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Charles R. Ewen

Crosses to Bear: Searching for Symbolism and Meaning in Edgefield Pottery

Ten years ago, Joe Joseph submitted a manuscript, "A Bakongo Cosmogram in Edgefield," for consideration for publication in *Historical Archaeology*. I was a brash young associate editor who had recently been granted tenure at East Carolina University, so due to my proximity to the site in question, the manuscript was assigned to me. I sent it out to three reviewers and quickly received two positive responses. The third response was highly critical, but in a constructive way. Given the conflicting views on the topic (all of which appeared valid), I suggested that this might make a good forum topic for the journal. The editor at the time, Ronn Michael, was game, but Joe was more interested in a stand-alone article, and chose to revise and resubmit the study. Life and work intervened and the manuscript was shelved until now. Joe is presently the editor of *Historical Archaeology*, and has come to appreciate my prescience. He finished the revisions to his manuscript and asked me to moderate this as a published forum.

Identifying a group qualified to discuss the topic was not a problem. Two of the original reviewers, Leland Ferguson and Carl Steen, agreed to comment on the newly revised article. Chris Fennell and Grey Gundaker, both of whose research focuses on the African diaspora, were pleased to join the discussion. The plan was not so much to critique Joe's article, but to use it as springboard to explore African influence on Southern folk pottery.

Joe's premise in the lead article is that cross marks found on pottery produced around Edgefield, South Carolina, are African in origin and serve to preserve that ethnic connection. Was this an implicit example of resistance to assimilation, a benign reminder of past lifeways, or a symbol of deeply held religious beliefs in a creolized culture? Joe is not certain, but feels that there

is a definite African connection requiring further exploration.

Chris Fennell accepts Joseph's basic premise and goes on to explore the reasons for the placement of these cross marks, suggesting that they were a subtle form of resistance. Leland Ferguson, whose ground-breaking work *Uncommon Ground* inspired Joseph's interpretations, hedges a bit. He claims that archaeologists may never understand the full meaning of the marks, but the more we pursue the topic, the closer we will come. The study itself serves to shake up stereotypical views of the past and leave us open to alternative explanations. Carl Steen, on the other hand, says: Phooey! He doesn't pretend to know what the cross marks mean, but feels the evidence better supports a Christian or Native American iconography, or they may simply represent owner/maker marks. In any event, more research is called for before making any interpretation. The final forum discussant, Grey Gundaker, agrees that more research is needed, and that it should begin with a better understanding of what the cosmograms meant to the people that inscribed them.

I attended a past SHA conference where the late James Deetz opined that "we will never actually *know* what happened in the past, and if you can't live with that, get a job!" It garnered the expected chuckle from the audience, but it struck me later that there was a serious message there. Even if archaeologists could travel back in time, we would still only get one perspective of the past. Those who want a black-and-white recounting of events *would* do better in a different field. But, and I think Deetz would agree, half the fun of our profession is exploring the different perspectives associated with the past.

As press time approached, it came to Joe's and my attention that a recent excavation at Dean Hall Plantation in South Carolina had produced a large quantity of colonoware. Several of the sherds were marked with Landrum crosses that were both identical to and different from those discussed in the forum. Joe and I decided that rather than incorporating these data into the papers we had already received, that we would

have the Dean Hall archaeologists, Andrew Agha and Nicole Isenbarger, provide us with a post-script. This would allow the reader to examine these new data with the benefit of having read the preceding discussion.

I must admit that I had initially expected this forum to be merely another search for Africanisms in the material record. As the contributions came in I was pleased to see that it was instead a dialogue on race, status, and ideology using

cross marks on slave-made pottery as the starting point. The final conclusions, if they are ever reached, are for the future. For now, the reader should consider the ensuing forum as what historical archaeology is all about: a multivoiced discussion of the past.

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