

**The Sugar Factory in the Colonial West Indies:
an Archaeological and Historical Comparative Analysis**

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December 2003**

Introduction

During 18th century, sugar was one of the popular foodstuffs ever, and constituted the world's most important and lucrative commodity—one as important to that era as petroleum is today. Wars were fought, lands were conquered, and an entire people were enslaved, all to gain control over the production of sugar in the face of a burgeoning rise in consumption back in Europe. To keep the flow of sugar, and its by-products molasses and rum, flowing steadily from its main region of production, the Caribbean, took all the efforts of one of the few industries to be born in the colonial world; the perpetually smoking and bubbling industrial complexes became hellish but all too familiar aspects of the West Indian colonial landscape.

Sugar had only become known to Europeans over the prior few hundred years. It had in medieval times been exceedingly rare, and was often thought of or used as a very expensive spice or medicine. By 13th century, sugar had come to the attention of European monarchs, who quickly developed a sweet tooth. Henry III in 1226 appealed to the Mayor of Winchester to get 3 lbs for him; by 1243, Henry ordered 300 lbs for the royal household. By the 15th century, when sugar from Spain and Portugal's island colonies began to reach England, sugar entered into the tastes and cookbooks of the rich (Mintz 1979: 58-59).

Having developed from a rarity to a luxury, events took place that would further change its status from a luxury to a necessity. The European consumption of sugar skyrocketed over the next few centuries, especially in England. Between 1660 and 1700, consumption on that island alone increased by fourfold. It tripled again between 1700 and 1740, then doubled between 1740 and 1775. In other words, between 1660 and 1775, English consumption of sugar increased 20 times, all of this at a time when the population increased only by less than 1.75 times (Mintz 1979: 59). Sugar consumption showed equally impressive growth in the 19th and 20th centuries, stopping only in the second half of the 20th century. We may have finally become saturated with the stuff.

The expansion of sugar use in the Western world coincided with that of bitter, heated tropical beverages. The spread of tea, coffee, chocolate, and other sugared ingestibles since the 17th century was one of the most important economic and cultural phenomena