

# Identifying change in household- and specialist-produced coarse earthenwares from 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jamaican slave villages

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## 1. Introduction

Archaeologists have long been intrigued by hand-built, open-fired coarse earthenwares found on 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century sites occupied by enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and United States.

In Jamaica, these hand-built coarse earthenwares, often referred to as *yabbos*, were accompanied by several types of locally-made, glazed, and/or kiln-fired ceramics likely manufactured and marketed by enslaved specialists.

Here we use quantitative, systematic evidence from 19 slave site occupations in Jamaica to test current theories about the role of, and variation in, locally-produced coarse earthenware types through time.



## 2. Expectations

Four current theories shape how archaeologists working in the Caribbean think about locally-produced coarse earthenwares in Jamaica. Using data from undocumented urban sites and slave households, Hauser argues that types of coarse earthenwares produced in Jamaica varied little throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (2007, 2008). Others see their manufacture and use as clear indicators of African ceramic production and culinary traditions (Armstrong 1999, Ebanks 2003). Nearly all argue that locally-produced ceramics were critical to many slaves' successful economic activities in Jamaica's Sunday markets.

If these arguments are correct, the frequency of coarse earthenwares should remain constant throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Rates of imported enslaved Africans were consistently high and Sunday markets were critical to slaves' economic and physical well-being during this same time period. If production and demand for locally-produced ceramics was driven by consumers seeking to enact African traditions, then discard of these wares should remain steady.

Recent comparative research suggests, however, that enslaved Africans in Jamaica and the United States preferred costly European goods over locally-produced ceramics for cooking and dining and for use in local and regional signaling systems that had little to do with African traditions (Galle 2010, in press; Rampersad et al. 2009). If this was the case, we should expect the following trends:

- The use and discard of locally-produced coarse earthenware ceramics will decline as more costly and more desirable imported refined ceramics enter the markets of Jamaica in the mid-to-late 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- The use and production of local coarse earthenware types should change to reflect the changing consumer demands of slaves.

## 3. The Sites

Data used in this poster come from 19 phased assemblages from excavated domestic slave occupations at four sugar plantations: New Montpelier, Stewart Castle, Seville, and Papine. The artifact and context data from each site are available to archaeologists and the public for free online through The Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (<http://www.daacs.org>).

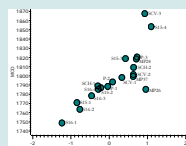


## 4. Dating the Assemblages

Discerning temporal trends in the ceramic data requires the development of a fine-grained, island-wide chronology for these sites.

We began by using two complementary statistical methods—Correspondence Analysis (CA) and Mean Ceramic Dates (MCDs)—to produce detailed intrasite chronologies for each site (Neiman et al. 2010).

Having established temporal occupational phases within each site, we seriated the site to produce a reliable island-wide chronology. Each site phase was ranked chronologically based on its CA dimension 1 scores.

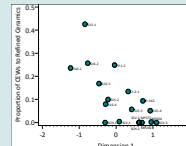


MCDs for individual site phases range from 1748 to 1843.

## 5. Coarse Earthenwares: Why Demand?

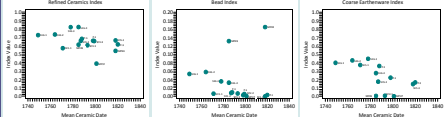
With dates in hand, we plotted the frequency of non-imported coarse earthenwares relative to imported refined ceramics by site phase.

The dramatic decrease in the frequency of coarse earthenwares counters the long-held assumption that locally-produced coarse earthenware ceramics were ubiquitous on slave sites in Jamaica throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.



### Coarse Earthenwares as Africanisms?

This trend also counters the expectation that coarse earthenware abundance should remain constant through time if local ceramic production and use played a critical role in the expression and retention of African ceramic manufacturing and culinary practices. Instead, the downward trend suggests that as the 18<sup>th</sup> century progressed, and imported, refined wares became increasingly available in markets, enslaved Africans selected costly refined ceramics over inexpensive, locally-produced wares. Abundance indexes (see Galle 2010 for details) also suggest that non-ceramic artifacts, such as glass trade beads, may be more accurate markers of African cultural and aesthetic traditions.



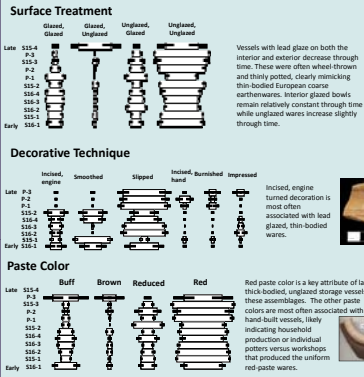
Imported and costly refined ceramics were steadily discarded by slaves in large quantities over the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Slave remains in remains rarely provided context to these items. The high discard rates of refined ceramics indicate that slaves actively received imported refined ceramics in the weekly markets that played a central role in Jamaica's internal slave economy. Purchases of expensive, imported, and ultimately non-essential displays used by enslaved people throughout the Atlantic World (Galle 2010, in press).

By the 1820s, the abundance of locally-made coarse earthenwares had declined dramatically, if demand for ceramics was driven by the desire for practical (that were produced using African pottery traditions). Rates of coarse earthenware discard should remain steady through time as enslaved Africans continued to use high-cost imported refined ceramics as they were discarded into dumps. As seen in the trend abundance index, we might also expect to see high coarse earthenware discard rates at sites like New Montpelier that had high rates of first-generation Africans living in a resource-restricted environment.

## 6. From Tablewares to Bulk Storage: Types Change Through Time

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

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



We plotted the mean log sherd thickness of all sherds identified as non-imported coarse earthenware. As expected, there is a marked increase in sherd thickness over time. Beads, jars, and other non-utilitarian glazed and unglazed hand-built vessels were generally thin-walled. As the seriation and sherd thickness plot suggest, these "tablewares" and cooking vessels decrease over time. Thick-walled, unglazed vessels with red paste dominate the later coarse earthenware assemblages and diagnostic sherds indicate that vessels took the form of large storage jars or may have been architectural fragments such as roofing tiles.

Unglazed, red paste color. Lead glazed, buff-light brown paste color.

## 7. Conclusions

Data from 19 slave site assemblages in Jamaica make this the largest and most chronologically detailed study of Jamaica-produced coarse earthenware ceramics from slave households. Patterns revealed here indicate that current archaeological arguments about these locally produced earthenwares need reevaluation.

- The discard of coarse earthenwares on slave sites in Jamaica decreases dramatically through time, especially in relationship to costly refined earthenwares imported from the UK, Europe and China.
- As the use and discard of coarse earthenwares decrease, the abundance of refined ceramics remains steadily high, suggesting that enslaved Africans chose to purchase more costly refined wares for dining as soon as they were available in the marketplace.
- Seriation of vessel attributes suggests that locally-produced vessels that imitated European wares in regards to glazing and decoration decreased during the fourth-quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century while large, thick-bodied, unglazed vessels suitable for storage and bulk processing remained popular.
- While the local production of handbuilt vessels and pots reserved for cooking and food consumption decreases, large-scale production of inexpensive, bulky forms for water and food storage remains constant throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This fits with Hauser's argument that a select number of specialized workshops manufactured ceramics that were then distributed across the island (2008).
- The abundance of glass trade beads remains steady throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century while coarse earthenwares decline. Beads, which have been associated with African spiritual and cultural practices, have also been linked to high populations of first-generation African slaves. That coarse earthenware abundance declines through time suggests that these wares may not be as closely linked to African ceramic and food preparation traditions as archaeologists have previously argued.

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