Inequality within a Slave Settlement at Monticello in the Late-Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

This paper examines recent archaeological research into among-household variation at Site 8, a historic site occupied by enslaved laborers at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. The site is located on the Monticello plantation in Albemarle County, Virginia, and was occupied from the late-eighteenth century through the early-nineteenth century. The research seeks to understand the extent and nature of inequality within the slave settlement at Monticello and to evaluate the impact of slavery on the lives of enslaved people. The study uses archaeological evidence to examine the distribution of artifacts and to assess the degree of residential segregation among the enslaved population.

1. Why look for inequality?

Inequality within a slave settlement is a significant issue that has been studied by archaeologists and historians. This paper examines recent archaeological research into among-household variation at Site 8, a historic site occupied by enslaved laborers at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. The site is located on the Monticello plantation in Albemarle County, Virginia, and was occupied from the late-eighteenth century through the early-nineteenth century. The research seeks to understand the extent and nature of inequality within the slave settlement at Monticello and to evaluate the impact of slavery on the lives of enslaved people. The study uses archaeological evidence to examine the distribution of artifacts and to assess the degree of residential segregation among the enslaved population.

2. Methodological challenges

For eighteenth-century domestic sites like the Virginia Plantation, where building techniques were somewhat similar, the methodological challenges of finding the present enslaved household’s area seem to be less of a problem, since many were small, relatively linear, and unobtrusive.

In the absence of sub-surface features, we rely on the spatial distribution of artifacts to identify and characterize households (e.g., Warshauer 1994). However, we have not been able to sample the full range of artifacts in the site.

3. Site 8

Site 8 is located on the southern edge of the plantation, directly south of the main house. The site consists of two sub-sites: the northern zone, which contains most of the artifacts, and the southern zone, which contains few artifacts. The northern zone is characterized by a dense concentration of artifacts, while the southern zone is characterized by a much lower density of artifacts.

4. Plowzone sampling

Sampling was conducted by dry-screening plowzone through quarter-inch mesh. A total of 266 quadrats have been excavated so far.

5. Chronology

The chronology was determined using radiocarbon dating, which provided evidence for four distinct phases of occupation at Site 8.

6. Household movement

Using the CA dimension-1 scores, we assigned the quadrats to five temporal groups. The CA solution suggests that the two groups are spatially adjacent to one another. We suspect the two groups represent two households that initially lived in close proximity to one another.

7. Subfloor pits

We observed four clusters of three to five subfloor pits in each room. These pits, which are likely storage cellars, are typically found beneath the floor of the room.

8. Consumption

The two-dimensional CA solution suggests that the northern zone is characterized by more consumption, while the southern zone is characterized by less consumption. This is likely due to the greater density of artifacts in the northern zone.

9. Spatial structure of discard

The multidimensional CA solution reveals that the northern zone is characterized by more discard, while the southern zone is characterized by less discard. This suggests that the northern zone is more active and dynamic than the southern zone.

10. Conclusions

This paper presents evidence for the existence of two, distinct household groups at Site 8. This evidence suggests that the household groups had different roles within the plantation economy. The northern group, which is characterized by a higher density of artifacts, may have been responsible for more labor-intensive activities, while the southern group, which has a lower density of artifacts, may have been responsible for less labor-intensive activities.

References


Contrasts in the spatial structure of real and ceramic discard suggest that artifact discard of the northern households doubled much more often in the maintenance than the residents of the northern zone. Stratification factors that encourage the maintenance include higher population densities, race, ethnic, and gender residential stability.


