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Exploring the Material Culture of Death in Enslaved African Cemeteries in Colonial Virginia and South Carolina

By Christina Brooks*

Introduction

In colonial America, throughout the Southeast region of the country, an invisible line once existed (Figure 1). With no identified boundaries, that line ran roughly in a southwest direction from the Chesapeake to a point in the Low Country. That line separated two politically, environmentally and socially disparate regions inhabited by culturally distinct yet similar groups of enslaved Africans. When examining the mortuary practices and funerary



Figure1. Author's drawing of "invisible" line

rituals of these two groups of enslaved Africans, the result of this undefined cultural boundary becomes apparent. Upon crossing that invisible line, patterns emerge in the archaeological record that demonstrates the differences in enslaved African burial sites between the two regions. As these groups moved into the 19th century that invisible line, dividing the regions and the

culturally unique patterns, becomes less apparent. Mortuary practices and funerary rituals become less distinct as enslaved Africans transition from wholly African to African American.

Considering the idea that religious cosmologies survived the brutal middle passage it is quite plausible to accept that these same beliefs and practices, now modified by the institution of slavery, survived the domestic slave trade and migration across the states. The routes of the domestic slave trade and the migration patterns of slave owning planters, as well as freedmen, suggest the distinct possibility that patterns in enslaved African mortuary practices and funerary rituals identified in the Chesapeake and Low Country can be observed throughout the states following the spread of American slavery. As slave owning planters and traders transported their human cargo out of Virginia and into Kentucky, Tennessee and North Carolina and out of South Carolina and into Georgia and the North Carolina coast (Deyle 2005) patterns in burial practices in these new locales remain constant with patterns identified in the Chesapeake and Low Country.

When examining enslaved African burials and the spread of these practices it appears that the origin from which the enslaved African arrived from Africa is less significant than where they arrived in America. It was the destination in America, mixed with the already established cultural identities brought from Africa that greatly determined the cultural identities that would be established. It was these new or newly mixed cultures that derived out of having to adapt to new environments as well as modify beliefs and practices in a strange new world that created the mortuary practices that are identified in the archaeological record.

There is no argument that the period of African enslavement in colonial America produced two distinguishable groups of enslaved Africans between the Chesapeake and the Low Country (Morgan 1998; Deetz 1988; Curtin 1972; Ferguson 1992). The argument remains in identifying the forces responsible for producing these culturally diverse groups. Curtin (1972) has argued that it was the destination in Africa from which the enslaved was purchased that marked this distinction. He noted that South Carolina planters bought enslaved Africans mostly from Angola while Virginia planters bought enslaved Africans primarily from the Gold Coast. Deetz (1988), in his study of colonoware, argued that the distinction was due to the pattern of planter-slave interaction in each region rather than ethnic differences. Ferguson (2004), based on his study of colonoware, argued that the differences could be attributed to the different quantities of imported Africans in the two regions that produced contrasting populations. Lastly, Philip

Morgan (1998) argued that the differences between the two populations of enslaved Africans were due to differences in adaptations to local environments.

Perhaps it is some or a combination of all of these reasons that contributed in one way or another to the emergence of these culturally distinct enslaved African populations in the Chesapeake and Low Country. For this research the question is not necessarily why these two distinct groups emerged but rather what was the result of such divergence and can this divergence be identified in the archaeological record, particularly as it pertains to mortuary practices and funerary rituals? Research at the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, under an NEH Challenge Grant provided by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation during the summer of 2011, explored how the institution of slavery and the slave trade conspired to produce a set of similar yet uniquely different funerary rituals and mortuary practices by enslaved Africans in these two regions.

Examining Mortuary Practices and Funerary Rituals

All living things die and because of this, death makes up a large, very important part of human culture. Significant for scholars, death leaves traces that are meant to remain and be observed that impart a rich source of information about mortuary practices and funerary rituals of the group interred. The significant role that death played and the desire to respond to it was no less important for enslaved Africans than it was for others occupying the same space and time, including slave owning whites, non-slave owning whites, free blacks and Natives.

Because of the integral part that death played, and continues to play, in the lives of humans, cemeteries are great repositories of cultural information. This intentionally placed material culture laid across a deliberate landscape can be important to the interpretation and understanding of the cultural systems of those interred. The documented history of enslaved Africans may be enriched when coupled with archaeological cemetery surveys that are capable of identifying and interpreting patterns within an appropriate context that reflect the values of the group interred.

Context

To understand enslaved African mortuary practices and funerary rituals it is important to examine burial sites within the context from which they were developed. There are perhaps two contexts from which enslaved African mortuary practices and funerary rituals should be

observed. Probably the most defining context, which will only be mentioned here, is the relationship of power or the social interactions between the slave owning planters and the enslaved as well as among the enslaved (Howson 1990). The institution of slavery and how it regulated social interactions cannot be ignored. The fact that a dominating group existed with a dominated group and shared the same time and space was bound to affect beliefs and practices of both groups.

It is also important to view these beliefs and practices from within a religious context. The extent to which dominating religions such as Christianity or Islam, had on enslaved African religious practices certainly complicates the study (Jamieson 1995). It is difficult to discuss the development of African culture in America without at least briefly talking about Africa. To understand African customs brought to America researchers should understand the progress and transmission of religious ideals in African regions where the enslaved where sold from (Raboteau 2004). While agreeing with Sobel (1979) that there is no central West African religious cosmos because culture and ethnic groups varied greatly throughout West Africa, it is important to recognize some common bonds that united West African cosmologies. These include belief in a spirit world and the supernatural, the importance of maintaining ancestor relationships and the belief in a higher power (Sobel 1979). The slave trade did not destroy these cosmologies. Over time these shared beliefs, shaped and modified by a new environment and the circumstances of slavery, led to a common religious perspective for enslaved Africans in America. The material culture associated with cemeteries as well as the funerary practices connected with enslaved African burials emerged directly from this unified religious cosmology.

Enslaved African Burial Studies

Enslaved African cemeteries are often homogenized into a general group of characteristics (Sheumaker and Wajda 2008; Blassingame 1979; Jones-Jackson 2004; Thompson 1984; Rice and Katz-Hyman 2010) and are not analyzed for their regional specific individualities (Joyner 1986). Charles Joyner (1986) was accurate when he argued that scholars tend to "describe abstract wholes instead of concrete parts." There is some ease in making generalizations due to the shared characteristics of enslaved African cemeteries in both regions (Sheumaker and Wajda 2008; Blassingame 1979; Jones-Jackson 2004; Thompson 1984; Rice and Katz-Hyman 2010). However, closer inspection reveals that the individualities of each

cemetery in both regions are diverse and would indeed exemplify "concrete parts." The discovery of variation depends on how closely these sites are scrutinized (Dethlefsen 1981).

Colonial Period Studies Burial Studies

Few African cultural practices remained unchanged by the institution of slavery (Joyner 1986). The involuntary migration of enslaved Africans to America formed and altered many cultural practices. New creolized cultures emerged that contained strong African influences mixed with European and Native. Early in American history a shift among these enslaved African groups took place as these communities transitioned from African to African American. Colonial burial sites provide an opportunity to view these communities prior to this transition thereby providing a temporal and cultural framework to explore the process of change and resistance.

(Dis)Similarities in the Chesapeake and the Low Country

In both colonial Virginia and colonial South Carolina, enslaved Africans were often segregated in life as well as in death. This provides a unique opportunity for scholars to examine beliefs about death for these two enslaved groups. It was not those interred, but the living that maintained the cultural framework that shaped mortuary practices and funerary rituals providing a great opportunity to study the communities at large (Dethlefsen 1981). When examining enslaved African cemeteries these sites should be observed within the context of power relationships between the slave owning planter and the enslaved (Howson 1990) as well as religious ideologies held by the enslaved and consider how both actually shaped the archeological record. The question becomes then, how did these enslaved communities manipulate, modify and transform the European planter's landscapes, beliefs and material culture to create their own worldview of death to form unique cultural identities in these two regions.

It can be dangerous to over-generalize and lump enslaved African cemeteries into a single group. At the same time it is important to recognize that many mortuary practices and funerary rituals did cross that cultural boundary line and were shared in both the Chesapeake and Low Country. Ironically this sharing of cultural traits seen in similar cemetery landscapes and material culture is the same landscape and material culture that pose differences between the two

regions. When observing these shared cultural traits it is important not to miss opportunities to also examine enslaved African cemeteries for their unique individual perspectives.

Landscape

In both the Low Country and the Chesapeake landscape played a significant role in mortuary practices and funerary rituals. While some enslaved communities were given more independent movement than others, no enslaved community was afforded complete autonomy. Land, for the living and the dead, was provided by slave owning planters who ultimately dictated and controlled the use of the space. Jamieson (1995) notes that enslaved communities were able to have some type of control over their burial space and practices yet it is unclear how much restriction was actually placed on land used for interment or how much control the enslaved communities were able to maintain. This control of land space would vary from plantation to plantation and perhaps varied greatly between the two regions. Regardless of how much control planters exhibited over enslaved burial practices it is evident that enslaved Africans used what they were given and modified it to fit their physical and social needs.



Figure 2. Enslaved African Cemetery on wooded lot (North Carolina)

Enslaved African cemeteries in both regions are often found in wooded areas (Figure 2). While the actual landscape of the area during use is not known it is plausible to believe these sites were created and maintained in wooded areas. Fitts (1996) suggests that the enslaved often

met in woods to communicate and keep alive African traditions, it is reasonable to assume that these traditions also included funerary rituals. Perhaps finding these cemeteries tucked away among the trees is an example of a creolized landscape where the planters provided land for an intended use that was reinterpreted for the creation and maintenance of African beliefs.

Enslaved cemeteries in both regions also often appear unkempt and unorganized in appearance (Figure 3). While the appearance of these cemeteries can suggest abandonment, desertion was usually not the cause for such appearances. Documentary history and oral accounts suggest that enslaved cemeteries remained an active part of the community's consciousness.



Figure 3. Low Country cemetery seemingly unkempt

Where landscape patterns begin to differ between the two regions is in cemetery location. Enslaved African cemeteries in the Low Country are often found on plantations sites. Within these sites the cemeteries are usually found near the dwellings of the enslaved community. This appears to be true also for the enslaved communities of the Chesapeake. The one difference between the two is that Low Country cemeteries appear more frequently near a natural source of water. This connection to water with Low Country enslaved African cemeteries may suggest a closure tie with African influences not shared by the enslaved of the Chesapeake. According to some West African traditions water served as an intermediary between the living and the dead (Fennell 2007; Vlach 1990).

Material Culture

Marking the location of a deceased loved one with formal grave markers does not appear to have been a frequent occurrence in either Low Country or Chesapeake enslaved cemeteries. It is unclear if this due to socioeconomic reasons (Little 1989), restrictions implemented by the slavers, or cultural beliefs of the enslaved population. What is apparent, as a result, is the lack of available material culture found within these cemeteries in both regions. While still rare, stone markers are more frequently found on burials in the Chesapeake then on burials in the Low Country, however, both regions exhibit a high number of unmarked burials and empty landscapes.

While neither region offers much material culture in the enslaved cemeteries, the Low Country does offers more in variety. Material culture, such as glass, ceramics, wood, plants, shells and metal are frequently identified in Low Country enslaved African burials (Jones-Jackson 2004; Blassingame 1979; Morgan 1998; Thompson 1984; Ingersoll 1892; Bolton 1891; Sheumaker and Wajda 2008; Little 1989) (Figure 4). This perhaps suggests that in the Low Country adhering to specific mortuary practices and funerary rituals was more important than memorializing loved ones with engraved burial markers. This again may suggest a close tie to West African practices and beliefs that Low Country enslaved communities maintained that the enslaved in the Chesapeake did not.



Figure 4. Material Culture found in a Low Country enslaved African cemetery.

Conclusion

It is unclear why certain mortuary patterns were similar between the Low Country and the Chesapeake while others, however small, differed in both regions. Perhaps the reasons have already been suggested when scholars described the difference between Chesapeake and Low Country slavery (Deetz 1988; Curtin 1972; Ferguson 1992; Morgan 1998) or perhaps it these

reasons remain unknown. What is clear is that these cultural differences do exist. If we heed Dethlefsen's (1981) advice and examine these sites more closely perhaps other cultural characteristics may emerge that will allow us to appreciate these sites for their heterogeneity, as well as similarities, and celebrate what these individual sites have to offer to our knowledge and understanding of enslaved African and African American history.

Note

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