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Material Culture and African-American Spirituality at the Hermitage

ABSTRACT

In this article, artifacts excavated from 19th-century African-American contexts at the Hermitage plantation near Nashville, Tennessee, are examined in light of their possible use in religious ritual, traditional healing, and other behaviors related to spirituality. While specific spiritual behaviors cannot be determined from the Hermitage archaeological and documentary record, the presence of a distinct African-American belief system at the Hermitage is suggested through comparison of selected artifacts from the Hermitage assemblage with various historical, folkloric, and archaeological sources. This belief system and its associated behaviors may have aided African Americans in achieving limited social and economic autonomy within the system of plantation slavery.

Introduction

In recent years, many historical archaeologists involved with the study of plantation slavery have attempted to address questions of African-American ideology in their analyses. Within this area of inquiry, a central focus of archaeologists has been the reconstruction of African-American religious ritual, along with other behaviors related to spirituality (Orser 1994:33). Several scholars have attempted to identify syncretisms between the African-American archaeological record and traditional West African religious practice (Brown and Cooper 1990; Cabak 1990; Ferguson 1992:109–120; Patten 1992; Adams 1994; Brown 1994; Orser 1994; Young 1994; Jones 1995; Wilkie 1995). The ideological motivation for these studies, following such scholars as Melville Herskovitz (1958[1941]) and Robert Farris Thompson (1983), has largely been to demonstrate the African descent of African-American culture, in opposition to the idea that traditional African cultures and worldviews were completely destroyed by the rigors of the middle passage and subsequent generations of slavery (Frazier 1957:3–21).

While these culture-historical questions are a necessary starting point for any study of African-American religion, scholars must begin to ask questions of their data that are more pointedly concerned with process and function in African-American culture: Why were particular ideas and behaviors retained from traditional West African cultures? What functions, if any, did they serve in enslaved African-American communities? How were these traditional beliefs transformed by processes of innovation, oppression, and creolization? These are some of the questions that must be addressed if the study of the religious and spiritual practices of enslaved African Americans is to have much relevance to students of African-American culture and anthropology.

The archaeological study of African-American spiritual behaviors has proceeded on several distinct levels of understanding. Initially, certain types of artifacts found in African-American contexts were thought of as possibly being associated with ritual behaviors. Leland Ferguson's (1992:1–32, 109–116) study of traditional African-American folk pots (colonoware), which presents evidence of religious and medicinal uses for these pots, is a classic example of this type of study. Other archaeologists have concerned themselves with the roles played by beads, metal charms, and Christian religious paraphernalia in African-American spiritual life (Smith 1987; Cabak 1990; Singleton 1991; Orser 1994; McKee 1995; Wilkie 1995; Stine et al. 1996). In addition, some attention has been paid to possible ritual uses of such "ephemera" as prehistoric lithic artifacts, modified potsherds, quartz crystals, smooth stones, and seashells (Klingelhofer 1987; Jones 1995; Wilkie 1995) which had previously been ignored by archaeologists whose main concerns lay in the reconstruction of diet and other physical conditions of enslaved life.

In addition, some researchers have attempted to identify archaeological contexts and assemblages that represent religious behavior on the part of enslaved African Americans. The best-known example of this approach is Brown and Cooper's (1990; Brown 1994) research at the

Levi Jordan plantation in east Texas. In this study, the authors attempted to define "activity areas" within the slave (later tenant) quarter that represented the primary occupations of the individual inhabitants. Among the occupations of the Jordan slaves and tenants so identified were those of African craftsman, political leader, and healer/magician. The healer/magician's cabin was distinguished by the presence of a "tool kit," recovered from a restricted area of the dwelling, consisting of:

Several cast iron kettle bases; cubes of white chalk; bird skulls; an animal's paw; two sealed tubes made of bullet casings; ocean shells; small dolls; an extraordinary (for this site) number of nails, spikes, knife blades, and "fake" knife blades; small water rolled pebbles; two chipped stone scraping tools; several patent medicine bottles; and a thermometer (Brown 1994:109).

In the context in which they were discovered, this group of somewhat mundane artifacts was thought to be analogous to traditional "tool kits" employed by West African, Afro-Caribbean, and creole healer/magicians in curing rituals (Brown 1994:109–110). A similar discovery was made by archaeologists excavating an early 19th-century deposit beneath the Charles Carroll house in Annapolis, Maryland. Here, archaeologists discovered a group of 12 quartz crystals, along with a smooth black stone and a faceted glass bead. These objects appear to have been placed intentionally together, and were covered with an inverted pearlware bowl which had an asterisk-like design on its interior base (Logan 1992; Jones 1995). Lynn Diekman Jones (1995) states that this group of artifacts is similar to several *minkisi* (charms) employed by the Bakongo, a cultural group originating in the Congo-Angolan region of Africa. In addition, George Logan (1992) cites this group of artifacts as producing the "breakthrough" to the interpretation that African Americans lived and worked in the area of the Carroll house in which the objects were found.

The archaeological assemblages at the Levi Jordan plantation and at the Carroll house are particularly important to the study of African-American religion, as they are highly suggestive

of the survival of African worldviews and religious knowledge during slavery. *Minkisi*, for example, are conceived of by the Bakongo as alive, each *nkisi* containing medicines which both embody and direct the spirit which dwells within it (Thompson 1983:117–118). The creation and use of *minkisi*, in addition to achieving particular ends, reflects a general conception of life, death, and the structure of the cosmos. This knowledge is codified in the Bakongo cosmogram, *Yowa* (Figure 1), in which

God is imagined at the top, the dead at the bottom, and water in between. The four disks at the points of the cross stand for the four movements of the sun, and the circumference of the cross the certainty of reincarnation: the especially righteous Kongo person will never be destroyed but will come back in the name or body of progeny, or in the form of an everlasting pool, waterfall, stone, or mountain (Thompson 1983:109).

The amply documented presence of symbols similar in appearance, meaning, and function to this cosmogram, as well as objects similar to *minkisi*, in the New World (Thompson 1983:108–131) lends further weight to published interpretations of the archaeological record at the Levi Jordan plantation and Carroll house. In addition, this evidence strongly supports the idea that the belief systems reflected in the archaeological record of plantation slavery were not simply random amalgamations of Euroamerican "mental heirlooms," as suggested by Puckett (1968[1926]:2–3), but rather were coherent bod-

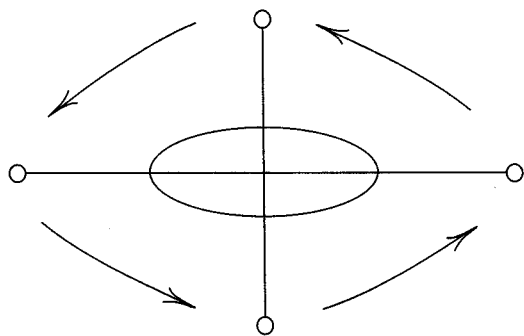


FIGURE 1. Bakongo Cosmogram *Yowa* (from Thompson [1983]).

ies of knowledge with clearly recognizable African roots.

At the same time, however, African-American culture must be viewed as the result of an intense process of creolization between Africans of varying cultural backgrounds, their African-American descendants, Native Americans, and Euroamericans (Mintz and Price 1992; Ferguson 1992). This process, combined with the relative isolation imposed upon communities of enslaved African Americans resulted in considerable local cultural variation. This variation, together with a paucity of documentary evidence, presents difficulties in determining the precise nature of the beliefs and practices reflected by the archaeological record in all but the clearest of archaeological contexts.

Another major stumbling block in studying artifacts with apparent spiritual and religious associations is that many objects documented as having served a role in African-American and West African spiritual behaviors are quite commonplace, becoming spiritually charged by specific ritual (MacGaffey 1991; Wilkie 1994:142). Many potential ritual objects can also be interpreted as having had utilitarian and/or domestic functions. For this reason, the findings at the Carroll house and at the Levi Jordan plantation, while spectacularly relevant to the study of African-American religion, cannot be considered a "Rosetta stone" for interpreting similar artifacts recovered from other African-American contexts, as has been suggested by art historian Robert Farris Thompson (Adams 1994).

The Hermitage

The remainder of this article consists of a discussion of various artifacts which are possibly connected to spiritual behaviors on the part of enslaved African Americans. The artifacts selected for inclusion in this study were excavated from contexts associated with the African-American antebellum occupation at the Hermitage, the 19th-century plantation home of Andrew Jackson, near Nashville, Tennessee. The material comes from five former African-American households at the Hermitage (Figure 2), selected both for their

intact antebellum deposits as well as for their varied locations on the plantation landscape. Two of the dwellings, known as the Triplex Middle (the central unit of a three-unit brick structure) (McKee et al. 1994) and the Yard Cabin (probably a log dwelling), are adjacent to the Hermitage mansion and were probably occupied by enslaved African Americans who worked in and around the mansion. A third structure, the South Cabin, was located approximately 165 m northeast of the mansion (Smith 1976:93–112). Cabin 3, one of a group of brick duplex dwellings about half a kilometer north of the mansion, likely housed enslaved African Americans occupied with agricultural tasks (McKee

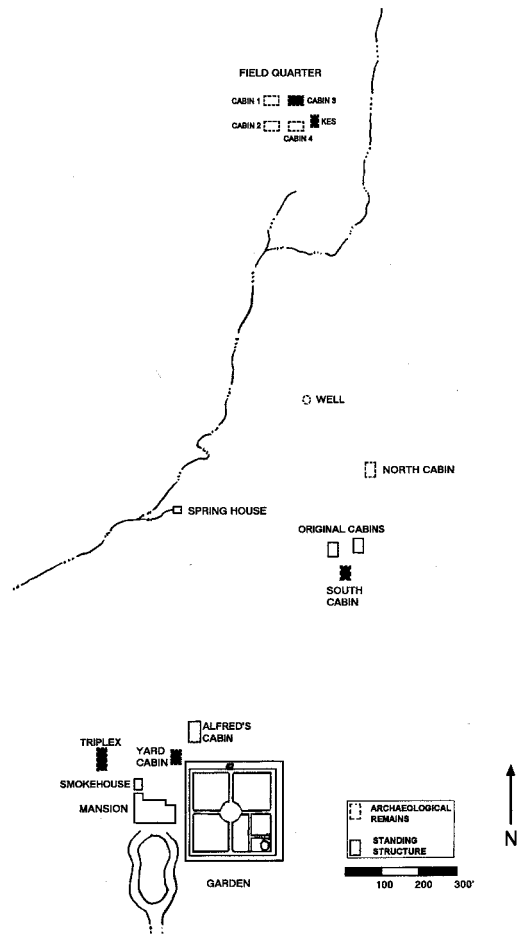


FIGURE 2. Map of the Hermitage property.

1993; Thomas et al. 1995). The main period of occupation for the dwellings mentioned above falls between 1821, when the Jackson family moved from their initial log dwellings to the present Hermitage mansion, and 1857–1858, when the Jacksons moved off the property. In addition to these dwellings, this study discusses the remains of a log structure known as KES, located near Cabin 3 in the Hermitage field quarter. This cabin was probably occupied by enslaved African Americans during the first decades of the 19th century, prior to the construction of the Hermitage mansion and brick field quarter (McKee 1993).

While all of the contexts examined are quite rich in artifacts, the generally mixed and disturbed nature of the deposits makes it difficult to define specific activity areas within the dwellings. The entire assemblage from each dwelling, consisting of artifacts recovered from 19th-century midden deposits and from features such as root cellars within the dwellings, will therefore constitute the basic unit of analysis for comparing the various sites at the Hermitage. Due to these archaeological limitations, concrete interpretations of “spiritual” behaviors on the part of African Americans at the Hermitage cannot be made at the present time. In addition, the lack of historical documentation concerning the spiritual beliefs and practices of enslaved African Americans, along with difficulties in constructing analogies with African-American folklore and African ethnographic material (Mintz and Price 1992:52–60; Thomas 1995a), may make such assertions generally unwarranted. Certain artifacts from the Hermitage, however, such as three small brass fist-shaped charms, a pierced coinlike medallion, and a distinctive assemblage of glass beads seem to indicate the presence of an active system of beliefs among African Americans at the Hermitage (McKee 1995). The data available will also be used to point out similarities between the material cultures of enslaved African Americans living and working on various areas of the Hermitage property, as well as the apparent selectivity shown by these people in acquiring various types of material objects. Finally,

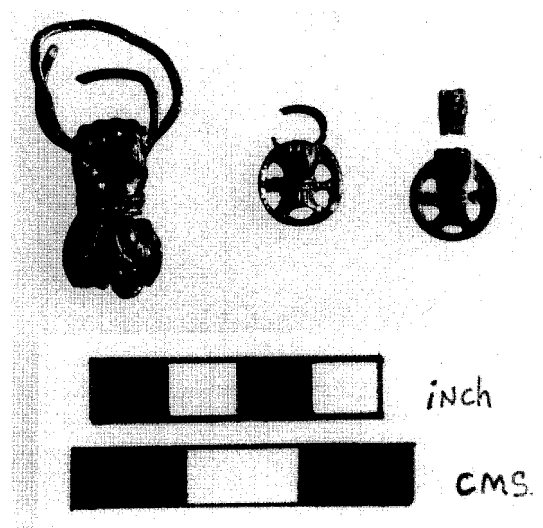


FIGURE 3. Hand-shaped copper alloy charms from the Hermitage.

some interpretation will be made of the apparent persistence of certain aspects of culture related to the spiritual realm throughout slavery, and the functions that these beliefs and behaviors may have served for the enslaved African-American community.

Material Culture

Categories of material culture may shed light on the lives of enslaved African Americans at the Hermitage. Hand charms, lucky bones, pierced coins, glass beads, “x” marbles, prehistoric stone tools, odd smooth stones, and modified ceramic sherds are treated further below.

Hand Charms

Three tiny copper alloy charms, each in the shape of a human fist (Figure 3), were recovered from African-American contexts at the Hermitage (Smith 1976; Singleton 1991:161; McKee 1993; Orser 1994:39–40). Two of these were recovered from Cabin 3, at the site’s field quarter, while one was recovered from the South Cabin. Among other small objects probably used for personal adornment by African Americans at the

Hermitage, these are particularly evocative of meanings beyond the purely decorative. The word *hand* occurs frequently in African-American folklore as a generic term for any small—not necessarily hand-shaped—good-luck or protection charm (Puckett 1968[1926]), and this usage may relate to the significance that these objects had for enslaved African Americans at the Hermitage. Samuel Smith (1987:9) has pointed out the similarity between these charms and the Islamic “Hand of Fatima,” used to ward off the evil eye. In addition, Larry McKee (1995) has noted a similarity with Latin American *figas* (hand-shaped charms) and *milagros* (votive items), which are thought to confer luck, fertility, and protection from supernatural forces. This physical similarity with *figas* and *milagros* suggests the possibility that these artifacts were brought to the Hermitage by African Americans acquired by Andrew Jackson in Florida (McKee 1993). References dating to the 1930s exist documenting African-American use of hand-shaped charms, including a reference to one stamped from metal (Hyatt 1970[1935]:583–585). Charms of this sort appear to have been used to ensure personal luck and protection from harm. Interestingly, Anne Yentsch (1994:32–33) has recovered an almost identical amulet from an enslaved African-American context in Annapolis, Maryland. This amulet and those recovered from the Hermitage are the only artifacts of this type reported in the archaeological literature. Larry McKee, director of archaeology at the Hermitage, is currently preparing an article describing the specific archaeological contexts and metallurgical composition of the Hermitage artifacts.

In the summer of 1995, the author brought photographs of the Hermitage “fist charms” along on a vacation to New Orleans, with the hopes that similar objects might be found for sale, and that information could be gathered concerning current and past uses of such objects. Although attempts to identify the Hermitage hand charm were unsuccessful, two different types of hand-shaped charms were encountered and purchased during a tour of the various voodoo and *botanica* shops in the city: a wooden

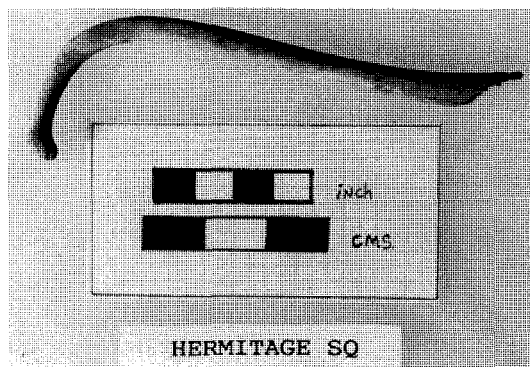


FIGURE 4. Raccoon penis bone from Cabin 3 root cellar.

“mojo hand” in the form of a human fist; and a “lucky hand root,” a tiny plant resembling a human hand. Instructions for the use of these charms echoed Frederick Douglass’s (1986[1845, 1982]:111) description of his, admittedly skeptical, use of a “certain root” as a protection charm. The specific meanings that the Hermitage hand charms held for their owners, along with the belief systems that they were a part of, are, of course, not made completely clear by these examples. These examples may, however, represent the continuity of a significant symbol in African-American culture, although questions concerning its specific origin remain unanswered.

Lucky Bones

Although folkloric anecdotes concerning the use of animal bones as charms by African Americans are quite common (Puckett 1968[1926]:256–259; Hyatt 1970:74–76), culturally modified bones—apart from such commercial items as buttons, combs, and knife handles—do not appear with any frequency in the archaeological record at the Hermitage. One possible exception is a raccoon penis bone recovered from a root cellar in the Cabin 3 West dwelling (Figure 4). A similar bone was recovered from an African-American context at Mount Vernon (Pogue and White 1991:44–46). The Mount Vernon bone has an incised line encircling its distal end, and was possibly used as a pendant. The Hermitage example is broken off

in the area where the Mount Vernon bone is incised. Baskets of drilled raccoon penis bones, strung on leather thongs, are seen for sale in New Orleans "voodoo" shops for use as personal charms. Although these commercial examples exist in radically different contexts from the archaeological examples mentioned above, they suggest a continuing folk tradition concerning the use of these bones.

Highly problematic in terms of archaeology is the possibility that animal bones used as charms may not have been visibly modified in any way. Hyatt's (1970[1935]:74–76) documentation of the traditional "black cat bone" charm repeatedly highlights the circumstances of the bone's collection, rather than subsequent modification. The specially collected bone may be used without further alteration as an ingredient in a charm bag, or simply carried in a pocket.

Pierced Coins

Another example of an item of material culture repeatedly connected through folklore and archaeology with African Americans is the pierced silver coin. These coins have been widely documented by folklorists as having been

used for good luck, protection from "conjuration" and as a general "cure-all" (Puckett 1968[1926]:314–315, 391). Pierced silver coins are often recovered from archaeological contexts associated with enslaved African Americans. These archaeological finds have been correlated with folklore, and with historical accounts of their use as adornments and charms by African Americans (Patten 1992:6; Orser 1994:41; Singleton 1995:131). Two items of this type have been recovered archaeologically at the Hermitage. One is a pierced (white metal?) medallion, recovered from the middle unit of the Triplex, in the mansion backyard (Figure 5). Another, a drilled dime dating between 1828 and 1836 (the hole is drilled through the date), was recovered from a 20th-century utility trench crossing the Yard Cabin site during excavations in the summer of 1996 (Larry McKee 1997, pers. comm.). The hole is drilled so that, when suspended, an image of an eagle on one side of the coin hangs right-side up. Unfortunately, this coin's uncertain context makes it impossible to associate it definitely with the 19th-century occupants of the Yard Cabin, although its date suggests that it was likely part of the 19th-century midden deposit at the site before the utility trench was dug.

Similarly to bones, coins have been used as charms without any modification, such as particular "lucky" coins carried in the shoe or in a pocket. Although usage of this type is practically impossible to determine archaeologically, particularly archaic or unusual coins such as a cut silver Spanish coin, dating to 1726, recovered from the yard of an enslaved African-American dwelling near the Hermitage mansion, as well as a cut coin dating to 1789 from Cabin 3, suggest that some African Americans at the Hermitage may have valued coins as keepsakes (McKee 1993:22).

Glass Beads

Glass beads, items commonly recovered from plantation excavations, have come under scrutiny from historical archaeologists as possibly having had meanings beyond the purely decorative for



FIGURE 5. Pierced (white metal?) medallion (45.89 mm diameter), recovered from the middle unit of the Triplex.

enslaved African Americans. A variety of researchers have argued that African Americans' uses of beads represent continuity between West African and African-American culture (Cabak 1990; Singleton 1991:164; Stine et al. 1996), indicate the presence of African-American women on sites (Smith 1977:159–161; Otto 1984:175), and indicate status differences within communities of enslaved African Americans (Otto 1984:72–74). European traders, in fact, exploited the pre-existing African preferences for certain types of beads in order to gain economic access to West Africa (Cabak 1990). It is likely, then, that enslaved African-Americans' uses of glass beads represent some degree of cultural continuity with West Africa, even if only through the continued preference for a specific category of material culture.

The assemblages of glass beads recovered from the various Hermitage dwellings selected for this study are illustrated by Table 1. Overall, the glass bead assemblage at the Hermitage is dominated by beads of hexagonal, drawn construction, making up 59 percent of all glass beads examined for this study, or 38 of a total of 64 beads. These beads are divided in color between blue, colorless, and black, with blue predominating (20 out of 37 beads, or 54% of

this category). Blue beads of this type were recovered from all of the contexts examined here, except from the dwelling site near the mansion known as the Yard Cabin. Here, the entire collection of beads consists of just two green, globular, mandrel-wound beads. In addition to the glass beads, two bone beads were recovered from these dwellings, along with several naturally and artificially perforated sections of fossil crinoid stems that may have served as beads.

Although sample sizes are small, the residents of all of the slave dwellings examined, except for those at the Yard Cabin, appear to have had equal access to glass beads. This supports Brian Thomas's (1995b) thesis of a high degree of cooperation and reciprocity among enslaved African Americans at the Hermitage. The assemblages of beads recovered at these households—again, with one exception—are also quite similar to one another, which may indicate consensus among enslaved African Americans at the Hermitage as to which sorts of beads were desirable. The assemblage suggests that African Americans at the Hermitage had fairly open access to beads. No archaeological or documentary evidence reveals the exact method of acquisition, i.e., whether it was through direct purchase, barter within African-American trade net-

TABLE 1
GLASS BEADS FROM HERMITAGE SITES

Types	Triplex Middle	Cabin 3 East	Cabin 3 West	South Cabin	KES	Yard Cabin	Total
Blue hexagonal	3	10	3	3	2	0	21
Black hexagonal	1	0	2	4	0	0	7
Colorless hexagonal	3	0	0	5	1	0	9
Brown hexagonal	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Colorless tube	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Dark globular/spheroid	2	2	0	0	0	0	4
Blue globular/spheroid	0	0	2	0	1	0	3
Colorless globular/spheroid	0	0	5	0	1	0	6
Green globular/spheroid	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Amber globular/spheroid	0	0	0	1	5	0	6
Turquoise toroid	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Colorless faceted	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
Dark faceted spheroid	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total	9	12	15	16	10	2	64

works, direct or indirect distribution from the mansion household, or through other means.

Thomas (1995b:117–118) suggests that the notable lack of beads recovered from the Hermitage Yard Cabin may indicate accommodation on the part of house enslaved African Americans to white modes of dress. While this may have been true for the residents of the Yard Cabin, the bead assemblage at the Triplex middle, equally near the mansion, was more substantial. This suggests that both house and field enslaved African Americans at the Hermitage had access to and used beads. The notable lack of beads from the Yard Cabin may also indicate a lack of women and children, more often associated with African-American bead use than men, at this dwelling.

A cursory examination of beads excavated from historical Cherokee sites and Euroamerican trading sites in eastern Tennessee suggests that glass beads traded to Native American populations slightly before and during the initial occupation of the Hermitage were predominantly of different types than those acquired by enslaved African Americans at the Hermitage. At the Tellico Blockhouse site, a trading fort, spherical red beads with green cores make up 60.7 percent of the total bead assemblage (65 of 107 beads), while blue beads make up 2.8 percent of the assemblage (3 of 107 beads) (Polhemus 1977:212–213). In addition, no blue beads were recorded among the trade goods shipped from Philadelphia to the Tellico Blockhouse between 1797 and 1807, or listed in a 1798 inventory (Polhemus 1977:323). Of the 72,772 beads recovered in six field seasons from the historical Overhill Cherokee site of Chota-Tenase, lamp black and white are the predominant colors, and 80.4 percent of the total sample are seed beads (Schroedl 1986:427–436). In addition, “preliminary analysis of beads from Tomotley and Mialoquo suggests that black and white are the predominant colors at these Cherokee sites” (Schroedl 1986:427–436). Although the mechanisms of bead acquisition by enslaved African Americans are unclear, the distinction between the bead assemblage at the Hermitage and those in demand by nearly contemporaneous Native

American populations in the Upper South may indicate that enslaved African Americans were able to exercise some degree of personal choice in bead selection. In addition, Stine, Cabak, and Groover (1996:50–52, 55–57) note that, while blue beads are consistently predominant in archaeological African-American bead assemblages throughout the southern United States, Native American bead assemblages are quite variable and suggest that consumer choice played a role in the composition of each.

There are several possible African antecedents for the use of beads by African Americans at the Hermitage. Beads of all kinds are currently used throughout West Africa for decorative, medicinal, religious, and economic purposes (Thompson 1983:43, 93–95; Fisher 1984:90–103; Blier 1995; Stine et al. 1996:53–54). Melanie Cabak (1990) and Theresa Singleton (1991:164) state that blue beads are sewn on clothing by Muslims to ward off the “evil eye.” Caesar Apentiik (1995, pers. comm.), a Ghanaian archaeologist working on the Hermitage excavation crew during the 1995 field season, reports that small beads similar to the blue and colorless hexagonal beads recovered at the Hermitage are currently used throughout Ghana by children, who wear them as a form of preventative medicine, a usage also described by Stine, Cabak, and Groover (1996:54) as widespread in West Africa. At the African Burial Ground in New York City, two child burials dating to the colonial era, one with waistbeads and another with a beaded necklace, were found, suggesting that this usage of beads persisted in the New World (La Roche 1994a:131–132, 1994b:14).

In addition, Apentiik stated that strings of beads are currently worn on the waists of some married Ghanaian women in order to ensure fertility. The use of waistbeads has considerable historical depth in Africa, and the beads themselves “have ontological, spiritual, metaphysical, and historical meaning” (La Roche 1994b:14). Native folklore suggests that enslaved African Americans on St. Eustatius, in the Dutch West Indies, used blue faceted beads in this manner, indicating the possibility that this practice was accepted by some Africans brought to the New

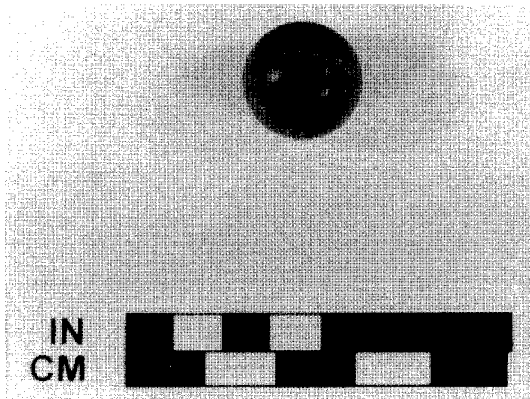


FIGURE 6. Stone marble with incised "x" from the South Cabin.

World (Smith 1987:7–8). A more direct indicator of the survival of this practice in the New World is burial 340 at the African Burial Ground, that of a woman aged between 28 and 35, with “a strand of primarily blue waist beads found *in situ*” (La Roche 1994a:4). In addition, burial 340 exhibited dental modification, suggesting to researchers that she was born in Africa (La Roche 1994a:3; Stine et al. 1996:62).

Although it is difficult to assign specific meanings to the beads recovered at the Hermitage, the very presence and distinctiveness of the bead assemblage may indicate some degree of cultural autonomy on the part of enslaved African Americans at the Hermitage. The beads themselves appear to be more similar to beads traded to African markets by Europeans (Karklins 1985:7–39), and to those recovered from other African-American sites in the Southeast (Stine et al. 1996:50–52) than to those traded to nearby Native American groups in the Southeast. Even if bead choice and distribution at the Hermitage was entirely in the hands of the Jacksons, the particular beads selected may represent the continuation of a previous trade “negotiation” between Europeans and Africans. If the beads were acquired independently in local markets or from traders, their presence indicates the participation of enslaved African Americans in the local economy, as well as their choice to expend limited economic resources on beads. Although the specific function of the beads re-

covered at the Hermitage is unknown, their presence is an important piece of evidence of the limited, negotiated cultural and economic autonomy of enslaved African Americans at the Hermitage.

“X” Marbles

Among the large variety of stone, glass, and ceramic marbles recovered from African-American contexts at the Hermitage are three small limestone marbles that have “x” marks incised on their surfaces (Figure 6). These might simply be marks of ownership. On the other hand, the “cross in a circle” motif is evocative of the Kongo cosmogram (Figure 1). This motif has been noted on items of African-American manufacture, such as colonoware bowls (Ferguson 1992:110–116), and inscribed on objects of Euroamerican manufacture found in African-American contexts, such as spoons (Klingelhofer 1987:114–115; Young 1994). Two of the copper hand charms recovered at the Hermitage (Figure 3) can also be seen as an example of this motif (Thomas 1995b:121). Newbell Puckett (1968[1926]:319), in his collection of African-American folk beliefs, describes the use of the cross symbol in “conjunction,” giving a game of marbles as an example of this use. In this example, the “x” is inscribed on the ground in order to give one’s opponent bad luck in the game. Significantly, an almost identical “x”-incised marble was recovered from the Gowen farmstead, located about 5 mi. from the Hermitage (Weaver et al. 1993:280), possibly indicating shared beliefs and significant contact between enslaved African Americans living at the Hermitage and the African-American community at this nearby farm. Similar marbles have also been unearthed at a Kentucky plantation by Amy Young (1994). Further investigation of gaming practices in the rural South would perhaps be useful concerning questions raised here. These marbles may provide an example of how beliefs are spread through the informal education that children receive during play with one another and through instruction from adult caregivers.

Prehistoric Stone Tools

Prehistoric Native American stone artifacts were found in all African-American contexts at the Hermitage. These objects include a number of whole and fragmentary chert projectile points (Figure 7), a large amount of debitage, several ground stone tools, and a very small amount of prehistoric ceramic. The recovery of prehistoric artifacts in African-American contexts at the Hermitage raises the possibility that enslaved African Americans were actively collecting and using them for some purpose. An alternative explanation for this lies in the fact that the Hermitage property has been the site of human activity for thousands of years. The occurrence of prehistoric artifacts in African-American contexts cannot, for this reason, be solely attributed to the actions of historic period residents. Conversely,

the abundance of prehistoric artifacts present in the fields and gardens at the Hermitage provided ample opportunity for their active collection and possible use by these people.

As a partial test of the idea that African Americans at the Hermitage actively collected and curated prehistoric stone tools, the ratios of chert flakes to stone tools were calculated for the cabin interior and feature fill for each of the dwellings examined (Figure 8). These ratios were then compared with the flake/tool ratio from excavation in the mansion garden, which is extraordinarily rich in prehistoric flakes and tools, and may have been the site of a considerable amount of prehistoric lithic production. It was predicted that if historic site occupants actively collected stone tools (and did not collect flakes), the ratio of flakes to tools would be lower in historic deposits. Unfortunately, the



FIGURE 7. Prehistoric artifacts from the West unit of Cabin 3.

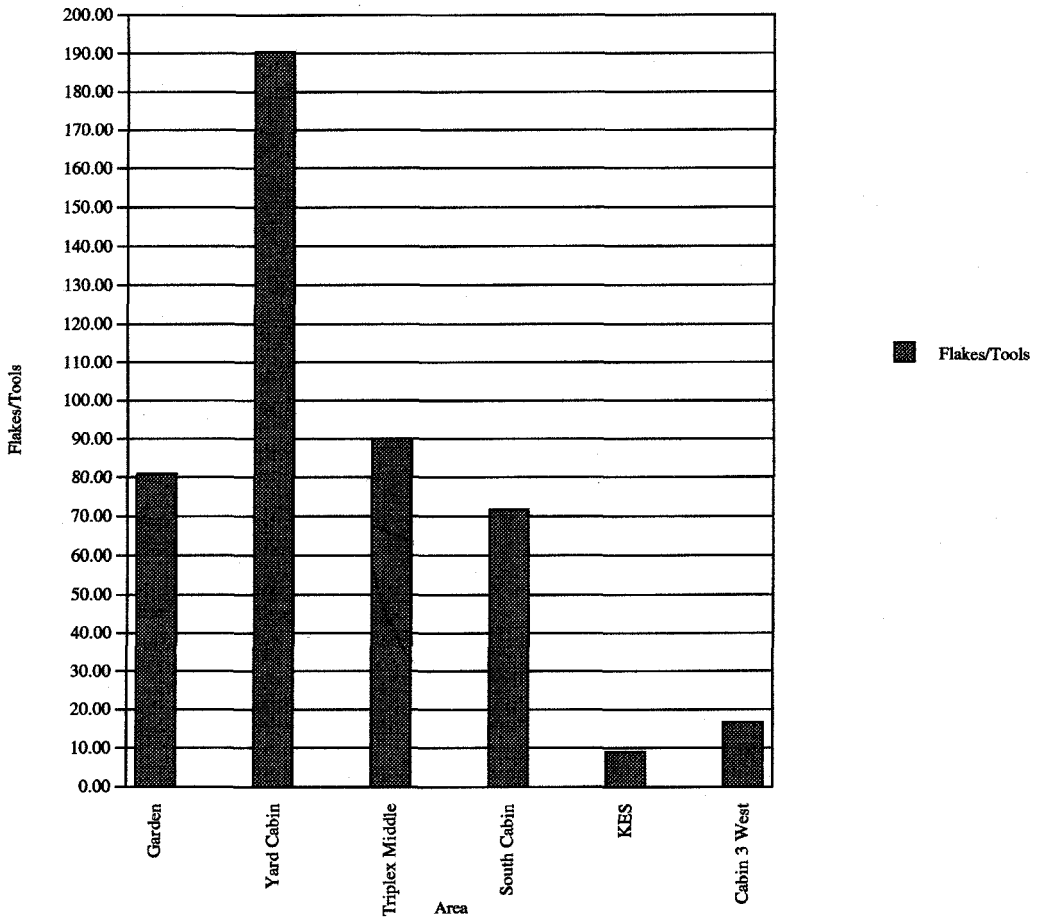


FIGURE 8. Graph showing ratios of chert flakes to flaked tools from the Hermitage Garden, and from historic midden deposits and feature fill at the Yard Cabin, Triplex Middle, South Cabin, KES, and Cabin 3 West sites.

results of this experiment were somewhat inconclusive. The flake/tool ratio decreases relative to the distance from the Yard Cabin (adjacent to the mansion garden), and may reflect prehistoric site use patterns rather than historic activity.

No distinct prehistoric middens or features have been encountered at the Hermitage, and it is probable that such prehistoric remains have been thoroughly mixed with later historic deposits through bioturbation—extensive rodent disturbance is evident at most Hermitage slave dwelling sites, or through cultural activities such as plowing. Although more research into the

Hermitage’s prehistoric occupation must be done in order to properly address these questions, this does not preclude the possibility that some African Americans at the Hermitage collected stone tools.

Prehistoric artifacts are commonly recovered from African-American contexts throughout the Southeast, and several theories have been advanced to explain their presence. Puckett (1968[1926]:315) suggests that these objects were instrumental in the production of charms, either by virtue of their own intrinsic talismanic value, or in the ritual production of sparks with a steel

strike-a-light. In my survey of New Orleans voodoo shops, I saw chert projectile points being sold in one shop as being "essential for your mojo bag."

A more direct explanation may be that the primary use of these objects was as utilitarian fire-starters, ready-made from high quality chert and easily collected by African Americans working in the fields at the Hermitage. Several of the points recovered do, in fact, show evidence of reuse as spark-strikers (Figure 9). These points show evidence of bashing along their edges, and a sample will be subjected to microwear analysis to look for more specific evidence of association with steel. Even if, however, it can be shown that these artifacts were used with strike-a-lights, we cannot determine the specific intentions of the striker beyond the creation of sparks. In addition, it is possible

that these artifacts simply represent the collections of children and other curiosity seekers.

Odd Smooth Stones

At each of the sites examined here, small chert nodules were recovered (Figure 10). Most of these artifacts are likely prehistoric hammerstones and small grinders, although some may have been collected and used by African Americans. Examples can be cited of African Americans using stones in conjuration, and similar worn, smooth stones were excavated at the Garrison plantation in Maryland (Klingelhofer 1987:116) and at Poplar Forest in Virginia, as well as at other African-American sites (Patten 1992). The function of these stones at the Hermitage, however, cannot readily be ascertained. In addition, a number of small, smooth pebbles

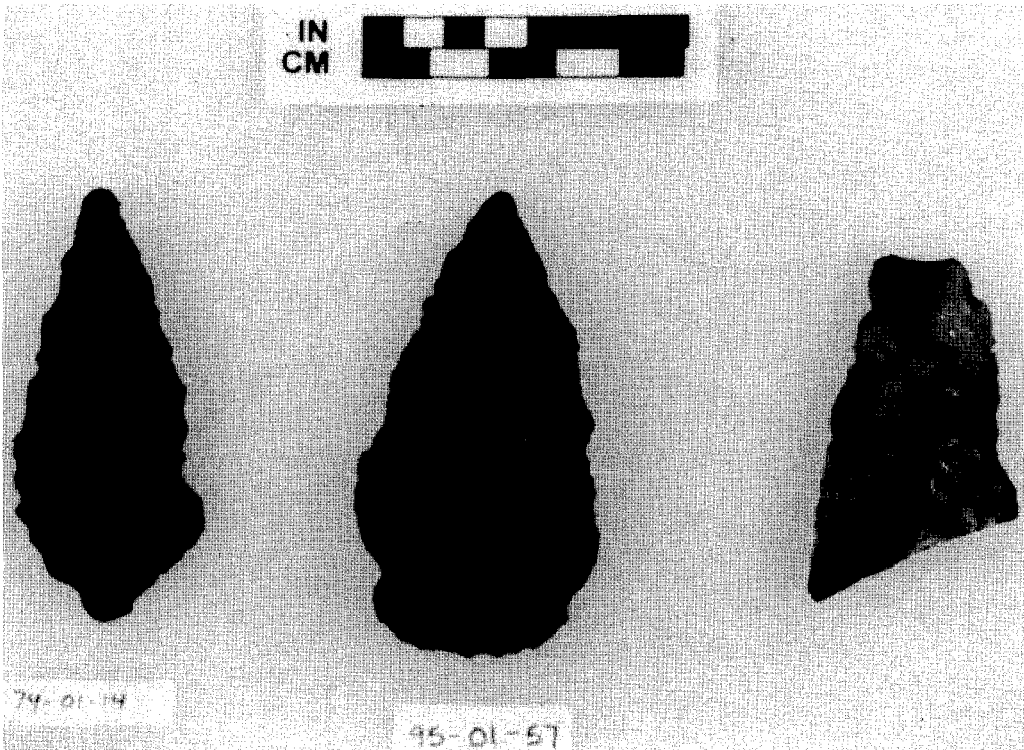


FIGURE 9. Prehistoric projectile points from Hermitage sites, with edge-wear possibly indicating reuse as spark strikers.

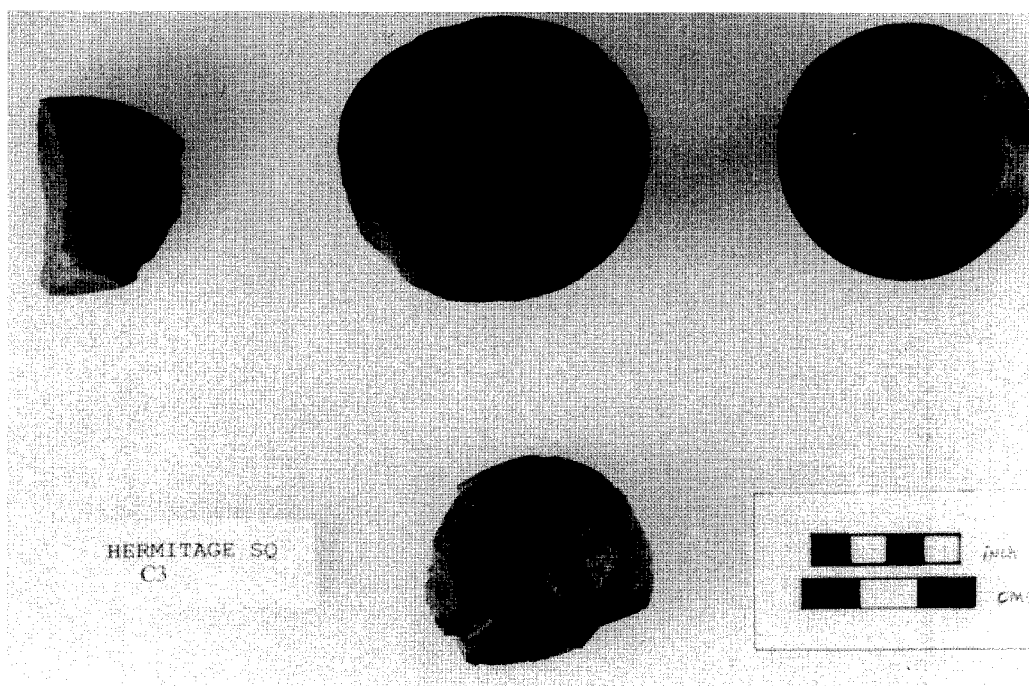


FIGURE 10. Round, smooth stones from the West unit of Cabin 3.

were recovered from the South Cabin area. While these pebbles appear to be of an ideal size to be used as gaming pieces, they may have been used for some other purpose, such as graveling a pathway.

Modified Ceramic Sherds

Several small ceramic sherds that appear to have been worked into “gaming pieces” were recovered at the Hermitage (Figure 11). Objects similar to these have also been recovered from African-American contexts in other regions, including Jamaica and Maryland (Klingelhofer 1987:115–117; Armstrong 1990:137–138). While these sherds are definitely worked, the functions that they served cannot easily be established. They do, however, look like checkers and may have been used as gaming pieces or counters.

In addition to these “gaming pieces,” a number of much smaller, smoothly worn ceramic

sherds were also recovered at the Hermitage. These artifacts, while relatively few in number, were recovered from all contexts examined for this paper. They are all approximately 5–10 mm in diameter and roughly triangular in shape. Artifacts of this type have been found at a number of sites throughout the Southeast and Middle Atlantic states (Wilkie 1994:271–273; Daniel Allen 1995, pers. comm.). These objects have been variously described as possible chicken or turkey gizzard stones (Smith 1976) and as “intentionally water worn” for possible use in charm bags, in divination rituals, or as gaming pieces (Wilkie 1994:271–273).

A sample of these sherds was shown to Emmanuel Breitberg, a faunal expert at the Tennessee Division of Archaeology. Breitberg (1995, pers. comm.) stated that the sherds appeared to have been worn by tumbling, possibly in a stream or in the gizzard of a bird, and that the sherds were of a size suitable for ingestion

by domestic fowl. The types of ceramics that have been found to be worn in this manner are those that are relatively hard-bodied yet tend to break into large numbers of small sherds. Coarse earthenwares would be ground to dust in a very short time by gizzard action, while thick, hard-bodied stonewares tend to break into pieces too large to be ingested.

The use of potsherds as gizzard stones by domestic fowl helps to explain the rarity of these artifacts as well as their presence on a number of sites. As gravel consumed by domestic fowl is generally ground to dust and excreted within a day or so, the consumption and destruction of inedible grit by these birds occurs daily (Schorger 1966:94).

The only stones to survive this process would be either those excreted by the bird before being ground to dust, or those recovered from dead animals. Interestingly, I have received reports of an intentional turkey burial containing small whiteware sherds in the gizzard area (Leslie Stewart-Abernathy 1995, pers. comm.), as well as of "old blue dishes" being broken up and fed to hens (Camehl 1946[1916]:xvii). Gravel is not generally found in the gizzards of slaughtered domestic fowl, as the birds are not fed for 24 hours before slaughtering (Emmanuel Breitberg 1995, pers. comm.). It is, however, not known

whether this practice was common at 19th-century farming operations such as the Hermitage.

The two best hypotheses to account for the presence of these sherds are intentional selection and alteration by enslaved African Americans, or the use of potsherds as gizzard stones by domestic fowl. The available information seems to favor the latter of these explanations. In addition, no reference to the use of potsherds or gizzard stones in African-American gaming or ritual has come to light during research.

Conclusion

Archaeological research at the Hermitage has not as yet provided the data necessary to delineate specific ritual behaviors on the part of the Hermitage's enslaved African-American population. However, the presence of items such as the brass "fist charms" and the distinctive bead assemblage are suggestive of both an active system of beliefs associated with specific items of material culture and the success of strategies employed by enslaved African Americans to acquire these items. Although the documentary record at the Hermitage is completely silent with regard to these objects, it is highly probable that the Jacksons were not actively engaged in providing beads and charms to their slaves. The presence of these objects, therefore, is an important piece of evidence of the limited economic autonomy that enslaved African Americans were able to negotiate with a planter-dominated society that was at turns indifferent to or directly opposed to slave participation in the marketplace economy. Several historical essays detailing the market-related activities of enslaved African Americans in the United States and Caribbean can be found in *Cultivation and Culture* (Berlin and Morgan 1993), and together provide a good overview of this complex subject.

As the archaeological study of questions related to African-American religion and ideology moves beyond the simple documentation of African "survivals," it is important to assess the significance that these beliefs and behaviors held in the African-American community. Wilkie (1995) notes the predominance of charms related

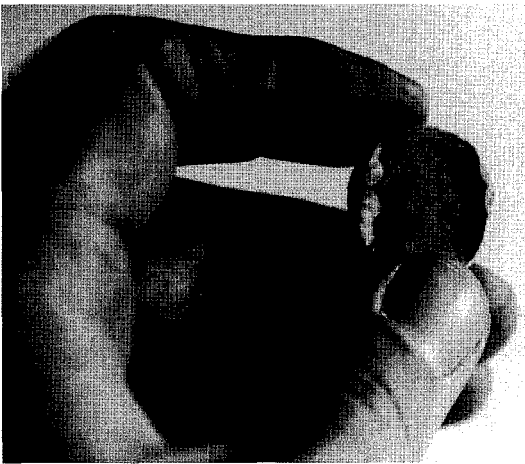


FIGURE 11. Reworked transfer-printed ceramic sherd from Cabin 2, in the Hermitage Field Quarter.

to marriage, love, and family life. She suggests that the persistence of these beliefs reflected African-American attempts to maintain stable families and communities in the face of the strongly disruptive influence of slavery. Wilkie argues that the spiritual realm provided an autonomous sphere, compatible with African-American worldview, which allowed enslaved African Americans to exercise control over their own communities (Wilkie 1995). This, in turn, argues against the widespread perception that status in enslaved African-American communities was conferred mainly through relationships with the Euroamerican plantation household. Rather, it can be argued, following Mintz and Price, that "the institutions created by the slaves to deal with what are at once the most ordinary and most important aspects of life took on their characteristic shape *within* the parameters of the masters' monopoly of power, but *separate from* the masters' institutions" (Mintz and Price 1992:39).

Maria Franklin, in her assessment of Colonial Williamsburg's reconstruction of the Carter's Grove slave quarter, takes a similar standpoint when she argues that "of primary importance to enslaved blacks would have been their community in the quarters. It was a place where they could be themselves and where the creolized African-American culture was created" (Franklin 1995:149).

It has also been argued by Kenneth Brown (1994) that African-American practitioners of traditional medicine and ritual held an important place in the internal plantation economy. Status was ascribed to these individuals by traditionally-minded African Americans, and these healers played an important role in the African-American community from which they stood to benefit economically. This takes the argument for the autonomy of enslaved African-American communities one step further, by indicating the persistence and economic importance of a profession which was wholly unrelated to plantation production, and which was generally discouraged and even repressed by the white planter class.

In addition to their influence within the enslaved African-American community, respect for

traditional African-American healer/magicians may have extended beyond the immediate plantation community, and even into the surrounding Euroamerican community. Although plantation owners generally decried the presence of "superstition" and "ignorance" among their enslaved, these wealthy, generally well-educated individuals were probably not representative of the bulk of the poorer white population who owned few if any slaves and formed the majority of the Euroamerican population in the antebellum upper South. These poorer whites, who generally shared with enslaved African Americans a broad sympathy with the spiritual realm, may have generally acknowledged the power of traditional African-American healers and "conjurers." In addition, the position of some enslaved African Americans as primary caregivers to members of the Euroamerican plantation elite, along with local reputations earned by successful traditional healers, may have convinced some slaveholders of the efficacy of these methods.

The hypothesis that whites, in addition to African Americans, sought treatment from traditional African-American healers is given further weight by an 1831 Tennessee law forbidding slaveholders from allowing their enslaved "to go about the country under the pretext of practicing medicine or healing the sick" (Public Acts of Tennessee 1831:122-123). The presence of this law would seem to indicate that such a problem was perceived by the state legislature. It is perhaps significant that slaveholders themselves are mentioned by this law as possibly permitting enslaved African Americans to practice medicine.

Traditional medicine, practiced by both whites and African Americans, may have been viewed as a healthier alternative to established "scientific" medical treatment, which often involved the administration of strong toxins to sick persons. Leaky bottles of a 19th-century cure-all known as "calomel" (mercurous chloride) excavated at the Hermitage South Cabin in 1974 prompted archaeologist Samuel Smith (1977:156-158) to advise caution when excavating 19th-century medicine bottles.

In conclusion, although archaeology at the Hermitage has not uncovered contexts that can

be linked to specific ritual behaviors, the overall artifact assemblage suggests that African Americans at the Hermitage actively participated in a shared pattern of beliefs that was distinct in many ways from the dominant planter ideology. In making this assertion, this study has tried to avoid the promulgation of archaeological "folklore." Although some of the analogies presented in this paper may be poorly founded, they are offered merely as suggestions to promote further research into this area of African-American history. There is really very little doubt that certain broad classes of African-American spiritual artifacts, such as charm bags prepared by skilled practitioners, have antecedents in a number of West African cultures (MacGaffey 1991; Jones 1995). It is important, however, to move beyond constructing genealogies of African-American belief systems and begin to question the functions that these beliefs and practices served in enslaved African-American communities. In addition, future research should be aimed at achieving a better understanding of the religions and cosmologies which underlay these practices.

Archaeological study of these questions will require particularly close attention to archaeological context, along with a willingness on the part of scholars to move artifact analysis beyond simple functional categories. It is important to recognize that enslaved African Americans participated in a shared system of beliefs that served important functions within their communities, and that successful strategies were employed by these men and women to practice and maintain these traditions in defiance of slaveholders. Ironically, the very ephemerality which characterizes these expressions of a functioning African-American belief system makes them quite difficult to observe archaeologically.

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