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A BURIAL IN THE CUNNINGHAM FIELD MOUND D
ON ST. CATHERINE'S ISLAND, GEORGIA

by

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CUNNINGHAM FIELD MOUND D ON ST. CATHERINE'S ISLAND, GEORGIA

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INTRODUCTION

During the excavation of a Deptford period burial mound known as Cunningham Field Mound D, on St. Catherine's Island, Georgia by archeologists from the American Museum of Natural History, a single historic period burial was discovered. Physical anthropologist Clark Larsen has determined that the burial is that of a Negro male between 30 and 35 years old. Dr. Harry Shapiro of the American Museum of Natural History has suggested the possibility that the individual might be of mixed ancestry.

The artifacts associated with the burial consist of two buttons found at the top of the head, and a dozen nails presumed to be from the coffin. Also, three sherds of a single plate of embossed blue edged pearlware quite possibly associated with the burial were recovered. (David Hurst Thomas, personal communication, March 1976).

At the request of David Hurst Thomas, assistant curator of the American Museum of Natural History I examined the two buttons and three pearlware sherds. I was also furnished a copy of a drawing of the burial made by Dennis O'Brien. The following comments resulted from this examination.

THE SHERDS

Three sherds of the same plate of Embossed Blue Edged Pearlware, Type 9 (South 1972; Noel Hume 1970: 131) were "possibly associated" with the burial (David Hurst Thomas, personal communication, March 1976).

This association may be the recovery of the sherds above the grave fill, on or near the surface of the ground. If this is the case, the fragments may well be the remains of a plate left on the surface of the grave as an offering, a practice among some southern Blacks (Combes 1974: 56).

The base of the plate represented by the three sherds was impressed with the mark "WOOD," used by the Staffordshire potter Enoch Wood at Fountain Place, Burslem, England, after 1784 (Godden 1964: 685). The embossed edge is not thought to have occurred prior to 1800 (Noël Hume 1970: 131), and is not known to have been used after 1818 (Godden 1964: 685-685). From this date range of ca. 1800 to ca. 1818 for the "possibly associated" plate, the burial can be said to have possibly occurred during the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

The question of status is also raised in regard to the blue-edged pearlware in view of the association of this type of ware with slave sites as demonstrated by John Solomon Otto in a recent study (1975). Otto found that edged and annular wares were present in higher frequencies at slave and overseer sites than at the upper status planter site.

THE NAILS

An important consideration here would be whether the nails were cut or wrought, cut nails having been developed after ca. 1790 (Noël Hume 1970:253). The nails found were wrought nails with T-heads (Noël Hume 1970:253). My experience with nails in houses of known date is that very shortly after 1800 cut nails occur in most houses, with early types of cut nails appearing in structures of the 1790's. We do not know what the pattern was for coffins regarding the time when cut nails replaced wrought nails. Our experience with houses suggests that coffins made during the first decade of the nineteenth century would likely contain

cut nails. Combining this information with the ca. 1800 to ca. 1818 date range suggested by the plate results in a date close to 1800 for the time during which this individual was interred, probably between ca. 1800 and ca. 1810.

Five of the dozen nails were unusual in that there was a gray ashy looking substance on the head (No. 529,532,534,537,538). I thought this may have been caused by a thin lead washer, perhaps placed around the nails to keep moisture out of the coffin, oxidizing with the nail to produce a white lead oxide. Another possibility was that the white substance might be lead paint from the coffin which still adhered to the heads of the badly rusted nails. To test these ideas I asked Dr. Scott R. Goode of the University of South Carolina, Chemistry Department to test for the presence of lead. A simple presence-absence qualitative test of extreme sensitivity was used on two of the nails (534 and 538) and the test for lead was negative. Dr. Goode stated that the violent manner in which the greyish substance reacted with nitric acid leads him to think that this substance might be a carbonate, such as calcium carbonate.

Two sources of calcium carbonate, either the remains of the burial itself or the remains of a non-lead paint or calking over the nail heads, such as whiting, can be suggested as being connected with nails in a burial context. Since it is difficult to suggest how only the heads of nails holding a coffin together would come into contact with the contents of the coffin, the idea of a non-lead paint or whiting on the heads seems the more likely explanation. Whiting (calcium carbonate), commonly called putty, is a substance that may well have been placed over countersunk nails to make them invisible. Such a procedure suggests a well made coffin as opposed to a homemade product.

Countersinking of nails and covering with whitening suggests also that the coffin was painted. The absence of lead, however, indicates the paint was likely that known as whitewash, which is made of lime (calcium carbonate). The question then arises as to whether whitewashed coffins were a cheaper product than those painted with lead paint. We know that whitewash has long been used by those of a lower socio-economic status level to paint houses and outbuildings, as opposed to those who could afford the more expensive lead based paint. Whether this status indicator can be demonstrated to apply also to burial practices in the early nineteenth century will have to await further data on the subject.

The absence of coffin hardware suggests that a simple, perhaps lower status, burial is represented, particularly in view of the fact that it was not located in a cemetery. However, little is known regarding the status indicators as revealed by early nineteenth century coffins from an archeological viewpoint. Generally, pre-1859 behavior regarding the dead simply involved the laying out, the coffining, and transporting of the body to the grave (Habenstein and Lamers 1955: 249). Status differences were involved, but the recognition of these patterns through archeological data must await more scientific excavation of burials of this period.

THE BUTTONS

The larger button (30 mm.) is South's Type 7, made of white brass with a copper wire eye fastened to the back during casting. The foot, which is hidden by the cast boss, and ends of the eye were turned out to form a foot before casting. The irregularities of the cast back have been removed by a cutting tool as the button was held in a chock while turning. The back is slightly concave (South 1964: 117; No. 1 Hume 1970: 91). The button type has been found primarily in an eighteenth century context dating from 1726 to 1776, but is also found in contexts

dating as late as the Civil War period (South 1964).

The smaller button (22 mm.) is South's Type 11, which is cast in one piece of soft whitemetal (pewter). The face has a decorative motif made of ten raised dots in a circle around a central larger dot. This type has been found predominantly in the nineteenth century, though some occur in eighteenth century contexts (South 1964: 118).

These buttons are certainly not a matched pair, and their location at the top of the skull (O'Brien 1975) suggests that they were not fastened to an article of clothing. Their position might well be the result of their having been placed over the eyes of the deceased in lieu of coins known to have been used for this purpose (Frazer 1947: 31; Combes 1974:51; Herskovits 1941). One thing the buttons have in common is a silver appearance when new. The absence of any other objects of clothing such as buckles, buttons, hooks and eyes, etc., suggests that a shroud was used.

A major consideration regarding the two buttons is the function they may have served in relation to the burial. If we eliminate their use on clothing, as suggested above, due to their position in relation to the body, and combine this with the knowledge that the deceased was a Black man, or possibly a half-breed, the beliefs held by nineteenth century Blacks become relevant to our study.

During life hoodoo bags are sometimes worn on top of the head of Southern Negroes to ward off witches (Puckett 1926: 165), while silver coins, bells, bullets, (and perhaps silver-colored buttons?) were used as a fetish metal to ward off evil (Puckett 1926: 288-89). This may possibly account for two buttons of a silver colored metal being located at the head of a deceased Black man, as a fetish to ward off evil after death. The finding of a button was also considered good luck (Puckett 1926: 495).

As mentioned above, coins were placed on the eyes of deceased individuals to keep them from coming open. This explanation is simply a functional one (Puckett 1926: 84, 123), for which two buttons could have served just as well, particularly if there was a shortage of coins within the socio-economic level of the deceased and those burying him. However, when we ask why it was necessary to keep the eyes closed, we find that folk belief held that if a person died with the eyes and mouth open he would go to hell (Puckett 1926: 85). It therefore behooved believers in hell to avoid this eventuality by closing the eyes and mouth of the deceased before death, or as soon as possible thereafter.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

An important fact to be considered is the isolated location of the burial in relation to other burials, this being the only historic burial found at this site. This is particularly significant when we examine the ideas held by Blacks regarding burial of the dead as reported by John Combes (1974: 56). Combes reports that:

The most important aspect of the burial area or for that matter the whole burial phenomenon is the importance attributed to the final resting place of the deceased spirit. It is imperative that the deceased be buried with the spirits of the other members of the family. The penalty for not being interred with the family spirits is, indeed, serious and results in a wandering spirit having no final resting place. There is not one other thing more important in one's life than to insure one's place in the family cemetery.

If the emphasis on burial with one's family spirits was as strong in the early nineteenth century as Combes has indicated it was later, the fact that a single burial was placed in the Cunningham Field Mound, isolated from other burials, is an important factor in interpretation. This fact certainly suggests a non-modal behavior pattern, and raises the question of why this individual was isolated from other burials.

The fact that the skeletal remains of the individual suggest a mixed blood (David Hurst Thomas, personal communication, March 1976), combined with the isolated location of the burial, tempts a causal connection between these two facts that is, however, unwarranted on this data alone. We can suggest that these facts probably reflect that a non-modal behavior pattern was likely involved in the burial of this individual.

An interview with a South Carolina Black informant having close ties with contemporary Black "root" men has revealed that such conjure men are always buried away from the family (community) burial area. This is because they have had contact with the spirit world during life, and it is assumed that they have made a pact with the devil in exchange for their earthly power. Therefore, such spirits are not placed where they will be in constant contact with those not having such malevolent connections.

Another interesting observation made by my informant is that people of Black-Indian ancestry are more likely to be conjure men than those of Black-White ancestry because of an assumed closer contact by Indians with the spirit world. My informant predicts that the isolated location of the burial and the mixed blood nature of his ancestry clearly points to a Black-Indian root (conjure) man. In this regard it is interesting to note that the individual was buried in what may or may not have been known at the time as an Indian mound.

The existence of a coffin suggests that although the individual was buried away from others, those who conducted the burial provided him with a shaped coffin. This burial certainly has different behavioral implications than those suggested by burial without a coffin, or in a plain unshaped, rectangular box. My informant states that burial of root men in coffins is particularly important as a means of better containing the

malevolent spirit. This is based on the belief that the spirit has the power to haunt all it has contacted while in the living body, and therefore there is a concern for strong permanent coffins, not temporary ones (Puckett 1926: 99).

The orientation of the feet of the burial to the east is in keeping with traditional Christian practice, and relates to the expected blowing of a horn in the east by Gabriel on Judgment day (Puckett 1926: 94).

SUMMARY

The combined data from archeology in the form of artifacts, orientation of the burial, the relationship of artifacts to burial, the isolated location of the grave, and the physical anthropological data from the bones, together with twentieth century ethnography and contemporary informant interview, point to the interpretation of this burial as that of a non-modal individual, possibly a Black-Indian conjure man interred during the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

The buttons, sherds, and nails from the Cunningham Field Mound D, Burial No. 3, have provided little more than a possible dating of the burial during the first decade of the nineteenth century, thus raising questions of the behavioral pattern represented by the location of the buttons at the head of the individual. However, the raising of these questions in the area of beliefs held by many nineteenth century Blacks in relation to burial practices, conjure men, witches, charms, fetishes, and belief in heaven and hell as revealed in the archeological record illustrates how little is known of such patterns. If pattern from a number of Black burials of the nineteenth century was available the archeological equivalent for known ethnographic belief-patterns could begin to be delineated. As graveyards are required to be moved as a

result of the march of progress, archeological mitigation should include research designs oriented toward answering some of these germane questions regarding past human behavior and belief systems as reflected in the archeological record (see South 1976).

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