

The New York Times



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) for samples and additional information. Order a reprint of this article now.

January 27, 2010

## Coffin's Emblem Defies Certainty

By [SEWELL CHAN](#)

When the remains of hundreds of colonial-era Africans were uncovered during a building excavation in Lower Manhattan in 1991, one coffin in particular stood out. Nailed into its wooden lid were iron tacks, 51 of which formed an enigmatic, heart-shaped design.

The pattern was soon identified as the sankofa — a symbol printed on funereal garments in West Africa — and it captured the imagination of scholars, preservationists and designers. Ultimately, it was embraced by many African-Americans as a remarkable example of the survival of African customs in the face of violent subjugation in early America.

The sankofa was widely invoked in 2003, when the 419 remains were reinterred at the site, now known as the [African Burial Ground](#), following painstaking examination. It was chiseled into a black granite memorial unveiled in 2007. It is featured in an interpretive display in the federal building at 290 Broadway (the construction of which led to the discovery of the graves), which describes it as a direct link to “cultures found in Ghana and the Ivory Coast.” And it serves as a logo for the African Burial Ground as a whole.

Michael A. Gomez, a professor of history at [New York University](#) and an authority on the African diaspora, said the design's apparent link to 18th-century Africa “is of enormous meaning and carries a lot of symbolic weight.” For decades, historians and anthropologists have debated the extent to which the continent's cultural practices endured and came to influence art, language, music and religion in the Americas — a question with particular resonance for the African-American community.

The burial ground sankofa was important in this debate, Dr. Gomez said, “because, let's face it, we don't have an extremely large amount of material culture with which to work.”

But now a peer-reviewed study, published this month in a leading history journal, argues that the heart-shaped symbol is not, in fact, a sankofa, and probably does not have African origins at all. Indeed, it suggests that the sankofa probably did not yet exist as a symbol in Africa at the time the coffin was made, and that the design is likely Anglo-American in origin.

The [National Park Service](#), which has managed the burial ground since it was declared a national monument in 2006, is itself stepping back from the original claim. As a result of research by scholars who prepared reports in 2006 for the federal government, the interpretive sign in the service's new \$5.2 million visitor center, scheduled to open on Feb. 27, will say only that the design “could be a sankofa symbol” and that “no one knows for sure.”

In an interview, Erik R. Seeman, the historian whose new study treats the sankofa claim skeptically, acknowledged that his argument could be politically fraught. In his article, published in the January issue of [The William and Mary Quarterly](#), he makes a point of emphasizing his belief that African influences did play a major role in the lives of early black Americans — although generally as part of hybrid traditions.

“As free and enslaved blacks created a distinctive culture in the New World, they drew on remembered African practices and Anglo-American religious and material culture to fashion something altogether original,” wrote Dr. Seeman, who teaches American history at the [University at Buffalo](#). Dr. Seeman’s article, adapted from a book, “Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800,” to be published in May by the [University of Pennsylvania Press](#), argues that scholars “have too readily attributed cultural practices to African antecedents without convincing documentary or archaeological evidence.”

After archaeologists who examined the bones “emphasized the African origins” of the beads, shells, rings and other objects in the graves, Dr. Seeman writes, “historians followed this lead, seeing in the African Burial Ground artifacts glimpses of a long-hidden African worldview in New York.”

Particularly striking was the coffin labeled Burial 101, containing the remains of a man between 26 and 35 who died sometime after 1760. (Some of the tacks within the heart-shaped symbol can be read as the number “69,” suggesting that the man died in 1769.)

The hexagonal, larch-wood lid of the coffin was studded with 187 cast-iron tacks, 51 of which made up the heart-shaped pattern, about 18 inches wide and 19 inches high.

“It can be safely concluded,” Kwaku Ofori-Ansa, an expert in African art at Howard University, wrote in a 1995 newsletter of the archaeological excavation, “that the image was meant to be” the sankofa — one of several hundred symbols that are stamped on adinkra cloth, used by the Akan people of present-day Ghana and Ivory Coast.

Although a series of reports produced for the African Burial Ground project in 2006 backed away from this definitive stance — stating only that the design “has been interpreted” as a sankofa — it was nevertheless used as a central element in the granite memorial completed the next year at a cost of more than \$5 million.

(There has also been some inconsistency regarding what the sankofa, thought to stand for a West African proverb, means. The 2006 reports render the proverb as, “It is not a taboo to return and fetch it when you forget,” while the new interpretive display offers the easier-to-grasp phrase, “Look to the past to understand the present.”)

Dr. Seeman’s study finds several problems with the sankofa identification. First, he writes, there is no evidence that the cloth existed in the 18th century. (The earliest surviving example of adinkra cloth, now in the [British Museum](#), dates to 1817, and the earliest known depiction of the sankofa comes from a 1927 catalog of adinkra symbols.)

Second, Dr. Seeman writes that it was customary for masters to supply coffins for their slaves, and so, if the man in Burial 101 was a slave, “it would have been his master’s decision to pay extra for the tacks on his lid.” Finally, Dr. Seeman notes that hearts portrayed by an outline of tacks were a common form of decoration on Anglo-American coffin lids.

But several anthropologists and historians, including Michael L. Blakey, who as the scientific director of the African Burial Ground project oversaw the archaeological excavation and analysis of the remains and artifacts, remained unconvinced that Dr. Seeman's arguments were decisive. They were shown a draft of his article.

"We often are unable to ascertain which meanings persons in the past held for the objects they created," Dr. Blakey, director of the Institute for Historical Biology at the College of William and Mary, wrote in an e-mail message. (The journal publishing Dr. Seeman's article is based at the college, but Dr. Blakey had no role in the publication of it.)

The sankofa, Dr. Blakey maintained, is one of several "plausible meanings" of the design, and one that "most perfectly expresses the meaning of the site for many people around the world."

Anne-Marie Cantwell and Diana diZerega Wall, authors of "Unearthing Gotham: The Archaeology of New York City" (Yale University Press, 2001), said it was not enough to look at documentary records or — given how little West African cloth of any kind has survived from before the 19th century — the extremely limited physical evidence.

"As archaeologists, we are keenly aware of how much is left out of the written record and the consequent pitfalls of relying on it, especially in such cases where the texts are few, far between and written by outsiders," they wrote in a statement in response to a reporter's question. "In this case, we think it is better to keep the door wide open to the possibility that the heart-shaped symbol might have been interpreted by the 18th-century mourners as a sankofa from their homeland."

And Dr. Gomez — who says he sees Dr. Seeman's article as part of a wave of scholarly work that "pushes back against the notion of concrete, specific connections between Africa" and its slavery-related diaspora — predicted that it would "cause a ripple" because "it was meant to cause a ripple."

He said that he believed that the article was vague and excessive in its claim that scholars had too quickly ascribed African origins to black American cultural practices and that it contained some faulty assumptions — that Anglo-American burial practices of the time were uniform and stable, for example.

Still, Dr. Gomez said, even if he was unconvinced by the argument for an Anglo-American heart motif interpretation, "Seeman may very well be right that this is not a sankofa symbol," either. Perhaps the best answer, he said, is the National Park Service's answer: "No one knows for sure."

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)