The pipe and the necklace provide a direct, strong link to the religions of Africa.

A Christianized African burial was

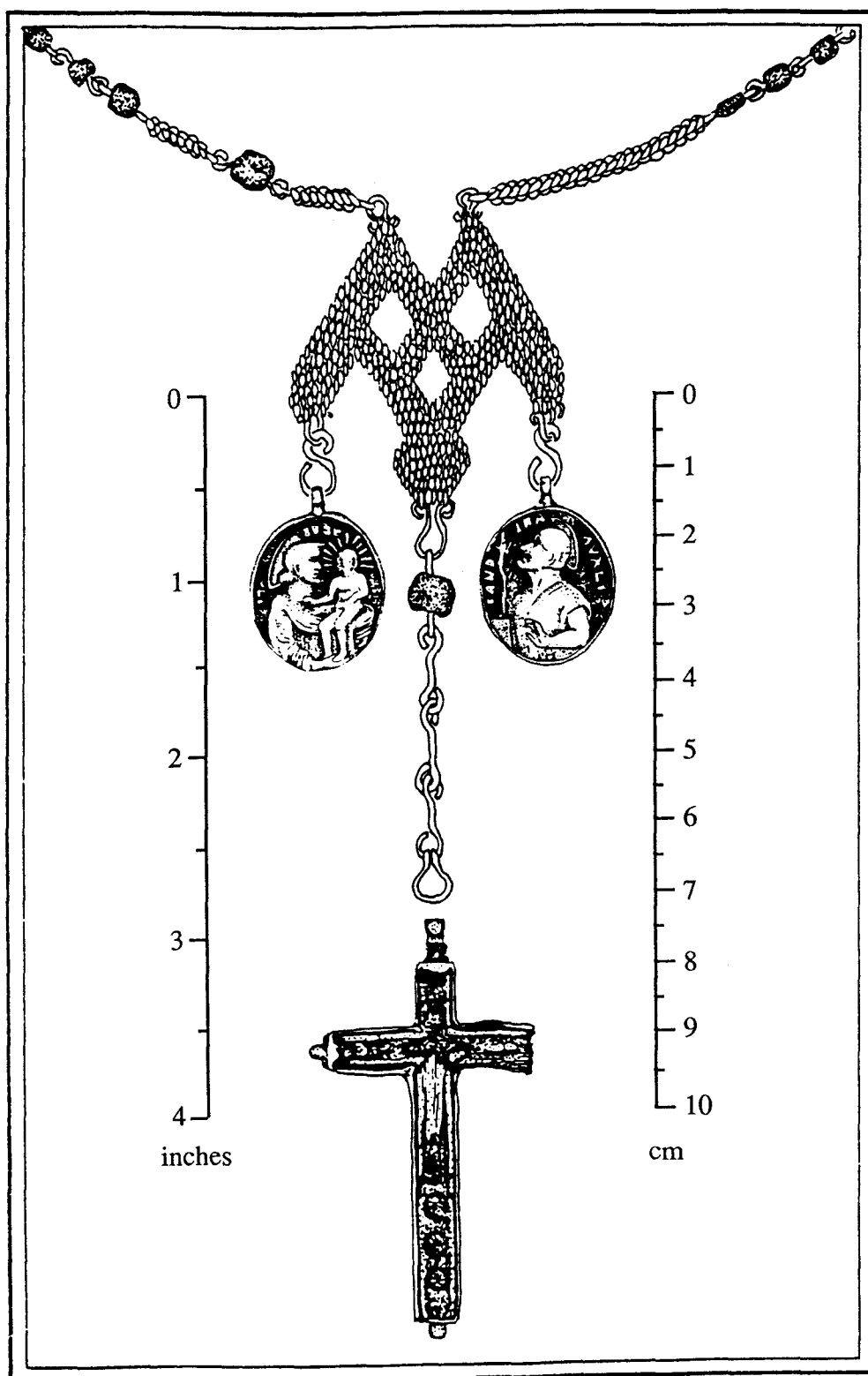


Figure 1. Rosary found with 40–49 year old male burial in New Orleans, Louisiana, c. 1800.

discovered a few years later at the first official cemetery in New Orleans, Louisiana. The Catholic fathers of this French colonial settlement on the banks of the lower Mississippi River sanctified this burial ground sometime before 1722. They later deconsecrated it in 1788, and the French inhabitants of the city removed their ancestor's remains for reburial elsewhere. In 1801, when the city leaders subdivided the former cemetery into lots to be sold for residential development, the only remains not removed were those of the city's poorest classes. At the very bottom of the social hierarchy, of course, were enslaved Africans. Archaeologists excavated thirty-two of these interments as part of a rescue project (Orser *et al.* 1986; Owsley *et al.* 1985). Only one of the still solid cypress caskets contained any religious objects. These objects are a rosary with 63 black wooden beads and two silver medals (one emblazoned with St Christopher, the other with the Madonna and Child) (Fig. 1), and a glass and white metal medallion with the image of the Virgin Mary etched in gold on the glass face. These items were found with 'Burial 11'.

Burial 11 represents the remains of a 40 to 49-year-old black male that had purposefully notched first mandibular incisors. Tooth mutilation is well known in Africa (Handler *et al.* 1982; Stewart & Groome 1968), and it is tempting to suppose that this individual had spent a portion of his life there. The presence of the rosary, however, implies that he had accepted Christianity at some point in his life. We will never know if his conversion occurred in Africa or in his New World home.

The difference between the material items associated with Burial 11, in New Orleans, and with Burial 72, in Barbados, may only reflect their temporal disparity. Someone searching for acculturation among slaves (e.g. Wheaton & Garrow 1985) may perceive the presence of African objects in the seventeenth-century Caribbean burial and the Roman Catholic objects in the late eighteenth-century burial in New Orleans as a prime example of the acculturative pressures experienced by African Americans in the New World. Looked at another way, however, the differences between the two burials may be perceived as representing the broad diversity of the African peoples brought to the New World, and how various individuals, at disparate times, accepted and followed different religious traditions. When historical archaeologists think about slave religion, however, their interest invariably focuses on the kind of artefacts found with Burial 72 in Barbados, objects that may reflect something of the slaves' African origins.

The search for African-inspired objects forms

the core of the archaeology of slave religion. For the sake of convenience, two sets of religious objects can be readily identified in the archaeological literature: objects that seem to reflect African religious traditions and belief systems, and objects with no clear African influence, but which appear to have been used in the pursuit of traditional religious observance. Neither class of items is well known in archaeology, but examples have been found.

Objects of African origin

Objects with obvious African affiliation are highly sought after by New World historical archaeologists because such objects provide concrete evidence that African peoples retained elements of their cultures in the New World. Regrettably, however, these objects — Herskovits' 'Africanisms' — are frightfully few in number in the archaeological record. Nonetheless, two kinds of objects appear to point most clearly to the African religious roots of New World slaves. These objects are earthenware pottery vessels and small, brass ornamental fists.

Upon first encountering pieces of the low-fired, unglazed, coarse pottery at slave sites, archaeologists in the American South assumed that they represented part of a Native American pottery tradition (Noël Hume 1962). After all, they bore a remarkable resemblance to the aboriginal pottery ubiquitous in southeastern prehistory and early history. The perception generally held was that, in order to reach the plantations, this so-called 'Colono-Indian' pottery must have been traded by Native Americans to plantation inhabitants. These natives traded the pottery either directly to slaves who used it in their cabins, or to their masters, who promptly gave it to the slaves for their personal use in the quarters (Baker 1972). A careful reading of the ethnographic literature, however, convinced Ferguson (1978) that this pottery, which he terms simply 'Colono Ware', was actually made by the slaves themselves. Archaeologists working along the eastern coast of the United States and in the Caribbean (Heath 1989; Lees & Kimery-Lees 1979; Mathewson 1972; Vernon 1988) have documented that Colono Ware appears in many contexts and occurs in both European vessel forms (bowls with standing rings, plates, and small cups and pitchers with handles) and non-European forms (shallow bowls and wide-mouthed pots).

In the course of his detailed and innovative study of several Colono Ware vessels found in South Carolina and Virginia, Ferguson (1992, 110–16) learned that many of the otherwise mundane,

shallow bowls in this tradition were incised on the bottom with an 'X', an 'X' enclosed in a circle, or an 'X' with arms extending outward like a reverse swastika. These marks could easily be imagined to represent identification symbols placed on the pots by their makers. Potters throughout eighteenth-century Europe used similar marks on their ceramic wares (Kovel & Kovel 1953, 213), and an 'X' is an easy mark to make in wet clay.

The idea that the 'Xs' on the bases of Colono Ware vessels may represent maker's marks is plausible, but Ferguson offers a much more intriguing interpretation. Often found on the interior base of the vessels rather than on the outside, as is true of most makers' marks, and sometimes resembling the encircled cross of the Bakongo sign of the cosmos (after Thompson 1983, 109), he interprets these crosses as symbols of an African cosmology. The Bakongo — a populous people living in today's Zaire — used earthen pots to contain powerful substances associated with healing and the control of the supernatural (Thompson 1983). Among the Bakongo, the association of pots with healing extends all the way to Ne Kongo, the renowned founder of their culture. Based on this ethnographic evidence, Ferguson (1992, 115) boldly concludes that 'South Carolina's marked bowls were made and used by American descendants of the mythical Ne Kongo who cooked medicines in earthenware pots'. In addition, these pots, because of their obvious difference from European glazed wares, also served as a form of 'unconscious resistance to slavery and the plantation system' (Ferguson 1991, 37). These clay pots were a way for slaves to proclaim their traditional cultures in a nonvocalized and relatively nonthreatening manner. The etching of powerful religious symbols on the insides of pots was a further way for slaves to retain a piece of Africa in the New World.

The mundane character of the earthenware pots made it possible for historical archaeologists to overlook the scratched 'X' marks for years. When noticed, these lines were often interpreted to be the cut marks made by knives (see Ferguson 1992, 29, fig. 25, for an example). The common appearance of the pots, and the nagging uncertainty over exactly who produced them — Native Americans, slaves, or creoles — clouds the issue of how they were used for religious observances, and obscures whether they had a religious function at all. Clearly, much further research is needed on Colono Ware before a definitive statement of its many meanings can be presented.

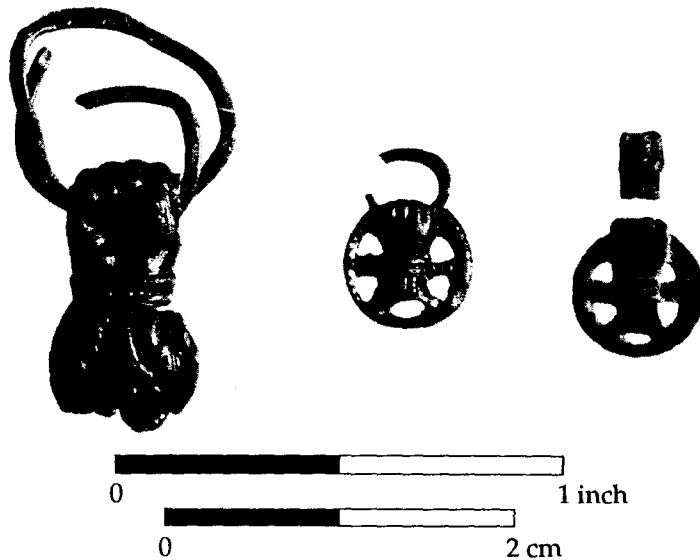


Figure 2. Three fist amulets found at The Hermitage, Tennessee, c. 1820s-1850s.

Objects that cannot be so easily denied as religious in nature are the small, brass, fist-shaped amulets found at The Hermitage, the early nineteenth-century Tennessee plantation home of United States President Andrew Jackson. To date, archaeologists have found three fist amulets in the slave cabin deposits of The Hermitage. Because the temporal context of these objects is in the antebellum period, before the American Civil War, their association with slaves is certain. The fists are small in size and are made of a stamped copper alloy; two of them clench rings, and the third incorporates a hook (Fig. 2).

These fist objects are similar in form to the *figas* that are commonly used, even today, throughout Latin America as good luck charms. *Figas* have occasionally been found at archaeological sites. South found a classic example at Santa Elena, a Spanish outpost located on Parris Island, South Carolina, occupied from 1566 to 1587 (South 1991). The clenched fist of the *figa* is thought to represent the hand of God grasping the souls of the saved, and as a charm, it is thought to be a powerful protection against the evil eye. *Figas* are also supposed to repel bullets. A historical connection between The Hermitage and Spanish America can be easily established. Jackson is known to have purchased slaves from the Spanish in the early nineteenth century (McKee 1992, 20), and the fists may simply be souvenirs from the Spanish territory.

The fists from The Hermitage are not exactly like *figas*, however. A true *figa* has the thumb extending upward between the first and the second finger in a symbolic representation of a cross. The example

from Santa Elena is true to this form (South 1991, 72), but the fists from The Hermitage lack the finger and thumb arrangement and are simply in the form of clenched fists. As a result of this variant form, the alternative possibility remains equally strong that the fist amulets at The Hermitage may have been used as charms to ward off witches (Smith 1976, 210). Writing of his experiences in Brazil in the mid-nineteenth century, Ewbank (1856, 245) notes that symbols of the cross, including *figas*, were particularly powerful objects, and that 'neither witches nor wizards can bear the sight of them'. This view has also been expressed in the United States. One former slave in Florida said that an 'old witch doctor' charged him five dollars to 'make me a hand', or a 'jack', because 'Dat be a charm what will keep de witches away' (J. Smith 1973, 199). Since 'hand' was a widely used term to refer to any charm regardless of form (McKee 1992, 21), the correlation between the warding off of witches and the hand charms at The Hermitage is difficult to make with complete confidence. Still, the connection is plausible.

Both the marked earthenware pottery vessels and the brass fist amulets seem to reflect something about slave belief systems. The meaning of either class of artefacts, however, is ambiguous. The pottery marks may be just maker's marks, and the fists may be simple souvenirs with no deeper significance. Nonetheless, an interpretation that makes reference to slave religion and belief systems is not only appealing, it also adds a substantial new dimension to our understanding of African-American slave life.

Mundane objects used in traditional ways

Proposing a religious affiliation for objects like The Hermitage fist charms may be somewhat risky, but both they and the marked pottery vessels do stand out in the archaeological assemblages as unusual objects. Religious interpretations for the functions of these objects — supported by reference to ethnographical and historical information — are entirely plausible. Other artefacts, those that appear even more commonplace in form and supposed function, are decidedly more difficult to associate firmly with the belief systems of enslaved Africans. This troubling archaeological problem is neatly summarized by Adams (1987, 204) in his analysis of slave sites at Kings Bay, Georgia:

Most conjure items were organic, and would not be found or at least distinguished easily. One such item would be a single black cat bone . . . but while cat bones were found, there is no reason to assume

these were magical items. A human tooth (lower left canine), however, was recovered in the Kings Bay Plantation Kitchen and it may be the result of magic, because the tooth was extracted after the death of the individual, a child three to four years old. Another tooth from an adult was found in the excavation of the bighouse [sic].

Adams apparently makes the decision about which artefacts were related to magic based on the only available evidence, the archaeological context. This evidence is not without problem, however, because the tooth found at the mansion also could easily have served a magical function as much as any other tooth found during excavation. Thus, at this point, archaeologists of slavery are left to make suppositions often based on plausible, but yet somewhat shaky, grounds.

Even though serious interpretative problems confront archaeologists at every turn, the association of everyday artefacts with religion and magic continues to be made. Numerous examples can quickly be cited. At the Horton Grove slave quarter in North Carolina, for instance, archaeologists found carefully peeled forked sticks between the walls of a late antebellum slave cabin. These sticks — possibly hidden and intentionally incorporated into the cabin's fabric — may have been used as protection from witches in a manner consistent with what some former slaves report (Singleton 1991, 157). Conversely, these sticks may have had nothing whatsoever to do with witchcraft; perhaps a child stripped the sticks and played with them, eventually losing them during cabin construction. The blue beads often found within slave cabin deposits provide another ready example. When Ascher & Fairbanks (1971, 8) reported finding a single hexagonal, faceted, blue bead at an antebellum slave cabin site in Georgia, they proposed a number of interpretations to explain its presence: that it was an 'ambassador bead', used as a kind of passport; that it may have played some role in cementing sociopolitical alliances in Africa; or that a Native American may have traded it to a Georgian slave. Recently, Adams (1987, 204), observing the presence of blue beads at several plantations throughout the American South, proposed that these single blue beads may signify an Islamic belief in using blue beads 'to ward off the evil eye'. Adams is equally cautious to note, however, that blue glass beads, like the black, yellow, and red beads he found at the Kings Bay slave cabins, were common items traded to Native Americans. Like Colono Ware pottery, perhaps the beads found their way to slaves through the commercial efforts of European-American or even Native American traders. Drilled coins provide still

another example. Drilled coins at first seem to represent simple curios used in necklaces until one realizes that former slaves in Georgia have suggested that pierced coins were used as charms to avoid evil. A former slave living in Oklahoma summarized this usage succinctly when he said that slaves 'wore a silver dime on a raw cotton thread around their necks to keep from being voodooed' (Rawick 1977b, 200). Pierced coins have been found at several plantation sites, including President Thomas Jefferson's Monticello (Patten 1992, 6), and other specimens are likely to appear at other sites. The pertinent question, however, is: are these coins to be regarded as religious items, decorative jewellery, or some combination of both? The archaeologist's viewpoint and choice of evidence, at this point in time, seem to decide which interpretation is accepted.

Another excellent example to demonstrate the interpretive problems faced by archaeologists is provided by the common iron pot. Visitors to slave cabins during the antebellum period saw iron pots in every hearth. Rossa Cooley, a Vassar-educated teacher who went to work on St Helena Island, South Carolina, noted, for instance, that a Miss Towne had reported in 1862 that 'The household utensils consisted of one pot, in which they [the slaves] cooked their hominy or peas with salt pork.' (Cooley 1926, 121) Former slaves made frequent reference to the iron pots they used in their cabins. James Singleton of Mississippi said that 'There was a big old iron pot hangin' over de hearth, an' us had 'possum, greens, taters, and de lak cooked in it' (Rawick 1977d, 1957); Benny Dillard of Georgia remembered that the slaves he knew boiled their food 'in the big old pots what [sic] swung on cranes over the coals' (Killion & Waller 1973, 56).

The function of iron pots in slave cabins seems so straightforward that further comment is unwarranted: iron pots were used for cooking. One of the truisms of southern cooking today is that the single-dish meal derives from the slave practice of cooking everything in the same large pot. This easy interpretation is shattered, however, by other slaves' comments that iron pots could have a distinctively religious function. According to ex-slave Charles Grandy of Virginia, an iron pot was commonly used to 'catch de sound' of slave religious services: 'Sometimes [you] would stick yo' haid down in de pot if you got to shout awful loud'; Marriah Hines, also from Virginia said 'Couse [sic] some of the masters didn't like the way we slaves carried on [at prayer meetings] we would turn pots down, and tubs to keep the sound from going out' (Perdue *et al.* 1976, 119, 141). Mrs

Channel, cited earlier, made the comment that the leader of a clandestine slave worship ceremony on her plantation 'would bend forward and speak into or over a vessel of water to drown out the sound' (Cade 1935, 331).

The slaves' use of pots to 'catch sound' probably had little to do with acoustics. Rather, the use of iron pots in religious observances was an African tradition related to the worship of deities (Rawick 1972, 39-45). The iron pot fragments found at sites like Millwood Plantation (Orser *et al.* 1987, 453) and at Kings Bay Plantation (Adams 1987, 348) may relate to more than just subsistence. According to Robert Hall (1989, 128):

the iron pot may stand not only for an African baseline but also for the chronological and cultural range of the religious history of Black Americans. By the end of the Civil War black Southerners were scattered along a continuum from the iron pot of African religionists to the silver chalice of the Catholics and Episcopalians.

The same case for religious or magical association might be made for the 'mundane' objects found with Handler & Lange's (1978) Burial 72 in Barbados. The bracelets and rings may be regarded as more than decorative jewellery; they may represent powerful amulets used for protection. One of the clearest and most remarkable uses of metal rings as protection against evil and as good luck charms was found in the 1930s along the coast of Georgia, in the same region where Adams (1987) found metal rings in the archaeological deposits of slave cabins. When the interviewers of the Georgia Writers' Project (1940, 20-21) spoke with George Boddison, they found that:

His wrists and arms were encircled by copper wire strung with good luck charms; his fingers were covered with several large plain rings. A copper wire was bound around his head and attached to this wire were two broken bits of mirror which, lying flat against his temples with the reflecting side out, flashed and glittered when he moved his head.

The interviewers discovered that he even had a brass ring in his mouth in the place of a lower tooth. Thus, it may be assumed that any ring found at a slave-related site may have been related in some fashion to a traditional belief system. On the other hand, it may be supposed, with equal conviction perhaps, that slaves wore some rings and bracelets simply for personal adornment. Some rings may have had dual functions.

One of the interpretive problems caused by such artefacts is that they appear either individually, without clear associations with other religious or ritual

objects, or else they are found with artefacts that may have a ritual significance that is not currently understood. Such is the case at Garrison Plantation in Maryland. At this site, Klingelhofer (1987) reports the association of incised spoons with small, polygonal objects made of wood, earthenware, and glass. It may well have been true that these items represent a slave religious 'toolkit' (Patten 1992), but clear religious associations between them cannot be neatly drawn. Their true function for now must remain a mystery. As Klingelhofer (1987, 116) writes, 'until more is known about Negro pagan religions, or games that slaves brought with them or devised in American bondage, the identity of these objects cannot be determined'.

One case where strong associations between apparent ritual objects do exist derives from the Jordan Plantation, an antebellum and postbellum site in East Texas. While excavating a cabin thought to have been inhabited by an African-American 'healer/magician', Brown & Cooper (1990, 16-17) discovered a toolkit composed of five cast-iron kettle bases, numerous pieces of used chalk, bird skulls, an animal's paw, medicine bottles, a tube composed of several bullet casings, nails and spikes, several spoons and knives, and two chert scrapers. Drawing on ethnographical and historical information, Brown & Cooper (1990, 16) suggest that all of these objects could have been used together for the conduct of African-style rituals. Kongolese ritual leaders in Cuba draw cruciform patterns on the bottoms of kettles with chalk — similar to the marks on Ferguson's pots, in fact; bird symbolism — associated both with healing and divination — is prevalent throughout Africa; sealed, hollow tubes can be used in certain healing rituals; and spikes and nails are driven into anthropomorphic wooden figures in order to fix spells cast on victims. Brown & Cooper (1990, 17) did not find any such figurines, and their interpretations of the religious nature of the objects are otherwise unsupported. Still, their willingness to envision the artefacts as an interacting collection of ritual objects, rather than as individual artefacts with only the most obvious uses, is significant. In order to perceive the possible religious applications of the artefacts at Jordan Plantation we must learn to see them collectively.

In keeping with the idea that much of this religious toolkit would have been hidden from the master's view, Brown & Cooper argue that much African-American ritual symbolism may have lacked an expression that could be identified by outsiders. This lack of expression would 'keep the behavior operating within the adapting community of African-Ameri-

cans' (Brown & Cooper 1990, 17). Their idea supports Ferguson's (1991) notion that the Colono Ware pots — and the Xs scratched on them, for that matter — have a dual function: one religious, one political. Such items allowed slaves to practise aspects of their traditional religions at the same time as they allowed them to embrace an empowerment that existed beyond the reach of the slave system. The slaves' bodies might be held in chains within the system, but their minds were free to maintain their own religious beliefs and their own concepts of personal freedom.

Conclusion

This brief essay shows that the archaeology of slave religion is only in its infancy. In the search for answers to questions about slave diet, social relations, and material elements of resistance, some historical archaeologists have found time to examine the religious lives of the African men and women who toiled on the plantations and within the cities of the plantation world. In this article I have only touched upon some of the discoveries and interpretations historical archaeologists have made over the past few years. The archaeology of New World slavery is such a rapidly growing field that over the next few years it is likely that we will know appreciably more about slave life and religion than we do now.

One of the biases that exist in the present data derives from archaeologists' preoccupation with large plantations. The reasons for this emphasis on the very large estates of the wealthy lower South and Caribbean are varied, but typically they relate to funding and local interest. It has generally been easier to obtain scarce funding for plantation archaeology when an historically important person is associated with the property. For this reason, active archaeological programs have been conducted at plantations associated with Andrew Jackson, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson, and with other notable members of the élite planter class (see Orser 1990). In the United States, the largest estates are typically along the Atlantic coast. Much of this focus has been driven, not by the research design of archaeologists, but by the needs of land developers, who have sought to build huge resorts and retirement communities on prime pieces of coastal real estate. This prized real estate was also valued in the past by the wealthiest planters, so the sites that have been studied, usually under the requirements of preservation legislation, have been the large, coastal estates. Federal bureaucrats have easily been able to judge these large estates, with their famous owners, to be 'significant'

and so worthy of federally funded study.

Historically, however, most plantations were not large. The typical plantation in the American South was small in acreage, housed less than ten slaves, and was tilled by the master working alongside the slaves (Stampp 1956, 30-31). These kinds of plantations formed the backbone of the American slave system. Nonetheless, only within the past year or so have archaeologists turned their attention to these small, unimpressive estates (Andrews & Young 1992).

In terms of religious beliefs, the distinctions between large and small plantations may not be insignificant. A former slave in Mississippi said that 'We didn't hear nothing 'bout hants [haunts] or charms. It was on the big places where all such as that went on.' (Rawick 1977c, 219) This comment implies that the size of the plantation may have played a role in whether and how slaves were able to express their religious beliefs. We may assume, perhaps, that slaves on larger estates had more anonymity and could have more easily maintained elements of a traditional religion than slaves on small plantation farms.

Unfortunately, the intriguing idea that plantation size and religious tradition is linked cannot be addressed at this time. Archaeologists studying slave religion are still too few in number, and our collective knowledge is too fragmentary to permit a definitive statement on this matter. There is every reason to believe, however, that the study of slave religion, along with slave life, will continue to grow in importance, and that eventually we will be able to write a more complete account of the religious beliefs and practices of the African men and women who were held in bondage in the New World.

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