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Elder Protest in Jamaican Slavery: Navigating Paternalism through Longevity

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This article analyzes the growing labor demands on elder enslaved Jamaicans at the turn of the nineteenth century, and the ways that those aging individuals resisted their enslavers' coercions. As England moved to abolish its slave trade in 1807, Jamaican planters drove enslaved elders harder than ever before to make up for labor shortfalls. This intensification produced a backlash, as those who had expected to "age out" of hard labor were forced to continue performing strenuous tasks. Elders resisted by running away from plantations, refusing to work, and bringing grievances before colonial courts—and also by recounting tales of extreme superannuation. Such tales were commonly recounted in obituaries of enslaved Jamaicans who died at incredibly advanced ages while claiming to have witnessed the Port Royal earthquake of 1692. That earthquake had become a key metaphor for Jamaica, representing a moment of transition toward a more "advanced" society of paternalistic plantation agriculture. Enslaved Jamaicans claiming extreme old age drew on that narrative to demand greater paternalistic restraint from masters as well as acknowledgment of their own authority on plantations.