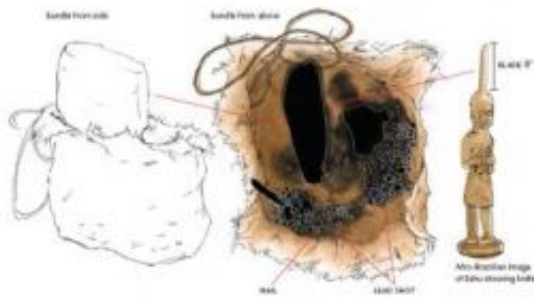


Archaeologists find unique, early US relic of African worship

October 21 2008



How the African bundle might have looked 300 years ago. Credit: Brian Payne, University of Maryland

University of Maryland archaeologists have dug up what they believe to be one of the earliest U.S. examples of African spirit practices. The researchers say it's the only object of its kind ever found by archaeologists in North America - a clay "bundle" filled with small pieces of common metal, placed in what had been an Annapolis street gutter three centuries ago.

The bundle appears to be a direct transplant of African religion, distinct from hoodoo and other later practices blending African and European traditions.

"This is a remarkably early piece, far different from anything I've seen

before in North America," says University of Maryland anthropologist Mark Leone, who directs the Archaeology in Annapolis project. "The bundle is African in design, not African-American. The people who made this used local materials. But their knowledge of charms and the spirit world probably came with them directly from Africa."

About the size of a football, the compacted clay and sand bundle originally sat in clear public view stationed in front of a house. X-rays show the object served as a container holding hundreds of pieces of lead shot, pins and nails intended to ward off or redirect spirits. A prehistoric stone axe extends upward from the top of the bundle.

Leone dates the object to about 1700, plus or minus 20 years, from a period when English beliefs in witchcraft could mingle more openly with the African.

"We're particularly intrigued by the placement of this bundle in so visible a spot, because it suggests an unexpected level of public toleration," says Maryland's Leone. "All the previous caches of African spirit practices we've found in Annapolis were at least fifty years younger. These had been hidden away and used in secret. But in this earlier generation, the Annapolis newspaper was filled with references to English magic and witchcraft, so both European and African spirit practices may have been more acceptable then. That changed with the growing influence of the Enlightenment."

After consulting with experts on West and Central-West African culture, Leone says the bundle might have origins in Liberia, Sierra Leone or Guinea among Yoruba or Mande speakers. It may have been fashioned in the image of a god and energized through its construction to invoke and disseminate spiritual power.

CLAY BUNDLE

The Maryland team discovered the bundle four feet below Fleet Street in the Annapolis historic district - about 1,000 feet from the Maryland statehouse. It sat in the gutter of a much earlier unpaved street on a hill overlooking an inlet. Water would have run down the gutter, making it a vital conduit for spirits and a strategic spot to place a powerful charm, Leone says.

The bundle measures about 10 inches high, six inches wide and four inches thick. It remains intact, held together by the sand and clay. X-rays taken at the state of Maryland's conservation facility reveal the bundle's contents - about 300 pieces of lead shot, 25 common pins and a dozen nails. The blade of the stone axe points upward.

Originally, some kind of cloth or animal hide probably wound around the bundle forming a pouch that held the metal objects. But it has long since decomposed.

INTERPRETATION

Leone immediately suspected that the object had African origins based on the materials and the construction, which differed from the hoodoo caches his teams have unearthed in Annapolis over the past two decades. To help identify the object, Leone consulted with Frederick Lamp, curator of African Art at the Yale University Art Gallery.

"The use of compacted clay and iron materials points to the African origin of this bundle," Lamp says. "Combining these materials was believed to increase the spiritual power of the objects."

Lamp adds that Mande groups, principally in Sierra Leone and Liberia, used packed clay as binders when building spiritual objects. If Yoruba in origin, the bundle would likely represent the image of Eshu Elegba, the

god of chance, confusion and unpredictability, the god of the crossroads. The axe blade could replace the comb in other representations of the Eshu, and it is also indicative of the power of Shango, the god of thunder and the lightning bolt.

"We hope to open a scholarly debate," says Leone. "Further research may help pinpoint the bundle's cultural origins. Whoever made this understood that public invocations of magic were a source of social control," Leone says. "It radiates power. The construction was intended to amplify its influence over the spirit world."

ENGLISH MAGIC

Before 1750, Annapolis' newspaper, The Maryland Gazette, frequently cited many-headed monsters, witchcraft trials in Europe, misshapen babies linked to magic, unaccounted appearances and disappearances and the world of pagan, non-Christian belief, explains Leone.

"English witchcraft in this period existed openly in public and was tolerated," he adds. "It's intriguing to speculate how English and African spirit beliefs may have interacted and borrowed from each other."

After 1750 though, the Gazette changed markedly. Leone says references to magic disappeared and the paper reflected the changing philosophy of the period.

OBJECT ON DISPLAY

Beginning today, the object is on display in the window of the Banneker-Douglass Museum, the state of Maryland's Center for African-American History and Culture.

The Annapolis Department of Public Works contracted for the archaeological excavation along Fleet and Cornhill streets in the city's historic district in advance of a project to lay underground utility cables. The area was part of early Annapolis' waterfront.

"We've been committed for a long time to uncovering our state capital's history, and yet the old never gets old, never ceases to astound me," says Annapolis Mayor, Ellen Moyer. "This latest discovery underscores just how deeply the city's European and African roots are intertwined."

Source: University of Maryland

Citation: Archaeologists find unique, early US relic of African worship (2008, October 21) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-10-archaeologists-unique-early-relic-african.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--