An Overview of Variation in Archaeologically Observed Mortuary Practices: A Case Study Examining Grave Placement, Headstone Type and Epitaph Content in Two Slave Cemeteries

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Numerous explanations for archaeologically observed variation in the treatment of the dead have been posited by archaeologists, including but not limited to differentiation in rank, social organization, philosophical-religious beliefs and the rise and fall of social trends. The focus of this study is to explore the variation of headstones, their epitaphs and the arrangement of graves within two different cemeteries in the antebellum United States after reviewing the theory concerning variation in the archaeological record. The dialectical contrast of these variables between the Common Burying Ground cemetery in Newport, Rhode Island and a slave cemetery in New Orleans, Louisiana will demonstrate that both social organization and religious beliefs can be driving factors influencing the treatment of the dead.

The Archaeology of Death

The focus of this study is an examination of the body of archaeological theory concerning variation in observed mortuary behavior followed by an examination of the variation between the headstones, epitaphs and placement of burials within the Common Burying Ground in Newport, Rhode Island and a slave cemetery in New Orleans, Louisiana. Such an examination will be conducted in order to demonstrate that both religious beliefs and social organization can cause observable differentiation in the treatment of the dead, and is best couched in a discussion of the archaeology of death. The archaeology of death has long been a focus of study within the discipline of archaeology and has included not only the examination of the physical human remains themselves, but also the associated artifacts and the treatment of the body (Carr 1995). Beyond these very broad concepts lie more complex issues pertaining to the variation of the associated artifacts, differences between the treatment of the body of individuals of varying age, sex or status, the placement or orientation of the body in the grave and the location of the grave itself within the archaeological record, both at the intra- and inter-site level. Archaeologists have used all of the above criteria to posit what the variations in treatment of the dead indicate about the interred individual(s), as well as the members of the social group that interred the individual, including but not restricted to cultural historical (Hertz 1960; Kroeber 1927), processual (Binford 1971; Brown 1981; Saxe and Gall 1977; Tainter 1977) and post-processual (Carr 1995; Chapman and Randsborg 1981; Henderson 1987) approaches.

Through the examination of these variables it is the goal of the archaeologist to interpret the variations among burials with the hopes of understanding the past behavior that created the burials. In this vein, processual

archaeologists have searched for statistically significant differences in the treatment of the interred individuals, crediting social organization or social complexity as the source of variation within the archaeological record (Binford 1981; Brown 1981; Saxe and Gall 1977; Tainter 1977). On the other hand, post-processual archaeologists have instead attempted to delve even deeper into these complex issues in search of the cultural or social meaning and the agency behind the social behavior that created the varying patterns in the archaeological record. In doing so, they have credited variation in the archaeological record to philosophical-religious beliefs (Carr 1995), social practices or social trends (Cannon 1989; Kroeber 1927), as well as physical constraints (Carr 1995; Henderson 1987). While archaeologists in both camps have been debating which approach is the most appropriate for the analysis of mortuary practices since the inception of the post-processual movement in the 1980s, the most effective approach is very likely an amalgamation of the two, as each of the theoretical frameworks have strengths and limitations, and in reality many of the aforementioned factors very likely play a role in mortuary practices.

The Archaeological Record

Before archaeological evidence is examined, it is necessary to consider the nature of the archaeological record itself, as there are numerous and complex issues at work in both the creation and the transformation of archaeological sites. To begin, burials are subject to the same formation, preservation and transformation problems that all other archaeological deposits are subject to. The cultural (C-transforms) and natural (N-transforms) factors or disturbances (Schiffer 1976) are particularly important when examining deliberate (in most cases) burial practices, such as the burial of a human (Henderson 1987).

The cultural factors involved in the formation of an archaeological deposit such as a human burial are important to understand because the degree of manipulation of the deceased individual prior to interment and the portions of the individual interred, as well as how the deceased individual was placed in the ground, in part determine what archaeologists may find in later excavations. However, once the individuals have been placed into the ground additional post depositional processes of both cultural and natural origin will transform the archaeological record. Cultural disturbances of this sort range from the retrieval of a temporary burial in order for a more permanent or secondary burial of the individual (Hertz 1960), to modern construction, looting or archaeological excavation. Natural disturbances such as water or wind erosion, floral or faunalturbation and cryoturbation are also important to consider, as they actively impact archaeological sites after their formation.

Whether the cause of the disturbance is natural or cultural in origin, Henderson (1987) states that understanding the disturbances and post depositional or transformational processes can lead to an accurate prediction pertaining to the date, construction and composition of an archaeological site. Additionally, taphonomy plays a particularly important role, as natural processes may rearrange or transform the material in the archaeological record, creating

patterns that appear cultural, but are in fact natural. Therefore, it is imperative to understand depositional and transformational processes prior to interpreting the archaeological record (Schiffer 1983).

The Archaeology of Slave Communities

The study of archaeological evidence from slave communities has been a relatively new focus within the discipline of archaeology. Plantation archaeology was first explored in the 1930s by James A. Ford and Morley Jeffers Williams, followed by Charles Fairbanks in the 1960s (Singleton 1995). Initial work in plantation archaeology in the middle of the twentieth century focused on what are now renowned sites including Jamestown, Monticello and Mount Vernon. While these more famous sites gained an immediate following, the study of plantation or slave archaeology as a whole did not really gain momentum until the Civil Rights Movement, the popularization of historical archaeology and the post-processual movement in the latter portion of the twentieth century (Ferguson 1992; Singleton 1985). That said, the interest and research in slave and plantation archaeology has since increased dramatically and comprises studies in diverse geographic areas including the antebellum American south, the colonial northeastern United States and the Caribbean, as well as a wide range of topics encompassing social relations, economics and power, race, class and gender relations, spatial relations, agency, resistance and mortuary behavior (Armstrong 2003; Bell 1990; Blakely 2001; Ferguson 1992; Garman 1994; Handler 1996; Howson 1990; Jamieson 1995; Klingelhofer 1987; Leone and Fry 1999; Orser 1988, 1990; Potter 1991; Singleton 1985, 1995; Stine et al. 1996; Watters 1994). Clearly these topics are too numerous and complex to explore in a paper of this length, so discussion will be limited to archaeologically observed variation in headstones, their epitaphs and the arrangement of graves within two different cemeteries in the antebellum United States.

Slave Populations

Slave populations that existed in antebellum North America were diverse groups that varied across space and through time. Slave populations in the northeastern United States were drastically different from the plantation populations in the American south because each group lived in different social environments. Slaves in the northeastern United States for example, lived in smaller groups and would very often reside within the house of their masters, while slaves in the south lived in larger groups in slave quarters separated from the masters' main house (Orser 1988). The populations themselves were also highly variable, as they were composed of individuals from different areas of Africa that were divided and sold off upon their arrival in the New World, creating culturally heterogeneous slave populations (Jamieson 1995). This of course, was by design, as slave owners did not want slave populations to become a cohesive, autonomous group (Howson 1990). Evidence of the differences that existed within and between slave populations is not always manifested in material remains contained in archaeological mortuary contexts as

one would expect, because they are masked due to the control imposed by the dominant group of slave owners (Garman 1994; Potter 1991). However, much like the slave populations themselves, the control exerted over them was highly variable and some differentiation is evidenced in the mortuary behavior of slaves, which is visible in the archaeological record (Jamieson 1995).

Mortuary Behavior

In the most basic sense, mortuary behavior is a practical act, implemented out of the necessity to dispose of the dead and is unique to humans (Hertz 1960). However, beyond its necessity and practicality there exists a moral, social, religious or spiritual component to the process that is evidenced in modern mortuary practices, historical accounts of past societies and ethnographic records of other cultures (Kroeber 1927; Ucko 1969). Because mortuary practices constitute more than simply the disposal of the dead, archaeologists have attempted to explain variation in mortuary practices both within and among groups. Binford (1971) posited that differences or change in social values or belief systems cannot explain the differentiation exhibited in the archaeological record. Others, such as Kroeber (1927) and Cannon (1989) argue that changes in social value or belief systems can and do engender changes in mortuary practices, just as changes in social values cause changes in fashion. Carr (1995), however, occupies the middle ground and posits that social organization, as well as social values or belief systems account for variation seen in the archaeological record. When examining the mortuary practices of slaves in antebellum United States it becomes apparent that variation in mortuary practices within and between slave populations is due both to social organization and social values or belief systems of the slave populations, as well as the dominating slave owners.

Archaeological Evidence

The archaeology of slavery encompasses archaeological sites in very different geographic areas including the northeastern and southeastern United States, representing different slave populations ranging from large plantations in the southeast to single slave households in the northeast. Although the populations in both areas were enslaved and dominated by whites, they were part of drastically different social systems and produced very different archaeological assemblages. In New England for example, slave populations lived on smaller farms in smaller groups (Garman 1994). These slaves typically worked solely in the house, were watched over constantly by their owners and frequently resided in the same house as their master. As a result, these slaves were constantly under the control of their master, who determined where the slaves lived, what they ate, what they wore and what material goods they were able to possess (Klingelhofer 1987). Slave populations on plantations in the south, however, lived in larger groups, worked mainly in the fields away from the master's house and lived in separate slave quarters that were segregated from the master's house (Lange and Handler 1985). While the slaves occupying

southern plantations were owned by white people, they were not under constant supervision and were therefore able to deviate a bit more from white control than the slave populations occupying the smaller farms in the northeast. As a result they had a small measure of control over their lives, which can be seen in mortuary practices and the archaeological record.

Slave Cemeteries

A brief survey of slave cemeteries from the antebellum period in the New World reveals that they are many and diverse (Armstrong and Fleishman 2003; Blakey 2001; Bell 1990; Garman 1994; Jamieson 1995; Watters 1994). However, the known sample of slave cemeteries is biased because many cemeteries were not formally marked, the graves within them did not contain traditional head or foot markers that were common to Christian cemeteries of the same time period and many slaves were not placed in formal cemeteries (Lange and Handler 1985). The location of these cemeteries therefore remains unknown and are usually inadvertently discovered during modern construction or ground disturbing activities and subsequently excavated by cultural resource management teams (La Roche and Blakey 1997). Nonetheless, an examination of the spatial arrangement of graves, the headstones accompanying the graves and their epitaphs within a few specific slave cemeteries will still shed light upon the mortuary behavior of the slave populations. Archaeological evidence of this nature should indicate whether the slaves were buried according to their own mortuary practices, i.e., grave placement within their own family or kin groups and headstones containing epitaphs referencing freedom through death, or whether they were buried according to the mortuary practices of the dominant white culture, i.e., epitaphs referencing servitude to their white masters. For the purposes of the remaining portion of this paper, discussion will be limited to the Common Burying Ground in Newport Rhode Island and a slave cemetery in New Orleans.

Spatial Arrangement. An examination of the spatial relationships between burials in these two cemeteries reveal interesting trends. The Common Burying Ground in Newport, Rhode Island was in use from 1720 to 1830 and was used to bury both enslaved African Americans and whites alike. However, the slave population was segregated from the white population and placed in the northernmost portion of the cemetery (Garman 1994). Additionally, the members of the dominant white population were buried in well-defined graves laid out in rows and placed according to familial relations. On the other hand, members of the slave population were buried in graves that were scattered about and were instead placed according to their relationship to their master, rather than their own families. Conversely, slave burials in the New Orleans cemetery were not only placed in the same cemetery as whites, they were also arranged in the same well-defined, neatly laid out rows in which the whites were also placed (Jamieson 1995). While the differential placement of slaves in the two cemeteries could be interpreted as differential social status or rank between the

two African American groups, it would be an incorrect supposition because both populations were under the control of the dominant slave owning class. Instead, the differential placement of graves is due to religious beliefs and practices, which will be discussed later in detail.

Headstones and Epitaphs. Much like the arrangement of slave graves within the cemeteries, the presence of headstones and their epitaphs provide insight into the relationships between slaves and their masters. An examination of headstones and their inscriptions at the Common Burying Ground cemetery showed that when the graves of interred slaves did contain a headstone, they were much smaller than headstones of slave owner's graves, if they contained a headstone at all (Garman 1994). The decoration or inscription upon slaves' headstones was also much more modest than that of whites, frequently containing references to the master rather than the interred slave, as well as references to the desired virtues of the slaves. Findings such as these from the Common Burying Ground cemetery provide evidence of complete control by the dominant group; in this particular case they owned the slaves and purchased their burial plot and headstone, most likely out of conspicuous consumption as a demonstration of wealth to other literate slave owners (Garman 1994).

Discussion

The evidence from the two different slave cemeteries presented above indeed represents differentiation or variation in mortuary practices between two African American groups. However, the mortuary practices seen in the archaeological and historical data are not those of the slaves themselves, but are those of the slave owning population. Attempts to document a connection between slave burial practices in the New World to African burial practices have been made in the past, producing mixed results. While some (Jamieson 1994; Stine et al. 1996) believe these efforts are worthwhile and continue to search for material remains in the New World that correlate to african material remains and therefore mortuary practices in Africa, others (Armstrong and Fleishman 2003; Howson 1990; Klingelhofer 1987) are more skeptical and believe attempting to make such connections can be dangerous.

Little doubt exists that slaves entering the New World did not simply leave their culture, beliefs or practices at home in Africa or check them at the door to the New World. There is, in fact, some evidence of artifacts of African origin and African influence found in slave graves in the New World, although these artifacts are few in number and found in very few graves (Jamieson 1995; Lange and Handler 1985). Although material culture was not included in the above discussion of the two cemeteries, it is clear due to the spatial organization of the cemeteries and the headstone epitaphs that the mortuary practices represented at the cemeteries were not those of the slave population. Additionally, the variation seen between the two cemeteries are due to two completely different factors: social organization and religious beliefs.

Social Organization

The spatial segregation found in the Common Burying Ground mirrors and represents the social segregation of slaves from their owners that was present in their daily lives. The division of blacks and whites has a long social history originally based in race and class. As race is an ideological construct, usually created by the dominant group, and class is related to the dominant mode of production, the division between the dominant white and dominated black population was quite clear (Orser 1988). In life the slave owners controlled the diet, dress, possessions and living conditions of the slaves (klingelhofer 1987). Similarly, in death the slave owners controlled where the slaves were buried, at times purchased a headstone and designed the epitaph, which usually memorialized the slave owner, rather than eulogize the deceased slave (Garman 1994). Additionally, the white population interred at the Common Burying Ground are buried according to family, indicating the importance of familial relations. The slave population, on the other hand, is buried according to slave owner, which separated husbands from wives and parents from children in death, indicating the importance of the relationship to their owner rather than to their family.

Religious Beliefs

In contrast, the inclusion of slaves in the New Orleans cemetery is a representation of religious beliefs of the dominant white population. It is recognized that because a master-slave or dominating-dominated relationship existed between the two groups that social organization is an underlying factor, however, in this case the religious beliefs of the dominant group superseded the social organization of the two groups or the social relationships between them. Historical sources indicate that in 1724 a Catholic law was passed in New Orleans that required all slaves to be baptized, and that all baptized slaves were to receive a Christian burial (Jamieson 1995).

Conclusion

The topics of mortuary behavior and slave or plantation archaeology are far too complex to cover in their entirety. However, an examination of slave burials in two cemeteries was conducted with specific attention to spatial relationships and headstone epitaph content. The examination has revealed that variation in the location of slave graves is exhibited between the two cemeteries and that grave location and headstone epitaph content varied within the Common Burying Ground. When these variations were examined within their social and historical context it became apparent that the mortuary practices represented were those of the dominant white class rather than the slaves, and that the variation was due to both social and religious factors. Examination of additional slave cemeteries of the antebellum period would likely exhibit similar differences and would be beneficial to pursue in the future. Also, given more time and the availability of the data, it would be interesting to document the material culture included in the graves of slaves interred in these cemeteries.

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