



North Carolina Archaeological Society

Newsletter

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<http://www.rla.unc.edu/ncas>

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Save the date of October 18 for the Fall Meeting at Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson State Historic Site!

NC Archaeology in the Digital Age

In 1934, the North Carolina Archaeological Society (then known as The Archaeological Society of North Carolina) began publishing a bulletin with announcements and papers of interest, the precursor to today's NCAS newsletter. To celebrate 80 years of informative Society newsletters, the Board of Directors is pleased to launch a new regular feature for our tech-savvy members: NC Archaeology in the Digital Age. Beginning with this one, each issue of the newsletter will now highlight a website with information of interest to NCAS members. Suggestions (and guest reviews) are welcome!

[The Archaeology of North Carolina:](http://www.rla.unc.edu/ArchaeoNC/)

[rla.unc.edu/ArchaeoNC/](http://www.rla.unc.edu/ArchaeoNC/)

Since its publication in 1999, *Time Before History: The Archaeology of North Carolina* by H. Trawick Ward and R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr. has been the go-to guide for anyone interested

in North Carolina's archaeological past. Now the Research Laboratories of Archaeology at UNC-Chapel Hill has created an online version of that trusted guide.

[The Archaeology of North Carolina](http://www.rla.unc.edu/ArchaeoNC/) website includes an abridged version of *Time Before History's* chronological narrative of the state's archaeological history. The online guide also offers the option of navigating by geographic region, making it easy to get a brief overview of the archaeological sequence for your specific area of the state.

The Archaeology of North Carolina website does not include the level of detail found in *Time Before History*, but it's a convenient alternative when the book isn't handy. The color photos also make the online version worth exploring. Of course, the biggest benefit of the website is that it can be readily updated as new information becomes available.

"Allah the Divider" was Lost by the Public House: Reinterpretation of a Penknife with Arabic Inscriptions from Colonial Brunswick Town

By Thomas E Beaman, Jr., RPA (Wake Technical Community College)
and Jennifer L. Gabriel (Independent Researcher)

For the archaeologist, ideational insights to the beliefs of a studied people can be the most difficult level of interpretation to reach. This is perhaps due to the more fundamental, functional interpretations sought in research designs, the limited field explorations of many sites (especially in cultural resource management work), or the often nearly inadequate time many archaeologists have to complete their post fieldwork analysis and reports. However, even in the best circumstances for excavation and interpretation, few of us actually do—or can—reach beyond the material world into the cognitive past.

When an artifact related to an identifiable religious belief and practice is recovered in context, it allows us as archaeologists to begin to gain deeper insights into our studied subjects, specifically a material link to belief in an intangible spiritual world or being. Many cultures around the world have

specialized architectural and artifacts for spiritual belief and practice. In the 16th, 17th, and 18th century colonial worlds on the western side of the Atlantic, such material culture generally speaks to a very limited range of religious belief. Be it personal artifacts such as rosary beads, crucifixes, and medals of Saints found on Spanish colonial sites, Jesuit rings of Canadian settlers, or sets of decorative tin-enameled plates, chargers, or tiles depicting various Biblical scenes, despite the specifics of denomination all have spiritual links to the Abrahamic based religion of Christianity.

However, this study deals with a single, unique artifact found in 18th century British colonial context that is clearly linked to a belief in Islam, another Abrahamic based religion. A small penknife with Arabic script was recovered by Stanley South in his 1960s excavations at Brunswick, a small, trans-

Atlantic port town in southeastern North Carolina. Easily recognized as a product of the colonial sphere of international trade, the interpretation of the script derived at the time of its recovery spoke of Allah. Though the presence of this knife at Brunswick is not debated as related to trade, a recent reinterpretation of the Arabic script has yielded a different but more common interpretation of Islamic faith.

The knife was found in 1960 during the excavation of the yard space east of the Public House, near Public Wall on Lot 27, in unit S13-9, stratum A. South described this stratum as a "colonial midden layer." A quickly derived mean ceramic date of 1747.6 from 1165 calculable sherds, and 180 pipe stems with mean dates of 1753, 1750, and 1755 (by Binford's, Hanson's #10, and Heighton and Deagan's formulas, respectively), provides a rough archaeological context for stratum A by the Public Wall. Each of these dates places this stratum, as well as the likely deposition of the knife, roughly in the middle of the 50-year occupation of the town, as well as close to the Spanish attack and brief capture of the town in September 1748.

The knife itself is made of brass, cast as a single piece. The body of the knife is only 2½ inches (63.5 mm) in length, and the length of the wrought iron blade from its attachment point measures a total of 1¾ inches (44.5 mm). Each side of the body contains embossed decorative flourishes around its edges, and has a flat panel with a border along the opening edge. This panel contains embossed Arabic letters on both sides. Dr. Muhsin Mahdi of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago was the original translator of this text in the 1960s. From a picture of the knife sent by South, he interpreted one side to read, "There is no god but God," and the other as "Allah the Divider." Dr. Mahdi also noted this was a type of Arabic script commonly found on the Malay Peninsula in southeast Asia, which was major export center of Asian porcelain through Singapore and other regional ports, in which both the British and Spanish had economic interests.

The phrase "There is no god but God" is a very recognizable phrase because it is part of the *Shahadah*, one of the five pillars of the Islamic religion. The *Shahadah* is the first and arguably the most important because it is the declaration of Islamic faith. For both the Suni and the Shia sects, the utterance and belief in the complete phrase allows one to become a Muslim and to convert to Islam. It also speaks to the fundamental concept of Islam known as the *tawhid*, or the doctrine of Oneness in the Islamic religion, the monotheistic ideal that God is one and unique, and has no partners such as in the Christian trinity of Father, son, and holy spirit.

However, Dr. Mahdi's translation of the phrase "Allah the Divider" was a much more difficult phrase to historically and contextually understand. Of the 99 names of Allah in the *Quran*, none of them refer to Allah any type of division or separator. Without a full recounting, a sample of these titled names in the *Quran* describe Allah as "The Exceedingly Compassionate," "The Exceedingly Merciful," "The King," "The Sovereign," "The Peace," "The Holy," "The Divine," "The Purifier," "The Giver of Honor," and 90 others, but none that suggest division or separation.

The curiosity over this phrase prompted an inquiry and request for a retranslation of the knife script. We contacted Arabic language instructor Sahal Jama Mohamed, who agreed to assist. We provided the same image of the knife sides that South sent to Dr. Mahdi over 50 years prior, and did not reveal to him the original translation. Mr. Mohamed returned with a different translation, with supporting linguistic evidence for the new

translation. As shown in the accompanying figure, in Mr. Mohamed's new translation, one side states, "There is no god except" and the name "Muhammad," while to reverse read, "messenger of God." Contextually, this is the full statement of the *Shahadah* that states that there is no god except God and Muhammad is his messenger.

Mr. Mohamed also noted the absence of vowels and accent marks on the knife script. He noted that Arabic is a language that uses mainly consonants, and in many cases, vowels are omitted in written text and are often implied or understood when reading Arabic. The accent marks were likely omitted due to the limited space on the knife. When asked of his level of confidence in his translation, Mr. Mohamed observed that Arabic text from the *Quran* had not changed since its completion in the 7th century AD (or roughly the past 1300 years). While there are over 5000 spoken forms of Arabic across Africa and Asia, all read the same text, written in the same way, from the *Quran*. These observations by Mr. Mohamed also call into question the origin of the knife's manufacture. As has been mentioned previously, based on the style of the script, Dr. Mahdi pointed to possible origins in the Malay Peninsula in the East Indies.

So, where is the knife from, and how did it get to the small port of Brunswick in southeastern North Carolina? At first thought, it might seem unlikely that such an artifact would be found at a colonial port town in America. However, the foreign nature of this artifact allows us to consider Brunswick in a broader spectrum as connected members of the world trade network that was operating during the 18th century. The port of Brunswick operated mainly in the export of naval stores to Britain, the new American colonies, and the West Indies.

The origin of the knife is presently unknown. With British power seated in India and the establishment of the successful East India Company, trade between the Company and much of the British colonial sphere definitely occurred in the 17th through 19th centuries. Imported Oriental porcelain that originated from the Far East has been found in nearly every excavated house ruin in Brunswick, indicating a well-established trade network and presence of world travelers and visitors from different cultures. Despite the different script interpretation, its creation on the Malay Peninsula may not be ruled out. It could also have a possible West African origin, which was often visited by sailors and ships that participated in the Atlantic triangle trade of enslaved Africans, cash crops, and manufactured goods.

The Port Brunswick shipping register also lists many imports and exports to and from the British ports of Bristol and London, as well as many ports in the Caribbean. While we cannot be certain, it is possible that this knife was accidentally dropped or lost by a foreign sailor while delivering trade goods from the East Indies or the Caribbean. Equally, it is also possible that a British sailor could have acquired the knife during a visit to the East Indies, West Africa, or a Caribbean port, and then dropped or lost it while at port in Brunswick.

Another possibility for the knife's origins that must be considered is from the Spanish Attack in 1748. The Spanish successfully captured Brunswick for three days until the colonists surprised the Spanish raiders and drove them back to their ships. It is possible that sometime during that time period, a Spaniard dropped the knife that could have been acquired from the Far East, Africa, or in the Caribbean. We do recognize the Spanish, much like the British, had worldwide trade ties for the exchange of material goods.

At this time, we can only make a few conclusive statements about the Arabic knife. The new translation of the knife with the text of the *Shabadab* reveals that whoever carried this knife was very likely of devout in his Islamic faith. We also can speculate that it was not made in southeastern North Carolina, and its appearance at Brunswick is most likely a direct result of the global interconnectedness of the trade networks that was operating in the 18th century, in which Brunswick was an active Mid-Atlantic participant. It is also a popular item on display viewed and discussed by visitors in the interpretive museum at the Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson State Historic Site.

This penknife also highlights the need for archaeologists studying Brunswick, and other similar previously investigated archaeological sites, to respectfully look beyond and build upon the original archaeological interpretations, especially those prior to the 1960s. While Lee, Tarleton, and South contributed an invaluable wealth of historical and archaeological information about Brunswick, the pre-1960s archaeology of their era focused primarily on the white male property owners whose town homes were the subject of their investigations. While these pioneers well discussed the upper status residents and their households, little to no material or interpretive consideration was given to larger anthropological topics of gender (in the role of women), ethnicity (such as the presence of enslaved Africans), meddling or lower class status associated with the port and shipping community, or when possible, other ideational ideas about religion, as well as how people understood their 18th century world and their place within it.

While the original research by Lee, Tarleton, and South was an outstanding starting point to understand the development of Brunswick, it is now time to reexamine the individuals of the

past who either lived at, or visited the port town. Archaeological evidence, such as the penknife described in this study, point to a large thriving community that included many members of different ethnicities, genders, social and economic statuses, and religious beliefs. Playwright William Shakespeare tells us in *As You Like It*, that, "All The world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: They all have their exits and their entrances; And one may in his time plays many parts." If we take this statement at its words, it is no comedy to undertake our responsibilities as modern researchers building on the work of our predecessors, and to try to give historical voice and understand the many parts played by the lesser known but equally important members of the 18th century community of Brunswick.

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This newsletter article was adapted from a presentation at the 47th Annual Meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology, Québec City, Québec, Canada, in the symposium entitled, "The Revelatory Power of an Artifact in Context." A complete version of this study is presently in preparation for print.



The Prehistory of North Carolina: An Archaeological Symposium

The last remaining copies of *The Prehistory of North Carolina: An Archaeological Symposium*, edited by Mark A. Mathis and Jeff Crow, have been reduced by 90 percent to \$1.00 per copy (plus tax and shipping). To order, visit the Historical Publications online store at <http://nc-historical-publications.stores.yahoo.net/profnocaarsy1.html>. You can also call 919-733-7442, ext. 0, to place an order. Once these copies are sold, this title will be out of print. *Note that all copies have slight cover imperfections.*

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Give a child you love a FREE membership in the Junior North Carolina Archaeological Society!

Want to share your love for archaeology with a special child? For a limited time, NCAS members receive one free 2014 Junior North Carolina Archaeological Society membership.

The Junior North Carolina Archaeological Society (JNCAS) is geared toward young North Carolinians interested in archaeology. Members receive occasional email updates, an annual kids-only newsletter, notices about special exhibits and events of interest to kids, and a discounted registration fee for Archaeology Explorers Summer Camps (overnight and day camps based in Morganton, NC).

To activate your free one-year membership, complete the registration form found in this newsletter. Free memberships can be upgraded to family memberships for \$5.

NCAS Newsletter Publication Schedule

All NCAS members are encouraged to submit articles and news items to Dee Nelms, Associate Editor, for inclusion in the *Newsletter*. Please use the following cut-off dates as guides for your submissions:

Winter Issue – January 31 Summer Issue – July 31
Spring Issue – April 31 Fall Issue – October 31