

«A COMMONWEALTH WITHIN ITSELF».  
THE EARLY BRAZILIAN SUGAR INDUSTRY, 1550-1670

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*Este ensayo examina los contornos básicos de la economía del azúcar en Brasil entre 1550 y 1660, cuando se convirtió en la principal productora de dicho artículo en el mundo atlántico. Comienza analizando el amplio espectro que situó al país en el contexto del sistema comercial euro-americano, para estudiar luego las condiciones locales y los desafíos específicos de la tierra, el trabajo y el capital a los que hizo frente la industria cañera brasileña temprana y que le confirieron un carácter y unos contornos peculiares. Finalmente investiga la rápida expansión del sector hasta 1620 y las razones por las que su crecimiento se estancó, incluso antes del ascenso de nuevos competidores en el Caribe después de 1650.*

PALABRAS CLAVES: *Brasil, Portugal, Holanda, siglos XVI-XVII, azúcar, mercado, factores de producción.*

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The first contacts with Brazil did not generate much interest in Portugal so long as that distant shore was seen only as a place to obtain dyewood or tropical curiosities. By the 1530s, however, the introduction of sugar cane and the beginnings of a sugar industry had begun to transform Brazil, especially its northeastern coast, into a colony of settlement. The sugar estates, by their nature and by their socially and «racially» segmented populations, eventually determined much of the structure of the colony and of its society. Cuthbert Pudsey, an Englishman who visited Brazil in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century captured the social character of the sugar mills, the political authority of their owners, and the way in which the mills themselves served as the poles of colonization:

«Now they invent mills to grind the sugar reed, their slaves to plant and preen their reed which need be planted once in seven years. Founders to cast their kettles, masons to make furnaces, carpenters to make chests, another part is busy to erect churches. Every mill [has] a chapel, a schoolhouse, a priest, a