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A River of Doubt: Marked Colonoware, Underwater Sampling, and Questions of Inference

By Christopher Espenshade[1]

In this essay, I argue that marked Colonoware bowl fragments recovered from rivers in coastal South Carolina do not support an inference that African Americans engaged in waterside spiritual ceremonies in those locations during the eighteenth century. At the Society for Historical Archaeology meetings in January 2007, I heard several scholars of African American archaeology repeating the fallacy that Leland Ferguson (1999) had conclusively demonstrated the association of marked Colonoware bowls with a riverside ritual in eighteenth-century South Carolina. Ferguson (1999) raised the intriguing proposition that a small sample of such artifacts could have been associated with such riverside ceremonies, and that those activities could have entailed developing beliefs that related to the Bakongo culture of West Central Africa. However, he did not prove this, and historical archaeologists should refrain from characterizing his proposal as a proven conclusion. This essay presents an updated analysis of related issues in sampling and inferences of significance that I raised in an earlier paper at the 2003 Southeastern Archaeological Conference (Espenshade 2003).

Examples of over-reaching, definitive statements from which archaeologists should refrain in this debate include:

"the statistical association of the vessels with rivers" (DeCorse 1999:140);

"the fact that most of these vessels were recovered from underwater contexts, a finding that suggests bowls were purposefully placed in the water as part of rituals" (Singleton 1999:11);

"Most of the marked colonoware bowls were found in the waters of rivers and streams, confirming their roles in rituals involving the waters that separate the living from the dead" (diZerega Wall 2000); and

"all these factors point to repeated and intentional practice -- again, most likely ritualistic" (Delgado De Torres 2006:7).

There are five problems with the waterside ritual argument:

- 1. The argument is based overwhelmingly on materials from sports divers.**
- 2. The argument ignores that sports divers collect a whole range of domestic refuse from the rivers, not just marked bowls.**
- 3. The argument is overly broad in considering any crossed line design similar to a cosmogram.**

4. The argument generally ignores well-dated, marked bowls from terrestrial contexts.
5. Most of the vessels considered in the argument lack solid chronological control.

1. *Sports Divers*

Of the 27 marked bowls considered in Ferguson's (1999) article, 16 were culled from artifacts collected by sports divers. Sports divers only dive in water, not on dry land. Any supposed statistical association of marked bowls with rivers is meaningless; the sample is clearly biased because the entire archaeological universe of coastal South Carolina was not sampled, only the wet bits. President Bush would get better approval ratings if only the Republicans were polled, but those numbers would not be representative of all Americans. All we know from Ferguson's biased sample is that some marked bowls are present in rivers.

2. *Refuse Disposal in Rivers*

In the antebellum period, there was much dumping of domestic refuse in the rivers. As well, shoreline middens have eroded into rivers. The same sports divers who found marked Colonoware pots also found unmarked Colonoware pots, European ceramics, glass, brick, mortar, oyster shell, metal items, and faunal bone. Anything that one might typically expect in a plantation kitchen midden or a slave house midden also ended up in the river. Ferguson does not argue that bricks, for example, were part of a riverside ritual. There is no evidence to suggest that the marked bowls in the river are any different from the other refuse in the river.

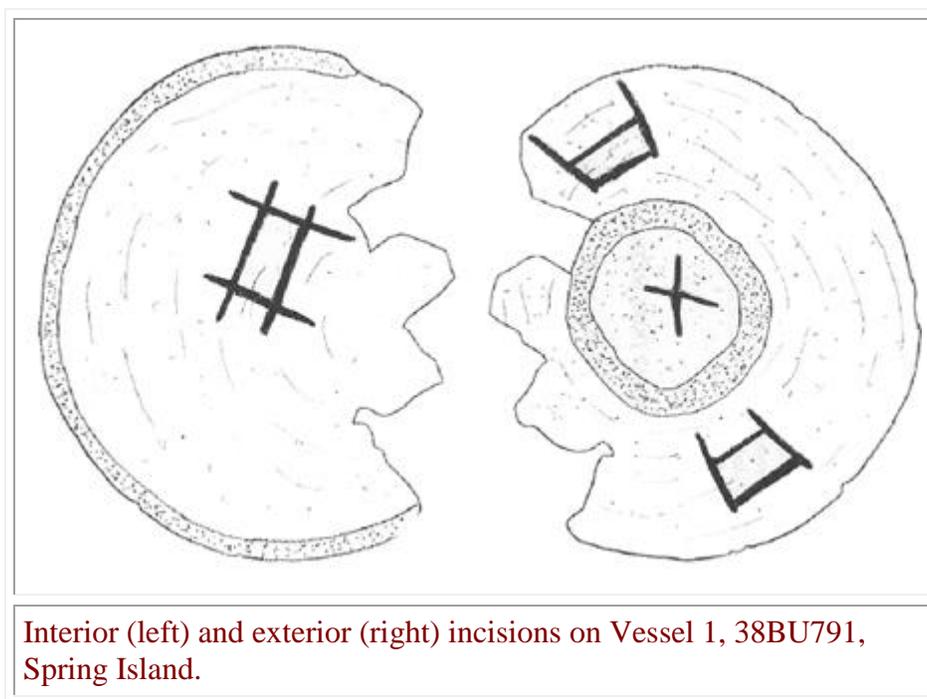
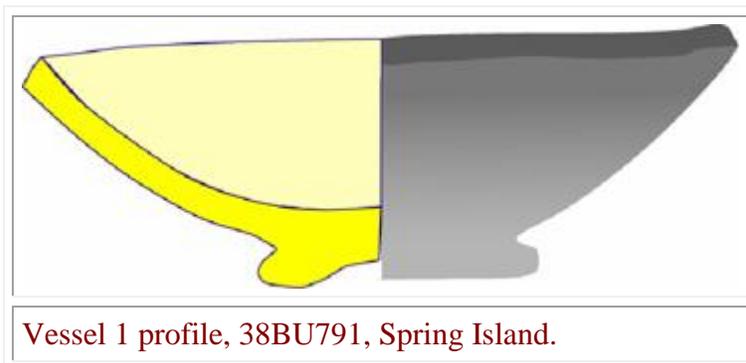
3. *Oversimplified Design Classes*

The classification of marks made by a number of individual potters, in diverse social and temporal contexts, is a challenge. It is the opinion of this researcher that Ferguson erred toward claiming too many designs related to cosmograms. In fact, only three of his marked sherds have crosses within enclosures. One of these three is a cross within a square or diamond, rather than within a round enclosure.

Beyond these three examples, Ferguson seems to be over-reaching to slot designs as related to the cosmogram. Any crossed lines become part of an X, which in turn becomes the heart of a cosmogram. Any arc becomes part of the enclosure. By this approach, it becomes hard to imagine any design (especially partial designs from sherds) that could not be somehow assigned as a cosmogram.

It is my position that Ferguson hoped to reduce a great amount of variability (despite his small sample size) into a few easily explained classes. My position is bolstered by his treatment of one of my favorite bowls (Vessel 1, Site 38BU791). Ferguson discusses only the basal X on this nineteenth-century bowl from the Bonny Shore slave community, yet makes no effort to address the grid design (much like a tic-tac-toe grid) on the vessel interior or the two, opposing, ladder designs on the exterior vessel walls. There is a lot of information

displayed on this Spring Island bowl, but Ferguson simplified it to a bowl with a basal X, and ignored the design elements that could not easily be translated into a cosmogram.

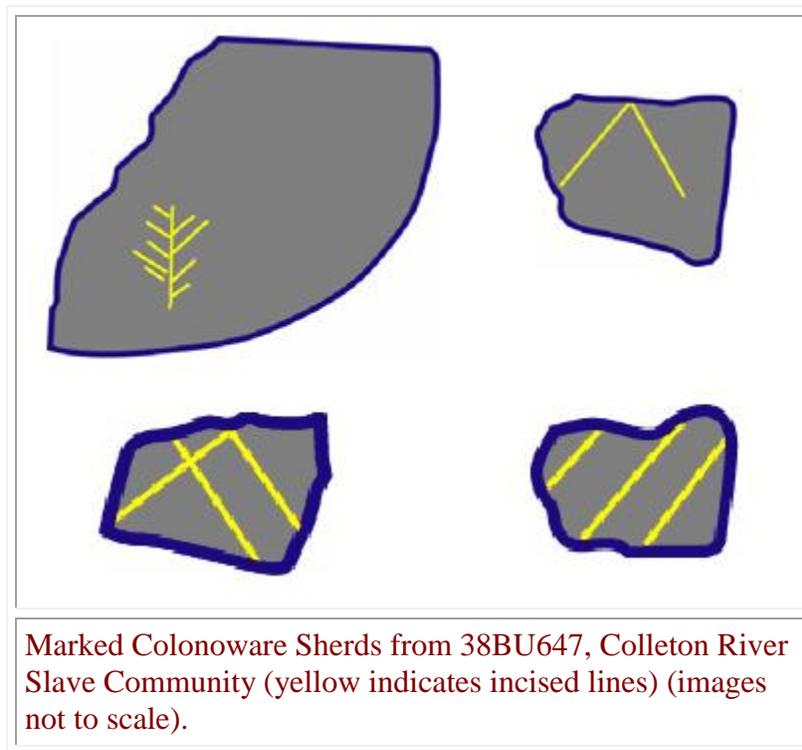


For most of his cosmograms to work, Ferguson must invoke the rim or the ring-base as the enclosure of the cosmogram. However, there are ring-base bowls without any markings, and his argument becomes bogged down. If the ring-bases or rims were not necessarily meant as elements of a cosmogram, then we simply have slaves putting Xs (rather than cosmograms) on bowls. An alternative explanation for such behavior is offered below after the dating is discussed.

4. *Terrestrial Bowls*

By 1999, when Ferguson's study was published, there were a number of reports available on marked bowls from terrestrial sites, but these were not all included in his study (it is

recognized that his original paper was written in 1989, but Ferguson had opportunity to edit his paper as late as 1994). At the Colleton River slave street, four of the 22 minimum vessels of Colonoware were marked (Kennedy et al. 1994; Espenshade and Kennedy 2002). Across the river at the Bonny Shore slave settlement, three of the 18 minimum vessels of Colonoware were marked (Eubanks et al. 1994; Espenshade and Kennedy 2002). Also on Spring Island, at the Pinckney Landing slave community, one of the 18 minimum vessels of Colonoware had a possible mark (Pietak et al. 1998; Espenshade and Kennedy 2002). The highly active sports divers program covered untold miles of river bottom, and derived only 16 marked bowls, yet just three excavations, which I happened to supervise, yielded eight marked bowls. How then are marked bowls related to a riverside ritual? If the terrestrial bowls had not been downplayed, Ferguson may have recognized the sports divers' bowls as simple refuse. A sample of what was in use in slave communities was dumped or eroded into the river.



5. Lack of Temporal Control

There is no good temporal control on the 16 marked bowls recovered from river contexts. The plantations near which they were recovered continued to be active through the Civil War, and Ferguson cannot use the river material to claim that these bowls were an eighteenth-century phenomenon.

The dating of the marked bowls from terrestrial sites is also not convincingly nineteenth century. Indeed, three of Ferguson's 11 marked bowls from terrestrial contexts are from a site that was not established until the nineteenth century (Ferguson 1999:Table 6.1; Eubanks et al. 1994). Two other, purely nineteenth-century, slave communities in Beaufort

County have also yielded marked bowls (Pietak et al. 1998; Kennedy et al. 1994; Espenshade and Kennedy 2002).

This lack of temporal control is important. What if the crosses did not become common until the nineteenth century? Indeed, it has been argued that use contexts of Colonoware changed through time, and that by the early nineteenth century, jar forms were rare and that bowls became the prevalent form (Espenshade 1998). The possible nineteenth-century origin of many of the marked bowls causes problems in the cosmogram argument, because there would have been a significant temporal gap when enslaved African Americans in South Carolina were making bowls but were not marking bowls. A nineteenth-century florescence in marked bowls would also raise the possibility that bowl-marking was a response to the increased Christianization of the slave force in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (consider the use of crosses and biblical verses by Dave -- an enslaved, African American, potter -- on Edgefield stoneware in the early to mid-nineteenth century). After all, as Carl Steen once reminded me, the cross is also a magic sign for Christians. Perhaps the cross was reborn and recontextualized in Gullah Christianity, rather than having a direct continuity with African cosmograms. This might explain why the supposed cosmograms on Colonoware are most commonly simple crosses.

Conclusions

Leland Ferguson (1992; 1999) opened our eyes to slave-made pottery and many other aspects of African American archaeology, and he has rightfully been applauded for his leadership. Unfortunately, some of his arguments require revision in the light of broader data.

This is the case for the marked Colonoware bowls from coastal South Carolina. Although most current researchers in South Carolina recognize the tenuousness of the waterside ritual argument because they are familiar with the data to the contrary we still see scholars of African Diaspora archaeology claiming that Ferguson (1999) proved this ritual existed. Part of this can be blamed on the myth of the gray literature, that only books published by major presses can possibly inform our discipline, and the other stuff (the grey literature) can be downplayed or ignored (for an eye-opening exercise, try to find the three CRM reports among the 39 pages of references cited in Singleton's 1999 volume). In actuality, by far the lion's share of studies of African American sites in South Carolina have been done in the realm of cultural resource management. You may not be able to buy these reports on Amazon.com, but any serious researcher can easily access these reports at the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology.

Although many of us are attracted to the noble image of an enslaved African Americans demonstrating their resistance by participating in an African-derived riverside ceremony using bowls with African-derived designs, the evidence is not there. Instead, the most parsimonious explanation for marked bowls in South Carolina rivers is that they were dumped or eroded there with other domestic refuse. These marked bowls are simple refuse, just like the unmarked Colonoware, the prehistoric pottery vessels, the glass bottles, the oyster shells, the bricks, the imported ceramics, the nails and spikes, and the tobacco pipes.

As to the possible link of the markings to Bakongo cosmograms, data are rapidly being accumulated on the dating of terrestrial examples to allow the issue to be further explored. In the meantime, scholars of African American archaeology are strongly encouraged to stop saying Ferguson has proven the association of marked Colonoware bowls with a riverside ritual. Scholars are further encouraged to be very careful in assigning an eighteenth-century date to the marked bowls of coastal South Carolina.

Note

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