Identifying change in household- and specialist-produced coarse earthenwares from 18th- and 19th-century Jamaican slave villages

1. Introduction

Archaeologists have long been intrigued by hand-built, open-fired coarse earthenware found in 18th- and 19th-century sites occupied by enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and United States. In Jamaica, these hand-built coarse earthenwares, often referred to as “Africans,” were accompanied by a variety of locally made, glazed, and painted items that presumably reflected manufactured and imported wares. Here we use quantitative, systematic evidence from 18 slave-site occupation to test current theories about the role of, and variation in, locally produced coarse earthenware types through time.

2. Expectations

First current theories shape how archaeologists working in the Caribbean think about locally produced coarse earthenware in Jamaica. Using data from undocummented urban sites and slave households, however argue that types of coarse earthenware produced in Jamaica varied little throughout the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries (2008). Others see their manufacture and use as clave indicators of African ceramic production and culinary traditions (Petraglia 1996; Ebert 2009). Few, if any, argue that locally produced wares varied during the Atlantic slave trade.

If these arguments are correct, the frequency of coarse earthenware should remain constant throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Rates of imported enslaved Africans were consistently high, slavery markets were critical to slave’s economic and physical well-being during the same time period; if production and demand for locally produced ceramics were driven by consumers seeking to accept African traditions, then our choice of these wares should remain steady.

Recent comparative research suggests, however, that enslaved Africans in Jamaica and the Americas often preferred locally produced ceramics over imported goods. The reasons are numerous: these goods were familiar, they were often more affordable, they could be procured using slaves’ wages, and they could be produced using the techniques and traditions of African ceramics. The evidence suggests that enslaved Africans in Jamaica produced their own earthenware.

3. The Sites

Most sites are documented in Jamaica, however, few have been studied in detail. Furthermore, the archaeological data from these sites is not well-documented and often does not include information about the date of occupation. The site information data are available to archaeologists and the public for free online through The Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (DACS) (http://www.dacs.org/).

4. Dating the Assemblages

Although temporal trends in ceramic data are important to the development of Atlantic island-wide chronologies for these sites.

We begin by using two complementary statistical methods: Correspondence Analysis (CA) and Micro Ceramic Glaze (MCG) to produce detailed ceramic chronologies for each site (Nemai et al. 2010). We plotted temporal data and occupational phases for each site, we evaluated the sites to produce a reliable island-wide chronology. Each site phase was ranked chronologically based on its CA dimensions 1 scores.

5. Coarse Earthenwares: Why Demand?

With dates in hand, we plotted the frequency of two imported coarse earthenware relative to imported refined ceramics by site phase.

The dramatic decrease in the frequency of coarse earthenware can be closely linked to the long-held assumption that locally produced coarse earthenware wares were ubiquitous in slave sites in Jamaica throughout the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Coarse Earthenware as African?

This trend also suggests the expectation that coarse earthenware abundance should remain constant through time as local ceramic production and use was almost constant over the expression and evidence of refined African ceramics. Furthermore, many of the refined wares were becoming available to markets, enslaved Africans selected refined ceramics over inexpensive, locally produced wares. Abundance indices (see Gale 2000 for details) suggest that non-earthenware artifacts, such as glass trade beads, may be more accurate indicators of African cultural and aesthetic traditions.

6. From Tableware to Bulk Storage:

Types Change through Time

Recent research by Hauser argues that locally produced coarse earthenware types varied little through time—until unrestricted hand-built vessels, glazed hand-built vessels and glazed wheel-thrown vessels present in all time periods at the same frequency (2008).

Using regression, we identified several attributes of coarse earthenware vessels that did change through time. Changes in these attributes suggest that the popular use of coarse earthenware vessels fluctuated through time. Significantly, these changes suggest a shift from the production of both, pots, and jars for food preparation and consumption to a focus on bulk storage vessels that were likely manufactured in specialized workshops.

7. Conclusions

Data from 10 slave-site assemblages in Jamaica makes the largest and most chronologically detailed study of Jamaican produced coarse earthenware ceramics from slave households. Patterns revealed here indicate that current archaeological arguments about these locally produced earthenware need reevaluation.

- The discarded coarse earthenware on slave sites in Jamaica demonstrates dramatic trend through time, especially in relationship to costly refined earthenware imported from the UK, Europe and China.

- As the use and discard of coarse earthenware decreases, the abundance of refined ceramics remains steady throughout.

- These findings are consistent with the view that enslaved Africans chose to purchase more costly refined wares for dining as so they were available in the marketplace.

- Surprisingly, the use of coarse earthenware decreases, the abundance of refined ceramics remains steady throughout the 18th century while large, thick-bottomed, unglazed vessels suitable for storage and bulk processing remained popular.

- While the production of hand-built vessels and pots remained for cooking and food consumption decreases, large-scale production of inexpensive, bulbous forms for water and food storage increased throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. This fits with Hauser’s argument that a select number of specialized workshop manufactured ceramics that were then distributed across the island (2009).

- The abundance of glass trade beads remain steady throughout the 18th century while coarse earthenware and bulbs, which have been associated with African imports, remain generally scarce. The dramatic decrease in coarse earthenware suggests that these wares may not be as closely linked to African ceramic and food preparation traditions as archaeologists have previously argued.