

A Caribbean Court: Henri Christophe, King of Haiti

Graham Gendall Norton

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On 2 June 1811 Henri Christophe crowned himself King of Haiti 'by the Grace of God'. The carriages and the crown came from London, but much of the influence on the court was French. Graham Norton showed the potential importance of monarchy in the new world. Haiti was the second independent state there after the United States. Henri Christophe created a hereditary nobility, a lavish court, the Royal and Military Order of St Henry, and dress regulations imposing costumes of different colours for each rank. He did not believe in simplicity. There was a brief period of prosperity during his reign thanks to the new Code Rural. King Henri, who spoke and understood English, disliked the United States and modelled himself on George III. He imported slaves from Dahomey in order to form a royal guard and he built many palaces, the most famous of which was called Sans Souci. At his court there were *tabourets* and a rigorous etiquette. In 1820, however, there was a coup against the King supported by soldiers crying 'No King! No Nobility! No tyranny!' The guard deserted. The King committed suicide. The Queen and her daughters fled to England. One treasure which they took with them was the manuscript 'Armorial général' with the coats of arms of the Haitian nobility. After Graham Norton's talk, this was described with slides by Clive Cheeseman from the College of Heralds. In the subsequent discussion it was pointed out that in many other circumstances, in Brazil, in Jamaica and in the ancient world, successful leaders of slave rebellions had also proclaimed themselves kings. Thus court history has a role to play in the study of the New World and of slave rebellions as well as of European and Asian monarchies.