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## Cosmograms, Crosses, and Xs: Context and Inference

### Introduction

Crosses or X marks were noted on a small percentage of low-fired, handmade earthenware vessels found in South Carolina in the 1970s, including some that had been recovered by salvage and hobby divers from underwater contexts. A researcher from the same area went to Africa and saw similar wares, with the same marks. The South Carolina vessels were found in plantation contexts, and the majority of the inhabitants of these plantations were enslaved Africans, so it seems logical to conclude that these vessels were in all likelihood made by slaves. Looking into the matter further, it was discovered that similar marks were used in ritual contexts in the Bakongo territory. Thus the bowls marked with Xs found in the underwater contexts were tied to a waterside ritual (Ferguson 1978, 1992, 1999; Thompson 1983; Fennell 2007a; Joseph, this volume).

While this is a stimulating and imaginative interpretation, there are many problems with it. This assumes that the pottery in question was made by Africans or their descendants, and is interpreted as a sign of a secret, undocumented (in North America), African belief system that was an element of the slaves' resistance to the dehumanizing effects of slavery, and their retention of an African identity (Ferguson 1999). This has expanded from colonoware to virtually any item marked with an X or +-like mark (Wall 2000; Fennell 2007b; Joseph, this volume). In disagreeing with the fine scholars and good people who have reached this conclusion, I mean them no disrespect, but hope to spur a more critical reading of the evidence, because their arguments are built on fundamentally flawed data.

Fundamental problem No. 1: It is by no means a given that enslaved Africans ever made pottery at all. This is true even in the low country, where the evidence for on-site manufacture is the

strongest. The evidence originally marshaled by Ferguson (1977, 1992), Wheaton et al. (1982), and Wheaton and Garrow (1985) to support this conclusion was that vessels were spalled in firing, unfired sherds were found, and fired lumps of clay with fingerprints were found. The large amount of colonoware found in the low country is probably the strongest evidence that it was manufactured locally (Wheaton and Garrow 1985; Ferguson 1992).

First, spalling can be caused by freezing, or the buildup of salts or other minerals in the body. Even so, unless the spall becomes a hole, the vessel would still be usable. Next, as a sometime potter, this writer can testify that unfired sherds will turn to amorphous clay very quickly. They will not remain sherd-like unless they are kept in a perfectly dry environment. More likely what the archaeologists were seeing was flakes of deflocculated clay that formed in the large pits dug to extract clay for the clay-walled houses at the site (Wheaton and Garrow 1985). These fired lumps of clay could more reasonably be considered daub than byproducts of pottery making. The "sheer volume" question is addressed below.

Fundamental problem No. 2: Leland Ferguson's original formulation of colonoware (Ferguson 1978, 1992) as an overarching "type" like creamware has confused the issue so that whenever handmade, unglazed pottery is found in a colonial context it is lumped together as "colonoware." Whether it was his intent or not, this implies that it is all alike, and the category has been interpreted as meaning that it is all a product of African slaves, carrying on an age-old tradition (Deetz 1999:43). This is clearly not the case, as I have argued before (Steen 1997). Only a small area of the South Carolina low country produces "colonoware" in large amounts. Despite what Ferguson initially said (Ferguson 1978), the colono-Indian wares of North Carolina, Virginia, and the mid-Atlantic states are clearly attributable to Native Americans, and at any rate, only small amounts are found (Noël Hume 1962; Binford 1964; Reinhart 1984; Steen 1991).

Further, even plantations in Georgia, Florida, and the Carolina backcountry, where low-country

planters moved their entire households, including slaves, at the height of colonoware production in the 1780s and 1790s, do not produce colonoware (Otto 1975; Singleton 1980). The one exception this writer has seen is the John de la Howe site (Steen et al. 1996; Steen 1999, 2002). In light of recent discoveries by the University of North Carolina at the Catawba reservation (Riggs et al. 2006), however, I am beginning to doubt my identification of the de la Howe pottery as colonoware. Another case where colonoware should logically be expected is Somerset Place Plantation in North Carolina. This site is literally in the middle of a vast swamp. Even today it is about 15 mi. from the nearest town. It was initially settled by 88 slaves direct from Africa, but no colonoware was found there (Steen 1994, 2003). If it is a fundamental and important African practice, why didn't all African slaves make it?

So, is low-country colonoware really slave made? Maybe, but to confuse matters more, if it is made by slaves, which ones? Most historians, archaeologists, and other researchers who study slavery think primarily of Africans when the word "slave" is used (Morgan 1999). True, South Carolina had a black majority as early as 1708 (Wood 1974) and was described as being like "an African Nation" by more than one traveler (Edgar 1998). But at the same time, Indian slaves made up about 20% of the population in 1708, and in fact, as much as 25% of the slave population was Native American as late as the mid-1720s (Menard 1995). Among southeastern Indians women were the potters (Swanton 1946:549). In the 1712 pamphlet *Profitable Advice*, John Norris recommended to his "friend" who wanted to settle in the low country that he purchase "Fifteen good Negro men; Fifteen Indian women" to work in the field, and three Indian women as cooks for the slaves and "other household business" (Merrens 1977). Cooks require pots and serving vessels, and their first order of business would be to make or obtain them.

Population statistics for South Carolina in the 18th century are spotty at best, but after the 1720s enumerators appear to have stopped differentiating between Indian and African; after this there were slaves and free people. A review of modern historical sources shows a similar disregard for Native Americans (Morgan 1999; Politzer 1999). In the literature of plantations and slavery, Native Americans are seldom, if ever,

even mentioned. Phillip Morgan, for instance, mentions Indian slaves on 4 of 795 pages in his book *Slave Counterpoint* (1999). Eugene Genovese (1974) and Daniel Littlefield (1991), to randomly pluck books from the shelf, do not discuss Indians as slaves at all.

Although the Indian trade was dominated by furs and skins, the trade in humans was important as well (Gallay 2002). By 1698 South Carolina traders had penetrated the interior of the country as far as the Mississippi, and were actively trading with the Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Creeks, among others (Gregorie 1926; Meriwether 1940; Crane 1956; Moore 1999; Gallay 2002). In the 1730s the Natchez, one of the last active Mississippian groups, went to war with the French and were defeated (Swanton 1946). About 100 of them came to South Carolina and joined the "Settlement Indians" who lived in the woods and swamps of the low country (Hicks and Tauchiray 1999). They made thin, plain, burnished pottery. This is also pertinent because the cross-in-circle motif attributed to Africans is a fundamentally important symbol, a core symbol, if you will, seen on numerous Native American pots and other artworks across the Southeast (Funderburk and Foreman 1957; Waring and Williams 1968). Thus enslaved Indians may easily be responsible for Xs or +s on pots.

Although I accepted the "sheer volume" argument for years, I am beginning to reassess this belief and wonder whether free Indians in the low country might not have been responsible for what archaeologists have called colonoware. An underappreciated fact, even by me, for instance (Steen 1997; Steen and Cooper 1998), is that there were free Indians living among the plantations from the first days of the colony. A missionary, Rev. Francis LeJau, reported in 1706 that a band of Etiwan visited and camped nearby as it traveled from place to place in the Goose Creek area finding food, as the group "had put no provisions up" (Klingberg 1956).

Today the descendants of the Etiwan, Cusso, and others still live within a few miles of LeJau's St. James Goose Creek Church, on Wasamassaw Swamp, Four Hole Swamp, and elsewhere in the low country (Hicks and Tauchiray 1999; Crediford 2009). Legal records from the 18th and 19th centuries show numerous Indians fighting for their freedom, using white neighbors' testimony to prove they were born free, so it is

clear they did not all move away and then come back. Planters and 19th-century cooks tell of the men hunting wild game for the master's kitchen (Rutledge 1847). It would be logical to assume that the Indian women could be making pottery and gathering herbs and plant foods for sale or trade to the slaves.

There are three accounts in the 19th century of Catawba Indians coming to camp among the plantations and making pottery to sell to the slaves (Deas 1910; Gregorie 1925; Simms 1970), but these all describe a manifestation of Catawba pottery making that began out of economic necessity around 1810, and is still practiced today (Merrell 1989; Blumer 2004). The earliest of these accounts specifically names the Indians as Catawba (Simms 1970).

Thin, highly burnished vessels with painted decorations and a distinctive fine micaceous paste make up a minority percentage of low-country colonowares in pre-1810 assemblages—that is, even before the documented trade of the 19th-century Catawba—which led to the naming of the “River Burnished” type (Anthony 1989; Ferguson 1989). Recent research at the Catawba reservation shows the manufacture of these thin, painted wares beginning among the Catawba in the 1750s, after they had been in contact with an unknown group in Camden, South Carolina (Riggs et al. 2006). So there is a strong possibility that local Native Americans, who were in most cases related to the disparate groups that made up the 18th-century Catawba, made the pottery, or that they hosted their kin from the Catawba nation while they visited and made pottery.

In the past, assuming that free Indians had a minimal impact, I have argued that Indian slaves were the true source of the low-country variant of “colonoware” (Steen 1997, 1999; Steen et al. 1996, 2002; Steen and Cooper 1998). This is not intended to take credit from one group and assign it to another. Culture is adaptive and ever changing. The slaves lived in close proximity and learned from each other. They intermarried, and mixed-race daughters (and possibly some sons) may have learned the practice and made it their own. To me it is a Carolinian trait, not just African, Indian, or European, but something that developed in place as an element of a unique manifestation of culture.

I have argued in the past that the low-country version of colonoware is unique, and to lump

it together with all other unglazed low-fired wares found in colonial settings is reductive, and results in the decontextualization of the artifact, and disenfranchises its makers (Steen and Cooper 1998). Ferguson's worst error was in lumping all such wares into a larger category (Ferguson 1992). It is easy to see the connection between factories all over Great Britain making a basically identical product for a short period, but how do pots made specifically for trade by Settlement Indians such as the Catawba and Pamunkey (Harrington 1908; Speck 1935; Fewkes 1944) compare to those made by mixed-race slaves in the low country? How can lumping them in with slave-made wares be valid? Functionally they are the same, but otherwise these are much different phenomena.

Returning to the symbols and inferred meanings; back in graduate school in the 1980s, while reading Clifford Geertz's seminal work on symbolic/interpretive anthropology (Geertz 1973) in which he discusses for about 20 pages the “Meaning” of a wink that he received on a street in Turkey, I came to realize what a slippery perch archaeologists put themselves on when they seek to derive “Meaning” from material culture. If Geertz were “there,” an essential component to interpretation by his definition (Geertz 1988), could interview his subject and work around the subject's half-truths, polite lies, and jests, not to mention the whole issue of “interpretation,” and still have trouble “translating” the “Meaning” of a wink, how can archaeologists possibly hope to ascribe a particular meaning to the use of a common symbol?

There is some unambiguous meaning in material culture at a “particular” level, and some meaning can be reasonably inferred based on ethnographic and historical documentation. But in the case of Bakongo cosmograms in North America there are no accounts, or even unambiguous suggestions that these Xs or +s, were meant to represent a little-understood African religion practiced 250 years ago. Even if the lessons of voodoo, Santeria and other New World manifestations of African religion are evoked, the direct linkage is still lacking that says, in effect, when the subject refers to “St. Peter” he or she really means “Papa Legba.”

Although gifted thinkers such as Christopher Fennell (2007a) have put considerable effort into proving this, stronger arguments can be made

for this symbol being used in the low country by Christians or Native Americans, or even Christian Native Americans. In 1706 the Church of England's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) sent the Rev. Francis LeJau to serve as a missionary at the St. James Goose Creek parish—the heartland of colonoware and plantation slavery in the lower South (Klingberg 1941, 1956). He was not the first nor the only SPG missionary, but is notable for the detailed reports he filed during his service. He wrote of African and Indian slaves who attended services and received communion, and of the many others who wanted to, but whose masters would not allow it. He also wrote of slaves fresh from Africa who had been baptized as Catholics by Portuguese priests, probably in Bakongo territory, who wanted to take communion. Some slaves practiced Islam as well, and he mentions a few who could read and write. Recent research on the 1739 Stono Rebellion by historians Mark M. Smith (2005) and John Thornton (2005) revealed that many of the core of that group were Bakongo Christians. They were recruited by a Spanish priest and army captain who were sighted on several of the Sea Islands in the first months of the War of Jenkins's Ear. The Jesuit ring Martha Zierden and Ron Anthony (Zierden et al. 1999) found at Stobo Plantation, south of Charleston, might take on a different meaning considered in that light, but that is another paper. In short, Africans had a good chance of being exposed to Christianity in their homelands and in the low country.

I have used the term “ethnic stew” as an analogy in the past, because in South Carolina and other colonies people from many backgrounds were thrown together and forced to adapt (Steen 1999). People who may have been bitter enemies for generations in their homelands might suddenly have been forced to live together. Children found new parental figures (and the reverse) to make up for their loss of family. Spiritual leaders and healers were, for the most part, left behind in favor of young and vigorous workers, so new means of appealing to the spirit world were required (Mintz 1974; Puckett 1975). Though the slave owners are said to have preferred people from specific areas, like the rice-growing regions (Littlefield 1991), they would actually take whomever they could get, and slaves were obtained from a variety of

sources (Morgan 1998). Some experience would be desirable, but most agricultural labor is not so technically complex that a person cannot be taught a given task in a few minutes. So an individual slave might be the only member of his or her group to be captured, and the only one in the area that spoke a particular language, or believed in a particular god or set of deities. There is evidence of broadly shared fundamental concepts (Mintz 1974; Levine 1977), but if anything, Africa, even today, is notable for the diversity of its belief systems.

Joseph and Ferguson have essentially plucked the cosmogram out of its stewlike context. There is no direct, unambiguous evidence for their conclusion, and there never will be in all likelihood. That does not mean it is not true, but at this stage it is simply an idea, a theory—and one that is not well or critically argued, in my opinion, though Christopher Fennell's work (Fennell 2007a) stands out as a strong counterargument to this assertion. The evidence they have marshaled is always prefaced by “maybe,” “might be,” and “could be”—to which my inner Louis Binford says, “So what?” It “might be” a lot of things. Archaeologists will never know. But instead of throwing out easily burst balloons, in my opinion archaeologists should strive to make the strongest possible argument. This is not to say that good efforts have not been made, but I remain unconvinced.

It is more likely to me, based on years of reading about Southern culture and an entire lifetime of living in it, the people who used this symbol were showing the same behavior seen today: symbolically declaring their love of their god, or at the least, to invoke God for their protection. From LeJau's accounts forward there are numerous descriptions of slaves attending their masters' churches and forming their own where possible (Genovese 1974; Levine 1977). LeJau even reported that one of his best students was going back to the plantation and leading services for the slaves.

Initially the Carolina colony was open to religious diversity (for Protestants anyway), but in 1704 a church act was passed which made the Church of England the official state church (Wallace 1951). Among the early settlers there were Baptists—who LeJau, a Church of England minister, detested. In this religion ministers are not seminary trained, but rather are “called by God”



from within the congregation to preach, and the feeling is, God chooses his messengers, black, white, or other to bring their neighbors and anyone they meet, the “Word” (Townsend 1935). Methodists and Presbyterians took their evolving religions to the masses with the Great Awakening earlier in the 18th century (1730–1750) and in what is known as the Second Great Awakening around the turn of the 19th century (1790–1840) (Blosser 2005; Hankins 2005). While both influenced the enslaved, it was the latter that was most directly pertinent to slaves and their religions, because the masters were beginning to see Christianity, with its promise of comfort in “the sweet by and by,” as a means of exerting control (Genovese 1974).

Some of the most important activities generated by this evangelical Christianity were revivals and camp meetings, many of which are still being held today (South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office 2009:26). These allowed a modicum of acceptable freedom and travel, and allowed community building. Webs of relationships were forged among the people of the scattered plantations as they came from far and wide to camp for days at a time. The gatherings also allowed community leaders to emerge. In the slave community, religious leaders held at least some small amount of power and influence, both among their communities and with the masters (Levine 1977). Certainly by the 19th century, churches and Christianity were physical and mental refuges for the enslaved that allowed them to endure a dehumanizing, oppressive, system (Genovese 1974). As one woman put it in the 1840s: “[H]e [God] comes to me, a poor black slave woman, and tells me be patient, ‘cause there’s no white nor black in heaven [dialect ‘corrected’]” (Levine 1977:1). This is only one of dozens of firsthand accounts, and probably hundreds of books and articles on the subject that other authors of this forum dismiss.

Following the Civil War, many churches which had previously provided gallery seating for slaves, threw all the newly freed black parishioners out (Bailey 1977). Potter and former slave owner Benjamin Franklin Landrum donated 5 ac. so that his former slaves and other people in the neighborhood could build a church of their own. This is Springfield Church, which is still in operation today (Steen 1994). Just a couple of miles west of Springfield Church is the Bettis

Academy, named for Rev. Alexander Bettis, a local African American preacher who organized more than 40 churches between 1865 and 1895 (Nicholson 2007). B. F. Landrum received his land by will from his father, the Rev. John Landrum, a circuit-riding minister who preached to several congregations and founded several churches in the area in the first half of the 19th century (Baldwin 1989). His son Rev. John G. Landrum was also a prominent and well-regarded churchman and educator. The town of Landrum, South Carolina, was named for him. So clearly, in this area blacks and whites alike were dedicated Christians.

Joe Joseph argues that the cross-in-circle marks used on pottery made at the B. F. Landrum and John Landrum sites between the 1810s and 1890s were not Christian crosses, but in fact, African symbols with secret meanings. Secret meanings cannot be recovered, this writer would argue. It might be true that the person making the mark had a particular meaning in mind, and that meaning may not have had anything to do with the generally accepted meaning of the symbol, just as Joseph argues. But it is an incredible stretch interpretively, considering that the symbol originates at the *Reverend* John Landrum site, and is passed down to his son, a church elder concerned enough about his former slaves’ spiritual well-being that he donated land to build them a church. A number of ex-slaves named Landrum and Miles are buried in the church cemetery, and all have Christian gravestones. Locally made alkaline-glazed stoneware gravestones found there have inscribed and inlaid crosses, and Christian messages (Steen 1994a).

John Landrum’s maker’s mark was a simple cross made by impressing a flat blade, like a screwdriver, twice to form a cross. B. F. Landrum impressed a stamp that produced a cross that looks as if a Phillips-head screw was used. That is, the cross bars are in relief (Castille et al. 1988; Baldwin 1989; Steen 1994b). The slave Dave, owned by John Landrum, and after his death in 1847 by his son-in-law Lewis Miles, is thought to have used an incised cross on some of his vessels (Koverman 1998). Dave also inscribed his vessels with verse, some of which (18% of the examples in Goldberg and Witkowski 2006) contain allusions to the Christian god. Everyone who has read the Brer Rabbit stories and other African American folktales is

aware of the trickster motif, in which an actor fools the victim, often through concealment and misdirection (Levine 1977). There may have been some secret coded message in some or even all of Dave's verses, but without him to explain their meaning and decode them, this will never be known. Though everyone should know better than simply to accept things at face value, in this case "face value" makes much more sense than the elaborate house of cards one must build to accept alternative hypotheses.

The invocation of dark secrets and spooky witchcraft is titillating and may sell more books and attract more attention than writing about the dreary monotony of slave life, but I would argue that doing so diverts attention from more important questions, and ultimately has a negative effect. Recent papers by Christopher Espenshade (2007), Leland Ferguson (2007), and Joe Joseph (2007) have revisited the issue of colonoware from underwater contexts, and its meaning. In this context Espenshade set out some valid criticisms of Ferguson's reasoning, some of which Ferguson acknowledged. Ultimately Ferguson conceded that he was throwing out imaginative ideas, or as he put it, "likely stories," for testing, which is good, except that they are accepted as fact because he is the academic "expert." Thus in his book *Slave Counterpoint*, the historian Phillip Morgan (1998:234) quoted Ferguson directly as if his "likely stories" were facts. Probably every graduate student in Southern history for the past 10 years has read this book. Walter Edgar (1998:67), in his *South Carolina: A History*, which for better or worse is *the* comprehensive history of the state for this generation, does the same. In his book on the Gullah people, biological anthropologist William Pollitzer (1999:171) also did the same, and so on.

At Flowerdew Hundred, Virginia, one of the most influential historical archaeologists, James Deetz, reinterpreted the colono-Indian ware at his site based on Ferguson's logic (Deetz 1999:43), and generations of students are taught that the colonoware there, which is identical to pottery the local Native Americans are still making today (Fewkes 1944), was actually made by African slaves. His student Matthew Emerson (1999) reinterpreted the red-clay tobacco pipes found on 17th-century Chesapeake Bay area sites as African, and elaborated at dissertation length about the "African" symbols found on them, ignoring

the fact that Indians in the region had been making these pipes since the 1400s and continued to do so into the 18th century (Swanton 1946:551; Binford 1964; Magoon 1999; Mouer et al. 1999). Thus they blithely disenfranchise 10 or more generations of Native American potters in favor of what is essentially a "likely story," or one might say in a more cynical tone, an academic fashion that will pass like all preceding academic fashions. This can be seen as yet one more insult by archaeologists to America's first people. I would not argue that Ferguson, Deetz, Emerson, or anyone else was intentionally biased against Native Americans, but viewed from a native perspective it could certainly be interpreted that way.

There are clearly demonstrable African retentions in North America. Melville Herskovits and others have demonstrated this empirically (Herskovits 1941; Mintz 1974; Creel 1988; Holloway 1990). What many seem to miss about Herskovits's research is the effort he made to separate products of the American experience from true Africanisms. In his view, and mine, Africans in America helped create a unique culture made up of people who were not completely robbed of their past and cultural identities, but who retained bits and pieces of knowledge that were blended together in the new milieu. Whether it is defined as syncretism, creolization, or ethnogenic bricolage, something new emerged, and local conditions dictated the shape it took. Some of these bits and pieces may well be symbols, but it must be recalled that the "Meaning" behind symbols is often idiosyncratic and is constantly changing and being reinterpreted.

Exactly what an individual meant when he or she marked a pot with a cross or X is something that can probably never be proven. For now, however, in my opinion, the best, clearest, and most defensible evidence is in favor of these symbols being used as Christian crosses on the Edgefield wares, and a little more equivocally, on the colonoware. For Edgefield the argument for a Christian interpretation is strong. John Landrum, the family patriarch, was described as "a man who had no time for trifles, and who was devoted to religion" (Goldberg and Witkowski 2006:84). His slaves would clearly be churchgoers, and though one can never rule out japery, in all likelihood the cross was used as a Christian symbol here.

For the 18th-century low country one can argue that Native Americans may have been using symbols of their own, and yes, Africans may have been using symbols of their own as well. Again, with symbols, nothing can really be ruled out (or proven) unless one can get a firsthand definition. The strongest arguments that can be built would have to be that they intended them as crosses, or as owner's or maker's signatures. It is known for a fact there were Christian slaves as early as 1706, and as the 18th century passed, they lived in an increasingly Christian-dominated community. But it is also known that personal gear was sometimes marked by its owner, and that potters sometimes marked their wares. So the "Meaning" of the mark is by no means clear, and may well change over time, and have alternate meanings in different contexts. Although it is important to continue to tell imaginative "likely stories" and raise possibilities for consideration, it is also important to take the next step, as Ferguson recommends (Ferguson 2007), and continue to apply skepticism and doubt, instead of accepting speculation as fact.

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