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"Controlling Nature and Transforming Landscapes in the Early Modern Caribbean"

Hollsten, Laura

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In the seventeenth century, the Caribbean islands were increasingly incorporated into the international trade network, the core of which was constituted by the European colonial powers. The growth of markets and buying power in Europe stimulated investments in sugar plantations. Consequently, sugar cane agriculture in the Caribbean developed into a considerable apparatus, consisting of land, people, animals and buildings. Agricultural methods and techniques, as well as well-organised routines in sugar production, were developed with a view to managing the sugar plantations as efficiently as possible. The results were in many cases deforestation, impoverished soils and erosion. The changes in the landscapes were noticed and commented upon by visitors who wrote travel accounts of the English and French islands. By the end of the seventeenth century, new agricultural methods and techniques had been developed, based on the growing body of experiences of the sugar planters. The aim of the strict regime on the plantations was to control nature in order to produce sugar as efficiently as possible. In some cases experience taught planters to use resources in a more sustainable manner. The ambition to control nature created the solutions to the problems caused by overexploitation. Conservationist measures were taken to keep the sugar production apparatus in as good a shape as possible. (Author's abstract at The White Horse Press.)

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