

THE SUGAR INDUSTRY OF PERNAMBUCO DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY¹

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ABSTRACT. During the nineteenth century, the abolition of slavery and advances in the technology of manufacturing sugar led to the replacement of the Labat system of cane sugar production by the central factory system. The resolution of a labor crisis and the financing of central factories at a time when competition from beet sugar was beginning constituted a challenge to which cane growing regions reacted differently. Around the Caribbean, some long-established sugar colonies could not meet the challenge and their production declined or stagnated, whereas other colonies rose to importance and prosperity. In Pernambuco, Brazil, the combination of a free population which was gradually drawn into the sugar industry, investment of foreign as well as domestic capital, and the appearance of new markets permitted the sugar industry to survive, even to increase production, but not to prosper.

IN the historical geography of the cane-cultivating regions of the Americas, the nineteenth century is of particular interest for it spans the period of transition from one form of sugar production to another. Major changes took place in land use, in population distribution, and in the structure of society, and a type of plantation which had existed in the New World since the beginning of colonial times passed from the scene.

Early in the sixteenth century, the Spanish established plantations on Santo Domingo. Soon after, the Portuguese founded sugar colonies along the coast of Brazil, most successfully in Pernambuco and Bahia; and during the seventeenth century, sugar plantations were spread through the islands of the Caribbean by the English, French, and Dutch. In all these colonies, from Brazil to the shores of Mexico, the organization of sugar production was basically similar, though there were

minor variations in the techniques of cultivation and manufacture. Land holdings were large and as great an acreage was planted to cane as the terrain, labor supply, and capacity of the mill would permit. The work of the plantation was done by slaves who also cultivated some provision crops on small plots of land. Wind, water, or animals powered the mills, and in the boiling and curing houses, the brown *muscovado* and whitish *clayed* sugars were made. Rum and molasses were valued by-products. Life centered on the complex formed by the plantation house and slave quarters, mill and workshops. The plantations were both units of production and nuclei of population in what was generally a dispersed settlement pattern. This old style of sugar production is frequently referred to as the Labat system after Père Labat, a French cleric, who lived in the West Indies at the turn of the eighteenth century and wrote detailed descriptions of sugar production in the various islands.² The Labat plantation was in fact a classic example of a tropical plantation: foreign capital and imported labor growing and processing a single crop for sale in temperate lands, an intrusive exotic in the host country.

The abolition of slavery and the advances in the technology of manufacturing sugar were the basic catalysts in the disruption of the

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² Père Labat, *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles de L'Amérique* (La Haye: P. Husson, 1724), 2 vols.