

Robert Allen (NYU Abu Dhabi)

‘Arabian slavery and the African slave trade, 1830-1913’

Slavery in Arabia was ‘benign’ in comparison to slavery on sugar plantations in the New World. Many female slaves were domestic servants, while many male slaves were production workers particularly in date cultivation and in pearling at the end of the period. This paper concentrates on the men. Their lot was better than that of sugar plantation slaves in that the slaves in date gardens had their own families and little farms from which they paid half of the output of dates to their owners. Frequently the slaves were manumitted although it was an incomplete form of freedom in that they remained dependent on their former masters and carried on much as before. The difference between the sugar plantations and the date plantations is usually attributed to beneficial teachings of Islam. While Islam was a convenient ideology, I argue in that paper that the organization of slavery in Arabia was in accord with the economic interests of slave owners. Date cultivation (and pearling) were skilled jobs that generated the most income when the slave’s intelligence and commitment were directed to maximizing output. This was best achieved by putting them on share contracts. In contrast, sugar cultivation was largely unskilled work (digging holes, spreading manure, cutting cane) that could be done by unskilled workers fresh from Africa organized in gangs. This view of slavery is developed by examining the tasks involved in the various activities, studying the trade in slaves through collections of slave prices spanning the capturing grounds in Africa to the final employment in Oman, al-Hasa, and the Gulf, analyzed in a GIS framework. Demand for slaves is also worked out in terms of models of date plantations and pearling. Profitability and viability calculations that originated in the great slavery debates of the 1970s are used to explore the issues in Africa and Arabia.