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Lynn Jones
University of Maryland

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Crystals and Conjuring at the Charles Carroll House, Annapolis, Maryland

Lynn Jones, University of Maryland

Introduction

During excavation of the ground floor of the Charles Carroll House, a number of quartz crystals and associated artifacts were recovered. Having received a great deal of publicity, this discovery created a lot of excitement and interest among the general public and among scholars of African and African-American history. On the verbal authority of several of these scholars, the crystals were thought to have been used by slaves and to be related to African divination and conjuring practices (Dr. Frederick Lamp, Baltimore Museum of Art; Dr. Peter Mark, Wesleyan University; Dr. Robert Farris Thompson, Yale University, 1992, personal communication).

History and Significance

The excavation at the Carroll House was conducted by Archaeology in Annapolis, a research project operated by the Department of Anthropology, University of Maryland, College Park, and by Historic Annapolis Foundation. Between 1986 and 1990, the Project excavated the garden surrounding the Charles Carroll House. The eighteenth-century landscape and its relationship to the house, and evidence of the eighteenth-century frame house which had been attached to the extant brick house were discovered during these excavations (Kryder-Reid 1991; Kryder-Reid, Leone, Einstein and Shackel 1989; Leone and Shackel 1990). In 1991, the Project was retained by the Charles Carroll House of Annapolis, Inc., a restoration organization, to excavate the ground floor of the brick mansion prior to interior restoration of the structure.

The property had been purchased in the early eighteenth century by Charles Carroll the Settler, who at his death in 1720 owned over 47,000 acres of land in Maryland including one-quarter of the lots in the city of Annapolis. In 1721, Charles Carroll of Annapolis (the Settler's son) built the brick mansion, which still stands on the property. The most famous occupant was Charles Carroll of Carrollton, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, a Maryland State Senator, and a framer of the Maryland Constitution. He was born in the house in 1737 and lived there until 1821 when he moved to Baltimore to live with his daughter (Logan 1992; Van Devanter 1975).

The significance of the ground floor of the Carroll House as an archaeological site is that it was used as working space and possibly as living space for enslaved African and African Americans. The kitchen and a cold storage room were located on the ground floor. The room next to the kitchen and cold storage room, referred to as the east wing, showed evidence of having been used as a sewing room. Many buttons, straight pins, and two pairs of scissors were among the artifacts excavated from the east wing. Thus, the ground floor of the Carroll House was the first slave quarter ever excavated in Annapolis.

Documents reflect the presence of slaves at the Carroll property. An inventory taken by Carroll in 1782 indicates 10 adult slaves and eight children living in Annapolis. The 1783 tax list for

Annapolis lists Carroll's household as consisting of two white males between the ages of 16 and 50 years of age, three white females, and two other white males (no ages given), and 19 slaves.

Although we know that slaves lived and worked at the Annapolis property, we cannot say with certainty where they may have slept or kept their belongings. There is no evidence for a separate slave quarters or slave cabins on the property, so some slaves may have lived in the spaces in which they worked, such as over the coach house or stable, or in or near the kitchen or the sewing room.

Of all the ground floor rooms of the mansion, the one in the east wing proved to be the richest area of the site. The east wing was originally constructed as a hyphen to connect the brick house with the frame house and was located next to the kitchen. Archaeologists discovered that the ground-floor room of this wing once had a wooden floor with space underneath it. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century artifacts were found densely distributed in the soil layers under the floor (Logan 1992).

Among the many artifacts recovered were several caches of quartz crystals and other objects. The largest group of crystals, 12 in all, were found grouped together in an area about 6 inches in diameter (Figure 1). Found with them was a tiny faceted glass bead and a smooth black stone. This group of items was covered with a pearlware bowl of English manufacture turned upside down over them. The bowl is hand-painted pearlware, blue on white design; the design looks like a large asterisk or sun-burst. This group of items was located in the extreme northeast corner of the room, between the brick floor-joist support and the wall. Several more crystals were found in the same room of the house (Logan et al. 1992).

Two more crystals, both approximately 1/2 inch by 1 inch in size, a piece of an ivory ring, and a bubble shell, native to Florida or the West Indies, were found just to the south of the one in which the large cache of crystals was found. These two crystals and the bubble shell were also found between the brick floor-joist support and the east wall of the room. The largest crystal found was a smoky-grey chunk which measured 4 by 3 1/2 by 6 inches and weighed approximately four pounds. This was found near a doorway on the opposite side of the room from the others (Logan et al. 1992). Ceramics, coins, and other artifacts found in the same layers as the crystals help date these layers. Pearlware, white salt-glazed stoneware, and several coins found in the same layer as the cache of 12 crystals established a date range of 1790-1820 for that layer, which was toward the end of the time period when the house was occupied by Charles Carroll of Carrollton.

Figure 1 Carroll House crystals (omitted from online version)

We know that quartz crystals and associated artifacts such as the ones found at Carroll House have been found on other archaeological sites in Maryland, Virginia, and elsewhere. Such artifacts have been found on sites associated with African Americans (both slave and free), but not on sites associated exclusively with European Americans. For example, Laura Galke reported a cache of six quartz crystals, a piece of galena, and a quartz projectile point found near the footing of a chimney at the Nash Site in Manassas National Battlefield Park (Galke 1992a:137).

At the Brownsville Site, also in Manassas National Battlefield Park, another small cache of quartz crystals was found near the remains of the chimney footing of a now-demolished house. The house is believed to have been built in the late eighteenth century and to have been used as a slave quarter for the plantation during the nineteenth century (Galke 1992b).

Excavations at the Mulberry Row slave quarters of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello revealed crystals, a cowrie shell, a horn ring, pierced coins, and a game counter with a star-like design on it (Patten 1992).

Leland Ferguson has found colonoware bowls with designs on the interior bottom similar to the design on the bowl found at the Carroll House. The design on the colonoware bowls is across with a square or a circle around it and is similar to a Bakongo cosmogram. In these cosmograms, the horizontal line represents the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and the vertical line represents the path of power from below to above (Ferguson 1992; Thompson 1983).

In all these cases mentioned above, crystals, specially marked pottery, coins, reworked glass or stone, beads, and other items of material culture have been found in contexts associated with the working and living spaces used by slaves; spaces that were also used later by free African Americans.

African Traditions in America

The main questions concerning these artifacts are how were these crystals used, by whom, and for what purpose? Were they used by slaves? Were they related to the retention of African spiritual rituals?

Sidney Mintz and Richard Price assume that diverse cultures existed in Africa during the Colonial and they address the retention of elements of African culture as being the retention of shared fundamental assumptions about belief systems and world view. Africans would have come from different areas of West Africa, different tribal groups, and would have spoken mutually unintelligible languages. People from different cultural groups in Africa may have shared basic assumptions about social relations, about what values motivate individuals, and about the way the world functions and about the relationship between living people and the dead, ancestors and kinship, the spirit world (Mintz and Price 1976:23).

Controlling the Spirits

When many Africans were transported to the New World and came into daily contact with people from other areas of Africa, modification of culture, language, and religion would have taken place. However, underlying the diverse cultures and specific beliefs was a world view which included belief in a High God or Supreme Being, in secondary gods, in the spirits of ancestors, and in the ability of humans to control spirit forces. Thus, African belief systems may have been adapted and reinterpreted, giving them material and ritual manifestations specific to the New World. (Mintz and Price 1976; Herskovits 1958)

The spirits of ancestors were considered to be powerful forces which could intervene in the daily affairs of living people. Ancestors were also guardians of the traditions and culture of a people, and could punish people for not maintaining the traditional customs (Raboteau 1978). Ways of communicating with ancestors and controlling spirit forces include divination, conjuring, witchcraft, sorcery, and curing. These practices have in common the human need to control and direct spirits, to predict and control fortune and misfortune, to protect from harm, and to gain knowledge about the future.

Raboteau explains that conjure is both a theory to explain the mystery of evil and also a practice for controlling or counteracting it. Conjurers could put a harmful spell on a person or could remove the spell. The equipment used by the conjurer included a cane, a charm, and a conjure bag. The charmed objects contained in the conjure bag might include graveyard dirt, glass, pins, bones, reptiles, hair, roots, and herbs. Sometimes stones are used in conjuring, such as in certain rain-making rituals. John Mbiti mentions the use of sacred objects and "'rain stones' some of which are rare and others [which] are believed to have fallen from the sky." Rain is regarded by some Africans as a sacred phenomenon, a mystical link between past, present and future. It is a manifestation of the eternal in the present "as it came, it comes, and it will come" (Raboteau 1969; Mbiti 1969:181).

Robert Farris Thompson explains the use of objects in Kongo healing arts in his book *Flash of the Spirit*. He examines the nkisi charm as it is used in curing and divination rituals. The nkisi is a group of objects believed to have a soul and a life of its own which contains medicines that are spirit-embodying and spirit-directing. The nkisi container can be a bag, a ceramic vessel, a wooden statue, or a cloth bundle (Thompson 1983).

The materials which embody spirit are cemetery earth, kaolin or white clay, or powdered camwood wrapped in leaves or cloth bundles. Sometimes mirrors or pieces of porcelain are attached to the outside of the nkisi. Spirit-directing elements include seeds, stones, sticks, bones, shells. These objects direct the power of the spirit toward whatever problem needs to be solved (Thompson 1983).

In *Art and Healing of the Bakongo*, Wyatt MacGaffey has translated KiKongo texts describing and explaining the uses of minkisi (plural for nkisi). In the early part of this century a number of African healers or diviners gave their minkisi to the Swedish missionary Karl Laman. Laman collected these objects and recorded much information about them as the healers explained in their own languages how these minkisi were made and used (MacGaffey 1991).

Each nkisi has a name, an individual composition, and is used for a particular purpose. Each one is slightly different than the others; each healer or diviner composes his own nkisi as a personalized force. Some are used for healing, some for divination, or to obtain wealth, or for success in warfare (MacGaffey 1991).

Nkisi Mbenza is "for blessing a man who has engendered a child by his own wife. This nkisi contains stones, quartz crystals, pieces of iron, and crab claws. When a man's first child is born, he is subject to certain taboos. Violators are afflicted with chest pains and coughing which the *Nkisi Mbenza* is used to cure (MacGaffey 1991).

Another nkisi containing quartz crystals is the *Nkita Nsumbu* which is also used for healing. It contains, among other things, quartz crystals, smooth stones, claws, pieces of iron, and brass or iron rings wrapped up in a cloth bundle. This nkisi has the spirit of land and the spirit of water; it is used to heal swelling of the body or boils (MacGaffey 1991).

By comparing these examples to the material found at the Carroll House, we can see definite similarities. Several of the nkisi from the Laman collection include many of the same materials as found at Carroll House, such as quartz crystals, crab claws, metal or ivory rings, smooth stones, bones and teeth. The large cache of object found at the Carroll House included crystals, a clear bead, a smooth black stone, and a bowl with a design resembling a Bakongo cosmogram. The bowl may have been used as a container for the crystals and other objects. Another group of artifacts from the Carroll House included crystals, an ivory ring, and a bubble shell. All of these items from the caches at the Carroll House are similar to the items included in the minkisi described by Bakongo healers (MacGaffey 1991).

The artifacts excavated at the Carroll House indicate that one, or possibly more, of Charles Carroll's slaves may have been a conjurer or diviner. Perhaps other slaves in town and from the surrounding nearby plantations consulted this person about their various problems. African and African-American slaves believed that it was possible to control supernatural powers. Drawing from slave narratives, Albert Raboteau describes a great deal of such activity in slave communities in the South. "Dey powder up de rattle offen de snake and tie it up in de little old rag bag and dey do devilment with it. Dey git dirt out de graveyard and dat dir, after dey speak on it, would make you go crazy." Slaves believed that the "conjure doctor had the power to "fix" and to remove "fixes," to harm and to cure, [that] it was possible to locate the source of misfortune and control it" (Raboteau 1969:276). The conjurers had power in the slave community because of this ability to control supernatural powers and they cultivated an aura of mystery that lent credibility to their reputations.

Conclusion

Many scholars have shown that slaves retained elements of their African cultures. These cultural traditions were expressed in social institutions and relationships, in religious life, and in material culture which slaves created and used within the constraints of slavery. One of the most persistent cultural retentions was the belief in the ability of humans to control spirits, influence fortune, and heal social or physical illnesses through the use of spiritually charged objects. Artifacts such as the crystals, the smooth black stone, ivory and brass rings, a glass bead, bones, and crab claws found in the east wing of the Carroll House may be the material expression of such beliefs in Annapolis. Some of Charles Carroll's slaves living and working at the Annapolis mansion may have composed minkisi to help them deal with the difficulties of life under the system of slave labor pervasive in this country in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

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