



2007 Annual Meeting - October 11-14 - Philadelphia, PA

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Grave Matters: Converso Funerary Art and Identity in Colonial America

Schedule Information:

Scheduled Time: Thu, Oct 11 - 6:00pm - 7:45pm **Building/Room:** Philadelphia Marriott / Room 404
In Session: Early American Circuits of Memory

Author:

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Abstract:

This paper addresses the question of how have the funerary art of conversos (hidden-Jews) in eighteenth-century Newport, Rhode Island both created and sustained a transnational community and culture, as well as supported ideologies of race, ethnicity, and religion. I argue that Newport conversos used gravestone iconography to unite the divided worlds of their lived selves. The conversos of colonial Newport may be the ultimate transnational subjects, in that they cross religious, ethnic, and geographic boundaries. The term "converso" is applied to Sephardic Jews who were forced to convert to Catholicism during the Spanish and Portuguese inquisitions, and who later often relapsed back into Judaism. In Spanish the word shares a root with both conversion (conversión) and to converse (conversar). Indeed it is the linguistic dynamism of the conversos that allowed them to succeed as colonial merchants. Although living in the British colonies and often attaining British citizenship, the Sephardic Jews of Newport maintained personal, religious, linguistic, and economic connections to family in Portugal, Amsterdam, Curacao, Barbados, and Jamaica. Upon arriving in Newport, many conversos underwent circumcision, remarried their wives, and openly took Hebrew names. Scholars have debated greatly to what extent the Catholicism of the conversos impacted the Jewish practice of the colonies and to what group colonial Jews showed the greatest allegiance: Nação (Portuguese), Kahal (Jewish), or their new British colonial home. Newport's Jewish cemetery provides an important resource for tracing the changes in Sephardic self-definition and the blending of the Nação, Kahal, and Colonial worlds. For many Sephardic Jews, gravestones were the only place that recorded their Portuguese, English, and Hebrew names simultaneously. Similarly, inscriptions from these stones are usually bilingual or trilingual and reflect the competing identities of the Jewish settlers. The competition between identities was religious as well as national: colonial Jewish gravestones are often more ornately carved than those in European Jewish cemeteries, and the carvings often include what scholars perceive to be both Jewish and Christian iconography. The prevalence of human figures on Jewish colonial stones is particularly interesting in that human figures (as opposed to animals or vegetation) was often seen by Jewish communities to be a violation of the second commandment and hence a sign of possible Catholic influence. While amateur historians have noted the interesting mixture of languages and symbol systems found on the stones, there has been no attempt to compare the stones found throughout the colonies, or to consider changes over time. In this presentation I provide the first systematic analysis of a colonial American Jewish cemetery. I compare the changes in iconography and inscription used in Newport to those used in three other prominent colonial Jewish Cemeteries (Curacao, Jamaica, New York). This study allows us to better understand the process of religious change in colonial America and the fluidity of Sephardic self-definition. I argue that for the Sephardim, gravestones allowed for an iconography of multiplicity in which their competing identities finally rested together in an integrated space.

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