

SLAVERY IN EARLY ST HELENA, PART THREE: THE CONSOLIDATION OF SLAVERY, 1695-1730

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The institution of slavery was central to the development of modern St Helena. However, the early history of slavery in the island remains underexplored by historians. A series of articles, published in *Wirebird* over three years (vols. 50, 51 and the present volume), has been concerned with filling this gap in the literature by studying the history of slavery in St Helena from the founding of the English colony in 1659 until the 1730s.

The first article explored the system of ‘black servant’ labour in St Helena. Between 1659 and 1682, African and East Indian labourers at St Helena were commonly referred to as ‘black servants’ and were theoretically able to become free planters after conversion to Christianity and a fixed period of service varying from three to seven years. The East India Company (hereafter EIC) was particularly mindful that these black servants were to be treated with respect by their English masters and to voluntarily enter into their service. Consequently, they sought to offer protections for the black population on their voyages to the island, encouraged their conversion to Christianity through religious instruction, and curtailed the length of their service. Although the surviving evidence is partial, it is likely there was a significant gap between the labour policies theorised by the company’s directors in London and the actual treatment of black workers in St Helena, and that black servants on the island in this period were actually held in a permanent form of enslavement.¹

The second article explored the expansion of slavery in St Helena in the 1680s. The EIC imported greater numbers of enslaved people into the island in these decades and the company’s attitude towards labour also began to change: an increased incidence of slave rebellion and plans to develop a plantation economy in the colony encouraged the EIC to adopt much harsher laws and labour policies in St Helena, modelled explicitly on the rigorous Barbados slave codes. Studying the EIC’s efforts to foster the development of plantation slavery in St Helena in the late seventeenth century helps to underscore the significance of the Caribbean colonies within England’s emerging empire and how social and economic institutions which had developed in the Caribbean island of Barbados served as a wide-ranging colonial model for the English, even influencing ideas and practices within the EIC and at St Helena.²

The present article brings the three-part series to a close by analysing the local climatic, environmental, and geographical factors that, by the early 1690s, had led to the failure

of the EIC's project to establish a plantation economy in St Helena based on a Caribbean model. Despite the EIC's lack of success in developing large-scale sugar plantations in St Helena, the institution of slavery remained an important part of economic and social life on the island into the eighteenth century. This article will therefore also explore the consolidation of the system of slavery in St Helena in the period 1695-1730, detailing forms of work and resistance among enslaved people in St Helena in the early eighteenth century.

THE FAILURE OF THE CARIBBEAN PLANTATION MODEL IN ST HELENA

By the early 1690s it had become evident that the EIC's vision of establishing large-scale sugar plantations in St Helena was not going to be successful. Although the EIC's directors were clearly well informed about patterns of social and economic development in the Caribbean and had devoted significant resources to the development of a plantation economy in St Helena, the EIC's project failed due to a variety of local climatic, environmental, and geographical factors.³

Unlike Caribbean islands such as Barbados, the climate and environment of St Helena is not conducive to the production of tropical cash crops. The mild climate, high elevation, mountainous environment, and rocky terrain of St Helena made the island thoroughly unsuited to developing a commercial industry based around the production of sugar cane. However, it is crucial to emphasise that this was not what early modern theories of climate suggested, nor what contemporary descriptions of the island had initially indicated. In the seventeenth century, European theorists believed that latitudinal variation was the most significant determinant of climate. In *An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon* (1681), for example, the EIC employee and slave trader Robert Knox observed that 'the difference of Longitude doth not much change or alter the nature of the Climate as the Latitude doth'. It was presumed, therefore, that all regions of the world which lay between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, such as St Helena, would possess a tropical climate.⁴

The company's directors also contended that the mountainous environment of St Helena caused dramatic temperature fluctuations, with the valleys being 'as hot as Barbados', while the peaks of the mountains were 'as cold as the middle parts of France'. By this logic, the company thought that planters should have been able to cultivate sugar cane, indigo and spices in the low-lying valleys which run throughout the island.⁵ Based on contemporary understandings of climatic variation, therefore, the effort to establish Caribbean-style plantation agriculture in St Helena was an entirely rational decision for the company's directors in London although, in reality, of course, St Helena's climate and natural environment were not at all favourable for tropical plantation agriculture. This is largely because the prevailing southeast trade winds and the Benguela Current act as a cooling influence on the island's climate.⁶

Furthermore, seventeenth-century publications commonly extolled St Helena's bounteous and commodious environment. The island was depicted as a paradise within the genres of travel literature and fiction, which provided sailors making the long journey between Europe and India with much-needed water and bounteous supplies of wild fruit. For example, in the fictional work *The Man in the Moone* (1638), the protagonist Domingo Gonsales describes 'the healthfulness of the Aire there, the fruitfulness of the soile, and the abundance of all manner of things necessary for sustaining the life of man'. While in 1644, the EIC employee Richard Boothby extolled the 'pleasant, healthfull, fruitfull, and commodious' nature of the island. The attitude that St Helena was a bounteous and commodious island survived well into the eighteenth century, and probably informed later efforts by the EIC to try to cultivate grape vines on the island (to produce wine) using Huguenot experts.⁷

By 1689, the directors of the EIC finally admitted that the 'infertility of the ground' on St Helena was the reason for their 'changeable attempts upon sugar, cotton and indigo'. Those living in St Helena, who had a much better understanding of local conditions, had been trying to tell the company's directors this for years. The St Helena plantation owner Orlando Bagley, who claimed to have experience planting 'in many severall countries', told the company explicitly in 1684 that 'no West India commodities will grow well at St. Helena'. In the early eighteenth century, efforts were made to revitalise the project to establish sugar plantations in St Helena by the governor of the island, John Roberts, who had personal experience in the Caribbean. Despite some unsubstantiated reports in September 1709 that the canes were 'flourishing very well' in Sandy Bay valley, this attempt to cultivate sugar on St Helena remained small scale, and the sprawling plantations envisioned by the company's directors during the 1670s and 1680s never emerged.⁸

THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE SYSTEM OF SLAVERY

Despite the failure of the EIC's project to establish a Caribbean-style plantation economy in St Helena, these efforts had long-term ramifications. The hundreds of captives brought to St Helena in the 1680s increased the enslaved population of the island and the more rigorous legal codes that were implemented in this decade further curtailed the freedoms of island's black inhabitants. In the first three decades of the eighteenth century the system of slavery continued to develop in St Helena, remaining an important part of economic and social life in the island. Enslaved people from Madagascar continued to be imported to satisfy the demand for labour on the island, new laws were passed regulating the liberties of slaves, and enslaved workers were forced to work in a variety of different occupations, both skilled and menial. At several points in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, groups of enslaved people in St Helena sought to free themselves by planning to rebel and to escape the island. Ultimately, by 1730, the institution of slavery had become an integral part of economy and society in St Helena, in large part due to the formative role played by developments that had occurred decades earlier in the seventeenth century.

Captives from Madagascar and West Africa continued to be imported into St Helena by the EIC in the opening decades of the eighteenth century, although their supply was often disrupted by imperial warfare between European empires in these decades. For instance, during the period of Britain's involvement in the War of Spanish Succession (1701-13), the company's directors explained that they had 'no prospect while the warr lasts to supply [St Helena] with Madagascar negroes or those of Guiney', but suggested that the island's inhabitants could instead purchase some from the independent slave traders who sometimes 'touch at St. Helena with negroes' for refreshment while enroute to the Caribbean.⁹ The only other advice the EIC had was to manage the enslaved workers already at St Helena more efficiently, by taking care 'they earn their living and be well looked after'.¹⁰ Unfortunately for the company's directors in London, it appears that successive governors of St Helena were negligent in their management of the company's slaves and plantations during the early eighteenth century. Enslaved people owned by the EIC were being used as personal servants by the governor and his retainers rather than for their intended use within agriculture and industry. It was said that whilst Mr Hoskison was in charge (as Deputy Governor 1711-12), he 'affected so much pomp that he always had three or four of our blacks to wait upon him', and that the 'plantations suffer[ed] extreamly by the blacks being taken off from looking after them and employed in carrying the governor's friends up and down in hammocks'. The EIC feared that these actions would endanger the food supply of the entire island, as 'the plantations wanted their labour' and the yams were left 'to rot and spoil'.¹¹

Less than three months after the conclusion of peace negotiations ending the War of Spanish Succession, the EIC once again felt confident enough to commission a series of large-scale slave trading voyages to resolve labour shortages at St Helena. In October 1713 Captain Thomas Sitwell was instructed to supply 60 enslaved people to St Helena, whilst in February 1714 the *Mercury Sloop* delivered 43 enslaved people from West Africa of 'the same kind [that] are often carried to the West Indies' to planters on the island.¹² In March 1715 five more merchant vessels were licensed to transport 'sound healthful and merchantable slaves natives of Madagascar, two thirds males one third females, none of them under sixteen or above thirty years of age' to St Helena.¹³ In subsequent years, St Helena continued to be regularly supplied with enslaved labourers, either through large-scale slave trading voyages financed by the EIC or via commerce with private merchants who stopped at St Helena to resupply while transporting captives to the Caribbean.

This regular slave trading traffic increased the enslaved population of the island. A series of demographic records relating to the enslaved population of St Helena begin in the early 1720s. In 1723, there were 647 enslaved people in the island, of whom roughly two-thirds were male. The EIC itself claimed ownership over 34% of the enslaved workers in St Helena in 1723, with the remainder being privately owned. The enslaved population of St Helena remained relatively stable until the early 1760s, when it began to increase. The number of people enslaved in St Helena exceeded 1000 for the first time in 1772. By 1811, there were 1,253 people forced to work in slavery in the island.¹⁴ The size of the slave population in St Helena in this period was small by comparison to the

tens of thousands of enslaved African workers who laboured in Caribbean islands such as Barbados and Jamaica. However, when placed in the context of the small size of the white population of the island, it is clear a majority of St Helena's population was enslaved by the early eighteenth century. The existence of a slave majority in St Helena reinforced the dependence of the island's white population on the use of enslaved workers in a variety of occupations, and also heightened fears about slave rebellion.

Enslaved people were forced to perform a variety of tasks in the economy of St Helena, all of which ultimately helped to ensure that the island continued to function as an important re-supply point in the EIC's trade with Asia. Slaves were commonly used in five occupations, which furthered the governmental and commercial aims of the EIC in different ways. They performed hard agricultural labour growing foodstuffs for the island's population, worked in skilled jobs as artificers, served in the domestic sphere, and constructed military fortifications for the defence of the island. The white inhabitants of St Helena also used enslaved people in the maritime sector. In 1684, the EIC recommended that the colonists in St Helena set 'their negroes when they can spare them, upon the taking, salting and drying of fish in boats round the Island', for which purpose a set of useful tools and implements were sent, including 'hooks, lines, yawles, heading and splitting knives'. This guaranteed that 'when the land [was] too dry to be dugg or wrought upon' there would still be work available for enslaved labourers.¹⁵ Using slaves in the fisheries also supported the food security of St Helena in times of drought, increased the nutritional profile of the inhabitants, and enabled the planters to drive a regular trade by provisioning ships headed to India and Barbados with salt fish.

The training of enslaved people as artificers was also encouraged by the EIC, because having a skilled enslaved workforce was understood to have wider benefits for colonial society. In 1684 soldiers in the garrison of St Helena who had been apprenticed during their youth in England were ordered to 'teach their respective trades to the most docile of your negroes'.¹⁶ By the mid-1710s, the most 'docile tractable and ingenious' slaves were trained under Mr Cleeve to 'do joyners and carpenters work', and some years later his enslaved protégées 'Will the Carpenter' and Jack Grewer passed on their useful skills to other enslaved apprentices.¹⁷ However, the youthful demographic composition of the slave population in St Helena, where, in 1717, 117 out of 310 slaves living on the island were children under the age of twelve, presented a number of difficulties for the white inhabitants. Large numbers of enslaved dependents who were not yet old enough to be apprenticed or perform hard labour needed feeding and clothing, and were thought by the directors in London to be a significant drain on the EIC's resources.¹⁸

In their letters to St Helena, it was common for the directors of the EIC to explicitly order that enslaved people working in these varied jobs should be treated humanely by the governor, the company's employees, and all the free planters. For example, in March 1714, the EIC emphasised that their slaves 'ought to be well taken care of, not only on the score of humanity, but likewise for our own advantage, considering how much their labour contributes to the general benefit of the plantations [and] the buildings'.¹⁹ Although enslaved people in both St Helena and Bencoolen (Sumatra) were to be kept

to constant hours of labour and managed with ‘proper discipline’, the company’s directors stated that they would ‘not have them cruelly treated if possible ... remember they are men’.²⁰ None but their immediate overseers were allowed to strike enslaved people, and even then they were ordered not to abuse their authority and ‘tyrannise’ over the slave community.²¹

These benevolent policies may have been issued because the EIC was primarily a profit-oriented trading corporation, and its directors were concerned that their great expense in transporting enslaved workers to their colonies would go to waste if these labourers were maimed or killed by brutal treatment. Alternatively, the humanitarian inclinations of the EIC towards enslaved people in both St Helena and Bencoolen may represent a lasting legacy of the older and more lenient labour traditions used by the company in a south Atlantic and Indian Ocean setting (which was explored in-depth in the first of this three-part series of articles).²² Of course, though, the persistent threat of violence and restrictive legal codes meant that the benevolent policies pursued by EIC officials in London towards their enslaved workers were rarely implemented on the ground in St Helena by the white inhabitants. For instance, during a voyage from St Helena to the Caribbean, Captain White reported that the enslaved people, ‘told him of their miserable usage, and that they had little or nothing besides yams, and rejoiced exceedingly they were delivered from St. Helena’.²³

That there was a significant disjuncture between the EIC’s benevolent instructions and how enslaved people were actually treated in St Helena in the early eighteenth century is perhaps best demonstrated by enslaved people’s resistance and the passage of new laws severely restricting their liberties. Fears about slave resistance and rebellion became an important matter for the EIC in 1695, a year in which conspiracy scares in both St Helena and Bencoolen threatened to undermine colonial stability. In St Helena, on 19 November 1695, an enslaved girl named Hannah hurried to her master Thomas Goodwin to impart some important information. She had overheard a rebellious faction of the slave population declare that they ‘intended that very night to murder all the white inhabitants of this place by breaking into theare houses and cutting all theare throats’.²⁴ Thomas Goodwin and his brother-in-law John Goodwin quickly took action by arming themselves and working through the night with other colonists to apprehend all the enslaved people they could find. By seven o’clock the next morning all the enslaved people were safely consigned to the fort, and inquiries could begin into identifying and punishing those responsible. After a series of court hearings, on the 16 December it was decreed that for the safety of the white inhabitants of St Helena an example should be made of the guilty parties. The ringleaders of the conspiracy faced severe and brutal retribution. Jack was suspended in chains alive on a hill that faced the fort and was left to starve to death, while Will and Randall were hanged and then publicly displayed with their bowels and head removed. Over the course of four days the lesser offenders, such as Jone, Ruface, Roger and Civil, were flogged more than three hundred times, and were branded on their shoulders with the letter ‘R’ to signify their disruptive behaviour.²⁵

As this episode from 1695 demonstrates, during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries one of the greatest potential threats to the EIC's continued presence in St Helena was from within, as enslaved people forced to work in the island used the threat of violence as a way to articulate their grievances with the English administration. Company officials and white planters responded by passing repressive legislation to consolidate their hold over power. In 1721, for instance, intelligence filtered back to the directors in London that the white inhabitants of St Helena were growing 'afraid of an insurrection because the governor calls the blacks his children and they are grown unmeasurably sawey [savvy] and too good to be spoke to'.²⁶ This potentially dangerous socio-political situation was compounded by the presence of a sizeable population of free blacks on the island, the majority of whom had found freedom following their master's death. Concern that the free black population were inclined to 'corrupt' and 'tamper' with the slave community was used to justify the curtailment of their civil liberties. New legislation passed by the St Helena council in 1725 emulated laws in the Caribbean in order to solidify the connection between race and slavery on the island. These new laws stated that 'none of the said free blacks shall have liberty to purchase or keep any slave whatsoever', implying that free black people had previously been slave-owners themselves in early St Helena, or theoretically could have been. The new laws also ordered that for the future all 'enfranchised blacks shall be obliged to leave the Island by the first shipping'.²⁷ It was also becoming increasingly common practice for manumitted free black inhabitants of St Helena to be returned to a condition of enslavement. In December 1730, Agnes, 'a free black wench', and her children by the white planter Francis Funge were returned to slavery for a term of 15 years after Agnes threatened to leave the island, generating fears that Funge may lose the 'benefit of their labour'.²⁸

The mistreatment enslaved people suffered in St Helena led, on occasion, to efforts to escape the island. In June 1718, for instance, a fishing yawl was reported missing, and four enslaved men were also absent from work. It was quickly realised that they had 'made some small provision for voyage', having taken extra oars and sails from another boat as well as 'some yams and two caggs each containing about eight gallons of water'. The St Helena council feared 'that they are all gone together to seek their own country as they have a notion they may do and find it' if they follow the sun. Apparently, one of the escaped slaves had said some time before 'he knew how to find his country', explaining that it was 'a great way off upon the water out of sight of this land where the sun rose for he had often observed the sun to rise over a great mountaine which is on Madagascar'.²⁹ This appears to have inspired future escape attempts in subsequent months. In November 1718 the council heard that another four 'black men' had 'run away with a fishing yaul from Prosperous Bay beach', and although the governor sent 'two boats after them [they] could not recover the boat with the runaway blacks again'.³⁰ To try to prevent this from happening again, in January 1719 the St Helena council introduced new regulations instructing the white inhabitants to lock up their boats, masts, and sails every night after they come in from fishing. This was explicitly to prevent the 'black men slaves' making 'their escape off the said Island by running away with the small fishing boats', something which the council thought was foolish

because of the ‘danger they run themselves into by perishing in the sea in persuance of an imaginary liberty.’³¹ The surviving historical record does not reveal whether any of the enslaved people who fled the island in small fishing boats ever reached Madagascar. But the fact they risked death in an attempt to escape slavery in St Helena speaks volumes about the exploitation they experienced, notwithstanding the humanitarian instructions regularly sent by the EIC’s directors in London.

CONCLUSION

Though efforts to recreate a Caribbean plantation economy on St Helena in the 1680s were ultimately unsuccessful due to climatic, environmental, and geographical factors, this project did have some lasting implications. The several hundred enslaved people transported to the island during the 1680s and 1690s contributed to the multiracial population of present-day St Helena. In 1723 there were 647 enslaved laborers on the island, a population which by 1811 had nearly doubled to 1,253 through regular imports of new captives, mainly from Madagascar.³² These enslaved workers were forced to perform a variety of tasks in the economy of St Helena that were key to the island’s continued function as a resupply point in the EIC’s wider commercial network. Despite the EIC’s humanitarian edicts to manage enslaved workers in St Helena with benevolence in the early eighteenth century, the island’s restrictive slave laws, the brutal punishments meted out to enslaved people, and the evidence of regular attempts to resist and escape the condition of slavery all strongly suggest that, in reality, the enslaved in St Helena experienced considerable violence and exploitation.

Although the enslaved workforce of St Helena was small when compared to elsewhere in the British empire, the inhabitants of St Helena would remain dependent on enslaved laborers working in agricultural and skilled occupations until the abolition of slavery in 1834, after which point the island became an important site of British efforts to suppress the slave trade, serving as a port of call for the Royal Navy’s West Africa Squadron and housing over 25,000 ‘recaptive’ or ‘liberated’ Africans in depots between 1840 and 1868.³³

Slavery – which existed in St Helena for around 175 years – is a key component of St Helena’s history. This is well known. The purpose of this series of three articles has been to shed new light on the early stages of the expansion of slavery in St Helena in the seventeenth century, which I hope to have shown is not only interesting in its own right, but was also connected to related developments in the early modern Caribbean, and exerted an important and formative influence on how slavery would later develop in St Helena during the eighteenth century.

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