



Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala depicted himself several times in his letter of complaint. Here, kneeling, he presents a copy of his work to the king of Spain. In fact, Guaman Poma never traveled to Spain, and his letter probably never reached the king. Nevertheless, Guaman Poma's illustrations offer remarkable images of early colonial Peru. • Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Copenhagen

### The Engenho

Colonial Brazilian life revolved around the sugar mill, or *engenho*. Strictly speaking, the term *engenho* (related to the English word *engine*) referred only to the mill itself, but it came to represent a complex of land, labor, buildings, animals, capital, and technical skills related to the production of sugar. Unlike other crops, sugarcane required extensive processing to yield molasses or refined sugar as a profitable export. Thus *engenhos* always combined agricultural and industrial enterprises. They depended both on heavy labor for the planting and harvesting of cane and on the specialized skills of individuals who understood the intricacies of the sugar-making process. As a result, *engenhos* were among the most complex business enterprises in the Americas.

In a colonial economy where sugar figured as the most important export, the Portuguese planters and owners of sugar mills were a privileged class, exercising political, social, and economic power. As long as they contributed to the government's revenues, they could usually count on strong royal support. The planters acted like landed nobility, but the nature of their enterprises required them to pay attention to affairs like businessmen. They operated on very small profit margins. Their exalted social position often disguised difficult financial predicaments, and turnover in the business was always high.

### Sugar and Slavery in Portuguese Brazil

While the Spanish American empire concentrated on the extraction of silver, the Portuguese empire in Brazil depended on the production and export of sugar. The different economic and social foundations of the Spanish and Portuguese empires led to different patterns of labor recruitment. Spanish conquistadores subjugated sedentary peoples with effective administrative systems and compelled them to provide labor in the mines and estates of Mexico and Peru. Portuguese nobles and entrepreneurs established sugar plantations in regions without the administrative machinery to recruit workers and relied instead on imported African slaves as laborers. Indeed, Africans and their descendants became the majority of the population in Brazil, not simply an auxiliary labor force as in Spanish America.

Like their Spanish counterparts, Portuguese colonists first tried to enlist local populations as laborers. Unlike the inhabitants of Mexico and Peru, however, the peoples of Brazil were not sedentary cultivators. They resisted efforts to commandeer their labor, evaded Portuguese forces by retreating to interior lands, and took every opportunity to escape captors who managed to force them into servitude. From the Portuguese perspective, relying on native peoples as laborers had an additional drawback. As elsewhere in the Americas, epidemic diseases devastated indigenous populations. During the 1560s smallpox and measles ravaged the whole Brazilian coast, making it difficult for Portuguese settlers even to find potential laborers, let alone force them to work.

Faced with these difficulties, the colonists turned to another labor source: the African slave. Portuguese plantation managers imported slaves as early as the 1530s, but they began to rely on African labor on a large scale only in the 1580s. The labor demands of cane cultivation and sugar production exacted a heavy toll from slave communities. Arduous working conditions, mistreatment, tropical heat, poor nutrition, and inadequate housing combined to produce high rates of disease and mortality: *engenhos* typically lost 5 to 10 percent of their slaves annually. In Brazil as in most other plantation societies, the number of deaths in the slave population usually exceeded the number of births, so there was a constant demand for more slaves.

The system had its critics, but government officials mostly left matters of labor management to slave owners. To them the balance sheet of sugar production dictated practices that paid scant heed to the preservation of slaves' lives, as long as the owners realized profits. Indeed, if a slave lived five to six years, the investment of the average owner doubled and permitted him to purchase a new and healthy slave without taking a monetary loss. Hence owners had little economic incentive to improve conditions for slaves or to increase their birthrates. Children required financial outlays for at least twelve years, which from the perspective of the owner represented a financial loss. All told, the business of producing Brazilian sugar was so brutal that every ton of the sweet substance cost one human life.

### Fur Traders and Settlers in North America

European mariners first frequented North American shores in search of fish. Although fishing was a profitable enterprise, trade in furs became far more lucrative. The North American fur trade began when fishermen bartered for fur with local peoples. After explorers found a convenient entrance to rich fur-producing regions through the Hudson Strait and Hudson Bay, they began the systematic exploitation of the northern lands. Royal agents, adventurers, businessmen, and settlers began to connect large parts of the North American interior by a chain of forts and trading posts. Indigenous peoples trapped animals for Europeans and exchanged the pelts for manufactured goods such as wool blankets, iron pots, firearms, and distilled spirits. The hides went mostly to Europe, where capitalist markets experienced burgeoning demand for beaver skin hats and fur clothing.

The fur trade generated tremendous conflict. American beaver populations, which were the chief targets of the trade, declined so rapidly that trappers constantly had to push further inland in search of untapped beaver grounds. When hunting grounds became depleted, native peoples poached or invaded others' territories, which frequently led to war.

The fur trade also took place in the context of competition between European states. This competitive atmosphere contributed to further conflict, as indigenous peoples became embroiled in their patrons' rivalries. During the mid-seventeenth

*The Search for Labor*

*Slavery*

*The Fur Trade*

*Effects of the Fur Trade*