

12-1-2008

"The Garden of the World": A Historical Archaeology of Sugar Landscapes in the Eastern Caribbean

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Recommended Citation

Hicks, Dan and Kelly, Kenneth G. (2008) ""The Garden of the World": A Historical Archaeology of Sugar Landscapes in the Eastern Caribbean," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 , Article 34.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol11/iss4/34>

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December 2008 Newsletter

Book Review

Dan Hicks. *"The Garden of the World": A Historical Archaeology of Sugar Landscapes in the Eastern Caribbean.* BAR S1632, Studies in Contemporary and Historical Archaeology 3, 2007, ISBN 978 1 4073 0046 7, £30.00.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Kenneth G. Kelly, University of South Carolina

Since the 1980s historical archaeology has profitably investigated the realms of Caribbean sugar plantations, exploring the nature of plantation spatial and social organization, slavery, and the world the slaves made. Yet the majority of this research has focused on the 18th and 19th century, the period of the pinnacle of King Sugar. Into this corpus of archaeological work, Dan Hicks has contributed a useful study that explores the full transition of the sugar plantation world, from the earliest English colonial establishments through the end of slavery and the collapse of the West Indian sugar industry through the lens of changing landscapes. The geographic focus of Hicks' study, which is derived from his doctoral dissertation for the University of Bristol, lies in exploring the evolution of landscapes associated with two estate properties, one on each of two islands of the Eastern Caribbean, St. Kitts (St. Christopher) and St. Lucia. By concentrating on these two estates, Hicks endeavors to see how changing attitudes and ideologies of colonialism are *writ* large on the landscape, drawing upon diverse influences from indigenous settlement, ideals of agricultural estates, inter-European conflicts, to the growing influence of an industrial model of tropical commodity production. As this study most closely explores the materialization of changing notions of British colonialism, the impacts and influences of the African-descended populations who labored on these estates are acknowledged, though not elaborated. This however is in no way a

weakness, because the colonial context of West Indian plantations has been comparatively little investigated, and *The Garden of the World* goes a long way toward addressing this gap.

As Hicks argues in his introduction, the several decades long tradition of “plantation archaeology” has had landscape as a significant aspect of its study. However, Hicks asserts that for the most part the landscape engaged by the archaeologists has been the landscape ideal as depicted by the elite inhabitants through cartography. In his estimation, a serious shortcoming in the landscape approach to plantations has been the general lack of integration of archaeological data, particularly field survey, which reflects the materialities of landscape, and not simply the ideals expressed by colonial planters. In this book, Hicks combines archaeological survey and other sources of data (cartographic, landscape views, etc) to follow the changing landscapes of the Eastern Caribbean. Hicks explicitly attempts to use archaeological data to query the traditional historical narratives derived from archive sources. He concentrates on St. Kitts, as it was the first permanent English settlement in the Caribbean, and on St. Lucia, where repeated, less successful attempts at colonization were made in the first half of the 17th century, before its full integration in the Caribbean circuit of sugar in the second half of the 18th century. The earliest years of English colonization in the West Indies were characterized by economic exploitations that were diverse, with tobacco, indigo and other crops being raised in contrast to the later emphasis on sugar. At both Wingfield estate on St. Kitts, and Balenbouche estate, St. Lucia, Hicks identified archaeological features that related to the pre-sugar landscape of colonization. By interrogating these features of enclosure, and considering them in view of diverse indigenous, agricultural, and settler strategies, he sees the landscape as an arena constructed by complex, multicultural interactions.

With the transition to sugar in the mid to late 17th century, the landscape of early settlement underwent transformation as an almost feudal relationship between tenants and mill owners characterized the early sugar production. In this system, the proprietors of large estates built and maintained mills and the associated industrial buildings, and processed the cane produced by adjacent small holders. The wealthy merchants who were experimenting with these feudal models established their manor houses, their productive capacity (sugar factories) and trading arenas within the enclosed landscapes that built upon the precedent of the Caribs and early colonists. However, by the early years of the 18th century, new notions of how to

appropriately materialize the increasingly elite status of sugar barons began to inscribe themselves on the landscape. Properties became aggregated under fewer owners, who “improved” their lands through the construction of self contained estate-based sugar processing technology supplanting the collective processing of the earlier period, acquired larger numbers of enslaved laborers, rationalized their lands through survey and the use of plantation management manuals, and developed new ideas of park-like plantation landscapes that drew upon classical precedent. Hicks explores these transformations through his investigations at Wingfield and Balenbouche, tying these broader transformations to specific historical and archaeological contexts. The final episodes of the sugar world in the Lesser Antilles are explored through the major transformations of emancipation, the increased efficiency and short-term profit motives that arose from the shortage of labor in the later 19th century, and the eventual move away from sugar as the sugar industry collapsed.

The Garden of the World is a welcome addition to the historical archaeological literature of the Caribbean. Its particular strengths derive from its close consideration of the cultural and historical contexts of these two estates on St. Kitts and St. Lucia. As Hicks himself states, this work supplements the general tendency of historical narratives of the Caribbean to emphasize the particular trajectories of Barbados and Jamaica, and to see those islands as normative for the entire British Caribbean experience.

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