

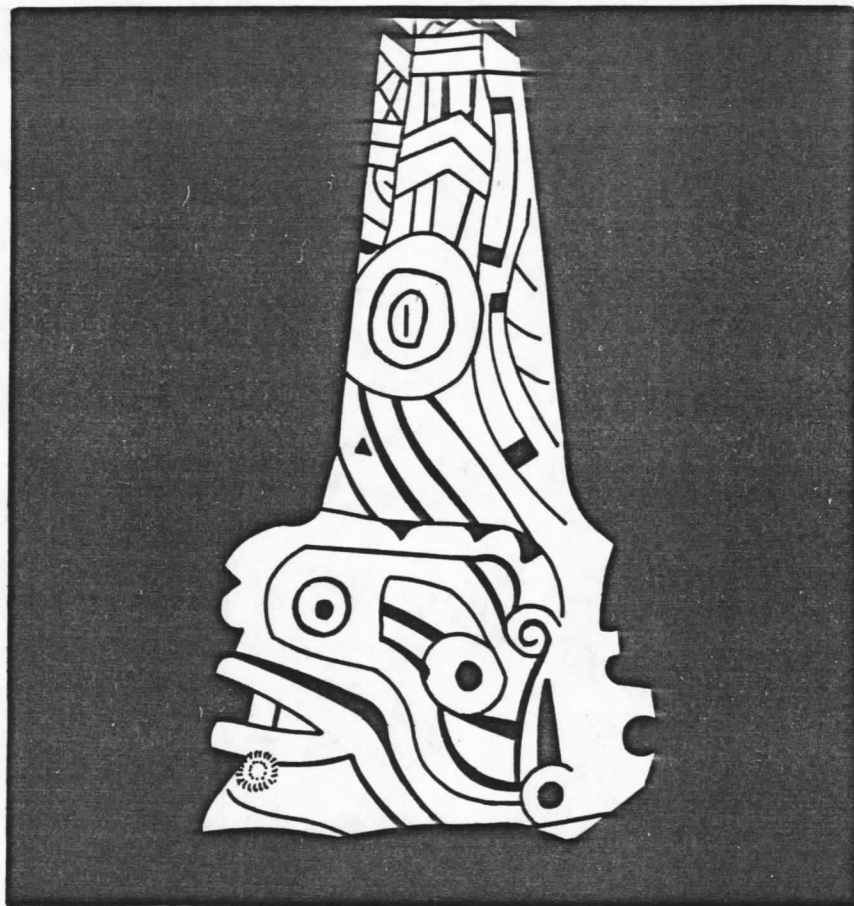
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PLANTATION ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE HERMITAGE: SOME SUGGESTED PATTERNS

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ABSTRACT

The interpretive significance of "patterning" in the artifactual remains found on historic sites is just beginning to be understood. In this paper three hypotheses, developed during the course of an archaeological project carried out at the Hermitage, are described and discussed. Each of these is thought to have considerable potential utility for helping understand certain widespread nineteenth-century cultural practices, especially as they occurred on southern plantations.

Introduction

I briefly considered the notion that I might entitle this paper: "Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, and Something Blue." This time-honored instructional rhyme for brides does seem to summarize the three hypotheses to be discussed. The something old, something new phrase could apply to Hypothesis 1. This concerns a widespread behavioral pattern, long known to medical historians but only recently made intelligible in the archaeological realm by a series of finds (glass vials) at the Hermitage. Hypothesis 2, concerning ceramic type distributions and plantation social categories, was borrowed from a colleague. Hypothesis 3 concerns a particular style of glass bead which seems to be predictably associated with slave activity areas, perhaps in a very special way. Its color is blue.

The Hermitage Site

The Hermitage is located in the northeast corner of Davidson County, Tennessee, on the outer fringe of present day Nashville's urban area (FIGURE 1). It was the third farm owned by Andrew Jackson in the Tennessee Central Basin. It was his home from 1804 until his death in 1845.

The Hermitage's beginnings were rather unpretentious. In 1804, it consisted of 420 acres of land and a group of log houses. However, by 1819, Jackson had started construction of his first mansion. This was a two-story brick building, first finished in 1821 and expanded in the 1830s, which today provides the focal point for visitation to the site. The site is maintained by the Ladies Hermitage Association, which was founded in 1889 and is one of the oldest such associations in the country.

The size of the Hermitage began to increase soon after its acquisition by Jackson, and during the late 1820s and 1830s it was a fully developed cotton and pig plantation, averaging over 1,000 acres in size. This ascension was in direct proportion to Jackson's own rise in fame. By 1834, during his second term as president, the Hermitage with its contiguous tracts totaled almost 2,000 acres.

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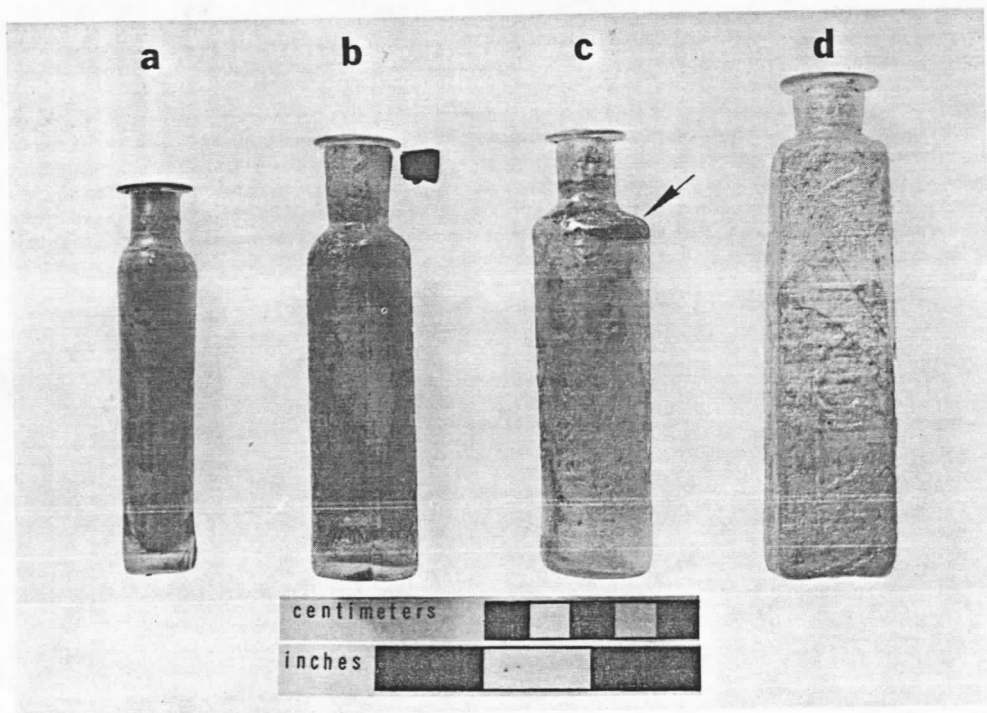


FIGURE 2. Hermitage vials (a-c from Area A; d from Area B).

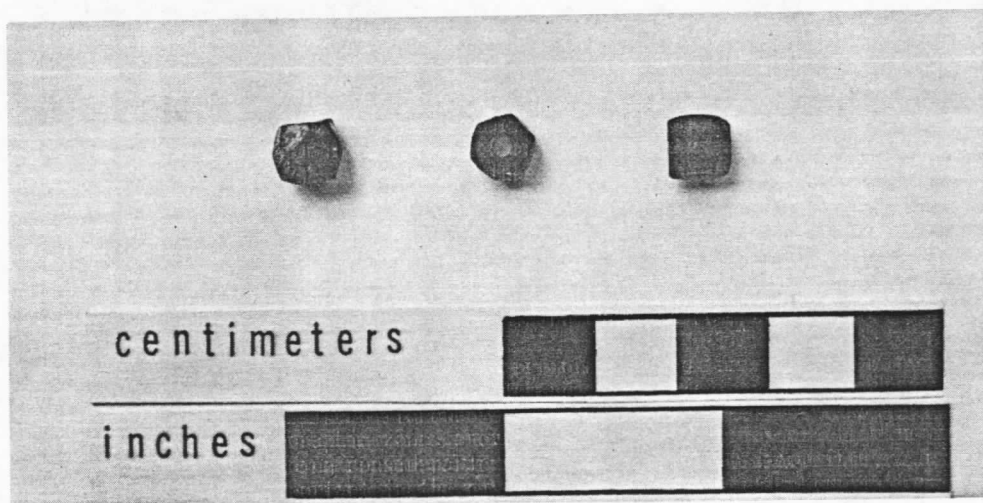


FIGURE 3. Hermitage blue, faceted beads (from Area A).

annular ware occur with greater frequency in the refuse areas of slaves and lower class Whites (as contrasted with debris from the owner's kitchen). This is hypothesized to be related to differences in diet, with bowls being the principal containers used by slaves in food consumption.

Presumably this will be discussed in even greater detail in Otto's section of a forthcoming publication (South 1977), so I am reluctant to comment on it in depth here. It should be noted, though, that for the Hermitage (Smith 1976:155-156 and Smith, et al. 1977: Part III) and Castalian Springs, a nineteenth-century farm-resort also located in Middle Tennessee (Smith 1975:86), we seem to be encountering a similar pattern, but in an attenuated form. Where Otto found a 25 percent frequency for banded ware sherds in slave cabin refuse, we seem to find at most about 7 to 8 percent. At Castalian Springs, however, it was possible by including fragments of handpainted and stenciled floral-design bowls to suggest a 34 percent frequency for this type of container.

In contrast, the ceramic collection from the Hermitage mansion (Brown 1970: 20-24) contains only two sherds of annular ware (.002 percent) and there seem to be few small bowls of any type represented.

Hypothesis 3

A single blue, faceted bead is described in what is apparently the first published report of a slave cabin excavation (Ascher and Fairbanks 1971:8-9). Subsequent reports have likewise continued to suggest a predictable association of this particular style of glass bead with slave quarters in use from after about 1780 (Fairbanks 1974:90; Smith 1975:88-89). In the case of excavations in the first Hermitage area (used as slave quarters after the 1820s), 10 of 52 glass beads found are of the blue, faceted style. These 52 beads were subdivided into 23 types with eight of the blue beads forming the largest group of a single type (examples shown in Figure 3). This type is described by Mary Elizabeth Good (in Smith 1976: 244) as follows (see also, Good 1972:106, No. 10):

8 specimens

Munsell color value 7.5PB 3/12
Diaphanitic color value 7.5PB 4/12

Translucent royal-blue, barrel shaped bead of simple, drawn construction, made from a hollow cane of glass which is hexagonal in cross section. Facets were ground on the sides of each bead at each end, leaving a central row of facets around the bead. The total number of facets may vary; usually there are 16 to 20. The ends of the bead are ground.

The other Hermitage types of this same general style (in Smith 1976:245-246) are:

1 specimen

Munsell color value 7.5PB 4/12 over 5PB 6/8
Diaphanitic color value 7.5PB 5/12

Transparent blue faceted bead of compound, drawn construction. The exterior medium-blue layer is hexagonal in cross section. The core is translucent sky blue. Facets were ground on the sides of each bead at each end, leaving a central row of facets around the bead. The total number of facets may range from 16 to 20 in the type.

1 specimen

Munsell color value 7.5PB 4/12 over 5PB 7/8
Diaphanitic color value 7.5PB 5/12

Transparent blue bead which appears to be of compound, drawn construction. The inner layer is translucent sky blue...has an additional row of facets... wavy striations on the exterior surface...[and may be later than the others].

Concerning the associational context of these specimens it was stated that the finding of blue, faceted beads in Area A, when considered in light of the previous finds, seemed:

to confirm the previous implication that over much of the southeastern United States we can expect to find [them] in association with the household debris of slaves. With the completion of a few more studies it may become possible to accept this as an established pattern (Smith 1976:284).*

Thus, in the summer of 1976, as we began testing the two brick building sites in Area B believed to be the "brick negro houses" referred to in an 1833 letter included in the Jackson papers edited by Bassett (1926-1933: V, p. 62), we anticipated finding numerous blue, faceted beads. It soon became apparent, however, that such was not to be the case.

Approximately halfway through the testing program only two beads had been recovered, both of them small seed beads. As this was at variance with the stated hypothesis, we began fine screening in water a sizable quantity of soil from selected locations (including the Cabin Site No. 1 sealed context mentioned earlier) in hopes of improving our recovery technique. Even this yielded only a few more seed beads, so that in all six such beads were recovered from both house sites.

This can also be given as a ratio of slightly less than six beads per thousand ceramic sherds recovered. By comparison, the 52 beads from Area A (the first Hermitage) represent a ratio of 11 beads per thousand sherds and for the blue, faceted style (three types), two per thousand. Furthermore, at the Castalian Springs site (Smith 1975:89), testing of a slave cabin had suggested a ratio of 25 beads per thousand sherds, with 17 of the blue, faceted style per thousand (though the actual number was only three).

With this in mind, we felt some need to seek a possible explanation for the apparent absence of blue or any other kind of faceted beads where we had felt sure we would find them. As with any test excavation there is the problem of adequate sample. While the sample obtained from Area B is not as great as we would like, this is at least partly compensated for by the quantity of soil that was water screened. It is also possible that these were not actually slave quarters. But, all other available evidence suggests that they were.

Still another possible explanation was initially suggested to us by an 1814 letter from Andrew Jackson to his wife, concerning some slaves he was sending from Alabama. His instructions were that shelters be built for them, and "I intend putting the wives in the citchen, the husband in the field" (cited in Smith, et al. 1977: Part I). Though the Area B houses were probably not extant at this time, they are well removed from the main complex (FIGURE 1) and are in what later must have been the outlying "field" portion of the plantation. The question becomes: Could they have been used primarily as quarters for male field workers, and might this explain the absence of larger beads (our assumption being that the blue, faceted beads were worn as adornment by female slaves, whereas seed beads were used as ornamentation on various kinds of garments, beaded bags, etc.)?

* Blue, faceted beads are also common on certain historic Indian sites.

This, it was soon learned, is marginal to one of the most controversial issues concerning the history of American slavery, the question of whether or not the slave family was a truly viable social unit. While the recent work by Gutman (1976) has dispensed with many of the older myths and clearly demonstrated that it was, there are still some nagging questions concerning where slaves were actually permitted to live in any given situation. For example, many of Gutman's conclusions concerning pre-Civil War slave families are based on plantation birth registers which list parents of the child born but do not specify if these same individuals did in fact share the same house or cabin. Granted that they probably usually did, there still may have been instances when this was not the case.

One such practice is described by Gutman (1976:131-135) using the terms "cross-owner" or "broad" marriage to refer to marriage off the home plantation. This seems to have been most common when an owner was on his way to becoming a planter and was steadily increasing the number of slaves in his possession. It would also seem that this would produce a need for sex segregated housing for Blacks living on one plantation with spouses on another.

We would suspect that some such need may have existed at times at the Hermitage for, according to the list prepared by Brigance (Smith, *et al.* 1977: Part I), Jackson's slave holdings increased at an almost steady rate from no more than 15 in 1804 to over 111 in 1840. While there does seem to have been a concerted effort on Jackson's part to purchase slaves in family units and to keep them together, it is still difficult to say how this was worked out in terms of housing. Unlike some southern plantations, there is no single area of the Hermitage that can be defined as the slave quarters. The slave housing areas that we can identify are rather widely dispersed. The possibility, supported by some evidence (Jackson 1819), that male field hands were shifted about between the Hermitage and other plantations that Jackson owned, should also be considered in connection with whether or not there may have been some segregation by sex in housing.

It is certainly not intended to suggest that the apparent absence of blue, faceted beads in Area B provides *proof* that only male slaves were housed here. At least one other possible explanation is that the wearing of such beads was related to slave social status, with field hands of either sex having less status.

What is important is that we may have discovered an interpretive tool with considerable potential utility. We still feel confident that an association between blue, faceted beads and slave cabin sites can ultimately be accepted as a normal pattern. What is further suggested is that they may have the additional potential to help identify former activity areas used mainly by individuals of one sex group or, as an alternative, activity areas used mainly by representatives of a particular slave social status group. What is most needed now is comparative data from better understood situations.

Summary

The above three hypotheses have been described in hopes of stimulating interest on the part of other investigators. They were selected for presentation because it is felt that each should have some degree of meaning on sites over a broad geographical area. It should also be apparent that because of its intricate social relationships and often diverse economic activities, the southern plantation represents a fertile field for the historical archaeologist with a concern for the patterns of material culture. Hopefully, we have only begun to explore its potential.

Notes:

1. This is a modified version of "The Hermitage Project: Some Highlights of an Interdisciplinary Approach," a presentation given at the 1976 Conference on Historic Site Archaeology in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

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