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# Plates in Graves: An Africanism?

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*Comments prepared for the panel discussion: Lessons from Historic Period Cemeteries, 1998 Meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology, Atlanta*

## Introduction

It almost goes without saying that laying the dead to rest is an important life-course event and rite of passage. The archaeological investigation of cemetery sites presents special opportunities to examine sociocultural aspects of death and associated ritual complexes. The broad issue with which I am concerned in today's brief presentation is the "reading" of sociocultural identities from grave data. My specific point of reference will be the practice of placing a plate in the coffin with the deceased prior to burial. Does this practice represent an Africanism? That is, is this practice a cultural "carry-over" from Africa? Is it part of a Creole Slave culture formed from European and Native American sources as well as African influences? And further, can such a practice be used to infer aspects of a deceased's sociocultural identity?

I am going to briefly define what I mean by sociocultural identity, and I will then outline what I know about plates in graves. Finally, I will discuss the implications of these data for archaeological interpretation.

## Sociocultural Identity

Without taking up a lot of time for this aspect of my discussion, sociocultural identity consists of those shared aspects of group identity which are both consciously and unconsciously constructed and performed in the course of everyday life. The material effects of class, ethnicity, and religious affiliation have been among the aspects of identity that historical archaeologists have considered. Some of these identities, following Barth, must be recognized not only by the individuals who comprise the group, but also by individuals external to the group. Various learned values, practices, and signs and symbols, transmitted from generation to generation, constitute the substance of these identities. Accordingly, these identities are both social and cultural in nature. We should note that while race too is a socially constructed category, it differs from ethnicity and other identities in that it is based upon inherited physical characteristics rather than on learned cultural substance.

## Plate in the Grave

I first became interested in the problem of plates in graves following the recovery of broken, but otherwise complete, plates from two individual graves at the 8th Street First African Baptist Church cemetery in Philadelphia, excavated under Mike Parrington's direction in 1984-85. I began to consider this phenomenon and its sociocultural connections more seriously when no plates were recovered during my own excavation of the earlier 10th Street First African Baptist

Church cemetery in 1990. The 8th Street cemetery had been in use from 1823 until the early 1840s, while the 10th Street cemetery was used from 1810 until 1822.

I want to make clear that what I am talking about is the inclusion of ceramics in the actual grave. This should not be confused with the practice of decorating the surface of graves with ceramics, glassware, cooking pots, or shiny objects, a practice that has been well documented in parts of the south and in the Kongo region of Africa.

A ceramic plate had been placed on the stomach of the deceased inside the coffin in each of these two burials at the 8th Street cemetery: the first was of blue edge-decorated pearlware and the second was of hand-painted Chinese porcelain. The Old World and Native American archaeological literatures are replete with examples of the inclusion of ceramic vessels and other "grave goods" in burials, apparently for use by the deceased in the afterlife or as a form of social display of wealth and/or power. African ethnographic literature also makes some reference to grave offerings, including ceramics. However, reports of ceramics from historic period burials in the New World are far less common.

To my knowledge there are only a few published and grey literature reports of such occurrences. Saucers have been recovered from four post-belle African-American graves in the southern United States (Cabak and Wilson 1998). A white salt-glazed stoneware saucer and a feather-edged creamware plate were reported recovered from two separate eighteenth-century English graves in Jamaica (Fremmer 1973). A shallow redware bowl was found in the grave of an enslaved African at the Newton Cemetery in Barbados (Handler and Lange 1973:137), and more recently, an ironstone plate was recovered from the grave of a poorly preserved female of indeterminate race at the Quaker Cemetery in Alexandria, Virginia.

The purpose and meaning of these objects is somewhat ambiguous. Femmer (1973), and others, has reported that plates of salt were traditionally used in parts of Ireland and England to control odor and/or bloating of the deceased. When discussing this issue a number of years ago with Mike Parrington, he told me the following story, which he claimed to be an old traditional joke from rural Britain: A farm laborer was applying for a job at the manor house. The farm manager says, "So you say you've been working at the farm just down the road for nearly the last month. Why did you leave that job?" The hand replies, "Well, the first week I was there the old cow died, and that wasn't bad eating. Then the second week, the old pig died, and that wasn't bad eating either. The third week, the old horse died, and that wasn't such good eating. So after that, when I saw the master taking a plate of salt up to his old, sick mother's room, I knew it was time to leave."

Based on what he was able to learn about this practice, Ray Fremmer (1973), who reported the Jamaican examples, concluded that the inclusion of ceramic vessels in the Jamaican graves might have been due to oversight rather than the result of an intentional act. But he also noted that in isolated parts of Jamaica it was traditional to place a dish containing a mixture of coffee and salt on the stomach of the deceased throughout the wake and burial. The widespread African practice of pouring of "libations" for the ancestors, while not generally involving a vessel, is another death-related practice that may have resulted in the accidental inclusion of a ceramic vessel in the grave.

It is also possible that these plates were deliberately placed in the graves for use in the afterlife, or the burial of the plate last used by the deceased may also have been meant to prevent the deceased spirit from harming the living. In parts of the South and Africa it was believed that the "energy" or "essence" of the dead was embodied in objects last used by the deceased. Further, if the plates had been deliberately broken before being buried, that would lend support to the notion that their placement in the grave was to "ground" the energy of the deceased.

### Implications

Is a plate in a grave an Africanism? Maybe, or maybe not. It is probably more accurate to consider this practice part of the creole complex of slave culture that arose in the New World from a wide variety of sources. We have few known examples of this practice in the record, and all are from African-American burials or other slave culture contexts. If placing plates in graves was truly a widespread traditional English practice, we should have at least some evidence of its occurrence outside the context of slave culture.

Is this practice indicative of African influences or an explicitly African-American identity? Probably, but not necessarily exclusively so. Clearly, the extent to which practices such as the burial of a plate in a grave can be used to infer sociocultural identity must be tied to the extent to which the practice is exclusively associated with a particular sociocultural group in specific temporal and geographic contexts. Based on what we know at this point, such can not be said to be the case with respect to plates in graves. As with the interpretation of most archaeological phenomena, we need much more comparative data before a definitive finding will be possible -- so be sure to let me know if you ever find a plate in a grave.

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