Negotiating the Plantation Structure: An Archaeological Investigation of Slavery, Subsistence and Daily Practice at Habitation Crève Cœur, Martinique, ca. 1760-1890

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This research integrates archaeologically recovered cultural material, faunal remains and historical data from 18th and 19th century slave and sharecropping households from the plantation site of Habitation Crève Cœur, on the island of Martinique. Through a synthesis of these data, I examine how the enslaved community, and later free sharecroppers who lived and labored on the site, negotiated the social and physical constraints of the plantation and island landscape through daily practices.

Crève Cœur is situated in the commune of St. Anne on the French island of Martinique in the Lesser Antilles chain of the Caribbean Sea. The plantation relied on the labor of enslaved and later free African and African-descended peoples, and operated from the mid-18th through the late 19th century, primarily for the production of sugar and its byproducts for export to the métropole and French colonies. The objective of long-term archaeological investigations completed at the site was to reconstruct the lifeways of the enslaved laborers at the plantation. The site contains standing ruins of industrial buildings, the maison de maître (the planter’s house/great house) and outbuildings associated with sugar production and storage. Archaeological investigations delineated discrete and largely undisturbed slave occupations on the terraced slopes of the hill located above and behind the maison de maître, including well-preserved faunal remains.

My project relies on an environmental archaeology methodology, specifically zooarchaeology, coupled with historical data. Historical archaeologists employ both the
historical and material record to inform our research questions. Due to the paucity of narratives and accounts directly from slaves, and the biases inherent in European accounts, material culture from archaeological research provides some of the only direct access to the local lifeways of enslaved laborers in the Caribbean. Zooarchaeologists identify, analyze and quantify animal remains recovered from archaeological contexts to investigate the system of food procurement, processing/preparation, distribution, preservation, consumption, and discard.

Archaeological research identified occupations that spanned the operation of the plantation, beginning around 1760, through emancipation (1848), and until the end of the sharecropping period (ca. 1890). Results indicate that the slaves at Crève Cœur manufactured pottery (known colloquially as coco neg), produced and consumed a variety of commodities, and utilized the plantation and surrounding island landscape to survive and negotiate their situation. Both the slaves and sharecroppers gardened, raised livestock (pigs, sheep, goats, and poultry), and procured wild terrestrial and marine resources, exploiting nearby waters to acquire diverse types of fish and shellfish.

Through the coupling of historical and archaeological data this dissertation argues that the daily subsistence practices of the enslaved laborers at Crève Cœur are a local manifestation of the developing economic and social autonomy of slaves on Martinique. From the mid-17th Century through emancipation, the human chattel on this island lived and died in efforts to increase the wealth of planters and of the crown. This research reveals that despite a seemingly impossible situation, slaves on Martinique managed to develop strategies to survive under dire circumstances, and through their actions, formulated creative practices and cultural traditions that persisted after emancipation and into today.