HISTORY OF THE SUGAR TRADE
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A Portuguese friend once told us that when the Moors conquered the Iberian Peninsula, they introduced sugar and slavery. Iberian sailors brought sugar to South America, where they set up sugarcane plantations and sugar factories that were manned by slaves. A Yoruba king invited Portuguese traders to set up a slave market in the seaport of Lagos, on the West Coast of Africa, which provided almost the entire transatlantic sugar industry with manpower until long after slavery was abolished. A large flow of cane sugar across the Atlantic to Europe was inaugurated.

The fact that sugar could be obtained not only from tropical sugarcane, but also from beets grown in Europe’s chilly climate was not discovered until the end of the eighteenth century, when a pharmacology student from Berlin succeeding in cultivating the first beets with high sugar content, from the white mangold-wurzel. The first sugarbeet factory, subsidized by the Prussian government, was put into operation in Silesia. The young sugar industry received an unexpected boost when the French and English set up trade blockades in their struggle for colonial power. The Continental System and the English Blockade brought international trade to a virtual standstill, making it impossible to import sugar from the colonies. With support of Napoleon, countless sugarbeet factories were built in France, the German territories, the present Belgium and the Netherlands. When the trade blockades were subsequently lifted, the sugarbeet industry collapsed. The abolition of slavery made beet sugar profitable again, but ever since production became mechanized, sweet beets cannot survive without political protection, because their uprooting from clay soils and longer refining process take too much energy.