

“Like an epidemic one could only stop with the most violent remedies”: African Poisons versus Livestock Disease in Saint Domingue, 1750–88

*By John Garrigus*

From 1757 to the beginning of the Haitian Revolution, French colonists in Saint Domingue’s North Province believed that enslaved Africans were poisoning them. In 1758 authorities executed an African man known as Macandal for leading a poison conspiracy. His death further convinced colonists that Africans were trying to destroy them, even though healthy animals and enslaved people were far more likely to die suddenly than whites. The history of livestock disease in Saint Domingue shows that the colony was subject to periodic epidemics of anthrax, a fast-acting and deadly bacterial disease. Anthrax was particularly virulent in the colony’s North Province, where high rates of animal mortality led colonists to import thousands of cattle and mules every year. From 1756 to the 1780s, drought and wartime blockades repeatedly caused near-famine conditions in Saint Domingue. Hungry enslaved people ate tainted meat, and thousands of them died. Colonial doctors and veterinarians diagnosed the disease in the 1770s. Yet planters, especially those growing coffee in the mountains, held tight to their belief in African poisoners. In 1788 they successfully argued that a colonist who tortured two enslaved women to death during what he believed was a poisoning outbreak should not be held legally responsible.