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## Sugar in Europe

Affluent Europeans bought sugar from local merchants, the demand for sugar so high that sugarcane growers were in need of more laborers to tend the crops. This demand caused the slave trade, originating in Africa, to expand, bringing slaves to the Americas to work the sugar cane crops.

Sugar would prove to be the most important commodity of the Columbian Exchange. During the Colonial Era, sugar held the same economic value and importance as oil does today. Although refined sugar was available to most of the Old World, the European climate made sugar cane virtually impossible to grow. As an imported item, sugar was considered a luxury good only the wealthy could afford.

The European discovery and subsequent colonization of Madeira and the Canary Islands would be precedents for the New World. The plantations and colonial governments of those islands would be models for the sugar plantations in the Caribbean and the Americas. Sugar cane, native to Southeast Asia, was introduced to the Dominican Republic by Christopher Columbus, in 1492. The new crop thrived in the tropical environment. Affluent Europeans bought imported sugar from local merchants, but soon, the demand outgrew grower's production capabilities.

The European growers could not produce a larger quantity of sugar cane without more laborers to work the crops. African slave traders provided slaves that were sent to the Americas to tend the crops. The labor of the African slaves was essential to cultivating sugar cane and the production of sugar. The slaves worked in both the sugarcane fields and the boiling houses and supplied most of the extreme labor involved in the process.

Of the nearly four million slaves brought to the Caribbean, almost all ended up working the sugar plantations.<sup>1</sup> Living conditions for the slaves were harsh, and death rates were high, at all stages of a slave's life. The more sugar demanded by Europeans, the more production was required. The more plantations they built, the more sugar they produced, the more slaves were acquired. Slaves imported from Africa were the beginnings of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. African slaves were chosen because they were immune to the diseases that killed many Native Americans.

Europeans grew wealthy on the backs of slave laborers. Sugar and slavery allowed Europe to accumulate wealth and power and would eventually set a course for a new economic system, as well as European dominance in the world. Affluent Europeans with their want of sugar unintentionally set off the foothold of the African slave trade in the Americas, including what is

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