Sugar, Slaves, and Shovel Test Pits: Preliminary Results from Nevis

1. Introduction

This paper explores changes in plantation and slave village organization during the 18th and early-19th centuries on two sugar estates located on the island of Nevis in the eastern Caribbean. We use survey data to evaluate competing models of economic and social change in the British Atlantic and its slavery-based economy.

2. The Models

Decline . . .

The traditional economic model suggests a permanent decline in the productivity of the British Atlantic during the second half of the 18th century. This led British elites to abandon the slave trade in 1807 and slavery in 1833 (Crawford 2001, Riggs 1945, Rubery 2003, Williams 1946).

Or Rise?

A more recent model points to the steadily increasing profitability of 18th-century sugar plantations in the Caribbean, spurred by gains in slave productivity (Jinks et al. 2003, Winder 1988). Recent archaeological evidence favors the second model. This model posits that abolition was achieved at real economic cost to British elites.

3. Archaeology to the Rescue!

Archaeological data can help clarify the issue. If the “Rise” model is correct, we should see evidence for:

1. Changes in patterns of land use and technological investment that increased efficiency of sugar production
2. Better living conditions for slaves, fewer involuntary, and greater flexibility for slaves through improved quarters
3. Changes in the supply of African slavery, and the prospect of the slave traders’ livelihood;
4. Data from recent archaeological surveys of two Nevis sugar estates, New River and Jessups, offer evidence for both.

4. The Sites

Located on opposite sides of Nevis, the New River and Jessup estates followed similar trajectories. Both estates were established in the 1720s and their peak periods were around 1750-1760. At this time, 111 enslaved African laborers at Jessups and 132 people were employed at New River. More occupations from both estates indicate that many more were imported directly from Africa while others were imported as “Ghut.

5. Survey Methods

- Detailed test pits (STPs) were placed on the landscape across the survey areas. Each STP was 5x5 meters. All data were recovered using hand tools. Photographs and georeferenced data were recorded for each STP.

6. Chronological Inference

Without chronological control, our STP data are analytically intractable. We used frequency variation methods to infer chronology for the STPs, using dates from each site.

- We used empirical-Bayes techniques to smooth counts of ceramic ware types in each STP based on prior probability distributions whose parameters were estimated by counts in STPs within 12 meters.

- We developed a Bayesian model to smooth ceramic type frequency variation.

- We used correspondence analysis to analyze ceramic dating to identify the chronology that includes type frequency variation.

7. Evidence from Landscape Reorganization

- New River and Jessups I appear to have been abandoned by the end of the 17th century, with New River I being left to forest. Jessups I was abandoned the following century.

8. Conclusions

- Our preliminary model supports the more recent “Rise” model. In addition to landscape reorganization and the creation of new economic opportunity among the former estate the evidence suggests a growing presence of sugar processing technology on New River estates in the mid-18th century. The evidence indicates that New River estates expanded their sugar output in order to maintain production.

- Together, these data support the “Rise” model, with its significant implications for abolition. Initially the slave trade and labor of slavery itself, was not intentionally downturn but it received a significant cost to British elites.

References


DAACS, Monticello Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton, The International Slavery Museum.